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History of Narrative Genres after Foucault

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Thomas Kuhn and Michel Foucault have explored the role played by epistemological paradigms in shaping and limiting how the world is understood and what can count as true at different times. Kuhn took the natural sciences as his subject, while Foucault focused on the social sciences. In this essay I propose to explore the existence and nature of cultural paradigms whose truth claims are less stringent than those made in the sciences, and to examine in particular the close relation between cultural paradigms and genres, including the significance of transformations within and between genres.

The initial accounts of scientific paradigms and social-scientific epistemes provided by Kuhn and Foucault assert their singleness and exclusivity, and thus seem to stand in strong contrast to the multiplicity of paradigms in the cultural field. For a number of such cultural paradigms can and typically do coexist--in some tension with each other, and possessing a greater or lesser authority and persuasiveness. In fact, both Kuhn and Foucault moved away from their early and extreme assertions of the uniqueness of dominant paradigms, even in the natural sciences and social sciences. Moreover, they recognized either the multiplicity of artistic schools or the transitional nature of artistic works and genres.

Kuhn had asserted the absence of competing paradigms in his earlier account, and even his later revision lays emphasis on

"the relative scarcity of competing schools in the developed sciences." ¹ **[End Page 267]** There tends to be only one such school in a particular field at any time, because it must provide the framework and rationale for problem-solving by a limited and sometimes small scientific community. On the other hand, a multiplicity of available schools characterizes a field before it reaches the stage of a normal science, and competing paradigms will find adherents during a period of scientific revolution as well. In such a revolutionary period, the operations of normal science are suspended until a consensus develops among those in the field in favor of an alternate paradigm.

Kuhn points out that both the social sciences and the arts stand outside this process--the arts especially, because, unlike the sciences, they are not problem-solving activities. In philosophy and the arts, he writes, "there are always competing schools, each of which constantly questions the very foundations of the others" (pp. 162-163), and each of which makes use of a number of exemplars at any one time (p. 167). Authors of narrative, to take

another example, will typically not write in accordance with a single cultural paradigm because their activity does not consist primarily of identifying and solving problems, as it does for scientists. There will thus be a number of schools of narrative at a given time, many of them residual. The appearance of a new genre of narrative may indicate an emerging cultural formation, one that might later come to dominance; similarly, the reappearance of a genre in an altered or hybrid form may reveal a shift of paradigms; and conversely, the fading of a genre from prominence may indicate the passing of a cultural paradigm.

Like Kuhn, Foucault begins by asserting that an episteme is exclusive, unique, and determining. In *The Order of Things*, he famously writes that, "in any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one *episteme* that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge." ² Moreover, in his account of the epistemes governing the social sciences from the Renaissance to modern times, discontinuity plays as great a role as in Kuhn's account, perhaps even greater. ³ The Renaissance and classical epistemes in *The Order of [End Page 268] Things* are, like Kuhn's paradigms, incommensurable. There is no progression from one to the other, and Foucault provides or suggests no possible causes for the rupture he describes; nor does he explore stages by which this transformation was accomplished. ⁴ It is striking, therefore, that he does give a painstaking and elaborate account of the stages by which the classical was itself transformed into the modern episteme between 1775 and 1825, noting stages and middle grounds between the two, and thus diminishing the discontinuity involved in this shift (pp. 217-300).

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault departs from some of the more uncompromising positions he takes in *The Order of Things*. Most significantly, in the later work he does not regard one discursive practice or positivity as defining the conditions of knowledge for all areas throughout a culture at any one time, nor does he insist on a sudden, simultaneous, and discontinuous transformation of all such practices from an earlier to a later state. Rather, different discursive formations undergo similar transformations at different times, sometimes separated by a half-century or more. ⁵ In this later conception, an epistemic metamorphosis is not "a sort of great drift that carries with it all discursive formations at once" (p. 175). Because Foucault now observes "fragmented shifts" that take place in one area or field but not another, his archaeology "disarticulates the synchrony of breaks" (p. 176). In other words, continuous elements persist through the breaks and transformations that occur. Thus, elements of multiple and diverse epistemological formations coexist at any time; the field of knowledge is not total or single. ⁶ This archaeological [End Page 269] view of unevenly shifting discursive practices bears a strong resemblance to the understanding of the nonsimultaneous shifts in social and cultural formation that Marx called "uneven development."

It is also significant that, although Foucault remains committed to tracing transformations in systems of thought, in later works such as the second and third volumes of the *History of Sexuality*, he departs from his earlier polemical insistence on the radical discontinuity between epistemes and their

all-encompassing singularity. Instead, in the narrative of the *History of Sexuality*, he discerns in the course of generations, even centuries, a gradual shift away from a regimen for the use of pleasures in the classical Greek world to an anxiety in the early Roman empire about the possibly harmful consequences of pleasure. He places more emphasis in these later works on problematizing than on archaeological analysis, and focuses on recasting and inverting accepted historical accounts. The form taken by such overturnings of previous perspectives varies from *Discipline and Punish* to the *History of Sexuality* and the lectures on governmentality, but it does not depend on sudden, radical disjunctures between totalizing epistemes. For example, in the lectures on governmentality, Foucault analyzes a tradition of anti-Machiavellian thinking and writing that extends with discernible continuity from the mid-sixteenth to the late eighteenth century--in other words, across the break between the Renaissance and classical epistemic formations that is drawn so sharply in *The Order of Things*. ⁷

In his writings on literature, Foucault indicates, as Kuhn also does, that literature and the arts often stand somewhat outside the epistemic constraints of their time. For example, "*Don Quixote* is the first modern work of literature" (*OT*, p. 48) because it operates by means of representation, identities, and differences, and uses Quixote's madness as a figure for the previous epistemic regime based on resemblances and similitudes. But, we might add, the knight-errant is also the hero of the narrative, and especially in the second part a figure of some pathos, indicating a doubly ironic sympathy of the work with his enchanted mental world. ⁸ The narrative thus has a foot in each way of understanding the world. In addition, *Don Quixote* is generally regarded as the first modern novel, **[End Page 270]** and it is fitting and typical, I suggest, that the appearance of this new genre serves as an index for a transformation between cultural paradigms. ⁹

Foucault's unique discussion of a literary genre also asserts the connection between that genre and a paradigm of knowledge. In "Language to Infinity," written between *Madness and Civilization* and *The Order of Things*, he argues that as the Gothic novel comes into existence in the late eighteenth century, it expresses for the first time a distinctively modern desire to say the unsayable and to write the inexpressible--not only the mad, but also the unlimited under the guise of the morbid, the sexual, and the violent. ¹⁰ Although Foucault generally focuses on the texts of particular authors, he sees that elements of different paradigms come into conjunction both in individual literary works and in genres as well, and that emerging ways of thought can find expression alongside elements of older forms on the thresholds between paradigms.

Thus, even in the social sciences and the natural sciences, where some of their formulations were quite restrictive, the theories of Foucault and Kuhn allow for the possible coexistence of different paradigms--not only among different fields, but also within a given practice during cultural transformations or scientific revolutions. The flexible epistemic status of narratives as well as of other nonscientific and artistic works produces a still greater multiplicity among cultural paradigms than in either kind of science, so that typically a number of overlapping and contradictory paradigms can be discerned in competition with

each other at any cultural moment. ¹¹ **[End Page 271]**

We have already noted that Foucault's archaeological account of asynchronous transformations in different discursive formations parallels Marx's account of uneven development. For Marx, the replacement of an earlier form of social life by a later one on which it has become a constraint "takes place only very slowly; the various stages and interests are never completely overcome, but only subordinated to the prevailing interest and trail along beside the latter for centuries afterwards." ¹² The persistence of which Marx speaks here does not usually occur in the sciences: because of the strong epistemological claim they make, when one paradigm in the natural sciences is replaced by another, the hypotheses and terms of the first generally drop out of use, at least among scientists in the field (although they may persist for centuries as popular beliefs and as a basis for social practices). But when artistic or narrative practices are superseded by others, they are not dropped entirely from textbooks, schools, markets, and other institutions; rather, precisely because they do not make exclusive claims to truth, they continue to find practitioners and an audience, even as forms that are not in close accord with the latest or dominant formation or paradigm. ¹³

Thus, of the residual, dominant, and emerging cultural forms of which Raymond Williams writes, survivals from past times will be most numerous at any cultural moment; ¹⁴ there will be one dominant, or two struggling to be so; and, of emerging formations, there will be only one or two, with few (though sometimes prominent) exponents. We might also observe that the time when a particular paradigm dominates in most arts and genres may be analogous to a time of normal science in Kuhn's theory, and that those times in which residual and emerging paradigms struggle with each other but none exercises a persuasive dominance may be comparable to times of scientific revolution in Kuhn or of epistemic transformation in Foucault.

In literature, the appearance of a new genre can indicate the recent or coming formation of a new cultural paradigm. We have already **[End Page 272]** seen that Foucault considers this to be the case when he takes *Don Quixote* as establishing an early satiric break with the mental world of Renaissance romance, or sees the Gothic as an anticipatory instance of modern literary attempts to break through the limits of language. Moreover, just as *Don Quixote* relies on elements of the Renaissance paradigm even in repudiating and mocking it, evincing some nostalgia for the signifying richness of such a world, so do the early Gothic novels make use of residual elements, such as the presence of the supernatural from medieval and Renaissance romance, and a desire to bring secrets to light from the Enlightenment (although both are subordinated in this genre to the drive toward extremes of sex and violence). One might argue that all genres are made up in such ways of multiple, discordant, and nonsynchronous elements. Because these hybrid elements in genres have parallels among the elements in cultural formations, not only can the appearance of a genre anticipate a cultural formation, but its duration can also register the persistence, or indicate the passing from dominance, of a larger formation.

The view of genres proposed here has much in common with Fredric Jameson's conception of genres and their history in *The Political Unconscious*. For Jameson, as a given society at any moment is shaped not by one but by many forms of production, including vestiges and anticipatory tendencies, so texts are shaped by a comparable variety of modes of cultural production at work at any one time. ¹⁵ As he sees it, when a genre emerges in its "strong" form, it expresses an ideological message, a symbolic resolution of a historical contradiction (p. 117). This ideology of the form persists into later, more complex and hybrid structures as a sedimented layer deposited by the conditions of the earlier time (p. 141). Thus, in the narratives he analyzes, "distinct and sedimented types of generic discourse" constitute "the 'raw materials' on which [later forms such as] the novel as a process must work" (p. 144). Jameson's argument might be revised and extended by including new and emerging genres in this process of hybridization. The idea that genres emerge in a "strong" or unmixed form cuts new genres off from earlier cultural history. ¹⁶ In my view, all genres are formed by adapting elements of **[End Page 273]** other, earlier forms and working them into a distinctive whole that is appropriate or useful for the time in which they appear.

Some of the formulations of Mikhail Bakhtin also usefully support and supplement the view of genres proposed here. Like Jameson, Bakhtin emphasizes the heterogeneous elements that make up individual texts--in particular, the layering or sedimentation by means of which languages from different times can combine to produce their distinctively composite narratives: "At any given moment, languages of various epochs and periods of socio-ideological life cohabit with one another. . . . [The language of prose] represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between different epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, [and] between tendencies, schools, circles, and so forth." ¹⁷ Bakhtin contrasts prose narrative with lyric poetry, which, as he understands it, expresses a single point of view and a single pathos in an elevated style. Prose and narrative, on the other hand, deploy in dialogical confrontation with each other the diverse languages of the street, shop, and office, of journalism, popular novels, and official discourses, along with the divergent and opposed interests and views of the world that all these languages express. Prose narratives capture and shape deposits and survivals from earlier periods, although they are often in conflict with the dominant languages of the present.

Bakhtin also sees genres not as a series of formal conventions, but as ways of conceiving the world: "Every genre has its own orientation in life, with reference to its events, problems, etc. . . . We may say that every genre has its methods and means of seeing and conceptualizing reality." ¹⁸ Such a conception of genre plays a significant role throughout Bakhtin's writings, from the essay on chronotopes and the study of the *Bildungsroman* to the late additional chapter on carnivalesque genres in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. ¹⁹ From this perspective, genres within cultural paradigms may be considered as roughly comparable to theories or hypotheses within scientific paradigms. Genres and theories both shape a view of the world and an

approach to problems that are authorized by the paradigm in effect; **[End Page 274]** genre and theory in turn both express and make concrete the paradigm itself. A paradigm consists of a way of authorizing, shaping, and limiting research in the sciences, knowledge production in the social sciences, or cultural work outside the sciences; and a genre, like a hypothesis, addresses a problem or question and conceives a way of managing it, if not of solving it.

The approach suggested here, then, would consist of an attempt to articulate an understanding of literary works and genres as sedimentary composites made up of earlier generic layers--a view close to Jameson's--on a framework of cultural paradigms adapted from the epistemological and scientific paradigms of Foucault and Kuhn. This approach makes it possible to answer many of the objections that have been raised to Foucault's early conception of epistemological paradigms. He has been charged, for example, with failing to account for what has been called epistemic lag: the effective appearance of paradigms that are holdovers or anticipations not in accord with a predominant paradigm. ²⁰ However, acknowledging the overlapping coexistence of multiple paradigms at any cultural moment (and the hybridity of most narratives and other literary works) provides a way of explaining such epistemic or cultural lags. Indeed, the exceptional and limiting case would be the work that belongs exclusively to one pure genre, or the moment when a single paradigm would determine without challenge the shape of all cultural productions. At the same time, the category of the paradigm remains useful as a way of designating frameworks of understanding or of cultural production that may vary in the extent to which they affect thought or expression: they may operate tacitly and unconsciously for some, as shaping a priori categories; while for others they may exercise a more limited hold, and their workings may be partly conscious because chosen from among other possibilities. Cultural paradigms would thus function on the border between inescapable, unconscious categories and conscious thought. ²¹

Certain genres--in particular, certain narrative forms--possess features that give them an affinity with cultural paradigms, although there is not a one-to-one correspondence between paradigms and genres. ²² Rather, a single paradigm may find useful analogues among **[End Page 275]** several genres; and conversely, a particular genre may typify more than one paradigm. For example, both satire and secret histories typify the skeptical paradigm of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; conversely, narrative satire itself characterizes not only that earlier paradigm but also the modernist paradigm of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is thus possible to analyze a succession of forms without regarding it as either constituting a progressive history or embodying an evolution toward increasing complexity. As different forms gain and lose prominence, they take their place in a sequence of challenges, displacements, struggles, and accommodations--not a cumulative accomplishment. In fact, exploring the waning or subsiding of a form may prove to be as productive as studying its early emergence, or the time of its persistence as a culturally useful or dominant artifact. Later manifestations of a form have a period of prominence and usefulness before they too give way to other generic configurations.

It may be that noncanonical forms such as the almanac stand in a closer relation to a particular cultural paradigm than do canonical forms; changes in popular genres that are formally conservative stand out clearly and signal shifts in the expectations, needs, or assumptions of their readers. Such changes will thus often indicate shifts within paradigms. Throughout his work, Foucault mostly discussed writings in intellectual and political history and the history of the social sciences (e.g., Petty, Turgot, Condillac, Bentham, Cuvier). However, popular genres accomplish cultural work alongside the intellectual products of high culture. Although popular works often confirm what is conventional and assumed in a cultural moment, they can also express contestatory energies that may indicate or help initiate transformations later to be picked up in high culture.

Thus, for example, an innovative satiric almanac became established in the first years of the Restoration and appeared annually into the nineteenth century; however, through the eighteenth century, its irreverent leveling of accepted cultural hierarchies became weaker and was replaced by statements of proverbial wisdom and short essays that recommended saving and hard work. Anarchic satire gave way to prudential calculations, until by the end of the century it was impossible to distinguish the satiric from the straightforward almanacs. In a shift that is closely associated with a shift in cultural paradigms, the ambiguities and ambivalence of **[End Page 276]** satire were transformed into clear affirmations of commerce, nation, and empire. [23](#)

If the history of the satiric almanac provides an instance of a transformation *within* a genre, other histories establish linkages that indicate transformations *between* genres. Satire can again provide a starting point--specifically--the satiric critique of civilization articulated by the Houyhnhnm in the fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels*. In his first and second discourses, Rousseau expresses the same critique of civilization, but he does so in his own voice, without the use of irony, satire, or a persona. His avoidance of mediating voices and forms is in accord with a paradigm based on the transparent representation of clear certainties. As a means of correcting the ills he diagnoses in the discourses, Rousseau turns to rethink the education of the individual, and in *Émile* he writes a pedagogical treatise that mutates into a novel. By thus producing a proto-*Bildungsroman*, he writes an anticipatory instance of the narrative form that may be most clearly related to an early-nineteenth-century paradigm concerned with organic growth and the cultivation of internal potential both by individuals and by peoples. [24](#) In addition, examining this history of generic transformations reveals the emergence of disciplinary methods in *Émile* and in earlier eighteenth-century narratives of relations between tutors and their pupils. This observation enables us to place the shift described in *Discipline and Punish* somewhat earlier than Foucault does there--that is, well within the cultural paradigm of the classical age described in *The Order of Things*.

Thus, in a study of the relation of narrative genres to cultural paradigms, one may employ and extend the approaches of the later Foucault--recognizing the multiplicity of cultural formations and the significance of popular genres--without leaving behind entirely the insights of the earlier Foucault.

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1. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 209. (Further references to this work appear parenthetically in the text.)

2. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 168. (Further references to this work appear parenthetically in the text.)

3. Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow explore pertinent parallels and divergences between the thought of Kuhn and Foucault at a number of points in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), esp. pp. 60, 69-70, 76-78, 198-200. They argue that Kuhn's notion of the paradigm as exemplar offers explanatory advantages that Foucault's notion of the episteme does not. They also maintain that beginning with *Discipline and Punish* Foucault himself realizes these advantages by analyzing paradigms in relation to social practice, and not only in relation to rules of discursive formation.

4. J. G. Merquior considers a series of ways in which Kuhn's paradigms and Foucault's epistemes resemble and diverge from each other, in *Foucault* (London: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 36-38. He points out, for example, that Foucault's epistemes exist below the level of consciousness, whereas Kuhn's paradigms are more accessible to consciousness and more closely resemble theories. On the other hand, both a paradigm and an episteme may be abandoned, not on the basis of an overarching standard of evidence or rationality, but because of cultural shifts or transformations.

5. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 175. (Further references to this work appear parenthetically in the text.)

6. Making particular reference to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Roger Chartier observes that Foucault does not present the French Revolution as "a time of a total and global rupture reorganizing all intellectual disciplines, discourses, and practices" ("The Chimera of the Origin: Archaeology, Cultural History, and the French Revolution," in *Foucault and the Writing of History*, ed. Jan Goldstein [Oxford: Blackwell, 1994], pp. 177-178).

7. Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 87-104.

8. I discuss the importance of such doubly satiric parody for the genre of narrative satire in Frank Palmeri, *Satire in Narrative* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).

9. Simon During, *Foucault and Literature: Towards a Genealogy of Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 114.

10. Michel Foucault, "Language to Infinity," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 51-67. See During, *Foucault and Literature*, p. 110. On "Language to Infinity" and some of Foucault's other criticism of literature, see also James Mell, "Foucault as Literary Critic," in *French Literary Criticism*, vol. 4, ed. Philip Crant (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1977), pp. 197-204.

11. In an argument whose direction parallels the one suggested here, Ian Maclean revises Foucault's notion of the episteme based on the work of Kuhn, Weber, Husserl, and Collingwood: such "conceptual schemes are potentially both pluralist and polyphonic; they contain different discourses which interact with each other both methodologically and terminologically, and are not closed or finite in the sense suggested by Foucault" (Ian Maclean, "The Process of Intellectual Change: A Post-Foucauldian Hypothesis," *Arcadia* 33 [1998]: 168-181, on p. 176). I am grateful to John Neubauer for pointing out the relevance of Maclean's argument to the conception of paradigms suggested in this essay.

12. Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), pp. 87-88. See also Marx's Introduction to *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago: Charles Kerr, 1904), where he argues that earlier forms of society are found in later, bourgeois forms, "but in a crippled state or as a travesty of their former self" (p. 301). Ernst Bloch further extends the idea of uneven development in "Non-Synchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics" [1932], *New German Critique* 11 (1977): 22-38.

13. On the relative flexibility and freedom of literary works to stand outside epistemic formations, see During, *Foucault and Literature* (above, n. 9), p. 114.

14. Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture* (1981; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 204.

15. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 95.

16. To take the example of romance, whose later historical transformations Jameson elucidates in *The Political Unconscious*, it is consistent with his larger theory to see chivalric romance in its first appearances not as a pure and new entity, but as a form that expresses its chivalric ideology by adapting elements of earlier genres: adventure and testing from the early Greek romances, combat from the medieval epics and *chansons de gestes*, and conventions of love from the Provençal lyric.

17. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), p. 291.

18. M. M. Bakhtin/P. M. Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 131, 133.

[19](#). Bakhtin's view of a genre's distinctive understanding of and orientation toward the world parallels Jameson's idea of the ideology of forms.

[20](#). See Merquior, *Foucault* (above, n. 4), p. 65.

[21](#). Maclean argues for such an understanding of paradigms, "a working hypothesis of a paradigm and a paradigm shift which is not constrained by Kantian categorialism" ("Process of Intellectual Change" [above, n. 1], p. 180).

[22](#). The relations between paradigms and narrative forms may be more pronounced and accessible than, for example, relations between paradigms and lyric forms, because narrative is typically more anchored in social and material life than is lyric; moreover, narrative forms are generally less interested in moving beyond particulars of time and place toward a transhistorical realm.

[23](#). For a fuller discussion of the history of the satiric almanac from this perspective, see Frank Palmeri, "History, Nation, and the Satiric Almanac, 1660-1760," *Criticism* 40 (1998): 377-408.

[24](#). For a more extensive discussion of relations among satire, history, and the *Bildungsroman*, see Frank Palmeri, "The Metamorphoses of Satire in Eighteenth-Century Narrative," *Comparative Literature* 48 (1996): 237-264.



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