

## A prologue on genre

### AGAINST GENRE

On the threshold of the twentieth century, Benedetto Croce delivered what is arguably the best-known assault on the role of genre in literature and art.<sup>1</sup> Attitudes of suspicion or contempt towards genre, especially among artists and writers, of course go back a long way (at least as far as the sixteenth century in Italian literature) and would survive long after Croce (not least because of his influence); the particular success enjoyed by his formulation owes much to the conviction and rigour of his argument, and to the way that argument connects with a whole philosophical system. According to Croce, the aesthetic sphere is the realm of 'intuition-expression', of a form of knowledge that precedes concepts and logic. Central to his thought about genre is 'the irreducible individuality of the single work',<sup>2</sup> any of the acts by which we group works of art having, at most, practical value. How little, in Croce's view, genres tell us about the reality of aesthetic experience, how arbitrary they can be vis-à-vis the nature of individual works, is revealed by his chosen comparison: genres are not unlike the criteria by which books are arranged in libraries – including size or publishers' series.<sup>3</sup>

Croce's most immediate target was the prevailing culture of positivism with its generalising procedures (extremes of biologism in the classification of literary works had been reached by Ferdinand Brunetière in the 1890s), and indeed his attitude has often been explained at least in part as a polemical reaction to such an environment. One hardly needs to observe, however, that Crocean aesthetics worked more generally against the entire tradition of genre theories – theories that had long been treated by

<sup>1</sup> The first, theoretical half of Croce's *Estetica* develops a series of lectures he had given in 1900. Benedetto Croce, *Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale: Teoria e storia* (1902), 4th edn, rev. (Bari: Laterza, 1912). A classic English translation is *Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (1909), rev. edn (London: Macmillan, 1922). For a more recent translation, see *The Aesthetic as the Science of Expression and of the Linguistic in General*, trans. Colin Lyas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). My sketchy references cannot do justice to the richness of Croce's thought on genre: an excellent introduction to the topic is the section entitled 'I generi letterari' in Paolo D'Angelo's *L'estetica di Benedetto Croce* (Bari: Laterza, 1982), pp. 59–65; see also Mario Fubini, 'Genesi e storia dei generi letterari', in his *Critica e poesia* (1956), new edn (Rome: Bonacci, 1973), pp. 121–201, and Cesare Segre, 'Generi', in *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, 16 vols. (Turin: Einaudi, 1977–84), vol. vi (1979), pp. 564–85.

<sup>2</sup> D'Angelo, *L'estetica di Benedetto Croce*, p. 63. On the complex matter of the relationship between genre and the logic sphere in Croce, see D'Angelo, *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> *Estetica*, part 1, ch. 4, p. 46.

their opponents as authoritarian and restrictive of creative freedom. Indeed, while Croce's doctrine holds genre as fundamentally extraneous to *all* aesthetic experience – to the production of, and the response to, *any* work of art – many writers before and after him have presented a 'softer' version of the art-versus-genre argument, according to which it is *great* works (and their creators, and the artistic progress they bring in) that function against genre, when not entirely outside its domain.

Similar contentions recur with some frequency even in the twentieth century, and can surface perhaps most surprisingly in the work of authors who have largely promoted a much more positive view of genre. One such is Hans Robert Jauss, a scholar whose insistence on the significance of genre it would be hard to overestimate. Jauss not only rehearsed the familiar claim that masterworks 'surpass the conventions of their genre', but at his most extreme turned it into a hard and fast rule, whereby a work's artistic value is *inversely proportional* to its compliance with generic traits.<sup>4</sup> Strictly applied, such a rule could lead us to conclude that, for instance, Da Ponte and Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* is artistically inferior to Benincasa and Bianchi's *Il disertore*.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, there is more to artistic products than their degree of generic innovation.

As we are about to see, much theoretical and critical work of the twentieth century has emphasised the importance of genre and contributed to refining the conceptual apparatus we use to tackle it – a fact that makes the apparent resilience of some prejudicial attitudes all the more surprising. As late as 1980, for instance, Jacques Derrida's much-cited essay 'The Law of Genre', in spite of its vaticinal tone, falls back on old and simplistic commonplaces, mechanically associating genre with limits and prohibitions, with hierarchies and authority, and reducing the theory and history of genre to 'tranquil categories', 'taxonomic certainties' and 'presumed stability'.<sup>6</sup> Such tired generalisations seem to disregard several decades of theoretical debate about genre, a debate on which Derrida's essay indeed had only a modest impact.<sup>7</sup> And of

<sup>4</sup> 'The more stereotypically a text repeats the generic, the more inferior is its artistic character': Hans Robert Jauss, 'Theory of Genre and Medieval Literature', in his *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 76–109, here 89; the phrase quoted in my main text is from p. 94. This volume translates into English a number of disparate essays that seem not to have previously appeared as a single book in German; the essay on genre was published first in a French translation by Éliane Kaufholz as 'Littérature médiévale et théorie des genres', *Poétique*, 1 (1970), 79–101, and then in the original German as 'Theorie der Gattungen und Literatur des Mittelalters', in Hans Robert Jauss and Erich Köhler (eds.), *Grundriss der romanischen Literaturen des Mittelalters* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1968–), vol. 1: *Généralités* (1972), pp. 107–38.

<sup>5</sup> See below, Chapter 4.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', *Critical Inquiry*, 7, no. 1 (autumn 1980), 55–81, here 56, 63; the article had just appeared in *Glyph*, 7 (spring 1980).

<sup>7</sup> Other commentators have already drawn attention to Derrida's simplistic approach and his basic disregard of much twentieth-century thought about genre: see Ralph Cohen, 'History and Genre', *New Literary History*, 17, no. 2 (winter 1986), 203–18, and Eugenio Bolongaro, 'From Literariness to Genre: Establishing the Foundations for a Theory of Literary Genres', *Genre*, 25 (1992), 277–313. It might be

course we can read his essay as just another specimen of the ‘textual-commentary-that-doesn’t-care-about-genres’, which, as Genette reminds us, is itself a subgenre.<sup>8</sup>

## HOW GENRES EXIST

The objections so recurrently made to genre theories, however, are not without foundation.<sup>9</sup> The traditional study of genres often looks like an endeavour to describe ‘sharply delimited objects that are “out there”’.<sup>10</sup> This is the position frequently referred to as ‘realist’. A genre – say, comedy – is made into a ‘real thing’, an entity endowed with an objective existence independent of us (and of individual works), something we can go out and describe in more or less accurate ways. Such a position is at times accompanied by ‘essentialist’ and ‘substantialist’ attitudes: genres can be thought of as having essential, necessary traits, and even some kind of permanence. In fact, history abounds

added that one of Derrida’s stated aims – that of debunking ‘Genette’s [...] ready acceptance of the distinction between nature and history’ (62), of deconstructing that opposition (73) – is based on a very rudimentary reading (indeed, on a rather spectacular misreading) of the essay taken as a starting point: Gérard Genette, ‘Genres, “types”, modes’, *Poétique*, 32 (November 1977), 389–421. Genette later reworked this essay into *Introduction à l’architexte* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), published in English as *The Architext: An Introduction*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, with a foreword by Robert Scholes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Genette, *Introduction à l’architexte*, p. 86 (‘commentaire-de-texte-qui-ne-se-soucie-pas-de-genres: c’est un sous-genre’), p. 81 of the English translation.

<sup>9</sup> In the remainder of this chapter I give an (admittedly tendentious) overview of some of the issues concerning genre; here follows some basic bibliography. Two excellent general studies are Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), and Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Qu’est-ce qu’un genre littéraire?* (Paris: Seuil, 1989): the first is a broad and erudite survey from the point of view of the literary historian, while the second has a more philosophical approach, defining or redefining many of the issues with logical rigour. A brief and accessible (though now somewhat outdated) introduction is Heather Dubrow, *Genre* (London: Methuen, 1982). An extensive and more recent survey from the musicologist’s perspective is provided by Hermann Danuser, ‘Gattung’, in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 2nd edn, ed. Ludwig Finscher, 27 vols. (Kassel: Bärenreiter; Stuttgart: Metzler, 1994–2007), Sachteil III (1995), cols. 1042–69. Fine studies of specific musical works and repertoires from the point of view of genre include James A. Hepokoski, ‘Genre and Content in Mid-Century Verdi: “Addio, del passato” (*La traviata*, Act III)’, *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 1, no. 3 (1989), 249–76; Laurence Dreyfus, *Bach and the Patterns of Invention* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), esp. ch. 4: ‘The Status of a Genre’, pp. 103–33, and ch. 5: ‘Matters of Kind’, pp. 135–68; and Jeffrey Kallberg, *Chopin at the Boundaries: Sex, History, and Musical Genre* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), esp. ch. 1: ‘The Rhetoric of Genre: Chopin’s Nocturne in G Minor’, pp. 3–29. Kallberg (p. 232 n. 2) pointed out that the 1980 *New Grove* still lacked an entry on genre; the lacuna is filled in the recent, revised edition: Jim Samson, ‘Genre’, in Stanley Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn, 29 vols. (London: Macmillan, 2001), vol. ix, pp. 657–9. For a recent treatment of genre in opera, see Alessandra Campana, ‘Genre and Poetics’, in Nicholas Till (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 202–24.

<sup>10</sup> Claudio Guillén, *Literature as System: Essays toward the Theory of Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 129.

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in examples of hypostatisations of this sort, genres having been treated by some like natural species (occasionally endowed with their own teleological evolution), by others like timeless substances such as the ‘categories of the spirit’ or the laws of nature. Moreover, realism is often associated with a particular attitude towards names: not only do they refer to existing things (the genres), but their correspondence with those things is of the kind mathematicians and linguists would call ‘biunique’ – for each name one thing, for each thing one name.

According to the position at the opposite end – one that can be called ‘nominalist’ – the names we use as genre designations are just that, words with no real referents. No such ‘thing’ as comedy is anywhere to be found, and all the particular works that are given that label may well share little or nothing else. One version of nominalism is, as we have seen, that expressed by Croce at his most radical: only individual works or individual aesthetic experiences exist, and from the aesthetic point of view genres are but ‘empty delusions’.<sup>11</sup>

Much of the work of later scholars has had the effect of rescuing the study of genre from this theoretical impasse – how to account for the presence of genre in the aesthetic experience while admitting that, *stricto sensu*, genre names do not correspond to any entities. (An important contribution, though by no means the only one, came from scholars broadly falling within the tradition of hermeneutics, such as E. D. Hirsch and Jauss.)<sup>12</sup> The way out of the impasse, in a sense, consists in giving a different turn to the basic ontological questions (whether, and how, genres exist). The answer – inflected in so many different ways during the twentieth century – could be sketchily put thus: the way in which genres exist, which is historical and cultural through and through, resembles that of practices and processes, of conventions and institutions, more than that of objects or that of substances.<sup>13</sup> Genres are accordingly seen as having not the constitutive or substantial role often ascribed to them in the past but a much more relative and unstable nature, one that is highly contextual and pragmatic. They are more and more likely to be characterised as tools – ‘the craftsman’s tools’ from the point of view of those who produce art, heuristic tools from that of the scholar.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Estetica*, part 1, ch. 4, p. 45. Equally strong is the anti-realism of another great philosopher of the twentieth century, John Dewey, whose considerations on art are in places reminiscent of Croce. For Dewey, the conceptual games by which we turn genres into ‘true individual[s]’ are examples of a ‘cerebral reverie’ removed from direct aesthetic experience: John Dewey, ‘The Varied Substance of the Arts’, in his *Art as Experience* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1934), pp. 214–44, here 216, 223.

<sup>12</sup> See E. D. Hirsch Jr, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), ch. 3: ‘The Concept of Genre’, pp. 68–126, and Jauss, ‘Theory of Genre’.

<sup>13</sup> On what he calls the ‘processlike’ nature of genres, see Jauss, ‘Theory of Genre’, p. 79 and *passim*. See also Cohen, ‘History and Genre’, 204–5, and Jean Molino, ‘Les genres littéraires’, *Poétique*, 93 (February 1993), 3–28, esp. 3–9.

<sup>14</sup> The quotation is from Rosalie L. Colie, *The Resources of Kind: Genre-Theory in the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 127.

One ought not to infer, however, that this theoretical trajectory will necessarily result in a weakened image of the ‘power of genre’.<sup>15</sup> On the contrary, since their fall from the heaven of entities, genres have time and again been acknowledged as a crucial element in the production and reception of art. In particular, it is widely recognised that our assumptions about the genre of a work strongly influence the ways in which we experience and interpret it; in fact, Hirsch argued that ‘every disagreement about an interpretation is usually a disagreement about genre’.<sup>16</sup> One could go as far as claiming that genre, understood in its broadest sense, is central to communication and interpretation in general: even in everyday life we construe the meaning of a statement in relation to our inferences about its kind. (If someone says, ‘I’m going to kill you’, my reaction will depend on an assumption about the ‘genre’ of the sentence – on my guessing that it is, say, a ‘threat’ rather than an ‘affectionate joke’.)<sup>17</sup> Like other linguistic and cultural codes shared by authors and publics, genre provides a space in which expression and communication can take place. For this reason, insisting on its negative aspects of limitation and prohibition amounts to telling a very partial story; to a greater or lesser extent we do depart from the proprieties of our codes all the time, but that movement meets its limit in our desire to communicate. In Austin Warren’s words, ‘the totally novel form will be unintelligible – is indeed unthinkable’.<sup>18</sup>

In exposing the naivety of some ontological assumptions about genres Croce had a case (as he did, in a sense, in emphasising the pragmatic side of genres).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Thus reads the title of a stimulating book to which we will return, Adena Rosmarin’s *The Power of Genre* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

<sup>16</sup> Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, p. 98.

<sup>17</sup> Bakhtin was probably the first to theorise explicitly that *any* form of verbal communication – whether oral or written – depends on its own types of utterance (‘speech genres’), of which the literary genres are only one subset. He did so in an essay from the early 1950s that remained unpublished until 1979, which I read in an English translation: ‘The Problem of Speech Genres’, in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 60–100. On the continuity between ordinary speech acts and literary genres, see Tzvetan Todorov, ‘L’origine des genres’, in his *Les genres du discours* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), pp. 44–60, published in English as ‘The Origin of Genres’, in Todorov, *Genres in Discourse*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 13–26; Todorov’s book gathers writings from the period 1971–7, not all appearing in the English translation. On the *differences* between aspects of everyday language and literary genre, see Segre, ‘Generi’, pp. 581–2, and Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (London: Cape, 1949), p. 245; the chapter on genre (from which the quotation is taken) is primarily Warren’s. See also Segre, ‘Generi’, p. 582.

<sup>19</sup> While it is important to acknowledge the pragmatic aspect of genre, a useful distinction can still be drawn between grouping for purely utilitarian purposes and doing so for heuristic ones: see Ritva Jacobsson and Leo Treitler, ‘Tropes and the Concept of Genre’, in Ritva Jacobsson (ed.), *Pax et sapientia: Studies in Text and Music of Liturgical Tropes and Sequences: In Memory of Gordon Anderson*, *Studia latina stockholmiensia*, 29 (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1986), pp. 59–89.

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Where later writers are unlikely to concur with him is in the claim that we can have ‘pure’ aesthetic experiences, ones that take place entirely outside any cultural frame.

## FAMILIES

Our relationship with genres, then, is relatively flexible (probably more so than our relationship with the codes of ‘natural’ languages), and their workings should not be seen in mechanistic or deterministic ways.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, their operating ‘norms’ are often unwritten, their processes often unconscious – somewhat like the usages of a language as internalised by a native speaker.<sup>21</sup> Differently from most theorised genres, ‘lived’ genres (genres as perceived and practised by individuals in historical contexts) provide us with categories that, whether or not we use them consciously, are always somewhat ‘flou’ (soft-focused).<sup>22</sup> In this respect, the theoretical re-examination of our assumptions about the nature of genres has proved especially interesting in relation to one particular question: what kind of grouping do these cultural categories imply?

For centuries, theorists seem to have treated genres, more or less explicitly, as classes. An individual is regarded as a member of a class when it satisfies a given condition, when it presents a necessary trait (or combination of traits). Thus, the trait (or combination) is common to all members of the class – usually grouped together under a name – all individuals not sharing it being excluded. In the past few decades, however, writers have been more and more likely to characterise a genre as a ‘family’. This term, differently from ‘class’, has only recently acquired a specific meaning in philosophical usage, where it is associated with the notion of ‘family resemblances’ (‘Familienähnlichkeiten’) found in Wittgenstein’s linguistic theories. In an oft-cited passage of his *Philosophical Investigations* (published posthumously in 1953), Wittgenstein writes that all the phenomena we call language ‘have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all – but they are *related* to one another in many different ways’. The same applies to all ‘the proceedings that we call “games”’:

<sup>20</sup> See Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, p. 93, to whom I owe the term ‘proprieties’ used above: rather than strict rules, genres (and languages) provide us with proprieties ‘which [it] is, on the whole, socially considerate to observe’. See also Dubrow, *Genre*, pp. 105 ff.

<sup>21</sup> See Todorov, ‘The Origin of Genres’, p. 19; Segre, ‘Generi’, p. 583; Franco Fabbri, ‘A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications’, in David Horn and Philip Tagg (eds.), *Popular Music Perspectives* (Göteborg: International Association for the Study of Popular Music, 1982), pp. 52–81, esp. 61–2; and Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, passim.

<sup>22</sup> Molino, ‘Les genres littéraires’, 5, 11–13.



if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that [...] I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than ‘family resemblances’.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the members of a family, a kind of grouping somewhat looser than a class, are related by a network of resemblances, of similar traits. Each individual shows some of these features, but no one feature is necessary: there is no need for any single trait to be present in all members of the family.

Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblance was explicitly applied to the study of genre in 1962 by Robert C. Elliott, who kept to the pragmatic terms of the philosopher’s formulation: there are ‘hundreds of different responsible uses of the term *satire*’, writes Elliott, and yet ‘there are no properties common to *all* the uses; or, if I could find an essential property, it would be so general as to be useless for purposes of definition’.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, Croce had made some theoretical use of the analogy between genres and families long before Wittgenstein used ‘family resemblances’ in the specific sense outlined above:

It might seem that we thus wished to deny any element of resemblance between different expressions or works of art. Resemblances exist, and by virtue of them works of art can be arranged in this or that grouping. But they are resemblances of the sort we perceive between individual human beings and that can never be captured through abstract determinations: they are resemblances, that is to say, to which identification, subordination, co-ordination and the other relations between concepts ill apply, resemblances that simply consist in what one calls ‘family likeness’, deriving from the historical circumstances in which the various works arise, or from the kinship between the souls of their creators.<sup>25</sup>

It is far-fetched to see in Croce’s passage an ‘astonishing early appearance’ of Wittgenstein’s later notion of family resemblance.<sup>26</sup> (Other possible differences aside,

<sup>23</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen / Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (1953), 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958; reprint, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), part 1, §§ 65–7.

<sup>24</sup> Robert C. Elliott, ‘The Definition of *Satire*: A Note on Method’, *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature*, 11 (1962), 19–23, here 22.

<sup>25</sup> Croce, *Estetica*, part 1, ch. 9, pp. 85–6 (‘Parrebbe che a questo modo si volesse negare ogni legame di somiglianza delle espressioni o delle opere d’arte tra loro. Le somiglianze esistono, e in forza di esse le opere d’arte possono essere disposte in questo o quel gruppo. Ma sono somiglianze quali si avvertono tra gl’individui, e che non è dato mai fissare con determinazioni astratte: somiglianze, cioè, alle quali mal si applicano l’identificazione, la subordinazione, la coordinazione e le altre relazioni dei concetti, e che consistono semplicemente in ciò che si chiama aria di famiglia, derivante dalle condizioni storiche tra cui nascono le varie opere e dalle parentele d’anima degli artisti’). In preparing this English version I have drawn freely on the translations by Ainslie and Lyas (see above, n. 1).

<sup>26</sup> Thus Lyas in his edition of Croce’s *Estetica* (p. 81). Lyas’s claim is supported by his choosing to translate Croce’s ‘aria di famiglia’ with ‘family resemblances’, the standard English translation for Wittgenstein’s ‘Familienähnlichkeiten’. Ainslie’s ‘family likeness’ is a better translation of the Italian expression, though ‘aria’ can connote a more indefinite impression; in that sense, a good approximation is Jauss’s ‘Familienatmosphäre’ (something like ‘family aura’): ‘Theorie der Gattungen’, p. 110 n. 11.

Croce's main point seems to be the logical irrelevance of these resemblances, rather than the absence of any necessary resemblance traits.) In a broader sense, however, the two philosophers do appear to use 'family' in a somewhat similar way – in order, that is, to suggest a kind of grouping whose characterisation is more *flou* than that of a class. It is at the very least in this broad sense that the term 'family' (or the occasional analogue such as 'open concept', 'open system')<sup>27</sup> is used by writers on genre, who often refer more or less explicitly to Croce (whose overtones of mistrust towards families tend to disappear), to Wittgenstein, or to both (at times in some odd combination).<sup>28</sup> One can see, furthermore, how easily the idea of family can relate to anti-realist positions: behind a genre name there is not an entity but the group of resembling phenomena for which we would use that name.

To be sure, whenever successful ideas such as that of 'family resemblances' are put to use in a wide variety of fields, and for purposes different from the initial one, the results are unlikely to be altogether unproblematic,<sup>29</sup> and the application of Wittgenstein's notion to the study of genres is no exception. One could point out, for instance, that whereas Wittgenstein's approach seems to verge rather on the synchronic (an examination of how a certain community uses 'game'), Elliott's clearly does not: his 'hundreds of different responsible uses of the term *satire*' (and of its analogues in various European languages) derive from a survey of the entire history of Western culture (with the risk of suggesting that if we set out to study all the historical uses of a word with an aim other than mere lexicography then such a study is justified, if not by a 'substance', by some kind of permanence behind all those different uses). And even when one restricts the field of enquiry to a specific historical context (as is usually most effective with genres), the choice to begin from the uses of a word – a procedure expedient in lexicography (or for Wittgenstein's philosophical aims) – is only one of those available to the student of genre. That it is often not the best choice will, I hope, become clear in the course of the following chapters; for the time being, suffice it to note that some notion of 'familial' groupings has often proved a useful tool for thinking about genres.

<sup>27</sup> Elliott, 'The Definition of *Satire*', 22; Cohen, 'History and Genre', 210.

<sup>28</sup> Hirsch, for instance, makes explicit reference to Croce when using the image of the family as part of his own anti-essentialist argument (*Validity in Interpretation*, p. vii), but then provides a definition that seems very close to the formulations of Wittgenstein (who goes unnamed): with reference to what he calls the 'broad genres', Hirsch states that 'there is no single specific difference common to [all their members]' (pp. 114–15). Jauss, too, mentions Croce only ('Theory of Genre', pp. 79–80), whereas Wittgenstein's role is made explicit, for instance, in Fowler (*Kinds of Literature*, pp. 41–2) and Molino ('Les genres littéraires', 17).

<sup>29</sup> See G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), esp. pp. 320, 332. An early discussion of the problematic use of 'family resemblances' in general definitions of art is Maurice Mandelbaum's 'Family Resemblances and Generalization Concerning the Arts', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 2 (1965), 219–28.



Many aspects of the recent work on genre may be viewed in terms of Wittgenstein's insights (whether or not writers make this clear, or are clear about it themselves). These include not only the emancipation from the obligation to explain in terms of classical 'analysis' (the breaking down into elemental, necessary features) but also the related understanding that, in accordance with our changing purposes, a term can be explained and applied in different ways, whose 'legitimacy' will be commensurate with their usefulness in relation to those purposes.<sup>30</sup> Thus, as perspectives and aims change, we will be able legitimately to explain and apply the same genre name in more than one way, or to ascribe the same work to more than one genre. Furthermore, we can venture that, in many contexts, membership of a genre can be a matter of degree: depending on our needs, we will (more or less consciously) not only consider how many resemblance traits of a certain genre's repertoire appear in a given phenomenon, but also weigh the extent to which they do, or decide that some of those traits are more central to the genre than others; we may then find ourselves in a position to claim that while work *X* does belong in a particular genre, it does so to a lesser extent than work *Y*.<sup>31</sup> (I have been pleased to discover that my conclusions here come close to those of recent work on genre from a cognitivist perspective.)<sup>32</sup> The nature of these decisional processes, however, raises a different set of questions, which will be at the centre of the next section.

## THE CRITIC'S GENRE

In the world of post-Crocean theories, then, genre can be characterised in any number of ways (and my brief overview has often forced into a single line of argument what is in fact a much more diverse range of positions). Depending on the chosen emphasis, a genre will be variously described as a cultural category through which we experience works, a shared code creating the conditions for communication, a grouping of individual phenomena interrelated by a web of resemblances, a family of situations in which we would use a certain word, a critic's explanatory and heuristic tool – and the list could be longer. The field is perhaps not as eclectic as such a list would suggest: one could show that there is a potential degree of overlap between these diverse descriptions, that they are not necessarily incompatible. Differences do exist, nonetheless, and some of them have very significant implications.

<sup>30</sup> See Baker and Hacker, *Wittgenstein*, p. 329.

<sup>31</sup> It may be worth clarifying that I usually refer to 'works' and their 'features' (as all writers on genre do) for the sake of brevity, and that I am not taking for granted a straightforwardly internalist approach: one could certainly claim that, in opera, the work is the staged event – and we will have opportunities to observe that factors triggering generic expectations can include, even before titles or generic labels, the venue and occasion of a performance.

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, Sinding, 'After Definitions', esp. 186.

In particular, and perhaps most importantly, whereas virtually all writers seem to embrace some notion of the ‘constructedness’ of genres, this is portrayed in a range of different ways, and the images at the opposite ends of that range are virtually irreconcilable. At one end stands genre the communal construct, the product of a culture – genre the language, as it were. Here, the role of the individual can fall anywhere between that of the (more or less native) ‘user’ and that of the scholar who, at any degree of cultural remove, tries to understand a code and its practices.<sup>33</sup> At the other end we find genre as an entirely individual construct, the result of the critic’s acts and personal decisions. The latter view, championed most cogently and influentially by Adena Rosmarin (to whom we will return shortly), can be seen as the extreme outcome of an anti-realist line of thought.

If at one point Robert C. Elliott refers to himself as a lexicographer, which suggests investigating the different *communal* uses of words such as ‘satire’, he also discusses the matter from the point of view of the *individual* who establishes that a certain work belongs to a given genre – an operation that can imply some alteration of the genre’s extension.<sup>34</sup> In fact, such decisions – continually made by authors, readers and critics (to stay within the realm of literature) – both determine and change the nature of a genre: they show types of contexts in which the use of a term is or can become acceptable (which is, I presume, what Elliott means by ‘responsible’).<sup>35</sup> In this sense, a critic’s conclusion is not necessarily different in kind from that of a more general ‘user’, both making an individual judgement against some cultural background. That type of judgement concerns, in Robert Elliott’s Wittgensteinian terms, ‘a *decision* question’ rather than ‘a *factual* question’ – a consideration that is given a particular slant when it comes to describing the specific nature of the critic’s proceedings: ‘When T. S. Eliot asks whether *Ulysses* should not be considered an epic, he is *recommending a decision*, not asking for a definition’ (emphasis mine).

There are notable consonances between such remarks and those found in the more radical argument of Adena Rosmarin (who, nonetheless, never refers to Elliott or even to Wittgenstein).<sup>36</sup> Rosmarin’s view of genre is emphatically anti-realist – or, in her formulation, non-representational. A genre cannot be something that precedes the critic’s description and is independent of that description (the representation in

<sup>33</sup> On ‘use competence’ versus ‘analytical competence’ in genre, see Fabbri, ‘A Theory of Musical Genres’, pp. 61–3. An extreme formulation of the ‘cultural’ point of view is that by which, in Todorov’s words, we should consider as genres only those groupings ‘that have been historically perceived as such’: ‘The Origin of Genres’, p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> ‘The Definition of *Satire*’, 22–3; all references to Elliott in the remainder of this paragraph are to these two pages.

<sup>35</sup> This dynamism between individual performance and collective competence is a recurring theme in writings on genre: see, for example, Segre, ‘Generi’, p. 584.

<sup>36</sup> Rosmarin, *The Power of Genre*, pp. 3–51.