

PART ONE

I *The Notion of Literature*

Before plunging into the abyss opened up by the question What is literature? I should like to offer a modest life preserver. My investigation will begin not with literature in its own right, but with discourse that, like my own, attempts to talk about literature. The difference lies in the itinerary rather than in the ultimate goal. Still, it seems possible that the path taken may be of greater interest than the destination.

We need to begin by casting doubt on the legitimacy of the notion of literature. The mere fact that the word exists, or that an academic institution has been built around it, does not mean that the thing itself is self-evident.

Reasons – perfectly empirical ones, to begin with – are not hard to find. The full history of the word *literature* and its equivalents in all languages and all eras has yet to be written, but even a perfunctory look at the question makes it clear that the term has not been around forever. In the European languages, the word *literature* in its current sense is quite recent: it dates back – just barely – to the nineteenth century. Might we be dealing with a historical phenomenon rather than an “eternal” one? Moreover, many languages (many African languages, for example) have no generic term covering all literary productions; and we are well beyond the days of Lévy-Bruhl, when this lack could be attributed to the well-known “primitive” nature of those languages, which were thought to be devoid of abstraction and thus also of terms designating genre rather than species. To these initial observations we may add the fragmentation characteristic of literature today. Who dares specify what is literature and what is not, given the irreducible variety of the writing that tends to be attached to it, from vastly differing perspectives?

The argument is not conclusive: a notion may legitimately exist even if there is no specific term in the lexicon for it. But we have been led to cast the first shadow of doubt over the “naturalness” of literature. A theoretical examination of the problem proves no more reassuring. Where do we come by the conviction that there is indeed such a thing as literature? From experience. We study “literary” works in school, then in college; we find the “literary” type of book in specialized stores; we are in the habit of referring to “literary”

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authors in everyday conversation. An entity called “literature” functions at the level of intersubjective and social relations; this much seems beyond question. Fine. But what have we proved? That in the broader system of a given society or culture, an identifiable element exists that is known by the label *literature*. Have we thereby demonstrated that all the particular products that take on the function of “literature” possess common characteristics, which we can identify with legitimacy? Not at all.

Let us use the term *functional* for our first approach to this entity, the approach that will identify it as an element in a larger system, through what this unit “does” in it. The second approach, in which we shall try to see whether all the instances of the entity that play the same functional role have the same properties, we shall call *structural*. The functional and structural viewpoints have to be rigorously differentiated, even though it is quite possible to pass from one to the other. To illustrate the distinction, let us consider a different object. Advertising unquestionably has a specific function in our society; but it becomes a much more complicated matter when we examine its structural identity. Advertising may use visual or auditory media, or others; it may or may not have temporal duration; it may be continuous or discontinuous; it may use mechanisms as varied as direct invitation, description, allusion, antiphrasis, and so on. For the undeniable functional entity (if we may take this at face value for the moment), there is not necessarily a corresponding structural entity. Structure and function do not imply each other in a rigorous way, even though it is always possible to observe affinities between them. This is a difference in viewpoint rather than in object. If we discover that literature (or advertising) is a structural notion, we shall have to account for the functioning of its component parts; conversely, the functional entity “advertising” is part of a structure that is, let us say, that of a society. The structure is made up of functions, and the functions create a structure; but since the point of view is what determines the object of knowledge, the difference is nonetheless irreducible.

The existence of a functional entity called “literature” thus by no means implies that of a structural entity (although it spurs us to try to find out whether or not such an entity exists). Now functional definitions of literature (by way of what it does rather than what it is) are quite numerous. We must not suppose that this path always leads to sociology: when a metaphysician such as Heidegger investigates the essence of poetry, he too grasps a functional notion. To say that “art is the enactment of truth”¹ or that “poetry is the foundation of being through language”² is to formulate a wish as to what art or poetry ought to be, without taking a position on the specific mechanisms that fit them for the task. The function may well be ontological; it remains a function nonetheless. Moreover, Heidegger himself acknowledges that for the func-

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1950) 25.

² Martin Heidegger, “Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung,” in *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1951) 38.

tional entity there is not necessarily a corresponding structural entity, since he tells us elsewhere that, in his research, “only great art is in question.”³ This does not give us an internal criterion that would allow us to identify any work of art (or literature), but only a declaration as to what one segment of art (the best part) ought to do.

The possibility exists, then, that literature may be nothing but a functional entity. But I shall not pursue this direction. I shall assume – at the risk of being disappointed in the end – that literature also has a structural identity, and I shall try to find out what this is. Many other optimists have gone before me, moreover, and I can use the responses they have suggested as a starting point. Without going into historical detail, I shall try to examine the two types of solutions that have been most frequently proposed.

A first definition of literature is based upon two distinct properties. Generically, art is “imitation,” varying according to the material used; literature imitates via language, just as painting imitates by way of images. Specifically, art is not just any imitation whatsoever, for what is imitated is not necessarily real but may be fictitious, need never have existed at all. Literature is a *fiction*: this is its first structural definition.

The formulation of this definition did not take place overnight, and it has surfaced in quite varied terms. We may suppose that this property of literature is what Aristotle had in mind when he noted, first, that poetic representation parallels representation “by color and form,” and, second, that “[the statements of poetry] are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars”⁴; this last observation makes more than one point. Literary sentences do not designate particular actions, which are the only ones that can really be produced. In another era, literature will be deemed fundamentally false, a tissue of lies; Frye has reminded us of the ambiguity of the terms *fable*, *fiction*, *myth*, which apply just as well to “literature” as to “falsehood.” But this is unfair: literary sentences are no more “false” than they are “true.” The first modern logicians (Frege, for example) noted that the literary text is not subject to the truth test, that it is neither true nor false but precisely *fictional*. This has become a commonplace today.

Is such a definition satisfactory? We may well wonder whether we are not about to substitute a consequence of what literature is for a definition of literature. Nothing prevents a story that recounts a real event from being perceived as literature. Nothing in its composition needs to be changed; we need only say that we are not interested in its truth value but are reading it “as” literature. A “literary” reading can be imposed on any text: the question of truthfulness will not arise *because the text is literary*.

Rather than a definition of literature, we are offered here, in a roundabout way, one of its properties. But can we observe this property in every literary

³ Heidegger, *Holzwege*, 29.

⁴ Aristotle, “De Poetica,” 1447a, in *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. 11, ed. W. A. Ross, trans. Ingram Bywater (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924).

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text? Is it a coincidence that we readily apply the word *fiction* to one component of literature (novels, short stories, plays), but that we use this label much less often, if at all, for another of its components, namely, poetry? We might be tempted to say that just as the novelistic sentence is neither true nor false even though it may describe an event, the poetic sentence is neither fictitious nor nonfictitious: the question does not arise, precisely inasmuch as poetry recounts nothing, designates no event, but confines itself, quite often, to formulating meditations or impressions. The specific term *fiction* does not apply to poetry because the generic term *imitation* has to lose all specific meaning if it is to remain pertinent. Poetry frequently evokes no external representation; it suffices in and of itself. The question becomes more difficult still when we turn to genres that are often termed “minor” but are nonetheless found in all the “literatures” of the world: prayers, exhortations, proverbs, riddles, nursery rhymes (each of which obviously poses different problems). Shall we declare that these too “imitate,” or shall we remove them from the set of phenomena denoted by the term “literature”?

If everything ordinarily viewed as literature is not necessarily fictional, conversely not every fiction is necessarily literary. Let us take Freud’s “case histories” as examples. It would be inappropriate to ask whether all the incidents in the life of little Hans or the Wolf Man are true. These incidents have quite precisely the status of fiction; all we can say about them is whether they serve Freud’s thesis well or badly. Taking a completely different example, shall we include all myths within literature (given that they are undeniably fictional)?

I am not the first, of course, to question the notion of imitation in literature or art. Throughout the entire period of European classicism we can trace numerous efforts to amend it so as to make it serviceable, for it turns out that the “imitation” has to take on a very general meaning in order to embrace all the activities it is supposed to include. The term then applies equally well to a number of other things, however, and a complementary definition is required: imitation must be “artistic.” But this amounts to using the term being defined in the definition itself. Somewhere in the eighteenth century, the situation is reversed. A new and entirely independent definition of literature appears, in lieu of adaptations of the old. Nothing is more telling in this regard than the titles of two texts that mark the boundaries of two periods. A text on aesthetics published by Charles Batteux in 1746 sums up the commonsense wisdom of the times: *Les Beaux-Arts réduits à un même principe*.⁵ The principle in question is the imitation of beautiful nature. In 1785, another title echoes the first: Karl Philipp Moritz’s *Schriften zur Ästhetik und Poetik* opens with an essay entitled “Versuch einer Vereinigung aller schönen Künste und Wissenschaften unter dem Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten.”⁶ The fine arts are

⁵ Charles Batteux, *Les Beaux-Arts réduits à un même principe* (Paris: Saillant et Nyon, 1773).

⁶ Karl Philipp Moritz, *Schriften zur Ästhetik und Poetik*, ed. Hans Joachim Schrimpf (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1962) 3–9.

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once again united, but now in the name of the beautiful, understood as an “achievement in itself.”

The second great definition of literature, then, comes under the banner of the beautiful: here “pleasing” wins out over “instructing.” Now the notion of the beautiful is crystallized, toward the end of the eighteenth century, in an affirmation of the intransitive, noninstrumental nature of the work of art. Having once been identified with the useful, the beautiful is now defined by its nonutilitarian nature. Moritz writes: “The truly beautiful consists in a thing signifying itself alone, designating itself alone, containing itself alone, in its being a whole accomplished in itself.”⁷ But art is defined in terms of the beautiful: “If a work of art has as its only reason for being the indication of something external to it, it would become by that very token an accessory; whereas in the case of the beautiful, the work of art is always primary.”⁸ Painting consists of images that are perceived for themselves and not in terms of some other purpose; music consists of sounds whose value lies in themselves. Literature, finally, consists of noninstrumental language whose value lies in itself, or as Novalis says, “expression for expression’s sake.” A detailed discussion of this reversal can be found in the central part of my book *Theories of the Symbol*.⁹

This position was defended by the German Romantics, who transmitted it to the symbolists; it came to dominate all the symbolist and postsymbolist movements in Europe. What is more, it became the basis for the first modern attempts to create a science of literature. Whether in Russian Formalism or in American New Criticism, the initial postulate is always the same. The poetic function is the one that focuses on the “message” itself. Even today this definition predominates, although its formulation may vary.

Such a definition of literature does not in fact deserve to be called “structural.” It tells us what poetry has to do, not how poetry succeeds in carrying out its mission. However the functional tendency was complemented early on by a structural viewpoint. One aspect more than all the others leads us to perceive the work in itself, and that is its systematic character. Diderot had already defined the beautiful in this way; later on, the term *beautiful* was replaced by *form*, which in turn came to be replaced by *structure*. Formalist studies of literature have the merit (and this is how they establish the science of poetics) of being studies of the literary system, of the system of the work. Literature is thus a *system*, a language that attracts attention to itself through its systematicity alone, a language that becomes autotelic. This is its second structural definition.

Let us examine this hypothesis in turn. Is literary language the only systematic one? The answer is unquestionably negative. It is not only in realms customarily compared to literature – such as advertising – that we find rigorous

⁷ Moritz, *Schriften*, 113.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁹ Trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

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organization and even the use of identical mechanisms (rhyme, polysemy, etc.); we also find these in realms that are, in principle, the most remote from literature. Can we say that juridical or political discourse is not organized, that it does not obey strict rules? It is not a coincidence, moreover, that until the Renaissance, and especially in Greek and Latin antiquity, Rhetoric went hand in hand with Poetics (we really ought to say that Poetics only came in on the heels of Rhetoric). Rhetoric had as its task the codification of the laws of nonliterary discourse. We could go further still and question the very relevance of a notion such as “system of the work,” precisely by virtue of the great facility with which such a “system” can always be established. A language includes only a limited number of phonemes, and even fewer distinctive features; the grammatical categories of each paradigm are few in number. Repetition, far from being difficult, is inevitable. Saussure, as we know, formulated a hypothesis about Latin poetry according to which the poets wove a proper name into the text, the name of the person to whom the poem was addressed or about whom it had been written. His hypothesis leads to a dead end, not for lack of proof but rather because of an overabundance of proof: in any poem of reasonable length, we can find any name whatsoever inscribed. Besides, why limit ourselves to poetry? “This game was able to become the habitual accompaniment for any Latin writer of the form he gave to his thought the moment it sprang from his brain.”¹⁰ And why only the Romans? Saussure goes so far as to discover the name *Eton* in a Latin text that served as an exercise for the students at that college in the nineteenth century; unfortunately for him, the author of the text was a scholar at King’s College, Cambridge, in the seventeenth century, and the text was not adopted at Eton until a hundred years later!

If it can be found so easily everywhere, such a system gets us nowhere. Now let us consider the complementary question. Is every literary text systematic enough to be called autotelic, intransitive, opaque? The meaning of such an assertion is easy enough to grasp when it is applied to a poem, an object “accomplished in itself,” as Moritz might have said; but what about a novel? It is hardly my intention to suggest that the novel is merely a “slice of life” stripped of conventions, and thus of systematicity; but its system does not make its language “opaque.” Quite to the contrary, the language of novels serves (at least in the classical European tradition) to represent objects, events, actions, characters. We cannot say, either, that the novel’s ultimate goal lies not in language but in the novelistic mechanism. What is “opaque,” in this case, is the world represented; but does not such a conception of opacity (or intransitivity, autotelism) apply just as well to any everyday conversation?

In our day, various attempts have been made to amalgamate these two definitions of literature. But since neither definition taken alone, is entirely sat-

¹⁰ Jean Starobinski, *Words upon Words: The Anagrams of Ferdinand de Saussure*, trans. Olivia Emmet (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979) 90.

isfactory, simply combining them can hardly advance our efforts. To correct the weaknesses of both definitions, it would be necessary to *articulate* them instead of simply adding them together or, worse, mixing them up. Unfortunately, the latter is what usually happens. Let us consider a few examples.

René Wellek deals with “the nature of literature” in a chapter of *Theory of Literature*.¹ He notes first of all that “the simplest way of solving the question is by distinguishing the particular use made of language in literature” (22), and he establishes three principal uses: literary, everyday, and scientific. Then he opposes the literary use in turn to each of the other two. As opposed to scientific usage, literary usage is “connotative,” that is, rich in associations and ambiguous; it is opaque (whereas in scientific usage the sign is “transparent; that is, without drawing attention to itself, it directs us unequivocally to its referent”); it is plurifunctional: not only referential but also expressive and pragmatic (conative) (23). As opposed to everyday usage, literary usage is systematic (“poetic language organizes, tightens, the resources of everyday language”) and autotelic, in that it does not find its justification outside itself (24).

Up to this point, we could take Wellek for a partisan of our second definition of literature. The emphasis on any particular function (referential, expressive, pragmatic) takes us far away from literature, where the value of the text lies in itself (this is what will be called the aesthetic function; Jakobson and Mukarovsky were already putting forward the same thesis in the 1930s). The structural consequences of these functional aims are a tendency toward system and the valorization of all the symbolic resources of the sign.

Another distinction follows, however, which appears to extend the opposition between everyday and literary usage. “The nature of literature emerges most clearly under the referential aspect,” Wellek tells us, 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” (25). And here, he concludes, is the “distinguishing trait of literature,” that is, “fictionality” (26).

In other words, without even noticing it we have moved from the second to the first definition of literature. Literary usage is no longer defined by its systematic (and thus autotelic) character, but by fiction, by propositions that are neither true nor false. Does this mean that the one is the same as the other? Such an assertion deserves at least to be formulated (not to say proved). We are no better off when Wellek concludes that all these terms (“organization, personal expression, realization and exploitation of the medium, lack of practical purpose, and, of course, fictionality” [27]) are necessary to characterize the work of art. The question we are asking is precisely what are the relations that unite these terms?

Northrop Frye raises the same issue in a somewhat similar way in *Anatomy*

¹ René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1956) ch. 2, “The Nature of Literature,” 20–8.

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of *Criticism*, in the chapter “Literal and Descriptive Phases: Symbol as Motif and as Sign.”¹² He too begins by establishing a distinction between literary and nonliterary uses of the language (his nonliterary category subsumes Wellek’s “scientific” and “everyday” uses). The underlying opposition turns out to distinguish external orientation (toward what signs are not) from internal orientation (toward the signs themselves, toward other signs). The oppositions between centrifugal and centripetal, between descriptive phase and literal phase, between sign-symbols and motif-symbols, are coordinated with the first distinction. Literary usage is characterized by internal orientation. We should note in passing that neither Frye nor Wellek ever asserts the exclusiveness of this orientation in literature, but merely its predominance.

Here again we encounter a version of our second definition of literature; and once more we glide toward the first before we know it. 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 hence are 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” (74). In this last sentence, it is not transparency but nonfictionality (belonging to the true-false system) that is now opposed to opacity.

The operative term that makes this passage possible is the word *internal*. It appears in both oppositions, once as a synonym for *opaque*, and again as a synonym for *fictional*. Literary language usage is “internal,” both in that the focus is on the signs themselves and in that the reality these signs evoke is fictional. Still, above and beyond the simple polysemy (and thus the basic confusion), perhaps each of the two senses of the word *internal* implies the other; perhaps every “fiction” is *opaque*, and every “opacity” *fictional*. This is what Frye seems to be suggesting when he asserts on the following page that if a history book were to obey the principle of symmetry (system, thus autotelism), by that very token it would enter the realm of literature, and thus of fiction. Let us try to see to what extent this two-fold implication is genuine; the effort will perhaps enlighten us as to the nature of the relation between our two definitions of literature.

Let us suppose that the history book obeys the principle of symmetry (and thus belongs to literature, according to our second definition); does it thereby become fictional (and thus literary according to the first definition)? No. We may have a bad history book, which is ready to twist the truth in the interest of symmetry; but the shift takes place between “true” and “false,” not between “true/false” on one side and “fictional” on the other. Similarly, a political discourse may be highly systematic; that does not make it fictional. Is there a radical difference between a real account of a voyage and an imaginary travel

¹² Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) “Literal and Descriptive Phases: Symbol as Motif and as Sign,” 73–81.

narrative in terms of textual “systematicity” (considering that the one is fictional and the other is not)? The focus on system, the attention paid to internal organization, do not imply that a given text is fictional. The implication does not work, at least not in this direction.

What about the other? Does fictionality necessarily involve a contextual focus? Everything depends on the meaning we give that last expression. If we take it in the restricted sense of recurrence, or of syntagmatic orientation (as opposed to paradigmatic), as some of Frye’s remarks allow us to suppose, it is certain that fictional texts lacking in this property exist; the narrative may be governed entirely by the logic of sequence and causality (even though examples of this are rare). If we take the expression in the broader sense of “presence of any organization whatsoever,” then all fictional texts possess this “internal orientation”; however we would be hard put to find any text that does not possess it. The second implication is thus not rigorous either, and it would be illegitimate to postulate that the two meanings of the word *internal* are the same. Once again, the two oppositions (and the two definitions) have been telescoped without being articulated.

We are left with the observation that the two definitions allow us to account for a large number of works ordinarily called literary, but not for all; and that the two definitions stand in a relation of mutual affinity, but not of implication. We remain floundering in imprecision and vagueness.

Perhaps the relative failure of my investigation can be explained by the very nature of the question I have raised. I have persisted in asking: What distinguishes literature from what is not literature? What is the difference between literary language use and nonliterary language use? Now by raising these questions about the notion of literature, I have been taking for granted the existence of another coherent notion, that of “nonliterature.” Perhaps we need to begin by questioning this notion.

When the topic under discussion is descriptive writing (Frye), ordinary usage (Wellek), or everyday, practical, or normal language, a unified entity is always postulated which appears extremely problematic as soon as it is subjected to scrutiny. It seems obvious that this entity – which would include ordinary conversation as well as joking, the ritual language of administration and law as well as the languages of journalism and politics, scientific writing as well as philosophical and religious works – is not a single entity. We do not know just how many types of discourse there are, but we shall readily agree that there are more than one.

Here we have to introduce a generic notion, in relation to that of literature: the notion of *discourse*. This is the structural counterpart of the functional concept of (language) “use.” Why is it necessary? Because, starting from vocabulary and grammar rules, language produces sentences; but sentences are only the point of departure of discursive functioning. Sentences are articulated among themselves and uttered in a given sociocultural context; they are transformed into utterances, and language is transformed into discourse. Furthermore, discourse is not a single entity; it is multiple, in its functions as well as

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in its forms: everyone knows that one must not send a personal letter in the place of an official report, and that the two are not written in the same way. Any verbal property, optional at the level of language, may be made obligatory in discourse; the choice a society makes among all the possible codifications of discourse determines what is called its *system of genres*.

The literary genres, indeed, are nothing but such choices among discursive possibilities, choices that a given society has made conventional. For example, the sonnet is a type of discourse characterized by supplementary constraints governing its meter and its rhymes. But there is no reason to limit this notion of genre to literature alone; outside of literature the situation is no different. Scientific discourse excludes as a matter of principle any reference to the first and second persons of the verb, along with the use of tenses other than the present. Jokes follow semantic rules that are absent in other types of discourse, while their metric composition, not codified at the level of discourse, will be fixed in the course of a particular utterance. Certain discursive rules have the paradoxical feature that consists in abolishing a rule of the language; as Samuel Levin and Jean Cohen have shown, certain grammatical and semantic rules are suppressed in modern poetry. But from the perspective of the constitution of a discourse, it is always a matter of more rules, not fewer. The proof lies in the fact that in such “deviant” poetic utterances we can easily reconstitute the linguistic rule that has been violated: it has not been suppressed but rather contradicted by a new rule. The genres of discourse, as we see, depend quite as much on a society’s linguistic raw material as on its historically circumscribed ideology.

If we recognize the existence of types of discourse, our question about literary specificity should be reformulated as follows: Are there rules that apply to all instances of literature (identified intuitively) and only to these? But when it is put this way, the question can only be answered in the negative, or so it seems to me. I have already mentioned a number of examples attesting to the fact that “literary” properties are also found outside literature (from puns and nursery rhymes through journalistic reporting and travel narratives to philosophical meditations); hence our inability to discover a common denominator for all “literary” productions (unless it is language use).

Things change radically if we turn, not to literature now, but to its subdivisions. We have no trouble spelling out the rules of certain types of discourse (this is what *Arts poétiques* have always done, confusing the descriptive and the prescriptive, to be sure); elsewhere the formulation is more difficult, but our “discursive competence” always makes us sense the existence of such rules. Furthermore, we saw that the first definition of literature applied particularly well to narrative prose, while the second applied well to poetry; perhaps we would not be mistaken to seek the origin of two such independent definitions in the existence of two very different “genres.” Indeed, the literature that has been taken particularly into account is not the same in the two cases. The first definition starts from narrative (Aristotle speaks of epic and tragedy, not po-