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Although the concept of literary genre has been radically challenged during the past few decades, the rumours of its demise seem a bit premature. The attacks can be described as focusing on two independent, but complementary fronts. First, it may be argued that genre is obsolete in today's literary life, and secondly, that it is a rigid, inflexible critical concept, incapable of coping with the dynamic nature of literature and the uniqueness of the literary work of art.

The first challenge stresses that modern and post-modern literatures have expelled generic rules, conventions and categories from their territory. What was perhaps valid in classical, classicist and other respected forms of canonic literature — thus goes the argument — is no longer functional. The process of liberation from generic rules began during Romanticism, where the individual talent of the writer was considered more significant than the conventions of the genre. The twentieth century, with its iconoclastic trends, brought this process to a culmination. Originality supersedes conventions ; textuality and intertextuality replace generic categories.

There is, of course, a germ of truth in all these arguments. But, unless these statements are qualified, they may provide a very partial, sometimes even distorted picture of the role of genres in modern and contemporary literature.

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To put things into perspective, it is important to stress that the opposition drawn between modern and pre-modern literature with respect to the role of generic rules can be overemphasized. Generic rules were never strictly abided by, in the strong sense of the word, even in classical and classicist literature. There has always been a tension, sometimes minor and latent, sometimes outspoken and conspicuous, between the generic model established at some point and the new work supposed to continue that generic tradition. Let us take a brief look at the opening lines of Virgil's *Aeneid*, a work that constitutes a central part of a very respected classical generic tradition, namely, epic poetry. Virgil opens his epic poem thus :

Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris
Italiam fato profugus Laviniaque venit
litora - multum ille et terris iactatus et alto
vi superum, saevae memorem Iunonis ob iram,
multa quoque et bello passus, dum conderet urbem
inferretque deos Latio ; genus unde Latinum

Albanique patres atque altae moenia Romae.
Musa, mihi causas memora, quo numine laeso
quidve dolens regina deum tot volvere casus
insignem pietate virum, tot adire labores
impulerit. Tantaene animis caelestibus irae ?

Arms I sing and the man who first from the coasts of Troy, exiled by fate, came to Italy and
Lavinian shores ; much buffeted on sea and the land by violence from above, through cruel
Juno's unforgiving wrath, and much enduring in war also, till he should build a city and
bring his gods to Latium ; whence came the Latin race, the lords of Alba, and the walls of
lofty Rome. Tell me, O Muse, the cause ; wherein thwarted in will or wherefore angered,
did the Queen of Heaven drive a man, of goodness so wondrous, to traverse so many perils,
to face so many toils. Can resentment so fierce dwell in heavenly breasts ? (Virgil : 1938,
pp. 240-241)

As is well known, Virgil's epic poem is closely modeled in many respects
after Homer. The close affinities between the *Aeneid*'s opening lines and the *Iliad*
and *Odyssey* are evident : the metrical pattern of dactylic hexameter, stating the
subject of the poem at the outset ; evoking lofty actions of warfare (remindful of
Achilles) and of wandering on the seas (like Odysseus) ; the invocation to the
muse ; the reference to Olympian gods monitoring human actions and sometimes
posing a threat to them — to mention just the most conspicuous ones. Thus,
Virgil's *Aeneid* could seem to be but a Latin rendition of Homer's model.

A closer look, however, will reveal that embedded within this faithful
adoption of the Homeric model, are many novel elements and themes. I would like
to point out two such major innovations. First, Virgil made an ambitious move in
trying to « paste » Homer's two epic poems into one : the *Aeneid* combines the
Odyssey's adventurous story on the seas with the *Iliad*'s heroic battles on a
desired land, and interweaves these two story lines into one narrative with one
protagonist, Aeneas. The very first three words of the work (*arma virumque cano*)
suggest in that respect the structure of the whole work, whose first half is devoted
to narrating the wanderings of a lonely, exiled man (*vir*), and the last six books to
the bloody and heroic conquering (*arma*) of the new found *patria*, namely Rome.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Virgil hints at the very beginning
that he is *connecting* the legendary story of Aeneas, the Trojan prince, with
historical and even contemporary political developments. Aeneas is not only a
mythical figure, he is also the founding father of Virgil's contemporary
Rome. Furthermore, because Aeneas holds such a revered legendary position,
Virgil suggests in some other parts of the poem that he indirectly represents Rome's
contemporary ruler, Augustus. Thus, the myth about the founding father of Rome
is told not only for its own sake, but is also charged with actual ideological and
political overtones and motivations (see, for instance, Yavetz : 1988, pp. 250-257,
276-284).

Thus, while apparently only repeating Homer's generic model, Virgil was
also in fact introducing various innovations to that model, « tailoring » it to his
own poetical and ideological agenda.

Let us look now at the opening lines of another highly respected epic poem, Milton's *Paradise Lost* :

Of Man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of *Eden*, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
Of *Oreb*, or of *Sinai*, didst inspire
That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,
In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth
Rose out of *Chaos*. (Milton : 1962, pp. 5-6)

Milton's opening lines may lure us into thinking that he too is writing another instance of the model of epic poetry, here in the English tongue. Again, a few conspicuous prototypical traits of the classical model are evident in these opening lines : we have the statement of the subject of the poem ; the invocation of the muse ; and there is a reference to some lofty states and deeds. Milton may create the impression that he is only « filling in » the old model with some new, « updated » content. This new content is, however, highly explosive. In fact, throughout the whole work there is a constant tension between pagan and Christian concepts. There is an enormous difference, for example, between the pagan muse whom both Homer and Virgil invoked, on the one hand, and God's voice on Mount *Sinai* to which Milton refers, on the other : the former represents aesthetic inspiration, the latter — Truth (with a capital letter). Perhaps the most striking illustration of introducing a totally new concept into the old model is the Christian notion of a hero ; there is an almost open contradiction between pagan and Christian concepts of heroism — whereas the former cherishes strength and bravery, the latter advocates self-sacrifice. Thus, what may seem as just another manifestation of the highly respected generic model actually creates an acute sense of conflicting value systems.

A close reading of works that seemingly manifest a faithful repetition of a revered, canonical generic model, would often reveal, as we have just seen in the case of the *Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost*, that one should not overemphasize the binding force of past generic rules just in order to support the argument thàt in modern literature we witness a radical liberation from that force. The truth is that generic norms and rules always played a dialectical and complex role in literary creativity.

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It is true that generic conventions are not the dominant, let alone the only, norms that coerce the writing and the reception of literary works in modern and contemporary literature. Sometimes, the individual poetics of the writer, or the literary and artistic trend in which he or she is working (e.g. the expressionist movement), for example, may be factors that matter more than the question « To

what genre is the work related ? » (Margolin : 1973, p. 225). By conceding this, however, one does not have to jump to the unnecessary and unsubstantiated conclusion that genre is no longer functional in contemporary literary production and reception ([1]).

It is important to point out, first, that there are certain parts of literature, especially in what is known as popular or trivial or non-canonized literature (Even-Zohar : 1990, pp. 15-17), in which generic conventions still perform a very central and binding role. I would not go so far as to argue that the more popular a genre is, the more it is characterized by strict rules, and consequently the more its works are predictable — but there are no doubt some genres that may demonstrate this high correlation between popularity and conventionality, notably in popular media (e.g. soap operas). Children usually like repetitions of formulae and of stories ; and adults are sometimes like children in that respect. When we read popular romance or open the TV for our favourite soap opera, we expect an adherence to certain formulae concerning plot structure, types of characters, etc. And if the authors of our beloved series of romances or the creators of the latest soap opera series would attempt more originality, they might lose a great part of their audience ([2]).

Whereas the importance of generic rules is most evident in popular literature and the mass media, their significance in serious, complicated, « high » literature should not be underestimated. True, many effects of « high » literature depend on the *deviation* from certain norms or rules associated with generic tradition. These deviations may be blatant, questioning certain conventions that are deemed central or even essential with respect to a generic tradition : e.g. fourteen lines in a sonnet ; a happy ending in a comedy. In most cases, however, we do not face such a dramatic challenge ; more often we have different degrees of tension and of playful deviation vis-à-vis the (by then) established set of norms associated with a generic tradition : e.g. introducing an unexpected topic to the sonnet form ; embedding a comic scene in tragedy. As we saw earlier in the brief discussion of the opening lines of two famous epic poems, new, sometimes even provocatively novel elements seem to be introduced more on the *thematic* level, while relatively many structural traits tend to be preserved (for a perspective emphasizing the structural elements in the concept of a genre, see Sternberg : 1973).

Sometimes, the challenge to existing generic categories is part of a process of « initiating » a new genre into the literary scene. When Fielding introduced what he considered to be a new kind of literature — what would later be known as the dominant literary genre of the past two centuries, the novel — he was using, in a semi-serious tone, the labels of already familiar literary genres and modes : « a comic epic poem in prose ». (Fielding : 1977, p. 25) Moreover, even when we are facing literary works that challenge the existing generic divisions, or texts that

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(1) For the importance of genre in the communicative situation between writer and reader, see, for instance, (Scholes : 1974, pp. 129-139), (Dubrow : 1982, pp. 1-7) and (Ryan : 1981).

(2) For a lively presentation of the role of generic expectations in popular literature, evoked by « clues » such as titles, subtitles, cover designs, see (Beebee : 1994, pp. 1-12). For the place of the concept of genre in the media, see (Schmidt : 1987).

deliberately try to escape generic categorization, it is vital to acknowledge the fact that the effects of these texts *presuppose* identifying those generic conventions. When you rebel against an establishment, the significance of your acts depends upon the fact that the audience are aware of that establishment. Joyce's *Ulysses* by no means follows familiar generic rules. Still, the work's effectiveness much depends upon the playful, sometimes challenging relationships with various generic and stylistic conventions of English and Western literature.

Thus, the generic categories played, and, as I have tried to show, are still playing a major role in the literary communicative situation as orienting and interpretative keys (Dubrow : 1982, pp. 1-2). In order to describe systematically the effects of those parts that challenge generic categories, we need to use generic concepts, generic categories and refer to generic conventions. These conventions are assumed by writers and readers, even those who fiercely challenge them.

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After I have argued that generic categories and norms still function in various ways also in modern and contemporary literature — i.e., the importance of generic categories in literary practice — I would like to take issue with the second front on which the concept of genre is criticized. Here, the argument is that the concept of genre represents an old-fashioned, rigid, essentialist mode of thinking about literature, that ignores new developments in critical schools, notably deconstructionist and post-colonial trends [3].

Some sections of literature, especially post-modernist and avant-garde, may declare that they can do without generic divisions and may challenge the need to divide literary works into « kinds », « forms », and genres. Literary studies, however, do not have that luxury. By arguing the importance of the concept of genre, I am not suggesting a regression to a rigid or essentialist mode of discussing genres. Our concept of a genre should be flexible, and sensitive to the dialectical tension of innovation and tradition evident in the dynamics of almost every genre, and also to the intricate relations between the autonomous development of a genre and its relations with the cultural « environment » in which it functions.

The answer to the question « Why genre studies today ? » is very simple : any attempt to give a systematic description of the production and reception of literary texts that does not include a reference to generic categories is partial or even misleading. Despite the radical pronouncements about the obsolescence of the concept of genre, a brief look at any curriculum of almost any department of literary studies would reveal that generic categories are almost indispensable. Courses like « Introduction to *Poetry*, » « Elizabethan *Comedy*, » « Eighteenth century *Novel* » — constitute the hard core of any department of literary studies, and all use generic labels and concepts.

(3) For a lucid criticism of essentialistic theories of genre, see (Schaeffer : 1989, pp. 32-63) and (Fowler : 1982, pp. 20-53). For a radical deconstructionist challenge to the concept of genre, see (Derrida : 1980).

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Despite many historical and conceptual changes and challenges, the concept of genre seems still to hold an important and central position in literary studies. One major reason for its perennial and productive use throughout the ages, as I will argue, is that it can transcend a few constricting dichotomies that sometimes characterize literary studies. The concept of genre, when interpreted in a cautious way, helps us to understand the complex nature of literature, and at the same time — counter to the accepted ideas — offers a sophisticated and flexible way for analyzing and understanding the literary phenomenon.

Literary studies in the twentieth century, especially structuralist trends, were greatly influenced by modern linguistics. Thus, for instance, following de Saussure, the dichotomy of *langue* vs. *parole* was introduced into literary studies. If one draws an analogy from Saussurian linguistics, the objective of poetics would be to systematically describe the « *langue* » or, to follow Chomskean terminology, the « competence » of readers, i.e., the underlying conventions of the literary system, including genre conventions (Culler : 1975, pp. 8-10 ; 113-130). From that perspective, the particular texts that « belong » to a genre would be considered its « *parole* » — contingent manifestations, actualization of the underlying generic literary conventions.

Such an application of the linguistic opposition immediately calls for qualification. After all, the specific texts that are associated with certain generic traditions cannot be described as merely contingent manifestations of an underlying basic generic « code » in the same way that, say, different vocal actualization could be related to a certain phoneme. Specific literary works are more important than any specific manifestation of a parallel linguistic unit (part of the *parole*) because literary works, as opposed to the arbitrary choice of linguistic activity, have aesthetic and cultural significance. Moreover, a specific literary work bears a far more important role vis-à-vis the generic rules : particular texts not only manifest these rules, they are also constantly re-constituting and re-shaping them. Every new text that is associated with a generic tradition holds this dialectical relation with the generic norms : while following the tradition, it also re-moulds and re-creates it (Weitz : 1964, pp. 307-311 ; Todorov : 1975, p. 6).

Thus, when it comes to literary genres, we have to qualify the dichotomy of *langue* vs. *parole* and to re-formulate their relationship in dialectical terms : generic rules (the « *langue* ») constitute, but are also constantly being constituted by new specific works of art (the « *parole* ») continuing and challenging that generic tradition.

Another schematic dichotomy that the concept of genre seems to transcend is the one between *synchrony* and *diachrony*. A devoted Saussurian will privilege the former : namely, the constituting elements and functions of a linguistic or semiotic system at a given point in time. Consequently, a literary critic is expected

to concentrate on describing the literary system at a given point, including its genres, or focus on a specific genre at a given point in time.

But, it is almost impossible to give a comprehensive account of a given genre at a given point in time without any reference to its past and tradition. To provide a systematic description of Roman comedy without any reference to its Greek predecessors from whom it was freely borrowed and translated, would result in a very partial, poor, and even distorted picture of that genre. Could we describe the English sonnet without any reference to Petrarch ? How is it possible to describe Shakespeare's Sonnet 130 — with its close parody of Petrarchism — without referring to the conventions of Petrarchan sonnets ? The awareness of generic tradition is in most cases a vital part of the genre's contemporary life ; the playful relations with different layers of its past sometimes constitute an important part of its aesthetic experience. Thus, the schematic « synchrony » should in fact be treated as a mere methodological abstraction, and the diachronic dimension should be part of any responsible description of a genre.

In a complementary manner, a diachronic account could reveal recurring patterns of relations among elements and functions, hence — something like a « synchronic » system. One such typical pattern would be the move of marginal elements in a genre's tradition to the foreground of that tradition (e.g. the psychology of a character in comedy would become the centre of attention). Thus it would also look like a « synchronic » description with systemic relations, as Jakobson and Tynjanov have already indicated in their pioneering work : « every system necessarily exists as an evolution, whereas, on the other hand, evolution is inescapably of a systemic nature. » (Tynjanov and Jakobson : 1978, p. 80) In short, by applying the opposition of synchrony vs. diachrony to the field of genre studies, one learns of its built-in limitation, if taken in a mechanical way. If one wants to discuss genres adequately and comprehensively, one has to combine the synchronic and diachronic dimensions, including the past, the present, and even the future expectations of writers and readers. Guillén formulates this point aptly when he says that « the concept of genre looks forward and backward at the same time. Backward, toward the literary works that already exist. Forward, in the direction of the apprentice, the future writer, the informed critic. » (Guillén : 1971, p. 109) It is characteristic in that respect that the subtitle of Guillén's *Literature as System*, is « Essays toward the Theory of Literary *History* » — thus, the artificial opposition between synchrony (« system ») and diachrony (« history ») is challenged on the very title page.

The concept of literary genre may also provide a corrective to well known oppositions such as textual *elements* and *functions* : a genre is always a « package deal » of certain textual elements and certain functions ([4]). These

(4) A similar point is made by Wellek and Warren (1973, p. 231), when they talk of genre as connecting « inner » and « outer » textual form. Even-Zohar's concept of textual model (Even-Zohar : 1990, pp. 41-43) is close to my description of genre in that it also emphasizes the binding relations created in certain literary and cultural contexts between different aspects of the text.

generic « package deals » tend to bind certain textual elements (e.g. types of character ; or metrical pattern) to certain functions (e.g. comic effects) — at least until an attempt to shake up these habitual connections is made. Thus, for example, we would expect to meet buffoons in a comedy, and dactylic hexameter in a heroic epic poem, although there is nothing inherently « natural » or necessary about these generic « package deals. » Generic traditions seem to use certain *potentials* of certain elements (e.g. funny aspects in the appearance of a buffoon ; solemn resonance of dactylic hexameter), and to bind them to certain aesthetic, rhetorical functions.

Another important aspect of the use of the concept of genre is that it overcomes the sometimes artificial distinction between « *textual* » and « *extra-textual* » facts and evidence — an opposition that has been so dear to the New Critics. Generic conventions are not part of a text in the same sense that a word or a sentence is. They are nonetheless an important and central part in the reading and comprehension process of that text : they provide certain orienting and interpretative keys to that text (for a comprehensive survey of the relations between genre and intepretation, see Fowler : 1982, pp. 256-276).

Approaching literature from the generic point of view, could also teach us a lot about the dynamic nature of literary history : at each point there is a constant tension between what are considered the genre's « hard core » elements and what are considered its « marginal ». One may also learn many important things about the limits, but also the power, of periodization of literature : each new period re-moulds the genre's makeup, by bringing in new elements (sometimes formal but most commonly — thematic ones) or, what is even more common, by re-arranging existing elements, and by assigning old elements and patterns new meanings and functions : masking in Shakespearean comedies is not only a device to complicate the plot, as it used to be in Roman comedies, but is also a way for a character to reveal his or her « true » identity (e.g. Viola's boy-like characteristics in *Twelfth Night*).

While studying some genres, we may also learn an invaluable lesson about the complex relationships between literary and non-literary phenomena. To follow the history, the developments, and the constituting elements of the diary, the autobiography, the epistolary novel, the science fiction (to mention but a few conspicuous cases) could teach us many interesting things about the sometimes fluid relations between literature and neighbouring linguistic, non-literary, communicative activities (this point has already been noted in Tynjanov's pioneering work : 1978, pp. 70-74).

To be involved in genre studies means also to learn about the dialectic of the *individual*, idiosyncratic talent, on the one hand, and the *social convention*, on the other. The individual talent always puts its mark on the social conventions, but is also coerced by them. Thus, here too we learn that instead of dichotomies, we should be talking of intimate dialectical relations. A writer who wishes to contribute to a generic tradition has to take into account what has been done before he or she

entered the scene. Knowing this does not mean abiding by everything that has been established. What part will an author accept, in what ways will he or she express the unique nature of his or her creative power ? This remains, and should remain, an open question.

To study literary genres means also to be constantly aware of the *boundaries* and the barriers between nations and languages and cultures, but also of the possibilities *to cross these boundaries* and to create an interesting dialogue — in the form of influence, resistance, incorporation, imitation, translation, filling gaps or needs of a deficient literary system (for the latter aspect, see Even-Zohar : 1990, p. 69), etc. — between different cultures. When one follows the long history of dramatic comedy, for instance, one learns about the significant differences between Greek, Roman, English, Italian and French cultures — but also about threads that bind them together as part of Western culture.

Studying literary genres is also a way to use, without being tied to, the achievements of different schools and approaches in literary studies. When you study the way a literary genre functions and evolves, you have to take into consideration aspects of its form and makeup (hence « textual, structural approach », e.g. Scholes : 1974, pp. 117-141 ; Sternberg : 1973), the ways generic conventions are activated by actual readers (hence « reader-response criticism », e.g. Iser : 1978 ; « empirical literary studies », e.g. Schmidt : 1987 ; Fishelov : 1995b ; « cognitive approach », e.g. Fishelov : 1995a) ; how these conventions are received and modulated in the social context (hence « reception theory », e.g. Jauss : 1982), and the relationship between literary genres and forms and the cultural and ideological factors (hence « Bakhtinian perspectives on genre », e.g. Bakhtin : 1985, pp. 129-141 ; « ideological perspective », e.g. Beebee : 1994). Thus, the concept of literary genre directs us to make a fruitful use of various critical tools, methods and conceptual frameworks that have been developed within different conceptual frameworks, without committing ourselves dogmatically to any of them.

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To conclude : to go back to what was the central concept of the first systematical treatment of literature, i.e., to the concept of genre in Aristotle's *Poetics*, is by no means a regression. The *Poetics'* opening words — « I propose to treat of Poetry in itself and of its several species » (Butcher ; 1895, p. 7) — have not only divided literary critics into « two hostile camps : genre critics (Aristotelian and otherwise) and their opponents who would speak of "poetry itself," rejecting "its kinds" as inherently destructive of the unique qualities of the literary object. » (Richter : 1974, p. 453) These words call attention to a fundamental aspect of literary structure, production and reception — tacitly acknowledged even by opponents of the concept, in their practical criticism. Thus, to focus on the concept of genre is to focus our attention on a sophisticated critical

concept that reveals the complex, multifaceted nature of the literary phenomena. It also helps us to understand the dynamic nature of literary structure, production and reception throughout history, liberating us from certain rigid dichotomies that we sometimes find in literary studies, and enabling us to use the achievements of heterogeneous schools of criticism.

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