The Notion of Literature

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BEFORE LAUNCHING into the awesome question of the nature of literature, let us begin, as a precautionary measure, by examining not literature itself but rather the kind of discourse which, like this very study, takes literature as its object. The difference will be one of approach rather than of objective; but who can say whether the course of the inquiry is not of greater interest than its final results?

We must first cast a doubt upon the legitimacy of the very notion of literature; neither the mere existence of the term, nor the fact that a whole university system is based upon it, can of itself justify its acceptance.

The first grounds for doubt are of an empirical nature. No complete history of the word and its equivalents, in all languages and throughout time, has yet been undertaken; yet even a superficial inquiry into the question suffices to convince us that the term has not always been with us. In the European languages the word *literature,* in its present usage, is quite recent: it barely dates back to the nineteenth century. Could it be that we are dealing with an historical and not at all an "eternal" phenomenon? Moreover, many languages (those of Africa, for example) still have no generic term to designate literature as a whole; and while Lévy-Bruhl would have sought to explain this absence by the so-called primitive nature of these languages allegedly incapable of abstraction and hence devoid of any words designating the general rather than the specific, the time when we could accept such an explanation has long passed. Finally, we must also take into account the diversification of literature in our own countries; who would dare decide today what is literature and what is not, given the irreducible diversity of all the written works which, from infinitely different perspectives, tend to be regarded as literature?

This argument is not decisive: a notion may be legitimate even though no corresponding word may as yet exist to designate it; it does, however, create a first element of doubt as to the "natural" character of literature. Nor is a theoretical examination of the problem more

reassuring. Whence do we derive the certainty that an entity such as literature really exists? From experience: we meet literary works in school, then in college; we find them in certain specialized stores; references to "literary authors" crop up constantly in our everyday conversations. That an entity called "literature" does function on an intersubjective and social level seems indeed unquestionable. Agreed. But what does this prove? That in a larger system—a society, a civilization—there exists an identifiable element referred to as literature. But does it prove that all the individual works grouped under this heading partake of a common nature which we can identify with equal justification?

Let us call "functional" our first definition of this entity—the definition which identifies it in terms of what it "does" as an element in a larger system; and "structural" our second, whereby we seek to test whether all the individual works collectively regarded as literature in the functional meaning of the word partake of the same characteristics. The distinction between the functional and the structural points of view should be rigorously kept in mind, even though to pass from one to the other is perfectly permissible. In order to illustrate this distinction, let us take the example of advertising: its precise function within our society is undeniably clear; but what of its structural identity? It can express itself though the visual and auditory, as well as other media; it may or may not have a duration in time; it may be continuous or discontinuous; it may use techniques as varied as direct inducement, description, allusion, antiphrasis, and so on. The unquestionable functional entity—assuming for the moment that it is indeed unquestionable—does not necessarily have a corresponding structural entity. The one need not necessarily imply the other, although the affinities between them can be easily observed. The difference is more in the point of view than in the thing itself: if literature (or advertising) is discovered to be a structural notion, then the function of its constituent elements will have to be determined; conversely, the functional notion "advertising" can be seen to belong to a structure which is, let us say, that of society. Structure is made up of functions, and functions create structure; but since it is the point of view which determines the object of knowledge, the difference remains an essential one.

Thus the existence of a functional entity "literature" in no way implies that of a structural entity (although it does make us want to find out whether such is not the case). Now functional definitions of literature (in terms of what it does rather than what it is) are very numerous, although they are not necessarily sociological: when a metaphysician like Heidegger considers the essence of poetry, he too arrives at a functional definition. To say that "art is the concretization of

truth," or that "poetry is the creation of being through words," is to say what the aim of art should be, without defining the specific mechanisms which would allow it to fulfill that aim. The function is here of an ontological nature, but a function nonetheless. Heidegger himself affirms that there is no structural entity corresponding to the functional one when he says elsewhere that his search is "concerned only with great art." This definition does not contain any internal criteria which would allow us to identify a work of art (or literature). It is a mere statement of what a certain kind of art—the best—ought to do.

It is possible that literature is only a functional entity. But we shall not pursue this line of thought. We shall assume instead—at the risk of being proved wrong in the end—that it also has a structural identity, and attempt to find out what it is. Many other optimists have preceded us in this search: their suggested answers will serve as a point of departure. Without concern for historical detail, we shall attempt to examine the two kinds of solution most frequently proposed.

From antiquity to the mid-eighteenth century, roughly speaking, the same definition recurs, whether explicitly or not, in the writings of the theoreticians of Western art. Upon close examination, this definition is seen to consist of two distinct elements. Generically, art is an imitation which varies according to the medium used; literature is imitation through language, painting through visual images. Specifically, it is not just any imitation; for what is imitated is not real but fictional, and need not have existed. Literature is *fiction*: this is its first structural definition.

This definition was formulated over several centuries and expressed in very different terms. It was probably this property of literature which led Aristotle to note that "poetry is more concerned with the general, history with the particular" (*Poetics,* 1451 b; the remark has another meaning as well): a literary sentence does not refer to specific actions, which alone could occur in reality. Later generations will view literature as essentially deceptive, false; Frye has drawn our attention to the ambiguity of terms such as "fable," "fiction," and "myth," which apply with equal ease to "literature" and to "falsehood." But this is misleading: a literary statement is no more 'false" than it is "true." The earliest modern logicians (Frege, for example) have already pointed out that a literary text cannot be submitted to the test of truth. It is neither true nor false but simply fictional—an observation which today has become a commonplace of literary criticism.

But is such a definition really satisfactory? Aren't we guilty of substituting for a true definition what is merely one of the consequences of literature? There is nothing to prevent a story relating a real event

from being viewed as literature; no changes in composition are needed, only the determination to disregard its truth and read it "as if" it were literature. Any text whatever can be given a "literary" reading: the question of truth will not arise precisely *because* the text is literature, and not the other way around.

Obviously, what is being offered indirectly here is one of the properties of literature rather than its definition. But can this property be observed in every literary text? Is it by chance that we freely apply the word "fiction" to some types of literature (novels, short stories, plays) but find it much more difficult to apply the same word to poetry—if indeed we ever do? It is tempting to suggest that just as the novel is neither true nor false even though it may describe an event, so poetry in turn is neither fiction nor nonfiction. The question does not even arise, inasmuch as poetry does not relate any events, but is very often limited to the formulation of a meditation or an impression. The specific term "fiction" is not applicable to poetry because the generic term "imitation" can remain relevant only by losing any precise meaning it may have; poetry is often not at all representational of an external reality, but sufficient unto itself. The question becomes even more difficult when we consider the so-called minor genres which are nevertheless present in all the "literatures" of the world: prayers, exhortations, proverbs, riddles, nursery rhymes (each involving of course its own special difficulties). Shall we claim that they too "imitate," or shall we separate them completely from the body of what we call "literature"?

If all that is usually regarded as literature is not necessarily fictional, conversely, all that is fictional is not automatically literature. In Freud's "case histories," for example, the question whether all the misadventures of "little Hans" or the "wolf man" are true or not is irrelevant: their status is exactly that of fiction: all one is entitled to say of them is that they support or contradict Freud's thesis. Or, to take a very different example: should all myths be viewed as literature, even if their fictional character is unmistakable?

We are certainly not the first to criticize the notion of imitation in literature or in art. European classicism continually attempted to modify the concept in order to be able to retain it. For the term had to be given a very general meaning if it were to remain applicable to all the activities with which it had been associated. But this in turn rendered it applicable to other things as well, so that it became necessary to add a further specification: imitation must be "artistic," which amounts to using the term to be defined as part of its definition. At some point in the eighteenth century the trend reversed itself; instead

of yet another rearrangement of the original definition, an entirely new one was proposed. Nothing illustrates the transition better than the titles of two books which mark the limits of two distinct periods. In 1746, a work on aesthetics appeared which sums up the opinion of the time: *The Arts Reduced to a Single Principle*, by the Abbé Batteux; the principle in question is the imitation of beautiful nature ("la belle nature"). In 1785, another work followed: *An Attempt to Unite the Arts and Letters through the Concept of Self-Sufficiency*, by Karl Philipp Moritz. The arts are again united, but this time in the name of beauty, understood as self-sufficiency ("in sich selbst Vollendetes").

The second major definition of literature will thus be based upon the concept of beauty; it will become more important to "please" than to "instruct." Near the end of the eighteenth century, the definition of beauty will center around the belief in the intransitive (as opposed to the instrumental) nature of a work of art. After having been equated with the useful, beauty is now defined by its nonutilitarian character. "True beauty requires that a thing signify nothing but itself, that it be a unity complete in itself," writes Moritz. And art is defined in terms of beauty: "If a work of art existed only to point to something other than itself, it would become nothing more than an accessory; whereas in the case of beauty, it alone must always be the principal thing." Painting is images perceived for themselves and not meant to serve any outside purpose, music is sounds appreciated for themselves. Literature is a noninstrumental language whose value resides in itself alone, or as Novalis has said, "an expression for the sake of expression."

Elaborated upon by the German Romanticists, this notion was to dominate all the Symbolist and post-Symbolist movements in Europe. What is more, it was to become the basis for the first modern attempts to create a science of literature. Be it Russian Formalism or American New Criticism, the point of departure is always the same. The function of poetry is essentially to emphasize the "message" itself. Even today this is the dominant definition, although its formulation may vary somewhat.

To be exact, such a definition of literature does not deserve to be called structural: we are told what poetry ought to achieve, and not how it proceeds to do so. But soon the functional perspective was to be complemented by a structural point of view: more than any other of its aspects, it is the systematic character of a work which allows us to perceive it in itself. Such was already Diderot's definition of beauty; later the term "beauty" was to be replaced by "form," which in turn

was to give way to "structure." Formalist studies of literature will have the merit of being studies of a literary system (of the whole of literature or of the individual work), thus creating the new science of poetics. Literature, then, is a *system*, a systematic language which draws attention to itself, which becomes autotelic. This is its second structural definition.

Let us examine this hypothesis in its turn. Is literary language alone in being systematic? Of course not. A rigorous organization can be found not only in areas usually associated with literature—some, such as advertising, even use the same techniques of rhyme, polysemy, etc.—but also in some regions far removed from its province. Who could deny that a judicial or political discourse is organized and obeys certain strict rules? It is not by chance that until the Renaissance, and above all in Greek and Latin antiquity, Rhetoric was set alongside of Poetics and assigned the task of codifying those rules which were concerned with all extraliterary discourse. One could even go further and question the very validity of a notion such as that of "the system of a literary work," given the ease with which any such system could be contrived. Language has only a limited number of phonemes, and even fewer distinctive features; nor are the grammatical categories in each paradigm very numerous; thus repetition, far from being difficult, is inevitable. Saussure is known to have formulated a hypothesis concerning Latin poetry, according to which the poet allegedly concealed within the body of the work the name of the person for whom, or about whom, the poem was written. If the hypothesis leads nowhere, it is from excess rather than from lack of proof: any name can be found in a poem of sufficient length. Besides, why limit the theory to poetry? "This practice was second nature to all educated Romans, who put everything, no matter how insignificant, into writing." And why the Romans? Saussure will go so far as to discover the name of Eton in a Latin text used at that college in the nineteenth century; unfortunately for him the author was a seventeenth-century scholar from King's College, Cambridge, and the work was not used at Eton until a hundred years later!

A system so easily discovered is not a real system. Let us now consider the complementary test: is every literary text so systematic that it may be said to be autotelic, intransitive, opaque? The sense of such a statement is relatively clear when it is applied to poetry which, as Moritz would have said, is a self-sufficient object; but what of the novel? Not that we wish to reduce the novel to a mere "slice of life," devoid of conventions and hence of system; but the presence of this system does not render the language of the novel in any way "opaque."

On the contrary, such language serves (in the classical European novel at least) to represent objects, events, actions, characters. Nor can it be said that the essence of a novel is not in its language but in its narrative technique; we are only amused by Shklovsky's remark that the sole purpose of the philosophical discussions in Dostoevsky's novels is to slow the pace of the narrative. Perhaps what is opaque in this case is the world represented; but could not such a conception of opacity (of intransitiveness, of autotelism) apply just as well to any everyday conversation?

Many attempts have been made in our time to bring together the two definitions of literature. But since neither of them, when taken alone, is really satisfactory, there is little advantage in combining them; in order to remedy their weakness, they should be fully articulated and not merely connected, or worse still, treated as if they were not different. A few examples will show, however, that such is unfortunately most often the case.

In the chapter of Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature* dealing with "the nature of literature," René Wellek seeks to define "literature" by distinguishing the particular use made of language in literature, by contrasting it with the two other main uses: the everyday and the scientific. Unlike the scientific, the literary use of language is "connotative," that is, rich in associations and ambiguities; it is opaque (whereas in the scientific use the sign is "transparent; that is, without drawing attention to itself, it directs us unequivocally to its referent"); and it is multifunctional: not only referential but also expressive and pragmatic (conative). Unlike the language of everyday use, it is systematic ("poetic language organizes, tightens the resources of everyday language"); and autotelic, in that its sole justification is within itself.

So far Wellek seems to be a partisan of our second definition of literature. Emphasis placed on any kind of function (be it referential, expressive, or pragmatic) has the effect of drawing us away from literature, where the text derives its value from itself (this is what will be called the aesthetic function, after a theory propounded by Jakobson and Mukarovsky in the 1930s). The structural consequences of this functional approach are a trend towards systematization and an emphasis on all the symbolic resources of the linguistic sign.

There follows, however, another distinction, apparently expanding on the opposition between the everyday and the literary use of language. "But the nature of literature emerges most clearly under the referential aspect," Wellek states, for in the most "literary" works, "the reference is to a world of fiction, of imagination. The statements in a novel, in

a poem, or in a drama are not literally true; they are not logical propositions." This, he concludes, is the "distinguishing trait of literature": that is, its "fictionality."

In other words, we have passed, even without realizing it, from the second definition of literature to the first. The literary use of language is no longer defined by its systematic (and consequently autotelic) character, but by its fictionality, by statements which are neither true nor false. Are the two definitions then the same? One would expect such a thesis to be at least explicitly formulated (to say nothing of proof). Wellek's conclusion, namely, that all these terms (systematic organization, recognition of the sign, *and* fiction) are necessary to characterize a work of art, brings us no closer to a solution. For the question which we are raising is precisely this: what are the relationships among these terms?

The situation is much the same with Northrop Frye, who deals with the question in the chapter entitled "Literal and Descriptive Phases: Symbol as Motif and as Sign" in his *Anatomy of Criticism*. He too begins by making a distinction between literary and nonliterary use of language (thereby combining Wellek's "scientific" and "everyday" uses into one category). The implicit opposition is between an outward and an inward orientation (toward what lies beyond the signs and toward the signs themselves, or toward other signs, respectively). The oppositions between centrifugal and centripetal, between descriptive and literal phases, between sign-symbols and motif-symbols are all related to the first distinction. It is inward direction which characterizes the literary use of language. In passing, it should be noted that Frye is no more willing than Wellek to affirm the exclusive presence of this orientation in literature; he merely affirms its predominance.

Once again we are faced with a version of our second definition of literature and once again, before knowing it, we have slid back towards the first. Frye writes: "In all literary verbal structures the final direction of meaning is inward. In literature, the standards of outward meaning are secondary, for literary works do not pretend to describe or assert, and are hence not true, not false. . . . In literature, questions of fact or truth are subordinated to the primary literary aim of producing a structure of words for its own sake, and the sign-values of symbols are subordinated to their importance as a structure of interconnected motifs." In this last sentence, it is no longer transparence but nonfictionality (that is, adherence to a true-false system) which is opposed to opacity.

It is no doubt the ambivalence of the word "inward" which accounts for this passage from one definition to the other, for the term is present

in both, being in turn synonymous with "opaque" as well as "fictional." The literary use of language is "inward" both because it emphasizes the signs themselves and because the reality evoked by the signs is fictional. But perhaps beyond mere polysemy (and thus beyond the elementary confusion) there is a mutual implication between the two meanings of the word "inward": could it be that all "fiction" is "opaque," and that "opacity" is "fictional"? Frye seems to suggest precisely this when he asserts that if an historical work were to comply with the principles of symmetry (indicative of a system, and thus of an autotelic structure), it would enter thereby the realm of literature, and hence of fiction. But do the two meanings of "inward" really imply each other? An examination of this question will perhaps help to elucidate the nature of the relationship between the two definitions of literature.

Supposing that a history book does follow the rules of symmetry (and is thus literature according to our second definition), does it thereby also become fictional (and thus literature by the first definition)? It clearly does not. It may become a bad history book; but the change is from "true" to "false," and not from "true-false" to "fictional." Similarly, a political discourse can be highly systematic without automatically becoming fictional. In terms of systematization, is there a radical difference in the account of a real journey and that of an imaginary one—even though one is fictional and the other not? Neither the tendency toward systematization nor the emphasis on inward direction is sufficient to render a text fictional. Thus at least one of the consequences of the would-be mutual implication proves to be untenable.

What about the other? Does fictionality necessarily imply a contextual orientation? Everything depends on the meaning given to the latter expression. Some of Frye's remarks seem to indicate that it is a matter of simple recurrence, or of syntagmatic rather than paradigmatic orientation. If this be the case, it goes without saying that there are texts which are clearly devoid of such properties: a narrative can be governed by the logic of succession and causality alone (although examples of this type are admittedly rare). If we understand the term in its broadest sense of the "presence of some sort of organization," then it is equally clear that all fictional texts possess this "inward orientation"; but what text—of whatever nature—does not? The second implication is thus no more rigorously true than the first, and there is no justification for postulating that the two meanings of the word "inward" are in fact one and the same. Once again the two distinctions (and the two definitions) have been merely combined without being fully articulated.

All that can be said is that each definition can account for a great number of works usually called literary, but by no means for all; and that they are admittedly linked by mutual affinities, but not by mutual implication. The discussion has not proceeded beyond the stage of vagueness and imprecision.

The relative failure of our investigation might perhaps be explained by the nature of the question itself. We have constantly asked ourselves: how can we distinguish what is literature from what is not? What is the difference between the literary and the nonliterary use of language? But to ask such questions about the notion of literature is to assume the existence of another coherent notion, that of "nonliterature." Perhaps the time has come to examine this notion as well.

Whether one speaks of descriptive writing (Frye) or of everyday usage (Wellek), of practical or normal language, a unity is postulated which upon examination turns out to be highly problematical. It seems obvious that this "usage," which includes jokes as well as practical conversation, the ritualistic language of administration and law as well as that of the journalist or the politician, scientific as well as philosophical and religious writing, is not a single entity at all. No one knows exactly how many types of discourse there are, but it is easy to see that there are more than one.

Another notion, generic in relation to the notion of literature, must at this point be introduced: that of *discourse*. The latter is the structural correlative of the functional concept of "use" (of a language). It is necessary to introduce it because the rules of language, which are common to all who use it, constitute only a part of the rules which govern our concrete verbal production. They only fix the norm of grammatical combinations within a sentence, a phonology, and a common meaning for words. But between the set of rules common to all utterances and the exact formulation of a specific utterance there is a gulf of indeterminacy. This gulf is bridged by the rules of each particular discourse (thus an official letter will not be written in the same way as an intimate one), as well as by the limitations inherent in the context of the speech act (the identity of the speaker and the listener, the time and place of the speech act). The rules of discourse are more restricted than those of language, but less restricted than those of a specific speech act.

A particular type of discourse is in turn defined by the list of rules which it must obey. The sonnet, for example, is characterized by extra limitations on its meter and rhyme. Scientific discourse in principle excludes any reference to the first or second person of the verb, as well as to any but the present tense. Jokes have semantic rules lacking in

other discourse, while their metric construction is determined in the course of the individual speech act. Certain discursive rules consist, paradoxically, of abolishing various rules of language; Samuel Levin in the United States and Jean Cohen in France have shown how certain grammatical or semantic rules are put aside in modern poetry. But from the point of view of the structure of a discourse, rules are always added, never subtracted. The proof of this is that even in "deviant" poetic utterances the broken linguistic rule is easily reconstructed; rather than being abolished, it was merely contradicted by a new rule. In literary studies the rules of discourse are discussed under the heading of "genres" (or sometimes "styles," "modes," etc.).

If we admit the existence of various types of discourse we must reformulate our question on literary specificity in the following terms: are there rules which apply to all forms of literature (intuitively identified as such), and only to those forms? The only possible answer, it seems to me, is a negative one. Numerous examples have already been noted of the occurrence of "literary" characteristics outside literature (from puns and nursery rhymes, journalism and travelogues to philosophical meditations). It has become equally obvious that there is no common denominator for all "literary" productions, unless it be the use of language.

The situation changes radically if we turn away from "literature" itself and focus on its subcategories. There is no difficulty in defining the rules of certain types of discourse (this has always been the function of the various *Artes Poeticae*, admittedly with much confusion between description and prescription). In other types the formulation of rules is more difficult, although our sense of "discursive competence" convinces us that they do exist. In fact we have already seen that the first definition of literature applies particularly well to narrative prose, and the second to poetry. The origin of these utterly independent definitions can perhaps be found in the type of literature which was considered in their formation. The first is based on narrative (Aristotle discusses epic and tragedy, not poetry), the second on poetry (as is apparent from Jakobson's analyses of particular poems): in each case one of the two major literary genres has been defined as if it were the whole of literature.

The rules of the so-called nonliterary types of discourse can be identified in much the same way. I thus propose the following hypothesis: from a structural point of view, each type of discourse usually referred to as literary has nonliterary relatives which resemble it more than do other types of literary discourse. For example, a certain type of lyric poetry has more rules in common with prayer than with a his-

torical novel of the *War and Peace* variety. Thus the opposition between literature and nonliterature is replaced by a typology of the various types of discourse. Frye can be quoted once again, this time without reservation: "our literary universe has expanded into a verbal universe."

The results of this inquiry might at first appear negative, since it essentially denies the legitimacy of a structural notion of "literature," and contests the existence of a homogeneous "literary discourse." Whether or not the functional notion is legitimate, the structural notion definitely is not. But the result is only seemingly negative, since instead of the simple notion of literature we now have a number of different types of discourse, each equally deserving of attention. If the choice of our object of study is not dictated by purely ideological reasons (which would then have to be spelled out), we no longer have the right to limit ourselves to purely literary subspecies, even if we are employed by the "Department of Literature" (be it French, English or Russian). A coherent field of study demanding recognition is at present hopelessly fragmented among semanticists and *littérateurs*, socio- and ethnolinguists, linguistic philosophers, and psychologists.

An explanation might be found, by the same token, for the dominance of these two definitions, rather than any other, throughout the history of literary theory. Viewed in their most general sense, which alone confers upon them their validity, they become affirmations of the significant nature of literary texts and of their systematic organization. But isn't the definition of any discourse—at once system and signification? Attempting to define literature, the theoretician defines instead a logically superior notion, the "genus proximum." These are indeed its two essential and complementary aspects, whatever they are called: pleasure and instruction, beauty and truth, gratuitous play and imitation, syntax and semantics (although the variation in terminology is in no way unimportant: although they refer to the same thing, the various terms signify it in different ways). What the theoreticians have failed to do, however, is to indicate the "specific difference" which characterizes literature within the "genus proximum." Could it be that no such difference is in any way perceptible? In other words, that literature does not exist?

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