

# The concept of literature and its terminological parameters

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## Abstract

*The study aims to find answers to the question “what is literature?”, presenting numerous attempts to fit this term, starting from the value criterion, the category of art, to find that literature is an art of movement. Another goal involves matching the term “literature” with a relatively recent concept, “literarity”, and trying to see how literature literarity can be established.*

**Keywords:** *literature, literarity, formalist, art, dynamic reality, conventions.*

To understand the specificity of the literary work and to demonstrate, where possible, its literarity, we should ask, first, what is literature?

At first glance, the question seems to have no difficulty, but analyzing it carefully, we realize that we face the most difficult and the most fundamental problem that a man of letters can ask. A simple look at the historical evolution complicates even more this problem: “For twenty-five centuries people have written works which today we call literature, but the modern term of *literature* is barely two centuries old”<sup>1</sup>. What is therefore literature and when is this term considered as a literary art?

Viewed through the prism of its evolution, history of literature provides us with several meanings, two of which are especially valid today:

“1. Literature = everything that is written, printed or published in any way, «writings» - a meaning that appears in phrases such as *primary literature, secondary literature, specialty literature, opera literature, piano literature, cosmetics literature*;

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Teoria literară*, trans. Mihaela Dogaru, Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 2003, p. 29.

2. Literature = «beautiful literature», fiction, which means texts with claims of aesthetic values”<sup>2</sup>.

One of these two meanings, which founded the literary favoured position was, especially the latter, the “fault” being borne, after H. Rudiger, by the “almost religious reverence for the artwork and the artist” which, *since the 18th century, has given literature and poetry a sacred and esoteric halo*”<sup>3</sup>.

The appropriate term of the meaning we give to today’s literature was, in Ancient Greece, the term *poiesis*, a term which referred to all things created by man. Aristotle<sup>4</sup> restricts its meaning to the scope of objects we now call literary. Those who led, however, to the meaning of the modern Western sense of literature as an imaginative writing were the theorists of the German Romanticism in the late 18th century, a precise source for this being the book *On literature in its relations with social institutions*, published by the French Baroness Madame de Stael in 1800. Later, in 1839, Sainte-Beuve is the one who reduces the scope of literature to “all imagination and artistic productions”<sup>5</sup>.

There were, moreover, several attempts to fix the essence of literature. In Russia, for example, in the late eighteenth century there was an attempt to free literature from the influence of the royal court and give it a more independent and professional character. But literature came into social life and only in the mid-1820 the situation changed, the year 1825 taking literature out of its incarcerated state.

The *criterion of value* has always been inherent to the concept of “literature”, finding its expression in many restrictive definitions of literature. There was also the effort to fix the essence of literature by means of the category of *art* (applicable to O. Walzel, E. Staiger, R. Wellek, W. Wimsatt and others); Wolfgang Kayser gives literature an “objectuality of its own kind” (*Gegenständlichkeit eigener Art*), and T. C. Pollock “introduces a categorical system, which is very close to that of Barthes/Pollmann. Namely, he distinguishes, apart from everyday language with its simple communicative function (*phatic communion*), two specific forms of language action: referential symbolism in scientific language and evocative symbolism in the language of literature. Where the evocation of one’s own experience is missing, we speak about pseudo-

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<sup>2</sup> Heinrich F. Plett, *Știința textului și analiza de text*, trans. Stănescu Speranța, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1983, pp. 8-34.

<sup>3</sup> *Apud* Heinrich F. Plett, H. Rüdiger, *op. cit.*; pp. 8-34.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotel, *Poetica*, Scientific Publishing House, Bucharest, 1957.

<sup>5</sup> Adrian Marino, *Biografia ideii de literatură*, II, Dacia Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 1992, pp. 163-165.

literature<sup>6</sup>. Wilhelm Kayser's considers that literature is, firstly, "a domain of game, closed in itself, a very specific world, governed by its own laws, independent of any reality", and its function is "to take the human out of his links with reality and to free him of any determination"<sup>7</sup>.

The formalist schools speak about "literature in itself and by itself", "the first law" of literature being "to remain its essential purpose"<sup>8</sup>. There appears, therefore, a very common perspective at the time. We also note the definition of literary specificity as a *pure form*, an orientation commonly identified with *formalism*. As art, literature will be considered as a "verbal creation", literature will be equal to text and, last but not least, it will be defined in terms of *system-structure* (I. M. Lotman, M. Bakhtin, T. Todorov, R. Barthes<sup>9</sup>).

Caught in a vast and inexhaustible network of associations at different levels and in different frames of reference, as those social, historical, ideological, cultural and intellectual, literature varies depending on ages, currents, styles, each historical moment having its specific literature. Thus, literature becomes "an act of speech carrying a significantly universe depending on specific contexts", all the meanings tending to "continual clarification and radicalization"<sup>10</sup>. For this reason, even if the sequence of boundaries between literature and non-literature could be continued, no definition would be entirely satisfactory. How to explain, however, this and why is it more and more difficult to give definitions in literature?

We could get a first answer from Pompiliu Eliade who, in 1900, opening a university course on "What is literature?" said: "No word is more difficult and easier to understand than this. But it must be defined precisely because of its intrinsic difficulty and its own ease. Who knows how to answer clearly this capital question: what is Literature? And on the other hand, in a vague way, who does not know what is Literature? There are two specialties of the human mind in which the profanes interfere..."<sup>11</sup>. Considering that *literature is an art*, Pompiliu Eliade hurries to assert that it is *the art of movement*. Being a social and not an individual phenomenon, "the process is open, because the idea of literature [...] is always

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<sup>6</sup> Heinrich F. Plett, *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> *Apud* Wilhelm Kayser, *Die Wahrheit der Dichtung*, in *Poetică. Estetică. Sociologie* (Studies of literature and art theory), Anthology, preface and bibliography by Vladimir Piskunov, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1979, p. 280.

<sup>8</sup> Adrian Marino, *op.cit*; p. 248.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 276.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 274, 286.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

“created”, which is reductive and, at the same time, productive process”<sup>12</sup>.

Referring to the same point, Boris Eihenbaum would emphasize: “There is no uniform, stable and homogeneous literature, which would have a permanent own chemical formula. Literary fact and literary era are complex concepts which are constantly changing, since both the relationships between the elements making up the literature and their functions are also changing”<sup>13</sup>.

We see therefore that the very fact of evolution liquidates any rigorous static definitions. The “taste” with political and literary ideologies, thus “exhausting” a type of literature to make way for a new phenomenon, that “came from its basements and its service courts”, as says Viktor Shklovski<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, “literary individuality is dynamic as literary era, within which and with which it is moving [...]”, and “to replace the dynamic point of view through the static one is to doom many important and valuable literature phenomena.”<sup>15</sup>

Being a “dynamic linguistic construction” or an *art of movement, an ideology vehicle and its destruction instrument*<sup>16</sup>, “a coherent structure, a homogeneous space, in which the works interfere”<sup>17</sup> closely related to a specific historical time, to a socio-cultural complex and a certain mentality, “literature” hardly bears a discussion of its principles, discovering, through each type of culture and every age, its own criteria which will help to recognize the literary objects. Therefore, abandoning the pretence of literary theory to offer an immanent definition of literature, every aspect of its nature is just a speculative instrument, capable - as Monica Spiridon<sup>18</sup> notices - to equip us with a critical view. Our goal is to correlate the term “literature” with a relatively recent concept, “literarity”, and see how, in these circumstances, *literature literarity* can be established.

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Very often mentioned, the concept of *literarity* tends to be confused with *literary* and with the verbal condition of literature, there being even some swings

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<sup>12</sup> Adrian Marino, *Hermeneutica ideii de literatură*, Dacia Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 1987, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> *Ce este literatura? Școala Formală Rusă*, Anthology and preface by Mihai Pop, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1983, p. 75.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 604. “During the decomposition of the species, it goes from center to periphery, and a new phenomenon from the little nothings of literature life appears in its place; it comes from its basements and service backyards”.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, Iuri Nicolaevici Tînianov, pp. 606-607.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Culler, *op. cit.*; p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> *Poetică și Stilistică. Orientări moderne*, Prolegomena and Anthology by Mihail Nasta and Sorin Alexandrescu, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1972, p. 292.

<sup>18</sup> Monica Spiridon, *Despre „Aparența” și „Realitatea” Literaturii*, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1984, p. 14.

and terminological alternation – *literalness* / *literarity*. Thus, “essence, purity, poetic and lyric nature, and other definitions of literary characteristics, tend to be replaced by a new term, which pretends to be the most «specific» of all: *literarity*”<sup>19</sup>. We might ask, looking at the stated assumptions, how did we get to this situation? What is the origin of this concept and what is the current which created it?

Having a sufficiently slow and tortuous genesis, the concept brings to our mind the Russian Formalists (this current has its beginning in 1915-1917): in 1915, the *Linguistic Circle from Moscow* is founded (R. Jakobson, O. Brik, B. Tomashevski, I. Tynianov temporarily Mayakovsky), and in 1916, in St. Petersburg, the *Society for the study of poetic language* (Opojaz), which groups together L. Iacubinki, E. D. Polivanov, V. Shklovski, B. Eichenbaum, S. T. Bernstein.

What is the momentum of this movement occurrence? What are the principles that characterize it? How does a criterion become operative in defining the literarity and what does it mean to speak about literature “literarity”? – These are just some of the natural questions that arise, inviting us to an objective reflection of this complicated and, at the same time, very actual phenomenon. We will, therefore, notice the track of this movement, pointing out the key elements that led to its imposition and to the consolidation of an autonomous and concrete science of literature, paving the way for many modern structuralist researches.

The movement that we call formalist appeared in Russia, on the eve of the October Revolution, as a reaction to neo-grammars in linguistics, to historical positivism in literary criticism and to naturalism in literature. Therefore, its fundamental features such as “distancing from the past”, “the link with the revolutionary literary movement”, “seeking new paths to know and understand literature”, “intransigence in maintaining positions” and “confrontational tone” have their full explanation in this context. Without being interested in the methodology problems of literary studies, but in those of literature as object of study, what characterizes the formalists is the wish to prepare, “from the intrinsic qualities of literature, an independent science”, knowing theoretically and historically the art deeds of the word<sup>20</sup>. Thus, creating its poetics opposed to methods that judged literary work by joining it to exogenous fields, such as biography, psychology, sociology, religion etc., the formalists have reconstructed the literary object as an autonomous object, seen through its artistic specificity.

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<sup>19</sup> Adrian Marino, *op. cit.*; p. 256.

<sup>20</sup> M. Bakoš, Prefață in *Ce este literatura? Școala Formală Rusă*, p. VII.

Their goal was to analyze literature as a system, and “revealing the artistic methods” is their slogan. As Gérard Genette noted, “this *theoretization* of the literary fact has had a decisive influence and a prolific posterity, allowing, in particular, the development of *the structural perspective, the narratological study and the semiotic criticism*”<sup>21</sup>.

Putting, at the beginning, literary research in the series of language facts (thus removing it from general, psychological or sociological cultural series), the early formalism attempts to establish the literarity through an “exclusive cantonment within the limits of the verbal message”, being nothing but a meeting place for critics and linguists in the realm of the *poetic language*. Conceiving literarity through its relation to a *range of reference*, “a broad and persistent tradition of understanding literature as *deviation* or *divergence* towards a factor *ab quo*, or “zero degree” has its origins here”<sup>22</sup>. The remarkable observations made, in connection with this, by Monica Spiridon, who has even established a difference between the formula of *Opojaz* and the new research direction: “establishing the polarity *poetic language / practical language*, the early *Opojaz* doctrine actually tried a systematization of the defining marks of the literarity by framing an absolute invariant [...]. As for the latest research [...], they rather align to the contemporary effort to offer an *empirical basis* for the notion of literarity [...] through its equivalence with an entity that is supposed to be «directly observable»: in this case *literary language*, the antipode of the normal one...”<sup>23</sup>.

The object of literary science must therefore study specific features of literary facts through which they are different from all other facts: “the object of literary science is not literature but “literaturnost” (literarity), which is what makes a literary work from a fact”<sup>24</sup>.

Aiming for a linguistic type method, the method of Russian formalists involves certain “empiricism”, as M. Bakhtin (whose ideas, being original, could be recognised only by dissociating them from the “formal method”) would find. Referring to this issue, Eichenbaum argues his “empiricism” in an article from 1925: “the «watchword» of the formalists poetic was to release the poetical discourse from «the philosophical and religious tendencies» of the symbolists; whence «the pathos of the scientific positivism that characterised them», «a rejection of philosophical assumptions, of psychological and aesthetic

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<sup>21</sup> Gérard Genette, *Marile curente ale criticii literare*, translation by Liliana Buruiană Popovici, Institutul European Publishing House, Iași, 2000, p. 34.

<sup>22</sup> Monica Spiridon, *op. cit.*; p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>24</sup> R. Jakobson, Prefață in *Ce este literatura? Școala Formală Rusă*, p. IX.

interpretations etc. ... It was necessary to deal with facts... Science had to be concrete»<sup>25</sup>.

The feature of the second period of the Formalism is the observation about how a language fact can acquire a literary status (especially through the evolution of literary theory developed by Tynianov, *О литературной эволюции* (About literary development), 1927). It is now established the category of *literary fact* that comes to replace that of *literature*. Redefining literary work as a system, not only as a sum of means, the formalists refer therefore to a dynamic reality, this phase containing now “the germs of a more comprehensive vision of reality”.

Speaking about the *differential* nature of literary quality, the Formal School also involves the particularly actual problem of peripheral facts presenting, from a new perspective, the general relationship between literature and society.

Sorin Alexandrescu<sup>26</sup>, in his *Introduction to Modern Poetics*, captures very well these aspects: Moving the focus from “the ‘effect’ or the ‘expressiveness’ explained by the stylistic approach to the autonomous significance towards the psychical or the social aspect that generated it and perceive it”, furthermore, integrating the local process in the work *system*, “the «language» and the «artifice», the defining aspects of the literarity, thus become analyzable structures in literary texts [...]”. Therefore, concludes Sorin Alexandrescu, “we easily recognize in this reasoning the design of the literary ‘element’ on a syntagmatic and a paradigmatic axis, in the sense they would be later defined by Jakobson”<sup>27</sup>.

Incurring these observations, it seems natural to ask ourselves how literarity manifests itself and what would be its criteria.

A convincing answer is proposed by Monica Spiridon. The author considers that, “not having an empirical identity on the textual plan, literarity fact does not coincide with a particular type of text - as formalists believed - but only reduces itself to an effect of the text, based on a conventional judgement. It is, first of all, a matter of conscience. Therefore, the concept called to designate it in the terminological arsenal of literary theory always refers to a prebuilt model”<sup>28</sup>.

As for literarity criteria, the perspective proposed by Heinrich F. Plett<sup>29</sup> seems interesting. Starting from the four perspectives proposed by the American

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<sup>25</sup> *Apud* B. Eichenbaum, M. Bahtin, *Probleme de literatură și estetică*, translation by Nicolae Iliescu, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1982, pp. 8-9.

<sup>26</sup> *Poetică și Stilistică. Orientări moderne*, Prolegomena and Anthology by Mihail Nasta and Sorin Alexandrescu, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1972, p. XCV (*Introducere în poetica modernă*).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>28</sup> Monica Spiridon, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> Heinrich F. Plett, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-34.

literate M. H. Abrams in his book *The Mirror and the Lamp*, theories that have decided, according to their dominance, what was or was not literature, Plett also chooses the four dimensions, trying to clarify how literature “literarity” can be established. We speak therefore about:

1. *the mimetic notion of literature* - the oldest criterion for delimiting literary phenomenon, but this is a restrictive notion as it excludes from literature any non-mimetic work, such as *poetry*, and not only this;

2. *the expressive notion of literature*, expressive meaning *emotionality*, *spontaneity* and - what is clear from these two - *originality*;

3. *the receptive notion of literature*. The reader is at the heart of this concept and the manner and the intensity in which he is affected by the text is the standard measure for what can be considered literature. In other words, the texts without effect are non-literary, and those that have an influence on the receiver are literary.

4. *the rhetorical notion of literature*. In this case, the notion of literature excludes any *non-rhetorical* text; on the contrary, it also involves, for example, non-fiction texts, to the extent that they prove a linguistic artificially artistic form.

Analyzing these perspectives, Heinrich F. Plett’s conclusion is the following: “*the four perspectives of the literature are not isolated and absolute, but intermediate*”, though, “the works of literature theory that emphasise a single aspect are not missing”<sup>30</sup>.

Thus, the mimetic aspect, the expressiveness, the deviance, the originality, the poetical and the narrative aspect put us on the ground of literarity, operating as perception and recognition criteria of literature in cultural codes of historical and social community. Therefore, “speaking about literature «literarity» is, first, to admit that the study of cultural phenomena must be integrated into a context and that the production of meaning in a culture is always governed by a system of specific conventions.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> Monica Spiridon, *op. cit*; p. 15.



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