
Abstracts

Robert Johnstone, The Impossible Genre: Reading Comprehensive Literary History 26

Recent comprehensive literary histories affirm their own impossibility, a gesture that once belonged to opponents of the genre. The challenge of “the impossible whole,” of course, has always influenced the design of histories of entire literary traditions, but the open avowal that the form is a project of the cultural imagination has several notable consequences. In this new understanding, for example, the histories of a given tradition answer to and provoke rather than supersede one another in sequence. Literary works cease to be pseudoevents listed to achieve the appearance of a full history; they dematerialize, and the literary historian uses their instability to maintain the discomfiting question of the relations among “history,” “literature,” and “nation.” For these reasons, the impossible genre will remain a medium of choice, and of controversy, as long as the current academic and public debate over textual, authorial, and cultural identities continues to rage. (RJ)

Bruce Robbins, Death and Vocation: Narrativizing Narrative Theory 38

Literary critics mistrust periodization, that basic act of literary history, because they are suspicious of narrative. Where does this suspicion come from? And why has it arisen, paradoxically, together with the growing authority of the concept of narrative itself? This essay places the rise of narrative theory in the contexts of professionalism, decolonization, and the nineteenth-century novel. Gérard Genette’s account of the triumph of “discourse” over “story” parallels the upward mobility of many nineteenth-century novelistic protagonists. Even denying that narrative theory can be narrativized, as Jonathan Culler does, has similarities to the vocational crisis in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*. Each of these narratives functions as a rhetoric of professional legitimation, leading outward from some account of “the ‘storiness’ of the story”—the role, for example, of death for Walter Benjamin and Frank Kermode—to a sense of vocation anchored in the concerns of an extraprofessional public. (BR)

James L. Battersby, Professionalism, Relativism, and Rationality 51

Translation, interpretation, adjudication, and objective knowledge are possible in a world without a foundation, a world that precludes the testing and squaring of claims against a reality external to conceptual schemes. In critical studies the prevailing relativist views assume that meanings and references are unstable, that facts, things, emphases, and values depend on various culture- or community-driven conceptual schemes, and hence that defining the inherent interests of literary and other texts is impossible. On the contrary, texts are knowable as internally justified, preregistered systems of intentionality and rationality. Each text exists as such a system prior to interpretation, and it is this system of determinate values and emphases to which interpretive analysis is accountable. (JLB)

Nicolae Babuts, Text: Origins and Reference 65

The conflict between formalist thinking and theories that view texts in their historical contexts serves as a starting point for the introduction of a cognitive view of literature. From this perspective language has full referential powers. The “referent” splits into two entities, however: things-in-themselves (in their material identity), which we cannot know, and things in their coded form, which are perceptually accessible. Readers’ mnemonic potentials, a consequence of the bonding of perception and language, are adduced to show that texts originate in past interpretations of other texts and in personal experience and that consequently social forces and historical events are subsumed in the individual memory. In the cognitive light, memory becomes the ultimate metaphor, and the epistemological claim of realism regains its compelling force. (NB)

Emily Miller Budick, Sacvan Bercovitch, Stanley Cavell, and the Romance Theory of American Fiction 78

Two questions posed by recent developments in literary theory are whether a tradition of American romance fiction exists and, if so, whether we want to continue to define it in the terms that have prevailed in literary criticism over the last thirty-five years. After briefly reviewing some features of the contemporary conversation concerning the theory of American romance, this essay puts into play two important figures in that conversation—Sacvan Bercovitch and Stanley Cavell—in an attempt to develop a new interpretive model for romance fiction. Finally, through certain of Cavell's ideas about Emerson, the essay reads a moment in Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, which is crucial to Bercovitch's recent reinterpretation of the book, and attempts to clarify what, perhaps, constitutes the enduring power of the romance tradition. (EMB)

Bradford K. Mudge, The Man with Two Brains: Gothic Novels, Popular Culture, Literary History 92

This essay centers on the Gothic novel's status as an impassioned, and hence suspect, subliterate form. The traditional division of the Gothic by gender into two supposedly equal generic strands is somewhat misleading, since the majority of Gothic novels were written (as well as read) by women and since Gothic novels were feminized—disparaged in gender-specific ways—by a critical establishment outraged by both the passion and the popularity of the form. Because the debate over the Gothic also concerned the boundaries between high and low literature, the polemicists' use of gender clarifies how literary argumentation participated fully in larger cultural issues. Both the controversy surrounding the Gothic novel in the 1790s and the furor over prostitution in the 1840s focused on a potentially disruptive female passion, and understanding the connections between these debates sheds light on the evolution of Britain's literary and cultural identity and on the current dialogue over literary history. (BKM)

Jay Farness, Festive Theater, Restive Narrative in *Don Quixote*, Part 1 105

An impromptu "festive theater" spreads its folkloric motives and themes throughout the action represented in the 1605 *Quixote*, shedding light on the knight's vexed status as hero or fool and the often lamented eclipse of his adventures by interpolated subplots in the book's second half. In a manner similar to the one C. L. Barber ascribes to Shakespeare, Cervantes allows the saturnalian rule of misrule to govern the theatricalized, carnivalized interactions of characters. But in archly celebrating the sentimental, romantic closures of a renewed golden age, the Cervantine narrative conspicuously stages—and thereby arouses curiosity about—the mediated text's dependence on unmediated festival. This complicity of theater and text typifies the negotiations between the high culture of early modern Europe and the popular practices and traditions that saturate it. (JF)

Adam Potkay, Virtue and Manners in Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian* 120

Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian* derived its extraordinary popularity from its power to resolve, in imaginary terms, the vexing ethical contradictions of the mid-eighteenth century. The poems effectively reconcile the age's nostalgia for the ancient polis ideal with its modern taste for polite manners. In the character of Fingal, the passionate fierceness of the citizen-warrior combines with the delicate affections fostered by domesticity, precommercial civic virtue joins with politesse, and the traditional attributes of masculinity merge with those of femininity. The abiding irony of Macpherson's text, however, is that its "feminization" of male heroes is offset by the dramatic elim-

ination of all heroines, suggesting a certain male resentment toward women as sponsors of men's acquisition of manners. (AP)

Marie Borroff, Sound Symbolism as Drama in the Poetry of Robert Frost
131

An understanding of the workings of sound symbolism in poetry is essential to theoretical and practical criticism alike. During the past few decades, we have come to recognize that sound-symbolic effects are solidly based on linguistic facts. Studies of the ways in which sound symbolism is put to use generally in the works of a given poet can fruitfully supplement traditional analyses of particular passages. Though Robert Frost is known for his proficiency in mimetic sound effects, the language of his "speaking voice" is not conspicuously marked by the systems of alliteration and assonance that characterize the verse of Tennyson or Swinburne. Yet such systems, among other features, appear in certain poems in a "chanting voice" associated, overtly or symbolically, with the protagonist's fear of death. Ultimately, this proves to be the poet's fear of obliteration, of succumbing to the power of a now obsolete music and thus vanishing from the poetic scene without a trace. (MB)