

What Is Literature?

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The classic intuition about the nature of literature—and indeed art in general—is that it depends upon the ability to offer a valuable experience apart from or in addition to the practical value of the information it conveys. This experience has been traditionally described as pleasure or delight and was often attributed to beauty or sublimity. Modern critics have become suspicious of these ideal sources of artistic experience. Beginning with Edmund Burke and his conception of the sublime, the modern aesthetic has expanded to include an element of discomfort and disorientation. Anti-traditional artistic experiments beginning in the nineteenth century have made beauty and pleasure seem like very limited conceptions of the experience that art can offer, and twentieth-century audiences learned to accept puzzlement, confusion, boredom, shock, and even disgust as valuable artistic experiences, so that by now it seems imprudent to define what art offers any more narrowly than to say that it is an experience due to a work of art and that it is a valuable one of some kind. I will venture beyond that to say that literature must be interesting in some way, however difficult or disturbing it may also be. If aiming at providing an valuable or interesting experience of some kind is sufficient to define art, the restriction from art to literature requires only that the experience be produced by a written text.

Written texts, of course, can interest us in ways that do not make them count as literature. They can please us by giving good news, for instance, news that is flattering to our self-interest, or by expressing congenial sentiments, showing us the world they way we want it to be. The chief problem for a definition of literature is how to distinguish positive experiences of this kind from ones that are specifically literary. This is where Kant's notion of the aesthetic played its part, with its claim that the pleasure we take in art is “disinterested.” There is something valuable in Kant's observation. Interested pleasures are the ones we are most concerned to eliminate as the source of literary pleasure, since, for

one thing, we are attempting to define a source of pleasure that can derive from works that were created thousands of years ago and typically have no connection with our current circumstances. The trouble is that disinterestedness seems merely negative, the absence of a quality rather than its presence. It is even more troubling that literary works by their very nature do incite intense interest. They offer us deeply moving words or allow us to experience imaginary events as if they were real. They allow us to feel about them something like the way we would feel if the experiences they evoke were real. It is also a drawback to Kant's account of the aesthetic that it is deeply entangled with his philosophy of mind.

Kant was concerned to separate aesthetic judgment from the mere tastes that govern ordinary life. Instead, he thought of aesthetic experience as a kind of psychological bridge between the kingdoms of freedom and necessity, between ethical and physical existence. What he shares, though, with taste-theorists like Hume is the assumption that art can be understood on the same principles that govern our responses to natural objects-- that there is no essential difference, for example, between responding aesthetically to a sunset and to a picture of one or to a literary description of one. What the artist can be thought of as doing, then, is endowing the aesthetic object with the qualities that naturally evoke pleasurable aesthetic responses in their real-world models. Thus it is not surprising that Kant's theory of the aesthetic focuses primarily upon our response to nature rather than to art. Kant seems to suggest that in confronting a work of art we are undergoing a once-removed experience of the qualities of the real thing. Later discussions of the aesthetic retain this attitude. Works of art are talked about as possessing "aesthetic qualities" in the same way that natural objects do.

This view of the aesthetic has some *prima facie* plausibility. After all, much of the art of the past has sought to borrow the beauty of things that are themselves beautiful. The fact is, though, that many of the objects that give us great pleasure in art do not please us in life. It is the way that they are evoked in art that gives them aesthetic appeal. A further

complication for the aesthetic view is that we do not respond to the qualities of artistic works regardless of how they acquired those qualities. We respond to artistic works, like all other human performances, employing our notion of the standards that have been established by previous performances in that activity or that derive from our general sense of the scope and limits of human powers. This cannot be the case with natural objects. We respond to their very qualities themselves so long as they are indeed natural. No special knowledge of nature is required, whereas those who are familiar with the practices of an art employ their knowledge of that art in the process of appreciation. So where we recognize, for instance, that one author's style has been borrowed from another's, or that a writer is falling back upon a cliché, our pleasure is thereby diminished. Art seems to lose some of its power for us when we can see too clearly how it has been achieved--when it loses, in other words, its impression of originality. The point becomes even more obvious when we discover that a painting is a forgery, that parts of a literary work have been plagiarized, or that a musical performance has been electronically enhanced in a surreptitious way. The implication for our definition of literature is that the value of the experience literature offers must be due to the skill of the artist. If the work offers value only on account of the self-interested appeal of the information it conveys, that is not artistic value, and if there is no skill in the performance, it will not offer pleasure at all. The requirement of skill does the same work as Kant's conception of the aesthetic, excluding merely practical interest while, unlike Kant's theory, offering a positive requirement. Works of literature must be designed to offer an interesting experience that can only be accomplished with skill.

The skill requirement is appealing on a number of levels. For one thing, it allows us to recognize that art, including literary art, is like so many other human activities in which we take pleasure in recognizing skill relative to the expectations that we have developed for the activity in question. In responding to art we are not responding to a mere physical or textual object. We are responding to a human action, a performance. Both in literature and in the speech of daily life we experience the pleasure that something is unusually well

expressed. The skill requirement also draws our attention to the fact that the evaluation of art is not something that takes place merely after the fact, in the form of horse-race comparisons among the greats. The act of valuing is caught up immediately in the pleasure we take in reading literature. We do not experience the pleasure of the work and then evaluate it. Rather, the pleasure we take is simultaneous with our recognition of its skill. We need not consciously compare it with other performances we have seen, but we experience the way it provides us with something of its own in comparison with other performances of the same kind.

It may not seem like much of an advantage to have connected literature with other kinds of performances, though, if we cannot say specify what distinguishes a specifically literary performance. What, precisely, is the nature of literary skill? I will offer the following suggestion: assuming that the field of literature is composed of written works, literary works are ones that are able to provide a valuable reading experience to an audience by the skillful choice, invention, or arrangement of words, themes, or narrated events. I say that literary works must be able to provide a valuable reading experience to an audience rather than that they actually do so because some works may never manage to reach an audience, yet they should still be defined as literary works. Obviously the audience must have certain qualifications; familiarity with the relevant language and literary conventions is required for valid appreciation, and some literature demands more of this than others. Esoteric or historically distant works may require expert knowledge, but such knowledge is not typically definitive of the literary audience.

Before I discuss the adequacy of this list of skills in accounting for the character of literary activity, it is important to note that the definition I have provided--and it will need to be augmented--implies that the deployment of skill in creating a valuable experience is intentional, but it does not assume that creating such an experience is the primary or only intention embodied in the work. This is important because criticism has traditionally recognized the literary character and value of writings that are not intended only or

primarily to offer a literary experience. Emerson's Essays, for instance, "The Gettysburg Address," along with many other famous orations, and works of history like Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire and Parkman's England and France in North America are all examples of works that, in addition to their primary communicative aims, succeed in providing an eminently valuable and interesting experience to the reader, one that makes them worth reading for their own sake. The entire genres of autobiography and memoir lie in this middle zone, embracing both literature and history. It is worth noting in this context that the concept of literature is a late-arriving one, and that many of the works we now think of as paradigm cases of the literary--Virgil's Aeneid, for example--would not have been considered by Virgil's contemporaries to be "literary" in the sense of merely offering a particular kind of experience. Works of this kind were also considered to be historical, moral, and political, with no sense that there was any tension between these different aspects. The absence of practical or didactic motives does not constitute literature. Rather, what constitutes literature is the power to create a valuable experience for the reader, whatever other motives may be in play. This being the case, the distinction between poetics and rhetoric is neither a very clear nor a very useful one. By welcoming works of history, moral essays, and even science into the category of the literary we are only recognizing its proper kinship with older conceptions like rhetoric and poetry.

What constitutes the literary, then, and leaves out most treatises in economics, politics, science, and mathematics, is the ability on the part of the author to make the work interesting by means of skill in composition. By this token we can say that Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations is a work of literature--though not necessarily a great one--whereas Marx's Capital is not. There are numerous passages in Smith which one can read for the pleasure of composition whereas such passage in Marx are rare. It might seem consistent with my approach to say that all written compositions are intended to hold a reader's interest, and so all of them are literary and most of them are failures. But not all of them aim to go beyond the interest of the information they are conveying. Most professionalized

discourse assumes that specialized readers have the motive to extract the information being conveyed without the enhancements of literary interest.

Let us go back, then, to our list of skills which I suggest can account for the appeal that is possible in writing, skills finding employment in the choice, invention, or arrangement of words, themes, or narrated events. Readers are affected by works that display these skills to the degree that they reach at least a competent level of performance compared with other works they have encountered as long as the works have been produced in the right way, not by mere imitation or fraud.¹ One can be impressed with a skill, of course, without being particularly interested in the display of that skill. The skill that goes into shot-putting, for example, leaves me cold. So the emphasis must be on the experience itself. The appeal to skill in the choice and arrangement of words seems relatively straightforward, and though the invention of new words is a relatively rare technique, some authors have indulged in it richly. The choice, invention, or arrangement of narrative events also seems unproblematic. This way of putting it can accommodate both fictions that are made up from scratch and historical narratives involving a complicated process of selection and arrangement. The part of the definition that raises the most problems is the reference to themes. Themes, of course, play a different role in works that are primarily didactic but have literary value and ones that are primarily literary. In the first type they are the necessary basis of the work and their literary interest is secondary whereas in the second they may be chosen for artistic effect as, for instance, the right kind of notions to attribute to a certain kind of character; this is what Aristotle seems to mean by dianoia. In either case, however, what makes for an interesting experience is not simply the truth value of the ideas but their experiential aspect; the most sublime conceptions, after

¹ Some philosophers deny that authors actually invent or create anything from scratch; what they do is nothing more than select attributes from the pre-existing possibilities; inventing Mr. Pickwick, for example, only involves identifying him as a person and then attributing to him a subset of the known human attributes. This way of thinking about invention departs radically from the common understanding, but nothing important hinges on it; readers who have qualms about the notion of invention may simply ignore that element of my definition, since for them invention is subsumed into the notion of choice.

all, can be expressed in a wooden terms, while the paltriest ones can be expressed with glamor. In appreciating literature one of the things we most value is the depth and subtlety with which a conception of the world is being presented, but this does not mean we have to agree with it to value it. A modern secular reader of Milton need not endorse his theology to recognize the value of his work. A work that is interesting based simply on the informational content it conveys and apart from any skill in its manner of expression cannot count as a work of literature by virtue of that interest alone.

Obviously the skill I am placing at the center my definition of the literary is not merely formal. It involves verbal, cognitive, and narratological resources; it comes across in just about any way an author can make use of words. Authors can display verbal or narrative ingenuity, formal cleverness or grace, poetic suggestion, mimesis, sonority, quality of vision or observation captured in words, humor, iconoclasm, power to shock, emotional evocativeness, sublimity, intensity, and power to evoke the sensorium. Skill can be directed to the traditional goals of art or to the subversion or evasion of these goals. The only criterion that cannot be removed is providing interest to the reader; that may not be a work's primary or even secondary goal but it must be accomplished.

If the use of skill to create a valuable experience is sufficient to define literature, it may seem unnecessary to refer to authorial intention, but the elimination of intention leads to a problem, for what if a recognizably literary work simply fails to be interesting because of its utter lack of skill? If the defining element of a literary work its ability to provide an interesting experience to the reader, then a failed work is not a work of literature at all. This is unsatisfactory, for in the case of most literary productions, even when they fail utterly there is simply nothing else for them to be. The most wretched poem in the world is a poem nonetheless. Here the intention of the author must be definitive. Failed literary works can typically be identified by their attempt to fulfill the requirements of a standard literary genre, though they can also sometimes be identified because they are attempting experiments that can only be literary in character; some of Gertrude Stein's writing comes

to mind. The need to recognize the properly literary character of literary failure demands that intention be included in the definition: if literary works fail to be interesting to the reader, they must at least be intended by their authors to be able to do so.²

So here's the definition:

A work of literature is a written work intended by its author to provide a valuable reading experience to an audience through the skillful choice, invention, or arrangement of words, themes, or narrated events (even if this is not the author's only or primary intention in creating it).

Questions and objections

What if someone derives a valuable experience from a work that neither gives good news nor expresses congenial sentiments nor displays literary skill as I have defined it? Doesn't it still have to be considered a literary work? My definition does depend upon the assumption that there are only so many sources of a valuable experience in words, so if we can exclude the experiences of getting good news and reading congenial sentiments, the only other likely candidate is the skill that goes into literature. It is true that if written utterances fail to provide a valuable experience on the grounds I've given then my definition fails, but this will only be a problem if someone can suggest a fourth source of value.

Here is a candidate. There is a certain pleasure in reading almost anything in a language one is learning the basics of, and obviously the pleasure is based neither on the content of the work nor the skill of the author. It has often been said that there is a kind of

² The point of this definition will be to include works that have literary goals as their primary purpose; works that have secondary intentions to provide literary value but completely fail to do so will not even be identifiable as literary, though we may have other evidence of the author's intentions. In that case they offer valid evidence of a lack of literary skill even if they are in a non-literary form.

poetry in the very composition of a language—that “language is fossil poetry,” as Emerson put it--and the experience of learning a new language does seem to have a certain poetic and therefore at least proto-literary quality. This is in spite of the fact that the sentences may have been composed merely for the purpose of instruction and have no literary value at all. The pleasure of a new language derives, in my experience, not from the most basic acquaintance with new meaningful sounds but from the way the language works within its phonetic and grammatical medium once the learner has begun to grasp and experience it. I do not think it is unreasonable to describe this pleasure as an effect of skill, the skill of working within a determined acoustical register, even if that skill does not belong to a single or identifiable person. It is not so much the skill that went into composing the utterance as much as it is the skill that went into devising the instrument, and it is often due as much to the charm of individual words as it is to sentences or works. The skill that goes into devising a language is a collective one, but this also suggests kinship with literary appreciation; we do not credit writers of the distant past, for instance, with having personally invented the worlds they convey to us or all of the terms in which they convey it, but these collective cultural resources undeniably constitute part of the value of their works.

If the reader will not concede that the pleasure of reading a new language is a response to skill of a certain collective kind, it is also germane to point out that foreign language learning depends upon a certain lack of appropriate knowledge and that its quasi-literary charm diminishes with further learning. The charm of new languages reminds us of the literary potential of language itself and our sensitivity to the skill thus invested.

What if a receding wave were to leave a poem that provides a valuable experience on the sand of a beach? It is best to take the high road with this kind of counter-example: wave poems are not written, so any experiences they might provide cannot count as literary. What this example points to is that all artifacts of culture are physical and so can in theory be replicated by chance, though only against astronomic odds. The astonishment that a

wave-poem would produce would most likely be astonishment that a wave could produce a replica of language at all, not to mention a replica of an intelligible utterance. It would not be a recognition of the quality of the poem. We would respond to it more the way we respond to seeing a cloud drift into the shape of a whale or a weasel--it's not that the image is such a fine one but that we can see it there at all. But what if a wave were to produce a poem that a literate reader would want to copy down before it was erased, a poem, perhaps, like one of Frank O'Hara's just before O'Hara's were becoming known? It would still be a pseudo-poem produced by accident. None of its words would have the utterance-meaning necessary to license inference or interpretation. The most we could say about it would be that it would be a fine poem if someone had written it, and we would be able to say what it would have meant if attributed to one author or another, or to ourselves.

What if one experiences the value afforded by the skill of a work without being able to recognize what that skill is? The definition I have offered does not insist that the audience have any particular insight into the skill being displayed in a work. One can experience the value created by a skill without being able to make a well-informed assessment of how it works. One has only to be able to recognize the quality of its effects.

What role does this way of defining literature leave for literary institutions?

Literary institutions play a more direct role in other current attempts to define literature than they do in the one I have offered. One prevalent theory defines art, including literary art, according to whether a work is recognizably participating in an established artistic practice. Let us call this the historical view. It faces a strong difficulty, the difficulty of first art, which is that the first person to invent an artistic practice is not following an established practice and therefore according to the definition is not creating a work of art. But this seems clearly self-contradictory. The first cave-girl who notices that a blotch on a cave-wall looks like a bird and decides to improve on it by making her own version is not, on the

historical account, practicing art. But in the skill-theory I have proposed, the girl's drawing of a bird succeeds in being art by virtue of her ability to provide a valuable experience, however rudimentary. It is not the likeness to other art that makes it art. It is the experience it offers.

Another current theory is the institutional view, in which a work of art becomes a work of art merely by virtue of the artist's gesture in putting it forward as such, the artist being a person who belongs to an artworld, an interlocking set of institutions that provide the artist with his or her authority as an artist. There is no concept of skill here; what the artist uses is his or her authority in being an artist. The institutional theory arose in response to works like Marcel Duchamp's "ready-mades," which are physically identical with their banal counterparts sold in stores but which acquire their artistic status simply by being presented as art. The circular quality of this theory seems to me insuperable, and it is unable to say why the institutions in question should be thought of as art institutions. The skill-conception of art, by contrast, recognizes what Duchamp has added to the experience of the objects he has chosen by means of the wit and whimsy needed to submit a urinal for exhibition in an art-show. Again we are directed to the artist's performance rather than simply to the object in which the work is embodied.

It might seem as if clause two of my definition comes close to replicating the institutional view because it emphasizes the artists' intentions rather than anything they succeeds in doing creatively, but that intention is not directed merely to creating a work of art by fiat but to accomplishing a certain purpose--to provide a valuable experience for the viewer. This makes it a work of art even when that intention fails. Works of this kind have no distracting ontological replicas for us to contend with. No matter how far they fall short of fulfilling the goals of a work of art, there is nothing else for them to be.

The institutional view seems more relevant to visual art than to literature, though literary ready-mades have been attempted. It is also worth noting that the institutional theory cannot account for one of the literary phenomena covered by the skill-theory--that

works which are not created to belong primarily to the literary field nevertheless can achieve the status of works of literature by virtue of the valuable experience they provide.

We cannot define art according to the institutions it creates because we need to know what art is before we can identify those institutions. But this is not at all to scant the importance of artistic or literary institutions. Though the use of verbal skill to create valuable experiences goes on in non-literary forms all around us--in oral genres and in forms of writing that have other than strictly literary goals--literary practices provide the fullest and most specialized outlet for the skills that animate the verbal imagination and a dedicated forum for their ongoing development. The most paradigmatically literary genres like fiction and lyric poetry permit the most far-flung and unfettered experimentation with the familiar literary resources. Still, it is also no accident that the most common resources of literature are borrowed directly from the arts of conversation--storytelling, word play, wit, and eloquence--arts in which people provide each other with valuable experiences through the use of verbal skill even if not in written form.

What if the value in the experience of the work is generated by misreading? Here I would point out that I have referred in the definition to written works rather than texts, the distinction being that texts are mere strings of characters but that works are texts under a certain interpretation. I assume that the audience has a sufficiently accurate understanding of the work so that its members can be thought of as reading the same work. Would a dull work of numismatics become literary if it could be systematically misinterpreted as a fictional narrative? Obviously it would become so for the people doing the misinterpreting, but they are laboring under a misapprehension and so reading a different work from the one intended. Would this new work be a work of literature? Perhaps it would if it is able to provide a valuable experience to an audience unable to recognize that the skill in question belongs to the one who invented the interpretation rather than to the original author. In a very real sense it would acquiring a new author. It could also become a literary work for

others who could recognize the skill of its construction while knowing that the skill was in the interpretation rather than the construction of the original work. There are many works that could be improved by misinterpretations that take fatuity and sentimentality as ironic. It is still hard for me not to enjoy Simon and Garfunkel's "I Am a Rock" as a piece of humor even though I now realize that, unfortunately, it was meant to be serious.