

Chapter 2

What is Literature and Does it Matter?

What is literature? You'd think this would be a central question for literary theory, but in fact it has not seemed to matter very much. Why should this be?

There appear to be two main reasons. First, since theory itself intermingles ideas from philosophy, linguistics, history, political theory, and psychoanalysis, why should theorists worry about whether the texts they're reading are literary or not? For students and teachers of literature today there is a whole range of critical projects, topics to read and write about – such as 'images of women in the early twentieth century' – where you can deal with both literary and non-literary works. You can study Virginia Woolf's novels or Freud's case histories or both, and the distinction doesn't seem methodologically crucial. It's not that all texts are somehow equal: some texts are taken to be richer, more powerful, more exemplary, more contestatory, more central, for one reason or another. But both literary and non-literary works can be studied together and in similar ways.

Literariness outside literature

Second, the distinction has not seemed central because works of theory have discovered what is most simply called the 'literariness' of non-literary phenomena. Qualities often thought to be literary turn out to be

crucial to non-literary discourses and practices as well. For instance, discussions of the nature of historical understanding have taken as a model what is involved in understanding a story. Characteristically, historians do not produce explanations that are like the predictive explanations of science: they cannot show that when X and Y occur, Z will necessarily happen. What they do, rather, is to show how one thing led to another, how the First World War *came to* break out, not why it *had to* happen. The model for historical explanation is thus the logic of stories: the way a story shows how something came to happen, connecting the initial situation, the development, and the outcome in a way that makes sense.

The model for historical intelligibility, in short, is literary narrative. We who hear and read stories are good at telling whether a plot makes sense, hangs together, or whether the story remains unfinished. If the same models of what makes sense and what counts as a story characterize both literary and historical narratives, then distinguishing between them need not seem an urgent theoretical matter. Similarly, theorists have come to insist on the importance in non-literary texts – whether Freud’s accounts of his psychoanalytic cases or works of philosophical argument – of rhetorical devices such as metaphor, which have been thought crucial to literature but have often been considered purely ornamental in other sorts of discourses. In showing how rhetorical figures shape thought in other discourses as well, theorists demonstrate a powerful literariness at work in supposedly non-literary texts, thus complicating the distinction between the literary and the non-literary.

But the fact that I describe this situation by speaking of the discovery of the ‘literariness’ of non-literary phenomena indicates that the notion of literature continues to play a role and needs to be addressed.

What sort of question?

We find ourselves back at the key question, 'What is literature?', which will not go away. But what sort of question is it? If a 5-year-old is asking, it's easy. 'Literature', you answer, 'is stories, poems, and plays.' But if the questioner is a literary theorist, it's harder to know how to take the query. It might be a question about the general nature of this object, literature, which both of you already know well. What sort of object or activity is it? What does it do? What purposes does it serve? Thus understood, 'What is literature?' asks not for a definition but for an analysis, even an argument about why one might concern oneself with literature at all.

But 'What is literature?' might also be a question about distinguishing characteristics of the works known as literature: what distinguishes them from non-literary works? What differentiates literature from other human activities or pastimes? Now people might ask this question because they were wondering how to decide which books are literature and which are not, but it is more likely that they already have an idea what counts as literature and want to know something else: are there any essential, distinguishing features that literary works share?

This is a difficult question. Theorists have wrestled with it, but without notable success. The reasons are not far to seek: works of literature come in all shapes and sizes and most of them seem to have more in common with works that aren't usually called literature than they do with some other works recognized as literature. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, for instance, more closely resembles an autobiography than it does a sonnet, and a poem by Robert Burns – 'My love is like a red, red rose' – resembles a folk-song more than it does Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Are there qualities shared by poems, plays, and novels that distinguish them from, say, songs, transcriptions of conversations, and autobiographies?

Historical variations

Even a bit of historical perspective makes this question more complex. For twenty-five centuries people have written works that we call literature today, but the modern sense of *literature* is scarcely two centuries old. Prior to 1800 *literature* and analogous terms in other European languages meant ‘writings’ or ‘book knowledge’. Even today, a scientist who says ‘the literature on evolution is immense’ means not that many poems and novels treat the topic but that much has been written about it. And works that today are studied as literature in English or Latin classes in schools and universities were once treated not as a special kind of writing but as fine examples of the use of language and rhetoric. They were instances of a larger category of exemplary practices of writing and thinking, which included speeches, sermons, history, and philosophy. Students were not asked to interpret them, as we now interpret literary works, seeking to explain what they are ‘really about’. On the contrary, students memorized them, studied their grammar, identified their rhetorical figures and their structures or procedures of argument. A work such as Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which today is studied as literature, was treated very differently in schools prior to 1850.

The modern Western sense of literature as imaginative writing can be traced to the German Romantic theorists of the late eighteenth century and, if we want a particular source, to a book published in 1800 by a French Baroness, Madame de Staël’s *On Literature Considered in its Relations with Social Institutions*. But even if we restrict ourselves to the last two centuries, the category of literature becomes slippery: would works which today count as literature – say poems that seem snippets of ordinary conversation, without rhyme or discernible metre – have qualified as literature for Madame de Staël? And once we begin to think about non-European cultures, the question of what counts as literature becomes increasingly difficult. It is tempting to give it up and conclude that literature is whatever a given society treats as

literature – a set of texts that cultural arbiters recognize as belonging to literature.

Such a conclusion is completely unsatisfying, of course. It simply displaces instead of resolving the question: rather than ask ‘what is literature?’ we need to ask ‘what makes us (or some other society) treat something as literature?’ There are, though, other categories that work in this way, referring not to specific properties but only to changing criteria of social groups. Take the question ‘What is a weed?’ Is there an essence of ‘weedness’ – a special something, a *je ne sais quoi*, that weeds share and that distinguishes them from non-weeds? Anyone who has been enlisted to help weed a garden knows how hard it is to tell a weed from a non-weed and may wonder whether there is a secret. What would it be? How do you recognize a weed? Well, the secret is that there isn’t a secret. Weeds are simply plants that gardeners don’t want to have growing in their gardens. If you were curious about weeds, seeking the nature of ‘weedness’, it would be a waste of time to try to investigate their botanical nature, to seek distinctive formal or physical qualities that make plants weeds. You would have to carry out instead historical, sociological, perhaps psychological enquiries about the sorts of plants that are judged undesirable by different groups in different places.

Perhaps *literature* is like *weed*.

But this answer doesn’t eliminate the question. It changes it to ‘what is involved in treating things *as* literature in our culture?’

Treating texts as literature

Suppose you come across the following sentence:

We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

What is this, and how do you know?

Well, it matters a good deal *where* you come across it. If this sentence is printed on a slip in a Chinese fortune cookie, you may well take it as an unusually enigmatical fortune, but when it is offered (as it is here) as an example, you cast around for possibilities among uses of language familiar to you. Is it a riddle, asking us to guess the secret? Might it be an advertisement for something called 'Secret'? Ads often rhyme – 'Winston tastes good, like a cigarette should' – and they have grown increasingly enigmatic in their attempts to jostle a jaded public. But this sentence seems detached from any readily imaginable practical context, including that of selling a product. This, and the fact that it rhymes and, after the first two words, follows a regular rhythm of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables ('round in a ring and suppose') creates the possibility that this might be poetry, an instance of literature.

There is a puzzle here, though: the fact that this sentence has no obvious practical import is what mainly creates the possibility that it might be literature, but could we not achieve that effect by lifting other sentences out of the contexts that make it clear what they do? Suppose we take a sentence out of an instruction booklet, a recipe, an advertisement, a newspaper, and set it down on a page in isolation:

Stir vigorously and allow to sit five minutes.

Is this literature? Have I made it literature by extracting it from the practical context of a recipe? Perhaps, but it is scarcely clear that I have. Something seems lacking; the sentence seems not to have the resources for you to work with. To make it literature you need, perhaps, to imagine a title whose relation to the line would pose a problem and exercise the imagination: for instance, 'The Secret', or 'The Quality of Mercy'.

Something like that would help, but a sentence fragment such as ‘A sugar plum on a pillow in the morning’ seems to have a better chance of becoming literature because its failure to be anything except an image invites a certain kind of attention, calls for reflection. So do sentences where the relation between their form and their content provides potential food for thought. Thus the opening sentence of a book of philosophy, W. O. Quine’s *From a Logical Point of View*, might conceivably be a poem:

A curious thing
about the ontological problem is its
simplicity.

Set down in this way on a page, surrounded by intimidating margins of silence, this sentence can attract a certain kind of attention that we might call literary: an interest in the words, their relations to one another, and their implications, and particularly an interest in how what is said relates to the way it is said. That is, set down in this way, this sentence seems able to live up to a certain modern idea of a poem and to respond to a kind of attention that today is associated with literature. If someone were to say this sentence to you, you would ask, ‘what do you mean?’ but if you take the sentence as a poem, the question isn’t quite the same: not what does the speaker or author mean but what does the poem mean? How does this language work? What does this sentence do?

Isolated in the first line, the words ‘A curious thing’ may raise the question of what is a thing and what is it for a thing to be curious. ‘What is a thing?’ is one of the problems of ontology, the science of being or study of what exists. But ‘thing’ in the phrase ‘a curious thing’ is not a physical object but something like a relation or aspect which doesn’t seem to exist in the same way that a stone or a house does. The sentence preaches simplicity but seems not to practise what it preaches, illustrating, in the ambiguities of *thing*, something of the

forbidding complexities of ontology. But perhaps the very simplicity of the poem – the fact that it stops after ‘simplicity’, as if no more need be said – gives some credibility to the implausible assertion of simplicity. At any rate, isolated in this way, the sentence can give rise to the sort of activity of interpretation associated with literature – the sort of activity I have been carrying out here.

What can such thought-experiments tell us about literature? They suggest, first of all, that when language is removed from other contexts, detached from other purposes, it can be interpreted as literature (though it must possess some qualities that make it responsive to such interpretation). If literature is language decontextualized, cut off from other functions and purposes, it is also itself a context, which promotes or elicits special kinds of attention. For instance, readers attend to potential complexities and look for implicit meanings, without assuming, say, that the utterance is telling them to do something. To describe ‘literature’ would be to analyse a set of assumptions and interpretive operations readers may bring to bear on such texts.

Conventions of literature

One relevant convention or disposition that has emerged from the analysis of stories (ranging from personal anecdotes to entire novels) goes by the forbidding name of the ‘hyper-protected cooperative principle’ but is actually rather simple. Communication depends on the basic convention that participants are cooperating with one another and that, therefore, what one person says to the other is likely to be relevant. If I ask you whether George is a good student and you reply, ‘he is usually punctual,’ I make sense of your reply by assuming that you are cooperating and saying something relevant to my question. Instead of complaining, ‘You didn’t answer my question,’ I may conclude that you did answer implicitly and indicated that there’s little positive to be said about George as a student. I assume, that is, that you are cooperating unless there is compelling evidence to the contrary.

Now literary narratives can be seen as members of a larger class of stories, 'narrative display texts', utterances whose relevance to listeners lies not in information they convey but in their 'tellability'. Whether you are telling an anecdote to a friend or writing a novel for posterity, you are doing something different from, say, testifying in court: you are trying to produce a story that will seem 'worth it' to your listeners: that will have some sort of point or significance, will amuse or give pleasure. What sets off literary works from other narrative display texts is that they have undergone a process of selection: they have been published,



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'He read for two straight hours without any training'.

reviewed, and reprinted, so that readers approach them with the assurance that others have found them well constructed and ‘worth it’. So for literary works, the cooperative principle is ‘hyper-protected’. We can put up with many obscurities and apparent irrelevancies, without assuming that this makes no sense. Readers assume that in literature complications of language ultimately have a communicative purpose and, instead of imagining that the speaker or writer is being uncooperative, as they might in other speech contexts, they struggle to interpret elements that flout principles of efficient communication in the interests of some further communicative goal. ‘Literature’ is an institutional label that gives us reason to expect that the results of our reading efforts will be ‘worth it’. And many of the features of literature follow from the willingness of readers to pay attention, to explore uncertainties, and not immediately ask ‘what do you mean by that?’

Literature, we might conclude, is a speech act or textual event that elicits certain kinds of attention. It contrasts with other sorts of speech acts, such as imparting information, asking questions, or making promises. Most of the time what leads readers to treat something as literature is that they find it in a context that identifies it as literature: in a book of poems or a section of a magazine, library, or bookstore.

A puzzle

But we have another puzzle here. Aren’t there special ways of organizing language that tell us something is literature? Or is the fact that we know something is literature what leads us to give it a kind of attention we don’t give newspapers and, as a result, to find in it special kinds of organization and implicit meanings? The answer must surely be that both cases occur: sometimes the object has features that make it literary but sometimes it is the literary context that makes us treat it as literature. But highly organized language doesn’t necessarily make

something literature: nothing is more highly patterned than the telephone directory. And we can't make just any piece of language literature by calling it literature: I can't pick up my old chemistry textbook and read it as a novel.

On the one hand, 'literature' is not just a frame in which we put language: not every sentence will make it as literature if set down on a page as a poem. But, on the other hand, literature is not just a special kind of language, for many literary works don't flaunt their difference from other sorts of language; they function in special ways because of the special attention they receive.

We have a complicated structure here. We are dealing with two different perspectives that overlap, intersect, but don't seem to yield a synthesis. We can think of literary works as language with particular properties or features, and we can think of literature as the product of conventions and a certain kind of attention. Neither perspective successfully incorporates the other, and one must shift back and forth between them. I take up five points theorists have made about the nature of literature: with each, you start from one perspective but must, in the end, make allowance for the other.

The nature of literature

1. Literature as the 'foregrounding' of language

'Literariness' is often said to lie above all in the organization of language that makes literature distinguishable from language used for other purposes. Literature is language that 'foregrounds' language itself: makes it strange, thrusts it at you – 'Look! I'm language!' – so you can't forget that you are dealing with language shaped in odd ways. In particular, poetry organizes the sound plane of language so as to make it something to reckon with. Here is the beginning of a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins called 'Inversnaid':

This darksome burn, horseback brown,
His rollrock highroad roaring down,
In coop and in coomb the fleece of his foam
Flutes and low to the lake falls home.

The foregrounding of linguistic patterning – the rhythmical repetition of sounds in ‘burn . . . brown . . . rollrock . . . road roaring’ – as well as the unusual verbal combinations such as ‘rollrock’ make it clear that we are dealing with language organized to attract attention to the linguistic structures themselves.

But it is also true that in many cases readers don’t notice linguistic patterning unless something is identified as literature. You don’t listen when reading standard prose. The rhythm of this sentence, you will find, is scarcely one that strikes the reader’s ear; but if a rhyme should suddenly appear, it makes the rhythm something that you hear. The rhyme, a conventional mark of literariness, makes you notice the rhythm that was there all along. When a text is framed as literature, we are disposed to attend to sound patterning or other sorts of linguistic organization we generally ignore.

2. Literature as the integration of language

Literature is language in which the various elements and components of the text are brought into a complex relation. When I receive a letter requesting a contribution for some worthy cause, I am unlikely to find that the sound is echo to the sense, but in literature there are relations – of reinforcement or contrast and dissonance – between the structures of different linguistic levels: between sound and meaning, between grammatical organization and thematic patterns. A rhyme, by bringing two words together (‘suppose/knows’), brings their meanings into relation (is ‘knowing’ the opposite of ‘supposing?’).

But it is clear that neither (1) nor (2) nor both together provides a definition of literature. Not all literature foregrounds language as (1)

suggests (many novels do not), and language foregrounded is not necessarily literature. Tongue-twisters ('Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers') are seldom thought to be literature, though they call attention to themselves as language and trip you up. In advertisements the linguistic devices are often foregrounded even more blatantly than in lyrics and different structural levels may be integrated more imperiously. One eminent theorist, Roman Jakobson, cites as his key example of the 'poetic function' of language not a line from a lyric but a political slogan from the American presidential campaign of Dwight D. ('Ike') Eisenhower: *I like Ike*. Here, through word play, the object liked (Ike) and the liking subject (I) are both enveloped in the act (like): how could I not like Ike, when *I* and *Ike* are both contained in *like*? Through this ad, the necessity of liking Ike seems inscribed in the very structure of the language. So, it's not that the relations between different levels of language are relevant only in literature but that in literature we are more likely to look for and exploit relations between form and meaning or theme and grammar and, attempting to understand the contribution each element makes to the effect of the whole, find integration, harmony, tension, or dissonance.

Accounts of literariness focused on the foregrounding or on the integration of language don't provide tests by which, say, Martians could separate works of literature from other sorts of writing. Such accounts function, like most claims about the nature of literature, to direct attention to certain aspects of literature which they claim to be central. To study something as literature, this account tells us, is to look above all at the organization of its language, not to read it as the expression of its author's psyche or as the reflection of the society that produced it.

3. Literature as fiction

One reason why readers attend to literature differently is that its utterances have a special relation to the world – a relation we call 'fictional'. The literary work is a linguistic event which projects a fictional world that

includes speaker, actors, events, and an implied audience (an audience that takes shape through the work's decisions about what must be explained and what the audience is presumed to know). Literary works refer to imaginary rather than historical individuals (Emma Bovary, Huckleberry Finn), but fictionality is not limited to characters and events. Deictics, as they are called, orientational features of language that relate to the situation of utterance, such as pronouns (I, you) or adverbials of place and time (here, there, now, then, yesterday, tomorrow), function in special ways in literature. *Now* in a poem ('now . . . gathering swallows twitter in the skies') refers not to the instant when the poet first wrote down that word, or to the moment of first publication, but to a time in the poem, in the fictional world of its action. And the 'I' that appears in a lyric poem, such as Wordsworth's 'I wandered lonely as a cloud . . .', is also fictional; it refers to the speaker of the poem, who may be quite different from the empirical individual, William Wordsworth, who wrote the poem. (There may well be strong connections between what happens to the speaker or narrator of the poem and what happened to Wordsworth at some moment in his life. But a poem written by an old man may have a young speaker and vice versa. And, notoriously, the narrators of novels, the characters who say 'I' as they recount the story, may have experiences and make judgements that are quite different from those of their authors.)

In fiction, the relation of what speakers say to what authors think is always a matter of interpretation. So is the relationship between events recounted and situations in the world. Non-fictional discourse is usually embedded in a context that tells you how to take it: an instruction manual, a newspaper report, a letter from a charity. The context of fiction, though, explicitly leaves open the question of what the fiction is really about. Reference to the world is not so much a property of literary works as a function they are given by interpretation. If I tell a friend, 'Meet me for dinner at the Hard Rock Café at eight tomorrow,' he or she will take this as a concrete invitation and identify spatial and temporal

referents from the context of utterance ('tomorrow' means 14 January 2002, 'eight' mean 8 p.m. Eastern Standard Time). But when the poet Ben Jonson writes a poem 'Inviting a Friend to Supper', the fictionality of this work makes its relation to the world a matter of interpretation: the context of the message is a literary one and we have to decide whether to take the poem as primarily characterizing the attitudes of a fictional speaker, outlining a bygone way of life, or suggesting that friendship and simple pleasures are what is most important to human happiness.

Interpreting *Hamlet* is, among other things, a matter of deciding whether it should be read as talking about, say, the problems of Danish princes, or the dilemmas of men of the Renaissance experiencing changes in the conception of the self, or relations between men and their mothers in general, or the question of how representations (including literary ones) affect the problem of making sense of our experience. The fact that there are references to Denmark throughout the play doesn't mean that you necessarily read it as talking about Denmark; that is an interpretive decision. We can relate *Hamlet* to the world in different ways at several different levels. The fictionality of literature separates language from other contexts in which it might be used and leaves the work's relation to the world open to interpretation.

4. Literature as aesthetic object

The features of literature discussed so far – the supplementary levels of linguistic organization, the separation from practical contexts of utterance, the fictional relation to the world – may be brought together under the general heading of the aesthetic function of language. Aesthetics is historically the name for the theory of art and has involved debates about whether beauty is an objective property of works of art or a subjective response of viewers, and about the relation of the beautiful to the true and the good.

For Immanuel Kant, the primary theorist of modern Western aesthetics, the aesthetic is the name of the attempt to bridge the gap between the

material and the spiritual world, between a world of forces and magnitudes and a world of concepts. Aesthetic objects, such as paintings or works of literature, with their combination of sensuous form (colours, sounds) and spiritual content (ideas), illustrate the possibility of bringing together the material and the spiritual. A literary work is an aesthetic object because, with other communicative functions initially bracketed or suspended, it engages readers to consider the interrelation between form and content.

Aesthetic objects, for Kant and other theorists, have a 'purposiveness without purpose'. There is a purposiveness to their construction: they are made so that their parts will work together towards some end. But the end is the work of art itself, pleasure in the work or pleasure occasioned by the work, not some external purpose. Practically, this means that to consider a text as literature is to ask about the contribution of its parts to the effect of the whole but not to take the work as primarily destined to accomplishing some purpose, such as informing or persuading us. When I say that stories are utterances whose relevance is their 'tellability', I am noting that there is a purposiveness to stories (qualities that can make them 'good stories') but that this cannot easily be attached to some external purpose, and thus am registering the aesthetic, affective quality of stories, even non-literary ones. A good story is tellable, strikes readers or listeners as 'worth it'. It may amuse or instruct or incite, can have a range of effects, but you can't define good stories in general as those that do any one of these things.

5. Literature as intertextual or self-reflexive construct

Recent theorists have argued that works are made out of other works: made possible by prior works which they take up, repeat, challenge, transform. This notion sometimes goes by the fancy name of 'intertextuality'. A work exists between and among other texts, through its relations to them. To read something as literature is to consider it as a linguistic event that has meaning in relation to other

discourses: for example, as a poem that plays on possibilities created by previous poems or as a novel that puts on stage and criticizes the political rhetoric of its day. Shakespeare's sonnet 'My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun' takes up the metaphors used in the tradition of love poetry and denies them ('But no such roses see I in her cheeks') – denies them as a way of praising a woman who, 'when she walks, treads on the ground'. The poem has meaning in relation to the tradition that makes it possible.

Now since to read a poem as literature is to relate it to other poems, to compare and contrast the way it makes sense with the ways others do, it is possible to read poems as at some level about poetry itself. They bear on the operations of poetic imagination and poetic interpretation. Here we encounter another notion that has been important in recent theory: that of the 'self-reflexivity' of literature. Novels are at some level about novels, about the problems and possibilities of representing and giving shape or meaning to experience. So *Madame Bovary* can be read as an exploration of relations between Emma Bovary's 'real life' and the way which both the romantic novels she reads and Flaubert's own novel make sense of experience. One can always ask of a novel (or a poem) how what it implicitly says about making sense relates to the way it itself goes about making sense.

Literature is a practice in which authors attempt to advance or renew literature and thus is always implicitly a reflection on literature itself. But once again, we find that this is something we could say about other forms: bumper stickers, like poems, may depend for their meaning on prior bumper stickers: 'Nuke a Whale for Jesus!' makes no sense without 'No Nukes,' 'Save the Whales,' and 'Jesus Saves,' and one could certainly say that 'Nuke a Whale for Jesus' is really *about* bumper stickers. The intertextuality and self-reflexivity of literature is not, finally, a defining feature but a foregrounding of aspects of language use and questions about representation that may also be observed elsewhere.

Properties versus consequences

In each of these five cases we encounter the structure I mentioned above: we are dealing with what might be described as *properties* of literary works, features that mark them as literature, but with what could also be seen as the results of a particular kind of attention, a function that we accord language in considering it *as* literature. Neither perspective, it seems, can englobe the other to become the comprehensive perspective. The qualities of literature can't be reduced either to objective properties or to consequences of ways of framing language. There is one key reason for this which already emerged from the little thought-experiments at the beginning of this chapter. Language resists the frames we impose. It is hard to make the couplet 'We dance round in a ring . . .' into a fortune-cookie fortune or 'Stir vigorously' into a stirring poem. When we treat something as literature, when we look for pattern and coherence, there is resistance in the language; we have to work on it, work with it. Finally, the 'literariness' of literature may lie in the tension of the interaction between the linguistic material and readers' conventional expectations of what literature is. But I say this with caution, for the other thing we have learned from our five cases is that each quality identified as an important feature of literature turns out not to be a *defining* feature, since it can be found at work in other language uses.

The functions of literature

I began this chapter by noting that literary theory in the 1980s and 1990s has not focused on the difference between literary and non-literary works. What theorists have done is to reflect on literature as a historical and ideological category, on the social and political functions that something called 'literature' has been thought to perform. In nineteenth-century England, literature emerged as an extremely important idea, a special kind of writing charged with several functions. Made a subject of instruction in the colonies of the British Empire, it was

charged with giving the natives an appreciation of the greatness of England and engaging them as grateful participants in a historic civilizing enterprise. At home it would counter the selfishness and materialism fostered by the new capitalist economy, offering the middle classes and the aristocrats alternative values and giving the workers a stake in the culture that, materially, relegated them to a subordinate position. It would at once teach disinterested appreciation, provide a sense of national greatness, create fellow-feeling among the classes, and ultimately, function as a replacement for religion, which seemed no longer to be able to hold society together.

Any set of texts that could do all that would be very special indeed. What is literature that it was thought to do all this? One thing that is crucial is a special structure of exemplarity at work in literature. A literary work – *Hamlet*, for instance – is characteristically the story of a fictional character: it presents itself as in some way exemplary (why else would you read it?), but it simultaneously declines to define the range or scope of that exemplarity – hence the ease with which readers and critics come to speak about the ‘universality’ of literature. The structure of literary works is such that it is easier to take them as telling us about ‘the human condition’ in general than to specify what narrower categories they describe or illuminate. Is *Hamlet* just about princes, or men of the Renaissance, or introspective young men, or people whose fathers have died in obscure circumstances? Since all such answers seem unsatisfactory, it is easier for readers not to answer, thus implicitly accepting a possibility of universality. In their particularity, novels, poems, and plays decline to explore what they are exemplary of at the same time that they invite all readers to become involved in the predicaments and thoughts of their narrators and characters.

But the combination of offering universality and addressing all those who can read the language has had a powerful *national* function. Benedict Anderson argues, in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, a work of political history that has

become influential as theory, that works of literature – particularly novels – helped to create national communities by their postulation of and appeal to a broad community of readers, bounded yet in principle open to all who could read the language. ‘Fiction’, Anderson writes, ‘seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations.’ To present the characters, speakers, plots, and themes of English literature as potentially universal is to promote an open yet bounded imagined community to which subjects in the British colonies, for instance, are invited to aspire. In fact, the more the universality of literature is stressed, the more it may have a national function: asserting the universality of the vision of the world offered by Jane Austen makes England a very special place indeed, the site of standards of taste and behaviour and, more important, of the moral scenarios and social circumstances in which ethical problems are worked out and personalities are formed.

Literature has been seen as a special kind of writing which, it was argued, could civilize not just the lower classes but also the aristocrats and the middle classes. This view of literature as an aesthetic object that could make us ‘better people’ is linked to a certain idea of the subject, to what theorists have come to call ‘the liberal subject’, the individual defined not by a social situation and interests but by an individual subjectivity (rationality and morality) conceived as essentially free of social determinants. The aesthetic object, cut off from practical purposes and inducing particular kinds of reflection and identifications, helps us to become liberal subjects through the free and disinterested exercise of an imaginative faculty that combines knowing and judging in the right relation. Literature does this, the argument goes, by encouraging consideration of complexities without a rush to judgement, engaging the mind in ethical issues, inducing readers to examine conduct (including their own) as an outsider or a reader of novels would. It promotes disinterestedness, teaches sensitivity and fine discriminations, produces identifications with men and women of other

conditions, thus promoting fellow-feeling. In 1860 an educator maintained,

by converse with the thoughts and utterances of those who are intellectual leaders of the race, our heart comes to beat in accord with the feeling of universal humanity. We discover that no differences of class, or party, or creed can destroy the power of genius to charm and to instruct, and that above the smoke and stir, the din and turmoil of man's lower life of care and business and debate, there is a serene and luminous region of truth where all may meet and expatiate in common.

Recent theoretical discussions have, not surprisingly, been critical of this conception of literature, and have focused above all on the mystification that seeks to distract workers from the misery of their condition by offering them access to this 'higher region' – throwing the workers a few novels to keep them from throwing up a few barricades, as Terry Eagleton puts it. But when we explore claims about what literature does, how it works as a social practice, we find arguments that are exceedingly difficult to reconcile.

Literature has been given diametrically opposed functions. Is literature an ideological instrument: a set of stories that seduce readers into accepting the hierarchical arrangements of society? If stories take it for granted that women must find their happiness, if at all, in marriage; if they accept class divisions as natural and explore how the virtuous serving-girl may marry a lord, they work to legitimate contingent historical arrangements. Or is literature the place where ideology is exposed, revealed as something that can be questioned? Literature represents, for example, in a potentially intense and affecting way, the narrow range of options historically offered to women, and, in making this visible, raises the possibility of *not* taking it for granted. Both claims are thoroughly plausible: that literature is the vehicle of ideology and that literature is an instrument for its undoing. Here again, we find a

complex oscillation between potential ‘properties’ of literature and attention that brings out these properties.

We also encounter contrary claims about the relation of literature to action. Theorists have maintained that literature encourages solitary reading and reflection as the way to engage with the world and thus counters the social and political activities that might produce change. At best it encourages detachment or appreciation of complexity, and at worst passivity and acceptance of what is. But on the other hand, literature has historically been seen as dangerous: it promotes the questioning of authority and social arrangements. Plato banned poets from his ideal republic because they could only do harm, and novels have long been credited with making people dissatisfied with the lives they inherit and eager for something new – whether life in big cities or romance or revolution. By promoting identification across divisions of class, gender, race, nation, and age, books may promote a ‘fellow-feeling’ that discourages struggle; but they may also produce a keen sense of injustice that makes progressive struggles possible. Historically, works of literature are credited with producing change: Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a best-seller in its day, helped create a revulsion against slavery that made possible the American Civil War.

I return in Chapter 7 to the problem of identification and its effects: what role does the identification with literary characters and narrators play? For the moment we should note above all the complexity and diversity of literature as an institution and social practice. What we have here, after all, is an institution based on the possibility of saying anything you can imagine. This is central to what literature is: for any orthodoxy, any belief, any value, a literary work can mock it, parody it, imagine some different and monstrous fiction. From the novels of the Marquis de Sade, which sought to work out what might happen in a world where action followed a nature conceived as unconstrained appetite, to Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* which has caused so much outrage for its use of sacred names and motifs in a context of

satire and parody, literature has been the possibility of fictionally exceeding what has previously been thought and written. For anything that seemed to make sense, literature could make it nonsense, go beyond it, transform it in a way that raised the question of its legitimacy and adequacy.

Literature has been the activity of a cultural elite, and it has been what is sometimes called ‘cultural capital’: learning about literature gives you a stake in culture that may pay off in various ways, helping you fit in with people of higher social status. But literature cannot be reduced to this conservative social function: it is scarcely the purveyor of ‘family values’ but makes seductive all manner of crimes, from Satan’s revolt against God in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* to Raskolnikov’s murder of an old woman in Dostoevski’s *Crime and Punishment*. It encourages resistance to capitalist values, to the practicalities of getting and spending. Literature is the noise of culture as well as its information. It is an entropic force as well as cultural capital. It is a writing that calls for a reading and engages readers in problems of meaning.

The paradox of literature

Literature is a paradoxical institution because to create literature is to write according to existing formulas – to produce something that looks like a sonnet or that follows the conventions of the novel – but it is also to flout those conventions, to go beyond them. Literature is an institution that lives by exposing and criticizing its own limits, by testing what will happen if one writes differently. So literature is at the same time the name for the utterly conventional – *moon* rhymes with *June* and *swoon*, maidens are fair, knights are bold – and for the utterly disruptive, where readers have to struggle to create any meaning at all, as in sentences like this from James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*: ‘Eins within a space and a wearywide space it was er wohnd a Mookse.’

The question ‘what is literature?’ arises, I suggested earlier, not because

people are worried that they might mistake a novel for history or the message in a fortune-cookie for a poem but because critics and theorists hope, by saying what literature is, to promote what they take to be the most pertinent critical methods and to dismiss methods that neglect the most basic and distinctive aspects of literature. In the context of recent theory, the question 'what is literature?' matters because theory has highlighted the literariness of texts of all sorts. To reflect on literariness is to keep before us, as resources for analysing these discourses, reading practices elicited by literature: the suspension of the demand for immediate intelligibility, reflection on the implications of means of expression, and attention to how meaning is made and pleasure produced.