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## What Activity Systems Are Literary Genres Part of?

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**Abstract.** The recent refiguring of genre theory within activity theory suggests the forms of communication can be understood as mediating social interaction within the larger systems of human activity. Microanalysis of located language in use, however, suggests human capacity to understand language is built on alignment to situated face-to-face interaction. Literate genres need to create recognizable virtual spaces of interaction for readers to orient toward. From this perspective we can understand the historical emergence of literary systems and the communicative spaces literary writers and readers learn to populate and inhabit imaginatively. While literature as a social system has come to depend on many complex social systems for its production, dissemination, and enculturation, the interactional spaces have come to see themselves as apart from all worldly concerns. Literary social and meaning systems should be seen within the entire social ecology of literate interactions.

In the interdisciplinary study of genre, most notable in the last decade has been an increasing alliance between rhetorical genre theory and activity theory, a loose collection of approaches to socially situated cognition mediated by historically evolved cultural tools based on neo-Vygotskian psychology. The flavor of the intersection of genre theory and activity theory can be tasted in the special issue of *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 4:4 on "The Activity of Writing, The Writing of Activity," and a new online collection of essays, *Writing Selves/Writing Societies*, both edited by David Russell and myself. David Russell's recent articles, "Rethinking Genre in School & Society: An Activity Theory Analysis" and "Writing and Genre in Higher Education and Workplaces" give a good overview of this perspective.

In this view, the forms of communication are understood as mediating social interaction within the larger systems of human activity. The forms of communication serve as tools to create intersubjective understanding in pursuit of activities. I have been particularly interested in how genres help people orient to a mutual site of interaction. Genres thereby differentiate a complex of interre-

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lated sites within each activity system and provide means by which distinctive activity systems develop and maintain structures visible and intelligible to social actors. Genres thus help us create and maintain differentiated communicative spaces within the world of textuality, which has few of the ordinary markers of time and space and none of that viscerally sensed environment by which we locate ourselves in the embodied world.

As sociologists, anthropologists, linguists, and psychologists who engage in micro-analysis of face-to-face social interaction are making evident, human beings have exquisitely tuned means of aligning themselves to others and their spoken words, and that further meaning is only intelligible in relation to the socially negotiated context, the deictic indexing of specific elements in that negotiated context, and the unfolding interactions and activity in the situation (Duranti and Goodwin). Human understanding of language seems to be achieved only by placing ourselves into a situation which focuses our attention, aligns us to others, activates motives for local action, and allows us to adjust our perspective as the situation unfolds and we attribute meaning to it. Even when distant or imagined events are being recounted through language, they are recounted through our here-and-now orientation to the people we are talking with (Chafe).

The invention and elaboration of literate activities over the last five thousand years has increasingly required us to develop more visible and striking means to locate the social interaction texts engage us in. While many of the earlier uses of literacy were closely tied to here-and-now embodied activities (creating memorials of cattle inventories and oral agreements, the scripting of speeches, transmitting decrees of officials over a wider domain, creating scripts of and memorials for public cultural events), literacy has increasingly been defining its own places of interaction—from academic journals and the many genres of contemporary fiction to government files and electronic chat rooms.

I have found letters to be a particularly interesting seedbed of genres. Letters often carry many of the markers of where they fit in social space and time. The earliest letters were read aloud in the name of the writer by a nuntio, who was considered an extension of the writer. Letters have typically included the place and date of origin, names of sender and receivers, personal greetings, relevant events leading up to the letter, and overt statements of intent of the letter. Such features have been the focus of the rhetorical treatises on letter writing. However, as letters became differentiated in function they became increasingly visible as different kinds of genres and started losing some of the overt markings of letters: organizational reports and memos, government and legal documents, financial instruments including paper money, and stockholders' reports. Even the origins of newspapers, scientific journals, and novels were intertwined with letters (Bazerman, *Letters*).

One can see in the rise of genred texts key elements of the complex forms of differentiated and distanced society. Every day we engage with many different kinds of people organized in many different social systems that are dependent on

geographically and temporally dispersed events. So I enter a store (dependent on managements, stockholders, government regulators, accountants, suppliers—each tied to the scene through a web of documents) and speak to a clerk in highly stylized ways that incorporate texts (such as on price tags and receipts), leave paper trails, and enter into larger literate systems of finances, corporations, taxation, personal budgets, and banking. It would take several pages here just to lay out a reasonably comprehensive picture of the texts involved in this one simple event. Then I walk to the post office and it happens all again. Then I teach a class to students here to study the knowledge in the library and textbooks and write papers and exams. This happens within a university that has its own webs of relations and documents. Even our relations to friends, lovers, and relatives are surrounded and pervaded by texts of law and government, religion and cultural belief, entertainment and marketing, domestic design and fashion industry, finances and professions, psychology and counseling, traditional advice and self-help literature. My book *The Languages of Edison's Light* maps the many literate systems Edison and his colleagues must interact with, and the many strategically clever but generically defined documents they need to produce in order to give presence, meaning, and value to their new technology of incandescent lighting and in order to elicit specific forms of cooperation in bringing the technology to material reality.

In literate interactions one must meet others across a recognizable space each can orient to, must make that space visible and intelligible to appropriate readers, must draw and maintain readers' attention to it based on their own motives and activities, and must create interpretable meanings and actions while maintaining the readers' imaginative reconstruction. This complex and delicate social interaction depends on maintaining trust with the readers—trust in the genred space, trust in the activities being carried out, and trust in the writer as an interlocutor—lest the bond created in that space be broken by incomprehension, conflicting motives, psychological distancing, and withdrawal. Fears of being duped or seduced or condescended to can change the reader's stance and alter attention, commitment, or understanding of the written words—that is, the imaginative reconstruction of what the words say and what the author is attempting to do.

Through the visual symbolic input alone the writer must evoke some shadow of the total somatic attention that draws people into face-to-face interaction located in the visceral here-and-now and shapes their perception of events. In doing so, the writer must be able to draw the reader out of his or her actual embodied time and space to attend focally on the world instantiated in the text, at the level required of the textual activity. Checking the scoreboard at a sporting event only momentarily draws attention away from the action on the field. Following instructions to assemble knock-down furniture challenges the do-it-yourselfer to correlate parts, action, and text. Reading a philosophic account of virtue can take one very far from the chair one is sitting in. With many texts,

including most literary texts, the only here and now that the reader can be drawn into is that which can be defined and maintained within the genred space—this includes not only the chronotopes represented in the text, but also the chronotopes from which the text is presented and within which the reader engages the text. These are the kinds of issues I see as fundamental to a rhetoric of literate interaction—the kinds of problems a writer must successfully address and which frame all the more specific decisions about writing—what is known as productive rhetoric. These issues similarly frame the questions a reader might address in asking what the text means and what the text is trying to do—what is known as critical rhetoric.

As I have suggested, these issues of locatable textual action, realized in an attention-gaining and attention-holding way to excite meanings, imagination, and interaction are germane to literary texts. Experienced readers develop elaborate landscapes of the literary world upon which they locate texts, partly informed by their notions and training of literary criticism and literary history, partly developed out of their own range of reading, partly influenced by the merchandising and marketing of books, partly drawing on available literary terminology.

Literary genre criticism and literary genre theory comes largely from this interest in locating texts within a literary landscape. Much of the genre theory as it has developed in literary criticism and literary theory has been to establish timeless and even universal taxonomies of literary types. Literary types were considered as coming from the nature of literature, language, or imagination, and not considered as constantly evolving cultural-historical constructions, invoked afresh by each writer and reader from their unique location within and experience of literary culture. The movement to a more evolving cultural historic view of genre, and thus of the kinds of texts, expectations, and experiences produced and consumed at any time, raises issues of changing ideology, emotions, cultural commitments, political motives, intertextual underpinnings, entertainment values, and a hundred other phenomenological issues. These issues have long been the stock and trade of literary studies, but recent cultural-historical work on genre has made it much more clearly how genre is the vehicle by which many of these literary elements are shaped by their textual type prior to authorial choice.

I would suggest, however, from the perspective of rhetorical and activity theory approaches to genre that more attention be paid to changing literary systems as fields of activity that engage particular socially located groups of people in various roles and tasks—and maintain particular kinds of social interactions across time and space within the literary spaces created by the literary system. Moreover, more attention might be paid to the ways the changing and various literary systems established in various times and places intersect with other activity systems, particularly the literate activity systems, of that time and place and of the other times and places the literary texts travel to.

As a starting point for thinking about genred literary production within the complex of social activity systems, we may refer to Pierre Bourdieu's vision of

agonistically structured fields of cultural production, drawing on the habitual dispositions of producers and consumers of culture. Bourdieu's concept of habitus provides an intriguing way to think about each person's experience and expectations of genre, a way shaped by social position and personal history. Bourdieu's imagery makes visible that the complexly structured literary world provides particular opportunity spaces for identity formation and personal advancement, and that these opportunities stand beside other parallel fields of production and are embedded within larger fields of social organization. Bourdieu also points towards the way the cultural capital, social capital, symbolic capital, and economic capital produced within other fields may become resources within any literary field of production. Bourdieu has been rightly faulted for seeing fields of cultural production simply as agonistic fields for self-advancement, for having too schematic and simple a view the interaction of socio-cultural fields, and for not having a concrete and detailed elaboration of the mechanisms of habitus. His account, nonetheless, begins to place literary production on a complex map of the social world populated by individuals trying to make lives with the resources and opportunities available to them.

Work on the history of the book has developed detailed pictures of the economics and technology of book publication and distribution, and the multiple participants within the literary system including publishers, patrons, printers, booksellers, librarians, reviewers, government regulators, purchasers, readers, and writers. This history has displayed the literary system in concrete terms and has placed systems of literary practice in relation to other social activity systems. Research on the history of authorship is also showing the kinds of authority, accountability, expectations, and trust readers invest in the individuals, performers, fictionalized narrators, groups, corporations, interests, and the communal or divine voices they see as originating texts and enunciating themselves through the text. Perhaps the strongest guides for thinking about what literature means within a genred system of literary production and consumption in relation to other social activity systems are the studies, following Janice Radway, of socially located readers with their socially impelled needs and socially structured opportunities for literary experience.

Thirty years ago I wrote a dissertation on occasional poems on the death of Queen Elizabeth and the accession of King James I. Although I had few terms to deal with the material I was describing, I noticed the strength of historically located meaning and passion attached to the events by people who perceived their lives dependent on a strong and clever monarch to guide their nation's fate in a troubled world. The various emotions and motives were realized through a variety of poetic forms, and were stratified by class and profession of the poets. The poems also spoke to the unfolding moment and activities—from memorials and statements of uncertainty about the future published within days of Elizabeth's death to verse inscribed on a gift to James and poems read by guild members at the stations of the royal progress through London. These poems and the

sentiments and motives for writers and readers were visibly located within and interpretable through the social organization of life's immediate activities, within large systems of economics, politics, learned and popular culture, and public celebrations.

The socially organized activities of the United States in the 1960's with its systems of economics, politics, learned and popular culture, and public celebrations, had both continuities and major differences from those of Elizabethan England. The assassination of President Kennedy also evoked massive emotions of attachment and disruption in relation to a perceived strong leader—but the investments in celebrity, leadership, cultural and political change, and economic and social interest were different. Although occasional poems (now a less common genre) were written and published around the events of 1963, the poems were of a very different character. The poems reflected different ideas about private emotions and the unconscious displacing public commitments and the changing attitudes towards public political display, especially among the educated elites who were the primary producers and consumers of poetry. The poems, even more, reflected the entire changing system of literary production and distribution. The poems collected by Edwin Glikes in *Of Poetry and Power: Poems Occasioned by the Presidency and the Death of John F. Kennedy* reveal poets drawn into far more private and solipsistic places of fantasies and personal anxieties. These places were well marked within the canon of mid-20th century poetry and fostered by publishing and academic and public cultural institutions. These institutions structured and maintained a market in introspective displays of authors' sensibility and imagination, transforming the world through exploring the inner post-Coleridgean, post-Freudian landscape. The places that these poems visited depended on an educated, leisured society that fostered psychologically based introspection by the cultural elite, on a publishing and bookstore industry distribution network that made culturally high-minded books available, and on readers who took poetry as a sign of cultivation and were aware enough of psychiatry and existentialism to recognize the mental places visited by the poems. It is not surprising that the same Harvard-educated Jack Kennedy who had Robert Frost memorably read at his inauguration, founded the NEH and brought Harvard and culture to the fore in American life and politics, was eulogized in that same system of cultural forms he helped foster.

The poems on the deaths of Elizabeth I and Jack Kennedy had little literary life beyond the events they memorialized and are now read, if at all, as political and social history—we treat them as verse and not poetry. W. H. Auden, on the other hand, wrote a number of occasional poems that were written and still read as literature—most notably "In Memory of W. B. Yeats." The contemplative place that Auden wrote to and that people recognized Auden's poems as visiting relied on literary publishers such as Faber & Faber, literary journals, and liberal university education of those who became the economic and cultural elites. His poetic world also was formed in relation to a continuing redefinition of the pur-

poses of art and the roles of intellectual elites as Europe became increasingly dark and more hopeless at the hands of political, economic, and the military elites. Auden memorializes Yeats' poetic world from a place within Auden's poetic world, from which he also observes politics tumbling towards World War II. It is this very situation, this creation of an alternative place of consciousness that gives poignancy to the famous lines:

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives  
 In the valley of its own making where executives  
 Would never want to tamper, flows on south  
 From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,  
 Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,  
 A way of happening, a mouth.

In celebrating Yeats, whom Auden in a simultaneous obituary accused of withdrawal from the issues of the day, Auden was further creating an imagined space for poetry which he himself was inhabiting and drawing his readers into—a place where no thing happens and a “nothing” happens. During this period as a public intellectual, regularly giving political speeches, he was going through his own struggles of conscience, and was shortly thereafter to announce that he would no longer speak at political meetings because he felt defiled by his ability to “make a fighting demagogic speech” (Carpenter 255-256). The middle verse which draws the distinction between the worldly faults of the person (“You were silly like us”) and the poetic gift was an afterthought, defining the divide of the worldly mourning of the first stanza (“He disappeared in the dead of winter”) from the poetic celebration, dividing the prose rhythms of his contemplative poems from the tightly formal tetrameter couplets of a song:

Earth, receive an honored guest:  
 William Yeats is laid to rest

....

With the farming of a verse  
 Make the vineyard of the curse  
 Sing of human unsuccess  
 In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart  
 Let the healing fountain start,  
 In the prison of his days  
 Teach the free man how to praise.

This is a fitting celebration and memorial of Yeats' poetic world, for in creating and enacting this place of poetic transcendence, Auden moves us both



formally and emotionally close to the consoling spot that Yeats himself took his readers in contemplating the failing human body and imagination:

Now that my ladder's gone,  
I must lie down where all the ladders start,  
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

We may recognize this place in our own spiritualized bodies, but only because we recognize a poetic means to get us there and because we are surrounded by a world that makes the poetic means to get us there available and intelligible, a world that recognizes the value of the journey. For the nothing to happen, trees must be cut down, verses shaped, manuscripts mailed to publishers, printing presses must roll, trucks carry books to the sellers, and people desiring the nothing must bring the books home to their armchairs.

The maintenance of a recognizable cultural space that remains accessible to readers sixty years later—despite the constant changes that are reshaping literary fields of activity and the meanings, motives, and relations enacted there—depends on the continued life of numerous educational, cultural, intellectual, publishing, economic, and legal activity systems. These activity systems provide readers with understandings and motives that make the poem materially available, meaningful, significant. These systems place the acts of reading and talking about the poem in a world of continuing cultural activity, and place the poem among other works within a cultural field.

The fields of literary and cultural activity, and the particular texts that evoke and mediate such activity, are places of deep social and cultural meaning, as well as sites of the creation of economic, political, and ideological value. They are sites of expression of fears and desires and frustrations of those people who engage in each literary system; they are also sites of identity formation, assertion and affiliation; they are sites of reflection on selves and societies, commenting on pasts and projecting futures.

As engaging as literary places can be for some segments of the population, drawing people into complex, multiple attention within the space of a single text where the mind resides for some moments in a world of imagination and evoked meanings, we must remember that the literary genres make up only a small subsystem of human-leisured uses of texts, appealing to the pleasures of only a very small group of people educated into its pleasures. There are many more textually evoked acts of imagination occurring each day on subways and buses as commuters read their romances and mysteries and popular magazines. And even these literate acts are far outnumbered by the acts of imagination as people read about their governments and try to intervene in its affairs in what limited, typified ways they have available, as they draw up plans and projects and follow instructions at the workplace, as they read medical journals in an attempt to imagine what is wrong with their patients and how they might better cure them, as

they project their food needs and the likely contents of food markets in order to create shopping lists to structure their daily marketing.

The real challenge activity-oriented genre theories pose for literary studies, is not, as I mildly put it in a 1994 paper, to see literary texts within their activities and alongside others, but to understand the role of literate imagination within all the text genres that have been increasingly forming the ligatures of societies in the last 5000 years. It seems socially irresponsible, if not criminal, for the departments that have a corner on textual studies in our modern academies not to take on that charge. Now also that the economic, political, and cultural systems are making it harder to maintain a market in traditional literary texts, it also seems prudent to reopen English Department horizons. It is less than two centuries since literacy started to become conflated with the literary, and only a little more than a century ago that the literary gained definitive authority over literacy.

It seems more fun to see how the whole social world works through texts than to keep disciplinary eyes focused on a narrow range of texts of interest to a narrow range of readers, no matter how highly we value that subset of texts and activity. Indeed, only by comparing the workings of the great variety of texts in the world can we get a clearer sense of workings and values of each subset—what each does that is done by no other. For those who are driven to understand all the wonders written language can do, this is the payoff for considering genres as socially located activities. Literate imagination is powerfully everywhere, once you recognize the places it creates.

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