The scope of SSOL
A discussion of the boundaries of science and literature

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This editorial evolved from a discussion among the editors of the Scientific Study of Literature concerning the appropriateness of a specific paper for inclusion in the journal. Without providing too much identifying information, the paper presented a challenge to the editors. It provided historical context for specific linguistic patterns but did not discuss methods, test hypotheses, or articulate the literary function of those patterns. Also, there was no reference to prior empirical work and no attempt to define the research project as a scientific study. The paper seemed better suited to a journal dealing with literary history or specializing in the particular bodies of poetry explored. However, one editor raised an interesting point: the paper could have been conceptualized as a historical and empirical case study and it could have been presented as an example of systematic procedures for the conduct of historical case studies. If this had been done, the paper would have been suitable for SSOL in that it presented methods for the scientific study of literature and exemplified these methods through the particular cases studied.

Such an internal discussion among editors concerning the appropriateness of a paper for a journal is not in itself unusual. However, when the journal sits on the border of several disciplines and is in itself a new entity going through a shift in editorship, we agreed that it would be useful to explicate our conception of the journal’s scope, ensure discussion and evaluation of that conception, and in this way offer guidance to those considering whether to submit their manuscripts to SSOL.

So what are the issues here? The scope of the journal requires clarification of two terms that are open to a range of interpretations: “science” and “literature.” The editors are generally at ease with the inclusive conception of “literature” provided in the journal’s policy document:
Literature is broadly defined as all cultural artifacts that embody literary devices, such as narrative genre, stylistic variations, and figurative language. The domain includes novels, short stories, and poetry, but also theatre, film, television, and digital media.

Despite the mechanistic overtones of the term “devices,” the accompanying elaboration ensures due regard for the complex “aesthetic function” of “narrative genre, stylistic variations, and figurative language.” Also, despite the causal explanatory preconceptions implicit in the term “function,” the accompanying elaboration ensures consideration of the “aesthetic” issues that persist across the full spectrum of modern and post-modern theories of literature (Robinson, 2007). Finally, the reference to “theatre, film, television, and digital media” affirms the extent to which the preceding concerns have shaped inquiry well beyond the boundaries of novels, short stories, and poetry. In short, although the phrase “digital media” has probably received less attention than it deserves, the inclusive conception of “literature” found in the SSOL policy document seems to us suitably complex.

However, the same cannot be said for the conception of “science” that is central to the SSOL mandate. Just as controversies about the literary canon in recent years have extended literary scholarship to include a broader range of genres, controversies about the nature of science have extended scientific studies to include a broader array of empirical procedures than have been published in SSOL. Although there is widespread agreement about the importance of “scientific” studies of literature, the SSOL policy document is silent about what that might mean. Given late 20th Century discussions in the philosophy of science, it no longer is viable (if it ever was) to invoke rhetorically “the scientific method” as an investigative desideratum. Instead, communities of investigators regularly review and revise procedures so that they provide more precise, profound, and replicable findings; and, those who provide meta-discourse about those procedures regularly reshape our conception of what science “is.”

The dynamics of such discourse ensures that the boundaries of science must be carefully, thoughtfully, and repeatedly examined. Two examples may help to affirm that this process does not only occur at the periphery of scientific disciplines. The last half-century of discourse in the social sciences has gradually shifted the investigative imperative from testing hypotheses (especially against some “null” counterpart) to the comparative articulation of models that provide the “best” fit to empirical data. The related technological shift to structural equation modeling, hierarchical linear modeling, and the assessment of replicability (e.g., meta-analyses) has created an educational (and generational) divide, as research communities gradually incorporate these methodological developments into their investigative praxis. Similarly, the last several decades have shifted the dominant investigative imperative in the social sciences from methodological
behaviorism to a methodological cognitivism (in the broadest possible sense). Besides technologically enhanced mental chronometry (the use of reaction times to assess the duration and temporal sequence of cognitive processes) and content analysis (the systematic decomposition of linguistic discourse), this shift has involved a controversial array of methods that promise rigorous and systematic study of first-person accounts (e.g., grounded theory, empirical phenomenology, discourse analysis). These developments, too, have created an educational (and perhaps generational) divide.

IGEL, the organization that sponsors SSOL, has participated in these and other changes in what is considered “scientific.” Since its inception, members have sought to articulate a conception of science that is both sufficiently rigorous and sufficiently sensitive to guide empirical studies of literature (Steen, 2003). In general, members have adapted existing methods from the social sciences (especially applied linguistics and psychology) to studies of literature, generating a diverse array of prescriptions regarding experimentation, measurement, and observation. The papers published in SSOL reflect that diversity. Published research has included computational and corpus linguistic analyses of literary style; experimental studies of engagement with literary texts; analyses of the cognitive, social and affective aspects of literary interpretation; and more. What is common to these papers is their reliance upon established empirical methods to investigate literary phenomena. Each method invoked (e.g., reaction times, content analysis, scaling procedures) has an explicit investigative logic, as well as a supportive literature articulating how it can and should be used. In SSOL, we expect published papers to respect that logic and to be grounded in the relevant supportive literature. Our reviewers, chosen partly for their expertise in particular empirical methods, provide the quality control that ensures conformity with such established standards.

During periods of transition in scientific praxis (e.g., regarding hypothesis testing, regarding first-person accounts), it can be difficult for journal editorship to ensure adherence to established standards for several reasons: (1) such standards may be on their way toward articulation, rather than already articulated; (2) there may be continuing controversy about the suitability of newly developed methods; and (3) it can sometimes be difficult to find reviewers with the appropriate expertise (e.g., in hierarchical linear modeling, in empirical phenomenological methods). In short, it is difficult for journal editorship to remain even-handedly open to methodological innovation and simultaneously insistently on adherence to the prevailing standards for methodological best practice.

This editorial is the beginning of an attempt to address that challenge. With the preceding comments as background, we want to consider how to work through an issue of some importance in empirical studies of literature: the use of qualitative methods. Although not everyone will concur, we as editors believe that
competently executed qualitative research can and should be published in SSOL. However, we also believe that studies grounded in qualitative methods should, like studies grounded in quantitative methods, conform to the investigative logic and conventions established for their use and implementation. For several qualitative methods, there is now a well-developed logic, a set of guidelines for best practice, and even an accepted form for results presentation. Learning the logic and acquiring the skills to implement these procedures is no less an accomplishment than learning the logic and skills required to conduct quantitative research. Increasingly expertise in qualitative research is acquired through formal training that compares with the training required for quantitative procedures. For that reason, the evaluation of manuscripts by reviewers with comparable expertise is as important for qualitative methods as it is for quantitative methods. A pivotal point is that, to ensure expert evaluation, clear and explicit presentation of the logic and procedures that guide qualitative methods (e.g., empirical phenomenology and meta-discursive description) should be included in manuscripts submitted to SSOL, just as is expected for papers involving quantitative methods (e.g., hierarchical linear modeling).

For these reasons, we conclude that manuscripts suitable for SSOL should uniformly lay out the methods used, regardless of whether those methods are qualitative or quantitative. The following table outlines what we expect to find in the rationale for and description of either qualitative or quantitative research methods:

<table>
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<th>Quantitative research</th>
<th>Qualitative research</th>
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<tr>
<td>A rationale for selecting a particular experimental or quasi-experimental design</td>
<td>A rationale for selecting a particular qualitative method of inquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A description of evidence for the validity and reliability of any measures used</td>
<td>A description of the steps taken to identify significant themes (or categories)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A description of the steps in data analysis, including statistical procedures</td>
<td>A description of what makes these themes rigorous, sensitive, and coherent</td>
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Without this kind of information in submitted manuscripts, it is difficult to evaluate whether the procedures used in the reported research meet the standards established for their use.

An important corollary to these requirements is that methodological innovation calls for particularly careful presentation in submitted manuscripts. Just as use of a new measurement procedure (e.g., a new questionnaire) calls for the presentation of additional psychometric detail (e.g., evidence of internal consistency, factorial validity), deviation from established practice with a particular qualitative
method calls for concrete description of how theme articulation was made rigorous and systematic. Normally, these objectives can be met by describing what is new in the chosen research methods in relation to relevant precedents (e.g., books or papers on Likert scaling, books or papers on explicative description). In short, manuscripts describing the use of novel qualitative or quantitative methods must meet similar (or, at least, analogous) standards and requirements.

A cautionary note should perhaps be sounded here. Advocates of qualitative studies regularly invoke the language of “interpretation” to clarify and justify their approaches to explicative description in first-person accounts. In this respect, they draw on discussions of the same theories of interpretation (“hermeneutics”) that have guided the explicative description (“exegesis”) of canonical texts in the areas of literature, religion, and law. Despite this convergence, SSOL is not an appropriate venue for manuscripts that provide explicative description of literary texts (canonical or otherwise), even though there are only shades of difference between the theories of explicative description that guide the interpretation of literary texts and those that guide the interpretation of, for example, first-person accounts of the experience of reading.

Also, advocates of qualitative studies sometimes argue that the language of “interpretation” converges with the language of “aesthetic judgment.” In this respect, the investigative process itself purportedly requires the exercise of poetic expression — and the form of disclosure that can occur through the exercise of such nuanced judgment. When such judgment is presented as one component of a more complete rationale for (1) selecting a particular qualitative method of inquiry, (2) identifying significant themes (or categories), and (3) describing what makes these themes rigorous, sensitive, and coherent (see the table, above), we consider this kind of qualitative research appropriate for SSOL. Because this research is innovative and currently under development, investigators working in this way have an additional responsibility to describe (1) how their practices depart from similar but more thoroughly established practices and (2) how poetic expression contributes to systematic and rigorous theme articulation.

So let us return to the original question concerning the scope of the journal and the criteria for papers that fall within our area of interest and expertise. As editors, and as described more fully above, the following three criteria guide our understanding of the scope of SSOL:

1. The journal is concerned with literature broadly defined as all cultural artifacts whose structure (e.g., narrative genre, stylistic variations, and figurative language) has an aesthetic function. This broad domain includes novels, short stories, and poetry, but also theatre, film, television, and digital media.
2. The journal will consider manuscripts reporting studies of literature in which the methods of inquiry are described with sufficient clarity and concreteness to allow replication or corroboration by others. These methods may be quantitative, qualitative, or mixed, and they may either be well developed or under development.

3. The journal will publish manuscripts that meet the first two criteria and, in addition, make a significant contribution to our understanding of literary phenomena.

We hope that this editorial and these criteria are helpful to those who are considering submitting manuscripts to SSOL.