



Decorated temple garden in Nanjing, China

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The Place and Function of Literature in the Next Millenium

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It is a daunting task to forecast the place and function of literature in the next millenium - a period corresponding roughly to that spanning from the appearance of the earliest vernaculars in Northern Europe to the present day. Nevertheless, I suggest that a look at the past may provide us with the best clues about the future of literature. Taking stock of the development of the use of literature since its beginnings in Classical Antiquity, there are points worthy of note, especially on

hindsight.

In this statement, I shall distinguish between literature in the broad sense, that is any message committed to writing (and therefore in principle ranging from an account book via a Runic stone to Marcel Proust), and to literature in the narrow sense, that is literature written with an audience in mind and intended for amusement, for gratification. The latter type is often defined by serving no obvious utilitarian purpose and by being consumed by an audience which has, especially in recent times, tended to belong to the cultural elite. Inclusion in 'narrow literature' varies over time. It tends more readily to accept works ascribable to one reasonably fixed source (e.g. *The Iliad* (Homer), *Faust* (Goethe)). Together with religious writing, it stands better chances than broad literature of coming to exist diachronically and cross-culturally, that is, to appeal to readers over a span of many years, centuries and even millenia, and of becoming known in more than one culture. However, narrow literature never existed in a vacuum, and depends for its vitality on an interplay with a much larger body of 'non-aesthetic' literature. It also seems to presuppose social stratification of some kind, for it is not until the aesthetically oriented elite accepts a work or a genre as literature that it becomes so: the tales of the common folk became part of the accepted German literature of the past when the brothers Grimm and other Romantics argued that folk literature was worth attention and their arguments were accepted by the German elite at large.

The Iliad, the *Odyssey* and Greek drama clearly fulfill my definition of literature in the narrow sense, and so does much literature from the Roman Antiquity. The proof that this literature appealed to the elite is found in Plato, Aristotle and Horace's attempts to define it, to describe identifiable characteristics.

Then came 'the dark age', maybe not for the natural sciences and technology, but for literature it certainly was: in broad and sweeping outline, the classical authors survived only in manuscripts and copies to be read, listened to, and appreciated by a small number of readers.

Literature had a slow revival in the early Middle Ages at courts and in monasteries, but literacy was not attained by more than a small fraction of the population, a fact which also applied to literature in the broad sense: there was no broad literature to support and uphold the narrow one.

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The role of literature in the next millenium

latter half of the Middle Ages, with the introduction of printing, with the moveable fonts. However, although the use of literature in the broad and the narrow senses increased, the culture was primarily oral: The words of Shakespeare were heard rather than read. Circulation of books, including of that monument for the establishment of the vernacular, the Lutheran Bible, was low.

Financially, narrow literature was created *con amore* or thanks to patronage and it was kept alive by 'popularity' in select circles. Driven by pragmatic necessity, there is always a material motive for broad literature. Narrow literature exists precariously. The renaissance in Britain was a period which saw an early system of producers (authors/actors) - distributors (actors/printers) - and consumers (listeners) in which the money flow actually enabled a few privileged writers to live from writing. They were far and few in between, and they hardly considered themselves aesthetic writers, but rather as competent playwrights and successful men in their craft.

It is not until the emergence of the middle classes in the 18th century that we find groups of commercially successful producers of narrow literature.

Of course, broad literature thrived with industrialisation and urbanisation which made for complex societies which needed of new educated leaders. These would come from the from the middle classes as schooling improved. They advanced by the ideas of personal freedom, equality and solidarity and rose in society all over Europe, most spectacularly so after the Napoleonic wars as their superior education and personal merit gradually saw them replace family connections or noble ancestry. State administration, trade and industry needed diligent and educated people. The ability to acquire knowledge, mostly through reading literature in the broad sense, became the most important factor for the advancement of the individual European.

Mass education and mass media using the written medium (newspapers, textbooks) created a wide spectrum of audiences using literature in the broad sense, which in turn, made for the creation of (more) literature in the narrow sense, the production and consumption of which therefore had its heyday in the 19th and early 20th century. Being formally akin to the instructive and informative types of broad literature (textbooks, newspapers), it is no coincidence that the long prose narrative, the novel, should make its appearance when education started in the 18th century and reached its apex in the 19th and 20th century, then to compete fiercely

The role of literature in the next millenium

with the short prose narrative, often published in transitory media. Epic, prose and narrative are, indeed have always been, more popular than poetry.

Although form occasionally plays an important role in aesthetic literature, narrow literature has usually adapted quite well to any kind of printed page. As a series of squiggles on the printed page, literature has released responses with readers, based on the fiction that although there is a stimulus prompting a response, this stimulus differs from the real-life message by not referring to a tangible and measurable reality. If there ever was one, it was usually highly personalised (as in poetry).

In Western Europe, the academic study of literature has evolved in the wake of 'schools' and trends in literature alongside large-scale consumption of aesthetic literature: roughly speaking Romanticism's focus on the creative personality led to biographical studies, the (largely peaceful) social changes of the mid-nineteenth century to realism, the increased use of translation at the same time to comparative literature, the experimental writings from the turn of the century to close reading, and general democratisation to an interest in pedagogics. In that context, empirical studies appear to be able to (at a certain metalevel to be sure) to cover the multiplicity of previous approaches (which were rarely monolithic schools anyway). Empirical studies enable us better to understand the mechanisms forming traditions out of isolated works and fragmented trends. I suggest that, for all its diversity, it is better at predicting what will happen to literature in the broad as well as in the narrow sense in the decades, perhaps even centuries to come; therefore it is appropriate that SPIEL takes up the topic of the future of literature. But the empiricism I refer to is broader than the one we consider a scholarly field today, because in my view, this particular branch never flourished fully: for all its popularity and despite its crucial role in the development of Western culture, the reading of literature is still one of the least explored human activities.

The intellectual approach to literature in modern critical schools has a link to Antiquity. The academic approach presupposes that there is a mass audience: in Greek Antiquity the key is 'drama', in the last two centuries arguably 'prose', although the other literary forms also have their critical adherents. The academic approach has, however, until the middle of this century, connected with elitist reading. The sociology of the elitist reading developed from a purely *con amore* activity to a high-status activity in today's world, with close circuits of producers,

The role of literature in the next millenium

distributors and consumers, in prestigious publishing houses and crowning the achievements of the 'best' with international awards, most prominently the Nobel Prize. For all the commercialism that we may see, there is, however, also idealism at work in these circuits at most levels (excluding, perhaps, the consumers whose main concern is enjoyment).

But there is other reading of literature: when I go by train and bus, I see readers absorbed in books. These are rarely Dostoyevsky or Shakespeare, but more often cheap novels. There is also, as amply demonstrated by Gunnar Hansson, enjoyment, gratification, and instruction in the reading of these books. Not that elitist reading is confined to isolation and quiet: people may read in noisy surrounding. Silent reading is not confined to quiet surroundings.

It is, however, characterised by being an individual occupation, and, in our conception of it, it presupposes some typographical signals which we, as individuals recreate in our minds. Or rather reading creates something in every one of us individually. It does something to readers: fills them with horror, makes them laugh, amuses them, meets with obvious and not-so-obvious demands. It fulfills some individual craving, and at the same time it is a strange activity in which, as a human being, one is never completely alone because there is an empathy shared with characters, the author, or another culture. The response is individual and can only be shared with others humans after the event, in a verbalised form.

Despite ever increasing circulation figures given for books, reading is essentially under attack in the Western world: the respect for the textual authority is undermined. Writers are writing books until they are taken out of their hands by publishing houses and translators use previous versions for their translations. Previously writers revised - now they write another book. Overall the process of writing is less sacrosanct and more rapid. Some of the precursors of its present-day alternatives were previously features in reading: the colour books of today had their counterparts in the illuminated medieval manuscripts. But, in children's books today, the pictures wield sway over the printed texts and force editors and translators to manhandle the text. The pictures may leap to life on their own, as they do in films, in television. Today there is also sound, music, but was this ever part of literature? Ballad-singing, narration, reading aloud connect with literature, but were never, in the narrow sense at least, part of the definition. I would assume that it is because, just like film in theatres, the response to these forms has normally

The role of literature in the next millenium

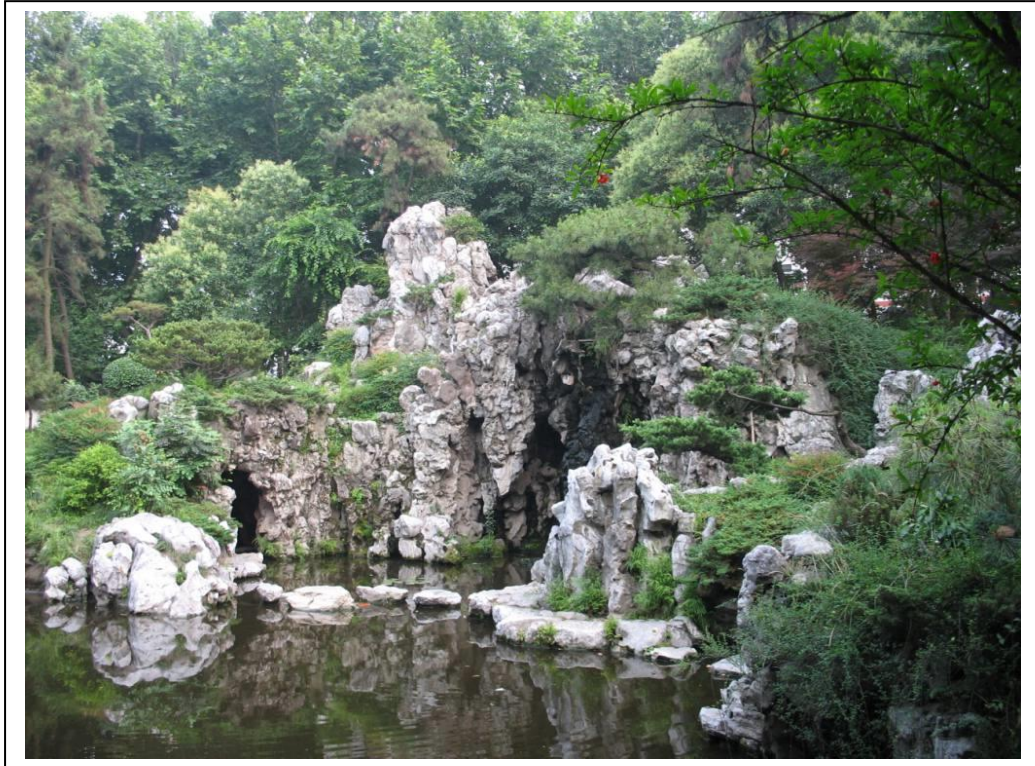
been a shared, communal one.

Yet pictures, sound, multimedia will not disappear or gradually be harnessed by literature. These new forms will - and are already creating - their own aesthetics. There will be other and yet undreamt of forms of art, combining stimuli some of which are not yet known. The average individual will spend more and more time on enjoying other forms of art, of amusement, of enjoyment and they will have their own audiences, their own circuits of creation, distribution, and consumption.

These new media have begun to take over some key functions of literature in the broad sense. Instructions come on multimedia. Teaching and accountancy is becoming computerised. Letter-writing is giving way to e-mail. To me this seems to be inevitable. Literature in the broad sense will lose ground in the future. Consequently the societal basis for the maintenance of elitist literature will be weakened and it will lose many circuits that help it thrive today. Sociologically, literature will, however, because it loses broad literature, become more elitist. It will also recede in importance on the social scene so that there are no more Nobel Prizes and revert to the same role it played before the mass education: but it will not die out. It is a type of communication which has shown that its strengths are its ability to exist diachronically and to traverse cultures. In losing its social status and consequently its social clout, narrow literature will become less money-driven than today when we find it hard to apply objective criteria for distinguishing between crass and cynical commercialism from idealistic publishing. The literature of the future will to a large extent be borne forth by idealists. It will continue to be written by individual writers with an urge or a wish to communicate in the specific medium of writing, rather than, in previous times, painting or sculpting, and, in the present, film-directing and television. The lack of a broad literature of the size it had until the advent of films and television, will imply that prose will recede: the readership brought up with prose instruction, manuals and prose textbooks in teaching will no longer be so large and consequently there will be less of a call for a form of narrow literature allowing for easy transition. The literature of the future will be more well-defined, it will probably be more experimental and it will stress form: my guess is that we shall see more poetry, more questioning types of literature. There will be fewer producers, distributors and fewer readers. Yet those of the future will, like the readers of yesteryear and today, be driven by the urge to share something which is at the same time, intensely gratifying at the personal level

The role of literature in the next millenium

and also shared with humanity.



Garden of old city manor, Nanjing, China