

HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF LITERATURE

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Summary

When we speak of literature we think primarily of fictional texts without immediate practical usefulness, texts addressed not least to our imagination and to our feelings, and of genres such as novels, short stories, poetry, and drama. Before the eighteenth century, few texts lacked a serious practical purpose unless they had the character of popular entertainment. The concept of literature – the idea of non-pragmatic texts that are still highly important from a cultural point of view – is a relatively new phenomenon; it came into being in Western Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This picture is confirmed by a look at oral cultures, at early cultures with writing like the Ancient Mesopotamian and Ancient Egyptian, and at classical literate cultures such as the Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Arabic, and Western cultures before 1750.

The crafting, in verbal form, of images that are humanly important either directly or through their suggestiveness, underlies what we call literature. Empirical investigations indicate that people in general read literature for enjoyment, identification, and escape, for knowledge of other times and places, and for perspectives on life. The scholarly and critical discussion of literature concerns many aspects: its history, its theory, the understanding and evaluation of individual works, and the interplay between literature and other social phenomena.

1. The Concept of Literature

The word “literature” is used, today, first of all to refer to texts in such genres as fictional prose (novels, short stories, and the like), poetry, and drama. Literature is considered to be an important cultural good, and so the word “literature” carries with it associations to high-quality writing. Nevertheless, literature is normally taken to include many texts meant mainly for entertainment (“popular literature”) or for young people (“children’s literature”). In fact, the term “literature” cannot be said to possess a fixed and constant reference. It may be used rather restrictively or in a wider manner in which “literature” also comprises specimens of more pragmatic genres – like essays or sermons – particularly if they are written with art and style.

“Literature” can also refer to non-written utterance (“oral literature”), and literature can combine with music or with visual art, as in song, opera, film, and televised fiction. In addition, computer-based creation of texts opens new formal possibilities (“electronic literature”).

When used about older times and about non-Western cultures, “literature” is typically employed in an even more inclusive manner. It then refers to all writing that transcends very limited practical purposes and to much “folkloristic” oral utterance (“verbal art”: tales, songs, proverbs, riddles, and so on). In this extended use, “literature” often covers also myth, philosophy, history, diaries, magic, and similar genres, while such things as contracts, inventories, artless personal letters, et cetera are normally excluded.

It may be natural to believe that literature must be almost like a natural kind: a clearly circumscribed category of texts whose defining characteristics can be singled out and described. It is worth emphasizing, however, that the idea of literature in something like its present version did not come into being until the eighteenth century (see Section 7 below) and that it has gone through a number of changes since then. In other words, “literature” has never had a really definite referent, nor has its reference remained stable over time. It is thus more realistic to think of “literature” as a less than precise designation for texts and utterances tending away from the purely practical and towards the artful or entertaining.

2. Oral Literature

Before the invention of writing circa 5,000 years ago, all human societies were oral cultures. All information that needed to be transmitted across a distance, or across time, had to be stored in the memory of individuals. We know from latter-day oral cultures that it is possible to memorize very large quantities of text verbatim. Many persons in oral cultures are libraries on two feet.

The expression “oral cultures” glosses over vast differences. Anatomically modern humans have existed for perhaps 100,000 years, and human language may be equally old. For most of this time, humans have lived in small groups dependent on foraging (“hunters-gatherers”). Successively, some groups learned how to grow edible plants and how to domesticate animals attracted to the rich environments preferred, and by and by created, by humans. Horticulture and agriculture (from circa 10,000 BCE) and pastoralism complemented hunting and gathering, and more complex, “tribal” societies

came into being. More developed forms of agriculture presupposed a sedentary lifestyle, which might lead to the creation of larger political entities: to systems of villages and small towns typically functioning as “chiefdoms”, and eventually to city-states and the emergence of full-fledged agrarian states. Such agrarian states did not necessarily possess writing, as the example of the South American Incan Empire (around 1500 CE) demonstrates.

The time before writing is prehistoric time: the time before written historical records. What we know about the languages of prehistoric societies is reconstruction, and the actual utterances produced in these societies are irretrievably lost. Consequently, we know nothing about what we might wish to call their literature. We can certainly speculate, extrapolating from the verbal genres encountered and described in hunter-gatherer groups, tribes, and chiefdoms in historic times, mostly during the last 200 years. However such extrapolations may be problematic: we cannot really know how inner developmental processes, and contacts with other, perhaps literate, societies, have affected the recent or present-day oral societies.

Even recent or present-day oral cultures differ very much in degree of complexity. For example, the now nearly extinct groups of hunters-gatherers that used to inhabit the isolated and inhospitable Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal had little of what we would now call “literature” when A.R. Radcliffe-Brown described them in the early twentieth century. There existed a body of myth, and tall tales were sometimes told. Also, the group sometimes gathered in an open space in its settlement after the evening meal to dance and sing to the sound of a sounding board functioning as a kind of drum. (Communal dancing, singing, and music-making – for merriment, for religious or magical purposes, as a preparation for war, et cetera – is well-known from many oral cultures and understood by outside analysts as, among other things, an important way of securing cohesion within the society.)

Groups of hunters-gatherers are typically very egalitarian; leadership tends to be an ad hoc, venture-by-venture affair. In larger and more stratified oral societies, greater opportunities for the diversification of verbal genres exist. Storytelling and individual singing will typically be much more developed than among the Andaman Islanders. Moreover, the more varied texture of social life will make room for verbal specialists, perhaps of several kinds. A more complex mythology and a richer set of rituals will have to be remembered and passed on, as well as more developed histories of clan and tribe, important for people’s self-understanding and claims to recognition. And the chief may want to draw to himself bards capable of presenting his deeds in a memorable fashion.

Professional verbal specialists, “poets”, appear to have played a conspicuous role in the early history of many Indo-European peoples. An Irish *file* or bard went through long formal training before he could associate himself with a master and record his master’s activities in verse. In African oral tradition, male or (sometimes) female bards (*griots/griottes*) or praise singers have fulfilled functions reminiscent of these into the present day.

In an oral culture, there will not only be spontaneous, one-off utterances, but also more durable, repeatable verbal compositions that could be called “texts”. There will often be myths or, on a more popular plane, stories, that will preserve a core content from one telling or sung performance to another even if they will not be repeated with exactly the same wording. Depending on the character of the society, there may be initiation rituals, and religious hymns, and orally transmitted law. In the more popular register, there may be songs, proverbs, riddles, et cetera, that can be said to be more or less fixed as texts. Oral cultures can be expected to possess a rich variety of designations of verbal genres, of types of text. They do not however themselves make a division analogous to the modern distinction between literary and non-literary texts.

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Biographical Sketch

Anders Pettersson was born in Karlshamn, Sweden 21 January 1946. He took a fil. kand. (1967) and fil. mag. (1968, 1972) at Lund University in theoretical philosophy, Russian, Swedish and comparative literature, Scandinavian languages, and political science, and a fil. dr in Swedish and comparative literature at the same university 1975. In 1969, he completed the Teacher Training College in Malmö, Sweden as a specialist teacher of Swedish and Russian.

After receiving his doctoral degree, he worked as a Senior Lecturer of Swedish at the University of Bergen, Norway (1975–1981), and later as a Lecturer in Arts Administration (1982–1990) and in Swedish and Comparative Literature (1990–1995) at Umeå University, Sweden. Since 1995, he is Professor of Swedish and Comparative Literature at Umeå University. He was Director of the university's Arts Administration Programme 1982–1990 and Dean of its Faculty of Humanities 1996–1999. Among his books and co-edited collections are *A Theory of Literary Discourse* (Lund: Lund University Press; Bromley: Chartwell-Bratt, 1990), *Verbal Art: A Philosophy of Literature and Literary Experience* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), and *From Text to Literature: New Analytic and Pragmatic Approaches* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005; editor, with Stein Haugom Olsen). He discharged his national military service in the Swedish Army 1964–1993, reaching the rank of captain.

Prof. Pettersson is Secretary-General of the International Federation for Modern Languages and Literatures (FILLM), Member of the Board of the Nordic Society of Aesthetics, and a Member of the International Comparative Literature Association's Committee on Literary Theory. He is married and has two adult children.