What Isn't Literature?



E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

My title seems to imply a skepticism almost total about the validity of any boundary lines marking off literature from non-literature. Therefore, let me state immediately that such an extreme position, arguing the absence of any distinction between literature and non-literature would be false, demonstrably false, by the following demonstration: I can gather a group of educated persons and set before them a series of texts paired off in groups of two. I can then ask them to write down on each text either the letter L or the letter N, standing for "literature" and "non-literature," I can choose the examples with care to exclude borderline cases, and then look confidently at the results of the experiment. After some trial and error, I can easily devise a list which always produces uniform and unanimous judgments from all educated persons. Armed with these absolutely consistent results, I can state with assurance that among educated speakers of English there is a genuine and demonstrable distinction between literature and non-literature. Though I have never heard of this experiment being performed, and have not troubled to perform it myself, I believe we could all agree that it probably could be performed successfully. If, for instance, the

pairs of examples always consisted of poems by Keats, technical reports from *Science* magazine, and sonnets of Shakespeare, the results would be reassuring.

On the other hand, I am equally sure that I could devise an experiment which would produce results that were anything but unanimous and reassuring. I could include letters by Matthew Arnold, and Jane Austen, histories by Macaulay, Hume and Eugene Genovese, biographies by Boswell and Mary Moorman, political speeches by Burke and Harold Macmillan, legal opinions by Cardozo and Warren Burger, scientific works by Darwin and Heisenberg, and a number of examples of still more doubtful classification by writers who have not yet entered the canon. In this experiment, we can be sure that the results will be extremely varied in a number of respects. We would have to report that our usage panel assigned L to the letters of Jane Austen by a vote of 70 per cent to 30 per cent, but that they withheld the classification from the letters of Jane Carlyle by a majority of 60 to 40. And we would find a further inconsistency in the pattern of voting. Some respondents, who side with the majority in one case, will side with the minority in another. We can predict these results also with some confidence, and perhaps someday an experimenter will decide to confirm this exceedingly obvious prediction. But even with these results before us, we need not suppose that the one experiment somehow negates the other, or calls into doubt the existence of such a thing as literature. No one doubts the reality of chairs, and yet nobody knows where chairs fade off into sofas and ottomans on one side and stools on the other; any similar experiments conducted with chairs would be likely to yield similar results.

So, my aim is not to suggest that the class literature doesn't exist as an understandable and real entity, any less than does the class chair. Moreover, I don't want to suggest that the great variety of borderline cases is an intellectual embarrassment for serious literary study and criticism. The word *science* suffers the

same difficulties; so does the word *art*. So, of course, does the word made famous by Wittgenstein, the word *game*. One of the great insights to be gained from reading Wittgenstein is a realization that language and thought require us to use classifications which slip and slide into domains of indispensable vagueness. We get into trouble only when we assume that the classification really *has* a boundary line or means the same thing in different uses. The only embarrassment to be suffered from the amorphousness of words is the attempt to pretend that they are not amorphous. Literary theory gets into trouble only when it pretends that the word *literature* can be satisfactorily defined, and then tries to erect generalizations on such a delusive definition. My skepticism, then, is not aimed at the existence of the class, literature, but at the attempt to falsely constrict its existence through definition. This paper might be considered a defense of literature against literary theory.

I think, though, that justice demands a sympathetic understanding of the dilemma of literary theory and the reasons it should wish to make definitions of *literature*. First of all, literary theorists share with the rest of us a tendency to assume that a word which we all understand *must* have a definable meaning. We know what literature is; let us therefore make that knowledge precise by distinguishing those traits which make a work literature from those which do not. Now, what I tried to show in my two imaginary experiments is that we know what literature is only vaguely, so that any attempt to remove that vagueness in a definition actually falsifies our knowledge of the word, rather than clarifies it. To define is to mark off boundaries distinguishing what is literature from what is not, but our knowledge of literature has no such defining boundaries; there are many cases about which we are not sure—important cases, not just peripheral ones. What the theorist should understand is that his definitions do not create literature, but can only attempt to clarify and make explicit what is already implicit in our use of

the word. The theorist who defines literature is in a position exactly analogous to the linguistic theorist who formulates a grammar. All sophisticated linguists know that their job is to formulate explicit rules for what is implicitly known by every native speaker. The native speaker is the court of last resort; he can never be wrong; only the grammarian can be. If the rules of the grammar do not coincide with or precisely describe the usage of native speakers, then the grammar is defective. So it is with definitions of literature; if they deviate in the least from the usage of educated men, it is the definition that is wrong, and not common usage. The literary theorist is like the grammarian in that he describes and clarifies a reality, but does not create the reality he describes.

It may be that the defining theorist retains an uneasy feeling that his work is not just descriptive, but prescriptive, that he has the job of telling us what we *ought* to conceive literature to be. There are a number of reasons he should wish to take this upon himself, and certainly with theorists like Coleridge, who had a sense of cultural mission, such a reformulation of our concept of literature is at once noble and valid. I shall be dealing with such normative aims a little further along in this paper. But we should be clear that present-day literary theorists of the academy have not for the most part taken on the prophet's robe. Their aim is to follow in the footsteps of Aristotle, and describe that which *is*, to do it better than anyone has before, and then to give a solid intellectual foundation to the great enterprise or industry which is the academic study of literature. The subject exists; the field exists; let us be clear about the essential nature of our subject. Then we will know how to proceed in our work, what problems to tackle, and what methods are particularly appropriate to the subject as we have defined it. The hopes are worthy, and the history of criticism continues to be strewn with the wrecks of these hopes. I concede that even unsuccessful descriptive definitions can be helpfully illuminating, of course. But the hope

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of success is a false hope, and can be proved to be a false hope. Like many other boys, I tried for years, off and on, to find a method for trisecting an angle with ruler and compass alone. Like the tribe of literary theorists who still attempt to define literature, I refused to give up the challenge, and spent many amusing but fruitless hours devising ever more sophisticated methods with ruler and compass. I was only willing to stop when a precocious mathematical freshman at college explained to me that I was trying to solve a problem having three unknowns by using only two equations; hence the attempt really was logically fruitless and impossible. I wonder whether such merely logical proofs will ever stop people from trying to trisect angles or define literature.

The reason I want to defend literature against the definitions of literary theory is not just a purely logical and disinterested reason, though that has its own delight and interest. I want to expose the futility of such definitions because they have done and continue to do a certain amount of harm. Besides being misleading, they always confine and constrict the subject in a way that makes the teaching and study of literature more narrow and one-sided than is good for ourselves, our students and our culture. In particular, the aesthetic orientation of the usual definitions has tended to aestheticize our choice of texts-to-be-studied and our way of teaching those texts. If literature were just a sub-species of the category *art* and if *art* were something that is only properly understood and appreciated under aesthetic principles, then our literary and cultural lives would be much impoverished. For we have not yet escaped from the fact that the only really successful delineation of the aesthetic mode of perception has been achieved by Kant and his successors. And the hallmark of this aesthetic mode is the disinterested contemplation of beauty. This high calling is in no way to be scorned or underestimated, and I wish to avoid even the hint of doing so. Nonetheless, definitions of literature in our time have tended to be oriented to the aesthetic as a guiding assumption of

the definition. And to regard literature as primarily and essentially aesthetic is not only a mistake; it is also a very unfortunate narrowing of our responses to literature, and our perceptions of its breadth and possibilities.

Let me therefore return to the reasons for the results of our two experiments. We were able to achieve complete and unanimous agreement about what literature is, in the first experiment, because we chose texts which belong to literature by virtue of fulfilling a number of quite different canonical traits. And the non-literary texts of the experiment were so chosen that they, too, could be excluded from literature on *every* implicit ground that underlies our normal use of the word. In the second experiment, however, the results were uncertain because the works chosen exhibited some traits which qualified them and other traits which might normally disqualify them. The predictability of our experimental results resided in the variability of the criteria that we use in classifying a text as literature. To explain this point, which we all implicitly know in any case, I will present a few examples of these sometimes conflicting criteria.

The most obvious (and presently the central) criterion we use is that of genre: poems, stories, plays. Now even if these fictional works, which earlier theorists called imitations, were the only works which we happened to call literature, we would find ourselves beset by problems of definition and classification; for the genres themselves merge into hybrid forms which cause just as many problems as the great big genre which we call literature. Take the example of poems, which we now think of as any text in verse, or perhaps as any text exhibiting uneven line lengths on the printed page. But even this tolerant, modern conception, about as broad as any native speaker is likely to conceive in using the word, leads to uncertainty of classification, as may be shown in several instances where prose has been converted into poetry by the simple expedient of transcribing the prose in irregular line lengths. In addition, the question, "Is this text poetry?", suffers still further difficulties and complications

when the normative criterion of poetry, also part of our vague conception, is brought to bear. No long poem can be all poetry, asserted Coleridge, and many educated persons refuse to accept as "true" or "genuine" poems certain texts which fail to meet their qualitative standards. The texts are excluded from the class called *poems* as rejects that do not meet the approval of a quality controller. They lack some trait which must be superadded to the mere trait of line-length or form. So powerful is this normative and conceptual principle of classification that some ancients, who stressed imitation or fictionality as the important defining trait of poetry, did not conceive of lyric poems as belonging among the recognized genres.

Let me quickly enumerate some further confusions in the very center of our sense of literature, before moving ahead to the positive conclusion which I intend to draw. My first example is literature by association, on the pattern of guilt by association. Milton is one of our great poets; his work stands at the center of the canon. Because he is a canonical writer, some of his texts, like *Areopagitica* and *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* are included within literature by a large number of persons. Wordsworth is a canonical poet; into literature, therefore, goes his travel book on the Lake Country, along with Dr. Johnson's *Tour of the Hebrides*, under the following principle: literature is anything written by a great literary figure. Another principle is that any text in any genre may be included in literature if it exhibits some excellence of form or style. Nearly everyone would include the Platonic dialogues because they are imitations. On the other hand, are there good reasons for excluding Aristotle's work? Perhaps, but if we exclude his *Poetics*, why should we not exclude Wordsworth's *Prefaces?* And if we include the *Poetics* of Aristotle, on what grounds do we exclude his *Metaphysics*, a far more interesting, imaginative and nontechnical work. Shelley, as we all know, wished to include even some legislative statutes of parliaments under poetry because they

created order and harmony out of disorder. Modern usage has not accepted Shelley's comprehensive principle altogether, but we have introduced our own versions of his expansive literary imperialism. We accept Nietzsche and Kierkegaard of course, but also Tacitus and Darwin. I recently asserted that Darwin was a much more interesting figure in 19th century literature than was Walter Pater, and I mentioned explicitly *The Origin of Species*. This was challenged in subsequent discussion by the late W. K. Wimsatt, who said I should have chosen *The Voyage of the Beagle*, which had more right to be called a literary work. A correspondent wrote me that I was just being eccentric, and that I knew perfectly well that *The Origin of Species* was not a literary work. Yet so various are the criteria by which we actually make such judgments, that I was able to direct him to four expert authorities who had preceded me in print in considering *The Origin of Species* to be literature.

Need I call your attention to the fact that a great many persons consider the Bible to be great literature? But I do not think we would find unanimity in the criteria on which this judgment is based. Some would stress the stylistic magnificence of the Authorized Version. In a large literature course, when I first started teaching, the Bible was conceived to be literature largely because of its poems and stories. But the criterion which many people use in deciding to call the Bible literature is very similar to the Coleridgean principle of bringing the whole soul of man into activity, and this is a principle which has for me a great appeal. Reading the Bible brings the whole soul of man into activity. And this principle can be extended or attenuated to include everything that De Quincey called "The Literature of Power." But it cannot be overstressed that this principle of engaging a reader on more than one level of his being—not just the intellectual or just the emotional, but both—is not and cannot be a truly objective principle of classification. It is in its very essence subjective because the perlocutionary effects of a text

are highly variable effects, differently engaging the hearts and minds of various readers. I cannot remember ever reading a book that more engaged my rapt soul than the small volume by Niels Bohr on the relation of atomic structure to the periodic table! Order out of chaos—high poetry in Shelley's sense. For me, that was and is a work of literature, one which altogether obliterates any clear division between the literature of knowledge and the literature of power.

Is it any wonder that no single definition of literature has embraced the whole continuum of uses to which educated persons put the word? Every attempt to make such a definition, without exception, has ended up being a stipulative definition, that is to say, a definition which stipulates how the word literature *ought* to be used, but entirely fails to define how it actually is used by great numbers of educated native speakers. John Ellis recently tried to turn the trick, in an otherwise sensible book called the *Theory of Literary Criticism*, by distinguishing between trait-definitions and use-definitions, the latter being the right way out of the muddle and confusion which surround the word *literature*. That was a sophisticated and intelligent tactic. The only defect in its performance was that his use-definition did not in fact embrace all the uses to which we put the word *literature*. Ellis was forced into the position that uses which fail to correspond to his use-definition are just wrong uses. So we were given yet another stipulative definition of literature: that is, a definition which tries to legislate, but does not actually describe the way competent persons actually use the word.

Now for my positive conclusions. First of all, I have argued that while the word literature embraces an enormous variety, and implies an unsteady, changeable system of criteria, the word is nonetheless meaningful and not entirely arbitrary. While some might include Darwin and Niels Bohr, nobody would include the article "Visual Disturbances after Prolonged Perceptual Isolation" by Heron, Doane, and Scott. The word

literature has a very great range, but does not embrace all that is written down. Secondly, I believe that the enormous range of the word, embracing as it does both descriptive (that is, generic) criteria, as well as normative criteria, is not at all an accident. The widespread use of the word arose late in the Victorian period in order to fill an important cultural need, and particularly an educational need. Humanistic instruction at the schools and universities had always included a very wide range of texts that were considered important or valuable on a variety of grounds. This remained true so long as the classics formed the basis of humane education in Europe and America. When one read the classics, one read Tacitus and Pliny as well as Vergil and Homer. Nobody then argued whether or not *De Rerum Naturae* by Lucretius was truly literature or truly a poem. To read it was part of a classical education. So, I think it was no accident that, when classical education became displaced by mass education in the local, national languages, that was also the time when the word *literature* in its more or less modern uses began to occur more and more frequently. A word was needed to embrace in the national language the great variety of canonical texts that were required to replace the classical canon. It was the Victorian scholar and educator Edward Dowden who warned against a limitation of the word *literature* to stand only for belletristic writing, to the exclusion of philosophical and other valuable texts.

In recent years, we modern educators have not heeded Dowden's advice. In our eagerness to show that literature was a subject and a substance *sui generis*, with its own special and appropriate methods, we lost sight of the larger educational goals that helped foster the currency of the word itself. We decided to give the word a predominantly aesthetic flavor, and to subsume literature under art. In order to narrow the word in this way, we were hurled into endless attempts to define literature to suit its special claims as a form of art rather than as a canon of texts worthy to be taught, read, and preserved in a

culture. My interest in showing that these attempts at definition have resulted in merely stipulative definitions has also had an educational motivation, and I have tried to suggest that the narrowness of a predominantly aesthetic definition can lead, and sometimes has led, to a narrowness of educational goals. In the heyday of the literary study of literature, which meant the aesthetic study of literature, I was once scolded by a class of sophomores for having assigned them Mill's *Essay on Liberty*. Of course, they were right in a sense. It was, contractually, a literary course, and what I was giving them to read did not correspond with what they had been taught to accept as literature. But in a more traditional and still current sense of literature and humane education, they were absolutely wrong. Let me, then, end with my own stipulative definition of literature. Literature includes any text worthy to be taught to students by teachers of literature, when these texts are not being taught to students in other departments of a school or university. That is a stipulative definition for which I claim mainly this virtue: it encourages us to think out our responsibilities in humanistic education, and make curricular choices on the basis of those responsibilities. That seems to me a better and immensely more interesting foundation for the teaching of literature than one derived from a stipulative definition of literature as art.

Why Theorize about Literature?



Edward Davenport

We need a theory of what literature is only when we have some problem with our own intuitive or commonsense notion of literature. Thus most people are never moved to inquire what literature is: they have a rough notion which suffices. Without a specific problem with our present notion of literature we are not only not moved to ask for a better theory, but if by some chance we were so moved, we would have a difficult time answering the question; for in order to recognize a superior theory of what literature is, we need to know what is wrong or problematic about the notion we already have. The kind of answer we want depends upon the kind of problem we want to solve. How do problems with a commonsense notion of literature arise?

It is possible for a student to read enthusiastically and widely in college, and even in graduate school, without feeling constrained to alter his intuitive or commonsense notion of literature inherited from childhood. If the student is not in the habit of comparing his rough theory closely with his experience of reading he may never notice any conflicts, and this without being a superficial reader. Northrop Frye goes so far as to s that "a critic may have a precise and candid taste and yet