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The Genre Function

Anis Bawarshi

The past fifteen years have witnessed a dramatic reconceptualization of genre and its role in the production and interpretation of texts and culture. Led in large part by scholars in functional and applied linguistics (Bhatia; Halliday; Kress; Swales), communication studies (Campbell; Jamieson; Yates), education (Christie; Dias; Medway), and, most recently, rhetoric and composition studies (Bazerman; Berkenkotter; Coe; Devitt; Freedman; Miller; and Russell), this movement has helped transform genre study from a descriptive to an explanatory activity, one that investigates not only text-types and classification systems, but also the linguistic, sociological, and psychological assumptions underlying and shaping these text-types. No longer structuring and classifying a mainly literary textual universe, as Northrop Frye (*Anatomy of Criticism*) and others in literary studies have traditionally suggested, genres have come to be defined as typified rhetorical ways communicants come to recognize and act in all kinds of situations, literary and nonliterary. As such, genres do not simply help us define and organize kinds of texts; they also help us define and organize kinds of social actions, social actions that these texts rhetorically make possible. It is this notion of genre that I wish to explore in this study in order to investigate the role that genre plays in the constitution not only of texts but of their contexts, including the identities of those who write them and those who are represented within them.

To make such a claim for genre, to argue that communicants and their contexts are in part functions of the genres they write, is to endow genre with a status that will surely make some readers uneasy. After all, in literary studies genre has for the most

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part occupied a subservient role to its users and their (con)texts, at best used as a classificatory device or an a posteriori interpretive tool in relation to already existing texts, and at worst censured as formulaic writing. Suffice it to say, genre has not enjoyed very good standing in literary studies, particularly since the late eighteenth century when interest in literary “kinds” gave way to a concern for literary “texts” and their writers, a shift that can be characterized as moving from “poetics” to the poem and the poet. So it is not surprising that, aside from the more recent work in New Historicism and cultural studies (see Greenblatt), the work done to reconceptualize genre over the last fifteen years has come predominantly from scholars working outside of literary studies, scholars who are interested in how and why typified texts reflect and reproduce social situations and activities. It is their work, especially its basis in functional linguistics and sociology, that informs a great deal of the theoretical underpinnings of this study. But breaking with what has become commonplace in nonliterary reconceptualizations of genre, I do not want to ignore literary considerations of genre or, for that matter, to argue that literary theories of genre are inimical to nonliterary theories of genre. Such distinctions only reinforce already unhealthy divisions between “literary” and “nonliterary” studies within English departments, divisions that are most clearly manifested when we define ourselves as either working in “literature” or “composition and rhetoric.” Instead, by reviewing recent studies of genre by literary scholars alongside studies of genre by scholars in rhetoric, composition, and linguistics, I hope to expose the extent to which genres are constitutive both of literary and nonliterary (con)texts as well as of literary and nonliterary writers and readers. In so doing, I posit genre theory and analysis as a method of inquiry that might very well help us synthesize the multiple and often factionalized strands of English Studies, including literature, cultural studies, creative writing, rhetoric and composition, and applied linguistics. Central to this genre-based inquiry are such questions as how and why texts as cultural artifacts are produced; how they in turn reflect and help enact social actions; and how, finally, they can serve as sites for cultural critique and change. Genres, I argue, can and should serve as the sites for such inquiry because genres, ultimately, are the rhetorical environments within which we recognize, enact, and consequently reproduce various situations, practices, relations, and identities.

In arguing that genres constitute all communicative action, I offer genre as an alternative to what Michel Foucault in “What Is an Author?” calls the “author-function.” In his essay, Foucault attempts to locate and articulate the “space left empty by the author’s disappearance” (345) in structuralist and poststructuralist literary theory. If the author can no longer be said to constitute a work, Foucault wonders, then what does? What is it that delimits discourse so that it becomes recognized as a work that has certain value and status? *Sans* the author, in short, what is it that plays “the role of the regulator of the fictive” (353)? For Foucault, the answer is the

“author-function.” The author-function does not refer to the real writer, the individual with the proper name who precedes and exists independently of the work. Instead, it refers to the author’s name, which, in addition to being a proper name, is also a literary name, a name that exists only in relation to the work associated with it. The author-function, then, endows a work with a certain cultural status and value. At the same time, the author-function also endows the idea of “author” with a certain cultural status and value. So the author-function not only constitutes the work, but it also constitutes the author of that work, the “rational being that we call ‘author’” (347) as opposed to the real writer with “just a proper name like the rest” (345).

The author-function delimits what works we recognize as valuable and how we interpret them at the same time it accords the status of author to certain writers: “these aspects of an individual which we designate as making him an author are only a projection, in more or less psychologizing terms, of the operations that we force texts to undergo” (Foucault 347). The role of author, therefore, becomes akin to a subject position regulated, as much as the work itself, by the author-function. Constituted by the author-function, the “real writer” becomes positioned as an author, “a variable and complex function of discourse” (352). Within this position, “the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction” (352–53).

Conceptually, the author-function helps delimit what Foucault calls a “certain discursive construct” (346) within which a work and its author function, so that the way we recognize a certain text and its author as deserving of a privileged status—a text worthy of our study, say, rather than simply to be “used”—is regulated by the author-function. Not only does the author-function, then, play a classificatory role, helping us organize and define texts (346), but more significantly, Foucault explains, it marks off “the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its *mode of being*. The author’s name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture” (346; emphasis added). Insofar as the author-function characterizes a text’s “mode of being,” it constitutes it and its author, providing a text and its author with a cultural identity and significance not accorded to texts that exist outside its purview. As Foucault explains, “The author-function is . . . characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of *certain* discourses within a society” (346; emphasis added). For example, he identifies such texts as private letters and contracts, even though they are written by *someone*, as not having “authors,” and, as such, as not constituted by the author-function, ostensibly meaning that their mode of being is regulated not by an author’s name but by some other function.

In English Studies, we use the author-function to designate certain works we call “literary,” works most often recognized, valued, and interpreted in relation to their authors’ names, which become cultural values we ascribe to these works. So, for example, a traditional literary scholar might state, “I study D. H. Lawrence” or “I am reading a lot of Virginia Woolf these days,” whereas a scholar in rhetoric and composition might state, “I am studying the research article.” Yet, if we use the author-function only to characterize and clarify certain discourses’ modes of existence, we stand to ignore a great many other discourses and their existence, in particular, how and why nonliterary discourses assume certain cultural values and regulate their users’ social positions, relations, and identities in certain ways. Foucault describes, for instance, how the author-function, endowing a certain text with an author-value, “shows that this discourse is not ordinary everyday speech that merely comes and goes, not something that is immediately consumable. On the contrary, it is a speech that must be received in a certain mode and that, in a given culture, must receive a certain status” (346). But what about the “everyday speech *that merely comes and goes*”? Since it does not exist within the realm of the author-function, what is it that regulates such discourse? We need a concept that can account not only for how certain “privileged” discourses function, but also for how all discourses function, an overarching concept that can explain the social roles we assign to various discourses and those who enact and are enacted by them. Genre *is* such a concept. Within each genre, discourse is “received in a certain mode” and “must receive a certain status,” including even discourse endowed with an author-function. In fact, it is quite possible that the author-function is itself a function of literary genres, which create the ideological conditions that give rise to this subject we call an “author.” And so, I propose to subsume what Foucault calls the author-function within what I am calling the *genre function*, which constitutes all discourses’ and all writers’ modes of existence, circulation, and functioning within a society, whether the writer is William Shakespeare or a student in a first-year writing course, and whether the text is a sonnet or a first-year student theme.

As a broader concept, the genre function can help us democratize some of the entrenched hierarchies that are prevalent in English Studies, hierarchies perpetuated by the author-function that privilege literary texts and their “authors” as somehow more significant than nonliterary texts and their writers. In “Resisting Privilege: Basic Writing and Foucault’s Author Function,” Gail Stygall argues that the author-function is partly responsible for the marginalization of basic writers (and their teachers) within departments of English (for others who have explored the author-function and its relation to literary and nonliterary texts and writers, particularly through the lens of legal discourse, see Woodmansee and Jaszi). Stygall, for example, applies the rhetoric of the author-function, so embedded a part of what she calls English Studies’ “discursive educational practices,” to the “institutional practice of basic writing” (321). We define and position basic writers, she explains, against the con-

ceptual backdrop of the author-function, a backdrop against which they are doomed to fail from the start. It is our unquestioned commitment to the author-function that ensures basic writers and their texts remain marginal. That is, when we define students as basic writers, we immediately deny them the status of authors and the concomitant privileges that accompany it, so that these students' inability to meet our expectations is foretold by the very discourse with which we eventually define them as basic writers. In exposing the author-function and its entrenched discursive practices, Stygall describes how we reinscribe our own privilege by constructing basic writers as nonauthors, as other than us, even as nonbeings. Because we are conceptually limited by the author-function to dismiss nonprivileged (that is, nonliterary) discourse as "everyday speech that merely comes and goes," we do not know how to value it. We ignore it because it is not an obvious part of our "discursive educational practices." The genre function, however, can expand the boundaries of our inquiry, allowing us to study how all kinds of discourses, literary and nonliterary, are complex sociorhetorical actions that enable their users to recognize, enact, and reproduce various social practices, relations, and identities. We are all, "authors" and "writers" alike, subject to the genre function.

I argue, then, that genres function, just as Foucault claims the author's name functions, on a conceptual as well as a discursive level. That is, genres are implicated in the way we experience and enact a great many of our discursive realities, functioning as such on an ideological as well as on a rhetorical level. Thus how we come to perceive and rhetorically act within these realities—and in so doing, how we reproduce these realities and ourselves within different kinds of texts—become relevant questions to the study of genre, which accounts not only for what Foucault calls a discourse's mode of being, but also for the mode of being of those who participate in the discourse. Such questions regarding the social mode of being of discourse and its participants have become more central for scholars and teachers of genre, especially since Carolyn Miller's groundbreaking article, "Genre as Social Action," first appeared in 1984. Based in part on Miller's work and the work of Campbell and Jamieson; Burke; Bitzer; and Halliday, whose work she extends, genre theorists have begun to question traditional views of genres as simply innocent, artificial, and even arbitrary forms that contain ideas. This container view of genre, which assumes that genres are only familiar communicative tools individuals use to achieve their communicative goals, overlooks the sociorhetorical function of genres—the extent to which genres shape and help us recognize our communicative goals, including why these goals exist, what and whose purposes they serve, and how best to achieve them. It is this oversight that genre theorists have begun to correct. Miller, for example, defines genres as "typified rhetorical *actions* based in recurrent situations" (159; emphasis added). For her, genres are not only typified rhetorical responses to recurrent situations, but they also help shape and maintain the ways we rhetorically act

within these situations. In other words, as individuals' rhetorical responses to recurrent situations become typified as genres, the genres in turn help structure the way these individuals conceptualize and experience these situations, predicting their notions of what constitutes appropriate and possible responses and actions. This is why genres are both functional and epistemological—they help us function within particular situations at the same time they help shape the ways we come to know these situations.

To argue that genres help reproduce the very recurring situations to which they respond (Devitt, "Generalizing") is to identify them as constitutive rather than as merely regulative, which is also what Foucault was claiming for the author-function. John Searle distinguishes between regulative and constitutive rules as follows: "Regulative rules regulate a pre-existing activity, an activity whose existence is logically independent of the rules. Constitutive rules constitute (and also regulate) an activity, the existence of which is logically dependent on the rules" (34). Those scholars who define genre as regulative perceive it, at best, as being a communicative or interpretive tool, a conduit for achieving or identifying an already existing communicative purpose (see, for example, Hirsch and Rosmarin in literary studies; Bhatia and Swales in linguistics), and, at worst, an artificial, restrictive "law" that interferes with or tries to trap communicative activity (Blanchot; Derrida; Croce; to name just a few). As Miller and Devitt argue, however, genre does not simply *regulate* a preexisting social activity; instead, it *constitutes* the activity by making it possible through its ideological and rhetorical conventions. In fact, genre reproduces the activity by providing individuals with the conventions for enacting it. We perform an activity in terms of how we recognize it—that is, how we identify and come to know it. And we recognize an activity by way of genre. Genre helps shape and enable our social actions by rhetorically constituting the way we recognize the situations within which we function.

We witness a remarkable example of the genre function at work in George Washington's first state of the union address. As Kathleen Jamieson explains, Washington faced an unprecedented rhetorical situation when directed by the Constitution to "report to Congress on the state of the union" (411). Faced with this novel situation, the first president of the United States, who had earlier led a successful rebellion against the British monarchy, promptly responded by delivering a state of the union address, Jamieson tells us, "rooted in the monarch's speech from the throne" (411). That is, Washington adopted an already existing genre to respond to the demands of a new situation, a situation, ironically, that had emerged as a reaction against the situation appropriate for that antecedent genre. Even more remarkably, this presidential address, so similar to the "King's Speech" in style, format, and substance, in turn prompted a response from Congress that, far from being critical of the president's speech, reflected the "echoing speech" that the House of Parliament traditionally delivers in response to the King's Speech (411). As Jamieson explains, "the

parliamentary antecedent had transfused the congressional reply with inappropriate characteristics,” characteristics that not only voiced an approval not felt by all members of Congress, but also, “because patterned on a genre designed to pay homage and secure privileges,” carried “a subservient tone inappropriate to a coequal branch of a democratic government” (413).

What Congress was responding to in its reply to Washington’s state of the union address was *not* so much the exigence of the rhetorical situation at hand as it was the situation as embodied by the genre function of the King’s Speech. Members of Congress assumed a subject role scripted by the King’s Speech and consequently enacted that role by responding in ways made possible by the “echoing speeches” of Parliament. One genre thus created the sociorhetorical condition for the other in what Anne Freedman has called an “uptake,” a concept adapted from speech act theory to refer to the situated and dialogical relationship between texts, in which one text—the King’s Speech—prompts an appropriate response or uptake from another—the echoing speech—in a particular context (“Anyone” 95). “Patterning the first presidential inaugural on the sermonic lectures of theocratic leaders,” Jamieson claims, “prompted an address consonant with situational demands” (414), demands scripted by the genres that communicants had available to them. This generative nature of genre, Aviva Freedman contends, reveals that “genres themselves form part of the discursive context to which rhetors respond in their writing and, as such, shape and enable the writing” (273). Antecedent genres thus play a role in constituting subsequent actions, even acts of resistance. Despite efforts to resist monarchical practices, Washington, perhaps unconsciously, assumed a monarchical role when he wrote his state of the union address as a King’s Speech, turning to an already scripted subject role to respond to a more immediate and idiosyncratic circumstance. Aware of the powerful constraints antecedent genres impose, Jamieson asks, “How free is the rhetor’s choice from among the available means of persuasion” (414)? She answers:

To hold that “the rhetor is personally responsible for his rhetoric regardless of genres,” is . . . to become mired in paradoxes. We would by that dictum have to interpret our founding fathers as deliberately choosing monarchical forms while disavowing monarchy . . . ; but those rhetors would be held “personally responsible” for rhetorical choices that in fact they did not freely make. (414–15)

Jamieson’s research illuminates the powerful role that the genre function plays in constituting not only the ways we respond to and treat situations, but also the subject roles we assume in relation to these situations. Genres have this generative power because they carry with them social motives—socially sanctioned ways of “appropriately” recognizing and behaving within certain situations—that we as social actors internalize as intentions and then enact rhetorically as social practices. So even when unique circumstances such as the first state of the union address and the democratic

ideals on which it is based call for new intentions, George Washington, as the writer of this address, is still so socialized by the traditional monarchical motives of the King's Speech that his intention as a writer/speaker is shaped and enabled by the antecedent genre and the traditional ideology it embodies. In order to write, Washington must first locate himself within the social motives embedded rhetorically in the genre function. We will now consider how the genre function is at work in much the same way within literary studies.

GENRE AND LITERARY STUDIES: LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

Heather Dubrow begins her 1984 survey of genre theory by asking readers to consider the following paragraph:

The clock on the mantelpiece said ten thirty, but someone had suggested recently that the clock was wrong. As the figure of the dead woman lay on the bed in the front room, a no less silent figure glided rapidly from the house. The only sounds to be heard were the ticking of that clock and the loud wailing of an infant. (1)

How, she asks, do we make sense of this piece of discourse? What characteristics should we pay attention to as significant? What state of mind need we assume to interpret the action it describes? The relevance of these questions, Dubrow claims, points to the significance of genre in helping readers delimit and interpret discourse. For example, knowing that the paragraph appears in a novel with the title *Murder at Marplethorpe*, readers can begin to make certain interpretive decisions as to the value and meaning of specific images, images that become symbolic when readers recognize that the novel they are reading belongs to the genre of detective fiction. The inaccuracy of the clock and the fact that the woman lies dead in the front room become important clues when we know what genre we are reading. The figure gliding away assumes a particular subject role within the discourse, the subject role of suspect. If, Dubrow continues, the title of the novel was not *Murder at Marplethorpe* but rather *The Personal History of David Marplethorpe*, then the way we encounter the same text changes. Reading the novel as a Bildungsroman, we will place a different significance on the dead body or the fact that the clock is inaccurate. Certainly, we will be less likely to look for a suspect. That is, we will not be reading with "detective eyes" as we would if we were reading detective fiction. The crying baby, as Dubrow suggests, will also take on more relevance, perhaps being the very David Marplethorpe whose life's story we are about to read.

Dubrow's example is significant for what it reveals about what I am calling the genre function. Not only does the genre function in this case constitute how we read certain elements within the discourse, allowing us to assume certain subject positions

as readers of the discourse, but it also constitutes the roles we assign to the actors and events within the discourse. The actors in the discourse—the crying baby, the dead woman, the inaccurate clock, the gliding figure—all assume subject roles within and because of the genre. How readers act in relation to the discourse as well as the actions that take place within the discourse become constituted by genre, so that, for example, the figure who glides rapidly away from the house can either be recognized as in the act of escape or in the act of seeking help, depending on the genre. The type of action taking place within the text, then, is largely constituted by the genre in which the text functions, because genre provides the conditions—what John Austin in his theory of speech acts calls the “felicity conditions”—within which utterances become speech acts. The meaning of the utterances in the Marplethorpe paragraph, including the actions these utterances are performing, the roles of the characters doing the performing, and even the sequence and timing of the utterances, are all interpretable in relation to the contextual conditions maintained by the genre. These genre conditions allow readers to limit the potentially multiple actions sustained by the utterances to certain recognizable, socially defined actions. Suffice it to say, we recognize, interpret, and, in the spirit of reader-response theory, also construct the discourse we encounter using the genre function. Genre, in short, is largely constitutive of the identities we assume within and in relation to discourse, whether we are characters in a novel or presidents delivering state of the union addresses.

Social action as well as identity construction are thus partly genre-mediated and genre-constituted. Dubrow seems to suggest this when she explains, following E. D. Hirsch, that genre is like a social code of behavior established between the reader and author (2), a kind of “generic contract” (31) that stabilizes and enables interpretation. Or when she writes that, “much like a firmly rooted institution, a well-established genre transmits certain cultural attitudes, attitudes which it is shaped by and in turn helps shape” (4). Dubrow does not go on to develop the potential inherent in this claim, at the very least the potential of this claim for readers and writers of nonliterary texts. As in nearly every study of genre published by a literary scholar, Dubrow takes genre to mean only kinds of literary texts, and what she calls the “generic contract” to include only the reader and writer involved in a literary context. And so, for Dubrow and other literary theorists, genre remains a uniquely literary institution, much like the author-function characterizes a specifically literary discourse. For all the insight literary theories of genre such as Dubrow’s can lend to studies of social action and identity, genre remains generally perceived by literary scholars as solely a regulator and classifier of literary actions and identity, at best helping to identify and interpret literary texts, while at worst interfering with or restricting the free play of literary texts.

In either extreme, the relationship between genre and text has historically been and still remains an uneasy one in literary studies, with most scholars denigrating

genre to a subordinate, a posteriori classificatory status. For those who perceive literary texts as being indeterminate, an expression of unbounded imagination, genre is an institutional threat to literary texts and authors. Benedetto Croce, for instance, argues that classifying literary works according to genre is a denial of their true nature, which is based in intuition, not logic. Genres, Croce claims, are logical concepts and as such should not be applied to literary works, which resist classification and are, anticipating Derrida's later poststructuralist argument, indeterminate (38). Perhaps the most famous dismissal of genre, cited by both Marjorie Perloff and Adena Rosmarin in their studies of genre as representative of the antiggenre position, comes from Maurice Blanchot, who, in *Le Livre à venir* (1959), writes that "the book alone is important, as it is, far from genre, outside rubrics . . . under which it refuses to be arranged and to which it denies the power to fix its place and to determine its form" (Perloff 3; Rosmarin 7–8). Echoing in part the formalist and more so the New Critical dream of a freestanding text made up of its own internal relations and subject to its own structural integrity, Blanchot perceives genre as a threat to the text's autonomy. Because formalist and New Critical theories of literature generally argue that a text's meaning exists relationally within its structure, every text therefore mediates its own meaning and so does not require an external set of conventions to help identify or clarify it. Texts do not necessarily need genres.

Even poststructuralist critiques of structuralism subordinate genres. Rejecting the stability of structures and exposing the contradictions, fissures, and tangles within what appears to be a self-contained and coherent text, poststructuralist theorists have, with iconoclastic vigor, deconstructed texts in an effort to highlight the instability and arbitrariness of meaning. In relation to such textual indeterminacy, genre exists tenuously. For example, Jacques Derrida, who in his "Law of Genre" acknowledges that "every text participates in one or several genres; there is no genreless text" (65), insists that the "law" of genre, as with any other kind of law, is an arbitrary and conservative attempt to impose order on what is ultimately indeterminate. Genre, as one more structuralist attempt to regulate or govern what Derrida calls the "nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions come into play" ("Structure" 1118), is a useful, albeit unstable, controlling structure within which texts participate but do not belong ("Law" 65), because in the end, a genre's "law" cannot enforce or contain a text's indeterminacy.

While Derrida does not reject genre, he nonetheless subordinates it to an ad hoc status, like many others, denigrating genre "as an aporia, a critical phantasm, or an imposition on literature" (Beebee 8). For Derrida and others (Cohen; Hirsch; Perloff; Rosmarin; and Todorov, to name just a few), genre, although relevant only after the literary fact, serves a useful role in the interpretation of texts. As an explanatory tool, genre not only classifies texts but also helps readers interpret them. These critics are careful to note, however, that even though genre may exercise some

explanatory power over literary texts, it does not interfere with their autonomy. Literary texts are produced and exist independently of genres; genres function only as critical apparatuses. Notice, for example, the apparent defensiveness with which Adena Rosmarin proclaims “The Power of Genre,” which happens to be the title of her book: “The critic who explicitly uses genre as an explanatory tool neither claims nor needs to claim that literary texts should or will be written in its terms, but that, at the present moment and for his implied audience, criticism can best justify the value of a particular literary text by using these terms” (50–51). Genre is therefore the critic’s tool or heuristic, a lens the critic uses to interpret literary texts. The same text can be subject to different genre lenses without compromising the text’s integrity, so that, along with Rosmarin, a critic could say, “let us explore what ‘Andrea del Sarto’ is like when we read it as a dramatic monologue . . .” (46).

Despite this seeming defensiveness, Rosmarin does acknowledge genre’s constitutive power, albeit only as an interpretive tool, involved in literary consumption, not literary production. This acknowledgment, echoed in Cohen, Perloff, and Hirsch, for example, signals a shift in literary genre theory away from classification and toward clarification of texts. This shift in emphasis, which Dubrow identifies as having begun in the 1930s, helped redefine genre so that it no longer only represented a classification system but also constituted the relationship between a text and its reader as well as texts and other texts (Dubrow 86). As a result, genre came to be recognized more and more as a psychological concept, a state of mind a reader assumes in relation to a literary text. As Tzvetan Todorov began to argue, and as we saw in the Marplethorpe example earlier, genres construct an interpretive context within which both the reader and text are situated and which determines to a large extent the way that the two interact (Todorov, *The Fantastic*). Moreover, genres not only establish a relationship between reader and text in what amounts to a psychological relationship, but they also establish a relationship between texts in what amounts to a sociological relationship—a kind of literary culture.

Sociology is the science of social relations, organization, and change, what Anthony Giddens calls the study of “human social activities” and the “conditions that make these activities possible” (2). Sociology, then, is the study of how social life is enacted and organized, how social activity is defined and related to other social activity in time-space. In his book *Metaphors of Genre*, David Fishelove explores the connections between sociology and genre theory, explaining that the metaphor “genres are social institutions” is commonly used by literary scholars to explain genre. Like social institutions, genres constitute textual relations, organization, and change. In fact, like social institutions, genres also provide the conditions that make textual activity possible and even meaningful. Fishelove, following Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism*, describes genres as shaping and governing a literary universe, so that genre theory becomes akin to the sociology of literary culture. As René Wellek and

Austin Warren put it, literary genres are institutions in the same way that church, university, and state are institutions (226). Yet, whereas the social and the cultural are the domain of sociology, genres are the domain of poetics (Fishelove 85). Within this literary universe, genres create a kind of literary culture or poetics in which textual activity becomes meaningful. Fredric Jameson describes such a culture when he writes, “genres are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact” (106). As artifacts, texts become both useful and meaningful insofar as they exist in relation to one another within generic contexts. As Todorov explains, “failing to recognize the existence of genres is equivalent to claiming that a literary work does not bear any relationship to already existing works. Genres are precisely those relay-points by which the work assumes a relation with the universe of literature” (*The Fantastic* 8).

Genres thus endow literary texts with a social identity within the “universe of literature,” constituting a literary text’s and its producer’s “mode of being”—a literary context within which literary activity takes place. As sociological concepts, genres constitute and regulate literary activity within particular space-time configurations. Käte Hamburger, for example, argues that each genre represents a particular reality, especially a temporal reality, so that, for instance, the “past tense in fiction does not suggest the past tense as we know it but rather a situation in the present; when we read ‘John walked into the room,’ we do not assume, as we would if we encountered the same preterite in another type of writing, that the action being described occurred prior to one in our world” (qtd. in Dubrow 103). So genres regulate our perceptions of time. But they also regulate how we spatially negotiate our way through time, as both readers and writers. Recall, for example, the Marplethorpe paragraph discussed earlier. If we read it as detective fiction, then we immediately begin to make certain space-time connections: the gliding figure and the dead woman assume a certain spatial-temporal relationship to one another as possible murder victim:suspect. That is, they assume a genre-mediated cause/effect relationship in terms of their spatial proximity and their temporal sequence. The gliding figure may simply be a gliding figure, peripheral to the plot. However, if we read the paragraph as detective fiction, then this figure’s gliding away from the site of a dead body at this particular time and at this particular distance makes this figure a suspect and the dead body a victim. The actions of each actor, in other words, along with the inaccurate clock, combine within the genre to form a genre-mediated sociorhetorical construct in which space and time are configured in a certain way in order to allow certain events and actions to take place (for more on genre and its relation to space and time, see Bakhtin; Schryer; and Yates).

Northrop Frye has argued that literary texts do not, as the New Critics claimed, exist as freestanding structures, but instead exist in relation to one another within a genre-mediated literary universe. His *Anatomy of Criticism* is in essence an

effort to describe and classify this universe. Genres play a significant role in the sociological constitution of this literary culture, identifying the various roles that texts and their authors play within it and how these roles get performed within the space-time configurations it constructs. This is why Gérard Genette refers to the classical literary triad of lyric, epic, and dramatic (each of which represents space and time in particular ways) as archigenres. Archigenres, which are overarching genres that govern all other literary genres, constitute just this kind of literary universe, a “properly aesthetic” universe within which literary texts and their writers and readers “naturally” function.

As we see from the preceding discussion, for many genre theorists in literary studies literary genres *constitute* and *regulate* literary activities. That is, adapting Searle’s earlier distinction, genres do not just *regulate* preexisting activities, activities whose existence is independent of generic conventions; rather, genres *constitute* the very conditions that their conventions in turn regulate. This is why genre theorists often define genre in terms of literary social institutions, institutions that enable and shape “human social activities” and the “conditions that make these activities possible” (Giddens 2). David Fishelove, for example, explains that as “a professor is expected to comply with certain patterns of action, and to interact with other role-players (e.g., students) according to the structure and functions of an educational institution . . . , a character in a comedy is expected to perform certain acts and to interact with other characters according to the structural principles of the literary ‘institution’ of comedy” (86). It is these “structural principles,” which function and are maintained at the level of genre, that make the activity at once possible and recognizable, socially and rhetorically. And just as social institutions assign social roles, so genres assign genre roles, both to the characters who participate within them and to the writers and readers who interact with them. Indeed, as Fishelove insists, “the concept of role is inseparable from that of genre” (101). Yet the problem here, as throughout this discussion of genre theory, is that literary scholars identify genre roles only with literary roles. Genres function only to maintain a literary institution, constructing a literary world in which various literary activities and identities are enacted.

What about identifying genres not only as analogical to social institutions but as actual social institutions, constituting not just literary activity but social activity, not just literary textual relations but all textual relations, so that genres do not just constitute the literary sites in which literary actors (writers, readers, characters) and their texts function, but also constitute the social reality in which the activities of all social participants are implicated? In other words, to what extent is the university as an institution and the roles enacted within it, to return to Fishelove’s example, constituted by its genres: research articles, grants, assignment prompts, lectures, critical essays, course evaluations, memos, oral exams, committee minutes, to name just a few? This is the question that genre theorists in linguistics, communication studies,

education, and rhetoric and composition have begun asking over the last fifteen years, and it is the question that we will now begin to consider. Answering it will allow us to begin synthesizing the literary as well as nonliterary ways that the genre function is at work in making all kinds of social practices, relations, and identities possible and meaningful.

BEYOND LITERARY STUDIES: GENRE AS SOCIAL SEMIOTIC

For most literary scholars, genre's jurisdiction appears to end when we leave the literary world. Not so for M. M. Bakhtin or Thomas O. Beebee. In "The Problem of Speech Genres," Bakhtin argues that genres mediate all communicative activity, from novels to military commands to everyday short rejoinders. In so doing, Bakhtin takes perhaps the most significant step toward a view of genre as social semiotic. Defining speech genres as typified utterances existing within language spheres (60), Bakhtin claims that "we speak only in definite speech genres; that is, all our utterances have definite and relatively stable typical *forms of construction of the whole*" (79; Bakhtin's emphasis). Such generic forms of the utterance shape and enable what Bakhtin calls a speaker's "speech plan" or "speech will" (78). He explains:

The speaker's speech will is manifested primarily in the *choice of a particular speech genre*. This choice is determined by the specific nature of the given sphere of speech communication. . . . And when the speaker's speech plan with all its individuality and subjectivity is applied and adapted to a chosen genre, it is shaped and developed within a certain generic form. Such genres exist above all in the great and multifarious sphere of everyday oral communication, including the most familiar and the most intimate. (78; Bakhtin's emphasis)

Genres, therefore, do not just constitute literary reality and its texts. They constitute all speech communication by becoming part of "our experiences and our consciousness together" and mediating the "dialogic reverberations" that make up communicative interaction (78, 94).

When individuals communicate, they do so within genres, and so the participants in any communicative act assume certain genre-constituted roles while interacting with one another. Bakhtin refers to the participants within discourse as "speech subjects" (72). The speaker's speech plan is mediated by her chosen genre; so is her style. In addition, the speaker's very conception of the addressee is mediated by genre, because each genre embodies its own typical conception of the addressee (98). In fact, the very word and its relation to other words is also mediated by speech genres: "In the genre the word acquires a particular typical expression. Genres correspond to typical situations of speech communication, typical themes, and, consequently, also to particular contacts between the meanings of words and actual concrete reality under certain typical circumstances" (87). Speech genres thus constitute the very communicative

situations within which speech subjects—both speakers and addressees—interact in the same way that literary genres constitute the literary context within which literary subjects—writers, readers, and characters—interact.

Thomas O. Beebee, defining genre as the “use-value” of texts, in part applies what Bakhtin claims for speech genres to written genres. For Beebee, “primarily, genre is the precondition for the creation and the reading of texts” (250), because genre provides the ideological context in which a text and its participants function and attain cultural value. Genres, in other words, embody texts with use-value (7)—“a text’s genre is its use-value. Genre gives us not understanding in the abstract and passive sense but use in the pragmatic and active sense” (14). This use-value is socially determined and so makes genres in part bearers and reproducers of culture—in short, ideological. In turn, genres are what make texts ideological, endowing them with a social use-value. As ideological concepts or categories, then, genres delimit all language—not just poetic language—into what Beebee calls the “possibilities of its usage,” transforming language from a denotative to a connotative level (278). Philippe Gardy describes this transformation as a “movement of actualization” in which “brute information” or the “brute ‘facts’ of discourse” (denotation) become actualized as “ideological information” (connotation) (qtd. in Beebee 278). So genre is an “actualizer” of discourse, transforming general discourse into a socially recognized and meaningful text by endowing it with what Foucault calls a mode of being or existence. It is genre, thus, that gives a text a social reality. Beebee concludes, “The relation of the text to the ‘real’ is in fact established by our willingness to place it generically, which amounts to our willingness to ideologically appropriate its brute information” (278).

Because genres function on an ideological level, constituting discursive reality, they operate as conceptual schemes that also constitute how we negotiate our way through discursive reality as producers and consumers of texts. In his functional approach to language, *Language as Social Semiotic*, M. A. K. Halliday explores this connection between language and sociology. Halliday maintains that “the network of meanings” that constitute any culture, what he calls the “social semiotic,” is to a large extent encoded in and maintained by its semantic system, which represents a culture’s “meaning potential” (100, 13). As such, “the construal of reality [social semiotic] is inseparable from the construal of the semantic system in which the reality is encoded. In this sense, language is a shared meaning potential, at once a part of experience and an intersubjective interpretation of experience” (1–2). This is why, as Halliday repeatedly insists, language is a form of socialization, playing a role in how individuals become socialized within pockets of culture he calls “contexts of situation.”

Language is functional not only because it encodes and embodies the social semiotic but also because it helps enact the social semiotic. Language, therefore, makes social reality recognizable and enables individuals to experience it, others, and

themselves within it. Halliday explains: “By their everyday acts of meaning [their semantic activities], people act out the social structure, affirming their own statuses and roles, and establishing and transmitting the shared systems of value and of knowledge” (2). The semantic system, representing what Halliday calls a culture’s “meaning potential,” in turn constitutes its individuals’ “behaviour potential,” which characterizes individuals’ actions and interactions within a particular social semiotic or context of situation (13). The semiotic system, which is social in nature, becomes cognitively internalized as a system of behavior when it is manifested in the semantic system, so that we internalize and enact culture as we learn and use language. The semantic potential (what a communicator can do or mean within social reality) constitutes the “actualized potential” (what a communicator does or means within social reality) (40).

For Halliday, contexts of situation (particular social semiotics within social reality) often reoccur as “situation types,” a set of typified semiotic and semantic relations that make up “a scenario . . . of persons and actions and events from which the things which are said derive their meaning” (28–30). Examples of situation types include “players instructing novice in a game,” “mother reading bedtime story to a child,” and “customers ordering goods over the phone” (29). These situation types “specify the semantic configurations that the speaker will typically fashion” (110).

Halliday refers to this typified semiotic and semantic scenario as “register.” Register is “the clustering of semantic features according to situation types” (68), a situated and typified semantic system that regulates the activities of communicators, including their contexts and their means of communication, within a particular type of situation. It is register, ultimately, that links a text and its sociosemiotic environment, because register assigns a situation type with particular semantic properties (145). Register thus syntactically and semantically embodies a situation type, becoming a linguistic, textual, and ideological simulacrum of a situation type. As Halliday explains, register is “a *conceptual framework* for representing the social context as the semiotic environment in which people exchange meanings” (110; emphasis added). As a conceptual framework within which a situation type is semantically realized, register regulates what actually takes place communicatively (the “field”), who is taking part (the “tenor”), and what role language is playing (the “mode”). The field of discourse represents the institutional setting in which language occurs, that is, the whole activity of communication within a particular setting. The tenor of discourse represents the relation between participants—their role relations—within the discourse. And the mode of discourse represents the channel of communication adopted by the participants (33). All three levels interact in particular and fairly typified ways within register.

What is of particular interest to us is where Halliday positions genre within register. For Halliday, genre is a mode or conduit of communication, one of the linguis-

tic means available within register that helps communicants realize the situation type. Functioning at the level of mode, within the field, tenor, and mode complex, genre represents the vehicle through which communicants interact within a situation type. Genres are thus relegated to typified tools communicants use within registers to enact and interact within a particular semiotic system. It is this semiotic system, Halliday explains, “that generates the semiotic tensions and the rhetorical styles and genres that express them” (113). As modes of communication, genres are instruments communicants use to express their typified social realities. Yet, as we have seen in the work of Bakhtin, Beebee, and some of the other literary scholars, genres occupy more than just an expressive role; genres also constitute what I have called particular and typified literary cultures, or, in keeping with Halliday, literary semiotics. That is, genres create the conditions in which not only texts but also their writers and readers function. And so, I propose to give genre more of a constitutive role in Halliday’s theory of language, making it function not only as one element within register, but also as an integral part of the very social semiotic that is realized by register. This is what I mean by genre as social semiotic.

As integral parts of how we maintain and come to recognize typified contexts of situation, genres are not simply how we communicate within register; they are also how we constitute register and all the semantic, social, and lexicogrammatical configurations within it. I make this claim because, as I see it, Halliday’s notion of register is too abstract and vague, too much akin to what composition scholars call “discourse community.” It is not very helpful, on either a theoretical or a pedagogical level, to claim that particular types of situations are realized by certain registers which in turn regulate the nature of the communicative activity, the relation between participants in the activity, and the mode of language, including genre, that is used to express the activity. It is not enough because the idea of “situation type” is much too general. Within the same situation type, for example, more than one genre is often at work, and each genre within a situation type constitutes its own typified register—that is, its own particular social activity, its own subject roles as well as relations between these roles, and its own rhetorical and formal features.

Each genre, then, constitutes its own social semiotic. To make this claim, however, is not to say that genres do not interact or participate with one another. More often than not they do interact in what composition scholars have called “genre sets” (Devitt “Intertextuality”) or “systems of genre” (Bazerman “Systems”). These sets of genres will often function together within situation types, each with its own particular field, tenor, and mode complex, yet each cooperating to construct a type of social activity or, to borrow David Russell’s recent term, an “activity system.” Within such activity systems, genres not only constitute particular participant roles and texts, but they also regulate how participants recognize and interact with one another. As such, any typified social activity—a report on the state of the union, for

example—is mediated by genres, each of which sets up its own situated identities and actions, including motives and intentions, as well as relations. This notion of situation type as resulting from and mediated by a set of genres can be clarified if we look at an example.

If we take a situation type, say “teacher instructing students in a classroom,” we recognize that there cannot be only one register at work within it. This situation type is much too dynamic—actualized by a range of shifting, even conflicting, situated activities, participant relations, and rhetorical styles and goals—to be embodied by a single register. What is at work within the situation type, rather, is a set of genres, each with its own particular social semiotic and each organizing and maintaining what we recognize as this situation type. For instance, the lecture represents one genre that constitutes a particular field (literally the physical configuration of the room, with teacher in front, students facing teacher in rows, and so on), tenor (the way students raise their hands and wait for signals from the teacher to ask questions, and the power dynamic this sets up), and mode (how the teacher organizes the lecture itself, the question-answer nature of the dialogue). But the lecture is not the only genre. Others include the assignment prompt, which in turn constitutes a different field, tenor, and mode, the student papers, the teacher’s comments on the students’ papers, the syllabus, the course description, and so on. Each of these genres constructs a different sociosemantic dynamic, a particular social semiotic which both students and teachers come to recognize and which in turn shapes and enables their various identities, activities, and relations within the situation type.

Halliday writes that “reality consists of meanings” (139). Genres do not just express or help communicants communicate these meanings as part of register; rather, genres mediate and maintain these meanings. As such, genres are not merely classification systems or innocent communicative tools; genres are socially constructed cognitive and rhetorical concepts—symbiotically maintained rhetorical ecosystems, if you will—within which communicants enact and reproduce specific situations, actions, relations, and identities. As individuals make their way through culture, they function within various and at times conflicting genre situations, situations that position them in specific relations to others and that contribute to the way they recognize their activities, themselves, and others.

GENRE AND THE CONSTITUTION OF SOCIAL IDENTITY

Sociologist Anthony Giddens argues that human activity—motive, intention, and agency—is constituted by and enacted within social systems, which it in turn reproduces. Giddens explains: “Human social activities . . . are recursive. That is to say, they are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves as actors. In and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible” (2). Giddens

describes this ecological process as the “duality of structure,” which is based on the theory “that the rules and resources drawn upon in the production and reproduction of social action are at the same time the means of system reproduction” (19). Human actors, in their social practices, reproduce the very social situations that in turn make their actions necessary, possible, and recognizable, so that their actions maintain and enact the very situations that consequently call for these very actions.

Giddens’s theory of structuration has much to offer genre studies. Carolyn Miller, for one, has already explored the connections (see “Rhetorical Community”) by arguing that genres, as typified sociorhetorical actions, play a key role in reproducing the very situations to which they in turn respond (see also Berkenkotter and Huckin; Yates and Orlikowski; and Giltrow and Valiquette). Miller writes: “The rules and resources of a genre provide reproducible speaker and addressee roles [see Bakhtin], social typifications of recurrent social needs or exigencies, topical structures (or ‘moves’ and ‘steps’), and ways of indexing an event to material conditions, turning them into constraints or resources” (71). Genres do this, as we discussed earlier, by constituting their own social semiotic, a semiotic that rhetorically shapes and enables social action and in turn is constituted by the very action which it enables. This is why genres shape our social realities and us as we give shape to them. Let us explore how genres do this in more detail.

Take a visit to a physician, for example. A physician’s office is not a rhetorically unmediated environment in which doctor and patient interact, a site within which “everyday speech merely comes and goes” because it ostensibly lies outside the realm of the author-function. We might be tempted to think it is a rhetorically unmediated situation because the doctor–patient relationship is such a sensual, tactile one, but this would be to underestimate the power of genre in shaping and enabling this very physical relationship. Prior to any interaction between doctor and patient, the patient has to complete what is generally known as the Patient Medical History Form. Patients recognize this genre, which they encounter on their initial visit to a physician, as one that solicits critical information regarding a patient’s physical statistics (sex, age, height, weight, and so on) as well as medical history, including prior and recurring physical conditions, past treatments, and, of course, a description of current physical symptoms. This is followed by insurance carrier information and then a consent-to-treatment statement and a legal release statement, which the patient signs. The genre is at once a patient record and a legal document, helping the doctor treat the patient and presumably protecting the doctor from potential lawsuits. But these are not the genre’s only functions. The Patient Medical History Form (PMHF) also helps the patient and doctor reproduce the sociorhetorical conditions within which they interact. For instance, the genre reflects how our culture and science separate the mind from the body in treating disease, constructing the patient as an embodied object. As Teresa Tran—a pre-med student who conducted a semester-long case study of the PMHF in a genre analysis course I taught—concluded, the

genre is mainly rhetorically concerned with a patient's physical symptoms, suggesting that we can treat the body separately from the mind—that is, we can isolate physical symptoms and treat them with little to no reference to the patient's state of mind and the effect that state of mind might have on these symptoms. In so doing, the PMHF reflects Western views of medicine, views that are rhetorically preserved and reproduced by the genre and that in turn are physically embodied in the way the doctor recognizes and treats the patient as a synecdoche of his or her physical symptoms (for example, "I treated a knee injury today" or "the ear infection is in Room 3"). The PMHF, then, is at work on the patient, socializing or scripting the individual into the role of "patient" (an embodied self) prior to his meeting with the doctor at the same time it is at work on the doctor, preparing her to meet the individual as an embodied "patient." So powerful is the socializing power of genre in identity formation that we more often than not accept and act out our genre roles. As Tran explains, "Also on the [PMHF], there is a part that says 'other comments' which a patient *will understand* as asking whether or not he or she has any other physical problems, not mental ones" (2; emphasis added). Even when a patient ostensibly has a choice, the genre function and the cultural ideology it reflects and reproduces are already at work constituting the patient's subject position in preparation for meeting the doctor. Thus the genre enables us to assume certain situational roles, roles established by our culture and rhetorically enacted and reproduced by the genre.

The PMHF as a genre works rhetorically to predict the physical interaction between doctor and patient. It is one of the many genres that maintains the sociorhetorical conditions shaping and enabling this environment or "activity system" (see Russell) we call the physician's office. The PMHF is not unique, then. Other genres in a physician's office are also at work constituting other social situations and relations: relations between nurses and doctors, doctors and other doctors, doctors and pharmacists, and so on. Within this genre-constituted and genre-mediated environment, communicants assume and enact various genre identities—ways of writing and speaking themselves into existence in particular situations, much as we write ourselves into the role of patient in the PMHF and, in so doing, shape and enable not only our social practices and relations, but also "the ways we think of ourselves as writers, the roles we use to describe ourselves" (Brooke and Jacobs 216).

We all function—authors, presidents, and patients alike—within genre-constituted realities within which we assume genre-constituted identities. The reason for this is that genre is recursively and inseparably linked to the concept of exigence, defined as a situation or event that individuals recognize as requiring immediate attention or response. This means that genres are not simply typified rhetorical responses to already existing exigencies, merely tools individuals use to deal with a priori situations. Rather, situations and their participants are always in the process of reproducing each other within genre: the PMHF rhetorically maintains the situational

conditions within which doctor and patient enact their roles and activities, and their roles and activities in turn reproduce the very conditions that make the PMHF necessary and meaningful. Genres, in short, constitute the very exigencies to which their users in turn rhetorically respond, so that the genre function does not simply precede independently of us but is rather something we reproduce as we function within it. Let us look at an other example. Like many other events, death is a material and social reality in our world, one that calls for various and often culturally idiosyncratic reactions. In some ways, we can define the response to death in terms of what Halliday calls a situation type, a typified social reality or semiotic that is realized semantically by register. But this is not entirely accurate. As a situation type, “the response to death” does not represent a single social semiotic realized within a single register. Rather, death is treated as a slightly different social semiotic in each of the various semantic and lexicogrammatical responses to it. Each semantic and lexicogrammatical response is actualized by a particular genre, which in turn constitutes death as a slightly different exigency recognized as requiring a particular type of immediate attention or response. The various ways in which individuals recognize, experience, and respond to death, therefore, become constituted by the genres they are using.

As a situation type, the “response to death” is represented and realized by a variety of genres in our culture, each of which constitutes it as a specific exigency, calling for a particular kind of response to fill a particular social need. So each genre constitutes its own social semiotic within which death takes on a particular social meaning and becomes treated as a particular social action (field), within which those involved take on particular social roles and relate to one another in particular ways (tenor), and within which certain rhetorical strategies and styles are used (mode). In our culture, for example, we have elegies, eulogies, obituaries, epitaphs, requiems, even greeting cards, just to name a few. Each of these socially sanctioned and typified rhetorical responses is not just a form or tool we use to express our feelings about death as an exigency; instead, each comes to constitute one of the various ways we make sense of and treat death in our culture. The obituary and the elegy, for instance, rhetorically respond to death differently because each genre treats death as a slightly different exigency, serving a different social function and requiring a different type of immediate attention and remedy. Thus the genres we have available to us become directly related to the ways we construct, respond to, and make sense of recurring situations, even similar situations. At the same time, as we saw in the PMHF example, genres are directly related to the identities or subject positions we assume as well as the relations we establish between ourselves and others within these situations.

We recognize obituaries, for example, as notices of a person’s death, usually accompanied by a short biographical account. They serve to notify the general public and so do not play as direct a role as, say, the eulogy does in helping those who are grieving deal with their loss. The purpose of the obituary, then, is not to console

those closest to the deceased or to help them maintain a sense of continuity in the face of loss, but to ascribe the deceased with a social identity and value, one that is recognizable to others within the community. So the obituary's purpose is not, like the eulogy, to assess and praise the meaning of the deceased's life and death; rather, it is to make the deceased's life publicly recognizable, perhaps even to celebrate the value of the individual-as-citizen. Rhetorically, therefore, the obituary often begins with an announcement of death, often without mention of the cause, and a notice of where the funeral services will be held. What is most telling about the obituary, though, is how it biographically represents the deceased. Unlike the eulogy, in which the deceased's personal accomplishments, desires, even disappointments are celebrated, the obituary describes the deceased's life in terms of its social value: who the deceased's parents are; who his or her spouse(s) and children are; where the deceased was born, lived, and died; what jobs the deceased held over the span of his or her life; what organizations and clubs the deceased belonged to; and so on. In other words, the obituary constitutes a certain public identity for the deceased, one that makes him or her recognizable to the general public in terms familiar to them: as a fellow citizen. As a genre, the obituary constitutes death as an exigence that requires us to reaffirm, using the occasion of someone's death, the public worth of that individual. The obituary constitutes the deceased as a public citizen, whose life is told in terms of the public institutions in which he or she participated. In short, the obituary constitutes death as a different kind of exigence and hence a different social reality requiring a different rhetorical action, a different relation among the participants, and different social roles than does the eulogy or other similar genres.

Carolyn Miller, in "Genre as Social Action," argues that because "[s]ituations are social constructs that are the result, not of 'perception,' but of definition," the very idea of recurrence is socially defined and constructed (156). What we recognize and experience as recurring, then, is the result of our construing and treating it as such. Moreover, the way we recognize a recurring situation as requiring a certain immediate attention or remedy (in short, an exigence) is also socially defined. Over time a recursive relationship results, in which our typified responses to a situation in turn lead to its recurrence. In all this, exigence plays a key role, at once shaping how we socially recognize a situation and helping us reproduce it. As Miller explains, "Exigence is a form of social knowledge—a mutual construing of objects, events, interests, and purposes that not only links them but also makes them what they are: an objectified social need" (157). So exigence becomes part of the way we conceptualize and experience a situation, and, as a result, how we respond to and maintain it.

Because genre and exigence are recursively linked, we oversimplify genres when we define them only as the typified rhetorical ways in which individuals function within socially defined and a priori recurrent situations or, the current buzzword in

composition, discourse communities (see Swales, for example, who relegates genre to one of six characteristics shared by members of a discourse community in order to help them achieve their goals). Actually, genres play a critical role in helping us reproduce this recurrence. Rather than being rhetorical actions “based” in recurrent situations, genres are both rhetorical actions *and* recurrent situations. That is, genres help communicants construct the very recurrent situations to which they rhetorically respond (see Devitt, “Generalizing” and Miller, “Rhetorical Community”). Exigence, as such, is not only a form of social knowledge but also specifically a form of *genre* knowledge. We rhetorically recognize and respond to particular situations through genres because genres are how we socially construct these situations by defining and treating them as particular exigencies. A genre is thus both the situation and the textual instantiation of that situation, the site at which the rhetorical and the social reproduce one another in specific kinds of texts. Genre *is* what it allows us to do, the potential that makes the actual possible, the “con” and the “text” at the same time. As such genre allows us to study the social and the rhetorical as they work on one another, reinforcing and reproducing one another and the social activities, the roles, and the relations that take place within them. This recursive process is what genre *is*.

CONCLUSION

I have been arguing that the genre function rhetorically constitutes our social realities—both literary and nonliterary—including how we recognize and enact these realities, others, and ourselves in particular space-time, ideological configurations. The genre function, in fact, becomes in key ways our situated and typified rhetorical reality, a reality we enter into and reproduce as we enact it. The actors in the Marplethorpe example we discussed earlier are constituted by it; D. H. Lawrence as a literary “author” is constituted by it when he recreates different memories of his mother’s death in one genre (a novel such as *Sons and Lovers*) and then in another (a poem such as “The Bride”), each genre in part socializing him to experience and narrate his memory of her in ways made possible by the genre’s rhetorical conventions; George Washington and Congress were constituted by it; patients and doctors are constituted by it; even after we die, we are constituted by it in our obituaries. The genre function is the social and rhetorical scene within which we enact various social practices, relations, and identities. We all, not just literary authors, become social actors within the genre function, endowed with certain social status and value. Recognizing this, we in English Studies can bring together our various linguistic, literary, and rhetorical subfields in order to recognize and study all kinds of texts—technical, business, legal, literary, expository—as complex rhetorical actions that socialize their users into performing social roles and actions, roles and actions that help reproduce the realities they describe and enact.

Charles Bazerman, in his recent “The Life of Genre, the Life in the Classroom,” reinforces what I am calling the genre function when he writes, “genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. . . . They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact” (19). Indeed, genres play a role in helping us organize, experience, and ultimately understand the situations within which we communicate; they are not just the effect of what we do when we communicate (the resulting novel or obituary or play or lab report or syllabus or state of the union address) but what we actually do when we communicate, the activity itself, or what Foucault calls its “mode of being.” Basically, genres shape us as we give shape to them, which is why they constitute our activities and regulate how and why we perform them. In this way, we can attribute to the genre function many of the claims Foucault makes for the author-function, except that the genre function accounts for all discursive activities, not just those endowed with a certain literary value. The genre function, as such, allows us in English Studies to expand and synthesize our field of inquiry to include the constitution of all discourses and the identities implicated within them, thereby helping us to rethink our at times unhealthy distinctions between literary and nonliterary texts, poetics and rhetoric, author and writer, literature and composition, and focus instead on how all texts, writers, and readers are constituted by the genres within which they function.

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