Part II

Literary creativity
Literariness

David S. Miall

Introduction

Historical perspective

The term ‘literariness’ was introduced by the Russian formalist critic and theorist Roman Jakobson in 1921, in a paper in which he stated: ‘The object of study in literary science is not literature but “literariness,” that is, what makes a given work a literary work’ (quoted in Eichenbaum, 1971: 8, emphasis original). In other words, Jakobson argued, what distinguishes the formal method is ‘that the object of literary science, as literary science, ought to be the investigation of the specific properties of literary material, of the properties that distinguish such material from material of any other kind’ (Jakobson, 1921, quoted in Eichenbaum, 1971: 7) – although the secondary features of such materials render it amenable to being employed in other disciplines, such as when we examine a literary work for the light it casts on psychological, historical, or ideological issues.

But as Erlich (1981: 198), a historian of the Russian formalist movement, puts it, the formalist commitment was to ‘the frame of mind produced by that passionate search for the differentia of literature which was the starting point of Formalist theorizing’. Thus we ask: what characterises a particular literary work? What specific feature best ensures its contrast to any other work and makes it unique? Its intrinsic quality – that which constitutes its literariness – came to be called its dominant, the constituent that also enables us to experience its unity (Erlich, 1981: 199). In poetry, for example, this is likely to be the rhythm, since this influences in turn other components, such as phonetic or figurative materials. In Dickens’s novel Little Dorrit, the dominant is plot, according to Shklovsky (quoted in Erlich, 1981: 246).

The term ‘literariness’ has been important, whether in the context of close, stylistic analysis of literature, or as a term in the disputed claim that there is no feature, or set of features, that can be shown to make literature unique. In this chapter, I will offer a brief review of some representative arguments on both sides, from which I will conclude that there is no specific set of features to which we can attribute literariness. But I will then mainly be concerned with offering a perspective drawn from theoretical and empirical studies of literary reading. I will conclude that literariness is a product of the interaction between a literary text, characterised by stylistic or narrative features, and an attentive reader, who is led to experience empathy or absorption.
The term ‘Russian formalism’ refers to two groups of literary theorists: the Moscow linguistic circle, which came together in 1915; and the Society for the Study of Poetic Language, or *Opojaz*, which formed in St Petersburg in 1916. The term was actually one of opprobrium, given to it by its Marxist critics, who accused the group of denying the relevance of historical materialism. Beginning in 1924, serious criticism included Leon Trotsky’s (1924) *Literature and Revolution*. Trotsky accused the groups of doing little more than counting syllables and analysing syntax, while ignoring the social significance of literature (Erlich, 1981: 102–1). The formalists – those scholars who continued to make important contributions – survived into the later 1920s. Jakobson, however, left Russia in 1920 for Czechoslovakia, where he completed a doctorate and attained a professorship at Masaryk University. He introduced formalist methods to the study of Czech poetry and helped to found the Prague linguistic circle, whose contribution to the concept of literariness will be mentioned later in the chapter.

Among other significant concepts in the early history of formalism are the distinction between practical language and poetic language made by Jakubinsky in his articles of 1916 and taken up by *Opojaz*. In practical language, the elements (syllables, morphemes, etc.) are intended for communication only; in poetic language, they have an autonomous value that contributes to poetic meaning. This distinction helped to shift the critical focus away from psychology, sociology, aesthetics, and other standard concerns of the literary critics of the time, towards linguistics as a scientific approach for elucidating the aural properties of poetry. In this move, formalism appropriated the claim of the futurist poets of the time to a ‘transrational’ language, seen as ‘the utmost baring of autonomous value’ in poetic language (Eichenbaum, 1971: 9). While not unique to poetry, it was said to be characteristic of it, although a specific poet engaged in writing poetically may be unaware at the time of the transrational implications of what he or she is writing. Thus the first major preoccupation of the formalists of *Opojaz* was the value of the sound of poetry, and here Shklovsky achieved an important shift of attention: rather than focusing on the sheer sound of poetry, which invited impressionistic interpretations (this being most evident in the poetry of contemporary symbolist poets), such as onomatopoeia or ‘painting with sounds’, he argued for the effects arising from the articulatory aspects of poetry. It may be, he said, ‘that a large part of the pleasure poetry gives us stems from its articulatory aspect – from a special dance of the organs of speech’ (quoted in Eichenbaum, 1971: 10).

**An analysis of literariness**

To take an example, in ‘The Sick Rose’ by Blake (1794: 37), the rhythm of the first line is evidently at variance with the remainder of the poem, until (perhaps) near the end in line 7:

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O Rose, thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.
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The first line contains three evident stresses (*Rose / thou / sick*), and a space representing a fourth stress at the end of the line that is unvoiced. The rhythm of this line would feel disrupted if the second line were to follow immediately without the delay called for by aligning the stresses in a pattern of two-stress lines (2 + 2 in line 1). To make a musical analogy, the first line would be a bar in 3/4 time when it should be 4/4, whereas the rest of the poem exhibits bars of 2/4 time – a contrast that clearly makes line 1 feel out of place. Only in line 7 do we see an echo of this, with the possibility of three stresses (*dark / sec– / love*), which perhaps disrupts the rhythmic pattern intentionally in view of the coming dissolution of the ‘Rose’ – although here two stresses seem acceptable (*dark / love*), depending on where the reader wishes to place the emphasis. The literariness of the poem lies in part, then, in its rhythmic and somewhat conflicted rhyme scheme. It lies especially, I would suggest, in the missing stress at the end of line 1. The diminution of the transrational force of this suggestive absence can readily be mirrored by supplying a word or two, for example ‘O Rose, thou art sick to death’; ‘O Rose, thou art sick and sore’; or ‘O Rose, thou art sick with loss’. This, we might say, rectifies the rhythm, but tends to trivialise the poetic force of the line.

**Some critical issues**

There are other aspects of the literariness of Blake’s poem at which we will look below. A consideration that the formalists highlighted was the mere survival of such a poem – the fact that we are still reading it some 220 years after it was first published. We cannot appeal to its pedagogical uses, since the teaching of English literature on a wide scale did not occur until the late nineteenth century. Here, we appear to have located another constituent of literariness, one less appreciated by formalist theory. According to Shklovsky’s sense of history, as we will review shortly, the automatism of everyday life is challenged by the novelty of artistic creation. The art form travels an inevitable road from birth to death, from ‘being savoured and relished, to mere recognition’; the survival of art depends on its innovations – its ability to surprise (Erlich, 1981: 252). The formalists considered this to constitute the laws of literary evolution. Art, according to Shklovsky’s account, was created impersonally, under the impact of the demand for novelty. This perspective has a strong resemblance to the empirical studies of artistic change by Colin Martindale (for example Martindale, 1990). Martindale’s hypothesis is that each successive generation of poets must employ an increasingly novel language in order for his or her work to continue attracting attention: Keats must outdo Wordsworth; and Keats, in his turn, must be outdone by Swinburne. As Martindale has shown in a series of publications (not only on literary evolution), there is strong empirical evidence for the driving power of novelty, as he has described it, being an influence on several epochs of art history and music. On the other hand, we can also argue for the inexhaustible power of literariness, as exhibited in the great works of literature, from Homer and Dante, through Shakespeare, to Dickens and beyond, each of whom continues to be read and enjoyed by significant numbers of readers. Indeed, there is still a major market for the publishers of literary texts (including many now in digital form), which continue to make a profit. Is ‘literariness’ a name that we give to the permanent values of the literary work? Is it in language, characterisation, plot, theme, or other components that the uniqueness of the literary text lies – and continues to attract readers? Do we simply know literariness when we see it? Or do we require some prior educational grounding in the competencies that underlie literary reading?

One preliminary set of answers to these questions is offered by the 1917 essay ‘Art as technique’ by Victor Shklovsky (1917). This essay – one of the earliest contributions
to formalist theory (also known as ‘Art as device’) – has been influential in particular thanks to its translation into English in 1965 in a book of readings (Lemon & Reis, 1965). In this essay, we can trace the emergence of other features that contributed to the concept of literariness. As Shklovsky shows at its outset, the prevalent view that ‘[a]rt is thinking in images’ (Shklovsky, 1965 [1917]: 5–6), promulgated by the Russian theorist Potebnya, is an inadequate basis for a literary theory or for the work of literary interpretation. It is said to make for ‘economy of mental effort’ (Shklovsky, 1965 [1917]: 5) in explaining the unknown in terms of the known – that is, the familiar image helps us to assimilate the unfamiliar. In particular, Shklovsky stages an argument on aesthetic cognition with the social philosopher Herbert Spencer (1882). Art, says Spencer, is the better for limiting its requirements on the attention of the reader or viewer. The ideas of the artwork must be understood with ‘the least possible mental effort’ (Shklovsky, 1965 [1917]: 9). In fact, Shklovsky (1965 [1917]: 12, emphasis original) points out, the situation is quite the reverse: ‘[A]rt exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony.’ Too much of life, claims Shklovsky, simply passes us by in a series of habitual behaviours. In a diary entry that Shklovsky cites, Tolstoy describes cleaning a room, then being unable to remember whether he had attended to the room or not: ‘[I]f the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been’ (Shklovsky, 1965 [1917]: 12). As Shklovsky (1965 [1917]: 12) puts it: ‘Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war.’ We may regard art as one of the remedies for this lack of awareness. He then adds a comment that, as we will see, becomes a key principle of later empirical work on literary reading: ‘The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged’ (Shklovsky, 1965 [1917]: 12). Shklovsky draws on several works by Tolstoy to illustrate his claim: in each, there is a process of ‘defamiliarisation’ (in Russian, ostraneniye) that makes familiar ideas or objects strange. In one, Tolstoy is presenting flogging in an unusual way: ‘. . . to strip people who have broken the law, to hurl them to the floor, and to rap on their bottoms with switches, . . . to lash about on the naked buttocks’ (Shklovsky, 1965 [1917]: 13). As Shklovsky points out, one of Tolstoy’s achievements is that the familiar name for the idea (here, ‘flogging’) is not mentioned; it is as though we are meeting it for the first time. Another technique for defamiliarising that he mentions is the ‘roughening’ of poetic language promoted by Leo Jakubinsky, one of whose techniques was the repetition of identical sounds (Shklovsky, 1965 [1917]: 22). Pushkin too was known for the deliberate roughness of the verse in his poetry, a device that ‘impeded’ the reading process.

Shklovsky’s essay offers not only a preliminary contribution to a theory of literariness, but also concepts with psychological significance that have been taken up and elaborated in later studies of literary response. One of these concepts, central to Shklovsky’s approach, is the impedence experienced by the literary reader and the suggestion that this is brought about by unusual verbal effects, such as in the Tolstoy story, which omits the name of the object he is describing. Thus Shklovsky (1965 [1917]: 12) tells us to expect the reading process to be prolonged, to be more difficult – to expect to feel more when arresting verbal artefacts are encountered and for the state induced in us by such perceptions to seem an end in itself. This, as we will see, is a set of testable propositions: not only can they be assigned a place in a theory of literature, but they can also be confirmed empirically as measurable components of literary reading (Miall & Kuiken, 1994).
**Literariness: The next phase**

Following the persecution of the two formalist groups in Russia in the 1920s, important theoretical development shifted to the Prague linguistic circle, in which the formalists ‘played a conspicuous part’ (Erlich, 1981: 156). They were indebted in particular to the influence brought to bear by the presence of Roman Jakobson. Shklovsky had already indicated an important theoretical component of formalism in his stress on the maximising of attention to the language of literature, on a reading that made the stone *stony*. The concept of attention was to be taken up some decades later in the focus on empirical studies of absorption while reading (Green, 2004). In the 1930s, however, in his essay ‘Standard language and poetic language’, it was Mukařovský (1964) who put forward the concept of *foregrounding*, the linguistic face of the psychological phenomenon of attention (that is, defamiliarisation), and who was to claim that foregrounding was the primary component of the language of poetry.

Reminding us of Tolstoy’s experience of habituation, in which his actions had become automatic and unconscious, Mukařovský (1964: 19) proposes that:

> Foregrounding is the opposite of automatization, that is the deautomatization of an act; the more an act is automatized, the less it is consciously executed; the more it is foregrounded, the more completely conscious does it become. Objectively speaking: automatization schematizes an event; foregrounding means the violation of the scheme.

As is evident, this definition distinguishes actions with which we are thoroughly familiar from those that strike us as odd or anomalous (as the sight of flogging would do, in a culture that had never known corporal punishment). Mukařovský (1964: 19) has yet to apply this to poetry:

> In poetic language foregrounding achieves maximum intensity to the extent of pushing communication into the background as the objective of expression, and of being used for its own sake; it is not used in the services of communication, but in order to place in the foreground the act of expression, the act of speech itself.

In this way, the components of the poetic text, such as rhythm, metaphor, or alliteration, draw the attention of the reader as objects of verbal pleasure in their own right, not because of their significance in helping to frame the meaning of the poem. The foregrounding of different components of a poem occurs systematically, but it cannot occur within a text as a whole: ‘[T]he simultaneous foregrounding of all the components of a work of poetry is unthinkable’, says Mukařovský (1964: 20). If we consider Blake’s ‘The Sick Rose’, however, this might seem possible, given the shortness of the poem: the rhythm, as we have already seen, is anomalous; there is only one rhymed couplet (*joy* and *destroy*); and ‘Rose’ has a common meaning, which seems deautomatised as the poem unfolds, suggesting several less usual meanings that would be hard to identify. Does each line contain some foregrounded feature? But another way of regarding the poem is in terms of its context, whereby it points sideways to related passages that occur throughout Blake’s two books *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1793–4). This creates a framework of issues that serves to clarify (by foregrounding) what function this poem has in the collection as a whole, for example by echoing questions about diseased, damaged, or thwarted sexuality that occur elsewhere (such as in ‘Ah! Sun-flower’, or ‘London’).

The arrival of the Russian group in Prague benefited Prague scholarship as much as the Russians benefited from their contacts in Prague, since both drew on closely similar
concepts of language and aesthetics. Their collaboration resulted in joint manifestos such as one published in 1935, which presents the claim that only poetry ‘enables us to experience the act of speech in its totality and reveals to us language not as a ready-made static system but as creative energy’ (Erlich, 1981: 157).

In discussion of how art can be evaluated, Mukařovský indicates that there are no rules:

> The problem in evaluating is to determine how and to what extent a given component fulfils the function proper to it in the total structure; the yardstick is given by the context of a given structure and does not apply to any other context.

(Mukařovský, quoted in Garvin, 1964: 26)

Thus any measure that we wish to apply must be intrinsic to the work; we cannot import it from outside. There are no ‘rules’, as Edmund Burke (1990: 49) puts it: ‘[A]rt can never give the rules that make an art’ (but compare Attridge, 2004: 12).

**Critical debates**

**Opposition to literariness**

This makes the theory of literature interestingly complex: what is the relation of literariness to literature? What counts as literature if the components of literariness are liable to shift their meaning from one work to another (that is, what is plot in a novel if it can be as unstable as that of *Tristram Shandy*, as noted by Shklovsky)? The standard view of literature as developed by the formalists was strongly criticised by Terry Eagleton (1983) in his book *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Theory is essential, for, in the words of Eagleton (1983: viii), ‘without some kind of theory, however unreflective and implicit, we would not know what a “literary work” was in the first place, or how we were to read it’. Thus Eagleton (1983: 3) dismisses much of the account of the formalists: he discredits the claim that literature has its own internal laws, and that ‘[i]t was made of words, not of objects or feelings’. According to the formalists, literature was an assembly of ‘devices’, which worked to ‘defamiliarize’ the act of reading (Eagleton, 1983: 3). Defamiliarisation, however, implies deviation from a norm. Eagleton (1983: 5) questions whether there is or ever has been such a thing: ‘The idea that there is a single “normal” language, a common currency shared equally by all members of society, is an illusion.’ The formalists (in their early writings, at least) ‘were not out to define “literature”, but “literariness” – special uses of language, which could be found in “literary” texts but also in many places outside them’ (Eagleton, 1983: 5). But, he claims, ‘[l]iterature, in the sense of a set of works of assured and unalterable value, distinguished by certain shared inherent properties, does not exist’ (Eagleton, 1983: 11). With sufficient historical time and shifts in values, even Shakespeare could come to be considered not literature.

This aphoristic comment of Eagleton’s sums up the problem that he and other recent theorists have set – that is, that literariness lies not in a set of literary devices, but in how people relate themselves to a particular piece of writing: ‘There is no “essence” of literature whatever’ (Eagleton, 1983: 9). In overstating his case here, Eagleton indicates how we might locate an answer to the problematics of the missing ‘essence’. In brief, the ‘essence’ is not a fabulation – it is not merely missing; rather, essence lies in the rules of growth and change created at each encounter with a literary work, at each repetition of its formal structures – and the incentive to experience its difference from any other literary work is given by
its peculiar language or waywardness of plot or characterisation. Between the most striking and original literary work and the work that is dull and unoriginal lies a continuum (compare Stankiewicz, 1961, cited in Pratt, 1977: 25), along which some works are of doubtful essence: they will be read by certain readers with interest, but disregarded by others. But at each level, to borrow Burke’s (1990: 49) terms again, ‘art can never give the rules that make an art’ – except that additional issues come into play when the rules of a given work low on the continuum appear to be stereotyped or ungenerative.

The Russian and Czech contribution to poetics that I have outlined initiated an important debate over the question of literariness. This was a central concept for these groups of theorists, but has been dismissed as an illusion in more recent thinking, such as in the opening chapter, ‘The “poetic language” fallacy’, to Marie Louise Pratt’s (1977) book Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse. Pratt’s primary focus is on the difference from ordinary language said to be evident in literary texts. This sets the text apart from and above ordinary language and society, while it conceals its underlying ideology – in which claim, she sees a reinstatement of the art for art’s sake position (Pratt, 1977: xvi). According to Jakobson (1935), however, this view, which equated poetic and aesthetic functions, was discarded early in formalist history. In Jakobson’s (1978 [1935]: 83) account, ‘this equation is unquestionably erroneous: a poetic work is not confined to aesthetic function alone, but has in addition many other functions’. These might include a scientific account or the writing of letters (Darwin’s On the Origin of Species has been considered poetry; Keats’ Letters convey key statements in his poetic theory). The poetic work, adds Jakobson (1978 [1935]: 84), is one ‘whose aesthetic function is its dominant’.

At the beginning of her first chapter, Pratt (1997: 3–4) raises an important issue: citing Eichenbaum on the opposition of poetic and practical language, she remarks how this promotes the idea that literary language functions differently from ordinary language (compare Stockwell, 2012: 138–9), and that this results from the visible properties of poetic language that ordinary or prosaic language lacks. But this difference has never been tested, says Pratt. No one has troubled to examine whether the various literary devices also exist outside literature: ‘Examples from literature are virtually never accompanied by data from extraliterary discourse’ (Pratt, 1977: 5). Even the shifting terminology devised in naming the non-literary should be cause for concern: ‘That the poeticians themselves have never been able to agree on a term for designating nonliterature should have led them to doubt the existence of any such monolith’ (Pratt, 1977: 6).

While it is true that non-literary language as viewed by the formalists was never established with its own range of specific functions or forms, Pratt’s book appeared a decade or more ahead of the empirical studies that would help to establish the validity of the contrast in linguistic and psychological frameworks (Hanauer, 1996; Hoffstaedter, 1987; Miall & Kuiken, 1994; van Peer, 1986). Meanwhile, other difficulties with ordinary language follow. For instance, the formalist Brik (cited in Pratt, 1977: 13) claims that verse is regulated ‘by the laws of rhythmic syntax, that is, a syntax in which the usual syntactic laws are complicated by rhythmic requirements’. Pratt finds Brik problematic here, since Brik is said to assume ‘that rhythmic organization is alien to non-literary discourse and can thus be taken as a distinctive feature of the poetic language’, and that rhythm does not arise for those concerned with syntax (Pratt, 1977: 13). Similarly in her attack on Levin’s (1962) book, Pratt takes issue with his concept of form, as ‘dummy structures’ in ordinary language, waiting to be filled in; according to Pratt, the contrast appears to be with meaningful, poetic structures as a part of the context for the creation of poetry, unlike non-literary language. Pratt here overlooks the great variety of ‘dummy structures’ that occur in everyday life, from making
a will to direct debit instructions for the bank, none of which will be found to contain much poetic language (however this is defined).

Perhaps a more important problem is that Pratt (1977: 24) imposes the binarism of the poetic/nonpoetic formula in her readings of Havranek and Mukařovský, whereas it is clear that both assume that poetic features are present in literature, but function differently from how they function in ordinary language. Pratt also objects to the collapsing of the binary distinction of poetic and ordinary language to a continuum model. This is supposed to threaten ‘the belief that intrinsic textual properties constitute “literariness”’ (Pratt, 1977: 26). What is missing from her argument is a recognition of the difference between incidental, random occurrences of such features in contrast to their organised role in literature. Pratt continues by noting the difficulty of assigning literariness to prose, whereas the literariness of verse is well established: this calls for clarification and Pratt (1977: 26) remarks again on ‘the poetic/nonpoetic dichotomy [which] raises the problem of empirical verification that . . . the binary opposition was designed to avoid in the first place’. In contrast, she appeals to the speech act approach to literature (which we will not pursue here), which:

... enables and indeed requires us to describe and define literature in the same terms used to describe and define all other kinds of discourse. It thus does away with the distortive and misleading concepts of ‘poetic’ and ‘ordinary’ language.

(Pratt, 1977: 88, emphasis original)

This creates another problem, however: it may efface what is distinctive about literature before it is decided how to describe and define it – and such a move would at the same time threaten the disappearance of literariness, since any features held in common by ordinary and poetic language would be familiar, whereas any feature unique to the literary would be invisible.

The empirical dimension

Empirical investigation (rather than verification) of some of these issues is possible and has been undertaken, as I will show. In this section, I will present work completed by the book historian Jonathan Rose (2001), whose readings of nineteenth-century memoirs of British workers has revealed a rich domain of uneducated literary reading. In the following section, I outline the modern, experimental approach to the study of literary reading, and describe a specific study of foregrounding by Hakemulder (2004).

**Empirical study 1: Untutored reading**

An influential postmodern view of reading is that it depends on acquisition of the right literary conventions. Without these, reading could not exist. Thus, in *Reading after Theory* Valentine Cunningham (2002: 5) points to the claim of Theory that: ‘Reading is always a postlapsarian business. It has always eaten of the tree of theoretical knowledge. So it is never innocence. It simply cannot exist unschooled.’ But prelapsarian reading (as we might call it) is just what Rose discovered. Readers of literature of 100 or 200 years ago not only had no acquaintance with the conventions and forms of literary reading, but also had never before read a literary work when they first picked one up – and yet found themselves able to read it successfully. Cunningham’s theorists (2002: 5) would dismiss this possibility as myth:
There is, of course, a common fantasy of the independent, the natural reader, of men and women quite alone with the text, making sense of it by their own unaided efforts, uncontaminated by givens and presuppositions, by prejudices and doctrines, especially not anything that might be called theory, or (especially) Theory . . . But no one ever did read de novo, raw, naturally; understanding never came that easily.

But, as Rose shows through historical evidence, the reality is rather different, and surprising – and it calls into question the assertions of a number of recent theorists. As Rose (2001: 4) puts it:

The failure of practical criticism, as it is actually practiced, is methodological: with some exceptions it ignores actual readers. In this terrain, critics repeatedly commit what might be called the receptive fallacy: they try to discern the messages a text transmits to an audience by examining the text rather than the audience.

Rose notes that working-class readers are said to have no interest in reading the literary classics. As Rose (2001: 4) puts it, this is a theory that ‘has no visible means of support’.

I cite below an extract from one of the accounts that Rose mentions. The author, Richard Hillyer (born 1901), was the son of a cowman in a poor Northamptonshire village, Byfield, near Billington. He attended elementary school in the village until about the age of 11. Hillyer says the lessons meant nothing to him, but the teacher, Mr Wickens, had a question period on Wednesday afternoons. Hillyer asked what a ‘poet laureate’ was – a term that he had seen in a newspaper. The question interested Wickens:

So, for ten minutes, he let himself go on it, and education began for me. There was Ben Jonson, the butt of canary wine, birthday odes and all the rest of it. I was fascinated. My mind was being broken out of its shell. Here were wonderful things to know. Things that went beyond the small utilities of our lives, which was all that school had seemed to concern itself with until then. Knowledge of this sort could make all times, and places, your own.

(Hillyer, 1967: 29)

In addition, the children were allowed to choose from a small library of books for half an hour of reading on Friday afternoon.

Among them were a few poems of Tennyson, printed on brittle, brownish paper, with a gaudy cover. It said on the title page that he was ‘Poet Laureate’ and that set me wanting to read them. The coloured words flashed out and entranced my fancy. They drew pictures in the mind. Words became magical, incantations, abracadabra which called up spirits. My dormant imagination opened like a flower in the sun. Life at home was drab, and colourless, with nothing to light up the dull monotony of the unchanging days. Here in books was a limitless world that I could have for my own. It was like coming up from the bottom of the ocean and seeing the universe for the first time.

(Hillyer, 1967: 30)

Among other books that Hillyer mentions appreciating were the novels of Dickens, which he borrowed from other houses in the village. These were ‘knocked about old copies that
had been picked up at a rummage sale for a penny, or thrown in with a heap of odds and ends to make a bargain for sixpence’ (Hillyer, 1967: 31).

Notable in Hillyer’s comments here are remarks that anticipate more recent approaches to literature: the text world theory—the delight in literary language, especially imagery and sound (‘incantations’). It would be of interest to conduct a stylistic analysis of this and other extracts from these memoirs of reading, to establish what aspects of poetic language appear to occur as if naturally to these readers.

I cite one other example, that of J. R. Clynes (1869–1949), who became a union leader and Labour Cabinet minister. In his memoirs, Clynes says that his father was illiterate, but that ‘he and my mother taught me the essentials of knowledge. Two sisters by their great helpfulness increased my chances. My schoolmaster taught me nothing except a fear of birching and a hatred of formal education’ (Clynes, 1937: 28). He continues: ‘My school days have no pleasant memories’ (Clynes, 1937: 28). Clynes (1937: 29) went to work part-time at the age of 10 in a cotton factory at Oldham, while continuing to attend school. At school:

> When we had been set poetry to learn at school I had furtively read on and on, avidly anxious for more, careless of punishments earned because I refused the drudgery of repeating one passage or another until it became a mere meaningless chant.

(Clynes, 1937: 31)

While in the factory, Clynes remembers some lines of Milton from *Paradise Lost*, previously learned ‘because I loved them’. Situated amidst the machines, ‘I stood there, transfixed and dazed, while the “horrid front of dreadful length and dazzling arms” (Bk I, 563–4) swept forward at me, and only just in time did I skip swiftly back out of reach’ – as if, through Milton’s eyes, he saw the cotton looms advancing to attack him. ‘After that the machinery had a different meaning for me; dimly I perceived the ordained perfection of its sweetly-running, magnificent rhythm’ (Clynes, 1937: 31) – and Clynes recites poetry to himself while working to the rhythm of the machines.

These extracts, and others like them, suggest that literariness is intrinsic to the experience of literary reading – that it is waiting to be discovered.

**Empirical study 2: Foregrounding and literariness**

Several different experimental designs have been used to investigate the relationship of readers with their reading. These are practical studies, not exercises in the ‘receptive fallacy’, as Rose (2001: 4) puts it. Typically, these experiments are designed to examine the responses of actual readers. We might believe, for instance, that a particular text feature that occurs a number of times in a short story, such as free indirect thought, influences readers’ empathy for a character. If we rewrite the story to convert each such feature to regular third person, does this reduce empathy? This might be measured by obtaining readers’ free responses as they think aloud while reading, or it might be captured by asking readers for their ratings of sections of the story on one or more judgements (strength of emotion felt by reader, likeableness of character, etc.). We then compare responses to the original story with responses to the altered version to measure the effect of the feature in question. In another design, variations in text features are studied without manipulation. Short sections of the text as a whole are measured for the presence of a feature, such as foregrounding. Readers then rate the effect on them of each of the story sections in turn, showing whether the feature...
in question has influenced their reading. Reading can also be influenced from outside the text, as it were. After the researcher chooses a suitable text, he or she tells readers in advance that the text is taken either from a literary story or a recent story in a newspaper. Does the preliminary orientation towards its genre influence the reader? (For other examples of empirical designs, see Miall, 2006.)

These three designs can be adapted to investigate a number of empirical questions: manipulation of a text feature; within-text differences, such as foregrounding; and the framing of a reading by preliminary genre categorisation. In the next section, I present an empirical study of foregrounding based on the manipulation paradigm and discuss its implications for understanding literariness in more detail.

Literary reading has had a number of claims made for its efficacy in understanding others (that is, empathy), moral development, outgroup perception, etc. But are such effects distinctive to literature, or merely a result of the contents of the text being read? In other words, does literary quality have any systematic value in bringing about such effects? If so, how are literary qualities (that is, literariness) recognised or defined? Mukařovský was responsible for the term ‘foregrounding’ – that is, the bringing to our attention of important and effective features of the literary text. The literary device is said to have the effect of disrupting or prolonging perception, thus renewing our understanding of the world around us. Other explanations of the effect of literature involve instructive content, empathy of the reader, or textual features other than foregrounding. Hakemulder (2004) points out that none of these explanations involve features distinctive to literary reading and that foregrounding itself occurs frequently in non-literary contexts, although its presence there is usually unsystematic and has little influence on the reader. A metaphor in a newspaper article, for instance, may be more likely to irritate a reader rather than interest or entertain her.

**The Hakemulder study**

Hakemulder (2004) used the rereading paradigm employed effectively by Dixon and colleagues (1993). Dixon and his colleagues reasoned that, because literary stories are more complex than popular fiction, the literary text would improve in the aesthetic enjoyment of readers for being read more than once. In this design, then, one of two stories was presented to readers: a story by Borges and a so-called true detective story (assumed not to be literary). Depth of appreciation was measured. After a second reading, this was found to have increased in the case of the Borges, but decreased in the case of the detective story. Dixon and his colleagues surmised that this improvement was the result of Borges’ use of an ambiguous narrator, who is often uncertain about the story that he is telling. In two further studies, effects on appreciation were shown to result either from narrator ambiguity or the degree of complexity of the story.

Hakemulder’s (2004) study was designed to compare a literary text high in foregrounding with an otherwise similar text low in foregrounding. It was predicted that the former text would have a greater impact on depth of appreciation and that it would also have a stronger effect on perception – that is, on opinions about immigrants in Holland. Thirty-two students completed the study, reading the opening 600-word section of Rushdie’s (1988) *The Satanic Verses* in Dutch translation, either in its original form, as translated, or in a shorter version, from which most of its foregrounding had been eliminated.

Participants read their assigned text twice and responded to the appreciation scale (questions included ‘Is this an example of good literature?’, ‘Did you enjoy reading the text?’, ‘Would you recommend it to a friend?’, ‘Do you want to read on?’). They were then asked
to complete a questionnaire on their opinion of the position of immigrants in Europe. These questions corresponded to issues evident in the Rushdie text or its variant form. It was predicted that those reading the original foregrounded version would score higher on the post-reading measures when comparing second with first readings.

Results showed that, in both groups, appreciation scores were approximately the same. Neither version of the text impacted on readers’ opinions about immigrants. In an earlier pilot study, significant effects had been obtained, but these were attributed to readers’ reading frequency. A second study was designed to employ more experienced, trained readers: freshman literary studies students.

In this study (experiment 1), student readers were randomly assigned to three groups: two experimental (a Rushdie text high in foregrounding or low in foregrounding), and one control. The same text and manipulation were used as before. The results for appreciation showed significant interactions for the questions on ‘good literature’ and enjoyment. For literary quality, scores increased significantly for the readers of the original version, while a slight increase occurred for the manipulated version. Increases also occurred for interest in reading the rest of the text. Tests of perception of immigrants showed significant increases in the acceptance scale, but for intolerance only those reading the original text containing foregrounding showed an increase. These modest results, Hakemulder (2004) suggested, may be the result of the low appreciation for the Rushdie text, given its unusual and striking style. Nevertheless, the emergent features that helped to shape the second reading appeared to show enhanced moral judgements about immigrants in the context of appreciation of foregrounding – that is, both content and form influenced readers’ attitudes.

Following this study, as reported so far, several points can be made about literariness – a concept that occupies an important place in this study. Given that readers had the opportunity to reread the text (whether in its original or manipulated version) and to judge its literary quality, it is illuminating that Hakemulder’s hypothesis about the effects of foregrounding were confirmed. Those who read the text containing the original foregrounding showed higher appreciation after their second reading when asked if this was good literature or whether they enjoyed reading it. In the Rushdie excerpt, an unusual setting and improbable action contribute to the text’s foregrounding: these demand an exercise of the reader’s imagination that the appreciation ratings show to have been easier during the second reading (since what is easier to enjoy attracts higher ratings). In the literary context, this ease indicates a greater command of the rules that emerged during the second reading, which make for greater aesthetic coherence – rules specific to this experience of reading, whether occurring consciously or unconsciously. Literariness thus has an emergent aesthetic quality that drives the dynamics of literary (but not non-literary) reading. Here, we find reflected the ethical attitudes of the reader (that is, the judgements about immigrants). As we saw earlier, Shklovsky’s examples of defamiliarisation (which often depended on foregrounding in stories by Tolstoy) were largely drawn from the ethical domain. In this context, literariness serves to situate us in relation to a world of moral issues, created by, but not limited to, the vision of the writer, since both reader and writer share the imaginative work of literariness.

The Rushdie text may have presented readers with difficulties because of its unusual style; hence the modest results reported by Hakemulder (2004). A second experiment (experiment 2) was designed, focusing on a shorter and more accessible text (Nabokov’s poem ‘The Old Bridge’) – one that was more easily manipulated to decrease the presence of foregrounding. Other variables were also introduced to track readers’ responses. Sixty readers from a psychology of media course participated. In addition to a control group, one group read the original poem, while a second group read a manipulated version that
reduced the foregrounding. Foregrounding in the poem was predicted to increase the reader’s appreciation for Nabokov’s treatment of love. The manipulated version was designed to remove all foregrounding. Participants answered both appreciation measures and perception measures – that is, questions about the perceived complexity of the poem, such as whether they understood the poem, whether it had more than one level of interpretation, whether it was ambiguous, or whether it contained unnamed implications. The study also included a questionnaire on the participant’s concept of love, consisting of thirteen bipolar adjective scales (for example fragile–strong, temporal–permanent, etc.). Since experience of literary reading was considered likely to affect the outcome, readers were also asked about how much time they had spent reading during the week prior to the experiment. Participants in the experimental groups read the poem, and answered the evaluation and perceived complexity questions, then repeated the procedure by rereading the poem and answering the questions again.

Results showed that some significant shifts in predicted directions occurred. In particular, the overall appreciation scores for the Nabokov poem were markedly higher than for the Rushdie passage used in experiment 1. Emergent effects that showed significant shifts for the original, but not the manipulated, version of the poem included seeing new aspects at second reading, whether the poem was enjoyable, and whether a third reading would be richer. Results from the bipolar adjectives test produced several interpretable factors, corresponding to those that were projected: at the second level, eternal love; at a third level, that eternal love is transitory (an implication of Nabokov’s poem).

Appreciation measures also showed several significant findings. On enjoyment, the high foregrounding group shifted upwards, from a first reading of 4.78 to 5.30 at second reading. The low foregrounding group, in contrast, scored lower on the second reading, at 4.37 and 3.93, respectively. Emergent effects that occurred for second readings showed higher scores for those reading the original poem. For example, for new aspects perceived at the second reading, poem readers scored 3.78 compared with 2.62 for those receiving the manipulated version. For whether readers would benefit from a third reading, mean scores were 4.37 (original version) and 3.06 (manipulated version). Emergent effects, if they were present, occurred unconsciously, since there were no reports that the text was easier to understand on a second reading, nor that its ambiguity or implicit meaning were better detected – but this is not surprising: such meanings may not occur consciously until a poem has been read a dozen times. The literariness of a given text may be difficult to experience for some readers with some texts.

**Conclusion**

Not any text can trigger a literary reading. Conventions may be responsible for the recognition of literary text features (see Schmidt, 1982), but the present studies show that it is more likely in many cases that text features are responsible for triggering conventions. Literary reading, then, is an interaction of text variables and reader variables (if attempting a definition of literariness, this is a place to start). The finding that reported that reading frequency, as measured in Hakemulder’s (2004) experiment 2, made no contribution to depth of appreciation suggests that immediate experience of the text plays a key role. As Hakemulder (2004: 213) puts it, it is the experiencing of textual features that seems to cause emergent literary effects: features such as narrator ambiguity, free indirect discourse, or foregrounding may direct a reader’s attention to the text world being created as he or she reads. This autonomy of the text is one way of regarding the experience of literariness. That readers
are aware of such emergent effects indicates a predisposition to be moved (in complex ways) by the act of literary reading, especially when supported by states of absorption or immersion – of being ‘lost in a book’. To put it another way, literariness includes recognition of foregrounding and can, at the same time, raise awareness of the phenomena of the external world – in the case of the present studies, the experience of immigrants and the transience of love. Literariness thus involves both a feeling for the textures and dynamics of the literary work, and an immersion in the ambivalence of the human predicaments that are represented in it.

Related topics
cognitive stylistics; literary narrative; literary stylistics and creativity; poetry and poetics

Further readings

This is one of the most succinct and forceful statements on what is distinctive about literary texts.


Leech, a prominent leader of the British stylistics school, offers a detailed and extensive account of the range of stylistic features that occur in literary texts.


This comprises extensive coverage of empirical studies of reading – their aims, scope, and limitations – all described from the perspective of an empirical scholar.


Stockwell makes an important contribution to explaining literary reading from the perspective of cognitive poetics.


A range of different perspectives on the contentious problem of evaluating literary works are presented in this text, edited by a noted theorist of empirical studies.

References


