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UNIT
1

Introduction to Literature

什么是文学？事实上，很难对文学下精确的定义。从不同角度出发，文学的定义会有所不同。文学作品的共性在于帮助我们开阔视野、认识自我、展望未来……它们所传达的美感、触及的情感甚或揭露的丑恶都会令人震动或给人启发。真正的文学，无论是诗歌、戏剧还是小说，都能够帮助读者了解世界、发现世界，更能够探究人心、揭示人性，可以在广大读者中引发共情。



Warm-up

Think of the questions before reading the texts.

- 1 What is your favorite literary work? Why do you like it?
- 2 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a German poet and dramatist, once said that “The decline of literature indicates the decline of a nation.” Do you agree with him? Why or why not?

Text A

Background Information

Terry Eagleton (1943-), a distinguished professor at Lancaster University in England, is one of the world’s leading literary critics and theorists. As a prolific critic, he has written several dozen books and hundreds of articles. The most widely read is *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), which is a study of a wide range of literary approaches such as Reception Theory, Structuralism, and Psychoanalysis. The essay “What Is Literature?” is extracted from the introduction to this book, in which Eagleton discussed the definition and features of literature.

What Is Literature?

Terry Eagleton

- 1 There have been various attempts to define literature. You can define it, for example, as “imaginative” writing in the sense of fiction – writing which is not literally true. But even the briefest reflection on what people commonly include under the heading of literature suggests that this will not do. Seventeenth-century English literature includes Shakespeare, Webster¹, Marvell² and Milton; but it also stretches to the essays of Francis Bacon,

1 Webster: 韦伯斯特 (John Webster, 1580—1632), 英国戏剧家。

2 Marvell: 马维尔 (Andrew Marvell, 1621—1678), 英国诗人。

the **sermons** of John Donne, Bunyan's spiritual autobiography and whatever it was that Sir Thomas Browne wrote. It might even **at a pinch** be taken to **encompass** Hobbes's³ *Leviathan* or Clarendon's⁴ *History of the Rebellion*. French seventeenth-century literature contains, along with Corneille⁵ and Racine⁶, La Rochefoucauld's maxims, Bossuet's funeral speeches, Boileau's treatise on poetry, Madame de Sévigné's letters to her daughter and the philosophy of Descartes and Pascal. Nineteenth-century English literature usually includes Lamb (though not Bentham⁷), Macaulay⁸ (but not Marx), Mill⁹ (but not Darwin or Herbert Spencer).

sermon 布道

at a pinch 必要时

encompass 包括

- 2 A distinction between “fact” and “fiction”, then, seems unlikely to get us very far, not least because the distinction itself is often a questionable one. It has been argued, for instance, that our own opposition between “historical” and “artistic” truth does not apply at all to the early Icelandic **sagas**. In the English late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the word “novel” seems to have been used about both true and fictional events, and even news reports were hardly to be considered factual. Novels and news reports were neither clearly factual nor clearly fictional: our own sharp discriminations between these categories simply did not apply. Gibbon¹⁰ no doubt thought that he was writing the historical truth, and so perhaps did the authors of *Genesis*, but they are now read as “fact” by some and “fiction” by others; Newman certainly thought his theological meditations were true but they are now for many readers “literature”. Moreover, if “literature” includes much “factual” writing, it also excludes quite a lot of fiction. *Superman* comic and Mills and Boon novels are fictional but not generally regarded as literature, and certainly not as Literature. If literature is “creative” or

saga 传奇故事

3 Hobbes: 霍布斯 (Thomas Hobbes, 1588—1679), 英国哲学家、科学家、历史学家。

4 Clarendon: 克拉伦登 (Edward Hyde, 1609—1674), 英国政治家、历史学家。

5 Corneille: 高乃依 (Pierre Corneille, 1606—1684), 法国诗人、剧作家。

6 Racine: 拉辛 (Jean Racine, 1639—1699), 法国剧作家。

7 Bentham: 边沁 (Jeremy Bentham, 1748—1832), 英国哲学家、法学家、经济学家。

8 Macaulay: 麦考利 (Thomas Babington Macaulay, 1800—1859), 英国政治家、诗人、散文家、历史学家。

9 Mill: 穆勒 (John Stuart Mill, 1806—1873), 英国哲学家、心理学家、经济学家。

10 Gibbon: 吉本 (Edward Gibbon, 1737—1794), 英国历史学家。



“imaginative” writing, does this imply that history, philosophy and natural science are uncreative and unimaginative?

- 3 Perhaps one needs a different kind of approach altogether. Perhaps literature is definable not according to whether it is fictional or “imaginative”, but because it uses language in peculiar ways. On this theory, literature is a kind of writing which, in the words of the Russian critic Roman Jakobson, represents an “organized violence committed on ordinary speech”. Literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language, deviates systematically from everyday speech. If you approach me at a bus stop and murmur “Thou still unravished bride of quietness,”¹¹ then I am instantly aware that I am in the presence of the literary. I know this because the texture, rhythm and **resonance** of your words are in excess of their abstractable meaning – or, as the linguists might more technically put it, there is a disproportion between the **signifiers** and the **signifieds**. Your language draws attention to itself, **flaunts** its material being, as statements like “Don’t you know the drivers are on strike?” do not.

...

- 4 Literature, then, we might say, is “non-pragmatic” discourse: unlike biology textbooks and notes to the milkman, it serves no immediate practical purpose, but is to be taken as referring to a general state of affairs. Sometimes, though not always, it may employ peculiar language as though to make this fact obvious – to signal that what is at stake is a *way of talking* about a woman, rather than any particular real-life woman. This focusing on the way of talking, rather than on the reality of what is talked about, is sometimes taken to indicate that we mean by literature a kind of *self-referential* language, a language which talks about itself.
- 5 There are, however, problems with this way of defining literature too. For one thing, it would probably have come as a surprise to George Orwell¹² to hear that his essays were to

resonance 引起的联想（或共鸣）

signifier 能指（语言符号的形式）

signified 所指（语言符号的意义）

flaunt 炫耀；卖弄

11 Thou still unravished bride of quietness: 诗句出自英国浪漫主义诗人约翰·济慈 (John Keats, 1795—1821) 的诗歌《希腊古瓮颂》 (“Ode on a Grecian Urn”)。此处诗人将希腊古瓮比喻为“委身给‘寂静’的纯洁的新娘”。

12 George Orwell: 乔治·奥威尔 (1903—1950), 英国小说家、社会评论家。

be read as though the topics he discussed were less important than the way he discussed them. In much that is classified as literature, the truth-value and practical relevance of what is said is considered important to the overall effect. But even if treating discourse “non-pragmatically” is part of what is meant by “literature”, then it follows from this “definition” that literature cannot in fact be “objectively” defined. It leaves the definition of literature up to how somebody decides to *read*, not to the nature of what is written. There are certain kinds of writing – poems, plays, novels – which are fairly obviously intended to be “non-pragmatic” in this sense, but this does not guarantee that they will actually be read in this way. I might well read Gibbon’s account of the Roman empire not because I am misguided enough to believe that it will be reliably informative about ancient Rome but because I enjoy Gibbon’s prose style, or **revel in** images of human corruption whatever their historical source. But I might read Robert Burns’s poem because it is not clear to me, as a Japanese **horticulturalist**, whether or not the red rose flourished in eighteenth-century Britain. This, it will be said, is not reading it “as literature”; but am I reading Orwell’s essays as literature only if I generalize what he says about the Spanish civil war to some **cosmic** utterance about human life? It is true that many of the works studied as literature in academic institutions were “constructed” to be read as literature, but it is also true that many of them were not. A piece of writing may start off life as history or philosophy and then come to be ranked as literature; or it may start off as literature and then come to be valued for its **archaeological** significance. Some texts are born literary, some achieve literariness, and some have literariness **thrust upon** them. **Breeding** in this respect may count for a good deal more than birth. What matters may not be where you came from but how people treat you. If they decide that you are literature then it seems that you are, irrespective of what you thought you were.

- 6 In this sense, one can think of literature less as some inherent quality or set of qualities displayed by certain kinds of writing all the way from *Beowulf* to Virginia Woolf, than as a number of ways in which people *relate themselves* to writing. It would not be easy to isolate, from all that has been variously called “literature”, some constant set of inherent features. In fact

revel in 着迷于; 陶醉于

horticulturalist 园艺师

cosmic 极重要的

archaeological 考古学的

thrust upon 把…强加于

breed 培育



pore over 仔细地阅读

ontological 本体论的

thistle 薊 (野生植物)

it would be as impossible as trying to identify the single distinguishing feature which all games have in common. There is no “essence” of literature whatsoever. Any bit of writing may be read “non-pragmatically”, if that is what reading a text as literature means, just as any writing may be read “poetically”. If I **pore over** the railway timetable not to discover a train connection but to stimulate in myself general reflections on the speed and complexity of modern existence, then I might be said to be reading it as literature. John M. Ellis¹³ has argued that the term “literature” operates rather like the word “weed”: weeds are not particular kinds of plant, but just any kind of plant which for some reason or another a gardener does not want around. Perhaps “literature” means something like the opposite: any kind of writing which for some reason or another somebody values highly. As the philosophers might say, “literature” and “weed” are *functional* rather than **ontological** terms: they tell us about what we do, not about the fixed being of things. They tell us about the role of a text or a **thistle** in a social context, its relations with and differences from its surroundings, the ways it behaves, the purposes it may be put to and the human practices clustered around it. “Literature” is in this sense a purely formal, empty sort of definition. Even if we claim that it is a non-pragmatic treatment of language, we have still not arrived at an “essence” of literature because this is also so of other linguistic practices such as jokes. In any case, it is far from clear that we can discriminate neatly between “practical” and “non-practical” ways of relating ourselves to language. Reading a novel for pleasure obviously differs from reading a road sign for information, but how about reading a biology textbook to improve your mind? Is that a “pragmatic” treatment of language or not? In many societies, “literature” has served highly practical functions such as religious ones; distinguishing sharply between “practical” and “non-practical” may only be possible in a society like ours, where literature has ceased to have much practical function at all. We may be offering as a general definition a sense of the “literary” which is in fact historically specific.

¹³ John M. Ellis: 约翰·M. 埃利斯, 美国作家、教育家。

7 We have still not discovered the secret, then, of why Lamb, Macaulay and Mill are literature but not, generally speaking, Bentham, Marx and Darwin. Perhaps the simple answer is that the first three are examples of “fine writing”, whereas the last three are not. This answer has the disadvantage of being largely untrue, at least in my judgement, but it has the advantage of suggesting that by and large people term “literature” writing which they think is *good*. An obvious objection to this is that if it were entirely true there would be no such thing as “bad literature”. I may consider Lamb and Macaulay overrated, but that does not necessarily mean that I stop regarding them as literature. You may consider Raymond Chandler¹⁴ “good of his kind”, but not exactly literature. On the other hand, if Macaulay were a *really* bad writer – if he had no grasp at all of grammar and seemed interested in nothing but white mice – then people might well not call his work literature at all, even bad literature. Value-judgements would certainly seem to have a lot to do with what is judged literature and what isn’t – not necessarily in the sense that writing has to be “fine” to be literary, but that it has to be *of the kind* that is judged fine: it may be an inferior example of a generally valued mode. Nobody would bother to say that a bus ticket was an example of inferior literature, but someone might well say that the poetry of Ernest Dowson was. The term “fine writing”, or *belles lettres*, is in this sense **ambiguous**: it denotes a sort of writing which is generally highly regarded, while not necessarily committing you to the opinion that a particular specimen of it is “good”.

ambiguous 模棱两可的

¹⁴ Raymond Chandler: 雷蒙德·钱德勒 (1888—1959), 美国侦探小说作家。



Exercises

Recall

Answer the questions using the information from the text.

- 1 Can literature be simply defined as “creative” or “imaginative” writing? Why or why not?
- 2 In what sense is the language of literature peculiar?
- 3 What does the author think of the term “literature” in comparison with the term “weed”?
- 4 What are the approaches to defining literature?

Interpret

Answer the questions based on your own understanding.

- 1 How do you understand the statement “Breeding in this respect may count for a good deal more than birth”?
- 2 What does the author mean by saying “There is no ‘essence’ of literature whatsoever”?

Evaluate & Connect

Answer the questions.

- 1 How do you understand literature? What do you think are the differences between literary works and non-literary works?
- 2 What do you think can be classified as fine literature?

Text B

Background Information

Arnold Bennett (1867-1931), a British novelist, playwright, critic, and essayist, is best known for his highly detailed novels of the “Five Towns,” an imaginary manufacturing district in northern England. His most famous novels – *Anna of the Five Towns*, *The Old Wives’ Tale*, and *Clayhanger* – are all set there. He wrote 30 novels, many of which feature ordinary people, and he was full of affectionate sympathy to his characters. “Where to Begin” is extracted from his book *Literary Taste: How to Form It* (1909).

Where to Begin

Arnold Bennett

1 I wish particularly that my readers should not be intimidated by the apparent vastness and complexity of this enterprise of forming the literary taste. It is not so vast nor so complex as it looks. There is no need whatever for the inexperienced enthusiast to confuse and frighten himself with thoughts of “literature in all its branches.” Experts and **pedagogues** (chiefly pedagogues) have, for the purpose of convenience, split literature up into divisions and sub-divisions – such as prose and poetry; or imaginative, philosophic, historical; or **elegiac**, heroic, lyric; or religious and **profane**, etc., **ad infinitum**. But the greater truth is that literature is all one – and indivisible. The idea of the unity of literature should be well planted and fostered in the head. All literature is the expression of feeling, of passion, of emotion, caused by a sensation of the interestingness of life. What drives a historian to write history? Nothing but the overwhelming impression made upon him by the survey of past times. He is forced into an attempt to reconstitute the picture for others. If **hitherto** you have failed to perceive that a historian is a being in strong emotion, trying to convey his emotion to others, read the passage in the

pedagogue 教师

elegiac 挽歌的；哀伤的

profane 世俗的

ad infinitum 无限地；无止境地

hitherto 迄今



Memoirs of Gibbon, in which he describes how he finished the *Decline and Fall*¹. You will probably never again look upon the *Decline and Fall* as a “dry” work.

- 2 What applies to history applies to the other “dry” branches. Even Johnson’s² Dictionary is packed with emotion. Read the last paragraph of the preface to it: “In this work, when it shall be found that much is omitted, let it not be forgotten that much likewise is performed.... It may repress the triumph of **malignant** criticism to observe that if our language is not here fully displayed, I have only failed in an attempt which no human powers have hitherto completed....” And so on to the close: “I have **protracted** my work till most of those whom I wish to please have sunk into the grave, and success and miscarriage are empty sounds: I therefore dismiss it with frigid **tranquillity**, having little to fear or hope from censure or from praise.” Yes, tranquillity; but not frigid! The whole passage, one of the finest in English prose, is marked by the heat of emotion. You may discover the same quality in such books as Spencer’s *First Principles*. You may discover it everywhere in literature, from the cold fire of Pope’s³ irony to the blasting temperatures of Swinburne⁴. Literature does not begin till emotion has begun.
- 3 There is even no essential, definable difference between those two great branches, prose and poetry. For prose may have rhythm. All that can be said is that verse will **scan**, while prose will not. The difference is purely formal. Very few poets have succeeded in being so poetical as Isaiah⁵, Sir Thomas Browne⁶, and Ruskin⁷ have been in prose. It can only be stated that, as a rule, writers have shown an instinctive tendency to choose verse for the expression of the very highest emotion.

malignant 恶意的

protract 延长

tranquillity 平静

scan (诗) 符合格律

1 *Decline and Fall*: 吉本的代表作 *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (《罗马帝国衰亡史》) 的简称。

2 Johnson: 约翰逊 (Samuel Johnson, 1709—1784), 英国文学评论家、散文家、诗人、首部英语词典的编撰者。

3 Pope: 蒲柏 (Alexander Pope, 1688—1744), 英国诗人、讽刺作家。

4 Swinburne: 斯温伯恩 (Algernon Charles Swinburne, 1837—1909), 英国诗人、文学评论家。

5 Isaiah: 以赛亚, 公元前8世纪的希伯来预言家。

6 Sir Thomas Browne: 托马斯·布朗爵士 (1605—1682), 英国医生、作家。

7 Ruskin: 罗斯金 (John Ruskin, 1819—1900), 英国作家、艺术家。

The supreme literature is in verse, but the finest achievements in prose approach so nearly to the finest achievements in verse that it is ill work deciding between them. In the sense in which poetry is best understood, all literature is poetry – or is, at any rate, poetical in quality. Macaulay's ill-informed and unjust **denunciations** live because his genuine emotion made them into poetry, while his *Lays of Ancient Rome* are dead because they are not the expression of a genuine emotion. As the literary taste develops, this quality of emotion, restrained or loosed, will be more and more widely perceived at large in literature. It is the quality that must be looked for. It is the quality that unifies literature (and all the arts).

denunciation 公开谴责; 斥责

4 It is not merely useless, it is harmful, for you to map out literature into divisions and branches, with different laws, rules, or canons. The first thing is to obtain some possession of literature. When you have actually felt some of the emotion which great writers have striven to impart to you, and when your emotions become so numerous and puzzling that you feel the need of arranging them and calling them by names, then – and not before – you can begin to study what has been attempted in the way of classifying and **ticketing** literature. Manuals and treatises are excellent things in their kind, but they are simply dead weight at the start. You can only acquire really useful general ideas by first acquiring particular ideas, and putting those particular ideas together. You cannot make bricks without straw. Do not worry about literature in the abstract, about theories as to literature. Get at it. Get hold of literature in the concrete as a dog gets hold of a bone. If you ask me where you ought to begin, I shall gaze at you as I might gaze at the faithful animal if he inquired which end of the bone he ought to attack. It doesn't matter in the slightest degree where you begin. Begin wherever the fancy takes you to begin. Literature is a whole.

ticket 贴标签于…

5 There is only one restriction for you. You must begin with an acknowledged classic; you must **eschew** modern works. The reason for this does not imply any depreciation of the present age at the expense of past ages. Indeed, it is important, if you wish ultimately to have a wide, **catholic** taste, to guard against the too common assumption that nothing modern will stand

eschew 避开

catholic 广泛的



deplorable 糟透的

surety 保证

egregious 极坏的；过分的

mediocrity 平庸之人

twaddle 蠢话；废话；拙劣的文字

epoch 时代

posterity 后代；子孙

disparage 贬低；诋毁

chaff 糠；谷壳

sift 筛选；区分

comparison with the classics. In every age there have been people to sigh: “Ah, yes. Fifty years ago we had a few great writers. But they are all dead, and no young ones are arising to take their place.” This attitude of mind is **deplorable**, if not silly, and is a certain proof of narrow taste. It is a **surety** that in 1959 gloomy and **egregious** persons will be saying: “Ah, yes. At the beginning of the century there were great poets like Swinburne, Meredith⁸, Francis Thompson⁹, and Yeats. Great novelists like Hardy and Conrad¹⁰. Great historians like Stubbs and Maitland, etc., etc. But they are all dead now, and whom have we to take their place?” It is not until an age has receded into history, and all its **mediocrity** has dropped away from it, that we can see it as it is – as a group of men of genius. We forget the immense amount of **twaddle** that the great **epochs** produced. The total amount of fine literature created in a given period of time differs from epoch to epoch, but it does not differ much. And we may be perfectly sure that our own age will make a favourable impression upon that excellent judge, **posterity**. Therefore, beware of **disparaging** the present in your own mind. While temporarily ignoring it, dwell upon the idea that its **chaff** contains about as much wheat as any similar quantity of chaff has contained wheat.

- 6 The reason why you must avoid modern works at the beginning is simply that you are not in a position to choose among modern works. Nobody at all is quite in a position to choose with certainty among modern works. To **sift** the wheat from the chaff is a process that takes an exceedingly long time. Modern works have to pass before the bar of the taste of successive generations. Whereas, with classics, which have been through the ordeal, almost the reverse is the case. *Your taste has to pass before the bar of the classics.* That is the point. If you differ with a classic, it is you who are wrong, and not the book. If you differ with a modern work, you may be wrong or you may be right, but no judge is authoritative enough to decide. Your taste is unformed. It needs guidance, and it needs authoritative

8 Meredith: 梅瑞狄斯 (George Meredith, 1828—1909), 英国小说家、诗人。

9 Francis Thompson: 弗朗西斯·汤普森 (1859—1907), 英国诗人。

10 Conrad: 康拉德 (Joseph Conrad, 1857—1924), 英国作家。

guidance. Into the business of forming literary taste faith enters. You probably will not specially care for a particular classic at first. If you did care for it at first, your taste, so far as that classic is concerned, would be formed, and our hypothesis is that your taste is not formed. How are you to arrive at the stage of caring for it? Chiefly, of course, by examining it and honestly trying to understand it. But this process is materially helped by an act of faith, by the **frame of mind** which says: "I know on the highest authority that this thing is fine, that it is capable of giving me pleasure. Hence I am determined to find pleasure in it." Believe me that faith counts enormously in the development of that wide taste which is the instrument of wide pleasures. But it must be faith founded on **unassailable** authority.

frame of mind 心态; 心绪

unassailable 不容置疑的



Exercises

Recall

Answer the questions using the information from the text.

- 1 According to the author, can literature be split up? Why or why not?
- 2 Does the author believe Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* is literature? Why or why not?
- 3 What do writers tend to choose for the expression of the very highest emotion?
- 4 According to the author, what must readers begin with when they are to form their literary taste? Why?

Interpret

Answer the questions based on your own understanding.

- 1 What does the author mean by saying "Literature does not begin till emotion has begun"?
- 2 The author says, "It is not merely useless, it is harmful, for you to map out literature into divisions and branches, with different laws, rules, or canons." Why is it harmful?

Evaluate & Connect

Answer the questions.

- 1 The author says, "If you differ with a classic, it is you who are wrong, and not the book." Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
- 2 How can we cultivate good literary taste?