What Is “Literature”?  

A first challenge in reading world literature is that the very idea of literature has meant many different things over the centuries and around the world. At its most general, “literature” simply means “written with letters” – really, any text at all. If you go to see your doctor about a persistent cough and she says “I’ll pull up the latest literature on tuberculosis,” she means medical reports, not Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain*. Even in more artistic contexts, many cultures have made no firm distinctions between imaginative literature and other forms of elevated writing. “Belles-lettres” would be a good translation of the ancient Egyptian term *medet nefret*, “beautiful words,” which could refer to any form of rhetorically heightened composition, whether poetry, stories, philosophical dialogues, or speeches. The classical Chinese term *wen* designated poetry and artistic prose but carried a much wider set of meanings, including pattern, order, and harmonious design. In Europe, reflecting older ideas of literature as “humane letters,” the concept of literature remained quite broad throughout the eighteenth century but came to be increasingly restricted to imaginative works of poetry, drama, and prose fiction. This understanding has become the norm around the world, including in the meanings now given to such terms as *wenxue* in Chinese, *bungaku* in Japanese, and *adab* in Arabic.

Still, these terms can be applied either very broadly or quite restrictively. Often readers only admit some poems and novels into the category of “real” literature, considering Harlequin romances and Stephen King thrillers as little more than verbal junk food, unworthy of inclusion in the company of Dante and Virginia Woolf. Even farther from the realm of literature are advertising jingles. Though it certainly represents a minimal form of poetry, a jingle isn’t meant to be savored for its beauty; its meter and rhyme are used purely instrumentally, to help the message lodge in your mind so that you’ll remember to buy a particular brand of toothpaste.

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Even in the sense of belles-lettres, literature can be defined to varying degrees of breadth. Great scientific writers such as Charles Darwin and eloquent essayists such as Montaigne or Lin Yutang offer many rewards to a reader who pays close attention to their language and to the shaping of ideas and of the narrative in their works. Sigmund Freud actually won a leading German literary award, the Goethe Prize, given him in recognition of the artistry of his psychoanalytical case studies, and he is often taught in literature courses next to Proust, Kafka, and Woolf. Literature anthologies now regularly include religious and philosophical texts, essays, autobiographical writing, and examples of creative nonfiction along with the poems, plays, and prose fiction that still occupy the bulk of their pages. Literature has expanded even beyond its root sense of works “written with letters,” to include oral compositions by illiterate poets and storytellers. Movies and television series give audiences many of the pleasures that novels gave nineteenth-century readers, and “literature” can appropriately be considered in its broad sense to include works of aural and visual narrative, from movies to manga and poetic podcasts.

In view of this variety, we need to prepare ourselves to read different works with different expectations. Primo Levi’s haunting holocaust memoir *Survival in Auschwitz* would lose much of its force if it turned out that Auschwitz had never existed or that Levi hadn’t been interned there, whereas for readers of Boccaccio’s *Decameron* it hardly matters whether there was an actual plague in Florence that forced people to flee the city and start telling each other ribald stories in the countryside. And quite apart from its real-world reference, there is the question of what literature is for. In many parts of the world, early theorists and practitioners understood poetry not only in terms of metrics or metaphors but as a mode of particularly intimate address. According to the Sanskritist Sheldon Pollock,

> before the modern period people in South Asia were very careful to distinguish the sacred Veda from what later would be called *kavya* [literally the “work of the *kavi*”], for which “literature” in our contemporary sense is a good translation. ... The Veda was said to act like a master in giving us commands; ancient lore and legends (*purana*) like a friend in offering us advice; and literature like a lover in seducing us. (Pollock, “Early South Asia,” 803–5)

By contrast, the Roman poet Horace expected that literature should have a public value, and famously remarked in his *Ars poetica* that good poetry should be *dulce* but also *utile* — both sweet and useful.

Writing in 1790, Immanuel Kant downplayed literature’s use value in his influential *Critique of Judgment*, in which he defined art as
“purposeful without purpose” ("zweckmäßig ohne Zweck," 173). Following Kant a century later, fin-de-siècle aesthetes celebrated “art for art’s sake” rather than valuing it for any social, religious, or ideological purposes or effects it might have. Despite its inventive character, though, literature has rarely been thought to serve only as entertainment or to give aesthetic pleasure alone. John Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* with the explicit agenda of justifying the ways of God to humanity, and his presentation of war in heaven had a political dimension as well, significantly inflected by his experiences with civil conflict in England. The poets Byron and Shelley advanced radical political views in works such as *Don Juan* and *The Mask of Anarchy*, and so would the Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht in the twentieth century. Even Oscar Wilde, who famously denied that art should serve any moral purpose, was advancing his aestheticist views in part to counter Victorian assumptions that artists should support their society’s moral codes – including the heterosexual mores that would destroy Wilde’s career and send him to jail for the crime of sodomy.

Outside Western Europe and North America, the strict separation of literature from political and religious writing rarely took hold to begin with. Mystical poetry continued to be written by Sufis in Persia and by bhakti poets in India, and throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it was taken as a given in many colonized societies that writers should be directly engaged in anticolonial struggle and then in the political debates of the ensuing postcolonial era. In the West itself, Kantian ideas of literature’s purposelessness were challenged by Marxist, New Historicist, and postcolonial approaches that drew new attention to the political agendas of many western as well as nonwestern writers.

Within a given literary tradition, authors and readers build up a common fund of expectations as to how to read different kinds of composition, and experienced readers can approach a work with a shared sense of how to take it. Reviewers may praise a popular history of the French Revolution for being “as gripping as a novel,” but we will still expect all the events in the book to be documented in sources that the historian has read and not made up. Conversely, the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges was famous for devising *ficciones* that often look like sober scholarly reports, but readers soon discover that unlikely or even impossible events are taking place, while many of Borges’ “sources” are entirely invented and are themselves part of the fiction. On a middle ground, when we read a book billed as “a historical novel,” we assume that it will adhere to the general outlines of a real sequence of events, but we allow the author to take major creative liberties in supplementing historical figures and events with invented characters and scenes.
Writers sometimes push the envelope through genre-bending experiments, and confusions can arise when we mistake a work’s genre or an author’s intention, as when Orson Welles broadcast his dramatization of *The War of the Worlds* and some listeners panicked at what they thought was a genuine news report of an alien invasion. Usually, though, within a given culture, a work fits broadly within a form whose rules an informed reader is expected to know, even as it may transform or actually subvert the form it employs. A lover of Petrarch and Shakespeare can approach Wordsworth’s sonnets with a good sense of what a sonnet is (fourteen pentameter lines, typically composed in one of two dominant rhyme schemes, the “Petrarchan” and the “Shakespearean”). With this background, readers can then appreciate Wordsworth’s creative use of this classic form and his distinctive departures from it, as when he varies the rhyme scheme for dramatic effect. We may no longer know the specific literary background of older texts, but often we will be familiar with more recent versions of the older tradition. Cervantes began *Don Quixote* as a satire on the knightly romances that were all the rage in his day in Spain and, although few readers today know the old tales of Amadis of Gaul or Tirant lo Blanc that Cervantes satirizes, many people will likely know the genre through modernized tales of King Arthur and Lancelot, not to mention postmodern reworkings in print and on screen, such as *The Princess Bride* or *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

With world literature, however, we often encounter works that reflect very different literary norms and expectations from the ones our home tradition employs. A close familiarity with Shakespeare’s sonnets won’t help us much in appreciating the distinctive drama of a *ghazal* – a lyric form popular over many centuries in Persia and India, with its own set of rules and its own assumptions about the ways in which poets experience love and longing and pour out their sorrows in highly ironic verse. Like Lewis Carroll’s Alice after her fall down the rabbit hole, we’ll need to get our bearings in an unfamiliar landscape, filled with characters who play by different rules from the ones we’re accustomed to. At once enticing and puzzling (“curioser and curioser,” in Alice’s assessment), this difference is what creates a wonderland different from our everyday literary reality – a heightening of the transformation that creative writers always perform on the world around them.

**The World of the Text**

Beyond the varied norms associated with individual literary genres, different cultures have often had distinctive patterns of belief concerning the nature of literature and its role in society. A good deal – though by no
means all – of western literature during the past several hundred years has been markedly individualistic. Many modern novels focus on the personal development of a hero or heroine often in opposition to society as a whole; they have protagonists such as Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, who escape from social restrictions, or else are tragically hemmed in by them, like Flaubert’s Emma Bovary. Much of western literature, as Harold Bloom has put it in *The Western Canon*, is “the image of the individual thinking” (34).

Western lyrics have long taken the form of individual thinking – or singing – aloud, as in the following lyric, an anonymous poem included in an English songbook around 1530, though it was probably much older:

> Western wind, when wilt thou blow,
> The small rain down can rain?
> Christ, if my love were in my arms,
> And I in my bed again!
> (Gardner, *New Oxford Book*, 20)

Here we seem to be overhearing the complaint of an unhappy lover, but the speaker isn’t addressing us or anyone else, just the wind, and even the wind is absent from the scene. Usually known as “Western Wind” (or “Westron wynde” in unmodernized editions), the poem is sometimes given a descriptive title, “The Lover in Winter Pineth for the Spring,” which situates it clearly amid the seasonal rhythms of late medieval and early modern England: we may imagine that the speaker is away from home during the winter (selling goods, or finding work in a city) but will need to come home to plant crops when the western winds bring the light spring rain. This much is likely, yet we don’t have any way of knowing whether the traveler is indoors or outside, trudging along a road or gazing out through the window of an inn, talking aloud or simply thinking. Even the speaker’s gender is undetermined, and as this was a song to be performed, the lover’s gender will vary according to whether a man or woman is singing.

The underlying orality of “Western Wind” can be seen even in its printed form. Its meter appears to alternate between four-beat lines (“Western wind, when wilt thou blow”) and three-beat lines (“the small rain down can rain”). This pattern is known as “ballad meter,” as it was commonly used in sung ballads. In performance, however, this meter isn’t irregular at all; these words would be set to music in 4/4 time, in units of two measures totaling eight beats. Depending on the particular setting, the seemingly shorter second and fourth lines could allow for a rest on the eighth beat, giving the singer time to draw a breath, or they could create an opportunity for lengthening key words, for dramatic
effect. This is the option taken in the 1530 songbook, in which the wind’s blowing is expressed by giving a full measure to the single syllable “blow,” while in the final line the extra beat is used to draw out the penultimate word, the erotically evocative “bed.”

Comparable effects can be heard in a good deal of modern popular music. Bob Marley, for example, was a virtuoso who set widely varied lines against a very regular syncopated beat. His songs were often organized in eight-beat lines paired off in sixteen-beat units, but he constantly compressed or stretched out words within the set rhythm, for dramatic effect. So in his song “400 Years,” backed by echoes and moans from his band, “the Wailers,” Marley sings lines that vary from three to a dozen syllables:

400 years (400 years, 400 years, Wo-o-o-o-o)
And it’s the same (wo-o-o-o-o) – the same philosophy
I’ve said it’s four hundred years; look, how long
(400 years, 400 years, wo-o-o-o-o, wo-o-o-o-o)
and the people (wo-o-o-o-o) they still can’t see.

Why do they fight against the poor youth
of today?
And without these youths, they would be gone –
all gone astray.

(Marley, “400 Years”)

If you listen to the song, you’ll find that these seemingly irregular lines are all given the same eight beats, with rhymes at the end of the second and fourth lines of each stanza, just as in “Western Wind.” Going beyond the English songbook’s moderately drawn-out “wind” and “bed,” Marley devotes eight full beats to the phrases “of today” and “all gone astray” in the second stanza, giving them a haunting resonance. In a further play of sound and sense, he begins the song with eight beats for the four syllables of “400 years,” first in his own clear tenor voice, then softly repeated by the Wailers, who dramatically embody the long years of slavery and its aftermath.

Both metrically and thematically, we enter a very different lyrical world in an enigmatic poem called “Nombrarte” (“Naming You”), written in 1965 by the Argentine poet Alejandra Pizarnik:

*No el poema de tu ausencia,*  
sólo un dibujo, una grieta en un muro,  
algó en el viento, un sabor amargo.*

(Pizarnik, *Extracting the Stone*, 98)
[Not the poem of your absence,  
only a sketch, a crack in a wall,  
something in the wind, a bitter taste.]

In many ways, Pizarnik’s poem is radically different both from “Western Wind” and from “400 Years.” Like Marley’s song, it has no set meter or number of syllables in a line, but it departs farther from traditional lyric by abandoning rhyme altogether. It is meant to be read rather than sung, and its effect is visual as well as verbal: the crack in the wall, suggestive of the broken relationship, finds a visual echo in the broken phrases of the second and third lines. A sixteenth-century poet might not have recognized this as poetry at all, and “Nombrarte” actually begins by asserting that it is “not the poem of your absence” that an earlier poet might have composed. It offers no movement, no expected resolution, and doesn’t even have a single verb. Instead of a fertile spring wind that will reunite the lovers, here we have an ill wind that blows no one any good and only leaves a bitter aftertaste.

Despite these differences, “Nombrarte” resembles “Western Wind” in important respects. We are shown a solitary situation, with none of the social surround created by Bob Marley’s Wailers, who echo his lines or underscore them with their moans. Like the early English poet, Pizarnik gives us a speaker who is obsessed with an absent lover, and we seem to be inside the speaker’s head; no one else is shown in the scene, which is barely suggested. As in the earlier poem, the speaker may be indoors or outside. She – or he? – may only be thinking about walls and winds, or may be feeling a chilly breeze while looking at a cracked wall: there’s no telling, as the focus is once again on the speaker’s interior drama.

On the basis of such examples, we might consider that canonical lyric poetry (perhaps in contrast to the more social modes of popular music) inherently shows “the individual thinking”; but a far more social world opens up when we turn to the love poetry written in early India, as can be seen in the following short lyric dating from sometime before the year 900:

Who wouldn’t be angry to see  
his dear wife with her lower lip bitten?  
You scorned my warning to smell  
the bee-holding lotus. Now you must suffer.  
(Ingalls, Dhvanyāloka, 102)

On a first reading, this poem seems only one step removed from “Western Wind” and “Nombrarte.” Once again, we are overhearing a single speaker, though now one who talks to someone else, apparently a close friend who
has hurt her lip and is afraid that her husband will be upset by her spoiled looks. The poem was composed in the Prakrit ("natural") dialect, typically spoken by women or servants rather than by upper-class men, who used the more elaborate and refined Sanskrit; so the language itself, as well as the speaker’s frankness, identifies her as a female friend. Although the scene has widened to include the friend’s wounded wife, she is silent, and once again we have only the most minimal indications of where the scene is supposed to be set. The conversation may take place in a garden graced with blossoming lotus plants, but it could just as well occur indoors, as the speaker tends her friend’s swollen lip.

If we read this poem as we would read the western examples, we would probably see it as concerned with the wife’s emotional state; we could take our cue from the poem’s conclusion, which emphasizes her suffering as a result of her husband’s anger. Yet, seen in these terms, the poem looks rather slender and unsatisfying, and the sudden introduction of the idea of suffering seems uncalled-for. A bee sting should really only be a temporary annoyance, and it ought to inspire sympathy rather than anger in any reasonable spouse. Are we to imagine that the wife is married to an abusive husband? Instead of bringing her some lip balm, has he flown off the handle just because the swelling keeps her from kissing him? From Euripides to Joyce Carol Oates, there is a long western tradition of literature concerning abusive spouses, and yet this explanation hardly seems relevant here. Far from condemning the husband, the friend begins by asserting that any husband would naturally be angry on observing his wife’s swollen lip. Why isn’t the friend being more supportive?

The riddle is soon solved if we read farther in Sanskrit poetry, for many Sanskrit kavyas or lyric poems concern illicit or adulterous love. What is more, Indian poets often speak of telltale marks from bites or scratches made by lovers in the heat of passion. From the poem’s opening couplet, then, a reader or hearer of kavya poetry would immediately be alerted to the underlying situation: the wife’s lover has carelessly bit her in a place she can’t conceal. The husband’s anger, and the wife’s suffering, follow naturally from this revealing mistake, and the poet’s skill is demonstrated in his playful use of a classic motif.

This much can be suggested by reading a collection of Sanskrit love poetry, but it is also possible to avail ourselves of more explicit commentary, for in the Sanskrit tradition scholar-poets wrote elaborate treatises on poetic language. This poem was cited by one of the greatest Sanskrit poeticians, Anandavardhana (820–890 CE), as an example of poetic suggestiveness. Commenting on Anandavardhana’s treatise around the year 1000, his follower Abhinavagupta offered a detailed explication of the poem. What his interpretation shows is how intensely social this poetry was seen to be, for Abhinavagupta never considers that the poem
features only the pair of friends and no one else. Instead, what at first looks like a private conversation turns out to be overflowing with social drama:

The meaning of the stanza is as follows. An unfaithful wife has had her lip bitten by a lover. To save her from her husband’s reproaches she is here addressed by a clever female friend, who knows that the husband is nearby but pretends not to see him. Now you must suffer: the literal sense is directed to the adulterous wife. The suggested sense, on the other hand, is directed to the husband and informs him that she is not guilty of the offense. (103)

Abhinavagupta’s reading immediately opens out the poem beyond the individual or two-person focus we might expect from a western lyric. At this point we may still find comparisons to the kind of double dealing found in Boccaccio and Molière, whose adulterous heroines and sly servants often direct two levels of meaning at differing recipients. But Abhinavagupta is only just beginning to describe the scene as he understands it. “There is also a suggestion,” he continues, “directed to the neighbors who, if they hear the wife being roundly abused by the husband, may suspect her of misconduct.” So the neighbors are on hand as well? And not just the neighbors: “There is a suggestion directed to her fellow wife, who would be delighted by the abuse of her rival and by [the news of] her adultery. The suggestion lies in the word dear (‘dear wife’), which shows that the wife addressed is the more attractive.” Having intuited – or invented – the presence of a second wife, Abhinavagupta believes that the speaker is telling her friend “You should not take on humiliation at the thought of being accused of bad character in front of your fellow wife; rather, you should take to yourself high esteem and now shine forth.”

The garden is getting pretty crowded by now, but there’s more to come, as Abhinavagupta supposes that even the wife’s lover is on hand as well: “To the wife’s secret lover there is a suggestion, telling him that ‘Today I have thus saved your heart’s beloved who loves you in secret, but you must not bite her again in a place that is so obvious.’” And, last of all, “To anyone clever who is standing nearby the speaker’s cleverness is suggested, [as though she were to say] ‘This is the way I have concealed things’” (103). Clearly, we are in a very different poetic world from the one in which the lonely lover plaineth for the spring.

Important though they are, the contrasts between the English lyric and the Sanskrit poem are differences of degree rather than reflections of some absolute, unbridgeable gulf between the East and the West. Some western poems involve more than one or two characters, and not every kavya depends upon a landscape as crowded as Abhinavagupta claims.
Even for this poem, the key insight is that the jealous husband must be within earshot, as this reveals the poem’s fundamental drama. It is far from certain that an entire crowd is ringing the garden, ears aflutter, and that the woman’s lover is hidden in the nearest fig tree. When Abhinavagupta goes so far as to interpret the word “dear” as indicating that there is a less beloved second wife at hand, he may be indulging in a perennial scholarly temptation – the drive to find some special meaning in every single word of a poem. This urge already surfaced two millennia ago in rabbinical interpretations of the Bible, whose every grammatical particle and unusual spelling was mined for some deep truth, while in modern times professors at Oxford and Yale excel at unfolding surprising meanings in the slightest turn of phrase in Keats. Quite likely the poet wasn’t referring to polygamy at all, but called the wife “dear” in order to underscore the depth of the jealous husband’s concern. Perhaps the poet just needed a word to fill out the line. Even if we take Abhinavagupta’s interpretation with several grains of salt, though, his reading shows that the social world is seen to be far more fully present in the poem than a western-trained reader might have thought. Realizing this difference enables us to make sense of elements that otherwise would seem inconsistent or pointless and allows us to appreciate the poem as a fascinating elaboration of its tradition’s resources.

When reading world literature, we need to beware of the perils of exoticism and assimilation, the extremes on the spectrum of difference and similarity. We won’t get very far if we take the Sanskrit poem as the product of some mysterious orient whose artists are naïve and illogical, or whose people feel an entirely different set of emotions from the ones we do. On that assumption, we might experience the poem as charming but pointless, overdramatizing a minor annoyance that only an Indian reader could appreciate, or reinforcing patriarchal norms that no right-thinking modern person, in India or elsewhere, should support. Equally, though, we should be wary of assuming that the ancient poet and his audience were just like us, playing by the same rules and with the same sorts of cultural assumptions that we might find in a modern poem about spousal abuse. We need to learn enough about the tradition to achieve an overall understanding of its patterns of reference and its assumptions about the world, the text, and the reader.

Reading the Sanskrit poem can illustrate a basic means of coming to terms with the difference of a foreign work: to pause at moments that seem illogical, overdone, or oddly flat, and ask what’s really going on. Not all such moments will yield dramatic insights, of course, either because the confusion can only be cleared up with some specialized knowledge that we lack, or else because the poet has actually stumbled; even Homer sometimes nods, as Alexander Pope famously remarked. Yet with any
new work, and particularly with those from a distant time or place, a good assumption is that moments that seem puzzling or absurd on first reading can be windows into the writer’s distinctive methods and assumptions. Pausing over the surprising emphasis on the husband’s anger, and looking for comparable moments in other works in the same tradition, we discover the real trouble with the wife’s swollen lip. Then we can see how beautifully the poet has modulated the traditions available in that culture, in order to give a unique expression to concerns that can appropriately be described as universal.

The Author’s Role

If different cultures have different understandings of the world that a literary text engages, they also diverge in their conception of the ways in which texts are created to begin with. In the western tradition going back to Plato and Aristotle, literature is something a poet or a writer makes up — an assumption built into our very terms “poetry” (from the Greek poiēsis, “making”) and “fiction” (from the Latin fictio, “to make”). This conception can involve celebrating the writer’s supreme creativity, but it can also place literature on a spectrum shading over toward unreality, falsehood, and outright lying. This is why Plato wanted poetry banished from his ideal city in the Republic, whereas Aristotle celebrated poetry as more philosophical than historical writing, able to convey higher truths free from the accidents of everyday life.

By contrast, various cultures have seen literature as deeply embedded in reality, neither above nor below the audience’s own physical and moral world. Writers are regarded not as making things up but as observing and reflecting on what they see around them. Stephen Owen has emphasized this difference in discussing the poetics of the Tang Dynasty (618–907), commonly considered the greatest period of Chinese poetry. In his book Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World, Owen quotes a poem by the eighth-century poet Du Fu:

Slender grasses, breeze faint on the shore,
Here, the looming mast, the lone night boat.
Stars hang down on the breadth of the plain,
The moon gushes in the great river’s current.
My name shall not be known from my writing;
Sick, growing old, I must yield up my post.
Wind-tossed, fluttering – what is my likeness?
In Heaven and Earth, a single gull of the sands.
What Is “Literature”?  

Unlike the Sanskrit poem, Du Fu’s lyric presents the soliloquy of a solitary observer, and in this respect it resembles many western poems. Yet the speaker is part of the natural world around him; far from fading away before the poet’s interior drama of illness, aging, and political regrets, the landscape is shown in detail, its physical features corresponding to the poet’s private concerns and memories. As Owen comments, Du Fu’s lines “might be a special kind of diary entry, differing from common diary in their intensity and immediacy, in their presentation of an experience occurring at that very moment” (13). Responding to this immediacy of observation, the poem’s readers would have taken the speaker to be Du Fu himself, not an invented, “fictitious” persona. Tang dynasty poets understood their task as one of conveying to their readers their personal experiences and reflections, artistically shaped and given permanent value through the resources of the poetic tradition.

Very differently, western writers have often asserted their artistic independence from the world around them. They have regularly insisted that their works don’t make declarative statements, sometimes even claiming that they don’t say anything at all: “A poem should not mean / But be,” as Archibald MacLeish declared in 1926 (MacLeish, “Ars Poetica,” 847). Three and a half centuries earlier, Sir Philip Sidney expressed a similar view: “Now, for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth” (Sidney, The Defense of Poesy, 517). By contrast, Du Fu’s readers were sure that the poet was affirming the truth of his experience; he had indeed written his poem late in life, in exile, on a night when he observed slender grasses swaying and a single gull on the sand, lit by the light of the moon. In his Apology, Sidney speaks of the poet’s task as “counterfeiting,” whereas Du Fu’s contemporaries saw him as perceiving the deep correspondences that linked heaven, earth, the grasses, the seagull, and the poet.

Like the Sanskrit tradition, Chinese poetry presents a difference in degree rather than a difference in kind from the western tradition. Du Fu’s readers knew that poets never simply transcribed whatever caught their eye; classical Chinese poems are elaborate constructions, in which the poet very selectively weaves elements from the world around him into poetic forms that employ long-cherished images, metaphors, and historical references. Equally, despite all the emphasis on counterfeiting and artifice, western writers have rarely gone as far as Archibald MacLeish in asserting that their works have no cognitive meaning – a paradoxical stance even for MacLeish, after all, since his poem is making a meaningful statement when it asserts that poems should not mean but be.

There have always been poets in the western tradition who seem to be recounting their own experiences as Du Fu does. As early as the seventh
century BCE, the great Greek poet Sappho certainly wrote as though she was describing just what she felt when she saw a woman she loved flirting with a handsome young man:

To me it seems
that man has the fortune of gods,
whoever sits beside you, and close,
who listens to you sweetly speaking
and laughing temptingly;
my heart flutters in my breast,
whenever I look quickly, for a moment –
I say nothing, my tongue broken,
a delicate fire runs under my skin,
my eyes see nothing, my ears roar,
cold sweat rushes down me,
trembling seizes me,
I am greener than grass,
to myself I seem
needing but little to die.

(Sappho, “To Me It Seems,” 304–5)

Even here, though, Sappho is mixing literal observations with artifice-laden metaphors. She may be green with envy, but she probably hasn’t turned greener than the grass. She has lost her voice, but her tongue isn’t physically “broken”; she feels flushed and hears a ringing in her ears, but she isn’t actually bursting into flames.

**Modes of Reading**

The contrasts between Du Fu and Sappho partly reflect differences in the way poets pursued their vocation in their respective cultures, but they are also differences in modes of reading and reception. In comparing Chinese and western poetic assumptions, Stephen Owen contrasts Du Fu’s evening scene with William Wordsworth’s sonnet “Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802.” Like Du Fu, Wordsworth contemplates an outdoor scene:

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
(Wordsworth, *Selected Poems*, 1: 460)

Despite the specificity of the poem’s title, though, Owen proposes that “it does not matter whether Wordsworth saw the scene, vaguely remembered it, or constructed it from his imagination. The words of the poem are not directed to a historical London in its infinite particularity; the words lead you to something else, to some significance in which the number of vessels on the Thames is utterly irrelevant. That significance is elusive, its fullness eternally out of reach.” Whether the poem concerns the force of solitary vision, or nature versus an industrial society, or some other theme, Owen says, “the text points to a plenitude of potential significance, but it does not point to London, at dawn, September 3, 1802” (Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry*, 13–14).

But why can’t the poem be read as pointing to London on September 3, 1802? It is true that Wordsworth isn’t inviting us to count the number of boats on the Thames, but neither was Du Fu counting blades of grass. The closing lines of Wordsworth’s sonnet insistently proclaim the uniqueness of the moment that he is recording:

Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne’er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will;
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!
(1: 460)

In these lines, Wordsworth invites his reader to share the scene that lies before his eyes. While he could certainly have recorded his impressions long afterward, or even invented the scene outright, Du Fu too could have dreamed up his evening scene, or written about it the next day. The difference concerns the reader’s assumptions as much as the poet’s own practice.

These assumptions can shift over time within a culture as well as varying between cultures. During the nineteenth century, readers regularly regarded the Romantic poets’ verses as closely reflecting their personal experiences. Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” written in 1819, when he was “half in love with easeful Death” (Keats, 97), was understood as expressing the melancholy of the consumptive poet as he sensed the approach of his early death. More recent readers have sometimes
preferred to emphasize the poem’s artifice – the ode closes with the speaker unsure whether he has really heard a nightingale or instead has had “a vision or a waking dream” – but Keats’s contemporaries didn’t doubt that he was moved to reflect on beauty and mortality by the sound of a real nightingale pouring forth its soul in ecstasy, in the fading light of dusk.

Chinese poets often composed their verses for social occasions, but “occasional verses” have long been written in the West as well. Byron recorded many of his experiences in verses with titles such as “On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year: Missolonghi, Jan. 22, 1824” – a poem whose impact depends on the reader’s awareness that Byron really was writing from the Greek town named in his subtitle, where he had gone to fight in the cause of Greek independence. Even when Byron wrote about medieval knights or Spanish seducers, his “Byronic heroes” were thinly disguised versions of their creator. Childe Harold’s musings and Don Juan’s sexual escapades were seen as virtual entries from Byron’s journal, a viewpoint encouraged by many ironic asides within the poems.

For much of the twentieth century, on the other hand, literary critics often preferred to regard literary works as what the New Critic William Wimsatt labeled “verbal icons”: self-contained artifacts independent of our biographical knowledge, artifacts whose meaning ought to be wholly expressed in the work itself. Since the 1980s, however, literary studies have increasingly striven to return literary works to their original social, political, and biographical contexts, and in such readings it can once again make a difference whether Wordsworth’s sonnet was or was not actually written on September 3, 1802.

As a matter of fact, it probably wasn’t. William’s sister Dorothy accompanied him on the trip during which he was struck by the sight of early-morning London from Westminster Bridge, and she recorded the event in her diary on July 27, 1802, six weeks before the date given in Wordsworth’s title:

After various troubles and disasters we left London on Saturday morning at ½-past 5 or 6. … We mounted the Dover Coach at Charing Cross. It was a beautiful morning. The City, St Pauls, with the River and a multitude of little Boats, made a most beautiful sight as we crossed Westminster Bridge. … there was even something like the purity of one of nature’s own grand spectacles. (Wordsworth, Journals, 194)

The shifting of the date suggests that the sonnet isn’t after all an “occasional poem” composed when Wordsworth had the perception he describes; even if the poem was first drafted in July, Wordsworth later
brought its date forward in a significant way. For in late July he was taking the Dover Coach on his way to spend a month in France, where he had lived for a year in 1791–2, during the heady early days of the French Revolution, and had shared the revolutionaries’ hopes for a radical remaking of society – hopes later dashed in the Reign of Terror and its imperial Napoleonic aftermath.

During his stay in revolutionary France, Wordsworth had plunged into an intense love affair with a Frenchwoman, Annette Vallon; their liaison had produced a daughter, Caroline, before Wordsworth’s family had insisted that he return home. In July 1802, engaged to be married in England, he was making a trip back to France to settle affairs with Annette; he would be seeing his daughter for the first time since her infancy a decade before. During this trip he wrote a series of sonnets filled with regret about the course of the Revolution and – less obviously – about his failed romance with Annette Vallon and his brief reacquaintance with their daughter. Caroline appears, for instance, as the unidentified child in his sonnet “It Is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free,” set on the beach at Calais:

Dear Child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,
If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,
Thy nature is not therefore less divine:
Thou liest in Abraham’s bosom all the year;
And worshipp’st at the Temple’s inner shrine,
God being with thee when we know it not.

(Wordsworth, Selected Poems, 1: 444)

Read biographically, this poem expresses Wordsworth’s ambivalent relief that Caroline is doing well without him and that, if he can only visit very infrequently, she can have the patriarch Abraham holding her all year round.

The visit with Annette before his impending marriage can’t have been easy, and Wordsworth was ready to get away after a decent interval. In a sonnet “Composed by the Sea-Side, near Calais, August, 1802,” Wordsworth thinks longingly of returning home: “I, with many a fear / For my dear Country, many heartfelt sighs, / Among men who do not love her, linger here” (2: 40). A companion piece, “Composed in the Valley near Dover, on the Day of Landing,” expresses his feelings on his return to England: “Here, on our native soil, we breathe once more,” the sonnet begins. In place of the daughter left behind in France, Wordsworth comforts himself with the sight of English boys at play: “those boys who in yon meadow-ground / In white-sleeved shirts are playing; and the roar / Of the waves breaking on the chalky shore; — / All, all are English.” Home
from the brief reunion with the lover of his youth, Wordsworth now experiences “one hour’s perfect bliss” with a different woman – his sister, Dorothy:

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Thou are free,  
My Country! and ’tis joy enough and pride  
For one hour’s perfect bliss, to tread the grass  
Of England once again, and hear and see,  
With such a dear Companion at my side.  
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(2: 43–4)

Wordsworth, then, can be read, like Du Fu, as conveying his personal experiences and observations rather than as representing the imaginary thoughts of an invented persona. Admittedly, Wordsworth only refers very obliquely to his romantic entanglements; though he specifies dates and places, the sonnets never mention Annette, Caroline, or even his sister by name. Instead, Wordsworth develops his private drama into a contrast: English peace and freedom versus French turmoil and tyranny. Yet Du Fu too was typically indirect in alluding to his major source of unhappiness, the failure of his political ambitions and his banishment from the imperial court: he never names the emperor or his political rivals any more than Wordsworth is prepared to name Annette and Caroline.

The fundamental difference between the poet's role in the Chinese and English traditions, then, involves ways of reading as much as poetic practice. Yet the resulting poems do read quite differently, as they make different demands and assume different habits of reading on our part. Du Fu’s poems are inseparable from his life, whereas to read Wordsworth’s sonnets against his biography is to make a choice that the poems sometimes hint at but never openly invite. In referring to a “dear Child” and a “dear Companion” in place of Caroline and Dorothy, Wordsworth may be offering an obscure half-confession, but he can also be giving his readers a purposefully limited view into his life. The reader isn’t meant to be distracted by an overabundance of personal detail, which Wordsworth would have regarded as egotistical self-display. By leaving the identities open, Wordsworth hopes to make his sonnets resonate more strongly for his readers; we can insert the faces of our own lovers, children, and companions in place of his. The shifting of the date of the Westminster Bridge sonnet, then, was something other than an act of autobiographical bad faith. Wordsworth re-dated the poem so as to place it at a time appropriate to its poetic mood: the period of relieved return rather than the anxious point of departure. Altering the facts of his life even as he builds on them in his autobiographical sonnets, Wordsworth is still working within the western tradition of the poet as the maker of fictions.
Among the most famous of Du Fu's poems is a sequence of lyrics known under the overall title of “Autumn Meditations.” These poems contain lines that could come from Wordsworth's sonnet cycle: “A thousand houses rimmed by the mountains are quiet in the morning light, / Day after day in the house by the river I sit in the blue of the hills. / ... My native country, untroubled times, are always in my thoughts” (Graham, Poems of the Late T’ang, 53). Closely though Du Fu and Wordsworth may converge in such observations, their methods are sharply different. Wordsworth served his poetic purposes by transposing “Westminster Bridge” from summer to autumn, but such a shift of timing would be nearly inconceivable in the Chinese tradition. It never would have occurred to Du Fu to write an autumn sequence in midsummer, or to take a summer experience and place it in the autumn. Such a transposition would almost certainly have produced poetic absurdities if he had attempted it, as Chinese poetry is closely attuned to the passing seasons. Flowers, seasonal occupations, and more would have to change. Even with such changes, the very tone of a summer poem would have seemed jarring in an autumn setting, so a summer scene simply couldn’t be passed off as an autumn event.

What Is a Novel?

Beyond the level of individual works, the relations among genres vary in different cultures’ literary ecosystems. Western readers, for example, have long been accustomed to think of poetry and prose as clearly distinct modes of writing; the very terms “prosaic” and “poetic” are typically regarded as polar opposites. In the later nineteenth century, various writers began to push against this distinction, writing more self-consciously poetic prose and sometimes composing “prose poems.” Yet these experiments have been the exception rather than the norm, and it can take some adjustment to read works from cultures that mix poetry into prose more openly than is usually the case in the West.

One of the greatest of all prose fictions is The Tale of Genji, composed around the year 1000 by a woman at the Japanese imperial court who wrote under the pen name Murasaki Shikibu. She interspersed nearly 800 poems through her book’s 54 chapters, and western readers haven’t always known what to make of the mixture. Arthur Waley, who first translated Genji into English in the 1920s, excised most of the poetry outright and translated the surviving lyrics as prose. In so doing, Waley made the Genji look more like a European novel – or, we might say, a kind of sophisticated fairytale for grown-ups. His approach is well shown by the epigraph he chose for the title page of his translation: it came not from a Japanese source but from the seventeenth-century French writer
Charles Perrault. Waley even quoted from his tale of Cinderella in French: *Est-ce vous, mon prince? lui dit-elle. Vous vous êtes bien fait attendre!* (“Is it you, my prince?” she said. “You’ve kept me waiting quite a while!”). Here Cinderella’s Handsome Prince is overlaid on Murasaki’s “Shining Prince” Genji, in a line that emphasizes the heroine’s cool self-possession, expressed with quite un-Japanese directness.

Waley’s choice to suppress the hundreds of poems in the original went dramatically against the work’s traditional reception, for Murasaki’s poems were always regarded in Japan as central to her text. As early as the twelfth century, the great poet Fujiwara no Shunjei asserted that every would-be poet must read the *Genji* (Tyler, “Introduction,” xiii). Often people didn’t bother with the sprawling narrative as a whole, but read excerpts centered on particularly well-loved poems. The predominance of poetic values in Japanese literary circles had major consequences for Murasaki’s practice as a writer of prose. Her story is built around poetic moments, and she shows relatively little interest in such staples of western fiction as character development or a plot with clear beginning, middle, and end. Her lead characters, Genji and his child-bride Murasaki – from whom Murasaki Shikibu took her own pen name – die two thirds of the way through the book, which then starts up again with a set of characters in the next generation. The story reaches a kind of tentative stopping point in its fifty-fourth chapter, but it doesn’t end in any way that readers of western novels would expect. Murasaki may have intended to carry the story further one day, but it doesn’t appear that a climactic “novelistic” ending was ever an integral part of her plan.

Murasaki also presents her characters poetically more than novelistically. The characters usually aren’t even identified by name but through shifting series of epithets, often derived from lines in the poems they quote or write. Not a proper name at all, for instance, *murasaki* is a plant bearing lavender flowers, used along with wisteria in several poems associated with Genji’s love affairs. Indeed, “Murasaki” actually first appears as the epithet of Genji’s first love, Fujitsubo, and only later is transferred to her niece, the tale’s principal heroine. Most translators from Waley onward have settled on fixed names for the characters, but in the original it is only minor, lower ranking figures who have set names. “The shining Genji” is mostly referred to by a series of different epithets, and the very word *genji* merely means “bearer of the name” (of Minamoto) – a surname bestowed on him as an illegitimate child by his imperial father. Genji, in short, is *a* genji, a son who is recognized but excluded from the imperial family. As vividly as Murasaki develops her major characters, they continue to suggest general qualities as they play out recurrent patterns that emerge generation after generation, in a narrative unfolding of poetic moments of fellowship, longing, rivalry, and reverie.
The genre that Murasaki was writing in – and revolutionizing – was called monogatari, a term usually translated today as “romance” or “tale.” These long prose narratives, often filled with ghosts, demons, and fantastic events, were typically set in the more or less distant past, and they had to compete not only with poetry at the top of the genre hierarchy but also with history. In addition, Japanese poetic and historical works alike were often overshadowed by the greater prestige of Chinese. Like Latin in medieval Europe, Chinese was studied and used by upper-class men, while women weren’t expected to learn Chinese, much less to develop literary ability in it. The vernacular monogatari became popular among women both as readers and writers, but like French novels in the eighteenth century or “chick lit” today, works in the vernacular were generally regarded as light entertainment of dubious moral worth.

It is important to know this context, but it doesn’t require specialized research to uncover it, as Murasaki includes an explicit defense of her work within the tale itself. In the twenty-fifth chapter we learn that the women in Genji’s household are amusing themselves during the rainy spring season by reading illustrated romances. Genji happens by the room of a young ward of his, Tamakazura, “the most avid reader of all,” as she is perusing her extensive collection of illustrated romances, and they engage in a nuanced debate on the value of such fictions. From the outset, Murasaki uses the scene both to assert the value of monogatari and to critique the limitations of the genre as she’d inherited it. Tamakazura, we are told,

quite lost herself in pictures and stories and would spend whole days with them. Several of her young women were well informed in literary matters. She came upon all sorts of interesting and shocking incidents (she could not be sure whether they were true or not), but she found little that resembled her own unfortunate career. (Murasaki, The Tale of Genji, 190)

Implicitly, Murasaki here stakes a claim for the new realism of her own tale, in contrast to the work of her (mostly male) predecessors in the genre.

Genji, however, doubts that women can even be good readers, let alone good writers. Looking around Tamakazura’s room,

Genji could not help noticing the clutter of pictures and manuscripts. “What a nuisance this all is,” he said one day. “Women seem to have been born to be cheerfully deceived. They know perfectly well that in all these old stories there is scarcely a shred of truth, and yet they are captured and made sport of by the whole range of trivialities and go on scribbling them down, quite unaware that in these warm rains their hair is all dank and knotted.”
Yet no sooner has he delivered this genially sexist judgment than he qualifies it, adding that “amid all the fabrication I must admit that I do find real emotions and plausible chains of events.” Though he wouldn’t be caught reading such tales himself, “sometimes I stand and listen to the stories they read to my daughter, and I think to myself that there certainly are good talkers in the world.” Shifting ground once again, he immediately undercuts this compliment with a renewed attack on the tales’ truthfulness: “I think that these yarns must come from people much practiced in lying.” In reply, Tamakazura pushes away her inkstone – has she been starting to write a tale herself? – and gives as good as she gets: “I can see,” she retorts, “that that would be the view of someone much given to lying himself” (190).

An extended, flirtatious discussion follows, ironically counterbalancing the truth-giving lies of fiction with the seductions of Genji’s cheating heart. The scene ends with Genji allowing that “I should imagine that it is in real life as in fiction. We are all human and we all have our ways” (191), and he agrees that even his young daughter can be exposed to the tales. In the end, “He spent a great deal of time selecting romances he thought suitable” – no doubt enjoying them in the process – “and ordered them copied and illustrated” (192). This single scene tells us as much about the literary milieu within and against which Murasaki was writing as we might learn from an entire treatise on the art of fiction.

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Reading Wordsworth, Du Fu, Sappho, and Murasaki Shikibu together, we can explore the distinctive ways in which these writers transmuted social and emotional turmoil into reflective works of art. Different traditions locate writers differently along the sliding scale between independence from society and integration within it, and a given tradition’s writers will be found at various places on the spectrum of their culture’s bandwidth, distinctively expressing fundamentally common concerns – political upheaval, romantic loss – that they link to elements from their lived environment: rivers, boats, birds, sunlight, and moonlight.

Even on a first reading, we can appreciate many of these commonalities and be intrigued by the differences we perceive. The challenge, as we read and reread, is to enter more deeply into the specificity of what each writer is doing. We can do so by attending to formal statements on literary art, when a culture has produced critics and poeticians like Aristotle or Abhinavagupta, and by attending to passages in which reflective writers such as Murasaki Shikibu themselves stake out their positions. Yet even when such explicit statements are lacking, we can read around within a tradition in order to gain a sense of its coordinates – its writers’ characteristic forms, metaphors, and methods. It is much better to begin
What Is “Literature”?  

by reading two or three dozen Tang dynasty poems than just one or two, seeing Du Fu more clearly, for example, through comparison and contrast with his great contemporaries Li Bo, Wang Wei, and Han Yu. It isn’t necessary, though, to read hundreds and hundreds of poems in order to get our bearings and develop an intelligent first appreciation of a tradition. Our understanding can always be refined and deepened through further reading, but the essential first step is to gain enough of a foothold in a tradition that an initially flat picture begins to open out into three dimensions. When this happens, we can pass through the looking glass and enter into a new literary world – the first and greatest pleasure of the encounter with world literature.