

Empirical Research and the *Literature* Synonymy

Thomas J. Roberts
University of Connecticut

What is literature? Literature is what literary critics talk about.

And what is a literary critic? A literary critic is someone who talks about literature.

Yes, these are circular definitions, but intellectual communities that have the character of literary and art criticism apparently must be defined in circular terms. The *literature* synonymy I cite in my title is what literary critics use when they refer to the thing they are all talking about, to what I am here calling *literature* but that others refer to with other names. This synonymy has a most curious lexical structure. In its structure we see something of the how and why of critical discourse.

Literary criticism (along with art and music criticism) has a poor reputation for the ways in which it uses its technical vocabulary. People who pursue empirical research into the arts (as do the men and women attending this Congress) must have terms with stable, operational, intersubjective meanings; but literary critics seem to be sublimely unconcerned that one critic may speak respectfully of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* as a poem and another speak of it as a work of fiction. *The Origin of Species* is in prose: how can it be labeled a poem? It is a scientific work: how can it be labeled fiction? Words shift in meaning in criticism—sometimes, one feels, even within the boundaries of a single essay. What sort of communication can there be when words will not remain firm?

I said that the *literature* synonymy is what literary critics use when they refer to literature. This is especially the case when they are talking on the highest level of generalization, when they want to tell us how literature is different, what makes one thing literature and another thing not.

I shall begin with the only part of this synonymy that I know well, with the part that exists inside the English language. English members of this synonymy include at least the words *poetry*, *fiction*, *literature*, *good writing*, *serious writing*, *verbal works of art*, and *classics*. The synonymy is most easily understood if we describe the differences between the ways in which those words are used outside criticism and inside criticism. Outside literary criticism, these words--*poetry*, *fiction*, *literature*, etc. always point in different directions. Inside criticism, they often point in the same direction. Outside criticism, people do not refer to Darwin's work as either fiction or poetry; inside criticism, as we have seen, people like Stanley Edgar Hyman have referred to that book both as *poetry* and as *fiction*. (He treats the works of Darwin, Marx, Fraser, and Freud "as imaginative organizations, as though they were poems" in *The Tangled Bank* [1966].)

There are other differences, of course. I think that no one inside literary criticism would refer to that bit of mnemonic verse that begins, "Thirty days hath September," as a *poem*, but since it is in verse, people outside criticism do speak of it as *poetry*. Nor would anyone inside criticism think of, say, a racist joke as fiction or of gross pornography as fiction even if its publisher presented it as fiction. Inside criticism, purely formal, objective criteria are modified by value criteria. But it is not to this sort of difference but to the interchangeability of the members of this synonymic set inside criticism that I address in these remarks.

The *literature*-synonymy is an international, multilingual lexical unit, as witness the fact that we who are attending this conference come from different natural language communities.

In German glossaries, I find the words *Literatur*, *Schrifttum*, *Poesie*, *Dichtung*, *Dickkunst*. In Czech lists, the words *literature*, *básnictví*, *básne*. In Polish, the words *literatura*, *poezja*. In Italian, the words *letteratura*, *le lettera*, *poesia*, *arte poetica*. In Spanish, the words *literatura*, *poesía*, *poems*, *poesías*. In Swedish, the words *litteratur*, *poesi*, *skaldedikt*, *skaldekunst*, *diktning*. In French, the words *littérature*, *poésie*. In Dutch, the words *literatuur*, *letterkunde*, *dichtkunst*, *poezie*. But there are many other words in these languages and many words in other languages as well.

None of this is new. An interchangeability of basic terms is found very early in literary criticism. In the following sentences, written in 1579, Sir Philip Sidney is addressing the ancient question of fiction and lying. This is a question that has much vexed philosophy but to which criticism has been sublimely indifferent.

Now, for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth. For, as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to be true which is false; so as the other artists, and especially the historians, affirming many things, can, in the cloudy knowledge of mankind, hardly escape from many lies. But the poet (as I said before) never affirmeth.

But Sidney does not use the word *fiction*. He is speaking of the poet, of poetry.

I have been listening to critics talk about literature for decades and I have been reading essays and books about literature (many of them in translation) for even longer, and it is my impression that in each of the natural languages (German, English, French,

Japanese, Chinese) in which people do talk about literature there is a subsynonymy of interchangeable words, any one of which may be used to refer to the central object of this group's focus, that is, to literature.

As I observed earlier, in English I can refer to literature as *poetry*, or as *serious writing*, or as *fiction*, or with any of certain other terms: *belles lettres*, *the classics*, *verbal works of art*, etc. I can use any of these terms without others protesting at my language. I can do this inside literary criticism but only inside criticism.

As I remarked earlier, all of the words in the English part of the literature synonymy are also used outside criticism, but outside criticism they all point in different directions. Sometimes they might seem to point in the same direction. Robert Browning's poem, "My Last Duchess," is both *poetry* and *fiction* in that it tells an invented story in verse. Such conjunctions are recognized outside criticism, but then the two terms, *poetry* and *fiction*, refer to different features of that text. When the critic Richard Freedman referred to the novel, *The Great Gatsby*, both as *fiction* as a *poem*, he was referring, we were assured, to the same feature of that work.

I indicated that the *literature* synonymy is a most curious lexical formation. A) Every word in the synonymy has its own life outside literary criticism. B) All of the meanings those words have outside criticism are known inside criticism. C) Only inside criticism does it ever occur that all these words have the same meaning as when in "The Well-Read Reader," Richard Freedman does call F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* "the greatest American poem." D) To accept and understand this interchangeability is to be a part of literary criticism.

If there is a *literature* synonymy in English, and there is another *literature* synonymy in Italian, and another *literature* synonymy in German, and another in French, etc., etc., then it is the case that the *literature* synonymy is a synonymy of synonymies. If so, then any word in any one of these natural language synonymies can be translated into any word in any one of the other natural language synonymies. What this suggests is what is also evident elsewhere. It is that all of literary criticism shares a common cognitive grid.

Criticism divides itself blurrily in many ways. It divides itself into natural language groups but also into “schools” of criticism, each contesting with all other. Marxist criticism is not identical with psychoanalytical criticism, which is not identical with feminist criticism, nor with any of the two or three dozen other schools of criticism. Each of these schools has its own cognitive grid. Yet all of the schools and all members of the schools share a concern about an underlying distinction between literature and not-literature.

While the word *literature* is certainly found outside criticism, that distinction between literature and not-literature so important inside criticism is not found outside criticism except as an echo from within criticism. We hear people start some remarks defensively, “I do not know what literature is but this book, etc., etc.” Sometimes people outside criticism use the word *literature* as a vague honorific. Sometimes it is used negatively, as when a reviewer praises a novel as “a good read” but then offers the stern admonition that “this novel is not, however, literature.”

Verbal definitions of literature seek to identify literariness, which is understood to be the quality (whatever that might be) that makes something literature, the quality that

sets literature off from nonliterature. But verbal definitions are far less common inside criticism than one might suppose. Even glossaries that seem to promise definitions of literature—indeed, seem to justify their own existence by providing them--avoid the problem of actually writing any definition of literature. My 1969 copy of Ruttkowski and Blake's *Glossary of Literary Terms in English, German and French* does not define either *literature* or *literary*. Nor does the seventh edition (1996) of Harmon and Holman's widely used *Handbook to Literature*.

Definitions of literature, like definitions of poetry, are most likely to appear in a Time of Manifestoes, and with an abundance of exclamation marks. Less self-serving attempts to identify "literariness" are initiated now and then, but the difficulty the definers face frighten away all but the innocent. Consider: Literariness is that quality found in some prose fiction (but not in *all* prose fiction), and in some prose nonfiction (but not in *all* prose nonfiction) and in some verse (but not in *all* verse) and in some scripts for stage plays (but not in *all* stage plays). Recognizing the difficulties, many of our contemporaries are content to think of literature as a social construct only. Why people who do define literature in this way would continue to teach literature, that is, to "profess" literature, is not clear.

Critics most often define the word *literature* ostensibly. Anthologies with the word *literature* in their title (e.g., *An Introduction to Literature*) rarely include verbal definitions of the term *literature*. Instead, the editors show their readers what the term means by giving examples of texts accepted as literature. Yet verbal definitions of other words in the synonymy, words like *poetry* and *fiction* and *serious writing* and the like do appear and are freely quoted in descriptions (rather than definitions) of the field literature

as a whole. Each individual term foregrounds a different feature of that literature to which all refer. Some elect to refer to literature as *poetry*; others, as *fiction*; still others, as *serious writing*; and so on. Those who do refer to it as *poetry* think of literature in terms of rhythm and metaphor; those who refer to it as *fiction* think of it in terms of invention; those who speak of it as *serious writing* think of it in terms of significance. This tactic of speaking of literature as though it were coterminous with poetry or coterminous with fiction is rarely challenged.

A community of discourse forms when people find that they do agree on which questions are worth asking but find also that they do not agree on the answers to those questions. If they cannot agree on the questions, they have no reason to talk to one another. If they agree on which questions are important and also agree on the answers, they have no need to talk. In criticism, people are agreed to talk about books but disagree in their readings, their appraisals, their understandings.

They are also agreed in their distaste for precision of speech, a dislike of precision that deeply displeases people of scientific bent. A crude analogy might be found in people sharing the experience of a brilliant sunset, talking about the sunset as they experience it. If at that moment we asked them to give a precise description of what it is that they are finding beautiful in that sunset, they might become a bit impatient. If we began by specifying the physical conditions—one plane of cirrus clouds at a height of four miles, a second at a height of six miles, sun at an elevation of four degrees, and so on—they might ask us to move away.

The focus of literary criticism—that “thing” that some of us call *literature* and others prefer to call *poetry* and yet others to call *serious writing*, etc.—has changed over

the centuries. In eighteenth century England, the word was often used to mean simply *everything in print*. As science began to contest for intellectual prestige with the poets and novelists during the nineteenth century, critics distinguished between the scientists and themselves by thinking of it as *the best fiction and verse and drama in print*. But in recent years, the emergence of feminist criticism and of African American criticism in North America and of popular culture studies changed our notions of the field *literature* once again. Criticism has published studies of what are called *scientific classics*. We seem to be returning to the notion of literature as *everything in print* or even, perhaps, to the notion of literature as *everything in words*. I think it is felt inside criticism that precision is dangerously limiting. Criticism does not want to be limited.

I shall end with an observation that appeared in Marvin Harris's *Rise of Anthropological Theory*.

The semantic ambiguity characteristic of such activities as poetry, art and literary criticism . . . in our own cultural experience cannot be dismissed as epiphenomenal or as subcultural variations. There is no reason to suppose that uniformity of understanding in such domains has a functional significance which outweighs the obvious benefits of ambiguity, obfuscation, and individual variation. . . . In human cultural repertoires there may actually be more domains which derive their salient semantic order from ambiguity and variation than there are domains whose orderliness reflects consensus and uniformity. (Marvin Harris's *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture* (NY: Crowell, 1968): 583.)

“You say *tomato* and I say *tomahto*,” the song goes, “Let’s call the whole thing off.” “You say *fiction* and I say *poetry*,” criticism says, “Let’s not call the whole thing off.” Plato said that “proof is the overruler of opinion,” and criticism knows that when opinion is overruled, the discussion stops. Samuel Johnson said, “I dogmatize and am contradicted, and in that conflict of feeling and sentiments I take delight.” Literary critics say that, too. “We dogmatize and are contradicted, and in that conflict of feeling and sentiments we take delight.” Perhaps literary criticism is as much about that conflict of feeling and sentiments as it is about literature.