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# Review of Gian Biagio Conte, Glenn W. Most, and Charles Segal, *Genres and Readers: Lucretius, Love Elegy, Pliny's Encyclopedia*

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Review of Gian Biagio Conte, Glenn W. Most, and Charles Segal, *Genres and Readers: Lucretius, Love Elegy, Pliny's Encyclopedia*

**Disciplines**

Arts and Humanities | Classics

## REVIEWS

Gian Biagio Conte. *Genres and Readers: Lucretius, Love Elegy, Pliny's Encyclopedia*. Tr. Glenn W. Most. Foreword by Charles Segal. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994. Pp. xxiii + 185. ISBN 0-8018-4679-X. \$32.50.

In 1986, the work of Gian Biagio Conte was little known in this country. Indeed, the avowed purpose of *The Rhetoric of Imitation*, published in that year, was, as Charles Segal stated in his foreword to the volume, to “bring [ . . . ] before an English-speaking public a book that consolidates new approaches to literary study with erudition, originality, and penetrating insight.”<sup>1</sup> In some ways, the volume succeeded brilliantly, introducing Conte to a wide American readership and making him an active force in Latin studies on these shores. But whether by accident or design, one result of the book has been to feed the ongoing debate among American Latinists about whether attention to literary theory is a way to rejuvenate the profession or a distraction from its basic mission. A tendency on the part of readers largely unfamiliar with his work to regard Conte as an apostle of continental theory, combined with the fact that *RI* is by no means a theoretical primer for classicists but a collection of work that relates a certain kind of practical criticism to selected theoretical issues, may have meant that the publication of the book created expectations that could not be satisfied. The primary theme of *RI* is the nature of the relationship between distinct texts that exhibit a particular type of similarity, a phenomenon that is variously called imitation, emulation, allusion, reference, or intertextuality—a branch of literary study in which classicists have always been active. It is a small but significant irony that American students of Greco-Latin intertextuality share with Conte an indebtedness to the great Italian classicist Giorgio Pasquali, whose paper on *arte allusiva* articulates clearly the importance of such research to all students of classical literature.<sup>2</sup> But where American scholars have tended to emphasize those aspects of the art of allusion that appear to remain firmly under the control of the masterful hand of the poet, Conte instead has preferred to explain the phenomenon as a property of texts that must be noted and interpreted by readers as if it were any other rhetorical figure—as a textual rather than a psychological effect.

From a certain perspective, these two approaches to intertextuality appear highly complementary and compatible. Unfortunately, some members of the

<sup>1</sup>Gian Biagio Conte, *The Rhetoric of Imitation: Genre and Poetic Memory in Virgil and Other Latin Poets*, edited and with a foreword by Charles Segal, (Ithaca, 1986), 17; hereafter cited as *RI*.

<sup>2</sup>“Arte allusiva,” *Italia che scrive* 5 (1942), 185-87 = *Stravaganze quarte e supreme* (Venice 1951), 11-20 = *Pagine stravaganti*, vol. 2 (Florence 1968), 275-83.

extremely polarized American classical profession regarded Conte's work less as the "via media" that Segal hoped it would be than as a species of two-headed monster. All reviewers recognized in *RI* the work of a highly skilled philologist. Some of these also admired the theoretical underpinnings of Conte's practical criticism; others found his methodological ruminations too abstract, uninteresting, or beside the point. It may be that some in this country have been inspired by Conte's example to think more seriously about the theoretical implications of the assumptions on which they base their work. On the other hand there has also been a fairly widespread tendency to "recuperate" Conte by stressing the more "traditional" aspects of his work and downplaying the rest. The reviewers of *RI*, who on the whole emphasized the book's traditional scholarly virtues, began this process;<sup>3</sup> and even Conte has cooperated, disarmingly describing himself as "a philologist who is happy with his job and who is only trying to explain what he encounters in texts" (*GR* 131). But things have gone too far when Jasper Griffin, in a review of Conte's new history of Latin literature,<sup>4</sup> can contrast that book with both *RI* and *GR* by noting that

In this book . . . he does not indulge the theoretical approach currently fashionable among some Latinists, which deplores any reference to authorial intention. . . .

It is indeed refreshing—it seems so strange to have to say it—that in his introduction Conte declares, "without the tension that drives us to seek an original intention in the literary work, our very relation to these works loses any real interest. I see no other protection from the arbitrary incursions of many modern interpreters, who may be eager readers but whose views are often unconsciously alien to the original historical contexts and cultural codes."<sup>5</sup> A more magisterial rejection of a currently fashionable view can hardly be imagined.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Among the most perceptive reviewers was Elizabeth Block (*CP* 83 [1988] 373–77), who carefully expressed important reservations about the theoretical component of *RI*. Sander Goldberg in a review of Conte's subsequent work (*BMCR* 5 [1994] 387–93) expresses similar reservations about Conte the theoretician while admiring Conte the critic and historian of literature.

<sup>4</sup>*Latin Literature: A History*, tr. Joseph B. Solodow, rev. Don Fowler and Glenn W. Most (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994). In view of the (perhaps excessive) amount of attention I have devoted to *RI* in a review of *GR*, I will in the interest of brevity resist the urge to review *LL* as well!

<sup>5</sup>*Latin Literature*, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup>Jasper Griffin, "The Long Latin Line," *The New York Review of Books* 41.16 (October 6, 1994), 42–44; the passage quoted appears on p. 42.

“Imagined” is the right word, because Griffin’s reading of Conte contains a generous dose of wishful thinking, abetted perhaps by hasty reading. The sentence immediately preceding the passage quoted by Griffin states, “Certainly it will be difficult, in some cases very difficult, to rediscover the true *intention of the texts*” (emphasis mine). It is not and has never been an *author’s* intention that Conte is proposing as the Cynosure of our interpretive efforts, but the intention of precisely those “cultural codes” that he cites as the determinants of meaning. Conte may be a sound philologist, even a magisterial one, but he is not wholly unconcerned with theoretical problems.

Establishing the validity of an interpretation, particularly in the case of allusion, is no easy matter. The desire to do so is clearly what was behind Conte’s effort to distinguish the intention of an author from what he called “the intention of the text.” In proposing a textual intentionality, Conte shared with, I would say, most of his American colleagues a desire to prevent an endless proliferation of ahistorical and unphilological interpretations of ancient literature. In order to tell legitimate and illegitimate interpretations apart, a test of some sort is required. Where Conte differs from some colleagues is in his reluctance to identify this *alte terminus haerens* with the conscious and deliberate intention of an individual person, the author of a text, something that most theoreticians of literature since Wimsatt and Beardley have regarded as unrecoverable in the first place and as an unreliable interpretive guide even if recovery were possible. Conte’s “intention” of the text is thus an honest attempt to solve a real theoretical problem.

Problems, however, must be perceived before they can be solved, and many classicists (and other students of literature), simply do not see one here. Divining an author’s intention is in the view of many practical critics what every reader has to do. Thus when Conte proposed his solution, it was not clear to all that one was even needed. Furthermore, the label that Conte gave his solution—“intention of the text”—created problems of its own. By flaunting the concept of “intentionality,” this term expresses a clear relationship to previous theoretical discourse; but to an unsympathetic reader it might look rather like a bit of semantic legerdemain; and in any case, it has (witness Griffin) led others into real confusion.

I dwell on this point partly because it is one of the main theoretical and practical problems addressed in *RI*, and partly because I am one of those who have in the past suspected Conte of inconsistency on this point.<sup>7</sup> If today I am still unready to declare myself completely satisfied, I think that I understand his position better; at least the issue does appear to me less of a stumbling block than it

<sup>7</sup>See my *Vergil’s Georgics and the Traditions of Ancient Epic: The Art of Allusion in Literary History* (New York and Oxford 1991), 21–22, with Conte’s thoughtful response, *GR* 178 n. 5.

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once did, and than it still appears to some, and no small share of this improved understanding is due to *Genres and Readers*.

I approached the actual subject of this review with a certain sense of déjà vu, as if it were an *instauratio* of *RI*. Again there is an illuminating foreword by Charles Segal; again there are various essays collected for this volume and translated from the Italian; and of course there is both practical criticism and the elaboration of a theoretical framework. And in general, Conte's view of the basic theoretical issues—how do texts mean?—and practical interpretive problems—how are we to understand this text?—remains essentially the same. But there are differences as well. This time the translator, Glenn Most, is named on the title page, and he has earned this *kleos* by doing an elegant job, much better than the team that worked on *RI*, and by allowing Professor Conte's voice to ring clearly in a variety of registers. The essays themselves, perhaps owing to the fact that some of them came into being as introductions to Italian editions and translations of Lucretius, Ovid, and Pliny, some evidently addressed to a general readership, are less labored than certain passages of *RI*. These essays depict their subjects, not excerpts from Vergil this time but entire works of literature, one of them enormous, with a broad brush. To be sure, Conte does not fail to provide aptly chosen discussions of specific passages to support his arguments, but in an essay of this type one has to move quickly, and Conte keeps things lively. Indeed, when one considers the standard maintained by most introductory essays, it is impossible not to admire what Conte has done with a rather unpromising genre. The essays that round out the volume include one entitled "Genre between Empiricism and Theory" and a meditation on *The Rhetoric of Imitation* itself as a "rhetoric of culture." Thus we have three essays in practical criticism on three different authors plus two theoretical or metacritical essays, all of them originally written for separate purposes. Surprisingly, though, the volume hangs together much better than its predecessor and makes for more compelling reading.

What unifies this volume is the consistent focus that Conte maintains on his attempts to answer questions about meaning as a type of communication. Where he had previously considered intertextuality as a kind of key to the more or less autonomous relationships between texts, relationships that participate in such relatively abstract notions as "generic norm" and "generic code," Conte now concerns himself chiefly with three comparatively tangible aspects of genre: the author, the text, and the reader. In *RI* his goal had been to understand intertextuality as a literary system; in *GR* he posits genre as the primary means of literary communication.

The attention Conte devotes to the problem of how valid communication takes place is entirely salutary. One of the central issues in contemporary literary studies has to do with whether we can even speak of valid communication, or of communication at all. Conte however starts from the premise that communication of some sort evidently does take place, and then tries to account for this

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phenomenon (this is what Segal means when he observes that Conte “works inductively, from texts to theory,” vii). He has little patience with varieties of interpretation that start from the premise that one cannot in theory prove that reliable communication is a normal occurrence and exploit this theoretical problem as if it provided a warrant for almost any readerly reaction to any text. Since some sort of communication through texts does appear to take place, Conte reasons, some law or laws must govern the process.

It is this governing factor that he calls “genre.” For Conte, genre is neither a recipe, such as we find in Menander Rhetor’s book of “Sample Speeches for All Occasions,” nor something that results from the perception of formal likeness: who, he asks, would consider as genres “all poetry written in the Aeolic dialect”; “a dying man’s last words”; “the poet meets Cupid at night”; and “the poet is transformed into a swan” (107)? Instead, to borrow a computing term, genre is a “communications protocol” that forces two different individuals, an author and a reader, to follow a certain set of rules by which they may share information. As individuals, the author and the reader each have a distinctive and unique perspective on the world; but as members of a shared culture, they have a basis for communicating their peculiar thoughts and experiences (even if, in literature, the flow of information is unidirectional, from the author through the text to the reader). Genre, Conte argues, is the cultural mechanism by which, in literature, this exchange takes place.

It is the fact that literary genres are rooted in a shared culture that gives them their ability to mediate communication between author and reader. Further, it is this social and historical specificity that gives the modern scholar, who is considerably removed from ancient realities, the opportunity of reconstructing the conditions that made communication possible between ancient authors and readers, and hence of correctly interpreting ancient literature. Conte illustrates this idea by discussing at length three different, but not totally unrelated, works of Latin literature: Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*, Ovid’s *Remedia amoris*, and the *Naturalis historia* of the elder Pliny. In each case he stresses the requirement imposed by each work, as a function of its genre, on author and reader alike, to become the kind of author and reader appropriate to it, the kind that is capable of appreciating the information that the one is teaching and the other is being taught, whether the topic be Epicurean physics, cures for lovesickness, or every possible piece of information that can be known about “the world”; and he goes beyond this basic insight to show how each work, acting on culturally-conditioned generic presuppositions, makes space for itself by testing the boundaries of the genre on which it is based.

In *De rerum natura*, for instance, Conte posits an author and reader capable of appreciating the “sublime” vision of the world outlined by the poem. This Conte defines, following Schiller, as an understanding of the limits imposed on us by our sensual nature combined with a recognition of our intellectual superiority (1). With respect to Lucretius, his view of the matter contrasts sharply with those that

emphasize such disparities as the Lucretian poet/teacher's lofty, almost condescending tone and the concomitant inferiority of his benighted addressee, and still more with those that would explain the presence of certain elements in the poem with reference to the poet's (utterly speculative) or the addressee's (slightly less so) biography.

Instead, Conte begins with the observation that Lucretius inherits from Hesiod and the didactic poets of the Hellenistic period the generic relationship defined by teacher/poet and pupil/addressee, but innovates in two ways. First, he invests these generic figures with "sublime" qualities, the capacity to stand in knowing contemplation of the cosmos and to experience the *divina voluptas atque horror* of which the text so movingly speaks. (Empedocles is perceptively brought in as an important predecessor in this respect.) He then emphasizes the way in which teacher and student come, as a result of the didactic transaction called for by the genre and actualized in the text, to resemble each other: "The very fact that the reader of a sublime text is a 'sublime reader,' both perceiver and creator of that text's sublimity, puts both the poet and the reader on the same level: both are reverent spectators impelled to become agitated, the sublime finding its sphere of action in both (first in the poet; then, by his mediation, in the listener)" (20).

The idea that in the literary work of art the poet and his reader find a space, structured by genre, where any personal differences between them are resolved into a culturally-conditioned similitude, occurs throughout *GR* (cf. pp. 50, 71, 136); and the collection is further unified by the specific insights that Conte develops by analyzing his chosen texts. In his essay on the *Remedia*, Conte argues that the generic "space" in which poet and reader meet and come to resemble each other must be a clearly circumscribed and hence partial analogue of some broader cultural zone (e.g. "Roman society"), but one that can be represented as a complete and systematic view of the world. "Every literary genre is obliged to manifest itself by this reduction of the world to a partial field of vision," he writes, "but the genre of elegy seems to be the most complete realization of such a systematic codification, if only because elegy performs this operation explicitly and consciously, and makes it the very pivot of its poetics" (37). The elegiac code involves an imperative to view the entire world of Greco-Roman culture through the lens of *amor*. Thus there are heroes in elegy, but only erotic ones; there is fidelity, but of a sort not recognized by the marriage bond, which is in fact antithetical to elegiac *fides*. (Here the culturally-specific nature of the genre can be glimpsed, though Conte does not dwell on this point.) There is, above all, no remedy: to love is to suffer without hope of a cure. For elegy to admit of remedies would be to confess that its partial view of reality was not the whole story, something that no genre can do. The system is closed, allowing no way out. What happens when a way out begins to present itself is no less than the destruction of the genre, which Conte briefly traces first in elegy itself, then in Ovidian *erotodidaxis*, where the very element of ironic detachment that underlies the *Ars amatoria* is already incompatible with the



truly elegiac world-view, until finally the lengthy discussion of cures in the *Remedia* frankly admits that there is an entire world of experience invisible from the lover's point of view.

From the notion that genre involves "the reduction of the whole to a part" (37), Conte moves to consider a part that poses as the very image of totality itself, the *Naturalis historia*. In contrast to the selectivity of elegy, Conte stresses the encyclopedist's catholicity—a trait that would seem to mark the encyclopedia as a problem from the perspective on genre that Conte has staked out. But he deals with this potential objection with great insight. "It is evident that [Pliny's] reluctance to select and his curiosity in every direction are not only his psychological orientations as a person but also instruments functional to his encyclopedic project," Conte maintains. "Indeed, an encyclopedia is essentially a text whose author cannot—and must not—foresee the totality of its possible uses, an 'open' totality of mechanisms that can be disassembled and rearranged differently according to the reader's needs" (68). It is apparent, then, that any systematic totality must necessarily be partial; hence the contradictory statements of principle given by Pliny rescue the *Naturalis historia* from a unitary, and hence partial, "totality" and leave it open and available to the various systems that readers might wish to impose on the amorphous (or perhaps "semimorphous" would be fairer) world of material that Pliny sees fit to record. Pliny's world is thus different from the totalizing system of Lucretius, which conforms rigorously to a single, materialist perspective on every aspect of reality. Indeed, Conte finds in these two works complementary generic constructs, each with its own vision of the world. "The true protagonist of the *De rerum natura* is an observer guided by the poet, while Pliny's ideal reader is a pure spectator (in the sense that he is offered a spectacle). The founding gesture of Lucretius' scientific rhetoric is "Don't be astonished if . . ." In Pliny, this will to observe and to understand is replaced by a very different exhortation: to let oneself be pervaded by marvel without forcing one's limits, an experiment with a subaltern reader which proves the novelty of the "sublime reader" proposed by Lucretius (xxii).

These first three essays work synergistically to offer a series of illuminating perspectives on genre that one can imagine finding their proper place in a systematic whole. As in *RI*, however, holistic systems are not Conte's stock-in-trade. The fourth essay on "Empiricism and Theory" ties up some loose ends and fills in some gaps. It is here that Conte shies away from the label of "theoretician": "I was not born a theoretician," he protests, "and theory is not my job. Nor do I wish to train a generation of theoreticians" (131). And indeed, reading *GR* (and rereading *RI* in the light of *GR*) it is impossible to doubt him. All along, it seems, Conte has been focussed on rather specific interpretive issues, differing from some colleagues only by his acceptance of the responsibility to address methodological problems of a theoretical sort when the generally accepted solutions appeared inadequate. In a memorable paradox he declares, "the biographical approach does

not do justice to reality" (111); and it is because of this and similar convictions that the student of allusion and genre—traditional topics of philological investigation, after all—was driven to explain the operation of those phenomena without recourse to authors whose intentions could not be known. The final essay demonstrates important continuities between the earlier book and the new one (while shedding a bit of light on some of the questions raised by critics of *RI*).

Thus in the structure of *GR* as well we see Conte working more obviously, in Segal's words, "from texts to theory," that is, in the very direction (one senses, despite Conte's protests) both of them would like to see the profession move. For those interested in making such a move, there is a lot left to do. Conte's approach to genre looks promising, and the trajectory that takes us from a rhetoric of imitation to one of culture is one that I would applaud. But this is still a very literary style of criticism. My favorite part of the book is the essay on Pliny, which, necessarily perhaps, makes the most of the relationship between the book and the world, and is one of the most suggestive and insightful essays on Roman imperial culture that I know. Beyond this, however, cultural realities are invoked as the appropriate matrix for considerations of genre in a way that is consistently rather general, and the actual cultural forces that give shape to genre go largely unexamined. There is a body of work on genres in discourse by M. M. Bakhtin that might be a good starting point for someone interested in exploring this connection more fully.<sup>8</sup>

A second area that I hope to see followed up is the relationship between Conte's approach to genre and the more traditional formalist criticism. Certainly we can gauge Conte's substantial disagreement with received opinion when he states that "Examined closely, the whole development of literary production from Catullus to Ovid can be considered as a process of the *construction* of genres, that is, of a literary system articulated in single areas, each of which finds its identity in comparison with others" (115; emphasis mine). It would appear that driving Conte's proposal of a new basis for the study of genre is a perception that there are serious problems with the formalist theory of genres (certainly true) and that there is in any case a widespread lack of interest in traditional generic criticism (only partially true). But we have recently seen what a critic such as Stephen Hinds can do working with the most undeniably formal indices of generic identity. It is moreover notable that both Hinds and Conte are drawn to works that do not admit of easy generic definition, works that are in no small measure truly *sui generis*. Indeed, by whatever criteria we choose to define the concept of genre, it seems that the works that hold our interest are those that defy us to classify them. In any case, the essential problems involving any theory of genre involve the most basic issues of ontology and phenomenology. The questions "What is this thing per se?,"

<sup>8</sup>*Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, tr. Vern W. McGee (Austin 1986). Bakhtin's earlier ideas on the relationship between literary genres and social realities suffer from the same idealist notions as one finds for example in Lukács.

“To what group does it belong?” and “By what criterion can similarity between distinct entities be established?” admit of no easy answers. The problems that the student of genre ought to face are akin to the central problems of Plato’s doctrine of forms or Kant’s theory of categories, and need to be addressed in the fullest possible philosophical context.

In spite of these cavils, I found this book a useful clarification of views that Conte had previously expressed and genuinely stimulating in its own right. In closing it seems appropriate to turn Conte’s themes and methods back on the book itself. The texts discussed in *Genres and Readers* highlight the fact that a work of literary criticism also deserves its place, minor perhaps and undistinguished in comparison with the three ancient exemplars, within the genre of didactic literature. We read Lucretius, Ovid, and Pliny, nowadays at least, not to learn how we may become Epicureans, fall out of love, or become lost in wonder at a complete inventory of the natural world. We read no doubt for various reasons, some of them personal, some of which we share with one another and, possibly, with members of the Roman audience that these works first addressed. To experience a work of literature in the hope of fulfilling the requirements that it imposes on its readership is one of our first responsibilities and principal pleasures. With this in mind, I would say that to read Conte’s work in search of answers to specific questions, be they empirical or theoretical in nature, is largely beside the point. Such answers there are, some familiar and some novel. Many will command assent; others will not. But beyond this, *Genres and Readers* issues a challenge, requiring us to become a certain kind of reader, summoning us to participate in a discourse of great variety, uncommon subtlety, generosity of spirit, and real practical value. It is a discourse that transcends national and linguistic boundaries even more than is usual in a discipline that takes pride in its cosmopolitanism. It is one that sees no contradiction between the demands of philological rigor and those of speculative philosophy. Its challenge is one that I would expect any serious scholar to find irresistible, its rewards worth many times the effort they demand.

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