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Genre Matters: Response

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Each of the papers I selected reminds us that the matter of genre is never an issue of definition or taxonomy, but of dynamic formation. With the novel, this issue of formation, through gestures of inclusion and exclusion, is particularly acute. If the "law of genre" seems to insist that genres are not to be mixed, that law is clearly made to be broken. And the novel is not only a mixed genre but a modernizing mixture. Through inclusion, ironization, and sublation, the novel subjects other genres and world-views to itself, taking them in, examining them, relegating them to the status of the old and outworn or the partial and fragmentary, within its voracious, comprehensive new order. The novel—certainly by the Victorian period—is not so much a loose, baggy monster as a dialectical engine for making these distinctions.

Analysis of generic formation always brings with it the ghost of an intentional effect, the suggestion of purposiveness that confirms our critical alertness to aesthetic form and to historical formation. In the papers I've selected, generic forces come together and pull apart, sometimes delicately, sometimes violently. Thus these papers help us to see questions of genre inflecting other matters. But they also help us to see some of the ways genre matters, especially to the novel.

David Kurnick distinguishes between domesticity and theater to argue against the received historical narrative of the novel's triumph and the theater's defeat. Using Thackeray's failed 1854 play, *The Wolves and the Lamb,* as his example, Kurnick proposes another model**,** of mutually internalized interrelation. Performed only once, at the "W. M. T. House Theatricals," the play's failure provides Kurnick with the "M. T. House" of his title. In what sense is the domestic interior "empty"? This is part of the conundrum that Kurnick poses. Providing a wonderful close reading of the stage set, with its "two drawing rooms opening into one another," he discovers the visual representation of an excessive, redundant domesticity folding into itself (260). This setting becomes the brilliantly turned pretext for Kurnick's parable of generic conversion.

The story of *The Wolves and the Lamb* becomes much more vivid when rewritten as *Lovel the Widower* (1860), gaining a quirky narrator, Mr. Batchelor, who takes an oblique—and, Kurnick claims, melancholic—relation to the central plot of domestication. Kurnick associates domesticity with the novel, and the theatrical past of the narrator with what's lost, as well as gained, in novelistically narrating the interior. Thus, Kurnick argues, interior monologue and even stream of consciousness are achievements in the history of novelistic narration that make do with what is left over when the exterior of that interiority has been excluded. In this argument, the original theatrical nature of Thackeray's project hones the novelist's ability to represent consciousness in all its vivid mobility, darting and hovering, enveloping the stale, conventional domestic plot within the penumbra of its queer angle of vision. In other words, Batchelor's narration—its mobile interiority, its restless ubiquity—does not signify his accommodation to the domesticity that triumphs at the end of the story, but his alienation from it. The domestic interior is empty, the opposite of a theatrically "full house."

Not the novel, but its theatrical past, seems most modern—seems most to promise stream of consciousness in the novel's future. Perhaps Kurnick over-stresses the story's association of the narrator's liveliness with his theatrical past, and perhaps, too, he over-stresses the association of the novel with domesticity, especially since the theater is also busy representing domesticity at this time. But still, these associations are not only warranted but powerful, for they afford Kurnick his meta-generic thesis, whereby novelistic narration gains in power by virtue of its alienation from theater. In his argument, "theater" means not "theatricality" but an ethical space that allows for certain social relations not expressible within the domestic interior. His account of the "ubiquity that seems to have no place to rest" (264), which he identifies as characteristic of Batchelor's narrative desire, is, in my view, the paper's strongest claim—indeed, it predisposed me to hear the other papers with such an understanding of novelistic desire in mind.

In "Dickens, Fascinated," Rosemarie Bodenheimer portrays Dickens in the grips of his own restless ubiquity, infatuated with Christiana Weller and flirting blatantly with her. Conducting this flirtation largely in letters, Dickens was able to construct a hypothetical zone, midway between fiction and "real life." My scare quotes around "real life" are meant to suggest a piquant matter of genre: authorial correspondence hovers somewhere between a mysterious personal unique-

ness, known or unknown to himself or others; a set of accomplished artworks, their closures permanently fixed; and the drama of real life, with its verifiable public events and ongoing attachments. Bodenheimer has brilliantly seized on the novelist's correspondence as a peculiar genre and has crafted a critical method of great subtlety and mobility. In *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans*, and now in her more recent work on Dickens, Bodenheimer reads through the letters both toward the life and toward the works, finding ways to concentrate our attention on the hinges between conscious and unconscious motivation, seeing and self-seeing, self and other. Thus the "blurring of boundaries between another man and the self" (272), in Dickens's case, is a blurring that is exceptionally well-focused through his letters (if the term "focus" can be applied to "blurring," and I think Bodenheimer's method shows that it can).

When Dickens's friend Thomas James Thompson initiated a real courtship with Weller, Dickens was both appalled and fascinated. "He was quite out of control," Bodenheimer wryly claims. Writing now to Thompson, now to Weller's father, and now to the girl herself, Dickens imagined a seemingly endless chain of "others" vying for her hand. Even her piano became a rival in one of Dickens's manic flights of projection. When it is revealed that Weller loves another altogether, beyond the self-created circuit of Dickens's correspondence, "the energetic Dick" exerts himself to secure her engagement to Thompson (qtd. in Bodenheimer 271). Thus he can imagine that he both was and always will be an intimate part of their happy union.

In this parable of Dickens's fascination, we see a graphic demonstration of his desire to be everywhere at once, reaching, with his epistolary tendrils, into every nook and cranny of a network of relations that he can also take credit for creating. Certainly bringing William Macready into the affair (by copying and wearing his glorious vest to the wedding) is the height of preposterous identification. This is a "dramatic case" not only because it was catalyzed in a performance situation—Dickens on his northern speaking tour, Weller concertizing on the northern provincial circuit. But it was "dramatic" also insofar as Dickens acted out his desire so blatantly in his letters. Nonetheless, for Bodenheimer, the erotic charge of fascination is not so much about its imaginary object, but about a "kind of internal shift in the fantasy of the self" (275). She sketches a brief history of fascination, in which the active, transitive malevolence of an "evil eye" model gives way to a

modern, intransitive, passive model, in which neither the boundaries nor the directional force between self and other are clear. This modern form of fascination bespeaks the desire *to be* rather than *to have*. In Bodenheimer's reading, for example, Steerforth becomes "a reckless and pre-Victorian kind of masculinity that attracts [Dickens] even as he argues for the earnest, disciplined model of manhood he means to espouse" (273–74). In the endless dynamics of his fascination with "another man," Bodenheimer reads Dickens "in love with [his] own transformational possibilities" (275).

For example, Bodenheimer argues that Dickens's infatuation with Weller could have been affected by "the sources of his fictional creation" of Little Nell (rather than, say, vice versa, making the real life prior to the fictional creation). The fictional Nell then becomes a "real" resource, like a formative template, potentially determining future emotional attachments in life. Whatever "the sources of his fictional creation" are, Bodenheimer's study does not fix them. In fact, she determines *not* to ground Dickens's fictional creation in a choice of one biographical source like "the Mary Hogarth syndrome" (271), or Dickens's supposedly arrested sexual development, or his sexual rivalries with other men, or the class antagonism that might relativize those rivalries within a larger sense of history. Instead Bodenheimer keeps the mystery alive by circulating among these various explanations, as her broadly defined textual field, with the letters at its center, allows her to do. As in the character "Fascination Fledgby," and as in the title *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), the mystery circulates outside the center of interest "in a free-floating and preposterous way" (274).

These first two papers respond to the melancholic effect of representation itself, creative energies becoming restlessly ubiquitous in open-ended and performative textual fields, such as letters or the theater. The panel on which Bodenheimer's paper appeared—and on which the other two papers I will discuss also appeared—was called "Insides Outsides IV: Possessed and Dispossessed," the fourth in a series of panels on the various historical and formal constructions of interiors and exteriors. The papers prompted my attention to ways the insides and outsides of the novel are being adumbrated. I listened to Daniel Hack's paper on "Revenge Stories of Modern Life" and Nicole Fluhr's paper on "Empathy and Identity in Vernon Lee's *Hauntings*" in the same spirit. Both of these papers show writers crafting furious novelistic critiques of modernity itself, imagining the present—and even the

real—as just another set of limitations to be overcome imaginatively. What happens when the desire to be everywhere at once—or the fear of that loss of boundaries—is projected across historical time? These last two papers revisit the Victorian fascination with revival. Each displays a novelistic critique and a critique of novelistic form. Each takes the concept of historical "revival" as a grand epistemological riddle.

Hack proposes that revenge be taken up as a way of thinking about relations in time. The revenge plot signifies the power of the past to remain determinant, to exert its regressive force and to draw everything back to some original moment of violence. This is a quintessentially never-ending story, and its never-endingness provides one form of horror, the fantasy of a demonic or titanic criminality, whose refusal to be hemmed in by the normative limitations of civil law bespeaks, in its worst light, the end of civilization itself, but in its best light, the fountainhead of all fiction, the endless production of story. The revenge plot questions the notion of progress, certainly, but also of progression. Chronological time folds inward and backward, its regression signifying identification with the past, rather than the desire to escape from it. There is no "history," for there is no secure sense of difference; instead, there are the transmigrations and recapitulations of the same. Thus, it seems to me, novels that take up revenge put themselves in an intense state of generic self-critique, playing in an arena where historical difference and concreteness are at issue.

If the "classic revenge story of modern life . . . is the story of the end of revenge" (279), Hack is interested in the other side of this coin, "a sharply different . . . revenge story of modern life," in which "narratives of modernization and the new turn into or are revealed to be revenge narratives" (280). In Hack's example, Wilkie Collins's *Basil* (1852), revenge propels both the plot and, we discover, its back story. Motives are traced backward in time to a prior generation, to an ultramodern original "crime," the failure to provide an expected preferment in professional life. "The novel stops becoming a story about the simultaneously appalling and enthralling newness of modern life and becomes instead a story about the simultaneously appalling and reassuring inescapability of the past" (282). Thus, in my responsive reading, the novel turns itself inside out, using the techniques of its own "novelty" to deliver a story of terrifying (or parodic) sameness.

I was stimulated—as I'm sure Hack intended—to think about the novel as a genre with its own history and to wonder what this

modernizing play on revenge narratives might tell us about the novel as a genre. One reason that revenge is subordinated in the "classic revenge story of modern life" is that it must be subordinated in order that the novel be *novel*. The "novel" must not repeat the same old stories, but return to them within a new and modern comprehension. The novel must constantly show itself in the act of regenerating its novelty, often by absorbing and subordinating older genres, stories, and discourses, "inside" its more capacious and ultra-modern form. By so doing, of course, it figuratively casts all those older forms and stories into the past, but it also keeps them alive in the present. So here, like a great impresario, Collins creates a further turn in the form—by regenerating the novel's novelty ironically—paradoxically, or dialectically, turning the novel generically against itself by morphing it back into the quintessentially prehistorical story. Hack calls attention to the "dehistoricizing historicization" of this genre effect (283).

Atavism, expressed in generic terms, is theatricalized in one Ur-text for the revenge narrative in the nineteenth century, *The Corsican Brothers*, known to English audiences primarily through Dion Boucicault's brilliant adaptation of the Dumas novel, staged first in 1852 and starring Charles Kean. In that story, the two eponymous brothers communicate by means of a mysterious, hereditary form of extrasensory perception, whereby either one will always know if the other is in mortal danger. While one brother remains in Corsica with their mother—where he adjudicates between peasant families involved in an endless vendetta over a chicken—the other brother becomes involved in a modern version of that very old plot. He has gone to Paris to study law, but ends up dying in a duel fought to defend the honor of the girl both brothers love. At the end of the play, the brother in Corsica vows to avenge his brother's death. Thus, the play closes by opening onto the endless vista of revenge. And thus, the play suggests, modern Paris is no different from primitive Corsica: in both, the ancient blood feud prevails. The twinship of the brothers encodes this depressingly regressive message—that the barbaric past lives on forever—and the fascinated suspense "between men" is a fundamental part of the story.

In the theater, of course, a ghost can actually appear. And famously, in *The Corsican Brothers*, the audience sees it, gliding up from under the stage on the mechanized inclined plane that came to be known as the "Corsican trap." Even if modern audiences realize that stage technologies have created an apparition for their faux-terrified

enjoyment, still the apparition is visible, an effect that is always more mediated by epistemological skepticism in the novel. In novelistic narration, the epistemological conundrum must be differently put. The "gothic" uncertainty about the boundaries between insides and outsides is sometimes written as an effect of religious superstition, sometimes of intense male rivalry and paranoia (as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has shown), sometimes of wishful thinking, and in particular of the wish to be elsewhere, to be someone else.

To achieve these effects in fiction, Vernon Lee creates short stories in a mode that might be called gothic historicism. In "Empathy and Identity in Vernon Lee's *Hauntings*," Fluhr argues that the stories in *Hauntings* (1890) enact a critique of the Victorian novel's discourse on sympathy. That seems right, especially when we recall Lee's place at the end of a long-nineteenth-century preoccupation with the possibilities and limits of historical knowledge, another generic arena where sympathy and objectivity play against one another. As Fluhr points out, Lee experiments with the epistemological issue of historical and aesthetic "distance," the conventional metaphor for activities of observing, apprising, and knowing. If George Levine has forcibly shown that the story of scientific epistemology is the story of a subject "dying to know," these late-nineteenth-century stories take that story to its parodic limits. One knower literally does die, while another lives on, but pointedly does not know anything about what he sets out to know.

As Lee's friend and most influential precursor, Walter Pater bracingly argued, "to come face to face with the people of a past age, as if the Middle Age, the Renaissance, the eighteenth century had not been, is as impossible as to become a little child, or enter again into the womb and be born." But though "an actual revival must always be impossible," he continued, we can "isolate [an age] . . . throw it into relief" (196) and thus come to know it, distinctly outlined, against the background of the self in the present. As if taking Pater up on a bet (so close is her terminology to his) and literalizing his emphasis on the persons of history, Lee imagines what it might be like actually to come "face to face" with the past—loving it to mad distraction, as does the narrator of "Amour Dure," or missing its meaning entirely, as does the narrator of "Dionea." Like Pater, Lee meditates on the possibilities of knowing the past through the vehicle of personal figures; and like Pater, she struggles with the epistemological difficulties this program entails, for personalizing the past seems to novelize history at the same

time that it makes the past knowable. Fluhr analyzes Lee's empathy in terms that recall the two different values of "fascination" from Bodenheimer's paper. If, as Royal Gettman argues, empathy means for Lee not projection but "a merging of the beholder and the object beheld" (qtd. in Fluhr 289), it would seem that to call this a "collaboration" must skim over the very dangers Fluhr is analyzing. We might find that Lee's later usage of "empathy" does grasp its more collaborative side, but the stories in *Hauntings* seem clearly to question its collaborative potential.

Lee poses her questions as questions of genre. History-writing establishes itself by assuming the distance necessary to enact knowledge, while first-person genres foreground the knower, enacting the loss of distance and the secure sense of an "other." Lee wants also to explore the generic differences between scholarship and art, as well as the differences in epistemological technique between the professional and the amateur knower, who "loves" instead of simply working. The amateur can't keep his genres sorted out; he has generic boundary issues, we might say. But within these epistemological games, that difficulty may be all to the good. Certainly it is clear that Lee—like Pater—writes an enchanting form of historiographic metafiction. This is one strong example of how late-nineteenth-century historical and aesthetic thinking intertwined to make "postmodern" arguments and artworks *avant la lettre*.

As Fluhr points out, each story in *Hauntings* is narrated by a male writer or artist who fails to make the work he intends—whether history, portrait, or opera. (As in Kurnick's argument, the failure helps us to see the point.) Lee has the historian-narrator of "Amour Dure" ask himself, "Am I turning novelist instead of historian?" (qtd. in Fluhr 292). Well aware that these perspectives are related, she demonstrates as much by having her narrator disappear into his own story. Falling in love with a figure from the past, he loses himself entirely. His search leads him deeper and deeper "in" (into the archive, into his fantasy), until he imagines that knowing the past is equivalent to avenging the death of his beloved, and he must pay with his own life. Here this "revenge story of modern life" involves the narrator blipping off the screen at the end of the story, in an ecstasy of "knowing" (in the sexual sense of that term). Reviving the past means death to the present and the end of the story.

Lee explains her playful confusions of insides and outsides by

commenting on her late-nineteenth-century genre of science fiction: "reasoning men of semi-science have returned to the notion of our fathers, that ghosts have an existence outside our own fancy and emotion" (qtd. in Fluhr 293). But, she claims, she is not writing about "genuine ghosts in the scientific sense," but about "spurious ghosts (according to me the only genuine ones)" (qtd. in Fluhr 293–94). These spurious/genuine ghosts are "born of ourselves," and "exist . . . only in our minds" (qtd. in Fluhr 294). A new science must be developed to deal with this form of the spurious/genuine. And as Fluhr rightly points out in the conclusion of her paper—which also handily concludes this sequence of papers—Lee's interior ghosts will soon be theorized in the modern scientific discourses and genres of psychoanalysis, in which the self is "both constituted and haunted by a past . . . at once historical and fictional" (294).

All these papers vividly exemplify our current interest in reading along the edges of representation, tracing the dynamic of internalization and exclusion that forms a genre or a work. For the novel, this manner of reading makes exquisite sense. Insofar as its vocation to contain (in both senses of that word) is so powerful, its activities of exclusion deserve intense critical reflection. But these negations, too, are a form of representation. And through its gestures of exclusion, the novel can dynamically (reflexively, paradoxically, dialectically) indicate characters, plots, and whole worlds that do not fall within its immediate focus.

As Alex Woloch has shown, the novel's massive "character-systems" exist in part to make their gradual exclusions felt. Framing characters out allows a novel to form an interior that closes in on itself, while still containing what it has excluded. Even more poignantly, Andrew Miller discusses—in "On Not Being Someone Else," another excellent paper given at NAVSA 2005—the novel's way of floating its own "counterfictional possibilities," its way of making its characters exist (like real people) among all the other lives they are not living. This "lateral prodigality" Miller takes as definitive for the genre in the nineteenth century, identifying it as "a structural feature of the period's realistic prose." Thus, according to Miller, the novel establishes the ethical aspect of its epistemology in its "winnowed exclusions" no less than in its "exigent elaborations." Its form carries its function, and "in this way, the ethical economy of the characters provides an ideal for the aesthetic economy of the novels they inhabit." This seems to me a novel way to talk about the proliferation of subplots and doubled characters,

not to mention the expressed yearnings, envies, attachments, and hatreds of those characters. But it is, moreover, a novel way to approach the way the novel gets at us where we live, in the sequences of identification and disidentification through which it guides us.

Whether of representations, of writers, or of readers, then, these papers all reach to portray the many forms of a restless ubiquity. As Kurnick reminds us, "writers don't always know what's good for 'their' genre, or even which genre is 'theirs'" (259). Likewise might readers enjoy the erotic pleasure of wandering; the seduction of being moved around; and the feeling of getting lost among all the others, dreaming of lives not lived even while intently focusing on the concrete bodies of one time and one place. These papers all concentrate on novel ways of shifting between the novel's insides and outsides, suggesting that the novel's melancholic sense of its own exclusions is a part of its form every bit as much as its voracious, comprehensive, baggy capacity to include.

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