

NOTES, DOCUMENTS, REVIEW ARTICLES, OPINION

The Invention of Genres¹

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The decision to discuss these books together arose from a personal compulsion, not to say obsession, but brings with it a deeply regrettable consequence. My obsession is with the nature of genre, with its importance and with what I can learn about genre and its theorising from studies of particular genres. I have therefore read them as if they participate in the genre of genre theory, taking little account of their other, perhaps principal, concerns, with philosophical topics (Cavell) and with the politics of cultural participation (Chambers), even with their local topics — marriage in modernity, the genderedness of skepticism (Cavell), the culture of AIDS and the practices of subjectivity (Chambers). The seriousness of this omission is evident when we consider that for each of these humbly brilliant books, the postulate of genre is germane to the issues they open up. Just how this is so carries implications for all the vexed issues in genre theory. So — but — these vexed issues will override my discussion of the topics raised by these authors, making the latter secondary. For which, I am sorry.

1 Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard UP, 1981; Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*, Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 1996; Ross Chambers, *Facing It: AIDS Diaries and the Death of the Author*, Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1998; Ross Chambers, *Loiterature*, Lincoln & London: U of Nebraska P, 1999.

At the same time, I am not sorry at all. It has allowed me to come to an issue that has bothered me for many years. The ancient world bequeathed to us two traditions for thinking about genre: rhetoric and poetics. The former, taken up famously by Northrop Frye,² is the theory of addressivity and uptake; the latter, of mimesis. For Frye, this is the rationale for the distinctions among drama, epic, and lyric; in the ancient tradition of the *ars oratoria*, three broad kinds — the epideictic, the forensic, the deliberative — were distinguished on this basis, and it is clear that the operative though informal generic distinctions in use in the contemporary west are made on a similar basis: memoranda, lectures, diaries, judicial sentences, prayers, petitions, pharmaceutical prescriptions, and so on (countless kinds). Bakhtin's study of "little speech genres" supposes this rhetorical focus, as does Anglo-American speech-act theory.³

It is the tradition of poetics, derived not from the work of the Roman rhetors but from the Greek philosophers, that has typically distinguished genres on the basis of their mimesis, their topics and the rules of decorum those topics command. Thus tragedy was distinguished from comedy as stories of divinely regulated fate from those of attempted human manipulation of daily conditions, and as the noble from the ignoble, with the *dramatis personae* and the register of their dialogue appropriate to them. In this tradition, a genre is a set of moves a kind of story goes through, and these mimetic *topoi* inform the *inventio* of the text. An example of this kind of work is Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* for traditional story-telling, and another, for 19th century literature, is Tony Tanner's *Adultery and the Novel*. A great deal of film genre study can be associated with this tradition, and for good reason. In particular the so-called popular genres of Hollywood cinema are characterised as kinds of stories with a predictable stock of characters, associated (often) with a set of stylistic conventions (think of the western, or of *film noir*). In studies of such genres, rhetoric is restricted to one of its parts — style — and addressivity is rarely a question.⁴

2 Frye, who is interested solely in the literary genres, distinguishes sharply between the "radical of presentation" and issues of "theme and the choice of images": only the former is the domain of a theory of genres (1957).

3 Note that Wittgenstein's account of language-games supposes continuity between "speech-acts" and "genres," and that likewise the conclusion of Austin's *How to do Things with Words*, an exposition restricted in the previous chapters to such things as promising and marrying or inviting, opens the category to the question of what the lectures themselves have been doing with words.

4 I should say, however, that the issue of the gaze is for cinema the equivalent of studies of address in verbal texts. It goes beyond my brief in this review to consider the broad question of the relation between psychoanalytical accounts of the gaze and genre theory (or psychoanalysis and rhetorical analysis).

How these two traditions relate to one another is the interesting problem. The famous passage of Book X of Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* in which the Schoolmaster discusses the poetic genres makes no mention at all of the oratorical genres, and no reference to Book III in which he discusses them. The function of the discussions is quite different in each case. In Book III he is concerned with how many kinds there are, and on what basis to distinguish them, and he runs, then evades, the risk accepted by Wittgenstein that there are "countless kinds"; in Book X, by contrast, he is concerned with the use of the poetic genres for the instruction of the young orator, who will learn style, says Quintilian, by learning from all kinds, as long as the examples used are exemplary and worthy of emulation. The relation of oratory to poetics is one of plunder, but the plunder is not considered to be reciprocal. The two sets of genres are asymmetrical, kept apart as the spoken to the written; hence, only the latter is available for continuing use over time. For Quintilian and the ancient tradition in general, rhetoric and poetics marked out the territory of the discursive into two distinct spaces and described two sets (kinds) of genres. There was Parnassus, where occasional instrumentality was suspended; and there was the forum, full of "heat and dust," where discourse turned its hand to achieving the purposes of the day.

With the demise of the assumptions underpinning this easy division of territory, we are left with a single general field of genres. This general field is identified by the definition provided by the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary:⁵

Genre: a style or category of painting, novel, film, etc. characterised by a particular form or purpose.

Note the disjunction, "form *or* purpose," which corresponds broadly to the assumptions underpinning the distinction between the poetic and the rhetorical. Supposing "form" to refer not only to such things as the prosody of the sonnet, but also to forms of stories, the two authors whose work I discuss below demonstrate this disjunction: Cavell's account of genre is informed by the tradition of poetics, where Chambers' is informed by rhetoric. When Cavell interprets his pair of genres in terms of the drama of knowing and doubting, thence of philosophical skepticism, he has no choice but to do so on the premise of a mimetic or representational theory of genre. Likewise, when Chambers reads AIDS diaries as playing out the urgency of commanding an audience, he has no choice but to do so on the premise of a rhetoric. These two kinds of

5 Except where noted, all definitions are cited from the same source, but in derived or summarised form.

theories in turn reveal two views of the forces at play in culture, hence of its history — a history of acts and practices with their effects, or a history of representations and interpretations of the world.

Do these two kinds of theories compete for control of a single territory? Certainly theorists such as Genette have argued that a genre is constituted by two dimensions — the “thematic” and the “modal” — that appear to reproduce the distinction that exercises me.⁶ This would suggest that rhetorical and poetic theories of genre are partial in complementary ways, but Genette’s notion of mode refers to the mode of enunciation — theatrical, narrative, monologic etc., and does not take into account the rhetorical issue of uptake and the strategies for securing it.⁷ Todorov, by contrast, uses exactly this issue to delineate genres on the model of speech-acts. The contrast retrieves the competition of the theories. It is hard to see how any history of texts could be organised in such a way as to make generic categories established on one set of criteria correlate with those established on the other. The field of the discursive is simply not this tidy. Furthermore — and following the form of an argument from Lyotard — there is no place from which to start in which “rhetorical features” and “poetic features” could be neutrally adduced and added together.⁸

This is contingently the case because the place from which we start is precisely the tradition in which rhetoric and mimesis are alternative ways of describing culture. This is true also, inevitably, for our two authors. However, the books under review reveal some suggestive points of convergence. Both, for example, “believe in” textual features on the basis of which to describe their genres, and both describe the modes of action of their texts in terms which require acknowledgement of informing intentions and consequences or effects. The rhetorical dimension of genres identified under a regime of poetic description cannot be denied, and the same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for those identified under a rhetorical regime. Yet the fact remains that we do not emerge with the same set of genres — the same categories or criteria of differentiation and comparison — when we start from one descriptive regime as from the other. The two

6 See Genette, “Genres, types, modes” (1977). If we take “mode” to include “medium,” it will be seen below that Cavell’s genres conform to Genette’s rule, but this is not true for Chambers’s: AIDS diaries, for example, are realised in print and on camera, while loiterature is to be found in dialogue as in third-person narrative, in poetry as in essays. Genette’s requirement would rule against these groupings, but with considerable loss.

7 Notice that Genette’s use of the term “mode” does not correspond with that of Frye (*op.cit.*), and indeed is close to Frye’s use of “genre.”

8 See Lyotard, *Le Différend* (1983). Notwithstanding this, the argument of *Le Différend* relies on assuming that “a genre” is something like a speech-act *with its own* mimetic protocols.

regimes are necessarily not exclusive of one another, but this does not amount to claiming that criteria established under them can be correlated with one another to determine a unified system of genres.

My modest task in this review is to describe the practices I find in a selection of recent work, not to resolve this *différend* but to mark it: these practices, as well as my description, are informed, perhaps governed, by a millennial habit. This habit shapes what we might call the culture of genre, thus shaping our understanding of what we mean by “culture” and its history — its acts and practices, or its products and their account of the world — significance in the sense of consequences, or in the sense of meaning.

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Invent: (from *invenio*, *invenire*, Latin, to come upon, discover.) To find out, discover; to devise, by means of the intellect or imagination; to create, produce or construct by original thought or ingenuity.

The paradox of invention was much played upon in Renaissance poetics, in which genre was the central organising concept. As in the classical canon, a “poet” — one who *makes* — was deemed to find as well as to devise: to imitate and to adapt the models of the past, to *discover in them* new possibilities (Colie 1973). Genre was, then, the principle of invention, of “creativity,” we might be tempted to say, were this word not disqualified by the romantic heritage of opposing “genre” to “originality.”

A similar paradox attends the work of genre critics, who may from time to time invent a new genre: they call it into existence by naming their corpus, and by differentiating it from its neighbours, but, like the biologist who identifies a new species, the critic must convince her or his readership that it was there to be found, previously assimilated or hidden within the folds of a broader class or in the interstices or interactions of a diversity of practices. Cavell acknowledges this in his preface to *Contesting Tears*, where he writes that what the book does is to “argue the case for proposing the genre” (xi).

Critic: one skilled in textual criticism.

Theory: A systematic statement of rules or principles explaining something.

Theorist: a person concerned with the theoretical side of a subject, or: a holder or propounder of a theory or theories.

Genre Criticism

A “genre critic” studies a single genre, in the text, as distinguished from theorist of “genre,” who is

concerned with questions such as the following: the classification of genres and sometimes with the epistemological or pragmatic basis for this classification (Hernadi 1972; Fowler 1982; Rosmarin 1985; Molino 1993), with the place of genre within the study of discourse (Halliday 1978; Bakhtin 1986), with the history of difference and variety amongst genres or amongst classifications (Genette 1977, Cohen 1986), or with the social determinants or historical conditions of the emergence of genres. The authors of the books under discussion claim to do both kinds of work: Cavell, for instance, writes that he is “interested in developing the idea of a genre as well as in defining the specific genres in question” (*Contesting Tears* 13), while Chambers argues that the study of the genre he calls “loiterature” illuminates the problem of genre in general (*Loiterature* Ch. 2). Nevertheless, the dominant genre within which these scholars choose to write in these instances is the genre of the critical study. Broadly speaking, this specifies a genre by naming it and by identifying the patterns of its characteristics. It then elaborates upon these in studies of individual texts. This elaboration is likely to attend to a range of variation, as each text explores the resources of its kind, adds to them, modifies them, defines the genre and at the same time opens that definition to the possibility of new futures: “Loiterly subjectivity is ... protean ... and not easily reduced to illustrative examples,” writes Chambers in *Loiterature* (57), and Cavell writes that “new circumstances or clauses ... are not limitable in advance of critical analysis” (*Contesting Tears* 4); “the specific relevant ‘features’ of the genre and the general candidacy of an individual film for membership in the genre are radically open-ended” (*Contesting Tears* 5). But, being scholars or theorists whose arguments are not limited to the scope of a single genre, both writers make cases for the broader cultural or philosophical significance of their genre and its concerns, and of genre in general. In *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell puts it this way: the films that constitute his corpus “are primary data for what I would like to call the inner agenda of a culture” (17). The remark could extend to the *corpora* of the four books under review. But what counts as the inner agenda of a culture differs under disciplinary and no doubt other conditions: what is “inner,” what is “a culture”?

The dictionaries sometimes suggest that we oppose “theory” in its sense of speculation to the close scrutiny of texts, and “criticism” to spontaneous reception. These books suggest that we are more likely to find continuities among these practices. Criticism, as Cavell points out, is “a natural extension of conversation” (*Pursuits of Happiness* 7), but neither, he insists, can be seriously pursued on the basis of a single viewing or reading. Let me add that, as a result of engaging in “genre theory” over many years, I have formed the view that its central task is to learn from and to reflect upon genre criticism, its premises and its presuppositions, sometimes also its findings, although this last leads often just to squabbles (reading those

squabbles is instructive, engaging in them, rarely). While there have been notable attempts to develop general theories of genre, I do not believe that such attempts can achieve what they set out to do. Sometimes I put this in this way: the issue of genre theory is not so much to propound a set of general principles purporting to explain genre, as to take “genre” as referring to a set of questions. This is what I hope to do in this review.

Feature: a distinctive or characteristic part of a thing

Text: the wording of something written or printed; the actual words, phrases and sentences.

Features (i)

In marked contrast to traditional genre theory, some prominent work of recent years has argued that genre does not inhere in putative patterns of features that are just “there” in the text.⁹ The attempt to discern such patterns, to define genres on that basis, and to theorise genre in general accordingly, is deemed to have failed (see Reid and MacLachlan 1994). I have been taken to argue this myself, since I once proclaimed with youthful enthusiasm that “the recipe theory of genre” is inadequate to deal with the complexity of the questions raised by the postulate of genre.¹⁰ But it does not follow from this inadequacy that we should give up on features altogether, displacing the problem of genre into some sociological dimension which is deemed to be more real than filmic or literary texts. Genre, it is sometimes argued in this work, consists merely in the work done by a name; elsewhere genre is the provisional effect of reading practices. This

9 Thomas Beebe attributes this tendency to “postwar theoretical discourses of structuralism and reader-response criticism” (1994, 3).

10 See Freadman, “Untitled (on genre)”, quoted to this effect in Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature*, 92 et seq. For Bennett, it follows that genre “is no more than an appearance-effect which results from the organisation of a set of differences into an inventory”; its positivity “melts into air” once it is admitted that genres are inherently relational constructs.” My own argument is more cautious than this, as can be gauged from the following: “We have known for many years that a very wide range of texts — far beyond what usually pass for “literary,” “artistic,” or “creative” texts — fail to be usefully described as conforming with a generic recipe; we have also known for many years that it is this kind of genre theory with its failures that has caused the discrediting of the very notion of genre. . . .” My argument in the original publication of the cited paper was part of a series of debates about the *teaching* of genre in literacy education; I contended then, and continue to do so, that mastery of a genre cannot be taught by teaching a recipe of features, but rather that it should be construed first as a series of rhetorical strategies for securing uptake in particular situations. A genre, I argued then, was better conceived as a relationship between *two* texts. I have pursued this argument in “Uptake” (Freadman 2002).

trend — which I shall call the “nominalist” account as opposed to a “realist” account which supposes that the name corresponds to an independent textual reality — is characteristic of literary studies but not of film studies, for reasons to do with the local histories of those enterprises. However, the books under review are innocent of the challenge to generic definition, neither conceding anything to its arguments nor mounting arguments against it. With this strategy, they imply that genre criticism depends upon the assumption that genres are, in some sense, there — here, again, we encounter the paradox of invention — and that genre theory cannot get on without genre criticism. They are books about features.

However, they are not *simply* realist, in that neither writer argues that the textual realities under scrutiny are “independent” — whether independent of the critical gaze or independent of their uptake in public reception. For Chambers in his study of AIDS diaries, this is the central issue. What do these texts want, or need, of their readers, and how do they go about getting it? The very nature of the texts themselves raises the issue of the ethics of reading and of criticism. For Cavell the question turns on his responsibility as a philosopher towards film and on the responsibility of his study of film towards philosophy: “to my way of thinking,” he writes as an epigraph to *Contesting Tears*, “the creation of film was as if meant for philosophy — meant to reorient everything philosophy has said about reality and its representation, about art and imitation, about greatness and conventionality, about judgment and pleasure, about skepticism and transcendence, about language and expression.” Film, and literature, have powers: to make demands on their viewers and readers, to reorient philosophy, to intervene in a politics. These powers have centrally to do with genre. They are strictly unthinkable if, as the sociologists would have it, genre were merely an “appearance-effect.”

Like the sociologists, some literary critics also disperse genre across a range of different explanatory sites, in which range “the text” is nowhere to be found. Sacrificed with the text is the notion that there are such things as textual features, and hence, the very project of genre criticism. I wish to look closely at an example of a serious proposal along these lines, since — in the way I currently arrange my authorities in this matter — the books under review stand as refutations of this kind of move. Ian Reid and Gale MacLachlan (op.cit.) start by taking up cudgels against an early structuralist account of “decoding.” The “text” — identified as “words and sentences” — does not become scrutable until we bring to bear on it much more than the dictionary and grammar we have internalised as our knowledge of the language. What they call “purely linguistic knowledge” is supplemented by “real world knowledge,” a concept they elaborate by following Derrida’s problematisation of the concept of the frame, so that the binary that

opposes inside to outside in its sociological uses is glossed by the paradox of the internally divided boundary. There is framing, but there is no frame, writes Derrida, but Reid and MacLachlan somewhat undermine the force of this slogan through the use of unfortunately spatial metaphors: the “framing” that accounts for interpretation, in their view, is intratextual, intertextual, circumtextual, and extratextual, this last being the role of the reader (88). On the basis of this account, they argue that genre is an effect of framing: “To read generically is to posit frames for interpreting the language used” (86).

This locates genre firmly outside the “text,” a function partly of editing and other institutional practices (which are preliminary readings) and partly of the role of the reader. We should heed the polemical orientation of this argument. By defining the text narrowly as consisting only of “words and sentences,” that is, of “language” construed as exclusively literal language (“programming a computer”), they make it impossible for a text to take any of this responsibility. Since discourse linguistics had moved well beyond the Saussurean “syntagm” by the date they were writing, we might wonder why they construe their “text” in this way. The answer is Hallidayan linguistics, and in particular, Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) account of genre, quoted to the effect that “Obligatory elements define the genre to which a text belongs” (quoted in Reid and MacLachlan 86). In earlier work, Ian Reid (1986) had argued from the example of epitaphs, for which no such “obligatory elements” can be adduced, that formal accounts of genre were misguided. The epitaphs work is cited and is deemed probative, not only against Halliday and Hasan, but also against Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s account of poetry.

I have some difficulties with this argument. In the first place, “formal features” are assumed to be what makes up the text as an object independently of any effects of framing, yet it is quite clear that that account of text depends upon the frame of a certain linguistic theory, one, notably, that distinguishes a language from its use and that identifies the units of a language for that purpose. In particular, nothing that is not recorded in the lexicon or in the grammar of the language could count as a “feature.” What of the “circumstances and clauses” of stories, as discussed by Cavell, or the rhetorical figures used by Chambers? That rather impoverished theory of text relies, sometimes tacitly, sometimes overtly, on precisely the opposition between “text” and “context” that Reid and MacLachlan denounce on the grounds that it assumes the opposition between the inside and the outside that they believe they have dissolved. If that dissolution is successful, then their argument against textual features has no more force than the argument *for* textual features that is their particular target. (If it is not successful, then their argument is in internal contradiction with itself.) Secondly, to argue that textual or formal features of the sort they dismiss cannot

account for genre implies neither that they have no place in some such account, nor that there may not be alternative theories that could identify features on some other, let's say discursive, basis. The problem of the formal features of a genre won't just go away, but Reid and MacLachlan believe it has. Jurij Lotman's account of it might have been useful to them: "... the semantic and syntactic aspects of a specific text do not determine its typological classification, but only function as *some of the traits* on the basis of which the functional character of a text is identified." Furthermore, "[a] change in the function of a text gives it a new semantics and new syntax. [That is] a general reinterpretation of the text takes place, in which *different semantic and syntactic units* become structurally significant" (1977, 119-20, my emphasis).

We might note that Lotman's inheritance is not the version of structuralism presupposed by Reid and MacLachlan, but the Moscow school of the 1920s, the Prague school of the 1930s, and Bakhtin. As argued by Jakobson, and as presupposed by this whole tradition, the distinction between "language" and its "use" was unviable and had been given away. Lotman's "syntax and semantics" must therefore be construed as informed by discursivity, hence much more richly than Reid and MacLachlan's "words and sentences." This is instructive, for it shows (a part of) how a certain history of literary theory produced a crisis for genre studies. No such crisis occurred in Eastern Bloc semiotics, nor did it in film studies. The question is, what counts as a "unit" such that that unit could count as a formal feature. Surely not the units and entities of Saussurean linguistics.¹¹ Jakobson's critique did not supply an alternative, although his "six functions" of language can be construed as a rudimentary theory of genre. Seeking a solution, structuralist literary theory looked to rhetoric, and found there "units" such as figures, but did not find the potential offered by rhetoric to theorise discourse on quite other premisses.¹² This is what we find in Chambers'

11 Reid and MacLachlan's critique names Halliday and Hasan, but to be fair to the latter, they too attempt to marry "language" and "discourse." True, they do so on the basis of a theory of language much less richly informed by generic variety than the tradition of Soviet semiotics, which is why I agree with Reid and MacLachlan that their work cannot provide an adequate basis for an account of genre; but Reid and MacLachlan appear to me to construe it in terms that tie it back to the Saussurean paradigm. Halliday and Hasan's work mattered more to genre theory in Australia than elsewhere: see introduction in Medway and Freedman, *Genre and the New Rhetoric* (1994). I should take this opportunity to say that while our debate since has gone this way and that, it was Ian Reid who encouraged and published one of my early essays on genre, and I wish to acknowledge his generosity.

12 A useful état présent of discourse linguistics can be found in *Langue française*, 121, 1999. Two articles in particular make analytical contributions to the history of "text" or "discourse" linguistics in relation to "sentence linguistics": Nerlich and Clarke, "Champ, schéma, sujet: les contributions de Bühler, Bartlett et Benveniste à une linguistique du texte," and Charolles et Combettes, "Contribution pour une histoire récente de l'analyse du discours." Two others give the prehistory of the split between linguistics and rhetoric in accounts of the relation between grammar and the *praelectio* in school teaching in the period between the Renaissance and the enlightenment: Viala, "Pour

work.

Reader: one who takes in the sense of a text, or peruses it by inspecting and interpreting letters, words, sentences, etc.

(Note, in the conjunction of “inspect and interpret”, the space opened up for the work of invention.)

The Role of the Reader

What is the reader’s role in respect of responsibility for answers to “such basic questions as ‘Is this a literary work?’ and ‘What exactly is its genre?’” (Reid and MacLachlan 85) and for the interpretive moves that flow from them? This role, I suggest, is to “invent.” In the book whose title I rehearse, Umberto Eco argues that the role of the reader is “in” the text, to the extent that s/he follows pathways through its semiotic possibilities, selecting and using materials to make the text that s/he effectively reads as s/he goes along (1979). The problem of the role of the reader was no doubt one of the most persistent issues of literary theory during the 1970s and 1980s: was the reader “in” the text, or was meaning generated by determinants “outside” of it as the sociologists argue? Was there an “ideal” reader in the text and a “real reader” outside somewhere as was argued by narratology? It is clear that the debate about the features of a genre takes the same form as this question. Is genre “in” the text, as a set of features? Or is genre in the reader or the reading? (Note that Reid and MacLachlan’s use of the paradox of the frame is an attempt to undo this dichotomy.) It is instructive to find that an apparent alternative to this dilemma plays out in the same alternative: if a text is “in” its genre as a member belongs to its class, that class can be construed intrinsically or “formally” (the class is a tradition of textual features or conventions) or extrinsically (the class is a hypothesis or strategy of reading).

Arguing that genre does not inhere in single texts, but in the differential relations among texts, Thomas Beebee (op. cit.) has attempted to avoid this dilemma. Genre is the “use-value” of a text, a value that is governed by the play of relational constraints of the system of these differences. While “genre is a writing lesson” (277), and presumably therefore relies in some way on features, “the identification of a genre lies not in its features, but in the use it puts them to” (274). Here the “use” is something that the text

une grammaire du discours: l’ ‘ordre oratoire’ face à la *Praelectio*, une occasion manquée” and Rossellini, “Les mots sans guère de choses: la *praelectio*.”

does; elsewhere, it may just as well be something that is done with the text: “The systemic nature of genre foils formalist studies, because formalism is limited to describing what is ‘there’ in the text, whereas any generic reading of a text is based equally on what is not there . . . and . . . on what cannot be done with it” (263). But Beebee does not elaborate on the kind of thing uses may be, and hence avoids theorising the relationship between the text’s use of its features and the reader’s. In his readings of particular texts, however, the text’s uses of its features are paramount, and it would seem that the reader has no particular role except to note them.

Ross Chambers has paid sustained attention to these issues in many of his books, starting from a critique of narratology in which he dialecticises the inside/outside dichotomy.¹³ The question is not, for him, whether the reader is “real” or “ideal,” empirical or textual, or even how two such entities might interact. The question is how a text gets some empirical reader to be its reader and how, having commanded a reader’s attention, it gets that reader to do its bidding. The text is thus endowed with desires and needs, with intentions and purposes, with tactics — means — for achieving this end. These are the questions of a rhetoric. Now we do not ask what rhetoric *is*, we ask what rhetoric *does*. This means that any conception of a “text” that is self-contained and ontologically distinct from its “reader” is impertinent here. “The *techné rhetoriké* dealt with language that allows effective action on another”; only a restricted, as distinct from a general rhetoric is conceived of as “amputated from its effective, pragmatic, or persuasive dimension” (Borch-Jacobsen 127, 130). Hence, because its object was just such a self-contained “text,” they are also the questions that run foul of some long-held shibboleths of literary criticism. It was the New Criticism that outlawed authorial intention and privileged the reader’s response; it was structuralism that taught that “la langue me parle,” that a culture wrote itself out through the agency of a writer and that the meanings of a text escaped that agent’s control; and it was post-structuralism that sloganised this issue as the death of the author.

13 See especially Ross Chambers, *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Poetry of Fiction* (1984), *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative* (1991), *The Writing of Melancholy: Modes of Opposition in Early French Modernism*, trans. by Mary Trouille (1993). In these books, Chambers elaborates an account of how “texts indicate their enunciative situation” making of this situation an object of reading (*Facing It* 12).

We might ask, then, if Chambers' position is an anthropomorphic transference of intentions from author to text. I think not. It is a retrieval for literary criticism of the questions of rhetoric: text as *practice*, not text as thing.¹⁴ In the case of AIDS diaries, the author is quite literally dead at the point of reading, and the discourse recounts his dying. This dying is the story told, distinguished from the telling of the story which is a "rhetorical phenomenon" (3). This too is discursivised; the "context of the enunciation" is neither lost, as a too-hasty application of the Derridean aporia would have it, nor simply retrievable as the new historians argue. What the text takes as the practical problem to be solved in order to say what it must say is readable in the representational techniques deployed. This is the rhetorical focus on the power of discourse to effect actions by affecting its audience, and the "rhetoric" of the text is its tactics to this end. While ancient rhetoric presupposed the co-presence of orator and audience, under which circumstances the rhetorical tactics disappear from view in their success or in their failure, the modern privileging of the written or printed text allows these tactics to be the object of attention.¹⁵ Chambers' interpretive move is to construe this text-object as the record of a practice, to construe reading as its *remise en marche*, then to read its effects in and on the experience of reading. The reader is on the line in this enterprise: "I chose the diaries that made me, as their reader, feel most anxious about the fact of my readership, hoping that by looking carefully at their structures of address I might gain some insight into that anxiety and what it might mean" (ix).

In AIDS diaries, the inferred authorial desire is "for continued social participation" (13) after death, and the text is that whereby such participation becomes possible. The author is thus dependent on the text, and the text in turn is dependent upon being read (8). Hence, this is a diary with a difference: it is not introspective or monological, it is "out there," "explicitly and openly conceived with a view to publication" (5). It puts its reader under an obligation "to continue the work of witness" (7), that is, to act for the text. The continual deferral of meaning works in practice like a relay of inference and (further) representation. In his eloquent preface, Chambers puts it this way:

14 It is regrettable that so few literary scholars know Carolyn Miller's important "Genre as Social Action" reprinted in Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway, eds., *Genre and the New Rhetoric* (1994).

15 Viala (1999) shows that this practice of "reading off" dates at least from the mid-18th century, and that a certain rhetoricised theory of discourse was possible on this premiss.

First, for reading subjects as well as for writing subjects, “taking part” hinges on a willingness to “face it,” without which neither mode of survival — the survival of the witness who lives to tell the story of dying, the textual afterlife (dependent on reading) of the story once told — can become a reality. But, second, facing it entails a recourse to techniques of representation with all the conditions and consequences that representation entails ... which means that we cannot know the “it” that we face but only write or read (it).
(viii)

The turn to rhetoric is, then, a turn away from a spatialised account of the relation of text and reader, towards a temporal account of the process of reading writing. Writing happens dependently, and this dependency is its weakness, its incompleteness. But here is to be found, as in other situations of weakness, *le pouvoir des faibles*, a power to seduce, or to manipulate, the reading it requires in order to achieve its purposes. To read these tactics is to move beyond subjection to their effects, making them visible to others, and taking active responsibility for what we do with our understanding of them. Chambers’ general question, then, is *what can criticism do?* in a situation in which the death of the author is (i) a literal fact, (ii) not merely the trivial inevitability of human mortality but the symptom of a severe social trauma, and (iii) a theoretical assumption whose paradoxes are inescapable. The implication of these paradoxes is that the text necessarily displaces the author and mediates the whole transaction. Hence the temptation of a fantasy reading in response to assumptions (i) and (ii), direct communication from writer to reader, is disallowed, but the equal and opposite temptation, complete disregard for “the author” in favour of “the reader,” is disallowed by the story of the dying. Chambers’ study of AIDS diaries is an investigation into the ethics of reading — not only in this situation, for the problems they raise are exemplary of the conditions of reading. The book thus works as a case study with implications for a decades-long quandary in literary theory. We can call this “the role of the reader,” and gloss it as the relation between “intention” and “interpretation.”

Intention: the purposes of an action

Interpretation: a construction put upon an action

The problem of intention has particular technical difficulties associated with it in film studies, insofar as the director may not control many of the aspects of the film’s making, but Cavell argues (in *Pursuits of Happiness*) against a certain taboo on use of the directorial name. As long as his “allusions to a director’s

intentions” have the function of suggesting “differences between films associated with that name and ones associated with other such names, the reference is ... intellectually grounded ... not a matter for metaphysical alarm” (8-9). Of intention, he writes the following:

[certain “impatient replies”] do not answer questions ... about how to understand what the director of a film is and what his or her intentions are, which, first of all, means to understand what a film is. The primitive mind, the human mind, can mean things because it has the medium of human culture within which to mean them, and mean itself, where things stand together and stand for one another. The genre of remarriage is a small medium of this sort, wherein distinctions can be drawn and, hence, things intended. (*Pursuits of Happiness* 95)

This suggests an account of intention in terms of genre (or in terms more generally of the media of culture): I might, say, have the intentions of a chess-player when I know how to play chess and am presently engaged in doing so, but not otherwise. As Cavell points out *Contesting Tears*, when a film intends something by a detail of some sort, that intention is readable as the use to which it puts that detail (*Contesting Tears* 24); that use, in turn, is readable in the terms of the genre. This suggests a particular form of the hermeneutic circle: intention is attributed to genre, while genre is the outcome of the interpretive work that governs the perusal of the text. This is not so much an example of the dreaded circular argument as it is the necessary form of the relation between hypothesis and the organisation of data.

That genre be definable in terms of generalisations over intentions or purposes is, as I have pointed out previously, the assumption of a rhetorical account of genre, and it has the effect of displacing the problem of intention from individual persons or from that object of sceptical inquiry, the mysterious “other minds.” Cavell appears to adopt this position, but it is odd that elsewhere, Cavell should draw a distinction precisely between “genre” and “intention.” This occurs in a discussion of the concept of “over-determination” later in *Pursuits of Happiness*: “... the concept [of over-determination] does not prejudge how much ... is the result of intention and how much of the genre, how much the result of specific function and how much of general structure” (250). The problem recurs in *Contesting Tears*: worrying again that some readers might find that his focus on directorial decision-making conflicts with his interest in genre, he writes: “... to me [these two emphases] reflect the specific economy of inner and outer, or of convention and intention, or of tradition and invention ...” (8). Here, it seems, Cavell has in some sense retreated from the insight to which his study of genre has led him, that is, an account of intention as a

function of the purposes of any given genre and the means available to achieve them; the retreat leads him back to an account that posits an individual mind that chooses its strategies and tactics to fit goals and objects formed independently of its medium. He has done so in each case at a polemical moment, apparently caught up in the terms assumed by his critics in their “metaphysical alarm” (intention is bad, because it posits a mind transcendent to its own practices). The high tradition of genre theory, however, could have reinforced the alternative view, and reminded his critics, that it is convention that governs intention, and tradition invention. (But how? We have still to face this question.)

Whether located in a director or dispersed amongst a team of technical workers, the control with which Cavell is concerned is exactly that which might work out as a set of rhetorical effects. Furthermore, like Chambers’ text that “desires” and “needs,” Cavell’s film “intends” “(intention is an expression of wanting)” (*Contesting Tears* 24) and “knows”: “I am assuming that the films may themselves be up to reflecting on what it is that causes them ...” (*Pursuits of Happiness* 6). The critic’s task is to know this knowledge and to reflect upon its implications: “I am always saying that we must let the films themselves teach us how to look at them and how to think about them” (*Pursuits of Happiness* 25). Illustrating this exhortation, he analyses a “didactic moment” in *His Girl Friday*, which he takes to be a “strict allegory” whose “purpose” is to make a point concerning the problem of sources. Cavell takes this discussion of sources to represent the issue of the relation of a particular text to its genre. I shall return to his discussion of this issue shortly. For now I wish to indicate a significant parallel with Chambers’ reading techniques. Based on the literary figure of the *mise en abyme*, Chambers finds (for example) a story in one of the video diaries he studies in which the point is the conversion of the dying man’s parents from homophobia to acceptance. This story, he says, “figures the relation with the viewer” and has pedagogical value. The rhetoric of the whole film is targeted to conversion of the phobic look (*Facing It* 62).¹⁶

For both scholars, then, the appeal to intention, to calculated effects, to purposes, is made good by recourse to moments of textual self-reflection. Such moments are available to attentive reading, and thus to the kind of “conversation” that a critic undertakes in relation with a text.

16 Cavell makes frequent use of such allegorical moments, but does not count them as *misses en abyme*, a term that he discusses and restricts to the occurrence of a film within the film (*Pursuits of Happiness* 206 *et passim*). This is a *mise en abyme de l'énoncé*, that is, of the story-line. See Chambers, *Room for Maneuver* for an extension of the figure to include *misses en abyme de l'énonciation*, that is, of the telling of the story. (My use of the archaic spelling of “abyeme” conforms with the standard use in literary studies of this figure, that stresses its source in medieval heraldic design.)

Our critical task is to discover why [the films] use their time as they do [he means their historical moment], why they say the things they say. Without taking up the details of the films we should not expect to know what they are, to know what causes them. (Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness* 6)

They also demand a reciprocal form of self-reflection on the part of the critic. As Chambers' book is generated by reflection upon his own anxiety, so does Cavell declare that what he is about — but in line with his exhortatory tone, he writes “we” — is to “subject these enterprises and their conjunction to our experience of them — that is, to assess our relation to these enterprises ...” (*Pursuits of Happiness* 10). This is, however, “a conceptual as well as an experiential undertaking; it is a commitment to being guided by our experience but not dictated to by it” (ibid.)

Features (ii)

The work of AIDS diaries, Chambers teaches us, is to *create* their readers, beyond the circle of friends and family for whom the dying of this person is a personal grief. Starting from a position of, at best, sympathetic distance, at worst active hostility, the reader of an AIDS diary must be brought into its concerns. How sad, we might think, but these people are not my people; or, this is a book for a community, but I am not of that community; or, this is not my business. Equally dissociated, a case not specified by Chambers, but of the world beyond the intimate circle more likely than those others to take up the book in the first place, are those who read it through professional or voyeuristic interest in personal writing, perhaps with aesthetic criteria uppermost. Such people may well find the discretion of Hervé Guibert's *La pudeur ou l'impudeur* to their taste, but have trouble with Eric Michael's distinctly confronting *Unbecoming*. That Chambers moves progressively from the former to the latter indicates to me that this is the group that concerns him most closely, though the hostility or fear of outsiders is in fact the concern of his texts. The texts thus tell stories about the people who cannot hear their stories, make gestures of reciprocal hostility, show what good taste requires should remain unseen, turning that back into accounts of hypocrisy and worse: they make the reader choose her place, with the hypocrites or against them, and face it. They get her to do this by, for example, haunting her, leaving her with an image of an unoccupied writing desk (Guibert), or by involving her in the story of a family's coming to accept the gayness of their son at the time of his dying, then to accept the importance of his partner (Tom Joslin's *Silverlake Life*), by issuing challenges or

invitations (ibid.), or by trying out a variety of generic solutions to oblige those left “facing it” to accept it (Michaels). Note that many of these tactics can be construed as speech acts,¹⁷ and that it is such things, as well as the *mises en abyme de l'énonciation* discussed above, that function as “features” in a rhetorical analysis.

Chambers' *Facing It* functions as a work of anamnesis, recalling to those who need it most, the literary scholars, that a genre in the rhetorical tradition is a generalisation over kinds of purposes and their purported effects. By contrast, it is in the poetic or mimetic tradition — for representation is a deeply philosophical problem — that we can situate Stanley Cavell's work (“film was as if made for philosophy”) and because his work is so deeply instructive as an example of the “formalist” account of genre, I want especially to focus on what is meant in it by a “feature.”

Cavell states his case concerning “features” in *Pursuits of Happiness* by arguing against a certain “picture of a genre as a form characterised by certain features, as an object by its properties” (28). Such objects might be identical members of some class, with the class defined by the closed set of properties shared by all its members. With that “bad” picture, we run the risk of not being able to account for new members of a genre, and furthermore, applying that picture rigorously, its requirements end up contradicting one another (29). Although he will find it “natural” and “inevitable” to speak of the characteristics of a genre as its features, he wishes to propose an alternative account:

The idea is that the members of a genre share a common inheritance of certain conditions, procedures and subjects and goals of composition, and that . . . each member of such a genre represents a study of these conditions, something I think of as bearing the responsibility of the inheritance. (28)

Under this alternative account, he suggests that we “... think of the common inheritance of the members of a genre as a story, call it a myth” (31). Each member, then, counts as an interpretation of that myth, and as progressive revisions or constructions of it. “In the construction of the myth, the picture of the properties of an object is replaced by an idea of the clauses or provisions of a story” (32). I am drawn to comment that although Cavell characterises the “features” account as “structuralist,” this view of progressive interpretations of a myth so resembles, for me, Lévi-Strauss' account of myth that Cavell's use of the term

¹⁷ Speech acts are defined as devices for securing uptake, though we must acknowledge that, they may not always succeed.

here seems rather to mean “positivist” than the structuralism I know. Be that as it may, I must concede that neither Propp nor Lévi-Strauss was ever taken to be working on the nature of genre, or of a genre (though I think it would be difficult to object seriously to that construal: simply, it was not on the agenda of discussions of their work in the 1970s). The problematic “picture” against which he levels his remarks has indeed dogged genre theory in film as well as literary studies, and is due more to a belief that a genre can be thought of as a natural class than to any particular 20th century school of thought. It is as an alternative to this belief that Wittgenstein proposes that we think of a class as a collection of “family resemblances,” a view taken up by Alastair Fowler for genre. Cavell thinks this won’t do either:

... if I said of games, using Wittgenstein’s famous example in this connection, that they form a genre of human activity, I would mean not merely that they look like one another or that one gets similar impressions from them; I would mean they *are what they are* in view of one another. I find that the idea of “family resemblances” does not capture this significance ... (29)

Games “are what they are in view of one another”; thus also genres. I think Cavell is proposing a relational account here, though he stops short at supposing a “system” as does Beebe.¹⁸ This proposal is explored in his idea of “adjacency,” to which I shall turn my attention shortly.

Reviews, I take it, are for asking questions of intellectual work, not for arguing answers to those questions. Here are some questions that we might put to Cavell at this point: is it right to construe his “clauses and provisions” of a story as the notoriously slippery notion of “the *topoi* of a genre”? Only if we can justifiably, or usefully, do so is the idea of the “clauses and provisions of a story” able to be adapted to non-narrative texts. Even of narrative texts, how useful is it to take a “genre” as coextensive with “a” story? Under this proposal, would epic count as a genre, or tragedy, or the ode? How capacious or restricted is a

¹⁸ I suggested something similar with my idea of little informal generic systems and the self-situating device of the “not-statement,” in “Anyone for Tennis” (op.cit.). The classification of signs raises similar problems, and I have noted elsewhere that Charles Peirce experimented with different classificatory devices to this end. Remarkably he argued that the reliance on resemblance was typical of biology, whereas chemistry and mathematics worked with open relational systems. “[...] [the ordinary logic] is tied down to the matter of a single special relation of similarity. [...] Thus, the ordinary logic has a great deal to say about *genera* and *species*, or in our nineteenth century dialect, about *classes*. Now a *class* is a set of objects comprising all that stand to one another in a special relation of similarity. But where ordinary logic talks of classes the logic of relatives talks of *systems*. A *system* is a set of objects comprising all that stand to one another in a group of connected relations” (CP4.5). See my “Peirce’s Second Classification of Signs” (Freadman 1996).

genre? What level of abstraction can a story stand?

Notably, at what level of abstraction would we find ourselves faced with the problems discerned by Barbara Herrnstein Smith in structuralist narratology generally (see Herrnstein Smith 1980)? Her critique of the claims of narratology, to find a kernel story underlying its versions — a critique levelled as much at Propp and Lévi-Strauss as at Greimas and Prince — elicited the turn to the “telling of the story” of which Ross Chambers’ work is a leading example. Is the turn to a mimetic account of genre necessarily an erasure of its rhetoric?

In fact I think that Cavell’s argument does not run the risk of these other attempts to find a deep structure. For him, the genre is not some purported kernel, but the outcome of all its transformations. It follows, if this is the case, that the rhetoric of each text-member — its *inventio*, its *dispositio* — is operative in the construction of the genre. And indeed, remarkably, we find the first question to be discussed in the first study of *Pursuits of Happiness*, is the means the film uses to “invite us to consider the source of romance”(49), that is, for us to bring into relation with this film a range of intertextual references that allow us to situate it generically. The rhetoric of the text, we infer, is directed first at getting the viewer to be *its* viewer, which means to view and read it in genre. We can take this as Cavell’s answer to the literary dilemma concerning the role of the reader.

Let us return to the claimed identity of “a genre” with “a story” and to the question of the status of such terms as “tragedy” or “comedy.” Cavell’s genres, we recall, are “the Hollywood comedy of remarriage” and “the Hollywood melodrama of the unknown woman.” Suppose we were to resort to a conventional style of answer: Cavell is studying a “sub-genre” of romance (or comedy, or melodrama). Like tragedy, comedy, and melodrama, we would say, “romance” is pretty capacious, and the “myth” on which it rings its changes is pretty abstract; it is their “sub-genres” that work out specific stories. This is an expedient answer, but a trifle lazy. It allows us not to bother with what we might mean by the genus genres: is the “myth” that informs them the same sort of thing as the myth that informs their species, and if not, have we not just evaded the issue? It seems to me, moreover, that to resort to this answer is to resort to exactly the problematic picture of genres that Cavell rejects. In saying this I suppose that sub-genres are something like species, and that any species shares the characteristics of its genus, and adds certain features that differentiate it (in geometry, a degenerate form subtracts certain features). This achieves nothing but a duplication of the problem caused by the “bad” picture. Cavell proposes a relation of “derivation,” basing this on the “negation” of the features of one genre by the features of its “companion” genre (*Contesting*

Tears 5). This is quite different from a relation of similarity. As I keep promising, I shall return to this mechanism shortly. For now what matters is that along with the rejection of the picture of a genre as of a class of objects, Cavell might be rejecting a picture of a system of genres as a hierarchical taxonomy.

Now Cavell's own answer in these books to the question of how capacious a genre is, is "not very." Indeed, the genres he studies are fairly restricted in time and space, and the identification of the genre within that scope is made on very stringent criteria:

... I am working with a notion of a genre that demands that a feature found in one of its members must be found in all, or some equivalent or compensation found in each ... (*Pursuits of Happiness* 146)

This requirement does not admit of a high level of abstraction, and hence, does not allow for much stretching at the edges (except in the judgment of what does or not constitute an "equivalent or compensation": Cavell is careful to require of such variants that they fulfil the same function as the absent feature). This stringency ensures that the postulate of genre is non-trivial, but at the same time does not solve the problem of what we mean by such terms as "comedy" or "romance." This is predictable from Cavell's identification of "a" genre with "a" story. Since Cavell goes to some length to discuss the historical precedents for his genres, I guess that his presupposition involves something like the following: terms such as "romance," "comedy," "epic" and so on have a diachronic extension, whereas the genres Cavell studies are effectively synchronic. The problem of what the generic names mean in each dimension is necessarily different for this reason. Comedies from Plautus to Feydeau are most unlikely to tell the same story. Synchronically, Cavell appears to be suggesting, we have as many genres as we have stories. Diachronically, some other meaning for the term "genre" is required.¹⁹ (We would have, I guess, to resort to the idea of "family resemblances" to account for groupings such as tragedy and comedy across the centuries. This would tidy up the field, and avoid the hierarchical taxonomy, with two conceptual advantages: families are by definition transgenerational, and in them — maintaining continuity at the same time as introducing diversity — it is the in-laws and de-factos, not to mention the bastards, that guarantee the openness of the set.)²⁰

19 For this argument, see Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Qu'est-ce qu'un genre littéraire?* (1989).

20 As Genette points out, the relation of genres to modes is complex, and unlikely to be one of simple inclusion (see "Modes, 'types', genres" 421).

Despite indications to the contrary, Cavell is inclined to solve the problem of articulating the historical dimension with his genres by means of a hierarchical taxonomy. In the Introduction to *Contesting Tears*, we discover that “the melodrama of the unknown woman” is “a” genre of melodrama (12) (“gaslight melodrama” being another), and likewise, that, because of a “puzzling feature” that sets them apart, three films that are ambiguously members of this genre and of the “remarriage” genre are treated as a “little subgenre” (ibid.). Is melodrama “a” story or “a” class of stories (sharing some clauses and provisions? which ones, exactly? When is a story not the same as another story?)? Must we resort to the proliferation of little subgenres as soon as we find a puzzling feature? Coupled with the positing of a genus genre that might remain untheorised, such proliferation puts at risk of trivialisation the very postulate of genre. The question now is whether Cavell avoids this risk.

In the case of comedy and romance, Cavell is concerned only to argue for the rediscovery of an old form in a new, not for the history of groupings under these terms; but in the case of melodrama, Cavell purports to solve the problem through resort to a single motivation for (all?) the species of melodrama. These two styles of explanation appear to be inspired by the work, respectively, of Northrop Frye (on Shakespearean comedy) and Peter Brooks (on melodrama). Melodrama is a class of stories based on a common *ethos*, “the essential gesture of theater as such” (*Contesting Tears* 39), the histrionic body. Cavell discusses Brooks’ proposal to the effect that the melodramatic “attests to and is meant to reach” “a region or source of lost order” (41) by referring it to Wittgenstein’s discussion of the fantasy of a private language, Kant’s of the relation between the moral and the religious, and Nietzsche’s parable of the madman in the market-place. The melodramatic is “the locus of ‘excessive’ expression” (40), figuring “the poverty and pathos of all expression” (ibid.): Cavell looks not for the ur-story of melodrama so much as for its “source” or “cause” — its “obstetrical scene” in which we are “born crying into the world with an inexpressible tale” (44). At which point, we might note in his writing of this passage that (approximately) only two references are to “melodrama,” while the rest are to the “melodramatic.” Does the adjectival form solve, or does it simply evade, the trap of nomination, which I take it inevitably “invents genres”? I do not know the answer to this question, but I do know that in Cavell’s work, it allows “a genre” to be theorised as “a story” without requiring the genus (is it even a genre?) to be theorised on the same basis. Then Cavell can seek his sources and causes in philosophical themes, told, for there is no other way, in parables and scenes.

This tempts me to take as indicative of his own postulate concerning the ground of genres his discussion of the “immeasurable differences” between Jacques Derrida’s work and his own. Locating

himself in a relation of discipleship with Emerson and Thoreau, Cavell sums these differences up in a contrast between the relation of American and European philosophy to the history of philosophy:

For Derrida the land of thought is fully occupied, as it were, by the finished edifice of philosophy, one that has genuinely been built by the impulse to philosophy, so that room for thought must be made, say by a process of reading or writing or following on by the pedagogy called deconstruction; whereas for an American the question persists whether the land of thought has as yet been discovered, whether it will be today, and whether it is at best occupied by fragments, heaped in emergency, an anthology of rumor. [...] Might one find some ground to deconstruct before there are any philosophical foundations in place? (*Contesting Tears* 65)

In a land without an edifice of thought, in which the first cabins of thought are still under construction, there is no question of wishing to go back, as if historically or pedagogically or archeologically, to the day of thought's founding — its metaphysical point of departure from chaos, or emptiness, or madness. The question is rather one of detecting these departures and arrivals every day. (*Contesting Tears* 66)

Cavell's procedure is not a deconstruction, he claims, because it supposes no foundation, yet even so, when his search for the ground of melodrama in a cause or a source ends up in an adjective that reinvents itself in small collections of stories, do we not have precisely that, resulting in nothing more metaphysical (or transcendent) than an anthology, or, as Ross Chambers might put it, a list that loiters in the local?

(Not) a Genre

What is the generic status of the group of texts assembled from the literature of two centuries and brought together by Ross Chambers under the punning noun "loiterature"? This is a book that collects texts as various as cultural studies and nineteenth century poetry, novels, essays and the (auto)biographies of dogs, allowing the collection to cohere on the family resemblances principle, "by listing examples of writing that have at least one feature of loiterliness in common, different as they may be in other respects" (*Loiterature* 35). It is a book that, on occasion, uses the term "genre" stringently, rather as Cavell does, to designate a type of story emerging in a restricted period of time: "the coming out story," "the AIDS story," "the cruising story" (251-52); yet it also uses the term "genre" loosely, to refer to loiterature itself: this is "a writing that

takes time to know the other and . . . the genre that transvalues the trivial” (35). It claims “to demonstrate that [the books thus assembled] can be grouped” (ibid.) as “the genre of the loiterly” (ibid.), and it invites the reader to add other examples to the paradigm it purports to describe (36).

It is a ramified paradigm, *insaisissable*; *le neveu de Rameau* is its namesake. It is more honoured in the adjective than in the noun. We can attempt to grasp it nonetheless by starting from what it is not: unlike strictly controlled narrative, it “never takes the shortest path towards its end” (20) — but then, what narrative *worth reading* does? We would have something like the structuralists’ kernel stories — no description, no detours into what the journalists now call back-stories or background information, no setting, no narrative interest, just the before and the after. The potential for story-telling to digress, to take pleasure in the very telling, to dwell on details and to weave unexpected relations amongst them, to maintain the reader’s interest by delaying its point, this is Chamber’s starting-point. Loiterature also contrasts with “disciplined argument” (31); it indulges a taste, rather, for “tangled relations” (ibid.). Loiterature “defers the future” and “dawdles in the past” (16); it is critical, but ironically and benignly, of discipline, of method, of authority, of the restriction of context (15); it is “like cultural studies” and it is not like history or the sublime (39-40). Apparently idle, reflective, it is also the other of philosophy. It can turn up in any genre in the use a text might make of digression, of inventory, of notations, and its favoured settings are the street or the café. These are the spaces of dailiness and of conversation; continuous with, not separated from the ordinary world (as the tradition of Shakespearean comedy requires, locating its playful conversations in a “green world” or its equivalent). Loiterature is an anthology of texts that loiter, but with intent; under cover of beguiling entertainment, diverting us from modernist melancholia, they raise — or should I write “it raises,” implying that it is the anthology, not its members in isolation, that takes this responsibility? — the most serious questions: about subjectivity, about progress and the ends of modernity, about our relations with alterity, tourism and colonialism, about banality, and about the one that I must focus on, because focus is demanded by the genre of the review: genre.

If loiterature is an “epistemology of the unsystematic” (10), how could it be a genre, if genre be defined stringently, as a structure that can vary only by obeying its own rules? And how could it be about genre, which is surely a matter of system? I’ll come back to the former question presently, and say to the latter, well, it depends. If we believe that there is “a” system of genres, we must adopt the model of a hierarchical taxonomy, a branching structures whose governing categories would be, say, “narrative” and “argument,” or “mimesis” and “diegesis,” or “poetry” and “prose.” From them we would descend to the

next level and then the next, eventually reaching something that Cavell would call, say, “the Hollywood comedy of remarriage” and Chambers “the coming out story.” Then literature would have nothing to say about it at all. However, instead of such branching or hierarchical structures, both Chambers and Cavell depend on relations of local adjacency, not (for the most part) on over-arching systems, and Chambers proposes an alternative diagram. This is the fork in the road, any branch of which leads to a further branching. Hesitating between two directions for the rest of my paragraph, I could say (i) hence, the starting point in digression, for which the fork in the road is the characteristic figure, or (ii) hence the structure of the book itself, in which “one thing leads to another” through a loosely coherent list of topics where what follows from what can be traced backwards to a meditation on the implications of digression itself. Digression is thus a rhetorical strategy characteristic of the texts Chambers studies in this book, and a theme (for want of another word: is it rather, like melodrama, a gesture, an *ethos*?) that opens the way to reflection on some central issues in modernity: the subject in history, the modes and function of critique, melancholy and pleasure, the rise of cultural studies from the tradition of the flâneur, irony and desire, and the role of the reader.

Digression is that moment, or move, of discourse that has no assigned place, though, as Chambers points out, it had a place in the rules of oratory in ancient Greece. Atopical, it could arise at any moment, and if not held in check, it threatened to disrupt the topical arrangement of its host text. It is therefore parasitical, and possessed of an energy not contained by the rules of genre. And, like the tropical fig that has engulfed the crêpe myrtle in my garden (in less assiduously self-monitoring times, the crêpe myrtle used to be called the “Pride of India,” a pretty flowering tree that itself sends up suckers without regard to the design of beds or to cadastral boundaries), it can take over. Its relation with narrative is thus, writes Chambers, to challenge its directedness and its closure (92), to be repressed by it, and hence to return within it. Discourse untouched, as it were, innocent of the disciplines of culture, pure writing; yet its relation to narrative, or indeed to argument, is — like the relation of criticism to the object of criticism — one of suture: it is “a pleasurable relaxation of constraint only to the extent that it remains connected with, and hence in the end governed by, the constrictions of discipline, system, cohesion, and linearity that it seeks to relax” (18-19). It is this relation — epitomised in Colette’s *La Vagabonde*, which is a novelistic “alloy” of “pure observation in the digressive, interrupted flow of a narrative of temporality, and fictional invention, sentimental interest, and the seductions of plot” (73) — that gives it both its meaning and its function. Some narratives (*Tristram Shandy* by Daniel Sterne, *Voyage autour de ma chambre* by Xavier de

Maistre, *The Mezzanine* by Nicholson Baker) so indulge this propensity that their narrative structure is marginalised or impoverished in favour of a text that is “all middle.” A philosophical dialogue such as Diderot’s *Le neveu de Rameau* ironises the Platonic tradition simply by juxtaposing the philosopher with the parasite, allowing no position to be expounded and none to be overturned by systematic Socratic probing, making of the text a space in which questions emerge and are explored along several lines, without resolution (45-55). This is one way in which digression is about genre, by disrupting the genres that host it, thus laying bare their rules of closure and cohesion, the machine of their cultural effectivity — their speech-acts —, the unspoken ideology that sustains their claim to value.

Another way in which digression is about genre is through its proclivity for collecting and sampling. “Collecting” is what the cruiser does, both in his sexual life and in his research (77ff.); it is also what the travellers who go nowhere do, as they hang out taking notes about wherever they are and whatever they see or hear or encounter there (26ff). (Here we are in the realm of genre theory, not of particular genres, specifically in that corner of the realm in which we might be drawn into discussions concerning the systematicity of our classificatory schemes.) Genre, writes Chambers — coming clean on the issue of taxonomies — is simply a way of collecting texts together. Any genre is a collection, whether that collection be based on variations of a single story, or on family resemblances, or on rhetorical strategies. Thence my question to Chambers: is any collection a genre? So when we read, we are cruising the field of film and writing (and the rest): the reader as cruiser, desiring yet taking a distance, sampling. Amongst other things, this book is about what it is to be Ross Chambers and to do what he has done in his encounters, some of them love-affairs, and some just passing affairs, with books. Reading, to be productive, to be critical as well as affectionate, is perpetual digression, a continual readiness to join what man has put asunder. A quote:

... genre itself (like loiterature), as a case of the paradigmatic (of classificatory listing), is exactly the phenomenon that both mobilizes and contests the classificatory practices without which we could neither think nor engage in social interactions. (35)

Both mobilizes and contests: we are talking about the very idea of genre. About how the word works — its “grammar,” Wittgenstein might say — about the work of that word. About a millennial history of attempts to technicize it and about its equally long history of evasions. The principle of collection is a demystification. Does this mean that we cannot make a particular collection, on stringent criteria, and call

it a genre? Of course we can. And when we do, does this entail a denial that such collections are themselves pragmatic constructs, contextually operative, perhaps institutionally and ideologically motivated? Of course it does not. And when we assert such things, does this in turn entail that we must throw in our lot with the sociologists and others who deny that genres have features. Of course not, again. Loiterature is a genre by being not-a-genre *in a certain way*. It is *not* a genre if being a genre entails one or several of the following propositions: that all its member texts deploy similar rhetorical strategies, or use the same formal rules of prosody and versification; that all its member texts explore the same story; that all its member texts belong to the same sociological or historical context or act in the same speech situation. Its way of being a genre is the way of digression; it is a genre that explores the permeability of contexts, the mixity of rhetorics, the promiscuity of stories. Does the principle of collecting mean that the postulate of genre, or the hypothesis of a genre, is *merely* ideological, and that analyses of the kind offered by Cavell are merely a disguise of that fact? This would suggest that collecting genres on the basis of their formal features has no value in descriptions of the work of culture or in an understanding of the stories we tell. This collection of books gives the lie to all that.

Hence, in order to be a genre, loiterature traverses a number of distinctions otherwise operative, and thereby gives a good description of Cavell's own essayistic method as exemplified especially in *Contesting Tears*, where he brings together philosophy and Hollywood melodrama in order to meditate on skepticism. Meditation, or rather "the meditations of ..." — can be loiterly (Marcus Aurelius) or disciplined (Descartes) (*Loiterature* Ch. 5), just as reading can range across a diversity of contexts (*Contesting Tears*) or focus single-mindedly upon its object (*Pursuits of Happiness*). We learn, and we learn about genre, from both. But I digress. And digress again, as I discover in my collection of quotes that, as Chambers ponders the very nature of intersections (7-13), of loitering without leaving home (25) and of travelling "around my room," so does Cavell describe his project thus, as a road with many forks that explores a room with many mansions:

My project, through its origin in an effort to bring into play, and relate, a small number of comedies and a smaller number of melodramas, is shaped by a set of preoccupations of mine with intersections between cinema and philosophical skepticism, between skepticism and tragedy and melodrama, hence (it turned out) between skepticism and gender, and between the two main traditions and institutional formations of Western philosophy, and between each of these traditions and psychoanalysis. (*Contesting Tears*, 199)

Features (iii)

Cavell “invents a genre” by finding a story told in variants by several texts; Chambers invents a genre by cruising the library. On the one hand, a single, restricted context; on the other, permeable contexts, this permeability figured by the mechanics of pun. But we should be wary of interpreting this contrast too quickly, as a return to the inner and the outer, text and context, formal features and sociology. It should be clear from the foregoing that there is a lot in common among the texts that Chambers collects, not a story, exactly, but a way of being in culture by being out of context, a set of implications, an “inner agenda” of culture under modernity. Likewise, the “inner agenda” of the films studied by Cavell can only be discerned by ensuring, as he does, that film and philosophy not be impermeable to one another. Genre, if it is anything, is the intrication of text and context: against the disintrication of the formal features of a text from the situation under which it is deployed, the assumption under which, say, an argument about frames against features can be mounted, we find that the intricacy of this relation is infinitely variable, but never not the case. This intricacy is the object of the critic’s invention. To trace it is to loiter a while at intersections, follow one fork or another, to see what turns up, and how things turn out.

The Invention of Genres

Let us note that neither the nominalist view of genre nor the narrowly realist view can account for the emergence of new genres: the former, because it does not recognise features — that is, rhetorical strategies that do social and cultural jobs not done by others, or stories that explore the ramifications of problems or issues not dealt with by other stories, and the latter because it has a tendency to immobilise genres in fixed relations with one another. The clear example of this latter tendency, the one with the most significant implications, is Lyotard’s account of the incommensurability of genres (1983). Genres, in his view (following Genette), are protocols of representation as well as rhetorical acts, but at the point where one genre is not the other, there is only silence, the sublime. The ethical imperative on writing is to “present the unrepresentable,” to invent “an idiom” for doing so. But Lyotard does not envisage the possibility that such an invention would be more than occasional, that it might be a genre. When Chambers presents AIDS diaries as a new genre invented in the interstices and from the material of other genres, he is saying just that; when he argues that digression is “an anti-sublime practice” (40), he is saying also that the

anti-sublime is sutured to the sublime, that digression is sutured to taxis and discipline to undiscipline, that mixity is sutured to purity in this matter of genre. We do not only sort and differentiate, we also cruise and collect: we read Cavell and Chambers together.

Who both, as it turns out, sketch an account of the emergence of their genres both across the stretch of history, and in the synchronic environment of others. For Cavell, the latter turns on his account of “derivation” and the relation of adjacency between two genres, a detailed exposition of which is given in the introductory essay of *Contesting Tears*. Derivation is a logical relation, based on “negation” which always presupposes its positive. I quote at length:

The mechanism of “derivation” is what I think of as the negation of the features of the comedies by the melodramas. For example, in the melodrama of unknownness the woman’s father, or another older man (it may be her husband), is not on the side of her desire but on the side of law, and her mother is always present (or her search for or loss of or competition with a mother is always present), and she is always shown as a mother (or her relation to a child is explicit). With these differences in the presence and absence of parents and children goes a difference in the role of the past and of memory [...] again, whereas in remarriage comedy the action of the narration moves . . . from a setting in a big city to conclude in a place outside the city, a place of perspective, in melodramas of unknownness the action returns to and concludes in the place from which it began or in which it has climaxed, a place of abandonment or transcendence.

The chief negation of these comedies by these melodramas is the negation of marriage itself ... (5-6)

The two genres share features of a search for integrity, and metamorphosis, this latter indicating “that the cause of these genres [is] among the great subjects of the medium of film, since a great property of the medium is its violent transfiguration of creatures of flesh and blood” into creatures of the screen (7). They also share a concern with the problematic of self-reliance and conformity “as established in the founding American thinking of Emerson and Thoreau” (9). But Cavell finds a chief model for the melodramas in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, where “[a] perfect negation of remarriage comedy’s basis in friendship is Nora’s refusal ... to stay one further night under the same roof with a man to whom she is not just legally bound but, despite all, remains attracted to, but from whom she shrinks from any longer receiving pleasure” (11). This idea of negation gives a precise construal of what Beebe has proposed: what is *not in the text* is part of what we use to construe genre. And it gives a criterion of pertinence for choosing among the infinity of things that are not in the text.

Negation can be re-negated: hence the little “sub-genre” discussed above. In the three films brought together under this head, the “puzzling feature” is a “negation of the unknown woman genre,” without for all that ending happily in remarriage (14). If negation is a mechanism for the production of new possibilities, this mechanism, like strings of double negatives, must run out of steam eventually, accounting for what is implied by the tight time-frame of Cavell’s corpus, the exhaustion of conventions, the end of that story. However, negation is surely not *the only* mechanism. Implied in Cavell’s account is the exploration of the medium itself, something he discusses in relation to the drama of conversation in the remarriage comedies, coinciding as they do with the invention of sound in the movies.²¹ And then, there is the historical dimension of comedy, of tragedy, of melodrama, traditions that invent new stories. If we look to Cavell for an account of the historical transformation of genres, we find it suggested by his discussion of the relation of the comedy of remarriage with Shakespearean comedy. Summarising this argument elsewhere, Cavell writes that he “build[s] a sense of the shared structure of the comedies of remarriage out of an understanding of Shakespearean romance” (1984, 6) specifying this shared structure as follows:

Some features of the older comedy that found new life on film are, for example, that it is the woman rather than the man who holds the key to the plot and who undergoes something like death and transformation; that there is some special understanding she has with her father, who does not oppose (as in conventional comedy) but endorses the object of her desire; that the central pair are not young, so that the issue of chastity or innocence, while present, cannot be settled by determination of literal virginity; that the plot begins and complicates itself in a city but gets resolved in a move to a world of nature ... (13)

The shared structure, then is reinvented or transformed in, and for, the medium of film, and most particularly, the talkies. The history, then, is essentially one of continuity. But one can imagine that the mechanism of derivation might be adduced to account for changes as distinct from the rediscovery Cavell argues for here.

Cavell’s account of derivation has the form, I have said, of a logic, a digital logic perhaps. True to his loiterly reading habits, Chambers presupposes a multi-generic environment, and insofar as negation might be said for him too to underpin the emergence of a new genre from its precedents, its relations of

21 Cf. Gilles Deleuze’s account of the emergence of dance movies, westerns, and road movies, in his account of the moving image in *Cinema* (1986).

negation are themselves multiple. The AIDS diary is the case in point. Diaries, they are nevertheless not like diaries, in that they are not contemplative or introspective, not monological, but outward looking, agonistic, concerned with their capacity to participate actively in the culture their subjects are about to leave. Like some autobiographical writing, too, they are nevertheless unlike autobiography, in that they are not memorials of a life, but stories of a death, often, too, dual autothanatographies. And they are, perhaps, the “negation” of the “coming out story,” in that, where the latter has affinities with the *Bildungsroman*, “... the AIDS story ... follows a declining curve uncannily symmetrical to the coming out story’s mounting curve” (*Loiterature* 251). But above all, AIDS diaries have their “source or cause” in a rhetorical problem:

In general terms AIDS diaries, while their “storylessness” is well adapted to the temporal experience characteristic of AIDS as a syndrome (its day-by-dayness, intermittency, and unpredictability), are less obviously welcoming to the narrative of resistance and survival that underlies the project of AIDS witness, and the adaptation of the diary as a private journal of self-examination to the purposes of witnessing has thus led to a range of generic solutions. (*Facing It* 94)

Nachlass fragments and home movies, travel narrative and war stories are amongst these solutions. Eric Michaels considers, and sets aside, model diaries, and considers the “will” and the “academic position paper” or manifesto (94-95 ff.). Above all, however, the diaries participate in the broader category of “witnessing writing” or testimonial literature, of which there has been an “unprecedented surge” during the twentieth century. Chambers ends, then, with two major questions concerning witness, each question having more general implications for the emergence of new genres:

One arises from the observation that not all emergencies produce witnessing texts and that each emergency seems to require the invention of its own forms of witness: there are conditions of possibility for the emergence of testimonial literature and determinants of genre that have not been theorized. [...] The second question asks why the twentieth century, unlike — or more so than — earlier periods, has been an age of witness. Here again there are conditions of possibility to consider. [...] but, if we look for an underlying motivation, a necessary cause deeper than the conditions of possibility, the clue lies, perhaps — this is a hypothesis for future work — in the characteristic orientation of practices of witness towards survival (living/dying to tell the tale) and the desire that structures of address imply for there to be a future. Our

century might be the first period — or the first for a long time — to have seriously doubted the plausibility of humanity's having a future and to have turned to witnessing as a response to that doubt. (134)²²

Causes “deeper than” conditions of possibility — the “inner agenda” of a culture. It is here that the realist attitude — that holds that genres are in some sense there — makes its most significant claim. This is, that genres are themselves formally content-laden and raise issues for and in culture that are not raised by other genres. These books make this claim most seriously and require of us a similar seriousness. Genre matters, dare I say it, in countless ways. We could go on to discuss the place of interpretation in the invention of this matter of genre and the matter of genres, but it is time to stop. I do so with these propositions: there are no doubt countless genres, invented in countless ways. There are also, no doubt about it — there is no doubt, too, that this is the point of genre theory — countless ways of not being a genre.

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22 We can look forward to Ross Chambers' new book, *Untimely Interventions: AIDS Writing, Testimonial and the Rhetoric of Haunting* for his further investigation of witnessing writing.

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