Genres in Motion

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WHEN WE INTERROGATE A CONCEPT LIKE GENRE, THERE ARE advantages to beginning with the way we use the word in the common language. In reading a text, we "identify" or "recognize" a genre. If we attempt to define or describe a genre as such, we are engaging in an entirely different order of activity, one remarkably close to legislation or border control. To identify something assumes a paradigm with a limited set of choices. We may identify a given text differently as a "novel," a "realist novel," a "pastoral"; we may debate whether a work is a "novel" or a "prose romance"; but in each case we presume sets of categories on various levels of specificity, whether we deploy particular categories to confirm or surprise common expectations in our identification.[1]

The politics of genre is intensely territorial, and the hinterlands of a genre are often contested territory. To locate Thomas Hardy's *The Dynasts* in the genre layout of a contemporary bookstore would present the learned shopper with a degree of uncertainty; there would be a limited set of choices (poetry; drama; literature; perhaps, improbably, novels), but the book has to be located somewhere, representing someone's decision about its genre. Genre is the primary category of sorting, after which we can move to the historical or alphabetical order of texts. Some provinces of poorer and less popular genres often seek to be annexed by one of the great powers, usually the novel. Heliodorus's *Æthiopica* began its career in English as *An Æthiopian History* in Thomas Underdowne's translation, probably from 1569; the generic marker "history" follows the Greek text. By 1687, in another translation, the work had become a "romance."[2] More recently, the generic marker "romance" has been removed from the title: the work is published as *An Ethiopian Tale* and discussed under the now common rubric "the novel in antiquity"

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(Häagg 54). The generic designation "romance," which (however anachronistic) added value from the late seventeenth through the nineteenth century, became unwanted baggage in the late twentieth century. To call such a work a novel is to invite readers to ancient texts.

The wonderful mid-sixteenth-century Telugu verse narrative *Kalāpūrnodayamu*, by Pingali Suranna, translated as *The Sound of the Kiss*, is identified by Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman as "in a certain sense, the first Indian novel" and "thoroughly modern" (xvi). After the tentative "in a certain sense," the rest of their introduction and the concluding essay more confidently refer to the work as a "novel." Rao and Shulman uniformly translate verse (with passages in *campū*, mixed prose and poetry) as prose to sustain the genre designation. The stakes are clear. A passport issued by the novel 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. If this sounds too dramatic, discussions of what works do and do not count as novels often have the flavor of debates on illegal immigration.

Rao and Shulman's phrase "Indian novel" raises another issue regarding genre. However anachronistic "Indian" may be in describing South Asian literary culture in the sixteenth century (as Rao and Shulman are well aware), the possession of an early novel brings cachet to the history of a national literature. The claim of an early novel outside Europe draws interest from some and suspicion from others. It seems quite natural that a non-European national or ethnic literature might not have an indigenous novel, because the novel is so often considered a marker of progress toward modernity, a condition that Europeanists guard jealously as their own. Literary cultures that do not produce a novel on their own have to suffer the indignity of receiving the genre as an import during the age of colonialism.

In contrast to the novel, genres that are supposed to belong to an early stage of a literature are expected to be found outside Europe. A nineteenth-century evolutionary account of genres seems to have been so thoroughly internalized that it survives as unreflective assumptions by scholars who would reject such claims on a theoretical level. The story of a literature is supposed to have an epic at the beginning. *Gilgamesh* was a sweet *trouvaille*, allowing us to begin all our world-literature anthologies with an epic. We are willing to overlook the Egyptians and sometimes will suggest that parts of the Hebrew Bible are an epic of sorts. An early epic seemed the proper way to begin a national literary history.

When Europeans began to assess Chinese literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they discovered that China did not have an early epic. Japan did not have one either, but Chinese literature went back to an antiquity that seemed to cry out for a foundational epic. The representatives of European culture said, in effect, We each have one, and our ancestors each had one, and the peoples we meet in our travels generally have one. Why don't you have one? This spectacular genre/gender moment (conjoined with the construction of China as the quintessential feminized other) has had a remarkably long life and remains one of the most common questions posed in public forums about classical Chinese literature. Excellent Chinese scholars have labored nobly to provide the missing genre (see Wang). Hegel's genre scheme, popularized, has been so well digested that it has become the very tissue of the educated mind.

To respond that many rich and successful literary traditions do not have early epics and do not necessarily need one does not, I fear, dispel the profound sense of lack but, rather, supplements the standard account with an awareness that some cultures have one and some don't, either offering a reassurance of European literature's superiority or promising a fecundity of difference or both.

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The eminently simple historicist explanation is that genre sets are nothing more than historical constructs that travel in recognizable regions of textual circulation. They are often initially socially determined venues of textual production that form families by strategies of emulation and deviation. Writing extends the range of circulation and of the textual family. The stability of a genre through history is a function of durable media for writing, institutions of scribal copying, or printing. The idealist counterargument, Hegel's scheme popularized, is still common: there are three core genres, epic (narrative), lyric, and dramatic, which correspond to situations of discourse—speaking about another, speaking for oneself, speaking as another. If those three core genres coincide with a primary map of literary genres only in the European literary tradition, this coincidence may be seen either as one local construction among many or as the result of Europe's unique capacity to discover and ground genre in a higher conceptual order.

There are many problems with the three-genres theory, not the least of which is the fact that the three situations of discourse often do not correspond to works otherwise comfortably situated in one of the three genres. Like some other pieces of the legacy of Hegel's *Aesthetics*, the clarity of the distinction depends on silent reading. Silent reading has been the norm for the past two centuries, but it was not always so. If we compound oral recitation with a literary language that in certain venues does not often use pronouns, then the distinction between speaking about another, speaking for oneself, and speaking as another breaks down—nor would making such a distinction occur to a competent user of that literary language. If we call such a venue Chinese poetry, the genre designation is made by analogy for different reasons. Where do we place a Japanese poetic diary, mixing narrative prose and lyric poetry, written by a man posing as a woman? What if the poetic diary turns out to be actually written by the imputed woman author or is taken to be so? What do we do with Fernando Pessoa or, on a more profound level, Rūmī writing as Shams-i Tabrīz? At what level of fictionality do we distinguish the "I novel" (*watakushi shosetsu*) from autobiography, and what do we do with the autobiographical text with a fictional third-person protagonist?

If we cannot securely ground genre theoretically, we are forced back into the mess of literary history, where the terms of the European genre system become merely local. Even the essential distinction between verse and prose breaks down, as in Arabic *saj*ʿ, rhythmic and rhymed but distinct from poetry, *shi*ʿ*r*. The strong distinctions are local, dependent on the local language and its resources. In Chinese, too, rhyme and predictable rhythm do not distinguish poetry from prose. The difference between verse narrative and prose narrative is supposed to be important, the move to prose often taken to suggest a widening audience and more popular, less elevated language. This is, however, not always true. Verse narrative can be the popularizing form (as in Chinese *tanci*), and the choice of prose for narrative can enable an unprecedented level of stylistic difficulty (as in the seventh-century Sanskrit writer Bāna). Once one steps outside the local family, the facts of literary history often disable the laws of genre that scholars sometimes try to derive from the local family.

Genre in history is a sediment of contingencies and changing motives. The Sanskrit system gives us *kāvya*, which seems as close to an idea of literature as any term comes outside Europe. The hymns of the *Rg Veda*, however, are sacred and cannot belong to *kāvya*, just as the Bible could be considered literature only recently and unproblematically only by nonbelievers. The relation between the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana* was as evident in South Asia as it is to modern readers outside South Asia, for whom they are sibling "epics." But in the Sanskrit taxonomy of genres they are distinct: the *Mahābhārata*, an older

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work, is *itihāsa*, "tradition" or "history"; the *Rāmāyana* is *kāvya*. The *Rāmāyana* becomes *kāvya* by a level of linguistic ornamentation, some uncertain boundary that separates it from the plainer *Mahābhārata*. The *Pañcatantra*, the famous collection of animal fables, is not *kāvya*, though it was the most successful Sanskrit literary export, traveling through Pahlavi to Arabic and Hebrew, to Latin, and to Italian, finally emerging in English in 1570 as *The Morall Philosophie of Doni*. Viewed historically, genre looks less like a map than a long series of family lineages, legislating endogamy but crisscrossed by wondrous migrations, mutations, and miscegenations.

The local configurations of genre differ sharply in their shapes and in the sharpness of the boundaries between them; still, some idea of genre seems to be a commonality. Or are there differences in the very idea of genre?

The term *ti* in classical Chinese literary theory is translated as "genre." *Ti* was used for distinctions of literary types that we would call "generic." The identification of *ti* and genre, however, grows complicated when we press further. *Ti* essentially meant "body" and, in extended usage, the normative form of something. But *ti* was "body" only in a limited sense. *Ti* was the word you used when you referred to the human body; in references to a particular body, such as "my body," a different word tended to be used, *shen*.[3] Thus, *ti* made an essential distinction between the categorical and the particular. As often in Chinese, if one wanted a class concept that rose above such a distinction, one combined the words into a compound, *shenti*, the modern word for "body."

The proper term for the human body, then, was *ti*, whatever the variations of height, chest size, arm length, or gender, which were distinct from the normative range of variation in other creatures, each of which had its own *ti*. On this level, it is easy to see *ti* working like the term *genre*. However, *ti* was also the term for a normative style, whether the style of a genre, an author, a period, and so on. It also could be used for a normative structure of exposition. In other words, while everything we would call a genre was a *ti*, not all *ti* were genres.

No small part of the pleasure of working with long-established and reflective traditions other than the European is seeing the conceptual universe put together somewhat differently. There is nothing mysterious about it; it is not even very complicated. It comes to look complicated because of a long history that began by foregrounding one set of distinctions rather than another. If the Chinese tradition aggregated concepts (genre, style) that the European tradition took as radically distinct, we can see at the same time that the European tradition tended to aggregate things (the categorical, the particular) that the Chinese tradition took as essentially distinct. There was a rich vocabulary for describing style and structure in particular texts, but *ti* was not used in the technical terms for such descriptions of the particular; *ti* identified a text as belonging to some norm. Chinese critics recognized that the genre set of *ti* was of an order different from that of the set of normative styles or normative structures of exposition, so the distinction of genre could be made; but the choice of the more general term emphasized that the issue was an identifiable norm of any kind.

One gain of comparison is that through the differences we see the real common ground among traditions. In Chinese and European literary criticism, the common ground is the production of a limited set of categories that pretend to cover a field. The actual world of literary texts is a mass of family resemblances, shared terms, and analogies. The putatively complete set of categories is a sorting mechanism to privilege one level of resemblances over others and give us the illusion of knowledge. The fate of such sets is well known: sets proliferate with new categories, subsets, and hierarchies; they are inherently unstable. Writing in the early third century AD, Cao Pi named four categories in Chinese literature (each made up of two

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genres); by the end of the fifth century, Ren Fang found eighty-four genres. We see the same process in South Asian literary theory and in European rhetorics. The hypertrophy of taxonomic knowledge returns to disorder, then back to simpler systems.

It is true that the passion for taxonomy, accompanied by sharp definition of the categories, seems to belong to a past age. The old rhetorics, with their endless enumeration of tropes, are largely gone. But here and there, wherever someone wants to count something (as, for example, subtypes of the novel), limited taxonomic sets must be made to enable the enterprise; texts must be located in one category or another, as Hardy's *The Dynasts* has to be placed in one physical space and not another. Under some circumstances, texts cannot be simply "texts"; when a census is taken, they have to be registered in a family, a locale. Genre is the discourse of total order, where everything has its place; hybridity is a secondary formation that reinscribes established criteria of difference. Only history reminds us how contingent any particular identification actually is.

Notes

1. The transient conquest by the shepherds in William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral* is a classic example of surprising expectations.

2. *The Triumphs of Love and Constancy Microfrom: A Romance, Containing the Heroick Amours of Theagenes and Chariclea: In Ten Books / The First Five Rendred by a Person of Quality, the Last Five by N. Tate*. The term "romance" was not in the title of the previous edition, in 1686.

3. This distinction collapses in later usage.

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