Genre Again
Another Shot

There has been so much interest in genre in so much valuable recent work that it came as something of a surprise to me that not everyone in literary theory shares the assumption that this is an important topic. Sobered by this discovery, I was further reminded of the dominant agenda of structuralist and poststructuralist theory by Christopher Prendergast’s 1986 book on mimesis in nineteenth-century French novels. Genre has always figured on that agenda: I recall the interest in Russian Formalist work on it, fuelled by Todorov’s early anthology. I recall Todorov’s own work, Genette’s, the revival of interest in Bakhtin, both his work on the novel and on “little speech genres,” and the Strasbourg conference whose papers were collected in *Glyph*. But genre’s place among the other items of that agenda has never been clear. Apparently it was just another topic in an unstructured list; or, alternatively, germane to the structuralist project of theorising the general laws of texts, it was due for deconstruction.

My own view is that the topic of genre radically reflects the agenda of literary theory, and that it can be used critically and polemically to discuss the presuppositions of that field. To participate in that polemic, I offer the following discussion of the use of the notion of genre in Prendergast’s investigation of mimesis. The way in which the text/context dichotomy reappears in this work will bear the brunt of my critique. My argument in simple is that this dichotomy has a role in a theory of semiosis only when genre is overlooked. Genre, in other words, is useful for theorising the conditions of the text as act, and is further useful for mounting a critique of the assumptions kept in play by that dichotomy.

One of Prendergast’s findings in the theoretical aspect of his book is that mimesis is a “language game,” a notion borrowed from Wittgenstein. This is further glossed through Lyotard, whose reading of this concept aligns it with the notion of genre. But “genre” has an ambiguous status in Prendergast’s argument, and it is not at all clear that he would accept “mimesis is a genre” as equivalent to “mimesis is a language game.” In what follows, I shall try to tease out what is at stake in this equivocation.

In the early stages of his exposition, Prendergast argues that a condition of the “concord’ between narrator and reader...[is] a socially shared universe of meaning” and that the narrator is also “constrained... by the generic conventions of his medium.” The reader’s “assent” must be obtained at both these levels (30). Nevertheless, the levels are “interrelated”:

*Southern Review, 23 (November 1990)*
the “subject” of mimesis is an intersubjective entity, a socially constructed subject issuing from the “cultural codes” which, in the wider sense Barthes gives to that term in S/Z, are held to underlie the whole organisation of the mimetic text. (30)

This is a simple formulation of Prendergast’s position, but the questions it raises are not answered in the more elaborated forms from later in the book. These are:

(i) Are there specific conventions that achieve mimesis differently in different genres, as Prendergast seems to imply with his mention of fairytales? If so, and given the corpus, one would expect him to follow Lukács’ project more closely and focus on the “economy of mimesis” as it is operated by the specific conventions of the nineteenth-century novel. But this is not the case, and Prendergast claims that his findings regarding “the mimetic language game” apply more broadly to an apparently transgeneric “mimetic text,” to “literary mimesis” in general (69). Indeed this is evident in his use of Aristotle. Despite the fact that the Poetics is explicitly a theory of genres, and its normative descriptions judgements about the conventions of the ideal texts governed by those genres, Prendergast overlooks their specific application to Attic tragedy and comedy and takes them as a theory of mimesis in general. In this, needless to say, he is not alone, and such long-standing habits of literary theory rob his proposal of most of its analytic potential.

(ii) If the “subject” of mimesis is intersubjective, what exactly is it to play the game? Are “we” always already playing by virtue of our cohabitation in the “shared universe of meaning”? The notion of the “language game” adds nothing to the general notion of a socially constructed reality, unless we specify what is particular to this game as distinct from that one, how a text ensures that a reader plays the right game at the right time, and what players of one game do that they do not do in another. Mimesis, “the art of ‘recognitions' par excellence” (31), acquires in this book the function of accounting for “a community’s relation to an object world” (73), thus obliterating the particularising potential of the generic postulate.

Prendergast introduces the question of genre in the section “On Verisimilitude.” Using detective fiction as his example, he reviews the argument that verisimilitude is generically determined: this argument holds that there are “sets of convention and expectation in terms of which items in the text will be deemed plausible not because they typically occur in real life, but because they typically occur in texts of this sort” (43). He then contests this claim on two grounds. Firstly, he argues, “the detective novel is constructed from two apparently conflicting systems of vraisemblance: the vraisemblance of the reader through which he misreads the signs; the vraisemblable of the detective (or rather the supervening vraisemblable of the text) through which the signs are read
correctly" (43). These are assimilated to Barthes' "cultural" and "hermeneutic" codes; the truth of the latter displaces the error of the former. However, they are only apparently different; they do not deploy different logics (44). Hence, "the sense we have of discontinuous systems is ... dispelled." (44). In the same way, the apparent discontinuity of the stylistic conventions of classical tragedy with "daily life" obscures the fact that the former "derive, in part at least, from assumptions of a social, as distinct from exclusively literary, character" (44).

Likewise again, "the conflicting models of vraisemblance at work in Don Quixote (45) do not uphold the thesis of discontinuity on closer examination:

The Don's own models appear to be unambiguously "generic," derived from the literary romances, while Sancho Panza's seem to come from the practical sphere of ordinary life. Yet the bookish sources of Quixote's notions of the world express codes of conduct that were once embedded ... in a real social context; ... while Sancho's vraisemblable will ... itself become a "bookish" source for a model of common sense (45).

The logical slippages in this argument are startling. In the discussion of detective fiction we might note that this kind of "novel is constructed from ... the vraisemblable of the reader ... [and] the supervening vraisemblable of the text" (43); is the "novel" the "text," and is the reader's logic part of the "construction" of "it"? It seems conveniently to have slipped out for a while, reproducing an inside and an outside — text/context, book/life, literature/the social. Where is "genre" in this couple? Assimilated apparently to "literature," so that the opposition between two inferential systems which was set up in the premise as itself the convention of the genre of detective fiction has become the opposition between the "generic" and the "non-generic." Now, what is set up by the conventions of a genre as the non-generic — like the straight man of a pair of clowns — is ipso facto generic; but Prendergast's "other words" restate the convention as follows: "a generic vraisemblable (the Wisdom of the detective) reverses or overrides the vraisemblable of everyday life on the basis of which the reader has classified the characters" (43). The slippage continues in the discussion of the other examples and determines the conclusion:

The case of detective fiction is, of course, a somewhat specialised one. But its clarity is such that it might lead towards a similar recuperation of the "generic" into the "social" in the case of more complex literary forms. (44)

The mistake is traceable to a tacit assumption that we know what real live everyday life is from the way it is represented in books; this is the very fallacy of the mimetic definition of meaning. Prendergast attempts to avoid this difficulty by pursuing his first objection with his second, but
I shall argue presently that the generic postulate has a much more precise purchase on the mimetic fallacy than he appears to have understood.

The second objection to the generic postulate is what Prendergast calls "the problem of the origin of literary genres" (44-45). Following the discussion of *Don Quixote*, he concludes that the "imbrication of the forms of social practice and literary practice, each shaping the other while being itself shaped by them, radically disorignates both" (45). If we must ask a question about the "origins" of genres, there are alternatives to asking whether the genres imitate life, or the other way around. This is the most familiar, and the most trivial, form of the literature—versus—life dilemma. Being modern, Prendergast dismisses the question of origins, and being what he understands by a materialist (that is, believing in life rather than literature), he argues for the above-mentioned "recuperation of the 'generic' into the 'social'" (44). I take it that what is essentially objectionable for a materialist in "modern French theory" is "recuperation" in the opposite direction. Prendergast has not understood that what is under attack is this very dichotomy, with the dilemmas that it necessarily entails. His repetition of these dilemmas is tiresome, unproductive, and dated.

The argument for recuperating the generic into the social is more radical than another argument that might have been predictable from the terms of Prendergast's argument, that is, an argument for "continuity" between them. The latter is the general thrust of Todorov's essay on genre: it maintains the binarism, but as opposite ends of a scale of which the criterion appears to be the mechanisms of aestheticisation of discourse. An argument similar to this has been made by philosophers of language in the context of discussions of fiction. Fiction is the "mention" of discourse, and the appearance of real entities in fiction can likewise be described as "mentions," "impersonations" or " citations." Lyotard's use of the mechanisms of citation in his account of "the post-modern condition," while declaring its conceptual debt to analytic philosophy, runs counter to this work in two significant respects: (i) It is not an account of fiction, in so far as any project conceived in that way assumes "truth" at the other end of the scale. Lyotard's work is precisely an account of the implications of citation in truth-conditional sentences, where such sentences require statements as to their own foundations, those statements requiring further foundational statements, and so on: each foundational statement cites its antecedent, thus declaring its discursive status. There can be no problematic of fiction in this situation, where the discourses of science have forfeited their metaphysical frame to their own epistemological requirements. (ii) As a result, discursive differences can no longer be based on the fiction/truth distinction that governs most of the text/context, books/life, literature/reality pairs that literary theory so often borrows from an unproblematised aesthetics. If
everything is discursive, and thus a "continuity" under this criterion, it is not a scale between two poles, nor is it homogeneous. Michelet is different from Flaubert on discursive, not epistemological or metaphysical grounds. However, Lyotard's use of the hypothesis of language games, and the performativity thesis in general, assumes a radical discontinuity, where the social "games" and the discursive forms appropriate to them are untranslatable into one another. By contrast, Prendergast's suggestion that the literary and the social are continuous seems to suppose translation between them effected by the automatic processes of pag ["derive" (44 and 45), "express," "were once embedded," "will become" (45)]. This has the effect of making the proposal that mimesis is a language game extremely difficult to sustain, for it disregards Wittgenstein's insistence on heterogeneity, and also the difference of practice and "place," without which any thesis regarding language games or genres is empty.

Prendergast's take on the problem of genres is governed by the opposition between "language" and "the social" — a distinction that even the most hardened empirical linguist would find inscrutable, but which is recognisable as derived from a mix of an unreflecting use of a Marxist taxonomy, and an equally unreflecting inheritance from positivist science: representations, it appears, are epiphenomenal, and the "kinds" of them marginal to any attempt to mediate this version of the "gap." By contrast, Bakhtin's "speech genres," Wittgenstein's "forms of life," and Lyotard's radicalisation of this hypothesis allow for a construal of the problem of genre as central to an analysis of "the social." The social is at least a complexus of semiotic practices that establish what I have called elsewhere ritual settings that in turn establish the rules for possible interactions within them. Those possible kinds of interactions are incommensurate and discontinuous with one another: these are the "games," and it is neither contradictory nor circular to say that there are games the business of which is to establish the rules of other games, including their rituals. (A familiar form of these is the committee.) It can be seen that this proposal joins Lyotard's not only in respect of the use it makes of the notion of "language game," but also in the postmodern paradox, that is, the series of games that ground (other) games. Nevertheless, and pace Lyotard, it is necessary for the viability of this proposal that we adopt the semiotic, as distinct from the linguistic or philosophic use of the term "language," to describe any system of signs. A genre, in my understanding, would normally be a semiotic practice in which a number of these would combine, and its conventions would include the rules of combination, the behaviours, patterns of interaction and forms of language appropriate to the ritual, or framing situation as well as the rule for this and the game's place in it. Indeed, the entailment of "frame" with "game" must, following Derrida's analyses, be both strict and
strictly paradoxical. Again following Derrida’s practice, the word “appropriate” should be read through the entire range of its paradigm, from “proper” to “appropriation,” for just as it is “improper” in a tennis match to swear at the umpire and claim the right to foot-fault, so does a chess move “not belong” on a tennis court. I suggest that it is this idea of “not belonging” that corresponds to the notion of the “plausible” in classic genre theory. The *vraisemblable* must, in this understanding of genre, be adjudged in terms of appropriateness criteria. This is a shift not unlike Austin’s introduction of “felicity conditions” in his analysis of successful speech acts, but it is familiar from classic genre theory as the connection between the *vraisemblable* and the *bienséant*. Prendergast finds the logic of this connection “irritatingly opaque” (54), but this is a sign of his radical failure to grasp the point of genre theory. In the absence of an understanding of how a “Poetics” and a “Rhetoric” call upon and presuppose one another, the genre postulate loses the crucial component of the performative thesis. In this situation, generic rules do indeed appear as epiphenomena, and the truth-conditional criteria for verisimilitude necessarily re-emerge. Symptomatically, Prendergast is heedless in this section of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, and his reading of the rules for plausible plots depends instead on the *Physics* (42 ff.).

Prendergast’s failure to capture anything of the interest or usefulness of the genre postulate shows up in a series of errors that would be trivial if they were not connected to an issue of such importance for his own thesis. Quoting Lyotard’s criterion for distinguishing genres as “irreconcilably different and competing positioning of the ‘referent’” (80), he goes on to restate it in his own proposal for considering mimesis as “a ‘language game’ with flexible rules (with different ways of position its ‘referents’)” (214). The problem in this modification is clarified in *Just Gaming*, where Lyotard argues that each language game requires its own mimesis. It seems that for Prendergast, mimesis is the field of all representation—but as I have argued, it is exactly at that point that the notion of a language game to describe it loses its point. Within this field, presumably, the “genres” operate minor modifications, at best, but do not in any way account for what counts as true in any given situation. The serious espousal of the genre postulate has exactly the opposite form, and, given the postmodern paradox, does not rely on an ultimate, general, or homogenising ground. Following Prendergast’s proposal that mimesis is a language game (though what the indefinite article can mean here it is difficult to gauge), the term “genre” suffers degeneration into even less specificity in his text: I quote only the genre of “brisk common sense” (214) and the genre of “contemporary Paris” (226).

This same lack of understanding of the theoretical potential of the genre postulate has the effect of obliterating its political implications. Undoubtedly, for Bakhtin, Wittgenstein and Lyotard it is through genre
that the sentimentality inherent in much communication theory, and particularly that relying on notions such as “community” and “intersubjectivity,” can be avoided. The performativity thesis is that discourse is a doing: the meaning of a text is its action in, and on, the social context in which it occurs. It has a great deal to do with the formation and the effectivity of local power relations, and with the control of fields of action. If it is the case, as Lyotard argues, that reference is determined by genre, then not only is genre determinant of the subject-positions that structure the interaction, it is also responsible for the constitution of its context in the wider sense. It is because of this that texts of one genre cannot “talk to” those of an other.

This is the question of the politics of discourse. For Prendergast, the political dimension of literature and literary criticism lies in the question of content — how “true” a fiction is, and whether in an ideal elsewhere beyond the reach of censorship, other forms of knowledge might have been possible. He concludes that they are not, that the sensus communis is constitutive of its own boundaries, that the ideological always already pervades a community’s relation with the world, which is the condition — irremediably social and in history — of the necessary failure of the search for this elusive other place. If, then, we are literary critics, our job will be to understand the forms of fictional representation, while our social-science colleagues can get on with the other forms of ideology. The alternative is based on an understanding of language as effectual in the constitution of power relations, rather than, as for Prendergast, a medium for represented contents. In my understanding, the genre postulate contributes to a development of this position, thanks, in particular, to its claim to theorise what it is to be an addressee in particular settings. In Bakhtin’s words:

addressivity . . . is a constitutive feature of the utterance . . . The various typical forms of this addressivity assumes and the various concepts of the addressee are constitutive, definitive features of various speech genres. (Speech Genres 99)

I have focussed on these points because they are raised, and dismissed, by Prendergast’s own argument. But the most fully worked out proposal for elaborating this position in respect of the specific requirements of a theory of literature comes in Ross Chambers’ recent work. It provides a genuine alternative to the tradition within which Prendergast is working. Where this tradition is governed by the project to read for the ideological conditions of representation, Chambers studies a text as act, implying — like all acts — its field and the unfreedoms that necessitate it in its specificity and its singularity. A text is strategies and tactics, the trace of the conditions of its own accomplishment. To read these conditions — what Chambers calls, following Flahault, the contextual dialectic — is to open up the possibility of a literary history that is a
history of writing. Against the text as knowledge of a world, Chambers offers the possibility of reading the text as act within it.

Whether, and how, this work can be articulated with theoretical work on genre is the subject of my current meditations. The difficulty is that Chambers’ work takes off from those large objects of investigation—“text” and “narrative”—that structuralism has bequeathed us. These objects relegate “genre/s” to a distinctly second place. Yet the invitation to attempt some sort of articulation is proffered by the fact that Chambers’ work is pointedly critical of the tradition from which it takes its terms of reference. A “renewed narratology,” he writes, would be a corrective to that tradition which,

in concerning itself with literary texts [has] neglected those features in them — those textual indices of contractual and transactional understandings — that themselves realize the narratives as communicational acts and open them, as verbal structures, onto a world of events and change.

(Story and Situation 10)

As I see it, this is also the point of working on genre, and there are two ways of taking up Chambers’ practice in terms of this construal of his project. The first is to take as material the fact that the corpus of Story and Situation is selected on generic criteria. The second is to focus on the historical problem of the “alienated text” which is, Chambers claims, what disables and thus foregrounds the problematics of the literary or narrative act, and to ask what this has to tell us about literary genre/s in the period dating from the mid-nineteenth century. My preference currently is for the second of these two options; I shall attempt to outline why.

Story and Situation is an analysis of art stories. The question, under the first option, would be whether this genre of narrative prose fiction perpetuates its act in a way that makes the statement that it is a genre a significant one. Chambers avoids the genre question, claiming that the “art tale” represents literary narrative in general (4). But, implicitly, it seems that the art tale is apt to represent a larger whole in this way for generic reasons. In a putative generic field that would contrast the art tale with, say, novels on the one hand and lyric verse on the other, the art tale can do two things realised severally by its neighbours. Like a lyric poem, it demands to be read as a whole, and is constructed by that reading as a “seductive object” (14), dependent on repeated acts of reading for its “ongoing meaningfulness” (12); like all prose fiction of the period, on the other hand, it manifests “the pressure within . . . readerly texts . . . of a sense of the writerly” (13).

This is probably the beginning of an answer to the question, why choose art tales to do this representative job, rather than something else? But it has very limited value as a use of the genre postulate, and still less
as a statement about genre. It is more interesting — more profitable — to attend to the fact that Chambers’ purpose is to say something about narrative literature and, indeed, in Mélancolie et opposition, about the literary text in the broadest sense appropriate to the period. Chambers’ point about alienation in the mid-nineteenth century is a point about the disempowerment of a subset of written texts. I am going to say, therefore, that it is a point about genre, for two reasons: first, because “disempowerment” is a point about the loss of the power to act, the loss of “place,” and, second, because a subset is a kind. Chambers argues that this subset is constituted as set partly by its alienation in, or by, “the overall circumstances of middle-class society” (12), and that this is the source both of its isolation and of its value:

The assumption that the right thing to do with a literary text is to interpret it and that the interpretive process involves first isolating a text (as structure) before “recontextualizing” it . . . so as to realize its potential of ongoing meaningfulness has become in our present-day practice so automatic and unexamined that we scarcely recognize its significance as an indicator of our general social circumstances and of our alienated approach to language in particular. (12)

Notice that to talk of “the right thing to do with” a text is to make a precise statement concerning generic performativity: how it makes us behave, what kind of things it makes us say, what kinds of semiotic practices it excludes as inappropriate. On the assumption that generic performativity is the significant criterion for genre rather than, say, named classes and definitions, it follows that in Chambers’ formulation “the literary text” is itself a genre. Of course, it has for some time been taken for granted that the “literary” acquires institutional particularity in the course of the nineteenth century. Chambers’ argument is more specific than this, both historically, and in its analysis of discursive practices. My suggestion bears on the theoretical weight the term “genre” might acquire in this problematic. In particular, I suggest that Chambers’ thesis implies two important corollaries: (i) the alienation of the literary depends on perpetrating its disempowerment as act, depends on constituting it as object for interpretation, depends, indeed, on denying the performativity of art; and (ii) collecting together the variety of literary genres in a single genre whose performativity denies performativity results in their indifferentiation and the disablement of their specific powers. It is under these circumstances that the power of the text, its act, becomes the problem that is represented in the ways analysed by Chambers’ readings. Not only do the differences among genres not make much of a difference any more; it is also the case that the same period sees the rise of aesthetic objections to the very notion of genre. It is no accident that the triumph of “interpretation” and of “the artistic text” that Chambers
describes as alienation accompanies the marginalisation of the concerns of traditional poetics. This is not merely explicable by the rise of "the author." The implication of Chambers' thesis is that there is a social and political stake in the deafness I am noting in literary theory to the questions put by the postulate of genre.

1 Southern Review 22.3 (November 1989), Special Issue on Genre, bears witness to the vigour and range of recent Australian work on genre. The footnotes in Southern Review 22.3 provide a good up-to-date working bibliography of the field. Work done by the group of functional-systemic linguists centred around the Linguistics Department at Sydney University is an important contribution to linguistic theories of genre; see, for example, Gunther Kress and Terry Threadgold, "Towards a Social Theory of Genre," Southern Review 21.3 (November 1988): 215-43; and for critical assessments of this work, see Paul Thibault, "Genres, Social Action and Pedagogy: Towards a Critical Social Semiotic Account," Southern Review 22.3 (November 1989): 338-62 and Terry Threadgold, "Talking about Genre: Ideologies and Incompatible Discourses," Journal of Cultural Studies 3.3 (January 1989): 101-27. Much of this work builds on the contribution made by Ian Reid's collection, The Place of Genre in Learning: Current Debates (Geelong: Deakin University, Centre for Studies in Literary Education, 1987). Interest in the topic is not of course confined to Australia; it has always been a live issue in cinema studies. Paul Hernadi's Beyond Genre: New Directions in Literary Classification (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell UP, 1972) brought it back into prominence in North American literary theory, and the best general work to date in this specific area is Alistair Fowler, Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genre and Modes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982).


7 Glyph: The Strasbourg Colloquium: Genre — A Selection of Papers, 7 (1980).

8 There is, for example, the argument in classical scholarship regarding the relation of tragedy and comedy with ritual. The argument can only be made in a restricted number of cases. In Les Genres du discours Todorov also argues that in another restricted set of cases there is a strong link between formal
genres and speech acts such as invitations. For a history construed along 
Foucauldian lines, that is, a project to describe the “conditions of emer-
gence” rather than the “origin” of certain genres, see Ian Hunter, “Provi-
dence and Profit: Speculation in the Genre Market,” *Southern Review* 22.3 

Don Manison, “Fiction and reality,” to appear in *Poetics Today*, MS cited by 
permission.

Jean-François Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowl-
edge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota 

I have argued for this metaphor in Anne Freedman, “Anyone for Tennis?” 
in *The Place of Genre in Learning: Current Debates* 91-124.

See Freedman, “Anyone for Tennis?”

Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad 
Godzich (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985) 15.

233.

J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 
1962).

Ross Chambers, *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of 
Fiction* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984), and *Mélancolie et opposition: les 
débuts du modernisme en France* (Paris: Corti, 1987); page references will be 
given in the text. It is a pity that *Mélancolie et opposition* appeared too late for 
Prendergast to use it, for not only is its corpus drawn from a period covered 
by Prendergast’s, but more importantly, as part of its project to explore the 
local conditions of writing and the possibility of their history, it contains a 
detailed discussion of the response of texts by the canonical authors of the 
1930s to the censorship laws as they were passed and revised during the 
period. Prendergast’s own discussion of censorship as the effective limits 
imposed on representation by the *sensus communis* and acted out by enforce-
ments of these censorship laws is certainly not at odds with Chambers’ 
account; but it would be considerably enriched by a Chambers-style inves-
tigation of the discursive strategies whereby the text meets and evades, or 
manipulates to its own ends, those laws as understood by a practising writer 
attempting to ply his (yes, mostly “his”) trade.


See Chambers, *Mélancolie et opposition*.

Recall that the distinction between “readery” and “writerly” applies only to 
prose writing. Verse by its very nature never pretends to be noiseless 
communication.