The Critique of the Generic Reason. (Rules of the Genre – Rules of Life)

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1. Codes of Literature – Codes of Life

In well-timed cultural contexts, some of the strongest norms of literature manage to impose on real life oppressive patterns of behavior. The following lines will look at the codes of literary genre, striving to stress their strong normative impact on everyday life and their latent extensions towards the social behavior. This was particularly the case for what is regarded as popular genres, such as medieval romances or melodramas, which engendered peculiar types of confusion between literature and life, labeled as "quixotism" or "bovarism."

Our paper narrows its focus to one of the pervasive formal paradigms of the nineteenth century literature, illustrated by a series of top novelists: the British rural genre. Some scholars rather see it as a subdivision of the so called regional literature:

> Let me begin with a word about the tradition of the English regional novel – contends Jacqueline Anne Ariail. The term is generally applied to the novels of George Eliot, located in the scenes of her youth, and to those of Thomas Hardy, whose fictional Wessex mirrors the Dorsetshire landscape. One can stretch the term to encompass Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, set in Yorkshire moors and Lawrence's English novels, all of which occur in the Nottingham countryside. While these novels are generally set in England's rural past there is always a tension between country and town that manifest itself (Ariail 1978: 63–64).

Other critics of the genre also imply that the British Rural is a particular kind of regional novel – in this respect: see the title of W.J. Keith's book: *Regions of the Imagination: The Development of British Rural Fiction*) (Keith 1988).

As literary historians often pointed out, during the nineteenth century this genre had a shaping impact on British everyday life. The context of this genuine *syndrome of rural novel* is worth noticing. According to K.D.M. Snell, the growth of regional fiction was closely entrenched in the expansion of reading public in the later nineteenth century (Snell 1998: 23) This fostered what Snell calls "the

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management of regional fiction" (Snell 1998: 39), meaning the endeavor of some rural counties – Dorsetshire, Shropshire, Yorkshire – to capitalize on the reputation given them by certain novelists and fostering the rewriting of local history as the history of an author (Snell 1998: 37–39).

For a comprehensive scrutiny of this socio-cultural development, our paper focuses on Stella Gibbons' emblematic novel *Cold Comfort Farm*, an astute fictitious X ray of the rural literary pattern (Gibbons 1932). It seems important to feature what only a few scholars had noticed since the publication of Gibbons' utterly successful novel: that her book endeavors to unravel the codes of the rural genre and to contribute to its pertinent assessment.

2. Stella Gibbons and the Challenge of Literature

Gibbon's main character, Flora Poste, is both a representative of the author and an epitome of the contemporary reader community. Despite her initial apprehensions, she travels from London to temporarily live with relatives on a Sussex farm which, on close inspection, turns out to be an appalling fortress of compelling generic codes and literary behavior patterns. The farm is a catchall of rural themes and images, motives, characterizations, allusions and prose styles – all stood on their heads, turned inside out, or blown out of proportion (Ariail 1978: 65).

In Foucault's terms, the farm as conceived by Gibbons is a *heterotopia*: a "real-invented" world, a rural universe as perceived and represented by a particular literary genre (Foucault 1967: 333–334). In real Sussex, Gibbons sets up a Hardy-like-universe and makes it clear for us that it has been crafted by literature:

> She reminded herself that Sussex, when all was said and done, was no quite like other counties and that when one observed that these people lived on a *farm* in Sussex, the address was no longer remarkable (Gibbons 2006: 21).

For Flora, an advised connoisseur of the literary rural novel, the structure of this heterotopia, its behavior codes and its stereotype characters – whose names she is able to anticipate – are utterly predictable:

> I think if I find any third cousins living at Cold Comfort Farm (young ones, you know, children of Cousin Judith) who are named Seth or Reuben, I shall decide not to go.
>
> Why?
>
> Oh, because highly-sexed young men living on farms are always called Seth or Reuben, and it would be such a nuisance. And my cousin name, remember, is Judith. That in itself is most ominous. Her husband is almost certain to be called Amos; and if he *is* it will be a typical farm, and you know how *they are like* (Gibbons 2006: 22).

The aptly named old aunt Ada Doom, the pivotal figure of the book, is the fatality of this literarily crafted world and the master theme of its generic discourses:

> So that was what it was. Mrs. Starkadder was the curse of Cold Comfort. Mrs. Starkadder was the *Dominant Grandmother Theme*, (my emphasis – M.S.) which was found in all typical novels of agricultural life. It was, of course, right and proper that Mrs. Starkadder should be in possession at Cold Comfort; Flora should have suspected her existence from the beginning (Gibbons: 17).

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Ever since her childhood, when she allegedly had seen "something nasty in the woodshed", Aunt Ada has grown deliberately mad. Hence all her family, including some rather remote relatives, is doomed to be forever prisoners in her claustrophobic farm:

> "Saw something nasty in the woodshed!!!" sudden shrilled Aunt Ada, smiting at Judith with the Milk Producers' Weekly Bulletin and Cow keepers' guide, something nasty! You are all wicked and cruel. You want to go away and leave me alone in the woodshed. But you never shall. None of you. Never! There have always been Starkadders at Cold Comfort. You must all stay here with me (Gibbons: 171).

As the critics put it "*I saw something nasty in the woodshed*" is the book's most famous line and has become a catchphrase" (Hammill 2001: 831).

An antipode of the real world, the Woodshed epitomizes the literary realm of the rural genre, where Aunt Ada had assumed the capital role. Flora swiftly identifies her behavior as a conventional theatrical part:

> So that was it. Aunt Ada Doom was mad. (…) It struck her that Aunt Ada Dooms' madness had taken the most convenient form possible. If anybody who went mad could arrange in what way it was to take them, she felt pretty sure they would all choose to be mad like Ada Doom (Gibbons: 119).

And so does Mr. Neck, a Hollywood producer, who tags on the spot *the woodshed line* as an obsolete literary and movie pattern:

> Gee, ma'am, I know it is raw, shouted Mr. Neck, craning out of the window of the car and peering up at Aunt Ada. But, gee, that's life, girl. You are living now, sweet heart. *All that woodshed line…that was years ago. Young Woodley stuff* (my emphasis – M. S.) (Gibbons: 187).

Flora Poste, an occasional visitor of the farm, is assigned the part of an "anthropological observer" (Snell 1998: 40) who keeps drawing highlighting comparisons: "…it was too true that life as she is lived had a way of being curiously different from life as described by novelists" (Gibbons: 87). In a certain way, Flora fears its compelling norms of behavior that she, as an astute reader of the genre, is too familiar with: "Worst fears realized darling seth and reuben too send gumboots", reads the telegram hastily sent to her Londonian friend, Mrs. Smiles (Gibbons: 50).

Overall Gibbons' Sussex farm conspicuously puts on display some of the key aspects and stereotypes of the rural world as outlined by the genre, referring to setting, themes, characters, discourses, scenery or style. Cold Comfort is a gloomy and pathetic universe of isolation and boiling misery, run by unhappiness and mess in all possible respects, a realm of eccentric and ridiculous attire, of abundant and superfluous tears and of enraged discourses:

> Persons of Aunt Ada's temperament were not fond of a tidy life. Storms were what they liked; plenty of rows and doors being slammed, and jaws sticking out, and faces white with furry, and faces brooding in corners, and faces making unnecessary fuss at breakfast, and plenty of opportunities for gorgeous emotional wallowing and parting forever, and misunderstanding and interfering, and spying, and above all managing and intriguing. Oh! They did enjoy themselves! (Gibbons: 56)

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The humanity of Cold Comfort seems to hold a primeval relation with nature, presented as opposite to both spirit and civilization. The dark, grotesque version of this humanity is Meriam, the coarse hired girl. The poetic one is Flora's untamed cousin Elfine, who wanders day and night on Sussex's dawns, like Mary Webb's characters, and dreams of emulating St. Francis of Assisi's attire and life style. The particular ways Gibbon refers to nature – sometimes in paragraphs tagged by herself as "the finer passages with one, two or three stars" (Gibbons: 6) – are meant to vaguely hint to the literary codes of landscape representation, more precisely, to Hardy's representation of nature, admired and followed by Lawrence, as confessed by the latter in his *Study of Thomas Hardy and Other essays* (D.H. Lawrence 1985: 50–52).

Also following in the footsteps of Hardy-and-Lawrence, the novelist oversexualizes Sussex's nature. As Robert Langbaum observed in their turn Hardy and Lawrence sexualize Wordsworth's living landscapes (Langbaum 1985: 71) and so does one of her characters, a histrionic fictional writer called Mr. Mybug, not part of the farm's family tribe, who indulges in a ridiculous literary style of life:

> Mr. Mybug, however did ask Renett to marry him. He said that, by God, D.H. Lawrence was right when he said that there must be a dumb, dark, dull, bitter belly-tension between a man and a woman, and how else could this be achieved save in the long monotony of a marriage? (Gibbons, p.206)

Literary genre is a reader-oriented pattern since it is the readership that assesses the fictional verisimilitude of a fictional universe. Carefully reading the novel, we come to understand that Gibbons assigns to Flora a double mission: to read and at the same time to (re)write the generic rural material.

On the one hand, the main character of the novel is the fictional counterpart of Gibbons herself, perceiving the Sussex experience mainly as a raw literary "material". Before leaving London, Flora unveils her plans to collect material for a forthcoming novel:

> Well, when I am fifty-three or so I would like to write a novel as good as *Persuasion* but with a modern setting of course. For the next thirty years or so I shall be collecting material for it. If one asks me what I work at, I shall say: Collecting material (Gibbons: 19).

But on the other, she is an astute reader able to detect models and to pinpoint them as literary, especially when they emerge as sources of discomfort for her – meaning almost all the time:

> It was true that in novels dealing with agricultural life no one ever did anything so courteous as to meet a train, unless it was with the object of cutting-in under the noses of the other members of the family with some sordid or passionate end in view (Gibbons: 26).

Eventually Gibbons' character prevails over this peculiar narrative universe where real people have been cast in scary literary roles by convenient cultural circumstances. Her robust campaign of normalization endeavors to dismantle the genre patterns and to replace them with the rules of what she calls ordinary life. In a nutshell, her strategy is to swing open the doors of the farm and to urge characters –

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and all the living beings of the farm including the bull confined to its shed- to escape in Life. In a way this equals a campaign against quixotism run by Sancho Panza himself.

We also need to emphasize that in Flora's world view Normal Life is ruled by codes displayed by her bedside book *The Higher Common Sense* as well as by its abridged version *Les Pensées*, by the Abbe Fausse-Maigre:

> Flora thought of "The Higher Common Sense". In spite of its impersonal theme, "The Higher Common Sense" provided a guide for civilized persons when confronted with a dilemma of the Aunt Ada type... Without actually laying down rules of conduct, "The Higher Common Sense" outlined a philosophy for the civilized being, and the rules of conduct followed automatically (Gibbons: 58).

What is on offer in this alternative respect?

The love marriage, to Elfine; the Hollywood movie industry, to Seth, who is fascinated by the striking hyper-reality of the "talkies"; domestic happiness, to Urk and Meriam as well as to Renett and Mr. Mybug; the peace of heart and an pleasant mood, to Judith; reasonable economic prosperity, to Reuben; public preaching around the world, to Amos. Aunt Ada herself eventually leaves the farm, tempted by the prospect of a leisure and merriment life in Paris.

By the end of the story, one of the characters is struck by the idea that in fact plane after plane keep taking off from the farm's lawn, towards more or less remote destinations. As Greenfield notices:

> In the closing pages, Flora Poste leaves the ordinary world which she has created on the Winds of Romance, in her lover's airplane (Greenberg 2011: 204).

3. A Critique of the Generic Reason

Seen in the first instance by its contemporaries as a wicked parody, *Cold Comfort Farm* is in fact a *staged interpretative scenario.* Gibbons cunningly builds a sophisticated storytelling process through which an outsider gradually pushes open the doors of the daunting literary dungeon, sets free a full cast of frightened people and allows them to take the path of a normal day to day existence.

Up to now, literary scholars oscillated when trying to assign various illuminating tags fitted to the stout campaign run by Flora and to its generic level. Quite recently, Jonathan Greenberg, for instance, swung between several terms in the same book. One of them is "parody" (Greenberg 2011: 216), pointing to a genre, a second generic reference included by him in one chapter's subtitle, notwithstanding: "the pastoral': *Cold Comfort Farm and mental life*. *Some perversions of pastoral* (Greenberg 2011: 92). At the same time, Greenberg's book openly contends to deal with a literary *mode* based on a specific type of attitude and sensibility, as well as on an excessively emotional type of discourse: "My discussion focuses on the satiric mode in narrative fiction" (Gibbons 2011: 185). "For Gibbons' novel is sharp enough in its satire…" (Gibbons 2011: 93).

Nicola Humble (*The Feminine Middlebrow Novel. 1920s and 1950s*) suggests that in Gibbons' book a surreptitious literary polemic is staged:

> A conflict between Austen and Brontë world view is played out in which ultimately the Brontë plot is consigned to the past: the modern world requires the open rationalism of an Austen (Humble 2001: 179–180).

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Following the same line of argument, the promotion of Austen's paradigmatic world is seen by Faye Hammill as the main target of Flora's campaign:

> Flora is clearly marked as belonging to the fictional world of Jane Austen. We are alerted to this early in the narrative when she mentions her ambition to write a novel as good as *Persuasion* and adds: "I think I have much in common with Miss Austen" (Hammill 2001: 20).

And also:

> Flora often reads *Mansfield Park* to sustain her amid the chaos of Cold Comfort, and it is the progress from disorder to order in Austen's books that appeals to her (Hammil 2001: 831).

At a closer inspection, Gibbon's novel is definitely not a parody. The novelist does not comply with the usual norms of the parodic contract to be concluded between an author and his readership, which allows the latter to successfully recognize the literary model at stake (Hutcheon 1985: 50–69). Rather than unraveling her literary sources, the novelist does her best to blur and to merge the patterns, to intermingle possible references to Hardy, George Eliot, Mary Webb or Brontë, attempting to get higher, beyond them, towards overarching models. Hence her rural fictitious world does not care to point to a particular author or book, except for a handful of references to D.H. Lawrence's novels or to the Brontë family, to be found in Flora's elaborated arguments with Mr. Mybug, a would-be-writer who is not part of the farm's world.

What Stella Gibbons does in fact is to constantly draw our attention to the shaping potential of a series of overarching literary codes: patterns of traditions, types of discourse, modes and first and foremost genres:

> We can remind ourselves of how fiction on rural society, and the development of more varied forms of rural novel were lampooned in a clever, caricatured fashion by Stella Gibbons, maintains H.D.M. Snell. This is a book that reminds us of the problem of an over-historical approach to regional fiction, in that it highlights the *importance of literary form and convention in determining the content of a genre* (my emphasis – M. S.) (Snell 1998: 22).

As Tzvetan Todorov puts it:

> In a given society, the recurrence of certain discursive properties is institutionalized, and individual texts are produced and perceived in relation to the norm constituted by this codification. A genre, whether literary or not, is nothing other than the codification of discursive properties (Todorov 1990: 198).

By the same token, Todorov concludes that genres are situated "in-between general poetics and literary history" (Todorov 1990: 201). We have to admit that Gibbons herself and her fictional world are obviously placed in such a meeting point.

Gibbons is very keen on unraveling the conventional-institutional generic rules of rural novels, or, in Gerard Genette's terms, the overarching "architext" that governs their poetic structure (Genette 1992: 1–87). From a different point of view, though, she was fully aware of the fact that this particular genre had been a milestone on the historic road of the British novel. It was closely linked to the advent of a particular type of common reader, brought about by the changes in the

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book trade and by the rise of mass literacy in the nineteenth century (Palmer and Buckland eds. 2013: 1). This newly arrived *addressee* of Literature had staunch standard expectations that the authors of the time were aware of and strived to comply with. Among the outcomes of this shift in readership was the emergence of a type of novel hyperconscious of its genre codes, of their ability to act as interceders between the author and his reader and to shape the socio-cultural behavior of the latter (Rose 1992: 70).

The ways Gibbons stages the impact of literary codes on daily life foresee the present situation when the commodities of advanced technologies (TV series, movies, computer games, on line popular products etc.) had eventually managed to yield a strong effect of hyper-reality and to shape real life, thanks to their strong transmedia "convergence" (Jenkins 2006: 5–20; Jenkins, Ford, Green 2013: 2–13).

We should also note something else. The epigraph of the novel warns us that "The action of the story takes part in the near future". Actually, in the book every now and then an apparently tiny detail of civilization keeps reminding us about this: the rural coin telephone provided with a TV dial, the bunches of ordinary people travelling back and forth by plain between the British cities despising the train, the vanguard glass building of the New River Club, the aerial mail delivery at the farm and so on. All these suggest that in one of its key-dimensions, Gibbons' world pertains of another generic set up: the utopia, and this in two different ways.

Firstly, the farm is a dire literary dystopia, governed in all possible respects by the norms of the British rural genre, pushed to their extreme spiteful capacity. On the other hand, if we come to think about it, the "normal" life that Flora dreams of is also a para-worldly projection, governed by the codes of the so called higher common sense. In this ideal universe, the ordinary people are also bound to live by the book, strictly following the rules of the *Pensées* of the Abbe Fausse-Maigre or of his *Higher Common Sense*, in the same way as Flora herself does, day after day. By the end of the novel, Elfine, just rescued from the dystopic farm, is being presented by Flora with a splendid edition of this compelling Bible of behavior, written in both Latin and German: the guide of her forthcoming life in a "civilized" but sheer utopian world, imagined by Flora.

In Gibbons' novel, the ways out of literature eventually end up in literature too.

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Abstract

Our paper tries to show that, in well-timed cultural contexts, *Genre*, one of the strongest codes of literature, imposes oppressive patterns of behavior on real life. This is particularly the case for what is regarded as popular genres such as medieval romances, melodramas and, as we seek to show, also for the so called rural British novel. Literary historians often point out that, during the nineteenth century, this literary genre had a shaping impact on British every-day life, locking up places, cities and even people in literary pattern catchalls.

The starting point for our analysis is Stella Gibbons' famous *Cold Comfort Farm*. Its main character, Flora Poste, is simultaneously a representative of the author and an epitome of the contemporary reader community's *Higher common sense*, as the author puts it. Despite her apprehensions, she travels from London to live with relatives on a Sussex farm which, on close inspection, turns out to be an appalling fortress of compelling generic codes and literary behavior patterns. After a robust campaign of normalization, Gibbon's character prevails over a particular type of narrative universe where real people have been cast in scary literary roles by convenient cultural circumstances. Seen by its contemporaries in the first instance as a wicked parody, *Cold Comfort Farm* is in fact a *staged interpretative process.* Gibbons cunningly builds a sophisticated storytelling process through which an outsider gradually pushes open the doors of the daunting literary dungeon, sets free a full cast of frightened people and allows them to take the path of a normal day to day existence.

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