

# The Concept of a Literary Genre

*Stein Haugom Olsen*

*Bilkent University\**

[stein.olsen@bilkent.edu.tr](mailto:stein.olsen@bilkent.edu.tr)

*ABSTRACT.* Genre theory, as it has developed in the last forty years, has made use of what I call a constitutive concept of genre, a concept that has built into it the assumption that genre plays a central epistemic role in the interpretation of verbal discourse. In this paper I argue that there are theoretical problems with such a concept that have not been recognized and that make it unsuitable as a critical instrument in literary history and literary studies. A fruitful concept of literary genre needs to be pragmatic with only a heuristic and not an epistemic function. As an example, the article looks at the criticism produced in connection with the picaresque novel and in particular at the account given of the origin of the genre, an account that could not have been given if one had employed a constitutive concept of genre.

*KEYWORDS.* Text; Work; Genre; Interpretation; Appreciation.

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\* *Correspondence:* Stein Haugom Olsen – Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities and Letters, Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey.



## 1.

«Genre, we might say», says the author of a relatively recent introductory book on genre,

is a set of conventional and highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning. In using the word “constraint” I don't mean to say that genre is simply a restriction. Rather, its structuring effects are productive of meaning; they shape and guide, in the way that a builder's form gives shape to a pour of concrete, or a sculptor's mould shapes and gives structure to its materials. Generic structure both enables and restricts meaning, and is a basic condition for meaning to take place.<sup>1</sup>

Genre is not determined a posteriori, but «is the precondition for the creation and the reading of texts».<sup>2</sup> It exists as a set of conventions that determine the readers interpretation of a work:

Genre guides interpretation because it is a constraint on semiosis, the production of meaning; it specifies which types of meaning are relevant and appropriate in a particular context, and so makes certain senses of an utterance more probable, in the circumstances, than others.<sup>3</sup>

This theorist employs what one may call a constitutive concept of genre. He holds that in order to grasp the meaning of a text it is logically necessary to make a judgement of the following type: “This text (T) belongs to this class (G)” or “T is G”, the class in question being a genre. “Understanding T” is “understanding *as* G”. The identification of a text as a G is taken to be a necessary step in

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1 FROW 2015, 10

2 BEEBEE 1994, 250. Quoted approvingly by FROW 2015, 110.

3 FROW 2015, 110.

understanding its meaning. This judgement is logically prior to any judgement concerning the meaning of the particular text in question. The judgement "T is G" involves a choice of strategies necessary for approaching T, the strategies being constitutive of the nature of the meaning which one may uncover in T. These strategies are themselves constituted by a set of concepts and conventions that *create the possibility of identifying the defining features of the genre in specific texts and the possibility of describing their meaning.*

The constitutive of concept of genre involves an implicit reference to a community of readers sharing certain concepts and conventions and employing them to group together and interpret a range of texts that, in their turn, yield to this type of classification and interpretation. Somebody who was not a member of this community (who did not know the interpretative and evaluative possibilities provided by the genre) would have no possibility of arriving at the concept of such a genre by abstraction from objectively given features of certain texts. For these features exist only for those who already possess the concept of the particular genre to which the text belongs. The genre is the perspective in which the text must be seen in order for its meaning to be recognized.

This concept of genre is not primarily a concept of *literary* genre. It is embedded in a general theory of understanding and ultimately the ambition is to develop a theory of culture. «This book», says Frow in the introduction to his book on genre:

is about the kinds or genres of speech, writing, images, and organised sound: forms of talk and writing, of drawing and painting and sculpting, of architecture, of music, and mixed forms like film, television, opera, drama, and digital games. It is a book about how genres organise verbal and non-verbal discourse, together with the actions that accompany them, and how they contribute to the social structuring of meaning.<sup>4</sup>

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4 FROW 2015, 1.

The theory of genre offered by Frow is based on the postulate that «Genre [...] is a universal dimension of textuality».<sup>5</sup> This is not an enabling hypothesis that may ultimately be proven wrong, but a premise on which the analysis and the theory is based. The approach adopted by Frow is *deductive*, and in this respect similar other structuralist approaches that have had the ambition to become global theories of culture. One can find the basic methodological assumptions of this type of theory in a number of early structuralist writings. The following formulation is from Roland Barthes' 1970-article *To Write: An Intransitive Verb?*:

We see culture more and more as a general system of symbols, governed by the same operations. There is unity in this symbolic field: culture, in all its aspects, is a language. Therefore, it is possible today to anticipate the creation of a single, unified science of culture, which will depend on diverse disciplines, all devoted to analysing, on different levels of description, culture as language. Of course, semio-criticism will be only a part of this science, or rather of this discourse on culture. I feel authorized by this unity of the human symbolic field to work on a postulate, which I shall call a postulate of homology: the structure of the sentence, the object of linguistics, is found again, homologically, in the structure of works. Discourse is not simply an adding together of sentences: it is, itself, one great sentence.<sup>6</sup>

The deductive theory of genre resembles these theories not only in that it works deductively from a postulate, but also in adopting the same linguistic vocabulary as structuralist and post-structuralist theories, the concepts of "meaning", "text", "discourse", playing a central role, as well as such terms as "system" and "structure". It is further postulated that,

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5 FROW 2015, 2.

6 BARTHES 1970, 136. A similar statement by Barthes occur in his article on narrative theory. See BARTHES 1975, 238-9.

Language is systemically organised not only at the level of phonetics or syntax but also at the level of use. The production of speech or writing is not a free flow of utterances but is shaped and constrained by the norms of rhetorical appropriateness that I have called genre.<sup>7</sup>

And the deductive theory of genre also shares with these theories the assumption that there is an underlying reality that the theory aims to reveal:

In particular, the book is about how genres actively generate and shape knowledge of the world; and about how generically shaped knowledges are bound up with the exercise of power, where power is understood as being exercised in discourse, as well as elsewhere, but is never simply external to discourse.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.

Two questions arise in connection with the constitutive concept of genre. The first is whether it is a useful critical instrument in areas such as literary history and literary interpretation and whether it imposes restrictions on these disciplines that close off avenues of explorations and licences interpretative practices that in the end have no relevance for the critical appreciation of a literary work of art. Secondly, there is the question if adopting this concept as a critical tool leads to counterintuitive theoretical conclusions or if it has theoretical consequences that from the point of view of literary studies are unacceptable.

One point to note is that the notion of “literary genre” as it is used in literary studies does not apply to a group of texts, but to a group of literary works. Literary works have texts, but works are, in the words

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7 FROW 2015, 134.

8 FROW 2015, 2.

of Peter Lamarque, «a species of cultural objects, whose very existence rests on essential possession of fairly complex intentional and relational properties».<sup>9</sup> The identity and survival conditions of works are different from that of texts:

Suppose the language in which a work is written has been entirely lost but suppose also that a text of the work – as a string of sentences – remains. It seems fairly clear that while the text survives, the work has not survived. Text-survival is not sufficient for work-survival. Literary works depend for their survival on competent readers with sufficient background to grasp the basic meanings of the work.<sup>10</sup>

It is literary works that are the objects of interpretation, evaluation, and research in literary studies. To identify a text as a literary work is in itself to make a generic classification that places the work within a cultural practice that determines how the work is to be apprehended.<sup>11</sup> In the case of literary works the mode of apprehension that determines the specific nature of a particular literary work is not understanding but appreciation. A work can be understood in many ways but the reader who approaches it as a literary work aims to recognize in it a specific kind of value.<sup>12</sup>

The concepts of literary work, appreciation, and aesthetic properties/significance/value are absent from the theoretical framework employed by the deductive theory of genre. One may therefore assume that the theory does not recognize the identification of a text as a literary work as a specific generic judgement which involves these concepts. This would mean that the concept of literary work really has no role to play in constituting the “meaning” of a text.

9 LAMARQUE 2010a, 56. See also LAMARQUE 2010b, in particular 163-7.

10 LAMARQUE 2010a, 69.

11 This has been a theme in almost all my works since *The Structure of Literary Understanding* (OLSEN 1978) and was developed in some detail also *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (LAMARQUE & OLSEN 1994, Chapter 10 *Literary Practice*).

12 See *Criticism and Appreciation*, in OLSEN 1987, 121-37. See also Peter LAMARQUE 2002, 285-306; and LAMARQUE & OLSEN 2004, 195-214.

Indeed, the concept of a literary work becomes superfluous. The consequence for literary studies is that it loses its object of study as this is dissolved into an indefinite number of genres of texts that have no common denominator that makes the texts literary works. The deductive theory of genre in this way closes off all avenues of explorations of literary works as works of art.

The absence of such notions as “literary work”, “appreciation”, and “aesthetic value” from this kind of theory is another feature it shares with other deductive theories operating within the same universe of discourse and having the same aim of being general theories of culture. The absence of such concepts indicates a rejection of the humanist values on which the humanities as university disciplines are based. Taking this rejection one step further, Jonathan Culler suggested some years ago that it was time for the humanities to change their name. «It is striking», said Culler,

That major advances in knowledge in the humanities in modernity have generally come from theoretical projects that have declined to take human intentions and purposes at face value, as satisfactory explanations, and have sought instead to look deeper, to more pervasive, transindividual structures and forces, in the process treating explicit intentions as phenomena that may offer obfuscation as much as explanation.<sup>13</sup>

Because the forms of inquiry that take as their aim «to look deeper, to more pervasive, transindividual structures and forces» would be seen by many academics as being «not legitimately of the humanities»,<sup>14</sup> Culler suggests that one should «try to invent a new name, so that our disciplines would not be characterized by a name that carries with it a potentially misleading ideology».<sup>15</sup>

Culler here points to a feature of theories that aim «to look deeper, to more pervasive, transindividual structures and forces» that distances

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13 CULLER 2005, 39.

14 CULLER 2005, 40.

15 CULLER 2005, 42.

these theories from humanistic disciplines such as literary criticism and literary history. Though the vocabulary used in these disciplines seems to be similar to the vocabulary employed in literary studies, the terms used (“meaning” and “text”, “system” and “structure”) have a different meaning when they occur in such theories. The same applies to the concept of “genre”. It is not that the term is extended to cover new fields of enquiry. The concept of genre as used in these theories has only a tenuous relationship with the notion used in literary history and literary criticism. The «structuring effects» of genre, says Frow in the definition quoted at the beginning of section 2 above,

Are productive of meaning; they shape and guide, in the way that a builder's form gives shape to a pour of concrete, or a sculptor's mould shapes and gives structure to its materials. Generic structure both enables and restricts meaning, and is a basic condition for meaning to take place.

But seeing genre merely as enabling and restricting meaning misses the point that a literary genre offers expressive possibilities that has little to do with meaning:

The sonnet must be held to have been an unspeakable blessing for Italian poetry. The clearness and beauty of its structure, the invitation it gave to elevate the thought in the second and more rapidly moving half, and the ease with which it could be learned by heart, made it valued even by the greatest masters. In fact, they would not have kept it in use down to our own century, had they not been penetrated with a sense of its singular worth. These masters could have given us the same thoughts in other and wholly different forms. But when once they had made the sonnet the normal type of lyrical poetry, many other writers of great, if not the highest, gifts, who otherwise would have lost themselves in a sea of diffusiveness, were forced to concentrate their feelings. The sonnet became for Italian literature a condenser of thoughts and emotions



such as was possessed by the poetry of no other modern people.<sup>16</sup>

Burckhardt here points to an essential survival condition for a literary genre: its worth. A genre provides a tool for literary expression that is recognized as valuable for the expressive possibilities it offers. The constitutive concept of genre does not open up for this evaluative element in genre identification.

### 3.

In chapter 3 of *Validity of Interpretation*,<sup>17</sup> *The Concept of Genre*, E.D. Hirsch «enunciated the interpretive role of genre with great clarity».<sup>18</sup> Hirsch's basic postulate was that «all understanding of verbal meaning is necessarily genre-bound».<sup>19</sup> Hirsch introduced a distinction between external and intrinsic genre, the latter being defined as «*that sense of the whole by means of which an interpreter can correctly understand any part in its determinacy*».<sup>20</sup> The sense of the whole was explained by Hirsch as a «system of expectations and associations» shared between speaker and interpreter<sup>21</sup> that is necessary for the speaker to make a meaningful utterance and for the receiver or interpreter to recognize the meaning. Intrinsic genres he described as:

Types of meaning [that] are always necessarily wedded to types of usage, and this entire, complex system of shared experiences, usage traits, and meaning expectations which the speaker relies on is the generic conception which controls his utterance.<sup>22</sup>

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16 BURCKHARDT 1990 [1860].

17 HIRSCH 1967.

18 FROW 2010, 110.

19 HIRSCH 1967, 76.

20 HIRSCH 1967, 86. Italics in original.

21 HIRSCH 1967, 80.

22 HIRSCH 1967, 80.

In interpretation the necessary first step is to recognize the intrinsic genre of an utterance. Only when the *type* of meaning is recognized can the interpreter determine what the meaning of the utterance is. If one mistakes the type of meaning that the speaker intended, then one misunderstands the utterance, or understanding fails completely.

One arrives at the correct intrinsic genre for a particular utterance through a narrowing down process. The interpreter starts with a «vague, heuristic genre idea» that is made more and more explicit, and he ends with the «determinate meaning» of the utterance he tries to understand. There is nevertheless a necessary distinction between the determinate meaning the interpreter arrives at and the type of meaning of which this determinate meaning is an instantiation.<sup>23</sup> This «necessity of an intrinsic genre is a structural necessity in communication and can only be grasped as such».<sup>24</sup> The class of intrinsic genres is an open one, and there is no limit to the number and kinds of meaning-types. Moreover,

There is no ready-made vocabulary for describing the intrinsic genres of particular utterances. We have no linguistic tools by means of which we could say, “*This* is the intrinsic genre of the meaning, and *that* is the meaning in its particularity”.<sup>25</sup>

The vague, heuristic idea with which the interpreter starts, is not an *extrinsic* genre unless it leads the interpreter to develop an intrinsic genre different from that intended by the speaker.

Any heuristic type idea which an interpreter applied to a great many different utterances would be extrinsic if it were not narrowed in a different way for different utterances. An extrinsic genre is a wrong guess, an intrinsic genre a correct one. One of the main tasks of interpretation can be

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23 HIRSCH 1967, 81 ff.

24 HIRSCH 1967, 82.

25 HIRSCH 1967, 82.

summarized as the critical rejection of extrinsic genres in the search for the intrinsic genre of a text.<sup>26</sup>

Traditional genre concepts as they have been used in literary history and interpretation are heuristic, but not extrinsic types of meaning. They are generally too broad to secure understanding, but they have the role of provisional schemata:

The larger genre concepts represent something real only to the extent that they represent norms and conventions that were actually brought into play. Used in this way, the terms are valid even if they are not adequately definitive.<sup>27</sup>

It is these provisional schemata that the reader has to narrow down and refine to identify the intrinsic genre constituted by the correct «expectations and associations» needed to understand an utterance correctly. Between the provisional schema and the meaning of the literary work that the interpreter is trying to understand comes the intrinsic genre.

If Hirsch enunciates clearly the role of genre in interpretation, his account also highlights a central theoretical weakness in the deductive theory. There are two problems in connection with the concept of an intrinsic genre that Hirsch tries, but fails to answer. The first problem, as formulated by Hirsch, is this:

Is there really a stable generic concept, constitutive of meaning, which lies somewhere between the vague, heuristic genre idea with which an interpreter always starts and the individual, determinate meaning with which he ends?<sup>28</sup>

If there is no such stable generic concept, constitutive of meaning, then the notion of intrinsic genre collapses into the notion of the

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26 HIRSCH 1967, 88-9.

27 HIRSCH 1967, 109.

28 HIRSCH 1967, 81.

determinate meaning with which the receiver ends. «Obviously», he says, «it is a useless tautology to assert that the interpreter must understand the speaker's meaning in order to understand the speaker's meaning».<sup>29</sup> Hirsch answers this objection by arguing that an intrinsic genre is a structural necessity in communication and can only be grasped as such, and he gives a number of examples to illustrate that without assuming such an intrinsic genre, understanding utterances would not be possible. He fails, however, to give a positive account of the «entire system» of meaning expectations, conventions, shared experiences, and usage traits that constitute the intrinsic genre for any given intrinsic genre. In the absence of such an account, the concept of “intrinsic genre” remain empty, and one has to seek elsewhere for the information and knowledge required by a reader to understand a text. Conceptually, such information has been handled by the notion of context, in its various forms. Hirsch argues that the understanding of an utterance requires more than the elements surrounding the occasion of an utterance that we normally refer to with the term “context”:

By “context” we mean a construed notion of the whole meaning narrow enough to determine the meaning of a part, and, at the same time, we use the word to signify those givens in the milieu which will help us to conceive the right notion of the whole.<sup>30</sup>

But in the absence of an account of the «construed notion of the whole meaning narrow enough to determine the meaning of a part», the notion of context is the only available resource for explaining how the receiver or reader understands the meaning of an expression.

The same problem faces the deductive theory. A general, positive account has to be given of how «generic structure both enables and restricts meaning, and is a basic condition for meaning to take place»,

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<sup>29</sup> HIRSCH 1967, 81.

<sup>30</sup> HIRSCH 1967, 87.

if the constitutive concept of genre is not to be left empty. Responding to Adena Rosemarin's point that

Once genre is defined as pragmatic rather than natural, as defined rather than found, and as used rather than described, then there are precisely as many genres as we need, genres whose conceptual shape is precisely determined by that need.<sup>31</sup>

Frow falls back on this (unargued) assumption: «Surely the point is that genre norms are shared and shareable, and are built into more or less durable infrastructures».<sup>32</sup> But he provides no principled account of what the genre norms are or could be for any one genre. What he does provide are examples of very simple forms of "genres" such as the riddle or the nursery rhyme where it is possible to make some sense of the notion of "shared" genre norms. No *general account* is offered of the «conventional and highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning» that genres provide or of the «more or less durable infrastructures» into which they are built.

Hirsch's account of intrinsic genres also faces the problem, that even should one accept that there is room between the «vague, heuristic genre idea with which an interpreter always starts and the individual, determinate meaning with which he ends», there is no limit on how specific this intrinsic genre can be. If «any heuristic type idea which an interpreter applied to a great many different utterances would be extrinsic if it were not narrowed in a different way for different utterances» then each and every utterance could in principle belong to its own, unique intrinsic genre. This does not pose a theoretical problem, but it does make the concept of intrinsic genre otiose. For if each and every utterance could in principle belong to its own, unique intrinsic genre, then the notion of context is all that is required to provide an account of how an utterance can be understood. And if this

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31 ROSMARIN 1985, 25.

32 FROW 2010, 111.

is true in the situation where each and every utterance belongs to its own unique genre, it is *mutatis mutandis* true even should there be more than one utterance belonging to the genre. Indeed, the context of an utterance is normally conceived such as to embrace all the aspects of the situation in which an utterance is made, also those that Hirsch wants to define as part of the intrinsic genre.

The problem appears in the same way in the deductive theory. If context is sufficient to determine the meaning of an occurrence belonging to any one of those genres that Frow mentions, «forms of talk and writing, of drawing and painting and sculpting, of architecture, of music, and mixed forms like film, television, opera, drama, and digital games»,<sup>33</sup> then the notion of genre as constitutive of meaning has no role to play.

#### 4.

«Error begins» says Croce,

when we try to deduce the expression from the concept, and to find in what takes its place the laws of the thing whose place is taken; when the difference between the second and the first step has not been observed, and when, in consequence, we declare that we are standing on the first step, when we are really standing on the second. This error is known as the *theory of artistic and literary kinds*.<sup>34</sup>

In this short passage Croce makes a distinction between the art work (the expression) and the genre to which it belongs, asserting the primacy of the artwork over the genre. Artworks can exist outside of any genre, but the existence of genre presupposes that there are already artworks in existence. Though Croce himself dismisses any system of genres as a useless impediment to criticism, such a dismissal

<sup>33</sup> FROW 2010, 1.

<sup>34</sup> CROCE 1922 [1902], 35.

does not necessarily follow from assuming the primacy of the art work. A system of genres can be established and researched, based upon observable features of existing literary works, but any particular genre that one identifies, or any system of genres, will only have a heuristic function. Should one assume that genre exists prior to the single literary work, then this will distort the understanding and appreciation of a work since the focus of the critic then moves away from the literary work to the question whether the work belongs or does not belong to one or more genres:

From the theory of artistic and literary kinds derive those erroneous modes of judgement and of criticism, thanks to which, instead of asking before a work of art if it be expressive and what it expresses, whether it speak or stammer or is altogether silent, they ask if it obey the laws of epic or of tragedy, of historical painting or of landscape. While making a verbal pretence of agreeing, or yielding a feigned obedience, artists have, however, really always disregarded these *laws of the kinds*.<sup>35</sup>

One does not have to share Croce's expressionist theory of art to recognize the importance of the distinction he makes. Indeed, Croce's point can be reformulated in terms of the logical priority of the concepts of work and genre: the concept of a literary work is logically prior to the concept of a literary genre. It is possible to identify and appreciate literary works without having the concept of a literary genre, but literary genres can only be identified with reference to groups of already existing literary works. The concept of genre has no epistemic role to play in the appreciation of a work of art. Knowing the conventions of a genre will facilitate the appreciation of a work belonging to the genre, but appreciation can also be achieved without knowledge of the conventions.<sup>36</sup> To use the old distinction introduced half a century ago by Searle, genre conventions are regulative but not

<sup>35</sup> CROCE 1922 [1902], 36.

<sup>36</sup> For an illustration, see OLSEN 2000, 38-9.

constitutive of appreciation.<sup>37</sup>

It will be part of the definition of a concept of literary genre that is regulative and not constitutive that a genre is identified *a posteriori* and inductively. Applying this concept, the judgement “W is G”, where W is a specific work and G a genre, is equivalent to the conjunction of a series of judgements “W is P”, “W is Q”, “W is R”, “W is S”, “W is T”, where W is the same work as in “W is G” and P, Q, R, S, and T are properties of the work, and the properties P to T are understood to be identifiable without reference to G or to each other. Thus, it is possible to establish the characteristic features of G inductively. That is, one points to the co-occurrence of certain properties in many works, decides that these properties are of particular interest for the appreciation of these works, and distinguishes the works possessing them by attaching to them a genre-label. The decision to class W as G is a conclusion following upon certain observations already made. These observations are made prior to the judgement “W is G” and are the basis for the judgement. The possession of the range of properties P, Q, R, S, and T constitutes a sufficient condition for identifying W as G. However, the possession of anyone of them need not be a necessary condition for this judgement. Some of the properties, perhaps all, may each be dispensable as long as a number of the others are present. Furthermore, it may be the case that the properties are weighted, i.e. that some are more central to the judgement “W is G” than others. Such properties will then be the most characteristic features of the genre. This is a *pragmatic* concept of genre that places no theoretical limit on the number and nature of the classes of works which may be recognized as genres. A critic is free to introduce such classifications as he thinks useful and to distinguish what classes he thinks necessary as genres. His choice will be governed by his critical needs and purposes and as long as these can be judged, on independent grounds, to be critically responsible and sound, there is no reason to challenge his choice. To repeat Adena Rosmarin’s point that

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37 SEARLE 1969, 33-42.



Once genre is defined as pragmatic rather than natural, as defined rather than found, and as used rather than described, then there are precisely as many genres as we need, genres whose conceptual shape is precisely determined by that need.<sup>38</sup>

## 5.

A pragmatic concept of the “picaresque” would be defined through a list of properties:

The low birth and disreputable background of the protagonists; their attempts to gain themselves a living by begging, deception and petty theft; the absence of a romantic love interest and the feeling that love and marriage are a snare; the episodic technique, in which the protagonist creates the chief link between a series of adventures; the everyday and contemporary setting; the corruption of a young person by a deceitful world; the questioning of accepted values through a persistently ambiguous attitude.<sup>39</sup>

Each property on this list is independent of the others. Each property is intelligible in isolation from the others and no reference to the other properties of the genre is necessary to identify anyone of them. Each property is objectively identifiable to the extent that it will actually have been observed and remarked upon by interested readers. One can add to the list or subtract from it, or both, according to what sort of concept of the picaresque one finds useful. Some critics also want to weight the properties, for example by giving prominence to the nature of the protagonist:

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38 ROSMARIN 1985, 25.

39 WHITBOURN 1974, x.

Now the literature of roguery, born of the later Renaissance, deals essentially with the occasional criminal who is tending to become professional, or with the professional criminal who stops short of villainy. It depicts the occasional criminal lured farther and farther into the mazes of habitual crime, or else turning back ere confirmed in iniquity.<sup>40</sup>

To this critic other properties will be less essential to the genre, and, to get what he considers an interesting classification, he does not hesitate to move away from the traditional Spanish picaresque novel of which he says:

So rigorous, indeed, proved this form that its limits were early over-passed in the land of its birth. First one element, then another fell away from the scheme, and out of Spain other tendencies quickened the process. Thus, the “Roman Comique”, like the *Viage Entretenido*, dispensed with the service of masters and considered a single profession; “Simplicissimus” dwelt on adventures; “The English Rogue” forgot satire and manners in assembling mere tricks; and Defoe eschewed humor.<sup>41</sup>

The weighting of properties made by this critic is dictated by his aim and by historical considerations. His aim is to trace the development of the character of the rogue and it is then of little importance to him that other characteristics of the picaresque peel off under a historical perspective. Operations involving adding to, subtracting from, or weighting the properties of a genre will in the end be governed by considerations of purpose and fruitfulness; considerations which will vary from occasion to occasion.

A pragmatic concept of genre involves no reference to aesthetic significance. Nothing is assumed about the relationship between the list of properties defining a genre and aesthetic purpose. If there is any

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40 CHANDLER 1974 [1907], 3.

41 CHANDLER 1974 [1907], 5-6.

relationship, it is incidental to the definition of the genre. It is, of course, possible to ascribe to the picaresque novel a feature of negative or positive aesthetic value. Thus, the Spanish picaresque novel is often criticized because it lacks unity:

In form, the romance of roguery was a retrogression and a rebeginning. The story for the story's sake had already reached a highly organized form from centuries of cultivation; but the new fiction disregarded the tradition of its predecessors, and proved the lowest type of book-organism. Its unity was an inferior unity; not that of time or place or action, but merely of the identity of the hero. It might run on indefinitely; it could and did accommodate endless continuations. It unrolled itself usually from the hero's own narration, as the easiest and most natural method of exposition, and since he could never tell of his death, he thus secured, by accident, a convenient pledge to immortality. The only check his garrulity could receive was the unwillingness of his auditors to listen further. Formlessness and lack of restraint were accentuated by the undue attention paid to detail, and even in the best specimens of the picaresque novel are to be discerned faults attributable to this want of symmetry and unity in the plan.<sup>42</sup>

Using a pragmatic concept of picaresque this lack of unity can only be an accidental, though perhaps unfortunate, feature of this type of novel. It is not a part of the definition of the picaresque that it should be aesthetically weak in respect of unity. It is the other way around: together with the bundle of features that is characteristic of the picaresque novel goes the feature of loose structure. Lack of unity seems to be a general weakness of the genre (if Chandler's description is correct, that is). Other features, such as the narrative fact of the low birth of the hero, happen to be neutral with regard to value. The evaluation of these features is independent of their occurrence as defining features of the picaresque. The pragmatic concept of genre is

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42 CHANDLER 1961 [1899], 16.

a purely descriptive one.

A pragmatic concept of genre makes possible the formulation of different and competing views of the same genre. In his book *Literature and the Delinquent: The Picaresque Novel in Spain and Europe, 1599–1753* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967) A. A. Parker argued that modern critics writing about the picaresque novel had stretched the genre concept «the picaresque» too far for the concept to be critically interesting.<sup>43</sup> The problem, Parker argued, was that the *picaro* had been conceived as a «rogue», a term that with its implications of «mischievousness or waggishness» had led to such definitions of the picaresque as «a type of satirical fiction originating in Spain in the sixteenth century and having an amusing rogue or vagabond as hero».<sup>44</sup> Instead of conceiving the *picaro* as a «rogue», he should be conceived as a «delinquent», that is «an offender against the moral and civil laws; not a vicious criminal such as a gangster or a murderer, but someone who is dishonourable and anti-social in a much less violent way».<sup>45</sup> The delinquent is «an unattached outsider or an unscrupulous gate-crasher»,<sup>46</sup> and it is the «atmosphere of delinquency» that is the distinguishing feature of the genre.<sup>47</sup> Around the concept of the “delinquent” Parker organizes a range of other concepts that together define what may be called the “world” of the picaresque: «The picaresque novel», he says, «thus arises as an exposition of the theme of freedom, including the concept of moral freedom».<sup>48</sup> There is the anarchical freedom from all social and moral restraint, and the responsible freedom that chooses discipline. The delinquent as the unattached outsider chooses anarchical freedom, but the choice is not wholly voluntary. The delinquent is always seen as a part of a larger universe where events in a large measure are predetermined. Thus, in the two Spanish Picaresque novels which,

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43 PARKER 1967, v.

44 Quoted by PARKER from the *Encyclopaedia Americana* (1959), PARKER 1967, 3.

45 PARKER 1967, 4.

46 PARKER 1967, 5.

47 PARKER 1967, 6.

48 PARKER 1967, 19.

according to Parker, constitute the paradigm for the genre,<sup>49</sup> the hero of one (*Guzmán de Alfarache*) is seen in a Christian context with original sin as a determining factor, and the hero of the other (*El buscón*) is a victim of psychological determinism.<sup>50</sup> However, the determinism is not complete. The heroes are repeatedly given a chance to live within their religion or society, but when such opportunities are offered them, they are rejected.<sup>51</sup> The concepts of «anarchical freedom», «responsible freedom», «caused delinquency», and «chosen delinquency» and the intricate way in which they are interrelated thus define a complicated picaresque universe that can be grasped only if one possesses these concepts and has the ability to combine them and apply them to any specific work where they may be required. «The triumph of Quevedo», says Parker, «– what helps to make *El buscón* the peak of the picaresque novel – is that the values of morality are intrinsic to the narrative, and that it is impossible to read it correctly without reading it as a profoundly moral story».<sup>52</sup>

Parker imposes much stronger constraints on the use of the concept of the picaresque novel. The main target of his criticism is indeed F.W. Chandler whose concept of the picaresque was dealt with in the last section. Where Chandler was quite at ease with the fact that one elements after another dropped out of the genre scheme, Parker insists that this permissiveness undermines any proper understanding and appreciation of the Spanish picaresque novel, and therefore prevents scholars from assigning a proper place to the picaresque novel in the development of the European novel. The rights and wrongs of this debate is of little interest for our purpose here. What is of interest, however, is that the pragmatic concept of genre, provides these critics with a concept of the picaresque that is sufficiently precise but also sufficiently flexible to permit a discussion between them. Given the pragmatic concept of genre, it is possible to define their differences

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49 Mateo Alemán, *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599-1604); Francisco de Quevedo, *La vida del buscón* (1626).

50 PARKER 1967, 40-1, 63-7.

51 PARKER 1967, 42-3, 67-8.

52 PARKER 1967, 62.

and their conflicts.

## 6.

«In 1554 three little books entitled *La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes, y de sus fortunas y adversidades* appeared in Antwerp, Burgos, and Alcala de Henares». <sup>53</sup> *Lazarillo de Tormes* had some initial success but was then more or less forgotten for almost 50 years. In 1599 Mateo Alemán published *Guzmán de Alfarache*, which, says Guillén, «was one of the first authentic best sellers in the history of printing». <sup>54</sup> What then happened was what Guillén calls a «convergence» between the two novels leading to the recognition of a common *género picaresco*:

The success of *Guzmán de Alfarache* around 1600 is well known. But critics have not observed that it also resulted in the resurrection of *Lazarillo de Tormes*; and that it sparked a ‘combination’ (to use Escarpit’s word), a double acceptance, a convergence, from which there arose, during the years immediately following the publication of *Guzmán* (1599), the idea of a *género picaresco* – an idea which was formulated for the first time by Ginés de Pasamonte in a passage of *Don Quixote* (1605): ‘mal año,’ said Ginés in a defiant moment, ‘para *Lazarillo de Tormes*, y para todos cuantos de aquel género se han escrito o escribieren’ (Part 1, Chap. 22). <sup>55</sup>

Three developments followed upon the publication of *Guzmán*. One was the reprinting of *Lazarillo de Tormes* in tandem with the many reprints of *Guzmán*. «*Lazarillo de Tormes*», says Guillén, «followed precisely the same itinerary» as *Guzmán*. <sup>56</sup> As *Guzmán* was reprinted around Spain and Europe, so was *Lazarillo de Tormes*. The second

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<sup>53</sup> GUILLÉN 1971, 137.

<sup>54</sup> GUILLÉN 1971, 143.

<sup>55</sup> GUILLÉN 1971, 143-4.

<sup>56</sup> GUILLÉN 1971, 145.

development was the appearance of a number of novels modelled on *Guzmán* and *Lazarillo*, a development described in the now very large literature on the picaresque novel. And thirdly, a countergenre came into being only a few years after the publication of *Guzmán* in the shape of *Don Quixote*. Cervantes, says Guillén, «quickly saw and judged that the most daring and characteristic feature of the picaresque story was its pseudoautobiographical nature»,<sup>57</sup> a technique that he parodies in the attempt by Ginés de Pasamonte to write *La vida de Ginés de Pasamonte*, while he himself chooses the narrative form of a third person narrator, writing a «history» and not an «autobiography».<sup>58</sup>

This story of the emergence of the picaresque novel and the birth of a countergenre represented by *Don Quixote* is illuminating and convincing, and Guillén adds to the story by filling in details about potential readers of such novels at the time they were written. It also provides an interesting insight into how the polarity between «fictional autobiography» – «fictional history» entered the history of the novel. «This is a polarity, I need not stress», says Guillén, «that will dominate the poetics of the novel, from Alemán-Cervantes to Defoe-Fielding, *Werther-Scott* or Balzac, etc.»<sup>59</sup>

This story could not be told in this way employing the constitutive concept of literary genre. It would then have to be told as a story of how the picaresque novel developed from earlier genres that were combined and/or extended. Such a story is possible but the question is what additional insight it could provide into the development of the genre of the picaresque. And such a story would raise the general problem of infinite regress. If the development of new genres always has to be explained in terms of the transformation and development of

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57 GUILLÉN 1971, 157.

58 GUILLÉN, of course, is not the only critic to adopt the view that the *género picaresco* came into existence suddenly with the publication of *Guzmán*. «*Guzmán de Alfarache*», says Parker, «was a best-seller both in Spain and abroad. Its popularity in its own country surpassed even that of *Don Quixote*. The new *genre* thus came into existence immediately», PARKER 1967, 23.

59 GUILLÉN 1971, 155.

earlier genres, then the question is how genres could arise in the first place. This is not an empirical question the answer to which cannot be given because the origin of genres is lost in obscurity.<sup>60</sup> It is a question that points to a paradox at the very heart of the constitutive concept: if genre is constitutive of the meaning of a work, then when there are no genres, the identification, interpretation and appreciation of literary works are not possible. As long as one adheres to a constitutive concept of genre, this paradox cannot be overcome or solved. Of course, the way out is the development argument that can take various forms. Histories of development a genre can be told in the way Guillén told the story of the development of the picaresque, but such stories always make use of the pragmatic concept of genre, where the genre is logically dependent on the notion of work.

## 7.

The concept of “literary genre” is tied to the notion of “literary work”. An exploration of the concept of literary genre must have as its point of departure the «fundamental truth»<sup>61</sup> of the distinctiveness of literary works as objects of interpretation, and the distinctiveness of literary interpretation as the way of apprehending the distinctive features of a literary work of art.<sup>62</sup> Theories that have as their ambition to become global theories of culture do not recognize the distinctiveness of literary works of art. This would in itself make the constitutive notion of genre developed in such theories problematic as

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60 See e.g. FOWLER 1982, Chapter 9 *The Formation of Genres*: «Of the origin of many genres we know nothing. The main kinds, including those with corresponding modes, mostly go back through Latin to Greek literature, where their beginnings are lost in pre-Homeric obscurity. More is known about the rise of the novel. But it, too, has an ancient history in its antecedents in epic, romance, and other forms – and besides, its status as a kind is problematic. So far as the classical kinds are concerned, the earliest examples extent presuppose others: ‘The genres are as old as organized societies’» (FOWLER 1982, 149).

61 See LAMARQUE 2002, 286 ff.

62 For detailed development of this idea, see LAMARQUE & OLSEN 1994, Part III; LAMARQUE 1996, 199-220; and OLSEN 2005, 11-35.



a critical instrument for literary history and literary criticism. There is, however, a further question whether there could be a workable (may be even fruitful) notion of a constitutive concept of *literary* genre. It is necessary to address this question because some influential critics that have no affiliation with theories aiming to become general theories of culture, apparently hold that genre knowledge has an epistemic and not only a heuristic role to play in literary appreciation. «We identify the genre», says Alastair Fowler, «to interpret the exemplar»:

In literary communication, genres are functional: they actively form the experience of each work of literature. If we see *The Jew of Malta* as a savage farce, our response will not be the same as if we saw it as tragedy. When we try to decide the genre of a work, then, our aim is to discover its meaning.<sup>63</sup>

Fowler is here apparently claiming an epistemic role for genre recognition. Identifying *The Jew of Malta* as a tragedy is a necessary first step in discovering its “meaning”.

However, a constitutive notion of literary genre runs into the same problems as a general notion of genre. As Hirsch himself points out (above, section 3) traditional genre concepts as they have been used in literary history and interpretation have a heuristic function and provide merely provisional schemata too broad to secure understanding. In order to be constitutive of understanding, they have to be narrowed down. But as they are narrowed down they apply to fewer and fewer literary works and, as there is no principle for delimiting the number and kinds of genres, the notion of a constitutive genre collapses ultimately into the “meaning” of the particular work in question. Theoretically such a constitutive notion of genre is superfluous, as the work done by this concept is adequately done by the notion of context. In the case of *The Jew of Malta* there is no free choice as to whether we “see” it as a tragedy or a savage farce. It is either the one or the other and the context, literary, social, personal

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63 FOWLER 1982, 38.

will provide the necessary clues for us to decide what it is. The notion of “tragedy” sums up certain aspects of this contextual information and in this way provides a pointer to how to appreciate the play.

There is something to be learnt, however, from looking at a case where the genre schema is made specific and applied to a range of plays that normally would fall under the heuristic concept but with the claim that the genre concept is indeed constitutive of appreciation. «We cannot understand», says Francis Fergusson,

the arts and the visions of particular playwrights, nor the limited perfection of minor dramatic genres, without some more catholic conception of the art in general. Thus, the pious effort to appreciate contemporary playwrights leads behind and beyond them. It leads, I think, to the dramatic art of Shakespeare and the dramatic art of Sophocles, both of which were developed in theaters which focused, at the center of the life of the community, the complementary insights of the whole culture. We do not have such a theater, nor do we see how to get it. But we need the “Idea of a Theater”, both to understand the masterpieces of drama at its best, and to get our bearings in our own time.<sup>64</sup>

Fergusson here makes the strong claim that possessing this Idea of a Theatre is a necessary condition for understanding and appreciating all tragic dramatic art and without such an idea «We cannot understand the arts and the visions of particular playwrights». Fergusson develops this Idea of a Theatre on the basis of two paradigm cases, *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*, as displaying clearly the «tragic rhythm of action» with its three stages: the purpose, the passion and the perception.<sup>65</sup> These three concepts as Fergusson develops them with reference to his two paradigms constitute the genre schema for interpreting all tragic dramatic art.

Fergusson is useful as an example not merely because he is specific

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<sup>64</sup> FERGISSON 1949, 2.

<sup>65</sup> FERGISSON 1949, 18.

in his claim about what is the genre schema for tragedy, but also because he is not shy about spelling out the consequences for the interpretation and evaluation of the plays he discusses. When he applies his schema of purpose, passion, and perception to modern realist drama, he finds that such plays are unable to provide the «epiphany» (the perception) that his scheme requires of genuine tragedies. His scheme forces him into a reading of Ibsen's *Ghosts* which sees the play as abruptly broken off in the passion stage (Mrs Alving tearing her hair and screaming at the final horror of Oswald turning insane), maintaining that the author was unable to provide the «epiphany» because of the «limitations» imposed by realist conventions. Ibsen himself is admitted being a «perfect» artist within these «limitations», but unable to reach the perfection of Sophocles and Shakespeare.

*The Idea of a Theater* provides a good illustration of what happens when a relatively specific genre schema is assumed to play a constitutive role in the appreciation of the members of a genre that traditionally has been grouped together for heuristic purposes: it leads to unacceptable critical conclusions. A schema derived from *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* does not necessarily explain other plays. It distorts both interpretation and appreciation when applied to a wider range of works. One can only be led to the conclusion that realist plays in general and Ibsen's *Ghosts* particular are "limited" by a misunderstanding of the logical status of interpretative schemata. Such schemata are not literary universals. They are attempts to explain particular works, and as such they must be judged in competition with other interpretations with reference to a general literary practice.

Adopting a constitutive concept of literary genre also leads to a problem that is specific to this concept. The problem is hidden as long as the focus of discussion is limited to one genre only, but if the perspective is broadened to include the whole field of literature, a constitutive concept of literary genre will divide literature into a set of mutually exclusive and incommensurable classes. If different genres were defined by a set of concepts and conventions constitutive of the

appreciation of works falling under that genre, different genres would define different modes of appreciation. There will be no unitary mode of appreciation which is characteristic of literature as such. It will only be possible to interpret and appreciate works belonging to a genre with reference to the schema of that genre and without any further reference to a concept of literature. It will be a mere accident that such genres as there are, are grouped together under a common name "literature". In this case, the concept of literature will be logically secondary to the concept of genre, and there will be no unitary concept of literary appreciation and value.

To some critics this may not seem unacceptable. They would argue that each genre has to be appreciated on its own premises, i.e. sonnets have to be understood as sonnets, romances as romances, comedies as comedies, picaresque novels as picaresque novels etc., or critical judgements about meaning and value will become arbitrary and subjective. A genre by genre approach, the argument goes, based on a constitutive concept of genre with its well defined conventions and descriptions, will guarantee that both interpretative and evaluative judgements can be rationally founded. On the other hand, any attempt to judge a literary work as literature (in general) rather than as a special type of literature is to invite subjectivity and confusion since there are no common standards for all literary works.

An acceptance of this argument would mean abandoning the "fundamental truth" of the distinctiveness of literary works as objects of interpretation, and the distinctiveness of literary interpretation as the way of apprehending the distinctive features of a literary work of art. Since there would, in principle, be no limit to the number and nature of genre-schemata which could be introduced as literary genres, the acceptance of a constitutive notion of genre would lead not merely to an orderly division of the field of literature, but ultimately also to its pulverization into an indefinite number of genres, ending in the ultimate chaos of one or more genres for each work, whose membership would be restricted to that work. It would not only lead to the conclusion that a definite number of genres define a definite

number of types of appreciation and literary value and that, consequently, a comparative evaluation of works from different genres is impossible, but ultimately to a pulverization of the concepts of appreciation and literary value altogether into an indefinite number of different incommensurable types appreciation and of value. The lack of any principle to limit and qualify the schemata admitted as defining genres, would end in the ultimate arbitrariness of an indefinite number of critical standards.

## 8.

Accepting the distinctiveness of literary works as objects of interpretation, and the distinctiveness of literary interpretation as the way of apprehending the distinctive features of a literary work of art is also to accept the Crocean position that literary genre concepts are pragmatic concepts with a heuristic function. This does not imply that genre concepts are unimportant for appreciation or unimportant for organizing aspects of the discipline of literary studies. It is a point concerning the logic of the concept and it should alert critics to the danger of asking too much of the concept of literary genre. The pragmatic concept is a flexible and adequate instrument for dealing with such questions as arise about 'kinds' of literary works.

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