Literary Genres as Norms and Good Habits

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Notions that designate literary genres are most often unstable. First and most obviously, they change with time, as the comparison between Greek and Renaissance tragedy shows. Moreover, genres often possess an internal flexibility that makes them mobile and unpredictable at any given time. A tragedy by Shakespeare does not display the same regularities as a tragedy by Marlowe. A tragedy by Marlowe rarely resembles another of his tragedies. Those who think about literary (and cultural) genres are therefore subject to two temptations: one is to freeze generic features, reducing them to immutable formulas, another is to deny genres any conceptual stability.

The seventeenth-century French disciples of Renaissance poetics dogmatically assumed tragedy to be the genre described by Aristotle’s Poetics, and, as a consequence, required writers of tragedies to observe the unity of action, time, and place, to present heroes that are neither perfect nor fallen but have a flaw that leads them to catastrophe, and to generate fear and pity in the audience, thus inducing a purification of its feelings. These features admirably fit Oedipus Rex and apply to some extent to Racine’s Bajazet or Phèdre, but they fail to account for the innumerable sixteenth-and seventeenth-century tragedies in Italy, France, Spain, and England that do not observe the three unities (as is the case with most Elizabethan and Spanish tragedies), portray either perfect or fallen heroes (Le Cid and, respectively, Rodogune by Corneille) and can hardly be said to purify the spectator’s feelings (The Jew of Malta, The Duchess of Malfi). Call this approach “dogmatic.” It made possible the seventeenth-century French conflicts between well-meaning but narrow-minded critics and embarrased writers of tragedies who, while knowing that their work might have violated some Aristotelian rule, were nevertheless aware that their “imperfect” tragedies have considerable literary value.

Symmetrically opposite situations occur when literary critics assume that genres have only a nominal existence or, going one step further, consider that while each text belongs to some genre, it nevertheless actively deconstructs the legitimacy of that particular genre. Call these stands the “nominalist” and, respectively, the “skeptical” approach. For the skeptic, Oedipus Rex is a tragedy that makes tragedy impossible, while
Phèdre follows the classicist rules only to undermine them in some mysterious, yet irresistible way. However attractive this approach may seem in the classroom or in the scholarly journals, in real life most writers are fully aware of generic constraints and, if they ever go against them, they do it hesitantly, reluctantly, and only because of some concrete, well justified artistic need. In seventeenth-century France, Corneille, for one, would have loved to follow the classical unities. When he didn’t, he had strong reasons, which he tactfully presented in his well-argued examinations of each play.

I am not sure that dogmatism, nominalism, or skepticism can capture the unique mixture of stability and flexibility of the notions that designate literary and, more generally, cultural genres. When dealing with such issues, no general principle, be it dogmatic, nominalist, or skeptical, can replace detailed attention to the interplay between abstract categories and the originality of their instantiation. With all their instability, generic notions are irreplaceable. Attempts to speak about literature in terms of a single all-encompassing category that would make generic concerns obsolete (the “masterpiece” of the Romantics, the “poem” of the New Critics, and the “text” of poststructuralist criticism) leave aside something essential.

Genre is a crucial interpretive tool because it is a crucial artistic tool in the first place. Literary texts are neither natural phenomena subject to scientific dissection, nor miracles performed by gods and thus worthy of worship, but fruits of human talent and labor. To understand them, we need to appreciate the efforts that went into their production. Genre helps us figure out the nature of a literary work because the person who wrote it and the culture for which that person labored used genre as a guideline for literary creation.

Considerations about genre are thus unavoidable and those who dispense with them do it at their own risk. A great amount of Shakespearian criticism, for instance, while admirably capturing the poetic texture of Shakespeare’s plays, has neglected these plays’ main objective, which was to please their audience in the theater. Shakespeare’s dramas are indeed full of poetry, but their poetry does not target solitary souls ready to shed tears. It is meant to reverberate on stage in the height of action. In Baroque drama rhetorical gesticulation and poetic gems are spread around with a magnificent generosity, but to appreciate them one needs to remember that they shine only for an instant, just enough to enhance the dramatic movement of passions and decisions. Similarly, the well-composed frames that grace an action movie are not still pictures, they are fleeting moments of a movement picture.

Should one then say that Shakespeare’s metaphors represent nothing but the bard’s way to cope with a prevailing dramatic norm? And, more generally, are generic requirements to be understood as norms?
In order to address this question, I will distinguish between several types of generic requirements. Some are strictly *formal*. A sonnet must have fourteen lines and its stanzas and rhymes must follow certain prescribed patterns (one being ABBA BAAB CDC DCD). These kinds of norms resemble social conventions, conventions of polite behavior, for instance. An individual who discards the norm that requires us to greet our friends can be said to behave impolitely. In the same way, a sixteen-line poem does not behave like a sonnet. It goes without saying that impolite people can learn, if they want, how to greet other people and that nothing prevents dutiful poets from writing regular sonnets. What is required in these cases is the appreciation and application of the appropriate rule.

I would notice, in passing, that such rules are conventional only in a limited sense of the term. They are conventional in the sense that the whole community recognizes them as obligations. But they are not conventional in the sense that the community can arbitrarily decide to replace them by another convention. Each such rule serves a purpose: greeting people signals nonaggression, the form of the sonnet has a well-calculated inner balance. A community might decide to stop saying hello to friends because it finds it useless to signal nonaggression. Writers can stop writing fourteen-lines love poems because they or their audience do not appreciate the inner balance of a sonnet. In such cases what changes is not merely the convention, but rather the urgency of the purpose it is meant to serve.

The fact that some literary subgenres, for example the sonnet, can be easily identified with the help of specific formal features has induced some literary critics to search for specific features in other cases, even in cases when there are none to be found. Sonnets can be immediately told apart from ballads by counting their lines and, in the case of pre-twentieth-century poetry, by observing their rhyme structure. Couldn’t we handle other categories, say narrative fiction, in an equally easy fashion? In their search for formal features that would define narrative fiction, several critics, most notably Käte Hamburger, have claimed that the representation of other people’s inner thoughts, deemed to be inaccessible to ordinary knowledge, occurs exclusively in fiction. A literary text that portrays the inner thoughts of human characters would be, according to these critics, fictional. And since the representation of other people’s inner thoughts sometimes takes the form of free indirect discourse, this peculiar grammatical feature has been assumed to offer the formal criterion, or at least the formal signpost, that differentiates fiction from other kinds of literary texts. Just as a fourteen-line poem with the right kind of stanza and rhyme structure can be confidently called a sonnet, the presence of free indirect discourse has been deemed sufficient for identifying a text as fiction.
The problem with such identification is that it widely misses its mark. Most narrative fictions do not use free indirect discourse, while some nonfictional texts, including journalist reporting and historical biography, do. The relevant difference here lays between categories that are formal in the first place, for example “sonnet”, and categories that are not, such as “fiction” or “tragedy.” The term “sonnet” means nothing but a fourteen-line poem, while the meaning of terms like “fiction” or “tragedy” goes far beyond their technical literary use. One rarely, if ever, hears people say “My friend’s message is a sonnet” (except if it is shaped as a fourteen-line poem embellished with the right kind of rhymes) or “My friend’s life is a sonnet,” while one often hears statements like: “His plans are fiction” or “His early life was a tragedy.” Categories like “fiction,” “comedy,” and “tragedy” belong to our everyday, nonliterary vocabulary. Indeed, most of us discover that things in life are comic or tragic before seeing or reading a comedy or a tragedy. Most of us meet with fiction before reading fiction. (Some even claim that as young children we first live in a fictional world. Later on, reality detaches itself from this magic world, forcing us to leave it. Perhaps we keep reading fiction because we are never fully resigned to this loss.)

The attempt to find a formal feature that defines, or signals, fiction is as misguided as the attempts of neoclassicist critics to fix once and for all the form of tragedy. Terms like “tragedy” and “comedy” have a moral and existential meaning and, as such, possess a considerable semantic flexibility. In real life many things count as tragedy, and, similarly, in literature tragedy does not have to follow a single formula. To be sure, cultural traditions identify successful ways of representing misfortune, good models (say, Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex) influence latecomers, and in the long run generic ossification occurs. As a result, some set of formal features (for example, the three unities, the good but imperfect hero, and so forth) gives the impression that it is necessarily linked with tragedy. But this is only an impression. Tragedy, understood as a moral and existential notion, can occur in so many ways and be so different from its literary representations that sooner or later, an author will inevitably write a tragedy that has little in common with the existing literary tradition.

The same is true about fiction, a generic notion that, admittedly, is more abstract than tragedy or comedy. While “tragedy” and “comedy” refer to ways in which events and actions affect us, fiction is a term that applies to ways in which we imagine and narrate such events and actions. Its everyday use certainly has moral and existential connotations, usually derogatory. But these connotations are usually linked to the moral and existential implications of story-building and story-telling, rather than action. Even when used in everyday parlance, fiction is a term of art.
Being a term of art does not make “fiction” a formal notion, in the sense in which “sonnet” is a formal genre, and does not guarantee that fiction can be linked once and for all with a set of formal features. The difference between fiction and nonfiction is, in a sense, invisible, as the biography of Marbot by Wolfgang Hildesheim irrefutably proves. Marbot is calculated to read as a scrupulous documentary biography of a late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century figure, but is in fact a work of fiction. Its fictionality is an extratextual feature, as it were, a spiritual property, if one speaks the idiom of the nineteenth-century Geistesgeschichte, a cultural function, if one prefers contemporary sociological terminology.

It is true that Marbot constitutes, for the time being, an exception. As cultural phenomena, most works of fiction have behind them a tradition of successful models and ossified procedures, which make it easier for the public to focus its expectations and for the writers of fiction to meet them. Since the nineteenth century, for instance, fiction is expected to emphasize the use of sensory details. If at the flea market I pick up a paperback that has no cover and no title page and on its first page I discover a richly textured description of, say, the Boston harbor, I am justified to expect the book to be a work of fiction. And yet, I have no right to be surprised if it turns out to be a history of the Boston tea-party. Textual procedures circulate across cultural genres. As the case of Marbot reminds us, there are many ways of narrating fiction and ingenious writers can always discover new ways of doing it.

The vocabulary of literary genres thus includes “content” terms that are shared with our moral and existential vocabulary (“tragedy,” “comedy”), terms of art that have a simple formal definition (for example, “sonnet”), and terms of art that refer to what I called “extratextual properties” and therefore require from their users a certain level of hermeneutic dexterity (“fiction,” and, as we will see in a moment, “novel”).

We can now return to the question whether generic requirements can be understood as norms. For the simple formal genres, the answer is definitely yes. A sonnet must have fourteen lines, the verses of a rondeau recur in certain definite ways, an epigram or a proverb cannot go beyond a certain length. These restrictions, however, are neither very frequent nor particularly interesting. What then about genres defined by their content: the tragedy, the comedy, the mystery novel, the Harlequin romance? As Gérard Genette noticed in his introduction to the question of genre, such cases are “empirical classes, established by observation of historical facts.” These categories have a normative content simply in the sense that within the traditions in which they strive, certain customs of literary production prevail. Writers, who like most human beings know their best interest, tend to follow these
customs and habits. But does this mean than the genres of tragedy, comedy, and so forth, have an internal set of normative requirements, independent from social custom?

My answer is affirmative. Writers do not select good yet imperfect heroes for their tragedies simply because their tradition instructs them to do so. Shakespeare’s metaphors are not mere ways of coping with an external requirement. To be what they are, Greek tragedy needs imperfect heroes and Shakespearian drama needs flights of poetry. Yet, as I will try to suggest by using the example of the novel, this kind of need is not an abstract a priori requirement, but comes as a consequence of the cultural tasks the genre chooses to fulfill.

The novel is an excellent case to study precisely because critics found it so difficult to identify its features and agree on its date of birth. Novel is a term of art, and critics who use it narrowly, referring to “long prose fictional narratives written after 1550,” place the rise of the novel in sixteenth-century or early seventeenth-century Spain (the place and time of the first picaresque novels and of Cervantes’ Don Quijote), late seventeenth-century France (where Mme de Lafayette wrote her Princesse de Clèves), eighteenth-century England (homeland of Defoe and Richardson), or even nineteenth-century France or Russia (where Balzac and Tolstoy wrote what some critics assume to be the first genuine modern novels). Those who use the term in the wider sense of “long fictional narratives that are not epic poems,” thus including Greek and Medieval romances, consider that the novel rose on the shores of the Mediterranean in the early A.D. centuries. Concerning the features of the genre, the critics who set apart the novel from romance emphasize realism, which they alternatively find in the precision of moral psychology, the empirical credibility of the story and its environment, the scope of the social and historical portrayal of the world, and the fierce opposition to the fantasy world of romance. Those who, in contrast, believe that romance and the novel share one long history tend to emphasize the moral and sentimental interests of the genre. In their view, both ancient and modern novels tell stories about couples in love and focus on the woman’s role.

These definitions are by nature vague and since the novel has been a versatile genre, some critics (most notably Mikhail Bakhtin) came up with the idea that the novel’s peculiar feature is the absence of any peculiar feature, the novel being mobility made flesh. Such assertions, I think, are cop-outs. They contradict the common sense observation that, featureless as the genre of the novel might seem to some critics, most writers and readers of novels know quite well with what kind of object they are dealing.

Before the eighteenth century, prose narrative subgenres were subject to a strict division of fictional labor, each subgenre specializing in a
certain kind of vision of the human world. The eighteenth-century novel writers deliberately mixed the features of several premodern prose subgenres, attempting to achieve both a complex vision and a more complete representation of the human condition. They obtained remarkable results and created new and relatively stable traditions, yet none of these traditions managed to dominate the field in its entirety. All along the eighteenth- and the nineteenth-century several varieties of novels were competing for attention, fighting each other and borrowing from each other artistic discoveries and technical devices. Considered from far above, the melee seems difficult to sort out. A more careful look shows however that the various competitors pursued definite artistic goals, which in turn influenced the way they wrote.

At the end of the sixteenth-century, although prose narratives were not the object of normative poetics, European writers and readers were quite familiar with the pattern of available choices. They were able to select between prose fictions that presented a highly idealized view of the human world and those that specialized in the portrayal of human imperfection. People who wanted to write or read an idealized prose narrative could settle upon the genre called in France "les éthiopi ques," which imitated Heliodorus' *Aethiopian Story*, a work rediscovered and translated into vernacular languages in the 1540s and 1550s. Alternatively, they could choose the chivalric novel, a genre that still attracted readers, but not writers, or they could select the pastoral novel. Greek novels and their modern imitations (the best known being Cervantes' *Persiles and Sigismunda*) emphasized the inflexible strength of virtuous characters who struggle to avoid the temptations of our world. To this stoic "mental set," chivalric novels (for example, *Amadis de Gaula*) opposed heroic characters who relentlessly fight to preserve the moral order, while pastoral novels (for example, D'Urfé's *Astrea*) depicted gentle but fragile human beings who gradually discover perfect love. Among the subgenres devoted to the analysis of human imperfection, the most pessimistic was the Spanish picaresque (*Lazarillo de Tormes, El Buscon* by Quevedo). It described a world in which human beings, cut from all their social links, are ready to cheat, steal, and swindle for a loaf of bread and a jug of wine, or, worse, for the sheer pleasure of being immoral. Novellas, comic or tragic, focused on the human flaws that emerge in close social interaction. The best examples were found in Boccaccio, Cinzio, Cervantes, and, later, Mme de Lafayette. Finally, elegiac stories (for example Boccaccio's *Fiammetta*) narrated in the first person the misfortunes of adulterous love.

The representational goals of these subgenres had direct consequences for the techniques employed. The idealist novel was interested in depicting virtues and vices directly, as it were, in their splendid
exemplarity. It therefore had to decrease its attention to physiognomic
details and concrete personality traits, and emphasize instead the
axiological abstraction of the characters, the eminent visibility of their
moral beauty. In the idealist novel, the terrestrial world, being a
threatening place ruled by contingency, cannot be considered as the
true home of the exemplary heroes. The multiplication of episodes
narrating various catastrophes (shipwrecks, kidnappings, disappearance
of royal children) emphasizes the uncertainty of the world, as opposed
to the moral constancy of the protagonists.

Conversely, the so-called realism of the picaresque novel is rooted in
its moral pessimism. A wealth of details about material life impresses
upon the reader the dereliction of the picaros, who, as individuals that
have no stable rapports with human society, remain indifferent to higher
moral concerns. The flaws highlighted by early modern novellas are
more concrete, better linked to the social milieu in which the characters
live, and therefore better motivated from the point of view of moral
psychology. This is why novellas concentrate on a single dramatic event
that reveals the crucial personality traits of their main character. This is
also why their setting must have a certain amount of sociological
plausibility. As for the elegiac stories, they use the first person narrative
at a time when most usually the inner gaze is expected to discover sin
and dereliction.

In the eighteenth century, writers like Samuel Richardson and Jean-
Jacques Rousseau created what I would call the modern idealist novel, by
successfully bringing to earth the heroes of the Greek, chivalric, and
pastoral romances. The princess Chariclea of Heliodorus' Aethiopian
Story reincarnated as Pamela, the virtuous servant, as Clarissa, the
inflexible middle-class daughter, and as Julie d'Étange, a splendid
representative of small Swiss nobility. According to the new principles of
moral egalitarianism, moral beauty was henceforth assumed to be
available anywhere around us. Under this assumption, only the inner
gaze can fully grasp the hidden treasures of the noble soul. Vast enough
to allow for an attentive exploration of the difference between the
beautiful soul and its surroundings, the modern idealist novels learned
from the novella how to structure their plots around a single strikingly
dramatic situation: seduction in Pamela, rape in Clarissa, the divorce
between love and marriage in Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse. From the elegiac
story, they borrowed the elegance of the confession in the first person.
In these epistolary novels, however, the individual conscience became
the site moral splendor rather than of moral infirmity. Confession aimed
at disclosing inner beauty.

"Nonsense!" proclaimed Fielding, the founder of what I would call the
modern anti-idealist novel. We are fallible beings and the novel is the
prose genre that explores the comic side of our fallibility. The inner gaze cannot be trusted, because our discourse hides our genuine motivations and deceives ourselves and other human beings. Characters, in particular the better ones, do not exactly know who they are and, as a consequence, their confessions are usually worthless. The genuine moral authority belongs to the author, who knows the truth about the characters. Fielding discards the first-person voice and spectacularly replaces it with the author's own voice.

I cannot go here into the details of the gigantic struggle between the various incarnations of the modern idealist novel and its anti-idealistic counterparts. It lasted a century and a half and lead to the destruction of both combatants, followed by the rise of the modernist novel. But I think I said enough to suggest that the features of each subgenre are selected because they best serve the representational purposes of that subgenre. The ancient Greek novel needs implausibly virtuous heroes and a multiplicity of episodes taking place in a wildly contingent world because it aims at representing the moral good directly, so to speak, without the detour through plausibility. Novellas stage flawed human beings caught in short, violent conflicts because it tries to catch moral imperfection in its act. The eighteenth-century sentimental epistolary novel encourages its heroines to profess their virtue because the genre aims to assert the inexhaustible glory of the beautiful soul.

These generic features can certainly be called normative. In the decades after the publication of Pamela, for instance, a smart writer of sentimental novels could not avoid seriously considering the way in which Richardson modernized ancient idealism. Richardson's discoveries had become the norm. Used in this way, the term "norm" means a successful artistic solution to a representational problem. Such norms are not obligatory rules of behavior, they are just effective recipes worthy of being imitated by writers who have similar artistic concerns and want to obtain similar results. They are good artistic habits, practices of the trade, rather than imperatives. But they are not set in stone. Those who adopt them are often faced with new artistic problems to which the acquired habits do not always answer properly. It may happen that a new, slightly different, solution leading to the formation of slightly different practices and habits, proves to be more adequate to the task at hand than the old recipe. Rousseau gave a lot of thought to Richardson's technique. Because the French tradition identified concrete details with the comic style and appreciated moral abstract debates, Rousseau must have felt that in Richardson's novels the wealth of concrete details undermines the impression of moral greatness made by the heroines upon the reader. Therefore, in Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse, he, like Richardson, placed the beautiful soul in a contemporary plausible
setting, built a powerful drama based on the heroine's feelings, and allowed her to describe her inner splendor in long, repetitive letters. But instead of conveying, like Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, the vivid impression of actual experience, Rousseau's prose privileged meditation and philosophical debate. Did this change simply reflect a different set of norms, say, the norms of the French moralist novel? Perhaps it did. But Rousseau's practice could just as well be seen as a "new, improved" recipe meant to achieve a new artistic goal: the representation of a beautiful soul that is more reflective than active.

To see genre as a set of good recipes, or good habits of the trade, oriented towards the achievement of definite artistic goals makes the instability of generic categories less puzzling and less threatening. Genres other than strictly formal ones are unstable and flexible because the goals pursued by writers with their help vary, as do the ways of achieving these goals. The good habits the writers form in the process (the recipes they discover, or, if you want, the norms they create) are therefore subject to change. In some cases these good habits are unduly codified, with the result that innovation, or, rather, adaptation to slightly different goals, is made more difficult. This was the case with neoclassical tragedy in France. But such cases are far from typical. Most often, genres end up by pursuing a variety of representational goals. They divide into subgenres, rivalries and struggles ensue, and attempts are made to achieve new syntheses. As the novel's history shows, the habits of the trade that we call genres are dynamic and difficult to stabilize, yet they are crucially necessary for the production and understanding of literary artifacts.

**NOTES**