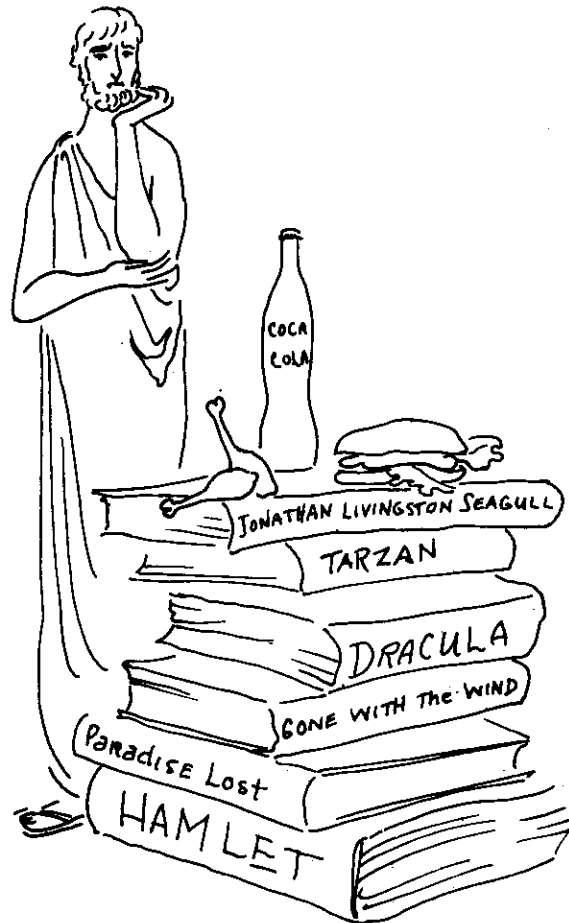


poeticity — a privilege of literature?

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POETICALITY - A PRIVILEGE OF LITERATURE?

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Russian formalists, French structuralists and recent Anglo-American literary critics assert that literature is a special kind of discourse. Their assumptions are that literature can be distinguished from other kinds of discourses by its 'literariness'.

For the formalists, there is an opposition between poetic and non-poetic language, and literary or poetic language is autonomous. These are the main points of their argument, according to Pratt (1977):

1. language functions in literature differently from the way it does elsewhere;
2. relations between the literary and non-literary functions of language are one of opposition;
3. this opposition is fully manifested in the observable properties of literary and non-literary language.

Thus, literature has properties that other utterances do not possess and is defined by these properties. Pratt (ibid.) also points out that the formalist claim of opposition between poetic and non-poetic language is based on presupposition, since it has never been tested. Literary language has never been compared to everyday verbal behaviour and examples from literature are never accompanied by data from extraliterary discourse. Devices observed in literature were assumed to be literary or to constitute 'literariness' (the term is Jakobson's who said: "the object of study in literary science is not literature but literariness, that is, what makes a given work a literary work" (1971). Non-literary language was assumed a priori not to possess the properties of literature. However, if the formalist claim was subjected to empirical verification, the distinction between literary

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material and other materials would have been challenged.
Pratt says (ibid.):

One simple negative proof of this is the fact that texts cannot always be identified as literature on sight. In addition, even the most cursory glance at the day to day behaviour of a speech community can tell us that neither the formal nor the functional distinctiveness that the formalist attributed to literature has any factual basis (p. 6).

Structuralists also view literary language in terms of its intrinsic properties rather than in terms of its cultural and social function, and as an independent system. Todorov stated:

Literature is a system of signs, a code analogous to other signifying systems such as natural language, the plastic arts, mythology, dreams, and so forth. Further, and here, literature is distinguished from the other arts, it is constructed with the help of a prior structure, that is, language; it is therefore a second-degree signifying system, in other words, a connotative system (1977:249-250).

He also stated, categorically, in another paper in the same book:

... it is literature which encompasses and explains language, literature is a theory of language we can no longer ignore if we are to understand literary functioning with the help of linguistic categories. Hence this absolute necessity: if we would make language into a theory of literature, we must read literature attentively, as a theory of language (ibid.:190).

The poetic-nonpoetic distinction has been a matter of argument in language studies for a long time now (see Pratt 1977, for Linguistics versus Poetics). Attempts to minimize this duality have been tried though. Jakobson's famous paper "Linguistics and Poetics" (1972) outlines his theory of communication, or functions of language. For him, in any speech event, in any act of verbal communication, there are six factors:

The addresser sends a message to the addressee.
To be operative, the message requires a context

referred to ('referent' in another, somewhat ambiguous, nomenclature), seizable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized; a code fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and addressee (or in other words, to the encoder and decoder of the message); and, finally, a contact, a physical channed and psychological connection between the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication. All these factors inalienably involved in verbal communication may be schematized as follows:

CONTEXT

| | | |
|-----------|---------|-----------|
| ADDRESSER | MESSAGE | ADDRESSEE |
|-----------|---------|-----------|

.....

CONTACT

CODE

(p. 89)

Each of these factors determines a different function of language. Although we distinguish six basic, aspects of language, we could, however, hardly find verbal messages that would fulfill only one function. The diversity lies not in a monopoly of some one of these several functions but in a different herarchical order of function. The verbal structure of a message depends primarily on its predominant function.

REFERENTIAL

EMOTIVE

POETIC
PHATIC

CONATIVE

METALINGUAL

(p. 95)

According to Jakobson, then, every message is framed in terms of these six functions, and some messages are dominated by one or another function. A message is REFERENTIAL when oriented to context. It is the outward-directed function of language, focusing impersonally on subject-matter. A message that the addresser focus on himself is EMOTIVE or oriented to the sender expressing the sender's attitude. This function highlights the state of the speaker. CONATIVE language, on the other hand is directed at the addressee. When the focus of the message is on the contact, the main function is PHATIC, the METALINGUAL function is oriented to the code, as in questions about meanings of the words. Finally, a message predominantly focused on itself is a POETIC one.

Pratt (ibid.) correctly observes, when criticizing Jakobson's model, that the notion of 'verbal structure' does not seem to mean the same thing for all six functions'. The referential, emotive and metalingual functions seem to be distinguished from each other in terms of subject matter. The phatic function, on the other hand, is defined contextually by the speaker's intention to 'establish, prolong or discontinue communication'. In the definition of conative utterances, Jakobson says that its purest grammatical expression is the vocative and imperative, and he proposes that imperatives lack truth value. Other verbal structures, however, are not taken into account. Persuasive language is not considered as conative either. Pratt points out:

The poetic function is distinguished in the model not by its subject matter, its lexicon, its truth value, its speaker's intent, or its grammatical form but by a criterion of a rather more fundamental order. The "empirical linguistic criterion of the poetic function" is its unique effect on the axes of selection and combination, "the two basic modes of arrangement used in verbal behaviour. "This effect is expressed in the famous projection principle: "the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination" (Jakobson, ibid.:95).

Poeticity is a matter of degree, depending on the extent to which the poetic function participates in the grammatical and lexical organization of the message. In works of 'verbal art' it is dominant (p. 33).

This projection principle puts the poetic function in a special relation to the other functions. According to Jakobson verbal art is defined as texts which are dominated by the poetic function, but it is not clear how the change from the poetic to the non-poetic or vice-versa occurs. The implication of Jakobson's theory is that the texts are intrinsically dominated by the functions, and in the case of the poetic function, poetry would be the main manifestation. It has not been considered by Jakobson, and also by literary critics who take the poetic function as a distinguishing category, that the reader and the way he chooses to read a text can determine a text's poeticity. Obviously, some writers highlight the poetic function in their texts, but the distinction between literary/non literary texts or what constitutes 'verbal art' is dubious. Well written letters, thesis, advertisements, etc... have the poetic function dominant, but still, a structuralist would not consider them as verbal art. Another example would be the reading of the Bible. Although much of it was written to report history, we can read it highlighting its poetic function. Texts are created for specific purposes. The reader however, can approach a text from a different point of view and its dominant function will be determined by the the reader's purposes. We can read history, for example, as fiction, or we can read speeches as literature. Suleiman (1980) observes:

The act of reading is defined as essentially a sense - making activity, consisting of the complementary activities of selection and organization, anticipation and retrospection, the formulation and modification of expectation in the course of the reading process. Although every reader performs these activities, exactly how they are performed varies from reader to reader and even within a single reader at different times; these

variations account for different realization of a given text(1) Iser (1974) uses the analogy of two people looking at the night sky, "who may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. "Variations in the readings of a text are thus attributable to variations in the activity of selection and organization: "the stars in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable" (p. 282). This implies that "the potential text is infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations" (p. 280). It suggests, furthermore, that there is a wide spectrum of acceptable realizations for any one text (p. 23).

Jakobson's theory was a landmark in language studies. However, those who use it in order to emphasize the distinction literary/non-literary, fail to consider that the addressee is a crucial element in the communicative process and that textual functions can be modified according to the interaction reader/text.

Poeticity then does not make a discourse superior and it is wrong to assert the distinctions between literature and non-literature in terms of textual properties. If we are going to look at literature only in terms of its poeticity, we examine a literary text as an object and not as communication, thus ignoring its interactional discourse dimensions.

Perhaps we could use Longacre's (1974) typology of discourse genres to redefine the problem. He proposes six kinds of prose discourse - drama, expository, procedural, persuasive and narrative.⁽²⁾

Drama is text which consists entirely of dialogue. Expository includes essays, scientific articles and descriptive material. Procedural is how-to-do or how-it-is-done text (p. 358).

Persuasive discourse is mainly propaganda language or language that tries to convince people to do things.

⁽¹⁾ My emphasis.

⁽²⁾ Callow, K. (1974) adds 'Argumentation' to the discourse types list. "Argumentation attempts to prove something to the hearer and tends to exhibit frequent contrast between two opposing themes" (p. 13).

Narrative for Longacre is story and the second most vivid kind of discourse after drama. Literature is just one of the places where narrative discourse occurs. For poeticsians, however, literature is a kind of privileged discourse. Todorov says:

...the object of literature theory is not works but literary discourse(1) and literary theory will take its place beside the other sciences of discourse which have to be established for each of the kinds (p. 7).

Chatman (1978) observes:

Poetics should construct a theory of the structure and functioning of literary discourse..(2)(p. 18).

Based on Longacre's discourse genres, I would propose, on the contrary, that any literary work is part of Narrative Discourse and is not a separate entity superior to other kinds of discourse. In terms of literariness, why can't an oral dialogue, or an advertisement or a joke be poetic? Poeticity depends on interaction, on the way the addresser sends his/her message and on the way the addressee receives it. Privilege, therefore, is an attribute that should not be seen as inherent in a given form of language.

(1) My emphasis.

(2) My emphasis.

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