Language games of literature

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Language games are bound to particular contexts. An utterance (a move in the game) is made under certain input circumstances and has certain practical purpose. The use of language in a game is governed by rules. They are not explicit (they are learned practically, as a skill) – but perhaps they can be expressed explicitly *ex post*. I.e.: (almost) everyone is able to form sentences understood by others in the intended sense and to use them in such situations, in which they are usually ("correctly") used. But not everyone is able to state explicitly, how a correctly formed expression is to be recognized, and what are the rules of its correct usage. Can we – at least potentially – grasp explicitly the rules of the correct formation and the correct usage of the expressions of *any* language game? (and are there always any such rules at all? – cf. Wittgenstein 2005, p. 25)

A popular counterexample – i.e. of a game, that is no doubt meaningful, but its rules cannot be grasped explicitly (as it seems) – is literature. This is so in two senses. Firstly concerning the rules of the correct formation and the correct usage of literature (i.e.: what can be taken as literature?); secondly concerning the rules of the right usage of value judgments like "This is a beautiful poem". However, we presume that literature *can* be distinguished meaningfully from non-literature, as well as good literature from bad one.

The problem may be trivial: for there is a lot of instructions for the creative writing, and a lot of theories in aesthetics, philosophy of art, theory of literature. The difficulty lies in the abundance. The rules of the correct use of the language game of shopping in a store seem to be rather simple and uniform; whereas the existing "rules" of the right literature production and the right evaluation definitely not.

If we want to keep the view that literature nonetheless *is* a meaningful language game, we must demonstrate that it's possible to distinguish between literature and non-literature – as well as between "big" and "not big" – even if the borderline wasn't sharp. But the game of literature is not like the others. So the distinction literary/non-literary will probably differ, too.

The idea, that the language of literature differs from any other use of language, is not unusual. For example Heidegger says that whereas poetry (and art) just shows, "reveals" things in their pure existence, as they are, the ordinary language expresses and shapes the whole of the "interpretation" of this world, which is a system of *practical* connections and consequences. (Heidegger 1977 § 34; 1954, p. 190ff)

This is surely an impressive view, but also literature (and the theory of literature) has its position in the context of our practical experience (the word "literature" has a more or less *definite* meaning, that one can learn). "Practical" does not mean that the use of a literary language expression or of an esthetical judgment can bring us some immediate (physical?) benefit. This cannot be said about many linguistic activities, including the non-literary ones. "Practical" means here, that also literature and aesthetics originate in some intersubjective frame of circumstances and consequences and must obey some rough rules in order to get into this frame. What we call "literature" must

fulfill some formal necessities (it *is* a language unit, either printed on a paper, or traded orally) and is usually received in a certain manner – it is read or listened to under certain circumstances: if the recipients have time and mind for it, if they want to evoke some mood or effect, and so on. These criteria are not unlimited: in a certain mood, under certain circumstances, or in order to evoke some effect, literature is just *not* used – for example in the army, if a private asks an officer for/tells him anything, he definitely does not use a language manner that we *usually* call "literary". What we qualify as "literature", has a *restricted* use (let's say in the sense sketched above).

But if we try to understand literature this way, problems arise. For this is a sketch of the rules of the *usage* of the literary language game; and the rules of the correct formation of the expressions are not touched. "Bring me sugar" is definitely a correctly formed sentence, that can be used correctly under certain circumstances (and under some others not). "Milk me sugar" seems *not* to be a correctly formed sentence. But it can be meaningfully used, as well as the seemingly incorrect "sentence" *the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe* – namely just as literature. And this is the problem. In any other language game – as it seems – the correct formation of the expressions is a prerequisite for possible meaningful and correct usage. In the literary language game, the correct usage becomes independent from the correct formation of the expressions. Perhaps the notion of the "correct formation" loses its sense at all within literature? (cf. Wittgenstein 1958, § 498)

Literature seems to be an open and dynamic game. We cannot say in advance, what is a correctly formed literary language expression, we cannot also state easily (if at all), which language phenomena don't belong into literature. We have seen that – under normal circumstances – a correctly formed expression is one that can be used meaningfully in a language game. But imagine the most improbable expression from the most distant context (mathematics, warfare, chemistry, economy, sport, ...) – we can never say it cannot be used in the literary language game (in a literary work, even in a "good" one) – and who knows: maybe it has *already been* used... An astonishing result seems to follow from this: the language game of literature encapsulates somehow (*in potentia*?) all the other games.

We can say, in a sense, that the distinction between literary and non-literary differs from most of other distinctions between something and non-something. When something is qualified as "not big", it cannot be qualified as "big" in the same meaning. This is an idealization, too. The cellular phones in 1995 were not big in comparison with those in the year 1990, but are big in comparison with the present types. The concrete use of almost all concepts changes through time. But this process is extremely rapid in the case of "literature" – it seems to subvert over and over a possible distinction between literary and non-literary. It is noteworthy that this process does not proceed in both directions. We can state, that some language move was a non-literary one, but in the very same moment it can be incorporated in a literary work and become literary. Non-literary seems to tend steadily into literature. But not in the reversed direction. From this reason, we cannot state firmly what *is* literary – is the sentence "I like yellow

cats" a literary one? Nobody knows (whereas we can much rather state, whether it can be a "scientific" sentence or an "army" one). But once something is admitted "officially" as literary (like "To be or not to be... "), can it be non-literary anymore? So we can say what is non-literary, but not always what is literary; and literature seems to occupy more and more the position of non-literature. So: isn't there anything paradoxical in what we call "literature"? (One can say: when everything becomes literature, nothing will be literature anymore.)

As well as all the language games, literature should have its rules, too – in order to be a language game at all. The rules are established by means of a custom or institution, which is intersubjective (Wittgenstein 1958, § 199). Grammatical sentences (rules) seem to be fixed, whereas the "ordinary sentences" not. Of course, rules change, too. However, the dynamics of their change is much slower. They are almost in all cases implicit – they are often even not perfected. There can be language games that are meaningful only "more or less". And their rules are "made up (or changed) as we go along". (Wittgenstein 1958, § 83) In a sense, literature proves itself to be just this type of language game.

The non-literary language moves (like "Two pints of beer, please") also can be made under very various circumstances and for very various goals. But their use is "more correct" in certain contexts and "less correct" in other contexts. The sentence is uttered "more naturally" by someone sitting in a beer house, having a certain expected result (two pints of beer brought), than – let's say – by a student in an university lecture about mathematics. But this doesn't mean, that the latter utterance cannot be meaningful – that it cannot cause the effect, for which it was directly designed and planned by the speaker – the deportation of the speaker from the lecture hall by the university security guard, for example. The difference between meaningfulness of these two kinds is actually not qualitative, I think (not so Wittgenstein – see 1958, § 498). The first type of use is so to speak a "default" one, whereas the second is "deviant" – but both are meaningful in their appropriate way. We can talk about "default" use of literature, too. A sonnet about moonlight can be foisted into a company annual report or declaimed to the salesman in a food store (to the question, what I would like) – but this is a less "default" (and in this sense less meaningful) use of literature.

In the case of literature, there is a strong zeal to state *explicitly*, what is literature and what is not, and also what is its social purpose, so to speak. But once something is stated explicitly, the subversive nature of literature manifests itself – someone uses the definition and tries to create something that can be called "literature", but is different from the view of the theory of literature. Perhaps we can grasp the notion "literature" just by means of this criterion of its self-revaluating (hermeneutical) and rules-breaking nature. It is in a sense true; but not fully: literature cannot break all the limits, without measure – otherwise the distinction between literature and non-literature would vanish at all. On the other hand, the distinction between literature and non-literature is not like the distinction between big and not big: anything non-literary can become literary and to state what is literary is not easy.

This paradoxical nature of literature is probably what Heidegger had in mind: our non-literary language games and concepts are ruled by a certain pragmatical respect: the delimitation of the distinction big/not big can change in time, but not dramatically, it is rather fixed and sharp. This is mainly because "big" is a pragmatical concept, that we use to "cope with" pragmatical needs (cf. Rorty 1980). Literature doesn't function quite like this. Our literary language games don't "cope with" anything, at least not in the same way as the games operating with concepts like "big" or similar. Literature has a certain frame delimiting it from non-literature, and this frame is given intersubjectively, but compared to other "coping-with" games, that are rather "sports" (see Lance 1998), literature is a "pure game", its notion is given by a "pure" convention (there is a very vague "coping relation" in its case, if any). However, the limit exists.

As this limit is given conventionally, it faces two problems: firstly, the subversive, self-hermeneutical nature of literature is still trying to reinterpret (or break) this limit. This activity is made possible both by the absence of a clear pragmatical "coping-with" function, and by many explicit definitions of what (real, valuable, ...) literature is, purported by the theory of literature. And how can we explain the fact that there are many examples of "officially admitted" literature, not trying to break the definition limits at all? Most of the literary production totally lacks this ambition, and still *is* literature. This points to the second problem of the conventional definition of literature. The fact is, that there is no *one* convention on what is literature, there are many, and each one quite probably has counterexamples (including the "subversive/rules-breaking" conception sketched above). The generality of the one word "literature" proves itself to be misleading. We are tempted by our "craving for generality" to believe that there must be *one* corresponding thing, as there is *one* word. But it is neither the case of "Beauty" or "Good" (see Wittgenstein 2005, p. 17f), nor of "literature".

There is no *one*, but a plenty of games called "literature", bound with each other by the "family resemblance". However, the nature of literature is queer – literature, or rather some of the literary games behave parasitic with respect to the theory of literature. Whereas we can clear the darkness about "Good", if we try to describe all the facets of the use of the word "good" – and sometimes we can show this way that some particular uses of the word don't make sense – literature behaves contrariwise. The attempts to grasp or describe the sense of "literature" cause a multiplication and some more complications in the "family" of literary language games.

We can conclude with the following remarks: the limit between literature and non-literature exists, but is somehow "unilaterally open" – one can rather distinguish non-literature from literature than literature from non-literature. This is because some (hermeneutical) language games of literature still tend to reinterpret their own rules, or rather to extend them continuously into the realm of non-literature. Literature doesn't "cope (directly?) with" pragmatical needs like some other games, it is rather a more "purely conventional" game. So there are very many literary language games – of a very large, complicated and diversified family. The activity of the theory of literature proves to be a Sisyphus' work: it provides a material for further complication and diversification rather than a clearing.[†]

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