STUDYING LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

AN INTRODUCTION

Dominic Rainsford

Studying Literature in English

Studying Literature in English is an accessible guide for literature students around the world.

This book:

- Grounds literature and the study of literature throughout by referencing a small selection of well-known novels, plays and poems
- Examines the central questions that readers ask when confronting literary texts, and shows how these make literary theory meaningful and necessary
- Links British, American and postcolonial literature into a coherent whole
- Discusses film as literature and provides the basic conceptual tools in order to study film within a literary framework
- Places particular emphasis on interdisciplinarity by examining the connections between the study of literature and other disciplines
- Provides an annotated list of further reading

From principal literary genres, periods and theory, to strategies for reading, research and essay-writing, Dominic Rainsford provides an engaging introduction to the most important aspects of studying literature in English.

Dominic Rainsford is Professor of Literatures in English at Aarhus University, Denmark, having previously taught in Britain, Poland and the United States. His publications include *Authorship, Ethics and the Reader* (1997), *Literature, Identity and the English Channel* (2002), and many articles on Dickens. He currently works on literature, ethics and quantification.

This page intentionally left blank

Studying Literature in English

An introduction

Dominic Rainsford

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2014
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2014 Dominic Rainsford

The right of Dominic Rainsford to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Rainsford, Dominic, 1965-
Studying Literature in English : an introduction / Dominic Rainsford.
pages cm
1. English literature--History and criticism. I. Title.
PR83.R33 2014
820'.9--dc23
2013047521

ISBN: 978-0-415-69922-8 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-415-69923-5 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-0-203-48382-4 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Taylor & Francis Books

To Saffron Steenberg Rainsford, who was conceived at about the same time and is already well into literature. Not just the apple of my eye, but the whole fruit salad.

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

Acknowledgements ix
Using this book x

PART I
Beginnings **1**

1 Good morrow 3

2 What is literature, and who does it belong to? 8

3 Canons 15

PART II
Form and genre **21**

4 Poetry 23

5 The thing which is not 34

6 Prose fiction 43

7 Plays and films 57

PART III
Periods and movements **71**

8 Medieval and early modern 73

9 From Colonial America and Restoration England to 1900 87

10 From 1900 to the present 104

PART IV
Positions, identities, ideas **119**

11 The place of literature 121

12 Literary theory 139

PART V
Over to you **161**

13 Primary and secondary sources 163

14 Reading, research, writing 171

Further reading 179
Index 188

Acknowledgements

Writing this book has helped me learn more about subjects that I have been trying to teach for many years – to students at University College London, Imperial College London, the University of Warsaw, Loyola University Chicago, Aberystwyth University and, since 1998, Aarhus University. I am grateful to many hundreds of these students for their enthusiasm and hard work, and for the countless ways in which they have helped to shape the arguments in the following pages. Those who took part in my 'Studying Literature in English' course at Aarhus in 2012 made a particularly significant contribution.

Several of my colleagues at Aarhus read parts of the typescript and made helpful comments: Mathias Clasen, Tabish Khair, Jody Pennington, Matthias Stephan and Johanna Wood. I am particularly grateful to Vera Alexander, Hans Bertens, Susan Bruce, Fernando Galván and Francesca Orestano, who, together with an anonymous reviewer, read the proposal for the book, and made detailed and valuable recommendations. My editors at Routledge – Stacey Carter, Polly Dodson, Emma Joyes, Ruth Moody and Elizabeth Levine – have been extremely efficient, patient and understanding.

I am grateful to Faber and Faber (UK) and Farrar, Straus and Giroux (USA) for permission to reproduce Seamus Heaney's poem 'Had I not been awake'; to Faber and Faber (UK) for permission to use an extract from Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf*; and to Pan Macmillan for permission to use Carol Ann Duffy's poem 'Anne Hathaway'.

Using this book

This book sets out to give you almost everything that you need as someone beginning to think seriously about literature in English, and not too much that you don't. Although it divides into various parts, which respectively concentrate on formal, historical and theoretical approaches, it is designed to be read from cover to cover: each chapter assumes information from the previous ones.

Studying Literature in English is designed, first and foremost, as a point of entry for people who are engaged with the subject as first- or second-year students at a university or other institution of higher education. It is meant to be particularly useful to students in countries where English is not the first language and where the equivalent of a British A-level in English Literature, taken for granted by a lot of similar-looking books, does not exist. However, even students in primarily English-speaking countries should be able to benefit from the comprehensive approach offered here, especially since literature is increasingly being taught, almost everywhere, as part of larger modular structures, where study time is rationed, and where the ability to see an academic field as a whole, and connect it with other ones, is very important. This book tries to tell you all that you need to know about literature, but also where to place literature in the context of a wider process of learning.

A guiding principle of the book is that it is impossible to be an effective student of literature without being a keen and accomplished reader. A complementary but less obvious claim is that it is impossible to be an accomplished reader without, in a sense, being a student. Of course, people can derive a great deal of pleasure from literature, and have considerable insight into it, without having studied it systematically: it is only very recently that some authors have deliberately written with a university-based readership in mind. But even books that we have known and loved for decades – perhaps since we were children – can take on new dimensions, offer new pleasures and enlightenment, if we come back to them with more systematic knowledge about what literature is, how it works, and what people tend to do with it. In other words, it is hoped that this book will also have something to offer people who simply 'study' literature as engaged readers, not necessarily in the context of a degree programme.

Many literary texts, from different parts of the world, traditions, genres and periods, will be mentioned in the coming pages. Repeated reference will be

made to a much smaller number of specific works, which – especially the longer ones – are among those most widely read and taught, wherever literature in English is studied. Most of these are to be found in widely used anthologies. If these relatively few texts – including Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Tennessee Williams's *Streetcar Named Desire*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* – are read (or, in the case of *Vertigo*, viewed) before or in parallel with this book, so much the better. But this is not assumed. You will be told (or reminded) about the texts, so that you can follow the arguments being made. Moreover, these arguments are designed to be relevant to any reading list that you are likely to be faced with in your studies, or that you yourself may choose.

A single book cannot say everything that is important about literature in English. For some readers, *Studying Literature in English* may be sufficient in itself, for others it will just be the beginning. It will help you to make a start with the 'mechanics' of literature, with literary periods and movements, with literary theory, and with the processes of researching and writing about literature. There are great advantages, I believe, in tackling all of these subjects together. But there are excellent books that specialise in each of them. *Studying Literature in English* concludes, therefore, with comprehensive recommendations for further reading.

This page intentionally left blank

Part I

Beginnings

This page intentionally left blank

1 Good morrow

We begin studying literature for all sorts of reasons, and with all sorts of expectations. For example, we may look to literature for entertainment, and we may hope that a bit more knowledge about literature will increase that entertainment. Or we may have an idea that literature can somehow help to make us stronger or better equipped for life, and that learning what literature is and how it works is therefore a matter of real importance. Let's get straight down to business by seeing how these requirements and expectations stand up in the presence of something that many people seem to think is a genuine piece of literature:

The Good-Morrow

I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I
Did, till we loved? Were we not weaned till then,
But sucked on country pleasures, childishly?
Or snorted we in the seven sleepers' den?
'Twas so; but this, all pleasures fancies be.
If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.

And now good morrow to our waking souls,
Which watch not one another out of fear;
For love all love of other sights controls,
And makes one little room an everywhere.
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
Let maps to others, worlds on worlds have shown:
Let us possess one world; each hath one, and is one.

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;
Where can we find two better hemispheres,
Without sharp North, without declining West?
Whatever dies was not mixed equally;
If our two loves be one, or thou and I
Love so alike that none do slacken, none can die.

Now, some of you will know who wrote this poem, and when. A handful may have come across the 'seven sleepers'; others, perhaps, will have a theory about what 'country pleasures' might consist of. We will get to the value, the uses and abuses, of this kind of information in due course. Right now, let's just consider this poem as a representative work of literature, a literary text. It must be that, because it's here in my *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, and because – as a search on the internet will quickly show – it has been quoted and analysed in many scholarly books and articles, and is included in literature courses at educational institutions all around the world.

There is a lot in this poem that is very upbeat, from the cheerful greeting in the title to the good news at the end: 'none can die'. The speaker of the poem seems to be in a distinctly good mood. He or she seems to have a message to get across about being in love, and how great that makes one feel. The old-fashioned pronouns 'thou' and 'thee' are singular: the message seems to be directed to a particular person, the one with whom the speaker is in love. So, this seems to be a very intimate and personal statement. And yet, here it is, in a mass-produced anthology. Presumably, the original addressee of the poem is long since dead (if indeed they ever existed). So, apparently, this poem seems to carry on having something to say, and not just to the original 'thou'. It is as if third parties (like you or me) were expected to derive something worthwhile from this statement or exhibition of the idea that one person (whom we don't know) loves another (whom we don't know either). Well, unless we are very misanthropic, we will probably be glad that there is, or has been, some love going on in the world, even if, in this case, it is not directed at us. But we already knew that there's love out there, and that people – on the whole – like it! So there must be something else about this poem, something to do with the particular way in which it gets this fairly unsurprising information across.

In fact, the poem doesn't just make statements. It also provides little details or images that tell us a bit more about the kinds of experience that the speaker seems to think are so great. Take these lines, for example: 'My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears, / And true plain hearts do in the faces rest'. Here we find a description of a phenomenon that many of us have observed for ourselves, although we may never have seen it described in writing. When two people look closely into one another's eyes they can actually see themselves, reflected in tiny convex mirrors. The poet has obviously registered this fact (either from personal experience or perhaps from reading about it in an earlier text – or both). If we, the readers, have previously had this experience with someone we loved, then we will probably enjoy being reminded of it. It was a good experience. If we have not had the experience, we may feel inspired to go out and try it, without delay! In that sense, this poem (at least, this bit of it) seems to offer a rather direct and simple route to the enjoyment and pleasure that many people expect literature (and the arts in general) to provide.

Having noted this pleasant fact concerning human anatomy and optics, the poet's mind seems to make an associative leap. Yes, lovers can see faces in eyes, and – just like that – they can see hearts in faces! Gazing lovingly into one

another's eyeballs, their barriers are down, and they give themselves over: a matter not just of desire but also of trust. They assure themselves that what they see is not just a surface: not just a face, and not just a mirror. They see a heart, a good heart, a 'true plain' heart. Now, unless something very weird and gruesome is going on, these two ('thou and I') do not really see each other's hearts – not in the way that they see each other's eyes, or even the faces reflected in the eyes. The idea of seeing the heart only makes sense metaphorically. That is to say, we, as readers, know that it is possible to talk about hearts – which in the literal sense are specialised chunks of meat, biological pumps with tubes coming out of them – as standing for something that can't physically be located: something like the capacity that a person has to feel love. Most readers of this poem will probably make this adjustment automatically, without thinking about it. They just accept that the poet wants us to imagine eyes as physical objects (otherwise the image of the reflected face won't work), but that hearts are not to be taken in this way at all. So the poet has done something that begins to seem rather clever: exploiting a parallel (faces in eyes and hearts in faces) and a contrast (the literal with the metaphorical), all at the same time. And this brings us, the lucky readers, a whole other form of pleasure and entertainment. Not only are we reminded of something that we probably regard as a beautiful real-life experience, we are also reminded of it in a beautiful way. The poem appeals to us both erotically and aesthetically.

So, if this is what we want literature to provide – pleasure and entertainment – then we can begin to see how 'The Good-Morrow' fits the bill, and how studying the poem might pay off. Even if a reader with no literary training could understand the reference to the real experience of seeing a face reflected in an eye, and the metaphorical idea of seeing a heart in a face, and even if they could spot the clever way in which these two things are simultaneously linked and contrasted with one another, then that would still leave an awful lot of other things in this poem that are not so obvious. And the pleasure provided by some parts of the poem would be weakened, surely, if there were other parts that we simply didn't get. The hope must be that there is more pleasure buried in the poem, and that we will be able to dig it out if someone gives us suitable tools.

Other readers may be less interested in the erotics or even the aesthetics of this poem. They may be not so much aesthetic as ascetic in their orientation to literature: looking less for pleasure than for truth. Perhaps they even seek, through literary texts, to destroy fanciful or harmful errors and illusions (although perhaps that carries its own kind of pleasure, too). The claim has been made, for example, that the kind of love that we may hope to experience in the twenty-first century simply didn't exist when 'The Good-Morrow' was written – by John Donne, around the year 1600 – and that, if we study literary history in detail, and without too many preconceptions, we can see love, as we know it (and many other things), gradually evolving. This illustrates a very important way in which studying literature, for many people, is much more than just entertainment. The claim is that literature does not just reflect aspects of the human world that authors and readers enjoy; it is actually a vital part of

the process by which that world is made and re-made over time. Literature, in this sense, is a means by which human beings explain themselves to themselves, and to one another; analyse how they came to be what they are; speculate about how they might have been different; and propose new models for how they might be in the future – some of which models, to some extent, get adopted. And when they do get adopted, we are changed forever. One famous critic has gone so far as to give William Shakespeare (1564–1616) credit for the 'Invention of the Human'!

If there is even a shred of truth in claims like these, think how important that makes literature. Reading texts carefully, we will probably have fun, but we will also learn things about how the world around us came about – with all its urgent issues of right and wrong, development and destruction, happiness and misery – and, still more importantly, how it is shifting, even now, under our metaphorical feet. We can even hope, through literature, to play an active part. For it is not only authors who make literature. An unread book is no more useful than a real, but disconnected, heart. An unread book – even Shakespeare – is just a block of compressed wood-pulp with some ink in it; an unpalatable, many-layered door-step sandwich. It only becomes literature, in any significant sense, when somebody reads it. Furthermore, a literary text, being read, is such a complex object that it is inconceivable that it will ever take shape, in two people's heads, in exactly the same way (or about as conceivable as that two football matches will be played in which the ball follows exactly the same route from start to finish; or that there will be two storms in which all the raindrops fall in exactly the same places). This gives readers – especially readers who know what they are doing – a lot of power and influence. It isn't unread books that change the world; they just take up space. It is literature as it makes itself known in the minds of readers, and in the things that readers say about it.

'The Good-Morrow' offers many pleasures, many kinds of information, and many opportunities for grounding and structuring the developing ideas that we all have about the world. The primary subject-matter might not seem very technical, intellectual, or deep. And yet, the nature of love – what could be more important than that? Almost all of us inhabit cultures that still like to think that they place love (whether it be of lovers, spouses, friends, family, country, humanity, God, or even life) as their No. 1 good (even if, from a distance, that position might seem to be occupied by money, celebrity, or power). If a text like 'The Good-Morrow' doesn't just offer us pleasing shadows of a Real Thing that exists independently, no matter what we say about it, out in the world; if, on the contrary, this small poem has played its small part in inventing love, and if, through us, it continues to sustain and replicate and modify love (perhaps in ways that Donne never could have guessed at), then we had better take it seriously. In doing so, we will learn about ourselves. Even if we don't think that we are learning we will be marked and changed. I wonder, to be honest, what thou and I did, till we read? Were we not weaned till then? Not really.

We will not be saying good-bye to 'The Good-Morrow' any time soon. We have barely scratched the poem's surface, and this book is meant to help you do

a great deal more than that. So, I shall return to this poem frequently in the pages ahead, picking out different aspects according to the focus of the chapter in question. 'The Good-Morrow' will serve, in that sense, as a model for the literary work in general: of what it consists of, how it works, and how it may be studied. That is a heavy burden for one little poem to bear, however, and not all literary works are alike. Actually, they differ from one another as much as people do. So I have chosen a small community of texts with which you will begin to be familiar as the book goes on, texts from different genres (some poems, for example, some novels, some plays), from different English-speaking nations, and from different historical periods; texts that offer a wide range of impressions of what literature can be, and of why we might want to spend our time on it. Some of these texts may be ones that you know already. Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, for example, and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* are not only standard texts at countless schools and universities, but profoundly embedded in the society around us (even in countries where English is not the first language), in ways that it may be difficult, at first, to appreciate. A few of the other chosen texts are less predictable: texts of which it might even seem possible to ask the question, 'Is this literature?', without having too many tonnes of global scholarship immediately pressing on your head, insisting, 'Yes, of course it is!' But even if you happen to know every one of these texts already, that isn't a problem. Far from it. And to emphasise this point, I shall end this section with a provisional and informal definition of literature: It is writing that you want to read even though you have read it before; in fact, it is writing that you want to read all the more, *because* you have read it before.

2 What is literature, and who does it belong to?

The definition with which I ended the previous chapter may catch something essential about literature, for some people. (It does for me.) But it is easy to find other definitions of literature that are completely different. Such definitions tend to fall within one, or more than one, of the following categories:

1 **Form and content**: Literature as a kind of writing in which the way that something is said matters as much as what is said; or where the way that something is said is *part of* what is said.
2 **Imagination and creativity**: Literature as writing that is not just the reporting of facts, but in which things are created or 'made up'. Usually, in fact, a kind of fiction.
3 **Subjectivity**: Literature as writing in which things, persons and events are described from a particular individualistic viewpoint, in a way that is different from an 'objective' understanding.
4 **Artistry**: Literature as deliberately artistic writing, intended to take its place in an existing 'literary' tradition.
5 **Greatness**: Literature as a kind of writing that only a few specially talented people are capable of, but which is relevant and perhaps useful to other people and deserves their admiration.

Brilliant critics and theorists (many of them literary authors themselves) have used something like each of these categories, at one time or another. So who is right? To whom should we appeal as the ultimate authority? 'Literature' is not a natural phenomenon that has existed since the beginning of time. It is something that people have invented; and they have done so repeatedly, in different places, in different contexts. How you see it depends, arguably, on how you construct or 'read' the world as a whole. Insofar as defining literature means constructing a model of human communication in which a line is drawn between one kind of writing and another, then categorising a text as 'literature' is itself, if done thoughtfully, a creative act.

Before this discussion gets too abstract, let's grapple onto another actual, allegedly literary, text. Of the fabulous variety available to us, I have chosen a short story by the American, David Foster Wallace (1962–2008). The story has

an ominously academic-sounding title, 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature', but most of the content doesn't seem to be like that at all. Here is how it starts:

> Then just as I was being released in late 1996 Mother won a small product liability settlement and used the money to promptly go get cosmetic surgery on the crow's feet around her eyes. However the cosmetic surgeon botched it and did something to the musculature of her face which caused her to look *insanely frightened* at all times. No doubt you know the way an individual's face can look in the split second before they start to scream. That was now Mother. It turns out that it only takes a minuscule slip of the knife one way or the other in this procedure and now you look like someone in the shower scene of Hitchcock.

This could, just conceivably, be a direct transcription of part of someone's spontaneous monologue. A little more plausibly, it could be a passage from a private letter. But it is neither of these things. It is presented, and was published, as a literary text – more precisely as a short story. The sentences quoted above are the beginning of the text; it is they that come immediately after the incongruously intellectual title. What might seem random, if you overheard it in real life, must now be regarded, therefore, as part of the plan. There is even a Latin term to describe this kind of random-seeming, and yet selected, starting-point: *in medias res*, in the middle of the affair, the business, the action. In a sense, this story seems to have no proper beginning; but, in another sense, it has a very clear one: the first words on the first page. It looks as though defining a sequence of words as 'literature' may have something to do with putting a frame around it. If you just happen to start hearing someone's real monologue halfway through – perhaps because that's when you happen to get on the same bus and sit down behind them – the starting point has, in itself, no significance. If, on the other hand, the monologue is framed as a work of literature, then the author's choice to start *in medias res*, with these particular words, becomes part of the point, and has to be considered in your assessment of the text as a whole.

The abruptness of the beginning of this particular story comes to seem both comic and disturbing, an effect that is increased throughout the story by the extraordinary way in which the narrator's thoughts, and the facts of his circumstances, are presented to us, all mixed up. Gradually, we learn about the mother who has had the unfortunate surgery; we learn why her son, the narrator, came to be 'released' in 1996 (he had been locked up for careless possession of venomous spiders, which certainly harmed and possibly killed someone); and we learn about this strange duo's bizarre relationship (Who helps, manages or manipulates whom?) and about the routine details of their bus journeys to see the lawyer. But the way in which this information is presented seems chaotic, as here:

> If the appointment is AM then the driver sometimes keeps a newspaper folded in a hutch by the automatic coin or token box which he tries to peruse while idling at stoplights although it is not as if he will get much of

> his daily reading done in this way. He [not the driver, but a young victim of the spiders] was only nine which was repeatedly stressed as if his age in any way strengthened any charge of negligence on my part. A common Asian species [not of boy, but of spider] not only has the sematic ventral insignia but a red line straight down the back, leading to its indigenous name, *Red line on back*. Standardized testing has confirmed that I have both a studious bend and outstanding retention in study which she [apparently the mother] would not even deny.

The words in square brackets could have been the author's. (There is no telling with David Foster Wallace, whose sentences can be a page long, and filled with parentheses and sub-parentheses.) But in fact they are mine: they represent mental work that this author makes the reader do, in order to figure out when the narrator is talking about spiders or about people or about some mixture of the two. As Wallace's readers, we are almost in the position of the frustrated bus driver, with our concentration interrupted every few lines.

The spider-collecting son is the narrator of this story. That is to say, it is a first-person narrative in which the 'I' (already established in the first sentence) identifies himself as the spider-collecting son. The most obvious of many alternatives that the author could have chosen would have been a third-person narrative in which 'I', the spider-collecting son, would have been 'he', and where the narrator who told us about 'him' would have been unidentified or 'impersonal'. But Wallace evidently decided that the first-person narrative, in which the narrator is also a character, was the way to go.

When we read this story, knowing that it is indeed a story – and, in some sense at least, a work of literature – we know that we should treat it differently from something like a diary or a statement in a court of law. In the latter cases, we would expect the 'I' and the person who actually wrote the text (setting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard) to be essentially the same person. When you write 'I' in your diary you may not proceed to tell the truth about yourself, exactly, but you probably mean 'I' to represent *you*: the person who has actually been out and about, alive, doing the things that the diary reports. Literary authors follow different rules: they may well keep diaries in which they use 'I' like the rest of us, but when they are writing literature they are free to use 'I' to stand for any one of a potentially infinite range of persons who have never existed and who may happen to be quite like the author, utterly unlike the author, or something in between. The 'I' in Wallace's first-person narrative turns out to be the son, but could have been the mother or the bus driver or even one of the spiders (such stories exist!). Perhaps the most fundamental concept that anyone who is beginning to study – or read – literature seriously has to digest is this: that the 'I', whether in a story like this or in a poem like 'The Good-Morrow', does not necessarily represent the way in which the author thinks of him- or herself, and does not necessarily share the author's opinions.

In the case of 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' we might say that the author has taken special steps to distance himself from his first-person narrator.

This spider-collecting son seems to be a potentially homicidal lunatic; he has been in prison; he does not sound like someone who is in the middle of a high-profile literary career. Given the way in which his narrative is chopped up – turning, it seems, on the spur of the moment from one thing to another – we might wonder whether this person can even be trusted to tell us the truth about his own acts and experiences, or those of the people around him. Perhaps, in fact, he is what is known as an 'unreliable narrator' – which means, like quite a few literary terms, exactly what it says.

So, a reader who has a certain range of experience with narratives (and that probably goes for anyone who has picked up either Wallace's book or this one) will realise that this is a text narrated by an invented figure who may have little in common with the actual author, and whose mind works in such a way that we may have to 'read between the lines' of what he says to us, rather than taking it as a reliable account of what has actually happened – even within the fictional world of the story! 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' is full of ideas, information, humour and surprises, but we don't know, at the end of it, all the details of what has supposedly taken place, and we certainly don't know what is going to happen next. Concerning the author of the text – if this is the first piece by Wallace that we have read, and we haven't read a biography or looked him up on *Wikipedia* – we know even less. Presumably he is a highly educated individual who knows the meanings of all of the words in the story (some of which are quite arcane). Evidently he has an interest in troubled and deviant minds, within the context of contemporary American society. But we don't know whether this story is typical of him or a brief aberration.

If we read the whole collection of eight stories, *Oblivion*, in which 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' was republished in 2003, we will soon become aware of common elements. The complex language, mixing academic and sophisticated elements with colloquial and even crude ones, is there throughout; as is a fascination with isolated personalities on the borderline between stagnation and dramatic, perhaps violent, self-expression. If we read further, we find that such things are characteristic of Wallace's writing as a whole (even though there is remarkable variation in the specific characters and situations that he writes about). After a while, the attentive reader will probably arrive at the point where he or she would be able to pick up a new story and identify correctly whether it was Wallace who had written it.

It is important not to confuse the narrator of a literary text with the real person who wrote it. On the other hand, a certain sense of the author is an obvious dimension of the way in which literature functions in the real world. Some authors do all that they can to make themselves invisible and let us experience the text on its own terms: 'Never trust the artist. Trust the tale,' as the English novelist D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930) famously wrote. Thomas Pynchon (b. 1937), a leading American novelist who influenced Wallace, is paradoxically famous for never appearing in public. Even when he made a guest appearance as a cartoon character, in an episode of *The Simpsons*, he was shown with a

bag over his head! But Wallace was not like that. He made himself quite visible, even to the point of wearing a 'trademark' headscarf. He tried to deny the significance of this habit: 'It makes me feel kind of creepy that people view it as a trademark or something – it's more a recognition of a weakness, which is that I'm just kind of worried that my head's gonna explode.' But all that this statement does is make the headscarf even more of a trademark, linking it to an idea of this author as both dazzlingly brainy and deeply troubled: too smart to live. And the factual, historical truth, sadly, is that this remarkable man killed himself, aged 46.

When we know these things about Wallace, the way in which we read his texts is likely to be changed. In 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature', for example, we may be struck by the way in which the narrator describes his odd appearance, even his physical size (Wallace was 6 foot 2); we may notice what he says about his 'outstanding retention in study' (whatever you think of his writing, Wallace was obviously spectacularly intelligent); and we are likely to think: yes, this is the kind of story that this man would write. Or even: I see! These stories are all about what it was like to be David Foster Wallace!

Wallace was certainly not the first writer to tell stories about himself at the same time that he told 'literary' stories. Conspicuous examples of this, earlier in the history of literature in English, would include Lord Byron (1788–1824) and Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), both of whom were known in their own time, and probably still are now, more for being their extraordinary and glamorous selves than for what they wrote. This may seem a pity, but perhaps we should think about the things that a literary text and a public life have in common. They both involve kinds of performance. Wallace's choices, in terms of how he presented himself, as a real person, to the outside world, and in terms of the idea of himself as an author that he allows to emerge through his texts (mediated as they are by fictional narrators), are all part of a larger system of communicating with the wider world, and of presenting through the mind and body – that is, performing – a set of views of what the world is like. For the majority of substantial authors, the series of literary texts that they produce is likely to be a much more interesting set of performances, in the long run, than how they dressed or what they said about themselves in interviews. In some cases, it is hard to imagine one without the other. Some theorists of literature would be impatient with this whole discussion, and say that an author's extra-textual behaviour is irrelevant! We shall see about that.

Wallace himself would no doubt have hated it, if he had discovered that thoughts about who he actually was and what he was trying to do got in the way of close attention to his texts. One might say that the 'unreliable' elements of a narrative such as the one we experience in 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' are actually designed, not so much to confuse us, as to make us pay close attention – to read. So let's go back to the text.

Around the middle of Wallace's story, the narrator / spider-collecting son tells us more about the causal and psychological links between his own deviancy and his mother's afflictions:

> Her fear of the phylum *arthropodae* [including spiders] is long-standing which is why she never ventured in the garage and could contend *ignorantia facti excusat*, a point of law. Ironically also hence her constant spraying of R - - d© despite my repeatedly advising her that these species are long-resistant to resmethrin and trans-d allethrin. The active ingredients in R - - d©. Granted widow bites are a bad way to go because of the potent neurotoxin involved prompting one physician all the way in 1935 to comment, *I do not recall having seen more abject pain manifested in any other medical or surgical condition* [...].

'R - - d©' seems to be the product that the mother injured herself with, leading to the legal claim that partly accounts for the bus-journeys to see the lawyer: 'Her original liability was that a worker [...] glued a can's nozzle on facing backward.' Presumably she was using this product against her son's spiders (even if, as he seems to claim, they stayed in the garage, where she never went). So she injured herself while trying to protect herself. This is ironic. That is to say, it shows Wallace using his enormous power as an author to bring elements of narrative and characterisation together to create a meaningful pattern: in this case, one in which one character is somehow turned against herself, so that a point is made at her expense.

Just as authors can play around, ironically, with their characters, so can they play games of trickery and provocation with the reader. There is indeed, in the real world (or at least in America), a household insecticide spray called 'Raid', and Wallace's narrator, and Wallace himself, may actually have had legal reasons for not spelling it out in full (although Wallace seems happy to use genuine brand names elsewhere). But 'R - - d' could also be read as 'Read'! Perhaps we are being told not to forget that this is a text. Perhaps we are being told that we have to do some work, as active interpreters, active participants in the making or re-making of the joint performance – the author's and the reader's – that this literary experience or event consists of. Such an interpretation will be more plausible – it will contribute more to a coherent and satisfying understanding of the text as a whole – if we can find other examples of significant but half-hidden semantic content. The narrator's reference to 'widow bites' might be a case of this. Just as Raid is a real insecticide, widows are a real genus of spiders (*Latrodectus*). But there is something odd going on here, whereby the narrator's dealings with his spiders overlap psychologically with his relationship with Mother – who also seems to be a widow. Is the narrator telling us that his own problems, and the threat that he poses to others, derive from the fact that he was, in some sense, *poisoned* by his mother?

Some people will think that this is a dangerous way to handle the text. They may say that I am 'reading too much into it'. Where to draw the line when reading a text between what you yourself are interested in and what you think that the author may have 'intended' is a crucial matter, and there will be much more about it in later chapters. In this case, however, I believe that I have some quite strong textual evidence on my side. Here, for example, the narrator moves, strangely but smoothly, from eight legs to two:

> Here [in the spiders' colouration] as so often in the arthropod realm the female dominates as well. To be frank Mother's *pain and suffering* appeared somewhat inflated in the original product liability claim [...]. Far be it from me to deny her however due to the *thickness of blood*. Sitting at home in dark glasses as ever knitting while monitoring my activities her *mouth parts working idly*.

In this last sentence, spider and Mother, widow and widow, are one. To pick this up, we must not just read, but 'R - - d©'!

Perhaps, therefore, this 'postmodern' story is what a famous 'poststructuralist' literary theorist (we'll get back to these terms!), Paul de Man, would have called an 'allegory of reading'. In other words, it is a text that appears to be concerned with things in the real world, outside literature (spiders, mothers, buses, lawyers ...), but really it is about the act of digesting and interpreting a text. It is about itself: literature about literature. Certainly it is! The good news, however, is that there are many other valid ways of reading it: as a horror story, a comedy, a study in mother-son psychological dynamics, a satire on American values and obsessions, a humane examination of social isolation or affective disability, a warning about the catastrophic threats that seemingly banal individuals all around us may be concocting in their garages, or even a performance of some of the amazing possibilities that were inherent in being David Foster Wallace.

Literature and its facets and manifestations, such as allegory and irony, play out in the following spaces (amongst others): between form and meaning; between narrators and characters; between the author, the reader and the text; between objective truth and subjective interpretation. Many of the greatest experiences that literature has to offer come from the gaps and tensions between these terms, and most of the important things that theorists of literature have to say are attempts at describing how these gaps and tensions work.

3 Canons

John Donne's 'The Good-Morrow' is what is known as a 'canonical' text. It is part of the 'canon' of literature in English. By this, we mean that it is a well-known poem; a 'good' poem; one that has earned its place in anthologies, curricula and cultural memory; one that has a special significance as a poem not quite like any other poem, but that nevertheless plays a part in the centuries-long collective effort or tradition that is the canon as a whole.

There are a few poems that are even more canonical, in the sense of seeming to be bywords for poetry, at least within the country that produced them. In England, these might include William Blake's 'The Tyger', Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan', and John Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and 'To Autumn'. The ultimate example, perhaps, would be William Wordsworth's 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' (sometimes known, unofficially, as 'Daffodils'), but any one of these might stand as the typical poem, the essence of what poetry is, for quite a lot of people (especially if they were made to read it at school). All of them, funnily enough, are 'Romantic' poems (roughly from the period 1790–1830). The only other poems consistently challenging Romanticism's popular status are perhaps a handful from World War I. We shall consider why these particular historical moments may have come to be privileged in this way in later chapters. Right now, it is enough to note that there are processes at work that make a few individual poems, and a few particular kinds of poetry, especially remembered, celebrated, and 'canonised'.

Of course, there will be some people reading this who think, 'Hey! Those aren't the most canonical poems! I can think of others that are more canonical than that!' If you are American, for example, it may well be Walt Whitman or Emily Dickinson that pops into your head, before Wordsworth or Keats. Just like the concept of 'literature' itself, the 'canon' takes shape within specific contexts; it is made, unmade and re-made by real people.

Even in England, there may be some for whom 'Daffodils' is not the quintessential poem. Perhaps, instead, it may be another rather flowery text, Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' But this is a very special case. There can be very little doubt that any systematic attempt to identify the leading canonical author in English-language literature would yield one result: Shakespeare. This would probably be the case even if the context

were not just English but World Literature. But this would not always have been so. People have found fault with Shakespeare over the centuries. Other poets and playwrights of his own time (the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth century) recognised some of his talents, but were understandably reluctant to think that he was in an utterly different league from themselves. Later, certain qualities that we now tend to prize in Shakespeare, such as a willingness to mix comedy and tragedy in the same scene, were seen as ugly or upsetting (even by such intelligent readers as the great eighteenth-century critic Dr Samuel Johnson). Much more recently, although Shakespeare has become a cultural constant – all of his plays being performed, somewhere, all of the time – there have been ups and downs. In World War II, for example, Shakespeare almost came to stand alongside Winston Churchill, as a symbol and guardian of England and perhaps of 'Civilisation'. In the 1970s and 80s, however, there was a backlash: some – at least in the academic world – began to question 'Bardolatory' (the worship of 'the Bard of Avon'), arguing that perhaps he wasn't so different from other writers, or that what is special about his texts had less to do with individual genius than a set of historical circumstances. Most recently, after this short patch of turbulence, the weight of critical opinion has turned once more to reinstating 'the Bard' as a unique, unprecedented, unrepeated marvel: yes, all the fuss was justified; it was (in the words of a recent critic) 'Shakespeare After All'!

Many of us (critics and readers) might now assign the No. 2 position in the English canon to Charles Dickens (1812–70). We might say that Shakespeare still, after 400 years, marks the high-point for drama, for poetry, perhaps for literature in general, but he did not write novels; the greatest novelist in English is Dickens. Once again, there will be dissent. Some will say: George Eliot, Herman Melville, Henry James, or James Joyce. Is it, anyway, a competition? Perhaps we should say that Dickens was the best at writing Dickensian novels, and James the best at writing Jamesian ones, just as tigers are best at being tigers and lions best at being lions. It is nice to have both (at a safe distance). But, in Dickens's case, the ups and downs have been spectacular and instructive. A colossal success in his own time (the mid-nineteenth century), read and adored by an exceptionally broad cross-section of society, he dropped almost completely from critical esteem after his death. His novels were said to be chaotic; he was a sentimental philistine; at best, he was an author for children. Famously, the most influential book by the most prominent mid-twentieth-century English critic, F. R. Leavis, left Dickens out of the 'Great Tradition' – only to admit him later on, gradually and rather grudgingly, starting with *Hard Times*, a slim novel that most twenty-first-century critics would rank well below fatter texts such as *Bleak House* or *Our Mutual Friend*. But perhaps, by now, Dickens's status is assured. Perhaps so much work has now been done, by so many sophisticated scholars, showing that there were things that were really remarkable and unique about Dickens's writing, that he can never be neglected again. It is hard to be sure. We are ourselves *in medias res*. History, despite some claims to the contrary, doesn't seem to be over.

The great majority of texts discussed at any length in this book must be admitted to be canonical according to various criteria, whether it be their presence in anthologies and texts of literary history; their on-the-street name-recognition-factor; the number of recent scholarly articles that discuss them; online hits; or their easy availability in bookshops and libraries. An exception could be David Foster Wallace, who is perhaps too recent an author for his status to be properly evaluated. He fulfils most of the criteria mentioned above, right now, but – for obvious reasons – has not done so for long. In 2011, three years after Wallace's death, the editors of the 8th edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* evidently did not feel the need to include him alongside the likes of Pynchon or Toni Morrison, or even others born more recently than him, like Jhumpa Lahiri and Junot Díaz. We may all have our opinions about which of these writers is likely to be rated most highly a hundred years from now. Meanwhile, their canonical status is fluid. They are like jellies that haven't set.

I said above that some might name Eliot, Melville, James, or Joyce, rather than Dickens, as the greatest novelist in English. In fact, some might say J. R. R. Tolkien, Agatha Christie, Stephen King, or J. K. Rowling! It might look as though the first list is an 'academic' canon, or perhaps an 'elitist' one, while the second is a 'popular' one. The first is a list of books that people feel that they ought to read; the second a list of books that they read for fun! But it is not as simple as that. Dickens, for example, was the leading 'popular' author of his time, and continues to appeal (especially through film and television adaptations) to a far from academic audience. Joyce, although intellectually demanding, deliberately blurs some of the boundaries between 'high' and 'popular' culture. And you can find learned essays in academic journals about Tolkien, Christie, King and Rowling. Certain categories or sub-genres of prose fiction (often referred to as 'genre fiction'), such as fantasy, crime, horror, and books for children, used to be rated collectively lower than a supposedly more pure or exalted kind of fiction that dealt with the big issues of life, love, and death, without slotting them into any obvious conventional framework. This is a hierarchical way of looking at literature, which goes hand-in-hand with canon-formation and which originated at least as far back as the Ancient Greeks, who elevated epic poems and tragic plays over all other kinds of literature.

There are still far more articles on Dickens and Joyce than on King and Rowling. There are still millions of readers for whom some of these authors' books, although they may be bulky on the shelf, are too 'thin' – too formulaic, fanciful, or unchallenging – to be enjoyable. And millions who recognise that while some novels may be good for relaxation, there are other, more difficult ones that are actually, in some sense, 'better'. Canons, in most parts of the world, fluctuate on free market principles: popular canons can be measured by the money that we pay to buy books; 'academic' ones more by the effort that we make to write about and teach them.

The ultimate academic canonisation, in literature, is perhaps the Nobel Prize, which is based on recommendations by large numbers of professors. The Nobel has had famous blind spots in the past, but seems broadly in accord with

academic opinion in recent years, with prizes for Seamus Heaney (1939–2013) and J. M. Coetzee (b. 1940), for example, widely regarded by critics in the early years of the twenty-first century as pre-eminent English-language poet and novelist, respectively. But academic and popular canons affect one another: 'ordinary' readers go into higher education and are made to read difficult books, learn to like them (sometimes), and take this recognition with them, back into the real world. Academic critics take note of the phenomenal popularity of certain authors, feel compelled to investigate why this is, and sometimes discover that there are good reasons.

Canons are influenced not just by critics and readers, but by schools, universities and the governments, which, in some cases, control what is read and taught at educational institutions. Canons are also influenced by publishers, who have ways of promoting one author rather than another. Mass-produced anthologies change every few years. The Irish poet Louis MacNeice (1907–63), for example, enjoyed something of a revival at the end of the twentieth century, had four poems in the 8th edition of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (2006), but was dropped from the 9th edition (2012): a simple editorial decision that will have cut his readership by thousands, at least for a few years. Sometimes, editors and publishers vie with one another over the high canonical ground. Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris's massive three-volume anthology *Poems for the Millennium*, for example, published by the University of California Press in 1995, 1998 and 2009, includes many kinds of modernist and postmodernist poetry that will probably never make it into the *Norton* (including much that most readers might not recognise as poetry at all). It is, amongst many other things, a kind of anti-*Norton*, or, more generally, a grand rebellion against an academic canon that, for these editors, sometimes seems so short-sighted as to have missed the point completely:

> The most interesting works of poetry and art are those that question their own shapes and forms, and by implication the shapes and forms of whatever preceded them. But it is possible for one to become a master of poetry (or even a doctor of poetry) and still be ignorant of all this. (It may not even be possible to do so without that kind of ignorance!)

It is also possible, one might add, to be regarded as an educated person without paying attention to any kind of poetry at all. Unlike many authors of prose fiction, the overwhelming majority of contemporary poets have to be content with a very small readership, and, for them, the canon-making choices of publishers, academics and other 'expert' readers are especially important. Or should we perhaps include rock lyrics in the category of 'poetry' – in which case the balance of power is shifted suddenly and dramatically over to the masses?

Canons have consequences. Questions of who's in and who's out determine more than just authors' bank balances or the reading that will be set for students. The evolving canon reflects different ideas of what literature is, different ideas of which texts and even which kinds of people are significant. When we praise a

certain kind of literature we are also praising a certain idea of what matters in life. This can be particularly obvious, and consequential, when the canon is used (as it often has been) to define the characteristics and ideals of a particular nation. For example: the title of this book refers, very deliberately, to *Literature in English*, but many people still use the more 'traditional' term 'English Literature' (or just 'Eng. Lit.') – which is fuzzy and ambiguous. Does it mean English-language literature or literature from England? Does it disguise an assumption that worthwhile English-language literature *is* literature from England? That is certainly the way it has tended to function in the past, pushing American literature, for example, postcolonial literature, and even literature from Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland (which are in the United Kingdom, but not in England!) or the Irish Republic (which is in the British Isles but not in England *or* the United Kingdom!) into a kind of dependant or satellite position which, with the passage of time and England's dwindling status in the world, comes to seem less and less appropriate.

Some would say that the very use of the term 'English Literature' helped the canon, for a long time, exclude a lot of people that should have been in it. The great reaction against this got under way in the later decades of the twentieth century, in ways that were intimately connected with mass social movements such as Civil Rights and Feminism. Just as black people still suffered discrimination in everyday life, so their writings had been cut out of the canon. Just as men still held most of the power, so literature by women had been suppressed or marginalised. The reaction to insights of this kind was a radical reconfiguration of the canon, not just in relation to living authors, but reaching far back into the past, so that, for example, in the 1970s and 80s, texts by women writers of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – texts that in some cases had almost been forgotten since the time when they were first published – suddenly found themselves thrust back into our bookshops, seminar rooms, and consciousness. That was an exceptional period of transformation, but there is no reason why equally dramatic changes should not happen again.

'Canon' is a rather stuffy word: both archaic and a little threatening. You had better keep on the right side of a canon or you may get your head blown off! But the fact is that what the canon consists of, what counts as good literature, and even what counts as 'literature' at all, is down to all of us. We always have to make a case for what we claim is worth reading. The work (in any sense) was not over when the original author laid down his pen: 'great' books will only keep their status as long as they are discussed. The literary canon is much less like a museum than a zoo. We have to keep feeding these texts, or they will die!

This page intentionally left blank

Part II

Form and genre

This page intentionally left blank

4 Poetry

Here we need to start with three very basic concepts: metre, verse form, and rhyme.

Metre

When you read a line of poetry you will almost certainly place more accent or stress on some syllables than on others. Take the opening line of 'The Good-Morrow', for example:

> I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I

Most people who are reasonably well acquainted with the English language will read this line as follows, with the accented characters representing stressed syllables:

> I wónder, bý my tróth, what thóu and Í

This is the pattern of stresses that corresponds most closely to everyday speech. Of course, it would be physically possible to stress the line in many other ways – for example, 'Í wondér, by mý troth, whát thou ánd I'. Well … try it! Aloud! Isn't it a great deal easier to read the line stressed in the first way? Or, if that doesn't satisfy you, get ten of your friends to read the line, record them, and compare the stresses. I bet that the average result will be very close, if not identical, to the first suggestion. It is not just random; there is a pattern in the line. Moreover, in this case, it is a very regular pattern: we have a 10-syllable line with stresses on the 2nd, 4th, 6th, 8th and 10th syllables. It consists of five repeating units, in other words, where each unit consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one. If, as is the case with 'The Good-Morrow', the poem consists of line after line arranged on more or less the same pattern, with a more or less fixed number of stresses per line, then we can say that it has a regular metre. In this case, the metre consists of five-stress lines. Lines like this have been around for a very long time; so long that we still refer to them in Ancient Greek: five-stressed metre, as a literary form, is pentameter, and that is also the name of an

individual five-stressed line. Others worth remembering are the three-stressed trimeter, the four-stressed tetrameter, and the six-stressed hexameter.

We think of lines of poetry, in other words, as measures of a certain length. But a line of poetry can also be thought of as a path, which the words of the poem walk along. This is the metaphor that seems to lie behind the way that we traditionally describe the units of stressed and unstressed syllables that establish the metre of the line: we call them 'feet'. And, of course, there are different kinds of metrical foot, and they all have Greek names. The first line of 'The Good-Morrow', as we saw, contains five units – or feet – each of which consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one. This kind of foot is called an iamb, and the rhythm that it gives to the line – unstressed, stressed / unstressed, stressed – is called iambic. The line as a whole is a pentameter consisting of iambs, or an iambic pentameter. In fact, iambic pentameter is the metre of 'The Good-Morrow' in its entirety, and of countless other poems in English, including many of the most famous ones, from the late Middle Ages to the present day.

You will still find this 'traditional' or 'Classical' (in the sense of Latin and Greek) terminology in most introductory texts on poetry, and in most works of literary criticism. However, there are other ways of describing the same things. Instead of saying 'pentameter', one can simply say 'five-stress-line'. Instead of 'iambic metre', one can talk about 'rising duple metre': 'rising' because the stress (and volume and/or pitch of the voice) rises in going from the unstressed to the stressed syllable, and 'duple' because the foot consists of two syllables. Another important rhythmical unit that we shall soon encounter is the trochee, which is a foot consisting of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one – like an iamb in reverse. In other words, trochees produce a *falling* duple rhythm. And then there are three-syllable feet: the anapaest (unstressed, unstressed, stressed; a rising *triple* rhythm) and the dactyl (stressed, unstressed, unstressed; a *falling* triple rhythm).

Verse form

'Verse' can be used as another word for 'poetry', and as the opposite of 'prose'. If prose is plain language, verse is language that has been turned over or around (from the Latin verb *vertor* – which also gives us 'version') so that it becomes something different. 'Verse' can also be used to mean a group of lines (as in the 'verses' of a hymn), or an individual line. This is rather confusing. In this book, individual lines will simply be called lines!

Just as poets are free to choose how many syllables or stresses there should be in a line, so they can choose whether to arrange lines in groups, and, if so, how many lines each group should contain. 'Verse form' is a general term for these structures, which have a strong visual dimension: they may be more obvious on the printed page than in a poem read aloud. A group of lines printed together is usually referred to as a 'stanza', which is quite simply a 'room' (in Italian). In other words, as well as thinking about measuring and walking, we

have a history of imagining poetry architecturally, as though a poem were a kind of house.

There are many different kinds of stanza. Some of them are simply named after the number of lines that they contain. Thus, the commonest stanza in English-language poetry is the quatrain, consisting of four lines. Others that are common enough to be worth remembering are the couplet (two lines), tercet (three), sestet (six), and octet (eight). There are other stanzas with more complicated specifications, often defined by line-length as well as the number of lines: for example, the ballad stanza, which is a quatrain consisting of alternating tetrameters and trimeters. And one stanza is so specific and peculiar that it is named after an individual poet: the Spenserian stanza, consisting of eight iambic pentameters followed by one iambic hexameter!

Rhyme

In fact, traditional verse forms like the ballad and the Spenserian stanza are often defined, not just by metre and length of stanza, but also by rhyme. The four lines of the ballad stanza, strictly speaking, should rhyme ABCB, while the nine lines of the Spenserian stanza go ABABBCBCC! But now we need to backtrack, for a moment, and make sure that we know what these letters represent.

For many people, rhyme is the most fundamental feature of poetry. As it happens, poems do not always rhyme (nor are they always divided into stanzas, nor do they always have a regular metre!), but the vast majority of poems that you have heard of, and can remember, do. In fact, it is partly because of the rhyme that you *can* remember them. One of the functions of rhyme seems to be precisely that: to arrange words in such a way that they trigger one another in our minds, and persist in our memories. This is no doubt why most literature before the invention of printing was in rhyming verse. When you don't have a printed text – in an *oral* tradition – you have to remember!

Consider, once again, the middle stanza of 'The Good-Morrow':

> And now good morrow to our waking souls,
> Which watch not one another out of fear;
> For love all love of other sights controls,
> And makes one little room an everywhere.
> Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
> Let maps to others, worlds on worlds have shown:
> Let us possess one world; each hath one, and is one.

The end of each of these lines rhymes, more or less, with the end of at least one of the others. For most speakers of English, the vowel and final consonant of the last syllable of the first line, 'souls', rhymes perfectly with the vowel and final consonant of the last syllable of the third line, '-trols': they are aurally identical. This, therefore, is what we call a perfect rhyme. For some speakers of

English (for example, those with certain kinds of Scottish accent), 'fear' will rhyme perfectly (or very nearly) with '-where' and 'gone' with both 'shown' and 'one', while, for the rest of us, the final consonants in each set (with 'r' and 'n', respectively) will rhyme perfectly, while the vowel sounds will be somewhat different: these will be imperfect, but still recognisable rhymes – a phenomenon that we call 'half rhyme' (or 'imperfect rhyme' or 'off rhyme'). We cannot know, for sure, exactly how Donne himself would have pronounced these syllables – although in fact, working backwards, from what appear to be rhymes in old poems, is one of the few ways that we have of reconstructing long-gone accents!

Overall, the rhyme-scheme in Donne's stanza goes like this: ABABCCC, where the letters represent end-rhymes (the rhymes at the ends of the lines). A rhymes with A, B rhymes with B, and so on – even if the rhymes, in some cases, for some people, are half rhymes. This is clearly not an accident: if you look again at the whole poem you will see that each of the three stanzas has the same pattern or rhyme scheme. Having established this pattern in the first stanza, Donne presumably wrote the first two lines of the second stanza, and then thought to himself, 'Now I need something that rhymes with "souls"! "Moles"? "Cajoles"? No, "con*trols*"!' 'Defines', for example, would have carried a similar meaning, and would even have fitted the iambic rhythm, but it would have wrecked the rhyme scheme. Moreover, it would have made the poem more difficult for us, the readers, to remember. Consciously or not, we *expect* something that rhymes with 'souls' at the end of the third line, and that expectation makes it easier for our brains to find the word. This is not the only important function of rhyme. Nor are end-rhymes the only kind of rhyme that we need to be aware of. Far from it! But we have now reminded ourselves of what rhyme is (along with metre and verse form), and it is time to look at how these technicalities actually matter, in some more real cases.

When students write their first papers or examination answers about poetry they often start by saying things like this: 'This poem is in iambic pentameters. It is divided into three quatrains which rhyme ABAB, CDCD, EFEF. There is a lot of alliteration. For example: "His pals upon the Pampas called him Pete" (l. 4).' Then they make a brief transitional statement, such as: 'The regular metre and alliteration give the poem a feeling of order and tranquillity.' Then they stop talking about the technicalities altogether and move on, with almost audible relief, to the interesting part, which is what the poem is *about*.

However, unless you can show, somehow, how the form of the poem contributes to what it is about – or, to put it differently, how form contributes to its content or to what it does for you or other readers – then there really isn't much point in mentioning pentameters, rhymes, alliteration or anything of that kind. You might just as well start by saying, 'This poem is in a book with a blue cover. On average, there are 278 words per page.' Moreover, unless *somebody* can show how the form of the poem contributes to its content, then you might quite reasonably ask, 'Why did this person bother writing this wretched thing in verse in the first place? Surely it would have been easier for everyone if it had been in prose.'

Well, here's a poem that really insists on being a poem – in which the rhythm is banged out, as if with a hammer on an anvil:

> Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
> In the forests of the night,
> What immortal hand or eye
> Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
>
> In what distant deeps or skies
> Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
> On what wings dare he aspire?
> What the hand dare seize the fire?
>
> And what shoulder, & what art,
> Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
> And when thy heart began to beat,
> What dread hand? & what dread feet?
>
> What the hammer? what the chain?
> In what furnace was thy brain?
> What the anvil? what dread grasp
> Dare its deadly terrors clasp?
>
> When the stars threw down their spears
> And water'd heaven with their tears,
> Did he smile his work to see?
> Did he who made the Lamb make thee?
>
> Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
> In the forests of the night,
> What immortal hand or eye
> Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

The first three words of this famous poem, by William Blake (1757–1827), dictate a certain rhythm. Neither 'Tyger' nor 'burning' can reasonably be pronounced with the accent on the second syllable, so these are not iambs; they are trochees. We could argue that the remarkable impact that 'The Tyger' seems to make, on many readers, derives in part from this basic formal characteristic of the first line (and several others): the fact that the line begins with a stressed syllable – so that the poem leaps onto us, as it were, and sinks its claws in without warning. Very good. So we can say that form matches content: the poem describes a fearsome beast and it does so through abrasive trochaic lines. We would not be the first to make this claim. But then we have a problem. 'The Tyger' is from *Songs of Experience*, a series of poems which, in combination with the slightly earlier *Songs of Innocence*, show what Blake refers to as 'the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul'. More specifically, 'The Tyger' of *Experience* seems to be one half of a pair of contraries, the other half being a poem in *Innocence* called 'The Lamb', which begins like this:

Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?

These lines also contain three trochees! We have to be careful, therefore. It can be all too easy to spot a particular formal feature and attribute certain qualities to it, when in fact the same feature, in a different context, would have an utterly different effect.

But this does not mean that we have to abandon the attempt to link form to content. We just have to do so with an appreciation of the complexity of the poetic object, the way in which each element only achieves its effects in combination with all of the other elements that surround it. So, if we go back to the first lines of 'The Tyger', we can see, again, that they consist of trochees. In fact, they are trochaic tetrameters – except that the last syllable seems to be missing! To make a complete trochaic tetrameter, Blake could have written, for example, 'Tyger! Tyger! burning brighter', but he chose to end the lines a little early, giving them what are called 'masculine' endings – as opposed to the unstressed 'feminine' ones that we would normally expect to find at the end of a trochee (women having, as everybody knows, much softer, less aggressive personalities …!).

So perhaps that is the crucial formal element that makes the opening of 'The Tyger' fierce, while that of 'The Lamb' is gentle: the fact that these lines end abruptly with sawn-off feet. But there are other differences, too. For example, the first line of 'The Tyger' is heavily alliterative: 'Tyger! Tyger! burning bright'. Alliteration has the effect of emphasising the syllables that it links together: the 'b's in 'burn-' and 'bright', for example, make one another more noticeable, so that these syllables, already stressed, become doubly so. Consider what would happen if we were to take the mild subject-matter of 'The Lamb' and place it within the rhythmical framework of 'The Tyger', imposing masculine endings and adding a bit of extra alliteration. We would produce something quite incongruous, such as (with profound apologies to Blake): 'Lamby! Lamby! on the lawn, / In the brightness of the dawn'. Still innocent, perhaps, but with something urgent and slightly hysterical about it, too – which is a direct consequence of the way in which the sounds have been arranged.

In fact, we are just beginning to unpack the powerful effects in Blake's lines. Rhyme, as we have seen, helps us to remember poetry. It has another important general property, which is that it links specific sounds, words, and ideas together: it picks them out from the other sounds that surround them and creates a special bond. The bond made by the highly emphasised (stressed, 'masculine') endings of the first lines of 'The Tyger' is between 'bright' and 'night'! These words are antitheses (almost as much as 'white' and 'black'). Blake uses rhyme to bring things together that would normally be far apart: a violent move that may well have an effect on readers even if they are not conscious of it. Alternating 'bright' and 'night'! It is as though these lines carry warning stripes, like the skin of the 'Tyger' itself. The softly repetitive endings, '… thee? /… thee?', of the first two lines of 'The Lamb' are not in the same league at all: these lines just bleat at us, sweetly.

The questions that Blake's speaker asks the 'Lamb' seem to invite a real answer. When it doesn't come (this is a lamb, after all), the speaker has to provide it himself – 'Little Lamb I'll tell thee, / Little Lamb I'll tell thee!' – and the poem ends with a series of assertions, to the effect that God made the Lamb, that God – as Christ – is himself a Lamb, and (implicitly) that all is good and right in the world: 'Little Lamb God bless thee. / Little Lamb God bless thee.' The many questions in 'The Tyger', on the other hand, are rhetorical – the speaker is wondering at the animal, in this case, rather than conversing with it – and they continue to the very end of the poem. One of these questions is 'Did he who made the Lamb make thee?' One answer to this question that the poem clearly prompts is, 'Yes, God made them both.' Another could be: 'No, the Tyger is the work of the Devil.' Yet another, when we take 'The Lamb' into account, is quite clearly, 'Yes, William Blake invented both "The Tyger" and "The Lamb".' In that sense, this is a self-referential text, in which the poet represents himself as being awed and intimidated by the contradictions of his own creativity. It is Blake who 'dare[s to] frame [this] fearful symmetry': Blake has confined this creature of his own imagination within the framework of the poem. More than that – because this is Blake, a great visual artist as well as poet – he has engraved a metal plate that he will use to reproduce images of 'The Tyger', 'framed', quite literally, within a little box.

There are not many poets like Blake, who can competently design and reproduce graphic, material, 'frames' for their writing. But all poets work with frames of one kind or another. All poems come into a world in which many poems already exist, and are defined both by the things that are new and different about them and by the ways in which they repeat aspects of the tradition; or, to put it differently, how they place themselves inside or outside poetic conventions. Take Shakespeare's 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' for example:

> Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
> Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
> Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
> And summer's lease hath all too short a date;
> Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
> And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
> And every fair from fair sometime declines,
> By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed.
> But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
> Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
> Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
> When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
>   So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
>   So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

This is Shakespeare, and this is a famous, 'great', canonical poem, so we might expect it to be completely original. Not at all. To start off with, it is an example

of one of the most narrowly defined conventional verse forms in English: the sonnet. That is to say, it is a fourteen-line poem in rhyming iambic pentameter, a form that had been in widespread use in English for several decades before Shakespeare wrote this particular example, and which derives in turn from Italian models, most notably by Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca), dating way back to the 1300s. Although sonnets tend to be printed as a single stanza, the Petrarchan sonnet can usually be divided into an octet with just two rhymes (ABBAABBA) followed by a sestet (usually CDCDCD or CDECDE), while the 'Shakespearean' or 'English' sonnet (although there are also English 'Petrarchan' sonnets) usually contains three quatrains, rhyming ABABCDCDEFEF, followed by a single couplet, GG. So, to that extent, Shakespeare seems to be being original … except that it turns out that even the 'Shakespearean' sonnet had been used before – for example by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, who met an untimely end seventeen years before the Bard was born!

But so what if Shakespeare took his metre, stanza length, and rhyme scheme from other poets? Surely the images and ideas of the poem are dazzlingly new? Not entirely. The Petrarchan tradition is synonymous with the idea of 'Courtly Love', in which the speaker of the poem describes his beloved as a superior, even divine, and usually unreachable being, putting them 'on a pedestal'. It is a form that elevates the love object but also turns them into a kind of statue, beautiful but lifeless (in contrast with the face-to-face mutuality that seems to be celebrated in Donne's 'The Good-Morrow', for example). Unlike Petrarch, with his beloved Laura, we don't know whether Shakespeare's speaker is addressing a woman or a man, but, whoever they are, they certainly sound superhuman. A great deal in this poem, that is to say, is exactly what we would expect of a poem of this type. The frame of the poem, both in terms of the patterns in which its words and syllables have to be arranged, and in terms of some of its main thematic elements, was already there, just waiting for Shakespeare to come along and fill it in.

With these expectations in place, there were essentially two ways in which a poet like Shakespeare could try to prove his merit: either by showing how minutely he could follow all the rules, or by showing his cleverness is breaking a few of them – which had to be done in carefully controlled ways, so that it didn't just look chaotic and incompetent. Shakespeare follows this latter course, and indeed, there *is* originality in what he does. Other poets had compared their real or imaginary mistresses, many times, to the sun ('the eye of heaven'), and to the summer; some had claimed that their beloved was superior to any other natural object. But Shakespeare seems to think through the paradoxes that lie within these conventional notions, making them both attractive and disturbing. He tells us that this beloved 'shall not fade', for example, while almost simultaneously giving us an unfading image of the real vulnerability of living things: 'Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May'. Most radically, he starts by developing the familiar idea of the divine superiority of the beloved, as someone higher and more wonderful than the speaker, but ends by suggesting that the beloved's 'immortality' is actually dependent on the poet's achievement: 'So long [as this poem] lives …, [it] gives life to thee'. Whereas the Petrarchan model

presents itself as glorifying the beloved, and yet makes them seem unreal, Shakespeare is arguably more honest: he tells us in the end that this poem celebrates the rhetorical powers of the poet at least as much as the wonders of its anonymous addressee. In fact, we are made to wonder whether the traditional power-relations of 'Courtly Love' still hold, or have been reversed. Does the beloved 'own' his or her beauty, or is it 'owed' to the poet, who is like a bank-manager controlling the beloved's assets? Both of these meanings are made possible by Shakespeare's 'ow'st'.

The important point here is that Shakespeare is not just being lazy, in taking so much from existing conventions. On the contrary, what he does with this poem is all the more striking and effective because we can see how he uses convention, following it in some respects, diverging from it in others. If this had been the first sonnet ever written it would, in some ways, have meant less. And we can only make this clear, in analysing this or any poem like it, if we pay almost as much attention to the minutiae of both form *and* content as the poet evidently did himself. Shakespeare's sonnet will live '[s]o long as men can breathe or eyes can see': we need to catch its rhythms and observe its shape upon the page.

Sonnets are still being written now, roughly four hundred years after Shakespeare and six hundred years after Petrarch. Here is a recent one, by the Scottish poet Carol Ann Duffy (appointed the Queen's own 'Poet Laureate' – a grand kind of canonisation – in 2009). It presents itself as spoken by Shakespeare's wife, no less, and starts by quoting a notorious passage from Will's will:

> 'Ann Hathaway'
>
> '*Item I gyve unto my wief my second best bed …*'
> (from Shakespeare's will)
>
> The bed we loved in was a spinning world
> of forests, castles, torchlight, cliff-tops, seas
> where he would dive for pearls. My lover's words
> were shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses
> on these lips; my body now a softer rhyme
> to his, now echo, assonance; his touch
> a verb dancing in the centre of a noun.
> Some nights, I dreamed he'd written me, the bed
> a page beneath his writer's hands. Romance
> and drama played by touch, by scent, by taste.
> In the other bed, the best, our guests dozed on,
> dribbling their prose. My living laughing love –
> I hold him in the casket of my widow's head
> as he held me upon that next best bed.

Once again, this poem would lose much of its point if we couldn't see – in the metre, the rhymes, the basic sonnet form – how conventional, in some respects, it is. There are a few anomalies – some lines that don't rhyme, for example – but,

essentially, if we don't look too closely at what it actually *says*, this poem could have been written in the sixteenth century. The rhythm of the poem is clearly iambic, with variations here and there that serve – just as in Shakespeare and other poets of his time – to provide extra dimensions to the meaning. Similarly, Duffy uses alliteration and other forms of internal rhyme ('assonance', for example, the rhyming of vowel-sounds) in ways that Shakespeare would have appreciated. For example:

> In the other bed, the best, our guests dozed on,
> dribbling their prose. My living laughing love –

Here the multiple rhymes in 'bed, the best, our guests' and 'living laughing love' suggest a quickness, exuberance and fluency that is evidently to be imagined as belonging to this couple's joyful private life, whereas 'dozed on, / dribbling their prose', flopping over from one line to the next, with the snore-like assonance between the long open vowels in 'dozed' and 'prose', underlines how thoroughly absent from such felicity these poor visitors, alone in the good bed, apparently were.

While the form of the poem has so much that is sixteenth-century about it, the things that it seems to be saying turn out to be determinedly anti-Petrarchan. It is even anti- (although also profoundly and obviously pro-) Shakespeare. To start off with, 'Ann Hathaway' is explicitly voiced by a woman. That is already a contradiction of what we would normally expect from a Renaissance sonnet. Even more importantly, while the Petrarchan tradition celebrates unconsummated love in what can almost seem a masochistic way, this poem tells us about memories of a love that has apparently been enjoyed physically, to the full. In that sense, the story that the poem tells us about a woman and her husband (on very thin historical evidence, it must be said!) is in blatant contradiction of the tradition that the form of the poem evokes. If it had been a 12-line poem, for example, or in ballad stanzas, this point simply wouldn't have been made.

In some ways, Duffy follows Shakespeare's lead (appropriately, since the poem can be read as an act of homage, or even a defence – showing us that the 'second-best bed' may not have been an unloving legacy, after all). Shakespeare had already tinkered with the power-relations of the Petrarchan tradition, as we have seen. Elsewhere, he seems to react against Petrarchanism altogether, seeing through the artificiality of its love-objects (for instance in Sonnet 130, 'My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun'). But we could say that in 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day' his relationship to the tradition is highly ambiguous: he does not exactly put the beloved out of reach, on a pedestal, but he ends up doing something that is perhaps even more dehumanising, saying that the beloved's future 'life' will be in the poet's text!

Duffy plays with this idea of the relationship between love, afterlife, and writing. Again, she pays homage to the idea, but also undermines it. When she has Shakespeare's wife describe his touch as 'a verb dancing in the centre of a noun', for example, she seems simultaneously to refer to Shakespeare's wicked way with the English language and to give us the image of a sexual act. Writing

is what ultimately matters, Shakespeare can seem to have been saying in his own poetry; writing is great, Duffy, on the other hand, seems to say, but someone who wrote like Shakespeare must also have been a tremendous lover. Or at least she thinks that it is fun to imagine that, for the space of 14 lines! We can't quite tell, in fact, whether that is what the poet really believes, or whether, on the contrary, she is making a point at Shakespeare's expense.

Duffy has chosen to use a very specific and demanding traditional verse form to underline the game that she wishes to play, audaciously, with the canon's king himself. Other poetry of relatively recent times is often much more remote from traditional forms, and may seem very difficult to analyse with the same critical terms and techniques. For some poets an apparent indifference to poetic form seems to be part of the point. A classic example of this would be much of the poetry of the nineteenth-century American, Walt Whitman, who was perhaps the greatest pioneer of 'free verse', poetry that does not rhyme (at least, not in any predictable ways), and does not seem tied to any particular rhythm, stanza, or line length – as here, at the beginning of his rebelliously titled 'Spontaneous Me':

> Spontaneous me, Nature,
> The loving day, the mounting sun, the friend I am happy with,
> The arm of my friend hanging idly over my shoulder,
> The hillside whiten'd with blossoms of the mountain ash,
> The same late in autumn, the hues of red, yellow, drab, purple, and light
> and dark green,

The places where a new line begins, in this poem, do not seem to be defined by anything metrical. The organising principle, rather, is the list. The poem just moves on from one thing to another: 'The [first wonderful thing], / The [second wonderful thing] / The [third wonderful thing] …'. 'Spontaneous' and an individual ('me'), as he presents himself as being, this poet seems too big to fit into any conventional structure: he needs more and more room as his vision of beauty and pleasure expands. Later in the poem the lines get even longer: one contains 52 syllables, more than five times the length of a regular iambic pentameter! But note: even here, Whitman's freedom would not mean so much if we did not have stricter models to contrast it with. When we are looking at poetry, we know that lines end where they do because they are meant to (not just, like prose, because they happen to reach the end of the page), and that means that even an apparent formlessness acquires formal significance.

This is by no means the last that you will hear about poetry in this book, but it is probably enough to be going on with! The main point: some 'technicalities' about poetry need to be learnt, because the content of a poem cannot be understood – in fact, does not even exist – except in relation to structures of metre, verse form and rhyme, both in the poem itself and in the poetic tradition to which it belongs. Even if the poet seems to make a point of ignoring one or more of these things completely!

5 The thing which is not

The main task of the first third or so of this book, having tried to clarify what 'literature' is, or can be, is to do a similar job at the next level down, with the literary mega-genres, poetry, drama and prose fiction. However, major concepts have cropped up in the meantime that are relevant to literature of all kinds, and they need more explanation. In Chapter 1, for example, I mentioned *metaphor* (in relation to Donne's 'hearts'), while in Chapter 2 *irony* became an issue (with the backfiring of Wallace's narrator's mother's attempt to protect herself). These concepts are so fundamental to the literariness of most literary texts that each could easily have a chapter to itself. But they also have something in common, which means that we can treat them together: both involve speaking indirectly; or saying one thing while apparently saying something else; or, indeed, saying two things at once.

Irony

If anyone is famous for being ironic in English-language literature, it has to be Jane Austen (1775–1817). Her third-person narrators do not always offer direct opinions about the characters whose doings they narrate, but they nevertheless have ways of making us aware of what they think of them. Take, for example, the celebrated first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*: 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.' As a sentence by itself, this is not necessarily ironical: for all we know (having just opened the novel for the first time), this may be exactly the 'truth' that the whole book is designed to demonstrate – especially if we bear in mind when it was written. If a twenty-first-century English novel, set in the present, were to begin with the same sentence we would tend to assume that the narrator would realise that the 'single man' might, for example, be gay! But homosexuality does not seem to have been openly discussed in the early-nineteenth-century circles known to Jane Austen, and we cannot be sure that this objection would have occurred to her – or to the kind of person that she or her contemporary readers would have imagined her narrator to be. What counted as ironic for Austen, in other words, may not have been quite the same as what counts as ironic for us. Irony depends upon a difference between what people say and

what we judge them to mean; and, when we make that judgement, we have to take into account when and where the speaker is located.

Nevertheless, we might well think, even just having read this first sentence of Austen's novel, that *some* sort of irony must be brewing. The very fact that it is the first sentence gives it so much prominence as to put it under strain. The assertion is so sweeping and confident that it seems too good to be true. Sure enough, as we read further into the first chapter, we very quickly realise that this narrator knows that human aspirations cannot be generalised in such a way. In fact, there can be massive variations even within one family: in this case, the Bennets. The point of view expressed in the first sentence, far from being universal, comes to be localised quite precisely in the mind (such as it is!) of Mrs Bennet, who has a pure infatuation with the mechanism of upwardly mobile marriage, uncontaminated by the more fleshed-out, down-to-earth concerns of her various daughters, ranging from Elizabeth's wish for the company of a man she can respect to Lydia's simple lust for officers and fun. It becomes clear, in other words, that the narrator knows that this sentence embodies a 'truth' that would be regarded as *universal* – and here is one irony – by a very *specific* type of individual, the Mrs Bennet type. Moreover, while the Mrs Bennet type might indeed attribute such wishes to the 'single man', what lies behind the claim is not really anything to do with what the *man* might want, but rather – and here is another irony – with what others (especially women) *want from him*! The real object of desire, in other words, is not the wife but the fortune! Because Mrs Bennet wants Mr Bingley's money for one of her daughters (again, not exactly in a greedy way, but more through her sheer uncritical, irony-free devotion to an ideal of family improvement) it is imperative that he should want to find a wife!

Whether the whole novel sustains this irony has been much debated. We could say, for example, that it is doubly ironic that the way the novel ends actually reasserts exactly the primary importance of marrying a rich man that the first chapter seems ironically to put in question: the heroine defies 'universal' expectations for a while, but then (perhaps exactly because of this defiance) she is rewarded with the conventional prizes of a man and his mansion. Austen first laughs at us, as it were, for thinking that she means what her narrator says in the first sentence, and then she laughs at us again for thinking that she *didn't* mean it! Chico Marx 'may look like an idiot', as his brother Groucho says in *Duck Soup*, 'but don't let that fool you: he really *is* an idiot'.

Irony is not always that subtle. It can become aggressive and depersonalised, shading into satire, in which a state of affairs or set of opinions is attacked through exaggeration or by being espoused with conspicuous insincerity. In *Pride and Prejudice*, at least some of the irony seems to be localised in the consciousness of the narrator, and thus it leads to an illusion of intimacy between the narrator and us, the readers: we seem to be being addressed by someone who knows that we will think as she does, and will get her little jokes. A very different situation confronts us in another ironical text, Jonathan Swift's 'A Modest Proposal' (1729), which famously offers us a solution to the excess of poverty-stricken children in Ireland: rather than letting them starve, or paying

to feed them, we should eat them! Unlike Austen's narrator, Swift's shows no sign that he is aware that some of his assertions will conflict with the reader's assessments or beliefs. He seems absolutely to mean what he says, and to think that it is only reasonable. He is not sharing a joke with us; Swift may be, but the narrator is not. The irony arises, in this case, because the attitudes expressed and policies suggested are so extraordinarily atrocious, so utterly beyond the pale of any imaginable society in which writers like Swift could exist, that the reader is driven to conclude that there must be an ironic distance, not between the narrator's beliefs and what he says, but between the narrator's beliefs and those of the author himself. There are only two alternatives: the author of this text is a satirist, deploying straight-faced arguments ironically, with a critical intent, or he is certifiably insane. (Note that the written archives of the world are actually full of disturbing hybrids: texts that employ satire and irony to pursue vicious personal vendettas or racist ideologies. Some readers have had difficulty distinguishing Swift from this category.)

Swift's most famous work, *Gulliver's Travels*, also has a narrator who seems to mean everything that he says, literally and straightforwardly. Gulliver is gullible, and one of the characteristics of gullible people (Mrs Bennet being another case in point) is that they are rarely ironical. But this certainly doesn't stop them from being the vehicles or butts of irony. On Gulliver's final voyage, he meets the Houyhnhnms, a nation of apparently rational talking horses. One of these horses, in a reversal of the normal order of things that Gulliver finds astonishing but not ironic (he is not thoughtful enough for that), becomes the human's 'Master'. The two of them discuss many topics. For example:

> [When we had] occasion to talk of *Lying*, and *false Representation*, it was with much Difficulty that he comprehended what I meant, although he had otherwise a most acute Judgment. For he argued thus; That the Use of Speech was to make us understand one another, and to receive Information of Facts; now if any one *said the Thing which was not*, these Ends were defeated; because I cannot properly be said to understand him, and I am so far from receiving Information, that he leaves me worse than in Ignorance, for I am led to believe a Thing *Black* when it is *White*, and *Short* when it is *Long*. And these were all the Notions he had concerning that Faculty of *Lying*, so perfectly well understood among human Creatures.

While Gulliver is gullible, the Houyhnhnm – by our standards – is extraordinarily naive. This passage is a kind of dialogue of the deaf: deaf to irony. The horse assumes that all verbal communication will be on the level: what you say is what you mean. The human, on the other hand, apparently fails to see any conflict between the vice (or, as he puts it, 'Faculty') of lying and the ideal of perfect understanding. If you believe that every utterance must be truthful, you can't have irony; nor can you have irony if you take insincerity for granted. Irony involves the acknowledgement that truth and falsehood, or at least two quite different ways of looking at something, can be current at the same time, in

the same utterance: so that you do not assume that a statement is true, or that it is false, but understand it as something to be weighed and judged.

Once we see the irony in the idea that lying is 'perfectly well understood' by humans, rather than just taking it for granted (like Gulliver), we are on the way to acknowledging the real complexity of the discourse that we are all immersed in, and that literature exploits. Sometimes, breaking the rules (for instance, by not telling the truth) works; when we are talking about how we communicate with one another, as humans, not Houyhnhnms, breaking the rules is part of the rules. Discourse is not always 'on the level'. Be careful, though: irony can be a dangerous weapon, at both ends.

Metaphor

The relation between literature and telling the truth has been debated for millennia. On the one hand, literature may be expected to give written depictions of the world as it is: an idea that we find in the Ancient Greek concept of mimesis, for example, or in nineteenth-century realism (more about these later). On the other hand, 'creative' writers tend to make things up; and, for many people, 'literature' and 'fiction' are almost synonyms.

Metaphor, one of the most characteristic features of literary language, embodies this paradox (an apparent contradiction that is built into a situation, and won't go away). Metaphors 'work' for the reader when they make the thing described more mentally accessible: when they 'bring it to life', as we sometimes say. But they do this by describing the thing in question as something other than what it is. Take this example from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*:

CAPTAIN Doubtful it stood,
As two spent swimmers that do cling together
And choke their art. The merciless Macdonwald –
Worthy to be a rebel, for to that
The multiplying villainies of nature
Do swarm upon him – from the Western Isles
Of kerns and galloglasses is supplied;
And Fortune, on his damnèd quarrel smiling,
Showed like a rebel's whore.

An 'art' or skill, like swimming, cannot literally be choked. It is not, in itself, a living, breathing thing – unlike the swimmers who may indeed endure a physical choking, and drown, if their art is, *as it were*, 'choked'. So, to talk about 'choking' an art is to be metaphorical. Perhaps we hardly notice this because we are used to so many things 'choking' (a road 'choked' by traffic; a footballer 'choking' at the last moment, losing concentration, and missing the open goal). We are not usually conscious of the metaphorical origins of such uses. Their status as metaphors is just a matter for etymologists, scholars … and pedants. In fact, the English language is littered with such 'dead metaphors'. 'Littered' in

that last sentence is another one. Even 'dead' in 'dead metaphor' is itself – to be really pedantic – a dead metaphor. Metaphors were never literally alive!

A little research in a good-sized corpus of early seventeenth-century texts would be necessary to decide whether 'choke' would have been a dead metaphor in Shakespeare's time, or whether its metaphoricity, in this context, would have struck the original audience. But, when it comes to the 'multiplying villainies' that 'swarm upon' Macdonwald, we are clearly moving far away from everyday usage, and from literal meaning, into something strikingly figurative. Villainies are not insects or any other kind of swarming creature. They are not even tangible things. And yet here they are, conjured up for us ('conjured up' being another dead – or at least comatose – metaphor!), as though they were crawling about on the surface of the person who actually contains them (in his 'heart' or mind). The Captain does not explain this. He does not even say, 'if you will forgive the metaphor'. He just gets on with it. He assumes that King Duncan and the other men with whom he is talking will realise that his primary subject matter is still Macdonwald, and that he has not really switched to ants or bees. Shakespeare assumes the same mental flexibility – the same acceptance of the figurative and metaphorical – in his audience.

This captain knows that he is speaking to a king. He is also conscious of having the job of describing exceptional, heroic deeds. That may be why his language is especially figurative, even by Shakespeare's standards. He wants to rise to the occasion, and to take his language with him.

In a metaphor, the connection between the thing described and the term used to describe it is not spelt out: the reader (or listener) has to make the connection. We have to see, for example, that 'swarm' suggests insects, and then do the additional work of understanding that Macdonwald can be seen as disfigured or infested by his defects of character in something analogous to the way in which real insects might infest and disfigure an otherwise attractive object. At some moments the Captain actually tells us (and his on-stage interlocutors) that he is being metaphorical. He does this by announcing that he is going to compare one thing, for the purpose of description, with another. For example, when he says that the battle was '[d]oubtful. / *As* two spent swimmers that do cling together / And choke their art' (my italics), he doesn't just use Y (the swimmers) to stand for X (the battle); instead, he says that X is *as* (or like) Y. This is a simile, which is a metaphor that announces itself as such – as if he had said: 'The battle was doubtful *in a way that could be expressed metaphorically by comparing the predicament of the two armies with that of* two swimmers who cling together, making it very difficult for either of them to swim.' In Shakespeare's version all of the words in italics above are replaced by 'as', which works better!

Personification and allegory

One more simile: 'Fortune, on his damnèd quarrel smiling, / Showed like a rebel's whore.' To express the risks of battle in terms of sexual unreliability is metaphorical; spelling the comparison out, by using 'like' (just as with 'as' in

the previous example) makes this a simile. But here we also have another kind of figurative language: personification. 'Fortune' – which is chance or fate, an abstract force – is here given personality and agency. Perhaps we should think that the Captain actually believes in a goddess Fortune, with human-like attributes, but probably not; more likely he is to be understood as knowing very well that he is talking about one thing in terms of another – in this case, the unpredictable twists of a battle in terms of the preferences of an imaginary deity – figuratively, for rhetorical effect.

Fortune's alleged feelings and preferences make her a personification of abstract qualities; her alleged willingness to attach herself to undeserving people places her in a metaphorical relationship to the 'rebel's whore'; and the fact that the Captain acknowledges this comparison places Fortune in a simile. We could also say that the goddess Fortune appears here as a (highly traditional) *symbol* of the role of chance in human affairs. In a slightly different way, the dagger that appears before Macbeth is a (less traditional, more personal) symbol of violence, his crimes, his guilt, or his impending doom. King Duncan himself, just by virtue of being king, is meant, within the imaginary monarchical society of the play, to symbolise goodness, justice and stability, standing in fact as the keystone of a whole symbolic order, so that when Macbeth kills him, he kills much more than just a man.

In reality (the 'reality' of this fictional text), Duncan *is* just a man, and his followers know that. That is part of the reason why they address him with such rhetorical inventiveness. The Captain's figurative language does not just decorate his narrative, it also helps sustain a grand idea of the person to whom he is primarily speaking. Much the same applies to this speech, with which Banquo ushers Duncan into Macbeth's castle:

BANQUO This guest of summer,
The temple-haunting martlet, does approve
By his loved mansionry that the heavens' breath
Smells wooingly here. No jutty, frieze,
Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird
Hath made his pendent bed and procreant cradle.
Where they must breed and haunt, I have observed,
The air is delicate.

There are various metaphors – dead or alive – lurking in this passage. Birds don't really have 'beds' or 'cradles', let alone 'mansionry'! Nor do the heavens actually have 'breath' (any more than swimming, itself, can 'choke'). These are anthropomorphic metaphors: talking about the birds or the sky as though they were people. (It can also go the other way, as we can demonstrate by 'pigging out' on pizza, or 'wolfing it down', especially if we do so 'sheepishly'.) But it is not immediately obvious that the general drift of Banquo's speech is metaphorical: in fact, it actually sounds as though he is quite an ornithologist, genuinely interested in the birds themselves. It is only in the wider context of the play, and of the

relations between its characters, that we understand that Banquo needs to be understood as talking about something else, above, beneath or behind (depending on how you look at it) the literal subject-matter. In fact, he is using the behaviour of the martlets to convey a message to his king: not just that Macbeth's castle is a good spot for bird-watching, but that it is a wholesome and hospitable place; somewhere nurturing; somewhere that accommodates family virtues and values such as marriage ('wooingly') and raising children ('procreant'). Perhaps Banquo really does like birds, but this is not a play about birds, or any other animal except the human one (even though it contains references to more than forty different species). The important drift of Banquo's words is metaphorical. Beyond that it is *allegorical*: advancing a whole narrative about how people ought to behave (and how kings, in particular, should be addressed and treated) while appearing, on the surface, to talk about something quite different.

Banquo has his allegorical moment *within* the play, but in fact the whole play can also be seen as an allegory. Not that everybody will have seen it in that way. Some people who saw Shakespeare's play when it was first performed, in the early seventeenth century, believed in witches. That is to say, they took the whole thing literally, understanding what they saw on stage as nothing more or less than the story of a particular individual, Macbeth, and the dreadful events that were unleashed by his encounter with real agents of supernatural evil. After all, the King at that time, James I of England and VI of Scotland, was himself a scholar (of a sort) of witchcraft, and a zealous persecutor of its supposed practitioners.

But for those in Shakespeare's audience who saw the witches (as most of us would now) as not just supernatural but unreal and impossible, their function in the play was allegorical. They contribute to the arresting, exciting and (for some) terrifying surface of the play, but they are not what the play is actually about. What the play is about, most readers and spectators would agree, is the more real and widespread (if not universal) scenario of a human being giving way to temptation, doing bad things to further his own interests, finding that this brings him little but pain, but being able to do nothing to reverse the process now that it has started.

Metaphor is by no means restricted to literary texts, as such. In fact, the general prevalence of metaphor in all kinds of discourse is one sign that our minds have literariness, of a sort, built into them. For this reason, metaphors are now studied, as we shall see in a later chapter, by neuroscientists. Literary authors use metaphors – unscientifically – to suggest things about situations and characters within the worlds of their texts. Metaphors are one more way of making links or building structures within a text, rather like rhyme. In *Macbeth*, for example, Banquo's speech about the 'martlet' is just part of a complex pattern of bird-metaphors that are particularly associated with Macbeth's antagonist Macduff. Ironically, Banquo's martlet with its 'procreant cradle' has colonised the home of a man who will soon start killing children. Shakespeare remembers this when he has Macduff's wife describe her son as a 'poor bird',

just before the two of them are murdered. One of the murderers, who was no party to this earlier conversation and presumably knows nothing of the martlet either, then dismisses young Macduff contemptuously, before killing him, as an 'egg'. When Macduff himself, who has not heard any of these exchanges, is told the appalling news, he asks, 'all my pretty chickens and their dam [...]?' This is all the more moving because it seems as though there is a kind of telepathy within the Macduff family: they sense and echo each other's metaphors across time and space, and even across the boundary between life and death. More formally, all of these metaphors 'rhyme' with one another (a metaphorical use of the word 'rhyme'!). The pattern that they create is no more accidental than the end-rhymes of a sonnet. They are a means of structuring the text and giving added meaning – which could be traced and developed further through the many other references in the play to animal life, and to animal and human 'nature'.

While we are looking at metaphor, we should consider another type of figure with which it is often compared and contrasted: metonymy. Where metaphor refers to something in terms of another separate and alien thing, metonymy refers to something in terms of one of its own parts or attributes. What these figures have in common is that neither is content to give us the thing itself, separate and complete. Like metaphors, metonyms are common in everyday speech. When we talk about 'the brains of an organisation' or 'the face of a political campaign', for example, we are not just referring to a pile of brains (on a table) or a face without a head behind it. On the contrary, we are talking about a complete and functional human being. It's weird, when you think about it, but very few listeners, in practice, would give it a second thought.

Literature tends to make us more conscious about the way language works. Metaphors and metonyms in literature tend to carry more weight than they do in ordinary conversations. They may, for example, be heavy with moral implications. Describing one thing in terms of something that it isn't may be uncomfortably close to lying. Similarly, describing something – or, even more, someone – in terms of just one part risks giving a distorted or reductive impression. Charles Dickens famously used 'hands' as a morally significant metonym in his novel *Hard Times*, where 'Hands' are the exploited workers of wretched Coketown. The metonymic way in which these workers' bosses refer to them exposes how they have been dehumanised by the harsh socio-economic situation in which they find themselves: they are not complete beings, just part-people, the part in question being that which wields the shovel, pulls the lever or sews the cloth.

Lady Macbeth becomes obsessed by her own hands: a metonymic way of seeing that is also full of irony. Lady Macbeth, like her husband, seems to have wanted to grow through crime, becoming progressively more powerful, richer, and (metaphorically) bigger. The first act of treachery and violence that was meant to set husband and wife on this path of growth diminishes them completely. The outcome is, ironically, the opposite of what they had imagined. Lady Macbeth, instead of being enlarged, is reduced to a part of herself, her murdering hands, which she stares at, apparently, until she contracts to the absolute nothing (as Macbeth comes to see it) of death.

Is there a telepathic connectedness within the Macduff family, or are the echoing metaphors (like the killer's 'egg') just cruel jokes? Should we see the roles of metaphor and metonymy in the Macbeths' imaginations as psychological diagnosis or as cosmic irony? In these ways, the small details of figurative language within Shakespeare's play are essential to its grand debates about fate and free will. Irony, allegory, metaphor, metonymy: they matter so much in *Macbeth*, and in so many other works of literature, because they are so fundamental to the strange world that we live in, and to our own strange minds.

6 Prose fiction

Now we come to the kind of text that most people these days think of as 'literature'. Works of prose fiction, especially novels, get reviewed in daily newspapers; occasionally even on television. Some get made into blockbuster movies. When a novelist wins a big prize, a relatively large number of people pay attention. A few novelists can become so successful that they start making serious money – becoming richer, in one famous case, than the Queen of England. That doesn't happen to poets.

So, for quite a lot of people, prose fiction is what literature is. Note that this is a historically specific phenomenon. In ancient Greece and Rome, most literature was in verse. We may read Homer's *Iliad* or Virgil's *Aeneid* now, in translation, as prose novels of a sort, but originally, and in some modern translations, they are verse epics. In Elizabethan England it was much smarter to be a sonneteer than a prose fiction author. Again, that is not the way it is now.

Even if people do not think of literature automatically as prose, they may assume that it is fiction – but that is also a historically specific way of thinking. 'Prose' and 'fiction': these are important concepts, and – like all concepts – they shouldn't be taken for granted.

Prose fiction genres – and narrative

Prose fiction consists of many sub-genres. Some of these are usually defined quite simply by length. The main categories are the novel and the short story. *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, which is a couple of hundred pages long in most editions, is a novel. A fairly good working definition of a novel might be a fictional narrative that is long enough to be published as a book by itself. It is not really that straightforward, of course. Some extremely short prose fiction texts – for example, some of the late writings of Samuel Beckett – have been published by themselves in very slim volumes. But, for at least 99 per cent of prose fiction texts, it works. If it is a single prose fiction narrative, and long enough to have been published originally as a book in itself (or even in two or more volumes), then it's a novel. The way that we apply this term is usually no more scientific than that.

I have been using the word 'narrative', which is much more general than 'novel' or even 'prose fiction'. A narrative is a sequence of events, fictional or non-fictional, told or narrated by someone – the narrator – to someone else. *Pride and Prejudice* is a narrative, but so is the *Iliad*, and so are most films, and so was the account that you may once have given your teacher of why you failed to do your homework, regardless of whether it was fictional ('I took my maths book home, laid it on the table, went out for a walk to get myself in the right frame of mind, and, when I came back, the dog had eaten it!') or true ('The dog really did eat it!'). In literary narrative, the person – known or unknown, named or anonymous – who narrates the narrative is the narrator. The person to whom the narrative is narrated may be called the audience or the reader, but is sometimes termed – more technically and abstractly – the narratee. The narratee is the person to whom the narrative *seems* to be directed: in that sense, producing a narrative involves creating a reader, just as it involves creating a narrator and characters. The whole business of how narrators narrate narratives to narratees is a sub-discipline in itself, and is called narratology!

David Foster Wallace's fictional narrative 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' is less than 10 pages long, and was originally published in a magazine, alongside other texts by other people. It was then republished with seven other texts by Wallace that together make up one book. One could imagine Wallace expanding the theme, developing the characters, perhaps adding more characters and events, and turning 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' into a perfectly good novel! But he didn't. He decided that he had said what he wanted to say after a few pages, and so the text is something else: what we straightforwardly call a short story.

There is also a category of prose fiction texts in between: texts that can fill a whole book but do not seem quite big enough to be in the same category as *War and Peace*, *Ulysses* or even *Pride and Prejudice*. We might choose to call these short novels or long short stories. Or we might call them novellas. Is *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, which weighs in at about 80 pages, a short novel, a long short story, or a novella? And does it make any difference? The only really interesting questions are these: what does categorising this text as a novel allow us to say about it? And, on the other hand, what would be achieved by categorising it as a short story or novella? This goes for so many literary categorisations, from 'poetry' or 'tragedy' to 'Romantic' or 'modernist'. Even 'literature' itself. A term is only as good as the thoughts and readings that it generates. It is a tool for opening and working on real texts. If you can find a better tool, use it. As for *Jekyll and Hyde*, thinking of it as a short story might lead to an emphasis on the relatively simple central 'point' of the narrative: a riddle (what has Hyde to do with Jekyll?) and its sudden, complete and sensational solution. Thinking of it as a novel might, on the other hand, turn the reader's attention to its complex narrative structure, the relatively large number of significant characters, and the extent to which it depicts an elaborate urban setting, even a fictional 'world'.

If we put the terminology for fictional narratives in an international context, other questions arise. What we call a 'novel' in English is, in some other languages, including French, German and Danish, a '*roman*' (pronounced in various ways). This is another sign that the categories that we use do not come from any infallible authority. Exactly the same extended prose narratives have come to be called by a name that derives for the Anglo-French term *romance* in some languages and from the Latin for something *new* (*novus* – novella – novel) in others. Ask yourself, what can be gained by thinking of *Pride and Prejudice* or *Jekyll and Hyde* (or, for that matter, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moby-Dick* or *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*) in terms of romance, and what in terms of novelty?

(Meta-)narrative and (meta-)fiction

A new novel can still make an impact in the world. But the genre of the novel is no longer new, and we tend to take it for granted. It is worth looking back to when the genre was young, to see what a strange phenomenon it actually is. When the first substantial English-language novels were originally published, they often presented themselves as not being fiction at all. When the book that we now call *Gulliver's Travels* came out in 1726, its title page made no mention of Jonathan Swift. Apparently, it was not a work of fiction at all: it was a book of travel writings, written by the traveller himself. After the title page came a series of short paratexts – texts that are included in the book but not actually part of the main narrative – in which the reader was informed that Lemuel Gulliver's real accounts of his travels had been edited and published by someone else. Again, this was not Swift, but someone called Richard Sympson, said to be Gulliver's cousin.

This is what Sympson says about the book, and more particularly about the facts of Gulliver's life, before and after the events narrated in his *Travels*:

> The Author of these Travels, Mr. *Lemuel Gulliver*, is my ancient and intimate Friend; there is likewise some Relation between us by the Mother's Side. About three Years ago, Mr. *Gulliver* growing weary of the Concourse of curious People coming to him at his House in *Redriff*, made a small Purchase of Land, with a convenient House, near *Newark* in *Nottinghamshire*, his Native Country; where he now lives retired, yet in good Esteem among his Neighbours.
>
> Although Mr. *Gulliver* was born in *Nottinghamshire*, where his Father dwelt, yet I have heard him say, his Family came from *Oxfordshire*; to confirm which, I have observed in the Churchyard at *Banbury*, in that County, several Tombs and Monuments of the *Gullivers*.
>
> Before he quitted *Redriff*, he left the Custody of the following Papers in my Hands, with the liberty to dispose of them as I should think fit. I have carefully perused them three Times: The Style is very plain and simple; and the only Fault I find is, that the Author, after the Manner of Travellers, is a

> little too Circumstantial. There is an Air of Truth apparent through the Whole; and indeed, the Author was so distinguished for his Veracity, that it became a sort of Proverb among his Neighbours at *Redriff*, when anyone affirmed a Thing, to say, it was as true as if Mr. *Gulliver* had spoke it.

The great irony, of course, is that this infallibly truth-telling Mr Gulliver never existed; nor did his cousin Sympson. Later in the book our credulity will be tested by accounts of people a few inches high, and of talking horses. All of this, in reality, has been made up by the literary author, Jonathan Swift (1667–1745), for his own very good reasons. But he obviously thinks that publishing hundreds of pages of descriptions of events that never happened is a funny thing to do, and so he creates a story to account for the story, a metanarrative, that allows the reader (at least the Gulliver-like gullible reader) to think that nothing that is going on here has anything to do with fiction.

That was one early-eighteenth-century approach. In Swift's case it was deliberately ironical: his provocative assertions of Gulliver's truthfulness suggest that he wanted the deception to be seen through by sophisticated readers. But many other authors of the time really seem to have tried to pass off their novels as non-fiction, for instance by writing them in the form of a collection of letters between the characters, which, according to the explanatory metanarrative, somebody just happens to have found, gathered together, and published. We can see the vestiges of this kind of novel in letters, or 'epistolary' novel, in parts of *Pride and Prejudice* and other works by Jane Austen in which at least some significant narration is placed in a letter from one character to another. Epistolary novels are still occasionally written and published, and even novels that pretend to be collections of e-mails.

But *Pride and Prejudice* is clearly a novel from a time when people had got used to the novelty of novels, and the pretence of non-fiction was not felt to be necessary or interesting. Letters and other documents that could conceivably have an excuse for existing, as non-fiction texts in the real world – or, in other words, in a world without literature – do occur in Austen's novel, but they are only a small part of it. The rest consists of a narrative that an unidentified narrator seems to be narrating to a potential readership or narratee, apparently 'us', who have no personal connection with the people whose actions are described and no obvious real-life reason to be told about them.

The *Travels* of Lemuel Gulliver exist, so the metafiction goes, because there really was a Lemuel Gulliver who went on these travels and wrote accounts of them, and because his cousin has decided to publish them. But why does *Pride and Prejudice* exist? Who is narrating to whom?

Let's have another look at the way the novel begins:

> It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.
>
> However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of

> the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.
>
> 'My dear Mr. Bennet,' said his lady to him one day, 'have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?'
>
> Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.
>
> 'But it is,' returned she; 'for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it.'
>
> Mr. Bennet made no answer.
>
> 'Do not you want to know who has taken it?' cried his wife impatiently.
>
> 'You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it.'
>
> This was invitation enough.
>
> 'Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week.'

Once the dialogue gets going, the narrative begins to fuel itself. Mr Bennet says something because Mrs Bennet has asked him a question. Mrs Bennet says something because, as we have already found out, she is present in this scene and is a person who cannot keep her mouth shut. But where on Earth have these people come from? What have they to do with me, the random reader who happens to have acquired the book, and, above all, who is this other person, the narrator, who confides or dictates to us in the first two paragraphs?

We may, of course, be such seasoned or habituated readers of fictions of all kinds that these seem like silly questions. But they are worth giving a bit of thought. Likewise a more general and fundamental question: How is it, exactly, that we have got to a point where some of the most widely admired achievements of human civilisation are actually a pack of lies, from cover to cover?

'Fiction' means things that are made up; not true. Insofar as fiction is characteristic of literature, literature has been seen as suspicious, over the centuries, by many smart people, from Plato onwards. And many authors of fiction have enjoyed the paradox of being licensed liars, and have exploited it, not just creating metanarratives that provide an excuse or alibi for their narratives but instead writing kinds of metafiction – in other words, fiction about fiction – in which the strange human tendency to make things up becomes an object of satirical and often humorous scrutiny. Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), for example, is full of authors of fiction, downright liars, and everything in between – and some of David Foster Wallace's stories include, disconcertingly, a character called David Wallace.

Yes, it is a funny thing to spend your time writing fiction. But then, it is not that easy *not* to write fiction, or to draw the line between fiction and non-fiction. If you think of an autobiographical novel, for example – a novel extensively based upon events from the author's own life – how exactly do we tell the

difference between that and a 'non-fiction' autobiography? When somebody tries to describe, as faithfully as possible, something that they experienced 30 years ago (or even yesterday), and wants to 'bring it to life' in a way that will hold the reader's attention, they are soon going to start using their imaginations: selecting, embellishing, and to some extent fictionalising the truth. Beyond the most simple objective facts, it is impossible to avoid doing this. And the same applies to other conventionally 'non-fiction' narratives, such as historical writing.

It is this realisation that underlies one of the dominant tendencies in literary studies around the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, the so-called New Historicism, which says, yes, literature needs to be seen in its historical context (which accounts for the word 'historicism'), and yet it is not simply the case that the truth of history can explain the inventions of literature (which is why this is 'new'). It is not that truth does not exist, but almost all texts, including history books, biographies, academic essays, and novels, contain greater or lesser proportions of fact and invention, and they can all help to explain or at least illuminate one another. *Macbeth* and *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, may be full of events that never happened and dialogue that was never spoken, but they are nevertheless part of a much wider field of discourse in which fiction and non-fiction texts overlap with and influence one another, and they may come as close to telling the truth about the world in which they were written, *when* they were written, as any other texts that we have.

We are actually very good at combining the desire for a kind of truth in fiction with the acceptance of all of its lies. We are able to switch into a fiction-reading mode, suspending our disbelief. We can often take novels and stories seriously even when they experiment with things that are completely hypothetical or even impossible. This is the case with magic realism, for example, in which detailed, believable sequences of events are mixed with things that we know are not part of real life; or with various categories of so-called genre fiction, such as Sci-fi, Fantasy or the transparent wish-fulfilment of popular Romance. We are aware that what we are reading follows certain conventions. For instance, once we have read a few novels (or seen a few films) with vampires in them, it is no longer a big issue that vampires don't exist. They *do* exist, as conventions; they become part of a metaphorical language for discussing real things that really do concern us, and we react to them as such. We are very good, once again, at moving through a world of text and discourse in which some things may be literally true, others not, but everything potentially carries meaning.

Narrators and characters

Most fictional literary narratives used to be written in verse (some, even a few novels, still are). But most, for at least the last two or three centuries, have been written in prose, which is to say that they are not divided by the author into separate lines. Prose, in that sense, is poetry's *other*. Nevertheless, prose can have many of the qualities that we find in poetry and consider to be 'poetical',

such as rhythm or alliteration. It also has its own systems of arrangement in patterns and blocks – in paragraphs and chapters – that can be analogous to stanzas.

Regardless of whether a narrative is in verse or prose, there are other categories of internal structure that we need to be aware of, such as plot, the types of character that are included and how they are connected with one another, and the kinds of narration through which the actions of those characters are represented. Although literary prose can seem more straightforward and less artful than poetry, that is not necessarily the case. It can be just as dependent on the artificial conventions of genre, and the stories that it tells can be just as much on the 'technical' or 'artistic' level of narration, concerning how the author seems to tackle the challenges of writing a fictional text, as on the more obvious level of character and action. For example, what we judge to be the narrator's point of view, in *Pride and Prejudice*, and what we can infer about the author's, are just as much part of what the whole experience of that novel can be about as the thoughts and actions of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy – even though most readers may think very little about the narrator and the author (or fail to distinguish between the two), and may start caring about Lizzie and Darcy almost as though they were real human beings.

In literary narrative, all persons – be they characters or narrators, or even, in rather different ways, the author and the reader – exist side by side, as functions of the text. Nevertheless, some characters may seem much more 'real' than others. According to the influential terminology of the early-twentieth-century English novelist and critic E. M. Forster, fictional characters can be divided into two main categories: the 'round' and the 'flat'. Round characters, with multiple dimensions to their personalities, rich inner lives, and the capacity to develop, are the main focus of the narrator's interest and probably of the reader's, too. Flat characters are there to expand the fictional world surrounding the main, round, characters without drawing too much attention to themselves.

One way of describing the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* would be to say that it presents two main characters each of whom, at first, strikes the other as flat: two-dimensional and incapable of change. But each gradually discovers depths in the other, and learns to manifest depths in themselves, so that they end up creating a shared roundness within which they can flourish together. Good for Lizzie and Darcy! But think of the permanently 'flat' types who get squashed on the way. What about poor, dull, competent but utterly uninteresting – or so we are told – sister Mary, for example? We never see her from within, because Austen's narrator gravitates towards, and sides with, the coolest person in the fictional room – and that is never Mary.

Is Austen's narrator *herself* proud and prejudiced? Does she ever get over these qualities? Can we imagine that Austen did? Is this novel actually good for us? Or is it a work of prose fiction that makes it all too easy for us to think that some people have poetry in their souls while others will always be prosy or prosaic? And that uses fiction's licence to kill, create, and everything in between, to play vicious power games with other people's lives – even if those people happen to be unreal.

Free indirect discourse, the one and the many

It would be quite possible to construct a reading of Austen's novel (and a great many others) as elitist and even a bit heartless, arguing that a tendency to value a few glamorous individuals – above all, the 'hero' and 'heroine' – and to de-value everybody else, is built into the very fabric of the narration. This reading might be supported by an analysis of the relationship between the heroine and Austen's narrator.

Consider the following passage from a fairly early stage of the novel. Elizabeth's sister Jane is ill, Elizabeth has walked over to Netherfield to be with her, and now she is stuck in the house with Bingley, his sisters, and Darcy:

> Their brother, indeed, was the only one of the party whom she could regard with any complacency. His anxiety for Jane was evident, and his attentions to herself most pleasing, and they prevented her feeling herself so much an intruder as she believed she was considered by the others. She had very little notice from any but him. Miss Bingley was engrossed by Mr. Darcy, her sister scarcely less so; and as for Mr. Hurst, by whom Elizabeth sat, he was an indolent man, who lived only to eat, drink, and play at cards, who when he found her prefer a plain dish to a ragout, had nothing to say to her.

Who writes, says, or thinks all of this? It is somebody who is evidently in a position to observe everything that is going on in the house; who is willing and able to make psychological and moral judgements – such as 'indolent'; and who knows enough about Elizabeth to say what she can 'regard with … complacency', and what pleases her. The passage appears to be expressed, that is to say, from the point of view of a very well-informed impersonal narrator. One could use the term 'omniscient', but that might be misleading: this narrator shows no obvious sign (at least, not here) of knowing what will happen in the future. In fact, this narrator seems deeply rooted in the present of the narrative. She/he seems also especially close to Elizabeth (who we could say is 'focalised' here, and throughout the novel) – to the extent that we may wonder whether the judgement passed on Mr Hurst, for example, might not be more or less exactly what passed through Elizabeth's own mind, expressed in very much her own words. That is to say, there is a touch of ambiguity about whether this is actually the narrator speaking (the same 'person' who had said, all those pages ago, that 'It is a truth universally acknowledged …'), or whether it is the character. This is known as free indirect discourse (or free indirect style), where, instead of just telling us the facts of the case 'objectively', or giving us a character's words to others (in dialogue), or to themselves (in articulated thought, within quotation marks), the narrator does something in between. She/he does not break the flow of the narrative or the sense of authority that comes with the nameless third-person stance, but seems nevertheless to slip into the point of view of a particular character and express their subjective feelings and ideas.

As Austen's narrative progresses, the use of free indirect discourse becomes more obvious. It begins to be clear that Elizabeth is the narrator's favourite, and that the latter is happy to associate her/his own modes of reasoning and feeling very closely with the character's. We can see this later in the first volume, when Elizabeth talks with Wickham. He has not yet been exposed as the obnoxious scoundrel that he is, so she is able to feel close to him while enjoying a few negative feelings about some other characters – such as the pretentious Lady Catherine de Bourgh. According to Wickham, Lady Catherine's

> 'daughter, Miss de Bourgh, will have a very large fortune, and it is believed that she and her cousin [Darcy] will unite the two estates.'
>
> This information made Elizabeth smile, as she thought of poor Miss Bingley. Vain indeed must be all her attentions, vain and useless her affection for his sister and her praise of himself, if he were already self-destined to another.

The observation that Elizabeth smiles seems to come from a third-person narrator – one who is looking at her from the outside. The observation that she was thinking of Miss Bingley seems to come from a superhumanly informed third-person narrator (actually, an impossible being), who can say, in a semi-detached summarising way, what is going on in Elizabeth's thoughts. But the next sentence is not so detached. It contains feeling, expressed through rhetoric ('Vain indeed. vain and useless'), suggesting that these are the words of someone who is personally involved in the action. The narrator has lent some rhetorical power to the character: we can't be sure that these are the exact words that that Elizabeth would have used (because there are no quotation marks), but we can be pretty sure that this is the spirit of her thinking.

Note that this blurring of the boundary between narrator and character does not rule out the irony that we have already discussed in this novel. Far from it. Austen lets us see through Elizabeth's eyes, and think her thoughts, but we still know that this scene is managed by a narrator. At least when we look back on this passage from a later point in the narrative we will see Elizabeth's feelings of *Schadenfreude* (pleasure in someone else's discomfiture or setback) towards 'poor Miss Bingley' are at least partly motivated by unconscious rivalry, because of her own growing attachment to Darcy. The heroine is placed at centre stage; her point of view is clearly the one that the narrator finds most sympathetic and wants to identify with; but, ironically, just because we get so close to her, we can see the ways in which she may be deceiving herself.

Other kinds of narration

It is easy to go on discussing *Pride and Prejudice*, because, despite the small social world in which its action takes place, it realises so much of the basic potential of the form of the novel. It can stand for novels in general, in that respect, just as *Macbeth*, in many ways, can stand for plays. But even the

greatest and most complex works of literature have to reject certain possibilities. Austen's third-person narrator, even though linked intimately with the heroine through focalisation and free indirect discourse, cannot give us quite the intimacy of a first-person narrative. This is no doubt one reason why Austen actually does incorporate some passages of first-person narration – such as Darcy's letter to Elizabeth, in which he is able to confess, explain himself, and lay his heart bare, in a way that would not have been so affecting if it had been reported from another's perspective or even in free indirect discourse. We have already seen an example of the first person used throughout a narrative, in Wallace's 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature', where elaborate ironic effects and psychological insights are achieved by having the central figure or protagonist tell his own story – so that we can compare what he says about himself with our own assessment of the actions that he describes. Or consider *Jekyll and Hyde*, in which there are various forms of narration, but where the first person is reserved for passages of intense personal recollection or confession, as here, where Dr Lanyon reports his witnessing of Jekyll's transformation into Hyde: 'I saw what I saw, I heard what I heard, and my soul sickened at it; and yet now when that sight has faded from my eyes, I ask myself if I believe it, and I cannot answer. My life is shaken to its roots [...]'

Towards the other end of the spectrum, a short story or novel can be narrated from a third-person perspective that seems completely detached, without free indirect discourse or any other clear sign that we are being 'managed' by a voice that is telling us to think one thing or another. The events of the story, and the words of the characters, are allowed to speak for themselves. This is the case with *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe, for example, from the first paragraph onwards:

> Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because he would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights.

Does this narrator think that this fight between the founder and the spirit actually took place? Does the narrator believe that such spirits exist? We don't know – and we still don't know at the end of the novel. We are just being told what the old men said to one another – what the *characters* believed to be the case.

Plot

Every narrative has a plot, of greater or lesser complexity. The plot is the sequence of developments as they unroll, for the reader, in the course of the

text, together with the causal links that are made between those developments: what it is that leads from A to B, from B to C, and so on. This is usually distinguished from the *story*, which is simply the implied underlying series of events, in chronological order, without any causality or sense of direction: A happened, then B happened, then C happened, and so on. You will come across this important but quite tricky distinction expressed in various different terminologies, even in different languages. Thus, you may hear about the Russian formalists, who distinguished between *fabula* (the bare sequence of events) and *syuzhet* (the treatment or presentation of those events), or the French structuralists, who used the terms *histoire* (again, the raw material of actions and events) and *récit* (the recital or telling of those actions and events). If you read around the subject you will find subtle differences in the ideas, not just the terminology, of these and other critics and theorists. But the important point, for now, is that there is a fundamental issue about the relationship between the things that are supposed to have happened, in a narrative text, and the way that they are presented to the reader.

One genre in which the distinction between plot and story is particularly obvious is the detective story. The whole text that we refer to as a 'story' in this case is more technically a narrative in which an underlying story (the chronological sequence of actions and events that we are to imagine as having taken place) is delivered to us by the narrator in an indirect and mysterious way, through scene-setting, factual evidence, claims and counter-claims, lies, revelations, recollections and red herrings. In this kind of narrative, one of the final elements in the plot, very often, is the revelation of what was actually the *beginning* of the story: the crime itself, committed in a specific way by a specific individual, whose identity we have been trying to figure out all the way through. The reader, in a detective narrative, is thus a detective (in competition, in a sense, with the fictional detective – Sherlock Holmes, Sam Spade, or whoever it may be), trying to find out what story lies concealed beneath the plot.

Even *Pride and Prejudice* has elements of the detective story. Elizabeth Bennet is like a fictional detective, and the reader is like the detective-reader of the detective story, as we move along the narrative path, or plot-line, towards discovering who was the real villain, Darcy or Wickham, or indeed who is the real Darcy, the one who is unpleasantly prejudiced or the one who is justifiably proud.

In the case of *Jekyll and Hyde*, we have something that resembles a super-sophisticated Gothic detective story, except that the plot is too complicated, and the underlying story too strange and incredible, for anybody within the text single-handedly to sort it out. We begin with an anonymous third-person narrator who tells us about Utterson, a lawyer and thus a detective-like figure. We are told about his conversation with his cousin Enfield, in which the latter takes us back in time, describing a violent and unaccountable incident in the street, to which a respectable person – whom we later come to know as Dr Henry Jekyll – seems to have some connection. Utterson hints that he knows what this is all about. However, it is not really Utterson who solves the case. Instead,

Stevenson's plot takes us through various twists and turns, back and forth through time, and the narration is handed over from the anonymous third person to various characters, notably Dr Lanyon, who presents himself as incapacitated by what he knows – barely able to put it into words – and finally to Dr Jekyll himself, who clears up what would otherwise have remained mysterious, finally explaining how the sequence of events underlying the plot was originally set in motion. All of this frustration and complication in the telling of the story adds to the grotesqueness of the raw material – Jekyll's experiment and its consequences – and makes the central action of the text less the work of one crazy protagonist than a symptom of the structures of behaviour and communication (or non-communication and secrecy) in a whole fictional society.

Happy and unhappy endings

Things do not work out very well for all of the characters in *Pride and Prejudice*. Charlotte Lucas has to face a safe but dreary life with an idiotic husband whom she certainly does not love. Lydia's love for the undeserving Wickham will last 'a little longer' than his for her, but their life together is a perpetual financial crisis. And yet, this is generally thought of as a novel with a happy ending! This is because we are persuaded by the narrative to think that Lizzie and Darcy (and, to a lesser extent, Jane and Bingley) are the people who matter. We know that fairly bad things happen to other people in the text – just as we know that far worse things happen, all of the time, to people outside the text – but we recognise that the main focus of this novel is on the ways in which things can sometimes go right for some people. There are conflicts along the way, but things turn out well in the end – for the characters upon whom we have been asked to concentrate. In that sense, the plot of this novel is both romantic and comic. That does not necessarily mean that it makes us laugh (although it may do), but rather that it tends to a positive and happy resolution – at least for somebody. Other types of plot also show conflicts along the way, but the general trajectory is the reverse: from a fairly good state to a much worse one. This gives us an unhappy ending, or – when the end result involves the destruction of one or more characters whom we have been persuaded to value – a tragic plot. An example of this would be *Things Fall Apart*, in which the magnificent strength and potential of Okonkwo, so clearly stated in the very first paragraph, comes to be frustrated and eventually destroyed.

This sense of the plot as having a strong overall tendency, for good or ill, is complicated in many fictional narratives by other 'secondary' voices, those of less focalised or favoured characters who may nevertheless get a chance, now and then, to speak for themselves. This book is not a systematic guide to critical terms (as you may have noticed): its aim, rather, is to persuade you that there are things going on in literature that may require a technical description, which you can then gradually learn to apply. But what we are talking about here is what you may see referred to as the 'polyvocality' or 'heteroglossia' (meaning 'different tongues') of the fictional narrative, especially the novel. These terms

come from narrative theory (especially the work of the Russian critic, Mikhail Bakhtin), but, of course, they describe something that authors have put into practice for centuries, without necessarily having a special word for it. When, for example, Charlotte Lucas challenges her friend Elizabeth with the question, 'Do you think it incredible that Mr. Collins should be able to procure any woman's good opinion, because he was not so happy as to succeed with you?', she effectively challenges the whole idea that the central figure – the heroine – is the one who matters, and even the idea that real life has a 'centre', and single plot, of that sort. Charlotte goes on: 'I am not romantic you know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins's character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair, as most people can boast on entering the marriage state.' This reminds us that there are other voices, and other ways of seeing, momentarily de-focalising Elizabeth and exposing the contingent nature of what we could call the novel's 'fairytale' ending. It shifts attention from individuals to the social structures that determine the life chances of 'most people'.

In fact, much of the point (and comedy) of Austen's fiction is about the relations between the individual and the group: consider also how Elizabeth and Darcy's impressions of one another are influenced by what they see of each other's behaviour towards third parties, such as Jane, Bingley, Darcy's sister, or Wickham. Similar points can be made about many other narrative fictions that seem, at first glance, to be solely interested in one or two people. Dr Jekyll, as I hinted above, is interestingly juxtaposed, not just with Mr Hyde, but also with Dr Lanyon, Mr Utterson and other characters in Stevenson's text. Okonkwo, in *Things Fall Apart*, is exceptionally prominent in his own community, and in the plot of the novel, but we gradually come to understand him in terms of the ways in which he conforms to social expectations (or fails to), and how he compares with the relatively 'minor' characters who surround him, be they family members, such as his father, his daughter, and his biological and adopted sons, or men who hold comparable positions of authority in the village, or colonial incomers.

So, when it seems to you that a narrative has a happy ending, or an unhappy one, ask yourself: for whom? How do things work out for the central characters? What makes them central in the first place? Are there other voices with different stories to tell? Is the text actually about individuals at all, or is it more about relationships: between major characters and minor ones, between characters and society, or, for that matter, between the narrator and the reader?

Plot, society, and you

What, ultimately, drives our desire for plot? There have been many answers to this question. Seeing shape and meaning in an otherwise random sequence of events can give a sense of security, a sense that we are getting somewhere. In that way, literary narrative can be seen as being about desire. Our desires are vicariously fulfilled through Elizabeth and Darcy, for example. Or, conversely, we may be warned against self-destructive desires, and consoled for our own

relative non-achievement, when we see what happens to Okonkwo, Dr Jekyll. or Macbeth. Everybody needs some kind of personal narrative structure, or personal plot, to give themselves a sense of identity and purpose. When somebody messes up, we sometimes say that they have 'lost the plot'.

Something similar goes for communities and institutions. National histories, for example, are plots constructed, highly selectively, from the data of the past: explaining how a nation came to be so wonderful, or perhaps excusing its gradual decline. Different social systems favour one kind of literary narrative over another. A novel of courtship and marriage, for example, like *Pride and Prejudice*, does not just indulge its hero and heroine, and provide wish-fulfilment for the individual readers, but also helps prop up a particular social ideology in which marriage is the fundamental structural principle – a lesson that is enhanced by the perceived objective authority of a third-person narrator. Meanwhile, in the business world, there has been much talk, in recent years, of the importance of 'storytelling', through which a company may construct an identity more attractive than its competitors', or may offer persuasive narratives of how its products will enhance consumers' lives. Advertising executives, like novelists, know what they are doing here: tapping into a need for significant narration. For most of us, life as a whole expresses some kind of narrative order, be it divine will, fate, or natural selection. Literary fiction, therefore, is not just a peculiar phenomenon, invented by chance. Nor is it mere entertainment. On the contrary, it seems to be the inevitable expression of real, immensely powerful – and perhaps universal – human needs and desires, to be understood in both individual and collective terms.

7 Plays and films

Many of the issues and concepts already discussed in this book in relation to poetry and prose fiction are also relevant to plays and films. The great majority of plays, after all, are full of words. The same applies to most films (although often to a lesser extent). We may call the people who choose and arrange these words 'playwrights' or 'screenwriters'; they may be more likely to write collaboratively than poets and novelists; but they still function as literary authors in most respects. The things that they do with words, on the page – before those words come to be performed or embodied by actors – embrace most of the aspects of literature that we have already looked at, such as metaphor and irony (as we have seen with *Macbeth*), character, plot (for which drama and dramatic theory provide the principal origins within the literary tradition), and even structural divisions, such as acts, scenes and shots, which in some respects can be analogous to textual divisions such as chapters, paragraphs and stanzas.

Drama and the dramatic

Plays are often referred to as 'theatre' and films as 'cinema'. This is a little odd, if you think about it. (What would we call novels and poems if we went about it in the same way? 'Library'?) But, of course, these are forms that can be said to fulfil themselves, or become complete, in most cases, in a specific location, a kind of building for which they are designed: the theatre or the cinema (or 'movie theatre'). This is always worth remembering when we *read* plays, and also when we *see* plays in a different kind of theatre from the one for which they were originally written, and even when we see *films* at home, on a small screen.

Plays and films, as well as intermediate genres such as plays written for television, are frequently categorised together as forms of 'drama': literary or artistic works that are realised through performance or acting. This distinguishes them from literary genres that are designed for reading, but it also points to some overlap. The 'dramatic' can be an element in almost all kinds of literature, including prose fiction and poetry. The 'dramatic monologue', for example, is a poem that includes both lyric and narrative aspects: lyric insofar as it is constructed as first-person expression; narrative insofar as the speaker tells a story, typically about his/her interactions with others. These others do not have a

voice in the poem (that is why it is a monologue), but a dramatic relationship is conjured up in which the speaker acts a role, as it were, and suggests the kinds of interaction that have been going on between him/her and these silent others. It is like a play, in other words, in which only one character stands there before us, and we have to read between the lines to figure out what the other characters might have said and done. This form lends itself especially well to the depiction of a sinister or manipulative speaker, who may even turn out to have done something nasty to the other voiceless characters – the classic case being Robert Browning's poem 'My Last Duchess' (1842).

Conversely, there are plays with an extensive dramatis personae and multiple 'speaking parts' – that is, multiple characters who make speeches or engage in dialogue – but which were never actually intended to be voiced by actors on a stage. Famous 'closet dramas' of this kind include John Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (1671). Some readers and scholars may think that other plays that *were* designed for the stage are actually better when read, while others may claim that merely to read the text of a stage play (or, perhaps more obviously, the script of a film) is as much a reduction of the value and power of that work as merely reading a description of a painting. This controversy, like many others, has raged most fiercely in Shakespeare studies. Fortunately, it is often possible to both read a play and see it.

The great majority of dramatic works, these days, are written in prose. At earlier points in history, plays have been primarily a poetic genre. Shakespeare, for example, and many other early modern writers, used the iambic pentameter as the basic structural unit for theatrical works, just as they did for sonnets. A few notable plays in verse have been written in recent years – Tony Harrison (b. 1937), who has also written film and television scripts in verse, is the major figure here – and verse survives in theatrical genres that are based on song: musical theatre and opera. We have to draw the line somewhere, and I will not be saying anything more about opera in this chapter, but it is worth noting that a potential overlapping of different literary genres – and even different arts – is the norm, rather than the exception. It can sometimes be helpful to adjust literary terms so that they describe aspects of texts, therefore, rather than designating mutually exclusive boxes into which those texts should be placed. This can help us recognise the presence of 'poetic' features in prose texts, for example, 'narrative' elements in lyric poems, and 'dramatic' elements in texts that we would not categorise as 'drama'.

Dialogue, diegesis and description

Plays and films do mark themselves out from other kinds of literature by emphasising the dramatic, and, in most cases, by calling for the dramatic potential in the text to be realised in performance. Most novels contain plenty of dialogue, but only rarely does dialogue make up the whole of a novel (if it did, we would be looking at a novel that was also a type of closet drama). In prose fiction, some of the information that the reader needs in order to

apprehend the plot is expressed through dialogue, while the rest is usually conveyed through narration that we are not to imagine as being spoken aloud, and the source of which may not be named (an anonymous and perhaps 'impersonal' narrator). In most plays, much more of the plot has to be conveyed through dialogue. This can be particularly obvious where the plot requires information about parts of the underlying story that occurred before the action of the play: so that one character has to narrate past events to another onstage for the benefit of the audience. This can be tricky if the playwright wants to sustain a sense of realism: people do not normally think of the informational needs of a third person, or audience, when they converse with one another.

When the playwright decides *not* to put background information into the dialogue this can also have interesting effects. Thus, Shakespeare could have found some way of answering the famous question 'How many children had Lady Macbeth?' by slipping a credible and unambiguous reference to the junior members of the family (or to their non-existence) into a dialogue between Lady Macbeth and her husband – but he had better things to do, being more concerned with symbolism and ideas than with offering a comprehensive portrayal of the home life of mediaeval Scottish nobility. Perhaps Shakespeare thought that doubt about whether the Macbeths had children would actually enhance other aspects of the play (for instance, the relationship between the Macbeths and the Macduffs). In that sense, he was turning a potential weakness of dramatic literature – that everything has to be put into speech – into a strength.

Tennessee Williams, on the other hand, in what is in most respects a highly realistic play, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (first performed in 1947), decides to tell his audience a great deal about events that pre-date the action, and accomplishes this diegetic (story-telling) work very effectively by having his protagonist Blanche Dubois turn up unexpectedly, at the beginning of the play, at the home of her sister Stella, after which she meets Stella's husband and various other characters for the first time in her life. Naturally, the sisters are eager for news from one another, and the other characters need to introduce themselves – and be introduced – to the newcomer. This they do in the usual way (usual, that is, in life, not just in art): by talking – through dialogue.

Many plays, especially fairly recent ones, exist as written texts that include passages that are not part of the dialogue: stage directions. In the case of early modern drama, the stage directions are usually quite minimal, and we rarely have any way of attributing them with certainty to the author. Shakespeare's plays were written for performance, and were not printed until after his death. All manner of stage directions and production notes, by Shakespeare himself or his collaborators in the theatre, may once have existed in written form, or they may just have been passed on orally within theatrical companies. On the other hand, there may not have been much need for elaborate stage directions, insofar as the early modern stage was generally much barer than we are used to these days. There was not much in the way of props, scenery or lighting, the appearance, placement and use of which would need to be described: there was not much, in other words, apart from the dialogue and what the actors could

make of it. In more recent theatre, on the other hand, considerably more of the informational content of the play may be conveyed onstage by non-verbal means, and many playwrights seek to determine (or at least influence) how this will be done, through writing. The opening scene of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, for example, takes place in surroundings that are described both poetically (in the sense of evocatively, with heightened language) and with precision:

> It is first dark of an evening early in May. The sky that shows around the dim white building is a peculiarly tender blue, almost a turquoise, which invests the scene with a kind of lyricism and gracefully attenuates the atmosphere of decay. You can almost feel the warm breath of the brown river beyond the river warehouses with their faint redolences of bananas and coffee.

These are not words that the audience of the play, in the theatre, can see or hear. They are only there for someone who reads the text of the play, or for the director, designer, lighting designer, and other members of the theatrical team who have to provide visual, aural and perhaps even olfactory realisations of this text on the stage. Williams, it seems, was counting on having his play read as well as seen. The passage above provides directions, but it is also a piece of literary writing that might not be out of place in a novel or short story. Comparable passages occur in many film scripts, but with less expectation that the text will be read by anyone who is not actually involved in the production, and with even more responsibility given to the director, cinematographer, composer, sound engineer and the rest of the team to convert written material into something else – so that the writer's literary powers are directed both straight at the audience, through dialogue (and sometimes in the form of a voice-over), and at a large group of artistic collaborators, who are influenced, by literary means, in the way that the complete multimedia package of the film is realised.

Metatheatre

Just like writing a novel, putting together a play or film is a funny thing to do, not least because it involves fiction, as well as (more obviously than a novel) illusion and disguise. Writers of plays and films are often conscious of this, and introduce elements of metatheatre (or metadrama) into their work. A famous example occurs towards the end of *Macbeth*, just after the hero has received news of the death of his wife:

MACBETH She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word.
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

It would be one thing for 'the man in the street' to talk about life as a 'poor player'; it is something else for a man on a stage to say this. It is as though Macbeth is suddenly aware that he is in a theatre, not a castle, and selects his metaphor accordingly. In other words, Shakespeare takes the risk of puncturing the illusion that what we see in the play is real. Not only that, but he risks having the audience who are watching Macbeth, the character, wonder whether he is being *poorly* played, and even whether the plot should have been differently arranged: 'She should have died hereafter'. The play is likely to be repeated – 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow' – but perhaps not, if the audience indeed decides that it is 'a tale / Told by an idiot'! Risky indeed, but this is also a moment full of opportunity. The actor can play this in such a way that he makes us think: no, this is not a poor player that we are seeing; this is a great one. At the same time, the play as a whole is put on the spot, and has the opportunity triumphantly to refute its protagonist's nihilism: no, Macbeth may have joined the living dead, but we can see that this playwright, and these actors, have turned horror into art, carnage into creativity. And that is arguably what tragedy is all about: showing, despite the onstage destruction of dreams and lives, that existence can be made to have a point.

Not only that, but Shakespeare's character's actor's reference, onstage, to the 'poor player' can make us wonder about other ways in which the play is about acting, or keeping up appearances: acting the part of the king in a society for which the ritual of monarchy is a kind of political theatre, or where, in Lady Macbeth's words, one should 'Look like th'innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't.' Seen in this way, this play (and many others) could be regarded as being an insular or self-obsessed piece of work by a playwright (who was also an actor) who sees the whole world in theatrical terms. Or we could turn that judgement on its head, and say that one thing that this play reveals – and that may be part of the reason for the popularity and centrality of theatre in many cultures – is that real life is indeed full of performance, and that we all really are, at least some of the time, engaged in acting.

For a more recent example of metatheatre, think about the central element in the plot of *A Streetcar Named Desire* that involves the protagonist's persona being seen through – at least from the hostile point of view of her brother-in-law, Stanley – as a false one, in the sense that she has been putting on an act that for a while entranced sections of her onstage audience (especially Stanley's friend Mitch), but now seems tawdrily theatrical:

STANLEY I've been on to you from the start! Not once did you pull any wool over this boy's eyes! You come in here and sprinkle the place with powder and spray perfume and cover the light-bulb with a paper lantern, and lo and behold the place has turned into Egypt and you are the Queen of the Nile! Sitting on your throne and swilling down my liquor! I say – *Ha! – Ha!* Do you hear me? *Ha – ha – ha!*

The allusion, here, to one of the most famous theatrical roles for women, that of Cleopatra (especially in a play by Shakespeare), is perhaps a little surprising, channelled through Stanley, but it is surely not accidental. Blanche does what anybody does, *acting* in the sense of performing in a certain way to make a certain impression on the people around her, and in order to sustain a certain idea, for her own sake, of who she is. (In this sense performance is like storytelling, and theatre is like other kinds of literary fiction.) More than that, she embodies and confirms, in Stanley's eyes, an idea of women in particular as theatrical creatures who put on a face (metaphorically and sometimes literally, with makeup): a face that entices (like the bright lights of the stage) but hides a dangerous reality.

Similar processes are at work, not onstage but onscreen, in Alfred Hitchcock's film *Vertigo* (1958). Here the central male character, Scotty, becomes obsessed by the woman whom he has been hired (as an ex-police detective) to tail, discovers that she is impossibly somehow identical with another woman, long since dead, and then that she is not at all the woman whom he originally thought she was, but rather an *actress* (amateur but extremely convincing) who has been manipulated into playing a part, for criminal purposes. Once again, the text (in this case, a composite of words, sounds and visual images) is apparently *about* its own internal processes, but also points out the presence of the theatrical and literary as dimensions of real life. Metatheatre and metafiction always cut both ways.

Real people and the uncanny

There has been a good deal already in this book about the structural interactions between different persons involved in a literary experience or event: characters, narrators, authors and readers. When we move from the text on the page to a specific performance based on that text – on the stage or screen – we are suddenly confronted with a different category of person. We are not just aware of persons represented within the text, and of its author and ourselves (as readers / viewers), but also of a new category of mediators: the performers. We may feel that we should try to ignore them, trying to believe, for example, that this is Macbeth that we see before us, not the same actor whom we saw in a romantic comedy just the other day. But this is easier said than done. When we see a known actor performing a role that is already known to us from other performances, or from a written text, do we look for a new way of understanding what can be made of the fictional person in question or do we look for the display of a new set of possibilities that the real person, the actor, can find in

him- or herself? The more experienced and sophisticated we are as theatre- or film-goers the more likely it is, surely, that the answer will be both.

Scotty, in *Vertigo*, is played by James Stewart, one of the biggest Hollywood stars of the twentieth century. Hitchcock famously cast him 'against type': making a man whose screen presence was usually both genial and heroic (and who was a war hero in real life) into a character who is both a profoundly troubled victim and a perverse manipulator. The whole point of casting against type is that the audience sees something that they did not expect – which depends on them remembering some of the other roles that this actor has played. In that sense, the actor (whether on screen or stage) often functions as a kind of palimpsest, a text consisting of multiple superimposed layers – Jimmy Stewart in several previous Hitchcock films, but also in *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), *Winchester 73* (1950), *The Spirit of St Louis* (1957), and so on – none of which quite obscures those that went before.

Stewart plays along with all of this in *Vertigo*, being the man that people expect him to be, some of the time, and then again quite a different kind of man, and somehow making it believable that one person could contain these contradictions. Kim Novak rises equally well to the challenge of acting a woman who is acting, and then acting the same woman who has tried to stop acting, but finds that the man that she had previously duped, Scotty, now wants her to start acting again.

Situations such as these, where a thing or person is somehow two different entities at once – half familiar and half strange – can be said to be versions of the uncanny, a set of feelings to which the cinema, with its vast powers of visual illusion and its placement of real people (the actors) in fictional roles, lends itself particularly readily, but which is also a much more general dimension of art and literature. The concept of the uncanny is best known from a 1919 essay of that title by Sigmund Freud, in which it is given a specifically psychoanalytic formulation. In Freud, the uncanny involves the appearance of a person, object or situation that we want to disown, that we want to say has nothing to do with us, and yet there is something intangibly familiar about it, because it expresses sides of ourselves that we have repressed. In other words the uncanny is a logical consequence of the central idea in Freudian theory (one that has influenced literary and cultural studies enormously): that we have an unconscious mind that influences us in ways that are, by definition, beyond our awareness. Thus Scotty, within the fictional world of *Vertigo*, might say, 'Haven't I seen this woman before? She must be different, and yet she is the same', and find himself driven, despite himself, for reasons that he cannot and does not want to understand, to force the 'new' woman to repeat actions that he desperately fears. Or viewers of the film might say, 'Haven't we seen this actor before? This isn't what he used to be like!' but perhaps find themselves disturbingly satisfied or satisfyingly disturbed by the revelation that, yes, there was something dark and threatening behind Jimmy Stewart's uprightness, diffidence and charm, all along – and yet, no, we don't really want to know that! It's producing feelings of … vertigo. Back in the unconscious with it!

The uncanny is one of those terms that can seem not just to name a feature of some texts, but rather to be constitutive, on some level, of most if not all of literature. In this respect it is comparable to metaphor and irony – all three of them having something to do with 'the thing which *is not*' but which nevertheless has meaning and significance. All of them are related to the paradox that literature is about the real world and yet also somehow differs from, substitutes for, and even competes with the real world.

Literary representations that we might now call uncanny predate Freud (and film) by centuries. Take, for example, Macbeth and Banquo's first encounter with the witches:

BANQUO What are these,
So wither'd and so wild in their attire,
That look not like th'inhabitants o'th'earth,
And yet are on't? Live you? or are you aught
That man may question? You seem to understand me,
By each at once her choppy finger laying
Upon her skinny lips: you should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so.
MACBETH Speak, if you can: – what are you?

The two warriors are faced here with something both *super*natural and *un*natural. They cannot immediately decide whether these are mortal creatures or something else, or whether they are male or female. The messages that the witches communicate, later in the scene, seem like lies or fantasies, and yet Macbeth, in particular, responds to them, soon finding himself acting out desires that he can barely acknowledge and that are against his rational understanding. The text, in that sense, speaks to the idea that we are divided, and driven by unconscious motivations, so that we are liable to be shocked and disturbed by signs in the world around us that point to what we did not know that we wanted, as though we have somehow been anticipated or seen through.

Performance and gender

The question of the witches' gender is particularly pertinent here, and takes us back to the historical reality of the theatre. Macbeth and Banquo wonder whether the witches are men or women. On the Jacobean stage, when this play was originally produced, the witches would have been acted by males – as would all of the other roles, including that of Lady Macbeth herself. Shakespeare exploits this fact in many ways (for instance in *Twelfth Night*, where a boy actor would have been required, rather mind-bogglingly, to play a woman who disguises herself as a young man). The usurpation of stereotypically male behaviour by females – such as Lady Macbeth – is a frequent symptom of an upset world in Shakespeare's tragedies, as is apparently 'womanish' behaviour

by men. Perhaps the most provocative dimension that the theatre's (and cinema's) constant and inevitable use of role-playing and pretence can involve is gender switching – especially when it uncannily suggests 'feminine' aspects in men (real ones, not just on the stage) that 'masculinity' seeks to repress, and 'masculine' aspects in women that are repressed by 'femininity'. Another word for 'uncanny' would, in this respect, be 'queer', and 'queer theory' is another whole sub-discipline of literary and cultural studies that sees gender-performance and other kinds of role-playing, so often foregrounded in dramatic literature, as profoundly connected with the ways in which real-life identities are set up, so that analysing these aspects of texts can lead to a 'transgressive' rethinking of social norms that may previously have been taken as 'natural'.

Women were excluded, as actors, from the early modern stage in the context of an obviously biased conception of gender roles, full of buried contradictions. It was acceptable for men to impersonate women onstage in texts that supposedly upheld masculine values. If women appeared onstage, however, they were effectively prostituting themselves. We can see echoes of this dynamic in many more recent plays and films, including those already discussed in this chapter. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stanley, a hyper-masculine character with a generally submissive, even self-martyring, wife, despises his sister-in-law Blanche, as we have seen, for her 'acting' – not least because it seems, from his perspective, to go along with a quasi-masculine assumption of authority and sexual aggressiveness. His reaction is to destroy her reputation and to punish her sexually – through rape. One kind of acting, involving a female character (and actress) stepping beyond some of her society's norms and questioning (or queering) their validity is apparently defeated in this play by another kind of ritual, another way of playing or performing social rules, powerfully symbolised by the poker-game (all male, just like Shakespeare's stage), to which Stanley returns at the end.

Similarly, the plot of *Vertigo* can been seen to involve destroying female presumptions of independence once, and then – because that involves trying to repress something that is ultimately much more real and powerful than the prevailing social norms, so that it uncannily returns – having to destroy it once again. But Hitchcock's development of this familiar basic narrative is arguably an even more radically progressive one than Williams's, insofar as the masculine controlling force is finally left a mere shell of its former self – as though we are being shown that feminine and masculine identities and performances are inextricably bound up together, like 'two spent swimmers', as Shakespeare might have said, 'that do cling together / And choke their art'.

Narration and point of view

Shakespeare's plays tend to contain significant patterns of imagery. Thus, in *Macbeth*, as we have seen, images concerning birds appear repeatedly – especially in relation to the Macduffs. Different characters use these images in ways that reinforce one another, even though they have obviously not had the opportunity to confer and plan what they will say. In some instances, this may suggest a

spiritual or 'telepathic' affinity, but we could also say that it shows that the play, despite being entirely divided into speeches uttered by separate, vividly realised characters, has a kind of collective 'voice' as well. The play walks a very fine line between letting the characters realistically but anarchically go their own ways and managing them so as to present a unified result: not a 'message' exactly but a recognisable pattern of preoccupations and ideas. Other plays, by other authors, also have to negotiate this balance and do so in many different ways. The fact that a play does not have a narrator, in other words, does not mean that it cannot contrive to make statements that are distinct from the individual speeches of the characters.

Film is (with exceptions) a more realistic medium than stage drama, not least because it can use an indefinite number of real locations rather than having to imitate them onstage. Utterances that sound inauthentic, highly stylised, or too good to be true may consequently be more conspicuous in film – they may sound 'stagey'. The kind of patterning of linguistic signs across characters noted above is probably rarer, therefore, in the cinema than the theatre. However, film has other ways of managing the audience's attention that stage drama lacks. When we sit before a stage, there are usually many different people and objects in front of us, to any of which we can direct our attention. If the whole space is well lit (by the sun, for example, in outdoor theatre, or in Shakespeare's Globe and its modern reproductions), we can even look at other members of the audience. By contrast, watching a film is, in some ways, more like reading a book. The sequence of shots, like the sequence of words running from side to side and gradually down the page, directs our attention to one relatively small package of information at a time. This means that the film camera, like the narrator of a written text, functions, to some extent, as one of the 'persons' of the narrative. The reader of a novel may not think about the narrator at all; viewers of a film may forget all about the camera; but both narrator and camera exert a crucial influence by directing the reader's or viewer's attention one way or another, and by doing so in a way that is more or less idiosyncratic – in terms of word-use or cinematographic technique.

Possible variations on the camera-as-person range from a stationary long shot, for example – where the camera is rather like an audience member in a theatre, looking from a fixed position at a stage set, where it is the actors within the frame who provide all of the movement – to a highly mobile camera position that seems to correspond to the movement of a specific character's head, so that we seem to experience the film, literally, through that character's eyes. Frequently, we encounter a fluctuation between these and other possibilities, as, for example, in the case of the long sequence in *Vertigo* where Scotty, in his car, follows Madeleine, in hers, and where the camera switches back and forth between Scotty's gazing face and the object of his gaze (his point of view or 'POV'), while simultaneously tracking the fluid progress of both the gazer and the gazed-upon through San Francisco. One could analyse this sequence in terms of two distinctly different perspectives, expressed by the camerawork: the POV of a character, Scotty, and the scrutiny of an omniscient intelligence

(which we might be tempted to call 'Hitchcock') that has chosen to depict and study Scotty's obsession. Or one could argue that the sequence presents us with what is really one subjectivity, characterised by obsessive voyeurism, expressed through multiple channels: where Scotty's way of looking at Madeleine becomes confused with the camera's way of looking at Madeleine, or at Scotty himself. 'Objective' and 'subjective' camera perspectives can be made to interact with one another, in other words, rather in the way that 'impersonal' narration and the thoughts of individual characters can blend together through free indirect discourse.

Reading and seeing

A sustained analysis of a film is often referred to as a 'reading'. For that matter, we can talk about 'reading' a painting or a building or – even more commonly – a situation or a real person's character. When we read a written text we are usually 'reading' both in a literal sense, and in the metaphorical one suggested by these other applications. We read the words of the text, and we 'read' the events, situations, characters, symbols and other phenomena that are constructed by those words. In the case of a staged text, like *A Streetcar Named Desire*, we are required to make elaborate connections between ideas conveyed through words (which we 'read' as we hear them) and ideas presented to our eyes as non-verbal objects (such as symbolic props – Blanche's lampshade, for example) and sounds (such as the music specified in the stage directions). Considering the similarities and differences between different media helps us to think about what 'reading' consists of – and about how hard to pin down it really is. The processes of reading novels and films, for example, converge in our minds: both words and cinematic images, once we have taken them in through our senses, seem to become something intermediate or hybridised, something that has aspects of both the visual and the verbal. We 'visualise' to some extent the things we read about in a written narrative, while we are liable to convert the things that we have seen in a film into mental text – which we can then 'verbalise' when, for example, we need to tell someone else what happens in the film or what it is 'about'.

In *Vertigo*, Hitchcock sets a scene in an antiquarian bookshop: Scotty goes there, as part of his obsessive attempts to investigate and identify Madeleine, to research obscure information about San Francisco's distant past. The bookseller, it is implied, is the last individual who retains this kind of information. This can be taken both as a celebration of the written word and as a suggestion that Hitchcock's own 'text' may be about to subsume and go beyond everything that the written word once did.

Cinema and transcendence

A basic course in either theatre or film studies would include many topics that this chapter has not touched upon, and many terms that I have not used. This is

a book about literature, and the point of this chapter has been to encourage you to think about what can happen when we discuss plays and films *as* literature: about what changes, for example, when we see a production of Shakespeare instead of reading the text; about what the similarities and differences are between the ways in which the reader's / viewer's attention is managed in written and performed narratives; and about 'literary' techniques and preoccupations, such as verbal irony and the performance of identity, that may be equally prominent in written, staged, and audiovisual media.

I will end by testing the limits of dramatic art as 'literature' a little further, by looking at some of the aspects of *Vertigo* that seem to have more in common, not with writing, but with other visual arts. For this is, amongst many other things, a very *painterly* film. Hitchcock was no doubt being self-conscious about this when he set important scenes, not just in a bookshop, but also in an art gallery. Think again about the use of colour in the film, and the meticulous composition of so many shots. The most painterly moment of all in the film is perhaps the spectacular panoramic tracking shot that follows Scotty and Madeleine as they walk beside a lake: in which Hitchcock even seems to have persuaded the local waterfowl to cooperate in several long seconds of perfect visual harmony and balance. This is the high point of Scotty and Madeleine's fortunes as a couple; things will never be as good for them again. Nature, at this moment, seems to join the elegant actors, the beautiful clothes, and Hitchcock's spotless San Francisco in convinced and reverential support of an idea of fulfilment and happiness. No words are spoken.

The switch from a verbal environment to a purely visual one, at this stage of the film, like the switch from an environment of conflict and suspicion to one of serenity, could be described as transcendence. This might in turn be related to the concept of the sublime, which has gone through various permutations in literary theory, from Classical definitions, through Romanticism, to psycho-analysis, but which always has something to do with the reader or viewer experiencing a shift in level or intensity of experience, so that the world suddenly and momentarily seems bigger: much bigger than the perceiving subject, but nevertheless comprehensible, so that the perceiving subject seems to grow at the same time, beyond his or her normal limits. This is another elusive concept, part literary technique and part natural phenomenon, and it has something in common with the uncanny. The uncanny involves an unsettling half-understood hidden meaning, a partial recognition that what is happening has something to do with us; in the sublime, the moment of transcendence is also to do with a partial revelation of what was previously unseen or not understood. It may be painful (the Classical and Romantic sublime is usually achieved through shock and terror), and it is always haunted by the imminent descent to a more mundane way of seeing and existing. The cinema lends itself readily to the sublime (as to the uncanny) through the possibility of sudden and arresting changes of frame-content and shot distance, changes that may be underscored by emotive narrative content and the subliminal effects of a musical score. All of this is going on in the scene by the lake – overlaid, perhaps, by the viewer's awe at Hitchcock's

audacity and technical skill. There are, as I say, no words in the shot, but it would not have anything like the effect that it has were it not for its position in the larger structure of the film. This non-verbal interlude is a stepping out of time (in that sense it is more than an interlude), which matters precisely because the characters in the scene have emerged from, and will return to, a world of fraught, manipulative dialogue and tortuous textual narrative. The fact that the film is painterly for a moment, in other words, does not stop it being literary. Even the temporary absence of words can be assimilated to those aspects of the film that make it resemble a novel or epic poem.

This page intentionally left blank

Part III

Periods and movements

This page intentionally left blank

8 Medieval and early modern

Does it matter when and where a literary text was written? Let's try a thought experiment. Imagine that there is one less surviving play by Shakespeare, because it never occurred to him to write *Macbeth*. Imagine now that another playwright writes *Macbeth* – exactly the play that we know, word for word – in the twenty-first century. How would people read the play? How would it be rated?

It would surely be viewed as a feat. There would be no doubt that the writer had prodigious literary talent and incredible insight into human behaviour. But it would be seen as a pastiche. We would find it very odd that it had been written as if from a beginning-of-the-seventeenth-century point of view, in old-fashioned language. We tend to think that the real *Macbeth* is still relevant to us; that Shakespeare is, in some respects, 'our contemporary'. But we would feel that this belated pseudo-Shakespeare was strangely anachronistic. If the 'new' *Macbeth* managed to attract scholarly interest (which is not certain), and came to be discussed and annotated, the commentary would be very different from what we now find in editions of Shakespeare. It might have to be more extensive! When analysing a literary work we normally think about what it says about the period in which it was written, and perhaps also about the period in which it is set (a semi-mythical one in the case of *Macbeth*); analysing the pastiche *Macbeth*, we would have to consider what it seemed to say about the period in which it was set and the period in which it was written, but also the period in which it *pretended* to have been written! For Shakespeare to have ignored the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries was natural enough: they had not happened. For our hypothetical author to have ignored them, when they *had* happened, is entirely different. The specific point in history at which we know that a text was written will almost always play a part in our assessment of its meanings and its value.

When we look back over literary history, and history in general, we try to see some structure in it. We see signs of development that help to explain how, for example, Shakespeare's world eventually turned into ours. We come up with historical explanations for why writers in Shakespeare's time typically had certain preoccupations while writers in our own time typically have others; and why certain modes of expression and literary genres have flourished at one time

rather than another. This development seems, to some extent, to take place *through* literature (and through culture more generally): writers, in describing and commenting on the world of their own time, help it to change. Thus it often seems appropriate to characterise a period in socio-political history in literary or cultural terms (for example, 'the age of Romanticism' or 'the postmodern era'), or a literary period in socio-political ones (such as 'the Enlightenment' or 'the Victorian period').

We have already looked at the issue of the canon: the mechanism by which we select certain writers as the significant figures in a tradition, and thereby give shape to the literary past. Literary history as a whole works in a rather similar way. When we characterise a particular moment in literary history we pick on certain ideas and techniques that we find in specific writers, rather than others. Just as the canon is selective and subject to change, so is our view of what was fundamental or characteristic about, say, the mid-seventeenth century. We have to create patterns and structures, otherwise we would not be able to talk coherently about the past at all. But they will never be the only patterns that could have been created.

One literary / historical period does not usually stop neatly when another one begins. We can see some acknowledgement of this fact if we look, for example, at the *Oxford English Literary History*, a prestigious series begun by Oxford University Press in 2002. There are a few cases where the Oxford editors seem to have decided that the world – for English literature – changed overnight, or at least in one year: thus, Vol. 3, *The Elizabethans,* ends its coverage with the death of the larger-than-life Elizabeth herself, in 1603, and Vol. 4, *Literary Cultures of the Early Seventeenth Century*, begins immediately afterwards, in the same year. But if we look at Vol. 8, *The Victorians*, a queen again lends her name to the period, but the dates are neither those of her reign (1837–1901) nor of her life (1819–1901), but rather 1830–1880, and the volume overlaps with two others, and thus with two other organisational models that we impose on the messy reality of literary history: Vol. 7, *The Romantic Period* (1785–1832) and Vol. 9, *From 'Victorian' to 'Edwardian'* (1875–1914). What we are going to look at now is how these more or less sharp or fuzzy boundaries are typically drawn, and what we typically expect to find in the chronological spaces, the 'periods', that such boundaries partly recognise and partly invent.

Some literary periods enjoy much more prominence than others, both among scholars and for the wider reading public. Almost everyone doing a degree in English Literature, for example, will be introduced to the Renaissance (although perhaps only through Shakespeare), Romanticism and modernism. But they may have a much more sketchy idea of what happened in the years between the Renaissance and Romanticism, for example, and they may not read anything pre-Renaissance at all. Reading widely takes a lot of time. But even if it is specifically, say, Romantic literature that appeals to you, there is a lot to be said for seeing it in a longer perspective: Romantic writers themselves certainly did!

England: Medieval literature (450–1500)

'Medieval' (or 'mediaeval') means, literally, 'of the Middle Age(s)'. But in the middle of what? The grand narrative of Western civilisation that has been dominant in 'modern' times suggests that there was a period of great development and achievement associated with the Ancient Greeks and Romans: the so-called Classical period, which ended with the collapse of the Western Roman Empire towards the end of the fifth century CE. There was another period of great development and accomplishment about a thousand years later: the Renaissance (meaning 'rebirth'; in other words, the reappearance of the potential that had been there in Classical times, or a kind of amazing second chance for collective humanity). In between, things were not so bright. In fact, these were the 'Dark Ages', or at least the 'Middle Ages': centuries popularly defined by little other than that they had the misfortune to be placed after one great age and before another one. Some people draw a boundary at about the year 1100, and call the six centuries before that date the 'Dark Ages' and the four centuries after it the 'Middle Ages'; others (like me) use 'Middle Ages'/'Medieval period' to characterise the entire post-Classical pre-Renaissance stretch. Needless to say, the reality was much more complicated than that. But this is essentially what these familiar terms mean, and the view of history that they promote.

In the specific context of English literature, it is in fact customary to split the Middle Ages into two sub-periods, roughly corresponding to some people's division between 'Dark Ages' and 'Middle Ages'. But a different terminology is used: 'Old English' and 'Middle English'. It comes as a relief that this way of dividing up the many centuries in question has a rather robust, objective logic to it, based on the development of the English language.

'Old English' denotes the period of the earliest texts in any recognisable form of English. This 'English' was spoken (in various dialects) by the Anglo-Saxons who invaded Celtic Britain, with various other Germanic tribes, around 450 CE. In fact, Old English literature used to be more commonly referred to as 'Anglo-Saxon' literature, and sometimes still is. 'Middle English', on the other hand, denotes a distinctly different phase in political, social and linguistic history, when Anglo-Saxon culture had largely been displaced by a series of events, notably the Norman invasion of England in the eleventh century, which introduced new ways of doing things and, most importantly, transformed the language.

The first *written* Old English dates from the seventh century, following the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity; before that, there was an oral tradition whose vestiges survive in later written texts. We still use many Anglo-Saxon / Old English words, albeit usually in slightly changed form, but we also use thousands of words of Romance origin, which first entered the language with the Normans. If we take the first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* as our example once again, a word from the former category would be 'truth', from the Old English *tríewþ*, *tréowþ* or *trýwþ*, first recorded, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in ca. 893, while an example of the latter category would be 'universally', formed from the adjective 'universal', which derives

from the Anglo-Norman *universell*, *universal* or *universel*, for which the first date in *OED* is, as luck would have it, exactly five hundred years later: 1393! That is to say, both of these words that Jane Austen took for granted (as we still do) were available to Middle English speakers, but only one of them to people whose only language was Old English. In that sense, 'Middle English' was clearly a step forward from 'Old English' towards the English that we speak today: which is new, late, or, as we usually say, 'modern' English.

The oldest commonly read literary work in English is *Beowulf*, a heroic narrative poem consisting of slightly more than 3,000 lines, generally regarded as the major text among the small surviving corpus of Old English / Anglo-Saxon poetry (only about 10,000 lines in all). As well as being the oldest it is also in a sense one of the *newest* texts that people read, insofar as the great majority read it in modern translation. Old English is indeed a form of English, but so different from ours that most of us, without some warning, would probably fail to recognise it as such. This is how the poem begins:

> Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum,
> þeodcyninga, þrym gefrunon,
> hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.

'Hwæt'? What!? Or rather, 'So'! Seamus Heaney, whose verse translation of *Beowulf* from the year 1999 was a best-seller, begins like this:

> So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by
> and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.
> We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.

Just one word is unchanged: 'in'! When we begin to know what we are looking for, we can perhaps see how 'geardagum' could be related to 'days gone by' ('ge-' was pronounced 'ye-'; think of 'days of yore', rearranged as 'yore-days'). In fact, speakers of other present-day Germanic languages may have better luck than Anglophones: Germans, for example, may detect *Köning* (king) in the second half of 'þeodcyninga' (both the Old English letters þ and ð are pronounced approximately 'th'), while Danes may see their word *ædel* (noble) in 'æþelingas' (princes), and themselves in the second half of 'Gardena'.

Aside from the challenge of the language, there are other things about Old English literature that may strike modern readers as very strange. Old English poetry sometimes seems repetitious – perhaps because of its origins in an oral tradition, requiring a different kind of attention from written texts. It is not arranged in iambic pentameters or any other familiar modern verse form. There are no rhymes at the end of the lines. Instead, rhythmic patterns are largely achieved through alliteration. And then there is the content: these texts draw us into a turbulent world in which Nordic myth and Christian ideas are at war with one another, or forming strange alliances. In *Beowulf*, for example, we have a tale about the eponymous hero's battles with a series of monsters, most

famously Grendel, who is a nightmare creature who can snatch up and destroy 30 warriors at one go, but who apparently also has a shady Biblical context, as the offspring (in some way; the genealogy is not clear) of the first murderer, Cain. This blending of Christian and pagan ideas is one of the aspects of the literature of the period that scholars emphasise, and that we can see as characteristic. Another would be the emphasis on ritual, royal authority and storytelling (indeed, literature itself) as mechanisms in a dangerous age (if not necessarily a 'dark' one) for holding the violence and chaos that Grendel seems to represent at bay. In other words, we look in these texts for literary devices, themes and symbolic patterns that correspond to what we know about the history of the time. And it is a two-way process: we infer much of what we believe about life in the Old English period from *Beowulf* and other early texts.

The poet James Fenton, in his vigorous *Introduction to English Poetry* (2002), argues that Old English / Anglo-Saxon verse has not really got much to do with the later tradition, and can safely be left out: it is not part of the 'English Poetry' to which most readers need to be introduced. Seamus Heaney, translator of *Beowulf*, took a different view. Heaney is perhaps best known for his own poems of the 1970s about ancient bodies preserved in peat bogs, such as 'The Tollund Man'. In these poems, Heaney looks at these extraordinary objects, which are also people – part sculpture and part corpse – and tries to connect with them, while also stressing their remoteness and unknowability. This seems to be his attitude to chance poetical survivals, the bog bodies of literature (like *Beowulf*, surviving miraculously in a single thousand-year-old manuscript): they are remote and strange, they may be written in a language we barely can recognise as our own, and yet they are part of us, too.

In the introduction to his translation of *Beowulf*, Heaney writes that he undertook the project at a time when he was largely based in the United States. The late-twentieth-century American poetic environment in which he found himself was invigorating, but disconnected, in its postmodern way, from earlier traditions. He felt the need to get back in touch with 'the first stratum' (under the bog, as it were) of the English language. Heaney was Irish, and was acutely conscious that the English he used was, in a sense, an alien language, sometimes even the language of the enemy. A deeply learned man, he also explored and translated texts in languages that represent other heritages, such as Old Irish and Latin. But it is clear that it was the English poetry of predecessors such as Wordsworth or Yeats and contemporaries such as Ted Hughes with which he identified himself most closely, and, for him, this was a tradition that went all the way back to Old English.

Heaney began the last collection of his poems published in his lifetime, *Human Chain* (2010), with this:

> Had I not been awake I would have missed it,
> A wind that rose and whirled until the roof
> Pattered with quick leaves off the sycamore

And got me up, the whole of me a-patter,
Alive and ticking like an electric fence:
Had I not been awake I would have missed it,

It came and went so unexpectedly
And almost it seemed dangerously,
Returning like an animal to the house,

A courier blast that there and then
Lapsed ordinary. But not ever
After. And not now.

I doubt that Heaney would have written this poem if he had not previously translated *Beowulf*. He chose to open his collection with an invocation of spiritual or perhaps supernatural agency, a kind of appeal to the Muse, who here takes the form of a gust of wind – but not an ordinary one – rousing the poet to his duty. This relates to a tradition much older than Old English. But the image of the poet waking, electrified, to the danger of a returning animal, seems to grow directly from the primary image of home in *Beowulf*, which is of the Danish leader's hall, Heorot, where the warriors sleep by their swords, always ready for the sudden nocturnal invasions of a monster – although not usually quite ready enough. One consequence of this reading of Heaney's poem is to make the poet into a warrior, which itself seems true to the Old English 'stratum' to which, along a 'human chain', it reaches back. The major historical figure of Anglo-Saxon times, Alfred the Great (871–99), was both a victorious military commander and a patron of literature (even, like Heaney, a translator); and *Beowulf* and other texts of the period express a time in which the *scop* (pronounced 'shop'; the bard, or reciter of heroic tales) and the swordsman work together, respecting one another's skills, speaking and fighting their world into shape. It is a different world from ours – in the nature and function of 'literature', and in many other ways – but it is not unconnected.

There is no doubt, however, that the majority of modern writers and readers of English feel appreciably more connected to the literary world that developed in the centuries following the Norman invasion of 1066. The earliest significant historical events that have a high profile in later English culture date from this period: events such as the murder of Thomas Becket in 1170; Magna Carta, 1215; the Peasants' Revolt, 1381. These events are all connected with the assertion or limitation of the power of the State. They relate to a historical narrative that locates English identity in a resistance to authoritarianism – which is open both to a conservative interpretation (England has a proud heritage and should stick to its traditional values) and to a radical one (the work of freedom is unfinished and must continue).

It is perhaps partly because some of his work seems to lend itself to the same story of English anti-authoritarianism that Geoffrey Chaucer (ca. 1343–1400), the writer who is generally regarded as England's first great literary figure (We don't know who wrote *Beowulf*!), has enjoyed quite such a high profile in later

centuries. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* present a broad cross-section of medieval society: from a knight to a miller; women and men; fairly wealthy and fairly poor; religious and secular; honest and corrupt; refined and vulgar. And all of these individuals get the opportunity to speak for themselves, at length, as they make their way to Becket's tomb in Canterbury. This is not the entire feudal world, of course. The very poor and the very rich are missing (and would not, after all, be likely to participate in this kind of collective pilgrimage). But enough different classes and types are here to make the point: people of different social levels and vocations are all still people, and can be compared. Rank is all very well, but social status has to be backed up by the story that you tell about yourself.

Chaucer's own storytelling is intricately structured. He places himself as one of the pilgrims – the narrator is 'Chaucer' – while the process of competitive storytelling is coordinated, within the *Tales*, by the 'Host'. Each pilgrim gets to speak about him- or herself, autobiographically, and then narrates a story of his or her choosing. Chaucer exploits these multiple layers: so that, for example, the story that each pilgrim tells has its own intrinsic interest but also reflects on the teller, who is thus both a narrator and a character in a larger narrative.

As modern readers, we too can choose between various levels of reading when we approach Chaucer's text. We can illustrate this with a relatively simple example, in which the Miller, one of the least refined and respectable pilgrims, summons up surprising powers of eloquence to describe one of the main characters in his tale, the young, beautiful and unfaithful carpenter's wife, Alisoun:

Ful brighter was the shining of hir hewe*	*colour / complexion*
Than in the Towr the noble* yforged* newe.	*gold coin*; *minted*
But of hir song, it was as loud and yerne*	*lively*
As any swalwe* sitting on a berne.*	*swallow*; *barn*
Therto she coude skippe and make game*	*play*
As any kide or calf folwing his dame.*	*mother*
Hir mouth was sweete as bragot* or the meeth,*	*honey drinks*
Or hoord of apples laid in hay or heeth,	
Winsing* she was as is a joly colt,	*skittish*
Long as a mast, and upright as a bolt.	
A brooch she bar upon hir lowe coler*	*collar*
As brood as is the boos* of a bokeler;*	*boss*; *shield*
Hir shoes were laced on hir legges hye.	
She was a primerole,* a piggesnye,*	*flowers*
For any lord to leggen* in his bedde,	*lay*
Or yit for any good yeman* to wedde.	*yeoman*

This flower ('a primerole, a piggesnye') turns out to be a more than willing agent in a plot that involves humiliating her kind but foolish husband and mocking religion (in a ludicrous parody of Noah's Flood).

Many medieval narratives are powerfully moralistic, anatomising sin and illustrating its evil consequences. The most sustained example of this is probably the religious allegory *Piers Plowman* by William Langland (ca. 1332–86), but we can see the same principle at work in some of Chaucer's narratives: for instance, in the 'Pardoner's Tale'. Alisoun, however, gets off lightly in *her* tale (unlike her lover Nicholas, whose *tail* is sharply punished), perhaps because the Miller is not a very moral man himself, and is rather besotted with his fictional creation. Thus Chaucer blurs the lines between 'his' characters and his characters' characters.

The basic story in which Alisoun plays her part is a familiar one, with parallels that range from Ancient Roman comedy to modern farce. It is the comedy of misalliance between the old and the young, especially the old husband and the young wife. It is not difficult for a modern reader to recognise this six-centuries-old young woman's erotic capital – kinky boots and all – and to be provoked, enticed or amused by its devastating effects on the small sexual economy of the men that surround her. It is tempting, in other words, to say that this medieval text contains elements of 'universal', 'timeless' human interest. And up to a point, that is fair enough: human beings have not changed much physically since Chaucer's time, and quite a lot of what matters to people – most would probably agree – is physically determined. As long as we continue, as a species, to need to eat, we are going to have some interest in stories about food …

Some would argue that our use of metaphor is also strongly determined by biology (an idea to which we shall return in Chapter 11). Modern readers seem to be able to connect, in any case, with the satirical similes that we find in Chaucerian passages such as this one. For instance, kinds of behaviour that we associate with the farm animals in the passage – the kid, the calf and the colt – still seem to make sense in terms of the lively, irresponsible personality that we recognise in Alisoun. We are even likely to understand the force of the Miller's joke about Alisoun as a newly minted coin: nice and shiny now, but liable to be passed from hand to hand, and doomed to lose her lustre sooner or later.

But then, as we probe deeper in the passage, we begin to uncover elements that seem more culturally specific and that cannot reliably be interpreted, we may feel, without a great deal of background reading in the period, and perhaps not even then. What are we to make, for example, of the fact that one of the animals to which Alisoun is compared, the colt, is normally gendered male? Would this have been irrelevant to a medieval reader (because it is non-gender-specific characteristics of youthful horses that are really at issue), or is there some kind of game going on here in the representation of Alisoun's conformity (or lack of it) to gender roles? And, if so, how does that fit into other aspects of this character, who could be construed as a misogynistic stereotype of the amoral young woman, or, quite to the contrary, as a kind of proto-feminist role-model – allowing the foolish men to confound one another, and thus subverting their patriarchal social order? Almost to the same degree as with Old English literature, most of us confront this text in the strange position of having to judge it in terms of what we know of medieval values and conventions, while

simultaneously learning much of what we know about medieval values and conventions from this very text! This may sound like a rather defeatist message, and in fact there are many other fourteenth-century sources, both literary and non-literary, that can be used to build up a more robust sense of the conditions, expectations and ways of seeing that were characteristic of the period, but it is worth thinking about: where do the assumptions that you make when you read an old text come from? From historical research, from your own imagination, or from the text itself?

One way in which we can ground some of our responses to a text is by looking at its generic qualities: in other words, at those aspects that show it to have a place in specifically *literary* history. The 'Miller's Tale', for example, is an example of the *fabliau*, a genre of verse narrative best known in France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries but later imported to England. Choice of the *fabliau* dictates certain parameters – such as approximate length – and determines the general character of the subject-matter: the comic interactions of relatively humble characters, with a strong element of the ribald and even the obscene. In fact, the *Canterbury Tales*, as a whole, can be seen as a series of experiments in genre: a catalogue of exercises in different literary forms of the day, chosen to complement the catalogue of different social types represented by the pilgrims themselves. *The Canterbury Tales* is thus both an utterly exceptional medieval text (for many readers, a more persuasive 'first masterpiece of English literature' than *Beowulf*) and an exemplary one.

Chaucer is a late-fourteenth-century author – which means that we have skipped over several centuries. The reason for this is that most literature produced in England, ca. 1100–1350, was Anglo-Norman – written in a variety of medieval French, not English at all. French went on being the primary language of the Court in England (while Latin was favoured by the Church) throughout this period, while English – gradually evolving, picking up new French and Scandinavian elements – reverted to a largely oral and non-literary condition. Chaucer is the major figure in the rediscovery of the vernacular that characterised the reign of Richard II (1377–99). In that sense, with Old English largely forgotten, he has often been constructed as the 'father' of English literature.

But Chaucer was not alone. 'Ricardian' literature (from Richard's reign) has other stars. In particular, the chivalric romance, another genre of French origin which appears in the *Canterbury Tales* – appropriately enough, in the 'Knight's Tale' – finds more elaborate expression in other hands, above all in the works of the anonymous author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. 'Romance' is a word that has had very different meanings at different points in literary history. In the medieval context it designates a narrative that traces the progress of a hero (typically a knight) who, bound on a noble quest, undergoes challenges (such as battles with monsters) that allow him to demonstrate his knightly worthiness. This may sound like the core of an earlier epic such as *Beowulf*, but the romance is typically much more individualistic: it is about the knight's own moral and spiritual status (although that may have a more generally symbolic

Christian meaning), rather than his service to a larger community, and it frequently involves courtly love – the knight being sponsored in his quest by a noble lady (hence later, looser applications of the word 'romantic'). The romance, in other words, anticipates the Petrarchan sonnet as a genre in which male adoration of the female tends to suppress female autonomy. This provides a further illuminating context for Chaucerian characters such as Alisoun, showing how a comparison of more than one source from the period can help us get a little closer to what might really have been the norms of medieval culture. A wider study might take into account the first major writings by women authors, which also date from this period: the late-fourteenth-century *Revelations* of Julian of Norwich and the early-fifteenth-century spiritual autobiography of Margery Kempe.

One of the most fundamental facts to remember about the literature that we have discussed up to this point, in terms of its actual presence and influence in the world, is that it was never mechanically reproduced during its authors' lifetimes. The technology did not exist. The process of circulation was limited to oral repetition or, later, laborious copying by hand. Printing was not introduced to England until the second half of the fifteenth century. When, eventually, William Caxton established the first English press, the first major literary work that he printed was the *Canterbury Tales*. But that was in 1477, nearly eighty years after Chaucer's death. Whether a text is written by hand or printed might seem a superficial matter: it need not have any impact on the literary qualities of the work in question. But it does have a huge impact on its availability. The more quickly, numerously and cheaply a text can be reproduced, the more potential it has to contribute to culture and shape ideas. A book printed by Caxton was an expensive object, but soon the numbers of presses and their efficiency increased, and their output was met by a growing readership.

England: The Renaissance / early modern period (1500–1660)

The printing press was one of the things that arguably made the Renaissance possible, insofar as it disseminated texts, information and ideas much more quickly and widely than had previously been the case. Other developments that marked a turning point in European culture around this time included new ways of seeing: quite literally in the case of the discovery of perspective in visual art; more metaphorically in the work of astronomers such as Copernicus (1473–1543) and Galileo (1564–1642), which radically altered at least some people's understanding of the position and status of human beings in the universe. The sense of being alone, whether as an individual or as a species, of having to rethink what matters and how to live, and the desire to explore these questions intellectually and artistically, is what the Renaissance means for many people. This process was facilitated by the 'humanist' rediscovery, by both religious and secular scholars, of Classical texts that had been neglected (especially Greek ones) for many centuries, which added to a great rush of information that in turn stimulated new creative achievements in science, philosophy, medicine, the arts – and, not least, in literature.

We still use the phrase 'Renaissance man' to denote someone who has a wide range of interests and abilities. In fact, we can see a new intellectual breadth and confidence emerging in literature in English at least as far back as Chaucer, whose works contain many references to astronomy and medicine, for example, as well as to religion and Classical literature. We usually categorise Chaucer as a pre-Renaissance writer, which makes sense in terms of English social and political history, but his terms of reference reach far beyond England. The intellectual developments that we associate with the Renaissance were well under way on the Continent long before they became established in the British Isles. Chaucer learned much from Continental authors, especially the Italians, Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, whose work could be seen both as a summing up of medieval knowledge and as a preparation for a new phase in human thought and creativity. The social types and structures that Chaucer represents in the *Canterbury Tales* are medieval in the sense that they are still those that characterised Anglo-Norman society, going back to the eleventh century, and yet what we think of as a more modern sensibility, characterised by scepticism, irony, cosmopolitanism and individualism, is beginning to seep in. Moreover, simply by choosing to write in English, Chaucer opened possibilities for his compatriots to develop a new kind of articulate and self-reflexive culture – possibilities that the coming of print subsequently magnified.

Instead of 'Renaissance', many scholars now use the term 'early modern' to denote post-medieval literature in English. Some of the characteristics of Chaucer's work can certainly be described in these terms. We may well feel that we would have had more in common with him – that he would have been more like 'one of us', and therefore more 'modern' – than the author(s) of *Beowulf*. The fact is that Chaucer, like many exceptional cultural figures, does not fit easily into one box or another. Historically, he is a medieval author. Artistically and intellectually, it would be sensible to speak of medieval aspects of, or elements in, his texts, alongside precociously 'Renaissance' or early modern ones. But this is not just about one man: a literary period always contains the seeds of the period that follows it, otherwise the following period would never come about.

Nevertheless, in historical terms, the Renaissance and/or early modern period in England is usually said to begin well after Chaucer: towards the end of the fifteenth century according to some scholars; almost a century later according to others. A frequently cited turning-point is the Battle of Bosworth in 1485, bringing the death of Richard III and the accession of the Tudors, who would include two of England's most flamboyant and impactful monarchs, Henry VIII (1509–47) and his daughter Elizabeth I (1558–603). Who was sitting on the throne meant infinitely more, in those days, than it does in any twenty-first century monarchy, and this can be seen in the ways in which early modern literature is often divided by sub-periods: we may speak of 'Henrician' literature (Henry VIII), then 'Elizabethan', then 'Jacobean' (James I, 1603–25), then 'Caroline' (Charles I, 1625–49). With the execution of Charles I, in 1649, at the end of the English Civil War, we enter a political and cultural period that is often defined specifically by the lack of a monarch – the Interregnum ('between

reigns'). When Charles II is crowned, in 1660, the new literary period (not just the political one) is the 'Restoration'.

Bosworth marked the end of the long-drawn-out Wars of the Roses, and of a long period of relative stagnation in English cultural life in general and literature specifically, during which the promise of Chaucer and other fourteenth-century authors was not matched. Under the subsequent Tudor regimes, state power and literature were often closely if uncomfortably allied. Thomas More (1478–1535), for example, author of the humanist *Utopia* (in Latin), was a friend of Henry VIII, but eventually paid for his intellectual and moral convictions with his head. Later, the first modern English epic, *The Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser (ca. 1553–99), can be read as allegorical propaganda for Elizabeth I. More generally, literary accomplishment could stand alongside obviously practical skills in areas such as soldiering and diplomacy, as part of the profile of a gentleman and courtier. This is one reason why aggressive wit features strongly in many Renaissance texts: writing, arguing, persuasion and swordsmanship could be seen as cognate abilities, all very much to be desired in a society in which the rewards for success were considerable and the compensation for failure virtually non-existent.

The beginnings of the English Renaissance can also be discussed in terms of the Reformation, the religious movement led in Germany by Martin Luther (1483–1546), which asserted a Protestant freedom – and duty – to read the scriptures for oneself, and to define a personal relationship with God, in defiance of the long-standing Catholic (pope-, priest- and monk-led) order of the medieval past. The early modern period is marked by violent shifts back and forth between Protestant and Catholic allegiances, which are partly to do with genuine conflicts of belief and partly political. When, for example, Henry VIII broke with Rome and established the Church of England in the 1530s, the grounds were partly theological, but it was also because the Catholic Church, which Henry had previous supported against Luther, would not grant him a swift divorce. The consequences for English society and culture were enormous: when Henry went on to 'dissolve' and physically ransack and demolish thousands of (Catholic) monasteries, he effectively eliminated some of the most consequential remaining structures of medieval England. Much was certainly lost in this process (art, architecture, manuscripts, but also some primitive forms of welfare provision), and the Reformation in general is sometimes seen as a terrible set-back for Northern European culture, irrespective of religious belief. On the other hand, the complex and often murderous tensions between Protestants and Catholics can be seen as lending a great deal of dark energy to the work of writers such as Shakespeare and Donne. The prospect of Damnation had been one of the most powerful subjects for medieval literature. Now there were new debates about whether people really would be damned, and, if so, exactly on what grounds. Because of what they believed? Because of how they worshipped? Because of what they did or what they failed to do? At times these debates were prosecuted so cruelly that the question of divine judgement hardly seems relevant anymore: when you

can be disembowelled and burnt for your beliefs, then Hell is already here on Earth.

To us, now, the English Renaissance seems to be dominated by Shakespeare: he is the one writer from the period who is often said to be 'universal' or 'timeless'. But he was also most definitely 'early modern'. If we think again about *Macbeth*: yes, there is a narrative and philosophical core to this play that makes it possible to re-stage it, effectively, in many different temporal and geographical contexts, but it is also an English play about the killing of Scottish kings, first performed in 1606, the year after would-be regicides had staged the Gunpowder Plot, during the reign of James I, the first monarch to unite the realms of Scotland and England. Shakespeare deals with anxieties about political succession, royal ambition and (in)sanity – and also with this particular king's obsession with witchcraft – in incomparably powerful ways. But he was not alone: there were plenty of other representations of political violence, moral crisis and supernatural influence in other plays of the period. However one wishes to define the early modern or the Renaissance, it is a fact that in Shakespeare's time – the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods; the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries – literature in England reached levels of innovation and accomplishment that have never been surpassed, both in the case of individual writers and in terms of collective enterprises, ranging from the King James Bible of 1611 (arguably as important a contribution to English *literature* as the work of Shakespeare himself) to the development of blank verse and the English sonnet.

The English Civil War and Interregnum mark a fundamental break in literary (as well as social and political) history, despite the subsequent restoration of the monarchy. Once England had executed one of its kings, kingship was never quite the same again, and consequently the power structures that characterised much medieval and Renaissance literature were altered, too. Some short-term changes were repressive: notably the closure of the English theatres (as supposedly sinful) under Puritan rule during 1649–60. But the intense political and theological debates that led up to, and ran through, these years, together with the literal cutting off of absolute authority, a decisive shift towards the typically more individualistic Protestant end of the Christian spectrum, and the further extension of print and literacy, began to lead to a much more multifarious and ultimately more free literary culture.

So much for England. But the history of early modern literature in English is not just about England. The accession of James I in 1603 united England and Scotland under one crown. Before that, England had begun its prodigious career as a colonialist nation, subduing Ireland (a process in which Edmund Spenser played an active political role), and competing with other European powers, with great success, for power and profit in more distant parts of the world (with the crucial defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, for example, and the foundation of the East India Company in 1600). We think of the early modern / Renaissance period as a time of exploration, discovery and unprecedented human development. For some – especially in Europe – it was. But exploration and exploitation often went hand in hand. Expanding freedom in some parts of

the world was built upon destruction and enslavement elsewhere, setting patterns that still dominate geopolitics today. 'She is all states, and all princes I', says the speaker in Donne's 'The Sun Rising', in one of this poet's many metaphors that draw on the colonialist ideology of the period. In another of his poems, the mistress is 'my America! my new-found-land'. It was intoxicating, evidently, to be in a position of power in the early modern world, whether as a man in relation to women or as an exploring / discovering / colonising nation in relation to everybody else on the surface of the globe.

9 From Colonial America and Restoration England to 1900

America: Colonial period (1607–1775)

English attempts to establish settlements in North America began in the last two decades of the sixteenth century, mainly in the hope of acquiring riches that could be transported to the homeland. The lasting settlements that followed the voyage of the *Mayflower* in 1620, however, were different: the participants were people who had chosen to leave Europe, above all on religious grounds, and to found (as they saw it) a new world elsewhere. This new world was not supposed to service or supply the old one; it was supposed to improve upon it. And this is the context in which a new literature in English began to evolve.

Seventeenth-century Puritan settlers came to America with visions of renewal and opportunity. As Governor John Winthrop (1588–1649) said to his co-settlers on the way over the Atlantic in 1630 – in the most quoted phrase from this period of American history – their community would be 'as a City upon a Hill': resplendent, with the potential to rise above the old world, but therefore exposed, and liable to be judged on its performance. In a tradition of Puritan sermonising that stretches from Reformation England, through early settlers like the Suffolk-born Winthrop, to later figures born in the Colonies such as pastor Jonathan Edwards (1703–58), an American rhetoric developed that was both charged with ambition and haunted by responsibility towards God and humanity. The resulting entanglement of religious and nationalist discourses has marked American society ever since.

The early English settlers came from a background in which religion was already at the heart of print culture: since the mid-sixteenth century, the best-selling volume of poetry in England had been the Protestant *Book of Common Prayer*. In Colonial New England the range of texts available was much more limited, and the religious emphasis even more obvious, with *The Bay Psalm Book*, for example, going through more than 50 editions in 100 years. But there is much more to Puritanism than sobriety and self-denial, and the religious content of Colonial poetry is often combined with domestic themes, and with a response to what seemed the Eden-like richness and purity of the American landscape. These elements co-exist in the work of Anne Bradstreet (ca. 1612–72),

for example, whose *The Tenth Muse* (1650) was the first published book of poems by a resident in America.

The seventeenth-century colonists were obviously a long way from the world of their parents and grandparents, and had limited contact with cultural developments in the homeland. Furthermore, they had other things on their minds: building new communities, establishing new traditions, trying to survive. Studies of American literature in English tend to treat it as quite separate from the literatures of Britain, almost as though they were in mutually incomprehensible languages. But there were trans-Atlantic cross-currents from the beginning. Bradstreet grew up on the estate of the Earl of Lincoln; her husband, with whom she emigrated, was a graduate of Cambridge University. Another celebrated American poet of this period, Edward Taylor (ca. 1642–1729), was born in Leicestershire but went on to be a student at the other Cambridge (Massachusetts): in other words, at Harvard University, founded in 1636. The name of the town is significant: Harvard's founders wanted to suggest a connection to the English tradition of higher learning. Likewise, Taylor's poetry shows the strong influence of English Metaphysical poets.

Britain: Neo-classical period (1660–1785)

The English-speaking population of America during the Colonial period was relatively small, and their cultural profile and literary output correspondingly limited. The same stretch of years in the British Isles, however, encompassed great political and cultural change, the evolution of new literary genres, and the production and consumption of unprecedented quantities of printed text. This added up to a complicated literary-historical picture, which is hard to categorise and classify. We have already looked at the years leading up to the English Civil War. After that, the whole period leading up to the beginnings of Romanticism is often referred to as 'neo-classical', and may also be heaped together, even less informatively, as 'the long eighteenth century'. But you will also come across references to sub-periods such as the 'Restoration', the 'Augustan Age', the 'Age of Sensibility' and the 'Age of Johnson', all of which need explanation.

The 'Restoration' refers to the re-institution of monarchy in 1660, in the person of Charles II. It can also be understood in terms of a 'restoration' of aspects of culture that had been suspended during the Interregnum. In fact, many important writers of the later seventeenth century were born and educated well before the Civil War. The single most significant Restoration text, the epic *Paradise Lost* (1667) by John Milton (1608–74), is in many respects a late-Renaissance work, sharing themes and techniques with writers such as Spenser, Shakespeare and Donne. But it is also a very direct response to the religious and political conflicts of the Civil War, and to the notion of the vulnerability and even dispensability of monarchy that the execution of Charles I had exposed: some of the arguments against God's right to rule voiced by Milton's Satan and other fallen angels are essentially republican arguments against monarchy. Milton sets out 'to justify the ways of God to men', and thus, by implication,

supports the King's claim to his subjects' obedience, but to what extent he really succeeds in serving, rather than implicitly undermining, either his divine or his earthly ruler has been debated ever since.

The most widely owned and circulated books of the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries remained the Bible and the *Book of Common Prayer*. Sermons were also printed and bought to an extent that may seem remarkable today (when Christian bookshops are self-contained minority-interest outlets, quite distinct from the regular trade). Among texts belonging to literary genres such as prose fiction and poetry, the most widely owned works, by far, were those with explicitly religious content and ambitions, such as *Paradise Lost* and *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) by John Bunyan (1628–88). But the prominence of such works does not necessarily indicate a dominance of religion over secular society; it indicates just as much a transition away from scriptural authority towards a more humanistic perspective. Writers like Milton and Bunyan are to some extent in competition with scripture: taking religious narratives and dogmas and incorporating them into the world of secular creativity, the world of literature as an enterprise of human imagination and thought.

Another way in which Milton makes a strange advocate for Christianity (although there is no doubt about his commitment to it) is that his writing combines Biblical sources with Classical ones. The events of *Paradise Lost* are largely set in the Garden of Eden and in Heaven, but the poem contains a huge number of references to Greek and Latin mythology and religion. It is even written in Latinate syntax, adapted (painfully to some critics' ears; magnificently to many others') to the English pentameter. In this respect, Milton forms a link between the Renaissance, with its 'humanist' rediscovery of the Classics, and a later 'neo-classical' desire to emulate them.

Milton's Puritan sincerity and work ethic contrast strongly with other aspects of Restoration culture. Charles II was famously fun-loving, and his court not notably devout. The theatres were allowed to re-open – now with actresses (a big plus for Charles) – and new dramatic genres, quite distinct from those known and practised by Shakespeare, evolved. The 'Restoration plays', as we now call them, of writers such as William Congreve (1670–1729) were comedies of manners – urban, stylish and cynical – and precisely targeted at a middle- and upper-class audience, eager to have their pretensions flattered, mocked, and then flattered again.

Urbanity and wit were prized in poetry, too. In writers such as Alexander Pope (1688–1744) these qualities were combined with Neoclassical imitation of authors such as Virgil, Horace and Ovid, literary stars under the Roman emperor Augustus (27 BCE–14 CE) – hence the term 'Augustan' to describe late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English poetry of this kind. In these poems, typically written in rhyming couplets, which allow for witty rhymes and neat antitheses (but also, sometimes, for a certain monotony and glibness), ideals of taste and decorum are propagated, which contrast strongly with the highly competitive new world of professional writers and publishers ('Grubb Street') in which they were produced. Pope's *Dunciad* (1728), a deeply erudite mock epic

(a kind of anti-*Iliad*), which lambasts inferior 'hack' writers (the dunces of the title), nicely epitomises this strange mixture of cultural tendencies, and shows how the figure of the literary author (as a professional, like a doctor or a lawyer) had become conspicuous. Writers were now part of a 'public sphere' – at least partly independent of state and religious authority and with access to a large, educated, paying readership – which was significantly different from the literary world of monarchical and aristocratic patronage of the Elizabethans or Jacobeans. This public sphere (supported both by learned societies and by new social institutions like the coffee houses) embraced literature but also intellectual fields such as the natural sciences, economics and philosophy – in the work of Isaac Newton (1642–1727), for example, and David Hume (1711–76). Literature, in other words, was part of a network of discourses that offered different ways (sometimes competing, often mutually reinforcing) of understanding the natural world, human nature, and the organisation of society. In this sense, we can talk about literature as contributing to the international changes that we call the Enlightenment. For all its Renaissance (and Biblical) roots, Milton's aim to 'justify' the ways of God is on its way to being an Enlightenment project. Pope's castigation of dunces is arguably one, too. And so, certainly, is Swift's extravagant, fantastical expansion and contraction, inflation and deflation of the human (as if with scientific instruments) in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Irony can be a tool of analysis, and a side-effect of the Enlightenment is the 'Age of Satire'.

The 'universal' tendencies of the Enlightenment – which could be linked just as easily with, say, Voltaire (1694–1778) in France, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) in Germany, or indeed Benjamin Franklin (1706–90) in America – developed alongside more local and exclusive aspects of English, Scottish, and to some extent British, culture. With the Glorious Revolution of 1688 (importing the Dutch King William) England underlined its identity as a Protestant state, in opposition to Catholic territories such as France, Spain and the Holy Roman Empire. With the Acts of Union (1706 and 1707), England (which had already controlled Wales politically for centuries) and Scotland, with which England had shared a monarch since 1603 but not a parliament, became a single powerful state: the United Kingdom of Great Britain. Ireland, although it would not be incorporated in the United Kingdom until a further Act of Union in 1801, had been governed from London since the late fifteenth century. Nevertheless, national and regional differences within the British Isles continued to be very pronounced, and were reflected in literature.

The geographical complexity of what used to be called 'English literature' is apparent when we consider the eighteenth-century authors who are now best remembered and most read: the early novelists. Aphra Behn (1640–89), Daniel Defoe (1660–1731), Samuel Richardson (1689–1761) and Henry Fielding (1707–54) were English, but Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) and Laurence Sterne (1713–68) were Anglo-Irish, and Tobias Smollett (1721–71) was a Scot. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) was for long regarded as the first real novel in English – joining a genre of long prose fictions that had been established elsewhere in Europe for more than a hundred years, not least by *Don Quixote* (1605 and 1615) by

Miguel de Cervantes (translated by Smollett and much read in Britain). However, *Robinson Crusoe*, like *Gulliver's Travels*, is a 'novel' that pretends to be a non-fiction work (in this case, the diary of a castaway), and so it is far from demonstrating the ease with fiction, as a concept, that we find in a later novelist such as Austen. On the other hand, extended works of prose fiction of a rather haphazard character – including 'picaresque novels' – had existed since Elizabethan times; and a strong case can also be made for the prose fictions of several women authors whose works were rediscovered in the late-twentieth century after long neglect, especially Aphra Behn, the first English professional woman writer, whose *Oroonoko* (1688) is really just as much a novel as *Robinson Crusoe*, albeit somewhat shorter.

A handful of mid-eighteenth-century novels by men stand out, however, as establishing the prestige of the genre in Britain. Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) was a sensation, read and discussed throughout fashionable society, and Fielding launched his own career as a novelist (he was already a highly successful playwright) by mocking what he saw as the hypocrisy of Richardson's narrative (about female innocence and purity) in *Shamela* (1741) and *Joseph Andrews* (1742). In doing so, he also included metafictional reflections on the nature of the novel and its relationship to the earliest surviving novel-length fictions – going back, via Cervantes, to the epics of Homer. The way in which these very few books impacted on the reading public brings out the meaning of 'novel(ty)' in a way that would largely be lost, in later centuries, when new novels became an unbroken flow. The way in which Richardson and Fielding wrestled publicly, in print, over the nature of virtue and how to represent it set the agenda for the novel as a forum for the exploration of psychology and morality; and Fielding's prefatory reflections on both genre and authorship gave the form an artistic and intellectual weight to which earlier prose fictions had not aspired.

As you will have already gathered, the 'long' eighteenth century (from the Restoration to the beginnings of Romanticism, when we move into the 'long' nineteenth century), was an extremely complicated period. The production of literature accelerated greatly during this time, and took many different forms. This is why so many different ways of categorising the period are in play. Yet another term that you will meet is the 'Age of Sensibility' (roughly 1745–85, but with roots going back at least as far as the Restoration). This describes a turn from the Neoclassical austerity and (some would say) coldness of writers such as Pope towards a self-conscious cultivation of emotion. Richardson's *Pamela* embodies an aspect of this tendency, eschewing action in favour of the drama of its heroine's tested feelings. More humorous authors, such as Fielding and especially Sterne, sometimes indulge and sometimes satirise the sentimental turn. Again, this is part of an international tendency: the hero of Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774; a huge success, also in Britain) has so much sensibility that it kills him. But sensibility took other, less obvious forms, including a reviving taste for an idealised medievalism (fed by Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 1765) and an intensified interest in the emotional interaction between humans and nature, whether in sublime or

picturesque forms, which anticipated some aspects of Romanticism. The cultivation of emotional responsiveness also led to an alienation from some aspects of the literary past – most obviously in the case of Shakespeare, some of whose work now seemed too coarse and violent. *King Lear*, for example, was performed throughout the long eighteenth century in a softened adaptation, with a happy ending. This is rather touching, in a way – but you should remember that this was also the period in which the Jacobite rebellions (aiming to re-establish an alternative, Catholic monarchy) were savagely suppressed (notably at Culloden, 1745); and, while influential members of the eighteenth-century public might be reluctant to see violence on the stage, they could still see the real thing at well-attended public executions.

Eighteenth-century reservations about Shakespeare took their most sophisticated form in the work of Samuel Johnson (1709–84), who shared the feeling that *King Lear* was excessively brutal, but whose edition of the *Plays* is full of editorial and interpretative insight. Here, and in his *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, Johnson begins to put the disciplines of both literary history and literary criticism on an academic footing, long before anything other than Classical literature could be studied at university. Importantly, Johnson's work on literature went together with his work on language: his *Dictionary* (1755) is a milestone in English lexicography. It is because of these and other achievements (essays; poems; prose fiction), and thanks also to the *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) by his Scottish friend James Boswell (1740–95) (itself a milestone in literary biography), that the latter part of the eighteenth century also finds itself referred to as the 'Age of Johnson'!

America: Early National period (1775–1828); Britain: Romantic period (1785–1832)

The Revolutionary War (1775–1781) and Declaration of Independence of the United States of America (1776) were obviously momentous political developments, both for the New World and the Old. They also had huge consequences for literary history.

As in the Colonial period, but on a grander scale, the combination of rapid change with a sense of innovation, strength and independence stimulated American writing, often raising the non-fiction prose of political ideas – in the hands of Thomas Jefferson (1724–1826), for example – to a very high level of literary accomplishment. At the same time, a newly coherent, rapidly growing American community, with the technology to print and circulate books, and conscious of being completely free-standing and needing a culture of its own, began to produce secular imaginative literature. The first American novel, *The Power of Sympathy* by William Hill Brown (1765–93), appeared in 1789.

These united and 'liberated' States had cast off the yoke of long-distance English domination, but they still embodied gross inequality and lack of freedom within themselves, in the institution of slavery. Some citizens of the United States recognised this grotesque paradox, and thus the cause of Abolitionism

provided a further channel for American rhetoric, driven by idealism and guilt, and caught up, as ever, with religious concerns. (Were Africans equal in the eyes of God?) Slavery would last for another century, but African American literature had already begun: with, for example, *Poems on Various Subjects* (1773) by Phillis Wheatley (ca. 1753–84), published with the kind assistance of the white woman who had purchased the author, as a seven-year-old, at a Boston slave market.

America had left Europe behind politically, but the English language could not be separated so easily from its hundreds of years of written history, and 'new' American literary genres were necessarily adaptations and developments of European models. Charles Brockden Brown (1771–1810), one of the first handful of fully professional American authors, was strongly influenced by the English novelists Samuel Richardson and William Godwin (1756–1836), while Brown's own work would in due course be appreciated by British writers such as Walter Scott (1771–1832) and John Keats (1795–1821). Similarly, *Precaution* (1820), the first novel by the first really successful American novelist (both in America and in Europe), James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851), was strongly influenced by Jane Austen (compare *Persuasion*, published two years earlier!). Only later, with the Leatherstocking Tales – especially *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) – did Cooper take the old imported generic vessel and fill it with iconically American thematic content: above all, the great myths of the West and the Wilderness.

Britain had fought to hold onto America, but there were many individual Britons who rejoiced at American liberty. Donne, in the early phase of the English Colonial project had written of 'my America!. / My mine of precious stones, my empery'. Now, in the extraordinary 'prophetic' works of William Blake, such as *America* and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (both 1793), the American heroes of the Revolutionary War triumph over a mad, reptilian George III, and the people of the New World are exhorted to take the cause of freedom to its moral and rational conclusion, freeing 'the swarthy children of the sun'. For radicals like Blake, the events in America, and still more the French Revolution (1789), were signs of a new beginning – above all, a reaction against the centuries-old authority of Church and King and all the social inequalities and constraints that went with it – and needed to be emulated in Britain. The resultant turmoil of values and ideas generated powerful texts in which the boundaries between politics and literature are partly suspended, from Edmund Burke (1729–97) on the conservative political right, to Tom Paine (1737–1809; born in Norfolk, later a citizen of Pennsylvania) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) on the radical left.

Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791) embodies the idea that this revolutionary moment is about doing justice to humanity, not just to specific nations; Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) reminds the world that it is possible to proclaim global freedom and still forget half the human race. 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive', according to the young William Wordsworth (1770–1850). It must have been – for some – but this new dawn had not

appeared from nowhere. Just as the Puritan settlers in seventeenth-century New England took their values and ideas from the specific English communities in which they had been raised, so an English writer like Blake, at the end of the eighteenth century, responded to the revolutions in America and France in ways that derive from a radical, dissenting history in Britain, going at least as far back as the English Civil War – or, as some would call it, the English Revolution.

Blake and Wordsworth, along with Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), are often referred to as the 'first generation' of British Romantic poetry; with Lord Byron (1788–1824), Percy Shelley (1792–1822) and John Keats making up the second. This second generation, who all excelled early and died young, encapsulate a popular ideal of what the Romantic poet should be – with Byron, in particular, becoming internationally famous for embodying this ideal within his own short lifetime (more or less creating the notion of the writer as glamorous celebrity). But 'Romanticism' covers a far wider spectrum of individuals and kinds of writing, as well as crossing national boundaries and incorporating other arts. (Ludwig van Beethoven, for example – born in the same year as Wordsworth, dying in the same year as Blake – would be part of a wider 'Romantic' picture.) Within British literary Romanticism, many of the most successful writers at the time – although subsequently neglected for many years – were women: poets such as Charlotte Smith (1749–1806) and Letitia Landon (1802–38). And 'Romanticism' also embraces early-nineteenth-century prose fiction: most importantly Scott, Austen, and the early Gothic novel.

So what is Romanticism? The first word that comes to many people's minds is 'Nature'. There is something in this. Plants, animals, land-, sea- and skyscapes figure strongly in many of these texts. But Blake's 'Tyger', as we have seen, is not 'just' a tiger. Wordsworth writes endlessly about wandering in the Lake District, but links it always to human predicaments and his speaker's state of mind. Keats is very observant about seasonal change in 'To Autumn', but his 'Ode to a Nightingale' has little to do with ornithology. And while, in Charlotte Smith's sonnet, 'On Being Cautioned against Walking on a Headland Overlooking the Sea, Because It Was Frequented by a Lunatic', inanimate nature is vividly presented (Smith's speaker *does* walk on the headland), it is filtered through memories of *King Lear* and subordinated to the representation of human distress. So, Nature is in there, but rarely for its own sake: rather, these texts are about how the natural world affects people, and how *human* nature determines the ways in which the outer world appears (a matter of hard psychology and philosophy as well as 'feelings'). Moreover, the reaching after harmony between the inner self and the natural world in Romantic poetry is often linked with ideas of social and political improvement: hence the excitement about events such as the French Revolution.

The conflicts between emotional and social imperatives in Austen's novels (even in some of their titles: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*) are symptomatic of a time when people were becoming more aware of the possibilities of sophisticated social interaction, with less taken for granted in terms of socially or religiously enforced norms of behaviour. In the Enlightenment,

humanity in general had been encouraged to grow up and start making rational decisions about how to behave. Romanticism should not be seen (as it sometimes is) as contradicting Enlightenment values, but it complicates them with its emphasis on subjectivity and its suggestions that there are parts of human experience that have not yet been reached and expressed. Austen and other writers of her time were sometimes aware of the rather brittle state of their society, with a frivolous fashionable scene at home in Regency England contrasting, for example, with the terrifying external realities of war with revolutionary and Napoleonic France. There are also some hints, alongside generalised pronouncements about the rights of man, that literary intellectuals were becoming more conscious of the ways in which their own lives were implicated in the oppression of others, be they the indigenous poor or the long-distance subjects of Empire – although it was left to twentieth-century critics to bring out the ironies of self-realisation in, for example, Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), where an elegant and civilised household appears to be supported by a sugar plantation in Jamaica, and thus by slavery. 'Postcolonial' literature in English does not start until the British Empire begins to collapse, more than a century later, but a canon of texts that will come to mean a great deal in a postcolonial context is already well under way.

Another way in which both Enlightenment and Romantic positivism about human capabilities and potential are challenged in the literature of the time, much more widely and conspicuously, is through an exploration of dark aspects of the individual human mind, which the Enlightenment may be unable to correct, and which Romanticism may unwittingly foster. The Gothic, going back to *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) by Horace Walpole (1717–97), and reaching its most memorable expression in English with *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley (1797–1851), reveals the downside – in monstrosity, madness and self-destruction – of releasing suppressed dimensions of human nature, and suggests (most obviously in the figure of the double or doppelgänger) that that nature may be fundamentally divided, at war with itself. Insofar as art was now freed, according to some theories, from the didactic purposes that marked the Augustan age (at least officially), expressing instead the amoral experience of the sublime, the Gothic was an inevitable branch of Romantic experimentation. It was also, for many of its readers, then as now, literature as a kind of scary fun: providing exhilarating half-understood glimpses of the hidden forces (above all internal, psychic ones) that run our lives.

The 'Early National period' in American literature (and history) began, clearly enough, with the Revolutionary War. It ends, conventionally, with the election of the seventh President, Andrew Jackson, in 1828, and the establishment of American democracy in a developed and abiding form. The beginning and end of the Romantic period in British literature are rather more difficult to define, and you may come across slightly different dates from those given here. Choosing 1785 locates the origin in the middle of the political and ideological turmoil of the American and French revolutions, although some would say that the Romantic movement in literature only really gets under way with

Wordsworth and Coleridge's groundbreaking collection of poems, *Lyrical Ballads*, in 1798. By 1832, the most prominent figures of 'second generation' Romanticism had gone to their early graves; and that year brings the first of a series of Reform Bills which, while not yet emulating the broad political empowerment of Jacksonian Democracy in the United States, gradually began to extend rights and liberties in Britain, eroding class differences, and making the dynamic Victorian era possible.

America: Romantic period /American Renaissance / Transcendentalism (1828–1865)

The few decades between Jackson's election and the next great turning point in American history, the Civil War (1861–65), were packed with brilliant literary innovations. With *Moby-Dick* (1851) by Herman Melville (1819–91) and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855), American literature acquired epic works, respectively in prose and verse, on a similar scale (and arguably in a similar league) to *Paradise Lost*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, or even Homer's *Iliad* – but works that were quite unprecedented stylistically in European literature and that take it upon themselves to express specifically American perspectives on the world. It is with texts such as these in mind that this period is sometimes identified as the 'American Renaissance', as though it echoed events in Europe several centuries before. Calling this period 'Romanticism' is also a way of linking America with Europe, as though the Romantic movement starts up in the United States just as it is fading in Britain, and there are some good reasons for this way of looking at things: New England authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82) and Henry David Thoreau (1817–62), for example, were directly influenced by Coleridge and Wordsworth (amongst many other sources) in developing a 'Transcendental' movement in literature and philosophy, which prioritised an individualistic, humanised, imaginatively heightened, not conventionally religious but spiritual engagement with the natural world, while Edgar Allan Poe (1809–49) and Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–64) provided the 'dark' complement to this, contributing uncanny tales of haunting, shadowing and madness to the Gothic canon, but with specifically American dimensions – as in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), which deals with the classic Gothic themes of religious guilt and persecution in the context of seventeenth-century New England Puritanism.

Once again, there are ironies in the fact that high literary culture deals, on the one hand, with self-reliance and realisation (in Emerson, for example), and, on the other, with the mind-forged imprisonments of guilt and madness (in 'dark Romanticism'), within a society that still practises slavery. In some of these texts the captivity of African Americans is deliberately raised as a shameful anomaly, while in some others it seems to lurk as a troubling unconscious. But increasing numbers of African Americans were speaking for themselves in these years, most famously Frederick Douglas (1818–95), whose *Autobiography* (1845) transcends the specific non-fiction genre of the slave narrative to

participate in the great American habit of weighing the self alongside national ideas and destinies. 'Light' and 'dark', black and white: this 'Renaissance' is a ferment of ideas and competing identities.

When questions of identity and ideology led to war, during Lincoln's presidency in the 1860s, the resulting destruction gave further stimulus to literary creativity, although the most famous novel of the Civil War, by far, was actually written by a man who was born after it happened. The visionary intensity and battlefield atmosphere of *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) by Stephen Crane (1871–1900) make this fact hard to believe, but it can serve as an important reminder that, while literature feeds on history and may even sometimes help to make it, historical time and literary time are not the same thing.

Britain: The Victorian period (1832–1901)

While the youthful United States were caught up in their own great issues of federal versus regional authority, slavery, and the ultimate expression of these conflicts in the Civil War, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was enjoying the long post-Napoleonic peace that made the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901) arguably the most productive period – industrially, economically, intellectually, artistically – in British history.

William Wordsworth ended up, far from his radical beginnings, as the young Victoria's Poet Laureate; the modernist W. B. Yeats (1865–1939) was a Victorian (in both Dublin and London) throughout his youth. But if we were to name a 'Victorian poet' it would probably not be either of them. It would be Alfred Tennyson (1809–92), Matthew Arnold (1822–88), Robert or Elisabeth Barrett Browning (1812–89; 1806–61), Christina or Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1830–94; 1828–82), or perhaps even Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–82; an American, but much read in England) – most of whom were dismissed as stuffy and dull for much of the twentieth century, but whose diversity and richness have since been rediscovered. One thing that tends to characterise these poets (to generalise very broadly) – and other arts of the period such as painting and even music – is a strong emphasis on narrative content, especially telling stories about domestic life with strongly individualised characters. This is even more the case when it comes to what, for most readers, is the outstanding Victorian genre: the novel, especially in the hands of writers such as Charles Dickens (1812–70), Charlotte Brontë (1816–55), George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans; 1819–80) and Thomas Hardy (1840–1928). In addition to these canonical figures, still pulled off the shelves (or downloaded) by many twenty-first-century readers in preference to works of their own time, and still imitated by 'neo-Victorian' authors, the sheer quantity of Victorian novels is extraordinary. Anthony Trollope (1815–82), who wrote forty-seven (mostly long ones) while working full-time for the Post Office, is a rather extreme but symptomatic case. The reading public, which had grown substantially during the eighteenth century, now grew very much more. Literacy expanded (about three quarters of England's population could read by the 1870s); hundreds of libraries were opened; print became cheaper; new

methods of circulation were developed, such as serialisation in affordable weekly or monthly parts (making the original experience of reading Dickens, for example, a bit like keeping up with the episodes of a TV drama). Only a few novelists made fortunes (then as now), but a significant number were able to earn a living, provided they treated writing as an industry as well as an art, studied the market, and worked very hard. When we look back at the Victorian period now, *Middlemarch* (1871–72) stands out as a unique classic, just like *Tom Jones* (1749), but the circumstances of these texts in their own times differed profoundly: Fielding's novel was one of a handful; Eliot's was one of thousands.

The mid-Victorian or 'High Victorian' era (often dated 1848–70), was troubled by the long-distance violence consequent upon being an imperialistic power, in competition with others (above all, in the Crimean War of the 1850s), and by the extreme internal inequalities consequent upon capitalism, massive population growth, urbanisation and the changing nature of work. But there was a vigour to this society, whether expressed in cultural/political displays such as the Great Exhibition of 1851 or in great novels such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) or Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852–53) – however much they may have criticised the society that produced them. The massive literary production of the period, however, goes along with a lot of textual angst. This is notoriously a society that worried about things, that was beset by doubt and grief.

Victoria herself famously wore mourning for the last four decades of her reign, after the death of her consort, Prince Albert, while the most important poem of her reign, most critics would agree, is Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850), which commemorates a friend of the poet's youth who had died way back in 1833. The factors behind this melancholia are multiple, the most obvious ones involving religion and science: new discoveries in disciplines such as archaeology and geology were casting doubt on the authority of the Bible and on an essentially Biblical account of the origins and destiny of humanity. Donne, in the seventeenth century, had been mortally anxious about his soul; Wordsworth was anxious about losing the perceptions of youth; Keats was anxious about the extinction of the self; Tennyson, even before the thunderbolt of Darwinian evolutionary theory (1859), was anxious about the extinction of the species! But the angst can also be seen as a more general consequence of the Enlightenment. Philosophers of the previous century had developed ideas of the purpose and obligations of human life within society. Now the Victorians found themselves with massive resources, in terms of Imperial dominions, manpower, capital and technology, with which to get things done in the world for good or ill, and the sense of responsibility was sobering. In this respect the Victorians were arguably closer to our own world of nuclear weapons and global warming than they were to the world of the Romantics.

Victorian concerns with duty, responsibility, fairness and guilt manifest themselves in literature in many ways: in the 'condition of England' novel, for example, taking as its central theme the nature of English society and the political problems that it presents. Some of these novels were even written by a future

prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli (1804–81). Here, literature both responds to and takes part in the process of political reform that went on throughout the nineteenth century, as the United Kingdom moved gradually away from the former dominance of the landed aristocracy to something more like a modern democracy. Meanwhile, the politics of the individual life are addressed through exemplary narratives of the making of a gentleman – Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849–50) and *Great Expectations* (1860–61) are the ultimate examples, combining exemplification and criticism of the genre – and through newly assertive writing by women – novels by the Brontës, for example, and poems by Christina Rossetti – which question the whole system of gender-roles over which, despite the maternal figurehead of the Queen, the figure of the gentleman presided.

As well as doubt, worry or guilt, Victorian authors have often been associated with prudery and sentimentality, and therefore thought to be inferior to a more modern kind of maturity, honesty and realism. There was plenty of underground pornography in Victorian literature, just as there were thousands of prostitutes in Victorian cities, but it is a fact that mainstream authors could not be explicit about what went on in the bedroom (or the lavatory), leading to a great many unconvincingly sexless narratives of domestic life. There are also a lot of long-drawn-out and weepy death-bed scenes. But Victorians were complicated people, like the rest of us, and we should beware of characterising them, or anyone else, too quickly. If sex acts go undescribed in the Brontës or in Dickens, for example, the psychological consequences of sexuality, such as desire and jealousy, often form the core of their works and are often deeply imagined and understood. And then, before we dismiss Victorians for being sentimental about, say, the death of children, we should think about the deep pre-Victorian roots of sentimentality in the eighteenth-century cult of sensibility, while at the same time recognising that Victorians, with their large families and high rates of child mortality, actually had to confront the reality of the death of the young considerably more frequently than people in privileged societies do today – and how exactly *should* such dreadful experiences be digested and represented?

While some Romantics, such as Wordsworth, had celebrated the idea of the child, the Victorian period marks the emergence of children's literature as a major field in its own right, even with a few of its own masterpieces. Some of it is sentimental, some didactic, and some profoundly ambiguous: appealing to children, but also upsetting conventional notions of what the differences between adults and children are: for example, in the 'Nonsense' poems of Edward Lear (1812–88), and in *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll (Charles Dodgson; 1832–98).

Another significant development during the nineteenth century was that the academic study of earlier literature in English began to be institutionalised. Writers came to see themselves more frequently in terms of an evolving narrative of literary and more broadly cultural development. In the case of the Pre-Raphaelite movement (1848–60), for example, a group of writers and artists defined themselves as having a specific set of aesthetic ideals and values (which is really what constitutes a 'movement'), and chose to associate themselves with

specific aspects of the cultural past – especially through another rediscovery or reinvention of the medieval – rather than with other tendencies in their own time.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a sense of what Victorian culture consisted of, and of its limitations, had already began to set in, leading to the beginnings of modernism in the form of a reaction against what were perceived as the dominant values. This was the period that you will see referred to as 'Aestheticism' or 'Decadence' (ca. 1880–1901), in which there is a transition from High Victorian energy to enervation and *ennui* – the latter a French word for what was seen, with some truth, as being a cross-Channel infection, influenced by writers such as Charles Baudelaire and Paul Verlaine. We also use the French term *fin-de-siècle* to characterise this period, referring both to the literal end of the century (and of Victoria's life and reign) but also to a more abstract end of an era. But the leading figure of this period, in literature in English, came to England from the West: the Anglo-Irish homosexual novelist, playwright, poet, critic, wit and dandy, Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), who, together with other theorists of 'art for art's sake' like Walter Pater (1839–94), critics of conventional masculinity, and proponents of 'The New Woman' (who would soon be demanding the right to vote), led the century to a conclusion in which fundamental aspects of human identity were up for reconfiguration, both in life and literature.

America: The Realistic period (1865–1900)

By the time we reach the late nineteenth century, with the end of the American Civil War, the United States have in many respects grown out of any youthfulness and innocence that they may seem to have had, relative to the Old World of Europe. Many of the social changes that took effect on one side of the Atlantic, especially those brought about by new technologies, made themselves felt on the other side more or less simultaneously. In particular, the growth of the city as the primary scene of human interaction and cultural performance applied as much to New York and Chicago as it did to London and Manchester. The Civil War, on the other hand, represented a specifically American trauma and break with the past, contributing to the appearance of a post-war literature that was very different from the work of Melville or Hawthorne.

When the last decades of the American nineteenth-century are referred to as the 'Realistic period' what is at issue is partly a matter of content, indicating texts documenting the salient facts of post-War 'Reconstruction' America, and partly a matter of style, noting a shift away from the extravagant and fantastical to the everyday and matter-of-fact. Kate Chopin (1850–1904), for example, who lived in the expanding industrial city of St Louis, Missouri, drew (like Wilde) on a French literary tradition. In her case, inspiration came from novelists such as Gustave Flaubert and Émile Zola, who had enjoyed the liberty to be 'realistic', in the sense of frank and direct about human desires and motivations, several decades earlier than their Anglophone peers. Chopin's depiction of female sexuality and its oppressive social constraints in *The Awakening* (1899) told the truth about society and psychology in a way that was less easy to take than

the outlandish or 'arabesque' Romanticism, however dark, of a writer like Poe – and led to censorship and scandalised reviews.

But, once again, new literary tendencies seldom replace the old ones altogether. The single most prominent author of the Realistic period is Mark Twain (Samuel L. Clemens; 1835–1910), who fits into this box because of his richly detailed descriptions of real places and ordinary lives, free from stereotypically 'Victorian' morality and sentiment, in novels such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884–85). But Twain was far from being just a realist. He was also a humorist and satirist: two things that require an ability to juggle the real and the fake, the sincere and the ironic. And, when we consider the way in which Twain evokes the scale and grandeur of the Mississippi, there is still an aspect of the visionary or mythic, even shades of Melville's whale.

Moreover, there are some writers who seem to stand quite apart from the general tendencies of literary history, either because they were not recognised or well integrated into the worlds of publishing and literary debate in their own time, or because their sympathies and insights seem to anticipate those of another age. Both of these factors combine in Emily Dickinson (1830–86), and it will be worth looking at one of her extraordinary poems in full, as a further reminder of what is at stake when we try to assess a real text in terms of the approximations of literary history:

I started Early – Took my Dog –
And visited the Sea –
The Mermaids in the Basement
Came out to look at me –

And Frigates – in the Upper Floor
Extended Hempen Hands –
Presuming Me to be a Mouse –
Aground – opon the Sands –

But no Man moved Me – till the Tide
Went past my simple Shoe –
And past my Apron – and my Belt
And past my Boddice – too –

And made as He would eat me up –
As wholly as a Dew
Opon a Dandelion's Sleeve –
And then – I started – too –

And He – He followed – close behind –
I felt His Silver Heel
Opon my Ancle – Then My Shoes
Would overflow with Pearl –

Until We met the Solid Town –
No One He seemed to know –

> And bowing – with a Mighty look –
> At me – The Sea withdrew –

The poem begins, we might say, in exemplary realist mode, with a first line like a note in a diary. But then, if you are not familiar with Dickinson, you may think that it degenerates into nonsense – at best in the positive sense of the endearing 'nonsense poetry' of a writer like Edward Lear. For one thing, Dickinson does not seem to be good at spelling or punctuation!

On the other hand, some of the imagery in the poem seems to resonate with other texts of the period: texts that address great issues. Matthew Arnold, for example, famously writes of hearing the 'long, withdrawing roar' of the Sea of Faith in 'Dover Beach', one of the most notoriously 'Victorian' of Victorian poems. Does Dickinson's withdrawing sea have anything in common with Arnold's? Then again, Dickinson is famous for being an eccentric isolated soul, like no one else before or since, and certainly seems to depict herself as such very often, but isolation and alienation were social realities for millions in the late nineteenth century, on both sides of the Atlantic, as people left the homes of their childhood to enter the anonymous city, or entered the depersonalised working environment of the factory. Perhaps Dickinson's confrontation with the 'Solid Town', as a kind inflexible reality that limits fantasy and individualism, has something to do with this. Or perhaps, rather, it is exactly when the sea withdraws that contact with reality is to be seen as lost in the poem. In a famous passage in *Middlemarch* (1871–72), George Eliot's narrator declares: 'If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.' Could we use this to look at the balance of reality and fantasy in Dickinson's poem in a different way? The sound of the sea, the wave of extraordinary images that the sea seems to bring, are perhaps intimations of a reality that can only be endured for a short while, they cut so deep.

A twenty-first-century critic has described Dickens (not Dickinson, although she read him!) as the great nineteenth-century 'realist of the fantasy life'. This is a paradoxical concept that upsets our nice distinctions. Perhaps there are some ways in which true realism requires a confrontation with the dream-like and irrational (after all, they play a big role in our lives): that is certainly what many later writers, in the modernist period, seemed to believe. Is Dickinson then a Modernist before her time – somehow bizarrely in touch, in her parents' house in Amherst, Massachusetts, with ideas that would galvanise the intelligentsia of Paris, London and New York decades later? For one thing, that might begin to make her 'bad' punctuation and spelling seem less of an embarrassment …

But, talking of embarrassment, what exactly are the realms of fantasy that Dickinson is delving into here? What is it that gradually takes possession of the speaker's clothes (and body) as if to eat her up? What rises and then withdraws? What are these overflowing shoes? If we anticipate a few hints from

Freud (whose *Interpretation of Dreams* would not appear until 1900), then this might have a claim to be the most erotic poem in the language, perhaps all the more so because its lust seems to be contained, in the end, by a hint of Victorian propriety and repression. So, Dickinson is of her time but also far beyond it. Moreover, she also reaches back into the past. There is a thin but unbroken thread that runs from this dazzling portrait of a pearl-riding sea-washed creature back to Renaissance allegories such as Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (1486). and then further back, to Classical antiquity.

10 From 1900 to the present

America: The Naturalistic period (1900–1914); Britain: The Edwardian period (1901–1914)

'Naturalism' sounds rather like 'realism'. What could be more real than nature or more natural than reality? However, these terms are commonly used to mark different periods in American literary studies (where 'Victorian' and 'Edwardian' would be out of place), and reflect two distinct elements in literary history more generally. Realism, which goes back to the 'mimesis' of the Ancient Greeks but becomes particularly prominent in Western art and literature in the mid-nineteenth century, involves attempting to represent the world truthfully, without distortion: presenting objects just as they appear in real life and people acting in readily believable ways. In that sense, realism is clearly different from literary movements or modes such as sensibility, romanticism, allegory or symbolism. 'Naturalism' is more specific: it involves taking a quasi-scientific and demystifying approach to human beings as part of the natural world, just like other living things. In other words, it involves showing human behaviour as determined by physical stimuli and constraints such as bodily desires and social conditions. 'Naturalism' in literature, therefore, is largely a late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century phenomenon, reflecting a world from which, for a significant number of writers and readers, God has disappeared – to be replaced, at least in part, by the secular system-building of thinkers such as Darwin, Marx and Freud. Much mid-nineteenth-century literature is already haunted by the fear that Man may turn out to be a natural object like any other (*In Memoriam*, for example), but although naturalism is already a force to be reckoned with in Continental Europe in the 1870s (notably in the novels of Zola), it is not until the turn of the century that some English-language writers begin to make it the guiding principle of their narratives.

It would be possible to conceive of a naturalist narrative that was not at all realistic: showing an imaginary place in which impossible things happen, but in which the human characters are driven by biological and societal imperatives (in that sense, *Gulliver's Travels* could be said to contain proto-naturalistic elements). In practice, however, most of the naturalist writers of the early twentieth century were also realists, describing human beings acting in 'natural'

ways, characteristic of their species, within a 'realistic', believable, historically and geographically specific context. Frank Norris (1870–1902) and Jack London (1876–1916) are important American authors of this type, while traces of naturalism can be observed in various British authors of the period – and indeed in any subsequent fiction in which human behaviour is represented as, to some degree, physically determined.

The early-twentieth-century novelists who have attracted most critical attention, however, are less easy to connect with any particular movement or any particular theory of how human beings work. In the novels and short stories of Henry James (1843–1916) and Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) we find fidelity to specific times and places, together with a deep interest in 'natural' human psychology, but these are combined with elements such as symbolism (at times almost mystical) in Conrad, an extreme mannerist refinement of style in James, and, in both writers, highly sophisticated narrative structures. James and Conrad are also among the first English-language authors really to transcend the notion of a national literature. James was an American who chose to live much of his life in Europe and whose fiction often explores the ways in which these Old and New worlds interact. Conrad was Polish by birth, and English was only his third language (after Polish and French): he travelled widely as a seaman before he began to write, and then set his narratives in parts of the world as diverse as Borneo, the Congo, South America, Geneva … and London. Both learnt as much from writers such as Dostoevsky and Flaubert as from the English-language tradition. As well as opening up these global perspectives, James and Conrad also did things with the form of the novel that had not really been possible in the mid-nineteenth century, demanding more from the reader, who, in works such as James's *Turn of the Screw* (1898) and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), has to digest not merely revelations of irresistible evil but also the tales within tales of multiple, probably unreliable narrators.

As the dates above suggest, James and Conrad were writers of the fin-de-siècle as well as of the new century, but they remained the strongest presences in English-language fiction in the years leading up to World War I. More characteristically 'Edwardian' writers, in England, would include the more parochial, less experimental novelist E. M. Forster (1879–1970) and the poet and author of fiction for adults and children Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), both of whom lived long enough to come to seem old-fashioned, but who tell us much about the conditions and ideas of England in their time – and, in works such as Kipling's *Kim* (1901) and Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), about the British Empire at its height.

A notable proportion of the most prominent figures in the 'English' literary world at the beginning of the twentieth century were in fact Anglo-Irish: descendents of the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland, closer to English culture and power than the Catholic, frequently Irish-speaking majority. George Moore (1852–1933), for example, was another follower of Zola's 'naturalist' example in the novel, and George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), along with his shorter-lived countryman Wilde, is one of the very few nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century playwrights

whose work is still regularly performed. Relations between Ireland and the centre of power in London became increasingly strained during this period, however, and literature became more than usually tangled in politics. W. B. Yeats, for example, as a poet committed both to his art and his country, was drawn back and forth between London and Dublin, between the cultural attractions of the centre of Empire and the excitement of an 'Irish revival' (even an 'Irish renaissance') – leading up to the violent Easter Rising of 1916 and the eventual formation, in 1921, of the Irish Free State, the precursor of the present-day Irish Republic.

Meanwhile, England's attention was drawn to mainland Europe. Thomas Hardy, who had turned away from the novel towards poetry in his later years, writes in April 1914, in 'Channel Firing', of 'great guns' practising for war, shooting towards the Continent, but sending echoes that penetrate England's most secret and ancient places: 'As far inland as Stourton Tower, / And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge'. He was rightly anticipating that English society and culture were heading towards profoundly traumatic disruption.

British Isles and America: The Modernist period (1910–1939)

Logically, 'Victorian' and 'Edwardian' literature should have been followed, at least in the United Kingdom and the British Empire, by 'Georgian' literature, corresponding to the reign of George V (1910–36), but the term is not often used in this way. Perhaps it would have been, were it not for World War I (1914–18), which, as well as killing millions, broke the continuity of George's reign and the political and cultural traditions that he represented, provoking rapid and devastating changes in the content and form of literature.

In fact, 'Georgian poetry' is a term that you may come across, deriving from a series of anthologies (1912–22) in which a loose confederation of early-twentieth-century poets tried to define themselves in a way that sounds old to us, but sounded new and modern to them. Georgian poetry tried to register some of the realities of a new century, but it was distinctly English in its preoccupations, formally unadventurous, and would be blown away by the much greater innovations of international modernism in the 1920s. Meanwhile, several of the Georgian poets died in World War I (Edward Thomas, 1878–1917) or came close to doing so (Robert Graves, 1895–1985). Other poets of the same generation did not set out to be part of any literary group or movement, but have been thrust into one by history, at the cost of their lives. These 'War Poets', such as Wilfred Owen (1893–1918) and Isaac Rosenberg (1890–1918), owe some of their fame to their premature deaths – making them the voice, for many readers, of millions of unknown soldiers – and their poems owe much of their power to the actual horror and misery that they describe, but these were also immensely talented young men who would no doubt have written much more, had they lived. Like the Georgians, poets such as Owen and Rosenberg were relatively conventional in their handling of poetic form, but they often created deliberate and moving contrasts between traditional stanzas and diction and the almost unspeakable

events that provided their subject matter. Dying in their twenties, these men conform superficially to an ideal of 'the poet' that had been established during the Romantic period (especially, in England, through Shelley, Keats and Byron), but the reality was not 'romantic' in any way: Owen writes in his 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' of 'these who die as cattle'. In the same poem, he describes 'the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle' and the 'demented choirs of wailing shells'. The onomatopoeia in the first of these phrases and the ironic religious imagery in the second would have been perfectly familiar, like the form of this poem – a sonnet – to Wordsworth or even Shakespeare, but the technology of mass destruction had developed far beyond their experience.

Machine guns, tanks and poison gas are of course just part of a wider pattern of technological development – not all bad – that did much to create the modern world as we know it: with the invention of the telephone and the automobile, for example, in the late nineteenth century, and controlled powered flight in the first decade of the twentieth. For those writers who survived the 'Great War', therefore, there was a great deal to think about, and much to compete with, if literature was not to seem a mere relic of earlier and quieter times. The early twentieth century is characterised by a host of literary and artistic alliances and movements, through which writers deliberately banded together to support one another and develop ambitions and idioms appropriate to the age: from the socially rather exclusive but intellectually wide-ranging Bloomsbury Group – including writers such as Lytton Strachey (1880–1932) and Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), but also painters, philosophers and the economist John Maynard Keynes – to the Harlem Renaissance in African American writing (Claude McKay, 1890–1948, for example, and Nella Larsen, 1891–1964). The Bloomsbury Group established new parameters in the politics of sex and gender, especially through an open association of homosexuality with high art and intellect, at the heart of the metropolis, but also in the further development of feminist ideas, inherited from the 'New Woman' of the 1890s. The Harlem Renaissance, on the other hand, included a deliberate attempt to construct the 'New Negro' as a valid and powerful identity in America, when slavery was still in living memory. These and other movements of the time have many differences, but they are united in the way that they combine artistic ambition and collective self-promotion with an impulse towards social revolution. There is no doubt, for these people, that art matters: that it can re-shape society.

The idea that art matters for its own sake, however – independent of social or moral aims – which had been promoted in the latter, 'decadent' part of the previous century, was still around, and was revisited in various ways in the years surrounding World War I, perhaps partly in the desire for something detached from historical reality and untainted by politics and blood. In the case of the Imagist movement, for example, a number of mostly American but London-based poets set out to produce texts that were as sparse and apparently unemotional as possible, often attempting to catch the appearance of just one scene or object: the whole text aspiring to be an 'image', in other words, rather than – like most poetry – a complex assemblage of multiple images and other

poetic devices, carrying implicit judgements and beliefs. The usually very short poems of the Imagists often seem extremely simple, even banal, creating some of the same bafflement ('Anyone could do that!') provoked in the uninitiated by abstract painting.

Provocation is a significant aspect of much of the literature (and other art) produced between the end of the World War I and the beginning (in 1939) of World War II. This is the period of 'High Modernism' (although exactly when this started and ended, as with 'modernism' more generally, depends on exactly which among a huge array of personalities and tendencies you choose to focus on). Writers such as Ezra Pound (1885–1972), who was an Imagist for a while but switched to other aesthetic ideals (and longer poems), and T. S. Eliot (1882–1965), who is widely regarded as the most influential English-language poet of the twentieth century, were very well read in the literary tradition but set out to break with it, incorporating new ideas from psychoanalysis and ethnography, using foreign literary conventions, mixing apparently mundane characters and events with arcane references and complex symbols, and flitting back and forth between lyrical, imagist and narrative modes, all within one text. The most significant work in this respect is Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), which seems to have some of the characteristics of an epic (in the tradition running from Homer and Virgil through Dante and Milton), and which may be understood as reaching a grand and meaningful conclusion, but which is actually only a little over four hundred lines in length, and can just as plausibly be seen as a despondent sequence of evasions and false starts: 'fragments' that the poet has 'shored against [his] ruins' and those of Western Civilisation.

The Waste Land owes its final form to brilliantly ruthless editing by Ezra Pound. After first appearing in Eliot's own literary journal *The Criterion* – one of many such 'little magazines' that promoted an intellectual self-consciousness about writing in the modernist period, linking creativity directly with theory and criticism – it appeared in book form from the Hogarth Press, run by Virginia Woolf and her husband Leonard. In other words, there was a lot of cooperation between writers at this period: a strong feeling among some, at least, that they were engaged in a joint effort to deliver new kinds of literature. *The Waste Land* was a thoroughly Anglo-American project: Pound was from Pennsylvania, while Eliot himself grew up in Missouri, studied at Harvard, but moved, after a period in Paris, to England, where he converted to Anglicanism and eventually became a British citizen. But the poem is more than Anglo-American: it notoriously confronts its readers with quotations from other languages (French, German, Ancient Greek, Sanskrit ...). Modernism in general tends to cross national boundaries to a greater extent than anything since Romanticism, ranging from American poetry to French/Spanish painting (Picasso), German architecture (the Bauhaus) and Russian film and music (Eisenstein and Stravinsky).

As well as being international, modernism is characteristically urban. The two things go together. New York, Rome, Moscow, but above all Paris and London were the great centres of creative activity in the inter-war years, and writers and artists moved there to be close to one another. Consequently, there

is also an association between modernism and exile: moving to the cultural centres often meant leaving home behind, becoming cosmopolitan but also displaced. In American literature, there is a 'Lost Generation' of writers who rejected the United States (permanently in some cases, temporarily in others) in favour of Europe: Pound and Eliot, but also, for example, Gertrude Stein (1874–1946), who was an important modernist in her own right, but also the patron and facilitator of many others, and, during parts of their transatlantic careers, F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940) and Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961).

The modernist author who has probably had the greatest impact of all is James Joyce (1882–1941): another exile, who always wrote about his home town of Dublin, but did so in Paris, Zürich and Trieste. *Ulysses*, which, together with *The Waste Land*, made 1922 the peak year of High Modernism, is an urban novel with strong realist elements – containing masses of factual information about the Irish capital on one day in 1904 – but it is profoundly modernist in form, embodying a shifting sequence of experimental styles, suspended between an ancient framework taken from Homer's *Odyssey* and flamboyant attempts to represent what has come to be known as the 'stream of consciousness'. This term, along with 'fragmentation' perhaps the one most frequently applied to modernist writing, can be slightly misleading. The main practitioners of 'stream of consciousness' narration (above all, Joyce and Woolf) knew that it is not really possible to transcribe everything that goes on in anybody's mind directly into prose (however experimental), and that to attempt to do so would produce unsatisfactory literature. What we find, rather, in *Ulysses* is an attempt to get the best out of the literary resources of the whole Western tradition, including realism, allegory and symbolism, and to excavate both high and popular culture, so as to give an unprecedented sense of the eclectic mixed-up nature of real (modern) lives, which are ruled by unconscious as well as conscious forces, and in which a wholly reliable and consistent self, identity or subject-position is not to be found. Unprepared readers may find *Ulysses* chaotic and frequently incomprehensible, but its many admirers would say that it gets to the truth of what it is to be human in a way that makes most previous fiction seem inadequate. The apparently sensible project of the nineteenth-century realist novel – in which everything is described as if objectively, where events always follow one another in chronological order, where the style is uniform throughout and the syntax conventional – suddenly seems like a lie, an attempt to persuade childlike readers that the world and their relation to it are much simpler than is really the case. *Ulysses* shocked many early readers by its style (or rather, its many styles), by its hospitality to people far removed from élite metropolitan culture (Joyce's 'Odysseus', Leopold Bloom, is a Jewish advertising salesman), and by its absolute lack of self-censorship when it came to religion and sex – which meant that it was censored and banned by external authorities, in various countries, for many years. Here and in the even more mind-boggling *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Joyce went as far, many critics believe, as the novel could go.

So, what really is modernism? What is modern about this particular period – more than any other – relative to its predecessors? There were great social and

technological changes in the early twentieth-century (World War I; the Russian Revolution; the emergence of the United States as a new kind of global power; rapid long-distance communication and travel), spectacular developments in science (Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, 1905) and in persuasive, imaginative pseudo-science (Freud). Modernism in the arts responded by making things new: competing with other intellectual pursuits in terms of creativity but also trying to process their insights. There was a deliberate emphasis on being different from what had gone before, but also, paradoxically, a return to ancient sources, as though Homer, for example, was in some respects more 'modern' than the literature of subsequent millennia.

Literature in the modernist period is perhaps more intimately connected with other arts than ever before. As modernist writers tried to find new ways of representing reality in words, they considered how it could be done in music, painting, dance or sculpture. (Comparisons have often been made between Joyce's multi-faceted narration, for example, and Cubism.) This is also the time when a new art is invented – cinema – with which literature would come to have a complex relationship and which, in some respects, is intrinsically modernist. Famous scenes in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) show him as a factory worker trapped within machines, sometimes in accordance with his employers' visions of efficiency, sometimes as a result of cartoonish industrial accidents. But there is a layer of irony and pathos of which the viewer may or may not be aware: Chaplin, the actor, is a living presence 'caught' by the camera and then delivered to successive generations of viewers through successive waves of audiovisual technology. Writers such as Eliot and Joyce, similarly, can encapsulate a spectacularly changing world, but are also in danger of being driven and controlled by it. When we look back at Modernist literature, we often find a strange mixture of imagination and creativity with political naivety and prejudice: Eliot echoes crude anti-Semitic stereotypes in some of his most innovative poetry; Pound and various other Modernists were seduced, at least for a while, by the apparent energy, clarity, glamour – and modernity – of fascism; only Joyce seems always to have seen through the seductions of ideology, from whatever source.

The 1920s were an unreal decade in some respects. Much of the world was stunned after World War I. There was space for exuberance and frivolity – 'The Jazz Age' – but also for artistic experimentation: rearranging the fragments of a broken world, with no expectation or desire of achieving a single coherent vision. Once again, all generalisations have their limits – Joyce's friend and protégé Samuel Beckett (1906–89) went on producing prose fiction and plays with clearly Modernist characteristics well into the last quarter of the twentieth century – but, on the whole, the 1930s marked a return to pre-Modernist modes of realist depiction and narrative coherence. Texts of this decade are also characterised by more specific and obviously committed engagements with social and political issues, stimulated by crises in employment and the international financial system – following the General Strike in Britain in 1926, for example, and the Wall Street Crash in 1929 – and by the rise of both fascism (now seen

for what it was by most English-speaking writers) and Russian communism (which struck many of the less-well-informed, for a while, as a utopian alternative). The most highly regarded British writer of the 30s remains W. H. Auden (1907–73), who was more formally proficient and versatile than any other poet since Eliot, and who, in poems such as 'Spain' (1937), addressed the moral crises of the period in ways that had real, if limited, political impact. In the United States, realist novelists such as John Steinbeck (1902–68) explored the lives of the poor in the Great Depression, their work often gaining a second life and greater audience through film: Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), for example, becoming a box-office hit (1940) for the director John Ford (1894–1973) and contributing to a growing heap of evidence that cinema as an artistic / literary form was capable of much more than just comedy and spectacle. Auden is a distinctly English figure; Steinbeck and Ford are thoroughly American; but just as Britain and the United States have a 'special relationship' (in Churchill's phrase) despite being 'divided by a common language' (in Shaw's), the literary culture of the 30s continued to be highly transatlantic: Hollywood sent America to Europe in cans; Auden, controversially, moved to New York at the outbreak of World War II.

World War II (1939–1945)

World War II did not produce a distinct group of war poets (or other writers). There are a handful of famous poems by individuals who served in the war: 'The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner' by the American Randall Jarrell (1914–65), for example, and 'Vergissmeinnicht' by the English Keith Douglas (1920–44; killed in action). The most influential writing of the war is on the borders of literature: Churchill's speeches, for example, and the essays of George Orwell (Eric Blair; 1903–50), who had emerged as a powerful writer about society and politics in both fiction and non-fiction in the 30s, and would develop that role further in the immediate post-war years (with the bestsellers *Animal Farm* and *1984*). Both Churchill and Orwell (many of whose wartime essays were directed, from London, to an American readership) successfully used the persuasive resources of literary writing to political effect. Much other writing of the period, especially for the cinema, falls into propaganda, where the desire to have a specific emotional and ideological effect on the audience takes precedence over complex narratives, original ways of using language and thought-provoking ambiguity.

The best known artistically ambitious World War II novels were published well after the conflict had ended: *The Heat of the Day* (1948), for example, by the Anglo-Irish Elizabeth Bowen (1899–1973), and several high-profile American works, such as *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) by Norman Mailer (1923–2007), *Catch-22* (1961) by Joseph Heller (1923–99), and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) by Kurt Vonnegut (1922–2007). But the literary legacy of World War II is far more extensive than these few titles suggest. Above all, the Holocaust, and the use of nuclear weapons against Japan, were revelations of the cruelty that human

beings were capable of, and of the annihilation that we might bring upon ourselves, that have changed the parameters of culture ever since.

Contemporary, postcolonial and postmodern (1945–)

Whereas 'modern' implies a period that thinks of itself as distinctly different from (and probably superior to) its predecessors and 'modernism' has come to denote a very specific time during which newness was at a premium, 'contemporary' usually just means that which is happening now. But when did 'now' start? Arguably it was in 1945, if you think that the Holocaust and Hiroshima are still among the defining events of 'our time' – and there is a very strong case to be made for that view, especially while many who experienced World War II are still living. On the other hand, the great majority of those who are currently beginning to read and study literature can only connect with the twentieth century through their parents, and some would argue that the invention of the microprocessor (in 1959) or the internet (ca. 1982) defines our 'contemporary' reality more than the atomic bomb – or that the world (at least the richer parts of it) changed profoundly in the course of a few hours on 9/11, 2001. All of these reference points actually blur the line between 'contemporary' and 'modern', insofar as they look for the beginning of the contemporary in some event that makes the previous era seem out of date. But the contemporary, in literature and culture, is also, on some accounts, linked with the 'postmodern', which can be taken to mean that 'modern' no longer means anything, and that all such hierarchical or progressive ways of ordering cultural time are at an end. Thus we enter another quagmire of competing terminologies; or are reminded, once again, that it is up to us, writers and readers alike, to structure the boundless reality into which we find ourselves thrown.

It is a relief, in this context, to turn to 'postcolonialism', which has a slightly more straightforward meaning. Postcolonial literature is literature produced by writers from former colonies of imperial powers (usually European) in the languages of those powers. For our present purposes, therefore, we are talking about literature produced after political independence or on the brink of it, in English, by writers from nations that used to be part of the British Empire. Postcolonialism emerged as a clearly defined object of study with the wave of departures from the Empire that followed the weakening of the United Kingdom and the general redrawing of the global map in World War II, and has thus been linked to countries in Asia and Africa such as India (independent since 1947), Nigeria (1960) and Kenya (1963), as well as smaller island states, especially in the Caribbean, such as Trinidad and Tobago (1962) and St Lucia (1979). The concept can logically be extended to other countries that became independent earlier, such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, and even Ireland – although the further back the moment of independence recedes, the less it may be appropriate to think of a sovereign state as 'post-' anything. After all, even England was colonised, if we go back far enough.

'Colonial' literature in English, predating independence, existed to a greater or lesser extent in most of the countries mentioned above. The Bengali Nobel Prize-winner Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), for example, wrote some of his works in English, and translated others, while R. K. Narayan (1906–2001) chose English as the language for his long series of novels set in multilingual South India, beginning in the 1930s. The canon of major Australian literature in English goes back to the nineteenth century, with Marcus Clarke's novel *His Natural Life* (1870–72), which gives an Australian perspective on the transportation of convicts, just a few years after Dickens had touched on this theme at the other end of the chain of colonial power, in *Great Expectations*. Nevertheless, by far the greater proportion of English-language literature read in countries such as Australia and India before independence – and taught in colonial schools and universities – was by British (and especially English) authors. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Wordsworth and George Eliot, in this sense, have all been agents of Imperial indoctrination and control, for better or worse.

The postcolonial marks a new phase in world history, where political power is relocated, but where the nature of cultural and linguistic power is more ambiguous, often confronting writers with a difficult choice: should they use the language of their former colonial rulers (which, in many cases, were destructive and exploitative), and thus retain connections with a massive literary heritage and global readership, or should they choose the indigenous language(s) of their newly independent country. The Kenyan novelist, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (b. 1938) is one of those who has wrestled with this issue: publishing first in English, then in Gikuyu, then again in English. This oscillation is itself part of the cultural work, the thinking through of the new geographies of power and influence, that the postcolonial condition involves. As for narrative content, postcolonial literature often involves a direct replaying and analysis of the colonial experience, as in the case of *Things Fall Apart*, with its complex depiction of Igbo-British interactions in the 1890s – and even with its title, which alludes to 'The Second Coming', a poem written by Yeats in 1919, while his own country was in the throes of independence.

Achebe's novel made a considerable international impact, especially in Britain (much more so, obviously, than if it had been written in a West African language). Its publication was seen by some as an inaugural moment for black sub-Saharan African literature, as though a novelist should carry the responsibility for defining a new reality, affecting hundreds of millions of people. Something similar happened with the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1980. This was long after India had achieved independence (and been partitioned), and yet Rushdie's title, as well as the epic scope of his narrative, gives the impression that he does indeed set out to speak for a whole generation of fellow Indians. It is part of the mechanism of modern publishing – in which publicity and marketing play a major role – that a handful of texts are singled out for special attention. But especially favoured (and genuinely remarkable) works like Achebe's and Rushdie's have brought many other postcolonial authors in their wake, bringing an ethnic and cultural diversity to bookshelves and reading lists

in Britain, America, and beyond, that would have been hard to imagine before the second half of the twentieth century.

The appetite with which postcolonial literature has been received in the homelands of a longer-standing English literary tradition may be partly due to a sense that British and American culture, post-World War II, has stagnated, gone round in circles, or become trivial. In the later 40s and 50s, in particular, there was a certain sense of deflation or anti-climax after the great achievements of modernism, and indeed of fear and paranoia. If we look at a work like Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (which I will persist in treating as literature as well as cinema), we find a narrative of suspicion, paralysis and, ultimately, self-destruction, which seems eminently appropriate to a point in time between the McCarthyite anti-communist 'witch hunts' (not least in Hollywood) and the Cuban Missile Crisis – a period in which many in the West lived in daily fear (which those of you born after the 70s may scarcely be able to imagine) of a third world war that might leave no survivors. *Vertigo* also has aspects of the gothic, of psycho-symbolism and surrealism, and of a form of positivist late Modernism (in the celebration of the city and cars, for example), all contained in a cast iron plot that leaves us in no doubt, in the end, about who has done what to whom. So it is a strange mixture: a deeply disturbing narrative that is neatly resolved (like conventional crime fiction); a spectacularly fresh and shiny cultural product that is also weighed down by nostalgia – shackled, like its characters, to the past.

In many prose fictions of the 50s and 60s, we find something similar to the Hitchcockian mixture of old and new, and a comparable atmosphere of paranoia, but often without the decisive ending that both Hitchcock's own preferences and the mass-market priorities of Hollywood dictated. At the end of American novels such as *Lolita* (1955) by Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977), for example, or, even more, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) by Thomas Pynchon (b. 1937), the reader has no good grounds to be quite sure what has happened. This is arguably the factor that tips such narratives, rather than one like *Vertigo*, into full-fledged postmodernity – which means that we need to return to that concept, and clarify it further.

The deliberately paradoxical term 'postmodernism' was first used extensively in relation to architecture, to describe buildings that did not just try to be 'modern' by being different from what had gone before, but instead included ideas and influences from various different periods of architectural history. It was as though Western cultural development had got to a point where people realised that what they might want to call 'modern' was just one more stage in an endless sequence, where the art and ideas of one period were not inherently better or worse than those of any other, and where we might just as well mix things up in any way that seems appealing. More generally, postmodernism has to do with a free mixture of traditions and influences in literature and all forms of art and culture: a mixture not just of elements from different times and places but also from different levels of discourse in terms of high and low, popular and élite. This makes it sound a bit like *The Waste Land* or *Ulysses* all

over again, and there are some who say that there is no clear difference between modernism and the postmodern. However, for all their eclecticism, there is no doubt that *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses* place themselves as high culture, and were designed to enter and galvanise the canon. Many postmodern works, on the other hand, seem genuinely unsure of their status, or to feel that the cultural hierarchies that Eliot and Joyce often provocatively transgressed are now simply irrelevant. This gives postmodernism a bad reputation, in some quarters, because it seems to deliver cultural products that are chaotic or unsatisfying; or because it is linked to the global spread of a single 'postmodern' model of culture, and to a specific political and economic ideology; or because it seems to imply that all positions are equally valid in ethics, as well as in aesthetics, and hence to an amoral relativism.

All of these aspects of postmodernism can be found in literature from the 50s onwards, but the idea of postmodernism as wholly characterising major texts from this period is mistaken. For example, an important sub-genre or sub-movement commonly placed within postmodernism is the 'Theatre of the Absurd', which, by abandoning traditional conventions of plot and character supposedly plunges us into an abyss of meaninglessness, appropriate to a world that has abandoned hope of cultural or moral progress. The leading writer in English in this genre was Beckett, whose *Waiting for Godot* (1953) has become proverbial for a situation of endless deferral, where meaning never comes. And yet, audiences warm to the tramps Vladimir and Estragon, almost as they had warmed, several decades earlier, to Laurel and Hardy (on whom Beckett's characters were partly based), and, when Beckett won the Nobel Prize in 1969, it was, according to the Nobel website, 'for his writing, which – in new forms for the novel and drama – in the destitution of modern man acquires its elevation', which is harder to understand than most of Beckett's own texts, but apparently recuperates him as a humanist, and one who still addresses the 'modern'. Similarly, Nabokov and Pynchon are clearly interested in history and morality (even if *Lolita* may be notorious for apparently flouting it), and later 'post-modern' novelists in America, such as Toni Morrison (b. 1931) or Don DeLillo (b. 1936), in Britain, such as Angela Carter (1940–92) or Julian Barnes (b. 1946), and in former colonies, such as J. M. Coetzee (b. 1940), somehow manage to combine games with the past and the future, unstable characters and uncertain endings, with moving engagements with the most serious issues, linked to real people in real places. Literature is not architecture or abstract painting, although it can sometimes share some characteristics with those forms: words almost always get entangled with specific human predicaments in the reader's mind. Perhaps the purest postmodernism in contemporary literature occurs in the work of a poet such as John Ashbery (b. 1927), in which apparent gestures towards deep meaning are constantly mixed up with the seemingly inconsequential, as though as to make us feel, in the words of his early poem 'Illustration' (ostensibly about the suicide of a nun), that we are witnessing 'an effigy / Of indifference, a miracle / Not meant for us'. This is certainly very different from the 'confessional poetry' of other Americans such as Robert Lowell (1917–77) or Sylvia Plath (1932–63),

which draws us into the painful particularity of the writer's own life – and indeed from the continuing expectation that most readers have, that poetry should say significant things about the most morally and spiritually important subjects.

Postmodernism is associated with a rejection of hierarchies of past, present and future, and of value, and with a reluctance to settle on specific meanings. It is often said to oppose previous eras' efforts to explain the world in terms of 'grand narratives', be they religious, scientific or simply the more general notion that we are collectively making some kind of progress. But postmodernism resembles all previous literary and cultural ideas, insofar as it gradually becomes historicised, associated with particular writers at a particular time, and thus reabsorbed into a newer, slightly more capacious grand narrative. Charting alternations, such as these, between rebellion and assimilation, would be one way to write the whole history of literature.

The contemporary literary world is immensely rich. There are writers who feel themselves to be deeply associated with centuries-old traditions, others who try to defy those traditions. Postcolonialism has expanded the canon of English-language literature immensely, and this has taken place alongside greatly increased attention to ethnically defined literatures within America and Britain: Native American, for example, Chicano, Chinese-American, Black British and British Indian. In a sense, all of this can be seen as an expression of the post-modern, insofar as there is no single narrative, or canon, that will comfortably contain all of this activity: different literatures, produced within different human contexts, are developing at different rates, and not in the same direction. So, perhaps there is, after all, a qualitative difference between 'our' period and those that went before. It has been suggested that we are now in the era of 'post-postmodernism', or perhaps of 'metamodernism', insofar as writers may embrace some of the technical freedoms of postmodernism while still wanting to observe that the world is changing in tangible ways, and still wanting to express preferences and values, hopes and fears. David Foster Wallace might be an example of a writer of this type. But is that really post-postmodernism? Were most postmodernists not really like that anyway? Were not these conflicts perhaps already anticipated, back in the time of High Modernism, by Joyce … even by Swift … or Shakespeare? Discuss.

Some of the most remarkable works of twentieth and twenty-first century literature are still written in ways that earlier authors would readily understand. Most novels since *Ulysses*, for example, seem nineteenth-century by comparison, whether in a deliberately playful chronology-busting postmodern way – John Fowles's metafictional *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), for example – or perhaps because the author feels that the methods of nineteenth-century realism are still the best: as in the ambitiously humanistic neo-Dickensian or Dostoevskian works of Saul Bellow (1915–2005) or Philip Roth (b. 1933). In poetry in particular, many contemporary writers who seem likely to be numbered among the 'classics' are also obsessed with the Classical, still processing the insights and using the methods of literature that is as much as three thousand

years old: Seamus Heaney, for example, Tony Harrison, and the Canadian Anne Carson (b. 1950).

'English literature' has come a long way. Above all, the leading figures in the first decades of the third millennium are not necessarily English – or American. And yet, they are still strongly tied to the whole tradition sketched in these three historical chapters. J. M. Coetzee, for example, perhaps the current novelist most admired by critics, grew up South African, has recently become Australian, but has literary allegiances running back, through Conrad and Beckett, to Defoe. Seamus Heaney was Irish – not British, least of all English – but had as many affinities with Wordsworth as with Yeats, and, as we have seen, with Old English. So, even if you only want to read, or only have to study, 'contemporary' literary, it pays to know about what preceded it.

This brings us to the end of our brief survey of the history of literature in English. You will probably have noticed significant gaps along the way: where are Philip Sidney, you may ask, John Dryden, Oliver Goldsmith, D. H. Lawrence, William Faulkner, Katherine Mansfield, Wallace Stevens, Philip Larkin, Derek Walcott, Doris Lessing. and a thousand other writers? Well, quite. If you need a more comprehensive account you should move on to one of the books exclusively devoted to 'English' (usually British or British and Irish), American or postcolonial literary history that I have listed under 'Further reading'. After that, you can move on to books devoted to specific periods. After that, books devoted to specific aspects of specific periods. And while you are reading all of those books, many more will be written!

The present survey has been introductory, and designed to make you think. It has had the following main objectives: (i) to give you a sense of broad patterns in literary history from the Middle Ages to the present; (ii) to give you some insight into what is meant by the terms that are most often used to classify different periods in Anglophone literary history, and into some of the issues that scholars within those periods tend to focus on; (iii) to make you think about literature in English as an international phenomenon (at least since the seventeenth century), with complex paths of influence throughout the British Isles, across the Atlantic, and, eventually, throughout the world; and (iv) to illustrate the partiality and distortion involved in any descriptive exercise of this kind.

By way of conclusion, I will suggest a few other routes that might be taken, in order to construct different histories of literature in English. Take the traditional emphasis on royalty in classifying periods in British literature: it is becoming more unusual, now, to talk about 'Elizabethan' or 'Jacobean' literature; instead we use the term 'early modern'. After all, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century subjects of Elizabeth and James may have had to acknowledge the supreme authority and power of their monarchs, but why should we? Perhaps it is also time to reconsider the categorisation of many millions of people's cultural activity, over nearly seventy years, as 'Victorian'. Tennyson might have said that his world revolved around the Queen; Dickens almost certainly would not. Other ways of structuring literary history could be found that might be more democratic, placing the emphasis on the great mass of humanity rather than

their figureheads: I have gone some way in this direction (as have most recent historians of literature), but even more weight could be laid on the epoch-making significance of the English and American revolutions, for example; or the process of reform in nineteenth-century Britain (which crosses the 'Romantic' and 'Victorian' periods); or the American Civil War; or technological developments that have changed the world for kings and commoners alike; or the changing status of religion in English-speaking people's lives from the Reformation and countless subsequent clashes between Protestant and Catholic beliefs, through the conflicts between Darwinism and Intelligent Design, to the recent resurgence of Islam as a perceived threat to Western lives and culture. We could also imagine a literary history that would be structured according to the changing relationships between human beings and the living world around them: proceeding from the war with animalistic monstrosity in *Beowulf*, for example, through the temple-haunting martlets and myriad other creatures in *Macbeth*, through the semi-human Yahoos and Houyhnhnms of *Gulliver's Travels*, through the worship or co-option of nature in the Romantics, to animal rights (a strong factor in Coetzee's writing, for example) and global warming.

Alternatively, we could decide to move in the other direction, away from literature's relationship with living things (human and otherwise), towards an emphasis on literature as an aesthetic phenomenon with its own internal history. Such an approach would emphasise developments in literary form, marking periods and movements in terms of the rise and fall of genres, for example, the development of particular verse forms, the ways in which certain syntactical structures and kinds of imagery have mutated on their way from Chaucer, Donne or Wordsworth to us. And then there would be other ways of tracing the history of literature, as an art, that would quickly overlap with questions of political and social orientation: if, for example, we decided to give more prominence to genre fiction such as detective stories or Sci-fi, in which case Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) and Dashiell Hammett (1894–1961), for example, or H. G. Wells (1866–1946) and Isaac Asimov (1920–92), might suddenly find themselves rocketed into period-defining prominence; or if we attended less to individual authors and more to collective forms of publishing such as literary journals, running from the hugely influential *Spectator* (1711–12), through the *Edinburgh Review* (1802–1929), Dickens's *Household Words* (1850–59), *Poetry* (1912–) and *The Criterion* (1922–39) (to name but a few), to *Playboy* (1953–) (which has published authors ranging from P. G. Wodehouse to Margaret Atwood!) and the *New York Review of Books* (1963–). There is also the question of a 'counter-culture' that specifically defines itself in opposition to the mainstream that I have dutifully outlined: hipper historians would certainly have said something, by now, about the 'Beat Generation' of Jack Kerouac (1922–69) and Allen Ginsberg (1926–97). Once again, any history of literature is only one of many: now you can start making your own connections and explanatory narratives.

Part IV

Positions, identities, ideas

This page intentionally left blank

11 The place of literature

One of the best things about studying literature is that every kind of knowledge is potentially relevant. Except under particularly repressive regimes, there are no obvious limits to the subject matter of novels or poems. Fictional characters may be engaged in any kind of human or inhuman activity, and authors may have had their view of the world shaped by innumerable kinds of experience. Donne is most famous as a poet, but was also a priest; Fielding was not just a novelist and playwright but also a magistrate; Whitman worked voluntarily as a nurse in Civil War hospitals; Charlotte Brontë was a schoolteacher and governess; Dickens, aged twelve, had a job sticking labels onto jars of boot-polish (which he didn't like), and later became a parliamentary reporter (which he did); Conrad was a sea captain; T. S. Eliot worked in a bank, and then as a publisher. Many writers, these days, supplement their income by teaching at universities, and this has perhaps encouraged an idea that 'serious' literature is designed to be read by people who have been to university, perhaps particularly those who have studied 'English'. Some of it is, for better or worse; plenty is not. Authors can write about whatever they want, for any kind of reader.

Similarly, people may have many different reasons for reading literature. They may want to read for the aesthetic pleasure of seeing words, or a plot, dexterously arranged. But most will also want to find enriching connections between the literature that they read and their own experience of life, whatever that may be. All of this perhaps goes without saying. However, it is a fact that the links between literature and other kinds of human pursuit – intellectual and otherwise – have come under increasing scrutiny in recent decades, especially for those who study literature in higher education. There are two main reasons for this. First of all, the humanities in general have been told to justify themselves in relation to other subjects that seem to offer a more obvious return on society's investments, such as the natural sciences, technology and business studies. Secondly, more and more students find themselves studying literature in the context of a joint or major/minor degree structure, where it may be combined with anything from history of art to politics, or in a modular framework in which it may be mixed up with anything at all. This is in addition to the fact that, for many students, 'English' already consists of a mixture of courses, not just in literature, but also in linguistics and some combination of historical,

social and cultural studies. The aim of this chapter is to provide some suggestions as to how to make sense of these combinations – both for students who are faced with them institutionally, and for readers who simply want to think about how literature in English might connect with their other interests and expertise.

English and other literatures

This book is supposed to be about 'literature in English' and all of the examples consist of texts that were originally written in some version of the English language. But authors and readers are not normally restricted in that way. Even if they do not read in any other language, vast numbers of translations are available. Most writers would love their works to be translated and spread throughout the world; most are also interested in texts that have travelled in the other direction. A few instances of this kind have already cropped up in previous chapters. In the discussion of naturalism, for example, I mentioned Émile Zola – as would almost any other discussion of naturalism, I imagine, that you might come across. In the discussion of English neo-classicism it was inevitable that I should refer to Classical authors. These are obvious cases where English-language literature has taken a certain turn under foreign-language influence. In some periods – Romanticism and modernism are the obvious examples – European literature has been particularly international. The connections between what Coleridge wrote in England and what Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) wrote in Germany, or between Joyce's work and the Norwegian plays of Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) or the Italian novels of Italo Svevo (1861–1928) are not coincidental: these authors were aware of one another, and their international networking was typical of their times. There is more than enough to read that was written in English, you may say, but, beyond a certain point, any study of Romanticism or modernism that proceeds in complete ignorance of anything non-English will run into difficulties. In fact, the context of literature in English has always been multicultural and multilingual: Chaucer was more influenced by French and Italian sources than native English ones; Milton wrote some of his poems in Latin. If we seek examples from contemporary literature, the English novelist Julian Barnes grew up in a family of French teachers, called his break-through novel *Flaubert's Parrot*, and is probably more appreciated and honoured in France than he is at home, while numerous authors in the United States now alternate between English and Spanish (sometimes within the same text), reflecting the multilingual reality in which they find themselves.

The history of 'English' as an academic discipline is bound up with the status of English-speaking countries (especially England itself) within the wider world. Promoting literature in one language above, or to the exclusion of, others can be a political move. On the other hand, there may be innocent and pragmatic reasons for it: we may lack the ability to read other literatures in the original, or we may lack the time (especially as students) to spread our reading across linguistic borders, without sacrificing depth and coherence. This may depend on

what aspects of literature we (or our teachers) wish to emphasise. If we prioritise close reading, treating literature as an art in which every word counts, then monolingual studies may be the most appropriate. If we are more interested in aspects of literature that seem relatively independent of linguistic detail – plot structures, for example, or political content – then it may make more sense to look at what literature in general, not just in one language, has to offer.

In institutional terms, the study of literature in more than one language at the same time often goes under the heading of Comparative Literature. In the same university there may be scholars working on Dickens and Thackeray in the English Department, for example, and on Dickens and Victor Hugo in 'Comp. Lit'. In some institutions, calling yourself a comparativist requires competence in more than one language; in others, texts are studied in translation. Recently there has been a movement towards the study of 'world literature'. This partly reflects a late-twentieth-century realisation, in the wake of postcolonialism, that the geography of important literature is much bigger than the European map (especially England, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Russia) that was emphasised by traditional Comparative Literature. But it also has roots as far back as the 1820s, when Johann Wolfgang von Goethe suggested, prematurely, that national literatures had lost their significance and *Weltliteratur* should now take over. Given the conditions of publishing and information exchange in our own day, it certainly makes sense to think about the presence and influence of a text has beyond its author's homeland. An internationally acclaimed novel written in Icelandic, for example, will quickly have been read by far more people in translation than in its original language – at which point the question arises whether it really should be defined as a work of Icelandic literature or rather as a work of world literature that happens to have had a relatively minor prefatory life in Iceland.

Linguistics

Most students who have to study both literature in English and linguistics have a fairly strong preference for one or the other. The academics who research in, and teach, these different fields tend to work in rather different ways and may even seem to be different kinds of people. When both groups find themselves sharing the same physical or administrative space there may be a certain coolness between them, or at least a preference for each doing their own thing without much discussion with the other. Once again, as with literatures in different languages, this may simply be due to a lack of time: scholars of American novels may work alongside scholars of French ones, but simply not have time to read one another's texts. Similarly, literature scholars and linguists may be too busy to share more than social chit-chat. But the potential overlaps between literary and linguistic studies are enormous.

For one thing, literary texts are one of the major resources available to historical or social linguists who want to study how English was used at particular times, in particular places. In the absence of recordings of real-life conversations, the

dialogues between fictional characters in older literary works may be the best guide that we have to how people ordinarily spoke to one another, or even to the semantics of individual words. When you look up a word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, you will often find that most of the early citations used to exemplify its meanings are taken from literary texts. This may be partly because lexicographers enjoy searching for words in old poems more than in mathematical treatises, sermons, or legal transcripts, but it is also very often because literary texts are the ones that have been preserved, and that include the most remarkable instances of linguistic usage. The development of a language is a process of collective creativity. A language is made by its users, and the users who usually do most to shape a language, stretching its range and excavating its latent potential, are literary authors. Another partly satisfactory definition of literature (to add to those that we looked at in Chapter 2) might be this: writing that deliberately makes a language grow, rather than just being content to take it as it is. Thus, almost any extensive study of how English has developed, whether historically – say, between Chaucer's time and ours – or geographically – in moving from Britain, for example, to North America – is likely to need literature as a source of data.

So, literature can be a resource for linguistics. The converse is equally true. Insofar as understanding a literary text requires close reading (and it certainly does, in order to address the great majority of questions that literature raises) then it helps to understand the language as well as possible. Obviously, you need to comprehend the individual words that the author uses, and for that we have dictionaries. But that is just the beginning. Many of the significant effects of a literary text are achieved not just through vocabulary choices but also through the careful manipulation of other aspects of language such as syntax or phonetics, and a full description of those effects will require some linguistic know-how. But let us look at an example, from a text that you might think that we have already wrung dry.

If we return once more to the middle stanza of Donne's 'The Good-Morrow', we find the following:

> Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
> Let maps to others, worlds on worlds have shown:
> Let us possess one world; each hath one, and is one.

These three lines beginning with 'Let' exemplify a common rhetorical device: a series of repetitions that suggest that the speaker is on top of his material, swelling with eloquence, hammering his point of view into our heads with successive blows on the same small spot. Politicians, for example, do this all the time. But the three instances are not semantically identical. In the first two cases, 'Let', in 'Let sea-discoverers' and 'Let maps', could be paraphrased, long-windedly, as 'Everyone can/must agree that it is the case that', so that there is an unexpressed third-person subject ('everyone'). When we come to the third instance, however, 'Let us' may be understood as meaning something much

more like 'You must give permission' – with a second-person subject – 'to us' (the speaker and his lover); or, alternatively, as a first person imperative: 'We should/must/will, you and I'. All three cases are imperatives, but the last is distinctly different, in kind, from the previous two. This is technical stuff, you may say, which does not add to our experience of anything important in the poem. On the contrary, this kind of virtuosic shift from a rather casual enumeration of common knowledge to a vigorous personal claim on the part of the speaker – for freedom, attention and respect – seems close to what the poem, emotionally and intellectually, is all about.

The above discussion suggests how a very modest amount of technical knowledge about linguistics can be made to serve the aims of literary criticism. Some scholars go further, treating literature as first and foremost a set of special cases of language use: which makes the study of literature not so much a discipline in its own right as a sub-discipline within linguistics. Work of this kind is often pursued under the heading of 'stylistics', which can usually be understood as equivalent, in terms of empirical method and testable hypotheses, to other branches of linguistics such as syntax and phonetics.

Literature and other arts

The point about the way Romanticism and Modernism crossed the boundaries between literatures could easily be extended to boundaries between different arts. We could make comparisons, for example, between Wordsworth and his close contemporary, the painter J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851). Both were devoted depicters of the natural world. In each case, however, we might want to ask whether they are really representing nature as it is, or imposing their human concerns upon it. Turner is regarded as having made tremendous breakthroughs in the representation of land, sea and sky, capturing effects of light and form that an earlier landscape painter (Claude Lorrain, for example) might have found chaotic and ugly, but bringing us much closer, thereby, to what the world is actually like. Something similar could be said about the way in which Wordsworth describes mountains and lakes, compared with the more formulaic and allegorical ways in which this had been done in the earlier tradition of pastoral poetry. On the other hand, a painting by Turner is immediately recognisable as a painting by Turner, not as a snapshot of nature; and Wordsworth's ways of describing the inanimate add up, over hundreds of poems, to the expression of a very distinctive subjectivity. In both the painter and the poet, therefore, we could say that there is a dialogue or oscillation, characteristic of Romanticism, between inner and outer, the inhuman and the human. In that sense, an extended comparison of Wordsworth and Turner might be at least as fruitful as one between Wordsworth and Keats. An almost infinite range of other comparisons between literature and the visual arts might be made (and have been), not just confined to comprehensive movements like Romanticism or Modernism: between eighteenth-century novels and the story-telling paintings and prints of William Hogarth (1697–1764), for example, or between scenes of

urban life in Tennessee Williams and the canvases of Edward Hopper (1882–1967). In the latter case, Hitchcock might be brought into the equation, linking the art of words with the art of pictures, through another art that uses both.

It is not just in the cinema that the verbal and the visual come together in the same work. We looked at William Blake's 'The Tyger' earlier, as a purely verbal text. But this was not what Blake intended. Search for the poem online and you will quickly find pictures of the form in which Blake himself printed it: a page of hand-engraved words with accompanying designs, notably a drawing of the 'tyger' itself. Moreover, you will find that this page, or plate, exists in many different versions, hand-coloured by the artist. As we know, the text of the poem contains ambiguities, but this was apparently not enough for Blake: he wanted to add different levels of meaning, over and over again, every time he made a new copy. Sometimes the picture of the animal is notoriously un-tiger-like, even cuddly; sometimes it is much more fierce. Clearly, these representations push us in different directions when it comes to how we interpret the text. Blake is an extreme case, but almost all literature – especially poetry – has a visual dimension. We may not be able to register the details of verse form when we hear a poem read aloud, but when we look at it on the page we can see the shape. What difference does that make? Is the verse form not functioning as a kind of graphic art?

Conversely, visual artists often attach words (even if it is just a title) to their work, or even plant them in it. For example, one of the more shocking or amusing works of the English artist Tracey Emin (b. 1963), entitled 'Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995', consists of a tent with lots of names sown into its interior. On the groundsheet are the words:

WITH
MYSELF
ALWAYS MYSELF
NEVER
FORGETTING

That would not be much of a poem, if it were just a verbal text. However, the whole work functions as a piece of composite art, rather like Blake's. In both cases, the artist takes the visual and spatial characteristics of poetry (which we have already looked at in the architectural metaphor of a 'stanza', a 'room') and materialises them. In the Blake poem, we are made to appreciate the process of putting a 'frame' around 'fearful symmetry' in a new way, when we see the frame that Blake has printed, in ink, around the text. In Emin's work, in order to read the text inside the tent, we have to more or less climb into it, and suddenly we find ourselves, in an unsettling or ridiculous way, almost joining the artist's catalogue of conquests. Full appreciation, in both cases, requires interest and experience in more than one art.

Poetry has had connections with music going back to Classical times: 'lyric' poetry is so called because ancient poems were recited to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument, the lyre. 'The Good-Morrow' was published in a collection

of Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*, and there is often little obvious difference between early modern poems that were written to be read and those that were designed to be sung: the poet and composer Thomas Campion (1567–1620), for example, produced some texts with accompanying music and some without. The word 'song' still had this flexible status when Blake included 'The Tyger' in his *Songs of Experience* – and there is evidence that he may indeed have sung this and similar poems, thus adding further dimensions of meaning that we can only imagine. Since then, Blake's poems have been set to music by many others, ranging from the composer Benjamin Britten (1913–76) to the 60s New York rock band, The Fugs. Similarly, a poem of Whitman's about his Civil War experiences, 'The Wound-Dresser', can now be experienced as a piece for baritone and chamber orchestra by John Adams (b. 1947). None of this is trivial. Any musical setting of a literary text (like any visual illustration of it) is an act of interpretation, a reading of sorts. We saw in the chapter on 'Poetry' that much may depend on how a line of verse is scanned, on how we enunciate the individual words and rhythmic patterns. A musical performance of a literary text constantly has to make choices of that kind.

There are many people working in the field of cultural studies, these days, who apply the tools of literary criticism, developed to read poets like Donne and Blake, to the lyrics of popular music. Amongst more traditional literary scholars – the people who normally work on authors like Donne and Blake – it has become something of a cliché that there is one popular musician who particularly deserves this form of attention: Bob Dylan (b. 1941). (There are even professors who think that Dylan should get the Nobel Prize for Literature.) Some of these critics maintain that he is essentially a verbal artist, or at least that the verbal and the musical can be clearly separated when we talk about him. There are many readings of Dylan's lyrics, for example, that treat them as poems on the page, finding subtleties of meaning that seem to stand up to comparison with the likes of Keats or T. S. Eliot. The point has certainly been made that the methods of literary criticism are relevant and useful in this case. But Dylan himself clearly thinks that these texts are worth not just reading, but singing, decade after decade. And what he does, famously, is sing the same songs in many different ways. He casts a bright or dark light on his compositions, metaphorically colours them, in ways that seem comparable to what Blake was doing with his own repeated darkenings, lightenings and colourings – with paint brushes – of his home-printed texts. Both of these writers / artists have used the conjunction of different art forms to produce something that is greater than the sum of its parts, and to pre-empt (and yet also expand) the work of the critic. We too, as critical readers of literature, would do well to keep its relationships with other forms of representation and communication in mind.

History

'I cannot comprehend the neglect of a family library in such days as these', says Mr Darcy, in *Pride and Prejudice*. His own, at Pemberley, 'has been the work of

many generations'. Darcy sees an intimate relationship, that is, between literature (in a broad sense) and time. We can imagine him associating the canon of great authors – firmly grounded, no doubt, in Greek and Latin texts – with the structure of privilege (or, from his point of view, honour and service) that gives him the status that he has. When he speaks of 'days such as these' he may well be thinking, in the wake of revolutions in America and on the Continent, that social and political traditions are under threat, and that holding tightly onto cultural ones will help. In saying these things, I am responding to Darcy's sense of himself in history, and of literature as a way of carrying the past into the future, but I am also historicising Darcy (the literary character) and the novel in which he appears, as early-nineteenth-century creations. Readers and scholars of literature do this all the time: the three previous chapters of this book, for example, are built on the assumption that literature has a history of its own, and that this can usefully be related to the larger history of non-literary ideas and events. Clearly, therefore, historical knowledge has the capacity to enrich readings of literary texts (and historical ignorance or confusion can easily screw them up).

Just as with literature and linguistics, there is a two-way relationship between literature and history. One very common and good reason that people give for reading literature is to gain insight into other people's lives. Most of these lives will be situated in the past. There are many non-literary sources that we can draw upon, for historical information. However, the further we go back in time, the more sparse and inadequate these sources tend to become by comparison with literary ones, with their detailed human content. One of the main ways in which historians and archaeologists of Anglo-Saxon England can make sense of the jewellery, weaponry and other artefacts that they have found, for example, is by reading descriptions of them in use in texts such as *Beowulf*. Much more recently, a novel like *Pride and Prejudice* tells us more and more about the way in which people interacted in Regency England, even while we use the facts that we already knew, before we read the novel, to make sense of it. Just because it is a work of fiction does not mean that it is not full of factual data. In the case of a text like *Macbeth*, for example, the challenge to us, both as literary and historical readers, is very complex: we need to think about what may have been going on in early-seventeenth-century England, to explain why Shakespeare chose to represent eleventh-century Scottish history in this way; but, simultaneously, the play's many departures from what we know, and what we know that Shakespeare could have known, about the real equivalents of Macbeth, Duncan and the rest will also serve as primary data for our understanding of the seventeenth century. If we happen to be putting on a production of the play, we may of course decide to uproot the text completely, and set it, say, in the Balkans in the 1990s. But by doing that we will certainly not dodge the question of history. Critics of our adaptation will wonder about our views of that particular part of the world at that particular time, and they will ask what it is about our own moment in history that made us think that this other one could somehow be illuminated by Shakespeare.

So, readers and scholars of literature often need historians, and historians often need literature. We will come back to the relationship between history

and literature – as the respective domains, in principle, of fact and fiction – in the chapter on literary theory.

The social sciences

If we accept that literature can tells us things about history, and history can tell us about literature, then it is only a short step to connections between literary studies and the specific histories of subjects such as economics, politics and law. The interactions of the social classes in *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, are conditioned even more by wealth than by birth: both Austen's narrator and her characters quite frequently and precisely categorise people in terms of their annual income. On the most basic level, it will help the reader to know how much a pound was worth in Regency England, compared with its value today. Beyond that, any knowledge that we may have of the ways in which different kinds of income – salaries and rents, for example – related to one another and were administered will help. The period in question is recent enough that there will be copious non-literary sources of economic data, such as Parliamentary debates and the records of financial institutions, but, even so, if we want to know how people in England two hundred years ago actually felt about wealth and (relative) poverty, financial security and the lack of it, then Austen will be a significant resource.

As for political history, if we want to gauge the force of Achebe's representation of English imperial power in late-nineteenth century Nigeria, we would do well to learn about the facts and then see how closely they match his fictional account. But a full reading of *Things Fall Apart* would also need to take account of the political history of Nigeria in the 1950s, insofar as this novel was written in the special circumstances of the years leading up to independence.

A more interesting question, perhaps, is whether literature can be relevant to the development of ideas in the social sciences right now, not just the past history of such ideas. Well, Achebe's novel can be seen as having been a significant contribution to the active political debates leading up to Nigerian independence. That is a historical matter now, but was current when the book came out. By the same token, a work of literature published tomorrow could, in principle, function as a political intervention in a current issue. But there are also ways in which a huge variety of literary texts, including very old ones, may be relevant to thinking about politics in the present: political discourse, like literature, is a mode of communication, and especially of persuasion, that depends upon language. This can be seen in speech-making. For example, it is generally accepted that Barack Obama owes his rise to the Presidency of the United States in 2009 not exclusively but substantially to his abilities as an orator – which are clearly related to his abilities as a writer, displayed not least in a highly literary autobiography in which he cites books, as well as people, as formative influences on his character and beliefs. Obama is an unusually bookish politician, but even the least intellectual are aware of the power of words. That is why politicians often say so little when they are interviewed, and say it many times over:

because they know that one or two misplaced words could finish their careers. Politics is thus a domain in which textual structures are created that can have massive practical, social and economic consequences; and some of the ways in which politics works are at least analogous to literature. It might seem strange, in a way, that so many serious people spend so much time reading and thinking about old novels or poems when they might just as well apply similar critical methods to contemporary political debate. Part of the explanation, of course, is that most people find the literary texts more enjoyable, but it is also the case that many of the problems that dominate politics are very old ones – to do with the opposition between security and liberty, centralised and distributed forms of power, or majority and minority interests – and the most thought-provoking presentations of these problems may be located, not in the latest discussions between serving politicians, but in works of imaginative literature that may be centuries old.

Literature can in fact engage with the political in many different ways. For example, it can be seen as having an inbuilt predisposition towards dissent: insofar as authors seek new ways of seeing and describing human realities, they necessarily stand in a critical relation to the status quo. But literature can also lend itself to propaganda. The study of literature can foster independent critical thought, making us realise that our world could be other than it is. But the teaching of literature can also reinscribe canons that maintain things as they are. Literature helps us to understand all sorts of people; but literature may be 'élite'. We might suspect that one reason why societies allow so many students (and academics) to busy themselves with literature and other humanistic studies might be because intelligent and restless people are thereby taken out of political circulation, at least for a while, and their energies diverted into harmless and insignificant channels. But then we read *Macbeth*, and suddenly we have a 'new' set of models for understanding how the outrageous ambitions of powerful individuals can still affect so many people in the world, and how politicians can trap not only others but also themselves in visions that may turn out to be nothing more than words.

Much of what has just been said about politics applies just as well to law. In fact, 'law and literature' has been a growing academic field in recent years. The court of law is a public institution in which fiction is often demonstrably present: when two testimonies contradict one another, someone is lying. Lawyers do not merely use rhetoric but may also assume personae – act – in order to further their client's cause. The court of law has, in fact, many of the characteristics of theatre, and legal proceedings are open to analysis as performance. Conversely, while reading literary narrative, we may find ourselves, as readers, being constructed as a members of a jury. For a while, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy and Wickham are effectively on trial; evidence is gradually presented to us as to why we should trust and favour one or the other. Austen, it eventually turns out, is making a case for Mr Darcy, and we, like Elizabeth Bennet, are likely to arrive at the appropriate verdict. In another kind of literary narrative, with a less reliable narrator, we may feel that the right case has somehow never been

made, and that we are even witnessing a miscarriage of justice. In *Vertigo*, for example, we may end up thinking that both script and camera have paid too much attention to Scotty, making him out to be a victim – either of other people's crimes or of fate – and too little to the women who have died along the way.

In a way, law *is* literature: it is a body of collectively authored texts that could have been quite different but, once made, give us models and narratives for interpreting and arranging life. The particular canon of legal texts that we have inherited (going back, like literature, to Classical times) determines the ways in which we think and act, more than we can ever fully comprehend. Similarly, literature is law: an author will always follow the rules of discourse and genre laid down by previous generations, to a great extent; when he or she breaks those rules, law-breaking becomes fundamental to the identity of the resulting work. The Modernists, in a sense, were criminals.

Business

For the last few decades, there has been increasing pressure on humanistic disciplines, especially in state-funded higher education, to provide students with professionally relevant skills. Often, this seems to mean entrepreneurial or management-related skills. When governments allocate money to education, they like to be shown that they will get a return on their investment – preferably itself in the form of money. Studying a language, especially a foreign one, can be recommended as facilitating communication with potential clients and customers. Often, humanists claim that studying the history and culture connected with a specific language – including its literature – enhances this effect: if you have some knowledge of the ideas, values, signs (everything from single words to complex symbols), imagined identities, and narratives of a given nation or community, then you have a better chance of doing profitable deals with them. That's the idea, anyway.

A lot of humanists, perhaps especially scholars and students of literature, react with instant hostility to ideas of this kind. They may well feel that everything that they like about literature transcends economic and commercial interests. But it is surely true enough that the interaction between different communities in the world (which seems a necessary and generally a good thing) can only be enriched – made more satisfying and less harmful, as well as more profitable – by the enhanced understanding that comes from studying literature. After all, if all that we knew of the culture of the United States was disaster movies and pop music, we would have a certain view of that country, which would surely be challenged and deepened if we then went on to read works by Melville and Dickinson, Toni Morrison and Don Delillo. Knowledge of all of these things – the high culture and the low – would at the very least give us more flexible expectations and a broader range of conversation, if we should suddenly find ourselves in a business meeting with a group of smart people from Texas or Illinois.

It can also be argued that literature enhances business-readiness in more fundamental ways. There are two main claims here: first, that great literature

provides insight into the way people, in general, think (in other words, into human psychology); and secondly, that most human operations, including setting up businesses, buying, selling, publicity and marketing, involve versions of storytelling, and are all therefore, in a sense, quasi-literary. One can imagine good cases being made for the commercial utility of reading many of the texts that we have already looked at, using a mixture of these arguments: *Macbeth*, for example, can teach us things about – or at least, form the basis for a good discussion of – leadership, and how it can go horribly wrong. The same could be said for *Things Fall Apart*, which would have the added benefit of offering newcomers to Nigeria an entry into recent history and related debates, should they find themselves doing business in that country. Visitors from Nigeria, on the other hand, might find themselves at an advantage if they dropped references to *Pride and Prejudice* into a sales-pitch in England – or possibly not. It rather depends what sub-context within English society we are talking about, and, in that respect too, Austen provides some guidance that is not wholly out of date. Perhaps even Donne's or Dickinson's poems could tell us something that could be monetised, about how to make an impact, create an image, embody charisma and gather a fan- or customer-base, in a few short words.

However, any way of looking at literature that exclusively presents it as a resource, a kind of service facility for the things in life that really count (that is, that can be quantified, preferably in monetary units), is only going to succeed up to a certain point. Literature, as we have seen, has the troublesome characteristic of being polyvalent, saying a whole lot of different things at once, some of them mutually contradictory. Many will feel that the prime function of literature in the world is at least as much to create doubt as to convey information. Some, indeed, will say that one of the best things about art in general is its apparent uselessness, or at least its resistance to being incorporated into any efficient system. In that way, it creates a breathing space for humanity, or even sustains the very notion of humanity as something other than the material conditions that keep people alive and make some of them richer. The attempt, in higher education and elsewhere, to make literary studies speak the language of business could well be seen as an attempt (conscious or not) by the adherents of a globally dominant (but specific and not inevitable) ideology to control and subjugate one of the few areas that has not yet succumbed entirely to its logic. And why, humanists might say, should literature be made to do that, when the dominant system clearly has many problems (as in the early-twenty-first-century global finance crisis)? What is the ultimate logic, in any case, of such an attempt? Is it not rather circular, suggesting that the only things worth doing are the things that make us prosperous? What are we supposed to do, then, when prosperity has been reached? If there is nothing of value beyond the means to create more value, then being human is ultimately only about power, and that always means the power of one individual or group over others, and therefore abuse and oppression.

These arguments against an idea of literature as the servant of business are not meant to invalidate the preceding ones in favour of the proposition. The

conclusions are obvious. When read intelligently, literature will help you do business, and most other things, in intelligent ways. When read reductively, for a simple insight or message, it probably won't. Literature may well be able to help us succeed; but it can also give us reasons for wanting to succeed, beyond success itself.

The natural sciences

Sciences such as chemistry, biology and astrophysics have an obvious but ambiguous centrality in a particular literary genre: science fiction. The first great practitioner of this genre in English (setting aside a few pioneering anomalies such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*) was H. G. Wells, who probably expected the central propositions in many of his fantastical scenarios eventually to become scientific fact. In some cases, they have already done so (*The First Men in the Moon*, 1901); in others, projects are well under way (*The Invisible Man*, 1897), or at least accepted, by some, as theoretically possible (*The Time Machine*, 1895). But Wells's scientific details, of course, are either absent or, in most cases, very far from the truth. Disappointingly, it has proved not to be the case that the moon sprouts flowers whenever the sun rises. Nevertheless, Wells has surely inspired genuine scientific enquiry in others, rather as the methods of Sherlock Holmes have sometimes been taught to real detectives. Moreover, some of Wells's writing belongs to another genre: popular science, which is writing that seeks to make the natural sciences accessible to a general non-expert readership, using some of the ingratiating and persuasive resources of literature, but without wandering (at least not intentionally) into fiction. Both of these genres, mirror images of a sort, are thriving in the twenty-first century, dealing in their different ways with the problem of massively consequential information, which all of us need to know something about, but which only a few have the time or the aptitude to absorb without some kind of artistic shaping and colouring.

The relationship between literature and the natural sciences is much broader, however, than the generic boundaries of science fiction and popular science. Chaucer wrote tales, romances, lyrics, an epic, but also a *Treatise on the Astrolabe* (an astronomical instrument); Francis Bacon (1561–1626) is a major figure in the histories of both English prose and scientific method; Wordsworth and Coleridge were friends with Humphry Davy (1778–1829), the greatest English scientist of his day, who seems to have taught them some chemistry, while writing poetry, fairly seriously, himself; Charles Darwin's grandfather Erasmus (1731–1802) wrote scientific treatises in verse; more recently, the novelist Ian McEwan (b. 1948) has done his best to train himself in climate change science and quantum mechanics in order to keep pace, in fiction, with the new ways of understanding reality that have been created by those disciplines.

It is probably too soon to understand how extensively late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors, like McEwan, have been influenced by the general scientific environment in which they grew up (whether or not they have deliberately paid attention to it). But if we look back to the Victorian period, for

example, we can see how the high-profile and emotive science of evolution produced profound literary repercussions, so that we can trace 'Darwin's plots' (to quote the title of one particularly influential critical study) through many late-nineteenth-century narratives. But this takes us towards a sense in which *all* literature may be susceptible to a scientific approach. Literature is produced by humans; humans are naturally occurring organisms; most, if not all, the behaviour of naturally occurring organisms (not just their physical attributes) can be accounted for, most scientists would argue, in evolutionary terms. Darwin's researches in physical adaptation led quickly to flawed theories of 'social Darwinism'; those have been followed in more recent years by a more dispassionate, generally less ideological, 'evolutionary psychology'; in the field of literary studies, there is now a significant community of 'evolutionary critics' or 'literary Darwinists' who analyse the choices that authors make and the stories that they tell in terms of what they reveal, whether they want to or not, about the processes of selection and adaptation that have been running our lives since long before Darwin, or anyone else, came along to detect or explain them.

Evolutionary criticism, rather like stylistics, is an approach that explicitly or implicitly questions the separation between the natural sciences and the humanities. Both approaches suggest that there is nothing esoteric about literature that makes it essentially different from other objects of study. The same is largely true of much of the work currently pursued under the heading of 'the digital humanities', in which, for example, processes of mass data-analysis, scarcely possible for literary critics before the availability of computers, are used to fundamentally change the scope of scholarly attention. For example, literary-historical arguments can now be advanced on the basis of statistical analysis of elements in a corpus of several thousand novels – all of which the critic has almost certainly not read. These elements might be linguistic units, geographical references, quantities of named characters, or many other things. The results of such research are usually very different from the sustained, sympathetic, often emotionally charged involvement with a few texts that has characterised most literary criticism over the ages. Luckily, few practitioners are so zealous as to claim that we have to choose one methodology over the others. As in the case of 'world literature', the digital humanities are arguably making us think about the real scale and consequence of literature as a force around the globe, not just as a unique, private experience – and that is surely worth doing, even if many of us may still feel that there is something about literature, in the end, that is not wholly accessible to digital, statistical, evolutionary or other hard-science paradigms.

One of the claims made for literature's importance and usefulness has for millennia been that it provides information about, or helps us to study, how people think. In other words, literature has things to say about psychology. As literary criticism has grown in sophistication, this has moved from taking characters within literary narratives as exemplifying particular 'humours' or natures or psychological types, through an emphasis on the narrator as exemplifying aspects of how we see the world (for example, in a 'stream of consciousness'), to a present situation in which the whole text, in its content and form, can be

analysed in terms of what it reveals about human thought processes. The social or softer science of psychology has partly been replaced by the harder, technology-based neurosciences, and some literary scholars, working in the field of 'cognitive poetics', believe that literary studies should participate in this shift. After all, there are essentially two main ways of studying naturally occurring phenomena: through examining the object itself or its products. Recently, the means available to us for examining the human brain, as an object – or the mind-brain as a physically-grounded set of processes and operations – have grown exponentially. Of the many products of individual mind-brains in the world, (some) literary texts are probably the most complex. Therefore, as data, it could be argued that literary texts, alongside scanning technologies, are a primary resource for neuroscientific enquiry. The ways in which this claim is pursued in critical practice include, for example, the analysis of literary metaphor, not just as a specialised artistic practice, but rather as exemplary of how we all think. When Macbeth, for example, laments that 'And all our yesterdays have lighted fools / The way to dusty death', he is strikingly rephrasing a literary cliché about life as a road (compare the beginning of Dante's *Inferno* or the 'valley of the shadow of death' in the Bible), but some cognitive literary scholars would claim that he is also using a basic metaphor – life as a journey – that exists throughout writing, culture and, most importantly, cognition (conscious or unconscious), and that would continue to exist with or without works of literature. In other words, studying literary texts, rather than offering a break from scientific rationality, can, through rational methods of analysis, show how normal human thought-processes (and the underlying mechanisms of connection in the brain) run along 'literary' paths.

Recognising connections such as these between literature, as such, and more widespread (possibly universal) human thought processes opens up the possibility of using literature to influence specific humans minds, not just in the traditional sense of inspiration or persuasion, but in terms of cognitive therapy. Hence, the place of literature in the 'medical humanities'. Recent studies have shown not only that literature is a resource for studying the science of the mind-brain, but also that it can be used, both clinically and in informal reading groups, to alleviate psychological disorders such as memory-loss, depression and autism. We understand, more and more, how our mental existence and health are linked to our physical state: literature, filled with ideas attached to physical representations of people and things, has long been in the business of negotiating between the intellectual, the emotional and the bodily or somatic: think about how ways of seeing the world relate to bodily conditions in *Gulliver's Travels*, for example.

Religion

When I began studying literature at University College London in the 1980s, the first-year programme included a rather monumental course called 'Intellectual and Cultural Sources'. We were required to read a long list of extraordinary

texts, from Homer, Plato, Virgil and Ovid, through Boethius and Montaigne, to Nietzsche, Marx, Darwin and Freud. Mary Wollstonecraft was, I think, the only woman on the list, and there was little if anything post-nineteenth-century. We could all come up with our own lists, no doubt. I would be inclined to throw in one or two oddities, stretching the concept of an influential text: perhaps Charlie Chaplin as a major influence in conceptualising the modern self, or the Mars rover Curiosity (b. 2011) as an extraordinary embodiment of what twenty-first-century humans can technically achieve, how we are projecting ourselves onto artificial 'posthuman' entities, and how we are haunted by supposedly outdated patterns of behaviour: Curiosity can be 'read' as both colonist and slave. But the most important item on the UCL list, the one that still matters most for students and readers of literature in English, was, I would say, (excerpts from) the Bible. You may think that you are well into literature in English if you have read one or two thumping volumes such as *The Canterbury Tales*, *Paradise Lost*, *Moby-Dick* or *Ulysses*, but the Bible is more important than any or all of these for an understanding of literary history: not just as a source of individual references, but as a conceptual framework. This has very little to do with whether one is a Christian, an adherent of any other religion, or an atheist. The facts are that the great majority of literary authors in English, until very recently, would have professed themselves to be Christians, and that the Bible was the main textual influence that they all had in common.

I have already argued that a literary text that deals with Biblical subject-matter, such as *Paradise Lost*, can be seen as partly in competition with scripture. It supplements and thus changes its 'divine' source-material. In that sense, it wanders between piety and blasphemy. It also indirectly reveals the literary character of scripture itself. Early English translations of the Bible are extraordinary achievements in prose, but they are also, like all other religious texts, collections of narratives, characterisations and metaphors. The English Bibles, above all the translations of William Tyndale (ca. 1490–1536) and the King James edition of 1611, have influenced English literature incalculably, but also owe their own form to literary influences. What divides religious texts from literary ones is essentially the question of belief, which for many readers is now obsolete. Even among believers, few would now claim that everything in the Bible is free from the idiosyncratic, historically specific input that characterises literary texts.

Let's look at one example of how literature serves and supplements religion. In all of the Gospels, we find descriptions of Christ being prepared for crucifixion. In Luke, for example, we read the following:

> And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots. And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God. And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him, and offering him vinegar, and

> saying, If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself. And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

One of the English medieval mystery plays, the York play of *The Crucifixion* (ca. 1425), covers the same basic material at much greater length. Here is an excerpt:

4TH SOLDIER	The cross on ground is goodly graid,*	*set / positioned*
	And bored even as it ought to be.	
1ST SOLDIER	Look that the lad on length be laid,	
	And made be fest* unto this tree.*	*fast*; *the Cross*
2ND SOLDIER	For all his fare* he shall be flayed:*	*acts*; *tormented*
	That on assay* soon shall ye see.	*by experience*
3RD SOLDIER	Come forth, thou cursed knave,	
	Thy comfort soon shall keel.*	*be chilled*
4TH SOLDIER	Thine hire* here shalt thou have.	*due punishment*
1ST SOLDIER	Walk on, now work we weel.*	*well*
JESUS	Almighty God, my Father free,*	*generous*
	Let these matters be made in mind:	
	Thou bade that I should buxom* be,	*cheerful*
	For Adam plight* for to be pined.*	*sake*; *punished*
	Here to dead* I oblige me	*death*
	Fro that sin for to save mankind,	
	And sovereignly beseek* I thee,	*above all beg*
	That they for me may favor find.	
	And from the Fiend* them fend,*	*Devil*; *defend*
	So that their souls be safe,	
	In wealth* withouten end.	*welfare*
	I keep* nought else to crave.*	*care*; *ask*
1ST SOLDIER	We,* hark, sir knights, for Mahound's* blood.	*Well!*; *Muhammad's*
	Of Adam-kind is all his thought!	
2ND SOLDIER	The warlock* waxes worse than wood.*	*devil / sorcerer*; *mad*
	This doleful dead dreadeth he nought.	

Here, the basic story about Christ, his tormentors, and humanity in general, is the same as in the Bible, but the structure of relationships has been fundamentally changed, and deepened, insofar as Christ and the soldiers are all represented as prosy individuals, functioning through the cumbersome technology of language, even as they struggle with the effort (for the soldiers) or the agony (for Christ) of punishment. The main purpose of plays such as this may well have been to make Biblical material accessible and persuasive for an audience that lacked the ability or opportunity to read, but it also serves as an amplification, modification and critique of the Biblical source: an act of piety, but also an act of appropriation; an act of faith, but also a process of accommodation to secular reality.

Christian references, narratives and ideas are present, in one way or another, in almost all of the texts that we have looked at in this book, and the same goes for the great majority of other works of literature in English. That is not to say, of course, that Christianity is the only religion, or the Bible the only religious text, that is relevant. The points raised above are intended to suggest a broader relationship between literary and religious texts in general (analogous, you may think, to what I earlier said about the relationships between literature and law). Moreover, there are many specific examples of the presence of other religious traditions in the work of English-language authors. William Blake and T. S. Eliot were Christians (of a special kind – especially Blake), but they both studied the *Bhagavad Gita*. Judaism has been a significant presence in literature in English, both through representations by non-Jewish authors – from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, through Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, to Joyce's *Ulysses* – and in the mostly more recent work of authors of Jewish belief, background or upbringing, such as the Americans Saul Bellow, Philip Roth and Tony Kushner (b. 1956), the British Howard Jacobson (b. 1954), or the South Africans Nadine Gordimer (b. 1923) and Dan Jacobson (b. 1929). Salman Rushdie's treatment of Islam, in *The Satanic Verses* (1988), brought about direct, life-and-death confrontation with clerical authority, generating the most internationally prominent moment of late-twentieth-century literary history. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) is perhaps the most prominent among many recent novels that has attended to the ways in which a host of different religious identities and traditions interact in multicultural societies.

So, once again, it has little to do with whether you are a believer. An enhanced knowledge of religion will enrich your understanding of literature; and, for literature in English, for obvious historical reasons, the Bible is the crucial text. If you read four chapters every day, the Old Testament will take you 233 days, and the New Testament a mere 65!

12 Literary theory

We cannot discuss literature at all without invoking some notion of what literature is. Similarly, we are unlikely to use words like 'irony' or 'author' without an idea, conscious or not, of what they mean. To have an idea about what something is or means, when there could be other views, is to have a theory about it. So, we have been theorising about literature since the first page of this book. This chapter does not take us into a self-contained area of study; rather, it makes explicit certain aspects of literature that have always been at work, since we started commenting on literary texts, and even since they were first created.

Most introductions to literary theory take their readers through a series of theoretical schools, past a series of celebrated names, as though the intellectually absorbing qualities of literature were the inventions of a particular set of often abstruse thinkers. This chapter seeks to put the horse before the cart, by starting with 'naive' (but fundamental) questions that real readers ask about texts, such as 'Who wrote it?' 'What is it about?' and 'Is it any good?' It will then show how such questions make theoretical debate necessary.

Criticism, theory, and the philosophy of literature

Literary criticism exists on various levels. Within academia, we find professional scholarly criticism, practised by trained readers – usually, these days with doctorates. Outside academia, literary criticism is widespread in the form of book reviews, printed or online. Beyond that, all readers engage in literary criticism of some kind, whenever they form opinions about texts that they read.

The main functions of criticism include explanation, contextualisation and evaluation. The critic, as an expert reader, is able to explain certain aspects of the literary text: for example, through formal analysis of the kind that we looked at in Chapters 4–7, and through interpretation (sometimes called 'exegesis'), which is essentially a process of finding meanings that can only be detected with specialised knowledge. The critic is likely to have reasons for claiming that all readings of a text are not equal: there are good readings and bad readings. In other words, training and knowledge are relevant; it is not all 'subjective'. When it comes to contextualisation, a critical reader may be able to illuminate aspects of a text by placing it in terms of literary history, as we did in Chapters 8–10;

by linking it to the social and political conditions within which it was created; and even in relation to facts of its author's life. As for evaluation, this is a kind of criticism that almost everyone practises (simply by saying that they have read a 'good book' or seen a 'good film'), but it is also the most slippery dimension of the whole business. 'Good' can be used either in an aesthetic or a moral sense, and people are often unclear about which they mean.

Let us consider some of the reasons a reader might have for liking or admiring a particular text: *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. I shall arrange these reasons under three headings, soon to be explained:

Non-critical

'I like this text because …
… my uncle gave it to me.'
… I read it on holiday in Italy.'
… it's short.'
… I'm from Scotland.'

Quasi-critical

'I like this text because …
… I identify with Dr Jekyll.'
… it made me laugh.'
… we need to understand addiction and crime.'
… I am fascinated by the 1880s.'

Critical

'I admire this text because …
… it has a well-constructed narrative.'
… it makes creative use of generic conventions.'
… it powerfully imagines a divided consciousness.'
… it gets to the heart of late-Victorian dilemmas.'

The first set of reasons are all excellent, but none of them requires any thought about the specific content of the text. In fact, only one of them requires even reading it. In the case of '… it's short', the (potential) reader may look favourably on this particular work, just because he or she is fatigued after ploughing through doorstoppers by Dickens and Thackeray. In the case of '… I'm from Scotland', the grounds for approval may simply be that Stevenson, according to the blurb, was a fellow-countryman.

Two of the 'quasi-critical' reasons, concerning crime and the 1880s, might not require reading the text either, at least not all of it, but they are based on *someone* having read it, and they imply the opinion that Stevenson says something informative about these subjects. As for identifying with a character or

being made to laugh, these comments suggest that the reader has got absorbed in the narrative, becoming 'lost in a book', to the extent that he or she experiences emotional reactions. I call these 'quasi-critical' reasons, however, because they do not seem to require expertise, even to the extent of being able to distinguish between literary writing and the account of real events that we might find in the news media or in a message from a friend.

The 'critical' reasons are all different from those hitherto discussed, because all of them imply the application to the text of specialist knowledge. In order to make judgements about 'narrative' and 'generic conventions', one would need either to have absorbed explanations of what these terms mean or to have encountered them in practice, in a range of texts; preferably both. There is an implied confidence about some technical aspects of literature. As for '… it powerfully imagines a divided consciousness', this implies some specialist knowledge about psychology (insofar as 'divided consciousness' is recognised as an object of study), as well as some insight into the process of imagining through which real things get used in literature, and some experience with other attempts at something similar (otherwise how could this one be rated as relatively 'powerful'). Similarly, the judgement that *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* 'gets to the heart of late-Victorian dilemmas' suggests prior knowledge of these dilemmas (more so than 'I am fascinated by the 1880s') and sufficiently broad reading to be able to evaluate Stevenson's text as a superior attempt to represent them. You may want to bear distinctions such as these in mind when considering whether real judgements that you come across, whether in academic books, in journalism, or in your own reactions to texts, actually qualify as criticism.

Literary criticism has been around for a long time, and has often been more bulky than the texts to which it is applied. Some of the practices of literary criticism are indebted to older traditions of exegesis in religious studies. In some early printed Bibles, for example, the primary text, the scripture, appears as a relatively small block in the middle of the page, surrounded by a mass of other text, which is scholarly explanation. You will see something similar if you look at a modern edition of a play by Shakespeare or any other literary text that contains words, ideas and references that are no longer common knowledge. Most criticism consists of a more or less sophisticated version of this process of adding explanations, clarifications, interpretations, background, cross-references and context – sometimes as a sentence or two in a footnote, sometimes in a complex argument, drawing on many kinds of knowledge, filling a whole book.

Most professional criticism, however insightful and brilliant, takes for granted the nature of the relationship between primary text and commentary (between the centre of the page and its margins in the early Bibles, for example, or between Shakespeare's text and the footnotes); takes for granted, in other words, how criticism should be done. But, when we begin to think about what that relationship ought to be, or how it could be different, then we are beginning to do literary theory. Another way of putting it would be to say that we are beginning to philosophise about literature. Philosophy, you may have noticed, was not included in the previous chapter: this is because it is a discipline almost

all of whose major branches are intimately involved in the issues covered in the chapter that we are now beginning. This, as we shall see, is not a wholly uncontroversial claim: 'theory' and 'philosophy' sound like synonyms to some people, but not to others. Both, however, certainly involve coming up with questions. So now, having jumped ahead to judgements that might be made about a text, let's look at some of the questions that ought previously to have been asked about it.

What happens in this story?

Consider this narrative:

> A country is being ravaged by three utterly ruthless and incredibly ugly dragons. The only suitably qualified hero in the whole land – Jane – sets off to kill them. She is equipped with a magic gun, which, for boring technical reasons, can only be fired four times, and which only works if she hits the dragon in exactly the right spot. Jane meets Dragon 1. She fires the gun. Dragon 1 (for whom you really don't need to feel sorry) dies. After searching for a couple of weeks, Jane meets Dragon 2. She fires the gun, but misses the crucial spot. 'Oh no!' says Jane. 'Now I've only got two shots left.' She fires once more, killing Dragon 2. 'Phew!' says Jane. 'That was close.' She searches for a couple more weeks, and then meets Dragon 3. Jane and Dragon 3 stare fiercely at one another. Jane raises her magic gun. Dragon 3 bares his vast and hideous teeth. *The end*.

This narrative may leave you dissatisfied. Perhaps you would be even more dissatisfied if you saw it in a three-hour cinema version, with no promise of a sequel. You would come away wondering, Who dies? The dragon or Jane? You might decide to finish the story in your own head, one way or another (depending on whose side you're on). But who *actually* dies? The dragon or Jane? The answer, when we remember that this is not real life but a fictional text, is NEITHER and BOTH. Perhaps you know what I mean; if not, think about it for a minute.

The answer is NEITHER, because, let's face it, this is a fictional text. All it is, in its written form, is the 153 words printed above. Jane is not a real person, and the three dragons – you will be relieved to hear – have never existed. In other words, they have no life outside the text. Nothing ever happened to them before the first word and nothing will ever happen to them after the last one. To think otherwise, would be to confuse a literary text (such as it is) with a segment from the course of real events, where, since the first twitch of energy after the Big Bang, there has always been a 'before', and where there will long continue (we hope) to be an 'after'. We may make comparisons between this text and real events, but it does not actually contain anything except itself, and none of its contents are anywhere else.

The answer is BOTH, on the other hand, because, as I asserted long ago, a text does not come alive, as literature, until somebody reads it – when,

inevitably, interpretations begin to form (also a Big Bang, of sorts). We cannot help using our knowledge of the English language to discover meaning in the ink marks shown above; we cannot help using our knowledge of, amongst other things, Janes, guns, searching (real and in fiction) and dragons (only fictional) to give the words of the text an intelligible content that constitutes a narrative; and we cannot help bringing that narrative alive for ourselves by supplementing its spindly textual presence with various assumptions and guesses about the world that it seems to imply. It asks us to entertain the notion that Jane and the dragons existed, and that they were living creatures with a before and an after. In that sense, it is an inevitable part of our experience of the text as a literary event (however paltry) that we come up with models for the unstated outcome. In those terms, playing the literary game, there is an infinite range of possible conclusions, of which the two simplest and most obvious are that Jane dies or the dragon dies. Those options both exist, in other words, as valid outcomes. If you are going to say that one of them is possible, or potentially 'true' in the fictional world implied by the text, then you are bound to say the same about the other one.

You would be amazed how much intellectual effort has been expended, wrestling with this issue. It relates to a problem that is particularly obvious at the end of a literary narrative, but it applies, to some extent, all the way through. I alluded earlier to the famous question 'How many children had Lady Macbeth?' This was used as the title of an essay, because many previous critics had pointed out that there are some passages in the play that seem to suggest that Lady Macbeth had children and others that suggest that she did not. Some critics seem to have thought that by comparing the passages and analysing them for long enough, a definitive answer might be reached. But it can't. Even if there once was a real Lady Macbeth who was a bit like Shakespeare's character, she and the character are not the same. The character has no existence outside the play. You can, of course, put on a production of the play in which the Macbeths have a flock of onstage offspring, or you can do another production which underlines their barrenness, but, in doing that, you are really just doing the same as the reader who decides, after reading about Jane and the dragons, to prefer one outcome rather than the other. That's fine; but don't think that you have solved the problem in the text itself.

This may all be obvious. But it wasn't, for most critics, for much of critical history. The points that I have made above imply a theoretical approach to literature, where we say that some things can be known and others cannot; that a text has a certain ontology or being that is distinctly different from a real set of events; that certain points can be presented legitimately as fact, in literary interpretation, while others cannot. These questions about literature lead quickly into questions about knowledge in general (epistemology) and about the relationship between words and things. In other words, we are led towards philosophical issues – especially, to thinking about how much we really know about the real world, when our experience of that world is mediated by discourses, so many of which, as suggested in the last chapter, have literary aspects.

You could pursue these matters through many kinds of further reading. If you look at books and articles that define themselves as 'philosophy of literature' you will probably find an emphasis on what literature can tell us about epistemology (and vice-versa) in the Anglo-American 'analytical' tradition; if you look at books and articles that define themselves as 'literary theory' or 'critical theory' (which, in most cases, are the same) you will probably find an emphasis on a primarily Franco-German 'Continental' tradition. The analytical approach tends to privilege dispassionate logic, while the Continental one, often in the form of 'poststructuralism', tends to imply political commitment: it is heavily indebted to Marx and Freud, and seeks to challenge dominant discourses in the world, apparently for the good of us all. In literary studies, as in the discipline of philosophy itself, there is often a lot of hostility between analytical and Continental approaches, but not always. Good work in both camps is about trying to use literature carefully and legitimately, to find out what it is, what meanings it can have, and what it can be used for.

As for the basic question, 'What happens?', there are many ways in which you will find it cropping up in your literary reading. There are of course certain matters in almost any literary text that can be clarified one way or another. There is a right answer, for example, to the question of whether Lady Macbeth dies, in Shakespeare's text, in quite a different way from the question about whether she has children, even though she never lived outside the text. The answer to whether she dies, as a character, is in the text, and anyone who is in doubt about that can be helped. Going right back to Classical criticism, you will find critics and theorists for whom the notion of an unambiguous ending is extremely important: in the old idea of 'poetic justice', for example, which demands, on moral grounds, that some characters end happily while others are punished, even though they are not real. Conversely, some postmodern texts seem to make a virtue of emphasising inconclusiveness and endless interpretative possibilities.

Most fictional narratives before the late-twentieth century did their best to persuade us that their characters would have certain definite fates, after and outside the text. You can see Jane Austen doing her best, for example, to persuade us that all of her main characters' lives will be either happy or miserable, noble or pathetic, even as she is running out of pages, and out of the small, real power that she has to make those lives (as fictions) carry on. *Pride and Prejudice*, like many nineteenth-century novels, ends with the grand conclusion, both individually and socially significant, of marriage: implying a future of procreation and continuity. Other novels may be *Bildungsromane*, preparing a fictional individual to be a complete and functional member of society – as though they would somehow be called upon to do things, after the last page. Think about how strange that is, if you want to, and then look at what people have said on the subject: to do with the way plots are designed to lead us in certain directions, for example, in narratology; or to do with how the 'world' of the text is created through its audience, in the 'reader-response' theories of writers such as (to descend finally and rather arbitrarily to named individuals) Wolfgang Iser or Stanley Fish.

Is it literature?

We have already seen that the question of what counts as literature is far from straightforward, given that 'literature' can be defined in many ways. The treatment of this subject in Chapter 2 was, therefore, a theoretical discussion. So, I will just complicate the issue a little further, very briefly.

David Foster Wallace's story 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' directly echoes (or mirrors) the title of a famous work of philosophy, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), by Richard Rorty. Was Wallace trying to say that a work of philosophy can be a work of literature, or vice-versa? Actually, when we examine the history of philosophy, we find that a lot of the key works contain obvious fictional and dramatic elements: from Plato's dialogues (full of quirky characterisation), through the trans-generic philosophical novels of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, to the whimsical but deadly serious parables or thought experiments, focusing on things like pencils or donkeys, in Wittgenstein or J. L. Austin. Even John Locke's otherwise ultra-sober *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) contains a not wholly plausible anecdote about a learned parrot.

David Foster Wallace himself wrote non-fiction books and articles on a variety of subjects, including philosophical ones. Many of the sentences in these non-fiction works could have found a place in his novels or short stories: they are marked by the literary author's style and characteristic preoccupations. Are they, therefore, part of his achievement as an artist? It would seem difficult to deny that they are. Similarly, why should we not take certain explicit or implied observations in Wallace's fiction as contributions to his positions on non-fictional matters? There are some ways in which it can be useful to make clear distinctions between literary and non-literary texts. But in other ways it is perhaps more useful to see the literary and non-literary as modes of discourse that can come and go unpredictably, across many different kinds of writing and speech.

Changing attitudes on this matter can be seen very clearly in the history of literary criticism. It is now very common, for example, to use a writer's diaries or letters (sometimes categorised as part of their 'life writing') as an important source of interpretative insight for their novels, poems and other conventionally 'literary' texts, but also, quite often, as part of their main literary *oeuvre* (even if they never imagined or desired that their letters would be read by anyone other than the original recipients). Many of the letters of John Keats, for example, are so vivid, imaginative, linguistically innovative and full of ideas, that some readers enjoy them more than his poems. Partly because, as we shall see, the author's supposed intentions (for example, that letters should be read by one person; poems by many) were pushed into the background by mid-twentieth-century literary theory, it no longer makes sense to most professional readers that one genre should automatically receive more attention than another. So, remember that there are usually good reasons for identifying a poem as a poem and a letter as a letter, but feel free to use one to shed some light upon the other. Moreover, even if you yourself never write anything but

e-mails and exam answers, don't think that that will save you, in principle, from occasionally lapsing into literariness!

Who wrote it?

In most cases, you might think, this is not in dispute. We do not know, of course, who wrote *Beowulf*; and, since then, there have been some writers who temporarily hid behind pseudonyms (usually 'George'). But generally, since Chaucer, literary authors have been more than happy to take credit for their work; and readers have felt a strong desire to give that credit, making connections between the work and the person.

Funnily enough, in the early years of professional literary criticism, from roughly the late-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century, while it was less usual than it now is to think of letters or diaries as part of an author's literary output, it was more common to use evidence from such kinds of writing to interpret it. Biographical criticism – telling us that a particular writer wrote as he or she did because of particular real experiences, or, conversely, that the main point of reading their work is to get to know the great mind that produced it – was, for many decades, the dominant form. You can see this if you look at the titles of earlier works of criticism, in which formulations such as *X: Life and Art* or *The Mind of X* are commonplace. What seems like a paradox, isn't. More recent developments in literary theory have simultaneously challenged conventional definitions of what literature is (thus encouraging attention to traditionally 'non-literary' writing) and cast doubt on the relationship between anything that a person writes (in a diary, for example, almost as much as in a novel) and the extra-textual person that they presumably were.

If you can convince yourself that Jane Austen, for example, was a particular kind of person – perhaps by extrapolating from the heroines of her novels – then you are going to be pushed towards reading those novels in a particular way. Jane Austen was *this* kind of person, you will say, so her work should be read like *this* – or *this* is what she meant. Such an approach became difficult after Freud (however semi-scientifically) helped us understand that people are not always the same from day to day, and are not even fully present, as 'I's or 'subjects', to themselves (which would have been old news, of course, to someone like Swift or Shakespeare). With a decline in confidence in the stable self has come an increased acceptance of multiple interpretations, or, to put it another way, of the power of the reader, rather than the author, to determine the meaning of a text. The idea that a text just means what its author originally wanted it to mean has become known, after a famous essay, as 'The Intentional Fallacy' (W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, 1946). Perhaps the author was not quite sure what he or she meant; perhaps they changed their mind; perhaps, in fact, authors are not much better qualified to tell you what their texts are about than anybody else. There has been a huge amount of argument about this: another (slightly less famous) essay was subtitled 'The Intentional Fallacy Fallacy' (A. D. Nuttall, 1968)! Still particularly influential are two much

misunderstood essays by the French structuralist theorists Roland Barthes (1968) and Michel Foucault (1969), proclaiming 'the death of the author' – but actually trying to encourage us to think seriously about our unavoidable responsibility, as readers, for re-creating the text, rather than trying to say, arrogantly or anarchically, that you and I are as smart as Shakespeare.

There are also more straightforward ways of looking at the problem of authorship. Few critics, these days, would deny that Shakespeare must have been an extraordinary man, even though they also realise, after Freud, 'The Intentional Fallacy', Barthes and Foucault, that there are severe limits to what we can add to our experience of *Macbeth* by trying to get to know Shakespeare as he really was. But Shakespeare himself would have had to admit that his work was not all straightforwardly original. He took much of the story of *Macbeth* from existing history and myth; more specifically, from a single source: *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577). More fundamentally, do we imagine that Shakespeare would have written five-act plays, or used iambic pentameters, if nobody had ever done so before? Although Shakespeare's name may stand on the title page (and should continue to do so, despite the entertaining speculations of conspiracy theorists), his work (and that of all other authors) reflects the indirect contributions of an unquantifiable mass of other people. Beyond that, however brilliant they may be, all authors write in the way that they do, about the subjects they choose, because of the historical situations in which they find themselves: *Macbeth* would certainly not have existed without Shakespeare, but nor would it have existed without Jacobean England; *Ulysses* would certainly not have existed without Joyce, but nor would it have existed without Dublin and its inhabitants. The theories that determine how we read literature, in other words, can be highly political: relating to who we think is important in society, and to whom, and how widely, we are inclined to allocate power. It is not surprising that you will find some of the most provocative arguments for the distributed authorship, as one might put it, of literary texts (not least in the case of the supreme cultural icon, Shakespeare) in 'cultural materialist' approaches to literature, in a tradition deriving from Karl Marx.

So, theory matters. If literature is important, then how we read it, and who we appeal to as sources or elevate as qualified judges of interpretation matters too. Moreover, within the smaller world of professional literary criticism, it is easy to see the practical consequences that shifts in theoretical or philosophical orientation bring. With the changing theoretical understanding of authorship, literary historians have been much more inclined, for example, to pay attention to the factual realities of co-authorship: admitting, for example, that early modern actors may have had some input in the texts of plays that have come down to us, or that Shakespeare may have been happy for another writer, Thomas Middleton, to do the witch scenes in *Macbeth*. Literature is not debased by this kind of realisation, but its status is subtly changed.

A special problem, in terms of crediting the author, arises in the case of translation. This may be a particularly pertinent issue, if English is not your

first language. Your English must be pretty good (or you wouldn't have got this far), but you may be reading some English texts in translation, or at least using translations as an aid, alongside the original. Alternatively, you may be a native speaker of English, studying English-language texts alongside translated ones from other national traditions. So, consider this question: Is Alexander Pope's famous *Odyssey*, much read in the eighteenth century, by Pope? It is a translation of Homer's text, and obviously would not have existed without it. On the other hand, Homer cannot have known any English (because there wasn't any), and he did not use rhyming couplets. So, every single turn of phrase in Pope's *Odyssey* would have been beyond Homer's habits and abilities. If the distribution of credit, in the case of Homer and Pope, is, after a bit of thought, fairly straightforward, the same is not so obviously true of *Ulysses*, for example, or of *Omeros*, a celebrated epic, inspired by the *Odyssey*, by the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott (b.1930). Pope's *Odyssey* is generally regarded, these days, as an extra in his literary profile, a lesser achievement than his 'own' poems, so it does not matter so much that it is, in a way, so unoriginal. Seamus Heaney may have felt the same way about his *Beowulf*. But *Ulysses* and *Omeros* are absolutely central, career-defining works for Joyce and Walcott. It seems to be possible, therefore, to get away with taking the whole structure of a narrative from somebody else, and yet to produce a text that is regarded as radically original. We would not imagine, however, that we have read Homer after reading Joyce or Walcott, and neither – unless we are very selective in our definition of what matters about literature or our understanding of how meaning is produced – should be we imagine that we have read Homer after reading Pope. The same applies, to a great extent, to translations of much more recent works. We cannot avoid using them, but we should think, critically and theoretically, about the status of the texts in question, and the kinds of judgement that it allows or excludes.

None of this is simple. In some cases, we might feel that a translation of an old work takes us closer to the 'original' than the actual surviving text of the original could. We get much more of the plot, characterisation and many other aspects of *Beowulf*, obviously, as non-readers of Old English, from reading Heaney's translation than from staring at the Anglo-Saxon manuscript. More subtly and controversially, we would surely be brought closer to the feeling of what it was like to be in the original audience for one of Shakespeare's plays, if archaic words which would take us too long, in the theatre, to figure out were replaced with modern ones, or even cut. Of course, Shakespeare's plays exist in all manner of translations and adaptations, some of which seem extremely remote from the original. The Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa, for example, made a version of *Macbeth*, usually known in English as *Throne of Blood* (1957), which is set, not in Scotland, but in Samurai Japan. He cut most of the dialogue; and what remains, of course, is in Japanese. Many plot details are adapted to the Japanese context. And yet, the very feeling of alienation from the text that Anglophones may experience, watching this film, may possibly take us closer to an 'original' strangeness in the play that centuries of productions by

the likes of the Royal Shakespeare Company may have tended to erase. Perhaps, if we were thrust back into the real Globe theatre (rather than its wonderful modern simulacrum) we would find it just as alien, and its performances as hard to identify with, as Kurosawa's film.

What does it mean?

Many of these big questions about literature are bound up with one another. The question of the meaning of a text had to arise, for example, during the discussion of authorship. The tendency of my remarks, like that of most recent critical practice, has been to undermine the primacy of the author as the source of meaning. But what about critics' ideas of meaning? How valid are they?

Many people, when relatively new to professional literary criticism, are amazed that there is so much of it, and dismayed that it is so diverse. It seems as though anybody can say what they like about a text, and get published. It seems to be 'all a matter of interpretation'; anybody is allowed to have a 'valid reading'. I have added frequently to the treasure trove or rubbish dump of critical interpretation in this very book, sometimes with tweaked versions of fairly familiar readings, sometimes perhaps with something a little more original. My aim has not been to tell you definitively what a given text means, but rather to give you some ideas about how you could re-read that text, and others, for yourself. Saying this might suggest that the process is limitless. In a way, it is. But you should not think that you can say whatever you like about a text, and get away with it. There are well-made arguments and poorly made ones; good readings and bad ones. If you are going to be serious about literary interpretation, then you have to attend to the text. Some of my own readings probably seem speculative. They are. We will never know, for example (as the 'authorship' discussion underlines) exactly what Emily Dickinson meant by all of the things in the poem discussed in Chapter 9. It would be possible to come up with plausible arguments, based on factual information as diverse as art history and the realities of nineteenth-century American life, for a wide variety of symbolic possibilities in Dickinson's sea and her 'solid town', and in the relationship between the two. But it is hard to imagine that there could be a persuasive account of the poem that says that the sea should be understood as a watermelon and the town as a rhinoceros. Still less that either of them stands for the Mars rover, Curiosity. These are silly examples, but the point is serious. Words have a specific range of intelligible meanings, within a given social and historical context. The same applies to more complex literary entities such as symbols and characterisations. There are almost always plenty of things in a literary text that are open to multiple readings; but not to infinite ones. Not many critics, these days, would say that a text has one reading. But nor would they say that anything goes. A major role of criticism is to add to the set of possible readings of a text, but also to help eliminate invalid ones.

In 2002, in one of the most celebrated (and mocked) public statements of the early twenty-first century, the then Defense Secretary of the United States,

Donald Rumsfeld, described the intelligence available about the war-zone in Iraq as follows: 'There are known knowns; there are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns; that is to say, there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns – there are things we do not know we don't know.' Whatever you may think about this statement in its original moral and political context, it is quite a useful way of describing kinds of knowledge in literary criticism. Having read Emily Dickinson's poem we know that we know, for example, that she understood that seas contain water and have tides that come in and go out. We know that we do not know, on the other hand, exactly who or what Dickinson was thinking of when she invented 'The Mermaids in the Basement'. Even if we found a letter in which she referred to some specific, fishy lodgers, that wouldn't help us much: it certainly wouldn't tell us *all* that she was thinking of. But if I claim, for example, that the mermaids are partly Dickinson's semi-suppressed way of alluding to the alternative lives that she might have led away from her parent's home, as a lover, the object of someone else's desire – well, I *may* have stumbled on a truth about the poem. You will perhaps respond that I don't *know* that about the poem. But, in Rumsfeld's sense, as a possible truth about the poem that we are not able to disprove, it is something that 'we do not know we don't know': an 'unknown unknown'. And that category of (non-)knowledge, however unsatisfactory it may seem, is an inescapable part of the reading process.

The Slovenian philosopher and critical theorist Slavoj Žižek reacted to Rumsfeld's statement by adding a fourth category: 'unknown knowns', by which he meant, in a typically post-Freudian way, 'the disavowed beliefs, suppositions and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values'. This is relevant to our thinking about literary criticism insofar, for example, as we might want to argue that Dickinson's poem testifies to an interest in sexuality that she does not wish fully to acknowledge; or (more plausibly), if we wished to criticise readings of the poem that explicitly denied its sexual content while simultaneously showing symptoms of recognising and being disturbed by it. Whatever the merits of this particular example, there are countless studies of literary texts that seem to assert one thing while showing signs of believing another: sometimes indicating the 'unknown knowns' of an individual imperfectly self-aware consciousness (such as we all have) and sometimes revealing the broader 'political unconscious' (in the Marxist critic Frederic Jameson's phrase) of a whole society in denial.

What is the context?

Much of this book, especially Chapters 8–10, implies a commitment to a historicist reading of literature: in other words, the assumption is made that something useful can be said about literary works by studying the context in which they were produced (and vice-versa). This is the dominant view in literary criticism at the present time. In the mid- to late-twentieth century this was not the case (at least, not among high-profile intellectual theorists and critics). The so-called

New Criticism, particularly in the United States, drawing on earlier 'formalist' approaches, encouraged readers to detach the text not only from the supposed intentions of the author but also from the whole factual baggage of the author's time. This approach brought particularly persuasive results with textually complex, imagery-rich, ambiguous poems, like those of the seventeenth-century Metaphysicals. In books such as Cleanth Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947), poems were treated as beautiful stony artefacts, with no meaning beyond themselves. They may contain references to people, and to things that matter in the world at large, but, within the poem, these are merely structural elements: like abstract shapes in architecture or notes in music.

The great virtue of this approach is that it encourages readers to focus on what the poem actually consists of – the words, and how they are placed in relation to one another – rather than jumping immediately to 'stock responses' that have more to do with our personal experiences with urns, cats, lovers or whatever other real-world objects the poem seems to name. If we look at 'The Good-Morrow', for example, a context-less approach may help us to appreciate the way in which Donne's wit functions as a process of abstract logic, almost like a mathematical equation, where satisfaction can be derived by the twenty-first-century reader, just as it presumably was by the seventeenth-century one, by observing a working-through of comparisons and conceits that may not have had any direct reference to events in Donne's life or anyone else's. Fine. But, having done that, will anything actually be lost by asking what we can know ('know that we know', or 'not know that we do not know') about the relation between things in this poem and things in the world in which it was written? What harm would be done by thinking about Donne's references to eyes and hearts in 'The Good-Morrow', for example, not just as abstract tokens in an intellectual puzzle, but also, say, in terms of the beliefs that people typically had, in Donne's time, about hearts and eyes as more than merely physical organs: as the 'seat of the affections' or the 'windows of the soul'? Beyond that, would it even be possible to begin the supposedly ahistorical work of reading the poem as a thing in itself without at least paying some attention to the historically specific meanings of individual words: 'die', for example, which was a common early modern term for having an orgasm (equivalent, oddly, to our own epoch's 'come').

The general theoretical consensus, these days, seems to be that the insights of scrupulous ahistorical reading should not be abandoned. But now that the lesson of looking closely at the text has been learned (at least by some), we can go on to look even more closely – being historically specific about the possible meanings that parts of a text could have had, given the moment at which they were produced. At the same time, there has been a move away from a simplistic model in which literature is pure fiction and historical records and accounts pure fact (an 'old' historicism) to something closer to the position established in the late twentieth century, especially in early modern studies, as New Historicism: where all texts, not just traditionally literary ones, stand at a certain distance from reality and need to be interpreted. That does not mean that we no longer

believe in historical fact: it is just that the game of relating literature to its original context has become more complicated, more important, and often more fun.

Who is it for?

The context within which a text was produced matters in the ways suggested above, but it will always, to some extent, have been lost. We can try to learn as much as possible about seventeenth-century England, to enhance our reading of Donne, but many of the potentially relevant facts were never recorded. Moreover, however much we may try to avoid 'stock responses', we will never fully overcome the fact that our readings are shaped by our own historical context. It seems reasonable, therefore, to acknowledge that a text may have been written for particular people in the past (the 'people of the time' or even specific individuals), and to do our best to find out about them, but also to claim, insofar as the text still has any importance, that it is for current and future readers.

Texts usually give the impression of having been written by someone particular. It may be futile, beyond a certain point, to connect the text with the facts of the real author's life, but the text inevitably performs a certain identity, or delivers what is often referred to as an 'implied author'. We have already looked at some of the complexities of this process in the case of David Foster Wallace, in Chapter 2. But texts can also imply readers. At the very least, almost tautologically, a text seems to be written for the kind of reader who would want to read such a text. In the case of Donne's poetry, for example, a reader with a certain level of education is implied (able to pick up double meanings, and with some knowledge of cartography and of the myth of the 'seven sleepers'). Slightly more controversially, we might argue that a male reader is implied: one who can identify, in the context of a patriarchal society, with the notion of 'getting' a beauty or 'possessing' worlds. On the other hand, readers who are female or feminist (or both) have since come along and enjoyed this poem, and, more to the point, read it in ways that specifically make use of its original masculine focus. A text, in other words can be *for* (made use of by) precisely the people that it seems *not* to have been *for* (designed to please). This can be extended beyond gender studies to all other aspects of identity-preference in literature. Postcolonial studies, for example, attend both to recent texts by non-European postcolonial authors, most of whose aims and sympathies are close to those of mainstream postcolonial theory, and to earlier texts by European authors who would not necessarily have favoured the dismantling of Empire at all, but whose works helpfully reveal its characteristics.

Questions of identity, not just in terms of race and gender, but also nationality, class and sexuality (especially in 'queer theory') were particularly dominant in literary criticism, underpinned by theory, in the 1970s and 80s, and continue to be important, although they have recently been supplemented by further concerns – not least, species identity, in relation to the representation and treatment, in literature and elsewhere, of non-human animals and even objects ('thing theory'). In some ways, the earlier concerns have developed quite

logically into the newer ones. In the case of feminism, for example, the theorists and critics of the second half of the twentieth century launched a critical attack on a patriarchal tradition in literature (and culture and society more generally), exposing what had formerly been regarded as universal 'humanist' ideas and values (with a corresponding literary canon) as ones that favoured male interests. The male, in other words, had been masquerading as the human. This line of thinking has since led to a more general critique of the concept of the human, questioning its status in relation to the non-human, whether animate or inanimate. Current research in this area often goes under the heading of the 'posthuman', incorporating the idea not only that there has been a theoretical shift from the way 'we' used to define ourselves, but also a material shift in the ways in which our identities are constituted in the world, with growing technological intervention in our bodies, and lives lived increasingly through virtual networks.

So, it is almost always an important exercise to try to figure out who a text may originally have been 'for', in the sense of who would have been likely to read it, and enjoy it, when it was produced. But who the text may be 'for' in the longer term cannot be predicted: future readers may not even be human!

Is it true?

Realism, as we have seen, is more characteristic of literature at some periods than at others. Mid-nineteenth-century fiction, for example, is typically more concerned with the representation of believable characters within a believable world than either earlier, Romantic, or later, modernist texts. Both Romanticism and modernism, however, often seem to be trying to get at the truth in their own way, even if that involves characters and situations that are literally unbelievable.

The question, then, is what effect it has on the more general meaningfulness or credibility of a text if it contains impossible elements. Both *Macbeth* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, for example, contain what most of us would regard as unbelievable characters and events. But Shakespeare's witches and ghosts interest us because they encapsulate kinds of malice, trickery and haunting (in the sense of being guilty or obsessed) that are very real parts of life as we know it. Similarly, we may enjoy the impossibility of the 'science' in Stevenson's novella (because of its audacity and imaginative eccentricity), but it probably also catches our attention because we know that people sometimes do switch suddenly and violently between personalities (in the case of some psychological disorders), and even because we realise that we ourselves are far from 100 per cent self-consistent.

Some works of literature are more obviously 'true' than others. Many fictions have been written that are ostensibly fictionalised versions of real events: historical novels, for example, or the kind of 'autobiographical fiction' that could almost be reclassified as belonging to the supposedly non-fiction genre of the autobiography. So, we can understand the question 'Is it true?' on that level. If someone asked us this about *Gulliver's Travels*, we would probably concede

that the answer is: no, there never was such a person as Lemuel Gulliver, still less any Lilliputians. But we might also say that Swift's book contains truths about the eighteenth-century world that make most other writers of the time seem like dreamers and lunatics.

Is it good?

'Good', as previously noted, can mean various things. In relation to literature, it normally relates to either aesthetic or moral value. When Keats says, at the end of his 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know', then he seems to be saying that the aesthetic is all that matters, and that it would be silly to ask him about ethics. On the other hand, this is actually not Keats speaking; it is the speaker of the poem. Or rather, it is what the speaker says that the urn says. And there are other things in the poem that seem to have to do with a world in which things may be morally good or bad. So, rather than solving the problem of the aesthetic *vs* the ethical, Keats seems to want to make us aware of it.

The question of what makes a literary text 'good' is partly connected with the matter of canonisation, discussed in Chapter 3. We usually think of the canon as listing texts that are 'good' in the sense of artistic achievement, which means, in terms of their distinctiveness, relative to other texts, as aesthetic objects. Another type of canon would select texts that we regarded as particularly good for their readers, or at least not harmful, in a moral sense. This way of looking at it may seem old-fashioned to many modern critics and theorists, but it is still a factor in the world. For example, some of those, in the United States, who think that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a racist book (as opposed to others who see it as an anti-racist one), think that it should not be taught in schools and universities. In reality, most canons are built up according to a mixed set of aesthetic and moral criteria: texts may be chosen not because they are morally 'good' or 'bad', but rather because they are regarded as particularly well-constructed tools for the discussion of, amongst other things, what is right or wrong with the world that we live in.

When we say that a text is good because it does original and creative things with literary form (in other words, aesthetically), we may in fact be saying, at the same time, that it has moral value: that is, if we think that originality is a virtue (like courage or patience), or if we think that a kind of formal harmony in art helps make people happy. Oscar Wilde claims, in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, that 'There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.' This fits with the notion of 'art for art's sake' for which Wilde is typically the poster-boy. And yet, Wilde is also known for provocatively asserting things that we cannot believe that he believed; this preface is attached to a novel that can be read as telling a highly moralistic tale; and, in lecturing us on how we *ought* to regard books, Wilde seems to be making a paradoxical moral claim: It is *wrong* to treat art in terms of right and wrong.

The nature of the 'good', whether in an aesthetic or a moral sense, is clearly a question for philosophy (in the sub-disciplines of aesthetics and of ethics, or moral philosophy, respectively). In the grey areas of literary theory, between philosophical enquiry and political practice, the 'good' may be both interrogated dispassionately and co-opted to serve a cause. Here we come back to the issue of identity, addressed under the question, 'Who is it for?' One person's good, in the real world, does not necessarily coincide with another's, either in the sense of 'good' as benefit or interest, or in the sense of 'good' as what is believed to be right or valuable. Theory can take sides, in these respects, and the corresponding status of texts can change over time.

Why all these books about books?

As I mentioned in Chapter 6, it is a funny thing to spend your time writing books about people who never existed and events that never happened. It is surely even funnier to spend your time writing books about those books. Are we not, with literary criticism, getting very far from reality? And besides, shouldn't good literature be able to speak for itself?

People who write books about books, professionally, open themselves up to some harsh suspicions and accusations. Perhaps, for example, they (I suppose I should say 'we') are people who don't really get literature at all, and so have to bring it crashing down to Earth: converting inspiration, sufficient in itself, into plodding explanation. Perhaps they don't even like literature, or are jealous of it, and, through know-all 'criticism' (and, even worse, 'theory'), want to take revenge. Perhaps, at best, they are people who would like to write literature themselves, or say what they think about real life, but cannot or dare not, and so hitch onto the backs of those who can, making a few good points now and then, perhaps even inventing the occasional nice turn of phrase, but never without a great deal of help from Shakespeare, Austen, Wallace … or some other *primary* author. Well, any critic might do well to bear thoughts like these in mind. We should ask ourselves why we are doing what we are doing (and this goes for students writing essays as well as scholars writing books) and whether it deserves other people's interest, approbation, or economic support.

Most literary authors do not write with an academic readership primarily in mind (or at least, they did not until the recent massive expansion of higher education), nevertheless, once they have been spotted as writing in a distinctive, interesting or 'good' literary way, they will soon find themselves the objects of academic attention. One of the most attractive ways of conceptualising the part that the critic then plays goes all the way back to Plato, who, in *Ion*, has Socrates say this to a Homer scholar:

> that's not a subject you've mastered – speaking well about Homer; it's a divine power that moves you, as a 'Magnetic' stone moves iron rings. […] This stone not only pulls those rings, if they're iron, it also puts power *in* the rings, so that they in turn can do just what the stone does – pull other

> rings – so that there's sometimes a very long chain of iron pieces and rings hanging from one another. [...] In the same way, the Muse makes some people inspired herself, and then through those who are inspired a chain of other enthusiasts is suspended. You know, none of the epic poets, if they're good, are masters of their subject; they are inspired, possessed, and that is how they utter all those beautiful poems.

Most of us will probably not share the belief that Socrates apparently had in the 'divine' as the ultimate source of inspiration, antecedent to primary texts as well as secondary ones (although few of us, religious or otherwise, may be without some kind of semi-conscious, analogous sense of ultimate origin or meaning). But the main drift of the argument can be reformulated as follows: We are all part of an ongoing history of writing (a 'human chain', as Seamus Heaney might have put it). We are in the middle of it, rather than being 'masters' of it. Shakespeare, as noted above, did not invent the five-act play (let alone tragic heroes, irony, or animal imagery). He deserves our admiration for his utterly exceptional qualities, but, to some extent, he and his critics are in the same position: all part of a network of discourse that none of us invented.

Literary authors are indebted to previous writing, but also implicitly critical of it. You have to see a lack, as it were, in the existing body of literature in order to be able to contribute to it. New literature cannot come into being, in that sense, without the study of literature. Similarly, it is hard to see how new literature, once produced, can be received into the world without acts of criticism taking place. Texts, once again, can only fulfil themselves through being read; and reading, as we have seen, requires varying degrees of critical expertise. You might say that *academic* criticism is not necessary for this to be the case. And yet, once a certain bulk of complex ideas has accumulated around a subject, nothing short of repressive force can stop people joining together to pool and disseminate their insights. Some literary criticism is wonderful (some even comes to be seen, in time, as having *primary* literary virtues); much of it, no doubt, is not worth the paper it is printed on. But literature could not survive if all criticism were somehow stopped; and, insofar as the world needs literature, it needs criticism, too.

What is theory for?

We have covered this question, insofar as we have seen that criticism is necessary, and that you cannot have criticism without theory. But let's have a look at the 'worst' kind of theory, the kind that many people think we would be better off without: deconstruction. This term is used to characterise a set of approaches to texts that was particularly dominant in literary studies in the last third of the twentieth century, but that still strongly influences much current writing. Deconstruction is usually categorised as a branch or aspect of post-structuralism, which, like postmodernism, tends to emphasise multiplicity, and

to question or undermine stable structures: 'grand narratives', fixed origins and single meanings. Just as, for some people, 'postmodernism' stands for complete anarchy – the end of civilisation as we know it – so 'deconstruction' is sometimes regarded simply as 'destruction', although you will also come across the word used sloppily, in the media, to mean little more than 'critical analysis'. The sense in which I am going to use it here is fairly close, I believe, to that used by most academic practitioners of 'deconstructive' criticism: Deconstruction describes processes through which the meanings that we (readers or authors) attach to a text tend to unravel, due to the logic of the text's own language, a logic that can be revealed, critically, through close reading. In other words, deconstruction is not so much a method that we apply to texts as part of their fundamental nature, and, the more that we try to insist on what a text means, the more it reveals itself. This process of revealing or self-subversion has the annoying consequence, anti-poststructuralists would say, of making all texts say the same thing (or nothing). In a sense, it is indeed always making the same point: that the attempt to control meaning is doomed to failure. In that sense, it is part of the generally political project of (Continental) 'theory', as well as being related to the would-be revolutionary aims of identity-based criticism (feminism, 'queer theory', etc.), in their criticism of the dominance of a narrow, exclusive concept of 'humanism'. But it is a point that really does seem to need repeating, over and over again.

Consider the following sonnet by Wordsworth:

> We had a female Passenger who came
> From Calais with us, spotless in array,
> A white-robed Negro, like a Lady gay,
> Yet downcast as a woman fearing blame;
> Meek, destitute, as seemed, of hope or aim
> She sate, from notice turning not away,
> But on all proffered intercourse did lay
> A weight of languid speech, or to the same
> No sign of answer made by word or face:
> Yet still her eyes retained their tropic fire,
> That, burning independent of the mind,
> Joined with the lustre of her rich attire
> To mock the Outcast – O ye Heavens, be kind!
> And feel, thou Earth, for this afflicted Race!

First, let's try to read the poem in a straightforward 'common sense' way, linked to what we know about Wordsworth as a man. Wordsworth was in France in 1802, when he apparently started work on this poem. Here he describes himself in a boat, sailing to England. There is a black woman on the boat. She is depressed and dopey; defeated. Her eyes show a sort of physical potential, derived from her supposed place of origin – 'tropic[al] fire' – but this no longer corresponds to her circumstances. She is powerless, while the speaker

(Wordsworth?), feels himself to be in a position of strength, authority and freedom, from which he can reach out to her, desiring to be charitable. So, he tries to strike up a conversation, and – when that doesn't work – he prays that Heaven and Earth will take pity on her. This, so far, is what a deconstructive critic might call a 'totalising' reading – because the reader, through a construction of the speaker, sees the situation as clear, coherent and complete. It is also a 'thematising' reading, because it delves into the words and exposes or constructs a specific content, to do with black abjection and affliction, where one group can be seen as outcast relative to another.

If we look at the available biographical information about Wordsworth, we will find plenty of support for this thematising reading. Wordsworth probably did travel with such a passenger, who would have been an exile from revolutionary France. We know that Wordsworth would have seen such banishment as deplorable: around the same time he wrote another sonnet praising Toussaint Louverture, a black man who led a revolution against slavery in Haiti. For Wordsworth to depict himself, confident in his own freedom, pitying this victim, would seem natural enough. Note that a type of criticism that emphasises the formal qualities of a text as a self-contained unit, such as French or Russian varieties of structuralism, or American New Criticism, would not be interested in this kind of real-world interpretation. Poststructuralism and deconstruction, on the other hand, tend to think about the internal properties of the text even more thoroughly, and yet tend to produce results that are also provocative in real-world terms.

Disruptions begin to appear in the poem, if we read attentively, which may go 'against the grain' of the obvious, 'natural' or 'common sense' reading, but only in ways that remain compatible with the words upon the page. 'We had a […] Passenger', says the speaker: as though he and his companion(s) (not just the boat or its crew) were carrying her – perhaps in the sense of 'the white man's burden', in the notorious later words of Kipling. The woman lays 'a weight' on the speaker's attempts to communicate: in other words, denies and frustrates them, not letting him in. In this sense, it is actually the speaker who is the 'Outcast'. This may seem 'counter-intuitive' but there is nothing in the poem that clearly rules it out. So the woman is confusing, both 'meek' and able to 'mock' the speaker. He is burdened, perhaps by pity, perhaps by guilt, but also perhaps by a fixed conception of the woman. When he speaks of the 'tropic fire' in the woman's eyes, there is clearly an allusion to the Tropics, but also to 'fire' as a trope (a figure of speech). After all, the woman's eyes haven't actually got fire in them. And that leads to the question: Is the woman herself a kind of trope, a figure for a blend of half-knowledge and anxiety rather than a known, identified, 'totalised' object? How could she not be?

The final apostrophe (an appeal to an absent person or abstraction) – 'O ye Heavens, be kind! / And feel, thou Earth, for this afflicted Race!' – invokes a wider response that might perhaps (i) echo the speaker's own (by being sympathetic) or (ii) compensate for it (by somehow avoiding tropes and presuppositions, and getting to the truth). And who, in the end, comprises 'this

afflicted Race'? Is it blacks (the 'obvious' reading), whites (like the poet), or even humans (playing on the familiarly double – inclusive or exclusive – meanings of 'race')? The dash before the apostrophe seems to echo the idea of the outcast: the moment in which the speaker expresses himself most passionately is itself cast out from the rest of the text.

I do not believe that I have contradicted anything in the poem. What I have contradicted are specific claims for – or constructions of – the poem's meaning. There is a politically, morally and emotively neutral consequence of this, which is that we have to accept that this poem (like all literary texts) contains points at which multiple, mutually contradictory readings are possible, creating moments of 'undecidability'. And then, when we bring history and real people in, there are consequences that are politically, morally and emotionally significant: making us see Wordsworth, for example, as more enmeshed in the contradictions of racial ideology than he might have liked to think; part of the problem, even, as much as its solution.

If you can pick holes in anything that I have said about Wordsworth's poem: great! Critics are not able to master and control their own statements, any more than a poet like Wordsworth. (There are also ways in which their statements about a poem can simply be wrong, unlike the poem itself.) But I hope that I have shown that deconstructive reading is not merely anarchic: in fact, it should be rigorous in its efforts to establish what the words on the page are capable of meaning. In this sense, as I previously remarked about New Criticism, deconstruction really necessities elements of a historical approach: we have to be able to eliminate anachronistic readings. For example, we will realise, after a little research into early-nineteenth-century semantics, that 'a lady gay' does not mean that the 'passenger' was a lesbian. The extent to which this kind of scrupulousness (which you could call an ethics of reading) is part of deconstructive criticism (and of many other forms of poststructuralism and 'theory' more generally) is a mark of its paradoxical relationship with the Enlightenment: questioning the Enlightenment's self-belief through its own methods, turning it against itself. On the other hand, a lot of what has been written in the name of deconstruction, like all other critical approaches, is sheer garbage. Ultimately, you will have to evaluate it yourself!

I have talked about deconstruction without mentioning the names of its most famous practitioners, such as Paul de Man and, above all, Jacques Derrida. If you want or need to know more about theory, you will find lots about them in books that I have listed in 'Further reading'; and then you can go on and read their own works, which are much more sophisticated and challenging than anything that I have said above. Derrida was a particularly flamboyant and charismatic theorist (with big hair and very shiny suits), but when he talked about 'deconstruction' he always tried to persuade people that it was not a method that he had invented, but rather a way of alluding to something that is an internal property of writing, and always has been. This fits with the general approach of this chapter, which has been to persuade you that there are questions that have always needed to be asked about literature, rather than treating the

theory of literature as anybody's particular property. You should think – not that Derrida is a monument, and that, like it or not, you have to learn about him – but rather that Derrida happens to be a particularly eloquent and influential source for ideas concerning aspects of literature that will have to be addressed by anybody who thinks about it beyond a certain point. The same goes for all other theorists: from Abrams to Žižek.

Part V

Over to you

This page intentionally left blank

13 Primary and secondary sources

We have now dealt with the most basic formal characteristics of literature, and of its main sub-genres; we have made a rapid survey of the history of literature in English, discussing a few specific texts in some detail; and we have looked at ways in which the study of literature connects with other disciplines, and at some of the main general questions that it raises, giving rise to theoretical debate. The few pages that remain will be more practical in focus. They will assume that you are either officially a student of literature in English, or that you are a reader who wishes to carry on reading and writing about texts in a scholarly manner. It should be apparent, by now, that literature cannot be seriously studied without careful reading, and that it cannot be satisfactorily read, beyond a certain point, without some study.

The basic materials in literary study are texts, primary and secondary. We have looked at how the former may be categorised generically; now we are going to look at how they are presented for the use of the student or scholarly reader, as editions. As for secondary texts, we are now going to look at both genre and modes of publication at the same time. At the end of this chapter, we will focus specifically on online sources. In fact, we find ourselves in the middle of a period of technological change, in reading, that is comparable to the invention of printing (or even more transformative), and more and more sources that used to be locked into physical forms (printed books or articles) are becoming accessible electronically. But the immediately foreseeable changes from printed to digital media will not alter most of the points that follow.

Editions

Looking around my university office, I find three editions of the poems of John Donne, each containing ‘The Good-Morrow’. There are further texts of the poem in multiple editions of various anthologies that I have collected over the years. Bibliophile (and son of a bookseller) that I am, I believe that I have a few more at home. If I go to my computer, I can find a considerable number of online texts of the poem. I can also access my university’s library system, and, with a few clicks, order up further editions, either from the library’s own collections, or, if necessary, by inter-library loan from almost anywhere in the world. If the

editions in question are very old and rare, and cannot be shipped, I can request permission to visit them in their own institutional homes. What is the point of all of this? After all, isn't it always the same poem?

Well, no. The text of the poem that I used in Chapter 1 is taken from the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, and is close, if not identical, to that found in various separate editions of Donne's poetry. However, the text of 'The Good Morrow' in the most recent edition on my shelves, *The Poems of John Donne*, edited by Robin Robbins (2008), is quite different at numerous points. First, there is no hyphen in the title. More significantly, instead of beginning, 'I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I / Did, till we loved? Were we not weaned till then, / But sucked on country pleasures, childishly?', it now begins, 'I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I / Did, till we loved: were we not weaned till then, / But sucked on *childish* pleasures *sillily*?' (my italics). The differences are accounted for, in Robbins's notes, in terms of choices that the scholarly editor has to make between no less than forty surviving manuscripts: the hand-written texts that would have been passed around in Donne's day, before his poems were eventually printed, after his death. None of these manuscripts appears to be the holograph (the original manuscript, in Donne's own hand), and extraordinary scholarly ingenuity, involving all kinds of literary and linguistic skills but also bibliographical and palaeographical ones (to do with things like paper and handwriting), have to be brought into the discussion of which manuscript should be preferred, at which point, over the others. This is a discussion which, like most academic enquiries, will probably never be finished.

Meanwhile, we need a text of the poem in order to carry on with the work of reading and interpreting it. If we are leading Donne scholars, we may want to take every manuscript (and every previous printed edition) into account, every time we think about the poem. But for most work on Donne, even at a high level, we just want one text that we can refer to, and that other enthusiasts will be able to find in their libraries. But that text had better be trustworthy: hence the need for editors like Robbins, who have the expertise to make decisions that the rest of us, by and large, can live with. In some cases (like the hyphen in the title), these will be very minor decisions. In other cases, choosing one source over another will make a big difference. For example, most previous editors of the poem, as Robbins notes, have preferred the first reading of Donne's line 3 (above) over the second one, with significant interpretative consequences: they 'have thought they detected a sexual overtone in "country"' (encouraged, no doubt, by a famous double entendre in *Hamlet*). This reading, like others in the poem, has been favoured by previous editors as 'vivid' or 'stronger', but Robbins's own editorial priorities lie with what appear most likely to have been the poet's own preferences, however relatively 'weak' they may seem to us; and so, in this case, it's out with 'country pleasures'. '[A]n implication', says Robbins in a dry footnote, 'that the sluggish lovers have been occupied with cunnilingus is inappropriate.' On the other hand, a future editor may decide that such an implication would be believably Donne-ish; or, for that matter, that it is 'sillily' that is the excessive tongue-twister.

Similar points could easily be made about the editorial history of most of the texts discussed in this book. For example, Wordsworth revised 'We had a female Passenger …' obsessively (as was his way) over more than forty years. When I discussed the poem in the last chapter, I used the final version that Wordsworth approved, which was published in 1845. Earlier versions differ substantially in almost every line, including the first, which sometimes begins, 'We had a *fellow*-Passenger …' (my italics), which would completely invalidate my point about the 'passenger' being somehow carried by the speaker himself! Note that editorial choices, in many of these cases, depend on what we believe to have been the author's intentions; on distinguishing their first intentions from their final ones; and on deciding which of these should be preferred. The practical business of text-editing, in other words, is intimately related to the kind of theoretical discussions about authorship upon which we touched in the previous chapter. Note, also, that these concerns do not just apply to very old texts: different editions of Joyce's *Ulysses*, for example, differ at thousands of points, partly because of manuscript evidence, but also because we suspect that the type-setters of the first edition may have had understandable problems with Joyce's revolutionary prose. There are even ways in which the discussion can be extended to film: it has been argued, for example, that *Vertigo*, as generally available, is the 'Hitchcock' version (adapted by the studio to fit the director's established image), rather than the one that the actual Hitchcock would have preferred.

Most of this stuff doesn't matter very much until you get to the point of doing original research. But it makes sense, as a student or general reader, to know something about where a text that you read comes from, and how much scholarly work may have gone into its preparation. Even if you are reading a text for the first time, and just want a mass-market paperback or screen-readable edition, you should think twice about your choice. Many of the cheapest paperback or online editions of nineteenth-century novels, for example, are unrevised reissues of Victorian editions, including numerous, sometimes significant, printer's errors. Paying slightly more will get you a modern edition in which such flaws have been eliminated, after very careful thought, by a highly qualified editor – and probably a whole lot of explanatory footnotes, as well.

Journals

When I was an undergraduate, and had to write weekly essays about literature (Those were the days!), I used to go into the university library every time, as far as I remember, to find two or three books about the text(s) and author(s) that I had chosen to write about, or about their literary-historical context. I then skimmed these books, found a few choice quotations, and planted them strategically somewhere or other within the texture of my own argument, so as to reinforce my claims (often by contrast with those of the hapless scholars whom I quoted), or, at the very least, to show that I knew my way around the library. There is nothing really wrong with this procedure, but I would probably do something slightly different now.

Books may be the most substantial and obvious class of literary-critical text, but most publication about literature goes on in the smaller-scale, less visible, but equally rigorous form of articles, typically of a length of about 4,000–8,000 words, in academic journals. Of course, the focus of these articles is usually narrower than that of a 90,000-word book. In fact, many if not most scholarly books contain at least one chapter that has previously been tried out and put into circulation as an article. Sometimes, an entire book may consist of revised versions of six or seven articles by the same author, previously published over several years, which have now been stitched together as one large project.

The cutting edge in writing about literature, therefore, is usually to be found in journals. What's more, if you yourself are about to write about literature on a fairly small scale (say, a 1,500-word paper), your own topic is likely to be a narrow one, and the sources that may be most useful to you will be correspondingly specific. And, if you only have a week or two to write your paper – well, you probably should have started sooner – but it is a considerable advantage that there is an abundance of high-level secondary material that comes in relatively small packages that can be read in their entirety, so that you can understand their arguments and do them justice when you cite, apply, and criticise them. So, if I were a student now, I believe that I would use secondary books somewhat less, and articles considerably more. That is why this section precedes the one on 'Monographs', although the latter might seem to the uninitiated to be the more important category.

Much has changed, of course, since I was an undergraduate (in the 1980s). Now that books have been removed from open shelves in many libraries to make way for computers, extra seating for growing numbers of students, or – in the case of the university where I now work – hammocks, the difference in terms of visibility and accessibility between books and articles has considerably diminished. Both kinds of text are now often available electronically: in some cases freely to everybody with access to the internet; more often through expensive institutional subscriptions to packages of journals and e-books from specific publishers. Many students – and other readers – are now in the lucky position of being able to find, open, and search within, instantly, the full text of hundreds of thousands of secondary texts.

It is not possible to give anything like a thorough guide to the kinds of article that are available. There are reference works under 'Further reading' that will help you with this. In the case of major authors, you will usually find that there are printed or online bibliographies: books or databases that consist of lists of other sources, with or without abstracts or critical annotations. In the case of Shakespeare's plays or Dickens's novels, for example, there are whole volumes of bibliography, with hundreds of pages, for each primary text, each listing thousands of secondary sources. Alternatively, you may be able to use an online search engine to search for an author, text, or topic through the titles, abstracts or full texts of many thousands, or hundreds of thousands, of articles, simultaneously. The best way to learn how to do this is by practice: experiment with the resources available to you, and ask your librarians.

Most academic journals are published regularly (usually four times a year). They consist of various kinds. If you were working on some of the authors discussed in this book, you might want to look at articles in *The Wordsworth Circle*, *The Emily Dickinson Journal* or *The Journal of Stevenson Studies*. Articles on the same authors, as well as slightly less high-profile ones, may also be found in much more comprehensive journals, such as *English Literary Renaissance*, *American Literature*, *The Journal of Victorian Culture* or *Post-colonial Studies*. Then there are journals that are even less specific, such as *PMLA* (*The Proceedings of the Modern Language Association of America*), *ELH* (*English Literary History*) or *Critical Inquiry*. There are journals that have a particular interdisciplinary focus, such as *Literature and Law*, *Philosophy and Literature* or *Literature and Medicine*. There are also journals devoted to particular genres, such as poetry, the novel, or science fiction; and many devoted to theatre, film, and performance studies in general. And so it continues. Sometimes it may be worth your while to get hold of complete issues of a particular journal (especially recent ones), to get an idea of what the typical debates in the field in question are about, and perhaps to get some ideas about what you yourself might write about; in other cases, you will know exactly what you are looking for already, and it will be best to find matching sources through carefully chosen search terms in an appropriate database.

Some journals are more prestigious and reliable than others. Especially if you are trying to produce original research – or at least to write a really solid and impressive paper – you may want to make a point of finding articles in 'peer-reviewed' journals: in other words, journals in which all the contributions have been thoroughly vetted by other scholars, before being accepted for publication. Most journals in the online collections subscribed to by higher education institutions, and almost all of those published by university presses and other major academic publishers, will be in this category. Other journals may be the sole publication of an author society, containing a mixture of scholarly articles and the amateur effusions of fans – but those can contain good stuff, sometimes, too.

If you are writing about a living author, the amount of scholarly material available may be more limited. In some cases, there may be little more available, yet, than newspaper reviews. You can use those, too, but you should always bear in mind the context in which the source appeared and the readership that it was intended for, and you should show that you are aware of this when you refer to the source in your own work.

Monographs

Books of literary criticism and theory exist in two main forms: multi-author anthologies and single-author monographs. The chapters in anthologies are similar in size and character to journal articles, and therefore do not require an extended discussion. Anthologies can be usefully specific in focus: such as a volume that brings together 12 critics writing about *Charles Dickens and Europe*, for example, or 15 essays on *Critical Ethics*. Frequently, such

collections are selected from papers given at an academic conference on a similar theme.

Conference-going (which basically involves travelling somewhere – usually a university – to meet up with fellow scholars, give a paper, listen to some other papers on related topics, network, have a few meals, and do a bit of sight-seeing) is one of the perks, but also the duties, of academic life. The same goes for publication. In the natural and social sciences, it is very common to go through a whole career publishing nothing longer than an article. In physics, for example, a five-page article can be enough, in principle, to change the world dramatically and to win you a Nobel Prize. In the humanities, it has been traditionally important to publish book-length monographs, insofar as developing an original argument convincingly and thoroughly, when talking about something like literature, takes a lot more space. Most doctoral degrees in literature (usually a pre-requisite, now, for an academic job) consist of a book-length dissertation, and this will often be revised, subsequently, to become the author's first commercially published book. The subsequent productivity of professional academics varies greatly, according to their institutional circumstances and personal ambitions, but most, these days will be expected to produce regular evidence, in published form, of active and ongoing research.

So, that's where most academic books come from, these days. As with journal articles, there is a huge selection of monographs available. (We may come to look back on the huge explosion of published literary criticism in the twentieth century, one famous critic modestly observed, as resembling the now inexplicable popularity of published sermons in the nineteenth.) It would be quite simply impossible to read all of the books published on Shakespeare, let alone the articles, even if you set aside all of the tens of thousands (I'm not exaggerating) published in the past. With Dickens, it might just be possible; but you would have no time for anything else. With Tennessee Williams or Chinua Achebe, the project would be more feasible – but you probably wouldn't want to read all of it anyway. As in the case of articles, the likely scenario is that you will be looking for material that helps you think and write about quite specific aspects of the author(s) and text(s) that you have been reading. So, as with articles, you will need bibliographical tools to guide you in the right direction. These will include the self-contained printed or online bibliographies of individual authors, as mentioned above, but also more general bibliographic databases – of which the best known, probably, is the *MLA International Bibliography* – as well as online library catalogues (in which elaborate subject searches are usually possible). Further very important guides to significant secondary sources, books and articles alike, are the bibliographies or 'works cited', as well as the footnotes or endnotes, in other secondary sources. Finding the material that you are looking for is often a matter of following a chain: finding the first source, then finding a second one to which the first refers, and so on, until you find what you need (or conclude that it doesn't exist, and that you'll have to write it yourself). The more frequently a source is cited, of course, the more substantial and interesting it is likely to be. A further guide to quality, as with articles, may be the publisher. Scholars usually try to place their

work with the best-known publisher who will take it. University presses are usually a safe bet. Beyond that, it would be invidious and probably misleading to try to name names: you will soon find out, if you read critically and carefully.

A further point to bear in mind, when looking for a useful secondary source, is that it may not be obvious from the title. In the case of articles, with their typically narrow focus, the title usually gives you quite a good idea of the contents, but this may not be the case with books. You may go into your library looking for a book on Carol Ann Duffy, for example, and find that there isn't one. But try looking for books on contemporary British poetry, and then check the index to see whether Duffy is featured. You may want to write about furniture in Jane Austen, but discover that no book called *Austen and Furniture* has yet been written: well, you may have to back up your work with a selection of sources, some on Austen, some on furniture, some on early-nineteenth century literature and domestic life in general, some on design, perhaps even some on 'thing theory'. The most useful sources for your argument may not have anything specifically about Austen or furniture in them, at all. Searching effectively for sources can take a lot of imagination.

Online sources

More and more books and articles are now available online. In fact, some journals (including some very good ones) now exist only in cyberspace – to the great relief of our friends, the trees. In addition, the internet offers us a huge range of literature-related websites, some of which embody the results of serious research and can therefore be treated as legitimate secondary sources. The situation changes constantly, but I shall briefly survey some of the main categories of site currently available.

An online encyclopaedia, written and edited collectively by an indefinite number of unnamed users – in this case, I am obviously thinking of *Wikipedia* – can be a useful source of very rapid inspiration. In fact, the ability to click from one subject to another, indefinitely, along a path of associations, is almost the apotheosis of the process of imaginative source-finding that I mentioned above. However, remember the nature of the texts that you are looking at, where they (may) come from, and how (if at all) they have been vetted. *Wikipedia* does aspire to a kind of peer review, by crowd-sourcing corrections and supplements. But this is not equivalent to the kind of highly controlled peer review practised by a reputable academic journal or book publisher. So, use it for inspiration, but you would be well advised to double check, and find the main backing for your academic arguments elsewhere.

In addition to publishing books and articles online, many publishers now run supplementary websites with supporting materials. An example would be the sites with extra texts, illustrations, audio material and secondary sources that are available to purchasers of Norton anthologies. Such sites are likely to conform to the academic standards of the publications to which they are attached. If you have the right to access them, it would make sense to see what they have to offer.

Major scholarly organisations usually have sites: for example, the Modern Language Association and the European Society for the Study of English, as well as more specific organisations such as the Renaissance Society of America and the British Association of Romantic Studies. Most of the material on such sites will be directed at professional academics, but some may be useful to students and readers more generally, including up-to-date links to further, presumably respectable, websites.

There are also many sites devoted to individual authors. In a few cases, the site itself is a major resource for research. An example would be the *William Blake Archive*, which offers high-resolution images of as many different copies as possible of Blake's hand-coloured plates – which you would otherwise have to travel to at least three continents to see. More commonly, single-author sites are attached to societies devoted to the study and appreciation of the author in question, membership of which is open to professionals and amateurs alike. There is the John Donne Society, for example, the Jane Austen Society of the United Kingdom, and the Emily Dickinson International Society. It is always worth checking whether such a society exists for an author that you are working on. Many of them offer regular events (if you are in the right place at the right time), as well as well online resources, and most are quite cheap to join.

Increasingly, individual scholars have websites, with materials related to their research interests and links to their own publications. If you come across a critical book or article that really impresses you, try finding its author's homepage (usually through the site of the university that employs them). But here we are drifting towards a much wider range of potential resources – blogs and other social media – which are developing all of the time, and the usefulness of which in an academic context remains to be seen.

There is one site that, at the time of writing, stands out as probably the most useful for studies in literatures in English in general, if you are lucky enough to have institutional access to it: ProQuest's *Literature Online*. This provides not only a vast quantity of secondary texts, including full texts of hundreds of scholarly journals, but also hundreds of thousands of primary texts (prose fiction, poetry and plays) – as well as highly adaptable search capabilities. Here, and in other online collections of scanned works of literature, it is increasingly possible to find, extremely quickly, exactly what you are looking for: say, all the 'mermaids' in Dickinson, or the first one in any canonical (or even fairly minor) English-language work. But don't forget to read whole texts, if you want to say anything about them that really makes sense.

14 Reading, research, writing

Most users of this book are probably engaged in some kind of official study programme that requires them to produce written (and perhaps also oral) responses to the literature that they have read, as part of the learning process and for purposes of evaluation. Even if you are not involved in such a programme, the fact that you have read this far suggests that you are serious about studying literature, in your own way. When you study literature you will have ideas about it, and you may want to write them down and convey them to others. This final chapter offers some introductory suggestions and advice about how to go about reading literature with a view to finding things that you want to investigate (research), and how to develop those enquiries into your own textual output.

Reading and re-reading

People often distinguish between reading for pleasure and reading as part of the task of critical evaluation and argument. This makes sense if, for example, you are a full-time medievalist, all of whose work is on fourteenth-century poems, but you like reading Dickens in the evening, when you are tired. Your blissful hours in the company of Mr Pickwick will probably not have much impact on your professional struggles with the Gawain Poet. For those of us, however, who have rather broad literary interests, it is very difficult to draw a boundary around the kinds of reading that need to be taken seriously. Reading something for pleasure, you may find something relevant to a project that you are engaged in; or you may suddenly light upon something that intrigues you, and has the potential to be developed into a new project. This is no doubt rather obvious: but you should always be ready to make connections, and take notes.

Ideally, we would always read literary texts at least twice before trying to write about them. During the first reading, you can figure out what interests you about the text and what you would like to say about it. On the second reading, you can be on the look-out for evidence for (or against) your argument, from the very first page. By the end of your first reading of *Things Fall Apart*, for example, you may have decided that you want to write about Achebe's extensive and complex treatment of the supernatural in Igbo culture – but you

might not have figured that out when you first read about the founder of Umuofia fighting 'a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights', in the novel's first paragraph. Repeated readings are obviously more feasible with shorter texts such as lyric poems and short stories. In the case of longer texts, re-reading remains the ideal, but may be impossible in practice. Then, you will need to rely on comprehensive note-taking, advance notice that you may receive – in lectures, say, or literary reference works – about the important themes, issues and techniques that you will find in the text, and retrospective methods of finding things that you half-remember, such as the digital searches mentioned at the end of the previous chapter. Such searches can be much more sophisticated, of course, than just looking for an individual noun, like 'mermaid'. If you wanted to write about Austen's concepts of necessity, persuasion and logic, for example, you might want to take your starting point (as usual) in the first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* – 'a single man in possession of a good fortune, *must be* in want of a wife' (my italics) – and then search for other significant uses of 'must be' which, you suspect, *must be* scattered through the novel.

Reading and listening

A very large number of literary texts are now available as audiobooks. Is this an acceptable or appropriate way for someone who is serious about literature to 'read'? The answer is not so simple. If you *are* going to listen to an audiobook, make sure that it is a full-text version, not an abridgement. Abridged audiobooks are usually *very* abridged, frequently missing out whole sub-plots in the case of novels. Any abridgement, like any translation, creates what is really a very different text.

In fact, any reading of a text aloud, even if it is the whole text, is still an adaptation, just as a performance of a play is an adaptation: the reader has his or her own ideas about the text, and finds ways of emphasising some aspects rather than others. It might make sense, therefore, to read a text to yourself first, in the old-fashioned way, so that you have a chance to figure out what you yourself think of it – and then listen to someone else read it, by way of revision or consolidation, or simply to see what they make of it, which may be different in interesting ways from your own, probably silent, reading.

Actually, the 'old-fashioned way' of absorbing a literary text was not necessarily silent. In the nineteenth century, for example, many 'readers' of both prose fiction and poetry would have experienced it primarily in a social setting, with books read aloud within a circle of family and friends. This was, after all, a good form of domestic entertainment, in the days before TV. So, if you listen to a Dickens novel, for example (full text!), rather than reading it silently to yourself, you are arguably getting closer to the experience of many, if not most, of the original audience. There will be a great deal that will go straight in one ear and out the other (unless you have a truly remarkable, not to say freakish, brain); and so, if you are trying to study the text seriously, you should also read it to yourself. But the audio experience does have the potential, like any approach to

the text involving someone else's input, to open up new, unexpected and fruitful perspectives. Audiobooks read by the authors themselves can be especially illuminating. The very fact that writers like J. M. Coetzee and Seamus Heaney, for example, have taken the trouble to make audio versions of their own work suggests that this is not altogether a trivial approach to literature. We even have short, fragmentary, barely audible recordings of Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson!

The primary text and you

Some theoretical approaches to literature, as discussed above, have a tendency to undermine clear distinctions between primary and secondary texts, insofar as all are part of a network of writing with no simple origin. This applies not merely to literary authors and professional critics, but also to you. To a certain extent, both the literary authors that you write about, and you, as you do that writing, are doing the same thing. You presumably wish to do justice to the texts that you write about, to the best of your abilities. That involves reading them carefully and not misrepresenting their contents; but it also involves applying a critical attitude to your own writing.

Finding a subject

Being critical about your own writing means also being critical about your thoughts. This is necessary even during the initial reading process, when you are beginning to formulate the possible subject of your paper or presentation. Many people spend a lot of time wondering what they should write about, perhaps despairing that it has all been done before. Well, until you reach the doctoral level, you are not necessarily expected to say anything completely new about literature – although it will be wonderful, of course, if you can. There are two main routes towards saying something new, or at least distinctive. One is to identify a gap, after surveying all of the existing secondary literature (which is not likely to be possible beneath the doctoral level, and perhaps not even then); the other is to be analytical and critical about your own reactions to the text, which has presumably caught your interest in some way. If you can identify what it is about a text that appeals to you, and then express that aspect or quality succinctly, then you will be well on your way to finding a point of view that will be original, at least to the extent of being characteristic of you (and you are probably not exactly like anybody else). For example, going back to Austen, you might happen to recall that one of Mr Bennett's sarcastic remarks to his wife made you laugh. On scrutinising your own reaction (as you might scrutinise a bit of Austen's own text), you might realise that what really attracts you to *Pride and Prejudice* is an element of ruthlessness that underlies its more obvious whimsicality and its drive towards a happy ending – and then, perhaps, you would have a subject: 'Malice in *Pride and Prejudice*', 'Austen's Intolerance of Failure', or, more abstractly, 'The Comedy of Contempt'. At this point, it

would be time to apply a further level of criticism to your own thought processes, and ask: How can I develop this idea into a claim that will be worth arguing for, in the required number of words? Expectations will differ, according to the conventions that you may be working within or the institution that you are at, as to how explicit this claim must be (you may, for instance, be required to spell out a 'thesis statement' at the beginning of your paper), but the general principle will be the same in most cases: you need to have something to say that takes the form of a proposition that can be discussed, and that needs to be defended. It is not quite like putting forward a falsifiable hypothesis in the natural sciences (although *some* statements about texts can, as discussed in Chapter 12, be simply right or wrong), but you should at least be trying to say something that other people might be bothered to disagree with; something that significantly advances specific aspects of the primary text, or specific ways of seeing it, over others.

Establishing a framework

What you can achieve in the course of a piece of writing about literature (such as a student paper) depends, of course, on the permitted length. However, even thick books of literary criticism often have just one main point to make, although it might be a point that depends on meticulous analysis of every one of an author's main works, for example, together with elaborate historical contextualisation and the explanation of complex theoretical presuppositions. If we are looking at a paper of one or two thousand words, then one main point will almost always be enough, and you will have to organise your material quite carefully if you are to make that point effectively; there will be little space for repetition or digressions.

People have different minds, and write in different ways. Most, however, will be better able to produce a coherent piece of writing if they have some kind of initial overview of its structure. Once you have established the claim that you wish to make in your paper, therefore, you may well wish to develop an outline that shows you clearly what you will have to do, in order to make that claim stick. For example, your paper might consist of an introductory section (perhaps one to three paragraphs) in which you briefly indicate what the paper will be about, perhaps placing your approach to the text in question relative to other, slightly more familiar, ways of approaching it; then, you will almost certainly launch into a series of critical readings of passages from the primary source; and finally, there will be one or two paragraphs in which you recap the main findings from your critical readings, and show how they support the point that you raised (but which was then an unsupported claim), at the beginning of the paper. There will be many variations on this basic structure: for example, if you want to make the point that the sea in Dickinson always has the same symbolic meaning (a bit unlikely), or at least that its meanings are very closely linked, then your series of critical analyses of different passages may be more or less interchangeable. If, on the other hand, you wish to argue that there is great

variation in Wordsworth's attitude to black people, or that those attitudes evolved over time, then your critical analyses will depend, for their effect, on their difference from one another, and the general drift of the paper will be less predictable and more exploratory. Irrespective of these differences, however, you should have a reasonably clear idea, in advance, of what you need to do in which parts of the paper; and preparing an outline in which, for example, the planned content of each paragraph is summarised in a sentence, will probably help. That way, you are less likely to get lost in the middle of the paper, or to find that you have run out of space. Your ideas may change somewhat during the writing – the very process of beginning to write about the primary material may stimulate new thinking about it – and that may lead you to make adjustments to your outline. Even so, having a provisional outline is almost always likely to give better results than just flinging yourself in and waiting to see what happens.

Argument and evidence

Decide what you know about the text that you are analysing, and how. If you have beliefs about its content that are not clearly demonstrable from the text itself, or not in the time and space available, think about that, and be open about it. Writing rather speculatively may be permissible – depending whom you are writing for – but try to distinguish, critically, between when that is the case and when, on the other hand, you have a point that can be proven, or at least strongly defended. You might want to think back to the discussion of 'known knowns', and so on, in the 'Literary theory' chapter. Once again, many of the same considerations apply to your writing as to literary authors.

Be particularly careful about to whom you attribute the claims, arguments and points of view within the primary text itself. For example: is it really Shakespeare who expresses his beliefs and feelings, in one of his sonnets, or is it a speaker that he has created? Whenever you say something about literature, you are liable to take certain assumptions about literary matters, such as authorship and intention, for granted. You need to think about the particular text (and probably its context), but you also need to think about the intellectual framework that allows you to see it as you do. Some student papers (especially longer ones, such as Masters' dissertations) tend to divide into hermetically sealed sections: (i) theory and (ii) literary analysis. Life (or literature) is not really like that: the two things are constantly treading on each other's toes.

Using quotations

A very significant amount of space, if not most of it, in most academic papers is devoted to the presentation and analysis of quotations (not 'quotes'!). It is crucial, therefore, that you work out how to do this effectively and fairly. When you choose a quotation from a text it is presumably because you think that it supports a point that you want to make. If you think critically (once again)

about why you think that it does so, you will learn something both about the quotation and the point. Now your task is to convey this process of reflection and discovery to your reader – who is not inside your head. In other words, quotations can't do the job just by themselves. You need to introduce them and you need to 'unpack' them, explaining exactly what it is in the block of text that you have just asked your reader to look at that is interesting, and that supports your argument. This will use up valuable space, but the fact is that most arguments will be much better supported by the careful discussion of two or three passages from the primary text than by the superficial treatment of ten.

Say that you are writing about *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and that your argument concerns how Stanley is represented. Your main claim might be that Williams's play is morally unsettling because it is hard to attribute the blame for the destructive and criminal behaviour of its main male character, who sometimes seems to be in full control of his actions, but sometimes seems to be a victim of patterns of behaviour that society has imposed upon him. You might want to say, for example, that we can see this mixture of independence and captivity when we look at the ways in which he expresses himself, as here (a passage that you will remember from Chapter 7):

> STANLEY I've been on to you from the start! Not once did you pull any wool over this boy's eyes! You come in here and sprinkle the place with powder and spray perfume and cover the light-bulb with a paper lantern, and lo and behold the place has turned into Egypt and you are the Queen of the Nile! Sitting on your throne and swilling down my liquor! I say – *Ha! – Ha!* Do you hear me? *Ha – ha – ha!*

Maybe you think that the job has now been done: that the mixture of independence and captivity has been shown, and that you can safely move on to other parts of your argument and other quotations. Perhaps you think that your reader will know what you meant. Perhaps *you* know what *I* meant. Or perhaps not. It's a fairly long and quite complicated quotation, and there are a lot of things going on in it, some relevant to the claim, some not. Unpacking the quotation, to support the claim, we might want to draw our reader's attention to an instance of knowledge and imagination in the passage, such as the comparison of Blanche to 'the Queen of the Nile', as evidence of Stanley's independent thinking (and responsibility for his actions), but also to his use of cliché (to 'pull [the] wool over [somebody's] eyes') as evidence that such independence of mind has its limits. We might want to add that '*Ha! – Ha! … Ha – ha – ha!*' is ambiguous: it suggests Stanley's power and defiance (and thus, again, his responsibility), but it can also be read as a descent into an inarticulate, childlike, and perhaps pitiable state. You wouldn't have known quite what I thought was significant about the quotation until I said all of this; now you do. As a result, you are in a much better position to assess whether my claim has any validity.

Quoting secondary sources

Quotations from secondary sources need to be handled carefully, too. Of course, you have to indicate how they relate to your argument (as with the primary quotations), but you also have to bear in mind that a secondary text, unlike a literary work, usually has a specific argument of its own, which you should not misrepresent.

If you have taken one of your significant ideas from a secondary source, you must, of course, indicate this: perhaps just by naming the source, but probably by quoting it (otherwise you may be guilty of plagiarism, the ultimate academic sin). On the other hand, you should not clutter your paper up with unnecessary quotations, supporting quite obvious and uncontroversial facts. If you need to mention that Shakespeare was born in 1564, for example, there is no need to cite a source for this information – given that the potential sources are so numerous and that the fact is so commonplace. (Similarly, you do not need to cite a source if you claim that Paris is the capital of France.) It would also be a bit ridiculous to quote another critic's claim that '*Macbeth* is set in Scotland', '*Macbeth* is one of Shakespeare's most famous tragedies', or even that '*Macbeth* is full of animal imagery', since these are all fairly banal observations, only requiring very rudimentary critical skills. Nobody will feel that you have robbed them of any glory if you present these insights as your own.

On the other hand, there is a range of situations in which quoting a secondary source is a legitimate or even a necessary thing to do: if, for example, you need to make use of non-obvious information or sub-arguments that you do not have the space to generate yourself; if you find that someone else has expressed an idea that you could, in principle, put in your own words, but you would not be able to improve upon it in any way; or to give a sense of existing critical views on a subject, which you may want to expand upon or even disagree with. For example, you might want to write a paper on 'The Tyger' in which you interpret the poem as chiefly expressing Blake's radical doubt about the nature of his own imagination, and his ability to turn it to constructive ends. To underline the distinctiveness of your own reading you might want to contrast it with others in which the poem is seen as much more socially and historically oriented, and much less characterised by doubt. You could quote the critic Jack Lindsay, for example, who argues that Blake 'decides', in this poem, 'that we must accept the fearful symmetry of life [...]. The Terror in France is unavoidable. It is part of a dialectic moving towards a fuller humanity, a broader and more secure symmetry of relationships between men and men, men and nature' (*William Blake*, 1978). This is a distinctive argument, worth quoting. You might want to acknowledge its merits, but then go on to say why, in your view, no such reading of the poem as 'deciding' or 'accepting' anything is appropriate. Above all, however, you should pay close enough attention to the context of the passage that you quote (the sentences on either side, but also the whole drift of the argument in the book or article in question) to be able to represent its claims in a way that the author could identify with (whether or not you agree with them). It

would be very misleading, for example, to cite me as saying that '[t]he first word that comes to many people's minds' regarding Romanticism 'is "Nature". [...] Plants, animals, land-, sea- and skyscapes figure strongly in many of these texts' (from Chapter 9 of this book), without acknowledging what I say immediately afterwards, to complicate these observations.

Not that you would necessarily want to quote this book in one of your essays anyway! You should treat the secondary sources that you use with due respect, but you should also be careful to judge just how much respect each one deserves; and you should take into account the purposes for which they were designed. This book probably contains a few new readings of a few texts (of the Seamus Heaney poem, for example, or the short story by Wallace, which haven't existed for long enough to accumulate much scholarly attention), but it is not primarily intended as original research. Perhaps I have even made one or two new points about *Macbeth* (although I rather doubt it). But if I wanted to write an article about *Macbeth* for a respected journal of early modern studies, I would have to go about it in a very different way, starting with as comprehensive a survey as reasonably possible of the existing secondary literature. It would have been quite impossible to do that for all of the primary texts that I have talked about in this book, and quite unnecessary, given its aims as an introductory work. So, you would probably be better off quoting from a proper scholarly article or monograph. The more ambitious your own writing about literature becomes, the more you will be picky about your sources.

If you seriously consider the questions raised in this book (and especially if you disagree with some of the suggested answers), then you should be on the way to thinking more critically, both about literature and about your own attitudes to it, and that should mean that your writing becomes more sophisticated and persuasive. The best way, I believe, in which you can learn to write about literature is by doing it, and by reading as widely and attentively as your other commitments allow you to, both in primary and secondary texts. Remember, when you read professional critics, that they are engaged in the same business, basically, as you: take note of how they structure their arguments, use quotations, document their sources, and see what you can learn from it. Good luck!

Further reading

Some of the works listed below offer a healthy contrast to the present book, a different way of 'introducing' literature in English; others represent a suitable next step in a particular direction, such as learning more about periods and movements, or kinds of literary theory; others are standard reference works, valuable at almost any level of literary study.

Dictionaries

Dictionaries are fundamental to the study of language, and therefore to the study of literature. 'Advanced learner's' dictionaries are of limited usefulness when it comes to literature, since literary authors, almost by definition, do not restrict themselves to everyday vocabulary.

The Chambers Dictionary. 1901. 12th ed. London: Chambers Harrap, 2011. A comprehensive one-volume dictionary; reliable, urbane, and known for its broad coverage of archaic and dialect words.

Collins English Dictionary. 1979. 11th ed. Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2011. Another comprehensive one-volume dictionary, very frequently updated, with the further attraction of a large number of biographical entries.

The Oxford English Dictionary. 1928. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1989. The ultimate resource for study of the English language across time, and an essential pre-requisite for much literary research. Based on a massive corpus and continuously under development, the *OED* includes extensive etymologies, as well as citations from thousands of literary texts. You will find the 20 volumes, plus supplements, in good libraries. The online version (available at many academic institutions) is more convenient and much more up-to-date.

General works

Birch, Dinah, ed. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. 1932. 7th ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Written primarily for people who love reading, but also very useful as a first port-of-call for students and academics, this time-honoured work is good value, and worth having on your shelf. As a source of basic facts about authors, texts, literary movements, etc., it is a safer bet than free online reference sources. The *Companion*'s mixture of scholarly rigour, common sense, accessibility and traditional Englishness (although less so now than in older editions) can be exemplified by the

entry on 'Shakespeare: authorship of the works', which rightly dismisses the popular debate about whether Bacon, Marlowe or someone else wrote the plays, attributing much of the fuss to 'a mad American'. Despite the title, the *Companion* now covers literatures in English, not just English literature (although separate Oxford companions to Irish, American and Canadian literature are also available).

King James's Bible: A Selection. ed. W. H. Stevenson. 1994. 2nd ed. Harlow: Pearson, 2010. It is perhaps not everybody's idea of a 'general' work, but the Bible, as argued in Chapter 11 above, is relevant to most literature in English. This is an excellent student's edition, richly annotated, specifically designed for use as 'background' to literary studies, and with most of the really boring bits left out.

Anthologies

Baym, Nina, gen. ed. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. 1979. 8th ed. New York: Norton, 2011; and Greenblatt, Stephen, gen. ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 1962. 9th ed. New York: Norton, 2012. These massive and widely used volumes contain most of the primary texts discussed in the present book, along with thousands of others. The period and author introductions are generally authoritative and well written, although they contain occasional errors. Most of the medieval texts in the *Anthology of English Literature* have been translated or modernised. Each volume contains extensive bibliographies. Norton also publish anthologies of African American and Australian literature.

North, Richard, Joe Allard and Patricia Gillies, eds. *The Longman Anthology of Old English, Old Icelandic and Anglo-Norman Literatures*. Harlow: Pearson, 2011. A wide-ranging and reader-friendly anthology, including literature in Old English from ca. 600–1100. Original texts are presented with parallel translations throughout. Clear explanatory notes.

Burrow, J. A., and Thorlac Turville-Petre, eds. *A Book of Middle English*. 1992. 3rd ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. A representative selection of comprehensively annotated texts dating from ca. 1150–1400, in the original, with guidance on grammar and pronunciation.

Demers, Patricia, ed. *From Instruction to Delight: An Anthology of Children's Literature to 1850*. 1982. 3rd ed. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford UP, 2008. Children are people, too, and much of 'their' literature is now also seen as worthy of adult attention. This anthology largely consists of British and American works from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, but includes a few earlier pieces. Particularly valuable as context for authors such as Swift and Blake.

Rothenberg, Jerome, and Pierre Joris, eds. *Poems for the Millennium*. 3 vols. Berkeley: U of California P, 1995–2009. A huge, highly innovative anthology. The first two volumes concentrate on Modernism and postmodernism respectively, while the third traces the roots of these movements in Romanticism. The emphasis is on an aesthetically and politically radical tradition (or counter-tradition). The editors include many kinds of text, such as concrete poetry and multimedia performance works, that you will not find in the Norton anthologies. Emphatically international and multicultural.

Critical terms

Abrams, M. H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 1957. 10th ed. International ed. N.p.: Wadsworth-Cengage, 2012. A comprehensive and surprisingly absorbing book, in which many of the definitions are linked together within

mini-essays devoted to major concepts (all definitions, however, being separately indexed). With extensive suggestions for furthering reading.

Baldick, Chris. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. 1990. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. More straightforwardly organised than Abrams and Harpham, with some particularly succinct and insightful definitions. Included in the reference section of ProQuest's database, *Literature Online*.

Prince, Gerald. *A Dictionary of Narratology*. 1987. Rev. ed. Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 2003. Narratology has a complex vocabulary of its own, and this little book is as good a guide to it as any.

Other introductions to literary study

Bate, Jonathan. *English Literature: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010. Fresh, lively, thought-provoking – and very short. Intended for enthusiastic readers, more than students. Bate begins, engagingly, with children's literature.

Eaglestone, Robert. *Doing English: A Guide for Literature Students*. 1999. 3rd ed. Abingdon: Routledge, 2009. Primarily directed at British students, heading towards or just beginning university. Astute and affable, with a particular focus on the social and political context of English studies, as they have developed in the UK.

Goring, Paul, Jeremy Hawthorn and Domhnall Mitchell. *Studying Literature: The Essential Companion*. 2001. 2nd ed. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010. A pragmatic, student-friendly book, which emphasises study techniques and literary theory. A large section is devoted to useful mini-essays on 55 literary theorists, from Auerbach to Woolf.

Montgomery, Martin, Alan Durant, Tom Furniss and Sara Mills. *Ways of Reading: Advanced Reading Skills for Students of English Literature*. 1992. 4th ed. London: Routledge, 2012. The title of this sober, methodical book is slightly misleading: it is mainly an introduction to basic characteristics of literary texts, including genre, metre, figurative language (which you need to be aware of, in order to 'read' effectively). The authors also deal briefly with some issues in critical theory, and have the merit of reducing technical jargon to plain speech whenever possible. There are well-designed exercises at the end of each chapter. This book might be particularly helpful for people studying both literature and linguistics, but who are more at home with the methods and style of the latter.

Pope, Rob. *Studying English Literature and Language: An Introduction and Companion*. 1998. 3rd ed. London: Routledge, 2012. Pope's book resembles Goring *et al.*, in emphasising study skills and theory. Divided into many largely independent sections and sub-sections, it emphasises literature much more than language, and includes a substantial anthology of primary texts (mostly excerpts), as well as lively study exercises.

Poetry

Furniss, Tom, and Michael Bath. *Reading Poetry: An Introduction*. 1996. 2nd ed. Harlow: Pearson Education, 2007. This is a large, comprehensive book, containing a good deal of literary history and theory, as well as discussions of the formal aspects of poetry, with exercises at the end of each chapter.

Spurr, Barry. *Studying Poetry*. 1997. 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Shorter than Furniss and Bath, but still chunky, Spurr's book takes a specifically

historical approach, being largely divided into chapters on 'Poetry through the centuries'. Enthusiastic and clear (despite the rather small print).

Williams, Rhian. *The Poetry Toolkit: The Essential Guide to Studying Poetry*. London: Continuum, 2009. Another bright, well-written book. Relatively short, and with a clear emphasis (as the title suggests) on the mechanics of poetry.

Prose fiction

Mullan, John. *How Novels Work*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006. Based on a series of articles for *The Guardian* newspaper, but reorganised into longer chapters concerning topics such as 'Beginning', 'People', 'Structure' and 'Devices', this is a happy combination of popular accessibility and intellectual substance. It refers to a wide range of canonical and contemporary novels, and will probably be a more satisfactory next step, for most readers, than more technical books on narratology.

Wood, James. *How Fiction Works*. London: Cape, 2008. Both idiosyncratic and highly authoritative, Wood's book is organised as a long discursive essay, and you never know quite where it will take you – but you will learn a lot, along the way, about many subjects, especially different versions and concepts of realism.

Plays

Lennard, John, and Mary Luckhurst. *The Drama Handbook: A Guide to Reading Plays*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. Directed at students and readers of English literature rather than actors or other theatre practitioners, this book provides a thorough, fact- and history-conscious introduction to 'reading' plays as both text and performance. It is divided into well organised and easily digestible chapters on topics such as dramatic genres, theatrical spaces, and the persons involved in the production and reception of plays. Pertinent examples are provided throughout, as well as a helpful glossary, bibliography and guide to plays on video/DVD.

Shepherd, Simon, and Mick Wallis. *Drama/Theatre/Performance*. London: Routledge, 2004. More demanding than Lennard and Luckhurst, this volume in the 'New Critical Idiom' series discusses the relationships not only between drama, theatre and performance, but also between literary criticism and cultural and performance studies. Shepherd and Wallis emphasise a historically grounded awareness of the politics of theatre, informed by discussions of feminist, Marxist, postmodern and other relatively recent theoretical perspectives.

Film

Bordwell, David, and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction*. 1979. 10th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012. A remarkably comprehensive work, given its relative compactness (taking the more than 1,200 illustrative frame enlargements into account). The authors deal with all of the major technical aspects of film-making, such as cinematography and sound, as well as narrative, genre, the commercial aspects of cinema, film history (briefly summarising the major movements) and criticism. With supplementary online material and guides to further viewing.

Braudy, Leo, and Marshall Cohen, eds. *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. 1974. 7th ed. New York: Oxford UP, 2009. A wide-ranging collection, including many specifically film-oriented essays that you won't find in more general anthologies of criticism and theory, such as Lodge or the *Norton*.

Monaco, James. *How to Read a Film: Movies, Media, and Beyond: Art, Technology, Language, History, Theory*. 1977. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. As the title suggests, this classic text is a good introductory work for people coming to film with literary habits and expectations.

Literary history: Comprehensive surveys

Alexander, Michael. *A History of English Literature*. 2000. 3rd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Briskly written and highly opinionated, this is nevertheless a reliable guide to the literature in English of the British Isles, from Anglo-Saxon times to the present. The emphasis is on major authors, but these are deftly woven together into a larger narrative. The texture of the book is lightened by illustrations and helpful chronological tables.

Gray, Richard. *A Brief History of American Literature*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Very readable and highly authoritative, including a great many texts and authors within a coherent narrative of literary history, persuasively linked to the wider myths, ideologies, strengths and conflicts of the United States. If, after digesting this, you are still hungry, see Gray's much longer *A History of American Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).

Poddar, Prem, and David Johnson, eds. *A Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literatures in English*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2005. This is an encyclopaedia, not a book that many people would want to read from cover to cover. But it is full of authoritative articles, each a few pages in length, that will provide excellent background reading for any work of postcolonial literature. Readers of Achebe, for example, might start with the articles on West African 'Historiography', 'Languages and Ethnicities', 'Religions' and 'Women's Histories'.

Poplawski, Paul, ed., *English Literature in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008. Fact-oriented and slightly monochrome in style, but systematically covering the social and political history of Britain in parallel with literary history, this is an excellent one-volume companion for readers for whom seeing literary works in the wider context of their times is a priority. Students of joint degrees in literature and history will find it especially useful.

Sanders, Andrew. *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*. 1994. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004. Not exactly 'short' – in fact, about three times as long as Michael Alexander's *History*, and without any pictures – this book is a grand progress, with room to include many relatively minor writers and develop elaborate critical assessments of the more important ones. Sanders seems to target readers who already know the literature of the British Isles quite well, but would like to see how it all connects together. It is hard not to be impressed by the wealth of information and the sustained sympathy for so many different kinds of writing.

Literary history: Specific periods

North, Richard, and Joe Allard eds. Beowulf *& Other Stories: A New Introduction to Old English, Old Icelandic and Anglo-Norman Literatures*. 2007. 2nd ed. Harlow: Pearson, 2012. A wildly enthusiastic, even boisterous book, aimed at kindling the imaginations of a student readership but well grounded in up-to-date research.

Burrow, J. A. *Medieval Writers and Their Work: Middle English Literature 1100–1500*. 1982. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Slightly old-fashioned in tone and critical

approach, this slim volume is still a very good introduction to the period. It is particularly helpful in explaining the differences between the conditions and expectations of 'literature' in medieval and modern times.

Briggs, Julia. *This Stage-Play World: Texts and Contexts, 1580–1625*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983. 2nd ed. 1997. This is a highly regarded study, providing a very effective introduction to all of the Elizabethan and Jacobean contexts that are most important for understanding the literature of the period, such as the theatre, the court and the educational system, as well exploring attitudes to religion, nature and the New World.

Fernie, Ewan, Ramona Wray, Mark Thornton Burnett and Clare McManus. *Reconceiving the Renaissance: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. Quite advanced, but if you have a strong interest in early modern literature, this is a comprehensive guide to the main tendencies in the field, in the wake of New Historicism.

Parry, Graham. *The Seventeenth Century: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1603–1700*. London: Longman, 1989. This book contains evocative chapters on the general cultural atmosphere of each of the sub-periods in question: Jacobean, Caroline, Civil War and Commonwealth, and Restoration, as well as further chapters on science, religion and political theory. Provides a great deal of information necessary for understanding this particularly complicated century, with extensive bibliographies if you need even more.

Speck, W. A. *Literature and Society in Eighteenth-Century England: Ideology, Politics and Culture, 1680–1820*. London: Longman, 1998. This is a good, concise introduction to a period (or series of periods) in which literature is often riddled with politics, and where careful explanation of the background is particularly necessary.

Giles, Paul. *Transatlantic Insurrections: British Culture and the Formation of American Literature, 1730–1860*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2001. Giles's book is a research monograph rather than a general introduction to a period, but it is clearly written, well organised, and has a lot to offer anyone who would like to pursue further the inter-connected discussion of literature in Britain and America attempted in Chapter 9 of the present work.

Butler, Marilyn. *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760–1830*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981. Despite its (relative) age, this much admired book is still extremely useful, managing to be both introductory and sophisticated, revealing the diversity and contradictions of Romanticism as it functioned in its social and political contexts.

Gilmour, Robin. *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830–1890*. Harlow: Pearson, 1993. A very learned work, divided into thematic chapters on science, religion, politics, etc., but with a very strong overall sense of Victorian culture and concerns. With particularly thoughtful and informative guides to further reading.

Nicholls, Peter. *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*. 1995. 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. As is necessary when it comes to Modernism(s), Nicholls's book ranges widely across Britain, France, Russia, America (including a chapter on African American modernism) and elsewhere, as well as connecting literature with other arts. Relatively advanced, and packed with information.

Gregson, Ian. *Postmodern Literature*. London: Arnold, 2004. Short and readable, but manages to cover a lot of ground: explaining the connections between postmodern literature and poststructuralist theory, with plenty of well chosen examples from American, British and postcolonial authors.

Interdisciplinary approaches

McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. 2000. 2nd ed. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010. Like postcolonialism itself, this book is partly defined by history and geography and partly by a set of cultural and political ideas. Poddar and Johnson (see under 'Literary history' above) provide more factual information, but McLeod's book offers a coherent guide to the history, application, ambiguities and possible shortcomings of the notion of the 'postcolonial' itself – and does so readably and on the basis of great expertise.

D'haen, Theo, César Dominguez and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, eds. *World Literature: A Reader*. London: Routledge, 2013. A useful collection of texts, tracing the development of the concept of world literature from Goethe to the present, and allowing us to assess its claims as an alternative to comparative and postcolonial approaches.

Mitchell, W. J. T. *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994. With essays ranging from Blake through abstraction to CNN, this is a highly thought-provoking collection from the best known scholar in the field of literature and the visual arts.

Posner, Richard A. *Law and Literature*. 1988. 3rd ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009. A hefty and fairly dense tome (but that shouldn't matter, if you're a law student). Posner is the central figure in the field, and writes with great authority about many aspects of the law-literature relation.

Tambling, Jeremy. *Literature and Psychoanalysis*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2012. Tambling does not claim 'scientific veracity' for Freud's theories, but manages to provide a persuasive account of their usefulness in literary studies (together with those of Melanie Klein and Jacques Lacan), in a short and fairly accessible book.

Stockwell, Peter. *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2002. Stockwell's book offers a good starting point for exploring the way in which stylistics has developed towards cognitive psychology, and to the 'hard science' approach to literature more generally.

Berry, David M., ed. *Understanding Digital Humanities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Most of the essays in this collection are rather advanced and specialised, but the book as a whole offers a useful sense of the currently much-discussed potential for information technology to substantially change the study of literature and other humanistic disciplines.

Literary theory: Anthologies

Leitch, Vincent B., et al., eds. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. 2001. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 2010. An enormous collection, from Classical times to the present, with very well written, informative introductory notes on all of the theorists included. The majority of the classic theoretical texts are in here somewhere, often as judicious excerpts that get straight to the point.

Lodge, David, and Nigel Wood. *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. 1988. 3rd ed. Harlow: Pearson, 2008. Less overwhelming in scale than the *Norton*, but still a weighty tome. Lodge only goes back as far as Marx, Saussure and Freud, thus emphasising 'theory' as a specific tradition with offshoots in deconstruction, feminism, reader-response theory, and so on. Fewer than 50 theorists in all, but most of the really influential arguments are included. With useful cross-references, so that you can trace various paths of theoretical development, according to your particular needs and interests.

Literary theory and philosophy of literature: Introductions and surveys

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 1995. 3rd ed. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2009. More ambitious and more enjoyable than it sounds, this book provides lucid explanations of the main concepts within all of the well known branches of literary theory, and clear advice on how to apply these concepts yourself. Barry's approach is strongly historical, showing how one movement develops from another, which makes all of them easier to understand. This would be an excellent next step in learning about literary theory, to be followed by the thing itself in anthologies or works by individual theorists.

Bennett, Andrew, and Nicholas Royle. *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*. 4th ed. Harlow: Pearson Education, 2009. A very different kind of book from Barry's, organised into 34 short essays with simple titles (such as 'The author', 'Laughter', 'Me' and 'Mutant') but sometimes with unpredictable contents. Bennett and Royle touch on a lot of different primary and secondary texts, and many readers will find their book fun and stimulating. The underlying approach is strongly Derridean.

Critchley, Simon. *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001. Not really a book about literature as such, but included in this list because it provides a very helpful introduction to the philosophical tradition that underlies most of what is usually categorised as literary theory, while making friendly and persuasive connections with the Analytical school more favoured by philosophers of literature.

Lamarque, Peter. *The Philosophy of Literature*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009. A lucid introduction to the main questions that the concept and/or phenomenon of literature raises for analytical philosophy. Helpful, therefore, to those students and readers of literature who are also interested in philosophy as an academic discipline, as opposed to the philosophical ideas that a given literary text may happen to express. Chapters focus on key concepts such as 'art', 'truth' and 'value'. Includes a persuasive discussion of the relationship between the philosophy of literature and 'literary theory', as it is usually understood. With comprehensive guides to further reading.

Reading, research, and essay-writing

Rules and expectations as to how you should write about literature may vary considerably from one place to another, and, if you are a student, you should of course be careful to follow the conventions that your teachers recommend. Much of the guidance in the following texts, however, is likely to be widely applicable.

Booth, Wayne, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. *The Craft of Research*. 1995. 2nd ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003. A classic guide by people who really know what they are talking about (the late Wayne Booth was a major critic and narratologist), this book is primarily directed at graduate students and others who are engaged in original research, but it contains much clear advice on finding sources, making claims, constructing arguments and similar activities that are also highly relevant for students at a more elementary level.

Fabb, Nigel, and Alan Durant. *How to Write Essays and Dissertations: A Guide for English Literature Students*. 1993. 2nd ed. Harlow: Pearson Education, 2005. Short, clear and very well adapted to the needs of most students, this book takes you through the whole process from coming up with a topic to revising a draft. It includes straightforward advice about such things as using quotations, avoiding common grammatical errors, and even 'meeting your deadline'.

Harner, James L. *Literary Research Guide: An Annotated Listing of Reference Sources in English Literary Studies*. 1989. 5th ed. New York: Modern Language Association, 2008. Awesome. Some 800 pages of lists of sources including dictionaries, encyclopaedias, 'bibliographies of bibliographies', library catalogues, internet resources, periodicals, specific sources for all the main genres, periods, national traditions and interdisciplinary approaches to literature in English, etc., and all with clear accounts of what these sources contain and can do for you.

Index

9/11 112

Abolitionism 92–3
academe *see* higher education
accent 23
Achebe, Chinua 168; *Things Fall Apart* 52, 54–6, 113, 129, 132, 171–2
act 57
acting/actors 57–8, 61–3
Acts of Union 90
Adams, John 127
adaptation 128, 172
addressee 4, 31
Aestheticism 100
aesthetics 5, 99–100, 118, 121, 140, 154
African American literature 93, 96–7, 107
Albert (Prince Consort) 98
Alfred the Great 78
allegory 40, 80, 84, 104, 109
alliteration 26, 28, 49, 76
allusion 108
ambiguity 32
American Civil War 97, 100, 118
American Renaissance 96–7
American Revolution *see* Revolutionary War
anachronism 73
anapaest 24
Ancient Greece 17, 23–4, 37, 43, 75, 82, 104
Ancient Rome 43, 75, 80, 89
Anglo-Irish literature 90, 105–6
Anglo-Norman literature 81
Anglo-Saxon period 75, 128; *see also* Old English
animals 80, 118, 152
anthologies, scholarly 167–8
anthropomorphism 39
anti-Semitism 110
apostrophe 158
architecture 24–5, 57, 108, 114–15, 126
argument (in a student paper) 175
Arnold, Matthew 97; 'Dover Beach' 102
art for art's sake 100, 107, 154
articles *see* journals
artistry 8
Ashbery, John: 'Illustration' 115
Asimov, Isaac 118
assonance 32
astronomy 83, 133
astrophysics 133
Atwood, Margaret 118
Auden, W. H. 111; 'Spain' 111
audience 60–1, 66
audiobooks 172–3
Augustan literature 88–9, 95
Austen, Jane 91, 94–5, 146, 169–70; *Mansfield Park* 95; *Persuasion* 93; *Pride and Prejudice* 7, 34–6, 43–56, 75–6, 94, 127–30, 132, 144, 172–3; *Sense and Sensibility* 94
Austin, J. L. 145
Australia 112–13, 117
author 6, 10–13, 36, 49, 57, 62, 146–9, 165; 'death of' 147; implied 152
author societies 167
authorship (as profession) 90–1, 93, 98
autobiographical novel 47–8
autobiography 48, 153

Bacon, Francis (Viscount St Alban) 133
ballad stanza 25
Bardolatry 16
Barnes, Julian 115, 122; *Flaubert's Parrot* 122
Barthes, Roland 147
Baudelaire, Charles 100

Bauhaus 108
Bay Psalm Book, The 87
Beat Generation 118
Becket, Thomas 78–9
Beckett, Samuel 43, 110, 115, 117; *Waiting for Godot* 115
Beethoven, Ludwig van 94
Behn, Aphra 90; *Oroonoko* 91
Bellow, Saul 116, 138
Beowulf 76–8, 81, 83, 128, 146, 148
Bhagavad Gita 138
Bible, the 77, 85, 89, 98, 135–8; Luke 136–7
bibliographies 166, 168
bibliography (academic discipline) 164
Bildungsroman 144
biographical criticism 140, 146, 152, 158
biology 80, 133 (*see also* Darwin)
Black British literature 116
Blake, William 93–4, 126–7, 138, 170; *America* 93; 'The Lamb' 27–9; *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* 27, 127; 'The Tyger' 15, 27–9, 94, 126–7, 177; *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* 93
blank verse 85
Bloomsbury Group 107
Boccaccio, Giovanni 83
body 135
Boethius 136
Book of Common Prayer, the 87, 89
book reviews 139, 167
Boswell, James: *Life of Samuel Johnson* 92
Bosworth, Battle of 83–4
Botticelli, Sandro 103
Bowen, Elizabeth: *The Heat of the Day* 111
Bradstreet, Anne 88–9
British Empire 95, 98, 106, 112
British Indian literature 116
British Isles 19, 90
Britten, Benjamin 127
Brontë, Charlotte 97, 121; *Jane Eyre* 98
Brontë sisters 99
Brooks, Cleanth 151
Brown, Charles Brockden 93
Brown, William Hill: *The Power of Sympathy* 92
Browning, Elisabeth Barrett 97
Browning, Robert 97, 173; 'My Last Duchess' 58
Bunyan, John: *The Pilgrim's Progress* 89
Burke, Edmund 93
business studies 131–3
Byron, George Gordon, 6th Baron 12, 94, 107

Cambridge University 88
camera 57, 66–9, 131
Campion, Thomas 127
Canada 112
canon 15–19, 29, 31, 33, 74, 97, 115–16, 128, 130–1, 153–4
Caribbean 112
Carroll, Lewis: *Alice in Wonderland* 99
Carson, Anne 117
Carter, Angela 115
Catholicism 84, 90, 92, 105, 118
Caxton, William 82
censorship 101, 109
Cervantes Savvedra, Miguel de: *Don Quixote* 90–1
Chaplin, Charlie 136; *Modern Times* 110
chapter 49, 57
character 13, 49–52, 54–5, 57–8, 62, 79–81, 97
Charles I 83, 89
Charles II 84, 89
Chaucer, Geoffrey 78–84, 113, 118, 122, 146; *The Canterbury Tales* 79–83; 'The Knight's Tale' 81; 'The Miller's Tale' 79–81; 'The Pardoner's Tale' 80; *Treatise on the Astrolabe* 133
chemistry 133
Chicano literature 116
children's literature 17, 99
Chinese American literature 116
chivalric romance 81–2
Chopin, Kate 100; *The Awakening* 100–1
Christianity 76–7, 80–81, 89, 136–8 (*see also* Catholicism, Church of England, Protestantism, Puritanism *and* Reformation)
Christie, Agatha 17
Church of England 84, 108
Churchill, Winston 16, 111
cinema 57, 67–9, 110–11, 126 (*see also* film)
cinematography *see* camera
citation frequency 168
Civil Rights 19
Clarke, Marcus: *His Natural Life* 113
class 79, 89, 129, 152
Classical literature 75, 82–3, 89, 92, 103, 116–17, 122, 126, 128, 131, 144 (*see also* Ancient Greece *and* Ancient Rome)
Classical terminology 9, 24, 37, 68, 126

closet drama 58
Coetzee, J. M. 18, 115, 117, 173
coffee houses 90
cognitive poetics 135
cognitive therapy 135
Cold War 114
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor 94, 96, 122, 133; 'Kubla Khan' 15
collaborative writing/performance 60, 147
Colonial period (in American literature) 87–8, 92
colonialism 85–8, 93, 112–13, 136 (*see also* British Empire)
comedy 16, 54 (*see also* joke)
common sense 158
communism 111, 114
comparative literature 123
condition of England novel 98–9
conferences, academic 167–8
confessional poetry 115
Congreve, William 89
Conrad, Joseph 105, 117, 121; *Heart of Darkness* 105
contemporary literature 112, 116–17
context 48, 141, 150–2, 167
contextualisation (in literary criticism) 139–41
convention 29–31, 33, 48–9, 108
Cooper, James Fenimore: *The Last of the Mohicans* 93; *Precaution* 93
Copernicus 82
counter-intuitive reading 158
couplet 25, 89
courtly love 30
Crane, Stephen: *The Red Badge of Courage* 97
creativity 8
crime fiction 17 (*see also* detective story)
Crimean War 98
Criterion, The 108, 118
critical theory 144 (*see also* literary theory)
Cuban Missile Crisis 114
Cubism 110
cultural materialism 147
cultural studies 65, 122, 127
culture 61, 80
Curiosity (Mars rover) 136

dactyl 24
dance 110
Dante Alighieri 83, 108; *The Divine Comedy* 96, 135
Dark Ages 75
Darwin, Charles 98, 104, 118, 133–4, 136
Darwin, Erasmus 133
databases 166–8
Davy, Humphry 133
dead metaphor 37–8
decadence 100, 107
Declaration of Independence of the United States of America 92
deconstruction 156–60 (*see also* poststructuralism)
Defoe, Daniel 90, 117; *Robinson Crusoe* 45, 90–1
DeLillo, Don 115, 131
de Man, Paul 14, 159
democracy 95–6, 99
Derrida, Jacques 159–60
desire 55–6, 99
detective story 53, 118
dialogue 47, 58–60
diaries 145
Díaz, Junot 17
Dickens, Charles 16–17, 97–8, 102, 116–17, 121, 123, 166, 168, 172; *Bleak House* 98; *David Copperfield* 99; *Great Expectations* 99, 113; *Hard Times* 41; *Oliver Twist* 138
Dickinson, Emily 15, 101–3, 131–2, 170, 174; 'I started Early – Took my Dog' 101–3, 149–50
diegesis 59
digital humanities 134
digital sources 163, 166, 169–70, 172
disaster movies 131
discourse 37, 48, 129, 131, 143, 145
Disraeli, Benjamin 99
dissent 130
dissertations, doctoral 168
Donne, John 84, 89, 98, 118, 121, 132, 170; Elegy 19: 'To His Mistress Going to Bed' 86, 93; 'The Good-Morrow' 3–7, 15, 24–6, 30, 124–5, 127, 151–2, 163–4; *Songs and Sonnets* 128; 'The Sun Rising' 86
doppelgänger 95
Dostoevsky, Fedor Mikhailovich 105, 116
double entendre 164
Douglas, Frederick: *Autobiography* 96
Douglas, Keith: 'Vergissmeinnicht' 111
Doyle, Arthur Conan 118
drama 58–68, 89 (*see also* theatre)
dramatic monologue 57–8
dramatis personae 58
Duffy, Carol Ann 169; 'Ann Hathaway' 31–3

duple rhythm 24
Dylan, Bob 127

early modern period 59–60, 82–6, 90, 117, 151 (*see also* Renaissance)
Early National period (in the literature of the United States) 92–3, 95
East India Company 85
Easter Rising 106
economics 17, 90, 115, 129
Edinburgh Review, The 118
editions, scholarly 163–5
Edwardian literature 105–6
Edwards, Jonathan 87
Einstein, Albert 110
Eisenstein, Sergei 108
Eliot, George 16, 97, 113; *Daniel Deronda* 138; *Middlemarch* 98, 102
Eliot, T. S. 108–10, 115, 121, 127, 138; *The Waste Land* 108–9, 114–15
elitism 17, 130
Elizabeth I 74, 83–4
Emerson, Ralph Waldo 96
Emin, Tracey: 'Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995' 126
emotion 135
end-rhyme 26
England 19, 78, 85, 106, 112
English Civil War 85, 88, 94, 118
English literature: definitions 19
English Revolution *see* English Civil War
English sonnet 30
Enlightenment 74, 90, 94–5, 98, 159
ennui 100
epic 17, 43, 69, 81, 84, 96, 108
epistemology 143–4, 150
epistolary novel 46
eroticism 4–5, 32–3, 80, 102–3 (*see also* desire)
essays: student *see* papers
ethics 154–5; of reading 159 (*see also* morality)
ethnography 108
European Society for the Study of English 170
evaluation (in literary criticism) 139–41
evidence 14; in a student paper 175 (*see also* quotation)
Evolution *see* Darwin, Charles
evolutionary psychology 134
exams 26
exegesis *see* interpretation
exile 109
explanation (in literary criticism) 139, 155

fabliau 81
fabula 53
fantasy 17, 48, 102
farce 80
fascism 110–11
feminine ending 28
femininity 65
feminism 19, 80, 93, 100, 107, 153, 157
Fenton, James 77
feudalism 79
fiction 8, 37, 43, 46–50, 60, 91, 130, 133, 142–3, 153–4
Fielding, Henry 90–1, 121; *Joseph Andrews* 91; *Shamela* 91; *Tom Jones* 98
figurative language 38–9, 42, 158
film 43, 57–8, 62–9, 108, 111 (*see also* cinema)
fin de siècle 100, 105
Fish, Stanley 144
Fitzgerald, F. Scott 109
flat and round characters 49
Flaubert, Gustave 100, 105
focalisation 50, 55
foot 24, 28
Ford, John: *The Grapes of Wrath* 111
form 8, 118
formal analysis (in literary criticism) 139
formalism 53, 151, 158
Forster, E. M. 49, 105; *A Passage to India* 105
Foucault, Michel 147
Fowles, John: *The French Lieutenant's Woman* 116
frame 29
Franklin, Benjamin 90
free indirect discourse 50–2, 67
free verse 33
French literature 81, 100, 122
French Revolution 93–5
Freud, Sigmund 63–4, 103–4, 110, 136, 144, 146, 150
Fugs, The 127

Galileo Galilei 82
gaze 66–7
gender 30–2, 62, 64–5, 80, 86, 99, 107, 152–3
General Strike, the 110
genre 34, 45, 49, 57–8, 73, 81, 91, 93, 118, 131, 133, 163
genre fiction 17, 48, 118
gentleman: early modern 84; Victorian 99
geopolitics 86

George III 93
Georgian poetry 106
German literature 91, 122
Germanic languages 76
Ginsberg, Allen 118
global warming 118
Glorious Revolution 90
Godwin, William 93
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von 123; *The Sorrows of Young Werther* 91
Gordimer, Nadine 138
Gothic literature 94–6, 114
grand narratives 116, 157
Graves, Robert 106
Great Depression 111
Great Exhibition 98
Great War *see* World War I
greatness 8, 29
Greece *see* Ancient Greece
Grubb Street 89
Gunpowder Plot 85

half rhyme 26
Hammett, Dashiell 118
hammocks (in the library) 166
Hardy, Thomas 97; ‘Channel Firing’ 106
Harlem Renaissance 107
Harrison, Tony 58, 117
Harvard University 88
Hawthorne, Nathaniel 96, 100; *The Scarlet Letter* 96
Heaney, Seamus 18, 117, 156, 173; *Beowulf* 76–8,148; ‘Had I not been awake’ 77–8, 178; *Human Chain* 77–8; ‘The Tollund Man’ 77
Heller, Joseph: *Catch-22* 111
Hemingway, Ernest 109
Henry VIII 83–4
hero/heroine 50, 55–6, 76, 81
heroic diction 38
heroic narrative 76
heteroglossia 54
hexameter 24
High Modernism 108–9, 116
High Victorian era 98
higher education 18, 92, 121–2, 130–2, 139, 155
histoire 53
historical linguistics 123–4
historical writing 48
historicism 128, 150–2
history 16, 48, 73–4, 81, 97, 116, 121, 127–9
Hitchcock, Alfred: *Vertigo* 62–3, 65–9, 114, 126, 131, 165
Hogarth, William 125
Holinshed’s Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland 147
Hollywood 63, 111, 114
Holmes, Sherlock 53, 133
Holocaust 111–12
holograph 164
Homer 91, 108, 110, 136, 155–6; *The Iliad* 43, 90, 96; *The Odyssey* 109, 148
Hopper, Edward 126
Horace 89
horror fiction 17
Household Words 118
Hughes, Ted 77
Hugo, Victor 123
human, the 5–6, 56, 94–5, 132, 153
humanism (Renaissance) 82, 89
humanities 121, 131–2, 168
Hume, David 90

iamb 24
iambic pentameter 24, 29, 58
Ibsen, Henrik 122
identity 152–3, 157
ideology 56, 86, 110–11, 115, 132, 159
illusion 60–1
imagery 4–5, 65–6, 107–8
imagination 8
Imagism 107–8
imperfect rhyme 26
imperialism 98, 112, 152 (*see also* British Empire *and* colonialism)
in medias res 9, 16
India 112–113
Intelligent Design 118
intention 13, 145–7, 150–1, 164–5, 175
intentional fallacy 146–7
interdisciplinarity 121–38
internet 112, 169–70
interpretation (in literary criticism) 139, 141–4
Interregnum 83–5
Ireland 85, 90, 105–6, 112, 117 (*see also* Irish Republic *and* Northern Ireland)
Irish Free State 106
Irish Republic 19, 106
Irish revival 106
irony 13, 34–7, 41–2, 46, 51, 64, 90, 101, 110
Iser, Wolfgang 144
Islam 118, 138
Italian literature 83, 122

Jackson, Andrew 95–6
Jacobite rebellions 92
Jacobson, Dan 138
Jacobson, Howard 138
James I 83, 85
James, Henry 16, 105; *The Turn of the Screw* 105
Jameson, Frederic 150
Jarrell, Randal: 'The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner' 111
Jazz Age 110
Jefferson, Thomas 92
Johnson, Samuel 16, 88, 92; *A Dictionary of the English Language* 92; *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* 92
journals: academic, 165–7, 170; literary 118 (*see also* little magazines)
Joyce, James 16–17, 109–10, 115–16, 122; *Finnegans Wake* 109; *Ulysses* 44, 109, 114–16, 138, 147–8, 165
Judaism 138
Julian of Norwich 82

Kant, Immanuel 90
Keats, John 93–4, 98, 107, 125, 127, 145; 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' 15, 154; 'Ode to a Nightingale' 94; 'To Autumn' 15, 94
Kempe, Margery 82
Kenya 112–13
Kerouac, Jack 118
Keynes, John Maynard 107
King, Stephen 17
Kipling, Rudyard 105, 158; *Kim* 105
Kurosawa, Akira: *Throne of Blood* 148–9
Kushner, Tony 138

Lahiri, Jhumpa 17
Landon, Letitia 94
Langland, William: *Piers Plowman* 80
Larsen, Nella 107
Latin language 81, 89, 122
Laurel, Stan, and Oliver Hardy 115
law 129–31, 138
Lawrence, D. H. 11
Lear, Edward 99, 102
Leavis, F. R. 16
letters 145
lexicography 92, 124
libraries 163–6
life writing 145
Lincoln, Abraham 97
line 24
linguistics 121, 123–5
literacy 85, 90, 97–8
literariness 40, 135, 146
literary criticism 92, 127, 139–41, 149, 155–6, 168 (*see also* journals *and* monographs)
literary Darwinism 134
literary history 92, 99–101, 116–18, 139
literary theory 14, 68, 139–60
literature: definitions 7, 8–9, 37, 43, 47, 124, 145–6; and film 68
Literature Online 170
little magazines 108
Locke, John 145
London, Jack 105
long eighteenth century 88, 91
long nineteenth century 91
Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth 97
Lorrain, Claude 125
Lost Generation 109
Lowell, Robert 115–16
Luther, Martin 84
lying 36–7, 41, 47, 130
lyric 57, 126

McEwan, Ian 133
McKay, Claude 107
MacNeice, Louis 18
magic realism 48
Magna Carta 78
Mailer, Norman: *The Naked and the Dead* 111
manuscripts 164–5
marriage (and the novel) 56, 144
Marx, Karl 104, 136, 144, 147, 150
Marx Brothers: *Duck Soup* 35
masculine ending 28
masculinity 65, 86, 100, 152
meaning 142–4, 149–50, 157–9 (*see also* interpretation)
medical humanities 135
medicine 82–3
medieval period 75–83, 137
medievalism 91, 100
Melville, Herman 16, 100, 131; *Moby-Dick* 45, 96, 101
metafiction 47, 62, 91, 116
metamodernism 116
metanarrative 46
metaphor 5, 34, 37–42, 48, 61, 64, 80; and neuroscience 135
metaphysical poetry 88, 151
metatheatre 60–2
metonymy 41–2
metre 23–4

Middle Ages *see* medieval period
Middle English 75
Middleton, Thomas 147
Milton, John 108, 122; *Paradise Lost* 88–90, 96; *Samson Agonistes* 58
mimesis 37, 104
mind-brain 40, 135
misogyny 80
MLA International Bibliography 168
mock epic 89–90
modern English 76
Modern Language Association of America (MLA) 170
modernism 18, 74, 100, 102, 106–10, 112, 114–15, 122, 131, 153
monarchy 83–5, 88–9, 93, 117
monographs, academic 166–9
monologue 9, 57–8
monstrosity 95
Montaigne, Michel de 136
Moore, George 105
morality 36, 50, 80, 91, 98, 115, 140, 144, 154
More, Thomas: *Utopia* 84
Morrison, Toni 17, 115, 131
multiculturalism 138
muse 78
music 94, 97, 108, 110, 126–7
musical theatre 58
mystery plays 137

Nabokov, Vladimir: *Lolita* 114–15
Napoleonic Wars 95
Narayan, R. K. 113
narratee 44, 46
narrative 10–11, 44–56, 97, 109
narratology 44, 54–5, 144
narrator 9, 34–6, 49–56, 62, 66, 79; first-person 10, 52; impersonal 59; third-person 10, 34, 51–2; unreliable 105, 130
nationalism 56, 105, 122, 152
Native American literature 116
natural sciences *see* science
naturalism 104–5, 122
nature 91, 94, 96, 118, 125
neo-classicism 88–92, 122
neo-Victorian literature 97
neuroscience 40, 135
New Criticism 151, 158–9
New Historicism 48, 151–2
New Negro, the 107
New Woman, the 100, 107
New York Review of Books, The 118
New Zealand 112
Newton, Isaac 90
Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 113
Nietzsche, Friedrich 136
Nigeria 112
Nobel Prize for Literature 17–18, 115, 127
non-fiction 46–8, 91, 145, 153
Nonsense Poetry 102
Nordic myths 76–7
Norman invasion 75
Norris, Frank 105
Northern Ireland 19
Norton Anthology of American Literature 17, 169
Norton Anthology of English Literature 4, 18, 164, 169
note-taking 172
Novak, Kim 63
novel 34, 43–56, 58, 69, 90–3, 97–9, 109, 116
novella 44
nuclear weapons 111–12
Nuttall, A. D. 146

Obama, Barack 129
octet 25
off rhyme 26
Old English 75–8, 117
online sources *see* digital sources
onomatopoeia 107
ontology 143
opera 58
oral literature 25, 75
oratory 129
originality 30, 156
Orwell, George 111; *1984* 111; *Animal Farm* 111
outline (for a student paper) 174–5
Ovid 89, 136
Owen, Wilfred 106; 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' 107
Oxford English Dictionary 75–6, 124
Oxford English Literary History 74

paganism 77
Paine, Tom: *The Rights of Man* 93
painting *see* visual art
palaeography 164
palimpsest 63
papers, student 26, 166, 173–8
paradox 30, 37
paragraph 49, 57
paratext 45
pastiche 73
pastoral 125

Pater, Walter 100
pathos 110
patriarchy 80, 153
patronage 90
Peasants' Revolt, the 78
peer review 167, 169
pentameter 23–4, 89
Percy, Thomas: *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* 91
perfect rhyme 25–6
performance 12, 13, 57–8, 64–5, 130, 172
periods of literature 74
persona 61
personification 38–9
persuasion 129
Petrarca, Francesco (Petrarch) 30, 32, 83
Petrarchan sonnet 30, 82
philosophy 82, 90, 98, 141–5, 154; analytical 144; Continental 144; of literature 144 (*see also* aesthetics *and* morality)
phonetics 124–5
physics 133
picaresque novel 91
Picasso, Pablo 108
picturesque 92
plagiarism (and sin) 177
Plath, Sylvia 115–16
Plato 47, 136, 145; *Ion* 155–6
Playboy 118
plays *see* drama
pleasure 4–6
plot 49, 52–6, 59
Poe, Edgar Allan 96
Poems for the Millennium 18
Poet Laureate 31, 97
poetic justice 144
poetry 18, 23–33, 48–9, 58, 126–7
Poetry 118
point of view 50, 66–7, 73
political unconscious 150
politics 18, 61, 78, 93–4, 99, 110–11, 113, 122, 129–30, 144, 147, 154, 157
polyvalency 132
polyvocality 54
Pope, Alexander 89, 91; *The Dunciad* 89–90; *The Odyssey* 148
popular culture 17, 109, 114
popular music 127, 131
popular science 133
postcolonialism 95, 112–14, 116, 123, 152
posthumanism 136, 153
postmodernism 14, 18, 74, 77, 112, 114–16, 144, 156–7
post-postmodernism 116
poststructuralism 14, 144, 156–8 (*see also* deconstruction)
Pound, Ezra 108–10
POV *see* point of view
Pre-Raphaelite movement 99–100
printing 82, 85, 87, 91–2, 165 (*see also* publishing)
pronunciation 25–6 (*see also* phonetics)
propaganda 84, 111, 130
prose 24, 33, 43, 48–9, 58
prose fiction 43–56
protagonist 52, 61
Protestantism 84–5, 87, 90, 105, 118
psychoanalysis 63, 68, 108
psychology 50, 91, 95, 99–100, 105, 132, 134–5, 153
public sphere 90
publishing 18, 97–8, 108, 113, 123, 163–70 (*see also* printing)
Puritanism 85, 87, 89, 94, 96
Pynchon, Thomas 11, 17, 115; *The Crying of Lot 49* 114

quatrain 25
queer theory 65, 152, 157
quotation (in student papers) 175–8

race 19, 152, 154, 157–9
radicalism 93–4
reader 6, 10, 13, 35–6, 44, 46, 49, 53, 55–6, 62, 105, 121, 139, 146, 150–3, 167; implied 152
reader-response criticism 144
reading 171–3; in the metaphorical sense 67
reading groups 135
reading public *see* literacy
realism 37, 59, 99–102, 104, 109–10, 153; and film 66
Realistic period (in American literature) 100–1
récit 53
Reconstruction 100
Reform Bills 96
Reformation 84, 87, 118
Regency 95, 128–9
relativism 115
religion 79–80, 84–5, 87–9, 93, 98, 118, 135–38, 156 (*see also* Bible *and* Christianity)
religious studies 141
Renaissance 32, 74–5, 82–5, 89, 103 (*see also* early modern period)

republicanism 88–9
Restoration 84, 88–9, 91
Restoration plays 89
Revolutionary War 92–3, 95, 118
rhetoric 31, 39, 51, 93, 129–30
rhetorical question 29
rhyme 25–8, 32, 40–1
rhyme-scheme 26
rhythm 24, 27, 49, 76
Richard II 81
Richard III 83
Richardson, Samuel 90, 93; *Pamela* 91
rigour 159
Robbins, Robin 164
rock music 18, 127
romance 45, 48, 54, 81–2
Romanticism 15, 68, 74, 94–6, 98, 104, 107–8, 125, 153, 178; American 96; British 91–6, 99; 'dark' 96; European 94, 122
Rome *see* Ancient Rome
Rorty, Richard 145
Rosenberg, Isaac 106
Rossetti, Christina 97, 99
Rossetti, Dante Gabriel 97
Roth, Philip 116, 138
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques 145
Rowling, J. K. 17; *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* 45
Royal Shakespeare Company 149
Rumsfeld, Donald 149–50
Rushdie, Salman: *Midnight's Children* 113; *The Satanic Verses* 138
Russian Revolution 110

St Lucia 112
satire 35–6, 80, 90, 101
scene 57
Schadenfreude 51
Schiller, Friedrich 122
science 40, 82, 90, 98, 104, 110, 133–5, 153, 168
science fiction 48, 118, 133
Scotland 19, 85
Scott, Walter 93–4
secularism 89, 104, 137
semantics 124, 151
Sensibility 88, 91, 99, 104
sentimentality 99
sermons 87, 89, 168
sestet 25
sexuality 99–100, 107, 152 (*see also* eroticism)
Shakespeare, William 6, 15–16, 31–3, 58, 61, 73–4, 84–5, 89, 92, 107, 113, 116, 141, 146–7, 156, 166, 168; *Hamlet* 164; *King Lear* 92, 94; *Macbeth* 7, 37–42, 48, 56, 59–62, 64–6, 73, 85, 128, 130, 132, 135, 143–4, 147, 153, 177–8; *The Merchant of Venice* 138; Sonnet 18: 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' 15, 29–31; Sonnet 130: 'My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun' 32; *Twelfth Night* 64
Shakespearean sonnet 30
Shaw, George Bernard 105–6, 111
Shelley, Mary: *Frankenstein* 95, 133
Shelley, Percy 94, 107
short story 9, 43, 44
shot *see* camera
simile 38–9, 80
Simpsons, The 11
singing 127
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight 81
slave narrative 96
slavery 86, 92–3, 95–6, 107, 136
Smith, Charlotte 94; 'On Being Cautioned against Walking on a Headland Overlooking the Sea, Because It Was Frequented by a Lunatic' 94
Smith, Zadie: *White Teeth* 138
Smollett, Tobias 90
social Darwinism 134
social linguistics 123–4
social sciences 129–31, 168
society 55–6, 79, 91, 94, 98–100, 140, 144
sonnet 30–3, 85, 107
South Africa 112, 117
Spanish Armada 85
speaker 4, 30, 57–8, 154
Spectator, The 118
speech 59
Spenser, Edmund 84–5, 89; *The Faerie Queene* 84
Spenserian stanza 25
stage direction 59–60
stanza 24–5, 49, 57, 126
statistical analysis 134
Stein, Gertrude 109
Steinbeck, John 111; *The Grapes of Wrath* 111
Sterne, Laurence 90–1
Stevenson, Robert Louis: *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* 44–5, 52–6, 140–1, 153
Stewart, James 63

stock responses 151
story 53–4, 59
storytelling 56, 62, 79, 132 (*see also* diegesis)
Strachey, Lytton 107
Stravinsky, Igor 108
stream of consciousness 109, 134
stress 23–4
structuralism 53, 158
stylistics 125, 134
subjectivity 8, 95, 139
sublime 68–9, 91, 95
surrealism 114
Surrey, Henry Howard, Earl of 30
suspension of disbelief 48 (*see also* illusion)
Svevo, Italo 122
Swift, Jonathan 90, 116, 146; *Gulliver's Travels* 36–7, 45–6, 90–1, 104, 135, 153–4; 'A Modest Proposal' 35–6
syllable 23–4
symbolism 39, 59, 77, 80–81, 104–5, 108–9, 114, 149
syntax 124–5
syuzhet 53

Tagore, Rabindranath 113
taste 89
Taylor, Edward 88
technology 107, 110, 112, 118, 135, 153, 163
television 57, 98
Tennyson, Alfred 97, 117, 173; *In Memoriam* 98, 104
tercet 25
terminology 44–5, 58, 112
tetrameter 24, 28
text 4, 62, 142–3, 163–5; primary and secondary 163–73
Thackeray, William 123
theatre 57, 59–62, 85, 89, 130 (*see also* drama)
Theatre of the Absurd 115
thematising reading 158
theme 77
thing theory 152
Thomas, Edward 106
Thoreau, Henry David 96
Tolkien, J. R. R. 17
Tolstoy *War and Peace* 44
totalising reading 158
tradition 32–3, 77, 108, 114
tragedy 16, 17, 54, 61
transcendence 68–9
Transcendentalism 96
transgression 65
translation 122, 148
trimeter 24
Trinidad and Tobago 112
triple rhythm 24
trochee 24, 27–8
Trollope, Anthony 97
trope 158
truth 34, 36–7, 48, 143, 153–4
Turner, J. M. W. 125
Twain, Mark 101: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 47, 101, 154
Tyndale, William 136

uncanny 62–5, 68
undecidability 159
United Kingdom 19, 90, 97
'universal' literature 80, 85
universities *see* higher education
University College London 135–6

value 154–5 (*see also* canon *and* evaluation)
Verlaine, Paul 100
vernacular 81
verse 24
verse form 24–5, 126
Victoria 97–100
Victorian period 74, 96–100, 117, 133–4
Virgil 89, 108, 136; *The Aeneid* 43
visual art 29, 68–9, 82, 97, 108, 110, 115, 125–7
voice 66 (*see also* speaker)
Voltaire 90
Vonnegut, Kurt: *Slaughterhouse-Five* 111

Walcott, Derek: *Omeros* 148
Wales 19
Wall Street Crash 110
Wallace, David Foster 11–12, 17, 47, 116, 152; *Oblivion* 11; 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' 8–14, 44, 52, 145, 178
Walpole, Horace: *The Castle of Otranto* 95
War Poets 106–7
Wars of the Roses 84
Wells, H. G. 118, 133; *The First Men on the Moon* 133; *The Invisible Man* 133; *The Time Machine* 133
Weltliteratur 123
Wheatley, Phillis: *Poems on Various Subjects* 93

Whitman, Walt 15, 121; *Leaves of Grass* 96; 'Spontaneous Me' 33; 'The Wound-Dresser' 127
Wikipedia 11, 169
Wilde, Oscar 12, 100, 105; *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 154
William III 90
Williams, Tennessee 126, 168; *A Streetcar Named Desire* 59–62, 65, 67, 176
Wimsatt, W. K., and Monroe C. Beardsley 146
Winthrop, John 87
wit 84, 89
Wittgenstein, Ludwig 145
Wodehouse, P. G. 118
Wollstonecraft, Mary 136; *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* 93
Woolf, Leonard 108
Woolf, Virginia 107–9
Wordsworth, William 77, 93–4, 96–8, 107, 113, 117–18, 127, 133, 174–5; 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' 15; *Lyrical Ballads* 96; *The Prelude* 93; 'We had a female Passenger' 157–9, 165
world literature 123, 134
World War I 15, 105–8, 110
World War II 16, 108, 111–12, 114

Yeats, William Butler 77, 97, 106, 117; 'The Second Coming' 113
York play of *The Crucifixion* 137

Žižek, Slavoj 150
Zola, Émile 100, 104–5, 122

STUDYING LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

AN INTRODUCTION

Dominic Rainsford