2

GENRE CRITICISM AND LITERARY THEORY

> [The New Testament writings] . . . their subject would not fit into any of the known genres.[1]
>
> All literature may in fact be genre bound, without this being consciously realised.[2]

When we cross over into the discipline of literary theory to lay a secure methodological foundation for the exploration of gospel genre, we notice immediately a similarity of scholarly debate and disagreement. On the one hand, some important literary figures such as Auerbach, quoted above, or Northrop Frye,[3] also assert that the gospels are unique. On the other hand, the quotation from Alastair Fowler is typical of much contemporary thinking which denies that anything can be *sui generis*. All are agreed that words like 'literary theory' and 'literature' do not admit of easy or precise definitions.[4] Increasingly, much modern literary theory sees literature and literary works as operating within frameworks of conventions and expectations. Chief among these is the notion of genre: 'Every work of literature belongs to at least one genre. Indeed, it is sure to have a significant generic element.'[5] Many discussions of gospel genre repeat Hirsch's statement: 'All understanding of

[1] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: University Press, 1953), p. 45.
[2] Alastair Fowler, 'The Life and Death of Literary Forms', in *New Directions in Literary History*, ed. Ralph Cohen (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 81.
[3] Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 41 and 62.
[4] Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (OUP, 1982), p. 1, or Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: University Press, 1957), p. 13.
[5] Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, p. 20.

verbal meaning is necessarily genre-bound.'[6] If literature itself and verbal meaning are in fact 'genre-bound', then any notion of the gospels as generically unique serves only to confine them never to being understood. Petersen concludes: 'To say that "gospel" is a unique Christian genre only raises the problem of generic code; it does not solve it.'[7] To assist in solving it, this chapter will examine how the concept of genre is handled by literary theorists. After a brief look at the historical background, attention will be given to what genre is, how it may be defined, to its behaviour and how it is used in the interpretation of verbal meaning. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of this study, there will be copious quotation and reference to literary theorists for the benefit of those unfamiliar with this area.[8]

A Historical background

1 Classical criticism[9]

Plato puts his classification of literature on the lips of Socrates; he divides poetry into three groups according to their mode of representation: simple narrative in the person of the author, narrative conveyed by 'imitation' (μίμησις), and that which mixes both sorts.[10] Aristotle's opening words of the *Poetics* describe his subject as 'poetry and its forms' (τῶν εἰδῶν αὐτῆς). These 'forms' or 'kinds' are epic, tragedy, comedy and dithyramb, to be distinguished by three criteria: the media of imitation (rhythm, speech, harmony), the objects of imitation (the people and what they are doing) and the mode of imitation (authorial narrative, or representing someone else, or with those involved actually doing something).[11] That literary genres should be described as 'forms' to be

[6] E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (Yale: University Press, 1967), p. 76; quoted by Talbert, *What is a Gospel?*, p. 11; Mary Gerhart, 'Generic Studies: Their Renewed Importance in Religious and Literary Interpretation', *JAAR* 45 (1977), p. 312; Kloppenborg, *Formation of Q*, p. 2.
[7] Petersen, *Literary Criticism for NT Critics*, p. 44.
[8] For summaries, see Heather Dubrow, *Genre* (London: Methuen, 1982); Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*; *Theories of Literary Genre*, ed. J.P. Strelka (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978); Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, pp. 68–126; René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), pp. 226–37.
[9] See further, D.A. Russell, *Criticism in Antiquity* (London: Duckworth, 1981); *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in Translation*, ed. D.A. Russell and M. Winterbottom (OUP, 1972).
[10] *Republic*, 392d; trans. *Anc. Lit. Crit.*, p. 61.
[11] *Poetics*, 1447a–1448a; trans. *Anc. Lit. Crit.*, pp. 90–3.

'imitated' reflects the wider Platonic concept of the 'Ideal Forms' governing all things. For Aristotle, the important principle is that literary works should conform to the form, metre, style, language, and so on, which is *appropriate* or *fitting* to the genre, i.e. το ἁρμόττον.[12] This principle of 'propriety' was crucial in ancient genre theory. Both Cicero, with regard to rhetoric (*Orator* 70–75), and Horace, for poetry, stress the principle of *decorum*. The *Ars Poetica* mocks a painter who might combine unsuitable partners, such as a human head on a horse's neck or a beautiful woman with an ugly fish (lines 1–9); similarly, various metres are fitting for different genres of poetry: 'Everything must keep the appropriate place to which it was allotted' (lines 73–92).[13] The later scholiasts, librarians and grammarians have a similar concern in their various divisions for all the forms of ancient literature. While one must be cautious about reading back from later rhetorical theory to the actual practice of classical poets and prose writers, the general guiding principle of classical genre criticism is clear: 'Each genre has its own rules and proprieties.'[14]

2 Dark and Middle Ages

Such writing as survives from these times tends to follow classical models. In biography, the work of Suetonius has great influence, for instance on Einhard's *Vita Karoli* (*c.* AD 835) or on the *St Wulfstan* of William of Malmesbury (*c.* 1093–1143). Meanwhile, William of Poitiers' *Gesta Guillelmi Ducis* (*c.* 1075) reflects many classical parallels and shows knowledge of Sallust. As regards genre itself, the mediaeval period had an interesting contrast between theory and practice. There is little critical consideration of genre itself, and what there is tends to be only in general terms. On the other hand, it was a period of experimentation and development of new genres and generic labels.[15]

[12] See the discussion about metres for genres, *Poetics*, 1459b–1460a: 'nature herself teaches people to choose the metre appropriate to the composition', trans. *Anc. Lit. Crit.*, p. 125.
[13] Trans. *Anc. Lit. Crit.*, pp. 279–81; see also, C.O. Brink, *Horace on Poetry*, (CUP, 1971).
[14] Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 10.2.21; trans. *Anc. Lit. Crit.*, p. 403; see also, *Menander Rhetor*, ed./trans./comm. by D.A. Russell and N.G. Wilson (OUP, 1981).
[15] Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, pp. 142–7; Dubrow, *Genre*, pp. 52–5.

3 The Renaissance and neo-classical periods

The Renaissance rediscovered both classical literature itself and genre criticism and theory, especially Aristotle and Horace. Italian critics such as Julius Caesar Scaliger and Antonio Sebastiano Minturno promoted ideas of genres with their different forms and rules. English critics, such as Sir Philip Sidney, also concentrated on Aristotle and Horace, though with perhaps less stress on the rules.[16] Neo-classical critics also followed classical theory and rules. Ben Jonson translated Horace's *Ars Poetica* in rhyming couplets: 'Each subject should retain / The place allotted it, with decent thews.'[17] Those writing on criticism include Dryden, Goldsmith and, above all, Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*. Once again, however, we find a tension between theory and practice. 'What does engage them above all . . . is repeating and refining the rules for each genre and testing particular works against those norms' – even though often these rules were not followed totally by the writers themselves.[18]

4 The nineteenth century

The explosion of literature in the last century brought many changes and developments of genres. The Romantic critics, with their great stress on the individual, rejected generic rules and norms. Under the pressures of the new situation of wider audiences, rapid publication and cheaper printing, genres could multiply and be short-lived – as can be demonstrated by the different types of the novel.[19] Darwinian evolutionary theory also contributed to this ferment, such that even someone as concerned for Aristotelian principles as Matthew Arnold was prepared to accept change and development of genres.[20]

This brief survey has demonstrated how influential Aristotelian genre theory was up to the turn of this century. Despite much experimentation and development of genres themselves, the theory of genre itself did not develop much beyond Aristotelian concepts

[16] Dubrow, *Genre*, pp. 55–63.
[17] *Of the Art of Poetry*, lines 124–5, trans. *Ars P.* l.89; Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, p. 181.
[18] Dubrow, *Genre*, p. 70; see also pp. 63–71 and Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, pp. 27–8.
[19] Wellek and Warren, *Theory*, pp. 232–3.
[20] Dubrow, *Genre*, pp. 77–81.

of separate genres of literature, each with its own rules and appropriate features. All this, however, was about to change.

5 The twentieth century

Northrop Frye comments that 'the critical theory of genres is stuck precisely where Aristotle left it. The very word "genre" sticks out in an English sentence as the unpronounceable and alien thing it is.'[21] He moves from such classical prescriptivism to a descriptive approach, for a literary critical method of 'classification' or 'schematization' of literature.[22] Such a taxonomy is attempted through four essays: the theory of *Modes*, concentrating on the subject or hero; the theory of *Symbols*, or units of literary structure, classified by different phases of the interpretation; the theory of *Myths*, a broad category linked to ideas of archetypes, related to the four seasons; and the theory of *Genres*. The last is 'an undeveloped subject in criticism'; he adds to the three Greek genres of epic, drama and lyric, a fourth, 'prose' or 'fiction' for the novel and the printed page.[23] Despite the importance and influence of Frye's work, it still remains true that his principal concern is taxonomic; for the development and function of genres we need to look elsewhere.

Benedetto Croce argued that such attempts to classify literature prevent the interpretation of each individual work. Others suggested that every work must be seen as unique, and thus the level of genre is reduced to that of the individual work, interpreted as the reader is able; the intention of the author is irrecoverable and cannot be used as a guide. However, Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature* contains a whole chapter on 'Literary Genres', as well as discussion of the development of genres.[24] Following on from this, E.D. Hirsch, Jr. stressed the importance of genre in the proper interpretation of literature and, against the 'intentionalist fallacy', reasserted a defence of author as determinative of the meaning of the text.[25] Finally, Alastair Fowler dedicated his

[21] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 13.
[22] *Ibid.*, 'Polemical Introduction', pp. 3–29.
[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 246–8.
[24] Wellek and Warren, *Theory*, pp. 226–37 and 252–69; see also Eliseo Vivas, 'Literary Classes: Some Problems', *Genre* 1 (1968), pp. 97–105.
[25] Hirsch, *Validity*, esp. pp. 68–126; and also, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University Press, 1976).

comprehensive survey, *Kinds of Literature*, arguing for the importance of genre for all communication, to 'E.D. Hirsch, Jr.'[26]

Additional interest in genre has come from structuralist critics. This area is complicated by the fact that structuralism as such is a wide-ranging and diverse philosophy or ideology, encompassing much more than literary theory. Further, various groups such as the Russian formalists and the French experts on linguistics and semiotics have had major influence upon structuralist approaches to literature at different times. Thus it is probably safer to speak of structuralists rather than structuralism itself.[27] Structuralist approaches are more concerned with a theory of reading than a theory of literature itself. From linguistics, structuralists have borrowed Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between *langue* – a system of rules and norms, as in a language – and *parole* – an actual utterance manifesting the system. When the *parole* is in written form, it is divorced from the speaker: therefore, the key activities are *écriture* and *lecture*, writing and reading, rather than a writer and his work. The *reader*, in order to understand any particular *parole*, must become *competent* in mastering the *conventions* which make up the underlying structures of the *langue*. *La langue* is thus seen as a *system* of relations and oppositions. Crucial to the understanding of this system are the *signs* and what they *signify* to the reader, hence the use of *semiotics*. Through these signs and conventions the reader is enabled to *naturalize* a written communication, to bring it within his own culture and understanding – and thus discover the meaning. Such a stress on the reader led Roland Barthes to talk of 'The Death of the Author',[28] and many 'post-structuralists' concentrate solely on reader and text. The study of text-linguistics attempts to apply the insights of linguistics to a whole text, rather than just sentences, through analysis of its

[26] Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, p. viii; see also, 'Life and Death'.
[27] See Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975); Daniel Patte, *What is Structural Exegesis?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); Petersen's *Literary Criticism for NT Critics*, pp. 33–48 summarizes important work by Roman Jakobson and Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (Texas: University Press, 1968).
[28] Roland Barthes, 'La Mort de l'auteur', *Mantéia* 5 (1968), ET 'The Death of the Author', in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142–8; the final words conclude: 'The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.'

discourse; meanwhile, the importance of the reader is stressed in the development of reader-response criticism.[29]

It is thus clear that genre is a major literary element, necessary for writing, reading and valid interpretation. Its importance for hermeneutics can be seen in the work of people like Gadamer, Todorov and Ricoeur.[30] Genre is part of the structure operative in the distance between a reader and a text which needs to be mastered in order for understanding and interpretation to take place.

6 Summary

The critical theory of genres was dominated by classical notions of Ideal Form and the need for appropriate methods and styles for each genre. Despite such theory, however, these ideas were often ignored in actual literary practice. After classical prescriptivism was replaced by descriptive approaches, in recent years genre has assumed renewed importance as a guide to the proper understanding of any verbal communication.

B Purposes and functions

1 Nominalism and classification

According to Juliet, 'a rose by any other name would smell as sweet' (*Romeo and Juliet* II.2.43). Thus names have no power in themselves, but are merely useful labels or descriptions, so that everybody understands what is being described. What constitutes the group or genre is that they all share the same name. Such a *nominalistic* view of genres has been adopted by various theorists, most notably Croce.[31] The purpose of naming objects is an aid to

[29] Klaus W. Hempfer, *Gattungstheorie: Information und Synthese* (Munich: Fink, 1973); for reader-response criticism, see Chapter 1, notes 36–8 above.

[30] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975); Tzvetán Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to Literary Genre* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1975); Paul Ricoeur, 'The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation', *Philosophy Today* 17 (1973), pp. 129–41; Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed./trans. John B. Thompson (CUP, 1981); see also Mary Gerhart, 'Generic Studies', *JAAR* 45 (1977), pp. 309–25, and 'Generic Competence in Biblical Hermeneutics', *Semeia* 43 (1988), pp. 29–44; Anthony C. Thistleton, *The Two Horizons*, (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980).

[31] Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic: As Science of Expression and General Linguistic*, (London: Peter Owen, 1953), esp. pp. 67–73 and 111–17.

communication, but has no effect on the properties of the object – hence the smell of the rose remains unchanged. If, however, this notion is transferred to less concrete objects such as literary genres, then the name begins to have a purpose: at first it may be a passive one in mere classification, as with types of roses, but soon it goes on to have an influence or control on the writing so named: 'Classification is a mode of naming, and I have enough empathy with the elementary principle of naming to desire that names acquired in classifying do their jobs – the exerting of a certain amount of linguistic control over entities.'[32] However, this notion soon runs into difficulties: literary genres are not so easily classifiable as different sets of flowers. So, whereas Hough can refer to genres as 'pigeon-holes', Fowler replies that 'in reality genre is much less of a pigeon hole than a pigeon'.[33] Even Northrop Frye is aware of the need to go beyond mere classification: 'The purpose of criticism by genres is not so much to classify as to clarify such traditions and affinities.'[34] None the less, clarification does not take us much further and so Frye's account is criticized by many as being merely a taxonomy.[35] Genre, therefore, is not merely a name, nor just a method of classification.

2 Descriptive or prescriptive?

Such nominalistic or descriptive approaches to genre are a reaction against classical and neo-classical theory which was prescriptive: genres were fixed, clearly distinguished one from another and each with their own appropriate elements to be included and rules to be obeyed. In fact, literary works and genres cannot be directed in this mechanistic fashion, and both classical and neo-classical authors broke their rules regularly. However, the retreat into descriptivism will not succeed either; taxonomy on its own is insufficient. Therefore some form of middle ground must be sought between these two extremes which allows for more direction and operation than mere descriptive classification, yet which avoids the legalistic

[32] W.G. Doty, 'The Concept of Genre', 1972, p. 413; Wellek and Warren, *Theory*, p. 226.

[33] Graham Hough, *An Essay on Criticism* (London: Duckworth, 1966), p. 84; Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, p. 37; see also Gerhart, 'Generic Studies', p. 312.

[34] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 247.

[35] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 18; chapter 1, *passim*, criticizes Frye; see also, Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 136.

prescriptive system of much classical theory. Doty was quoted above as wanting genres to exert 'a certain amount of linguistic control over entities'. Wellek and Warren argue similarly that genres do have an effect; they are not just principles of order, but act as 'institutions', even 'institutional imperatives'. They find this middle ground, therefore, in a notion of *regulation*: 'We must conceive of genre as a "regulative" concept, some underlying pattern, a convention which is real, i.e. effective because it actually moulds the writing of concrete works.'[36]

3 Conventions

If classical theory involved rules, contemporary debate prefers conventions. As Frye said in 1957, 'the study of genres has to be founded on the study of convention'.[37] Since then, structuralist critics have made convention one of their key concepts. The whole of speaking and writing is itself a system of conventions – and this includes genre: 'A genre, one might say, is a conventional function of language.'[38] Genre is one of the conventions in a *langue* which we must master to understand a *parole*. Hirsch also sees language as a system of conventions: 'There is probably no better single word than "convention" to embrace the entire system of usage traits, rules, customs, formal necessities and proprieties which constitute a type of verbal meaning.'[39] If language is made up of conventions, this is even more true of literature, which has not only the conventions of the language in which it is written, but also all the literary conventions relevant to that type of writing. Thus, in order to master a specific piece of literature (the *parole*), we need to know the *langue* of the language and the *langue* of that piece of literature. Chief among such conventions is genre: 'Of all the codes of our literary *langue*, I have no hesitation in proposing genre as the most important, not least because it incorporates and organizes many others . . . It is an instrument not of classification or prescription, but of meaning.'[40] In this way, therefore, meaning becomes the middle ground sought between prescription and description.

[36] Doty, see n. 32 above; Wellek and Warren, *Theory*, pp. 226 and 261–2.
[37] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 96.
[38] Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 136.
[39] Hirsch, *Validity*, p. 92.
[40] Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, p. 22.

4 A set of expectations

Next we must consider how this convention functions. Hirsch sees genre as 'a system of expectations': 'These expectations could have arisen only from a genre idea: "in this type of utterance, we expect these types of traits".'[41] Such expectations arise out of our previous experience of other, similar types of utterance. This idea of generic expectations is of crucial importance in much structuralist criticism in understanding both how language itself functions as well as the use of genre. Thus Culler says that genres are 'sets of expectations which allow sentences of a language to become signs of different kinds in a second-order literary system. The same sentence can have a different meaning depending on the genre in which it appears.' Genre functions as a 'norm or expectation to guide the reader in his encounter with the text'. He goes on to quote the French structuralist, Marcelin Pleynet: 'It is indeed this word (novel, poem) placed on the cover of the book which (by convention) genetically programmes or "originates" our reading. We have here (with the genre "novel", "poem") a *master word* which from the outset reduces complexity.'[42]

Such an understanding of genre does occupy the middle ground between descriptivism and prescriptivism. It is clearly much more than a nominal description of the work, for it is influencing the author's actual writing as well as forming the reader's expectations in advance. On the other hand, we are not talking about prescriptive rules, which must be obeyed, but rather a conventional set of expectations, which allows scope for the expectations to be fulfilled and occasionally for the unexpected. Dubrow uses the notion of 'contract' to describe this:

> The way genre establishes a relationship between author and reader might fruitfully be termed a generic contract. Through such signals as the title, the metre and the incorporation of familiar topoi into his opening lines, the poet sets up such a contract with us. He in effect agrees that he will follow at least some of the patterns and conventions we associate with the genre or genres in which he is writing, and we in turn agree that we will pay close attention to certain aspects of his work while realizing that others,

[41] Hirsch, *Validity*, pp. 83 and 73.
[42] Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, pp. 129 and 136, quoting Pleynet, *Théorie d'ensemble*, (Seuil, Paris, 1968), pp. 95–6.

because of the nature of the genres, are likely to be far less important.[43]

Thus, not only can the same sentence have different meanings within different generic contexts, but so can larger units. Exactly the same footage of a typical film motif, such as a spy fighting with a soldier on top of a railway carriage, will produce very different audience reactions, depending on whether it forms part of a spy thriller (tension) or a comic parody (laughter). 'Without helpful orientations like titles and attributions, readers are likely to gain widely different generic conceptions of a text, and these conceptions will be constitutive of their subsequent understanding.'[44] If we apply this insight to the gospels for a moment, it is clear that very different expectations will arise from considering their genre as lectionary or aretalogy. Furthermore, we can have no idea of what to expect from a *sui generis* work!

5 Mistaken expectations

This idea of genre as a set of expectations is most clearly grasped, argues Hirsch, when a mistake is made in our expectations. Thus communication may proceed quite happily until problems occur, especially something totally *un*expected. At this point, we may experience a flash of insight which radically alters our expectations and revises our understanding of the communication to date: 'Oh! you've been talking about a book all the time. I thought it was about a restaurant.'[45] A true understanding of the genre may be hidden in the text at the start, therefore; perhaps useful master-words like the title are missing, or misunderstood. However, as reading or communication proceeds, the revision of our mistaken expectations leads us to a proper understanding of genre. Hirsch develops this in his later work, *The Aims of Interpretation*, with the concept of 'Corrigible Schemata' – a phrase taken from Piaget's research in child development. Developmental psychologists start out with a schema in the same way that scientists begin with an

[43] Dubrow, *Genre*, p. 31; see also, Culler: 'The function of genre conventions is essentially to establish a contract between writer and reader', *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 147.

[44] Hirsch, *Validity*, p. 75; Dubrow, *Genre*, pp. 1–7 makes a similar point by exploring the different reactions and expectations arising from considering a brief paragraph as the opening sentences of works of differing genres, such as a murder novel or *Bildungsroman*.

[45] Hirsch, *Validity*, p. 71.

hypothesis, or art historians with a genre: 'A schema sets up a range of predictions or expectations which, if fulfilled confirms the schema, but if not fulfilled causes us to revise it . . . the process of understanding is itself a process of validation.'[46] This all helps to clarify still further the concept of genre as a set of expectations; we approach a work with certain generic expectations which are then constantly checked and revised in the light of what we actually find. Dubrow describes the process of reading a work with changing expectations and points out that we often go back to earlier passages to check something, or even re-read the entire work.[47]

The confounding of generic expectations plays an important part in much comedy. Speaking of the operation of genre at the level of intelligibility or *vraisemblance*, Culler says: 'We know, for example, that it would be totally inappropriate for one of Corneille's heroes to say, "I'm fed up with all these problems and shall go and be a silversmith in a provincial town".'[48] Of course, that is precisely what *does* happen in much comedy, whether it be the Aristophanic παρὰ προσδοκίαν joke, where 'contrary to expectation' we get a sudden insertion of comic bathos in a passage of pseudo-high flown language, or the deliberate mixing of genres for comic effect typical of modern television comedy, such as *Monty Python's Flying Circus*.

Fowler also considers possible mistakes and imports a concept from information theory: 'In information theory, oral and written conventions work as signal systems, by which communications are constructed from series of signals.' In direct speech one can check back with the speaker to ensure that one has 'heard' the intended message. In literary works this is impossible, and when these works are old or unfamiliar, the possibilities for mistakes are increased. To counter this, information theory uses redundancy, defined as 'an additional set of rules, whereby it becomes increasingly difficult to make an undetectable mistake.' Redundancy is thus a superfluity or overabundance of rules and conventions to ensure that the message gets through all the 'noise' of extraneous signals which may mislead. Such superfluity means that even old or unfamiliar works whose conventions have been somewhat forgotten may be able to be reconstructed successfully. Redundancy in literature is expressed by literary conventions and 'of all literary forms the class

[46] Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation*, pp. 32–3.

[47] Dubrow, *Genre*, pp. 107–8.

[48] Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 145.

whose continuance probably matters most is genre.'[49] So Fowler concludes his massive study of genres in *Kinds of Literature* with the statement: 'Genre is an organizing principle of the redundancies by which it is possible to break the hermeneutical circle and to reconstruct old or difficult works'.[50] So when dealing with documents like the gospels which are not part of our contemporary literature and whose conventions are unclear it is through genres that we may enter into the hermeneutical circle and comprehend their meaning.

6 Summary

Genres operate in a middle ground between the two extremes of classical prescriptivism and nineteenth-century descriptivism. They are conventions which assist the reader by providing a set of expectations to guide his or her understanding. Such expectations are corrected and further refined in the light of actual reading. Through genre we are enabled to understand even old or unfamiliar works, like the gospels.

C Definitions and levels

1 Terminology

In discussions of genre theory and criticism, there are a large number of terms at hand: genre, form, type, kind and so on. This situation is especially complicated for biblical scholars because of the range of the word 'form', from the wider meaning of the 'form of a book as a whole' through to the technical use of 'forms' in form criticism. Translation from German muddies the water still further: both *Gattung* and *Formen* are often used untranslated in English.[51] Doty comments that German Old Testament scholars use *Gattung* for a preliterary type, which the New Testament scholars call *Formen*, reserving *Gattung* for the whole literary type, which we call 'genre'. For Doty, 'form' does not equal *Gattung*, but rather

[49] Fowler, 'Life and Death', pp. 78–80; definition of redundancy quoted from Colin Cherry, *On Human Communication*, (New York, 1961), p. 185; see also *Kinds of Literature*, pp. 21–2.
[50] Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, p. 278.
[51] See J.M. Robinson's article, 'On the *Gattung* of Mark (and John)', where *Gattung* means the genre of the whole.

form and content together make up *Gattung*.[52] To prevent this confusion, the word *Gattung* will be avoided here. As for 'form', the range of possible meanings requires careful attention to its context. If it is intended to refer to technical form-critical 'forms' – of the various pericopae – this will be made explicit. 'Form' on its own is taken to include notions of shape or structure – as in 'the form of the book'. The plural use of 'literary forms' refers to specific literary conventional types which may range from forms as small as phrases to forms of complete works. Thus the qualifying context of the word must always be observed.

The main problem is the absence of a suitable English term. We will avoid the German *Gattung*, but 'genre' is French. Some early criticism preferred Latin or Greek words such as γένος, εἶδος, or *species*. Some dictionary definitions of 'genre' do not even include literary types or kinds.[53] Therefore some writers have tried to avoid 'genre' and use other terms. Shuler uses 'pattern' from time to time,[54] though whether this is any clearer is debatable. Hirsch prefers 'type', but this too has a wide range and he has to return to 'genre': 'It will be convenient to call that type which embraces the whole meaning of an utterance by the traditional term "genre".'[55] The gloss 'class' is equally problematic, particularly in the light of the discussion on classification above. Wittgenstein's term 'family resemblance' identifies the resemblance which several examples have in common. The attraction of 'family resemblance' is that it is sufficiently vague to cope with the blurred edges of genre (unlike 'class'), yet still sharp enough to have some meaning. 'Family resemblance theory seems to hold out the best hope to the genre critic.'[56] For our purposes, while 'family resemblance' will provide a useful analogue for genre, it is rather cumbersome without being much clearer. Thus, whereas such terms as pattern, class, type or family may help to expand the meaning of genre at any one time, none of them are sufficiently satisfactory to replace it for our circumstances, and therefore genre will continue to be the principal term for this study.

[52] Doty, 'The Concept of Genre', pp. 418 and 434; see also Ernest Stahl's discussion of *Gattung, Art, genus, species* and genre in *Theories of Literary Genre*, ed. Strelka, p. 80.
[53] Absent in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (OUP, 1973), but defined by *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* as 'a literary species'.
[54] Shuler, *A Genre for the Gospels*, p. 25.
[55] Hirsch, *Validity*, p. 71.
[56] Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, p. 42.

2 Levels of genre

Classical literary theory sees genres at the level of *Universals*, especially Aristotle's genres of epic, lyric and drama. Frye follows this notion of large universal genres, while adding his fourth, 'prose'. These genres become so large and unwieldy that they cease to be of any use. Levels are polarized between Aristotelians – who think genres are very limited in number – and Croceans – who say there are as many genres as there are literary works.[57] Culler argues that certain post-structuralist interpretations, such as those of the *Tel Quel* group, similarly end up with as many groups as there are works, each with its own unique system.[58] Similarly, some gospel critics think each of the gospels to be unique, providing four different genres. However, if the universal genres are too big, calling every work its own genre is to make the concept so small that it has no use; the idea of a group or family of one does not yield much assistance for comparison. So we would argue that genre cannot operate truly at either extreme, but at several intervening levels.

3 Broad and intrinsic genres

Hirsch's idea that the true genre of a work may lie hidden at the start and emerge precisely as reading goes on has already been met. Thus, at the beginning genre is a vague and imprecise idea – which he calls *broad genre*. At the end of the process of reading is the final understanding of the actual meaning as expressed precisely in the specifically chosen words – and so we may talk of unique meanings rather than unique genres. Between these extremes lies the work's *intrinsic genre* which is the controlling conception, the shared set of expectations or contract, common to both author and reader; this is not as precise as the exact words, but yet a lot more precise than the vague, broad genre with which one commenced reading. In this way, Hirsch's intrinsic genre is similar to our 'set of expectations' concept: 'Understanding can occur only if the interpreter proceeds under the same system of expectations, and this shared generic conception, constitutive both of meaning and of understanding, is the intrinsic genre of the utterance.'[59]

[57] See Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation*, p. 67–71.
[58] Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, pp. 241–54.
[59] Hirsch, *Validity*, pp. 80–1.

So, genre starts at the broad, heuristic level, open to correction, becomes defined more exactly at the intrinsic level where reading confirms or corrects our initial expectations, and proceeds on to the actual, unique meaning of this particular text. We may represent the process as follows:

Broad genre
↓
Intrinsic genre
(Contract/set of expectations)
↓
Expectations modified by reading
↓
Textual meaning

This is rarely a simple, linear process; the developing encounter with the text involves the need for checking and redefining our expectations, and so we may move back through one or two stages several times before finally arriving at the meaning. The process is, therefore, one of narrowing and closer focus.

4 Mode, genre and subgenre

Fowler also has three levels at which generic conceptions operate, but they are levels of function, not meaning, affecting both composition and interpretation. We begin with the central level, for this is what we have been calling genre: this is explained as 'historical genre', a group about which there is general agreement in terms of historical origins and shared features of both form and content, even allowing for variety and change.[60] Operating at a higher or broader level above this is the concept of *mode*. Whereas a genre can be described in terms of a noun, mode is better seen adjectivally. Thus, a tragedy is an example of that genre and we would have certain expectations arising from the appropriate conventions of tragedy; however, things may occur in a tragic mode in all sorts of different writings and genres without those conventions. So mode is more wide-ranging and vague; it never implies a particular external form or structure and includes only a selection of the genre's features.[61] Thirdly, there is the lower or narrower level of subtypes or *subgenres*. Most genres can be subdivided, usually according to specific details such as subject-matter or motifs. In fact, whereas

[60] Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, pp. 56–7. [61] *Ibid.*, pp. 106–11.

genre itself is a mix of many features of both form and content, subgenre is often determined by a particular subject or content. Such subgenres, Fowler suggests, are akin to what are termed genres in the classical rhetorical manner, such as *propemptikon* or *renuntiatio amoris*.[62] A representation of these levels of genre must show movement outwards, with genre in the centre:

Mode
(motifs and styles)
↑
Genre
(form and content)
↓
Subgenre
(subject and material)

While Hirsch's levels of genre help to ascertain the meaning of texts through increasing awareness of their genre, Fowler's levels of generic function illuminate both the understanding of the development of a group of texts and the genre to which they belong.

5 Constituent features of genre

Genre is thus a group of literary works sharing certain 'family resemblances' operating at a level between Universals and actual texts and between modes and specific subgroups, and functioning as a set of expectations to guide interpretation. Next we must consider how genre is constituted and recognized, i.e. what sort of features help to make up a genre: 'If a theory of genres is to be more than a taxonomy it must attempt to explain what features are constitutive of functional categories which have governed the reading and writing of literature.'[63] The temptation to think of genre as defined by *one* particular feature, or even a couple, should be avoided because any one feature can appear in a number of different sorts of works. Therefore, one should look for many features; it is the combination of them which constitutes the genre. Thus genre is described by Doty as a 'congeries' or 'cluster of features', and Hirsch agrees: 'The best way to define a genre – if one decides that he wants to – is to describe the common elements in a narrow group of texts which have direct historical relationships.'[64] These common elements include those of both form and content: 'Genre should be conceived, we think, as a grouping of literary works based, theoretically, upon both outer form (specific metre or structure) and also upon inner form (attitude, tone, purpose – more crudely, subject and audience).'[65] This mixture of many different generic features makes up the cluster which we call a genre. These features are not in themselves definitive, but they contribute to the overall picture of the genre. So Fowler concludes: 'A kind is a type of literary work of a definite size, marked by a complex of substantive and formal features that always include a distinctive (though not usually unique) external structure.'[66]

[62] Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, pp. 111–18: see pp. 59–61 below.
[63] Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 137.

6 Signalling the whole

We cannot wait until the reading of the text is complete, and all the features have been noted, before deciding about the genre, since genre is a set of expectations to guide the reading. Therefore we need certain features to indicate or suggest the broad genre, and then closer reading of all the text in the light of those expectations will enable the intrinsic genre to be grasped more clearly. As Dubrow reminds us, this is not a legalistic process – if this is an example of genre *x*, then we must find *a*, *b*, c – but rather 'what if/then probably': 'What if the genre of this work is the *Bildungsroman*? Then probably the hero will . . .'[67] Certain features give immediate generic clues, such as Pleynet's 'master-word', the description on the book's cover which programmes our reading. Other elements can direct our generic expectations right at the beginning, such as the title of the work; allusion to other writers or examples, possibly in a prologue; the opening phrase or sentence may signal the genre;[68] certain names may indicate genre, such as heroes in epic, shepherds in pastoral or characters such as Pilgrim and Hopeful in allegory.[69] In this way we break into the hermeneutical circle: once we have picked up an initial vague or broad genre from one or more such indicators or signals, this genre programmes our expectations for certain other features also to

[64] Doty, 'The Concept of Genre', p. 440; Hirsch, *Validity*, p. 110.
[65] Wellek and Warren, *Theory*, p. 231.
[66] Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, p. 74.
[67] Dubrow, *Genre*, pp. 106–7.
[68] Compare how the phrases 'Once upon a time . . . ' and 'Good evening, here is the news . . . ' function as immediate indicators of genre and provide the listeners with quite different expectations about how to interpret what follows.
[69] See Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, chapters 5 and 6 on Names and Signals.

occur. Whether or how they do so helps refine generic understanding down through intrinsic genre to the actual meaning of the specific utterance.

However, not every feature should be expected to occur in every example of the genre. Todorov says that genre is 'a principle operative in a number of texts, rather than what is specific about each of them'.[70] This prevents such an approach becoming the prescriptive rules of classical theory. It does not matter if a particular work does not have all the features or fit the genre exactly. What is important is that it has *sufficient* features for the family resemblance to be recognized: 'Recognition of genre depends on associating a complex of elements which need not all appear in one work ... Usually there are so many indicators, organized into so familiar a unity, that we recognize the generic complex instantly.'[71]

The final issue here concerns how all these features and conventions are learned. In structuralist terms this is described as the *acquisition of literary competence*, learning the 'grammar' of literature. While such grammar can be learned by explicit study, like the grammar of language itself, many generic conventions are acquired by authors and reader alike in *unconscious* ways, as we acquire the grammar of our native language: 'Codes often come to a writer indirectly, deviously, remotely, at haphazard ... So much of genre's operation is unconscious.'[72] This point may help to explain how the evangelists acquired the ideas of their chosen genre(s) and how their first readers understood their meaning immediately, whereas we, like foreigners, must undertake a deliberate process of learning and interpretation because of the great distance between us and the writers' culture and conventions.

7 Summary

The term 'genre' includes ideas of pattern, class, type and family resemblance. Genre operates at an intermediate level between that of Universals and that of specific verbal meaning. From the point of view of function, mode is a broader concept than genre, which itself can be divided into subgenres. For the purposes of understanding, genre often begins as a vague, broad concept and is then refined by reading. Genre is made up of a wide range of features, comprising

[70] Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 3. [71] Fowler, 'Life and Death', pp. 80–1.
[72] Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, pp. 43 and 52.

both form and content, several of which play an important part in signalling the genre at the start. Acquisition of such features and genres by authors and readers is often largely unconscious.

D Development and relationships

1 Generic shifts

Genres do not resemble some kind of eternally immutable Platonic Ideal Forms, but are in a constant state of flux, shifting and regrouping as features alter and as new works are written. Consider for example the development of epic from Homer to Vergil and on through Spenser and Milton: there is still a family resemblance, but many of the specific *features* have altered immensely. Both genres themselves and the boundaries between them shift from age to age and according to locality.[73] Their names also change: 'Not only do generic labels change with time, but also (and this is far more confusing) the same labels come to be used in different ways.'[74] Thus, if we follow the term 'epic' still further to the film industry and the kinds of productions called either 'epic' in general (mode) or 'an epic' (genre), the point is clear. Given that genres, their boundaries and labels all shift, discussion of genre must always take account of such flexibility. Also, we must discuss the concept of genre appropriate to the time and place of writing, rather than confuse the issue by bringing in later, particularly twentieth-century, understandings of the genre as we may know it today.

2 Generic development

An obvious model for generic development is some form of evolutionary process. Wellek is unhappy with this idea, since it is possible that a writer may reverse the development consciously and use archaic conventions. On the other hand, it is clear that there is development, and so the literary critic needs to establish literary relationships between the various authors and works.[75] Fowler, however, rejects Wellek's dismissal of evolutionary concepts. Genre evolves in the way a species evolves, or an institution. Like an institution, it is circumscribed by the confines of period and locality; as cultures change, so genres reflect that change. Thus it is

[73] Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 129.
[74] Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, p. 130; see further, chapter 8 'Generic Labels'.
[75] Wellek and Warren, *Theory*, pp. 255–60.

appropriate to use biological analogies and talk in terms of 'the Life and Death of Literary Forms.'[76] Fowler's three-stage model for the development of genres will be followed below.

First, we need to appreciate the genre's *origins*, including both the sociological setting within which it arises and the literary setting within which it is placed.[77] As with the gospels, this may be an oral stage. Genre analysis of the whole literary form, however, really begins once the oral tradition assumes a literary shape and is written down. This is the genre's *primary stage*, the assembling of the various features into a recognizable group, so that these originally independent motifs become linked together. Often this phase may be unconscious: the writer may just see it as some fresh ideas. However, from a subsequent perspective, the new genre is realized.[78] An early practitioner can come to have enormous influence on subsequent writers – for example Aeschylus on tragedy or Theocritus on pastoral. Hans-Georg Gadamer stresses that genre is history-bound and is influenced by its classic expression or representation. Such classics affect both the composition and interpretation of subsequent examples of the genre.[79]

The *secondary stage* is when other writers begin to produce literature based consciously on the primary model. The classical stress on μίμησις/*imitatio* assisted with this process. This stage is marked by conscious modification or sophistication of the genre. Thus Vergil draws on the primary Homer for his secondary *Aeneid*, or the primary Theocritus for his secondary *Eclogues*, but with each he takes the genre further on to a new stage.[80] The *tertiary stage* occurs when there is a quite new reinterpretation in a different direction. Often this may mean importing new features, or include burlesque or satire. The secondary stage can never be quite the same again.[81]

These stages may interpenetrate chronologically – so Vergil, as well as being secondary to Theocritus, acts as a primary stage for Milton, Spenser and Drayton. Further, he is quite capable of tertiary reinterpretation within his own work. So Fowler concludes that we must 'think in terms of continuous generic development.

[76] Fowler, 'Life and Death', pp. 83–8; *Kinds of Literature*, pp. 164–7.
[77] See Doty, 'The Concept of Genre', pp. 422–8 on sociological settings.
[78] Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, pp. 156–9; 'Life and Death', p. 90.
[79] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 257–8.
[80] Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, pp. 160–2; 'Life and Death', p. 90.
[81] Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, pp. 162–4; 'Life and Death', p. 91.

"Primary", "secondary" and "tertiary" then become relative to an observer interested in particular generic forms.'[82]

3 Generic mixtures and flexibility

Most literary critics are agreed that nothing literary comes about 'in a special act of creation *ex nihilo*. Human beings do not create in that way.'[83] All work is dependent on what precedes it; anything completely new would be incommunicable: 'The totally familiar and repetitive pattern is boring; the totally novel form will be unintelligible – is indeed unthinkable.'[84] Such comments undermine the form-critical view of the gospels' *sui generis* character: the totally new cannot even be thought, let alone communicated. In fact, the creation of new types arise from old types: a new vessel made by a craftsman involves somehow the old shapes known previously, argues Hirsch. The new depends on a 'leap of the imagination' from the known into the unknown, to assimilate it and make it known, either through an amalgamation of two old types, or an extension of an existing type.[85] Similarly, Wellek and Warren say 'the good writer partly conforms to the genre as it exists, partly stretches it . . . by and large, great writers are rarely inventors of genres; they enter into other men's labours and make them great.'[86] Of course, the new work is not merely the same as that from which it came. What is made by the amalgamation or extension of previously known forms is something new: a genre transcends its source. Thus, when Theocritus assembles his sources, ideas and inspirations for his poetry, he puts together the primary stage of the literary genre of pastoral. So new genres do not spring into being fully formed, like Athena from the head of Zeus, but they emerge and develop through the mixing and extending of previous forms.

Genres continue to mix in their development. Despite the strict theoretical rules about purity of genres, both classical and neo-classical authors mixed their genres. Genres are as susceptible to change as all literary conventions. Fowler argues that they can be transformed in various ways: topical invention; combination of generic repertoire; aggregation of short works; changes of scale;

[82] Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, p. 164.
[83] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 97.
[84] Wellek and Warren, *Theory*, p. 235; see also Hirsch, *Validity*, p. 103.
[85] Hirsch, *Validity*, pp. 104–5.
[86] Wellek and Warren, *Theory*, p. 235.

changes of function, especially of speaker; counterstatement or generic inversion; inclusion of one genre within another; and mixtures and hybrids. Cairns has a not dissimilar list for the changes of classical genres by topical invention or rearrangement; generic inversion; inclusion; reaction; and speaker/addressee variation.[87]

Even more flexible than the genres themselves are generic modes. Generic 'modulation' is a major feature of literary development and the method whereby one genre frequently influences another. So Fowler concludes: 'In short, the whole developing tissue of literature is made up of multifarious extensions and interactions of genre.'[88] Further, this flexibility allows for variations in genre both synchronically and diachronically. The development is not simply one of a linear nature along the temporal axis. Genres may vary at the same time in different places, authors or even within the same author's works.

4 Generic relationships

Genre involves literary relationships; as Doty says, 'generic definitions are best understood as relational terms – they demonstrate how some literary works are similar'.[89] If genre involves 'family resemblances', then the key to correct generic understanding will be to relate literary works to other works to ascertain points of contact and divergence. Indeed, Dubrow so likens genres to human personalities that she can refer to generic relationships in terms of rebellion, hostility or hospitality.[90]

Such comparisons must be contemporary with the period when the work was composed. Therefore, arguing that the gospels are not biographies because they do not compare with modern biography is pointless. We need to know the original genre and its predecessors: 'A work's genre is the genre at composition, which relates to an antecedent genre, itself the cumulation of a series of earlier forms.'[91] So genre must always be set in its historical context. Study of the historical context will include analysis of which genres were actually available at the time. Although there is a great variety of genres possible, the dictates of literary fashion and canon mean that 'each age has a fairly small repertoire of

[87] Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, pp. 170–90; F. Cairns, *Generic Composition in Greek and Roman Poetry* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1972), pp. 98–245.
[88] Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, p. 212.
[89] Doty, 'The Concept of Genre', p. 439.
[90] Dubrow, *Genre*, pp. 116–18.
[91] Fowler, 'Life and Death', p. 86.

genres that its readers and critics can respond to with enthusiasm. And the repertoire easily available to its writers is smaller still.'[92] Therefore, it is no use censuring Mark for not writing in the conventions and genre of, for example, modern investigative journalism; this was just not available to him. He could develop a new genre by extending those available perhaps, but a leap of that magnitude into the unknown is not possible.

Fitting genres into their literary network is sometimes represented by drawing genre maps. While this can occasionally have some illustrative use, as in the next chapter, such maps do have their limitations: 'Genres are better understood . . . through a study of their mutual relations . . . These relations are partly diachronic or dynamic (formation, combination, mixture), partly static (similarities, contrasts).'[93] Hierarchies of genres were important for classical prescriptivism, as in the hierarchies proposed by Aristotle, Cicero, Horace or Quintilian. However, generic hierarchies are just as susceptible to change and literary fashion as everything else generic.[94]

5 Summary

Genres are dynamic and flexible groupings whose boundaries and labels shift. Generic development moves from initial origins through three main stages. No genres develop *ex nihilo*: instead, they extend or amalgamate other existing genres. Developed genres are open to further mixture and modulation. Therefore it is vital that genres are studied in terms of their literary relationships to the works of their own day and age.

E Interpretation and evaluation

1 The use of genre

Genre is at the heart of all attempts to communicate, a crucial component of the *filter* through which a writer's idea passes between its conception and its expression as a written word. Similarly, it is part of the filter through which written words must pass to reach the reader's understanding. However, if the writer's filter is that of a first-century Hellenized Jew and the reader's filter

[92] Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, pp. 226–7.
[93] *Ibid.*, p. 255; pp. 239–55 discuss genre maps.
[94] Fowler discusses hierarchies in *Ibid.*, chap. 12.

is that of a twentieth-century western biblical critic, it is hardly surprising if some distortion occurs in the act of communication. Thus, in the same way that one must learn the evangelist's language to read the actual words written, so too one must learn his literary language, *langue*, to appreciate the concepts being communicated, *parole*. Chief in literary language is genre: 'A speaker and an interpreter must master not only the variable and unstable norms of language but also the particular norms of a particular genre.'[95] Genre is used in the construction, interpretation and evaluation of meaning, and each requires a final brief consideration.

2 Construction of meaning

The first activity a reader undertakes is to reconstruct the communication written down by the author. Your mind is currently reconstructing thoughts which originated in my mind from these squiggles of ink printed on the page. If I communicated my thought via the symbols ⊕◇▼♠⊙√△⊗☆■↖, you could not reconstruct it, since you do not know the code or genre in which it is written. Construction of meaning works its way up different levels – from the actual printed ink marks to the language itself and on to the literary context and conventions under which I write, and genre is integral to the process: 'Genre can be a powerful instrument in construction, since its conventions organize most other constituents, in a subtly expressive way.'[96] Here the structuralist observation that we are '*homo significans*: a creature who gives sense to things'[97] helps to explain why things like ⊕◇▼♠⊙√△⊗☆■↖ are so frustrating: we simply cannot make sense of them and derive meaning from them. This process of making sense is *vraisemblablisation*, often translated as 'naturalization', to bring the text into our world of understanding: 'to naturalize at these various levels is to make the text intelligible by relating it to various models of coherence'[98] – in other words, by deciphering the conventions, by translating the codes within which the message has been sent. Here genre recognition and interpretation are vital.

Ricoeur sees genre at this level as 'work': 'To master a genre is to master a "competence" which offers practical guidelines for "per-

[95] Hirsch, *Validity*, p. 71.
[96] Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, p. 259.
[97] Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 264.
[98] *Ibid.*, p. 159.

forming" an individual work.'[99] Another way of describing this activity is *re-cognition* of what the author has communicated. However, one can only recognize what the author has actually sent, the meaning which his signals transmit, rather than his own private intentions. If he did not manage to encode them into the work, or we have lost the means to decode them from the text, then they are lost. So it is not always possible to be sure that one has arrived back at the author's original meaning, even after all this process of genre recognition and reconstuction.

3 Interpretation of meaning

Much recent debate has concerned *valid or invalid interpretations*; whether the author determines the interpretation or whether any interpretation the reader can find in the text is valid. Seeing genre as a 'contract' or 'code' between author and reader assumes that the author's intentions can be reconstructed. Some critics believe that it is impossible to recover the author's intention, the 'intentionalist fallacy'. Such views are put forward by various 'post-structuralist' critics, including Roland Barthes' 'Death of the Author' and the *Tel Quel* school.[100] *Reader-response criticism* has also put the stress on the reader, rather than the author. Any contract or dialogue is solely between the reader and the text: 'Meaning is a product of the interaction between text and reader.'[101]

Hirsch's 'Defence of the author' (the title of chapter 1 of *Validity in Interpretation*) reasserts the importance of genre: 'Understanding can occur only if the interpreter proceeds under the same system of expectations [as the speaker/author used], and this shared generic conception, constitutive both of meaning and of understanding, is the intrinsic genre of the utterance.'[102] Valid interpretation depends on the 'if/then' implication of the utterance: 'If the meaning is of *this* type, then it carries *this* implication ... valid interpretation depends on a valid inference about the proprieties of the intrinsic genre.'[103] This is a control on the subjectivity of the reader's response: 'The unifying and controlling idea in any type of utterance, any genre, is the idea of purpose'; that is, the

[99] Paul Ricoeur, 'The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation', *Philosophy Today* 17 (1973), pp. 129–41; quotation from p. 135.
[100] See note 28 above and Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, pp. 241–54.
[101] Resseguie, 'Reader-Response Criticism', *JAAR* 52 (1984), p. 322.
[102] Hirsch, *Validity*, pp. 80–1.
[103] *Ibid.*, pp. 91 and 121; see also, Dubrow, *Genre*, p. 106.

CANISIUS COLLEGE LIBRARY
BUFFALO, N. Y.

author's purpose: 'All valid interpretation of every sort is founded on the re-cognition of what an author meant.'[104]

If we apply this to the gospels, it is clear that their genre needs to be known in order for valid interpretation of their meaning to take place. However, Hirsch does allow that in certain sorts of literature the author may have intended the text to mean more than he himself knew at the time, or intended the text to be used and pondered by future generations of readers. Such texts might be legal or biblical texts intended to have a wider meaning.[105] In such cases, a wider interpretation is valid because the author intended to make the text wide-ranging. Usually, however, we cannot know more of the author's purpose and intention than the text reveals – and this is primarily through genre.

4 Evaluation of meaning

Finally, genre plays an important role in the evaluation of meaning – assessing how good or bad the meaning is, and how well or badly it has been expressed. Because there is no extrinsic, agreed system of values, evaluation is very hard. An intrinsic mode of evaluation could be to consider how well the work fulfils its genre. However, is a work which fulfils a silly purpose excellent simply because it has fulfilled its generic purpose?[106] Furthermore, fashions change in what is valued about genres: classical theory praised the need to keep to the rules of the genre and what is appropriate, whereas in much modern theory, originality – which often involves breaking the rules – is valued highly. In both cases, generic considerations play an important role.[107]

5 Summary

Genre is a system of communication of *meaning*. Before we can understand the meaning of a text, we must master its genre. Genre will then be our guide to help us re-construct the original meaning, to check our interpretation to see if it is valid and to assist in evaluating the worth of the text and communication.

[104] Hirsch, *Validity*, pp. 99 and 126. [105] *Ibid.*, pp. 121–6.
[106] See Jasper Griffin, 'Genre and Real Life in Latin Poetry', *JRS* 71 (1981), pp. 39–49.
[107] For further discussion, see Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation*, esp. pp. 114–23, and Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, chapter 14.

Conclusion

Dubrow concludes: 'Generic categories and principles rarely provide simple answers to problems about literature – but they regularly offer us one of the surest and most suggestive means of seeking those answers.'[108] This study of genre has demonstrated that it functions as a set of expectations, a kind of contract between author and reader to guide interpretation of the text. The behaviour of genres has been examined at various levels, as well as the models proposed for the development and growth of genres. What has emerged is that genre is a concept absolutely basic to the study of texts and one which involves the attempt to set them within the web of literary relationships of their own day. There are several implications of all this for gospel genre.

First, *the gospels cannot be described as unique in terms of genre*. The form-critical view of them as *sui generis* betrays a fundamental flaw in its understanding of literary theory. As Vivas says, likening genre to a plan followed by artist, critic and reader alike:

> Let me iterate the point: the plan is not sui generis. No artist, however talented, can make objects each of which is in a class by itself. If he could, his work would be totally idiotic, utterly private, each job would be a monad without windows or pre-established harmony. His work would say nothing to anyone but himself, the maker – if it did that much.[109]

Second, *the gospels must be compared with literature of their own day*. They should not be castigated for lacking features of modern works, such as investigative journalism, psychological study or modern biography, nor compared with later concepts of genre or literature, such as Shakespearian tragedy or whatever, without great caution and awareness of possible anachronism.

Third, *the bewildering array of genres proposed in recent years for the gospels arises from a failure to appreciate the proper definition of genre and the levels at which it functions*. Many of the proposed analogies are *modal* rather than *generic* descriptions, e.g. whereas Mark could well have many dramatic characteristics (modes), its form and content will not allow it actually to be described as drama (genre). The gospels do contain many features and characteristics

[108] Dubrow, *Genre*, p. 118.
[109] Vivas, 'Literary Classes: Some Problems', *Genre* 1 (1968), p. 103.

from a wide range of *generic modes*, identification of which can prove very helpful. This does not alter the fact their actual *genre itself* has still to be clearly established.

With this understanding of genre as our background and framework, the next step in this study must be to establish a similarly clear understanding of classical literature and in particular the forms and genre of Graeco-Roman biography.

3

GENRE CRITICISM AND GRAECO-ROMAN BIOGRAPHY

> Much, perhaps too much, has been written on ancient biography as a literary genre with formal origins and fixed rules.[1]
>
> In order to define the genre of Graeco-Roman biography, we must abandon the notion that an intricate, standard biographical form was developed and passed on through the centuries.[2]

Our study of literary theory has demonstrated that genre is a crucial tool for the study and interpretation of a text in that it provides a form of contract between author and reader, giving a set of expectations for both composition and interpretation. Now we turn to another discipline, that of classical literature, to provide us with the second area of expertise needed for our study. We shall begin with the use made of genre criticism among classicists to discover if similar ideas about genre may be found to be important here also. Then we will turn to the genre of Graeco-Roman biography itself to consider its genre and development. Only after all this has been done will we be in position to assess the relationship of the gospels with Graeco-Roman biography.

A Genre use and theory

1 Theory and practice

The innocent New Testament scholar who crosses over into study of classical literature may be tempted to read off concepts of ancient literary theory either from the various authors' prefaces to

[1] Opening words of B. Baldwin, 'Biography at Rome', in *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History*, vol. 1, ed. Carl Deroux (Collection Latomus, vol. 164, Brussels, 1979), pp. 100–18; = chapter 2 of his *Suetonius* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1983), pp. 66–100.

[2] Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (University of California Press, 1983), p. 54.

What are the Gospels?

A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography

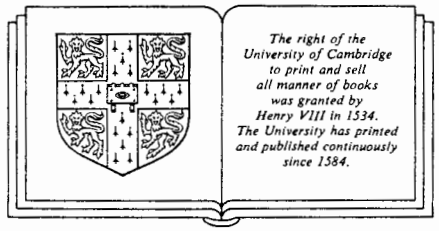
RICHARD A. BURRIDGE

Lazenby Chaplain and
Part-time Lecturer in Theology and Classics
University of Exeter

.947

54.95

12/10/98 SO EXE



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
NEW YORK PORT CHESTER
MELBOURNE SYDNEY