IS IT LITERATURE AND WHAT DOES IT DO? FOREGROUNDING AND ITS EFFECT ON OUR PERCEPTION OF THE WORLD SURROUNDING

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Introduction

Claims about the effects of reading literature are numerous and often far-reaching. Literature could help us better understand our fellow human beings. It stimulates our ethical reflection on moral dilemmas in our daily lives. It may restore our awareness of the world around us.

However, the empirical evidence for the effects of reading literature does not directly speak to these claims. Moreover, it typically pertains to the narrative fiction rather than to literature; in none of the available studies the degree of literariness is a factor of interest. In the present study I attempt to remedy this.

To do this I need an empirical basis for what literature is. I will use a method based on an experience that most of us will have. Reading a literary text, for instance, a poem, for the first time we may already come to feel something of its beauty. But often we will find that on second or third reading we come to understand more and more of the aesthetic devices at work in the text, how they are interrelated, and how they can help us to construct meaning. This experience is different from reading non-literary text, for instance a popular romance novel. Such texts we do not need to read twice. A second reading will not add to our aesthetic appreciation, or our admiration of how the text was written. What I will argue in this paper is that this variation in responses to texts provide an empirical basis for literariness: appreciation of literary texts increase over time, while that of non-literary texts will not. Some scholars and researchers have provided a strong case that literary quality is determined by extra-textual factors, like conventions, the status of the publisher, or the social dynamics of literary criticism (cf. Fish, Bourdieu). Here I will look at the possibility of including text qualities in the empirical study of the effects of literature.

Nevertheless, we should also consider the possibility that literary effects do not depend solely on textual features but that they emerge as a result from an interaction between reader and text. For one reader, rereading a poem would result in new insights, for another it might not. Therefore, empirical investigation of literary effects should not only include text variables in its design, but also reader variables.

Renewed awareness

What exactly are the effects that we would expect from ‘literariness’? I will try to define this more precisely by first looking at literary theory and then discussing some research that might be relevant here.

One of the main theories about what makes a text literary, those of the Russian Formalists, relates form to effect, and therefore seems a suitable starting point for the present undertaking. For Shklovsky (1917) the main function of art in general is to renew our awareness of the world surrounding. How does this work?