Afterword

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WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT GENRE?

Following a hint from Wai Chee Dimock, let us perform a conceptual experiment. Imagine that literature departments were to begin hiring faculty members primarily by their expertise in particular genres instead of (as is usually the case in the larger departments) primarily by their expertise in particular historical periods. Literary study, I hope you will agree, would very soon cease to exist in its present form. This prospect exposes something about literary study in its present form that might after all prove unworthy of being mourned, which is to say of being preserved.

The proposal of hiring by genre is not meant as feasible or desirable; such hiring would present the obvious risk of massive generic reification. But if the idea seems so implausible, I think it's not because critics are sure that genres couldn't stand the pressure that would thereby be placed on them. It's because we are accustomed to assume that historical periods will and do stand such pressure—in other words, that by contrast organization by period permits literary criticism to achieve a high and publicly persuasive degree of rigor. My counterfactual is intended to make this assumption seem less self-evident. It's intended to suggest that our institutional commitment to historical periodization is both much stronger and much narrower than we might on reflection prefer it to be. Stronger in that it is never merely institutional, never merely a case of period coverage as the language that deans are assumed to understand at line-allocation time. How many of us can afford not to follow the money, allowing our decisive sense of who we are and what we do as critics to be determined by our responsibility to a given period? And narrower in that our commitment leads us to a somewhat restrictive

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version of history, one in which knowledge of everything significant within a relatively well-defined span of time counts for a great deal more than—to lay out one equally historical alternative—the ambitiously wide-ranging and unpredictable sorts of metanarrative that might be encouraged by period-bridging continuities of genre. One virtue of taking genre seriously is that it permits us to indulge in some momentary alienation from these familiar historical commitments.

Some might have feared, and others might perhaps have hoped, that a return to genre would mean a return to the now unfashionable predecessor of period coverage: the old great-books vision of a conversation across the centuries, a vision of simultaneity propped up by the premise of a universal, transhistorical human nature. None of the essays in this otherwise diverse collection makes so dramatic an about-face. More often than not, the point of bringing up generic continuities is, on the contrary, to display and give proper value to historical differences. Sometimes these differences are primarily temporal: for example, between Thom Gunn and Ben Jonson or between Mahmoud Darwish and the traditional Arabic elegy. Sometimes what is underlined is distances that are social or cultural without being chronologically dramatic: the gap between Chinese westerns and their American originals or between the Caribbean and the Euro-American crime novel. In all these cases, however, genre makes possible a legible scene of transformation. It is the common language by which the reader, comparing before and after, can frame and measure an artist's or a culture's or a period's creative achievement.

At the same time, of course, anyone pursuing the creative, the original, and the innovative in their pure form might well be frustrated by this process of valuation. Only certain sorts of achievement can be computed in this way. Those that make no concession to transhistorical sameness are excluded. Versions of the new are recognized as valuable only if they reach back for comparison with the old. In that sense they are obliged to be at least somewhat faithful to the old. From the point of view of the existing literary tradition, genre thus accomplishes an additional function that some will see as not additional at all but rather the real if hidden motive of the exercise: it is reassuring. Reassurance is one subliminal message readers might have detected in the call for papers that set the current issue in motion. The one named example of what we editors were looking for, Derek Walcott's refunctioning of Homer, might have seemed to say, Look, there has been an almost miraculously painless continuity between contemporary Third World writers and the founding texts of the Western tradition. A contemporary Caribbean writer can still find his inspiration, as Dante and Milton did, in the epics of ancient Europe. They are part of the same conversation. The old conversations need not be scrapped, then, as some of the older participants feared. The entry of new conversational partners does not mean that everyone will need extensive professional retraining. The category of literature remains in good working order: coherent, representative, inclusive. Despite seemingly radical differences of time, place, and culture, despite the strangeness of the past and the foreign, literature's kinds persist, making known kinds of room for most human impulses to self-expression, even extravagantly novel ones. The same reassurance would emanate from genealogies of genre that moved outward from non-Western origin texts like the *Ramayana*.

Thus, according to Stephen Heath, genre is "necessarily conservative" (169). For many, though not for Heath, this is a source of complaint against genre. According to John Frow, genre is bound up with "the exercise of power," with "constraint." "The structure of the elegaic genre imposes meanings which predominate over whatever the poet's more immediate emotions and intent might have been" (2, 10, 21). Frow's unabashed political

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allegory pits the "shaping force" of genre's rules against an emancipatory ideal of artistic creativity and autonomy. Ideally, each text would be its own genre. True literature is perhaps "the dissolution of kinds" (23, 26, 27). Literariness seeks escape from "a kind of policing," a "regime of reading" (125, 139)—genre as a mode of social domination. (The same might be said of periodization, which is also permanently at war with literariness, but that is another subject.) Is submission to the conservative regime of genre inevitable? Frow avoids this conclusion by discriminating between participation in a genre, which in his view is mandatory, and belonging to a genre in a stronger sense, which can perhaps be sidestepped (25). But the answer is less important here than the assumption that produces his sense of emphatic political dilemma. In limiting literature's possibilities, genre is seen as complicit with the larger culture; it is a social institution, burdened with the weight of social interests and constituencies and relaying that unwelcome burden to literature. Note in passing how paradoxical it is for genre to count on the one hand as the very body and substance of literature, as Heath describes it, and on the other hand as the social police that holds literature back from the fullness of its possible expressions. Yet when genre is discussed, the metaphor of the police is everywhere.

"A passport issued by the novel," Stephen Owen writes above, "is a great convenience for travel across languages and centuries. If, however, a work like *The Sound of the Kiss* comes to the attention of the genre police, it will likely have its passport invalidated and be deported back to verse romance." Owen's figure of the genre police as border police, which is to say officials of the nation-state, brings into relief the genre debate's geopolitical dimension. If genre is an agent of social domination, the sort of domination that most concerns us now is that of some nations over others, which is the focus of Owen's essay. The problem is not simply that the givenness of genre, lending itself to acts of recognizing the reassuringly familiar, favors the established at the expense of what might aspire to be radically unfamiliar. Owen registers his protest not at the level of the text or author but at the level of the nation. He reminds us that we have not come to the end of the competition of nations; the old rivalry between national literatures has not been suspended or superseded by a neutral age of universal good intentions. Novels and epics are good things for a national literature to have, for they guarantee that your literature will be read, which otherwise might not happen; they are money in the bank. Thanks to the general internalizing of the Hegelian evolutionary scheme for genre, national literatures are supposed to have originary, foundational epics; they are felt to have committed an embarrassing lapse if, like Chinese literature, they have no such epic to show for themselves. Genre categories impose an onerous and misleading set of expectations on national literatures that are not European. Non-European literatures are forced to compete in a marketplace whose values, defined by established European genres, put newcomers at a systematic disadvantage.

Owen's point is made more systematically by Rey Chow in her recent book *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work*. If the generic categories that make comparison possible always favor one national literature over another, as Chow suggests, then perhaps comparison itself has to be revalued. "These days," she writes, "the term 'comparative' is often used in tandem or interchangeably with such words as 'diverse,' 'global,' 'international,' 'transnational' . . . and the like, in ways that once again conjure the signature aspiration of . . . going beyond restrictive national boundaries" (72). Chow is right to suggest that comparison has come to serve as a stand-in for cosmopolitanism, and right again to suggest that we should not take this substitution at face value, as if the intellectual operation of

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comparing were as innocent and inevitable as it looks and as if the same held therefore for cosmopolitanism's dissociation from the nation. It bears repeating that cosmopolitanism is always partial, in both major senses of the term, and sometimes far from strategic. If you want Americans now to apologize for what other Americans did to the Indians, if you want reparations for slavery, if you even want to defend what remains of the welfare state, then you need not more cosmopolitan detachment but a stronger sense of national belonging—if perhaps also a temporally and politically different one.

But Chow's key objection to comparison and her suggestions for transcending it are, I think, less strategic. Borrowing from Foucault's *The Order of Things*, Chow asserts that "the mute ground upon which it is possible for entities to be juxtaposed" no longer exists (76). Much might be said here about the offloading of epistemological authority onto history, the history that makes things like "mute ground" appear and disappear, so that certain claims are not wrong but *no longer* valid, and we know this because history has told us. In any case, since the ground or norm of comparison no longer exists, comparison in the old sense is now ruled out. Unfortunately, history's news has not reached the provinces, for this underlying grid of supposed sameness "seems to be still alive in comparative literature" (76). I put it this way to stress the strangely linear narrative that Chow is pushed into by substituting history for argument.

Looking toward the future, Chow offers two alternative models for being comparative. The first, also attributed to Foucault, is "a violent yoking together of disparate things," which would make comparison into "an unfinalizable event" whose "meanings" would "have to be repeatedly negotiated" (81). The second is to study the history of power implicit in the norms of comparison, including genres. In my opinion, the first of these—a violent and unfinalizable comparison whose meanings have to be repeatedly negotiated—comes very close to a description of what comparison always already was. Who ever thought that comparison was finalizable, or that meaning did not have to be repeatedly negotiated?

Here are two examples. In 2004, explaining the French presidential vote, a bipartisan landslide for Jacques Chirac that was intended to stop the embarrassing rise of the far-right nationalist Jean-Marie Le Pen, Perry Anderson wrote as follows: "The second round duly gave him a majority of 82 per cent, worthy of a Mexican president in the heyday of the PRI. On the Left Bank, his vote reached virtually Albanian proportions" (14). This is national comparison wielded as insult—an insult to French democracy, but one that of course depends on an assumed lack of respect for the undemocratic habits of Mexico under the PRI and of Albania generally. You might also say that though the initial hierarchy is clear, all three countries are denigrated, and the nuances of denigration are multiple and anything but final. Or consider a sentence from Stefan Collini's book *Absent Minds*, which includes acute commentaries on national comparison in general and on Anderson's practice of it in particular. "[I]n terms of public perception of assured quality," Collini writes, "'Oxford' was to philosophy what 'Harrods' was to department stores" (399). As I read it, this line offers a gibe at all the terms in the comparison. Straightforward enough at the first level, it clearly works at a second or third level to ridicule the public perception of Oxford (too commercial) but also probably to ridicule Oxford itself, and maybe even philosophy itself. If there's a stable norm here, I can't find it. It makes sense that comparison is so frequently paired with the adjective *invidious*, for even the simplest comparison opens the door wide to all sorts of ill will, allowing malevolence to express itself in many devious and self-contradictory ways.

What Chow's first alternative adds to comparison as it already functions is a will

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to resist normative judgment—a resistance to comparison as blaming. The same resistance comes through in the second—in Chow's words, a "suggestive alternative paradigm" that would see comparison as "a type of discursive situation, involuntarily brought into play by and inextricable from the conditions of modern world politics" (84). This second alternative assumes that comparison is always implicitly unfair, since the supposed common ground will be more present in or characteristic of one term than the other. And it assumes that what will determine the choice of the ground is disparity of power. Hence, non-Europeans are measured by European yardsticks like "modernity" or "human rights" or "the genre of the novel" and can thus be innocently blamed for not attaining this European-defined standard. The comparative scholar's job would therefore be to expose the inequalities of comparison's playing field. As she says, "Comparison would . . . include a critique of the *uneven distribution of cultural capital* . . ." (86).

In other words, the old comparison involved blaming, and the new comparison (i.e., critique) must become a blaming of such blaming. I phrase this tendentiously so as to bring out a logical incoherence: to call for critique is to invoke another common measure—equality of power—that is no less normative than the one it replaces. To blame blaming is not to stop blaming. But Chow does in fact try to stop blaming, or to step outside it. She does so through literariness. She quotes Kant, as interpreted by Samuel Weber, such that aesthetic judgment becomes "oscillating," "a process of suspending and possibly *de-legitimizing* its own premises" (87). This is the model—she calls it deconstructive, but one could as easily call it literary—that she goes on to apply to comparison:

> [I]s not cultural difference exactly that "object" which confronts us repeatedly with the limits of the terms of its representation and evaluation, demanding thus a reflective judgment of those terms themselves? To the (more narrowly defined) aesthetic question as to how we can represent and evaluate this object, cultural difference, in all its particularity . . . we must thus add another (historical and political) level of interrogation, to be directed precisely at the hierarchical *frames* of comparison . . . that stand in the way, as it were, as universals subsuming otherness rather than letting such otherness challenge and disassemble their self-perpetuating modus operandi. (87–88)

Letting otherness challenge the frame of comparison—this would not mean letting otherness be itself, any more than it would mean letting otherness continue to be compared with what is not itself. It would be a use of otherness: a forced mobilization that puts the ethical weight of real, often severely disadvantaged people behind (of all things) literary self-referentiality, literature conceived of as autonomous of social norms, as concerned primarily with itself rather than with social representation. It is by becoming pure self-referentiality that literature becomes a common denominator by which comparisons can themselves be compared, judgments suspended, frameworks perpetually challenged. Taken in this sense, literature seems to pull off the singular miracle of blameless comparison. It becomes the antinormative norm, the antigenre genre.

What happens to the ideal or ideology of the particular, of which self-referential literariness offers a notable example, when a particular society refuses the apparent privilege of exemption from the norm and demands instead that the norm's promises be fulfilled? This is the question that the African anthropologist James Ferguson turns against the phrase *alternative modernities*. *Modernity* is probably the most notorious of those terms, like *the novel*, which set a Eurocentric standard that non-European cultures can then be judged by their failure to achieve. *Alternative modernities* has thus become the rather suc-

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cessful slogan of an all-cultures-are-equal escape from this mandatory norm. Yet this slogan has been less popular in Africa than in East Asia, Ferguson says, because Africa, unlike parts of East Asia, is still waiting for its share in modernity's material benefits. Equality of cultural respect is no substitute for what Africans themselves might recognize as equality: equality of living standards, equality of access to the goods of the earth. There is no excuse, he concludes, for focusing on the "happy story about plurality and nonranked cultural difference" to the neglect of a second, much less happy story that results in "relatively fixed global statuses" in a "world socioeconomic hierarchy" (179). We would do well, with Ferguson, not to jettison the overt, self-declared normativity that underlies this Asia-Africa comparison. For only this norm allows us to appreciate the fact that the government of China has managed to raise its population's average standard of living despite a simultaneous rise in inequality between Chinese rich and Chinese poor. There can be no ethically responsible discussion of either Africa or China without a transnational comparison of living standards. The standards and how they are arrived at will always require scrutiny, and from more than one viewpoint. But without them, important stories (e.g., stories about economic inequality) simply cannot be told.

That in a nutshell is the case for genre. It is a case that can and should be made in history's name. History is not defined or exhausted by acts of literary periodization, let alone by routine critical operations within periods. Its intellectual projects have no predetermined scale. Experience shows that they can be induced to cramp themselves for a time within the restraints that govern faculty lines. But if so, a conceptual and political price will be paid. To refuse genre in favor of literariness, seen as a sort of essence of the antigeneric, is to make history in the ambitious sense inconceivable. Consider the paradoxical way in which the ethical debate over comparison has been affected by the fashion for absolute terms like *human rights*, *torture*, and *genocide*, terms whose power comes in part from their presumed immunity to the relativizing disease of comparison. Their power emerges, one might also say, from their sacredness, which holds them apart from comparison's profane promiscuity. But this very sacredness makes them fatally attractive to those in search of comparison. The sublime incomparability of the Holocaust, for example, is little by little claimed for the suffering of more and more parties, more and more national particulars. Hence the irresistible spread of *fascism* and *genocide* across the full field of comparison, leading to the term *Islamo-fascists*, to calls for the genocide convention to be applied to violence against women, and to other grotesquely inappropriate linkages. The sacred as incomparable creates ever more profanity.

Understood as sacred in just this sense, literariness produces the same result. An antigeneric absolute, it proliferates, as we saw above in Chow, attaching itself to the culture of any nonhegemonic nation, which is to say to most of the world's literatures, each of which is asserted or assumed to be unique, beyond comparison. By a sort of moral contagion, incomparability thus comes to seem the rule rather than the exception. As such, it produces not the scrupulous differentiation in whose name it arose but, on the contrary, a morass of indistinction in which significant narrative is impossible. It's hard to imagine that incomparability is in the long-term interest of any national literature.

My valuing of significant narrative displays a debt to the work of Fredric Jameson, who has famously argued on behalf of narrative at every scale, the larger the better, and who mobilizes genre in order to do so. Genre criticism, he suggests, "has in fact always entertained a privileged relationship with historical materialism" (105). The logic of the relation is clear enough. Genre carries social constraints. These constraints, which force it

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away from pure literariness and make the police metaphor so attractive, also turn genres into the building blocks of potential histories that link the literary to the nonliterary, thus making a larger claim on our attention than individual masterpieces or, for that matter, individual periods. From the perspective of historical materialism, there are social tasks that cause a genre to be seized on at a given historical moment and invested with special energy and representativeness. The same process causes genres to be dropped and replaced by others, but also picked up later and refunctioned. Franco Moretti speaks of genres as "temporary structures" or "morphological arrangements that *last* in time, but always only for *some* time" (14). Moretti, who prefers to think of independent generic life cycles rather than of genre as subordinated to longer-term social tasks, gives the example of the replacement of gothic novels by historical novels after 1815. Jameson's examples are much bolder in their historical scale, as when he discovers the same "positional notion of good and evil" in the chanson de geste and the American western (118). The benefit of this enlargement of temporal scale is to make possible—not inevitable, but theoretically possible—a narrative vision of human ethical development that would be simply invisible at the scale of the local and the short-term. Why would criticism voluntarily deprive itself of this additional scale of transperiodic vision and the aggregations it brings into view?

The period, like the nation, should perhaps be seen a sort of pseudo-anthropocentric norm that has been adopted for a long time out of laziness. It is one level of magnification among others, no less valid than any other but also no less arbitrary. It has no claim to absolute authority. The advantages of proclaiming its arbitrariness and throwing open the question of literature's temporal as well as geographic scale can be illustrated by Dimock's experiments with reading in what she calls "deep time." Thoreau, as Dimock demonstrates, can be read with the Bhagavad Gita on military action, and not just because Thoreau read the Bhagavad Gita. Henry James can be read with *Gilgamesh*. We should think of epic "as an archaic genre that has been threaded into the present: still evolving, still energized by foreign tongues, and reproducing itself across many scales, bearing witness to the input of many environments" (86). Dimock makes an argument for reading the ancients, non-Western as well as Western, synchronously with the (non-Eurocentric) moderns, and in so doing she seems to be trying to ensure the (enlarged) literary canon a happy and unending afterlife. But her deepening of time also has other, more devious effects. One is a blurring of the line between literature and religion. Are texts of classical non-Western traditions visibly distinct from religious orthodoxies? Seen at this scale, the category of religion itself is no longer more autonomous than that of literature; indeed, each is enmeshed in the fragility of the other. In this sense, insisting on the persistence of genre across deep time does not so much sustain the category of literature as destabilize it in a new and interesting way. Through transperiod narratives of genre, literature surrenders some of its autonomy, becomes once again the vehicle of social constraint, bends beneath the weight of another putatively higher authority. Once again, this is both a threat to unfettered literary self-expression and a claim literature makes to extraliterary significance.

We should care about genre, then, because genre shores up the category of literature. But it can do so only because it is not purely or exclusively literary. Nor are the histories it enables us to tell. Genre tempts us with versions of history that take us beyond the period-by-period agenda of our ordinary studies.

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