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Transformations of a Genre

A Literary History of the Beguiled Apprentice

Ralph Cohen

Edited by John L. Rowlett

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EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Shortly after founding *New Literary History* (*NLH*) in 1969, Ralph Cohen drafted two working papers in the early 1970s that inconspicuously opened a new horizon on literary study, one that combined theory and history in a compelling way. These two original essays, “The Origins of a Genre” and “Literary Theory as a Genre,” unpublished in his journal but now readily available, may serve as a prologue to the kind of thinking Cohen would continue to explore and refine for the rest of his literary life.¹ By the time he had composed the present work, his thinking had moved well beyond Mikhail Bakhtin’s and Tzvetan Todorov’s successes in shifting “the direction of genre study from classification to its functions in human speech and behavior.”²

Whereas numerous critics—from Northrop Frye, Rosalie Colie, and Alastair Fowler to Barbara Lewalski, Fredric Jameson, Hans Robert Jauss, Jonathan Culler, Michael McKeon, and many others—had, by the turn of the century, advanced our understanding of literary genres and their mixtures, these works stopped short of arriving at a sufficiently historical conceptualization of genre that attended to its range, its shifting continuities, and its cultural bases. Introducing the first of twin issues of *NLH* (2003) on “Theorizing Genres,” Cohen writes: “There have been few attempts to envision genre study as a theory of behavior or as one that can provide an insight into the arts and sciences. This issue and the following one ... are an effort to expand the range of genre study as well as to examine its current practices” (v).

The individual and collective aim of Ralph Cohen's literary project was to orchestrate "a generic reconstitution of literary studies."³ The present work, his literary history of the genre beguiled apprentice, encompasses his vision of just such a project. It is the first study of its kind. Since we continue to confront many of these problematics today—an adequate theory of change, the nature of narrative, a richer understanding of "literature" and the "literary," the literary nature of our humanness, and the shifting generic contexts for interpretation and gender relations—this posthumous work is as fundamental, lively, and useful today as it was when composed in the latter decades of the twentieth century (and perhaps more readily grasped). I note this cognizant of the vast amount of scholarship produced in the last thirty years (much of it introduced in *NLH*) that has made us increasingly aware of the varied and valuable ways genre has been criticized, theorized, and historicized. Yet this study, the sole book Ralph Cohen wrote after initiating the journal, stands alone. In Ralph Cohen's modest words: "This book represents what it describes; it offers an argument that redefines the nature of the literary and does so by attending to historical arguments and those of contemporary theory. Its genre is critical theory and practice, though it is also affiliated with genres like poetry, history, periodical papers, autobiography, and so forth." The identification and analysis of a genre that began as an anonymous ballad, "became" an array of literary genres, and ended up a new literary history demonstrates Cohen's procedure for dealing with a theory of genre as the basis of literary creation, interpretation, and history.

Placing Cohen's work among contemporary critics, mediating its applicability to present critical endeavors, and denominating the currency of its usefulness properly remain the task of critics who find his procedures persuasive and enlightening. Knowledgeable readers of English literature will recognize his contribution as anything but archival. Although it emerges at an earlier moment in the generation of a literary norm that is governed by competing forms of theory, its foundational components, the manner in which they are handled, and its ethical autobiographical features are persistently illuminating, and its long-lasting vision remains a reliable guide, especially useful today to a wide range of scholars practicing genre criticism.

Most of Cohen's published contributions to contemporary theory and literary history came in the form of the theoretical essay, of which he wrote and edited many. Cohen excelled at this short prose form, which he shaped to serve two purposes: to theorize, with deft particularity, critical concepts

in need of rethinking; and to teach those concepts, by reading and discussing them transactionally at the personal invitation of a colleague or former student. Consequently, he published few of these essays-as-scripts since they had served Cohen's intensely occasional, pedagogical purpose. He used these conceptualist essays to articulate his major contribution to historical studies, a theorization of genre devoted to describing and explaining two principal systems of generic phenomena: one synchronic, the other diachronic.

On the one hand, his theoretical essays explain how a literary period may be understood as a synchronic system—a hierarchy of generic and discursive forms and their shifting interrelations, from innovation through norm stabilization to norm weakening through forms losing their validity, to their supersession by an immediately succeeding system. In his essay “Historical Knowledge and Literary Understanding” (1978), Cohen refers to a work-in-progress that proposed to describe, theorize, and account for such a synchronic genre system, “a study of literary change from Milton to Keats.”⁴ This study Cohen never published as a book; rather it took the form of innovative essays, only some published by Cohen, that deal with the emergence, epistemology, exemplification, and supersession of what he called “the Augustan mode.”⁵ In occasional essays, he demonstrates and develops in detail this literary system of interrelated works, governed by didactic forms, and the manner in which it is supplanted by a generic system governed by lyric forms.

On the other hand, between 1985 and 1987, Cohen published five theoretical essays in which he refers to another project, a multi-period project “proposing a literary history based on a theory of genre and generic transformation.”⁶ Cohen had begun to formulate these issues around his process theory of genre in the 1970s when he began to envision a working model to test and apply what amounts to a theory of human behavior. These five essays announce his study of the Barnwell ballad that proposed to exemplify how a new literary history might be written as a diachronic history attentive to continuities and changes. This, too, became for him a work-in-progress. These essays, intended for publication as a book, trace, diachronically, the generic transformations of a single genre, the beguiled apprentice, within and across diverse generic systems. The creativity demonstrated by gender critics has been apparent for some time; but in recognizing, naming, describing, and explaining the cultural bases for the transformations of this genre, Cohen deals with gender issues

in a generic framework, reminding us of the creativity and self-revelation that belongs to genre criticism as well.

By 1984 he had completed a draft of much of the manuscript, as can be seen from the sudden emergence of the essays dealing with genre theory and the Barnwell ballad, including: "The Regeneration of Genre" (published here for the first time, but delivered in 1984), "Literary History and the Ballad of George Barnwel" (1985), "Afterword: The Problems of Generic Transformation" (1985), "Generic History as New Literary History" (1985), "History and Genre" (1986), and "The Fictions of Rhetoric" (1987); all of which featured Cohen's Barnwell project in order to expose some of the deficiencies of contemporary critical practice and to propose a satisfactory alternative. One of the three published articles that have not been collected among his theoretical essays is reissued here, adapted as part of the book's design.

It is in this book, rather than in his published essays, that Cohen reconceives, describes, analyzes, and demonstrates what a history of genre could look like and what a reconception of narrative implies. His published theoretical essays and the Barnwell history complement and shed light on each other. I have noted that "the lack of a comprehensive source to serve as an explanatory model of [Ralph Cohen's] concepts" might account for "the lack of widespread appropriation of his revisionary theory" (xix), and my recent collection of his essays was designed to constitute such a source. The present history of a genre, a more personal work, provides another. By "more personal" I mean not to suggest that Cohen considered scholarship impersonal. Indeed, in his "Note" to the journal's inaugural issue, he writes: "I have said that *New Literary History* was born out of the personal research in which each of the editors was involved. Its initiation is not, and could not be, impersonal. For us, personal belief and involvement is consistent with, even essential to, effective and reliable scholarship."⁷ Yet while clearly indicating the editor's role in connecting personal inquiries to public values, Cohen scarcely ever published in his own journal; and when he did publish essays—like most of the essays mentioned above that are based on or refer to the Barnwell manuscript—they were characteristically placed in a collection of essays or a European journal that constituted expressions of his friendship to the editors (sometimes former students), what we might call public inquiries connected to personal values.

The Barnwell book is a more private instance of the strategy by which Cohen connected personal inquiries with public values. In his introduction, he separates personal inquiries and public values in his writing: "I

shall not pursue the line of personal autobiography in terms of family, teachers, and background. Rather, I shall limit myself to those episodes which serve as intellectual autobiography." Withholding the personal from the reader is a private act which veils his recognition of the applicability, to his own personal romance, of the sexual saga of a virgin's seduction by an experienced woman. This recognition shaped his personal behavior and may account for his choice of the Barnwell story as the generic Proteus whose transformations he decided to treat, since other genre possibilities existed.

If this is not the precise corpus Ralph Cohen intended to contribute to the discipline of genre studies, such an important and useful history is nonetheless as reliable and convincing—indeed, as necessary—if edited with fidelity. Cohen's reticence in bringing the study to a close may have had something to do with the fact that he recognized the history he was writing was indeed closely affiliated with Addison's criticism and Percy's editing and their contributions to the genre. Their participation as critics in the genre's unfolding built in transformability of the genre by a theorist. Negotiating his own role in the resurgence of the genre, Cohen can be understood to enact the term *beguiled* in an antithetical sense to that fittingly applied to most previous instances of the genre—namely, a shift from Barnwell's being deluded by trickery and flattery based on the vulnerable pleasures of gender differences, to the genre critic's being charmingly diverted by the pleasant occupation of his own study based on the private pleasures of genre discrimination. Yet from time to time the genre critic makes public some of the pleasures in a published essay, exhibiting a pattern of proffering and withholding, thereby enhancing the pleasure in a kind of intellectual seduction of the reader or listener, whom he is beguiling to learn.

If we consider the Latin *apprendere* and the French verb *apprendre* from which *apprentice* is derived, we can note its dual sense, to *learn* and to *teach*. Consequently, Ralph Cohen—as both scholarly apprentice and intellectual enticer to his students and colleagues and to a scholarly journal and its international community—considered his study of the genre he was identifying as a pleasurable source of both learning and teaching. Hélène Cixous recognized Cohen's openness to difference as a "lucid, patient exercise of a great *force* of nonaggression," an openness she found exhibited by his journal, "a sort of *well-tempered* literary democracy."⁸ His paradoxical sense of teaching as learning, borne of the same openness to difference, led to a scholarship of gender neutrality.

Ralph Cohen continued to extend his insights and explore and test conclusions in the generic history he was unfolding, while simultaneously using his theoretical essays to address and think through ancillary issues of explaining change that arose in the literary domain of theory and gender relations. Accordingly, he used the diachronic project as he employed his theoretical essays to frame questions for himself and for the journal that needed broader theoretical attention. In this respect, his theoretical essays and the present book served its author dialectically with the issues of *New Literary History*, what Wolfgang Iser insightfully dubbed “Ralph Cohen’s book.”⁹ This “book” was a periodical series of essays challenging readers to rethink contemporary theoretical issues the editor was so prescient at apperceiving; in turn, collecting and editing the essays had an influence on the editor’s own literary history.

This “book” promised its readers to unfold on schedule. Yet the present book was unscheduled. And I must acknowledge that despite all the theoretical thinking the gestation of this book received, it stubbornly resisted being born. One reason for this was Ralph Cohen’s assuming an even greater scholarly burden in establishing, at the University of Virginia in 1990, the Commonwealth Center for Literary and Cultural Change, an organization that “requires a forum to share its inquiries with an audience beyond the actual participants”; those inquiries were received in *New Literary History*, which thereafter became a quarterly.¹⁰ In addition to that, after retirement from the University of Virginia, Cohen, rather than completing the Barnwell manuscript for publication, founded and directed the Cohen Center for the Study of Technological Humanism at James Madison University in 2014. This institutional conduct revealed his emerging interest in learning about cognitive studies, an interest that had enveloped his thinking over the last decade of his life. Explorations in cognition and its changes, probing the boundaries of the human in science and technology, interested him because, if his behavioral understanding of genre consciousness as a social technology might be shown, by way of neurological advances, to have a biological as well as a generic basis, a novel interdisciplinary study of human behavior, what he called “technological humanism,” might be established. At the close of his life he was once again engaged, as apprentice, in the pleasures of a visionary.

Aside from that, Ralph Cohen, an indefatigable master at the genre of revision, had more or less completed all but the conclusion to the book by 1990, and multiple drafts existed of each of the earlier chapters. There is no question but what the manuscript was unfinished and that it had

become more practical to release parts—or the thinking those parts had generated—in the form of theoretical essays that used the single genre he was describing as evidence and control. Besides, since revisions for Cohen constituted “a process of literary self-discovery,”¹¹ generating revisions preempted completion so long as attempts in different versions remained productive of literary self-knowledge. In this regard, he may have been averse to anything short of posthumous publication lest his product of self-discovery, upon becoming a product, be misunderstood as an act of self-advertisement, a posture he studiously avoided all his life.

Revising as textual correcting, collating, and assembling the chapters to his satisfaction simply for the sake of publication he recognized as a daunting task; and for the editor of *New Literary History* and the educator-at-large, as he became, it was too distracting a task, one that could perhaps better be left to an editorial apprentice. Indeed, establishing the most illuminating, most complete draft of each chapter became the pleasure of the editor. So editing a publishable version that would serve Cohen's vision was a test of the editor's conscientiousness and a wager that the result, whatever its shortcomings, would merit a reprieve from the reader. In deference to the author and in keeping with the genre, no editorial effort has been made to reduce repetitions. The book's two interventions are designed to interrupt the rhythm of the proceedings, change the perspective, rehearse the aim of the project, and take stock of its implications. Though by no means unconvoluted with Cohen's oeuvre, I have found these interruptions and redundancies illuminating because they sometimes replicate and thereby clarify conceptual dilemmas. Any inconsistencies belong to the editor's limitations.

Recognizing the prescience of Iser's comment, I can add that—alongside the journal Cohen founded and edited for forty years and his collected theoretical essays—we now have four of Cohen's major works of critical theory, only one of which, I might note, he completed.¹² Was completion necessary? In the case of an open genre, completion belongs to the unknowable future of possibilities, our inability to foretell the actualizations of generic history. The genre the critic is rewriting cannot be completed, of course, by the critic, but Cohen's instance of the genre, his analyzing and explaining the genre's interrelations and the social provocations and implications, is done—though unfinished. Treating acts of beguilement and victimization in acts of critical theory and literary history, Cohen converts the received corruption of innocence and the subjugation of women that are characteristic of versions of the genre into his personal

reworking of the gender of literary history, the public analogue of which he pursued in his journal. The issues Cohen pursued in *New Literary History*, and the thinkers he selected to publish, reveal his cognizance of their work and serve as public syllabi of his studies and of the issues and courses he was teaching.

Cohen's vision was of an inclusive literary history, a multi-voiced endeavor, aimed at reconceiving historical knowledge and regenerating literary studies, a visionary invitation open to all humanistic scholarship, an enterprise that promises to be much less narrowly conceived than was customary in the twentieth century. In another sense, it is clear from the Barnwell manuscript and from the related essays he published that Cohen wrote as if he expected to finish the book and convert his work-in-progress, born out of the personal research of an apprenticing historian, into a model for writing the history of a genre.¹³ With respect to any beguiling pleasures for the author, a work-as-process applies only to the genre critic's lifetime. However, from the reader's standpoint, even if finished with by the author, the same unfinished work-as-product, may beguile literary historians well beyond.

The multiple genres that belong to the history of the Barnwell plot reveal, Cohen notes, "the need to undo history by redoing it in a different genre. And they demonstrate that no undoing can proceed without some continuous doing. Genre members enact the process by which a genre undergoes change so that my own chapters are themselves a contribution to literary history and critical theory." Is the disappearance of Barnwell as a cultural force analogous to the disappearance of sonnet narratives in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? Is this the dissipation of a cultural force? Or is it another systemic transformation, a rejuvenation of that force, as the narrative is redeemed by way of a novel combination of history and theory? What Cohen has modeled in this study of genre is a historical procedure to study all literary texts, all texts worthy of study, as a family of forms and their shifting connections and transformations.

Nevertheless, continuity persists. Consider the possibility that Cohen's history of the beguiled apprentice amounts to its renewal, its reformulated function in a new norm in which literary history and genre criticism provide the epistemological conditions for its continuance. In his reinvigoration of the genre, the critic becomes a rebooted apprentice to a scholarly discipline, and the actualization of literary history as a transformation of genres becomes possible. Unless more fiction writers, filmmakers, or television screenwriters see the emergent possibilities of the beguiled

apprentice for the twenty-first century, contemporary genre critics may be responsible for this particular history's continued theoretical presence.¹⁴ In any case, with Cohen's example, the horizon of expectation is open for a new group of *literary* genres whose histories can now be created. For these critics, at the very least, one aspect of that continuity is the joy to be taken in the reading, the analysis, the explanations of change. After all, as Iser has reminded us, the work of completing the text has always belonged to the reader. Although rhetorical arguments did not persuade Cohen to complete and publish the sequestered manuscript, the extraordinary insights and implications of his study generated the editor's confidence to deliver these pages to readers with the conviction that a new literary history becomes its own form of persuasion.

Charlottesville, VA

John L. Rowlett

NOTES

1. Ralph Cohen, "The Origins of a Genre: Descriptive Poetry" and "Literary Theory as a Genre," *Genre Theory and Historical Change: Theoretical Essays of Ralph Cohen*, ed. John L. Rowlett (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2017), 36–49 and 50–67.
2. Ralph Cohen, "Introduction," *New Literary History* 34, no. 2 (2003): v.
3. Ralph Cohen, "Introduction: Notes Toward a Generic Reconstitution of Literary Study," *New Literary History* 34, no. 3 (2003): v–xvi.
4. "Historical Knowledge and Literary Understanding," *Genre Theory and Historical Change*, 221.
5. "The Augustan Mode in English Poetry," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 1, no. 1 (1967): 3–32. This essay and "Historical Knowledge and Literary Understanding," should be considered in conjunction with Cohen, "On the Interrelations of Eighteenth-Century Literary Forms," "The Origins of a Genre: Descriptive Poetry," "Innovation and Variation: Literary Change and Georgic Poetry," and "Some Thoughts on the Problems of Literary Change 1750–1800," all but for "The Augustan Mode," collected in Rowlett. In addition, see Ralph Cohen, "On the Presuppositions of Literary Periods," *New Literary History* 50, no. 1 (2019): 113–27; and Rowlett, "Ralph Cohen on Literary Periods: Afterword as Foreword," *New Literary History* 50, no. 1 (2019): 129–39.
6. "Literary History and the Ballad of George Barnwel," in *Augustan Studies in honor of Irvin Ehrenpreis*, ed. Douglas Lane Patey and Timothy Keegan (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1985), 13–31; 14.

7. Ralph Cohen, "A Note on *New Literary History*," *New Literary History* 1, no. 1 (1969): 6.
8. Hélène Cixous, "Tribute to Ralph Cohen," *New Literary History* 40, no. 4 (2009): 751; Cixous's italics.
9. Wolfgang Iser, "Twenty-five Years *New Literary History*: A Tribute to Ralph Cohen," *New Literary History* 25, no. 4 (1994): 738.
10. Ralph Cohen, "Introduction," *New Literary History* 21, no. 4 (1990): 777.
11. Cohen, *The Art of Discrimination: Thomson's The Seasons and the Language of Criticism* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1964), 17. Cohen goes on to note that "this [Augustan] concept of 'process' as a form of criticism identified 'criticism' with the poet's literary self-knowledge" (18). So it was with Cohen's revisions of the literary history he was writing, and he privately discovered his individuality within this process.
12. I should note that since interpretation is a genre, Cohen had already written the partial history of a genre in his critical theory, *The Art of Discrimination*, by focusing his narrative of continuity and discontinuity on an "analysis of critical statements and critical activity, spanning more than two hundred years, with regard to a single poem" (3). As his theory of change and of genre criticism developed, Cohen came to see every act of literary writing—not simply that of criticism—as constituting interpretation, or, more precisely, as a genre member articulating an interpretive response, whether particular or general, to the predecessor genre.

In delivering his own interpretation of the poem in *The Unfolding of The Seasons* (1970), Cohen was responsible for an innovative mutation in the critical reception of the poem. At the same time, he revealed the value and necessity of a literary history that—unlike new critical readings of the poem—set systematic (Augustan) limits on any analysis, understanding, and explanation of the poem as such. After his interpretation of that poem, he returned his attention to *literary* theory, with a particular interest in theorizing genre as a reformulation of a linguistic-based concept of literary criticism, or critical practice, that had been less capacious and more suited to explanations of particular poems.

13. In December 1984, Cohen delivered a presentation at the meetings of the Modern Language Association that he called "Examples of a New Literary History." Among the auditors was Paul Zimmer, Director of the University of Iowa Press, who, "looking for promising work," surmised that Cohen's paper might be part of a book-length manuscript. In a letter dated January 15, 1985, Zimmer invited Cohen to consider Iowa's publishing his manuscript. In response, Cohen replied, January 23, 1985: "my presentation ... is part of a book that I am writing which deals with genre, narrative, and history. In fact, I hope to complete the book by September 1985." Paul

Zimmer was not the sole editor Cohen disappointed by withholding this manuscript for more than thirty years.

14. The genre was rewritten in the twentieth century as *The Beguiled* (1966), Thomas Cullinan's Civil War novel of a wounded Union soldier recuperating at a southern all-girls boarding school. It was subsequently transformed into a southern gothic film by Don Siegel (1971). Sofia Coppola (2017) flips the script, transforming Siegel's southern gothic into a feminist parody, with teenage Alicia as apprentice tease and McBurney as emasculated male. Cohen's reconceptualization of the beguiled apprentice as literary history and Siegel's transformation of the genre into a film indicate the rhizomatic directions a genre can take. Cohen's literary history and the parody of Siegel's film by Coppola are both indicative of a shift in generic systems.

The television series *The Apprentice* and *The Celebrity Apprentice* hold provocative possibilities for enterprising and creative interpreters.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The scholarship that traces the history of a genre over four centuries could not have been accomplished without the prodigious help Ralph Cohen received from the librarians he came to so rely upon. Cohen spent most of his summers of the 1970s and 1980s in the British Museum gathering instances of the Barnwell genre, and to this end he was forever appreciative of their unflagging contributions. I regret that I did not know these librarians and that, without Ralph's personal thanks in print, they must remain nameless in this acknowledgment of their invaluable services.

Also deserving of special appreciation are the amanuenses, three of whom I know well, who surrendered countless hours typing, then later keyboarding, what must surely have seemed an endless manuscript. Barbara Smith and Charlotte Bowen, serving successively as Assistants to the Editor of *New Literary History*, contributed many pages to the proliferating manuscript in the early stages; and Mollie Washburne, now Managing Editor of *New Literary History*, continued producing rewritten versions of the manuscript and confides, having recently welcomed her first grandchild, that she no longer wants to talk about "ole George Barnwell, who was undone by a strumpet." I'm grateful to Mollie for getting to me updated versions of chapters she saved that were not among the manuscript files.

Ralph's and my colleagues who encouraged this undertaking were many. I must thank, in particular, Jeffrey Plank, whose attentive readings were as precise as they were tireless. Cliff Siskin, Jerry McGann, Rita Felski, Chip Tucker, Eddie Tomarken, and Michael Prince each played an important role in encouraging my efforts. Those who knew of my

ambition were as skeptical as I that it would come to fruition. Considering how pleased they will no doubt be to read a demonstration of Ralph's generic criticism, I feel emboldened to seek their leniency for the editorial crime of sending forth something they may feel Ralph's demanding insistence on getting it right withheld.

I owe special thanks to Cliff Siskin and Anne Mellor, editors of Palgrave Studies in the Enlightenment, Romanticism and Cultures of Print, who have made this editorial collaboration uncommonly insightful, and to Molly Beck, Senior Editor for Literature, and Jack Heeney, Editorial Assistant, at Palgrave Macmillan for executing seamlessly the book's production. This book also profited from the close reading of a knowledgeable literary scholar who served as an astute external reader. The reader's discerning comments articulating the importance of this publishing event suggest a theoretical framing of Cohen's generic transformations that would argue, shifting emphasis, "not ... for a literary *history* but ... for a *literary history*, one that recognizes the historical dynamics and rhythms of forms as more than just sociological epiphenomena." Indeed, advocates and represents.

All of the papers making up the manuscript of this book have been housed in the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia, under the able supervision of University Archivist, Lauren Zuchowski Longwell. Once catalogued, they will be accessible to those wishing to consult the material from which this book has taken shape, as well as letters pertaining to its production and publication. On behalf of future scholars who will benefit from her curatorial care, I thank Lauren.

Over forty-five extraordinary years, Abbie has become all too accustomed to receiving quiet notes of gratitude. She wouldn't have it any other way. Even so, I can't but declare that her abiding love, keen intellect, sense of moderation, and discerning taste have been—like a second nature—richly enabling without my acknowledging it.

Part of Chap. 2 appeared as "Literary History and the Ballad of George Barnwel" in *Augustan Studies: Essays in Honor of Irvin Ehrenpreis*, ed. Douglas Lane Patey and Timothy Keegan (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1985). It is here reprinted with permission of Associated University Presses. Chapter 9 appeared in a somewhat different iteration as "Afterword: The Problems of Generic Transformation," in *Romance: Generic Transformation from Chrétien de Troyes to Cervantes*, ed. Kevin Brownlee and Marina Scordilis Brownlee (Hanover, NH: Univ. Press of

New England, 1985), 265–80. Parts of Chap. 12 appeared as “The Fictions of Rhetoric,” in *The History and Philosophy of Rhetoric and Political Discourse: Volume II*, ed. Kenneth W. Thompson (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987). Edited versions of the latter two are here reprinted with permission of the publishers. The unpublished conclusion, adapted for the book, was delivered in October 1984 as part of the Patten Lectures at the University of Indiana.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ralph Cohen (1917–2016), among the most eminent critical thinkers and educators of his time, achieved international distinction as scholar and editor and as classroom teacher and colleague. *New Literary History*, the award-winning journal of theory and interpretation that he founded at the University of Virginia in 1969 and edited for forty years, was a new type of learned journal that introduced the theoretical essay into literary studies, thereby shaping and normalizing the role of theory in writing creatively about literary history and cultural problems. He extended these activist procedures throughout the modern university by initiating, at the University of Virginia, an interdisciplinary research center, the Commonwealth Center for Literary and Cultural Change (1988–1995), which had as its primary aim, he wrote, “the study of change and continuity in individuals and institutions in the arts, humanities, sciences, and social sciences.” Cohen’s historical scholarship was centered on genres of the British Enlightenment, and his dissertation on Hume’s critical theory and his own book of critical theory, *The Art of Discrimination: Thomson’s The Seasons and the Language of Criticism* (1964), were forerunners of his essays on contemporary history and genre theory. The present book stands as the culmination of a brilliant career that opens new horizons on the future of genre criticism and literary history.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

John L. Rowlett received his doctorate in literary studies from the University of Virginia where he was a student of Ralph Cohen's. He served as Program Director of the Commonwealth Center for Literary and Cultural Change at the University of Virginia and as Advisory Editor of *New Literary History*. He edited *Genre Theory and Historical Change: Theoretical Essays of Ralph Cohen* (2017) and is writing about Cohen's literary thinking.



Autobiographical Introduction

During the 1970s I began to write a book that addressed itself to the question, “Why do writers write in particular genres?” Why do writers choose to write a tragedy, a novel, a critical essay, a comedy, a sonnet sequence? Was there something about a genre that connected the writing of a tragedy or other genre with a new view of human experience? What sense would it make then to suggest that every time a writer like Virginia Woolf or Susan Sontag changed the genre in which she wrote, she changed the worldview she held? If the genre did not express a worldview, did this mean that our assumption that each text is its own world is a redundant conception—meaning no more than that each text is what it is?

I want in this introduction to explain how I came to think my question an important one and to indicate the kind of problems it led me to consider. I shall not pursue the line of personal autobiography in terms of family, teachers, and background. Rather, I shall limit myself to those episodes which serve as intellectual autobiography. Before I conclude I shall want to explain my choice of writing this introduction as autobiography and literary theory and how such choice relates to the theory of genre I came to hold. It will, I hope, become apparent that some of our distinctions between public and private explanations need to be erased and that you will recognize in my linkages some of your own generic procedures.

The question that I posed as a beginning was not, of course, a beginning. Somewhere in the midst of my considerations about genre the question began to assert itself: How and why do writers, given a single narrative, treat it in different genres—narratives of Prometheus, Antigone, Samson, Jesus, Mary, Faust, Queen Elizabeth, Robin Hood, and so forth? What role, if any, does genre play in narration? No text I know of can be treated as though it is mono-vocal; they are all multivocal. Could a theory of genre then assume textual, multivocality as a given? What would such a theory be and why would I want it? In other words, the question with which I began my inquiry was not one question but many. Yet the critics with whom I discussed these inquiries seemed to have only one reply. It appeared that to utter the word “genre” was to preemptively invalidate any inquiry one was to pursue. Genre theory was one siren song that critics had no trouble disregarding.

Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man and many non-deconstructive critics, including Michel Foucault, sought to deny the usefulness of genre theory for literary study. It is, of course, always possible to make a virtue of resisting fashion, as Stanley Fish does, and insist on one’s conservatism. But resisting or affirming fashion is not of interest to me. I sought then, as I seek in this book, to understand what texts are and what parts they play in our lives. Surely, up to the mid-twentieth century the identification of texts as “kinds” or “genres” was taken for granted by most critics, even though the concept of “genre” underwent many changes from the time it came to be used as an explanatory device by Greek rhetoricians up to and including the writings of R. S. Crane and Kenneth Burke.

Of course, not all of our contemporary theoreticians—Russian Formalists and Marxists—are prepared to abandon genre. Fredric Jameson, who is probably our most persuasive Marxist literary theorist, sought to retain a genre theory because it permitted him, for example, to reveal the historical changes from realism to modernism in the genre “novel” and to relate genre to developments in capitalist society. Genre theory served to support his belief in a homology between literary structure and economic structure. Another reason for his support of a genre theory was the tradition, initially developed by the Russian formalists and continued by the Prague structuralists, that genres formed hierarchies. Such hierarchies with their dominant genres were used by the formalists to explain the “evolution” of literary history. In our time, a belated formalist, Tzvetan Todorov, has applied a generic view to the study of the “fantastic” and has been pursuing an inquiry into the origin of genres.

It became clear to me that this major contemporary disagreement on genre theory was not a matter of taking sides, of joining one or another of the theoretical claimants. Rather, it appeared at first a disagreement about the area to be covered. Those critics who sought to explain *historical* continuities and discontinuities frequently did so on grounds that were identified with a historical concept no longer producing “effective history,” in Foucault’s term—a historical concept that could not cope with contemporary, dispersed writing. Foucault argued that genre theories were constituted to explain writings more stable than contemporary texts. Thus, to apply such genre theories to contemporary writing was anachronistic as well as inappropriate. Of course, any genre theory that could not apply to contemporary writing would indeed be of little use to me as an explanatory procedure.

What was taking place in contemporary writing, not merely in contemporary literary writing, was noticed by scholars in many disciplines. Anthropologists like Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Mary Douglas, Victor Turner, and Clifford Geertz found in literary study tools and procedures for describing an interpreting behavior in non-industrialized societies. The sociologist Erving Goffman found in “frame analysis” a genre procedure for dealing with everyday life. Cultural geographers found in literary study the basis for analyzing the function of cultural space. The mixing of genres clearly implied multiple strategies in dealing with human behavior. Geertz called this phenomenon the “blurring” of genres, assuming, mistakenly, that this was a new phenomenon in genre theory. Referring to what he called “blurred genres,” Geertz wrote the following:

This genre blurring is more than just a matter of Harry Houdini or Richard Nixon turning up as characters in novels or of midwestern murder sprees described as though a gothic romancer had imagined them. It is philosophical inquiries looking like literary criticism (think of Stanley Cavell on Beckett or Thoreau, Sartre on Flaubert), scientific discussions looking like belles lettres *morceaux* (Lewis Thomas, Loren Eiseley), baroque fantasies presented as deadpan empirical observations (Borges, Barthelme), histories that consist of equations and tables or law court testimony (Fogel and Engerman, *Le Roi Ladurie*), documentaries that read like true confessions (Mailer), parables posing as ethnographies (Castaneda), theoretical treatises set out as travelogues (Levi-Strauss), ideological arguments cast as historiographical inquiries (Edward Said), and so on.¹