Introduction: What is Literature?

If there is such a thing as literary theory, then it would seem obvious that there is something called literature which it is the theory of. We can begin, then, by raising the question: what is literature?

There have been various attempts to define literature. You can define it, for example, as 'imaginative' writing in the sense of fiction - writing which is not literally true. But even the briefest reflection on what people commonly include under the heading of literature suggests that this will not do. Seventeenth-century English literature includes Shakespeare, Webster, Marvell and Milton; but it also stretches to the essays of Francis Bacon, the sermons of John Donne, Bunyan's spiritual autobiography and whatever it was that Sir Thomas Browne wrote. It might even at a pinch be taken to encompass Hobbes's Leviathan or Clarendon's History of the Rebellion. French seventeenth-century literature contains, along with Corneille and Racine, La Rochefoucauld's maxims, Bossuet's funeral speeches, Boileau's treatise on poetry, Madame de Sevigne's letters to her daughter and the philosophy of Descartes and Pascal. Nineteenth-century English literature usually includes Lamb (though not Bentham), Macaulay (but not Marx), Mill (but not Darwin or Herbert Spencer).

A distinction between 'fact' and 'fiction', then, seems unlikely to get us very far, not least because the distinction itself is often a questionable one. It has been argued, for instance, that out own opposition between 'historical' and 'artistic' truth does not apply at all to the early Icelandic sagas. In the English late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the word 'novel' seems to have been used about both true and fictional events, and even news reports were hardly to be considered factual. Novels and news reports were neither clearly factual nor clearly fictional: our own sharp discriminations between these categories simply did not apply. Gibbon no doubt thought that he was writing the historical truth, and so perhaps did the authors of Genesis, but they are now read as 'fact' by some and 'fiction' by others; Newman certainly thought his theological meditations were true but they are now for many readers 'literature'. Moreover, if 'literature' includes much 'factual' writing, it also excludes quite a lot of fiction. Superman comic and Mills and Boon novels are fictional but not generally regarded as literature, and certainly not as Literature. If literature is 'creative' or 'imaginative' writing, does this imply that history, philosophy and natural science are uncreative and unimaginative?

Perhaps one needs a different kind of approach altogether. Perhaps literature is definable not according to whether it is fictional or 'imaginative', but because it uses language in peculiar ways. On this theory, literature is a kind of writing which, in the words of the Russian critic Roman Jakobson, represents an 'organized violence committed on ordinary speech'. Literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language, deviates systematically from everyday speech. If you approach me at a bus stop and murmur 'Thou still unravished bride of quietness,' then I am instantly aware that I am in the presence of the literary. I know this because the texture, rhythm and resonance of your words are in excess of their abstractable meaning -or, as the linguists might more technically put it, there is a disproportion between the signifiers and the signifieds. Your language draws attention to itself, flaunts its material being, as statements like 'Don't you know the drivers are on strike?' do not.

This, in effect, was the definition of the 'literary' advanced by the Russian formalists, who included in their ranks Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, Osip Brik, Yury Tynyanov, Boris Eichenbaum and Boris Tomashevsky. The Formalists emerged in Russia in the years before the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, and flourished throughout the 1920s, until they were effectively silenced by Stalinism. A militant, polemical group of critics, they rejected the quasi-mystical symbolist doctrines which had influenced literary criticism before them, and in a practical, scientific spirit shifted attention to the material reality of the literary text itself. Criticism should dissociate art from mystery and concern itself with how literary texts actually worked: literature was not pseudo-religion or psychology or sociology but a particular organization of language. It had its own specific laws, structures and devices, which were to be studied in themselves rather than reduced to something else. The literary work was neither a vehicle for ideas, a reflection of social reality nor the incarnation of some transcendental truth: it was a material fact, whose functioning could be analysed rather as one could examine a machine. It was made of words, not of objects or feelings, and it was a mistake to see it as the expression of an author's mind. Pushkin's Eugene Onegin, Osip Brik once airily remarked, would have been written even if Pushkin had not lived.

Formalism was essentially the application of linguistics to the study of literature; and because the linguistics in question were of a formal kind, concerned with the structures of language rather than with what one might actually say, the Formalists passed over the analysis of literary 'content' (where one might always be tempted into psychology or sociology) for the study of literary form. Far from seeing form as the expression of content, they stood the relationship on its head: content was merely the 'motivation' of form, an occasion or convenience for a particular kind of formal exercise. Don Quixote is not 'about' the character of that name: the character is just a device for holding together different kinds of narrative technique. Animal Farm for the Formalists would not be an allegory of Stalinism; on the contrary, Stalinism would simply provide a useful opportunity for the construction of an allegory. It was this perverse insistence which won for the Formalists their derogatory name from their antagonists; and though they did not deny that art had a relation to social reality - indeed some of them were closely associated with the Bolsheviks - they provocatively claimed that this relation was not the critic's business.

The Formalists started out by seeing the literary work as a more or less arbitrary assemblage of 'devices', and only later came to see these devices as interrelated elements or 'functions' within a total textual system. 'Devices' included sound, imagery, rhythm, syntax, metre, rhyme, narrative techniques, in fact the whole stock of formal literary elements; and what all of these elements had in common was their 'estranging' or 'defamiliarizing' effect. What was specific to literary language, what distinguished it from other forms of discourse, was that it 'deformed' ordinary language in various ways. Under the pressure of literary devices, ordinary language was intensified, condensed, twisted, telescoped, drawn out, turned on its head. It was language 'made strange'; and because of this estrangement, the everyday world was also suddenly made unfamiliar. In the routines of everyday speech, our perceptions of and responses to reality become stale, blunted, or, as the Formalists would say, 'automatized'. Literature, by forcing us into a dramatic awareness of language, refreshes these habitual responses and renders objects more 'perceptible'. By having to grapple with language in a more strenuous, self-conscious way than usual, the world which that language contains is vividly renewed. The poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins might provide a particularly graphic example of this. Literary discourse estranges or alienates ordinary speech, but in doing so, paradoxically, brings us into a fuller, more intimate possession of experience. Most of the time we breathe in air without being conscious of it: like language, it is the very medium in which we move. But if the air is suddenly thickened or infected we are forced to attend to our breathing with new vigilance, and the effect of this may be a heightened experience of our bodily life. We read a scribbled note from a friend without paying much attention to its narrative structure; but if a story breaks off and begins again, switches constantly from one narrative level to another and delays its climax to keep us in suspense, we become freshly conscious of how it is constructed at the same time as our engagement with it may be intensified. The story, as the Formalists would argue, uses 'impeding' or 'retarding' devices to hold our attention; and in literary language, these devices are 'laid bare'. It was this which moved Viktor Shklovsky to remark mischievously of Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy, a novel which impedes its own story-line so much that it hardly gets off the ground, that it was 'the most typical novel in world literature'.

The Formalists, then, saw literary language as a set of deviations from a norm, a kind of linguistic violence: literature is a 'special' kind of language, in contrast to the 'ordinary' language we commonly use. But to spot a deviation implies being able to identify the norm from which it swerves. Though 'ordinary language' is a concept beloved of some Oxford philosophers, the ordinary language of Oxford philosophers has little in common with the ordinary language of Glaswegian dockers. The language both social groups use to write love letters usually differs from the way they talk to the local vicar. The idea that there is a single 'normal' language, a common currency shared equally by all members of society, is an illusion. Any actual language consists of a highly complex range of discourses, differentiated according to class, region, gender, status and so on, which can by no means be neatly unified into a single homogeneous linguistic community. One person's norm may be another's deviation: 'ginnel' for 'alleyway' may be poetic in Brighton but ordinary language in Barnsley. Even the most 'prosaic' text of the fifteenth century may sound 'poetic' to us today because of its archaism. If we were to stumble across an isolated scrap of writing from some long-vanished civilization, we could not tell whether it was 'poetry' or not merely by inspecting it, since we might have no access to that society's 'ordinary' discourses; and even if further research were to reveal that it was 'deviatory', this would still not prove that it was poetry as not all linguistic deviations are poetic. Slang, for example. We would not be able to tell just by looking at it that it was not a piece of 'realist' literature, without much more information about the way it actually functioned as a piece of writing within the society in question.

It is not that the Russian Formalists did not realize all this. They recognized that norms and deviations shifted around from one social or historical context to another -that 'poetry' in this sense depends on where you happen to be standing at the time. The fact that a piece of language was 'estranging' did not guarantee that it was always and everywhere so: it was estranging only against a certain normative linguistic background, and if this altered then the writing might cease to be perceptible as literary. If everyone used phrases like 'unravished bride of quietness' in ordinary pub conversation, this kind of language might cease to be poetic. For the Formalists, in other words, 'literariness' was a function of the differential relations between one sort of discourse and another; it was not an eternally given property. They were not out to define 'literature', but 'literariness' - special uses of language, which could be found in 'literary' texts but also in many places outside them. Anyone who believes that 'literature' can be defined by such special uses of language has to face the fact that there is more metaphor in Manchester than there is in Marvell. There is no 'literary' device - metonymy, synecdoche, litotes, chiasmus and so on - which is not quite intensively used in daily discourse.

Nevertheless, the Formalists still presumed that 'making strange' was the essence of the literary. It was just that they relativized this use of language, saw it as a matter of contrast between one type of speech and another. But what if I were to hear someone at the next pub table remark 'This is awfully squiggly handwriting!' Is this 'literary' or 'non-literary' language? As a matter of fact it is 'literary' language, because it comes from Knut Hamsun's novel Hunger. But how do I know that it is literary? It doesn't, after all, focus any particular attention on itself as a verbal performance. One answer to the question of how I know that this is literary is that it comes from Knut Hamsun's novel Hunger. It is part of a text which I read as 'fictional', which announces itself as a 'novel', which may be put on university literature syllabuses and so on. The context tells me that it is literary; but the language itself has no inherent properties or qualities which might distinguish it from other kinds of discourse, and someone might well say this in a pub without being admired for their literary dexterity. To think of literature as the Formalists do is really to think of all literature as poetry. Significantly, when the Formalists came to consider prose writing, they often simply extended to it the kinds of technique they had used with poetry. But literature is usually judged to contain much besides poetry - to include, for example, realist or naturalistic writing which is not linguistically self-conscious or self-exhibiting in any striking way. People sometimes call writing 'fine' precisely because it doesn't draw undue attention to itself: they admire its laconic plainness or low-keyed sobriety. And what about jokes, football chants and slogans, newspaper headlines, advertisements, which are often verbally flamboyant but not generally classified as literature?

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