

Genre and the Institution of Research: Three American Instances

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NO CONCEPT IS MORE FUNDAMENTAL TO LITERARY STUDY THAN GENRE. IT IS VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE TO THINK SERIOUSLY ABOUT LITERATURE without considering the codes or conventions that structure literary texts. Aristotle's distinction between the "poetic kinds" of epic and drama and Horace's insistence on poetic decorum are early attempts to distinguish among types of creative expression in order to understand and appreciate the specific excellences of each. The most enduring typology of genres divides literature into three classes, depending on who speaks in and therefore controls the work. As M. H. Abrams represents these distinctions, they consist of "lyric (uttered throughout in the first person), *epic* or *narrative* (in which the narrator speaks in the first person, then lets his characters speak for themselves); and *drama* (in which the characters do all the talking)." Other divisions have been proposed (e.g., Northrop Frye's division of comedy, tragedy, irony, and satire), as have more nuanced accounts of genre itself that focus on how genres can cross, mix, and stretch to include deviations from type. But as a means of imposing a preliminary principle of order on an immense and various field, genre is an indispensable concept.

The concept of genre organizes literature, but the effect of genre, according to John Frow, is to organize the world, or, as he puts it, to "actively generate and shape knowledge of the world" (*Genre* 2). Comedies, tragedies, satires, sitcoms, reality shows, gangsta rap, *Rocky* films, and murder mysteries all present "a relatively bounded and schematic domain of meanings," a sifted or filtered version of "the world as a certain kind of thing" whose principles of organi-

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zation often reflect unspoken ideological premises ("Genre Worlds" 134, 140). Communicating a sense of structure and meaning, generic codes both underscore the difference between literature and the world and contribute to literature's reality effect. Generic conventions, Frow argues, work most effectively in this respect when they function as "the unsaid of texts, information which lies in a shadowy region from which we draw it as we need it" ("Genre Worlds" 132).

In making this argument, Frow focuses not on literature, where genres are often marked by observable formal features, but on historical texts, which implicitly deny that they have generic features and claim to be neutral transcriptions of reality. While he expands the domain of genre beyond its traditional literary horizon, he nevertheless affirms the traditional position that genre is an exclusively linguistic phenomenon.

But there is no reason to confine a study of genre to language. If language can display patterns, so can other products of human creativity, such as institutions. To test this hypothesis, I would like to consider one institution in particular, the research institute, or institute for advanced study. The question that will drive the inquiry is whether genre means the same thing or functions in the same way in a worldly medium as it does in linguistic constructs. My initial hypothesis is that it does not—that the research institute, at least, does not frame the world as a certain kind of thing, does not produce a restricted domain of meanings, and does not produce reality effects. Rather, I will argue, it does the opposite: it seeks to hollow out, in the world, a reality-free zone where ordinary constraints do not apply and the world itself is called into question.

While instances of the research institute have begun to proliferate, I will confine my discussion largely to three prominent free-standing research institutes in the United States: the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton (IAS), the Center for Advanced

Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford (CASBS), and the National Humanities Center in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina (NHC). Although each has its individuating features, their points of formal consistency invite us to consider them as instances of a genre—that is, as particular realizations, reflecting both specific intentions and the forces prevailing in a given historical context, of the same general idea.

That idea, and the ultimate source of many of the derealizing effects to which I have alluded, is research. To provide optimal conditions for research, the institute for advanced study reflects in concrete form the concept of research itself. The history of this concept begins not with the research institute but with the research university. So deeply rooted in the American system of higher education is the unity of research and education that it is difficult for many academics today to think of them apart. But the notion that a university could be a research center was not even considered before the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Wilhelm von Humboldt founded the University of Berlin on the principles of scholarly specialization, the ultimate unity of human knowledge, and research. Before then, research had been conducted in less directed or organized fashion, largely by learned societies, academies, and gentleman scholars; universities were devoted to the dissemination of the already known rather than to the cultivation of the not yet known. And while the new concept, supported by the state, established itself fairly rapidly in Germany, whose tradition of philosophical idealism may have created a predisposition in favor of the not yet observable, it met considerable resistance elsewhere. John Henry Newman began *The Idea of a University* by declaring that the university was properly dedicated to "the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement" (3). As late as the 1950s, A. L. Rowse reported, an Oxford don could speak freely and contemptuously about "that

state of resentful coma dignified by the name of Rezeach"—a term of opprobrium, worsened by being pronounced with a German accent (qtd. in Wesseling 14).

The new concept was embraced much more readily in the United States, where research universities on the German model began to appear toward the end of the nineteenth century, beginning with Johns Hopkins University. One Hopkins professor, Charles Sanders Peirce, formulated the principle of research, which he called "the first rule of reason": "Upon this first, and in one sense this sole, rule of reason, that in order to learn you must desire to learn, and in so desiring not be satisfied with what you already incline to think, there follows one corollary which itself deserves to be inscribed upon every wall of the city of philosophy: Do not block the way of inquiry." For Peirce, reason is the highest end of human cognition. Interests, desires, agendas, external pressures of any kind are the natural enemies of reason, the value of which can be measured not in terms of utility or benefit but only on its own terms. It is in the context of such an account of reason that research comes to be considered fragile, precious, essential, and pure; and it is in the context of an academy dedicated to such purity that tenure and academic freedom become crucial principles designed to protect scholars from retaliation on those occasions when the way of inquiry has led them, willy-nilly, to conclusions that cross established interests.

In the United States, impurities have been created not by reactionaries who reject research as a Hunnish innovation but by those who have embraced it for the wrong reasons. The ever-increasing dependency of research on corporate, foundation, or state funding has introduced a host of impurities into the system particularly of scientific research. The greatest source of these impurities is not bad faith or opportunism but simply the vast utility of science, which introduces an economic incentive. As Henk Wesseling, former rector

of the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, has written, there is today "an unbroken chain connecting knowledge to science to research to technology to industry to production to economic growth and finally to wealth and well-being." This chain, he adds, "forms the main justification for research" (15). By endorsing this justification, the university secures necessary funding but heaps up impediments on the way of inquiry. Writing with what one hopes is ironic (and radical) understatement, Derek Bok notes in his 2005 book *Our Underachieving Colleges* that "commercialization threatens to impair the university's reputation for objective, disinterested teaching and research" (117).

Very early on, the distinction between pure research and its evil twin, funded research with predetermined ends and identifiable utilities, was becoming evident, but so was the inertia of any institution of higher learning that was not dedicated to research. In other words, research was increasingly recognized as both essential and problematic. To resolve the difficulty of how to conduct the right kind of research, the Hopkins-trained educational reformer Abraham Flexner conceived of a new way of structuring the entire enterprise. He persuaded Louis Bamberger and Bamberger's sister, Caroline Fuld, who made their fortunes in retail in New Jersey (selling out to R. H. Macy just before the crash of 1929), to direct their philanthropic efforts toward the creation of a new kind of university, devoted entirely to graduate education and focused on what Flexner called "fundamental research," which was not determined by specific ends or rewards but was focused on underlying questions. Although he would not have put the matter in these terms, Flexner was creating an institutional genre, in which his premises would determine the shape of all future instances.

To understand the form that research institutes have taken, we must reconstruct the thinking of this one man. That thinking was

partly critical and contemporary, partly idealistic and ahistorical. From the first, the Institute for Advanced Study, as the new university was to be called, was intended as both a complement to research universities and a rebuke. The grounds for such a rebuke have grown to a dismaying extent in recent decades, but many of them were already apparent to Flexner: the increasing size and complexity of universities diminished their ability to concentrate on the main mission; their departmental structures encouraged protectiveness, parochialism, and petty politics; and their teaching imperative conflicted with the imperative to produce research. For all these reasons, Flexner thought universities were actually discouraging the kind of work he wanted to promote: "creative activity, productive and critical inquiry [undertaken by] minds which can both specialize and generalize" (Woolf ix; see Regis).

Flexner believed that only such activity was capable of breaking out of the habits and routines that beset what Thomas S. Kuhn (working a generation later, at a successor institution, the Center for Advanced Study in Behavioral Sciences at Stanford) would call "normal science," a replication of procedures and expectations reinforced by official approval. Impressed by the highbrow collegiality of All Souls College at Oxford, Flexner thought scholars should challenge and stimulate one another in a nonhierarchical community where disciplinary boundaries were permeable and the truth was its own reward—a community in which the "administration should be inconspicuous, inexpensive, subordinate" (Woolf ix). Another powerful figure from the early years at Stanford, Robert Merton, would invent a name for the distinctive intellectual environment of the research institute: "serendipity," the condition in which fortuitous encounters and conversations lead to unexpected insights—a rare event in normal circumstances but a routine one in a free and open milieu where everyone is proceeding along the way of inquiry.

To produce what Merton would call "serendipity conditions," Flexner insisted that the living conditions for the scholars should represent "a marked improvement over contemporary academic conditions in America"—which led to the institute's acquiring the reputation of an Institute for Advanced Salaries—and that the subjects taken up "should be fundamental in character" (Woolf x). The scholars were to enjoy an ideal freedom that would liberate their curiosity; they would have, as Flexner put it, "no duties, only opportunities" (Wesseling 6). As the idea ripened, he became convinced that even graduate students would be burdensome and dropped them from the plan. Unlike research universities, which tended to measure the value of a scholar's contribution by the external funding obtained or the number of students taught, the institute was to be dedicated to the first, and only the first, rule of reason.

Flexner's plans were based not on a realistic view of the world as it was but on an idealized view of the world as it used to be. Driving his project was a recognizably post-Romantic desire to shake off the deadening effects of habit or routine by embracing research as a source of creative rejuvenation, an academic *élan vital*. Fueling this aspiration were two even older ideas, the first pertaining to the individual character of the scholar and the second pertaining to the kind of community in which fundamental thinking could flourish.

When Flexner thought about the faculty for his new kind of university, he contemplated a very particular sort of person. "Those men," he wrote of the scholars who would come to his new institution, "know their own minds; they have their own ways; the men who have, throughout human history, meant most to themselves and to human progress have usually followed their own inner light; no organizer, no administrator, no institution, can do more than furnish conditions favorable to the restless prowling of an enlightened and informed human spirit" (Woolf x). The

Western tradition alone contains many iconic figures who sought to purify their minds and achieve wisdom by withdrawing from the world, including Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle; Saint Jerome and Saint Anthony, alone in their caves with their books and their demons; on down to Newton, Thoreau, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. As Newman put it, "The common sense of mankind has associated the search after truth with seclusion and quiet. The greatest thinkers have been too intent on their subject to admit of interruption; they have been men of absent minds and idiosyncratic habits" (6).

The thought that such figures would be happy in one another's company represents a genuine triumph of the imagination. The research institute may have been conceived with self-absorbed heroes of the intellect in mind, but it is difficult to imagine any of the thinkers named above passing their days in a research institute. It was the idea of withdrawal (made more palatable by advanced salaries; opportunities, not duties; and a sylvan setting with immense library resources nearby) rather than the fanatics who would actually withdraw that Flexner valued. Serendipity occurs only in small groups, and a true hermit would be as unwelcome in such a group as a provost. For years Wolf Lepenies, rector of the *Wissenschaftskolleg* at Berlin, greeted the incoming class of scholars by citing Henry James's essay "The Limitations of Dickens," where James wrote, "A community of eccentrics is impossible," to which Lepenies would add that "the *Wissenschaftskolleg* accepts the challenge of disproving this claim year after year in the hope that, from three to four dozen eccentrics, a group, a community, a visible college will emerge" (Wittrock). If communities do frequently crystallize in research institutes, it is only because the scholars understand that collegiality is part of the program. Dickensian eccentrics, many of whom comport themselves as if they were the only persons in the world, have no place in such a setting.

One of the stars of the early years of the Institute for Advanced Study, Kurt Gödel, became convinced he was the target of assassination attempts and that his wife (who referred to the institute as the *Altersversorgungsheim*, or "home for old-age pensioners") was the only person who could be trusted to prepare his food. When she became ill and could no longer cook for him, he wasted away. At his death shortly thereafter, he weighed sixty-five pounds and was in an advanced stage of inanition; nevertheless, eighteen months before his death he was still an active faculty member at the institute. He knew his own mind and had his own ways; he followed his own inner light; but one doubts that during Gödel's last years the director of the institute was boasting about accepting Dickens's challenge. Research institutes forge communities only if the eccentrics in them are nondelusional.

What would become the generic features of the research institute were set, then, at the beginning. It was to be a modern Academy, in which free, unencumbered, and idiosyncratic (but sane) people could withdraw from the world to pursue fundamental truths through research, each in his or (rarely) her own way, while permitting themselves to be challenged, informed, instructed, and inspired by the others in an intimate, nonhierarchical, participatory community. Whatever variations have been introduced into the Princeton model by subsequent research institutes, these two concepts—scholars as harmless eccentrics pursuing the truth according to their own lights and the community of high-minded equals—have been preserved.

Just as Flexner was dreaming of his new university, conditions in Germany and elsewhere in Europe were conspiring to block the way of inquiry, especially for Jews. Einstein became available in the United States, as did John von Neumann and, a few years later, Gödel. After the war, the institute recruited such luminaries as Robert Oppenheimer, Erwin Panofsky, George F. Kennan, and Free-

man Dyson, making the institute one of the world's great research centers, especially in mathematics and theoretical science. In a few years, the research institute was recognized as a model that could be adapted elsewhere. It became transformed from a singularity into a genre, as a genus has multiple species.

Founded by the Ford Foundation on land overlooking the Stanford campus in 1954, the Center for Advanced Study in Behavioral Sciences was a cold-war institution, "inspired," as Bjorn Wittrock has written, "by a belief that the social and behavioural sciences could contribute to an encompassing process of democratization." After World War II, these disciplines underwent rapid expansion and professionalization—the International Political Science Association and the International Sociological Association were both formed in 1949—and many people, especially in the United States, were convinced that coming years would see a dramatic increase in the understanding of the principles that govern human behavior through the application of an experimental scientific method. If the IAS had signaled a new American dominance in mathematics and science, the Stanford center was intended to do the same for American social science and indeed for American-style democracy.

This intention helps explain the fact that while the CASBS emulated Princeton with respect to fundamental principles, it rejected its most fundamental—and most antidemocratic—practice. Since its first appointees were in effect refugees, the IAS offered permanent employment, supplementing the faculty after the war with "members" who competed for one-year fellowships. The CASBS, by contrast, offered residential fellowships to forty-five or fifty scholars a year (as opposed to the nearly two hundred that the IAS eventually came to invite). With fewer scholars and no rank distinctions among them, the CASBS could well imagine that it represented an even purer instance of the concept of the research institute than its distinguished predecessor did. But

the CASBS had its own antidemocratic tendency, which was expressed in formal terms by the process by which fellows were selected. The group that founded the center included some of the leading social scientists at the time: Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton, Edward Shils, Frank Stanton, Paul Lazarsfeld, and the center's first director, Ralph Tyler. They viewed the center as the means by which the future direction of social science could be determined and an orderly succession secured. The key in both respects was the closely held process of nomination and invitation, a process opaque even to many of the lucky, and often surprised, recipients of invitations.¹

The third major American research institute took its bearings from the second. Among the scholars invited to Stanford in the late 1960s were M. H. Abrams, Gregory Vlastos, and Morton Bloomfield, humanists who referred to themselves as "lace-curtain behaviorists." Over the course of their stay, they became convinced that, just as the disciplines of mathematics and science were served by the IAS and social and behavioral sciences were served by the CASBS, the humanities should have a research institute of their own, one that would not only serve humanists but also symbolize the position of the humanities in the life of the culture. They enlisted the support of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Council of Learned Societies, and soon a planning group was formed. The group included Lionel Trilling, Hannah Arendt, Henry Nash Smith, Daniel Bell, Lawrence Stone, Gertrude Himmelstern, and the man who would become the new institution's first director, the Columbia philosopher Charles Frankel. Although much the youngest of the group, Steven Marcus of Columbia, author of *The Other Victorians* and *Engels, Manchester, and the Working Class*, was asked to coordinate the planning effort. With material assistance from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, Wachovia Bank,

and other sources, the National Humanities Center opened its doors in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, in 1978. Today it is still the only major independent research institute in the world dedicated to the humanities.

The institution that emerged from the chrysalis of the CASBS was very different from its predecessor because it was responding to a different cultural and intellectual environment. Here, once again, the variations in the genre are illuminating. The lace-curtain behaviorists who first conceived of the idea of a humanities research institute were, like the founders of the CASBS, operating in a crisis atmosphere, but it was not the same crisis. The cold war had been supplanted by several nested and interlinked crises. The first was general, the deep and multifaceted sense of disorientation and disaffection following the great upheavals and traumas of the 1960s, including the deepening disaster in Vietnam, which produced a broad-based repudiation of American imperial aims and of those parts of American culture that promoted, supported, or accepted those aims. A second crisis affected the academy in particular. *Crisis in the Humanities*, a collection of essays edited by J. H. Plumb in 1964, was the first of what would become a lengthy list of publications with similar titles. In his introduction to the volume, Plumb passionately denounced the professionalization of the academy, describing it in lurid terms as "the whole sickening deadening process of increasing specialization," which resulted in the segmentation of knowledge into sectors of expertise and blocked genuine understanding. The fragmentation of knowledge mirrored the fragmentation of culture, which, Plumb said, "has shattered the confidence of humanists in their capacity to lead or instruct" (9).

A third crisis was gathering force in the humanities disciplines during the 1970s, when the new institution was being planned. These were the years when developments in Continental philosophy seemed to offer philosophi-

cal support for skepticism toward the claims of authority of all kinds. The authority of disinterested inquiry, and science in particular, was, in the new ethos, widely regarded as an instrument of intimidation and control masking as neutral or impersonal knowledge. The high-minded humanistic rhetoric about the enduring values of culture, tradition, and reflective inquiry that swirled about the creation of the NHC was animated by a deep concern about the implications of several losses: the loss of a unitary culture, the loss of confidence in authority in general and in the moral character of American or Western culture in particular, and the loss of cultural status for humanists in a university system increasingly dominated by the spirit and values of science.

Like its two predecessors—and like the research university before them—the National Humanities Center was conceived in a reformist spirit. Even as the founders wished to replicate the positive experience some humanists had at the CASBS, the actual arrangements that were finally determined amounted to a rejection of several of the most characteristic features of the CASBS, beginning with the social sciences. Humanists in residence at Stanford during the 1960s may have felt themselves lodged in the enemy camp, in an institution that was ideologically and methodologically oriented toward mass society, technology, and bureaucracy rather than toward individual experience. As Mel A. Topf put it in a widely read article, the social sciences presumed "the meaninglessness of the single event and the single human being in themselves" and the priority of "broad process or general 'laws'"; they represented "the intrusion of the mode of the natural sciences into the world of human affairs and into man himself" (233). Social and behavioral scientists might have seen themselves as avatars of democracy, but the social order they described and, in their more positivistic moments, exemplified was seen by humanists as soulless, gray, and stultifying. To many readers,

the most resonant essay in Plumb's volume was Ernest Gellner's rearguard argument for holistic, intuitive knowledge that remained close to experience, especially as rendered in literature and the arts. The "knowledge" disciplines, as Gellner called them, threatened to deprive society of true knowledge and humanist intellectuals of their aura of dignity, their "full cognitive status" (72). Humanistic knowledge, he argued, was closer to lived experience; it was acquired by means that resembled the "sensitive, locally rooted, but static and fairly low-productive ways of the artisans. The humanists," Gellner concluded, "are the artisanate of cognition" (75).

In this climate of mingled apprehension and defiance, the NHC determined its arrangements. Like Stanford but unlike Princeton, it refused to appoint permanent faculty members. Unlike Stanford but like Princeton, it determined to select its fellows by a transparent competition with several levels of review designed to ensure that fellows would be selected on the basis of the individual merit of their proposals. Each of these decisions represented an attempt to realize in terms appropriate to the humanities and to the moment the implications of the concept of research institute.

Fifty years after the founding of the Institute for Advanced Study, the freestanding research institute had been established on American soil as an institutional genre with three quite distinct instances. Each of the major disciplinary divisions had an institute of its own, and the concept was being seriously promoted as an innovation that could stand comparison, in sheer revolutionary force, with the invention of the university in the Middle Ages and the research university in the nineteenth century.² Impressed by the dynamism of American higher education, Europeans began to think of refashioning their own educational system—in which research, battered by history, had been on the decline for many years—on the American model. As an inexpensive but prestigious institution, the

research institute, in which a small group of scholars spoke to one another of fundamental matters in an atmosphere magically free from ordinary constraints, has been embraced in one country after another, assuming different forms in each setting. The Netherlands institute was followed by the Wissenschaftskolleg of Berlin (1980), the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences, the Collegium Budapest, and eventually by others in central and eastern Europe, South Africa, Japan, and Israel. Not all the research sponsored by the European institutes was fundamental in character. The notion of utility, firmly excluded at Princeton, reappeared in various ways in the European setting, where a number of research groups undertook projects with public policy implications. This and other differences reflected the difference in funding sources. Whereas the American institutes were supported by foundations and individuals, the European institutes were funded by the state and large corporations supported by the state. The Wissenschaftskolleg, which was originally supported primarily by the city of Berlin and the Volkswagen Foundation, announced at its inception four goals, two of which directly specified anticipated benefits of the institute to Berlin.

What sort of benefits does a research institute confer on a city? They are not imaginary, but they have something to do with the imagination. Unlike the genres Frow discusses, which frame the world as a certain kind of thing, the research institute frames not the world but an antiworld. Its constituent elements are in fact drawn from the genres of imaginative literature. The autonomous and idiosyncratic scholar is a projection of lyric, the community of equals is based on a notion of drama, and, perhaps, the reformer who creates the institute is modeled on the figure of the controlling narrator. Devoted to fundamental research that answers to no immediate utilitarian end, the research institute represents in concrete form the independence of

the mind from constraint, the untrammelled powers of the imagination. The presence in one's midst of such an institution implicitly testifies to the success of the society in conquering the grinding forces of nature and necessity. Worldly prestige attaches to such an institution and to the society that sustains it.

Everywhere genre appears, it represents an internal difference in the work, a factor, as Frow puts it, of the "unsaid." Rhyme and meter in a sonnet bespeak a writerly concern with craft, even in a work ostensibly dedicated to, say, my mistress' eyes. In historical works, generic features may bespeak, as Frow suggests, unspoken ideological premises. And in a worldly genre such as the research institute, generic conventions bespeak a philosophical fantasy of the harmonious community of free-ranging intellects occupying an Archimedean point outside the world. Its grounding in fantasy has enabled the research institute to be highly adaptable, capable of responding not just to Nazism, the cold war, and vast cultural upheavals but to crises all over the world. Research institutes have a rich history of utility to the societies that supported them and an even richer prospect before them. Committed to the collective production and frictionless dissemination of information long before Bill Gates announced these as the goals of technology, the research institute will be remapped in new ways as globalization continues its inexorable advance.

NOTES

1. In 2008 this process will be discontinued and replaced by applications.

2. This comparison is attributed by Connor to Francis C. Oakley.

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