
*What follows is a selection of the self-addressed questions and responses that make up the first part of my forthcoming book. This part constitutes about a third of the book; the remaining chapters deal with specific issues such as “Context,” “Metaphor,” and “Affect.”*

Q
A great deal of philosophical ink has been spilled, and a vast number of philosophical pixels activated, in pursuing the question of “the ontological status of the work of art.” (Many of these are treated in Richard Shusterman’s useful study, *The Object of Literary Criticism.*) You identify yourself with the tradition that sees the work as having its existence in the readings, or performances, given to it. This is, of course, one of many positions that have been adopted in these discussions, all of which have been contested by other philosophers and literary theorists. What is the basis of your claim?

A
My thinking has been animated for a long time by the question of literature’s distinctiveness among linguistic practices: what is different about a novel or a poem in comparison with a letter, a factual article, an opinion piece, a sermon, a historical study, a scientific treatise, a philosophical argument, an after-dinner speech? Various attempts to distinguish literary texts from other kinds of text by means of the analysis of inherent features have failed; there is no way literature can be defined by its inherent properties, as I tried to show in *Peculiar Language*. Even if someone were to devise a computer program based on all existing works classified as either “literary” or “non-literary” and capable of making a sharp distinction between the two categories, the next significant literary work could defy its predictions and render the program worthless. Nor is it possible to determine what is literary by reference to the author’s intentions; there are countless examples of texts written without the intention to produce anything like literature in its modern sense or that of any of its predecessors (“belles lettres,” “poetry,” “poesie”) that we now happily read as literature, and many works intended as literary that we read as documents of another sort. And it’s clear that we can’t identify the work with any particular embodiment in a physical object: there would then be as many *Dunciads* as there are material copies. The literary work comes into being only in the event of reading.
Q
Wouldn’t an alternative approach to the question be to understand the distinctiveness of the work of literature as a matter of potential: a work is literary if, when read in the appropriate manner, it provides the experience you are talking of? The work would then inhere neither in material instantiations nor in readings, but as a type, an ideal form, possessing certain properties.

A
This characterization runs into trouble when you take account of the fact that the body of potential literary works would have to include all texts that could have been read or at some point in the future could potentially be read as literature, even if this has never happened and will never happen. And it’s hard to imagine any text that could be definitively excluded on this basis, given the changeability and unpredictability of the boundaries of what can be treated as literature. (We’re in Stanley Fish territory here: he argues in “How to Recognize a Poem When You See One” that no inherent properties are required for a text to have the potential to be read as a poem.) We have no way of knowing whether any given text may, at some point in the future, be readable as a literary work.

Of course, this is a theoretical, universalizing rather than a practical, real-world statement. If we limit ourselves to a particular cultural context (which could be interpreted narrowly or broadly) the idea of literary potential becomes more usable. A work of literature as constituted within a given cultural context, then, would be a linguistic text that, when read in the appropriate way, yields a literary experience. (Whether what we currently think of as ‘literary experience’ is itself open to change, of course; I’m only talking about the present state of affairs.) However, we would still have no way of knowing the status of any particular text until the test of actually reading it had been carried out. Moreover, cultural contexts are unstable and changing, so literary potential is not a permanent characteristic.

Q
But surely the common understanding of a “literary work” is that it is a thing not a happening?

A
It’s true that if pressed on the question of the status of the “work of literature” most people would probably speak in terms of an object rather than an event (without thinking through what kind of object this might be). However, when someone refers in conversation to a “work of literature” the phrase often carries the implication—not necessarily conscious—of an experience of enjoyment, interpretation, perhaps puzzlement, an experience recalled or imagined or heard about. In these cases it’s neither a reference to an ideal object—the type of which all texts are tokens—nor to a physical object—the particular book in which the text is lodged, but to an event. A “work of philosophy” or a “work of scientific writing” seldom has the same connotations—or if it does, it suggests the speaker has read the work in question in part as a literary work.
Q
By treating literary works as events, you foreground the temporality of the reading process. Don’t you overlook the importance of the spatial dimension of some works? Most of our reading is done through the eyes, not the ears, after all.

A
Yes, of course, space plays a crucial role in a number of our literary experiences. Free verse, to name just one example, relies on the spatial arrangements on the page to signal that it is poetry, and to enable the exploitation of both the consolidating effect of the line and the fracturing effect of the line-break. But literature’s spatial properties are all perceived and processed in time; even concrete poetry has to be taken in by the eyes and mind as a sequence. My argument isn’t confined to the obviously temporal arts like literature, music and film; painting and sculpture have their being as art in the temporal event of being looked at (and perhaps touched).

Q
It’s noticeable that in discussing literary practice you use both text and work; yet you don’t seem to use them in the way enshrined so influentially by Roland Barthes in the essay “From Work to Text.” Are you deliberately challenging Barthes’s use of the terms? What is the difference between them in your thinking?

A
Barthes’s essay was important to me many decades ago in highlighting the creative role of the reader and challenging critical approaches which sought to limit the meaning of a novel or a play to what can be ascertained about its production. But if I ask myself what happens when I read literature (or most non-literature, for that matter) I have to acknowledge that I’m conscious of the fact that these words have been selected and organized by an author. I may not know who the author is, or have nothing more than a name to go on, but the words have the quality of what I’ve called authoredness. (Kant’s notion of “purposiveness without purpose” bears some relation to this idea, though Kant finds this quality in nature as well as—and more importantly than—in art.) And when it’s literature that I’m reading, this dimension is particularly important, because my awareness is of the author’s inventive activity. So in referring to literary uses of language I like the word work, with its implication that that creative labour is not something left behind but something sensed in the reading. The other important implication of the term work is, as I’ve said, that the work’s existence—its ontological status, if you like—is not as an object but as an event; work can be a verb, after all. If I wanted to be pedantic, I would use working instead; and it might be helpful to hear this behind my use of the shorter word.
The term *text*, on the other hand, refers to all types of linguistic entity. We can include in the category of “text” the literary exemplar conceived simply as a string of words, as they might be “read” by a computer. If I read Conrad’s novella ‘Typhoon’ in search of information about seafaring practices at the end of the nineteenth century and for that reason alone, I’m reading it as a text—a series of signifiers whose conventionally endorsed meanings I’m familiar with. (To be more philosophically precise, the text of “Typhoon” is a type of which I’m reading a token, say the version published in a particular collection of Conrad’s stories; there are many such tokens, but only one type, which has no material existence apart from its tokens. When I refer to the text of “Typhoon,” then, I’m referring to the type.) It’s true that the marks on the page or sounds in the air are only language for someone who possesses the requisite knowledge that renders them legible as letters or phonemes, and words and sentences constructed out of these; nevertheless, it’s possible to say that the text has a meaning independent of any reading—even if humanity were to be wiped out, a computer could still interpret stretches of signifiers as linguistic utterances.

If I read “Typhoon” as literature, on the other hand, enjoying it as an event rather than trying to extract any information from it, I’m still reading the text, but I’m now experiencing it as a *work*. The “workness” of the text, in other words, lies in the effects it produces in a reader—and this is something a computer could not be programmed to encompass. Strictly speaking, I don’t read a work, I only read a text; but in reading it in a certain way (assuming it’s the appropriate kind of text) it comes into being as a work. Large numbers of readers have read the text in this way, and each time this has happened the text has been realized as a work; but the work “Typhoon” has no existence outside these readings (which include, of course, Conrad’s own readings and re-readings as he wrote the text). It has, however, acquired a degree of stable identity as a work thanks to the process of repeated interpretations and correction of others’ interpretations—what Stefan Collini has called “cultural Darwinism” (*Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, 16). The literary text is one which is potentially a work for any reader who has the necessary skill. (As we’ve noted, however, the test of literary potential is only usable within determined cultural limits.) I will admit that I sometimes use, as shorthand, formulations that fail to keep the work–text distinction clear: it’s easier to say “I read a work” than “I read a text as a work”—but the former should always be taken to mean the latter.

Several versions of this distinction have been proposed by theorists of aesthetics. For instance, Mikel Dufrenne begins his magisterial *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* by distinguishing between the “work of art” and the “aesthetic object” (where the word “work” is on the side of what I’m calling “text”). Genette comes closer the terminology I’m using, as the following comment suggests: “To identify a text . . . is one thing, to identify the work that immanates in it is quite another, for the work is the way the text operates” (*The Work of Art*, 245). (For Genette, “immanence” names the object in which the work of art consists, in contrast to “transcendence,” which refers to the ways in it may function beyond the presence of that object.)

Literary works may in time lose their literariness, and become merely texts that reinforce what is acceptable and familiar. Blanchot describes this process as follows: a work may become “graspable” in time, and when this happens,
it expresses or it refutes what is generally said; it consoles, it entertains, it bores. . . . At this juncture what is read is surely no longer the work; rather, these are the thoughts of everyone rethought, our common habits rendered more habitual still, everyday routines continuing to weave the fabric of our days. And this movement is in itself very important, one which it is not fitting to discredit. But neither the work of art nor its reading is present here. (*The Space of Literature*, 206)

Q

Where exactly is the work to be located, then? Is it a psychological event in the mind of the reader?

A

Not quite: the work is a realization of the text as *it is experienced in my reading* (that “as” meaning both “when” and “in the manner in which”). If I’m attempting to write a critical study, the work I’m referring to is likely to be the product of several readings. In a statement like “*Moby-Dick* was published in the middle of the nineteenth century” it’s to the text, that is, the type of which all material manifestations are tokens, that I’m referring; whereas the statements “*Moby-Dick* changed my sense of the natural world” or “*Moby-Dick* plays an important role in America’s self-understanding” probably refer to the literary work—in the first case, to my experience of the text as a work of literature, in the second to a conception of the work as realized in its readings that has acquired broad agreement.

Q

What do you mean by the word “experience”? It sounds like a rather vague term from traditional humanistic criticism, suggestive of individual psychology. How far would you agree with Adorno, who objects that without historical awareness, artistic experience “degenerates into empathetic appreciation”? Adorno makes a strong pitch against the idea of the immediate experience of art—“Many artworks of the past, and among them the most renowned, are no longer to be experienced in any immediate fashion and are failed by the fiction of such immediacy”—and his recommendation is that a “stubborn semblance of spontaneous accessibility . . . be destroyed to permit their comprehension” (*Aesthetic Theory*, 348-9).

A

I realize I use the word “experience” a great deal, and I need to clarify that I’m not employing it to refer to an empirical psychological event nor to a model of literary reading which privileges immediacy over cultural and historical depth. French and German present different terminological difficulties. In French there is no corresponding verb to the noun *expérience* (which can also mean “experiment”); the nearest term is *éprouver*, with its suggestion of testing. Levinas says that he prefers to use the noun *épreuve* rather than *expérience*, because the latter implies the mastery of the I (“Entretien,” 108). Adorno, following Benjamin, usefully distinguishes between *Erlebnis*, or an
immediate experience in the present, and Erfahrung, or cumulative experience—the latter being appropriate to an understanding of the artwork. These terms are usefully discussed in Barbara Cassin’s remarkable Dictionary of Untranslatables.

Adorno’s complaint about the idea of immediacy is of a piece with his view that “aesthetic experience first of all places the observer at a distance from the object” (Aesthetic Theory, 346). This argument worries me: to thus dismiss the reader’s impression of an intimate connection with a powerful work of literature, the feeling that it speaks to one with transformative directness, sometimes to one’s innermost being, is to elevate the academic’s way of responding over that of the untrained reader. When Adorno says that it’s essential to an experience of a Beethoven symphony that one hear in it the echo of the French Revolution (349), he is privileging a small minority of listeners—and, for that matter, offering a classroom cliché that is as likely to diminish as enhance a full engagement with the work.

In spite of what I’ve just said, I’m sympathetic to Adorno’s contention that “not experience alone but only thought that is fully saturated with experience is equal to the phenomenon [of the artwork]” (349)—though one might also advocate experience fully saturated with thought. I’m not arguing for total immediacy: what is distinctive about responses to artworks, in contrast to experiences of the world outside art, is an awareness of the medium – in literature, the creativity with which the language, the forms, the generic expectations, have been handled. The experience of a literary work is of a staging of reality, of emotions, of language’s capacities.

The experience of immediacy that I value and that Adorno is so distrustful of is an illusion, brought about by a coincidence between two sets of norms that might be historically very distant, and to engage with the work fully is not to strip oneself of all one’s inherited knowledge and predispositions (“prejudices,” Gadamer would call them) but to bring them to bear on what one is reading, always ready to have them altered or challenged. A useful approach is that of Krystof Ziarek, who argues in The Historicity of Experience in favour of a notion of experience he calls ‘poietic’ (as opposed to psychological or empirical), stressing its capacity to transform the everyday.

An alternative would be to talk of the “encounter” with the work, which has the advantage of lacking those psychological connotations you mention, but to me this word suggests a rather limited relation, in terms both of its intimacy and its duration. I sometimes find myself speaking of “living through” a work of literature, a phrase that conveys a stronger sense of the closeness and fullness of the relation; but “experience” remains the most convenient term, for all its problems.

Q
So the work of literature is a completely subjective event? One of your reviewers, Timothy Clark, commented that your critical practice “can drift towards becoming a kind of particularized reader-response” and that “something rather too close to subjectivism seems to threaten” (397). Is your position that of Pater, who famously wrote in the Preface to The Renaissance, in a rebuttal of Matthew Arnold:

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“To see the object as in itself it really is,” has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly. The objects with which aesthetic criticism deals—music, poetry, artistic and accomplished forms of human life—are indeed receptacles of so many powers or forces: they possess, like the products of nature, so many virtues or qualities. What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to ME? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence? (xxix)

A

I like Pater’s emphases on the importance of honesty to the critic’s own response to the artwork, on the role of pleasure, and on the changes the work brings about; and I approve of his insistence that the work can't be considered “in itself” separately from an individual engagement. (His approach to art is premised on the centrality of beauty, which—for reasons we will need to come back to—is not something I would agree with.) When I try to do justice to the power and value of a literary work in a commentary, of course, I have no option but to base my discussion on my own experience of it, though I hope to be able to enter into conversation with others in my community in order to sharpen and deepen that experience.

To call the experience “subjective” is misleading, however, since this term implies random variation among readers, whereas any individual’s reading of a work is determined by a personal cultural and ideological history, and a resultant set of techniques, preferences, habits and expectations, that overlap considerably with those of others in his “interpretive community,” to use Stanley Fish’s phrase. That is to say, I belong to a group whose members share a great many of my own mental and emotional habits and norms—or, to be more exact, I belong to a series of groups that operate in concentric circles, each one sharing less with me than the one inside it—and my reading practices are in part determined by those habits and norms. Instead of the term subject I’ve used the term idioculture (derived from the notion of idiolect as the unique version of the language system employed by a single individual) in order to signal the cultural constitution of any reader.

It’s also important to acknowledge, though, the individual reader’s capacity for creativity, which would not be possible if reading was completely determined by past and present cultural norms and proclivities. Creativity is possible because an idioculture is a singular nexus of such materials, one in which contradictions and tensions keep open the chance of the emergence of the new, and thus of a challenge to the wider culture.
Q
Is there such a thing as a “correct” interpretation of a literary work, then?

A
If “correct” means “fixed for all time,” then there isn’t, for the obvious reason that the meaning of a work changes as the context within which it is read changes (while, thanks to the logic of iterability, remaining the same work). But if “correct” means “appropriate to the time and place in which the reading takes place,” then the term has some purchase. At least it makes sense to have a discussion about the correctness of this or that reading of a text; there may be no final resolution, but we know the kinds of evidence that would be considered valid at the time of the discussion, and disagreements, if not abolished, can be refined. The dispute may turn out to be about the kind of correctness being sought—correctness for what purpose or in what arena. The once-famous debates between the New Critics or Scrutineers and the Old Historicists were debates about what an interpretation is and the relevance of historical and biographical evidence to it. (Two celebrated disputes erupted over Andrew Marvell’s poetry: between Cleanth Brooks and Douglas Bush over the “Horation Ode” and between F. R. Leavis and F. W. Bateson over “A Dialogue between the Soul and Body.”) Behind the debates about particular poems lay a much wider disagreement about the proper form of the study and teaching of literature. But may the readings not sit side by side as representing different kinds of correctness?—one a description of how a contemporary reader with some literary sophistication and a little general knowledge can enjoy and be affected by the poem in question, the other an attempt at a scholarly reconstruction of how the poem might have been read in its time. The interesting further point is that the former type of reader, studying an example of the latter response, might well find the poem has changed as a result of the historical information provided—a change which is not a matter of applying a new framework to the poem, but of actually finding it different, thanks to the newly acquired knowledge.

Q
You’ve identified three features of the event that constitutes the literary work of art, both in its coming into being and in its being received: otherness, inventiveness, and singularity. To clarify your argument, could you say more about these terms and how they are related to one another? Why do you need three terms?

A
We could think of these as three dimensions of the experience of literariness, in creation and reception. I’ll say a little about each (which will involve gathering up some of my earlier comments); but it’s important to remember that they are really different aspects of a single experience.

Otherness or alterity is a dimension of the literary experience that manifests itself as surprise or unfamiliarity, whether massive or minimal. Otherness, in the sense in which I’m using the term, is not just anything (idea, entity, person, culture) hitherto unencountered; it’s that which
is unencounterable, given the present state of the encountering mind or culture, what Levinas calls the “same.” (As I’ve remarked, otherness is always relative to a state of things, in a certain time and place.) It is unencounterable because the modes of encounter made possible by this state of things (a state which could be described in both social and psychological terms, in the same way that Saussure describes the system of language) do not allow for it. Otherness is not just out there, unapprehended because no-one has thought of apprehending it, or because it bears no relation whatever to existing forms of knowledge, but because to apprehend it would threaten the status quo.

It might be tempting to say that the other is not just “other to” or “other than” the same, but that it is “the other of” the same, in that it is related to the same by this necessary exclusion; this, however, would make the relation of other to same much too cosy and predictable, as though we could simply derive the other from the same. But we cannot, because the occlusion of otherness is itself occluded. This is why the artist works in the dark, by trial and error, waiting for signs of otherness to emerge, and pursuing these when they do—which has to be achieved by means of a readjustment of existing horizons and habits. And the literary reader, too, starts in a state of uncertainty, alert to what may arrive to challenge frameworks of expectation and allow otherness to be acknowledged. If the reader is different after having read a work, I believe, this is because of the otherness it has introduced him or her to; but again I need to stress that the change I’m talking about can range from a revaluation of the entire moral basis of one’s life to a new appreciation of the power of the couplet.

**Inventiveness** names the production of or encounter with the work as an invention, a word which encapsulates both the act of making and the result of that making. To experience inventiveness as a reader thus involves an engagement with the maker as well as the made; it’s therefore related to authoredness. I’m trying here to do justice an important aspect of what it feels like to read a work of literature, one that I outlined earlier in discussing the question of historical transcendence: we’re aware that the words we’re reading bear the impress of a creative act—even a found poem has been transformed from its original condition by a creative process—and we take pleasure in reliving that act. Not literally, of course, unless we’ve been studying the genetic history of the work; but imaginatively. As the words enter our consciousness it’s as if we’re sharing in their discovery by the artist. Furthermore, to think of the work as an invention is to emphasize its relation to the culture within which it was created: the writer who succeeds in writing inventively has absorbed her culture’s norms, varieties of knowledge, store of earlier productions, predispositions and habits, as well as the available techniques and methods of the literary field—what Henry Staten calls *techne*—and used them to go beyond what has previously been thought and felt (or thinkable and feelable). As readers, we deploy a similar array of resources and find ourselves, if the work is indeed inventive, taken to somewhere new.

**Singularity** is also something we experience in any encounter that can be called literary: the work comes across as different from any other work we know, even though its materials—the various components of the techne that the artist deployed in creating it—may be familiar. Singularity is not opposed to generality or universality (as Hegel’s “particularity” is); it’s a
configuration of general properties that creates, for the reader, a unique experience. So the singular work does not have a unique and unchanging identity; on the contrary, it’s open to change and reinterpretation. The identity of any sign depends on its being interpretable in different contexts; were it not so, languages couldn’t function, as it would be necessary to reconstitute the original context in order to understand an utterance. (This is the logic of what Derrida calls iterability.) As Jonathan Culler puts it, “The singularity of the work is what enables it to be repeated over and over in events that are never exactly the same” (“Derrida and the Singularity of Literature,” 871). The singularity of the literary work goes beyond that which enables the sign to function, however, as it involves a cluster of signifying elements with complex relations to one another that are the product of an author’s inventiveness, and have the power of introducing otherness as part of a reader’s experience. Blanchot captures something of my sense of singularity in his characteristic style: “The book which has its origin in art has no guarantee in the world, and when it’s read, it has never been read before. It does not come into its presence as a work except in the space opened by this unique reading, each time the first and each time the only” (The Space of Literature, 194).

To return to the point I began with: although these words name three different aspects of the literariness of the literary work, they aren’t separable; they are, if you like, three different ways of looking at the same event. If you try to imagine a work that is singular without being inventive or reaching out to otherness, you end up imagining only a work that is different from other works, with nothing in that difference that calls forth the response we think of as “literary.” (I called this “uniqueness” in The Singularity of Literature, to distinguish it from singularity.) A work that is inventive is necessarily one that is singular and introduces otherness into the field of the same; a work that brings the other into the field of the same is necessarily singular and inventive in its handling of the materials at hand.

One more point needs to be made: although I’ve presented them as nouns, what we’re really talking about are verbs, aspects of the event of literature. Otherness occurs in the apprehending of new thoughts and feelings; invention is the process that produces the work of art and the tracing of that process in a reading; singularity is the crystallizing of a work’s special identity. In engaging fully with a literary work as literature one is experiencing all three of these as they operate together and reinforce each other in a single complex movement.

Q
What is the particular attraction for you of the term performance? What do you mean by saying that the reader—even the silent reader—performs the work of literature? And how does this relate to your argument that as readers we enjoy the revelation of the power of language?

A
I find the theatrical metaphor useful, because I believe the event of the literary work puts on stage, as it were, the emotions, the mental and physical events, the apprehendings of the external world,
that it depicts. Unlike the historian describing as plainly as possible the mental state of a politician making a crucial decision, for example, the novelist “stages” the individual’s mental processes, allowing the reader to bring these to life as events—while always remaining aware that they are being staged, and that it’s not a matter of gaining direct access to mental reality. We might compare the pleasure taken (by many viewers though certainly not all) in the utterances and actions of individuals being filmed in a reality TV show and the pleasure taken in the utterances and actions of fictional characters being acted in a good television drama. Our awareness in the BBC adaptation of Parade’s End that it is Benedict Cumberbatch uttering words written by Tom Stoppard (who derived them from Ford Madox Ford) doesn’t diminish our intellectual and emotional involvement in the character of Christopher Tietjens; in fact, our involvement is enriched by that awareness, and by our pleasure in the skill evident in the language, acting, mise-en-scène, and so on. (This awareness is related to what Roman Jakobson, putting it in terms of perception, famously called the “set for the message.”) We are conscious—perhaps only barely conscious at times—of a significant distance between what we’re watching (or in the case of a literary work, reading) and the world outside art, but it’s a distance that multiplies the sources and types of our enjoyment.

At the same time, this enjoyment of what is achieved with language in a work of literature is also an enjoyment of what is revealed about the power of language, and of the literary forms into which it can be moulded. Blanchot stresses that this is true of all the arts: the work “is what makes its nature and its matter visible or present, it is the glorification of its reality: verbal rhythm in the poem, sound in music, light become colour in painting, space become stone in the house. . . . The work makes what disappears in the object appear. The statue glorifies the marble” (The Space of Literature, 123). The literary work glorifies the language, we might add.

Q
You argue not just that what you call the “act-event” of invention succeeds in introducing into the familiar landscape of a culture a way of thinking, seeing, feeling, or handling language that is new to that culture, but that its exclusion from the culture up that point is more than a matter of chance. The culture, you claim, is sustained by its exclusions, and the artist finds a way of accessing a part of this excluded realm, through the inventive handling of the given materials of the art-form. Why do you think it’s necessary to take this further step: isn’t it enough to say that the writer brings into the culture something it has never before acknowledged, for whatever reason?

A
To some degree this an empirical matter that has to be tested against literary history, but the theoretical argument goes as follows. Take a culture at a given moment in time (this, of course, is a simplification: there’s no such thing as “a culture,” only cultural constellations, large and small, constantly changing; but the simplification will help us get to the heart of the issue): it’s made up of the sedimentations of its particular history, manifested in the practices, dispositions, norms, limits,
emotional tendencies and mental contents that characterize its members and sustain it as a viable, if fragile, whole. This is the context within which the artist works. The realm of ideas, feelings, technical possibilities and formal arrangements that the culture does not acknowledge is infinite, and most of the original works that artists or would-be artists create—works that differ, that is, from anything that has been created before within that culture, and hence draw on that infinite realm—have very little impact; they simply add something different to what exists. What the writer—the “serious” writer, if you like—is striving for is an original creation that will effect a change in the culture, through the changes it brings about in its readers, and through the new possibilities it introduces for future works. This is what I’ve called invention, which names both the process and the artefact. (Sometimes the process is not a conscious one, as in the case of works whose literary potential only becomes evident to a later generation.) I’ve distinguished between invention, which, although it’s usually achieved by an individual, is something that happens to a culture, since it has never come into being before and opens up new possibilities for other artists, and creation, which is something that has never happened to the particular individual before—though it may have occurred to many other individuals. Margaret Boden, in “What is Creativity?,” has termed these “historical creativity” and “psychological creativity.”

Such an invention can only come into being if the cultural norms are challenged by the new thing introduced, which means that in some way its relation to the culture is not neutral, but in tension, even antagonistic. I’ve stressed that the concept of otherness is necessarily relational, a point that not all users of the term acknowledge; to be other is to be other to an existing state or entity or subject. So the otherness which tests the culture, which demands a change in the culture in order for it to be apprehended, must be an otherness which the culture excludes, not one which just happens not to have been acknowledged. And for a culture to exclude a possibility, and to have to change if that possibility is to be admitted, implies that it has depended on that exclusion in order to perpetuate its existence.

Since this excluded realm is, by definition, out of reach to anyone constituted by the culture that has excluded it—that is, to any idioculture formed within the broader cultural context—the task of the writer is to exploit symptoms of the exclusions in order to make a space for otherness to enter. These symptoms are to be found in the inconsistencies, strains, fractures, and stoppings short that mark any culture at a given moment. Many features of the culture no longer possess the force and value they once did; they have become routinized, overused, exhausted. (A somewhat similar argument in the realm of science that has become very familiar is Thomas Kuhn’s theory of paradigms, whereby a governing set of assumptions about the world throws up an increasing number of anomalies until a breakthrough results in the establishment of a new, hitherto inconceivable, paradigm.) The writer cannot know in advance what that otherness will look like: hence the repeated descriptions by artists of the created work as coming from somewhere else, appearing of its own accord, and hence, too, the frequent accounts of artists who doggedly pursue a hunch or uncertain glimmering of something to be achieved without any concern for the size of the potential audience or material reward. Let me quote just one of potentially thousands of comments; this is Zoë Wicomb:
Not even for myself do I write: an impossibility, since in confronting the blank page there seems to be no pre-existing self. (The self I know would rather slouch in a hammock, sipping something or other.) Rather, eerily, in that process of forging a narrative, of discovering what I am writing, a strange self seems to wonder at the text that is painstakingly being formed. (“The Challenge is to Capture Marginal Stories”)

Theoretical discussions of the coming into existence of the “new” don’t always acknowledge the testimony of creative artists (or, for that matter, scientists, mathematicians, philosophers, engineers and many others); Michael North, for example, has written an entire book with the title *Novelty* that makes no reference to such testimony or to the extensive discussion in continental philosophy of the “other” and the “event” (as an unpredictable occurrence—the arrival of otherness—that brings about a change). The logical problem North identifies in any concept of the “new”—nothing can be new in itself, since newness names a relation with a previously existing state of affairs—disappears when we recognize that the grasping of otherness by means of an invention is an event (and, from the point of view of the creator, an experience). I tend to avoid words like “new” and “novelty” because, as North stresses, what is regarded as new is often a repetition of something old; “invention,” with its previous meaning of “finding” and its links with words like “advent” and “event”—from the Latin *venire*, “to come”—is truer to the phenomenon I’m describing. (Readers of Derrida will recognize my indebtedness to his essay “Psyche.”)

I must stress that otherness, and hence cultural (and idiocultural) change can be of many kinds. One obvious area is ideology: the writer challenges reigning assumptions that arise from domination by a particular class by introducing perspectives that those assumptions exclude. But other possibilities lie in the texture of human relations, in the emotions that are allowable on particular occasions, in ideas about the physical or psychic world, in the formal arrangements of literary art. The exclusion I’ve referred to shouldn’t be taken as necessarily something to be judged unfavourably; the example of ideology is somewhat exceptional in this regard, as most exclusions are not the product of a particular system of power.

The closest argument to mine that I’ve encountered is Wolfgang Iser’s in *The Act of Reading*, building on Roman Ingarden’s work. Iser’s contention is that “all thought systems are bound to exclude certain possibilities, thus automatically giving rise to deficiencies, and it is to these deficiencies that literature applies itself” (73). The reader, then, “can reconstruct whatever was concealed or ignored by the philosophy or ideology of the day, precisely because these neutralized or negated aspects of reality form the focal point of the literary work” (73). By contrast, “didactic literature”, he notes, “will generally take over intact the thought system already familiar to its readers” (83). Iser gives, as one example, the manner in which *Tristram Shandy* recodes Lockean philosophy, finding a solution to the weakness of Locke’s associationist premises in human sociability. Iser’s argument leaves no space for other kinds of recoding, however; for example, inventive writers usually produce formal and generic innovations as well as exploring new types of content or new modes of thought.

The model proposed by Bourdieu for what he calls “great symbolic revolutions”—the specific example he discusses is Baudelaire—is also close to mine, although I would extend the model to all
inventive artistic achievements. Such authors, he argues, all “find themselves placed before a space of already made possibles, which, for them and them alone, designates in advance a possible to be made.” He continues:

This impossible possible, both rejected and called for by the space which defines it, but as a void, a lack, is what they then strive to bring into existence, against and despite all the resistances which the emergence of this structurally excluded possible induces in the structure which excludes it and in the comfortably installed occupants of all the positions constitutive of that structure. (Pascalian Meditations, 92)

An example will, I hope, make this structural event clearer. Let’s consider a young poet at the Inns of the Court in 1590s London by the name of John Donne. We know very little about the actual circumstances of Donne’s composition of satires, elegies and love lyrics in this period, but we know that he circulated them to close friends but was opposed to wide circulation and even more to publication. Let’s suppose the year is 1595 and young John is trying his hand at a love poem. We can imagine him reading Spenser’s sonnet sequence, Amoretti, published in that year, and thinking, “These are well-turned poems, but there must be a way of using the language to create something with more fire in it.” He would probably have got hold of a copy of the rather poor edition of Sidney’s Astrophel and Stella published by Thomas Newman in 1591, and been somewhat more impressed by Sidney’s ironic take on the Petrarchan tradition of passionate address to an idealized and resisting beloved than by Spenser’s Neoplatonic encomia. We’re told Donne was a great theatre-goer, and perhaps among the plays he had seen in the first half of the 1590s were some of Shakespeare’s early works, which could have included the very different representations of sexual relationships in The Taming of the Shrew, Love’s Labour’s Lost, and Romeo and Juliet. Why can’t the short poem achieve that degree of liveliness, that verbal manifestation of intense passion?, he might well have wondered. He had many opportunities to discuss poetry with other writers undertaking legal studies at the Inns of Court at this time, including John Marston, Joseph Hall, John Davies and Edward Guilpin, and no doubt shared with them an admiration of the Latin verse of Juvenal, Martial, Catullus and Ovid. Here a different question arose for him: how can the English language be made to achieve the vividness and directness of these poets—Juvenal’s cutting satires, Martial’s concentrated epigrams, and the erotic love poetry of Catullus and, above all, Ovid.

So Donne attempts a Petrarchan sonnet addressing a mistress. Too formal, too starchy, too rigid. Why not let the lines fall into different lengths, thus varying the iambic pentameter with shorter segments? And what about a rhyme scheme that doesn’t follow an existing pattern, but will keep the reader on her toes. Why not vary the old ti-tum-ti-tum occasionally, as if the feelings being expressed are so strong they can’t be restrained by regular metrical alternation? As he writes and rewrites, he finds his love-poem becoming a little drama, occurring in an identifiable scene that the reader is invited to imagine, rather than an unsituated, extratemporal declaration of feelings. What might powerful sexual attraction lead the lover to think or say—for instance, when the light of the morning sun penetrates the curtains after a night of delightful sex? Donne would have been aware of one precursor: the thirteenth poem of the first book of Ovid’s Amores has the poet begging the dawn not to hurry, allowing that farmers should be called to the field, oxen to the
yoke, plaintiffs to the law-courts, but not that he should be divided from the girl lying so sweetly at this side. But Ovid took nearly fifty lines to spell out this prayer; it would be more potent if something similar were done more economically (and sophisticated readers would enjoy the challenge to the classical precursor). Shakespeare had revitalized the old aubade tradition in depicting Romeo and Juliet’s parting at daybreak, but that was in a play...

And from somewhere—inspired by the Muse, Donne might have said—the right words, in the right rhythm, capturing the right tone of voice, emerge:

Busy old fool, unruly Sun,
Why dost thou thus,
Through windows, and through curtains, call on us?

Although Donne could not have written this opening without a mind furnished with lines and themes from his reading of the Latin love poets, Renaissance Italian and Spanish verse, and the writing of his English contemporaries and forebears (including Marlowe’s translation of Ovid’s *Amores*), it brings something new into English culture. Neither Spenser nor Sidney could have written it—not because they lacked the skill to do so, but because it was, to them, an unthinkable manner of writing, a manner that was not included among the possible options open to them. The courtly qualities that poetry embodied for them, in their different ways, would have been threatened by the unashamed individualism of this speaking voice, the forthright unbridledness of this outburst, the drama and immediacy of this evocation of sexual desire, the knowing absurdity of the conceit, the gaiety of the implicit laughter behind the preposterous dressing-down inflicted on the sun. The versification alone threatens the newly established decorum of English accentual-syllabic metre: a four-beat line with initial inversion allowing strong stresses at beginning and end is followed by a surprising two-beat line. (Such is the expressive dynamism of the voice that we scarcely notice the subtle play of sound, especially the repeated [ʌ] sound in *un-, Sun, dost, thus* (for the Elizabethan reader, *dost* probably doesn’t belong here, but *Busy* does) and the rhyme of *fool* and *-rul*- . And any lingering sense of the old hierarchy of the gods and planets is brushed away with nonchalant ease.

The remainder of the poem, which we know as “The Sun Rising,” fully lives up to this opening: the tone remains vividly captured as the speaker turns from chiding the sun to welcoming it, on an equally implausible pretext; the sense of an outrage performed on all the courtly conventions of decorous speech and behaviour continues; and the rhythm tests the limits of metrical normality.
Q
Yet Donne didn’t publish his poems—does this affect your argument about the inventive writer introducing into the English language and the English literary tradition new possibilities for other writers?

A
It’s true that because of Donne’s antipathy to publication or even wide circulation, very few writers were made aware of those opportunities at first (and others, like Ben Jonson, chose not to capitalize on them). During the seventeenth century, however, we can see very clearly how Donne’s poetic breakthrough became an enabling resource for poets, especially after the first, posthumous, publication of his poems in 1633 and the second edition (in which, for the first time, the lyric poems were gathered together and given the title *Songs and Sonets*) in 1635. Many of the Caroline court poets, including Carew, Lovelace, and Suckling, show the influence of Donne’s discoveries, as does the work of Katherine Philips. The writer who most fully absorbs Donne’s innovations and uses them as a springboard for his own inventiveness is Marvell. But literary history doesn’t follow a simple trajectory, and Donne’s outspoken eroticism, outrageous conceits, and free rhythms were soon meeting with disapproval; as the century progressed, Denham and Waller helped to set a new tone in poetry, and Dryden cemented it. (There were eight editions of Donne’s poetry within the century after his death, and then none for nearly a century and a half.) Although Donne’s reputation started to recover in the nineteenth century—Browning’s dramatic monologues are hardly imaginable without the earlier poet’s example—it wasn’t until the early twentieth century that the possibilities inherent in his innovative intervention in the English poetic tradition once more became available to poets.

Q
While it’s possible to see Donne as inventively changing the landscape for future poets, the example of his love poetry being a rather obvious one, it’s not very easy to see every work of literature as having a comparable importance. Aren’t you exaggerating the significance of inventiveness, in your sense?

A
I agree that Donne is an obvious example, but I wanted to show the operation of cultural invention at its clearest. But I do believe that every work that contains at least a spark of inventiveness is making a potential change in the cultural environment—I say potential because of course everything depends on the reception of the work, as we see vividly in Donne’s case. Take the poetry of Sir John Suckling, for example, one of those minor Caroline court poets I mentioned. Here’s a poem that bears the unmistakable stamp of Donne’s love poetry:
Out upon it, I have lov’d
Three whole days together;
And am like to love three more,
If it prove fair weather.

Time shall moul’t away his wings,
Ere he shall discover
In the whole wide world again
Such a constant lover.

But the spite on’t is, no praise
Is due at all to me;
Love with me had made no stays,
Had it any been but she.

Had it any been but she,
And that very face,
There had been at least ere this
A dozen dozen in her place.

Suckling makes no major intervention in the poetic tradition established by Donne, and yet this poem is not quite like anything Donne wrote; it’s a singular invention that alters in a tiny way the available resources of English poetry. Part of the poem’s originality is metrical: it uses the familiar four-beat rhythm that is the staple of the poem-as-song, but in a version that heightens the rhythmic swing by varying the disposition of stressed and unstressed syllables—the form sometimes known as dolnik. (Any attempt to analyse the metre in terms of classical feet would suggest a complex form involving trochees with missing syllables and sudden switches from trochaic to iambic meter, whereas part of the charm of the poem is the very simple, straightforward rhythm.) This in itself is far from original, but what is original is the way Suckling takes advantage of the “virtual” beats that play a role in much four-beat verse. The first two stanzas follow the pattern of the ballad stanza and the common hymn measure so often used in song forms: four beats, three beats, four beats, three beats, but with a fourth “silent” beat felt by the reader rounding out the second and final lines. (A basic musical setting would include a measure or half-measure of accompaniment here.) The last line of the third stanza is one where we expect three beats, and it can be made to fulfil this explanation without difficulty by letting the first stress fall, as it would in speech, on “any.” This, of course, is where the poem surprises us by turning from a sardonic attack on the nature of love—three whole days is to be counted a triumph of constancy!—to an encomium of the beloved. Then comes the poem’s most inventive moment: if we had been tempted to laugh away the apparent shift of tone, the line is repeated as the opening of the final stanza, a repetition that immediately creates a feeling of greater seriousness, as the
speaker dwells on this idea; and the seriousness is heightened by the metrical demand that this be read as a four-beat line, inviting a stress on the first syllable. Suckling has one more surprise up his sleeve: the last line should have three beats, and so we would expect “A dozen in her place”—so the extra dozen (numerically an extra 132) also produces a line that, although still metrically acceptable as it fills out the full length of the line, is itself excessive. Although this line marks a return to panache of the carefree womanizer, it remains a compliment to the one woman. These are very small matters (we might also mention the striking visualization of Time moulting its wings), and similarly small discoveries and adjustments can be found in thousands upon thousands of poems, novels, short stories, and plays; this multiplicity of invention is what makes for the richness of the cultural sphere.

Does it make any sense to say that Suckling, in exploiting the resources of common measure to create a complexity of tone in a way that no-one had hitherto done, was introducing into poetic practice a possibility upon whose exclusion existing practice had depended? It would be a rather overdramatic way of putting it, perhaps, but if his poem is characterized by inventiveness, something like this must be correct. To unpack this complicated question further it’s necessary to introduce the distinction between originality and invention that I drew in The Singularity of Literature. Whether Suckling’s poem was original or not is an empirical, historical question: it would require extensive research to establish whether any other English poet had accomplished exactly this combination of metrical and tonal expressiveness, and whether other poets had taken advantage of what he achieved in their own work. On the other hand, whether we can say now that the poem is inventive, in the sense in which I’m using the term, depends on the experience of reading it today: a work is only inventive for a reader, since inventiveness is only experienced in the act-event of reading. (The kind of thorough investigative analysis advocated—and undertaken—by Bourdieu into the conditions under which artistic breakthroughs occur deals only with originality, not with inventiveness.) Though I haven’t done sufficient research to decide on the degree of originality represented by Suckling’s poem, I do find it inventive. It produces a little charge of surprise each time I read it: in its use of sexual rakishness as a means to make an amorous compliment it ventures into an affective space I’ve encountered nowhere else and in its handling of poetic techniques to achieve this complex unfolding it possesses genuine singularity. This is what entitles me to say that, for me, it is a work of literature. If I were to discover that what seems fresh in Suckling’s poem was actually derived entirely from another poet’s work—in other words that it had no originality—I would probably find my sense of its inventiveness fading, though it’s hard to imagine it disappearing. (If the poem was a word-for-word copy, I would simply transfer my admiration to the earlier poet; the poem would retain its inventiveness.)

The puzzle as to how in the early twenty-first century I can find poems written in the sixteenth and seventeenth century inventive, carrying me into new territories of thinking and feeling, showing off the power of the language and poetic technique in a fresh light, remains one of the most difficult phenomena in literary practice to explain, and we shall have to return to it.
Q
Your account of literary invention is largely based on theoretical deduction. Is there any concrete evidence for it?

A
Above all, I would appeal to the evidence of literary history: the activities of writers since the classical period, and the reports that have come down to us of readers’ experiences. To trace artistic, including literary, history in the West is to follow a narrative of constant invention as each artist builds on and departs from previous art to offer a new apprehension of inner and outer worlds, and to find fresh ways of utilizing the materials of a particular medium to surprise and please the recipient. Chaucer adapted the Italian endecasillabo to create a medium for English verse, the iambic pentameter, that allowed him to capture subtleties of tone and humour hitherto unavailable to English poets; Sidney fine-tuned English prose to embody courtly virtues in the Arcadia; Shakespeare exploited the material potential of the new theatres in a way that appealed to the masses; and so on down to the current crop of writers each attempting to create a work that will strike readers as possessing distinctiveness, opening new horizons, and providing the pleasure that comes from inventiveness.

Q
We need to pick up the tricky question of the apparent transcendence of history involved in your notion of invention. What is the relation between a writer’s inventive bringing into the world of a work of literature at a specific moment in history and the reader’s experience of that work as inventive fifty, a hundred, a thousand years later?

A
This is indeed a tricky question, and not one that has been much addressed in literary theory, although it seems to me central to what is distinctive about literature. As Rita Felski has noted, “We cannot close our eyes to the historicity of artworks, and yet we sorely need alternatives to seeing them as transcendentally timeless on the one hand, and imprisoned in their moment of origin on the other” (“Context Stinks,” 575).

There is plenty of evidence for the experience of inventiveness as something happening in the present even while the reader is well aware that the work dates from the past. We can return to Donne for some examples of readers’ testimonies. In The Singularity of Literature I quoted F. R. Leavis’s account in Revaluation of his reading of an anthology of seventeenth century poetry: reaching Donne’s poems after ninety pages of work by other poets of the time, he says that ‘we cease reading as students, or as connoisseurs of anthology pieces, and read on as we read the living’ (18). For a more recent witness we can turn to Achsah Guibbory, the editor of the Cambridge Companion to John Donne, who opens an essay on Donne’s erotic poetry with this: “Even after four centuries, Donne’s love poetry strikes us as fresh and immediate, with its urgent rhythms, its
irregular, frequent stresses communicating the sense that passion cannot be contained within regular iambic feet” (133). One could multiply these examples from a number of academic and non-academic sources.

Leavis doesn’t hesitate to identify the inventiveness he experiences in the poems as he reads them with the inventiveness felt by Donne’s early readers: “The extraordinary force of originality that made Donne so potent an influence in the seventeenth century makes him now at once for us, without his being the less felt as of his period, contemporary” (Revaluation, 18). And Leavis is surely not alone in making this claim: few readers who sense that the words of, say, “The Sun Rising” open up a fresh perspective on sensual love would hesitate to say that it’s Donne’s inventiveness they are experiencing, rather than something the words are achieving by themselves, irrespective of Donne’s creative efforts. (This is an aspect of authoredness, to use my coinage again; it’s also perhaps reflected in our habitual use of the present tense in describing what happens in a literary work.) But is this simply an illusion created by the intensity of the feeling; are we really just experiencing the work’s originality in relation to our own past reading and our own habits and expectations?

In attempting to answer this question, we must first return to the distinction between the scholar’s sense of a work’s originality and the experience of inventiveness described by Leavis (who distinguishes it from the scholar’s way of reading). If I’ve read a great deal of sixteenth-century poetry, I will appreciate Donne’s originality more fully than someone with only a limited acquaintance. That historical knowledge may well enter into my reading of the poem and may enhance my enjoyment—or diminish it, if it seems that Donne was less original than I had at first assumed. The experience of the poem’s inventiveness, however, its introduction of something unanticipated in the reading process, doesn’t depend on historical knowledge, although historical knowledge may feed into it. What it feels like is a transcendence or short-circuiting of history, a leaping over the centuries to share the adventure of creation with the writer. And, yes, on occasions it could well be an illusion: although there may be some historical evidence to confirm that what feels like inventiveness now corresponds to what was actually inventive then, such evidence can never be conclusive. My sense that I’m reliving the exhilaration of the original invention may indeed be only a reflection of the work’s relation to my own culture, a purely contingent phenomenon, a happy coincidence.

However, there are reasons to believe that, at least in the case of works that can be said to emanate from a culture historically linked to my own, there is usually more than coincidence at work. When I read a novel and enjoy its forays into what feels like new territory, I experience a transformation in my own idioculture, which is, as I’ve said, a complex of attitudes, aptitudes, habits of thought and feeling, and pieces of knowledge, formed as the impress of the broader culture around me in a constellation that includes traces of my past cultural experiences. If I’ve absorbed a rich array of cultural materials and my culture has a historical connection with that of the work I’m reading, it’s at least possible that the inventiveness I engage with is related to that of the writer. Although the feelings, discourses, and behaviours that constituted the experience of “being in love” in the late sixteenth century were hugely different from their equivalents today,
there nevertheless remains, when all the differences have been taken into account, a common
residue that enables readers today to share something of the situations and emotions of individuals
in loving relationships several hundred years ago.

While, as I’ve suggested, there can be no single “best” reading of a work of literature—given
the dependence of all readings on the situatedness of the reader—the better readings are usually
those made by readers immersed in their own culture and informed, to some degree at least, about
the culture in which the original work was written. At the same time, it’s possible for the cultural
context of the reader, crystallized in a singular idioculture, to create obstacles to good readings.
Many commentators in the eighteenth and nineteenth century responded strongly but negatively
to Donne’s inventiveness. It was perhaps Dryden who established this commonplace, with his
judgement in the Dedication to “Eleanora” that Donne was “the greatest Wit, though not the best
Poet of our Nation” (Poems 1685-1692, 233). Hyppolite Taine can serve to furnish a fairly extreme
version of a common Victorian view: “Twenty times while reading him we rub our brow and ask
with astonishment, how a man could so have tormented and contorted himself, strained his style,
refined on his refinement, hit upon such absurd comparisons?” (History of English Literature, 204).
Clearly, such readers were not participating in the excitement of Donne’s own inventive
explorations of the powers of English verse; they were simply registering the difference between
his poetry and that of his forebears (and most of his successors until their own time). The otherness
apprehended by Donne remained wholly other to them because the poetic culture of their own
period required that such ways of writing, thinking, and feeling be excluded in order for them to be
able to pursue their own composing and reading.

It could be said that the culture of Renaissance England—or, rather, those aspects relevant
to the composition and reception of Donne’s love poetry—were too different from those of the
eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to allow the kind of transhistorical experience of inventiveness
that later generations were able to enjoy. The situation is not essentially different when we’re
dealing with writing in different cultures arising in different parts of the world. If I read one of
Rumi’s love poems translated from Farsi, the chances are that any inventive encounter with alterity
I experience has little do with the original impulse of creation—assuming I’m not expert in Persian
literature and culture. This is not a reason for ignoring poetry from other cultures; it’s an argument
for trying to absorb some of their elements. And if I do find myself moved by a Rumi poem because
it happens to chime with certain aspects of love poetry in my own culture, there’s nothing
illegitimate or reprehensible about the pleasure I feel—though chances are be it won’t be
particularly deep or complex.