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NOT ANOTHER ADULT MOVIE:

SOME PLATITUDES ON GENERICITY AND THE USE OF LITERARY STUDIES

Sune Auken

A key question when discussing the reasons for literary studies is whether the study is an aim in itself or a means to achieve some other purpose. One of the fundamental discrepancies here seems to be that although literary studies as a means to an end is the easier argument to make, very few people actually engage seriously in literary studies for any other purpose other than their own need to understand and enjoy literature.

For a number of years now I have been bringing up the question “why study literature?” in all my freshman classes. Even before their first day at the university practically all of my students have been asked why they want to study literature, and precious few have had any particular luck answering it. Thus, they are often intimidated and frustrated by the question, and they spend a lot of time dodging it or mulling it over. But more than that, *they feel* the discrepancy just described. They feel awkward trying to defend the study of literature for its own sake, and thus they tend to resort to the second line of argument, but not entirely without feeling that they are somehow betraying themselves. And in one important sense they obviously are: they have one motive for studying literature, interest, but they indicate other reasons that are easier to defend socially. This situation calls for a response from us as teachers of literature. A major reason for the importance of this subject is that we fail our students, we fail our subject matter, and in an important sense we fail ourselves too if we are not able to give a meaningful answer to the question “why study literature?”.¹ The crisis of legitimacy is read-

1 In the 20th century the *importance* of literature has been held as an equally central assumption in movements otherwise opposed. The “Great Books” tradition, towards which I admit having a profound weakness, presupposes an inherently edifying effect in the studying of literature - to the point where Eliot (1968) can make this claim about I. A. Richards; “Mr. Richards, like every serious critic of poetry, is a serious moralist as well (Eliot 1968,17). The importance of literature, if not the edifying effect, is

ily apparent in Fleming (2000), whose presentation of the two paradigms underlying literary studies, the “wisdom” paradigm and the “knowledge” paradigm, is lucid, but whose own solution to the crisis in the dominant knowledge paradigm is woefully inadequate.

It is essential to realize that the question itself is more interesting than threatening. The real threat lies in the questioner’s presupposition, not in the question. It seems that the question in itself is frequently asked not from a desire to obtain a sensible answer, but from a desire to expose the study of literature as useless and the student as lazy or as an egotistical. So the presupposition is that the question has no meaningful answer; hence the scare effect on the students. However, when asked in an open-minded hermeneutical context,² the question is both fundamental and enlightening as it involves such issues as the nature of language, the nature of literature, the nature of humankind, the nature of society, etc. Also: as teachers of literature we really *want* to know why literature is worth studying and teaching, and, if anything, it is our experience as both readers and teachers that makes it really worth studying. Why else would most of us have intense experiences of meaning when teaching it, and why else would our students have similar experiences from learning it?³

The basic claim of this short and tentative article is that the concept of genre - difficult, slippery and manifold as it is - shows us that to study literature for its own sake actually by and of itself leads to knowledge readily relevant in a number of other contexts. The point is that not only do we avoid the choice between studying literature for literature’s own sake and

confirmed in much criticism of literature. Abbreviated to the point of parody; Marxist criticism portrays literature as an important part of an oppressive superstructure. Feminist criticism portrays it as an important part of a patriarchal oppression. Queer theory establishes literature as an important part of a heteronormative oppression. And deconstructive criticism features it as an important expression of logocentric oppression. They all agree that it is exceedingly important, though usually for worse. For a more nuanced criticism of several of these positions see Bredella 1996.

2 Cf. Gadamer 1990, 368-384.

3 This intense experience of meaning C.S. Lewis, who is far less of a literary aristocrat than Eliot, holds to be the real literary experience that singles out real literary reading as a separate activity. After having described how the persons who read literature for status always adjust their opinions and their tastes “at exactly the right point”, Lewis continues: “Yet, while this goes on downstairs, the only real literary experience in such a family may be occurring in a back bedroom where a small boy is reading *Treasure Island* under the bed-clothes by the light of an electric torch” (Lewis 1961, 8).

studying it for some other purpose, we actually get better access to the things usually put forward as the “real” purpose of studying literature *by* studying it for its own sake.

The understanding of how genres - or perhaps rather, generic structures - work within literature is of far-reaching importance in the fields of literary history and literary theory. Long after the ambition to produce anything akin to a sound genre system has been abandoned, we continually refer to generic concepts. Indeed we seem unable to go anywhere in literary studies without these concepts. A few recent titles, chosen more or less randomly: *The Novel. An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900-2000* (Hale 2006), *Novel Histories. The Fiction of Biblical Criticism* (Boer 1999), “Shall We Continue to Write Histories of Literature?” (Gumbrecht 2008), *Fiction on the Fringe. Novelistic Writing in the Post-Classical Age* (Karla 2009), *Narrative Negotiations. Information Structures in Literary Fiction* (Veel 2009) and *Music in Contemporary British Fiction. Listening to the Novel* (Smyth 2008). Even in this very short list, generic terms are prolific: “Anthology”, “History of Literature”, “Novel” and “Fiction” (both repeatedly), “Narrative”, “Histories”, “Criticism” and even “Music”.

Within the study of genre, my personal interest has for a long time been drawn to the role that generic structures play in our interpretation of concrete works of literature. It is my conviction that even on the most basic level, our understanding depends on our ability to comprehend the complex and interwoven generic structures of which the work is composed.

The ability to recognize and interpret generic structures is not limited to our comprehension of literature, nor does it only take place in scholarly interpretation. Generic interpretation of literature is only a part - though a very important and illuminating part - of our wider competence in comprehending the culture or cultures to which we belong. And what frequently happens in scholarly interpretation is only - if “only is the right word - a reflected and refined version of interpretative moves carried out by each of us on a daily basis. We continually make interpretations and decisions based on our culturally conditioned knowledge of the generic structures surrounding us. And if, for some reason, our knowledge of these structures is imperfect, faulty or incomplete interpretations may occur.

An example from everyday life: a few years back I was in a movie rental store in the otherwise pleasant company of my eldest son, who was by then four years old. Now, like other four-year-olds, he had rather fixed opinions about his needs and wants, and from the childrens movie section he yelled across the store “Honestly, dad, not another adult movie!”. I sometimes

wonder how most kids manage to survive their childhood without getting strangled by their parents.

But I should have been proud, of course. My son was exhibiting a very high degree of generic competence, and only made a very slight mistake. He knew the overarching genre “movie”; he knew that within his culture a major possibility for getting access to a movie was in a rental store like this one. He also had the specific generic competence to know what *kind* of film he wanted his father to rent. He even displayed superior generic control in being able - by juxtaposition - to name the kind of film he did not care for. This gave him access to some sort of genre system based on rhetorical categories: there are movies made for children and movies made for adults. What he did was simply to assume the existence of generic - and communicable - categories based on this distinction. This led him to the category “adult movie”, which he used in communicating his wishes across the store. From his point of view, the communication was a complete success, at least insofar as I, the object of his utterance, understood his opinion perfectly. But there was of course one slight glitch in my son's knowledge about the cultural situation into which he was speaking. Apparently, not really having a conscious concept of such matters, he was unaware that the generic term “adult movie” is a euphemistic term for “pornographic movie” - and thus caused his father some embarrassment in the movie rental store.

What is exemplified by this anecdote is that generic categories are always present in meaning-making, that our use of them is creative and that even slight juxtapositions of categories can have a huge impact on the interpretations possible in the situation - sometimes even to the point of parody. The situation also exemplifies the conventional power of genre. Even though the use of pornographic material is so widespread that most people in the rental store probably had first-hand experience of it, and even though nobody suspected me of exposing my son to pornography (I hope!), the situation was exceedingly awkward.

Another question central to the study of genre is active in the situation as well: the convergences across the demarcation line between fact and fiction. My son wanted a particular *kind* of fiction and so he used a generic term. However, the effect may have been a story worth telling, but it most certainly was not fiction. Now, much has been said about the demarcation line between fact and fiction.⁴ I can merely add a few platitudes: within genre studies, especially when it comes to generic interpretation, there is a constant

⁴ Cf. Cohn 1999, Walsh 2007.

intertwining of the two spheres. Looking through the trash box of my e-mail account, I came across a letter sent by the “U.K National e-Lottery” with a genre given in the e-mail header reading “*Notification Letter*.”⁵ The letter itself reads:

Congratulations,

Your email Won(71,500 British Pounds) on our online draw, 15th June, 2009.

To claim, kindly provide your: Full Name, Full Address, Telephone Number, Occupation, Sex, Age & Country of Residence via email.

Best wishes.

Mary Westley.

Online Co-ordinator

Read within the genre given in the paratext, this is a notification of a very big prize, which has apparently been won by the recipient of the e-mail, in this case me. There is, however, ample evidence to suggest that something is not quite right. There are a number of mistakes in the English of the letter and a strange looking typo (“won(71,500 British Pounds)”), all rather puzzling in a letter coming from something sounding as official and British as the “U.K National e-Lottery”. It also seems highly unlikely that I can win a lottery I never bought a ticket for, and somewhat unusual that I appear to have won a big prize from an organization that does not even know my name. On top of these intratextual and rhetorical clues comes culturally conditioned generic knowledge: I have seen a number of similar e-mails offering me either diplomas from strange, hitherto unknown universities, willing sex-crazed girls, shady economic deals or a number of more or less attractive things, and I know these offers to be concealed scams to get at my money. So we are basically dealing with two different genres here, a “notification letter” and a “scam”. The notification letter is fictional, the scam is real. However in order for the scam to be successful, it has to pose as another genre, and as soon as the reader recognizes the true genre of the letter, the intended effect is nullified. The “notification letter only exists as a cover for the scam, but the scam is never apparent in the text, and it cannot

5 I pick up the thread here from a similar though shorter analysis in Frow 2006,100.

show itself in the text without losing its intended effect. So the con trick can only succeed if it successfully poses as a member - and in this case an utterly fictional member - of another genre: the "Notification Letter" loses its intended effect as soon as it is recognized as fictional.

Turning to a different and much more complex example, we will find that the immediate recognition of the fictionality of what poses as factual is a precondition for the intended effect. Margaret Atwoods Booker Prize winning novel *The Blind Assassin* (2000) contains a number of newspaper clippings. One of these (apparently from *The Globe and Mail*, dated October 7, 1938) has the headline "Griffen Lauds Munich Accord". In this article, a Canadian industrialist named Richard Griffen is quoted from a speech entitled "Minding Our Own Business". According to the article, Griffin praised the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain for the Munich Accord. A central part of the article reads:

In reply to questions about the status of Czecho-Slovakia under the Accord, he (Griffen. sa) stated that in his opinion the citizens of that country had been guaranteed sufficient safe-guards. A strong, healthy Germany he claimed, was in the interest of the West, and of business in particular, and would serve to "keep Bolshevism at bay, and away from Bay Street". The next thing to be desired was a bilateral trade treaty, and he was assured that this was in progress. Attention could now be turned away from sabre-rattling to the provision of goods for the consumer, thus creating jobs and prosperity where they are most needed - "in our own backyard". The seven lean years, he stated, would now be followed by seven fat ones, and golden vistas could be seen stretching through the '40's.

Mr. Griffen is rumoured to be in consultation with leading members of the Conservative Party, and to be eyeing the position of helmsman. His speech was roundly applauded.⁶

Anyone searching through the political history of Canada in the 1930s for a pre-eminent industrialist and ambitious politician by the name of Richard Griffen will search in vain - obviously. There is nothing unrealistic about a Canadian businessman saying something to a similar effect at the time, but this exact person never said it; in fact he never existed. This is not a great revelation, as reasonably cultured reader who has come this far in Atwood's masterpiece will be fully aware that Griffen is a fictional character, having encountered him in that capacity over several hundred pages. Moreover, the

6 Atwood 2000, 555f

reader will be aware that the overall generic context of the newspaper article or newspaper clipping (a small, but significant paratextually determined generic difference) quoted is a piece of fiction; Atwood's novel. These generic inferences - made at first glance by virtually all readers preconditioned by Western literary culture - are nonetheless so strong that Atwood actually has to insert a footnote informing the reader that one of the clippings - though fictionalized, of course, by the generic context - has actually been taken from a genuine article and copied into *The Blind Assassin*. Without this footnote, one would automatically have regarded this clipping as an invention alongside all the others.

The generic competence that allows the reader to recognize the fictionality of the newspaper clipping is, however, only the first step in a complicated interpretative process. A further step is the recognition that, despite the fictional nature of the clipping, it also involves a number of factual generic codes connected to the genre of the newspaper article or newspaper clipping. The generic distinction between the two becomes increasingly relevant here as the newspaper article is a text appearing within the paratextual framework of the whole newspaper, alongside other - possibly equally important - articles, aimed at a geographically and temporally limited readership. In this form, the life span of the text is exceedingly short. It is meant to be read one day and forgotten, or at least replaced by other articles the next. By contrast, the newspaper clipping is an article that has been singled out and saved for perusal at a later - possibly very much later - point in time. In Atwood's novel this later point is represented both by the publication date of the novel and by an autobiographical manuscript by Griffens aged widow, Iris Chase Griffen, written in 1998-1999, which makes up the main part of the novel. Thus, we are dealing with a classical case of an embedded genre - or in the terms of Bakhtin, a relationship between a primary and a secondary genre.⁷

One genre, the embedded or primary genre, does not appear on its own terms, but is mediated through or embedded in another genre whose total structure makes up the whole of the utterance - of which the embedded or primary genre is only a part. But still the embedded genre maintains a lot of its original properties. Indeed, those properties are usually why the embedded genre is there in the first place - and why the embedded genre is recognized at all. In this case the reader needs generic knowledge about real life newspapers to understand the fictive function of a clipping like this one, including understanding that because the fictive newspaper clippings

7 Bakhtin 2000.

draw on the credibility and objectiveness of the actual genre, the newspaper clippings give a credible and objective view of Richard Griffen which is not part of Iris' personal interpretation.

At least one more crossover between fact and fiction is at work in this text. Though the newspaper clipping is fictional and it appears in a work of fiction, viz. Atwood's novel, it presupposes that the reader has some actual knowledge of European history - at least The Munich Accord and Hitler's conquest of Czechoslovakia, and consequently the early history of World War II. It is also important to know that Richard Griffen may be fictional, but his views were shared by a number of important political and economic figures in Western Europe, Canada and the US, as is acknowledged by the last sentence in the quotation above, where Griffen's remarks are said to be "roundly applauded". If the reader knows that The Munich Accord was one of the great failures of the appeasement policy, that Hitler was a monster, that there was nothing whatsoever to be gained by a strong Germany under Nazism, that the acceptance of the conquest of Czechoslovakia was a failed and callous policy, and that the seven years following 1938 were not seven fat years, but the years of the bloodiest war in history, he will have a striking characterization of Richard Griffen that confirms the hateful description given of him by his ex-wife. The picture drawn even takes on a certain apocalyptic aspect through the biblical imagery employed by Griffen in his reference to the seven lean and the seven fat years.

The intertwining of the two spheres, the factual and the fictive, is predominant in all kinds of literary discourses - though diverse, complex and contextually situated - but this example also illustrates the distance between the genres actually used in everyday life and the literary application of these genres. As Cohn points out, fictional genres are not obliged to be in accordance with historical data - they can employ them, transform them and incorporate fictional as well as empirically true elements side by side.⁸ This is frequently the case in the diary novel, the epistolary novel, the autobiographical novel and other similar forms - all fictive transformations of actually existing genres. These uses of genre are both a continuation and remodelling of the employed genre whenever it is contained within a fictive frame.

If we turn to the diary novel, the fictive character is no different from other diary writers in the sense that they are both describing - for private eyes only - their experiences, thoughts, emotions, etc. shortly after they took place. By virtue of the short time elapse, it is quite plausible that both

8 Cohn 1999,15.

the Active and the factual diary writer are capable of rendering lengthy observations, detailed descriptions of events, clothes, weather reports, etc., but this does not make the form any more “natural” or identical to the real life genre; even though the entries in the diary novel feign to be “for private eyes only”, the novel as a whole is not thus intended, and this clearly affects the formalistic, rhetorical and thematical levels of the novel. For instance, one of the most common differences is that the diary entries will frequently exceed what a diary writer could have managed to put down on paper in the time the fictive frame allows for writing the entry - a case in point is Ishiguro (1996). Furthermore the entries in the diary novel often have a stylistic and rhetorical eloquence way beyond the real diary. However, the most striking difference is the focused thematic line in the diary novel in contrast to the actual diary; because the entries in the fictive diary make up a coherent story, there is nearly no room for remarks that do not add to either that story or the characterization of its characters. Even what seems to be a digression, such as the multiple catalogues in Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1998) of her weight, calorie consumption, and number of drinks and cigarettes each day, serves a function in the larger narrative whole. They characterize Bridget’s self-obsession and show what is primarily on her mind. Moreover, these catalogues are a means whereby she can gain some measure of self-control. Even though the novel has gone to great lengths to mime the actual diary, e.g. through abbreviations (“alcohol units 1 (v.g.), cigarettes 9 (v.g.) calories 1800 (g.)” (43)). the omission of the subject and rather short paragraphs with nearly no lengthy observations, the novel is a coherent story, which describes Bridget Jones’ journey over exactly one year from a lonely, desperate “singleton” to a person able to form functional relationship with responsible adult” (3). In short, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* primarily uses incoherence as a feature from the actual diary - in contrast to most diary novels - but in the fictive frame this incoherence is transformed into a coherent image and story of an unhinged, insecure and fumbling individual who tries to find meaning in her life and achieves this goal on the very last pages.

As soon as an actual genre is transformed into a fictive frame, the fictive genre both employs certain variable characteristics of the actual genre, as a mimesis, and delineates itself from it when this is necessary for the fiction as a whole. Both the mimicry and the delineations are due to either formalistic, thematic or rhetorical considerations, specific to that particular work only, and therefore provide an essential generic understanding of how genres are put to use. In this process the reader, the student, or the scientist becomes

aware not only of the uses of genres in the particular work, but, on a more general level, of how we use genres - both in fiction and real life - to convey meaning in different contexts.

The central place held by literature within genre studies is to some degree historical. Since genre was a major concept in literary studies at a much earlier point than in other studies, a lot of the basic assumptions - and a lot of the basic mistakes - have been made within literary studies. Even today literary theory is still vital to the study of genre - though indispensable work in genre theory has been made in a number of other fields, especially linguistics and rhetorics (such as Swales (1990) and Miller (1984,1994))- Though rhetorics has had a long genre tradition, it has focused less on a theoretical or analytical understanding of genres, instead primarily employing a didactic approach, e.g. how is a good sermon, speech, letter, poem, etc. written. The basic, and very tentative assumption here is that since literature holds a central place in genre studies, and since genre holds a central place in culture, then studying literature, and especially studying genre in literature, is, by and of itself, conducive to our understanding of culture. And as literature is best studied by actually studying literature - and by now we are knee deep in platitudes - we really need to do just that, whether we study literature as a means to acquire cultural knowledge or, if you will, competence, or as an aim in itself. Hence, as is shown in the different examples given above, the line between fiction and fact is permeable - no matter what signposts, rhetorical situations or other characteristics are available to help us distinguish one from the other. There is a constant osmosis going from one to the other and back again; you cannot understand one without competence in the other and vice versa. This demonstrates that the ability to comprehend literature is by no means isolated. In many respects, the meaning-making taking place in our comprehension of literature is a specific form of a meaning-making that takes place all the time in our general interaction with the culture or cultures in which we participate. This is true not only of fiction, but also of other kinds of literature.

Turning back to genericity, we can see that much of our cultural competence is cast in generic form. As in so many other fields within the humanities, the study of genericity is marred by vagueness, by concepts whose meaning suddenly transmogrifies, by problems of demarcation between areas, etc. David Hume's attack on the human sciences in the introduction to *A Treatise of Human Nature* applies here as much as anywhere.⁹ But, as is

9 Hume 1984, 41-46.

also the case elsewhere, this has more to do with the ambiguous character of the subject matter we are attempting to analyse than with any inherent shortcoming in the humanities. What is more; ambiguous and vague meaning-making is at the very heart of genericity. Generic knowledge is, so to speak, knowledge of the not known. If I enter a book store and go to the shelf with "Poetry" written on it (Oh, happy book store that has such a shelf), I know beforehand, without even having seen the books on the shelf, much less opened them, something of what to expect from them. Indeed, in all likelihood that is why I approach the shelf in the first place: I like poems and thus anticipate finding something I might like there. However, my generic knowledge is also knowledge of the not known as I would be utterly unable to recite even a single paragraph from the books there (unless, of course, it turned out that I knew some of the collections of poetry already); and, indeed, if I already knew what was in the books on the shelf I probably would not bother to approach it, but rather look for other books I did not know already. So generic knowledge is based on what may appear to be an inherent paradox at first glance; I approach the shelf because I know what I will find, but I also approach it because I do not know what is there. This is true not only of collections of poetry, novels or other kinds of literature, but equally of other areas. You choose to watch a "Newscast on TV for the exact same reason. You want "news", something you do not yet know, but you do know that you want it. Seen from this angle, generic knowledge has some of the central characteristics of the question as it is described by Gadamer (1990). It is open-ended; there is no telling what the answer will be, and in order to achieve a new understanding, one has to keep the question afloat for as long as possible. But at the same time, it is not without direction; it imposes certain restraints on the investigation and it sets a subject for it, thus allowing it to move forward without being constantly sidetracked.

It is surprising that genre theory took so long to move from a specifically literary tool to one directed at a broader cultural horizon. Once you begin to take notice, you will see genres everywhere. We have newspaper genres (letter to the editor, commentary, reportage, review, TV or radio program, obituary, editorial, etc.), we have TV genres (news, show, competition, commercial, documentary, mockumentary, etc.), we have genres in libraries (fiction, non-fiction, poetry, biography, history, etc.), and the new media have generated a number of new genres (web page, text message, facebook status update, blog, wiki, etc.), each with its own specific characteristics. What is more, you do not even have to move into the field of culture or media to find yourself in the midst of genres. People go to a "consultation"

at the doctor's, train for a "job interview", and children get confused when their parents tell them "we are not arguing, we are having a discussion" as all indications point to the communicative genre being an "argument" and not a "discussion".

Moreover, generic understanding is tacit to a very high degree. It is also active when we are not aware of it, even if we are unaware that such a thing as competence in genre actually exists. Most members of "our" culture are able to master the explicit and implicit rules governing the generic social situations described above without needing to reflect on the fact that they are actually dealing with genres. Despite being vague, ambiguous and hard to define, generic competence is a necessary and nuanced tool in our understanding of the cultural landscape surrounding us.

As indicated above, genericity is more than just expectations guiding our choice of book/TV program/movie, etc., it is also an open-ended set of regulations which governs our interpretation of works or situations. This has been unfolded in a number of different studies and needs no further elaboration here. The "laws" of a genre are clearly not fixed and immovable, and multigenericity, genre bastardizations, genre breaks and genre mixtures are prolific. This is clearly demonstrated in the works of, for instance, Fowler (1982) and it is recurrently evident in any extensive studies of generic structures; it is evident in Croce's refutation of genre as a concept, in a number of details in Frye's work with genre as rhetorical structures, in Bakhtin's distinction between primary and secondary genres, and in Hans Robert Jauss' lucid discussion of the medieval genres.¹⁰ Even at the time of writing the article, Derrida (1980) was evidently flogging a dead horse when he made a display of discovering that genres actually do mix. But still, as my example from the video rental store demonstrates, we have a very clear understanding of what is implied by different genres, and we are able to register the significance of even minor juxtapositions within genres.¹¹

10 Croce 2000 [1902], Frye 1968 [1957], Bakhtin 2000 [1979], and Jauss 1982 [1972].

11 From this intertwining of literary studies and a broader cultural horizon the question may arise whether the beneficiary effects from literary studies described here are really just a local form of beneficiary effect achievable through cultural studies in general, and thus whether literary studies might as well be replaced by cultural studies. The question, however, seems slightly flagellantic, and somewhat meaningless as it presupposes that it detracts from the result if two different approaches lead to it. Literature remains worth studying for these reasons even though the same reasons might be given in favour of other approaches within the humanities.

Let me return to the opening question of this article. Is literature studied as an aim in itself or as a means to achieve some other purpose? Two dangers are inherent in this question. If, on the one hand, we argue too vehemently for literary studies on the grounds that we achieve something else through them, I believe we have lost the game before it even begins, as this “something else” will most likely always be better achieved by aiming directly at it. Moral philosophy is best studied by studying moral philosophy, language by studying language, history by studying history, and if you want to solve personal issues, consulting a psychologist or psychiatrist is probably the right thing to do. What is more, no matter how seriously we study literature in order to achieve other aims, we are in one important sense not studying it at all. Lewis (1961), using a soccer metaphor, describes it like this:

The man who plays football for his health is a serious man: but no real footballer will call him a serious player. He is not whole hearted about the game; doesn't really care. His seriousness as a man indeed involves his frivolity as a player; he only 'plays at playing', pretends to play.¹²

On the other hand we must not become so purist that we are unable to accept the beneficial effects of reading literature as intrinsic to the study of literature. Arguments along the line that art serves its own purpose and needs no further justification are tantamount to argumentative solipsism as they will convince nobody not convinced already. Oscar Wilde's famous “all art is quite useless” aphorisms at the opening of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are wonderfully elegant and arrogant, of course, but they presuppose that the reader is able to appreciate literature without any help from the book, and anyone approaching the study of literature without this sense will get every possible prejudice he ever had about literature confirmed by the aphorisms.

It is, of course, worth noting that we will learn a lot of things about history, language, psychology, etc. by studying literature, and this fact does not diminish the value of literature or of literary studies. In fact, many “defences of literature” will at some point end up arguing along the lines of Tzvetan Todorov:

If someone asks me why I love literature, the answer that I immediately think of is that literature helps me live. I no longer seek in literature, as I did in adolescence, to avoid wounds that real people could inflict upon me; literature

¹² Lewis 1961,11.

does not replace lived experiences but forms a continuum with them and helps me understand them. Denser than daily life but not radically different from it, literature expands our universe, prompts us to see other ways to conceive and organize it. We are all formed from what other people give us: first our parents and then the other people near us. Literature opens to the infinite this possibility of interaction and thus enriches us infinitely. It brings us irreplaceable sensations through which the real world becomes more furnished with meaning and more beautiful. Far from being a simple distraction, an entertainment reserved for educated people, literature lets each one of us fulfil our human potential.¹³

It is hard to imagine two critics more different than Todorov and Lewis, but here, as in Lewis (1961), we have a deep-rooted sense of the importance of literature to life very close to that expressed in the Great Books-tradition. At a later stage in his argument, Lewis also puts forward viewpoints on the “use of literature” quite similar to Todorov’s. So the basic argument seems to be that there may be great benefits from spending a lot of time on literature, but that these benefits are best achieved by reading literature out of interest and for the sake of literature. In fact, the core of the argument might well prove to be that these benefits are intrinsic to the study of literature *as literature*, and cannot be achieved by studying literature as a means to an end.

Here, the study of genre offers a crucial opportunity. Genre is a vital concept at all levels of the study of literature, so in working with genre we are at the heart of literary studies, and we are thus studying literature as an aim in itself. There is plenty of room for the Lewisian reader who reads literature to admire it as such, who studies it to become more receptive to the manifold and all-consuming experience of reading, who reads out of a passion for literature.

But as we have seen even *within* the field of literature, the factual plays an important role, and as readers we will repeatedly need to have recourse to information taken from the realm of the factual in order to understand what we read. Moving from the fictional to the factual realm, we will constantly need to have recourse to different kinds of fictive genericity in order to find our way. So we cannot study literature from a generic perspective without at the same time entering the factual world. There may be “signposts” (Cohn) or rhetorical considerations (Walsh) telling us when we cross from one realm to the other, but there is no such thing as an isolated literary understanding of genre. Even in the case of Fowler (1982), a literary scholar if ever there was

13 Todorov 2007,17.

one, the principles guiding his understanding of literary genre are relevant in numerous other contexts, as witnessed by Swales (1990).

Consequently, as soon as you take up the study of literary genericity, you will end up studying not *just* literary genericity, but genericity in a much broader context. Seen from this perspective, a clear distinction between studying literature as an aim in itself or as a means to an end *could* be seen as a misunderstanding, since studying literary genericity in order to understand literature will by itself give you a deeper understanding of a much broader cultural horizon - which will prove beneficial in regions far beyond literary studies. But, in fact, this can only be achieved in a satisfactory manner by studying literature with the aim of studying literature - not just reading it for the sake of your health.¹⁴

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