EPIC AND NOVEL
Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel

The study of the novel as a genre is distinguished by peculiar difficulties. This is due to the unique nature of the object itself: the novel is the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted. The forces that define it as a genre are at work before our very eyes: the birth and development of the novel as a genre takes place in the full light of the historical day. The generic skeleton of the novel is still far from having hardened, and we cannot foresee all its plastic possibilities.

We know other genres, as genres, in their completed aspect, that is, as more or less fixed pre-existing forms into which one may then pour artistic experience. The primordial process of their formation lies outside historically documented observation. We encounter the epic as a genre that has not only long since completed its development, but one that is already antiquated. With certain reservations we can say the same for the other major genres, even for tragedy. The life they have in history, the life with which we are familiar, is the life they have lived as already completed genres, with a hardened and no longer flexible skeleton. Each of them has developed its own canon that operates in literature as an authentic historical force.

All these genres, or in any case their defining features, are considerably older than written language and the book, and to the present day they retain their ancient oral and auditory characteristics. Of all the major genres only the novel is younger than writing and the book: it alone is organically receptive to new forms of mute perception, that is, to reading. But of critical importance here is the fact that the novel has no canon of its own, as do other genres; only individual examples of the novel are historically active, not a generic canon as such. Studying other genres is analogous to studying dead languages; studying the novel, on the other hand, is like studying languages that are not only alive, but still young.
This explains the extraordinary difficulty inherent in formulating a theory of the novel. For such a theory has at its heart an object of study completely different from that which theory treats in other genres. The novel is not merely one genre among other genres. Among genres long since completed and in part already dead, the novel is the only developing genre. It is the only genre that was born and nourished in a new era of world history and therefore it is deeply akin to that era, whereas the other major genres entered that era as already fixed forms, as an inheritance, and only now are they adapting themselves—some better, some worse—to the new conditions of their existence. Compared with them, the novel appears to be a creature from an alien species. It gets on poorly with other genres. It fights for its own hegemony in literature, wherever it triumphs, the other older genres go into decline. Significantly, the best book on the history of the ancient novel—that by Erwin Rohde—does not so much recount the history of the novel as it does illustrate the process of disintegration that affected all major genres in antiquity.

The mutual interaction of genres within a single unified literary period is a problem of great interest and importance. In certain eras—the Greek classical period, the Golden Age of Roman literature, the neoclassical period—all genres in “high” literature (that is, the literature of ruling social groups) harmoniously reinforce each other to a significant extent; the whole of literature, conceived as a totality of genres, becomes an organic unity of the highest order. But it is characteristic of the novel that it never enters into this whole, it does not participate in any harmony of the genres. In these eras the novel has an unofficial existence, outside “high” literature. Only already completed genres, with fully formed and well-defined generic contours, can enter into such a literature as a hierarchically organized, organic whole. They can mutually delimit and mutually complement each other, while yet preserving their own generic natures. Each is a unit, and all units are interrelated by virtue of certain features of deep structure that they all have in common.


The great organic poetics of the past—those of Aristotle, Horace, Boileau—are permeated with a deep sense of the wholeness of literature and of the harmonious interaction of all genres contained within this whole. It is as if they literally hear this harmony of the genres. In this is their strength—the inimitable, all-embracing fullness and exhaustiveness of such poetics. And they all, as a consequence, ignore the novel. Scholarly poetics of the nineteenth century lack this integrity: they are eclectic, descriptive; their aim is not a living and organic fullness but rather an abstract and encyclopedic comprehensiveness. They do not concern themselves with the actual possibility of specific genres co-existing within the living whole of literature in a given era; they are concerned rather with their co-existence in a maximally complete anthology. Of course these poetics can no longer ignore the novel—they simply add it (albeit in a place of honor) to already existing genres (and thus it enters the roster as merely one genre among many, in literature conceived as a living whole, on the other hand, it would have to be included in a completely different way).

We have already said that the novel gets on poorly with other genres. There can be no talk of a harmony deriving from mutual limitation and complementariness. The novel parodies other genres (precisely in their role as genres), it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language, it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, re-formulating and re-accentuating them. Historians of literature sometimes tend to see in this merely the struggle of literary tendencies and schools. Such struggles of course exist, but they are peripheral phenomena and historically insignificant. Behind them one must be sensitive to the deeper and more truly historical struggle of genres, the establishment and growth of a generic skeleton of literature.

Of particular interest are those eras when the novel becomes the dominant genre. All literature is then caught up in the process of “becoming” and in a special kind of “generic criticism.” This occurred several times in the Hellenic period, again during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but with special force and clarity beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century. In an era when the novel reigns supreme, almost all the remaining genres are to a greater or lesser extent “novelized”: drama (for example Ibsen, Hauptmann, the whole of Naturalist drama), epic
poetry (for example, Childe Harold and especially Byron's Don Juan), even lyric poetry (as an extreme example, Heine's lyrical verse). Those genres that stubbornly preserve their old canonic nature begin to appear stylized. In general any strict adherence to a genre begins to feel like a stylization, a stylization taken to the point of parody, despite the artistic intent of the author. In an environment where the novel is the dominant genre, the conventional languages of strictly canonical genres begin to sound in new ways, which are quite different from the ways they sounded in those eras when the novel was not included in "high" literature.

Parodic stylizations of canonicized genres and styles occupy an essential place in the novel. In the era of the novel's creative ascendency—and even more so in the periods of preparation preceding this era—literature was flooded with parodies and travesties of all the high genres [parodies precisely of genres, and not of individual authors or schools]—parodies that are the precursors, "companions" to the novel, in their own way studies for it. But it is characteristic that the novel does not permit any of these various individual manifestations of itself to stabilize. Throughout its entire history there is a consistent parodying or travestying of dominant or fashionable novels that attempt to become models for the genre: parodies on the chivalric romance of adventure [Dit d'aventures, the first such parody, belongs to the thirteenth century], on the Baroque novel, the pastoral novel [Sorel's Le Berger extravagant], the Sentimental novel [Fielding, and The Second Grandison of Musaus] and so forth. This ability of the novel to criticize itself is a remarkable feature of this ever-developing genre.

What are the salient features of this development of other genres suggested by as above? They become more free and flexible, their language, renew itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the "novelistic" layers of literary language, they become [dialogized] permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing—the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the opened present). As we will see below, all these phenomena are explained by the transposition of other genres into this new and peculiar zone for structuring artistic models (a zone of contact with the present in all its openendedness), a zone that was first appropriated by the novel.

It is of course impossible to explain the phenomenon of novelization purely by reference to the direct and unmediated influence of the novel itself. Even where such influence can be precisely established and demonstrated, it is intimately interwoven with those direct changes in reality itself that also determine the novel and that condition its dominance in a given era. The novel is the only developing genre and therefore it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding. Only that which is itself developing can comprehend development as a process. The novel has become the leading hero in the drama of literary development in our time precisely because it best of all reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making; it is, after all, the only genre born of this new world and in total affinity with it. In many respects, the novel has anticipated, and continues to anticipate, the future development of literature as a whole. In the process of becoming the dominant genre, the novel sparks the renovation of all other genres, it infects them with its spirit of process and in conclusiveness. It draws them ineluctably into its orbit precisely because this orbit coincides with the basic direction of the development of literature as a whole. In this lies the exceptional importance of the novel, as an object of study for the theory as well as the history of literature.

Unfortunately, historians of literature usually reduce this struggle between the novel and other already completed genres, in these aspects of novelization, to the actual real-life struggle among "schools" and "trends." A novelized poem, for example, they call a "romantic poem" (which of course it is) and believe that in so doing they have exhausted the subject. They do not see...
beneath the superficial hustle and bustle of literary process the 
major and crucial fates of literature and language, whose great he-
roes turn out to be first and foremost genres and whose “trends” 
and “schools” are but second- or third-rank protagonists.

The utter inadequacy of literary theory is exposed when it is 
forced to deal with the novel. In the case of other genres literary 
theory works confidently and precisely, since there is a finished 
and already formed object, definite and clear. These genres pre-
serve their rigidity and canonic quality in all classical eras of their 
development, variations from era to era, from trend to trend or 
school to school are peripheral and do not affect their ossified ge-
neric skeleton. Right up to the present day, in fact, theory dealing 
with these already completed genres can add almost nothing to 
Aristotle’s formulations. Aristotle’s poetics, although occasion-
ally so deeply embedded as to be almost invisible, remains the 
stable foundation for the theory of genres. Everything works as 
long as there is no mention of the novel. But the existence of nov-
elized genres already leads theory into a blind alley. Faced with 
the problem of the novel, genre theory must submit to a radical 
re-structuring.

Thanks to the meticulous work of scholars, a huge amount of 
historical material has accumulated and many questions con-
cerning the evolution of various types of novels have been clar-
ified—but the problem of the novel genre as a whole has not yet 
found anything like a satisfactory principled resolution. The 
 novel continues to be seen as one genre among many; attempts 
among others to distinguish it as an already completed genre from 
other already completed genres, to discover its internal canon— 
one that would function as a well-defined system of rigid generic 
factors. In the vast majority of cases, work on the novel is reduced 
to mere cataloging, a description of all variants on the novel— 
albeit as comprehensive as possible. But the results of these de-
scriptions never succeed in giving us as much as a hint of compre-
prehensive formula for the novel as a genre. In addition, the 
experts have not managed to isolate a single definite, stable char-
acteristic of the novel—without adding a reservation, which im-
mediately disqualifies it altogether as a generic characteristic.

Some examples of such “characteristics with reservations” 
would be: the novel is a multi-layered genre (although there also 
exist magnificent single-layered novels), the novel is a precisely 
plotted and dynamic genre (although there also exist novels that 
push to its literary limits the art of pure description), the novel is 
a complicated genre (although novels are mass produced as pure 
and frivolous entertainment like no other genre), the novel is a 
love story (although the greatest examples of the European novel 
are utterly devoid of the love element), the novel is a prose genre 
(although there exist excellent novels in verse). One could of 
course mention a large number of additional “generic characteris-
tics” for the novel similar to those given above, which are imme-
diately annulled by some reservation innocently appended to 
them.

Of considerably more interest and consequence are those nor-
mative definitions of the novel offered by novelists themselves, 
who produce a specific novel and then declare it the only correct, 
necessary and authentic form of the novel. Such, for instance, is 
Rousseau’s preface to his La Nouvelle Héloïse, Wieland’s to his 
Agathon, Wezel’s to his Tobias Knouts, in such a category be-
long the numerous declarations and statements of principle by 
the Romantics on Wilhelm Meister, Lucinda and other texts. 
Such statements are not attempts to incorporate all the possible 
variants of the novel into a single eclectic definition, but are 
them themselves part and parcel of the living evolution of the novel as 
a genre. Often they deeply and faithfully reflect the novel’s strug-
gle with other genres and with itself (with other dominant and 
formidable variants of the novel) at a particular point in its devel-
opment. They come closer to an understanding of the peculiar 
position of the novel in literature, a position that is not commen-
surate with that of other genres.

Especially significant in this connection is a series of state-
ments that accompanied the emergence of a new novel-type in 
the eighteenth century. The series opens with Fielding’s reflections 
on the novel and its hero in Tom Jones. It continues in Wie-

* d. Christoph Martin Wieland (1733–1813) is the author of Geschichte des 
Agathon (1767, first of many versions), an autobiographic novel in the guise of a Greek romance, considered by many to be the first in the long line of
German Bildungsrone.

e. Reference here is to Johann Carl Wezel (1747–1819), Lebensgeschichte 
Tobias Knouts, des Weisen, sonst der Stammler genannt (1773), a novel that 
has not received the readership it deserves. A four-volume reprint was 
published by Mezler (Stuttgart, Afterword by Viktor Lange) in 1971. Also see 
Elisabeth Holzhey-Penniger, Der desorientierte Erzähler: Studien zu J. C.
Wezel’s Lebensgeschichte des Tobias Knouts (Bern, 1976).
land’s foreword to Agathon, and the most essential link in the series is Blankenburg’s Versuch über den Roman. By the end of this series we have, in fact, that theory of the novel later formulated by Hegel. In all these statements, each reflecting the novel in one of its critical stages (Tom Jones, Agathon, Wilhelm Meister), the following prerequisites for the novel are characteristic: (1) the novel should not be “poetic,” as the word “poetic” is used in other genres of imaginative literature; (2) the hero of a novel should not be “heroic” in either the epic or the tragic sense of the word: he should combine in himself negative as well as positive features, low as well as lofty, ridiculous as well as serious; (3) the hero should not be portrayed as an already completed and unchanging person but as one who is evolving and developing, a person who learns from life; (4) the novel should become for the contemporary world what the epic was for the ancient world (an idea that Blankenburg expressed very precisely, and that was later repeated by Hegel).

All these positive prerequisites have their substantial and productive side—taken together, they constitute a criticism (from the novel’s point of view) of other genres and of the relationship these genres bear to reality: their stilted heroizing, their narrow and un lifelike poeticalness, their monotony and abstractness, the pre-packaged and unchanging nature of their heroes. We have here, in fact, a rigorous critique of the literariness and poeticalness inherent in other genres and also in the predecessors of the contemporary novel (the heroic Baroque novel and the Sentimental novels of Richardson). These statements are reinforced significantly by the practice of these novelists themselves. Here the novel—its texts as well as the theory connected with it—emerges consciously and unambiguously as a genre that is both critical and self-critical, one fated to revise the fundamental concepts of literariness and poeticalness dominant at the time. On the one hand, the contrast of novel with epic (and the novel’s op-

[1] Friedrich von Blankenburg (1744–1796), Versuch über den Roman (1774), an enormous work (over 300 pages) that attempts to define the novel in terms of a rudimentary psychology, a concern for Tugend in the heroes. A facsimile edition was published by Metzler (Stuttgart) in 1965. Little is known about Blankenburg, who is also the author of an unfinished novel with the imposing title Beyträge zur Geschichte deutschen Reichs und deutschen Sitten, the first part of which appeared a year after the Versuch in 1775.

position to the epic) is but one moment in the criticism of other literary genres (in particular, a criticism of epic heroization), but on the other hand, this contrast aims to elevate the significance of the novel, making of it the dominant genre in contemporary literature.

The positive prerequisites mentioned above constitute one of the high-points in the novel’s coming to self-consciousness. They do not yet of course provide a theory of the novel. These statements are also not distinguished by any great philosophical depth. They do however illustrate the nature of the novel as a genre no less—if perhaps no more—than do other existing theories of the novel.

I will attempt below to approach the novel precisely as a genre-in-the-making, one in the vanguard of all modern literary development. I am not constructing here a functional definition of the novelistic canon in literary history, that is, a definition that would make of it a system of fixed generic characteristics. Rather, I am trying to grope my way toward the basic structural characteristics of this most fluid of genres, characteristics that might determine the direction of its peculiar capacity for change and of its influence and effect on the rest of literature.

I find three basic characteristics that fundamentally distinguish the novel in principle from other genres: (1) its stylistic three-dimensionality, which is linked with the multi-linguaged consciousness realized in the novel; (2) the radical change it effects in the temporal coordinates of the literary image; (3) the new zone opened by the novel for structuring literary images, namely, the zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its openness.

These three characteristics of the novel are all organically interrelated and have all been powerfully affected by a very specific rupture in the history of European civilization: its emergence from a socially isolated and culturally deaf semipatriarchal society, and its entrance into international and interlingual contacts and relationships. A multitude of different languages, cultures and times became available to Europe, and this became a decisive factor in its life and thought.

In another work I have already investigated the first stylistic
peculiarity of the novel, the one resulting from the active polyglossia of the new world, the new culture and its new creative literary consciousness. I will summarize here only the basic points.

Polyglossia had always existed (it is more ancient than pure, canonic monoglossia), but it had not been a factor in literary creation; an artistically conscious choice between languages did not serve as the creative center of the literary and language process. Classical Greeks had a feeling both for "languages" and for the epochs of language, for the various Greek literary dialects (tragedy is a polyglot genre), but creative consciousness was realized in closed, pure languages (although in actual fact they were mixed). Polyglossia was appropriated and canonized among all the genres.

The new cultural and creative consciousness lives in an actively polyglot world. The world becomes polyglot, once and for all and irreversibly. The period of national languages, coexisting but closed and deaf to each other, comes to an end. Languages throw light on each other: one language can, after all, see itself only in the light of another language. The naive and stubborn coexistence of "languages" within a given national language also comes to an end—that is, there is no more peaceful co-existence between territorial dialects, social and professional dialects and jargons, literary language, generic languages within literary language, epochs in language and so forth.

All this set into motion a process of active, mutual cause-and-effect and interillumination. Words and language began to have a different feel to them, objectively they ceased to be what they had once been. Under these conditions of external and internal interillumination, each given language—even if its linguistic composition (phonetics, vocabulary, morphology, etc.) were to remain absolutely unchanged—is, as it were, reborn, becoming qualitatively a different thing for the consciousness that creates in it.

In this actively polyglot world, completely new relationships are established between language and its object (that is, the real world)—and this is fraught with enormous consequences for all the already completed genres that had been formed during eras of closed and deaf monoglossia. In contrast to other major genres, the novel emerged and matured precisely when intense activation of external and internal polyglossia was at the peak of its activity; this is its native element. The novel could therefore assume leadership in the process of developing and renewing literature in its linguistic and stylistic dimension.

In the above-mentioned work I tried to elucidate the profound stylistic originality of the novel, which is determined by its connection with polyglossia.

Let us move on to the two other characteristics, both concerned with the thematic aspect of structure in the novel as a genre. These characteristics can be best brought out and clarified through a comparison of the novel with the epic.

The epic as a genre in its own right may, for our purposes, be characterized by three constitutive features: (1) a national epic past—in Goethe's and Schiller's terminology the "absolute past"—serves as the subject for the epic; (2) national tradition (not personal experience and the free thought that grows out of it) serves as the source for the epic; (3) an absolute epic distance separates the epic world from contemporary reality, that is, from the time in which the singer (the author and his audience) lives.

We will deal in more detail with each of these constitutive features of the epic.

The world of the epic is the national heroic past: it is a world of "beginnings" and "peak times" in the national history, a world of fathers and founders of families, a world of "firsts" and "bests." 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 transferral of a represented world into the past, and the degree to which this world participates in the past. The epic was never a poem about the present, about its own time (one that became a poem about the past only for those who came later). The epic, as the specific genre known to us today, has been from the beginning a poem about the past, and the authorial position immanent in the epic and constitutive for it (that is, the position of the one who utters the epic word) is the environment of a man speaking about a past that is to him inaccessible, the reverent point of view of a descendent. In its style, tone and manner of expression, epic discourse is infinitely far removed from discourse of a contemporary about a contemporary addressed to con-

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g. Reference here is to "Über episiche und dramatische Dichtung," co-signed by Schiller and Goethe, but probably written by the latter in 1797, although not published until 1827. The actual term used by Goethe for what Bakhtin is calling "absolute past" is vollkommen vergangen, which is opposed not to the novel, but to drama, which is defined as vollkommen gegenwärtig. The essay can be found in Goethe's Œd.A. Werke [Jubiläums-Ausgabe, Stuttgart and Berlin [1902–1907]], vol. 36, pp. 149–152.
temporaries ("Onegin, my good friend, was born on the banks of the Neva, where perhaps you were also born, or once shone, my reader. . . ."). Both the singer and the listener, immanent in the epic as a genre, are located in the same time and on the same evaluative [hierarchical] plane, but the represented world of the heroes stands on an utterly different and inaccessible time-and-value plane, separated by epic distance. The space between them is filled with national tradition. To portray an event on the same time-and-value plane as oneself and one's contemporaries (and an event that is therefore based on personal experience and thought) is to undertake a radical revolution, and to step out of the world of epic into the world of the novel.

It is possible, of course, to conceive even "my time" as heroic, epic time, when it is seen as historically significant; one can distance it, look at it as if from afar [not from one's own vantage point but from some point in the future], one can relate to the past in a familiar way [as if relating to "my" present]. But in so doing we ignore the presentness of the present and the pastness of the past; we are removing ourselves from the zone of "my time," from the zone of familiar contact with me.

We speak of the epic as a genre that has come down to us already well defined and real. We come upon it when it is already completely finished, a congealed and half-moribund genre. Its completeness, its consistency and its absolute lack of artistic naiveté bespeak its old age as a genre and its lengthy past. We can only conjecture about this past, and we must admit that so far our conjectures have been rather poor. Those hypothetical primordial songs that preceded both the epic and the creation of a generic epic tradition, songs about contemporaries that directly echoed events that had just occurred—such songs we do not know, although we must presume they existed. We can only guess at the nature of those original aëdonic songs, or of the cantilenas. And we have no reason to assume that they are any more closely related to the later and better-known epic songs than to our topical feuillerons or popular ditties. Those heroicized epic songs about contemporaries that are available to us and that we do know existed arose only after the epic was already an established form, and arose on the basis of an already ancient and powerful epic tradition. These songs transfer to contemporary events and contemporaries the ready-made epic form; that is, they transfer to these events the time-and-value contour of the past, thus attaching them to the world of fathers, of beginnings and peak times—canonizing these events, as it were, while they are still current. In a patriarchal social structure the ruling class does, in a certain sense, belong to the world of "fathers" and is thus separated from other classes by a distance that is almost epic. The epic incorporation of the contemporary hero into a world of ancestors and founders is a specific phenomenon that developed out of an epic tradition long since completed, and that therefore is as little able to explain the origin of the epic as is, say, the neoclassical ode.

Whatever its origins, the epic as it has come down to us is an absolutely completed and finished generic form, whose constitutive feature is the transference of the world it describes to an absolute past of national beginnings and peak times. The absolute past is a specifically evaluating [hierarchical] category. In the epic world view, "beginning," "first," "founder," "ancestor," "that which occurred earlier" and so forth are not merely temporal categories but valorized temporal categories, and valorized to an extreme degree. This is as true for relationships among people as for relations among all the other items and phenomena of the epic world. In the past, everything is good: all the really good things [i.e., the "first" things] occur only in this past. The epic absolute past is the single source and beginning of everything good for all later times as well.

In ancient literature it is memory, and not knowledge, that serves as the source and power for the creative impulse. That is how it was, it is impossible to change it: the tradition of the past is sacred. There is as yet no consciousness of the possible relativity of any past.

The novel, by contrast, is determined by experience, knowledge and practice [the future]. In the era of Hellenism a closer contact with the heroes of the Trojan epic cycle began to be felt, epic is already being transformed into novel. Epic material is transposed into novelistic material, into precisely that zone of contact that passes through the intermediate stages of familiarization and laughter. When the novel becomes the dominant genre, epistemology becomes the dominant discipline.

The epic past is called the "absolute past" for good reason: it is both monochronic and valorized [hierarchical], it lacks any relativity, that is, any gradual, purely temporal progressions that might connect it with the present. It is walled off absolutely from all subsequent times, and above all from those times in which the
singer and his listeners are located. This boundary, consequently, is immanent in the form of the epic itself and is felt and heard in its every word.

To destroy this boundary is to destroy the form of the epic as a genre. But precisely because it is walled off from all subsequent times, the epic past is absolute and complete. It is as closed as a circle; inside it everything is finished, already over. There is no place in the epic world for any openness, indecision, indeterminacy. There are no loopholes in it through which we glimpse the future; it suffices unto itself, neither supposing any continuation nor requiring it. Temporal and valorized definitions are here fused into a single inseparable whole (as they are also fused in the semantic layers of ancient languages). Everything incorporated into this past was simultaneously incorporated into a condition of authentic essence and significance, but therefore also took on conclusiveness and finality, depriving itself, so to speak, of all rights and potential for a real continuation. Absolute conclusiveness and closedness is the outstanding feature of the temporally valorized epic past.

Let us move on to tradition. The epic past, walled off from all subsequent times by an impenetrable boundary, is preserved and revealed only in the form of national tradition. The epic relies entirely on this tradition. Important here is not the fact that tradition is the factual source for the epic—what matters rather is that a reliance on tradition is immanent in the very form of the epic, just as the absolute past is immanent in it. Epic discourse is a discourse handed down by tradition. By its very nature the epic world of the absolute past is inaccessible to personal experience and does not permit an individual, personal point of view or evaluation. One cannot glimpse it, grope for it, touch it; one cannot look at it from just any point of view, it is impossible to experience it, analyze it, take it apart, penetrate into its core. It is given solely as tradition, sacred and sacrosanct, evaluated in the same way by all and demanding a pious attitude toward itself. Let us repeat: the important thing is not the factual sources of the epic, not the content of its historical events, nor the declarations of its authors—the important thing is this formal constitutive characteristic of the epic as a genre (to be more precise, the formal-substantive characteristic): its reliance on impersonal and sacrosanct tradition, on a commonly held evaluation and point of view—which excludes any possibility of another approach—and which therefore displays a profound piety toward the subject described and toward the language used to describe it, the language of tradition.

The absolute past as the subject for epic and sacrosanct tradition as its sole source also determine the nature of epic distance—that is, the third constitutive characteristic of the epic as a genre. As we have already pointed out, the epic past is locked into itself and walled off from all subsequent times by an impenetrable boundary, isolated (and this is most important) from that eternal present of children and descendents in which the epic singer and his listeners are located, which figures in as an event in their lives and becomes the epic performance. On the other hand, tradition isolates the world of the epic from personal experience, from any new insights, from any personal initiative in understanding and interpreting, from new points of view and evaluations. The epic world is an utterly finished thing, not only as an authentic event of the distant past but also on its own terms and by its own standards, it is impossible to change, to re-think, to re-evaluate anything in it. It is completed, conclusive and immutable, as a fact, an idea and a value. This defines absolute epic distance. One can only accept the epic world with reverence; it is impossible to really touch it, for it is beyond the realm of human activity, the realm in which everything humans touch is altered and re-thought. This distance exists not only in the epic material, that is, in the events and the heroes described, but also in the point of view and evaluation one assumes toward them; point of view and evaluation are fused with the subject into one inseparable whole. Epic language is not separable from its subject, for an absolute fusion of subject matter and spatial-temporal aspects with valorized (hierarchical) ones is characteristic of semantics in the epic. This absolute fusion and the consequent unfreedom of the subject was first overcome only with the arrival on the scene of an active polyglot and interillumination of languages (and then the epic became a semi-conventional, semimoribund genre).

Thanks to this epic distance, which excludes any possibility of activity and change, the epic world achieves a radical degree of completedness not only in its content but in its meaning and its values as well. The epic world is constructed in the zone of an absolute distanced image, beyond the sphere of possible contact with the developing, incomplete and therefore re-thinking and re-evaluating present.
The three characteristics of the epic posited by us above are, to a greater or lesser extent, also fundamental to the other high genres of classical antiquity and the Middle Ages. At the heart of all these already completed high genres lie the same evaluation of time, the same role for tradition, and a similar hierarchical distance. Contemporary reality as such does not figure in as an available object of representation in any of these high genres. Contemporary reality may enter into the high genres only in its hierarchically highest levels, already distanced in its relationship to reality itself. But the events, victors and heroes of "high" contemporary reality are, as it were, appropriated by the past as they enter into these high genres (for example, Pindar's odes or the works of Simonides); they are woven by various intermediate links and connective tissue into the unified fabric of the heroic past and tradition. These events and heroes receive their value and grandeur precisely through this association with the past, the source of all authentic reality and value. They withdraw themselves, so to speak, from the present day with all its inconclusiveness, its indecision, its openness, its potential for re-thinking and re-evaluating. They are raised to the valorized plane of the past, and assume there a finished quality. We must not forget that "absolute past" is not to be confused with time in our exact and limited sense of the word; it is rather a temporally valorized hierarchical category.

It is impossible to achieve greatness in one's own time. Greatness always makes itself known only to descendants, for whom such a quality is always located in the past (it turns into a distanced image); it has become an object of memory and not a living object that one can see and touch. In the genre of the "memorial," the poet constructs his image in the future and distanced plane of his descendants (cf. the inscriptions of oriental despots, and of Augustus). In the world of memory, a phenomenon exists in its own peculiar context, with its own special rules, subject to conditions quite different from those we meet in the world we see with our own eyes, the world of practice and familiar contact. The epic past is a special form for perceiving people and events in art. In general the act of artistic perception and representation is almost completely obscured by this form. Artistic representation here is representation sub specie aeternitatis. One may, and in fact one must, memorialize with artistic language only that which is worthy of being remembered, that which should be pre-

served in the memory of descendents; an image is created for descendents, and this image is projected on to their sublime and distant horizon. Contemporaneity for its own sake (that is to say, a contemporaneity that makes no claim on future memory) is molded in clay; contemporaneity for the future (for descendents) is molded in marble or bronze.

The interrelationship of times is important here. The valorized emphasis is not on the future and does not serve the future, no favors are being done it (such favors face an eternity outside time), what is served here is the future memory of a past, a broadening of the world of the absolute past, an enriching of it with new images (at the expense of contemporaneity)—a world that is always opposed in principle to any merely transitory past.

In the already completed high genres, tradition also retains its significance—although under conditions of open and personal creativity, its role becomes more conventionalized than in the epic.

In general, the world of high literature in the classical era was a world projected into the past, on to the distanced plane of memory, but not into a real, relative past tied to the present by uninterrupted temporal transitions; it was projected rather into a valorized past of beginnings and peak times. This past is distanced, finished and closed like a circle. This does not mean, of course, that there is no movement within it. On the contrary, the relative temporal categories within it are richly and subtly worked out (nuances of "earlier," "later," sequences of moments, speeds, durations, etc.); there is evidence of a high level of artistic technique in matters of time. But within this time, completed and locked into a circle, all points are equidistant from the real, dynamic time of the present; insofar as this time is whole, it is not localized in an actual historical sequence; it is not relative to the present or to the future, it contains within itself, as it were, the entire fullness of time. As a consequence all high genres of the classical era, that is, its entire high literature, are structured in the zone of the distanced image, a zone outside any possible contact with the present in all its openendedness.

As we have said, contemporaneity as such (that is, one that preserves its own living contemporary profile) cannot become an object of representation for the high genres. Contemporaneity was reality of a "lower" order in comparison with the epic past. Least of all could it serve as the starting point for artistic ideation or