

Literature, Genre Fiction, and Standards of Criticism

Many years ago, I adopted a deliberate policy in order to guide my choices in fiction reading. I resolved to alternate a "serious" book with a "fun" book: so Elmore Leonard's *Swag* would follow Vladimir Nabokov's *An Invitation to a Beheading*; after Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*, I picked up Stephen King's *Under the Dome*. I still follow this pattern, more or less. The appeal of the approach is simple. Serious literature and genre fiction offer different kinds of pleasures. Serious literature is rewarding, but it requires some effort and attention, and so it makes sense to take a break and read something lighter in between, rather like running intervals.

The idea that high and low art offer distinct kinds of pleasure is familiar. My graduate adviser, Marcia Muelder Eaton, used to distinguish between different kinds of pleasures of art by talking about the television show *Dallas*. Watching *Dallas*, preferably while drinking scotch, offers certain pleasures. But these pleasures are the pleasures of relaxing, of familiarity, of *not* having to engage oneself fully, of allowing the artwork (if you're willing to count *Dallas* as an artwork) to do the work of entertaining you. By contrast, the pleasures of serious art require effort of thought and feeling on the part of the audience.

The distinction quickly takes on an evaluative aspect, which is manifested in the physical layout of bookstores: "Mystery," "Romance," and "Science Fiction" each have their sections, while "Literature" occupies its own distinct (and more esteemed) space. While *some* genre fiction is thought of as respectable and serious, it is not seen in this way unless it is seen as *transcending* its status as mere genre to become something more important: Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* is not just a Western, and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* is much more than a work of science fiction.

The distinction between high and low art, or, in this case, between literature and genre fiction, shapes our practices of critical evaluation in several ways. First, it is widely thought that genre fiction supplies its own internal criteria for success: for example, a mystery, *qua* mystery, must create suspense in the reader. (Carroll 1994) Second, it is also thought, though more contentiously, that literature is *not* appropriately judged in the way that genre fiction is, *viz.* according to a fixed set of criteria applying to a type. Third, and most controversially, literature is thought to be, perhaps because it cannot be judged in the rather rule-bound ways that genre fiction can, better or more important than genre fiction. In this paper, I will critically examine these three claims and some attempts to refute them. I will defend the view that there are in fact real differences between the pleasures of genre fiction and literature, and there are also some differences in how we should critically assess them. But I will not try to argue that this difference constitutes a reason for thinking that literature is better than genre fiction, except in some very highly context-sensitive sense of "better."

1. *Genre standards*

The first work of literary criticism, Aristotle's *Poetics*, is also the central model for genre-based criticism. Aristotle recognized several genres of poetry: tragedy, epic, comedy, and the satyr-play. In accordance with his more general methodology, Aristotle thought that the study of each type must incorporate an understanding of its nature, which includes, importantly, the *telos* of the type. For example, plot is the *telos* of tragedy – the story must culminate in a *katharsis* of pity or fear brought about by a downturn in the main character's fortunes. Aristotle derives quite specific principles about which tragedies are better and which are worse by pointing to specific features that contribute to that *telos* or aim. For example, spectacle, he argues, is not the most effective way to bring about the desired response in the audience.

That which is terrifying and pitiable can arise from spectacle, but it can also arise from the structure of the incidents itself; this is superior and belongs to the better poet. For the plot should be constructed in such a way that, even without seeing it, someone who hears about the incidents will shudder and feel pity at the outcome, as someone may feel upon hearing the plot of *Oedipus*. To produce this by means of spectacle is less artful and requires lavish production. Those <poets> who use spectacle to produce what is only monstrous and not terrifying have nothing in common with tragedy. For we should not seek to every <kind of> pleasure from tragedy, but <only> the sort which is particular to it. Since the poet should use representation to produce the pleasure <arising> from pity and terror, it is obvious that this must be put into the incidents. (Janko (trans.), *Poetics* 53b1-13) [bracketed material from Janko]

Aristotle's method in the *Poetics* is very much in keeping with his methods elsewhere.

The criteria in *The Nicomachean Ethics* for assessing moral character are likewise discovered from a study of humanity and its *telos*. An appropriate plot effectively and reliably gives rise to the emotions appropriate to tragedy; spectacle, by contrast, tends to produce monstrousness and not what is pitiable. Aristotle's rule against the overuse of spectacle, then, is derived immediately from his understanding of the aims particular to tragedy as a genre. What is supreme in achieving these aims for Aristotle is *plot*. The story is the reason for the characters being the way they are, for the dialogue being what it is, and the story is responsible for producing the key emotions in the audience (in this case, pity and fear).

While few contemporary philosophers or literary critics would aspire to the level of specificity that Aristotle made famous, the idea that understanding the purpose of a genre can help us to fix the criteria for works belonging to that genre is commonplace. A genre not only supplies certain fixed character types, story schemas, and other standard features, it also tells us at least something about what makes for success in that genre. As Kendall Walton (1970) notes, different kinds of art treat different properties of their members as standard, variable, or contra-standard. Standard features (e.g., that the protagonist of a whodunit is a detective who attempts to solve the crime) do not attract our aesthetic attention. Variable categories sometimes do (e.g.,

the protagonist may be a professional detective or police officer, such as Hercule Poirot, or an amateur, such as Miss Marple). Contra-standard features attract our attention by challenging the work's status in the category (e.g., when the narrator is himself the killer, as in Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*). Noël Carroll (2000) extends Walton's theory by deploying these distinctions to do evaluative work. If a work is intended by the author to belong to a particular genre or category, but it lacks a sufficient number of standard features of that category (or it has too many contra-standard features) then it may be judged a failure. (Of course, the author may intend to stretch or transcend the genre. I will return to such cases later.) Knowing which features are standard, variable, or contra-standard for a particular genre not only calibrates the reader's expectations, it also implicitly establishes some baseline standards for judging the work's success *qua* member of that genre.

There is little doubt that there is something to Carroll's approach. A mystery that makes the killer too obvious to the reader fails in an important respect, as does one that obscures the evidence of the killer's guilt too thoroughly. The book will either fail to create, or fail properly to resolve, suspense in the reader. This is not to say that such a mystery would always be an *utter* failure; witty dialogue and well-drawn characters may still make it well worth reading, but it will be judged less good than it might have been if it had succeeded in creating and sustaining suspense about the killer's identity. Genres, then, supply incomplete, *pro tanto* criteria for their evaluation.

2. Judging Literature

In *On Criticism* (2009), Noël Carroll notes that most serious critics are reluctant to offer evaluations of art. Carroll notes that serious critics (as opposed to mere reviewers) see the task of criticism as primarily interpretive, not evaluative. The literary critic gives a work context,

illustrates its main themes and motifs, comments on its use of language, and perhaps situates it in a tradition. But at least some critics are reluctant to praise or condemn the literature they discuss.

Carroll argues that this turn in criticism is a mistake – that critics *ought* to focus their attention on evaluation. I am sympathetic with his argument, though I do not defend his position here. In the case of literature, at least, there are plenty of exceptions to Carroll's general rule: serious critics (not mere reviewers) who engage in evaluation clearly and reflectively. The question for us is what standards these critics deploy in making their evaluations, if they do not make use of genre standards.

First consider an approach exemplified by the critic James Wood in his *How Fiction Works* (2008). Wood focuses on particular ways in which language can be used in literature, and argues that these techniques can be employed well or poorly. For example, he argues that the appropriate use of free indirect discourse must employ words that the characters themselves might use, not words that the author would choose. He offers up John Updike as an example of an author who fails this test, and who is therefore guilty of "aestheticism," that is, of having an overly literary style. Wood quotes a passage from Updike's *Terrorist*, in which Updike offers the reader the inner monologue of the main character, Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, a devout, fanatical teenage Muslim:

He will not grow any taller, he thinks, in this life or the next. *If there is a next*, an inner devil murmurs. What evidence beyond the Prophet's blazing and divinely inspired words proves that there is a next? Where would it be hidden? Who would forever stoke Hell's boilers? What infinite source of energy would maintain opulent Eden, feeding its dark-eyed houris, swelling its heavy-hanging fruits, renewing the streams and splashing fountains in which God, as described in the ninth sura of the Qur'an, takes eternal good pleasure? (Updike, pp. 3-4; quoted in Wood, pp. 27-28)

Wood then takes Updike to task for failing to make it plausible that these are the character's thoughts, rather than the author's. Having introduced this section with "he thinks," Updike appears to be trying to give us a glimpse of the *character's* train of thought. It is supposed to be the character who thinks "If there is a next" and who characterizes that thought as originating from an "inner devil." But Wood argues that this inner dialogue is not true to what we know about the character; these thoughts and phrases are clearly Updike's.

We are only four pages in, and any attempt to follow Ahmad's own voice has been abandoned: the phrasing, syntax, and lyricism are Updike's, not Ahmad's ... The penultimate line is telling: 'in which God, as described in the ninth sura of the Qur'an, takes eternal good pleasure.' ... Updike is unsure about entering Ahmad's mind, and crucially, unsure about *our* entering Ahmad's mind, and so he plants his big authorial flags all over his mental site. So he has to identify exactly which sura refers to God, although Ahmad would know where this appears, and would have no need to remind himself. (Wood 28-9)

Wood's criticisms, like Aristotle's, are derived from the central purpose or aim of the book: in this case, *Terrorist*. But the aim in question has nothing to do with the plot or the emotions to be produced in the reader. Free indirect style is, Wood thinks, the cornerstone of modern narrative, because it combines the author's and the character's voices, and this combination, he thinks, is the heart of modern literature.

Thanks to free indirect style, we see things through the character's eyes and language but also through the author's eyes and language. We inhabit omniscience and partiality at once. A gap opens up between the author and character, and the bridge – *which is free indirect style itself* – between them simultaneously closes that gap and draws attention to its distance. (Wood 11, emphasis added)

For Wood, modern literature is about the tension between the author's voice and the character's voice, and that tension can be dealt with in better and worse ways. The evaluation of literature is based on an understanding of the phenomenology of reading literature: the dual awareness that one is reading something written by an author, and the immersion in a world of persons created by that author.

Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (1994) focus their critical approach to literature not only on the use of literary devices like free indirect style, but also on a literary work's treatment of various *themes*: "Literary appreciation is the appreciation of how a work *interprets and develops* the general themes which the reader identifies through the application of thematic concepts." (1994, 403) Some of these themes are perennial (e.g., free will and determinism) and some are topical (e.g., overcrowded cities and industrialization). Lamarque and Olsen do not mean that perennial themes are somehow part of the objective fabric of the world – universal, absolute, or transcendent –, but they do insist that some themes recur again and again over time and across cultures: preoccupations with family, mortality, inevitability, and freedom, are, they think, widespread. By contrast, topical themes reflect the concerns specific to particular historical moments or cultural conditions. Works that treat perennial themes are more important than those that focus on highly topical themes; works of the latter kind tend to decline in relevance over time. The best literary works can support a wide range of interpretations, and these interpretations are richer and deeper than the interpretations that are possible for a novel that focuses only on highly topical questions and problems. Consider Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was the best-selling American novel of the 19th century, but is now mainly of historical interest, because its central theme, the evils of race-based slavery, was highly topically specific, while its contribution to more enduring themes such as equality has proved less substantive – in fact, it is now often criticized for its failure to render its black characters as fully human, and thus its failure to serve as a basis for an adequate examination of perennial human themes.

Lamarque and Olsen's criterion forms the basis for a *telos* that can be applied to all literature as such:

One central, characteristic purpose defined by the literary practice and served by the literary work is to develop in depth, through subject and form, a theme which is in some sense central to human concerns and which can therefore be recognized as of more or less universal interest. (450)

This criterion represents the fusion of two ideas: that literary works are valued for the *ways in which* they realize their goals, which involves the kinds of critical tools employed by Wood, and that they are valued for to the extent to which the themes central to the work are perennially *important* to humans as such. So, in critiquing a work like *Terrorist*, we could look not only at the weaknesses in the use of various literary techniques, but also at how those techniques help (or fail to help) to realize the exploration of some theme, and whether that theme is merely topical (like "Americanization"¹), or perennial.

3. *Two kinds of criticism or two kinds of works?*

We might summarize the foregoing by suggesting that genre fiction is supposed to be judged according to (a) a set of fixed formulae that apply to the work (b) in light of the fixed purposes of the genre. What's more, we might note that these purposes are (c) plot (rather than character or theme) driven. By contrast, literary fiction is to be judged according to (d) the importance of the themes it examines and (e) how well it makes use of literary and imaginative devices to realize those themes.

One might object, however. Why should we apply one set of evaluative criteria to genre fiction and another set to "serious" literature? Genre fiction treats themes too – some perennial and some topical – and makes use of devices like free indirect style more or less well. Couldn't we look for themes in genre fiction, and be attentive to the techniques shown in the writing? Similarly, couldn't we fix the purposes of different types of "high" literature in the same way

¹ See Robert Stone's book review, "Updike's Other America," in the *New York Times*, June 18, 2006.

that we fix the purpose of a genre, and then look at to what extent the book follows rules that serve this purpose?

What's more, perhaps the very distinction between genre fiction and literature rests on a shaky foundation. Michael Chabon has suggested that high literature is really just another genre.² In addition to "the ghost story; the horror story; the detective story; the story of suspense, terror, fantasy, or the macabre, the sea, adventure, spy, war, or historical story; the romance story" and the like, he asks us to consider "the contemporary, quotidian, plotless, moment-of-truth revelatory story." (2002, 6) Each of these, including the last, is a genre, he suggests, with its rules and limits imposed by the expectations of the form. What is distinct about "high literature" is its plotlessness (or, more modestly, its lack of emphasis on plot), but this, he argues, is not, or at least not always, a virtue. It imposes limits and imposes expectations on the reader just as the genre of romance does. Similarly, in his discussion of film genres, Carroll (2000) maintains that even avant-garde and experimental films fall into genres, not based on the type of plot, but on other characteristic features, on the basis of which we form our critical judgments.

These objections, however, go a bit too far. To suggest that literature is simply another genre of fiction, like the Western or the Romance, is to ignore a fact that Chabon, and Aristotle, acknowledge, and even emphasize elsewhere: genres are distinguished from one another principally by looking at the story-type, the *plot*. Insofar as literature falls into distinct types, it does so on the basis of features other than plot, such as theme or character. So different kinds of great literature may indeed be categorized as falling into certain "types," but these types are not thereby genres, because genres are distinguished from one another according to their plot. This

² Chabon's claims are discussed in Hoberek (2007). I am grateful to Robert Chodat for drawing my attention to this discussion.

matters because plots are powerful emotion-producing machines. A Western differs from a Romance or a Detective story based on the story schema, and one can expect a particular emotional journey for each type; but the "quotidian, plotless, moment-of-truth revelatory story" offers no such schema for story or for the reader's emotional response.

It is certainly right that we can and should judge genre fiction by the standards applied to great literature, and great genre fiction stands up well to such scrutiny. Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* deals with the enduring theme of the authenticity of emotion. Elmore Leonard's novels made wonderful use of dialogue, revealing characters and setting scenes with minimal or no description, while creating a sense of rhythm and style, with author's and characters' voices in play. Consider the opening of his *LaBrava* (1983), in which two characters are looking at photographs that are never described, except in the dialogue:

"He's been taking pictures three years, look at the work," Maurice said. "Here, this guy. Look at the pose, the expression. Who's he remind you of?"

"He looks like a hustler," the woman said.

"He *is* a hustler, the guy's a pimp. But that's not what I'm talking about. Here, this one. Exotic dancer backstage. Remind you of anyone?"

"The girl?"

"Come on, Evelyn, the shot. The feeling he gets. The girl trying to look lovely, showing you her treasures, and they're not bad. But look at the dressing room, all the glitzy crap, the tinfoil cheapness."

"You want me to say Diane Arbus?"

"I want you to say Diane Arbus, that would be nice. I want you to say Duane Michaels, Danny Lyon. I want you to say Winogrand, Lee Friedlander. You want to go back a few years? I want you to say Walker Evans too."

"Your old pal." (pp. 1-2)

The dialogue is not only lovely to read, it also efficiently conveys much about the background and personalities of the characters speaking. Of course, much writing in genre fiction does not hold up as well, but the fact that some of it does suggests that these criteria are not out of place in critically evaluating genre fiction.

Further, it is certainly right that much literature makes use of formulae, just as genre fiction does. In much character-driven introspective fiction, for example, the main character learns something about him or herself (although, occasionally, and contra-standardly, he or she fails to do so). When we read Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010), which is framed around the history of Patty and Walter Berglund's marriage, we (rightly) expect that by the end, whether the relationship itself survives, Patty and Walter will come to better understand their own roles in the relationship and its problems.

But the formulae or rules that guide our evaluations of literature are not quite the same as those that guide us in reading genre fiction. First, as noted earlier, the expectations and purposes of genre fiction are strongly plot driven, and are tied closely to (more or less) standard emotional responses to the events in the plot: e.g., pity, satisfaction, surprise. Second, adherence to these formulae and expectations is much less common in literature than in genre fiction. Cases like Christie's *Roger Ackroyd* are remarkable because they are so rare. Literature is much more apt to ignore or subvert the standard features of the type than Romances or Fantasy fiction is. These are differences of degree, not of kind, but differences nonetheless.

4. Comparing Literature and Genre Fiction

In an essay reflecting on his education as a writer, Michael Chabon writes:

As a young man, an English major, and a regular participant in undergraduate fiction-writing workshops, I was taught – or perhaps in fairness it would be more accurate to say I learned – that science fiction was not serious fiction, that a writer of mystery novels might be loved but not revered, that if I meant to get serious about the art of fiction I might set a novel in Pittsburgh but never on Pluto. *The Long Goodbye* could be parsed by the literary critic for a class on Masculine Anxiety in the Postwar American novel, but it was unlikely to appear on the syllabus of a general twentieth-century American literature class alongside *Absalom, Absalom* and the stories of Flannery O'Connor. (2008, 176)

In one sense, Chabon was mistaken: his own genre writing, such as *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, which is a piece of detective fiction and historical fantasy, has been taken very seriously as literature, and one could point to many other examples, including novels by writers such as Margaret Atwood, Kazuo Ishiguro, Cormac McCarthy, and Graham Greene. But in a larger sense he is of course right: these exceptions are seen as just that, exceptions. Great works of genre fiction are seen as having transcended their genres, and shaken off the traces of their lesser origins. The fact that these books are great page-turners with gripping plots that cleverly anticipate and provoke suspense or pity in the reader is secondary to their treatment of theme and their use of literary techniques to examine that theme. Their greatness derives not because of their use of genre plot-types but despite it.

But there is something missing from this view; we need not deny that in general, there is a difference between what makes genre fiction and literature good in order to see that some works can have the virtues of both, and, what's more, that being a good mystery can make a work *better* as a serious exploration of literary theme. Literary criteria and genre criteria are distinct, but they may work together and support one another.

Consider an example: Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is a piece of hard-boiled *noir* detective fiction in the mold of Raymond Chandler. (It is also set in an alternative history in which Jews from Europe settled in Alaska after World War II instead of Israel.) The genre he adopts brings with it some rules and types, and Chabon embraces them: the anti-hero, Landsman, is an alcoholic divorcee and a non-believer with a dark past; what appears to be a solitary murder turns out to be part of a vast, sinister conspiracy; the writing is pure *noir*, embracing *noir* clichés of setting, style, and characterization:

Landsman has eight hours to go until his next shift. Eight rat hours, sucking at his bottle, in his glass tank lined with wood shavings. Landsman sighs and goes for the tie. He slides it over his head and pushes up the knot to his collar. He puts

on his jacket, feels for the wallet and shield in the breast pocket, pats the sholem he wears in a holster under his arm, a chopped Smith & Wesson Model 39. "I hate to wake you, Detective," Tenenboym says. "Only I noticed that you don't really sleep." (1-2)

Change the names and remove the Yiddish and this passage could come from any Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe story. But the themes of the book, exile and the idea of home, are deepened by the use of these genre tropes, not sullied by them. Chabon is able to use the standard plot devices to highlight these themes, and the themes in turn draw our attention to the conspiracy to move the Jews of Sitka to Jerusalem. Will the Jews of Sitka find a home? What would it mean for them to do so?

If the distinct features of genre fiction can enhance literary value, what, then, is there to the idea that genre fiction offers not only different sorts of pleasures, but lesser ones, than literature? Here I think we should acknowledge that the rules and tropes of genre fiction can serve different purposes. When genre fiction aims principally to entertain, the formulae of the genre make reading the book easier: one knows what's coming, and less energy and attention are required to enjoy it. Familiarity creates comfort, and one is then free to focus only on the aspects of plot and characterization to which the genre draws attention. But an author (or a reader) can also draw attention to the rules, and use those expectations to thematize ideas or to illuminate a motif in the story.

I do think then, that there is something to my old habit of alternating "lighter" and "heavier" reading. Some works provide greater effort and distinct pleasures than others. Most, but not all, of these are what we call genre fiction. As to whether or not the pleasures of literature are *greater* in something like John Stuart Mill's sense (in which the higher, intellectual pleasures are far superior to the more sensory pleasures), this is less clear.

Noël Carroll suggests that some works of literature are of greater social importance than others, and this is what permits us to elevate great literature above great works of genre fiction. Similarly, Lamarque and Olsen prefer works that treat perennial themes over those that discuss topical ones. But, as noted earlier, genre fiction and literature, as categories, are not distinguished by their thematic content or social importance.

What may be more helpful is a model defended by Ted Cohen (1993). Cohen notes that works of art turn their audiences into communities. Some communities are narrow, and some are broad. Broad communities, he says, are formed either "because the work has great depth or because it is pretty much all surface." (156) Different kinds of communities, he argues, have different values. Some communities, and presumably this is the case with the communities of enjoyment that form around great works of literature, are more enduring, as they are based on more perennial connections and concerns. Some communities are small and create a sense of intimacy; they pick out what makes this group of readers special. We need, Cohen says, both kinds of communities. And we need both kinds of books.

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