

CRITICAL EXCHANGE # 13: SPRING 1983

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LADY ROWENA BESTOWS THE CHAPLET ON "THE DISMEMBERED," AFTER THE TOURNAMENT. —Chap. vi

## GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

James J. Sosnoski

Critical Exchange is a journal of research in progress. It attempts to bridge the gap between the moment of critical articulation and the time of its publication. Under the auspices of the Society for Critical Exchange (SCE), scholars actively involved in researching issues central to the development of contemporary literary theory are brought together to "exchange" their views. Within months of the event, an edited record of their communal inquiry is published in these pages.

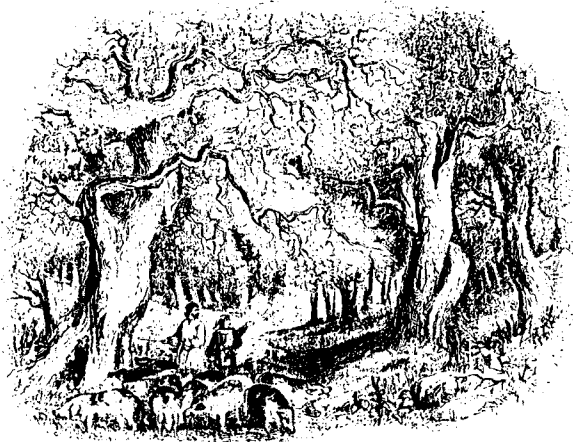
This is the first issue of Critical Exchange (CEX). It is numbered 13 to reflect the circumstance that it continues SCE Reports, which, in the past, contained the proceedings of SCE's MLA session. This issue is devoted to the 1982 MLA session on literary change. It reprints Professor Cohen's essay and includes the commentaries of Professors Riffaterre, White, Flieger, Ford, Harkin and Jay. Susan Elliott, Clark University, served as guest editor.

CEX 14 will publish the proceeding of "A Symposium with Fredric Jameson" which was held in the Fall of 1982 at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. It will feature Jameson's "The Ideology of Space" and will include commentaries on Jameson's work. Steve Nimis, Miami University, will be guest editor of this issue.

Critical Exchange is circulated only among the members of the Society for Critical Exchange. The Spring issue of CEX is usually devoted to the SCE MLA session. The Fall issue is usually devoted to some other SCE sponsored event. Any member of SCE is welcome to develop a proposal for an "exchange"; and, if it is accepted by the Editorial Board, to guest edit the proceedings. If you have an idea for an "exchange," please write or call.

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HURTH AND WANDA DRIVING HOME THE SWINE.—Chap. I

GUEST EDITOR'S PREFACE:

THEORETICAL WRITING AS A KIND OF CHANGE

Susan Merritt Elliott

Innovative change requires toleration of uncertainty: in order to initiate change, as opposed to passively allowing it to take place, one must engage in activities whose outcome one may not be able to predict. Merely waiting for change to happen without doing anything oneself to bring it about, as Vladimir and Estragon do in *Waiting for Godot*, results in painful insecurity and loss of self-confidence in one's own past and current practices—which has become commonplace. Engaging in activities merely "to pass the time," moreover, produces no change of status: the status quo persists, and we "do not move."

Active pursuit of new modes of thought and the writing behaviors communicating them, built upon the old yet different from them, entails taking risks. These risks may seem to produce new modes of certainty; even the kind that holds that nothing is certain can feel like a new certainty. Take the example of the concept of entropy; borrowed from physics, it has been applied to modes of thought in other disciplines, including that of literary studies. While entropy is a measure of uncertainty, as a construct itself, it serves some as a certitude.

Some practitioners of our profession, more able to question their own practices and to enjoy the challenge and excitement generated by the questioning and formulating of answers than others who become mired down in anxiety and self-doubt when the stability of their systems of belief are threatened, become innovators, leaders of others willing to listen, to hear and to learn, and perhaps then to go on to become innovators themselves.

Such an innovator is Professor Ralph Cohen, whose essay "A Propaedeutic for Literary Change" is the focus of this (first) issue of *Critical Exchange*. Ralph Cohen is the leading spokesperson for new directions in literary study. As editor of *New Literary History*, he has heralded new modes

of thought, bringing them to his reader's attention and thus nurturing them.

Each of the essays written as responses to Professor Cohen's paper and also presented at the MLA Convention in Los Angeles, in December 1982, illustrates several of his key assumptions about the nature of change, the kinds of change, and explanations of change: (1) "that what is 'literary' is what authors, critics, theorists have identified at the same time or at different times as 'literary';" (2) "that change can be seen only against continuity;" (3) that in order to account for "the kinds of change" that he proposes to discuss, "the term 'text' will not serve," and "what is needed is to redefine every literary 'text' as a member of a genre;" (4) that "genre can be understood as a family term;" (5) "that there exists no such phenomenon as 'writing' which escapes forms of genres;" and (6) that "a theory of literary change will explain that such a shift in the generic hierarchy and in the reconceptualizing of genres [seen as now taking place] is a form of resistance to and subversion of received assumptions and practices of explanation."

The response essays published in this issue also illustrate Cohen's point that "any attempt to discuss change in a genre system . . . cannot avoid explanatory models for history or politics or anthropology, or some other field in which change is a factor." For example, Hayden White's explanatory model--the natural family--comes from biology and social history (in response to White, Cohen explains that he himself had the law in mind); Michael Riffaterre takes his models from linguistics and reading theory and poetry; Jerry Aline Flieger's explanatory models come from psychoanalysis, Marxism, and literary criticism; Gregory Jay, James E. Ford, and Patricia Harkin take their models from literary or critical history and theory.

What Cohen writes about "the nature of literary change," then, can be seen as applying to these essays too: "The nature of literary change is thus a study of alterations which can only be understood in terms of the persistence of non-altered elements of frameworks which provide an identity;" "literary change is always connected with or characterized by concepts of knowledge, language, and structure that define some changes as variations of these and others as contradicting, rejecting, or overturning them" (my emphases). "The persistence of non-altered elements of frameworks which provide an identity" are not, for Cohen, therefore,

solely textual elements but also contextual elements: conceptual forms expressed in writing and hence themselves members of genres.

At the end of his essay, "The Generic Basis of Narrative History of Literary Change," James Ford "would even venture to predict that in spite of their incommensurate aims, the most radical contextualist will be able to find much in the essay to appropriate in the service of such concepts as impermanence, difference, tracings, and intertextuality." While White, Riffaterre, Jay, Flieger, and Harkin have found much in the essay to appropriate in the service of such concepts, both Riffaterre and Flieger express the most concern about what Cohen may be saying about what is "literary," despite his expressed emphasis that what is "literary" is subject to the kind of change he defines. Their responses indicate the kind of "resistance" and "subversion" of which Cohen speaks with regard to current conceptual changes in literary theory.

Thus, in "Literary Change and Literariness," Riffaterre stresses the importance of the reader in the definition of the literary and the function of intertextuality in the reading of literature, because he feels that Cohen omits these considerations. Cohen's position, it seems to me, would regard the reader as a social convention of literature also subject to change.

In "Changing the Terms: Identity Crisis in the Literary Process," Flieger often takes issue with what she perceives as Cohen's conservatism, quite overturning Ford's prediction. Though Cohen explicitly states that "change is then a form of adaptation or 'revolution,'" Flieger argues that from Cohen's "perspective," "change . . . may be construed as a kind of dismemberment of an 'original' corpus, rather than a process of adaptation or growth." Though Cohen does say that ". . . it is the nature of literary structures that change and persistence are present together," Flieger still perceives a "bias in favor of textual identity" in his position.

Flieger's procedure is to look for Cohen's assumptions as if they were embedded in his statements, to ferret out what he really thinks is "literary," rather than to take his initial definition of his assumption about what is "literary" at face value, as if one can never say what one does in fact mean. This procedure reflects her assumptions about what is

"literary" (which are perhaps based on her own immersion in psychoanalysis, Marxism, and post-modern literature and criticism). She treats Cohen's "Propaedeutic" as a literary text, trying to define underlying meanings beneath the text, in the subtext. As Cohen has argued in "The Statements Literary Texts Do Not Make", ". . . we ought not to forget that 'subtext' is a metaphor for an author's unstated, unwritten 'text.' The actual subtext is written by the critic, who, in writing it, becomes himself an author" (New Literary History, 13 [1982], p. 381).

As Cohen points out in the "Propaedeutic," "explanations in literary study are always made in terms of the aims of the explainer." Fliieger and all the other writers represented here, including myself and Cohen, illustrate this point. It is my guess that most of the resistance to what Cohen says has to do with this notion, which may be perceived by some as "contextualist" or even "subjectivist." And while Ford has attempted to predict what "the most radical contextualist" might write in response to Cohen's essay, I find that the responses seem to bear out Cohen's own prediction: "The pursuit of inquiries into literary change . . . has an element of the unpredictable . . ." If we could predict what Riffaterre or White or any other writer represented here would say, we would not need them to say it, and there would be no change.

Ford rejects Cohen's "mixed" concept of genre, saying ". . . no work can 'belong' to more than one genre if, as I believe, a single (though possibly complex) principle of subordination is the essence of a genre." In holding to this "traditional" or "conservative" position, however, Ford offers a response to Cohen's own attempt to redefine genre which illustrates that the very attempt at redefinition is an instance of literary-critical change, one which Ford himself is resisting and subverting.

In the discussion of the responses to his essay during the MLA sessions, Professor Cohen expressed his appreciation of Gregory Jay's attempt, in "Genre and Literary Change," to examine Cohen's own previous writings. Jay's essay may be seen, then, as an illustration of a kind of written response that follows a familiar critical convention, which is therefore identifiable: namely, surveying past writings in order to define a context for the new addition: "The propositions set forth in this propaedeutic summarize and extend the rhetorical view of literary history previously articulated by Cohen in his

analyses of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poetry." Jay both follows and departs from the critical convention by interpreting the past work of the author (in this case, Cohen) in the context of Jay's own post-structuralist interests: "Is it too speculative to read here a critical allegory about literary change and literary history?" and he examines Cohen's formulations of critical concepts as they relate to those of past and present critics (e.g., Eliot, Harold Bloom). For Jay, "one value . . . of recent criticism has been its ingenuity in detecting the continuity of rhetorical and conceptual structures that are transgeneric"; he sees Cohen's "rhetoric of genres" as aiding the "project" of Marx, Freud, Nietzsche ("their elaboration of a mode for analyzing, and thus transforming, the hidden agenda or structure composing apparently stable or natural identities"), with certain limitations: "it seems limited when appearing to reassert the privilege of received categories or to identify a work with any single genre." Cohen, however, does emphasize the mixed modes of any literary work and that the generic identification is affected by the "aims" or motives of critics, theorists, and other authors. While I believe that Cohen would agree with Jay that ". . . the identity of a genre" is "an 'extratextual' logos produced by the history of differences it purports to originate and govern," his own language does not generally employ the same post-structuralist, conventional lingo (linguistic code). It is perhaps Cohen's adherence to a different language convention that enables Ford to have some agreement with him, whereas Ford would depart at precisely the juncture that Cohen and Jay intersect.

My own point is that these responses to Cohen's paper illustrate his point about the concepts of literary change: one can see in each response "the persistence of non-altered elements of frameworks which provide an identity"--they are hence recognizable forms or genres of written response to a written paper on a theoretical issue; and they are--at the same time--forms of adaptation or of 'revolution' for the given writer in response to what Cohen has said. As an essay, none is exactly the same as anything else that the author has written before, yet there are similarities: ". . . it is the nature of literary structures that change and persistence are present together."

White considers Cohen's essay in the context of "an older humanistic tradition" whose concern was "human beings in the course of their self-realizations," a personalization

of literary-historical "entities." He performs a metahistorical analysis of Cohen's literary history and, hence, extends his already established approach to a new subject. Riffaterre continues his pursuit of the "reader" and the "intertext," while pursuing now also "literariness" in response to Cohen's stated position. Flieger's conjunction of psychoanalysis, Marxism, and deconstructionism expresses a new conservatism of her own. Jay surveys the previous writings of Cohen while adapting an old critical convention to a newer critical thinking. Ford considers a past debate between literary critics as a framework for placing Cohen's current viewpoint--finding a "generic basis" for it in his own procedures while he addresses Cohen's concept of genre. Harkin examines the change in a literary convention ("the ingenue conventions of the eighteenth-century epistolary novel") used by three novelists (Richardson, Scott, and Burney) as an instance of literary change.

Patricia Harkin ends her essay "Genre and the Problem of Character in Literary Change" by saying, ". . . it is not clear to me that Mr. White's construction [that a new genre is a "reflection" of the changing codes of history writing] 'misconstrues' the relation between language and genre, as Cohen charges, by refusing to take into account the fact that 'genres are constituted by linguistic codes that are inconsistent in their implications.'" I would suggest to her that Cohen may be arguing that the "implications" of "linguistic codes" are "inconsistent" because authors, critics, theorists who use the codes for writing and other interpretive activities are not consistent--that their practices change even as they stay the same. (This may be seen through the kind of examination that Jay does with Cohen's own writings; one could do the same with the writings of White and Riffaterre.) Their interpretations of the linguistic codes are offered in these constantly changing, constantly staying-the-same linguistic codes: ". . . it is the nature of literary structures--and these would include linguistic codes themselves--that change and persistence are present together"; "moreover," Cohen argues, "the reading by scholars of any past work involves the imposition of their own linguistic code upon one of the past."

Thus, while Harkin examines the literary convention of the ingenue as used in the eighteenth-century epistolary novel (a genre that post-eighteenth-century writers have named), her reading of the novels imposes her own (current) linguistic code upon that of the past novelist. In this way, her code involves terms from Hayden White that cannot be said to have been current

in eighteenth-century writing (or thinking) and therefore change the implications of the convention of the ingenue even as she observes its continuities (such as the ending in marriages enabling a new social order). That is to say, her observations about the implications of the changes in this particular eighteenth-century literary convention (which at that time was not considered a convention in the same way as it is now) are potentially revolutionary: through her current examination of it in the framework of a theoretical inquiry, the convention (part of a linguistic code) changes even as it persists. Literary ingenues can never appear the same as they could before her scrutiny of them in this context.

But what has changed is not the convention or even the practice of a convention; what has changed is her (and now our) concept of the convention. As Hayden White observes in Metahistory, which Harkin defines as in part an examination of "the tendency of Enlightenment historians to 'ironize' history writing": ". . . the very claim to have distinguished a past from a present world, implies a conception of the form that knowledge of the present world also must take, insofar as it is continuous with that past world. Commitment to a particular form of knowledge predetermines the kinds of generalizations one can make about the present world, the kinds of knowledge one can have of it, and hence the kinds of projects one can legitimately conceive for changing that present or for maintaining it in its present form indefinitely" ("Introduction," Metahistory [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973], p. 21). Given one's own present commitment or lack of commitment to the "particular form of knowledge" expressed in this statement by White, one may or may not be able to accept it and to apply it to one's own work. Commitments may change too.

However far the writer has been able to progress after reading and thinking and writing about Cohen's position is (1) a measure of how much that writer has learned from the essay and, (2) a measure of the heuristic value of the essay as a kind of writing. The value of Cohen's "Propaedeutic" is in the interaction between it and its readers: ultimately, in the responses to the paper (and the responses to the responses . . .); in its having helped its readers to experience a change in their own consciousness of his subject, and, finally, in his having been the stimulus of their greater understanding.

Writing has this power to affect people's minds, to alter their points of view. But while their minds to some degree change, to some degree they also stay the same: persistence and change together. Changing people's minds--their way of seeing--is a process. Revolutions--and all human revolutions are conceptual in nature--take time. They require both persistence and the willingness to change. And, to vary the allusion, there is motive to this apparent madness of our theoretical pursuits: we want things to get better, however much we may want things to stay the same. While we may say we welcome change, we also may fear it.

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MIRIAM DANCES BEFORE PHARAOH'S DAUGHTER TO BRING HIM HIS SON.—CHAP. XXII

## A PROPAEDEUTIC FOR LITERARY CHANGE

Ralph Cohen

I wish in this short paper to touch on three aspects of literary change: (1) the nature of change; (2) the kinds of change; (3) explanations of change. I do not wish to debate the meanings of the term "literary," and I shall, therefore, assume that what is "literary" is what authors, critics, theorists have identified at the same time or at different times as "literary." The fact that such authorities may disagree about the significance of "literary" will in no way affect the inquiry I propose. My aim is to offer a propaedeutic for a study of literary change.

### I. The Nature of Literary Change

Any discussion of literary change implies that there is a stable entity which can be divisible into parts. If a part of this entity changes, the gestalt can still be recognized; there remains a continuity which is necessary for change to take place. Change is opposed to the concept of changelessness on the one hand and differentness on the other. Changelessness undergoes no alterations of its parts. Differentness (and this applies to at least two events, situations, texts, etc.) refers to unrelated instances. Robert Nisbet puts it this way: "Change is a succession of differences in time in a persisting identity."<sup>1</sup> And he goes on to say that "only when the succession of differences in time may be seen to relate to some object, entity or being the identity of which persists through all the successive differences, can change be said to have occurred."<sup>2</sup> Nisbet is referring to social change, and differences in time are necessary for change in society to take place. But if, for example, one discusses changes in the meaning of the word "wit" in the *Essay on Criticism*, the idea of time is of trivial importance: change of meaning here is not governed by time but by context. Different contexts, different meanings. This steers us at once to further discriminations. Semantic change need not imply change of concept. In fact, it indicates the variations that fall within the range of a single word. It is quite another case to consider period change or style change in

which concepts undergo alteration despite the continuity that persists among parts or elements of a period or a "style." To relate literary change to concepts of thought and feeling or to forms of authorial and reader consciousness is to realize that literary change is connected with larger frameworks of change in nature and in man. Change is one of the ways in which we describe natural events: a seed "becomes" a seedling, a caterpillar "becomes" a butterfly; water "becomes" (changes into) steam. These are changes of shape with underlying identities. In the first two examples, we have a progress in which the change is seen to be inherent in the seed or in the stages of growth. In the third, the transformation retains the same chemical properties though these have turned from liquid to gas. Thus, the study of change in all these cases involves frameworks from botany or entomology or chemistry.

Consider the problem of identity and form change in mythological stories. Zeus, Hera, and other Greek gods and goddesses are constantly changing shape. Such form change, whatever its aim, is governed by a consciousness of the god's power and the god's knowledge that whether he becomes a bird or a beast, he can return to his original form. In other words, the language, soul, or spirit retains an identity. In literary texts, transformations of shape that retain identity are common. We can see this clearly in Apuleius' story written in the second century A.D. of Lucius who is transformed into an ass though he continues to think in the language of a human being: "though I was no longer Lucius, and to all appearances a complete ass, a mere beast of burden, I still retained my mental faculties."<sup>3</sup> Or consider the famous twentieth-century story which begins "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a giant insect."<sup>4</sup> Gregor's shape has changed but he continues to think in human language and to be concerned about his human affairs.

My point is that change can be seen only against continuity, and in literary study, continuity can be studied only against or in contrast to change. The reason for this is that each literary text is always different from all others --no matter how slight the difference. However, the term "text" will not serve me in accounting for the kinds of change that I propose to discuss. What is needed is to redefine every literary "text" as a member of a genre. In doing so,

it is possible to find that every text includes some elements from its generic past and others that relate to its synchronic present. Every text thus can be understood as multi-dimensional, possessing elements which constitute it as a member of one or more genres and which relate it to other texts in different genres.

I realize that numerous contemporary critics and theorists consider received generic classifications discredited, and I share their opinion. But I find no need to identify genre with such received categories (those that Maria Corti identifies) as "abstract, atemporal," didactic, or those that are "historic, diachronic, inductive."<sup>5</sup> Maria Corti's semiotic approach is to relate genres to the "universe of senders and addressees" and to concern herself with the problems of the transformation of genres. Other theorists, like Tzvetan Todorov and Michel Bakhtin have also redefined "genre" without accepting the older and defunct classifications. After all, terms like "trace," "discourse," "absence" have been redefined, and there is no reason to assume that genre need be excluded from this process, especially since, as a critical formulation, it makes accessible an understanding of literary change.

In this new sense, genre can be understood as a family term, constituted by elements or parts such as meter, character, types of rhetoric, and discourse to produce certain effects. These elements can, of course, appear in different genres, each genre being identified by the nature of their combination and the effects produced. It is not surprising that genres differ in comprehensiveness and scale. A proverb can be part of a tragedy or comedy or a book of proverbs; a tragedy that is considered a performance genre by one critic may be considered a poem by another. The Pentateuch may be considered a sacred narrative at one time and a secular narrative at another. My point is that "writing" is identified in generic terms and that there exists no such phenomenon as "writing" which escapes form or genres. This in no way is meant to imply that a text belongs only to one genre. *The Essay on Criticism*, e.g., is obviously both a didactic poem and a critical text. Even an author may recognize that his text can be interpreted as belonging to more than one genre. Henry Fielding calls *Joseph Andrews* "a comic romance," which he defines as a "comic epic poem in prose; differing from comedy, as the serious epic from tragedy: its action being more extended and comprehensive; containing a much



larger circle of incidents, and introducing a greater variety of characters."<sup>6</sup> Relying on epic, comedy, and romance, this definition indicates that for Fielding the work possessed elements from all three genres that were combined in imitation of Don Quixote.

Without proceeding to a theory of genre, it may be appropriate to note that because genre has some continuity of elements and effects, it provides a basis for locating which elements have been changed or added or omitted. The term "genre" indicates the kind of changes it can deal with. The term has its source in the Latin "genus," which refers to "kind" or "sort" or "species" or "class." Its root terms are "genere," "gignere"—to beget and (in the passive) to be born. "Genre" can refer to a member of a class or a whole class; it can refer to how a class is constituted (the varied members); it can refer to a changing process, or to the members of a class as definite and unchanging, a product. It has the same root as "gender" and, in being related to gender, indicates the naturalistic distinctions that are implied. Genres have many elements in common but they do have distinct ends that change according to the historical situation.

If we consider the kind of changes that are generic, we note changes within a genre and changes between genres. Maria Corti puts it this way: "A genre may be transformed by itself from the inside by a change in the function of one of its constitutive elements, following which the traits that are secondary in one era become primary in another; the genre reproduces like a microsystem those functional variations that generate the very movement of literature" and again "a genre is also transformed by changes in other genres in the literary system, which means that there cannot be a history of a genre in isolation; on the contrary, every phenomenon of correlation and influence must be considered."<sup>7</sup>

Any attempt to discuss change in a genre system, however, cannot avoid explanatory models from history or politics or anthropology or some other field in which change is a factor. But the subject matter of literature complicates the uses of any model. In any period there are texts from the past that are treated as present and living works, there are genres that have been disregarded or are minimally practiced, and there are genres that are dominant and those that are

considered minor or short forms. Those that are part of the living literature form a hierarchy. The concepts that govern such a hierarchy will explain both the nature of the hierarchy and the values attributed to it. Thus, every text is an intersection of at least two systems: a diachronic generic system and a synchronic, hierarchical one.

Such systems are constructed by critics to explain continuities and discontinuities in relating particular works or groups of works to the kinds of changes that are posited. Are changes made consciously by authors or formulated by critics? To put the question in this way is to pose a separation that need not be honored. Since every text shares elements with others and introduces new elements, the issue of change is not properly discriminated by such differences. Changes may be no more than variations of underlying period concepts of organization, philosophy, or language, and there is no necessary relation between a new genre and a new concept. A new genre such as the novel in the eighteenth century may conform to the concepts underlying the received genres, may, indeed, be no more than a variation of them. On the other hand, it is possible for Wordsworth correctly to claim that his rejection of eighteenth-century poetic language and the concepts of modification and epistemology underlying them leads to a new kind of poetic language and artistic vision.

The consciousness of change may apply to the individual writer, but the descriptions of beginnings and endings of periods or movements are formulated after the fact by critics and scholars. These are fictions that depend on the critic's view of what texts constitute a period and why he wishes to divide ongoing time in this particular manner. I shall return to these problems in my discussion of the explanations of change, but it is necessary to note here that the subject matters selected for change—as, for example, changing attitudes to women or the changing role of the father—can be derived from disciplines other than literature. In this sense, some inquiries into change result from knowledge of change developed in other areas such as psychoanalysis or linguistics or history. The pursuit of inquiries into literary change, therefore, has an element of the unpredictable, and, indeed, the multiplicity of instances that would be considered literary changes have yet to be charted.

Since change inevitably involves a relation with continuity, it will follow that discontinuities will entail the persistence of some larger entity. If there is a change in the diction of poetry, what persists is the relation of diction to thought or to poetic structure or to a speaker. If a particular genre like the sonnet is not written over a period of time, what persists is the relation of this omission to a poetic hierarchy or to the lyric poems that are written. And if a period ends and a new period begins, what persists is a hypothesis (or a theory) about the process of periodization or about the persistence of some elements or the discontinuity of others from one period to another.

The nature of literary change is thus a study of alterations which can only be understood in terms of the persistence of nonaltered elements of frameworks that provide an identity. Literary change is always connected with or characterized by concepts of knowledge, language, and structure that define some changes as variations of these and others as contradicting, rejecting, or overturning them. Change is then a form of adaptation or of "revolution." But it is the nature of literary structures that change and persistence are present together. The kinds of relations between them account for the kinds of changes critics identify.

## II. Kinds of Change

The kinds of change mentioned by critics are so varied that it seems difficult to organize them into coherent groups. Indeed, discussions of change occur in almost all texts although there seems little theoretical awareness of the problems involved. I shall focus on changes within a text (an instance of a genre), changes that apply to groups of texts (within one or more genres), and changes that are the result of the impact of non-literary institutions and actions upon literary texts.

Within a single text we note the changes that take place in its production. This can involve a study of work sheets or revisions in which the changes are examined in terms of certain persistent elements. Such study may serve to reveal the adaptations appropriate to support or supplement or expand concepts governing a genre. Or it may indicate the network of elements from different genres with

which a work is being connected. Whether in work sheets or in print, the revisions will be seen as trivial, as adapted to received concepts, or as resistant to them.

In this respect a generic theory will make it necessary to provide a revisionary vocabulary of generic change. If satires that are exemplary are seen by Dryden as heroic poems, this conceptual change is the result of redefining satire by including heroic elements in it. When Meyer Abrams describes the "greater Romantic lyric" as a development of the georgic descriptive poem, he must provide a series of revisionary or developmental procedures that can "transform" one kind of poem into another. And this must be a matter of the ratio of change to persistence of elements. The kind of change that an individual text undergoes can involve the placement of a sermon, for example, into the text of a novel--as in *Tristram Shandy*. The insertion of one genre into another so that the whole becomes a part implies the comprehensiveness of genres and may indicate the nature of a generic hierarchy. But can one genre be transformed into another? Can a sonnet be transformed into the greater Romantic lyric? Does the epic become transformed into the novel?

The transformation image in botany or chemistry presupposes that change is either an evolution of an identity or the retention of an identity in different form. In order to explain literary transformation as a change, for example, the critic needs to argue that the greater Romantic lyric is inherent in the georgic descriptive poem or that it is a member of the same family of genres. It might be possible to argue, for example, that the ten-line stanza that Keats developed for his odes is a variant of the sonnet form--a quatrain and a sestet instead of two quatrains and a sestet. But then one would have to argue that the sonnet and Keats's odes compose a family that displaces rather than transforms the georgic descriptive poem. Whatever similarities of imagery or rhetorical procedures the genres share, these are connections, not evolutionary developments.

Among the kinds of changes in literature are those that involve parody or burlesque of noncomic genres. In such conversions there may be an opposition or an attack upon the values attributed to the original text. But parodies often aim to draw attention to the values of the ori-

ginal by indicating the pleasures that can be taken in it. This is often the case with ballad parodies.

I have suggested that genre study seems to me the most adequate procedure for discussing change, but many of my colleagues prefer to consider texts as composed of words or sentences and consider genres as units resulting from these initial combinations. For such critics literary change becomes a consequence of changes in a linguistic code. Hayden White, basing his discussion of change in literary history upon Roman Jakobson's sixfold model of the literary field, remarks that changes in the linguistic code "will in turn be reflected in changes both in the cognitive content of literary works (the messages) and the modes of contact (genres) in which messages are transmitted and received."<sup>8</sup> In this view the changes in language determine the kind of genres most appropriate for the changed messages: In a given period and place in history, the system of encodation and decodation permits the transmission of certain kinds of messages regarding one context and not others; and it will favor those genres adequate to the establishment of contacts between different points in the whole communication system represented by language in general. Significant periods of literary change will thus be signaled by changes in the linguistic code; changes in the code will in turn be reflected in changes in both the cognitive content of literary works (the messages) and the modes of contact (genres) in which messages are transmitted and received. Changes in the code, finally, can be conceived to be reflective of changes in the historico-natural context in which a given language game is being played.

Now this is an important hypothesis regarding the relation of "language" to genre. And it begins with the assumption that since language is a literary component shared by "the context, the audience, the artist, and the work alike," any statements about literary change must be related to "the more general field of linguistic transformation."<sup>9</sup> What we have here is the claim that literary texts are read in language and written in language and that the system of incodation and decodation define the transmission or prohibition of messages.

Such a hypothesis seems to me to misconstrue the relation between language and genre. Although genres are

language structures, they are not reducible to language nor are they merely reflections of changes in the language code. Because every text is an instance of a genre (at least one), genre as a structure always includes features that have continuity with the past--whether these are compositional or metrical or thematic, etc.--and features that are innovative. Genre by this definition is constituted by linguistic codes that are inconsistent in their implications; moreover, the reading by scholars of any past work involves the imposition of their own linguistic code upon one of the past.

But in another sense, such a view of change overlooks the control a literary genre exercises upon the codes appropriate to it at any historical moment. The primacy of tragedy and comedy or of kinds of lyric poetry alters the conception of the codes appropriate to each genre. The choice of genre becomes not a linguistic act but a social one which determines the linguistic. If one takes a ballad like "The Ballad of Jane Shore" and converts it into a tragedy, the historical situation of the genre dictates that the characters will have to be elevated and the subject related to affairs of state. When a novel is converted into a film, it is self-evident that the visual imagery will dictate the possibilities of verbal transformation.

Consider one other valuable analysis of literary change, that of Michael Riffaterre. He finds that language forms a descriptive system "built of nouns, adjectives, ready-made sentences--cliches; stereotyped figures, arranged around a kernel word that fits a mental model of the reality represented by that word."<sup>10</sup> Such systems function differently in different genres and at different times. Now Michael Riffaterre wishes to stress the language system current at a particular time, and, indeed, he wisely urges that its value in contributing to a more adequate study of historical analysis and change: "Style analysis should contribute to thematology in future by including all descriptive systems in these compilations arranged according to type, indicating their generic and chronological distribution."<sup>11</sup>

Such a hypothesis of descriptive systems is transgeneric. It may be found in whatever genres are current at a particular time. But can we accept this version of continuity and change of a descriptive system within a genre without knowing

its role in the structure of genre? Do such systems arise exclusive of the genres in which they are found in order to fit some abstract mental model of reality? Does it not seem more likely that such systems would arise culturally as extrapolations from generic explanations? That such systems exist as abstractions providing only some similarities in any specific instance?

In order to describe the kinds of changes that exist among groups of genres, the critic must posit such abstract entities as norms, epistemes, periods, individual and period "styles," "modes of writing," etc. With regard to change, these groupings imply a systematic approach to literary study; they aim to locate similarities among diverse individual texts and to explain the changes that--as a group--such texts undergo. (Of course, the identification of texts as "literary" or "literature" belongs with inquiries about changes governing the nature of literary study.)

If we wish to discuss changes among "norms" or "periods," it will be apparent that the definition of what these are must precede any analysis of change pertinent to them. When Mukarovsky defined a norm "as a publicly acknowledged goal with respect to which value is perceived as existing independently of an individual and his subjective decisions,"<sup>12</sup> he relied on a "so-called collective awareness."<sup>13</sup> He realized there are not only competing norms, but that norms are constantly being undermined. The relation between norm continuity and discontinuity becomes too elusive to pursue and thus the beginnings and endings of norms, the numbers and kinds of works and elements involved become resistant to systematization. A much simpler procedure for dealing with norm change is offered by Thomas Kuhn, the historian of science. He tracks the beginning and ending of a scientific paradigm by referring to common institutional procedures used in educating scientists, to a practical institutional "norm."

Any application of Kuhnian "normal science" to literary study has to substitute concepts of generic expectations or common problem-solving for institutional practice. But because, in literary study, these are always multiple, the notion of a unified "norm" seems unusable. As for multiple norms, these seem to pose problems about their discontinuance.

Periods no less than norms are critical abstractions or fictions, and any attempt to explain period change must do so within a framework of persistence between periods. Does a period consist of "literary" texts written within a particular time span or of literary texts available in a time span or of those that writers and readers find valuable? In any time period there are texts composed in earlier times; are these to be considered part of the "period"? It is difficult to avoid the view that texts which form part of a canon regardless of when they were composed do indeed form part of a period. This means that a period is multi-temporal as well as multi-dimensional; the literary texts of a period so understood will then be governed by concepts of different chronological time. A change of period will thus have to make reference to different rates of change and to different relations among genres.

Because critics introduce period change in order to explain large-scale or revolutionary changes, or changes of literary hierarchies, they tend to neglect the continuities. The strategy is understandable, but it cannot lead to an adequate study of conceptual change. Some literary unit like genre is necessary to include continuity in any discussion of change. Debates over the length of time of periods or over the existence of periods--whether there is an Age of Sensibility or whether it is no more than the concluding thirty years of a neo-classical period or whether we have entered a post-modern period following modernism or are in the concluding phase of modernism--are misplaced because such determinations are not part of any theory of change, only ad hoc claims for evidence that is slanted to support one's hypothesis. They are fictions that function to explain particular changes; they do not explain the need, function, and aim of such changes.

When discussions of periods are displaced by discussions of receptions of literary texts, types of change become primary. But even if we attribute "receptions" to critics who express their views in writing (in contrast to readers about whom the critic can only speculate), the usefulness of such reception depends on the kinds of explanations offered.

### III. Explanations of Change

Although I have divided my discussion into "the nature of change," "the kinds of change," and "explanations of change," I have done so merely for strategic purposes: to open different aspects of the question of literary change. It is apparent that I have not hesitated to cross boundaries and move among the three areas despite my emphasis on a particular one. Description and explanation are obviously intertwined even though Michel Foucault in The Order of Things, for example, tries to keep them separate and to resist methodological explanations in the empirical sciences:

The role of instruments, techniques, institutions, events, ideologies, and interests is very much in evidence; but one does not know how an articulation so complex and so diverse in composition actually operates. It seemed to me that it would not be prudent for the moment to force a solution I felt incapable, I admit, of offering: the traditional explanations--spirit of the time, technological or social changes, influences of various kinds--struck me for the most part as being more magical than effective. In this work, then, I left the problem, of causes to one side; I chose instead to confine myself to describing the transformations themselves, thinking that this would be an indispensable step if, one day, a theory of scientific change and epistemological causality was to be constructed.<sup>14</sup>

He exaggerates his modesty, but his reference to "spirit of the time, technological or social changes, influences of various kinds" seems to be quite distant from other contemporary explanations of literary change. These explanations begin with concepts of a literary text: a text which is a multi-dimensional system will inevitably possess some elements that are changing more rapidly than others. In fact, the changes will be recognized only in terms of continuities. Different rates of change will, of course, also apply to membership in a hierarchy of genres. I have offered as an explanation of this the notion that every literary text is inevitably different from any other in the same genre. Let me add here that these differences operate within a series of temporary possibilities.

So too, technological or social changes need not be disregarded. The closing of theaters certainly provides a reason for not writing dramas, just as the insistence by government on the writing of "social realism" threatens punishment to those who disregard this policy. Such social pressures, at the very least, explain the neglect of certain kinds of writing even if they do not explain those that are written. But the notion of "explanation" is at issue here, for if Foucault conceives of explanation in terms of causes, he will expect relations that historians will rarely be able to provide. Explanations in literary study are always made in terms of the aims of the explainer. To ask why a genre like the novel was introduced in the eighteenth century is to take for granted that the novel is a genre and that its novelty is a chance occurrence or the result of a series of writings that are intertextual with it. The term "introduction," therefore, conceals within it evolutionary or developmental categories which involve ratios of continuity and change or randomness or both.

At which point is the "cause" to be discovered? Does it not imply an originating moment when the particular originating work is not yet identified? Is it Robinson Crusoe or Moll Flanders or Pamela or Joseph Andrews? If the critic puts aside the notion of "cause" and substitutes probable reasoning or reason giving, he will introduce reasons about generic differentiations, about the relation of such differentiations to social attitudes, about the relation of this genre to a synchronic system, about the shifts in function of the elements that compose the genre.

Sociologists and anthropologists who discuss social change tend to use three explanatory procedures: evolution, revolution, and randomness. Social change thus is the result of certain developmental or evolutionary procedures. Evolution need not mean a movement from a lower to a higher stage but to a series of successive stages not unlike the charting of individual growth by Erik Erikson. Such developments are connected to particular social structures and the kinds of changes are identified as adaptations or adjustments. Those changes which result in reorganizations of the structure are revolutionary changes. As for randomness, it is an attempt to leave open the introductions of unexpected pressures--whether legal, military, etc.--upon the structure.

Explanations of literary change are often related to and sometimes dependent upon moral, social, political, and psychological concepts. The most elementary procedure here is to make literature reflective of such changes: a social or political change is posited and literature is claimed to mirror it. More sophisticated critics grant that literary language constitutes its world and they recognize that what they have to explain is a change in the manner of literary construction. One of the ways in which this is done is to argue that changes in the external world result in changes in the psyche. Thus literary texts by revealing changes in consciousness reveal changes in the external world. This is Fredric Jameson's procedure:

An objective fragmentation of the so-called outside world is matched and accompanied by a fragmentation of the psyche which reinforces its effects. Such fragmentation, reification, but also production, of new semi-autonomous objects and activities, is clearly the objective precondition for the emergence of genres such as landscape, in which the viewing of an otherwise (or at least a traditionally) meaningless object--nature without people--comes to seem a self-justifying activity.<sup>15</sup>

The correlation is not merely reflective, for it involves the production "of new semi-autonomous objects and activities." But the difficulty with this type of explanation is that by insisting on reification and fragmentation, it becomes the procedure it describes. It neglects the relation of continuity and the concepts that underlie it so that the relation of landscape poetry to pastoral and georgic forms from which it comes is suppressed or overlooked. And the role of nature as place as well as the connection of place to property and politics is misconstrued.

Since changes are of different kinds, it is obvious that explanations of them will be of different kinds. I mean by this that although all explanations will have to refer to evidence to support their claims and will need to specify the changes to which they refer, some changes are directly social while others are only remotely so. Some literary change is the result of imposing censorship where none previously existed, or the imposition of an index or a

canon that undergoes change as a result of institutional decisions. So, too, the vocabulary of literary criticism becomes social at one time and scientific at another. The social vocabulary of "refinement" and "decorum" and "correctness" is clearly related to social behavior, that of "scientific," "evolutionary," or "developmental" much less so.

What do explanations of literary change explain? Any explanation will describe the kind of change that has taken place and will offer some historical clues for it. But no explanation by a modern critic of a past change avoids distortion. What we can do is to control the distortion by introducing generic elements stipulated by others from earlier times. Such continuities are not so much fused horizons as they are possibilities from which choices are made. But history is sometimes treated as though an element of past writing is always essentially the same, and the differences in time are trivial. When Paul de Man argues that the language of criticism and literature is permanently "unreliable"---"the most unreliable language in which man names and modifies himself"---he stresses the continuity, the persistent function of language.

If we wish to explain literary change, can we avoid the changing attitudes toward poetic language? And, of course, it will be remarked, can we avoid the changing attitudes toward genre. A theory of literary change should be able to explain such changes, but what is needed for such an explanation is a unit of analysis that will permit all such inquiries. I think that genre as I have been using it can serve such a purpose. And it can serve because a genre is a social as well as literary unit; thus it is subject to the acculturating processes of language and of symbolic behavior. If we accept the view that any example of a genre is a combination of elements, then only some of these undergo change; for, otherwise, how would it still retain membership in a class? Therefore, we can argue that every literary text is constituted by elements that are in opposition or tension because they are identified, at the very least, with different time schemes and the intersection of diachronic and synchronic systems.

This phenomenon makes clear why beginnings and endings of periods can only be tentative and uncertain. In fact, the more extensive the change to be explained, the more useful a system which will control the explanation. It is always tempting to posit an essential continuity such as the oedipal

conflict between strong poets of different times while minimizing or ignoring other explanatory procedures. But if it is granted that genre exercises control in constituting a text, no explanation can neglect its function.

The theories of literary changes that I have been discussing fall within the group of related genres called literary history, literary criticism, or literary theory. Those critics who find only differences of degree--and not always these--between the languages of criticism and poetry insist on the fictive constructs of both. For them, explanation is inevitably about themselves because a literary genre theory is as self-reflexive as poetry. If one argues that all writing is genre bound, then a theory of change will deal not only with the nature and kinds of change but with the explanatory functions of each genre.

Theory and criticism are important today in the hierarchy of genres because they function as explanations of other genres and of themselves in a society in which orality is competing with writing. At such a period in the history of culture, efforts are made to consider explanation as forms of pleasure and as instances of fictive construction. Thus, historical, critical, and theoretical genres are seen as being reconstituted by their own processes of explanation. And the boundaries that separated these genres from those that were traditionally constituted as fictions are in process of erosion. A theory of literary change will explain that such a shift in the generic hierarchy and in the reconceptualizing of genres is a form of resistance to and subversion of received assumptions and practices of explanation. But not all are subverted, and I have suggested that generic procedures may well lead us to the consciousness of literary change that we seek.

## NOTES

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6. "Author's Preface to Joseph Andrews," Joseph Andrews and Shamela, ed. Martin Battestin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 7.
7. Corti, pp. 133, 134.
8. "The Problem of Change in Literary History," New Literary History, 7 (Autumn 1975), 107.
9. Ibid., p. 106.
10. "The Stylistic Approach to Literary History," New Literary History, 2 (Autumn 1970), 40.
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12. Jan Mukarovsky, Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value, tr. Mark E. Suino (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1970), p. 25.
13. Idem.
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A COMMENT ON PROFESSOR COHEN'S  
"PROPAEDEUTIC FOR LITERARY CHANGE"

Hayden White

In his introduction to the first issue of *New Literary History*, Professor Cohen indicated one principle on which he and his colleagues on the Editorial Board agreed, namely, "the need to reexamine the nature, interpretation, and teaching of literary history, especially in the face of the current rejection of history either as guide to or knowledge of the present." His current essay, on which we have been asked to comment, is another of his many contributions to this process of reexamination. Here his aim, as I see it, is to establish the necessity of a concept of change adequate to a proper appreciation and study of literature's "historicality." Just beyond the confines of his reflections on "A Propaedeutic for Literary Change," I discern the outlines of the question: how is literary history possible? Professor Cohen's answer to his question--or at least part of it--is that literary history is possible only on the condition that a proper notion of the kind of changes that literature undergoes be brought to the study of it.

Professor Cohen explicitly eschews the task of defining the nature of "literature" itself, but he obviously believes that, whatever else it may consist of, literature must also be conceived to consist of the kinds of entities that undergo specifically "historical" processes. The burden of his criticism of the theories of literary change mentioned in Part II of his essay is that they all deprive literature of its historicality, in one way or another. This means, among other things, that they deprive literary entities of their identities, and they do this by dissolving these identities in or reducing them to functions of other, non-literary processes or structures considered to be more fundamental or determinative: such as linguistic "codes" (White), "mental models" (Riffaterre), "norms" (Mukarovsky), or something like the "paradigms" of Thomas Kuhn (pp. 10-11). He does not deny that each of these approaches to the study of literary change may very well illuminate certain aspects of the career or context of "literature" in one or another of its "periods." But these approaches all obscure either that continuity-in-difference or that difference-in-continuity without which the

kinds of changes he wishes to ascribe to literature cannot be apprehended. Considered as what he calls theoretical "fictions," such conceptions of literary change may very well, as he puts it, "function to explain particular changes" in the literary field. But, by his lights, they cannot "explain the need, function, and aim of such changes" (p. 11). And this because they lack a principle by which to identify the identities of literary entities themselves.

His criticisms of the kinds of explanations that literary theorists such as Jameson, Bloom, and Foucault have advanced to account for literary change derive from the principle stated in the middle of Part III of his essay: "Since changes are of different kinds, it is obvious that explanations of them will be of different kinds" (p. 14). He says "will be," but I read the sentence to stipulate "must be." For it is not to any specific explanation or explanatory procedure that he objects, but rather to any tendency to regard all of the kinds of changes we can perceive as occurring in the literary field as effects of a single kind of causal mechanism, agency, or force. Thus, his objection to Foucault is that he seems to be looking for a causal explanation of a kind that "historians will rarely be able to provide" (p. 13). Professor Cohen grants that we can often find extrinsic causes as well as extra-literary "reasons" why certain kinds of changes occurred in a given period of literary history, but his point is that while "some changes are directly social, ... others are only remotely so" (p. 14). This is why, presumably, the best that can be hoped for in any search for an explanation of changes in literary structures and processes is only "some historical clues" to why they occurred when, where, and in the ways they did (p. 15). We cannot provide causal explanations of the entities inhabiting the field of literature, because these entities--at whatever level of generality or complexity we encounter them--possess identities. Which is another way of saying that they are neither particulars (each of which is different from every other) nor universals (and therefore changeless), but rather products of mixtures of universals and particulars--in much the way that certain paradigmatic "characters" of literature, such as Hamlet, Faust, or Huck Finn, must be construed if we are to account for their "individuality." Professor Cohen extends this notion of individuality to cover all of the kinds of entities that he conceives to populate the field of literary history: texts, corpora, styles, periods, traditions, and so on. This is



not to say that he anthropomorphizes these entities, but he does come close to personalizing them. For the kinds of changes that he ascribes to them resemble more than anything else the kinds of changes that an older humanistic tradition ascribed to human beings in the course of their self-realizations.

As I understand him, he wishes to argue that literary entities have certain discernible traits, rather like what an older psychology called "character traits." It is these traits that undergo processes of combination, transformation, deepening and leavening, inscription and effacement, generalization and particularization, until they become dormant, recessive, or moribund. These traits are not timeless or eternal, common to all literary entities everywhere and in all periods, but are to be conceived rather after the manner of "family attributes." A given cluster of traits may be dominant in one generation (thereby marking a discernible "period" in the life of a given "family" or, we might add, "dynasty") and recessive in another. They may be widely disseminated or present but assertive in a relatively restricted area of the literary field at a given time and place. But because they are species-traits, and in the case at hand endemic to "writing" in all its forms (writing is the class to which all species of literature belong), they can never become totally extinct and irrecoverable--in the way that certain natural species can be said to have become extinct--at least, not as long as "writing" continues to exist. And this because, as he puts it, "... there exists no such phenomenon as 'writing' which escapes forms or [he adds] genres" (p. 3). "Literature," I take it, is a species of the class "writing," distinguishable from other species by the array of "forms or genres" characteristic of it across its whole history. The history of literature consists of the production, combination, recombination; elevation and demotion within a hierarchy; and retirement, retrieval, and renewal of these "forms and genres"--which are the "parts" out of which identifiable wholes, each with an individuality of its own, are made. And it is these "parts" and the process of their combination and arrangement in a hierarchy over time that are the proper subjects of literary history for Professor Cohen. This is how I understand him.

Let me say before proceeding that I find nothing in this to which to object on theoretical grounds. I do not think that there is any one, sovereign way of doing history or conceptualizing its processes. And Professor Cohen's way of conceptualizing literary history belongs to an old, honorable, and by no means moribund tradition. I wish to stress also that what he offers us here is not a theory of literary history fully elaborated, or even a theory of literary change fully worked out in its methodological implications, but only a propaedeutic to both. He is defining a problematic, anticipating a "topics" of literary history, situating us before a field of inquiry, and suggesting some preliminary thought regarding certain pitfalls that may await us in any effort to penetrate that field. It would be inappropriate, therefore, to respond to his tightly argued essay with objections based upon an alternative theory of literary history or, for that matter, literary change. What is called for on this occasion is not an alternative theory, but an inquiry into the nature of the "operator" in Professor Cohen's discourse that enables the kinds of moves, both positive and negative, of which his discourse consists. This "operator" is, of course, the notion of genre.

It is, to be sure, only a notion. Professor Cohen explicitly denies any intention of providing a theory of genre or a classification of genres. He fully concedes that the traditional concept of genre is thoroughly discredited, so we must take him at his word that he is not trying to--as it is now said--"recuperate" this concept in its integrity and impose it on literary studies as the authority to which all theory must pay homage in return for patents of legitimacy. We must, he says, "redefine" the concept of genre if it is to do the kind of service to literary studies that he envisions for it. What is the nature of this "redefinition" of the notion of genre? What is its function in Professor Cohen's discourse? How does it operate in order to enable the kind of literary historical theory that I have attributed to him? To anticipate my conclusion, let me say that, in my view, the notion of genre, as he would define it, serves to constitute literature as an auto-generative process, the products of which will be conceived to be related as members of "families," with the families themselves having the aspect of "fictitious persons," that is to say, corporations. In a word, the notion of genre will serve to transform "literature" into a "social"

phenomenon, the kind of phenomenon about which it can properly be said that it has a history.

Recall that Professor Cohen denies that the discrete text, regarded in its particularity, can serve as an object for the study of literary change. Taken in itself, he says, "each literary text is always different from all others--no matter how slight the difference" (p. 2). Although a given text may be a product of many revisions at the hands of its author, and can therefore be said to have undergone transformations in the course of its composition, it cannot serve as an indicator of either change or continuity until it has become identifiable as a "member of a genre" (p. 2). Prior to the moment of its identification as a member of a genre, the only "continuity" against which the transformations in the text could be measured would be something like "authorial intentions"; and this, we would have to say, is less a "literary" than a "psychological" reference point. It is the identification of the generic attributes of the text that permits us to speak of it as having a historical, as well as a purely personal, past. Professor Cohen puts it thus: "What is needed is to redefine every literary 'text' as a member of a genre. In doing so, it becomes possible to find that every text includes some elements from its generic past and others that relate to its synchronic present" (p. 2-3). In other words, a text becomes a member of a family of texts, simply by virtue of the fact that it will necessarily share certain formal features with other texts. It is this resemblance of a text to other texts that allows us to understand why every text is "multi-dimensional, possessing elements which constitute it as a member of one or more genres and which relate it to other texts in different genres" (p. 3).

At this point, we are permitted to ask: what precisely is the nature of this resemblance? This is a crucial question for Professor Cohen, and it is obvious that he feels the force of it; because he candidly admits that in order to give credit to his notion of the relation of a text to a genre, he must not only "redefine every literary 'text' as a member of a genre," but also "redefine" the notion of genre itself. "After all," he says, "terms like 'trace,' 'discourse,' 'absence,' have been redefined, and there is no reason to assume that genre need be excluded from this process, especially since, as a critical formulation, it makes accessible

an understanding of literary change" (p. 3). Of what, then, does this (projected) redefinition of genre consist?

It consists apparently of the ascription to texts of just those conceptual elements that would permit us to apprehend them as members of "families." "In this new sense," Professor Cohen writes, "genre can be understood as a family term, constituted by elements or parts such as meter, character, types of rhetoric, and discourse to produce certain effects" (p. 3). But what specifically does the phrase "family term" direct our attention to in our efforts to comprehend the relationships obtaining between a text and its "generic past"? Are "families" of texts comprised of individuals related only by resemblance, connected by genetic affiliation (as natural families are), or linked by some other mode of relationship, such as participation in a common enterprise, after the manner of a social group? The last option seems most likely, since obviously the claim of mere resemblance would be too weak for Professor Cohen's purposes and that of genetic affiliation would be too strong.

Recall that in this essay his aim is not to provide a full-fledged theory of genre, but only to identify the kinds of changes which literary, in contrast to natural, entities undergo by virtue of their status as members of the class of "writing." Since there is nothing "natural" about writing, the kinds of changes that its species-types can be said to undergo must be conceived to belong to the other order of culture, which is to say, to the order of "fictions" governed by rules of convention. What he requires, then, is an analogue of a process by which, not real but only fictitious "families" are constituted: the kind of process by which human groups are constituted over against their merely genetic affiliations. This seems to me to be the purpose that Professor Cohen's "redefinition" of genre is intended to serve.

The notion of genre suggested by Professor Cohen permits him to say of literary "families" what he could not say of natural families, namely, that they "have many elements in common but they do have distinct ends that change according to the historical situation" (p. 4). And it permits us to understand his construal of Maria Corti's remark, quoted approvingly by Professor Cohen, that:

A genre may be transformed by itself from the inside by a change in the function of one of its constitutive elements, . . . The genre reproduces like a micro-system those functional variations that generate the very movement of literature, . . . A genre is also transformed by changes in the literary system, . . . (p. 4)

If I am not mistaken, none of this could be said about natural families, but all could be said of the kinds of fictional or artificial "families" we call "corporations," which is to say, social institutions held together by contracts and conventions.

If we treated genres as products of contracts or conventions, we could then credit the kinds of changes that Professor Cohen attributes to them, on the one hand, and the kinds of auto-telic powers he ascribes to them, on the other. Moreover, a corporate theory of genre would explain why it is that, as he puts it: "Any attempt to discuss change in a genre system, . . . cannot avoid explanatory models derived from history or politics or anthropology or some other field in which change is a factor" (p. 4). It would explain why, as he says, "In any period, there are texts from the past that are treated as present and living," while others are "disregarded or are minimally practiced, . . ." (p. 4) And it would explain why, those texts that "are a part of living literature form a hierarchy" (p. 5), since natural families do not naturally form a hierarchy, while corporate families and systems of such families always do. And, finally, it would explain why Professor Cohen is so comfortable with the notion that, although "every text is an intersection of at least two systems: a diachronic generic system and a synchronic, hierarchical one, . . . Such systems are constructed by critics to explain continuities and discontinuities in relating particular works or groups of works to the kinds of changes that are posited" (p. 5). These "constructions" by critics are of the same order of "fictionality" as those genres of which they are constructions.

All this gives us some insight, I believe, into the nature of that "identity" which Professor Cohen attributes to literary entities of all kinds and the "persistence" of which "across a succession of differences" is a necessary presupposition, by his lights, of any attempt to fashion a theory of literary change. At the end of Section I of his

essay, he writes: "The nature of literary change is thus a study of alterations which can only be understood in terms of the persistence of non-altered elements of frameworks which provide an identity" (p. 6). But the "identity" alluded to is constituted by the kind of affiliation that contracts and conventions provide. This is why literature manifests all of the kinds of change that we can perceive to occur in society and culture at large. Since it is a fictional identity that has been provided, this identity is subject to all of the kinds of changes that fictionalizing processes in general can be said to produce.

The strength of this conception of genre which, by now, may be totally different from what Professor Cohen had in mind, is that it allows us to regard the objects of literary-historical attention, not as things, but as relationships or rather structures of relationships. We would not have to regard a text, a corpus, a canon, a style, a period, and so on as an object which remains the same across a succession of changes in its attributes, but rather as a matrix, a system of exchange or correlation which actively works in the interest of its own self-perpetuation, in precisely the same way that social and cultural institutions do, whatever the forces brought to bear upon them in the interests of changing them. This is an important consideration for anyone aspiring to a theory of literary history, because the problem of history in general is less that of change than that of continuity or persistence. Historical change can be accounted for in the same way that Darwin accounted for changes in the biological system, i.e., by a combination of species-variation, on the one side, and changes in the environment that make some variations more viable than others, on the other side. What Darwin could not account for, and what modern theories of the genetic code explain well enough, is species stability, perdurance, continuity, etc. And what Professor Cohen directs our attention to, as I see it, is the necessity of a search for something like a genetic code for the study of literary history.

The principal impediment to the successful prosecution of this search lies in the notion, common to most theories of culture in our time, that institutions are products of convention and therefore should be infinitely revisible at the will of the human beings that serve or are served by them. That such is not the case is demonstrated by the two

centuries and more of recent history, in which one revolutionary program after another has not only failed in the effort to make society anew, but has succeeded at best in giving new forms to inherited structures of domination, control, exchange, and so on. The persistence of the past in whatever present or future that revolutionary movements have tried to forge out of their sense that human beings can make their own history, underscores the truth of Marx's dictum that while men make their own history, they cannot make it in whatever way they choose, but only in the ways permitted by the stage of development at which they have arrived in a given historical moment. If this is true of history-in-general, it must also be true of literary history. And, as I see it, this is the larger implication of Professor Cohen's "Propædeutic for Literary Change" and the notion of genre that he seeks to place at the center of work yet-to-be-done in any conceptualization of the tasks of literary historical studies.

In other words, what Professor Cohen directs our attention to is not so much a theory of literary change as a theory of literary persistence, continuity, perdurance, and so on. Such a theory will have to address the problem of the force or strength of literary conventions, the ways in which they succeed in reproducing themselves in spite of efforts on the part of writers to overturn, revise, or otherwise break with them. This argues for a systematic search for something like a genetic code, of the sort recently invoked to explain the reproducibility of species-types in natural families. This should be easy enough for literary theorists, since the very notion of code is specific to language, speech, and writing and would have been inconceivable to genetic theory had these not been available as models on which to draw for the conceptualization of biological reproducibility in general.

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## LITERARY CHANGE AND LITERARINESS

Michael Riffaterre

Ralph Cohen begins his discussion of change by stating that he does not wish to debate the meanings of the term literary. Whereupon he proceeds to propose a minimal, or very general definition of the term: "what is literary is what authors, critics, theorists have identified at the same time or at different times as literary. The fact that such authorities may disagree about the significance of literary will in no way affect the inquiry I propose."<sup>1</sup>

I take this to mean that literary refers to a consensus of reactions to a certain type of text that could also be described as a verbal work of art, whether it is successful or not, that is, whether or not it accords with the taste of a given audience or readership. I am not sure we should go quite so far as to say that almost all opinions about the significance of literary are acceptable (in fact, I am sure they are not, and I shall return to this point shortly). But in any case, no one can define a text as literary without opposing it to texts or verbal entities, sentences, phrases, and types of discourse that are not literary. We may not know how to analyze or justify the opposition, but one basic fact withstands any analytical strategy, namely that literariness sets apart certain verbal forms and texts, or at any rate our perception and interpretation of these. (I do not, however, see how we could imagine a perception or interpretation that would foist literariness onto a text without the presence in the text of formal features that invite such reactions.)

I insist on restricting basics in this way, for this approach neatly separates one of the three aspects of change from the other two: just by opposing literary to non-literary, we perhaps cannot explain the nature and the kinds of change, since these are accessible only if we start listing features that are present in the literary and absent in the non-literary, or positive in the first and negative in the second. But this opposition is sufficient for determining the relevancy of explanations of change.

Indeed, it posits an inescapable alternative. Either literariness involves the whole object of inquiry and permeates

all its components, or the object contains elements that are not literary and are somehow subordinated to the literary ones. In the first case, any explanation of change that treats the object as it would a non-literary one will be false. In the second, there should be two ways of accounting for change, one pertinent to the literariness of the object, and the other pertinent to the object considered from a viewpoint other than literary. That there can be such consideration is not as paradoxical as it looks: sociologists, linguists and historians have often used literary texts as evidence for sociological, linguistic, and historical inquiries. This is quite legitimate so long as they do not claim that their respective inquiries are also pertinent to the literariness of the changing works or genres or types of discourse: they do no more than include literary facts among other categories of societal, verbal or behavioral facts. The literary text is only a pretext for a certain type of paraphrase in a metalanguage, the relevancy of which has not been established.

Ralph Cohen feels, however, that non-literary explanations cannot be disregarded, citing diverse forms of political censorship, such as a government's official preference for writings characterized by social realism.<sup>2</sup> No doubt they cannot be disregarded, from the historian's viewpoint. Whereas the literary analyst can afford to ignore them, for censorship is always motivated by reasons other than literary ones. Either literature is singled out as a target because of an effectiveness that remains to be explained, as opposed to less effective, more ephemeral, non-literary modes of expression; or else it is not singled out, but is silenced by a gag applied to all public pronouncements. Furthermore, social realism, in Cohen's example, precedes as a literary phenomenon the blessings it ultimately receives from the State and the consecutive public policy favoring its generalization.

To be sure, certain critics or historians recognize non-literary explanations of change as extrinsic causes, but maintain that they are pertinent to literature, because consciousness is determined by social being and literary works are but "symptoms whose cause is of another order of phenomenon from its effects." Jameson, for instance, refers to Frank Kermode's finding an "unquestionable causal relationship between the admittedly extrinsic fact of the crisis in late-nineteenth-century publishing, during which the dominant three-decker leading library novel was replaced by a cheaper one-volume

format, and the modification of the 'inner form' of the novel itself."<sup>3</sup> Jameson concludes that literary scholars are missing the point when they attempt "to interpret the new form in terms of personal evolution or of the internal dynamics of purely formal change." Most certainly they are, but that does not make his interpretation more pertinent. They are wrong factually and he is right factually. But these facts, correct or incorrect, pertain to a pre-literization level of causality. They constitute the conditions that restricted or oriented the author's creative process. These conditions, however, cannot explain the literariness of the resulting new type of novel,<sup>4</sup> because this literariness is necessarily tied to the reader response factor, and the reader has no natural way of knowing past circumstances of the writer's struggles. The reader sees the finished product, and perceives therefore only those restrictive conditions that are encoded in the text or in a tradition, thus present before his eyes or in his mind (e.g. meter, lexical exclusions, or the tropes that allow meaning to develop unimpaired by these exclusions).

Ralph Cohen rightly remarks that "explanations in literary study are always made in terms of the aims of the explainer."<sup>5</sup> I would rephrase this as follows: explanations are made always in terms of the explainer's ideology. The good, or pertinent, explanation is that which does not superimpose its ideological grid onto the literary work. Otherwise ideology controls the decoding and distorts the text. No reader is ever innocent of ideological rationalization. But rationalization remains a legitimate stage of the reading process if it builds exclusively on a decoding controlled by the text itself.

If we did try to define literary and see what residual common properties are left after comparing the variations of usage, our definition would have to include the concept of a conscious reader. Ralph Cohen's first paragraph lists as authorities on literariness authors, critics and theorists. The reader is omitted: and yet authors write for him; critics are supposed to teach him how to read better; theorists cannot avoid including him in the models they construct. While I agree with Cohen that traditional genres do not adequately reflect the multi-dimensional complexity of a text,<sup>6</sup> the best assurance we have of the relevancy of the genre is the reader's assumption that any work of art corresponds to a genre, that it is not just a monument in isolation but a member of a class. Even if such a view is oversimplified, or not very

enlightening, the genre as oversimplification or as spurious taxonomy would still be the proper object of literary analysis, since such a figment of the reader's imagination would still be the behavioral reality under study, a variety of reader response. The historian would still have to explain what, in the literary act of communication, makes the reader react to his perception of intertextuality by inventing categories.

No textual or discursive phenomenon therefore can be literary if it remains beyond the reader's ken. If this unperceived factor is invoked as a cause, it can explain only those changes in a text that have no literary function.

When we explore the nature of literary change, therefore, we must first explore the nature of its perception. Our question should be: to what extent are changes in literary practices and the reader's praxis of literature perceived as such, and to what extent does this perception play a role in the reader's interpretation?

Nowhere is this essential role of perception more apparent than in intertextuality, that is to say, in a reading procedure that is the opposite of the "normal" decoding of the text. This normal decoding, the one that prevails in everyday usage, is linear: words are deciphered sequentially in accordance with the syntactic relationships indicated by their respective positions and by a number of grammatical connectors. Reading becomes intertextual when the text contains anomalies that block deciphering and appear to the reader, on second thought, as the signs of an incompleteness to be completed elsewhere. Elsewhere, that is, in the intertext that can be either potential in language or already actualized in literature. The text is literary because it cannot be deciphered the way non-literary utterances are--as a sequence of words spelling out what is meant. It is literary because it has to be deciphered as a sequence of presuppositions. Each word that is pertinent to the significance functions as an embedding, summarizing as intertext (the word being the lexical deixis of a full-fledged syntagm) or giving a reverse image of that intertext.

Now my point is that such a text is not perceived intertextually at first reading. It becomes intertextual and unveils its significance when the initial interpretive approach--the linear decoding--has failed. A change occurs that is uniquely literary, when the text achieves its textuality

not through an exhaustive deciphering of any meaning present in the surface message, but through the intertext whose absence, displacement or reversion is indicated by the surface message. Reading, literary reading effects the change.

And yet nothing has changed in the letter of the text: the reader has shifted from the reference of words (as successive, discrete semantic units) to things, to a reference of text (as one semiotic unit, perceived in toto, as a sum total of its parts) to text.

There is a Surrealist poem by Andre Breton beginning On me dit que la-bas les plages sont noires (I am told that down there the beaches are black), that offers the description of some enchanted isle of the Southern seas, a modern Garden of Eden, both an escape from the real world and a locus amoenus transcribed in an exotic discourse. This discourse does not so much represent distant climes as it hyperbolizes the connotations of the locus amoenus. As our reading progresses, we gather that this exotic landscape stands for carnal love. The peak of a volcano spouting lava has to be a phallic symbol--the sociolect attests to the image and one line: Lancant ses derniers feux sombres entre tes jambes (Darting its last dark fires between your legs) is as explicit as one could wish. The other sexual partner, the woman, fills out the landscape in various metonymic guises. All this could be straight symbolism. If it were only that, we would have here an example of literary discourse rather than of a literary text--a string of semantic displacements that do not constitute a whole. These displacements could not by themselves justify, let alone impose the wrenching reinterpretation that the reader is now forced to perform. This coup de theatre abruptly replaces our perception of a series of conventional tropes with the sudden awareness that all these devices combine to form one complex sign, standing for something entirely new.

The surprise change from linear to intertextual interpretation is triggered by two points of absolute nonsense that are at one and the same time the blocks on which we stumble in our linear reading, and the keys to intertextual reading, for they give, in the form of easy examples, the grammatical rule that you must use for that reading: the text now has to be understood a contrario, as the reverse image of the intertext where we will discover meaning in its straight form. The poem ends thus, on a landscape seen from the top of the volcano:

Et plus bas vers tes bras qui s'ouvrent  
 A la preuve par le printemps  
 D'APRES  
 De l'inexistence du mal  
 Tout le pommier en fleur de la mer  
 (And lower down, towards your arms opening wide  
 to the proof by Springtime of AFTERWARDS  
 of the nonexistence of Evil, the whole blossoming  
 appletree of the sea).

These five lines resist linear deciphering until the meaning of the capitals of afterwards sinks in. Springtime proving there is no evil after, suddenly reveals itself to be the reverse or complementary version of the first of all intertexts--the story of the Fall, of the expulsion from Eden. The appletree blossoming afterwards (or in spite of) reverses the symbolism of the appletree Sin slithered out of. The tree's blossoms prove that Evil is gone just as the rainbow was proof to Abraham of a new covenant. Afterwards is capitalized because it is the hinge upon which the intertextual reversal turns, overturning the whole vast corpus of postlapsarian theology. Breton's poem owes its power to its unity, and it owes its unity to two facts. One: each detail of what we first read as an exotic landscape spells out sex, the whole description being a long reiteration of the one meaning--carnal love. Two: The whole sequence turns after upside down, and redeems the postlapsarian universe--innocence comes after the fact.

This radical hermeneutic change of verbal forms (that remain unchanged qua forms) is confirmed, by the way, by an actual intertext--a prose essay of Breton's, L'Amour fou, a philosophical travelogue describing the same exotic landscape as the setting of a cruise during which the poet found the woman of his dreams. The description is couched in terms such that every metonym for landscape must be deciphered as a metaphor for sex, and there is even an aside from the author that makes explicit the redeeming virtue of love. But this intertextual verification is not absolutely necessary: the poem itself is built so that without itself actually changing, it forces its reader to effectuate the semiotic change that confers literariness upon the text.

The reader's role in bringing about semiotic transformations depends on his linguistic competence. Generic structures

are built on verbal structures. It is only natural that Ralph Cohen should analyze the connections between language and genre. In his criticism of Hayden White's linguistic model for literary change,<sup>8</sup> he insists that a genre exercises control over the codes appropriate to it at any historical moment. When he later discusses my own concept of descriptive system, he obviously feels that such systems are also under the sway of genre, since he asserts that the critic cannot see them as representing continuity and providing a context for change, unless he already knows their role in the structure of a genre. "Do such systems arise exclusive of the genres in which they are found," Cohen then asks, "in order to fit some abstract mental model of reality?" and he answers in the negative.<sup>9</sup> This, of course, is consistent with his view of the primacy of genre: there can be no literariness independently of the genre--a tempting view indeed if descriptive systems were structures of the same kind as genres, if they differed from genre only in that they have a wider distribution (they are in fact trans-generic, for the simple reason that they are semantic entities, the stuff upon which all genres can build). If that were the case, it would be our task to find out how descriptive systems are integrated in one generic system: the generic structure, for example, would set up general rules restricting the number and kinds of textual variants of the descriptive systems' invariants, or modify these same invariants. The system structures would be analogs of the generic structure (or "extrapolations" of it, as Ralph Cohen puts it).<sup>10</sup>

A descriptive system, however, is not an abstraction in the sense that a structure is. Whereas a genre is indeed such an abstraction, a set of rules organizing relationships that are actualized at the level of texts, a descriptive system is very concrete. I define it as a network of words associated with one another around a kernel word, following the model provided by the sememe of that nucleus. Each component of the system is metonymically related to the nucleus. So strong are these relationships that any such metonym can serve as a metaphor for the whole, and annex the presuppositions of the nucleus. At any point in the text where the system remains implicit, the reader can and in fact must fill in gaps and reconstitute the whole representation from the metonym. The system rests on structures, no doubt, but when we come to it, it is already actualized. Even

though each system is the mental model of a reality, it is abstract only in the loose sense that thought is abstract as opposed to a physical substance. But in the reader's mind a descriptive system is already actualized as language. It is made up of words, of phrases. Likewise, the relationships between its components are not just a grammar, but a syntax made tangible and memorized in the shape of stereotyped sentences. Unlike the concept of a semantic field that groups together associated meanings, all belonging to one sememe, the descriptive system is situated at the lexical level: it does not derive directly from the sememe but from the lexeme corresponding to the sememe. This is why synonyms cannot share the same system, another proof that the system is not an abstract one. In short, the descriptive system is like a possible description of its object. It is like a text expanding on the word referring to this object, a ready-made segment of any speaker's linguistic competence.

Because of this essential difference, concreteness versus abstractness, the integration of a descriptive system in a genre structure can never involve the system as a whole, but only those components of the system whose stylistic features fit the esthetic requirements of the genre. Take for instance the representation of suicide in the French novel of the nineteenth century. The descriptive system built around that word in French contains a number of words such as poison or rope (or elegant synonyms of rope) that refer to common tools of self-destruction. They echo traditional representations that go all the way back to ancient literature and whose conventional character softens the whole unpleasantness, e.g. Octave's poisoning himself poetically at dawn in sight of the Greek shores in Stendhal's Armance. Literary change such as the advent of realism in the novel follows one of two paths: in the place of the poison metonym, it substitutes a depiction of the dreadful effects of the poison, which cancels figurativeness (the rhetorical displacements within the descriptive system) by reverting to a literal narrative. Instead of Stendhal's sanitized allusion to the conventional lethal draught, we then have the harrowing step by step enumeration of symptoms in Madame Bovary's protracted agony. These symptoms by the way simply spell out a descriptive system borrowed whole from non-literary discourse, from medical diagnosis. Change is achieved by linguistic, or rather discursive borrowing.

The other path to realism consists in selecting another metonym of the suicide system, the improbable rechaud, 'portable stove.' In the French sociolect of the time, the coal-burning portable stove stands as a synecdoche for the whole portrayal of death by carbon monoxide. The stove itself, being a small household appliance, connotes a minor or insignificant aspect of life. As a metonym for suicide, rechaud thus represents a literary index of realism within the realistic subgenre of the novel. It owes this function to two features of the genre: first, a basic rule of the novel is to dissolve the diegesis, (narrative and description), breaking it down into sequences of metonyms, and especially to reify characters by replacing their direct portrayal with representations of setting, clothes, habits, etc. Second, a rule specific to the realist novel dictates the selection of those metonyms that are at the bottom of the social and esthetic scale of values. This opens the gates to words designating objects formerly deemed insignificant in a literature that predicated literariness on the exclusion of the contingent, of the accidental, of the unexemplary, of whatever was incapable of sublimation. Hence the popularity of rechaud. For instance, Balzac describes the fall of a bankrupt public figure; the great man is dying like a rat: Raoul s'asphyxiait comme une simple couturiere, au moyen d'un rechaud de charbon (Raoul was gassing himself like a vulgar seamstress with a portable coal stove). The condescending simile makes explicit the connotations of the metonym.

But now that I have, I hope, clarified the interaction of genre and descriptive system, I must introduce a corrective that suggests either limitations in the relevancy of the former or a need to shift the focus from genre to discourse, at least in some instances of change.

Let us consider the following from a 1854 novel by Barbey d'Aurevilly:

Ses yeux, deux rechauds de pensees allumes et asphyxiants de lumiere eclairent tout cela (les cicatrices d'un visage defigure), comme la foudre eclaire un piton qu'elle a fracasse.<sup>12</sup> (his eyes, like two stoves of thoughts, lighted with an asphyxiating light, brightened the scars of his face, as lightning illuminates the peak it destroys).



Never mind if the image is too much for our taste. It testifies to the power acquired by *rechaud*. It may be ludicrous but only if we tried to visualize; in other words, if we tried to force a realistic interpretation on this text. The associative power of the descriptive system is such that its mimetic logicality has become irrelevant. Metonymy has become a metaphor, and denotation has been replaced with connotation. The asphyxiating light, the stove-like eyes are gibberish as mimesis, but semiotically perfectly effective symbols of the evil, of the reek of death in life that emanate from the face here described: the man is an outlaw, a Romantic personation of evil. The change consists in a shift from metonymy to metaphor, in a shift from *rechaud* as an index of verisimilitude to *rechaud* as symbol and therefore as a denial of verisimilitude. And yet the genre has not changed, and the novel still belongs in it. Genre here is unrelated to change, and we must resort to the transgeneric concept of *literariness*. What makes the image possible, and its innovative departure from the mimesis so effective, what effects the change is the existence of the descriptive system as a network of metonyms. It functions therefore as a grid of equivalencies, with a built-in program of substitutions, that permit lexical exchanges without any semantic loss. Whether it works or not as a representation, whether it is grammatical or not, *rechaud* now symbolizes death. Its very ungrammaticality causes the reader to make a jump from the original lowly connotations to the present awesome metaphorical aura. Ungrammaticality--change, that is, predicated on the continuity or stability the descriptive system enjoys in the sociolect--ungrammaticality here defines *literariness*.

So much so that in a poem written in the same year as this Barbey d'Aurevilly novel, V. Hugo can speak of atheism as a moral asphyxia, and write:

. . . allume dans ton ame  
 Le hideux rechaud du Neant!<sup>13</sup>  
 (go light up in thy soul Nothingness,  
 the awful stove).

This in a genre, epic poetry, that he resuscitates, and within which this symbol, ludicrous to today's reader, was accepted then as exemplary of the highest poetic mode. *Literariness*, inseparable as it is from ungrammaticality,<sup>14</sup> thus appears sufficient to engineer a very radical type of

change--the creation of a specialized discourse, the coinage of pre-poeticized words, intrinsically literary in any context where ungrammaticality cancels their referential function, words therefore that are literary regardless of genre.

The above in nowise detracts from Cohen's demonstration of the validity of genre as a principle in the explanation of change: his view of the necessary interaction of continuity and change has a compelling logicality that I am not questioning. Rather, I suggest that it is more widely applicable, and hardly depends on categories invented by critics, or on norms immobilized, as it were, isolated by historians with the benefit of hindsight. This interplay of change and the unchanging only translates into a temporal code the reader's natural sense of ungrammaticalities. Far from challenging or cancelling the sociolect, they make the reference of text to sociolect necessary, thus transforming the latter into an intertext, and transforming referentiality into intertextuality. This metamorphosis takes place within the actual time limits of a reading. The reader may rationalize it as a departure from the past, from convention. But rationalization is but a secondary stage of reading. In the primary stage, change consists essentially in the reader's natural perception of *literariness* as otherness.

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NOTES

1. Ralph Cohen, "A Propaedeutic for Literary Change," p. 1.
2. Ibid., p. 13.
3. Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 25-26.
4. They explain the creative process to the extent that the stone in Cromwell's ureter explains the Restoration. One will recognize Pascal's argument: undoubtedly he saw this as a pertinent cause, but what actually happened here, I suspect, was that he could not resist the lure of the oxymoron. The distance, the qualitative difference between extrinsic cause and literary effect never fails in its poetic seduction of the scholarly mind.
5. "A Propaedeutic," p. 13.
6. Ibid., pp. 3.
7. Andre Breton, L'Air de l'eau (1934). The poem's intertext is L'Amour fou, published two years later: literary change does not necessarily parallel chronology.
8. "A Propaedeutic," pp. 8.
9. Ibid., p. 10.
10. Ibid., p. 10.
11. Balzac, Une Fille d'Eve (1832), Bibliothèque de la Pleiade, vol. II, p. 143.
12. L'Ensorcelée (Bewitched), chap. VIII, p. 166.
13. La Légende des Siècles, "Tout le passé et tout l'avenir."
14. I am using ungrammaticality in a broad sense to cover whatever appears in context unacceptable to the reader, whatever threatens language as representation, undermines verisimilitude, or creates inconsistencies, contradictions and nonsense.

CHANGING THE TERMS: IDENTITY CRISIS IN THE  
LITERARY PROCESS

Jerry Aline Flieger

Ralph Cohen's "Propaedeutic for Literary Change" seems motivated by two distinct but related theoretical projects. The essay functions ultimately as an apology for the procedure of genre analysis in literary criticism, presenting a convincing case for the heuristic value of generic categories in the practice of literary criticism in general, while arguing specifically for the usefulness of the generic approach in the consideration of the problem of literary change. But even before advancing the merits of the case of generic criticism, the essay attempts to establish the parameters of any discussion of literary change, laying down groundrules for debate. The first of these groundrules is negative: in the introduction to his paper, Professor Cohen unequivocally states his unwillingness to "debate the meanings of the term 'literary,'" calling instead for a kind of gentlemen's agreement or consensus concerning the definition of this key term ("I shall assume that what is 'literary' is what authors, critics, theorists have identified at the same time or at different times as literary"). He goes on to stake out the terrain of the discussion, opting to consider three points in succession: namely, the nature of literary change, the kinds of change, and the explanations of such change.

Now in spite of the clarity and evident good sense of these groundrules, the development of the essay itself suggests that the terms of the discussion are not perhaps as self-evident as they appear. In particular, we must wonder if it is ever possible even to broach the question of literary change without taking a position, be it explicit or implicit, on "the meanings of the term 'literary.'" In Professor Cohen's own essay, for instance, an apparently neutral statement, which could almost slip by unnoticed--the simple assertion that "any discussion of literary change implies that there is a stable entity which can be divisible into parts" (p. 1)--is actually a highly inflected statement which conceals a fundamental position about the nature of literature and the literary act. And it is an assumption which is by no means without consequence for the discussion which it serves to introduce.

I want, then, to take a cue from Barthes (and from Freud), and to look again at the ideological valence or psychological stakes of that which "goes without saying" (Barthes' definition of ideological discourse), directing my brief remarks to a reconsideration of the groundrules of the discussion at hand. I want to look especially at the notion of textual "entity" or "identity" which insists in Professor Cohen's analysis, and which becomes explicit in the following formulation (the closing of Part I): "The nature of literary change is a study of alterations which can only be understood in terms of the persistence of non-altered elements or frameworks which provide an identity." It is only, I think, in questioning the notion of textual identity that we may finally hope to do justice to the most important insights in Professor Cohen's own analysis, concerning the multi-dimensional nature of the literary text (Part III) as well as the merits of the generic approach which the essay seeks to rehabilitate. Such an inquiry will in turn solicit a reexamination and reordering of the three categories of the essay. For I want to suggest, first, that the "nature of change" must be considered as indissociable from the nature of the literary act itself, and that it logically follows that any "explanation" of change, as well as any taxonomy or listing of "kinds of change" must be informed, if not determined, by our understanding of the term 'literary.'

#### I. The Nature of Literary Change, or Change as Literary Nature

What, then, are the implications of the understanding of the literary text as an entity displaying a persistent generic identity? First of all, the very choice of terms such as "stable entity," "continuity," "persisting identity," etc., it seems to me, works to overemphasize the conservative properties or functions of the literary act, overprivileging the role of a "changeless" ground in textual production, and hence providing an unduly static concept of genre as the locus of an underlying continuity or as the recognizable gestalt which is counterposed and opposed to alteration. Even Nisbet's somewhat more dynamic formulation of change (cited in the first section of the essay) as "a succession of differences in a persisting identity," still manages to convey a static impression of the changing literary text, as a series of "stable entities" which seem frozen or suspended in time,

like Zeno's arrow in flight. This definition of change, moreover, is really a figure-ground concept, in which "changelessness" (of an always recognizable "gestalt") provides a backdrop for incidental change. This characterization, then, seems to encourage a hierarchical valorization of that always recognizable "entity" or corpus which seems almost to survive in spite of the accidents which may alter its "parts." Change, according to this perspective, may be construed as a kind of dismemberment of an "original" corpus, rather than as a process of adaptation or growth. Nisbet's notion of a persisting identity thus seems permeated with the kind of nostalgia for "plenitude" which has been the focus of so much recent critical commentary.

Of course, Professor Cohen's own use of the concept of textual or generic identity is tempered throughout by certain correctives, like his explicit rejection of Maria Corti's "received categories of genre." Yet the mere characterization of change as the counterposition of an identity with its altered "parts"--rather than, say, as an organic historical process (Marxist criticism), or as the "work" of the Unconscious (Freudian criticism), or even as a play of difference (deconstructive criticism)--may end up contributing to some of the abuses in "normal" or "period" genre criticism which Professor Cohen himself points out in the final section of his paper. An overemphasis on the continuity of literary genres, for instance, can lead to an underestimation of the role of history in literary change, giving short shrift to the importance of the changing ideological ends of the literary text. Professor Cohen, for instance, does mention in passing that "genres do have distinct ends that change according to the historical situation" (p. 4), but he characterizes these "ends" as a kind of secondary trait, merely one of many "parts" or elements whose alteration need not destroy the text's underlying "entity." This position, of course, is one which is at odds with many important schools of critical theory, including both Marxist and psychoanalytic criticism, for which the ends, be they ideological or libidinal, are the essential or defining characteristic of the literary process.

Furthermore, the emphasis on generic identity or gestalt may contribute to the simplistic view of the text as reflection of authorial psychology or intention, or as mirror of historical conditions--a view which Professor Cohen explicitly rejects in his paper--precisely because it fosters a view of the text as an entity or product which can be separated out from its

"causes." And the bias in favor of textual identity can contribute, moreover, to the characterization of the discipline of literary criticism itself as a derivative or reflective activity, which "cannot avoid explanatory models from history or politics or anthropology or some other field" (Cohen, p. 4). When Professor Cohen states, for example, that the study of change involves "frameworks from botany, entomology, or chemistry" (p. 2), he may himself be participating in a view of literature as "reflection" of real life.

A third consequence of an emphasis on generic or textual identity is a local one: Professor Cohen's view of genre as an identity whose "parts" undergo alteration fails to account for the diversity of the kinds of change mentioned in the essay itself. Changes from one genre to another, semantic change within a single text, different versions of one work--all these are insufficiently accounted for by a theory of literary genre as the locus of textual continuity or identity. In the first section of the paper, for instance, Professor Cohen refers to "semantic changes governed not by time but by context (different contexts, different meanings)" (p. 1). This example of changes of the meaning of a key term within the work itself is one example of a type of literary change which resists explanation in generic terms, simply because the changed contexts all occur within an individual text. But, perhaps more significantly, this example illustrates that a text is capable not only of being "different from all other texts," which Cohen agrees is always the case (p. 2), but also of being different from itself. Such an example works against the notion of "stability" in the literary act, since it illustrates the differential nature of textuality itself, the capacity of a work to be creatively unstable, and thus to furnish multiple "contexts" for its reading and interpretation.

The category of intratextual "change," then, seems to open to a definition of the literary process itself as a kind of difference, alteration, or contextual play. Consider, for example, the following characterization of reading (by Michael Riffaterre) as a process of discovery of "change" in the text, the reader's participation in a game of hide and seek of which "change" is the very essence:

The text is an object of gradual discovery, of a dynamic and constantly changing perception, in which the reader not only moves from surprise to

surprise but sees, as he moves forward, his own understanding of what he has read being modified, each new finding adding a new dimension to previous elements.<sup>1</sup>

This kind of emphasis on the differential nature of the text is, of course, a distinguishing characteristic of much of contemporary critical theory, but it is by no means confined to post-modern or post-structuralist analysis. A view of an activated and actualized literary text also informs the artistic vision of such canonic figures as Flaubert and Proust, who both stress the change of vision required of the artist in order to provoke the "surprise" of reading. (For Flaubert, "style is a manner of seeing," while for Proust, it is the task of the artist Elstir or Bergotte to allow us to "see through new eyes," or "through the eyes of a hundred others," in an ever-changing kaleidoscopic vision.) For many writers and critics, "change" is not a property of the text, nor is it something which happens to the text, but it is the fundamental nature of the text itself. For these writers and critics, any discussion of literary processes must challenge the notion of the underlying identity of texts, the knowledge, to use Cohen's metaphor, that the god may return after the metamorphosis (p. 2). For such a "knowledge," of course, depends on an assumption of the conservative function of literary processes.

But it is not enough merely to argue about the nature of literature itself in order to reach an understanding of the question at hand. What is needed is a comprehensive theory which will attempt to relate the various levels and kinds of literary change, whether they be on the level of the individual work or an entire genre or group of genres. And if the view of the literary text as a process of difference of change (rather than as a state to which change occurs) is to be useful in elaborating this comprehensive or organic theory, it must be pertinent to all three aspects of Professor Cohen's discussion. And this does indeed seem to be the case: for if the "nature of change" is seen as coinciding with the nature of the literary, then the "explanations of change" will necessarily be bound up with the theory of the literary process itself. And the "kinds of change" may then be expected to serve as illustrations of this theory.

## II. Reordering the Terms: Explanations and Kinds of Change

Now this alternate view of change, informed by the alternate view of the textual process to which I have alluded, by no means implies the elimination or disqualification of the generic procedure which Professor Cohen seems to favor. But it will result in an even more pronounced emphasis on the multi-dimensional nature of texts and of genres alike, favoring the second formulation of the concept of literary genre (which appears on p. 3 of Professor Cohen's paper) as "a family term, constituted by elements or parts such as meter, character, types of rhetoric, and discourse to produce certain effects." This "new sense of genre" as a kind of molecular soup of elements or parts which interact in a dynamic of combination and rearrangement is different in emphasis from the original figure-ground formulation. For the second modular understanding of genre could almost qualify as a structuralist procedure (in the manner of Genette), since it emphasizes the functional aspects of a text, and therefore is compatible with an examination of the ends or objectives of a text (a question which seemed to be neglected by the earlier formulation). Unlike the first emphasis on genre as gestalt or identity, this second formulation is by no means incompatible with the notion of text, in the etymological sense of an interweaving of disparate elements. And this second concept of genre, it seems to me, comes close to that found in the recent work of critics like Jameson, Eagleton, and Kavanaugh, who reject a strict or simple "determinism"—Althusser's "mechanical causality"—in favor of an account which strives to reconstitute the complexity of the relations between society and the "semi-autonomous" literary text.<sup>2</sup> In a similar spirit, Hayden White has recently argued for the need to escape from an ultimately stultifying distinction between text and context, literature and framework, "myth" and "history."<sup>3</sup>

What all of these recent analyses have in common is their interest in a comprehensive theory of textuality and textual change as a "socially symbolic act" (Jameson) with political, esthetic, and societal consequences. In this kind of analysis, a theory of the literary act precedes and informs a discussion of its instances: an "explanation" of the "nature" of change enables a discussion of the instances or "kinds" of change.

## III. The Political Unconscious: Toward a Theory of Literary Change

The most recent work of Fredric Jameson, it seems to me, is the best example to date of this kind of analysis, which makes use of a multi-dimensional view of the literary text as well as a non-static concept of literary genre.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Jameson takes pains to point out that "genre criticism has always maintained a privileged relation with historical materialism" (*The Political Unconscious*, p. 105), and he makes it clear that he intends to exploit and enhance that relation. Like Ralph Cohen, Jameson insists on looking at genre as an intersection of multiple systems. Focusing on the conventional distinction between semantic views of literary genre (which emphasize "essence" or "content" in the manner of Frye) and syntactic explanations of genre (which emphasize process or paradigm, in the manner of the structuralists and formalists), Jameson maintains that the "text must remain susceptible to study from both these options." (He does, however, point out that the choice is not without ideological consequences.)

Like Professor Cohen, Jameson makes use of the categories of sameness and difference, continuity and discontinuity, in his evaluation of these two tendencies in generic criticism. But unlike Cohen, Jameson finds that generic discontinuity is by far the more important of the two terms, as is evinced by his definition of the novel as "a synchronic unity of contradictory or heterogeneous elements" (p. 141). Jameson's textual "entity" or "unity," then, is far from "stable": it is, rather, a precarious and symptomatic compromise between conflicting pressures and tendencies. In other words, Jameson's theory of genre is informed by an explicit position "on the meaning of the term literary." For Jameson, the literary text is an act of wish-fulfillment (in the Freudian sense of the term), a symptom of sorts which seeks an "imaginary solution" to ideological contradiction. This theory permits him to combine a synchronic and a diachronic perspective, since he considers the "political unconscious" to be a social and historical construct, enabling the critic to speculate about the changes in genre through time, as well as to account for the status enjoyed by a particular literary form at any given moment of time. For Jameson, the text is unstable, open to the winds of history. Indeed, for Jameson, the "heterogeneous" text is itself a transformative process, since it works to resolve historical contradictions with "imaginary" solutions.

One advantage of this approach is the emphasis which it places on the textual function of objective, rather than its "causes" (which is the case, unfortunately, with the too-simple determinism which flaws some Marxist analyses). Jameson's hybrid Marxist-Freudian interpretation of literature, with its emphasis on the ideological quotient of textual gratification, goes a long way toward providing an organic and complex account of literary change on all levels, by positing that change or alteration is a function of a "desire" which is itself susceptible to alteration through history. In other words, the Political Unconscious is a valuable mediating term, which permits the critic to discuss both intention and reception of the text in terms of the production of literary gratification or pleasure, as well as in terms of ideological function.

Jameson's work is an important first step, since it attempts to emphasize the social nature of the heretofore highly subjective category of wish-fulfillment. But what is needed is a clearer elaboration of the relation between personal and social history, and an application of the concept of the political unconscious to the domain of esthetics proper (taking on, for instance, the important question of the political ramifications of Freud's opposition of "esthetics" and "work"). This effort will require a continuation of the critique of subjectivity, begun by Lacan and others, which will continue to challenge the notion of textual "identity," thereby changing our own practice as critics and teachers, and enabling us to encounter the literary text not as an "object" of study, but as an act of social consequence.

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#### NOTES

1. Michael Riffaterre, Essais de Stylistique Structurale (Paris: Flammarion, 1971), p. 327.
2. See especially James H. Kavanaugh's "Marxism's Althusser: Toward a Politics of Literary Theory," Diacritics (Spring 1982), pp. 25-45.
3. Hayden White, "Getting Out of History," Diacritics (Fall 1982), pp. 2-13.
4. Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981). And see also the special issue of Diacritics (Fall 1982) devoted to Jameson's work.



"UPON MY LIFE—UPON MY SOUL, SIR!"—CHAP. XXIII.

THE GENERIC BASIS OF NARRATIVE HISTORY  
OF LITERARY CHANGE

James E. Ford

The general issue of literary change can be made concrete in the question, is narrative-causal history of literature possible? With few exceptions, the evidence of past practice of literary historians would suggest that it is not. The vast majority of historical works has been either of the philological type, which R. S. Crane describes as "consist[ing] in the literal exegesis and comparison of texts in terms of the material traits of their content and form in a context of the circumstances of their composition," or the dialectical variety, wherein the "concern is to discriminate . . . the qualities or values which any work shares with any other work by partaking in the common causes of all human discourse--language, the mind, society, history, and so on."<sup>1</sup>

In terms of the argument I want to develop here about the generic requirements for literary history, I would say that these common approaches are both defective in that their assumptions and methods make them incapable of preserving the literary phenomena of literary works. For narrative-causal history must be phenomenal history, and narrative-causal history of literature must be history of literary phenomena. I nominate genre, in the sense to be developed below, as the concept which can enable the critic-historian to preserve the phenomena. In so doing, I join Ralph Cohen in championing genre as that which is most likely to satisfy the requirements for the specification of persistence in change which is the primary condition for narrative history of change. However, agreement at the surface on the importance of genre may not extend to more fundamental agreement about the nature of genre, if I understand correctly the view of the concept he gives in "A Propaedeutic for Literary Change" and elsewhere.

To force my own terms on Professor Cohen, I would say that he opposes Hayden White and Michael Riffaterre precisely because their (dialectical) approaches to literary change work alike to insure the reduction of the literary phenomena. Countering White, Professor Cohen asserts that "Although genres are language structures, they are not reducible to language . . .," rather, one must understand "the control

a literary genre exercises upon the codes appropriate to it . . ." ("A Propaedeutic for Literary Change," pp. 8-9. Hereafter cited as "PLC"). That is, to remove any element from its subordinate relation within a literary work in order to reduce it to codes is to lose the literary phenomena--to reduce the cathedral to its stonework. Riffaterre's approach is similarly criticized because it leads to reduction to a "kernel word that fits a mental model of the reality represented by that word" ("PLC," p. 9). This kernel word concept is transgeneric and puts the analytical cart before the horse: "Can we," asks Professor Cohen, "accept this version of continuity and change of a descriptive system within a genre without knowing its role in the structure of the genre?" ("PLC," p. 9-10) Not, I would answer, if we are to have history of literary phenomena.

So Professor Cohen and I are against the same thing; I am not at all certain that we are for the same thing. Although we both would assert the priority of "the structure of the genre," we may not be championing the same view of that structure. While I fully agree that "The choice of genre becomes not a linguistic act," I begin to worry when I read further that the choice is "a social one which determines the linguistic" ("PLC," p. 9). In the context of the literary works under discussion, I would have thought it to be essentially an artistic choice.

Looking beneath the surface of his words, I conclude that, if I understand it correctly, Professor Cohen's conception of genre will not allow him to identify the concrete generic wholes his aims actually require as he seeks "to define every literary 'text' as a member of a genre" ("PLC," p. 2). For, as I believe Walter Davis has correctly seen, it is possible to preserve the literary phenomena only by "making form a truly purposive principle," "an immanent principle of structure capable of realizing itself in particular works in a continuous way . . ."<sup>2</sup>

I think that Professor Cohen's conception of genre omits this main requisite of genre, which I would specify as that subordinating principle which gives a work coherence, its final cause or "peculiar power." In spite of the fact that he defines genre as "a family term, constituted by elements or parts such as meter, character, types of rhetoric, and discourse to produce certain effects" ("PLC," p. 3), I do

not feel the force of the "to" worked effectually into the essay. Missing from the preposition is the crucial appreciation of the architectonic role of the work's end, "for the sake of" which the parts function as the effect or final cause establishing "their strict subordination to form as a principle of power endowed with the power to transform those materials, giving them what Aristotle termed 'an end or purpose which they would not by nature assume?'"<sup>3</sup> In a literary text it is the subordinating principle which transforms into literary phenomena elements which were before only potentially such.

Although Professor Cohen does include "effects" in his definition of genre, there is little indication here, and even less in what follows, that in his scheme end is anything more than one element among equals. The crucial notion of a subordinating final cause is absent, and that absence explains his multitude of overlapping, unparallel categories of works which, though they are indiscriminately called generic, are more accurately to be viewed as classes of groupings according to any number of subject-matter, material, technical, traditionally or dialectically determined characteristics.<sup>4</sup> Failure to distinguish what I would term essential from accidental and historical elements results, in "A Propaedeutic for Literary Change," in all of the following being labelled genres: proverb, comedy, performance genre (presumably drama), poem, sacred narrative, secular narrative, didactic poem and critical text (all from p. 3), epic and romance (p. 3-4), novel and Wordsworthian poetry ("a new version of poetic language and critical vision") (p. 5), sonnet and lyric (p. 6), satire, exemplary satire, heroic poem, greater Romantic lyric and georgic descriptive poem (the latter two pace M. H. Abrams), and sermon (p. 7), ode and ballad parodies (p. 7), and ballad (p. 9). It even seems possible that Cohen considers generic Keats' ten-line odic stanzas (p. 7) and film (p. 9). Of course there is no reason to class things together except for the usefulness of the classification. My purpose here is the preservation of literary phenomena in order to enable the production of literary history. There is a sense in which, therefore, I am reversing the logical order of the terms of the title of another of Professor Cohen's essays, "Historical Knowledge and Literary Understanding," in suggesting critical concepts which are sufficient to result in true literary history.

It is patently true that elements which have come to be closely identified with works written in one genre can be employed in other genres. We can all point, for example, to satiric elements in works which we would not otherwise be inclined to call satires. However, the truth is that the same element does not function in the same way in different genres; transported, elements serve a function "they would not by nature assume," and to fail to perceive this difference is to risk falling into errors of historical judgment, evaluation, and interpretation. Sheldon Sacks finds a perfect example of this danger in the ridicule the title character of Emma directs toward the chattering Miss Bates. The "informing principle" of satire as a genre is ridicule of something or someone outside the work (or, more loosely, within the work). In a satire, one would expect the treatment of Miss Bates (with perhaps a cast at the whole of her chattering tribe) to be there essentially for the sake of satirical ends. In fact, Emma's callousness prompts Knightley's reprimand, which causes our heroine's self-censure, contributing importantly to her personal growth. Rather than serving satirical ends, this element functions to advance the plot of a mimetic work--"an end opposed to satire"--as well as to qualify the reader's judgment of Emma. A reader who does not appreciate the true subordinate role of Miss Bates, and thereby overrates her "satirical" quality, might fail to "recognize the adeptness with which Jane Austen has revealed, with exquisitely appropriate understatement, Miss Bates' essential good nature and freedom from malice, so that, when Emma errs, the extent of her culpability is precisely defined."<sup>5</sup> Such a reader, were he or she a historian, might also treat the incident within the history of literary change as inaccurately as one who fails to recognize the specific sorts of transformations undergone by elements mythic in origin when they are incorporated into imaginative works of literature, such as in Euripides' dramatic treatment of the gods.

After reemphasizing that all writing is generic, Professor Cohen adds, "This in no way is meant to imply that a text belongs only to one genre" ("PLC," p. 3). Obviously a text may belong to more than one of the classes Professor Cohen lists--a tragic or comic novel, a comic or satiric ode. However, no work can "belong" to more than one genre if, as I believe, a single (though possibly complex) principle of subordination is the essence of a genre. Only a failed work would strain at realizing its structure between



two competing powers. If a work belongs to more than one genre, it is impossible to speak of the form of the work; if there is no subordinating form, there is no preserver of the literary phenomena; if the literary phenomena are reduced, there is no appropriate matter for literary history of change.

I conclude from reading his criticism of Crane (whom he acknowledges as providing "some of the historical antecedents for the theoretical principles that I propose") that there is more than an accidental relationship between Professor Cohen's deemphasis of ends and his multiplication of intersecting forms. He cites approvingly Crane's belief that the critic's job is "to discover the problems of particular writers at different times--their changes in forms, materials, and techniques--that explain their works as 'multiple historical relations' and as 'unique artistic wholes.'"<sup>6</sup> But he seems to find the idea of "multiple historical relations" infinitely more congenial than the concept of "unique artistic wholes" which, for Crane, is the logically prior concept for the writing of literary history.

That word "artistic" is particularly troublesome. Although Crane is praised for "his defence of constructional principles," he is judged to be in error "in conceiving of the literary text as an 'artistic' whole. This view presupposes a consistency of systems or functions that is unnecessarily rigid in explaining the diverse rhetorical procedures and their combinations. The aims of a literary work need not be seen as single . . ." ("HKLU," p. 246). Obviously not. Crane would certainly agree that Fielding could incorporate the inculcation of virtue into a work which furnished the peculiar pleasures inherent in a mimetic account of the career of a basically virtuous, naively roguish English youth, without supposing that both aims were structurally equal. And he could as easily agree that writers aim to make money while they encourage us to virtue or move us to pity and fear, without being prevented from distinguishing between the didactic or mimetic principles of subordination which are essential to the respective success of two very different kinds of works. Anyone subscribing to Crane's approach is as theoretically able to handle the crassest commercial rhetorical work as the most ethereal lyric--as long as fundamental generic distinctions are maintained. In Critical and Historical Principles it is clear that Crane chooses to limit his attention to developing principles and procedures

in relation to imaginative works of literature, in distinction, as he says, to "most literary histories [which], however great their diversity in other respects, have presupposed a conception of imaginative literature (or poetry) which does not differentiate essentially, but only accidentally, between one of its species and others, or between any of these and writing in general."<sup>7</sup>

Since Professor Cohen rejects the middle ground of phenomena on which authors actually encounter and solve constructional problems in order to create literary wholes, he must look elsewhere for constructional control. He must seek what he needs to organize his "generic features" (which in the modern fashion might well be called "genrethemes") outside the literary work. We know from "A Propaedeutic for Literary Change" that he rejects what he sees as the mechanistic reductions of White and Riffaterre. In "Historical Knowledge and Literary Understanding" he took the opposite approach, finding on the high ground "the concept of the period norm." This is a "norm in the sense that the critic is providing an explanation of the underlying principles of combination" with a concept that "permits a distinction between how [generic] features are joined and between the overt statements of subject or the historically identifiable rhetorical devices" ("HKLU," pp. 237-238). Professor Cohen says explicitly (confirming my intimation that his constructional principles would not in fact remain on the phenomenal plain) that his is a view of "poetic construction as a moral and epistemological procedure for dealing with the past" ("HKLU," p. 240). That is, to quote Crane again on the dialectical approach, Professor Cohen's concern is with qualities or values works acquire "by partaking in the common causes of all human discourse--language, the mind, history, and so on."

The analytical procedure for anyone with such a conception of norm is to measure a number of works written over a given period against a norm--the pattern of rejection-affirmation is an instance--to which they are dialectically related. The success of the attendant procedure can be judged by the resultant interpretation of Keats' "Ode on Melancholy," which ends with the assertion that in the poem "pleasure must be sacrificed to obtain melancholy . . . . Melancholy can be achieved only at the expense of losing the most sensuous pleasures that make life desirable. Thus the obtaining of melancholy is warrant that one has lived intensely at the

same time that such intense living is over" ("HKLU," p. 242). This interpretation fits Professor Cohen's pattern; it also seems to me nearly the opposite of what the poet of "negative capability" means. If I am right, it is an example of the type of evidence-bending even the best of interpreters are subject to when working within a dialectical scheme. (Even if I were wrong about the ode, my main point would not be affected.)

In "A Propaedeutic for Literary Change," Professor Cohen seems no longer able to hold to even so remote and general a constructional principle as a norm, though he continues to assert that the concept of genre is necessary for persistence. Norms are now mere "abstract entities," either too elusive to be of much use or, when related to Kuhn's idea of the paradigm, too reminiscent of the Cranian notions that had previously been rejected: "Any application of Kuhnian 'normal science' to literary study has to substitute concepts of generic expectation or common problem solving for institutional practice" ("PLC," pp. 10).

Though an unwary reader might be misled, Professor Cohen's position clearly has nothing to do with any Aristotelian formistic views of genre, in spite of the surface conservatism of the vocabulary and the apparently conservative aims expressed in the essay.<sup>8</sup> Professor Cohen has rejected the mechanistic approaches of others and he has abandoned his own former dialectical inclinations. What is left? His genre turns out to be a decentered ground for intersecting genrethemes. Far from being a guarantor of persistence, such a creature displays a lack of both synchronic self-identity and diachronic continuity not unlike the properties of the "text" of deconstructionism. I would even venture to predict that in spite of their incommensurate aims, the most radical contextualism will be able to find much in the essay to appropriate in the service of such concepts as impermanence, difference, tracings, and intertextuality. Such an exploitation may go beyond Professor Cohen's intentions, but there is little in the essay to call into question the logic of even the most radical contextualist extrapolation. What is certain is that the principles and assumptions underlying "A Propaedeutic for Literary Change" are not such to ensure that what the literary historian produces is both literary literary history and literary history.

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#### NOTES

1. Critical and Historical Principles of Literary History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 3.
2. The Act of Interpretation: A Critique of Literary Reason (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 68-69.
3. Davis, p. 69.
4. On the distinction between genres and "traditional genres" and other classifications, see Crane, p. 15.
5. Fiction and the Shape of Belief: A Study of Henry Fielding--with Glances at Swift, Johnson and Richardson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), p. 13.
6. "Historical Knowledge and Literary Understanding" (hereafter, "HKLU"), PLL, 14 (1978), 246.
7. Crane, p. 2.
8. The term "formistic" and some of the other terms used in this paragraph and earlier to categorize possible perspectives on genre are drawn from the pluralistic systems of Richard McKeon (especially his unpublished "Philosophic Semantics and Philosophic Inquiry") and Stephen C. Pepper, World Hypothesis: A Study in Evidence (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

## GENRE AND THE PROBLEM OF CHARACTER IN LITERARY CHANGE

Patricia Harkin

One of the most problematic aspects of literary change, I believe, is that of character. I refer not to change in the delineation of a single character within a work, but rather to changes in authors' and readers' conceptions of character types or of characterization. Such concepts allow us to make critical statements about "the changing characteristics of the picaresque," for example, or to have a notion of "anti-hero" which is somehow continuous with "hero," or to undertake an analysis of "Shakespeare's fools," or "Hemingway's women."

Ralph Cohen urges that we study this change in generic context, since genre can be understood as a family term, "constituted by elements or parts such as . . . character . . . to produce certain effects," and quotes approvingly Maria Corti's suggestion that "a genre may be transformed by itself from the inside by a change in the function of one of its constitutive elements," (4). Cohen's procedures work especially well to explain a diachronic change in a recognizable character type in two contiguous sub-genres, for example, the eighteenth century epistolary novel and the nineteenth century historical novel. Cohen presents this position in specific opposition to Hayden White's assertion that "changes in the linguistic code will in turn be reflected in changes both in the cognitive content of literary works (the messages) and the modes of contact (genres) in which the messages are transmitted and received." (p. 8) White's implication here, as Cohen reports it, is clearly that code, rather than genre, should be the overarching category for the study of literary change. But Cohen charges that White's hypothesis "seems . . . to misconstrue the relation between language and genre." (p. 9) Genres, Cohen asserts, are not "merely reflections of changes in the language code;" rather they are "constituted by linguistic codes that are inconsistent in their implications." (p. 9) Hence I infer that, for Cohen, an explanation of literary change which construes generic change as merely a reflection of change in the culture's system of encoding and decoding would risk being inadequately attentive to the complexity of the phenomenon it seeks to investigate.

My project is to examine Cohen's argument against a particular historical problem in which both character and genre change significantly. My exemplum is a type of character I name "ingenue." I choose her because she is particularly problematic. Unlike such formulaic characters as the miles gloriosus, or the fool, she cannot be defined solely by traits. However, several traits suggest themselves: the ingenue is young, innocent, unsophisticated, appealing. It is clear at once, however, that such trait-oriented or semantic descriptions must confront the problem of naming the traits that will be decisive, defining them, and determining whether they are applicable to a given character. By contrast, a functional study of the ingenue raises the problem of naming functions that are adequate to describe her role in the narrative structure without being so abstract as to be useless to this inquiry. The ingenue, for example, can marry the hero, or serve as his "helper" or "donor." She can be Propp's "sought-for-object" or she can be the subject--the heroine of a female-centered fiction. The more abstract Greimasian geometries necessitate abandoning traditional notions of character such that the term ingenue could have no meaning. Still the term is intelligible. Young, unsophisticated female characters evince enough similarity through time to be recognizable, even while changing. How might we formulate those elements that change as against those that are continuous?

Cohen would invoke the notion of generic control whose continuity of elements and effects provides a basis for "locating which elements have been changed or added or omitted." In such epistolary novels as *Pamela* and *Evelina*, the young female character is central. In Scott's *Waverley*, Rose Bradwardine is "marginalized." All three females are young, sexually innocent, socially unsophisticated and writers of letters. What is discontinuous, I believe, as the ingenue moves from genre to genre over about fifty years, is the social and semantic domain of the innocence and the nature of the plot events to which the innocence gives rise.

The ingenue conventions of the eighteenth century epistolary novel, if we may so generalize, have, for my purposes, four important characteristics. First, they connect sexual with socio-political and socio-cultural innocence. They oppose this innocence, located in the country, with the corruption of the city. *Pamela*, for example, is innocent of the mores

that permit Mr. B to seduce or to violate her. Evelina's guardian, intent on maintaining her innocence of glamorous city life, seeks thereby to prevent her from desiring a life that, he thinks, can never be hers. But Evelina's consequent social innocence, her naivete about London mores, leads her into faux pas wherein her sexual innocence is cast into doubt.

Second, epistolary heroines inscribe their innocence in writing. Both novels problematize the opposition between speech and writing in a series of plot events in which the heroine's speech, as a result of her innocence or weakness, goes unheard or is misunderstood while her writing is understood to be an accurate representation of her personal history. Pamela's journal and letters are the only correct accounts of the events of the fiction. Evelina's letters include accurate and critical comments on society which function as a satire on London life.

Third, both novels problematize the connection between power and writing in a series of sexual threats to the ingenuae authors of personal histories. Pamela hides her journal in her undergarments. To read her writing, therefore, is to rape her. When Evelina writes to Lord Orville, in an effort to provide an accurate account of her encounter with his coachman, her letter is intercepted by Sir Clement Willoughby, who does indeed offer sexual violence to her twice in the narrative.

Finally, both texts point to, but do not name, a way of knowing a truth that is not empirically available, and they locate that truth in the ingenuae herself. Both Mr. B and Lord Orville see through to the natural goodness of Pamela and Evelina in spite of the accidents of their dress and manner.

In *Waverley*, Scott expands the tradition by connecting personal and national history in the character of his protagonist Edward Waverley. He explicitly gives the name imagination to the way of knowing that which is not empirically knowable; he specifies the past as that which is to be known, and he raises questions about the appropriate way of knowing it. For several chapters, Edward Waverley is satirized

for trying to live the life he imagines. Late in the narrative, however, the narrator declares that "the romance of his life was ended, and that its real history had now commenced," (*Waverley*; or 'Tis Sixty Years Since,' ed. Claire Lamont, [Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1981], p. 283).

To understand the function of the opposition between romance and real history in Scott's generic change, it is useful to look at the ingenuae, Rose Bradwardine, and her connection with each term. the ingenuae figure, central to the epistolary novel, is here only the protagonist's fiancée. Her importance to the reader is a function of the way she affects changes in his understanding. When Waverley first encounters Rose, she describes to him a feud with the Highlanders. The protagonist is amazed that she has actually experienced "such a scene as he had used to conjure up in his imagination as only occurring in ancient times," (*Waverley*, p. 72). Here Scott shifts the locus of the ingenuae's innocence and even of her youth from space to time. Rose lives in an earlier stage of historical development; her world is feudal. She speaks her history, and there can be no question of its empirical accuracy, but the immature Waverley calls it a romance.

Rose writes twice in the narrative. First, under Waverley's tutelage, she writes romances. They translate Tasso together. Later, Rose writes real history. Her letter to Waverley describes the arrival of a party of Hanoverian soldiers who suspect him of Jacobitism. She writes "I cannot prevail on myself to write what wicked falsehoods they said . . . . I hope God will protect you, and that you will get safe home to England, where you used to tell me there was no military violence nor fighting among clans permitted, but every thing was done according to an equal law that protected all who were harmless and innocent," (*Waverley*, pp. 139-40).

The theory of history that subtends Rose's letter may safely be associated with the Philosophic Historians, particularly Adam Ferguson's notion that history is the record of the slow but steady progress of mankind toward virtue. The past, for Ferguson and his colleagues, was primitive and vicious, only slowly tempered by the civilizing influence of the law. That complacency is resonantly called into question by Scott's revision of the ingenuae conventions. Innocent Rose Bradwardine

has learned from Waverley that her own feudal society is vicious. But when she writes to him, it is to apprise him that the viciousness of his own government is about to strip him of his rank. Her understanding of history is superficial and reductive, especially to the extent that she understands history as the power of law to govern men's appetites. She herself is evidence that Ferguson's generalization is invalid. So, the non-empirical truth that the ingenue Rose communicates is precisely the opposite of what she writes.

When Waverley writes to Rose, he writes about the history of which he has empirical knowledge, the execution of the Jacobites at Carlisle:

... while he could not suppress his own feeling of the calamity, by endeavoring [sic] to place it in a light which might grieve her without shocking her imagination. The picture which he drew for her benefit he gradually familiarized to his own mind, and his next letters were more cheerful, and referred to the prospects of peace and happiness which lay before them. (Waverley, 329).

Waverley's gentle epistolary lovemaking is a "history" which leaves out all that is ugly and terrible so as to serve the ideological needs of author and audience. Both Rose and Waverley are landed gentry; the peace and happiness which lies before them will maintain the economic and political status quo. The trait of innocence, shifted here from the socio-cultural to the socio-historical register, allows us to point to the deconstructible opposition between romance and real history, and to see behind it an antinomy. It is necessary to know the past. The past cannot be known by reason operating on empirical data. Histories are narratives in which the historian makes inferential connections among past events. Imagination is therefore the operative faculty of mind. Imagination is not a reliable way of knowing because it selects and synthesizes those past remembered events to form a new "created" whole.

We can therefore explain these changes in the character of the ingenue by citing the tendency of Enlightenment historians to "ironize" history writing, a tendency which is

examined by Hayden White in Metahistory, and which is appropriately described as a code change. Our question now becomes whether generic study permits us to describe or explain these changes in such a way as to support Cohen's charge that White "misconstrues" the relation between language and genre. Cohen's understanding of genres as socially produced mixtures of conventions allows for a notion of genre as mediator between the codes of a culture and an individual literary work. By studying this mediation, we can see the codes changing. If, for example, we posit a generic continuity named "novel," or even "comedy," in Frye's sense, as mythos, then we perceive that all three fictions end with marriages that enable a new social order. In the epistolary novels, the marriages occur between economic power, located in a sophisticated male character, and natural goodness located in an ingenue. In Waverley, the marriage semantics involve an old historical order, in Rose's feudal innocence, and a new, conceptually suspect sophistication, in Waverley's "enlightened" Hanoverianism. Only in the third fiction, however, is the ingenue bride marginalized. Moreover, since Rose's innocence also raises questions about the empirical accuracy of historical narratives, her marginal status suggests that the comic resolution is achievable only by repressing the threatening realization that history making serves the ideological needs of author and audience. This perception rests on an understanding both of generic conventions for marriage and of codes of history writing.

Cohen would also invoke the notion of the synchronic hierarchy. Since Rose's innocence questions the epistemological grounds of history writing, it is appropriate, following Cohen, to look at instances in other genres of comparable epistemological questioning. "... Tintern Abbey" comes particularly to mind, and with it a context in which Waverley's written remembrance of Carlisle can be read as a "tranquil restoration" of "sensations" not "sweet" but sweetened, made "more dear" for the sake of Rose, his muse. The generic conventions for the romantic lyric establish a context in which imagination is valorized for its ability to change our perceptions of the empirical.

These readings are of course illustrative of Cohen's point that scholars impose their own linguistic codes upon

those of the past. My reading of *Waverley*, reflecting my interest in the ideological function of generic conventions, has prompted me to notice that the lyric conventions, when introduced into a novel, create a situation in which linguistic codes are inconsistent in their implications.

Cohen implies that White's procedures would cause him to fail to notice these inconsistent implications. He writes that "in [White's] view the changes in language determine the kind of genres most appropriate for the changed messages" (p. 8). (The lyric might be more appropriate for messages about imagination; the novel would be the locus of messages about history writing.) While it may be true that White's procedures will lead him to emphasize some genres over others as he studies changing codes, it is not clear that he therefore "misconstrues" the relationship between language and genre. White's interest in codes would lead him to ask what is sayable in 1814 about history, about imagination, about women, about muses, etc. Although he would certainly understand the historical novel as a reflection of changing codes of history writing, and mark its emergence as an instance of a new genre required by a new message, his procedures, as he practices them, do not seem to be so rigid as to prevent his perception of the complexity of the phenomenon he investigates. Rather, I suggest, the difference between Cohen and White is one of aims and strategy: Hayden White looks for changes in the systems of encoding and decoding and emphasizes those which he finds; Ralph Cohen looks for evidence of continuity in change. The different strategies of the two theorists converge in this instance to permit us to perceive these three ingenues both as a system of literary perduration and as symptom of literary change.

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BIAN DE HOE-GILBERT BEARS REBECCA FROM THE BURNING CASTLE OF TORQUIL STONE.—Chap. xxxi.

GENRE AND LITERARY CHANGE

Gregory S. Jay

"Our fathers did, for change, to France repair."  
--Dryden, 1681

"Those enchanters . . . are perpetually setting shapes before me as they really are, and presently putting the change upon me, and transforming them into whatever they please."  
--Jarvis, trans., Don Quixote, 1742

"He had just received in a handful of change, the piece that he had . . . been seeking."  
--Johnson, 1751

"You cannot put the change upon me so easy as you think."  
--Scott, 1821

"No change given. Passengers are requested to examine their tickets and change before leaving."  
--modern, unattested 1

The enchantment of Ralph Cohen's "A Propaedeutic for Literary Change" lies in its logical wizardry, as the strange shapes of literary history are transformed into what, generically, they really are: the "parts" of a "stable entity" that testifies to a "continuity." The persuasive force of the argument is exhibited less in the reflections on change itself than in the insistence upon the retention of identity despite an apparent metamorphosis. Thus we are led quickly to the law of genre as the *logos* ensuring the orderly analysis of literature: "What is needed is to redefine every literary 'text' as a member of a genre." It is the discipline of a renovated genre theory that predominates in this propaedeutic, and that subordinates literary change to a manageable stability, since "some literary unit like genre is necessary to include continuity in any discussion of change." At a time in literary theory when the notions of identity, order, continuity, and classification have taken such a beating, this return to taxonomy provides a welcome relief from undecidable aporias and deconstructed logocentricisms. Cohen knows the post-structuralist canon as well as anyone, yet he assimilates its lessons to an avowedly conven-

tional literary history. Of course I pun with this "conventional," in order to suggest the degree to which Cohen's attention to literary devices both aligns his theory with those of previous formalisms and marks his liaisons dangereuses with the proponents of a textuality without reserve.<sup>2</sup>

What links Cohen's argument to those of other contemporary critics is its constitution as a rhetoric. The models of intertextuality applied to the history of poetry by Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman, for example, follow in the tradition of E. R. Curtius as they chart the diachronic transformation of tropes in the synchronic arrangement of figures.<sup>3</sup> What ensues is a critique of our notions of literary history and poetic consciousness related to the deconstruction of metaphysics carried out by Derrida in his attention to the play of metaphor in philosophy. Cohen has been no less sensitive to the trickeries of literary devices than his post-structuralist colleagues. Indeed, his studies of Thomson and Denham exhibit a philological rigor rarely matched today. But these readings consistently offer a kind of Augustan balance and restraint in the conclusions they reach, perhaps reflecting--as do the excesses of the post-structuralists--the "text-milieu" from which the theorizing springs.<sup>4</sup>

The positions set forth in this propaedeutic summarize and extend the rhetorical view of literary history previously articulated by Cohen in his analyses of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poetry. Change is of course the central topic in his study of Thomson's The Seasons. As it will for the idea of genre, nature provides Thomson's poem with a grounding metaphor that organizes loss and difference in a continuity, though one carefully conceived to avoid the twin pitfalls of the random and the static. "The Seasons, with its awareness of limitations and change, urges upon man a participation in the environment, an awareness of it that provides unexpected delights together with unexpected sadness, destruction and the need to trust in God. And it does so by developing techniques for revealing the past in the present, the individual in the general, the sadness in the joy." The perception of "the individual in the general" envisions the theory of genre, and Thomson reclaims our interest as he is shown to be a revisionary artist of inherited devices. Just as nature accommodates change to its ultimate (though mysterious) unity, literary history appears to be an organic whole capable of retaining its identity despite the poet's trans-

formations of it. "The sources and models for The Seasons are Job, the Georgics, De Rerum Natura, L'Allegro, Il Penseroso and Paradise Lost, and these do not lead to a new genre called 'descriptive poems.' Rather, The Seasons is a religious didactic poem, and its 'unifying vision' appears in the manner in which it joins eulogies, elegies, narratives, prospect views, historical catalogs, etc." We note that this list of precursors preeminently features literary efforts to treat the disharmony of nature and culture, or to restore fallen natures to an orderly paradise, and that this problem lies within the very concept of genre itself. Cohen is careful to show that "organicism becomes merely another type of fragment," but this only reinforces our suspicion that natural metaphors--such as genre--cannot contain the changes of literature.<sup>5</sup>

Thomson is shown to be an innovator who adopts, adapts, adjusts, varies, revises, rearranges, ridicules, parodies, and mocks the poetic material he inherits. "But varied meanings of the same word or convention in no way led Thomson to relativism, for he accepted the belief in God's wisdom and love." And he "accepted some aspects of literary continuity" as "a basis for his interpretation of the simultaneity of past and present." Despite his "varied uses of genres and figures," Thomson's "view of change operates within the given natural and institutional boundaries."<sup>6</sup> As the study concludes, the correlation between natural change and literary change continues to be a source of insight, and of troubling questions. While the "seasons provided Thomson with a naturalistic basis for change . . . the cycle of the seasons is not the circle of perfection . . . It leads to a temporary completion that introduces a new beginning." Organic order is, from one perspective, a salvation from chaotic change: "The unifying imagery in each season and the stylistic and thematic unity of the whole prevent the poem from collapsing into a heap of fragments." Unlike Eliot's The Waste Land and its "heap of broken images," Thomson's The Seasons can find a genetic pattern in nature for the controlled expression of human change. Regardless of the incessant "fragmentation" of natural order, life's mutable aspects "are controlled by a concept of natural change governed by a God who for all His variations is timeless and omnipresent." Apprehension of this Logos, however, remains fleeting at best: "It is possible to establish coherence and organic interrelatedness in some areas of Thomson's world, but the world as a whole remains a maze, the plan of which is hidden from mortal eye."<sup>7</sup>

Is it too speculative to read here a critical allegory about literary change and literary history? The "timeless and omnipresent," though rarely and individually glimpsed, divine pattern resembles that "simultaneous order" of the "whole of literature" notoriously promulgated by Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Harold Bloom's repeated attacks against this "noble idealization" help us to read in retrospect the exclusions, losses, desires, and disorders motivating such fictions in Eliot (and perhaps in Thomson as well).<sup>8</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, a far more disturbing and less harmonious vision of literary influence and poetic history overshadows the canonical picture of Eliot as conservative theorist of Tradition: "Tradition," he subtly cautions, "cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour."<sup>9</sup> Such a tradition is not a passively received or happily re-sighted whole, but an actively chosen canon designed to authorize a particular revisionary practice. Eliot's critical essays and the allusions in his poetry demonstrate that a poet's tradition is systematic and idiosyncratic, intense and narrow. For the poet, literary change involves processes of rejection and defense that preclude from the start any comforting idea of the simultaneous, the omnipresent, or the timeless. The break with nature always signals, conventionally, this lack of correspondence between natural genealogies and the haunted temporality of the textual.

But the natural repeatedly recurs as a structural resolution of cultural paradoxes that exceed it. Thomson's "conversion of literary conventions to his own artistry" threatens the whole with fragmentation, yet in the organic structure of the poem the "repetitive themes, images, words become a means for interconnecting the whole." Such, one might argue, is the task of the literary critic charting the changing appearances of conventions and devices. However, as with Thomson, the organic metaphor fails to provide finally an absolute perspective on the "maze" of literary history. "Thomson's order," Cohen shrewdly concludes, "demands of the reader a rejection of completion, a constant and unending discrimination of distinctions."<sup>10</sup> What sameness or genres can possibly survive this interminable analysis of differences? Can the poet's twin desires for identity and change be fixed within the formal categories of technical innovation and variation? Or do the poet's motives belong to a genre that crosses, and perhaps undermines, any of its incarnations?



Evident here is the tension between ceaseless differing and a logos of timeless coherence. This impasse (or *aporia*) stands at the heart of Eliot's own radical ambivalence towards tradition and the individual talent. The poet desires to put his difference in the place of the father, and yet seeks an authorizing order from the past to sanctify his usurpation and his defiance of a natural (in Eliot's case a Romantic) genealogy. Cohen's theory of genres rightly supplements Bloom's theory, so that when we read *The Waste Land* we note not only its anxious, guilty, and murderous attitude toward the poetic fathers but the forms Eliot adopts as vehicles and embodiments of this struggle. The poem is a ragbag of different genres, but this fragmentation or drowning of the body of tradition in paradoxical hopes of its resurrection only underscores our recognition that the pastoral elegy--from its sources in Frazer through its revision by Milton, Shelley, Whitman, Tennyson and others--provides the poem with its generic identity. The death and rebirth narrative of the elegy, combined with the poet's identification with the slain precursor, makes of the elegy not only an allegory of generic intertextuality but a reminder of the loss and disorder entailed by every desire for identity. *Elégists* conventionally entertain and then repudiate natural metaphors in the effort to comprehend death--the ultimate metaphor of change. Eliot's anti-pastoral anti-elegy continues the tradition by relentlessly mocking and deconstructing its devices, while he goes on longing for the principle of order they once made appear so real.

Turning back to the "Propaedeutic," we see that part one is entitled "The Nature of Literary Change." The preface specifically ruled out any debate over the term "literary," assuming the "literary" to be what the authorized tradition recognizes. Such a ruling, like genre itself, appears to belong to culture rather than nature, and this ambivalence of realms has always been a thorn in the side of genre theory.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, genre is defined as a "family term . . . each genre being identified by the nature of their combination and the effects produced." The etymology of "genre" shows that "It has the same root as 'gender' and, in being related to gender, indicates the naturalistic distinctions that are implied." The metaphor of the etymological "root" doubles the description's reliance on an organicist framework, repeating as it does a naturalistic view of philology influential since the eighteenth century. Are the "naturalistic distinctions" observed here put in question, as their ground in metaphor

is exposed, or are we meant to understand that the distinctions between genres are as natural and transparent as the distinctions between the genders? Feminist and psychoanalytic theory will cut us off before we can rely upon the latter.

The relationship between text and genre, like that of culture and nature, will always be supplementary (in Derrida's sense) and thus never able to function as an origin of proper identities or as the telos of a history. In other words, rhetoric is an unnatural act that generates systems of genealogy that may interpret differences as particular orders, but only through the irrevocable exclusion of non-generic or bastard traits and only in the service of a master genre or ideology that governs the critical act. "To relate literary change to concepts of thought and feeling or to forms of authorial and reader consciousness," says the "Propaedeutic," "is to realize that literary change is connected with larger frameworks of change in nature and in man." As the unit of such analysis, however, genre already presupposes such a framework and so delimits the scope of change, ruling out the transgressive difference in privileging "innovation" and "variation." It is not the "unrelated instances" that disturb the theory, but those instances of difference that cannot be subsumed by the metaphysics of genre or the literary history of stable entities. "The nature of literary change is thus a study of alterations which can only be understood in terms of the persistence of non-altered elements of frameworks which provide an identity." Here we note that, at least grammatically, "nature" is a "study," and change the begrudgingly returned difference left over after the production of the imprint of a more valuable identity. If the framework only exists against the foreground of change, then do we not have a *mise-en-abyme* in which each framework in turn becomes the changing element in another framework? The role of genre theory is to put a stop to such a deferral of identity, such an uncanny notion of change, through a recourse to the ultimate frameworks of authority and tradition: "no explanation by a modern critic of a past change avoids distortion. What we can do is to control the distortion by introducing generic elements stipulated by others from earlier times." But this only turns the *mise-en-abyme* into a diachronic spectacle of the endless distortions composing literary history.

Though he finds it "tempting," Cohen rejects Bloom's "oedipal" model for poetic continuity, since "if it is granted

that genre exercises control in constituting a text, no explanation can neglect its function." This rejoinder requires a number of responses. First, in practice Bloom does posit a genre--the "crisis ode"--as the vehicle of this conflict, proposing it as a revision of M. H. Abrams' "greater romantic lyric." Second, the judgment here against Bloom depends upon a narrowly conventional definition of genre. Earlier Cohen acknowledged "that numerous contemporary critics and theorists consider received generic classifications discredited." He claims to "share their opinion" and to "find no need to identify genre with such received categories." This is an entirely convincing, and promising, paragraph, but its relation to the remainder of the essay remains puzzling.<sup>12</sup> Although genre becomes the linchpin of the theory of literary change, no new definition of either is offered. The genres involved during the argument are the "received generic classifications" of tragedy, comedy, lyric, ballad, sonnet, novel, and the other recognizable forms associated with specific effects. Much of the essay, in fact, defends the conventional idea of genre, against recent innovations, all of which violate the law of genre by proposing other principles for the organization and analysis of the products of language.

One value, I believe, of recent criticism has been its ingenuity in detecting the continuity of rhetorical and conceptual structures that are transgeneric. Such criticism disturbs the identity of literature as a stable entity or academic institution, and in so doing offers insights that the older new criticism was blind to (the reverse, of course, is equally true). The contribution, for example, of Fredric Jameson's The Political Unconscious is to provide a method for reading the text of diverse genres as part of a continuous tradition in which social contradictions are symbolically resolved in a structure of romance or utopia. Cohen finds that the book "neglects the relation of continuity and the concepts that underlie it so that the relation of landscape poetry to pastoral and georgic forms from which it comes is suppressed or overlooked." In response one might reply that such a generic genealogy is at least as guilty in its suppression of the text's participation in social and conceptual formations that cross the boundaries of genres. "Romance" for Jameson is precisely a transgeneric term (as is, finally, narrative) for that "single great collective story . . . for Marxism, the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity."<sup>13</sup> The importance of Marx, Freud,

Nietzsche and other philosophers of difference or deconstruction emerges in their elaboration of a mode for analyzing, and thus transforming, the hidden agenda or structure composing apparently stable or natural identities. Cohen's rhetoric of genres aids that project in its keen eye for the multiplicity of genres traversing any given work, but it seems limited when appearing to reassert the privilege of received categories or to identify a work with any single genre.

Third, Cohen's own rhetoric lends tacit support to Bloom's theory. When "genre exercises control in constituting a text," we have the conditions for the murder of the father. Jameson's "single great collective story" is in Bloom's hands the recurrent struggle of the poet for freedom from the necessity of obeying the dictates of the fathers. In prescribing for the poet a set of conventional techniques and concepts, genre also entails its own undoing. The identity of the new poem or poet can only be constructed out of a difference; the necessary perception of that difference against a background of continuity only increases the anxiety of the individual talent and the consequent turning against the father's tropes. A poem thus has no genre, no stable identity, but occupies a strategic place between the genres it inherits and those it turns to for a countering canon of devices and concepts. A poet's response to the father's genres, or his choice of alternative forms, obeys not only an aesthetic imperative but the transgeneric "logic" of desire. Thus the identity of a genre turns out to itself be an "extratextual" logos produced by the history of differences it purports to originate and govern. The identity of a poet is likewise a genre or narrative that transgresses with its desire the orderly whole it both retrospectively projects as nature and projectively represents as culture. As Eliot himself put it: "In an ideal state of society one might imagine the good New growing out of the good Old, without the need for polemic and theory; this would be a society, as actual societies are, in which tradition is ever lapsing into superstition, and the violent stimulus of novelty is required."<sup>14</sup>

NOTES

1. These epigraphs are drawn from the entry under "change" in the Oxford English Dictionary.
2. All of Cohen's work shows an expert attention to the intricacies of convention. See in particular "Innovation and Variation: Literary Change and Georgic Poetry," in Ralph Cohen and Murray Krieger, Literature and History (Los Angeles, 1974), pp. 10-14.
3. Cohen has responded to Bloom's theory of poetic history on various occasions, for it parallels his own in many of its assumptions. See "On a Shift in the Concept of Interpretation," in The New Criticism and After, ed. Thomas D. Young (Charlottesville, 1976), pp. 65-66, 78, and "The Statements Literary Texts Do Not Make," New Literary History, 8:3 (Spring, 1982), pp. 384-385.
4. "We do not possess a careful study of theories of criticism in the light of their text-milieu: how theory depends on a canon, on a limited group of texts, often culture-specific or national." Geoffrey Hartman, Criticism in the Wilderness (New Haven, 1980), p. 5.
5. Ralph Cohen, The Unfolding of "The Seasons" (Baltimore, 1979), pp. 2-3.
6. The Unfolding of "The Seasons," pp. 5, 7.
7. The Unfolding of "The Seasons," pp. 325, 327.
8. Harold Bloom, A Map of Misreading (New York, 1975), p. 30.
9. T. S. Eliot, Selected Essays, 4. This argument, and a discussion of the genres of The Waste Land, appears in my T. S. Eliot and the Poetics of Literary History, forthcoming in 1983 from the Louisiana State University Press.
10. The Unfolding of "The Seasons," pp. 328, 327, 330.
11. Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," Critical Inquiry, 7:1 (Autumn, 1980), pp. 55-82. One wonders what Cohen's response would be to Derrida's deconstruction of genre.
12. A similar move characterizes Cohen's overview of the use of literary analysis in other humanities disciplines. His generally favorable account ends with a call for a return to genres. "The Function of Literary Study for the Humanities," in Images and Innovations: Update '70s, ed. Malinda R. Maxfield (Spartanburg, 1979), pp. 140-57.
13. Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious (Ithaca, 1981), p. 19.
14. T. S. Eliot, "Reflections on 'Vers Libre'," in Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot, ed. Frank Kermode (New York, 1975), p. 32.



EFFIE RECEIVES THE SUBJECT TO APPEAR AS A WITNESS UPON HER SISTER'S TRIAL. —Chap. xiv.

LITERARY CHANGE IN LITERARY HISTORY:  
AN OVERVIEW

Takis Poulakos

During the last decade the issue of literary change has received increasing attention. Part of the reason, Professor Ralph Cohen points out in his introduction to New Dimensions in Literary History, may lie in the new direction critics and theorists have taken in their approach to issues, a direction that calls for literary studies which are systematically sound. No longer content merely to identify changes in literary conventions, literary features, etc., critics and theorists have sought ways to move beyond the paths traced by their predecessors by offering systematic explanation, identifying their assumptions, revealing their presuppositions. Another reason may lie in a shift of attitude toward the literary work itself: in a post-formalistic era, a work of art is no longer considered to be a fixed "object" of investigation, but rather an "event," an "action," a "relation" between it and the reader. Such definitions stress the flexible aspect of texts, and dispel the notion that a work has a "changeless" nature; consequently, literary studies are more concerned with issues of change than they were two decades ago.

Of course, such explanations of literary change fall themselves under the scope of more general inquiries into historical, critical, and theoretical changes.

Defining change in general as difference in continuity, Ralph Cohen points out that literary change can only be studied against a background of continuity. A discussion of change must also make evident that nonaltered background against which alterations can be discerned. For example, traditional studies of periodization have failed to establish a background of continuity from one period to the next, as they focus on a changing foreground. Yet changes can be measured systematically only against a background of continuity.

This paper begins by assuming that Cohen's definition of literary change as difference-in-continuity or continuity-in-difference is shared by several other critics, and proceeds by identifying the exact nature of literary change as described in the works of a selected few. Since the scope of literary

change is vast, only one aspect--changes in literary history--is included here. The following critics/theorists are, in one way or another, preoccupied with literary history, each approaching the subject from a different angle: Ralph Cohen approaches literary history by concentrating on the study of genre; Hayden White examines the interrelationship between literature and language; Michael Riffaterre studies the reader's relation to a work; Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman examine a work's relation to its literary past; Hans Robert Jauss zeroes in on a work's relation to the history of its reception; Robert Weimann and Fredric Jameson develop the interrelationship between a work's genesis and its effect upon society.

According to Professor Cohen, literary change can best be studied in relation to genre since "some literary unit like genre is necessary to include continuity in any discussion of change" (See "A Propaedeutic for Literary Change"). Genres do not possess a changeless identity and each generic instance is different from every other. Each instance, however, possesses a sufficient number of features which combine to make it a member of a class; so stable are these features that in any time span some generic features are more dominant than others. Thus, though there are no stable features which can be seen as the essential features of a genre, some generic features become in any particular period more characteristic of a genre than others. The genre as a whole in time possesses features some of which disappear, others of which are added, and the connecting links are always between particular historical moments of the genre. In this sense, Cohen's notion of stability is as historical as is his notion of change: what remains stable is the fact that any work constitutes a genre instance of one or more types.

More specifically, Cohen sees every writer as committed to historical possibilities and his composition as based on historical precedents which offer the source for but do not determine his generic construction. This is possible because a writer may create new combinations of forms out of old combinations, or he may employ similar literary features for new poetic ends (See "Historical Knowledge and Literary Understanding," Papers on Language and Literature, 14 (1978), pp. 227-248).

Other works by Professor Cohen pertinent to the topic of literary change are: "Innovation and Variation: Literary Change and Georgic Poetry," Literature and History, William Andrews

Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles, 1974, pp. 3-42; "Literary Theory as a Genre," Centrum, 3 (1975), pp. 45-64; "On the Interrelations of Eighteenth-Century Literary Forms," New Approaches to Eighteenth-Century Literature: Selected Papers from the English Institute, ed. Phillip Harth, Columbia University Press, New York, 1974, pp. 33-78; "On a Shift in the Concept of Interpretation," The New Criticism and After, ed. Thomas Daniel Young, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1976, pp. 61-79; Cohen, Ralph, "The Function of Literary Study for the Humanities," Images and Innovations: Update '70's, ed. Malinda R. Maxfield, papers of the So. Humanities Conf., Converse College, Spartansburg, SC: Center for the Humanities, Converse College, 1979, pp. 140-157.

Like Cohen, Hayden White defines literary history in terms of difference and continuity: "a literary history must be nothing more nor less than an account both of change in continuity and of continuity in change" ("The Problem of Change in Literary History," New Literary History, 7 (Autumn 1975), p. 105). To determine what is changing and what is continuous in any given period of the whole historical record, we must study "the component shared by the context, the audience, the artist, and the work alike. This component is language in general" (p. 106).

Changes in any of the four prime elements of the literary field (work, artist, audience, context) must be related to the more general field of linguistic transformation. Change then is for Professor White a dialectical interrelationship between the elements of the literary field and the linguistic code (Jacobson's code) which serves as the mediating agency among them all.

Though literary innovation, like speech innovation, must be presumed to be going on all the time, historically significant literary innovation is possible only at those times when new systems of encodation and transmission of messages are being constituted; but these times are also those during which "language itself has fallen under question and none of the conventional modes of message formulation and transmission appear to be adequate for naming and classifying the elements of the larger historical-natural context" (p. 108).

For Hayden White then, literary change becomes a consequence of changes in a linguistic code; any statements about literary change must be related to the more general field of linguistic transformation. Other works by White pertinent

to the issue of literary change are "Interpretation in History," New Literary History, 4 (Winter 1973), pp. 281-314; "Literary History: The Point of It All," New Literary History, 2 (Autumn 1970); Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1978.

For Michael Riffaterre, literary change consists essentially in the reader's perception of literariness. Thus though socio-political events may themselves cause changes in the composition of a work, the reader perceives only the finished product, having "no natural way of knowing past circumstances of the writer's struggles" (See "Literary Change and Literariness"). Hence the nature of literary change is closely tied to the nature of its perception by the reader. Whereas the linguistic code used by a given text remains changeless, the code brought to the text by the reader is constantly, like language itself, changing.

The concept of "intertextuality" enables Professor Riffaterre to define literariness through a reading procedure "that is the opposite of the 'normal' decoding of the text." Ungrammaticality effects a change in the normal linear reading procedure, marking also the point at which literariness obtains: "the surprise change from linear to intertextual interpretation is triggered by . . . points of absolute nonsense that are at one and the same time the blocks on which we stumble in our linear reading, and the keys to intertextual reading."

All this is possible because texts are composed of descriptive systems: "Every descriptive system provides the general language from which the poet makes his private or individual language; thus questions of genre, tradition, influence are 'peripheral' to the problem of the very existence of the literary work."

Since "descriptive systems" undergo changes in meaning, Riffaterre leans on a "history of words" in order to reconstruct the original meaning of a work (See "The Stylistic Approach to Literary History," New Literary History, 2 (Autumn 1970), pp. 39-55; reprinted in New Directions in Literary History, ed. Ralph Cohen, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1974, pp. 147-164). Other works by Professor Riffaterre pertinent to literary change are: Semiotics of

Poetry, Indiana University Press, 1978 (esp. pp. 39-40 and 172, footnote 24); "Flaubert's Presuppositions," Diacritics, 11, Winter 1981.

Literary change as a way of describing a work's relation to its past (generic or otherwise) informs the writings of Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman, who identify the uniqueness of a work through the ways in which it participates in but also resists its literary past. Professor Bloom offers an oedipal model for poetic continuity--an ongoing crisis each poet faces. What changes on the diachronic axis are the resolutions themselves, unique for each poet as he struggles for freedom from the dictates of his poetic father. (See The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry, Oxford University Press, New York, 1973; A Map of Misreading, Oxford University Press, New York, 1975).

Geoffrey Hartman studies the "identity crisis" each poet goes through as he attempts to individualize the "chaos of forms." On the basis of this crisis, Professor Hartman founds a history of poetic vocation which records an ongoing "genius/Genius" contest (the artist's struggle with past masters) and a quarrel of "genius with genius loci" (of art with the natural religion or dominant myth of its age). In such a search for a vocation "There are, always, it seems, two geni fighting for the soul of the artist: two stars or visions of destiny, or Genius and the genius loci." (See "Toward Literary History," In Search of Literary Theory, ed. Morton W. Bloomfield, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1972, pp. 195-235).

In another paper, this tension is put into the form of a journey as each artist progresses from a chaos of forms, "with which the historical consciousness begins," toward a revel of forms, "which erases then affirms the art-reality distinction." Professor Hartman feels that a history of "authentic responses" is possible only so long as a work is seen as historically individuated. (See also "A Short History of Practical Criticism," New Literary History, 10 (Spring 1979), pp. 495-509; reprinted in Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1980).

Whereas Bloom and Hartman address the issue of the extent to which a work is historically individuated by focusing on a work's relation to its past, Hans Robert Jauss addresses the same problem by concentrating on a work's relation to its

future. For Jauss, the history of a work's reception is a valuable tool, indispensable in reconstructing the past: we cannot understand a work of art by reconstructing the set of conventions, expectations, etc., that existed at the time of its production since the historical consciousness of a period can never exist as a set of recorded propositions.

At the moment of its reception, the individual work of art stands out as unintelligible with regard to the prevailing conventions. But a history of reception will discover properties held in common between a given work and its projected history. Thus a history of reception will contain elements of "genuine paradigmatic" similarity that circulate freely between the formal singularity of the work and the history of its reception. As De Man, in his introduction to Jauss' Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, puts it, "In Jauss' historical model, a syntagmatic displacement within a synchronic structure becomes, in its reception, a paradigmatic condensation within a diachrony. Attributes of difference and of similarity can be exchanged thanks to the intervention of temporal categories: by allowing the work to exist in time without complete loss of identity, the alienation of its formal structure is suspended by the history of its understanding." (See also "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," New Literary History, 2 (Autumn 1970), pp. 7-37; "The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature," New Literary History, 10 (Spring 1979), pp. 181-227).

Literary change, as examined by Robert Weimann, lies at the center of the problem of interpreting a work of the past from a contemporary point of view. For Weimann, time and timelessness are fused into one in the interrelated functions of art: the mimetic (historical), and the moral (ever-present). The twofold functions call for a corresponding activity on the part of the historian-critic who must see the work both as a "product of its time," a "mirror of its age," and as a "producer of the future," a "lamp to the future."

When a work of the past is seen against its present reception and when the contemporary interpretation is seen against the historical significance of the work, then can we begin to acquire "a sense of history which can discover permanence in change but also change in seeming permanence; the past in the present but also the present in the past." (See "Past Significance and Present Meaning in Literary

History," New Directions in Literary History, ed. Ralph Cohen, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1974; reprinted in Structure and Society in Literary History: Studies in the History and Theory of Historical Criticism, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1976, pp. 18-56; also see "'Reception Aesthetics' and the Crisis of Literary History," trans. Charles Spencer, Clio, 5 (1975), pp. 3-33.

Fredric Jameson addresses a similar problem: the inherent paradox in which a work of art reflects the conditions of the time of its production and yet transcends those conditions, maintaining a relevance to its own but also to subsequent epochs. Jameson offers a different approach from the one suggested by Weimann.

For Professor Jameson, historical epochs consist of "overlays" of different modes of production. Thus a work of art which grasps a social contradiction and which projects a vision that resolves a problem expressible in terms of a specific mode of production can still remain relevant to subsequent works which are produced under similar and dissimilar modes of production. "Classic works" do not appeal to later ages by some timeless wisdom but through their presentation of man's capacity to endow lived contradictions with intimations of possible transcendence.

Narratives are universal in their capacity to justify the dream of achieving an ideal community; they are particular in their representations of the contradictions present. But narrative and history are subjected to the forces of a similar dialectic--"Desire" in conflict with "Necessity"--and they record a similar movement: the processes through which a unity of meaning (Plot, History) is imposed upon the chaos of elements (story-elements, historical events). (See The Political Unconscious, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1981. Also see "Demystifying Literary History," New Literary History, 5 (Spring 1974), pp. 605-612; "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre," New Literary History, 7 (Autumn 1975), pp. 135-163.)

Additional works pertinent to the study of literary change in literary history are the following:

Buck, Gunther. "The Structure of Hermeneutic Experience and the Problem of Tradition." Trans. Peter Heath. New Literary History, 10, (1978), pp. 31-47.

Canary, Robert H., and Henry Kozicki, eds. The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978.

Crane, R.S. Critical and Historical Principles of Literary History. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971.

De Man, Paul. "Literary History and Literary Modernity." In Blindness and Insight. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, pp. 142-165.

Eggers, Walter F., Jr. "The Idea of Literary Periods." Comparative Literature Studies, 17 (1980), pp. 1-15.

Galan, F.W. "Literary System and Systemic Change: The Prague School Theory of Literary History." PMLA, 94 (1979), pp. 275-285.

Krieger, Murray. Theory of Criticism: A Tradition and Its Systems. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

Kusher, Eva. "Diachrony and Structure: Thoughts on Renewals in the Theory of Literary History." Synthesis, 5 (1978), pp. 37-50.

Lodge, David. "Historicism and Literary History: Mapping the Modern Period." New Literary History, 10 (1979), pp. 547-555.

Starobinski, Jean. "The Meaning of Literary History." New Literary History, 7 (1975), pp. 83-88.

Todorov, Tzvetan. "The Origin of Genres." New Literary History, 8 (1977), pp. 159-170.

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## Comparative Literature & Literary Theory Program

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Professor James J. Sosnoski  
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Dear Jim,

In SCE Reports 11 (Spring, 1982), Richard Barney reviews a Conference on Theories of Reading held at Indiana University in September, 1981, which I also attended. Since my recollections and notes appear to be richer than Professor Barney's on certain points, I should like to fill out the picture of what he reports as follows:

The underlying political nature of the discussion, especially as it bore on the economics of the profession, became particularly clear when Barbara Herrnstein Smith and Peter Brooks, representatives of the nation's more prominent institutions--the University of Pennsylvania and Yale--were repeatedly singled out by heated criticism for their view that studying students are not necessarily important for developing a theory of reading. (One political caucus question to them read: "Does a disinterest in student 'readings' of literature imply a political unwillingness to share power with the young?") [p. 101]

The "view" here attributed jointly to Peter Brooks and myself is, as stated, absurd and was expressed by neither of us. What I did say (among other things) was:

(a) that, judging from the organization and activities of the conference, one might conclude that reading was an activity confined to teachers of English literature and their students;

(b) that if current "theories of reading" were not so dominated by the immediate interests of the literary academy, it might be usefully recognized that there are texts that are not read in literature classes, readers who are neither professors or students, and motives and occasions for reading that are not academic;

(c) that it was methodologically naive to believe, as a number of conference participants apparently did, that the written "responses" (or "protocols") elicited from their students (under the conditions they described and implied) constituted

raw data about the processes involved in reading; and, therefore (in response to a question to which the panelists were specifically asked to address themselves),

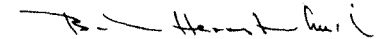
(d) that whatever pedagogic or self-revelatory value the production of such protocols might have for individual teachers and students, they were of limited general interest in the development of what might be properly considered a theory of reading.

Although nothing in these remarks referred to or implied anything about my own classroom practices or policies, it appears that they did indeed provoke from "the political caucus" the tendentious question Professor Barney cites. What he refers to as "the underlying political nature of the discussion" (and also its intellectual reaches) was perhaps most dramatically illustrated by a particularly fevered moment in the exchange that followed--when, after I repeated the gist of my prior remarks and added that a more general theory of reading (that took account of, among other things, related activities occurring outside the classroom) would have, as I put it, "greater explanatory power," one member of that caucus (who had earlier given a stirring account of the successful democratization of his own classroom) shouted in triumph: "You see--so it is only power you want, isn't it?"

I am not sure what Professor Barney had in mind in regard to how the discussion "bore on the economics of the profession" unless it was his suspicion that, there being no other obvious candidates in sight, the "representatives of the nation's more prominent institutions" had to be cast in the role of the establishment heavies in the political caucus's pre-written script.

There is much that needs saying about the political and economic dynamics of the practices of the literary academy, but that project was not much advanced at the Conference on Theories of Reading which, whatever its achievements, did not, I think, unmask the power structure either of theories of reading or of anything else.

Sincerely yours,



Barbara Herrnstein Smith  
University Professor of English  
and Communications



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