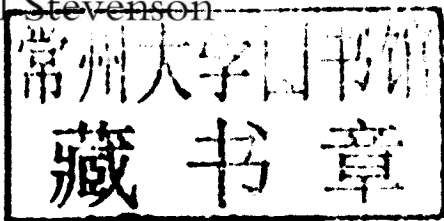


THE EDINBURGH INTRODUCTION TO STUDYING ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Michelle Keown, James Loxley and
Randall Stevenson



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Preface

Reading literature offers us diverse and abiding pleasures and can be rewarding in a great variety of ways. Such pleasures, though, can be enhanced, sustained and deepened by the critical study of literature, and such study can be an absorbing, challenging and enriching experience in itself. This book aims to open the door to such experience and to give a glimpse of its rewards. Expert, thorough, up to date and easy to follow, the chapters which follow provide a straightforward and effective pathway towards increasing your enjoyment and broadening your understanding of literature. Anyone wishing to become a more insightful and informed reader will find practical and lasting guidance throughout these pages. If you are studying literature formally as part of a course or for a degree, this book will also impart the skills and knowledge required to begin a more advanced programme of study.

One reason literature matters is its longevity as a practice and an art form. In this book, we have drawn on a wide variety of examples from different periods. This is because the serious study of literature demands historical awareness: literature has changed over the centuries, and will probably change again; unsurprisingly, what is understood or defined as literature has changed as well. All of the literary examples are drawn from easily accessible sources, either standard and familiar editions or widely-available anthologies such as those published by Norton and Longman. You will find a list of all the primary literary works to which our contributors refer in the 'Works Cited' section at the end of the book, along with all the secondary literary and critical material each chapter uses. We have not assumed that you have read these works previously, and the contributors take care to explain the kind of texts they are discussing and their key concerns. The same applies to the secondary material they mention.

The chapters of this book do not need to be read in sequence, and you may find it more useful to read particular chapters or sections in an order that suits your own needs. The book aims to provide you with a comprehensive understanding of the forms and techniques literature uses and the variety of ways in which it can be interpreted. This means that the essays do use specific and specialist terminology to define particular critical approaches and literary techniques. These are explained by each contributor as they arise in discussion; later chapters may refer back to these definitions and indicate where each term first occurs. However, if you find a particular term or idea puzzling, the Index will point you towards the page or pages where it is first explained and to any subsequent uses or elucidation. At the end of each chapter you will find a list of 'Next Steps', indicating critical works that our contributors judge to be good places to continue your own reading and research in a particular area.

All of the contributors to this collection teach or have taught in the University of Edinburgh's English Literature department – an outstanding and long-established department that celebrates its 250th anniversary in 2012. They share extensive experience of introducing students to the joys and demands of studying literature, and this has been crucial both to the way in which the individual chapters have been written and to the overall design of the volume. In this respect, the editors and contributors would especially like to thank successive cohorts of first- and second-year students of English and Scottish literature at Edinburgh whose acute questioning has required us to reflect on the fundamentals of our discipline and to think carefully about how to explain them to an intelligent and enquiring audience. The idea for the collection was first broached by Jackie Jones at Edinburgh University Press, and we are grateful to her for this fruitful suggestion and to her and all at the Press for their subsequent support.

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Section I – Introductory

1

What is Literature?

Alex Thomson

Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said – ‘Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.’

This striking and dramatic poem was written by Percy Shelley and published in 1818. The overall effect is of the hollow pride of the emperor: nothing could hold back the tides of time, and the drifting sands have covered over every further trace of his achievements. Just as the traveller has come back from a great distance, so the poem bridges wastes of time, bringing to life something like an echo of Ozymandias’s imperious tone. To the devastation of the king’s political power Shelley opposes the creative power of poetry: against the ‘shattered visage’ of Ozymandias he lays the dramatic and evocative power of ‘Ozymandias’, his poem. To write such a poem, Shelley is suggesting, may

be to have something in common with the King of Kings. But he also hints that it may have more in common with the sculptor whose genius the poem commemorates, who both defers to and mocks the authority of his ruler.

How do we know that this is a poem? There are few unusual words in it, and if we reproduced it as a piece of prose it would make perfect sense, as the grammar of the sentences seems fairly straightforward. There is a rhyme scheme, and we might say that breaking the sentence up into lines adds to the deliberate patterning of the words: the repetition of consonant sounds between 'stone' and 'stand', for example, is highlighted by placing them on either side of a line break. But these are just technical ways of elaborating something we have already taken for granted: the line breaks offer a further signal that this is a poem, which we expect to differ from prose in the way it looks on the page. This recognition requires prior knowledge. We must already have learned that writing set out this way on a page is what people call a poem, and that when we encounter such an object, we need to frame appropriate expectations about what we are going to read and how we might react to it.

The fact that we recognise the text in front of us as a poem alerts us to the possible significance of its pattern. Without this alertness, we will miss the full force of ways in which the ostensible subject of Shelley's poem is displaced, as we read, by a more profound and ambiguous meditation on the limits of worldly ambition. The conversational tone of the poem's beginning, when replaced by that grandiose inscription – 'My name is Ozymandias . . .' – dramatises the apparent distance between the prosaic world of the poem's composition and the once-imposing but now-departed majesty of Ozymandias's kingdom. Because we are aware that we are reading an artful arrangement of language we know we need to be alert to this kind of effect, and to further hints and suggestions. These include, among others, the contrast between the density of stone which can be made to carry an inscription, and the shifting sands which will not retain the faintest impression; the hint that the fragmentary survival of the sculptor's work surpasses the achievement of Ozymandias himself; the way that a short poem (a mere fourteen lines) can enclose and describe all that remains of the once-proud ruler.

This kind of reading of pattern follows straightforwardly from the simple recognition of 'Ozymandias' as a poem. But there are other recognitions and judgements which follow less straightforwardly. With the appropriate background of knowledge, we might want to move on to judgements about what *kind* of poem this might be. An ode or a ballad? Lyric or dramatic verse? What kinds of metre or rhyme does it use? These are technical issues, and the terminology and expectations each requires may not be available to someone who has not had the opportunity to learn about poetry – or to read introductions

offered by Alan Gillis, Lee Spinks and Penny Fielding in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of this volume. By contrast with these technical issues, the identification of a poem seems instinctive, though this may mean only that we learned it so long ago that we have forgotten that it was something we had to learn. But what about moving on in another direction, and towards another kind of recognition: what does it mean when we identify Shelley's poem not just as a poem but as part of the larger category of *literature*?

This obviously requires a harder kind of identification. We easily recognise 'Ozymandias' as poetry – and respond to its demands on our sense of the pattern of words on the page – simply because it is written in verse. But to see it as 'literary' raises questions about what it might have in common with other works of literature not necessarily written in verse. For example, both novels and plays *may* be in verse, but certainly need not be, and most often are not. So while paying close attention to a single poem leads us to focus on the distinctive and unusual effect of arranging words in lines of verse, to ask 'what is literature?' suggests that there must be some other quality shared by all the forms of writing we perceive as literary.

An answer commonly given to this question is that a work counts as 'literature' when it is *fiction*. In this view, 'literature' is distinguished by a set of conventions according to which readers accept that what they are reading is not literally true. Rather than describing or analysing something in the real world, literature is primarily a work of imagination. As readers, we are happy to accept that the encounter Shelley describes in 'Ozymandias' probably did not take place, that Shelley did not meet a traveller and that no such statue stands in a desert. (Although a little research might tell us that there was an Ozymandias, the pharaoh Ramses II in the thirteenth century BCE, and that at the time of writing there was widespread cultural interest in the ruins found by European travellers in Egypt.)

The idea that literature is fiction can be most clearly seen in the ways we distinguish between literary and non-literary works – for example, when we try to explain how a novel differs from a cookery book. One tells a story, but the other gives us recipes, instructions on how to create a tasty dish. One is drawn from the imagination of the author, but the other is drawn from practical experience of cooking. So when we explain our assumption that the novel is literature but the recipe book is not, we are not saying that there is anything wrong with the recipe book compared with the novel. The term in this use is not evaluative but descriptive, and it signals a difference in the intended function of two types of work. One gives instructions, and while we might be amused or entertained by details of the origin of the recipe or the cook's lifestyle, these are subsidiary to the useful value of the book; the other entertains or engages us through a story which we know not to be true. The

difference is significant because it tells us what we can expect the book to be good for: we expect a recipe book to instruct us in the correct methods and ingredients needed for a particular dish, but we do not necessarily expect it to amuse us. Conversely, while a recipe we encountered in a novel might be one that we could safely make, we would not feel deceived if it turned out to be unreliable. The stakes are often higher than this, however. In everyday life we take people at their word, and societies are built on trust. Authors of fiction are given something like a right to lie.

Though an aspect of poetry, fictional relations with the world are clearly particularly important for novels. We expect a novel to be in some sense rooted in the real world: although we allow a degree of licence for unusual things to happen, if a novel were to become too unlikely we might dismiss it. We often draw generic distinctions between novels primarily to indicate their degree of distance from 'everyday' reality (fantasy, science-fiction, horror) and may be suspicious of the literary credentials of novels which rely on overly formulaic plots (detective novels). This rootedness in the world, however, reminds us that while 'fiction' may be the opposite of 'fact' it need not be the opposite of truth. Indeed authors often claim – and readers often accept – that there is a kind of 'truthfulness' about the novel, or about drama. Although a novel or play may not depict a specific event in the world it may rely on a kind of fidelity or truthfulness to the world as we experience it. This points to difficulties in relating literature to the idea of fiction which go all the way back to the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle in the fourth century BCE and to his approval of writing that offers a general truth, rather than the messy particularity of specific events. In more modern times – and with experience of the novel, rather than the drama and poetry which was Aristotle's main focus – literary historians have gone on to praise authors' ability to present not general truths but accurate versions of specific societies at specific moments in time. For many of these commentators, this accurate representation and 'realism' is the very essence of the modern novel.

Indeed, in a few cases, fiction has been directly influential in drawing a society's attention to real social problems. A good example is offered by the American author Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* (1906), which shed light on the horrific working conditions in Chicago slaughterhouses and led directly to popular calls for legislative action. Historical novels are another interesting borderline case. A historical novel promises to tell us something about how things really were in the past (we expect the author to have done some research) but we allow the novelist sufficient licence that specific details of plot, dialogue or description may be inventions. A historical novel that failed to pay any consideration to appropriate accuracy would either be a bad novel or not a historical one at all. Conventions by which we make this kind

of judgement, between truth and fiction, have evolved over recent centuries, and not only since Aristotle's time. For example, although we now think of *Robinson Crusoe* as a novel, on the title page, when it was first published in 1719, it claimed to be autobiographical. Nowadays we would wish to distinguish quite carefully between autobiographies and novels, but the name of the real author, Daniel Defoe, did not appear anywhere on the first edition, encouraging readers to suppose instead it was Crusoe's own story, 'written by himself'.

Literature seems to move freely, in such ways, between real and represented worlds, truths and imaginations, and it is not surprising that playful and provocative writers have written works which tease at the boundaries, taking advantage of literature's licence to deceive. We would not trust a historian or an accountant who made things up, but the possibility that we are being led astray, or our imaginations stretched across boundaries, lies at the heart of literary experience. The Nobel-Prize winning South African writer J. M. Coetzee offered a rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe* called *Foe* (1986) in which a character who had been left out of the novel goes in search of its author, yet she is unable to find him; the book reminds us that the licence we grant to literature detaches its author from his or her responsibility for its contents. When he accepted the Nobel Prize in 2003, Coetzee ignored the convention by which an author gives an acceptance speech and instead read a prose piece written in the third person, describing Crusoe in the act of writing his autobiography. A similar game was being played by the novelist Gertrude Stein when she published *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in 1933. Since Toklas was Stein's lover, and a fair portion of the book is devoted to her account of their life together, is this a memoir, or a novel? Is it a biography of Toklas or of Stein? One thing we can conclude is that this is not Toklas's autobiography: with Stein named as author, Toklas seems to become a fictional character – rather as Robinson Crusoe does, once the name of Daniel Defoe is added to the title page of the novel alongside his.

These are works which play with the boundaries between fact and fiction. Because this kind of playfulness is exemplary of the allowance we grant to literary works this seems to confirm our original hunch about the relation of literature to fiction. But there is another category of literary works which sits on the same borderline but which troubles the equation of literature with fiction. Some kinds of writing – such as travel writing, autobiography and essays, and more private forms such as diaries and letters – do not seem to belong firmly in either the literary or non-literary camp. They claim to report the factual experience of the author but at the same time they foreground the author's perspective, suggesting that their value lies in recording that which is not simply a matter of verifiable factual report. When we judge that such a

work is literary, we are clearly not relying on a distinction between fact and fiction. Indeed, we bring an additional form of judgement to bear upon it. For example, we might distinguish certain forms of travel writing – on the grounds of style or the qualities of the author's reflections – from travel guides: the latter, like recipe books, perhaps offering no more than straightforward instruction about methods and practicalities of travel. We can read for pleasure a piece of travel writing which, while factual rather than fictional, offers us no information or instruction at all.

The most complex example is the essay, a prose form displaying and dependent upon a sense of style and the use of rhetoric – the conscious fashioning of structure, and figures of speech such as metaphor, to persuade an audience or readership. An essay is an experiment – literally, a try at something – and it should be playful and exploratory. For that reason it lends itself to use by literary writers as much as philosophers – indeed Francis Bacon, the early master of the English essay, can be counted as both. Although characterised by a tendency to experimentation, stylistic self-consciousness and speculation, the emphasis of the essay is also on careful argument and not on the imagined but the real world. The essay is therefore considered nowadays as primarily philosophical rather than literary: for the most part it is a form that has become subordinate to its subject matter. The essay, in other words, exists in the service of literary criticism or philosophical debate or historical explanation and is only occasionally treated as a literary form in itself.

We asked, in effect, whether we could explain our idea of literature with reference to our idea of fiction: it turns out that while asking what we mean by fiction is a very useful frame through which to think about literature we cannot simply substitute one for the other. Although we are happy to see much of literature as fiction, there are forms of writing which are clearly literary but not so clearly fictional. The example of those types of writing suggests that there must in fact be various types of judgement involved when we determine whether or not works belong to the category of literature. One such judgement has already emerged, in my comments about travel writing above, when I mentioned 'an additional form of judgement . . . on the grounds of style, or the qualities of the author's reflections' which might allow non-fictional works to be counted as part of literature. This 'additional' form of judgement derives from the equation of 'literature' not with fiction but with 'fine writing'. On this view, literature is writing which is concerned with giving pleasure, through attractive form and expression, as much as with the communication of information. This directs our attention away from the content of the written work ('is it factual or fictional?') and towards its form ('how is it written?').

This is why for many people today poetry is seen as exemplary of literature in general. Poetry is characterised by unusual or at least clearly deliberate use of language, from which we expect not only more striking and memorable phrases than we would from more everyday ways of writing but also something enigmatic or mysterious in quality. Sometimes this can take the form of heightened or awkward language; at other times it will seem to be more natural, while requiring equal care and artifice. Robert Burns's lines in 'To A Mouse' (1785) – 'the best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men, / Gang aft agley' – is conventional enough in sentiment: compare Robert Blair's 'The Grave' (1743): 'The best-concerted schemes men lay for fame / Die fast away'. We find the lines effective not because of the sentiment, but because this has been formed into a memorable and elegant phrase. The use of colloquial and alliterative language – 'Mice an' 'Gang aft agley' – creates for the poem an aphoristic or concisely proverbial quality, forcibly communicated to readers. The success of Burns's lines is such that they have passed into common usage, just as Shelley's: 'Look on my works' has become an ironic short-hand for a hollow boast. In their passage back into the common phrase-stock of English, these examples remind us that literature is made from and returns to ordinary language. It is the uses to which this language is put, the patterns which it is made to form, which are distinctive.

So by this way of defining the term, 'literature' would mean writing in which something distinctive and striking about the style lends it a quality which goes beyond the communication of information. This attempt to define literature depends, in other words, on something like a distinction between form and content in any act of communication. In daily life, if we have something to say we may think about the way we say it in order to make it clearly understandable or to persuade someone who doesn't want to do something to do it anyway. Our choice of form will be of secondary importance to the intended message, though: designed to enhance the message, but not to draw attention to itself as a way of passing a message. By contrast, literature chooses not to privilege the communication of a message, but instead to allow the relationship between the form and content to be configured in other ways. So whereas the idea of literature as fiction is concerned with the content of works – *what* they communicate, and how this relates to the world – we have now turned instead to consider form: *how* they do what they do. This is an understanding of literature as an *art form*. Considering the formal presentation of any message, separately from its content in part, highlights ways a writer has created a work which may be beautiful, shapely or stylish. Critics who take this line often appeal to the general ideal of a work of art, or to analogies with other art forms: a poem may be imagined on the model of a symphony or a painting, in music or the visual arts respectively.

Defining literature as fine writing – pleasing or effective style in any genre – offers a useful clarification. It seems to explain what happens when we condemn a work as insufficiently literary – when we criticise a novel, for example, which has failed to grip us not because of our personal taste but because of what we take to be technical faults, such as an unbelievable plot, cardboard characters, descriptions riddled with clichés, or clunky and wooden dialogue. Such judgements of technical excellence or inadequacy of style might be made in relation to writing in any mode or form. You might find my second-last sentence unpersuasive because it was itself clunky and wooden, criticising bad writing in terms which have themselves become banal and clichéd. Bad writing can appear anywhere: good writing can likewise be discerned and described as literary even if we find it in what we usually consider a non-literary form. We expect history books to be accurate, and we draw a clear dividing line between the responsibility of the historian to tell the truth and the licence we grant to the novelist to draw on his or her imagination. Yet a well-written history book, as much as a novel, might be described as ‘literary’: not on the grounds of factual accuracy but because it possesses qualities of clarity, elegance or stylishness in its author’s expression.

The emphasis on form, which sharpens our sense of the language used, has allowed something special or different – something other than an idea or piece of information, something hard to paraphrase – to be communicated. But this does not mean that we ignore the content or the work’s power to refer. Take Shelley’s poem again. Of course it is accepted, as I said earlier, that poems may be fictions. So we are happy to accept that the ‘I’ of the first line may be a fictional character, and no more Percy Shelley than is the ‘I’ of another of his poems – ‘Song of Apollo’, supposedly sung from the point of view of the god. In the case of one of the other poems quoted above, readers and critics often confuse the poet Robert Burns with the ploughman speaking in ‘To a Mouse’. Again, though, there is no reason to believe that any particular ploughman ran his plough through any particular mouse’s nest; nor should we altogether identify living, breathing poets with the voices speaking in their work. (Not least if, as in the Victorian poet Robert Browning’s ‘Porphyria’s Lover’ (1836), the speaker of the poem is confessing to a murder!) Yet when Shelley writes in his ‘Song of Apollo’ (1824) ‘I am the eye with which the Universe / Beholds itself and knows it is divine’ he does mean it in at least one sense: the poet is like the sun in shedding light on the universe. Similarly, the ploughman is a conventional figure for the poet, and in imagining the destruction of the mouse’s nest, Burns imagines the long struggle of the human over the natural world. In this struggle, poetry is always on the side of the human, and of art and culture’s imposition of form, order and ‘light’ on the natural world – even when it also allows us to sympathise with the downtrodden creatures of the earth.