Chapter 1

What Is "Literature"?

A first challenge in reading world literature is the fact that the very idea of literature has meant many different things over the centuries and around the world. Even in the English-speaking world today, the term can be applied very broadly or quite restrictively. At its most general, "literature" simply means "written with letters" – really, any text at all. In the examination room following a skiing accident, when your surgeon says "I've pulled up the latest literature on compound fractures," she means medical reports and statistics, not Thomas Mann's novels. In its cultural sense, "literature" refers first and foremost to poems, plays, and prose fiction – works of creative imagination written in heightened and pleasurable language. Yet even in this focused sense, literature's boundaries are blurry. Often readers only admit some poems and novels into the category of "real" literature, including Virginia Woolf but considering Harlequin romances and Stephen King thrillers as subliterary trash. Advertising jingles are rarely assigned in literature courses, even though they represent a minimal form of poetry.

Serious or artistic literature can be described by the term belles-lettres, a phrase suggesting that beauty of language matters more than a literary text's use-value or its direct statements. By contrast, a jingle is not meant to be savored for its beauty; its meter and rhyme are used purely instrumentally, helping the message lodge in your mind so that you'll remember to buy a particular brand of toothpaste. Even in the sense of belles-lettres, though, literature can be defined with varying degrees of breadth. A great essayist like Michel de Montaigne, and eloquent scientific writers such as Charles Darwin or Sigmund Freud, offer many rewards to a reader who gives close attention to their language and to the shaping of ideas and narrative in their works. Freud actually won a leading German

literary award, the Goethe Prize, in recognition of the art of his essays and case studies, and he is often taught in literature courses alongside Proust, Kafka, and Woolf.

The boundaries of literature were quite broad in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and though they contracted in the first half of the twentieth, they have steadily widened out again over the past several decades. Literature anthologies now regularly include religious and philosophical texts, essays, autobiographical writing, and examples of creative nonfiction along with poems, plays, and prose fiction. Literature has expanded even beyond its root sense of "written with letters" to include oral compositions by illiterate poets. Movies are often found on literature course syllabi today, even though the dialogue is only one part of the artwork, and often not the most important part. All the same, today's movies give many of the pleasures that novels gave nineteenth-century readers, and "literature" can appropriately be considered in its broad sense to include such works of cinematic narrative.

Many cultures have made no firm distinctions between imaginative literature and other forms of writing. "Belles-lettres" would be a good translation of the ancient Egyptian term *medet nefret*, "beautiful words," but *medet nefret* could refer to any form of rhetorically heightened composition, whether poetry, stories, philosophical dialogues, or political speeches. The classical Chinese term *wen* is translated as "literature" when it refers to poetry and artistic prose, but it carries a much wider set of meanings, including pattern, order, and harmonious design. In view of this variety, we need to prepare ourselves to read different works with different expectations. Primo Levi's haunting *Survival in Auschwitz* would lose much of its force if it ever turned out that Auschwitz had never existed, or that Levi had not 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.

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's "sources" are entirely invented and are part of the fiction themselves. At a middle ground, when we read something subtitled "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 deliberately push the envelope with 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, a work fits well enough within a form whose rules we know. 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. With world literature, however, we often encounter works that reflect very different literary norms and expectations than 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 north India, with its own set of rules for rhyme and its own assumptions about the ways in which poets experience love and longing and pour out their sorrows in highly ironic verse.

The World of the Text

Quite 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 in its emphases. Many modern novels focus on the inner development of a hero or heroine, often in opposition to society as a whole, with the protagonist escaping from social restrictions – like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus – or tragically hemmed in by

them – like Flaubert's Madame 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 an individual thinking aloud, as with the following lyric by an anonymous sixteenth-century poet:

> 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!
> (Quiller-Couch 20)

Here, we seem to be overhearing the complaint of an unhappy lover, but the speaker isn't addressing anyone, just the wind, and even the wind is absent from the scene. Nor is the scene itself fully present to us. We don't have any way to know whether the speaker is indoors or outside, pacing about the countryside or gazing through the window of an inn; the focus is strongly on his – or her? – interior state of mind.

Similar emphases can be seen in an otherwise very different poem, "Nombrarte" (Naming you), written four centuries later by the Chilean poet Alejandra Pizarnik:

> No el poema de tu ausencia,
> sólo un dibujo, una grieta en un muro,
> algo en el viento, un sabor amargo.
> (Pizarnik 98)

> [Not the poem of your absence,
> just a sketch, a crack in a wall,
> something in the wind, a bitter aftertaste.]

In many ways, Pizarnik's 1965 poem is radically different from "Western Wind." It has no rhymes and no set meter or number of syllables in a line; it lacks any completed sentences, with no verbs and only a few broken phrases. A sixteenth-century poet would probably not have recognized this as verse at all. The poem even begins by denying that it is "the poem of your absence" that an earlier poet might have composed; it offers no movement, no expected resolution. Instead of a fertile spring wind that can reunite the lovers, here we have an ill wind that blows no one any good and only brings a bitter aftertaste.

Despite these differences, "Nombrarte" resembles "Western Wind" in important respects. Like the sixteenth-century poet, Pizarnik gives us a speaker who is obsessed with an evidently absent lover, and we seem to be inside the speaker's head. The absent lover seems as far away as the western wind was for the earlier speaker. 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 chill breeze while looking at a cracked wall that brings her situation home to her: there is no telling, as the focus once again is on the speaker's interior drama.

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 around the year 800:

> 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 102)

On first reading, this poem seems only a step removed from "Western Wind" and "Nombrarte." Once again, we are overhearing a single speaker, though now talking with someone else, apparently a close friend who has hurt her lip and is afraid that her husband will be upset by her spoiled looks. Though the scene has widened to include the 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 be occurring indoors, hours later, as the speaker tends her friend's swollen lip.

If we read this poem as we would read the Western examples, we would see it as concerned with the wife's emotional state, taking our cue from the poem's conclusion, which emphasizes her suffering. Yet seen in these Western 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 tradition in the West of literature concerning abusive spouses, so this explanation

may come to a Western reader's mind, and yet it hardly seems relevant here. Far from condemning the husband, the friend begins by asserting that anyone would naturally be angry on observing his wife's swollen lip.

The riddle is soon solved if we read farther in Sanskrit poetry, for many Sanskrit *kavyas* or lyric poems concern illicit or adulterous passion. What is more, Indian poets often speak of tell-tale marks from bites or scratches made by lovers in the heat of passion. From the poem's opening couplet, then, a reader 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 seen in his playful use of a classic motif.

This much can be learned about the poem's context 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 discussed in around the year 1000 by one of the greatest Sanskrit commentators, a scholar named Abhinavagupta. What his interpretation shows is how intensely social this poetry was seen to be. Abhinavagupta never considers that the poem features a 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. (Ingalls 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 European fiction and drama, in 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." And more than that: "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."

The garden is getting a little crowded by now, but there is more to come. "There is a suggestion to the adulterous friend of the speaker, informing her, '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.' " And next, "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 different poetic world than the one in which the lonely lover plaineth in 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 East and 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 is 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. 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 thousand years ago in rabbinical interpretations of the Bible, whose every grammatical particle 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. Perhaps the Sanskrit poet was not 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 a grain of salt, his reading shows that the social world is 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 should beware of the perils of exoticism and assimilation, the two 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 than we do. On that assumption, we might experience the poem as charming but pointless, either lacking any real focus or else oddly over-dramatizing a minor annoyance as a cause for suffering. Equally, though, we should be wary of assuming that the medieval Sanskrit poet and his audience were *just like us*, playing by the same rules and with the same sorts of cultural assumptions we might find in a contemporary 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 one 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 is really going on. Not all such moments will yield dramatic insights, of course, either because the confusion can only be cleared up with some detailed 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, can reveal 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 writer *makes up* – an

assumption built into our very terms "poetry" (from Greek *poiesis*, "making") and "fiction" (from Latin *facere*, "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 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), often considered the greatest period of Chinese poetry. In his book *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics*, 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.
> (Owen 12)

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 unknown, invented persona. Tang Dynasty poets understood their task as 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 do not 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 his "Ars Poetica" in 1926 (MacLeish 847). Three and a half centuries earlier, Sir Philip Sidney expressed a similar view in his *Defense of Poesy*: "Now, for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth" (Sidney 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 linking heaven, earth, grasses, seagull, and 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.
(Caws 304–5)

Even here, though, Sappho is mixing literal observations with artifice-laden metaphors. She may be green with envy, but surely she has not 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 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 13–14).

But why couldn'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 masts 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!
> (Wordsworth 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 "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 did not 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 William Wimsatt labeled "verbal icons": self-contained artifacts whose meaning ought to be wholly expressed within the work itself, independent of biographical knowledge. 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 truly 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. She recorded the event in her diary for July 31, 1802, five weeks before the date given in Wordsworth's title:

> After various troubles and disasters, we left London on Saturday morning at $^{1}/_{2}$-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. (Darbishire 194)

The shifting of the date suggests that the sonnet is not 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

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 1:444)

Read biographically, this poem expresses Wordsworth's ambivalent relief that Caroline is doing well without him, and 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 cannot 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" (Wordsworth 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:

> 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. (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 refers only 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 of English peace and freedom versus French turmoil and tyranny. Yet Du Fu also 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, making different demands and assuming 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 sonnets' themes require him to have a child a contrasting adult companion at his side, but the reader is not 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, who can insert the faces of their own beloved 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's redating of the poem enabled him to place it at a time appropriate to the sonnet's 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, 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 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, migrating birds, 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 could not be passed off as an autumn event.

What Is a Novel?

Different expectations about literature vary the relations among genres 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 more openly into prose than is usually the case in the West.

One of the greatest of all prose fictions is *The Tale of Genji*, written shortly after the year 1000 by a woman in the Japanese imperial court writing under the pen name "Murasaki Shikibu." She interspersed nearly 800 poems through her book's fifty-four chapters, and Western readers have not always known what to make of the mixed result. 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 and helped keep attention focused on the unfolding story. Yet his choice 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* (Murasaki 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. Not only is her story built around poetic moments, but Murasaki shows relatively little interest in such staples of Western fiction as character development and plot. 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 new set of characters in the next generation. The story reaches a kind of tentative stopping-point in its fifty-fourth chapter, but it does not end in any way that readers of Western novels would expect. Even if Murasaki might have intended to carry the story further, it does not appear that a climactic "novelistic" ending was ever an integral part of her plan.

Murasaki also presents her characters more poetically than novelistically. The characters are usually not even identified by name but by shifting series of epithets, often derived from lines in poems they quote or write. Not a proper name at all, for instance, *murasaki* means "lavender," a key word in several poems associated with Genji's love affairs. Indeed, "Murasaki" actually first appears as the epithet for Genji's first love, Fujitsubo, and only later is transferred to 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 name "Genji" merely means "bearer of the name" (of Minamoto), a surname bestowed on him – as an illegitimate child – by his emperor 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 in generation after generation, in a narrative unfolding of poetic moments of fellowship, longing, rivalry, and reverie.

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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 their culture's bandwidth on the spectrum, 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 poet 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, but even when such explicit statements are lacking, we can read around within a tradition to gain a sense of its coordinates – its writers' characteristic forms, metaphors, and methods. It is much better to begin by reading two or three dozen Tang Dynasty poems than just one or two, seeing Du Fu more clearly, for example, by comparison and contrast to his great contemporaries Li Bo, Wang Wei, and Han Yu. It is not 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 opens 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.