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DIALOGUE



Genre as World System: Epic and Novel on Four Continents

WAI CHEE DIMOCK

What would literary history look like if the field were divided, not into discrete periods, and not into discrete bodies of national literatures? What other organizing principles might come into play? And how would they affect the mapping of “literature” as an analytic object: the length and width of the field; its lines of filiation, lines of differentiation; the database needed in order to show significant continuity or significant transformation; and the bounds of knowledge delineated, the arguments emerging as a result?

In this essay, I propose one candidate to begin this line of rethinking: the concept of literary genre. Genre, of course, is not a new concept; in fact, it is as old as the recorded history of humankind. Even though the word itself is of relatively recent vintage (derived from French, in turn derived from the Latin *genus*),¹ the idea that there are different kinds of literature (or at least different kinds of poetry) came from ancient Greece. Traditionally it has been seen as a classifying principle, putting the many subsets of literature under the rule of normative sets.

Theorists like Benedetto Croce have objected to it on just these grounds. “[I]nstead of asking before a work of art if it be expressive and what it expresses,” genre criticism only wants to label it, putting it into a pigeonhole, asking only “if it obey the *laws* of epic or of tragedy.” Nothing can be more misguided, Croce says, for these “*laws of the kinds*” have never in fact been observed by practicing writers (36–37).² Derrida makes the same point. “As soon as genre announces itself, one

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must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity.” This sort of border policing is madness, he says, for the law of genre is an impossible law; it contains within itself a “principle of contamination,” so much so that the law is honored only in its breach (224–5).

FAMILY RESEMBLANCE

Keeping these objections in mind, I invoke genre less as a law, a rigid taxonomic landscape, and more as a self-obsolting system, a provisional set that will always be bent and pulled and stretched by its many subsets. Such bending and pulling and stretching are unavoidable, for what genre is dealing with is a volatile body of material, still developing, still in transit, and always on the verge of taking flight, in some unknown and unpredictable direction. “Genre is much less of a pigeonhole than a pigeon,” Alasdair Fowler has suggested. Movement is key, and if this movement is vested in the concept of *kinds*, it is not as “permanent classes,” but as “families subject to change (37,v).”

This analogy to “families” is especially worth thinking about. It reminds us that genre is not just a theory of classification but, perhaps even more crucially, a theory of interconnection. *Kin* is every bit as important as *kind*. And, by kin, what I have in mind is not necessarily a genealogical relation, but, just as often, a remote spectrum of affinities, interesting when seen in conjunction, but not themselves organically linked. Likeness here is probabilistic and distributional; it has less to do with common ancestry than with an iterative structure of comparable attributes, issuing from environments roughly similar but widely dispersed. What matters here is not lineage, but a phenomenal field of contextually induced parallels. Born of the local circumstances that shape them, and echoing other genres shaped by circumstances more or less alike, they make up a decentralized web, something like what Deleuze and Guattari call a “rhizome.”

This web can be further elucidated by a concept from Wittgenstein: “family resemblance.”³ Wittgenstein uses it to talk about a conceptual elasticity that classifies tennis, chess, and ring-a-ring-a-roses under the same heading—“games”—constituting this as a “family,” with a largely undefined and infinitely expandable membership. Tennis, chess, and ring-a-ring-a-roses have no common ancestry; they do not go by the same operating principle; there might not even be a single attribute common to all three. Instead, what allows them to be grouped together is “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail” (31–32, #66).

Family resemblance is multi-location, multi-platform, and multi-dimension. Relatives might resemble one another in broad outlines, in shape and size; they might also resemble one another in some small detail, such as a stylistic tic. Kinship is not limited to one feature, one modality, or one scale. It can emerge even when there two things being compared are manifestly unlike. Tennis and chess, different in almost every way, are alike in one thing: each has a structured outcome, each divides its players into winners and losers. This outcome does not hold, however, for ring-a-ring-a-roses, whose similarity to the other two has much less to do with the terminal

effect than with something much more general, something like fun. The “family” made up by these three games revolves not on a single plane, but on many axes, brought into being by “spinning a thread . . . fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres” (32, #67).

FRACTAL GEOMETRY

The spinning of threads is an especially apt metaphor for the twists and turns that run from one genre to another, a family whose tensile strength lies in just this sinuousness. These interconnections have little to do with linear descent. What they exemplify instead is a nonlinear system, with structural entanglements at various angles and various distances, a complex geometry. This nonlinear system is very close to what Levi-Strauss understands by “kinship,” which, for him, is more *mathematical* than biological. In *Structural Anthropology*, he emphatically says: “kinship does not consist in the objective ties of descent or consanguinity between individuals” (50). Rather, it is a permutative prism, effected by different degrees of rotating, combining, and scattering, and generating different clusters of relations, clumped together on different platforms. Kinship is “a network of different types of orders” (312). It is a geometry that spills over onto several scales at once.

For Levi-Strauss, this spilling over creates a problem for the researcher, for it is not clear on what scale the analysis is to proceed, what mathematics should be summoned. On the one hand, kinship relations are “considerably more numerous than those dealt with in Newtonian mechanics”; on the other hand, they are “far less numerous than would be required to allow a satisfactory use of the laws of statistics and probability. Thus we find ourselves in an intermediate zone: too complicated for one treatment and not complicated enough for the other” (314).

Writing in 1963, Levi-Strauss did not know about a new mathematics that was yet to appear, one that goes far beyond the Euclidean geometry of Newtonian mechanics even as it transforms statistical analysis, introducing scalar refinement previously unimaginable, and paying special attention to the “intermediate zone,” phenomena that spill over between dimensions. This new mathematics goes by the name “fractal geometry.” From the first, it is interdisciplinary (and interlingual) in its scope. Its inventor, Benoit Mandelbrot, is at home in at least four fields:

A graduate of Ecole Polytechnique; Caltech M.S. and Ae.E. in Aeronautics; Docteur es Sciences Mathématiques U. Paris. Before joining the IBM Thomas J. Watson Research Center, where he is now an IBM Fellow, Dr. Mandelbrot was with the French Research Council (CNRS) . . . he has been a Visiting Professor of Economics and later of Applied Mathematics at Harvard, of Engineering at Yale, of Physiology at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, and of Mathematics at the University of Paris-Sud, and has been with M.I.T., first in the Electrical Engineering Department, and most recently as an Institute Lecturer. (Mandelbrot “About the Author”)

Aeronautics, economics, engineering, physiology—all these disciplines converge in the new mathematics. Its practical value is great enough, furthermore, to merit a paying job at IBM.⁴ And, just as it underscores the kinship among fields, its very name is a testimony to the kinship among languages. *Fractal* has an interesting etymology, which Mandelbrot calls attention to: “*Fractal* comes from the Latin adjective *fractus*, which has the same root as *fraction* and *fragment* and means ‘irregular or fragmented’; it is related to *frangere*, which means ‘to break.’ The stress should logically be on the first syllable, as in *fraction*” (4).

Fractal is a set of points that cannot be plotted as one, two, or three dimensions. It is a geometry of non-integers, a geometry of what loops around, what breaks off, what is jagged, what comes only in percentages. Mandelbrot is moved to propose this new geometry because of his dissatisfaction with Euclid’s. “Many important spatial patterns,” he writes, “are either irregular or fragmented to such an extreme degree that *Euclid*—a term used in this Essay to denote all of classical geometry—is hardly of any help in describing their form” (1). Unlike the Euclidean objects—squares, circles, and triangles, with their clean resolution—the shapes that interest Mandelbrot are shapes with serried outlines: the wispy puffs of clouds, the lacy fronds of ferns, the pocked and porous surface of the sponge, the coiled dimensions inside a ball of twine.

THE PROBLEM OF SCALE

These whirling, tessellating, clumping shapes make length indeterminate. In his celebrated chapter, “How Long is the Coast of Britain?” Mandelbrot points out that there is no single answer to this question, since everything depends on the yardstick being used, the scale adopted to make the measurement. If an observer were to measure the coastline from the air, from a distance of twenty thousand feet, that aerial vision would yield a clean line—and a shorter distance—since all the nooks and crannies would be passed over. If the observer were on the ground, measuring the coast at close range and on foot, in units of eight or nine inches, the coast of Britain would be much longer, thanks to the zigzags newly recorded. And, if the observer were not a human being at all, but a snail, using *its* feet as the unit of measurement, the zigzags would be even more pronounced, and the coast of Britain longer still. In short, as the scale “is made smaller and smaller, every one of the approximate lengths tends to become larger and larger without bound. Insofar as one can tell, each seems to tend toward infinity” (29).

Fractals is the geometry of the irregular and the microscopic, what gets lost in a big picture. It does what aggregating and averaging cannot. To aggregate and to average, Mandelbrot says, is like wrapping a tinfoil around a sponge: the former does “measure” the latter, but only by completely obliterating every detail of its texture. Refusing to do this, fractals would seem opposed to any large-scale paradigm. This turns out not to be the case. Mandelbrot’s geometry of the minuscule is, in fact, matched by a geometry of what gets “larger and larger without bound.” It is a meditation on infinity, on what keeps spinning out, in endless spirals. These two—finite

parameters and infinite unfolding—go hand in hand. The latter is embedded in the former, coiled in the former, and can be released only when the former is broken down into fractional units. For it is only when the scale gets smaller and the details gets finer that previously hidden dimensions can come swirling out. Scalar opposites here generate a dialectic that makes the global an effect of the grainy.

The fractal database thus comes as a spectrum, ranging from the microscopic to “phenomena on or above Man’s scale” (1). Aeronautics, economics, engineering, and physiology all benefit from this duality of scale. Literary studies would as well, I argue; for this discipline, like the others, is energized by the feedback loops between the very large and the very small. Mandelbrot finds (this is strangest feature of his geometry) that whether one magnifies or reduces the unit of measurement, some deviation is bound to occur: some turbulence, some “noise,” some irregular beat or bump on the linear frequency. The twisting, curling, bulging shapes are not limited to just one scale; they are much more deeply transitive, and much more robustly self-propagating. They carry over tenaciously from one metric to another, spewing out countless copies of themselves on countless dimensions.

Mandelbrot calls this “self-similarity.” It is a reproductive system of sorts, but statistical rather than biological, taking the form of a scalar recursiveness. What is repeated here, over and over again, is a sporadic but also quite durable quirk, an off-scale excrescence that breaks up and messes up the straightforward causation of any linear system. Roughness is more elementary than we may think. It is certainly more reproducible. More so than cleanness or smoothness, it is the rough weave of the fabric, the bumpy surface of pits and pocks, that is threaded throughout the world, in infinite extension as well as infinite regress. Mandelbrot speaks of these pits and pocks as “fractal kin,” a “family of shapes” (1). Such a family, going all the way up and all the way down, all the way out and all the way in, loops the gnarled contours of the globe through the gnarled contours of every single node.

ENDLESS KINSHIP

Here then is the mathematics Levi-Strauss was looking for: one that is robust across scales, keeping track of kinship at every level. Fractal geometry is the lost twin of anthropology. And—this says something about both disciplines—it is no less the lost twin of literary history, especially the study of genre. Here as well, what this geometry allows us to see is a tangle of relations, one that counts as a “system” precisely because its aberrations are system-wide, because pits and bumps come with many loops and layers of filiation. Even literary forms that look quite different at first sight turn out to have these quirks in common. That family resemblance runs through them even as their trajectories diverge. And, depending on context, this family resemblance can be extended, modified, and recombined in any number of ways. The process is ongoing, and will never be complete, since there is no end to such irregularities, no end to the second and third and fourth cousins coiled within each ball of deviance.

Literary history becomes a different kind of history when it follows the careers of these second and third and fourth cousins, in turn having cousins of their own.

Periodization becomes much more complicated then, for a population of kin is bound to scatter and reconnect at odd intervals. Their oddities, echoing one another from far off, force us to go back and periodize all over again. It is an unfinished business, messing up any paradigm that assumes its data to be complete. We don't know where any particular genre might spiral out, what offshoots might spin off from it. We don't know how much time it will take, or how much space it will string together. Literary genres are, after all, as old, as widely dispersed, and as unpredictable as human beings themselves. The epic has thousands of years behind it, and so too does the novel. Both stretch from antiquity to modernity, both show up in every human habitat. Their longevity and ubiquity make them the durable threads that bind together the entire species.

COMPARATIVE MORPHOLOGY

Franco Moretti, drawing on the work of Immanuel Wallerstein and Frederic Jameson, puts genre at the center of a "world-system" for just this reason.⁵ He calls for a "comparative morphology," one that takes as its starting point a distributive map, reflecting the circulation and evolution of literary forms, and operating on the same scale as the planet. Only such a map can capture the full range of environmental input, the difference that each locale makes. What Moretti wants, in short, is a developmental database, assembled along both the axis of space and the axis of time, and tracking not only existing forms but also emerging ones. This developmental database is generalizable as a law, what he calls a "law of literary evolution" (57).⁶ For him, such a law would account for both continuity and change. Its history is in effect the history of recorded life, a history of the interaction between the local and the global.

Moretti's paradigm is crucial to any "world" approach to genre. I would like, at the same time, to caution against what strikes me as his over-commitment to general laws, to global postulates operating at some remove from the phenomenal world of particular texts. As Moretti forthrightly admits, what he advocates is a paradigm called "distant reading," so named because of its clear opposition to the better known, "close" variety. Unlike close reading, distant reading is meant to track large-scale developments; it is not meant to capture the fine print. Moretti does not worry too much about this. According to him, "if the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, less is more" (57).

Is this really true? Is the loss of the text a price worth paying in order to project literature onto a large canvas? If fractal geometry has anything to tell us, it is that the loss of detail is almost always unwarranted. There are any number of reasons (such as the pleasure of reading) that I can name, but probably the most pertinent one is the fact that the literary field is still incomplete, its kinship network only partly actualized, with many new members still to be added. Such a field needs to maintain an archive that is as broad-based as possible, as fine-grained as possible, an archive that errs on the side of randomness rather than on the side of undue coherence, if only to allow new permutations to come into being. Rather than seeing comparative mor-

phology as a thinning process, one that leads to a formalizable law, I would like to see it as a thickening process, one that keeps a full, cumulative, and not necessarily unified record, the better to meet emerging forms half way.

BACKWARD EXTENSION

This sense of emergence can be extended, not only forwards (which is the usual direction it takes), but also backwards, to material that, for one reason or another, has been left out of standard literary histories. I am thinking especially of the phenomenal field of pre-modern and non-Western literature, and its under-theorized relation to two genres: the epic and the novel. It is a commonplace, of course, to speak of the “rise” of the novel in the eighteenth century, a rise supposedly coextensive with realism, with print culture, and with the rise of the middle class.⁷ This is true to a large extent in the English case, but a broader frame—less narrowly periodized and less narrowly nationalized—yields a very different picture. Classicists such as Arthur Heiserman and J. J. Winkler have long called attention to the existence of the novel in ancient Greece.⁸ Margaret Doody, while attentive to the eighteenth century, has also insisted that the archive is in fact much larger, that it ought to include pre-modern and non-Western material. In her wide-ranging book, *The True Story of the Novel*, she takes the genre much further back and much further east. This backward extension seems to me crucial if we are to redraw the literary map, bringing below-the-threshold data back into the field of vision.

Rather than concentrating on the novel and tracing it back to antiquity, however, I would like to explore a broader constellation, namely, the co-evolution and cross-fertilization of literary forms. I begin not with the novel but with the epic: as a form possibly antecedent to it, and always bearing a non-trivial relation to it. Tracing the relation between these two across a range of environments, I put far-flung kinship at the center of any discussion of genre. This far-flung kinship, in turn, reminds us that irregularities need to be traced as far back as possible in order for each new instance to be seen anew. The oddities of genre, being venerable, have been discussed for quite some time. There is a critical literature going back to antiquity on just this point.

In what follows, I revisit this critical literature, beginning with Plato and Aristotle, and using these two as a springboard to a still more ancient past, a non-Western birthplace of genres, located not in Greece but in Mesopotamia. Then, as a counterpoint to this backward loop, I will turn around and go forward, in the last part of the essay, moving into the twentieth century, and moving to two other continents, Africa and America, so that the never-ending saga of the epic and the novel can truly become a saga of the world.

PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

In the *Republic*, Plato divides poetry into two modes: poetry that is imitative, and poetry that is narrative. Since these are *modes*, they designate not particular

works but their general orientations. And, as orientations, both might be present in the same work, though to different degrees. Rather than being a catalog of discrete types, Plato's landscape is gradational—a spectrum—with one mode presiding on one end, and the other mode presiding on the other. In the middle, these two meet. This is a unique feature of the spectrum: its midpoint is a point of maximum contact, maximum interaction, aligned with both poles, with input from both. Doubleness is a structural provision here, while each pole is singular. According to Plato, poetry such as tragedy and comedy is singular in just this way: it is an instance of the “wholly imitative.” The dithyramb is also singular, being located at the other end, an instance of the “opposite style.” Only one kind of poetry is located in the middle, the point of maximum contact, with access to both ends, and encompassing the fullness of the spectrum: “the combination of both is found in epic” (94, #394).

For Plato, the epic is the most full-throated of genre, pivoted on what it is able to take in. Not unified or monolithic, it is structured instead by the extensional force of a spectrum. This extensional force is given even more emphasis by Aristotle, in turn pointing to a larger set of circumstances surrounding the genesis of the epic. For me, this is one of the most interesting observations in the *Poetics*, though one that has been the least remarked upon. As we know, tragedy is what interests Aristotle the most, but the epic, being an adjacent genre, also comes in for a good bit of attention. According to him, these two have much in common, but they diverge on one point, namely, that “the epic has a very strongly marked special tendency towards extra extension of its bulk” (63–64, section 24, 1459b23–1459b24). This tendency suggests two things. First, the bulky epic is heavier, it moves at a different pace, a different rhythm, with a different kind of propulsion and, not infrequently, a different kind of inertia. Secondly, because it is moving so slowly, it also gathers together the world in a different way. Its kinship network is broader, with tributaries coming from afar, significant input from many foreign tongues.

FOREIGN WORDS

Central to Aristotle's argument about epic is a linguistic map, with a longstanding and ongoing loop of interaction between the center and the peripheries. Unfamiliar words lurk on the horizon and slowly filter in, changing the shape of the common tongue and reconstituting it on a different terrain. Aristotle discusses this in Section 22 of the *Poetics*, a section devoted to the use of foreign words in poetry. He writes: “Impressiveness and avoidance of familiar language is achieved by the use of alien terms; and by “alien” I mean dialectical words, metaphor, lengthening of words, in short anything other than the standard terminology. But if the whole composition is of that sort, it will be either a riddle or a piece of barbarism: riddle if made up of metaphors, barbarism if made up of foreign words. For the very essence of a riddle is, while talking about real things, to make impossible combinations of them.... And the result of foreign words is barbarism” (59, section 22, 1458a20–1458a30). Aristotle sees two dangers facing the poet. On the one hand, there is the dullness of all-standard terminology; on the other hand, there is the “barbarism” of all-unfamiliar words. Since the former is just as bad as the latter, a good writer needs to be on guard

against both by taking advantage of both, using the alien as a check on the clichéd. Foreign words are, for that reason, not just barbarisms but *necessary* barbarisms. Aristotle takes them for granted; his very taxonomy presupposes their presence. According to him, “Of the various kinds of words, compounds are best suited to the dithyramb, foreign words to epic verse, and metaphors to iambic verse” (61, section 22, 1459a9). Different kinds of poetic meter are correlated, in short, with different kinds of nonstandard diction. Foreign words, it turns out, are the special province of epic.

Why? Aristotle offers this oblique explanation: “For the hexameter is the slowest moving and weightiest of all verses—that is why it is the most receptive to foreign words and metaphors” (64, section 24, 1459b35). The epic is the most lumbering of genres; its transit through different environments is a slow transit; this slowness opens it up, makes it porous to its surroundings. The epic, in short, is a kind of linguistic sponge. Springing up at contact zones, it is also super-responsive to its environment, picking up all those non-Greek words that come its way, but not necessarily dissolving them, perhaps keeping them simply as alien deposits, grains or lumps that stick.

What might these words be, and how did they get into the picture in the first place? Aristotle offers no further details, but, with the help of recent scholarship, we can speculate a bit more on this interesting point, bringing a larger circumference to bear on ancient Greek culture. If the *Poetics* is to be trusted, foreign input would seem always to have been an important part of the epic tradition. This tradition was prior to Aristotle, prior even to Homer, with antecedents going much further back, and going back to non-Western languages.

MESOPOTAMIAN EPIC

None of this would come as a surprise to students of Mesopotamia, who have been making just this argument for quite some time. Walter Burkert, for instance, argues in *The Orientalizing Revolution* that ancient Greece was on the receiving end of a civilization still more ancient, centered in Mesopotamia, with Akkadian, Ugaritic, Phoenician, Aramaic, and Egyptian offshoots. A form of epic had flourished in this ancient civilization—notably the Sumerian epic and the Akkadian epic, such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Many of the formal attributes of these Mesopotamian epics would also be found in the Greek epic. Burkert has a list of these. Above all, he points to the pervasive use of direct speech and the repetitive, piled-on formula that introduces it: “The lavish use of direct speech, the representation of whole scenes in the form of dialogue is, indeed, a peculiarity of the genre. In Akkadian, the introductory formula is, in literal translation: “He set his mouth and spoke, to [so and so]...he said [the word].” The simple meaning of *speak* is expressed in three synonyms—just as with the well-known Homeric formula, “he raised his voice and spoke the winged words” (116). The act of speaking is triply underscored in both the Mesopotamian epic and the Greek epic. This elaborate (and seemingly gratuitous) speech convention punctuates the epic, giving it its peculiar rhythm. The use of three synonyms obviously slows down the action. Taking note of

this detail, along with Aristotle's observation about the presence of foreign words, we can make some guesses about the epic, using its form as an index to its conjectural history, both past and future.

First, the epic seems always to have been a genre spurred by cultural contact. Since this is the case, since the proximity of the alien is a genetic precondition, it stands to reason that this genre should have some sort of formal vehicle to register that fact, to highlight the foreignness of foreign words, their non-trivial departures from standard usage. Its elaborate speech convention might have been one such formal vehicle, for while this convention is applied to everyone who speaks, it can also be used, if necessary, to highlight the nonstandard diction of one particular speaker. This is indeed the case in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Benjamin R. Foster points out that this Mesopotamian epic

contains clear differentiations in the speech of individual characters, including style, diction, grammar, and even pronunciation. Ut-napishtim, for example, expresses himself in the elevated, obscure style suitable for an antediluvian sage but has a curious mannerism of rolling or doubling consonants (sharru for sharu, shaqqa for shaga, ushaznannu for ushaznanu, niqqu for niqu) . . . and Ishullanu, the gardener, uses a nonstandard form in Tablet VI, line 72 (this could be translated either as archaic and proverbial, "Hath my mother not baked?" or as a colloquialism: "Hain't my mother baked?"). (xx)

Nonstandard speech is a lexical marker that gives the epic its peculiar morphology. This lexical marker has implications for its structure of time. For what these archaisms point to is a prehistory, a deep time antecedent to and bearing a diacritical relation to the present. The *lexical* axis of the epic, in short, serves also as a *temporal* axis. Its deviations from the linguistic norm are testimonies to a receding but still active past. It pays tribute to that past by highlighting a mode of speech associated with it, a mode of speech that is cast either in a foreign tongue, or in a tongue that has a foreign sound to it. The linguistic fabric of the epic is, for that reason, not in the least smooth. It is a rough cut, with dents and bumps, each representing a coil of time, a cyst-like protuberance, in which an antecedent moment is embedded, bearing the weight of the past and burrowing into the present as a warp, a deformation. In this way, the lexical map of the epic is a map, not only of space, but also of time. The cumulative life of humankind is captured here as a looping, bulging, swirling net, featuring both the linguistic norm and its nonstandard variants. It is this that gives the epic its scope. It also makes this genre a prime candidate for fractal geometry.

DANTE'S *COMMEDIA*

Fractal geometry, in fact, describes not only the Mesopotamian epic, but, even more aptly, its medieval, European counterpart. In a remarkable recent book, *Heaven's Fractal Net*, written by a religious historian, William J. Jackson, the *Divine Comedy* is cited as the most stunning instance of a recursive structure enacted on

several scales. Jackson points to the *terza rima* itself, a three-line unit, with each rhyme making “a small circle in its rhythm of returning sounds - interlinkings within larger interlinkings” (41). Likewise, the punitive logic of *contrapasso*, with the crime repeated in the punishment, makes hell a place of “infinite reiteration” (42). These are large-scale fractal structures. In the context of this essay, I would like to focus especially on its minute features, the dents and bumps in its lexical surface. Like *Gilgamesh*, the *Commedia* is spurred by cultural contact, pivoted at the point of maximum interaction. Its linguistic fabric reflects this. Non-Italian words show up almost as soon as the *Inferno* begins. “*Miserere di me*”—these are the first words spoken by Dante to Virgil. It is surely no accident that Latin should be used on this occasion, when the two poets are brought face to face for the first time, when Dante is asking Virgil to have pity on him. That older poet has to be addressed in the language he had originally used, a language older than any of the Italian vernaculars, and still a common tongue for the educated when Dante wrote.⁹

Like *Gilgamesh*, then, the *Commedia* also has a bumpy fabric, riddled with words that do not synchronize. Aristotle has been proven right in both Akkadian and Italian: the lexical surface of the epic is indeed sponge-like, lumpy, full of holes, porous to nonstandard diction. Latin is, for that reason, not the only foreign words on exhibit in the *Commedia*. If it marks a point of lexical elevation, elevated from the Italian vernacular of the poem, there are plenty of other usages to give foreignness a low definition. These include, most obviously, the crude profanities of the demons, including what seems to be non-words made up by them, for instance, “*Pape Satan, pape Satan aleppe*,” spoken by Plutus in *Inferno* 7, or “*Raphel may amech zabi almi*,” spoken by Nimrod in *Inferno* 31. As Zygmunt Baranski points out, the *Commedia* is a kind of non-stop carnival when it comes to languages. Dante uses “every register of his native language, and further embellishes this with Latinisms, Gallisms, a wide range of neologisms, regionalisms, words associated with particular literary genres, other kinds of technical vocabulary—drawn, for instance, from optics, astronomy, scholastic theology, mysticism, and language of merchants—and, finally, foreign words” (13). For Baranski, this virtuoso performance is meant for one express purpose, namely, to show off the impressive range of one particular vernacular, the Florentine tongue, to prove that it can harness all the linguistic resources of the world, that it can do everything that Latin can and do it better.

This is very much the case, within the context of authorial psychology, the psychology of Dante as a vernacular poet. Within the context of comparative morphology, however, it would also seem to be the case that this is part of a reproducible structure, the effect of cultural contact. *Gilgamesh* is there to prove it. The Italian epic and the Akkadian epic are cousins for just this reason. Their kinship is a kinship in lexical bumps, produced by the non-trivial presence of foreign words, used to mark a prior layer of history. This prior layer comes into play not only when Dante uses Latin to address Virgil, it also comes into play when, in *Purgatorio* 26, he allows Arnaut to come forth to speak. Rendered in direct speech, and rendered in Provençal, this dramatized use of a foreign tongue once again brings into relief a roughed-up chronology, a roughness built into the epic and marking it as a genre.¹⁰

UPDATING BAKHTIN

What is also built into the epic, then, is a differential axis of time. This is what Mikhail Bakhtin singles out as its generic signature in his classic essay, "Epic and Novel." Bakhtin writes: "The world of epic is the national heroic past. . . . The important point here is not that the past constitutes the content of the epic. The formally constitutive feature of the epic as a genre is rather the transferal of a represented world into the past" (13). A layer of prehistory is a given. Temporal distance is what gets the epic going; it is its structural prerequisite.

Of course, for Bakhtin, this structural prerequisite also means that the epic is an archaic genre, firmly locked into the past. Its horizon is a backward horizon, already behind it, and it has no point of contact with the contemporary world. Bakhtin writes: "In its style, tone and manner of expression, epic discourse is infinitely far removed from discourse of a contemporary about a contemporary addressed to contemporaries. . . . We come upon it when it is already completely finished, a congealed and half-moribund genre . . . it is impossible to change, to re-think, to re-evaluate anything in it . . . it is impossible to really touch it, for it is beyond the realm of human activity" (17). Bakhtin, of course, has his own reasons for defining the epic in this way, as a genre that has already run its course, that can have no further meaning, no further development in the modern world. The point of the exercise is to show that there is only one genre that is truly alive right now—the novel—an autonomous genre, not indebted to the epic and indeed completely replacing it, taking over the literary field at just that point where the epic is consigned to oblivion. According to him, only the novel is adequate to the competing languages of the modern world; only the novel can give voice to the heteroglossia that reflects human diversity.

And yet, as must be clear from our preceding discussion, this cannot be true. What Bakhtin takes as a generic attribute of the novel is in fact not unique to it. Non-standard diction had a much longer history and a different genetic locale, finding its earliest home not in Europe but in Asia. Bakhtin is handicapped, not only by a too-restrictive database, but also by overlooking some less cited passages in what ought to be canonical texts. Still, his theory need not be jettisoned. It only has to be amended, I think, by replacing his linear model of supersession with a fractal model of looping: a model of recursive kinship. In other words, rather than seeing the epic as an archaic genre, completely behind us, and pronounceable as dead, I would like to see it as an archaic genre that has made a loop into the present: still evolving, still energized by foreign tongues, and reproducing itself across many scales, bearing witness to the input of many environments.

All we have to do is to look at Derek Walcott and his experimentations in *Omeros* to see just how *unmoribund* the epic is, how vital it can be in a creolized medium. But I would like to make a related claim as well, a riskier claim, having to do not with the survival of the epic as epic, a poetic genre, but with its survival as a spilled-over phenomenon, spilling over into other dimensions of literature, and becoming a *fraction* of prose. This is the most interesting implication of fractal geometry. It theorizes the novel as a linguistic sponge in its turn, picking up the poetic genre, inserting it into a different medium, and keeping it intact to some extent, as

grains and lumps. It is this kind of fractal geometry that I would like to trace as the *Divine Comedy* makes its way to two other continents, as it takes up residence in two novels, as sponge-like as the epic.

THROUGH OTHER CONTINENTS

One of these is written by Amiri Baraka (otherwise known as LeRoi Jones), the other by J. M. Coetzee; one written in the United States, the other in South Africa. A poet and a playwright, Baraka is also at home in prose, having written numerous essays and a novel with this hard-hitting title: *The System of Dante's Hell* (1964). Dante's topography is kept more or less intact: the novel also features nine circles, beginning with those who are uncommitted in the vestibule, and ending up with the treacherous in the ninth circle. The lexical bumpiness reappears as well, as in this account of the Eighth Circle, fourth Bolgia, what Baraka calls "Ditch 4." This is the "ditch" of the soothsayers. Punishment here proceeds by the Dantesque logic of *contrapasso*: the soothsayers, who presume to look into the future, now have their "Heads twisted backwards" (49). With this detail in place, Baraka goes on to name these people. And there are quite a few names, primarily the names of black preachers: Orlando Davis, John Wieners, Charlie Davis, Ray Simmons, Sess Peoples, and Morris Hines. This is what Baraka says about Morris Hines: "Morris Hines: As a compact, years ago under the shadows of those grey or brown buildings. Always heavier than his movement. Escape Bolgia in a buick. Left-handed first baseman: "Ingentes." Flatterer, even as whore Beatrice had her prediction, her Georges Sorel. We had our church. Sussex Ave. was rundown & all the negroes from the projects went there (the strivers after righteousness. American ideal, is not Cyrano's death on Lock Street. The poor went to Jemmy's church, but big Morris and his deacon father sat next to Joyce Smith's house every Sunday & their mother wd fan God. Malebolge (for the flatterers) for me, there is all you can imagine. Jehovah *me fecit*" (53–54). The eighth circle, ditch four, is a well-populated locale, for the simple reason that the black community has always had an abundant supply of preachers. Dante's *Inferno* might have had an especial resonance for just that reason. But the Italian epic also aids and abets the African-American novel in another sense. It gives Baraka a chance to deviate from standard English on both ends of the spectrum: the deviance of the black dialect is thickened by the deviance of Dante's Italian, words such as *bolgia* and *Malebolge*. And, beyond Italian, Baraka has still another lexical layer tucked away, another bump, more anachronistic still, instanced here by the Latin phrase, *me fecit*. Amiri Baraka is generally known for his radicalism rather than his classicism. So it is all the more unexpected, and all the more significant, that his novel should have this deep kinship with the epic, looping it into the present as a fractal dimension of itself, spinning out in endless spirals.

Those spirals also take us to Africa, to a novel by J. M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron*. This is a novel that "is like a sum, a labyrinthine sum, pages long, subtraction upon subtraction, division upon division" (26). It is the story of an old woman, a Mrs. Curren, a teacher of classics, now dying of cancer. That fate seems to afflict all whites in

South Africa, making them the subject of a mini-epic, a mock-epic: “White as grubs in our swaddling bands, we will be dispatched to join those infant souls whose eternal whining Aeneas mistook for weeping. White our color, the color of limbo” (92). Meanwhile, the name of the black housekeeper turns out to be Florence, and her children have these unlikely, allegorical names: Hope and Beauty. In a dream vision, her masked eyes come to Mrs. Curren “like eyes in pictures from the ancient Mediterranean: large, oval, with the pupil in the center: the almond eyes of a goddess”: “Who is this goddess who comes in a vision with uncovered breast cutting the air? It is Aphrodite, but not smile-loving Aphrodite, patroness of pleasures: an older figure, a figure of urgency, of cries in the dark, short and sharp, of blood and earth, emerging for an instant, showing herself, passing” (178). Along with this ancient goddess, Mrs. Curren is watched over by a guide of sorts, a homeless person who takes up residence in her house, someone named Mr. Vercueil. What kind of a name is that? What language is it is? “Vercueil, Verkuil, Verskuil. That’s what he says. I have never come across such a name before,” Mrs. Curren says (37). Several critics have heard in it an echo of Virgil, perhaps the most famous guide in all of Western literature.¹¹ This, in any case, is what Mrs. Curren says about Vercueil: “We share a bed, folded one upon the other like a page folded in two, like two wings folded: old mates, bunkmates, conjoined, conjugal. *Lectus genialis, lectus adversus*” (189). This image of two people gathered together like a page folded in two is probably a re-working of that memorable line in *Paradiso* 33, *legato con amore in un volume*: bound with love into one volume (33:86). The binding has to be done with words, for only words can spin out such long-distance threads, only words can spin out the fractal dimensions of an European epic in an African novel, making the latter as bumpy as the former. And the bumps are created, once again, by the presence of Latin, featured not only in the four words, *Lectus genialis, lectus adversus*, but also in a more extended discussion between Mrs. Curren and Vercueil, talking about the language itself:

“What is Latin?” he asked.

A dead language, I replied, a language spoken by the dead.

“Really?” he said. The idea seemed to tickle him.

“Yes, really,” I said. “You only hear it at funerals nowadays. Funeral and the odd wedding.”

“Can you speak it?”

I recited some Virgil, Virgil on the unquiet dead:

*nec ripas datur horrendas et rauca fluenta
transportare prius quam sedibus ossa quierunt.
Centum errant annos volitantque haec litora circum;
tum demum admissi stagna exoptata revisunt.* (191–192)

The lines are from *Aeneid* 6, spoken by the Sibyl about the unquiet dead, telling us that they are doomed to wander these shores for a hundred years before they are admitted to the wished-for still waters. Mrs. Curren can recite these lines in Latin, just

as Dante can. But she is right: in a South Africa still ruled by apartheid, foreign words can bear witness only to many casualties, both real and metaphoric. “You only hear [Latin] at funerals nowadays,” she says. It is the language of the dead, and Virgil can only be a homeless person, cut off from the Latin where he used to have his being. It is that cutting off that Coetzee mourns in *Age of Iron*. But, mourning it, and quoting from it these lines about the strangely active dead people, he also grants it a strange kind of afterlife. The death of the epic is, in this sense, also its wake in the novel. The fractal kinship is never more alive.¹²

ENDNOTES

1. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the earliest use of the word in English to denote a type of literary work was in 1770; in French, this sense of *genre* dates from the mid-seventeenth century.
2. Croce writes: “Every true work of art has violated some established kind and upset the ideas of the critics, who have thus been obliged to broaden the kinds, until finally even the broadened kind has proved too narrow, owing to the appearance of new works of art, naturally followed by new scandals, new upsets, and—new broadenings” (36–37). See Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic: As Science of Expression and General Linguistic*.
3. I am grateful to Jay Clayton for urging me to foreground this concept.
4. Mandelbrot has since left IBM and is now Sterling Professor of Mathematics at Yale University.
5. The seminal work here is, of course, Emmanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, 3 vols. See also Frederic Jameson, “Magical Narratives: On the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism,” *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*.
6. From his “Conjectures on World Literature,” 57. See also Moretti, *The Modern Epic: The World-System to Garcia Marquez*.
7. The classic statements here are Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding*; and Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740*.
8. While the antiquity of the epic is well-established, the novel has also been shown to be of ancient origins, traceable at least to Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*, written in the 2nd century A.D., and, even further back, to the *Metamorphoses* ascribed to Lucius of Patrae. See Ben Edwin Perry, *The “Metamorphoses” Ascribed to Lucius of Patrae*, Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1919. More recently, classicists have made a concerted effort to argue for the presence of the novel in ancient Greece and Rome. See, for instance, Graham Anderson, *Ancient Fiction: The Novel in the Graeco-Roman World*; Thomas Hagg, *The Novel in Antiquity*; S. J. Harrison, *Oxford Readings in the Roman Novel*; Arthur Heiserman, *The Novel before Novel*; P. G. Walsh, *The Roman Novel: The Search for the Ancient Novel*, ed. James Tatum; John J. Winkler, *Auctor & Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius’ “Golden Ass.”*
9. Dante’s *De vulgari eloquentia* was composed in Latin. For the transition from Latin to Italian, see Ernst Pulgram, *The Tongues of Italy: Prehistory and History*; Cecil Grayson, *A Renaissance Controversy: Latin or Italian?*.
10. Arnaut’s words are as follows: “Tan m’abellis vostre cortez deman,/ qu’ieu no me puese ni voill cobrire./ Ieu sui Arnaut, que plor e vau cantan;/ consiros vei la passada folor/ e vei jausen lo joi qu’esper, denan./ Ara vos prec, per aquella valor/ que vos guida al som de l’escalina,/ sovenha vos a temps de ma dolor!” (*Purgatorio* 26: 140–147).

11. Sheila Roberts, "'City of Man': The Appropriation of Dante's *Inferno* in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*," David E. Hoegberg, "'Where is Hope'? Coetzee's Rewriting of Dante in *Age of Iron*." Susan Gallagher, also commenting on Vercueil's name, suggests a parallel with Tolstoy's story, "What Men Live By." See Gallagher, *A Story of South Africa* 198–200.
12. I am grateful to Susan Griffin, Beth Boehm, Debra Journet, organizers of the 2005 Narrative Conference in Louisville, and Jim Phelan for giving me a great forum to present my work. An earlier version of this paper was given as the Lionel Trilling Seminar at Columbia University. My thanks to Jonathan Arac, Director of the Seminar, and to Mary Louise Pratt and Gayatri Spivak, whose vigorous comments have spurred me on to reshape the piece.

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