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# Literary Genres and Literary Meaning

By Michael H. Means, Ph. D.

Most current modes of literary criticism have focussed on what can be called verbal texture: relationships between syntax, rhetoric, imagery and metaphor, and the like. They have made us more conscious than previous criticism has of the complexity of meaning characteristic of most poetry. This complexity, often called ambiguity, tension, paradox, irony, or polarity, is of course a matter that is necessarily different in each poem. Thus we have general critical approaches that help us isolate and describe the uniqueness of each work of literature. When modern critics go beyond this examination of “local” characteristics in order to consider the over-all structure of the work before them, they again look for that which is unique, for the “organic unity” (the term is Coleridge’s) that inheres in it.

This essentially Romantic preoccupation with the uniqueness, the individuality of literary works has succeeded in making readers more responsive, but it often fails to take into account an equally important characteristic of literature. Each poem or play or novel is unique, but it is also composed largely of traditional elements and it exists in relation to literary tradition. For a full response to a work of art we must respond not only to its individual characteristics — the particular artist’s solution to the particular problem of wedding this form to that content — but also to those characteristics it shares with many other works.

To re-assert, then, the importance of tradition, as I wish to do here, is not to replace one set of critical methods with another but to supplement it. The New Critics, for example, have given us a method of examining literature that is useful even if one disagrees, as I do, with their epistemology. But to gain full comprehension of a work of literature, to respond to that work as fully as possible, requires that we respond to all characteristics of the work. The critical method I wish to advance here is, therefore, intended as supplementary to other methods, not as the only one.

My topic, literary genres and literary meaning, began to bother me while I was revising my doctoral dissertation, entitled “*The Consolatio* Genre in Middle English Literature.” What I had done in it seemed sensible enough: I tried to provide a frame-work for interpreting a half-dozen rather puzzling medieval English poems by showing that they had structural characteristics similar to some elements in Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, even though these poems differed from each other in a great many other ways. I was reasonably confident that I had said something useful, but then the worrying began. How did my study, I wondered, fit into that branch of literary theory dealing with genres? Were the similarities I

described merely accidental, or even imaginary? Could what I did be articulated into a “method,” and if so, could that method be applied fruitfully to other works of literature? I offer here some tentative conclusions drawn from that musing, some examples to suggest the utility of genre analysis in understanding the meaning of a literary work.

First of all, however, let me say that I take for granted that poetry justifies such endeavors; great poetry, after all, puts us in the presence of a highly responsive mind engaged in the simultaneous acts of ordering experience in the most personal (and therefore most human) way possible, and of celebrating that experience and that order. Any effort we can make, then, to apprehend a great piece of literature is as rewarding as it is pleasurable.

Genre analysis is as old as the first piece of literary criticism that attempted to understand poetry rather than put poets in their place, Aristotle’s *Poetics*. In the opening sections of the *Poetics*, Aristotle distinguished the various literary types or genres then current, traced their historical development, and then attempted to describe each genre by its structural characteristics, concentrating in the fragment that survives on tragedy. In this seminal document of literary criticism we have an approach to literature based not on subject matter or attitude, but on poetic technique. In many ways, the subject matter employed by Homer and Sophocles was similar, even identical; the two poets differed in the *ways* they *used* that subject matter. Aristotle described these techniques as a series of conventions appropriate to particular forms. Each genre, in other words, was identified by the particular set of techniques or conventions shared by every poem in that genre.

A very promising start for literary criticism—unfortunately, students of literature chose not to build upon it until comparatively recently.<sup>1</sup> Instead, Renaissance and later critics tended either to ignore this aspect of the *Poetics* or to fall into the Averroistic notion that “Aristotle” and “truth” are synonymous terms, thus making infallible dogma out of what Aristotle clearly intended as tentative description.<sup>2</sup>

After Aristotle, and until quite recently, genre-theory has been used mainly for two purposes: evaluation and classification. Evaluation, the idea that some genres are inherently superior to others, has a certain attraction. The epic poem and the tragedy clearly offer the poet greater scope than does the sonnet or the epigram. But this approach presents the obvious difficulty that one can compose a wretched poem in *any* genre. Newton, it is said, regarded the epic poem as the noblest creation of the human mind, but presumably that was before his contemporary, Sir Richard Blackmore, wrote his half-dozen epics—all, justly, unread today. We can

1 Alexander Pope’s “*Peri Bathous: or, of the Art of Sinking in Poetry*” (1727) is very possibly the first attempt in English at practical criticism, at analysing and evaluating individual lines and passages of poetry.

2 On the tentative nature of the *Poetics* see S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, 4th ed. (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1951), pp. 328-29.

give Lord Byron the final word on the inadequacy of genre as a criterion of greatness. In a pedestrian critical essay entitled *Invariable Principles of Poetry*,<sup>3</sup> the Reverend William Lisle Bowles charged, among other things, that Alexander Pope was an inferior poet because he wrote in inferior genres. Byron, in reply, crushingly cites the examples of Petrarch, Dante, Ariosto, Burns, Gray, and Dryden, and concludes that "Poets are classed by the power of their performance, and not according to its rank in a gradus."<sup>4</sup>

The second purpose I mentioned, classification, has a little more to recommend it. One of the more pernicious consequences of Aristotle's impact on Western thought is the idea that to label a thing is to dispose of it. The early American colonists, we are told, asked the Indians for the "real names" of the new plants and animals they found here and, when they were told, went away content that they had learned something useful.<sup>5</sup> Our students, too, find comfort in labelling things "comedy of manners," "Spenserian sonnet," "pastoral elegy," and the like. We enshrine such classification, at the University of Dayton and everywhere else, in our lower division Types of Literature courses and in our advanced courses entitled *The English Novel*, *Restoration Drama*, *The Metaphysical Poets*, and so on. Such labelling, to be sure, has not only the pedagogical value of enabling us to group vaguely similar works together conveniently, but also the more important value of suggesting appropriate ways to contemplate individual poems. When we pick up a sonnet, for example, we expect to find either a problem stated in the first eight lines and its resolution in the last six, or a problem developed through three four-line stages and then resolved in a gnomic couplet. Even when we find a sonnet organized on a different plan, the very fact that our expectations are defeated makes us more responsive to the form the poet chose.

Because critics have tended to dogmatize and extend Aristotle's conclusions rather than develop his methodology,<sup>6</sup> classification has been traditionally the central preoccupation of genre-analysis. The medieval world inherited from the ancients a Platonic tri-partite system based on purely external narrative technique: poetry was divided into the *genus activum* or *imitativum*, in which dramatic characters alone speak (e.g., all plays, some pastoral poems, dramatic monologues); the *genus enarrativum*, in which only the poet speaks (didactic verse, historical narrative, lyric poetry); and the *genus commune*, in which both poet and characters

<sup>3</sup> Printed in 1810. The passage referred to here is reprinted in Raymond M. Alden, ed., *Critical Essays of the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921), pp. 252-53.

<sup>4</sup> Rowland E. Prothero, ed., *The Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals*, 6 vols. (London: John Murray, 1898-1904), V, 553. Byron's two open letters to John Murray in rebuttal of Bowles' essay are in V, 536-66 and 567-92 of this edition.

<sup>5</sup> See Thomas Pyles, *Words and Ways of American English* (New York: Random House, 1952), p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ronald S. Crane, ed., *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 14 and 17.

speak (epic poems, most narrative poems).<sup>7</sup> This corresponds roughly to the first person, second person, and third person distinctions some critics make today between various narrative forms<sup>8</sup> and is related to the concern with narrative point of view which is a major element in recent criticism of fiction.<sup>9</sup> In the fourteenth century, French poets and critics developed, in the *Art de Seconde Rhétorique*, a genre-classification based largely on stanza-patterns: the *ballade*, *rondeau*, *virelai*, etc., often with elaboration of subdivisions: the *ballade* with and without *envoi*, the *ballade layee*, *ballade double*, and the like.<sup>10</sup> And, of course, we still use the words “sonnet,” “ode,” and “ballad” as generic terms. Renaissance and Neo-Classical critics extended the idea of what constitutes a genre by including consideration of such aspects of poetic composition as stylistics, tone, purpose, and subject matter, but one almost always detects underlying their statements the implicit but nagging question, “Would Aristotle *really like* our poetry?”

Using genre-analysis for the sake of classifying has its merits. But it also has one inescapable and fatal drawback: most works of literature refuse to be pigeonholed. Dante’s *Commedia*, for example, is structurally a pilgrimage, employs two importantly different dialogue techniques, is in intention a theodicy (an exhortation to God, a justifying of God’s ways to man), and demands the four-fold interpretation which medieval exegetes gave to the Bible.<sup>11</sup> It also embodies elements of the historical narrative, the apocalypse, the consolation, and what Northrop Frye calls the contrast-epic;<sup>12</sup> finally, it is a mimetic form in the *genus commune* and written in *terza rima*. But then the *Commedia* has always been recognized as an Everest towering above other poems but repaying the arduousness of ascent by its loftiness of view. To take a work a little closer to sea-level, let us consider Christopher Marlowe’s *Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, an example to which I will return again a little later. *Faustus*, with its plot of the fall of a great man because of his tragic flaw of hubris, its reversal, and its catharsis of pity and fear, is a classical tragedy; but its use of devils, the Good Angel and the Evil Angel, and its pageant

7 Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, tr. Willard R. Trask, Harper Torchbooks (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 440-41.

8 Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1942), p. 237.

9 The standard book on this subject is Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

10 See Warner Forrest Patterson, *Three Centuries of French Poetic Theory*, 2 vols. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1935), II, 60 ff. for a list of these genres and an anthology of verse illustrating them.

11 On this last point, see Dante’s letter to Can Grande della Scala, *A Translation from the Latin Works of Dante Alighieri*, tr. Phillip H. Wicksteed, Temple Classics (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1904), Letter X, pp. 347-48.

12 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 317-18. I am far more indebted to this book in my critical thinking than references in this paper might suggest.

of the personified Seven Deadly Sins gives it some shaping characteristics of the morality play; and, finally, in its purpose, effect, and some of the conventions employed it is a theodicy.

For a last example of the futility of pigeonholing, consider that kind of literature that we are probably most familiar with. The long prose fictional works that we call novels can, as Northrop Frye has shown, be more clearly understood if considered as varying combinations of four different genres—novel, confession, romance, and anatomy—each with its appropriate structural characteristics and mode of ordering experience.<sup>13</sup> Thus we do not have to pretend that *Robinson Crusoe*, *Tom Jones*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby Dick*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, and *Ulysses* are all “just alike” in their structure and conventions. Nor do we have to say that *The Scarlet Letter* is a poor novel, when in fact it happens to be a very fine romance.

If, however, we reject the two traditional purposes of genre analysis, evaluation and classification, there yet remains a third purpose which, I submit, justifies this kind of criticism. Genre analysis can give us important clues to the meaning of literary works, however complex these works might be. The basis of any division of literary works into genres, after all, is the assumption that the form of the work is an important part of the nature and, therefore, of the meaning of the work. In a play, for example, the kinds of characters and the kinds of ideas or events that cause them to act the way they do, the elements out of which the playwright constructs his “world,” and the kind of plot in which these characters and elements are disposed, all affect significantly the meaning of the play, the response of the audience to the play. The choice of language—verse or prose, stylized or colloquial—also affects our response. Finally, the inclusion of certain kinds of data not so much for their instructional merit as for their symbolic or conventional value can be part of the literary structure.

It is an example of conventional data used structurally that I will use as my main illustration of what can be gained by genre analysis.

In Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, the second scene of Act II<sup>14</sup> presents what modern readers of the play commonly regard as the first of a great many disappointments, disappointments all the more keenly felt because of the occasional flashes of brilliance throughout the play. Faustus, after mastering and going beyond philosophy, medicine, law, and theology, finds nothing left to challenge his mind but magic, which of course means black magic, diabolism. Here too he is successful. After the proper amount of incantation, and to the accompaniment of fire and smoke, demonic pageantry, warnings from the Good Angel, seductive promises from the Evil Angel, and exploding firecrackers, Faustus does sell his soul to the devil in

<sup>13</sup> Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 303-14.

<sup>14</sup> The text I use is in Hazelton Spencer, *Elizabethan Plays* (Boston: D. C. Heath and Co., 1933), pp. 41-63.

exchange for unlimited power.

The audience is, at this moment, at a high peak of expectation. Occult secrets, unbribed license, power over all of nature have been promised—in short, every detail possible to arouse horror, repugnance, and utter fascination in the audience. Now, in Act II, scene ii, Marlowe must fulfill that expectation.

The scene opens with Faustus saying,

When I behold the Heavens, then I repent,  
And curse thee, wicked Mephistophilis,  
Because thou hast deprived me of those joys.

(II, ii, 1-3)

After Mephistophilis, Faustus's attendant devil, argues with him, however, Faustus resolves never to repent. He then returns to his interest in the heavens:

Come, Mephistophilis, let us dispute again,  
And argue of divine astrology.  
Tell me, are there many heavens above the moon?  
Are all celestial bodies but one globe,  
As is the substance of this centric earth?

(II, ii, 33-37)

Mephistophilis replies that they are, and that "All jointly move upon one axletree" (II, ii, 41); in reply to a further question he distinguishes between the 24-hour movement around the poles of the world and the differing motion "upon the poles of the zodiac" (11. 49-50). This is disappointing after all the build-up: the Aristotle that Faustus had long since transcended could have told him more, and he properly replies, "Tush, these are freshmen's suppositions" (11. 58-59).

But he tries again:

FAUST. But tell me, has every sphere a dominion or *intelligentia*?

MEPH. Ay.

FAUST. How many heavens, or spheres, are there?

MEPH. Nine: the seven planets, the firmament, and the empyreal heaven.

FAUST. Well, resolve me this question: Why have we not conjunctions, oppositions, aspects, eclipses, all at one time, but in some years we have more, in some less?

MEPH. *Per inaequalem motum respectu totius.*

FAUST. Well, I am satisfied.

(II, ii, 59-71)

Faustus is satisfied, but we are not. These latter facts are just as elementary in Ptolemaic astronomy as the others that Faustus ridiculed. What is easy for us to overlook in our disappointment at the supposed thinness of Marlowe's inventive powers is that this dialogue involves a conventional element found in a great many ancient, medieval, and Renaissance theodicies, a convention that any educated theater-goer of Marlowe's day would be almost certain to recognize, almost as certain as we are in our recognition of the "bad guy" in a cowboy movie.

Our first clue is in Faustus's opening line, "When I behold the Heavens, then I repent." Astronomical knowledge was considered ennobling in itself in many ancient philosophical systems<sup>15</sup> and, as such, came to have a structural function even in the pre-Christian theodicy. A convenient starting place for examining the role of this convention is in Cicero's "Dream of Scipio," the final section of his *Republic*. In this episode, Scipio Africanus the Younger relates how, at a crucial point in his life, he dreamed that he was taken up into the heavens by the shades of his grandfather, the elder Scipio, and his father Paulus, who instruct him in the conduct proper for receiving the highest eternal rewards. But at one point in the argument, and before the grandson is completely convinced about the will of the gods, he looks down on the tiny earth beneath him. Scipio Africanus the Elder, seeing this, rebukes the young man with long lectures on the nine spheres and on their music.<sup>16</sup> The result is a sense of awe on the young man's part that makes him much readier to be "put in tune" with the divine will. Similarly, near the beginning of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, the allegorical instructor-figure, Dame Philosophy, inspires the utterly disconsolate narrator by recalling to him in moving verse his earlier joys at astronomical or cosmological speculation.<sup>17</sup> The same thing occurs three times in Dante's *Commedia*, twice by the narrator's first guide, Virgil, and once by Beatrice.<sup>18</sup> It occurs again in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*<sup>19</sup> and in many other works.

Now the reader really learns nothing new about astronomy from these scenes; he has known about the nine spheres all along. But whenever this cosmological data occurs in theodicies, it nearly always serves two other functions. First, and most important, it confers almost sacramentally a receptivity to the divine will or to truth, a harmonizing of the individual with the entire cosmos (which was itself seen as the principal natural manifestation of divine order, harmony, and often *numen*). Secondly, it commonly serves to identify the instructor-figure (usually an angel, saint, or

<sup>15</sup> E. g., Plato, *Timaeus*, 47; Aristotle, *De Caelo*, I. ix. 279a-279b. For a lengthy, brilliant tracing of the kind of associations of word meaning implicit in this convention, see Leo Spitzer, "Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony: Prolegomena to an Interpretation of the Word 'Stimmung,'" *Traditio*, II, (1944), 409-64, III (1945), 307-64.

<sup>16</sup> Cicero, *De Re Publica*, VI, xvii-xviii.

<sup>17</sup> Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, Liber I, Metrum II.

<sup>18</sup> Dante, *Purgatorio*, IV, 55-84 and XIII, 13-21; *Paradise*, I, 97 ff.

<sup>19</sup> John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, VII, 633-1509.



allegorical personification) as a fully accredited possessor of some share of divine *numen*. Thus the imparting of cosmological lore serves a primarily functional or structural role rather than an instructional or didactic role in the theodicy.<sup>20</sup>

So clearly recognizable was this role of cosmology that Geoffrey Chaucer, in the *Hous of Fame*, could use it as a basis for one of his funniest scenes.<sup>21</sup> In the poem, the narrator, Geoffrey, dreams he is carried up to a heavenly place by an eagle who turns out to be the archetype of the long-winded pedant. As poor Geoffrey dangles from the eagle's talons, he is treated to the same kind of astronomical dissertation that I have just described, but to the eagle's surprise, he is much too terrified to feel very much ennobled.

One of three places where Milton employs this convention in *Paradise Lost* is another variation.<sup>22</sup> Toward the end of Book V, the angel Raphael recounts to Adam that when God the Father announced His Son, who would reign with Him as vice-regent, the angels celebrated with a dance so intricate and harmonious that it formed the music of the spheres (though before the spheres were made) for God's own delight:

That day, as other solem dayes, they spent  
In song and dance about the sacred Hill,  
Mystical dance, which yonder starrie Spheare  
Of Planets and of fixt in all her Wheelles  
Resembles nearest, mazes intricate,  
Eccentric, intervoly'd, yet regular  
Then most, when most irregular they seem:  
And in thir motions harmonie Divine  
So smooths her charming tones, that Gods own ear  
Listens delighted.

From this generic background we can return to our examination of the scene in *Doctor Faustus*, but when we do, we no longer find it dramatically weak but, rather, almost brilliantly inventive. Marlowe's problem, in recapitulation, was to satisfy the expectation he had created for occult lore of a sort beyond the range of the human mind. Since he obviously did not possess such lore, he resolved his problem by using the cosmological convention. He could expect his audience to recognize what he was doing, first because they would recognize that the play was a theodicy and, second, because he prodded their memory by Faustus's opening declaration that the Heavens induce him to repent. But Marlowe had another problem to resolve: he had to show that even though this knowledge was super-human, yet it was diabolic, hence perverted and tawdry. He solved his double problem, then, by having

20 Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963), pp. 52-53, argues that cosmology is, simply, a literary form.

21 Geoffrey Chaucer, *Hous of Fame*, II, 925-1018.

22 The passage I describe is *Paradise Lost*, V, 618-27; the other two I refer to are V, 405 ff. and X, 650 ff.

Mephistophilis make a particularly simple-minded presentation of Ptolemaic astronomy, showing that Faustus recognized it as “freshmen’s suppositions,” and then having Faustus express satisfaction at “learning” equally basic data. This short scene of Marlowe’s, I submit, represents as subtly brilliant a manipulation of this standard convention of the theodicy genre as one will find in English literature or perhaps in any literature. In this scene Marlowe precisely identifies both the power and the worthlessness of the devil’s offerings and thereby prepares the audience for the subsequent waste that Faustus makes of this power throughout the rest of the play.

By a similar kind of analysis, I showed in my dissertation<sup>23</sup> that certain basic structural elements of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* recur in several medieval poems, and that by recognizing their occurrence and function we are much closer to an understanding of the poems. The structure on which Boethius builds his argument is a fairly simple one. A narrator who is suffering severe misfortunes, is instructed and enlightened in a vertical dialogue<sup>24</sup> with an allegorical character; the knowledge imparted by this instruction, furthermore, is in itself consoling. Because the instructor is an allegorical personification, her teaching represents, conventionally, absolute certainty within the limits of the thing personified. Thus Boethius’s instructor, Dame Philosophy, represents not Boethius’s philosophy or Plato’s philosophy, but perfect philosophy. Dante’s *Commedia*, one of the poems in this genre, employs a slight modification of this convention: the instructors, Virgil and Beatrice, are symbolic (or, more properly, typological) rather than allegorical beings. But again, Virgil, who represents Human Reason, is not Dante’s reason or even the historical Virgil’s reason, but the highest degree of reason human nature can possibly attain.

The poems I dealt with in my study — the French *Roman de la Rose* and the Italian *Commedia*, the anonymous English *Pearl*, Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, *Piers Plowman*, Lydgate’s *Reson and Sensuallyte*, *The Kingis Quair*, and Hawes’ *Pastime of Pleasure* — are all, I think, clarified by this approach because they are all given a framework by it. They are all characterized by series of lengthy dialogues in which ideas are discussed directly (something we products of Romanticism tend not to like in our poetry). The *consolatio* framework provides them with a plot, a device that relates the subject matter being discussed to the roles of the characters, to changes that take place in the characters, and to events that occur outside the dialogues proper.

The instructional role of Dante’s Virgil and Beatrice has long been recognized,<sup>25</sup> though no one, so far as I have been able to discover, has identified this role

<sup>23</sup> “The *Consolatio* Genre in Middle English Literature” (unpublished dissertation, University of Florida, 1963).

<sup>24</sup> As distinguished from a horizontal dialogue in which the speakers have equal status or authority; the terms are from Stephen Gilman, *The Art of “La Celestina”* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956), pp. 159-60.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Irma Brandeis, *The Ladder of Vision; A Study of Dante’s Comedy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1961), p. 11 ff.

as Boethian. Similar kinds of roles are played by the instructors in the other poems I have named and, similarly, other narrators are led, like Dante the narrator, to a final, consoling illumination or resolution of their difficulties. As a result, these poems can be seen to have plot and action, but because the plots are based on conventions that are no longer fashionable, they can easily go unrecognized.

A reasonable objection at this point would be that I am hiding behind old and, for the most part, dull poems, that I fail to deal with works that people still read. I am quite aware of this lack in my paper, but I think, first, it can be attributed to the fact that we find these works dull because we are unfamiliar with their generic characteristics. But, secondly, we *do* respond, unconsciously perhaps and with varying degrees of sophistication, to the generic characteristics of literary works that form the staple of our reading diet. Thus we all, as I mentioned earlier, know how to respond to the sonnet genre. Or when the ghost appears at the beginning of *Hamlet* we know that the play will deal with revenge and probably with death: after all, that is what ghosts are for. Similarly, we know how to respond to a story that begins, "Once upon a time . . . ." or to the phantasmagoric transformations found in a lot of modern drama ranging from Strindberg to the Theater of the Absurd. Most of the time we know how to respond to novels, too, but when we hear someone say, "Yes, it's interesting, but is it *really* a novel?" the chances are that the answer should be, "No, it's a romance (or an anatomy), and if you recognized it for what it was you wouldn't curl your lip so."

Every period of literary history is crowded with obviously great works that just as obviously do not fit the convenient pigeonholes. The usual result is that these works do not have the attention paid them that they deserve. The inadequacy of our present critical methods is apparent when we realize that they cannot easily accommodate such varied works as *Pilgrim's Progress*, *A Modest Proposal*, *The Compleat Angler*, *The Essay on Man*, Blake's prophetic books, Byron's *Don Juan*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Sartor Resartus*. (Apropos of Carlyle, may I remark that our treatment of the great Victorian essayists as examples of "style" is a tacit confession of our methodological inability to "place" them as literary works.) A more sophisticated consciousness of literary genres could, I think, solve many of our problems in interpreting these works.

If we return to Aristotle's *Poetics*, as I suggested earlier, to learn method rather than dogma, we can find there several principles to guide our generic analysis. Two principles that I especially want to stress are the use of great examples and the necessity of historical orientation. To the ancient world, Homer defined the form of the epic. Although subsequent epics, the *Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost* for example, have modified our concept of that form, we still have a useful referent in Homer for understanding epic characteristics in other works, even poems like *The Rape of the Lock*, which may seem quite different. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle wisely used an inductive approach to the study of tragedy, but even more wisely he settled on a single play,

*Oedipus Rex*, as his example *par excellence* of tragedy, even though he was doubtless aware that several tragedies of Euripides differed in important structural details from Sophocles' masterpiece. Such an approach is necessary, *so long as we are interested in more than merely pasting labels on our poems*, because these great, seminal works provide the fixed axletree, to borrow Mephistophilis's word, around which our generic analyses must turn. For instance, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, on which I based my earlier study, was, after the Bible, probably the most widely read and most influential single literary work for about ten centuries. Without these great, central works as guideposts, genre analysis of the sort I propose would quickly degenerate into something akin to the mindless quest for "parallel passages" that characterized a lot of nineteenth-century literary scholarship.

The second lesson to be learned from Aristotle is the necessity of an historical approach to genre analysis. Literature exists most meaningfully in its tradition, as T. S. Eliot has reminded us in one of his most important essays,<sup>26</sup> and the kind of analysis I am asking for is predicated on the idea of the poet responding or reacting to literary tradition in the composition of his verse. Thus *Oedipus Rex* or *Crime and Punishment* might possibly have some generic influence on Ian Fleming's James Bond stories, but Fleming cannot possibly have influenced Sophocles or Dostoevski. I am not arguing here, incidentally, that there is nothing to be learned by comparing *Oedipus Rex* to *Goldfinger* — both works, after all, do exist in the present and it is entirely possible for us to carry responses to one over into our reading of the other. But Sophocles, like Fleming or like any other author, composed his works out of elements he found in his literary tradition. My concern here is that we recognize these structural elements, with their traditional associations, values, and functions, in order to determine how they operate in the literary works we read. This concern with the historicity of literature reinforces my first point, the necessity of grounding our analysis in the enduring and seminal works of literature — the works which have been most influential.

What I have proposed in this essay is not a universal theory of literary criticism. It is not a substitute for every other kind of critical enquiry. But it is a request that we recognize and respond to the major structural elements in the poems, plays, novels, and stories we read and, most importantly, that we respond to the traditional generic functions and associations of these structural elements — that, for example, we learn to respond to cosmology as we have learned to respond to the good guy's white hat. By so doing—by placing the work in its context (often enough in its many contexts) — we can deepen and enrich our response to literature. And that, after all, is what literary criticism is all about.

<sup>26</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *The Sacred Wood*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen and Co., 1928), pp. 47-59.