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William Irwin Thompson and the Play of Knowledge

J.P. Telotte

The notion of genre often seems fundamentally opposed to the question of ambiguity, since it implies a formula or pattern, derived not from a unique work, but from a tradition or succession of texts with which an audience is essentially familiar. In keeping with our natural desire for explanation and formulation, for closing the gaps in the world we inhabit, we classify or group, arrange in generic categories, many of our human concepts and most of our art. Consequently, as Jacques Derrida notes, the concept of genre typically plays "the role of order's principle,"¹ although it does so subversively, by concealing the inherent boundaries, jointures, or sutures which are involved in that act of grouping singular entities. In effect, it masks our anxieties over the ambiguous, the unclassifiable, the different, by providing an illusion of a central known body of work, a gravitational field around which our art and perspectives on it may be oriented for better understanding. In contemporary American literature we have seen the emergence of a group of works which seem to defy that generic placement: Carlos Castaneda's popular combination of anthropology and Yaqui Indian mythology, Robert Pirsig's blend of philosophy and fictional form, even Norman Mailer's experiments in overlaying fact with narrative form demonstrate this centrifugal tendency, as each writer operates profitably at the very edge of our traditional classifications, as if at an interface of several literary genres. This decentering activity results not only from the perceived complexity of that world which these writers seek to describe and explain, but from a growing doubt of the applicability of those customary formulas and patterns. That doubt has ultimately proven profitable, those form-defying ambiguities spurring a new literary development, what we might term a re-genre-ation in writing.

The most revealing example of this tendency may be that provided by the work of William Irwin Thompson, a trained literary critic and author of six books, all of which defy easy

classification. What Thompson's writings represent is not simply a decentering of the traditional literary formulas, but a revisioning of the genre of criticism itself, which casts into relief many of our fundamental principles of analysis, classification, and evaluation. While his speculations on history, anthropology, technology, art, and man's future seem addressed to essentially the same popular audience as is the work of Castaneda and Pirsig, Thompson began writing in a more traditional mode, that of historical criticism, as his first book, *The Imagination of an Insurrection*, studies the links between the rising spirit of Irish nationalism, culminating in the Easter Rebellion of 1916, and the writings of the most prominent literary figures of the era, especially Yeats, George William Russell (A.E.), and Sean O'Casey. Rather than simply speculating on the influence that this moment in history had on these writers, however, Thompson focuses as well on their share in fashioning events, and thus on a symbiotic relationship existing between the artist and his culture. As he explains, "the private imagination becomes a public event," equally as much as those "public events become private imaginations."² What Thompson implicitly recognized at this point in his writing was the inadequacy of either extrinsic or intrinsic criticism, of simply overlaying the imagination with historical models in order to evaluate its products, or of shutting out those influences when appraising the work of art, as has so often been the case in the wake of New Criticism. Both approaches have to prove equally incommensurate to true criticism and proper understanding, since both merely presume different centers of importance and value—one in history, the other in art itself—at the price of ignoring certain inevitable ambiguities.

With his next book, the celebrated *At the Edge of History*, therefore, Thompson began the project of decentering his own criticism, not only by abandoning a formal focus on literature and its meanings, but by perching himself on the edge, so to speak, of contemporary culture, at a point where the traditional demarcations have visibly begun to blur: where science fiction and film speak more immediately of the American experience than does traditional literature, where new or foreign religions are readily embraced as alternatives to the old, and where different lifestyles seem to challenge the basic structure of society. *At the Edge of History*, consequently, seems at first a strange *mélange* with its discussions of the writings of Arthur C. Clarke, Edgar Cayce, and Nathanael West, Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the strength of Zen

Buddhism in the United States, and the influence of both Disneyland and the Esalen Institute on life in California. That very range of subjects, though, creates the impression of a consciousness standing at the periphery of our culture, seeking to discern some meaningful pattern in our social fabric. As Thompson attempts to gain a perspective on the whole—people, history, their art—however, a most puzzling picture emerges, of an America which seems to be “slipping away from the traditional American culture,”³ to be losing contact with that sense of history which has always been one of the critic’s most reliable tools of analysis. The cause of this “slipping away,” he suggests, is partially due to a new sense of history in light of an awakening to the paradoxes and contradictions with which it seems shot through. In fact, Thompson suggests that what has resulted is a recognition that “our view of the past is a fiction we create to rationalize our position of power in the present, and our view of the future . . . simply a magnification of our present.” What became clear is that in the use of history as a critical mechanism, we often have simply brought one kind of creative act to bear on another, compared a culture’s imaginings to those of an individual artist, and thus inevitably arrived at a most ambiguous interpretation of our world.

With this ongoing revisioning of history, there should also come a sense of power or at least a great freedom from a tyranny of the past, but this has not been the case. What Thompson finds in our culture instead is a “dislocation of the individual from an integral culture and the resultant fragmentation of the self,”⁴ largely because we have come to see ourselves inhabiting an ambiguous and historical realm, cut off from an easily determinate meaning. The possibility of participating in that dynamic interchange between history and art, the self and society, through our imaginative capacities has essentially been overlooked or neglected in a concern with the self alone.

It has traditionally been the work of the artist, Thompson points out, to assist in this imaginative shaping of a culture’s sense of history and of the self, thereby to provide for its members the myths they need to maintain their identities and values. He reads the work of the Irish poet Padraic Pearse in precisely this light, suggesting that Pearse saw himself as a reincarnation of the ancient hero Cuchulain, returned to perform heroic deeds for the Irish people or to die a martyr’s death in the attempt. By his writings Pearse managed to inspire his countrymen to action, although it is

with his martyrdom that he managed the greatest feat—crafting a myth to sustain others in their nationalistic concern. In modern America, however, our poets, novelists, and dramatists, Thompson feels, have abdicated from this task; their work has either clung to the traditional formulas and the messages they implicitly carry or it has become effete, feeding upon itself. In the former case, the artist has essentially “chosen to perish with the old” world his work mirrors, and in the latter, his product has tended to become swallowed up by the theories of its own creation, thus turning endlessly inward. Of course, as Thompson quickly notes, “each culture gets the art it deserves,”⁵ so the failure of our traditional forms represents, to his symbiotic perspective, a failing in the culture itself.

The root cause of this failing, he suggests, is both the world man inhabits and the manner in which he seeks to interpret it. The environment facing the artist today “is not really nature, but information,”⁶ since each year we are deluged with more than forty thousand new books and a million scholarly papers, all challenging our prior assumptions about the nature and shape of that world. When formulas are forced to interpret or render such a multitude of *informing* principles—that is, schemes which themselves subtly suggest new patterns or formulas, or at very least, the limitations of the old—then a failing will naturally manifest itself, a failing whose source is in those traditional and rigid forms which prove incommensurate with the modern situation. At the same time, we *want* form or shape, a structure within which to speak of our situation, as well as a pattern for our very lives; and Thompson readily admits that “there is no growth without the limitation of form.”⁷ In that desire for form, however, there lurks a tendency to forget about our necessary participation in shaping both the world we inhabit and our means of conceiving it.

At the root of Thompson’s work, therefore, there is an implicit identity between our attitudes toward culture and art, just as there is between the subjects of his own writing and the form he employs. Here form and content merge, as the questions of how one properly understands the contemporary human situation and of how one writes about or represents it become essentially the same. As he explains in his most recent book, “we are all on edge,” but those edges “are important because they define a limitation in order to deliver us from it. When we come to an edge we come to a frontier that tells us that we are now about to become more than

we have been before. As long as one operates in the middle of things, one can never really know the nature of the medium in which one moves"⁸—or, he might have added, the medium through which one sees, understands, or even conveys his understandings to others. Appropriately, then, when he speaks of the modern era, Thompson often employs the terminology of modern criticism, particularly of those forms which have sought to challenge the traditional models by revealing precisely the sort of ambiguities or absences previously cloaked by our tools of analysis. From his peripheral vantage point, Thompson speaks of the need for "decentering" our perspective on human history and suggests that "we are entering a period not of destruction, but destructuring,"⁹ wherein we try to take the measure of given forms in order to move beyond them. In fact, Thompson's latest book, *The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light*, does precisely this, analyzing the myths of Western culture in order to locate in their origins the necessary mythos for the emerging new consciousness.

In discussing the varied paths taken by contemporary literary criticism, Josué V. Harari points out that "criticism has reached a stage of maturity where it is now openly challenging the primacy of literature. Criticism has become an independent operation that is primary in the production of texts."¹⁰ That commentary hints at one of the main objections many have to criticism today, the view that it often loses sight of its primary task of illumination and seeks to supersede the works which are supposedly its very *raison d'être*. What Thompson's example, as well as that provided by authors like Pirsig, Castaneda, or even Lewis Thomas, suggests is the necessity of that challenge which has blurred many of our traditional distinctions. Art, as Thompson reminds, "not only records the present, it helps to create the future"; and in response to this imperative these writers have attempted "to build a form that had the structure of art but the content of scholarship," especially since "the cultural responses to poem and novel had become so studied and mannered that there was little room left to challenge the cultural description of reality itself" in the traditional forms.¹¹ In his interrelated discussions of such varied topics as Tantric Yoga, quantum mechanics, science fiction, and anthropology, then, Thompson demonstrates the necessary breadth of this new American artist, the "juggler of information":

You have to be willing to throw your net out widely and be

willing to take in science, politics, and art, *and* science fiction, the occult, and pornography. To catch a sense of the whole in pattern recognition, you have to leap across the synapse and follow the rapid movement of informational bits. You treat in a paragraph what you know could take up a whole academic monograph, but jugglers are too restless for that: the object of the game is to grasp the object quickly and then give it up in a flash to the brighter air.¹²

Such rapid "pattern recognition" and description, of course, can only occur from a decentered perspective, from outside the technological constructs with which man tends to surround himself, and from outside the conventional patterns which he uses to speak of himself.

The form of this new literature is therefore geared to the conditions which have produced it. Throughout Thompson's writings, for instance, we find an insistent, almost didactic prose style which suggests a basic sense of urgency, as if there were no longer time for the subtler, hidden messages/massages of metaphor; at any rate, it is a style most appropriate to the perceived task of the artist who must help impart a greater awareness of "who we are, where we come from, and where we are going."¹³ This writing displays not so much a mindfulness of itself as of its audience and of the urgency of communicating with that audience. Hence, it functions much like talk in its rapid exposition of ideas, intriguing and unexpected analogies, and the tendency to hint at a larger picture whose full outlines are left for the curious individual to sketch in for himself. In Thompson's case, this style seems a natural outgrowth of his investigations, since his first book essentially focuses on the power of rhetoric to effect cultural change, while the more recent *Darkness and Scattered Light* is essentially a transcript of four talks which he gave upon the opening of the Lindisfarne Association in New York. And if he tends to describe his writings in precisely this way, as "talk," he differs little from those other contemporary authors who have sought to inject the immediacy of that oral/aural relationship into their work. Castaneda, for example, tends to structure his books according to the principle of Socratic dialogue, which allows his readers to participate in the initiation of his protagonist by the Yaqui medicine man Don Juan; and Pirsig's persona repeatedly resorts to what he describes as a "chautauqua," that is, an oral disquisition on a topic of common

concern. The product in every case is a literature that is pointedly open-ended, challenging the reader-listener to participate in an ongoing dialogue, and as a result to assume a new perspective on his cultural situation.

If these writings, Thompson's especially, often seem more like the product of a Zen master than of a critic or even a novelist, then, it is because the writers see this "art of the new age" as requiring a "simple, direct, and mythopoeic" form, as being more "a performance of reality and not a description."¹⁴ The ancient oral traditions of art which produced works like *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*, we know, expressed the basic myths which underlay human culture; and at the same time, those mythic expressions were essentially performances, oral presentations which afforded the poet an opportunity to demonstrate his skill in embellishing a well-known story, in employing to best effect certain standard poetic devices, while they also provided audiences a chance for some immediate involvement in the celebration of their cultural roots. It is just that sort of combination, of mythic expression, performance, and involvement, which seems to be reappearing in these works and is especially manifest in Thompson's writings.

Thompson begins his latest book, *The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light*, with the observation that if one studies history, the result "itself becomes an event of history. Study mythology, and the work itself becomes a piece of mythology, a story in which old gods wear new clothes but live as they did before the fashions became tight and constricting to their ancient, natural movements."¹⁵ He writes, in essence, about the various articulations and transformations of myth which eventually shape themselves into another articulation, a further formulation of those basic myths we need to survive. Beneath his metaphor about reclothing the gods, then, we find a key to his own work, an indication that he is himself engaged not simply in studying myths, but in fashioning a mythos of myths, a shaping formula of some value today. In his most frequently repeated comment, Thompson asserts that "myth is the history of the soul, the memory of our greater Being," a fact which has been lost on the typical anthropologist who "projects onto the mythic landscape of the origins of humanity his own vision of human nature."¹⁶ That modern tendency, as an event in history itself, points up a fall man has undergone—a fall away from a sense of the whole, the sacred, the universal, and one which he identifies with the emergence of a dominant patriarchal system in human

society. "All civilizations in their late development forget their founding visions,"¹⁷ however, and their chroniclers, from their perspective within that fallen system, typically can do little more than mirror that lapse in their time-honored formulas. By exploring and attempting to synthesize various esoteric traditions—for example, the Cabala, Midrash, Yogic practice, Hopi, Mayan, and Egyptian myth, and Gnostic belief—Thompson has sought to piece together that spiritual history of mankind, to "re clothe" those old gods. What he theorizes is the divine creation of a "dynamic, free universe" wherein God and man "play a complex game,"¹⁸ marked by a series of falls: of the soul into the body, of innocence into human experience, and of an essentially androgynous system into a patriarchal one. As a result of that fall into and through time, though, an enlightenment can follow, as man comes to see his role in this cosmic game and attempts to reunite center and periphery. In delineating this scheme, Thompson seeks, as he says, to "perform" this mythic history of which he speaks, unlocking our perspective from the narrow time frame and experience of the everyday and from those traditional formulas to which it is typically bound. In the process, of course, we cannot help but think of this mythic outline as an allegory of Thompson's very project, for he, like other writers in the Western tradition, has experienced a fall into form, into a structure which sharply divides the potential participants in this creative dialogue into author and readers, a patriarchal force and a feebly submissive society. When that "art" is pushed to its limits, though, forms begin to merge and a new kind of literary product may result.

This window onto a mythos of the human spirit which Thompson seeks to fashion is, admittedly, not the usual product of criticism, but as he suggests, it is a necessary vision which has not been forthcoming from history, science, or our traditional literary forms. In his own writings, therefore, Thompson attempts to work out a combination of sorts, what he terms a shift from *Wissenschaft* to *Wissenkunst*:

In *Wissenschaft* you train a neutral observer to read a meter with objectivity; all observers everywhere should see the same event and describe it in the same way. In *Wissenkunst* the historian, like the musical composer, creates a unique narrative of time, and in this unique narrative the reader recognizes the universal truth of events.¹⁹

Of course, the scientific tradition has itself disclosed the very limitations of *Wissenschaft*; relativity, quantum mechanics, and the indeterminacy principle all indicate, as Werner Heisenberg attests, that "reality varies, depending upon whether we observe it or not."²⁰ To account for those ambiguities which the scientific method has revealed, to address those gaps in our understanding which it has disclosed, then, a new genre of formulation is necessary, one which overlaps the work of science and art to produce a third and more relevant pattern. *Wissenkunst*, or as Thompson terms his own approach, "the play of knowledge," thus seeks to incorporate what different disciplines have held as mutually exclusive, without trivializing its varied contents, as popularizers today often seem to do. If at times that combination seems indeed almost playful, we might take that effect as a most positive sign, certainly a better one than is that high seriousness which our literary criticism, unmindful of itself and its inherent limitations, was often wont to adopt. As the philosopher David Miller suggests, "play may be the root metaphor of an emergent mythology," such that in the work of writers like Thompson "we may be witnessing a mythological revolution, turning toward a new frontier in which leisure, meditation, and contemplation are potentially dominant. Instead of work being our model for both work and play, play may be the model for both our games of leisure and our games of vocation. Play may be the mythology of a new frontier" of consciousness²¹—or even of a new literature.

At that new frontier, obviously, content and form work—or play—symbiotically and, as a result, call into question our traditional sense of boundary and distinction. History is perceived as "his story," that is, as one author's fictionalized interpretation and linking of events; science is essentially "a construct of consciousness that itself has a cultural history"²² which remains to be taken into account; and our different literary genres merge into one form of narrative, attempting to trace out the shape of the modern consciousness. I began by consigning Thompson's work to an even more restrictive category, the genre of criticism, only to suggest that his writings ultimately represent a radical critique of such categorization, as if a deconstructive principle at work upon itself. More than simply criticism turning back upon itself in the pattern of so much reflexive fiction, though, Thompson's works delineate the essential problem of all generic work. Largely because of our consecration of certain traditional forms, our ready

attribution of weight and mass to the categories of drama, poetry, and fiction, for example, literary genres have developed extremely powerful gravitational fields which tend to draw works into their sphere of influence, especially since that centripetal movement makes for ease of explication and organization. Works which stubbornly remain on the periphery, because they are possessed of a vital force sufficient to defy that pull of easy classification, however, remind us of the limits of categorization; as Thompson notes, it is a "kind of limit which is built into the way in which the mind constructs reality. There is a limit inherent in the nature of explanation itself," simply because our descriptions must always constitute "the map and not the territory."²³ The writings of Thompson, Castaneda, Pirsig, and others not only point up the great vastness of that territory of the imagination, but also reveal just how much of that frontier must remain unmapped by our present tools of classification and analysis, and thus how vital that process of re-genre-ation described here truly is.

NOTES

¹"The Law of Genre," trans. Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry* 7 (Autumn 1980): 81.

²*The Imagination of an Insurrection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 235.

³*At the Edge of History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 6. The following quotation is from the same text, p. 202.

⁴*Imagination of an Insurrection*, 182.

⁵*Darkness and Scattered Light* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1978), 170.

⁶*Evil and World Order* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 75.

⁷*The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), 217. On this note, we might return to Derrida's comments about genre, for he describes a similar paradox when he suggests that "there is no genreless text," but that by "making genre its mark, a text demarcates itself." ("The Law of Genre," 65)

⁸*The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light*, 7, 8.

⁹*Darkness and Scattered Light*, 74.

¹⁰"Critical Factions/Critical Fictions," in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), 70.

¹¹*Darkness and Scattered Light*, 170.

¹²*Evil and World Order*, 78.

¹³*Darkness and Scattered Light*, 15.

¹⁴*Darkness and Scattered Light*, 171.

¹⁵*The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light*, 3.

¹⁶*The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light*, 82, 99.

¹⁷*The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light*, 181.

¹⁸*The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light*, 25.

¹⁹*The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light*, 249.

²⁰*Physics and Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 52.

²¹See his study, *Gods and Games: Towards a Theology of Play* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 138.

²²*The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light*, 59.

²³*Darkness and Scattered Light*, 149.