CHAPTER 2 • J. HILLIS MILLER

LITERATURE MATTERS TODAY

Ranjan Ghosh and I have agreed to add within our paired essays comments by each of us on the other's essay of a given pair. This initial pair (chapters 1 and 2) consists of somewhat programmatic statements by each of us about the nature and function of literature as we see it. Ghosh's essay is challenging in a number of ways. I have read it repeatedly in order to get the hang of it as best I can. I have learned much from it, for example, about Sanskrit or Hindu literary theory and also about Rabindranath Tagore. I also have a new understanding of Ranjan Ghosh's own theory of literature. Of these three things I had been only partially informed. Now some further light has dawned.

I begin this chapter by stressing, as I have in the preface, that neither of us speak for a whole culture, Ghosh for Indian culture, I for U.S. culture. Both those cultures are immensely diverse. Many different conceptions of literature abound in each. Simona Sawney, for example, in *The Modernity of Sanskrit*, has argued for the heterogeneity both of modern Indian literature in Hindu and of the Sanskrit tradition that has so deeply influenced it.[1] My conception of literature is only one among the many different ones that are salient in the United States today. To some of my compatriots, perhaps to many, my position may seem idiosyncratic. Ghosh and I speak for ourselves, though each is a representative, on the one hand, of one Indian way to define literature, or, on the other hand, of one U.S. way.

Nevertheless, something of cultural or national difference may lie behind the way the two essays are strikingly different in their conceptions of what literature is and why it matters. Their stylistic and methodological procedures also differ. I shall insert some dialogical observations about these two forms of difference here and there in my chapter. In spite of these differences, however, an unexpected consonance between our two views of literature ultimately emerges. It was unexpected by me, at least.

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Why and How Literature Matters to Me

Matters! This is an odd word when used as a verb. Of course we know what it means. The verbal form of *matter* means "count for something," "have import," "have effects in the real world," "be worth taking seriously." Using the word as a noun, however, someone might speak of "literature matters," meaning the whole realm that involves literature. The newsletter of the Maine chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club is called *Wilderness Matters*, punning on the word as a noun and as a verb. We might say, analogously, "Literature Matters," as my title does. In medieval Europe, learned people spoke of "the matter of Rome," "the matter of Arthur," "the matter of Greece," meaning the whole set of stories that lay behind Aeneas's story, the Arthurian romances, or Odysseus's, Achilles's, and Oedipus's stories. The verb *matter* resonates with the noun *matter*. The latter means sheer, unorganized physical substance. Aristotle opposed unformed matter to form. This suggests that if something matters its import is not abstract. What matters is not purely verbal, spiritual, or formal. It has concrete effects on materiality, in the form perhaps of human bodies and their behavior. Does literature matter in that sense today?

It matters quite a bit, however, what we mean by "literature" when we ask whether literature matters today. I am assuming that *literature* means printed books that contain what most people ordinarily think of these days as literature, that is, poems, plays, and novels. Just what is literary about poems, plays, and novels is another matter, to which I shall return. I shall also have something to say in other chapters about the migration of the literary to new digital media. I call this magic transformation prestidigitalization.

It is often taken for granted that what most matters about literature, if it matters at all, is the accuracy with which it reflects the real world or functions as a guide to conduct for readers living in that world. The mimetic paradigm, two and a half millennia old, going back to the Greeks, in its multitude of permutations, has had, and still has, great power, at least in the Western world. A little reflection, however, will show that this paradigm is extremely problematic. It is easily contested or easily made more complicated, as I shall later on briefly show.

The reader will also recognize that adding *today* to *literature matters* is a move that matters. Literature's import differs in different times, places, and societies. My interest is in the question of whether literature matters now, today, here in the United States of America (since I know that best). I am

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also interested in the global here and now, within which all we human beings, Americans and the rest, more and more live from moment to moment today. I note from the outset that the multitude of books and essays, such as this book, on whether or not literature matters any longer would not be necessary if the mattering of literature today were not in doubt. All who love literature are collectively anxious today about whether literature matters. No such books and essays would likely have seemed necessary in Victorian England, for example, my original field of specialization. To literate Victorians, both middle class and upper class, the assumption that literature mattered quite a lot was so much taken for granted as almost never to be a matter for interrogation.

Literate and *literature* have the same root, meaning written letters. You are literate if you can make sense of written letters. You are then "lettered." Literature is made of letters, marks made on paper by some writing technology or other. The primary technology was printing presses, in the epoch from the seventeenth century to the present. That was the period of what we Westerners generally mean by *literature*. Most Victorian readers took it for granted that printed literature, especially in the form of novels, reflected back to them the everyday social world they lived in. Novels, moreover, taught them how to behave in courtship and marriage, as well as in many other regions of everyday life. That way of assuming that literature matters may explain the continued power, even today, of the mimetic, realist paradigm.

Literature, however, was also the chief way Victorians could enjoy the pleasures of entering into an imaginary world invented for them by someone more gifted than they in manipulating language. Those pleasures were often seen as guilty and dangerous, especially for young women, but also for young men. Think of Catherine Morland, the heroine of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, or of Conrad's Lord Jim. Flaubert's Emma Bovary is the paradigmatic example of fictional characters corrupted by reading literature.

These two assumptions about why literature matters were in tension in Victorian culture and in European culture generally. That tension defined the social role literate Victorians, of the middle class and the upper class, assumed literature to have. Think of it! The Victorians had no film, no radio, no television, no video games, no DVDs, no Internet, no iPhoto, no Kindles, no iPads, no smartphones, no Facebook. Such technological impoverishment! They had only printed books, newspapers, and magazines to satisfy their needs both for reflective mimesis and for enjoying the imaginary.

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The reader will note already how different, both in style and in concept, this chapter is from Ranjan Ghosh's "Making Sahitya Matter." On the one hand, my chapter is relatively cool, rational, and objective, with only a pervasive evanescent scent of irony to distinguish it from some forms of standard academic discourse in the United States. My instinct is to begin with somewhat ironic comments on the complexity of everyday words in English, such as *matter*. This, like irony in general, is a way of being both inside and outside at once. Ghosh, on the other hand, does not refrain from writing poetically, nor from appropriating the poetic writing of others, for example, passages from Tagore and Chuang-tzu, as the best way to communicate what he wants to say. His references to a Hindu or Sanskrit concept of poetry is buttressed by reference to Chinese analogues. By "writing poetically," I mean appropriating the language modes of his examples for his own discourse. He assumes that explaining literature can only be done to some degree poetically, or, to use one of his words, by "fabulizing" it. I would be more likely to use the term *parable* (as in the parables of Jesus in the New Testament of the Christian Bible) or the term *catachresis* (the Greek name for a word that is not literal but does not substitute for any literal word, such as "leg of a table" or "face of a mountain"). But a fable, too, speaks by indirection about something that cannot be spoken of directly. Ghosh uses Tagore's stories of the fish and Chuang-tzu's story of the tree and two geese and Frost's poem "Birches" (the last in an extended discussion) as parabolic, catachrestic, or fabulist exemplifications of what literature does. For Ghosh, literature indirectly names, through its sacredness, the unnamable other world that orients literature.

Ghosh also frequently uses poetic or alogical linguistic devices like paradox or the simultaneous affirmation of opposites. The implication is that *sahitya* is not open to exposition in strictly logical language only. The sacred, as Ghosh argues, is both about the meaning that sahitya's utility generates and the meaning that emerges beyond its utility. On the one hand, Ghosh gives much allegiance to the Sanskrit concept of literature as sahitya, even though he gives Western formulations equal allegiance. The term *sahitya* is formed from the word *sahit*, "union." It names union with the Dao (the sacred), that is, with the hidden world that literature expresses indirectly. I, on the other hand, would hesitate to use the word *sacred* to characterize secular literature, that is, printed novels, poems, and plays in Western languages. In my tradition, that is, broadly speaking, in the Western tradition, the only texts that are widely assumed to be sacred are the Bible, both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible, and the Koran.

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Secular texts, for example Dante's *La Divina Comedia* and many others, may be religious through and through, or register religious experience, but they do not have the sacred authority the West ascribes to the Bible. Ghosh uses the word *sacred* in a way quite different from my habitual usage. In a lucid note to me, Ghosh explains just what he means by *sacred*: "I am using the word 'sacred' to mean a part of literature which is 'untouched,' something that does not give easy access to its readers. This has nothing to do with 'divine' or sacramental authority. Sacred is the secret power of literature to generate more meaning when conventional understanding of literature becomes aporetic."

I shall now dare to speak briefly about why literature has mattered to me. Here is another important difference between my position and Ghosh's. Ghosh makes many references to Western texts (Heidegger, Gadamer, Rancière, etc.) that are in resonance with Sanskrit sahitya. His bottom line is the assumption that the Sanskrit concept of poetry is just one version of a worldwide theory of literature, perennially true, that has much diversity and complexity. This theory is not limited in time, culture, or language. I, on the contrary, claim that my theory of literature's nature and uses has validity only for me, even though others (I hope) may agree with me.

In spite of my many years of studying literature, teaching it, and writing about it, I remain to this day puzzled by literary works. I remember the poem that exemplified my puzzlement and still does so. This is a short poem by Tennyson, one of the songs in *The Princess*, called "Tears, Idle Tears." It is a wonderful poem. I read this poem when I was still majoring in physics as an undergraduate at Oberlin College and found it an exceedingly strange use of language. In my science courses, I was taught to say the truth straightforwardly, to explain anomalies, and to use language in as uncomplicated a way as possible. Tennyson seemed to me to do no such things. The poem begins:

> Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
> Tears from the depth of some divine despair
> Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,
> In looking on the happy Autumn-fields,
> And thinking of the days that are no more.[2]

I asked myself, what in the world does this mean? What does Tennyson mean by calling his tears idle? In what sense are these tears idle? Why did he write, "I know not what they mean?" I did not know what they mean, either. The poem is very beautiful. There is no doubt about that, but so

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what? And “tears from the depth of some divine despair?” What does “divine despair” mean? It might mean despair of some god. What god? Gods are not supposed to despair. What is this god in despair about? Why are the autumn fields happy? I thought they were just inhuman matter. In short, I had dozens of questions about just these few lines. It seems to me that simply to read the poem out loud to students, as teachers often used to do, and to say how beautiful it is, is not enough. Yes, I agree. It is beautiful. But what does it mean? I think we are justified in demanding a high degree of explicability from literary works and in demanding that our teachers help students in this hermeneutic work.

Why, I continued to wonder, should it matter to me whether I read and understand this poem or not? I wanted to figure out answers to these questions, to account for the poem in the way astrophysicists account for data from outer space. Decades after my shift from physics to literature, I wrote an essay trying, belatedly, to answer those questions I had about “Tears, Idle Tears.”[3] What was wrongheaded about my original project took me some years to discover. I am still discovering, that is, still trying to come to terms with what de Man identifies as the irreconcilability of hermeneutics and poetics, meaning and the way meaning is expressed.[4] I shall discuss what de Man says in chapter 4. A shorthand description of my mistake would be to say that data from the stars and the linguistic matter that makes up poems require fundamentally different methodologies of “accounting for.” I have spent my whole life trying to account for various presumptively literary works. That is my vocation: reading, teaching, lecturing, and writing about print literature. Literature matters a great deal to me.

My citations from literature, as opposed to Ghosh’s, for example, my quotation from “Tears, Idle Tears,” are used to exemplify my puzzlement about just what literary works in the Western tradition mean, say, or are meant to do to their readers. Ghosh’s citations are meant to exemplify the way literature’s sacredness is mostly inscribed in the unnamed and the unstructured. I am more interested than Ghosh is in making rhetorical, formal, or stylistic analyses of literary works. I am more willing than he is to consider positively literature’s contribution to empirical knowledge about the social world and its role in the formation of ethical norms, whereas he stresses the sacredness of literature’s “uselessness” in the everyday world of getting enough to eat or keeping warm in cold weather. I am also much more concerned than he is with the medium of poetry, in particular the epochal change going on right now throughout the world from print

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culture to digital culture, from printed books to computers, Kindles, and iPads. Ghosh says nothing about this in his chapter 1. For Ghosh, in his chapter 1 at least, literature as sahitya apparently remains literature, when expressed in whatever medium. For him, to recall H. Marshall McLuhan's famous formulation, the medium is *not* the message. The message is in the words in whatever medium.

Well, how much does literature matter in the world in general today? It is easy to see that literature, in the sense of printed poems, plays, and novels, is mattering less and less. We are in the long, drawn-out twilight of the epoch of print literature, an epoch that began less than four centuries ago and could end without bringing about the death of civilization. Though, of course, literary works are still widely read all over the world, in different degrees in different places, literature matters less and less to many people, including highly educated ones. Recent statistical studies have shown that fewer and fewer young people read books of any sort for pleasure. The double role of allowing the pleasures of entering imaginary worlds and of learning about the real world and how to behave in it are more and more shifting to new technological devices of telecommunication: films, video games, television shows, popular music, Facebook, and so on. I include television news broadcasts as forms of the imaginary. They have almost as much interpolated advertising as news. Advertising is another form of the imaginary. The ability or the need to create imaginary worlds out of words on printed pages is less and less an important part of most people's lives. Probably people are becoming less adept at doing it. Why go to all the bother to read that extremely difficult novel, Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*, for example, when you can so much more easily watch the splendid BBC television version?

The new telecommunications devices have made a fantastically rapid change worldwide in human culture. Literature, too, has been radically and irreversibly changed. Downloading and reading on a computer screen, or on a Kindle, or on an iPad, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* or any of the hundreds of thousands of other literary texts now floating in cyberspace is in obvious ways, and in more subtle ways, too, greatly different from reading a literary work in a printed book. This is partly because the digital version is searchable and can be cut and pasted, partly because its material base, its matter, its *subjectile*, as Derrida calls it, is so different.[5] A digital text has a radically different surrounding context. That new context is all the unimaginable heterogeneity of cyberspace as against the neat rows of alphabetized books in a library. Each context has a different form of

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portability and a different location, or nonlocation. The nonspace of cyberspace accessed by those ghostly letters on a computer screen is strikingly different from a printed book in a private or public library. A printed book is a solid object you can hold in your hands, not evanescent letters on an electronic screen.

The process of inventing literary works has also been radically changed. The underlying matter of literature, its material base, has been revolutionized. For most poets or novelists, no more writing successive drafts by hand on paper with a pen or pencil, then laboriously typing and retyping the text to get a final draft ready to be typeset. This typesetting happened at first, during the early print epoch, letter by letter. Subsequently it was done by linotype, with successive proofs to be read and marked by hand. These were set and then reset again when the second proofs had been checked. That was still the case when I began my scholarly work.

The composition of literary works on the computer has changed all that. The ease of revision of a computer file means that a new literary text is never really finished. It can always be further revised, as I am revising this essay at this moment (5:56 PM, April 16, 2016), and have revised it repeatedly in the past several years. The successive drafts of computer files are, for the most part, lost forever. That puts a whole scholarly industry out of business: the study of early drafts of a given text. This new form of literature exists from the beginning in a quasi-disembodied form, as zeros and ones on a hard drive or in some cloud memory. Though the file may ultimately take print form, that printing is now done flawlessly from a computer file. That file often exists as a PDF. More and more, literary works come out simultaneously in print form and as e-texts. People who read literature at all anymore often choose to read it on line, in another form of the prestidigitalization of literature.

As I said in a book title, *The Medium Is the Maker: Browning, Freud, Derrida and the New Telepathic Technologies*,[6] the mode of materialization of a given literary work fundamentally determines its meaning and its performative force. The matter of literature matters. The new computer medium makes literature radically different from its old self, different, that is, down to its roots, which is what *radical* etymologically means. *Medium* must be taken here in the sense both of a new material base and of a seemingly, but of course not actually, somewhat spooky, spiritualist, mediumistic, telepathic means of transmission. Something speaks to me through the medium, for example, from the computer screen, but by an entirely explicable technological process. Ranjan Ghosh is much less concerned than

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I am with the effect of the medium on meaning. At least he writes little about it. For him, just as "the Sacredness of Literature" is perennially valid as a concept of what literature is and what it does, so it does not seem to matter in what medium a given work is encountered. Frost's "Birches" remains Frost's "Birches," whether we read it in printed book or on an iPad, in a digitized version. That is a plausible assumption, but I am arguing otherwise. For me, the medium is an important determinant of meaning.

Strangely enough, one thinks with one's fingers when writing. I am not a creative writer, just someone who writes about, and roundabout, literature, in endless circumlocution. Nevertheless, I have gone through the difficulty of changing from inventing words with a pen in my hand, as I used to do, to inventing them with my fingers on a computer keyboard, as I do habitually now. The latter is happening right now, with the words that are at this moment flowing through my fingers from who knows where in my nervous system, onto the keyboard and then magically appearing on my computer screen. Some impersonal inner voice seems to speak them as they are keyed in. They come into being by an inventive bodily process that is more discovering than deliberately making up, to recall the bifurcated meaning of invention.

Derrida long ago identified literature, in our modern Western sense, with the several centuries of print culture and its attendant technologies, with the appearance of modern democracies and modern capitalism, and with the concomitant rise of a literate middle class granted nominal (I stress nominal) freedom to say and write anything in a literary work and not be held accountable for it.[7] An author could always say, for example, of the narrator of a novel or of the speaker of a lyric poem she or he has written, "That is not me speaking but an imaginary person created out of words." Derrida also long ago prophetically foresaw, in a notable passage in the "Envois" section of *La carte postale: De Socrate à Freud et au-delà*, that computer technology would bring literature, along with a number of important other cultural institutions, to an end. One of Derrida's imaginary postcard writers asserts: "An entire epoch of so-called [*ladite*] literature, if not all of it, cannot survive a certain technological regime of telecommunications (in this respect the political regime is secondary). Neither can philosophy, or psychoanalysis. Or love letters."[8] I use this passage as the epigraph for my chapter 8 in this book and discuss it further there. The technological regime, for Derrida, overpowers any political regime, as we can see in the transformations in North Africa of repressive regimes. These transformations have been made possible, to a considerable

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degree, by mobile phones. Derrida elsewhere writes in "Envois" about how psychoanalysis, as a quasi-science and as a social institution, would have been radically different if Freud and his associates had been able to communicate by e-mail rather than having to depend on the postal system and the telephone.[9] The same thing can be said of literature. Suppose Shakespeare or Fielding, Wordsworth or Dickens, had been able to compose on the computer and self-publish an e-text version on a personal website or on Facebook! The mind boggles at the thought!

The signs that Derrida was right, that is, the signs of a gradual vanishing of print literature as a cultural force, are everywhere visible, in different degrees and in different ways in each country. I discuss these in some detail in my chapter 8. We do not have time, today, it might well be argued, to worry about whether literature any longer matters. Who cares? How can we justify taking time to care about something so trivial, something that matters so little, when we have such big problems?

I have elsewhere argued for an anachronistic reading of older literary works. I mean by *anachronistic* a reading of literature in the context of our situation today, not by way of some attempt to put oneself back inside the mind-frame of a Renaissance man or woman in order to read Shakespeare, or of a middle-class Victorian to read Dickens or George Eliot.[10] The concept of a uniform period mindset, as in *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, or *The Elizabethan World Picture*, is in any case extremely problematic.[11] Victorian and Elizabethan frames of mind, the evidence shows, were quite heterogeneous. Even if a uniform period mindset existed, why would identifying oneself with it be an attractive thing to try to do, except for literary historians, those putatively impersonal and objective scholars? Why pretend we are still Victorians or Elizabethans? The answer, I suppose, is that it will make us better readers of *Middlemarch* or of Tennyson's *The Princess*, but literary works create their appropriate frames of mind in their readers, a different one for each text, however much explanatory historical footnotes may help. In place of the virtues claimed for the so-called historical imagination, I argue in some detail in chapter 8 that literature matters most for us if it is read for today, and read rhetorically, to some degree as training in ways to spot lies, ideological distortions, and hidden political agendas such as surround us on all sides in the media these days.

I give here one example: NBC evening news, on television in the United States, ends almost every day with another "Making a Difference" segment. These are typically moving human-interest stories about how some person, family, or group is helping neighbors. One typical segment told

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the story of a family in Texas that is sending $2,000 a month to a family in Alabama in which the breadwinners have lost their jobs and have had their mortgage foreclosed. They were about to lose their home because they could not make the monthly mortgage payments. The father is also being aided in his job search. Who would not admire the charity, the human sympathy, of that family in Texas? The hidden political message, however, drummed in implicitly day after day by ever new versions of such stories, is that we do not need to have higher taxes on rich people and large corporations, better education, regulation of banks, other financial institutions, and credit card companies, and stimulus spending by the Federal government to create jobs, universal health care, control of carbon dioxide emissions, and so on. We do not need these because charitable families in Texas or elsewhere will always save the needy. It is an attractive fantasy.

Teaching people how to read rhetorically those old poems, plays, and novels could make studying literature concentrated training in reading the media. By *rhetorically* I mean teaching literature by way of a distinction between hermeneutics and poetics, what is meant and the way that meaning is expressed. I borrow these terms from Paul de Man, who borrows them from Walter Benjamin and from the *Hermeneutik und Poetik* series of conferences and conference books from the University of Konstanz.[12] De Man claims, correctly, that hermeneutics and poetics are incompatible.

Of course this incompatibility can also be taught by way of items in the new media, for example, by explaining the hidden message in the way the spokespersons in television commercials for oil, gas, and coal are consistently briskly attractive women, or minorities, or bearded intellectuals, not the more or less ruthless and greedy white men who actually run Chevron, Halliburton, the fracking companies, and the rest. Many of the best and most exemplary rhetorical readings, however, are of literary works, or of philosophical and theoretical texts, for example, readings by de Man and Derrida. Literary works, moreover, offer more concentrated and complex examples.

Teaching students how to read in the light of the distinction between poetics and hermeneutics is a way literature can still be brought to matter. This way of teaching students how to read literature is, alas, unlikely to become a widespread program. It is a Utopian dream. This dream may become reality in isolated cases, but most teachers of literature are not taught to teach in that way. Literature, as I have said, is in any case taught less and less in any way at all, at least in the United States. To many people here, literature does not matter.

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Now it might be argued that the satisfaction of human beings' insatiable desire for the literary, for the imaginary, that is, for a certain figurative or fictive use of words or other signs, has simply migrated to other media, for example, to films, including animated films, or to video games, or even to punning newspaper headlines, or to television advertising. "A certain figurative or fictive use of words or other signs" is an extremely problematic definition of the literary, by the way, warranting extensive commentary. Derrida is right, I believe, to assert, in his interview with Derek Attridge in *Acts of Literature*, that "there is no text which is literary *in itself.* Literarity is not a natural essence, an intrinsic property of the text. It is the correlative of an intentional relation to the text, an intentional relation which integrates in itself, as a component or an intentional layer, the more or less implicit consciousness of rules which are conventional or institutional—social, in any case."[13] *Intentional*, here, is a Husserlian or phenomenological word naming the orientation of consciousness toward something or other. Newspaper headlines and television ads are often conspicuously witty and imaginative. If Derrida is right, we might well be justified in intending them as manifestations of literarity, that is, taking them as literature. A television commercial often takes the viewer or listener instantly into a conspicuously wacky or slapstick imaginary world, as in the one that shows a little dog rushing back and forth trying to find a safe place to hide a bone. This is an analogue, it turns out, for human beings' search for a safe place to put their money. It is an ad for an investment firm.

Such ads employ an extremely sophisticated set of conventions. They often use animations and other advanced cinematic devices. Most such commercials, by the way, have a large component of outright lies or at least of ideological distortions, as in my example of NBC's "Making a Difference" series, or in the many ads on behalf of oil, gas, and "clean" coal companies. Lies are a potent form of the imaginary. If Shakespeare were resurrected today, he might be creating video games or advertising spots, not writing plays. The digital world is where the big money is.

This migration of literarity is certainly happening, but this movement happens at the expense of literature in the traditional sense. Printed literature is, in the West, gradually becoming a thing of the past.

Let me now get serious and ask again why literature (in the old-fashioned sense of printed poems, plays, and novels) ought still to matter even in these dire times. In order to be more specific, to get closer to the actual matter of literature, let me give a series of citations from the openings of several works, all in English (with one exception) that I claim are

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literature. Most people worldwide would probably agree that my citations are examples of what is commonly meant by *literature*. I take openings because they strikingly reveal the way each work shows itself to be different, unique, even within the oeuvre of a given author. The opening of each work instantly takes the reader into a distinctive imaginary world cut off from the real world, though a transformation of it. Entering such a world is what I mean by the "pleasures of the imaginary." And an intense pleasure it is! That pleasure is a good in itself. I postpone, for a moment, explaining what I mean by "the imaginary," a phrase so far taken too much for granted in this chapter. In order to illustrate one of my points, I shall call down all my opening lines from cyberspace, downloading each by way of an almost instantaneous Google search:

Elsinore. A platform before the castle.
FRANCISCO at his post. Enter to him BERNARDO

BERNARDO: Who's there?
FRANCISCO: Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself.
BERNARDO: Long live the king!
FRANCISCO: Bernardo?
BERNARDO: He.
FRANCISCO: You come most carefully upon your hour.
BERNARDO: 'Tis now struck twelve; get thee to bed, Francisco.
FRANCISCO: For this relief much thanks: 'tis bitter cold,
And I am sick at heart.

—Shakespeare, *Hamlet*[14]

OF MANS FIRST DISOBEDIENCE, AND THE FRUIT
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal tast
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of EDEN, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
Sing Heav'nly Muse

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*[15]

IT is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

—Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*[16]

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:

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She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

—William Wordsworth, “A Slumber Did My Sprit Seal”[17]

Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,
Tears from the depth of some divine despair

—Alfred Lord Tennyson, “Tears, Idle Tears”[18]

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world.

—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*[19]

“I can never bring myself to believe it, John,” said Mary Walker,
the pretty daughter of Mr. George Walker, attorney of Silverbridge.
Walker and Winthrop was the name of the firm, and they were
respectable people, who did all the solicitors’ business that had
to be done in that part of Barsetshire on behalf of the Crown, were
employed on the local business of the Duke of Omnium who is great in
those parts, and altogether held their heads up high, as provincial
lawyers often do. They,—the Walkers,—lived in a great brick
house in the middle of the town, gave dinners, to which the county
gentlemen not unfrequently condescended to come, and in a mild way
led the fashion in Silverbridge. “I can never bring myself to believe
it, John,” said Miss Walker.
“You’ll have to bring yourself to believe it,” said John, without
taking his eyes from his book.
“A clergyman,—and such a clergyman too!”

—Anthony Trollope, *The Last Chronicle of Barset*[20]

Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven
That seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice . . .

—W. B. Yeats, “The Cold Heaven”[21]

Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure. Parfois, à peine ma bougie éteinte, mes yeux se fermaient si vite que je n’avais pas le temps de me dire: “Je m’endors.”

—Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*[22]

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In Hydaspia, by Howzen
Lived a lady, Lady Lowzen,
For whom what is was other things.

—Wallace Stevens, "Oak Leaves Are Hands"[23]

Well, there is literature for you, the real right thing! I could extend the list indefinitely, in a litany of remembered literary pleasures. Do those pleasures matter? What makes reading them pleasurable? Is it a guilty pleasure? I stress seven features my examples share:

*Each is markedly different from all the others. Each is unique, incommensurable with the others, even though each in one way or another uses perfectly ordinary words that name things and actions familiar in the real world. Those words are, nevertheless, here transformed. They are appropriated to name imaginary worlds that have no referential correlates in the real world. You can meet Lady Lowzen and visit Howzen only in Stevens's poem, even though "by Howzen" is a play on the German or Pennsylvania Dutch phrase *bei Hausen*, meaning "next door." The imaginary is next door to the real. All the informative, realist specificity of *The Last Chronicle of Barset*'s masterly opening lines is a sham, and readers know it is a sham. No Walker family and no apparently felonious Rev. Josiah Crawley exist anywhere but in the pages of the novel, or, rather, in the imaginary realm to which those words on the page give the reader access.

*Each citation provides entrance into a distinctive imaginary world by the magic "open sesame!" of a few inaugural words. These words work like Alice's passing through the big mirror into the looking-glass world at the beginning of Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*.

*This entry into the imaginary happens "suddenly," to borrow Yeats' word. It happens in an instant, in a decisive break with whatever may have preceded the reading of these particular words, for example, the reading of a previous example. It is a plunge in medias res, but into strange and alien things, like finding oneself suddenly in a foreign country.

*Each opening passage, in one way or another, conspicuously uses figurative transfers or plays on words, though not in any predictable or uniform way.

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*The effect on the reader, on me as reader, at least, is to create an almost irresistible compulsion to go on reading in order to find out what happens next. These inaugural instants are each, in one way or another, enigmatic, puzzling, partly because leaping into the middle of things seems in each case to presuppose all sorts of things the reader does not yet know, for example, the name of the presumably felonious clergyman, Josiah Crawley, in the opening of Trollope's *Last Chronicle.* You want to go on reading to find those things out, to orient yourself. Each example, moreover, is, in a different way in each case, clearly the beginning of some kind of narrative, a story. Human beings, we know, love stories.

*Though the reader knows perfectly well, or thinks he or she knows, that each fictive realm is created by the language that tells of it, nevertheless, it seems, in my experience at least, but only seems, that each realm has been there all along. It seems to have been waiting somewhere to be entered and described with the open sesame of so-called literary language. Invention, as making up, seems, fallaciously, to be invention as discovering, as the antithetical Latin word, *inventio*, can also mean.

*Each inaugural passage, though, in a different way in each case, even Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* by way of its stage directions, creates the illusion of a speaking or writing voice, a storyteller. Nevertheless, even when, as in many of my examples, that voice speaks explicitly as an "I" the narrative voice is characterized by a certain strange impersonality. This speaking or writing enunciator is like that strange voice that speaks within me, to a considerable degree out of my control, the words I am writing down at this moment. The words come from who knows where and are spoken within me by who knows what impersonal linguistic power. I take responsibility for them, but they are not me speaking, any more than the real person Herman Melville speaks or writes, "Call me Ishmael."

Maurice Blanchot, in a notable essay, called this strangely alien voice, a voice already coming from a fictive or imaginary world, "La voix narrative (le 'il,' le neutre)" (The narrative voice, the "he," the neutral).[24] I shall return later in this chapter to a more extended discussion of Blanchot's theories of narrative. Blanchot is, in my judgment, one of the greatest literary critics and theorists of the twentieth century. His work has had a consid-

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erable influence over the years on my own conceptions of literary theory and of literary criticism. Hegel, Émile Benveniste, Paul de Man, and, most recently, John Namjun Kim have in different ways brought into the open the abyssal ambiguity, duplicity, or, better, "ironic undecidability," of the words for the ego in different Western languages. This especially so when they are used in openly literary texts, as in so many of my examples.[25] One conspicuous example is Yeats's "Suddenly I saw." The "I" who speaks in a literary text seems at first to be a person, a self, perhaps the self of the author, but reveals itself to be at the same time an empty placeholder ("eine leere Flasche") for anybody, in the end for nobody but an impersonal power of literary speech, Blanchot's "neutral."

To develop this line of thought adequately would take another long essay, but I break the line now by citing the two wonderfully vertiginous passages de Man cites and comments on from Hegel's *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* in "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's *Aesthetics*": "So kann ich nicht sagen was ich nur meinen," which de Man translates as meaning, among other things, "I cannot say what I make mine," "I cannot say what I think," and "I cannot say I." I add: "So I cannot say what I only (or simply) mean." The other passage from Hegel de Man calls a "quite astonishing sentence," as indeed it is: "Ebenso, wenn ich sage: 'Ich,' meine ich mich als diesen alle anderen Ausschließenden: aber was ich sage, Ich, ist eben einen jeder" ('When I say "I," I *mean* myself as *this* I to the exclusion of all others; but what I say, I, is precisely anyone; any I, as that which excludes all others from itself').[26] The great Hegel, master of pure reason, has here stumbled into the abyss that lies beneath the innocent word *I*, as well as into the way repeated phonemes call attention to themselves as pure sound: "Wenn ich sage: 'Ich,' meine ich mich."

It is a universal feature of so-called literary texts, or of any piece of language taken as literature, intended as literature, read as literature, different from one another as they all are, that in them the *I* of the author is transformed into an impersonal, anonymous, neutral, neutered power of language, an empty flask. An everyday and seemingly innocent example of this transformation is the familiar omniscient, or, better, telepathic, narrator of canonical English novels.[27] Among my examples, the narrators of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and of Trollope's *The Last Chronicle of Barset* illustrate this. Trollope's *Framley Parsonage*, discussed in chapter 10 here, is another example. The anonymity and undecidability of such language is evident in the pervasive irony of fictional narrative voices. "Was ich sage, Ich, ist eben jeder." ("What I say, I, is precisely anyone.")

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Of just what kind of matter are the imaginary worlds entered by this strange literary use of language made? Why does crossing a border and entering them matter? I have so far used the words *fictive* and *imaginary* interchangeably. Most people, even literary theorists from Aristotle on, assume that a fictive text takes words from the everyday real world and uses them to name, by imitation (mimesis), a virtual reality that has no referential counterpart, even though real persons, places, and events may often be transposed into the fictive.

Matters are not quite so simple, however. Just here, work by two unlikely theoretical bedfellows, Maurice Blanchot and Wolfgang Iser, will help my formulations. I have in mind Blanchot's *Les deux versions de l'imaginaire* (Two versions of the imaginary) and his "Le chant des Sirènes" (The Song of the Sirens").[28] For Iser, I shall focus on a late work, *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre* (*The Fictive and the Imaginary*).[29] Both Blanchot and Iser, in different ways, but in ways that are in unexpected resonance, propose a triad rather than a doublet of just two terms, *real* and *fictive*. Iser names the elements of this triad: the real, the fictive, and the imaginary. What Iser says in the preface and in the first chapter, "Fictionalizing Acts," of *The Fictive and the Imaginary* is complex. It is at a high level of abstraction. It may, however, be summarized as follows: Iser contests the long tradition, with its many permutations going back to Aristotelian mimesis, defining the fictive more or less exclusively in terms of its oppositional or dialectical relation to the real. Iser asserts that a third term, "the imaginary," must be invoked. The imaginary, he says, "is basically a featureless and inactive potential" in human beings for dreams, "fantasies, projections, daydreams, and other reveries," as well as for activating fictions. The imaginary is, in a phrase not translated into the English version, "*diffus, formlos, unfixiert und ohne Objektreferenz*": diffuse, formless, unfixed, and without objective reference.[30] Iser's imaginary must not be thought of as in any way a transcendent entity, a divine realm of potential forms. Iser's thinking is resolutely areligious, anti-idealist. In spite of Ghosh's somewhat unusual use of the word "sacred," what Iser says is, somewhat unexpectedly, not altogether different, at least according to my understanding, from Ghosh's definition of "the Sacred of Literature." For Iser, the imaginary is an exclusively human potential. Ghosh insists that his sacred of literature is not religious in the usual sense. In a note to me, Ghosh explains this clearly: "For me 'sacred' is the unique imaginary that literature keeps close to its heart. We read literature, interpret it, make sense of it and yet there is something to which literature does not allow easy access.

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This is the 'sacred' which keeps our interest in literature alive and endows literature with the power to attract us forever. So every time you read Tennyson's poem the text 'puzzles' you; this puzzlement comes from what I call the 'sacred' of the poem. The poem always leaves something behind for you every time to seek to 'resolve' your puzzlement. The 'sacred' of the poem is its 'comeback power'!"

Nor are the real, the fictive, or the imaginary thought of by Iser as purely linguistic entities. Though he recognizes that literary texts, as embodiments of the fictive, are made of words, and though he talks a lot about "semantics," Iser appears to have a prejudice against language-based literary theories. He says firmly and categorically: "Wer Sprache verstehen will, mehr als nur Sprache verstehen muß" ("Whoever wants to understand language must understand more than just language").[31] That sounds plausible enough, but it tends to lead Iser to downplay the constitutive role of language in generating fictions. He says, for example: "Daraus ergibt sich die für jeden fiktionalen Text notwendige Selektion aus den vorhandenen Umweltsystemen, seien diese sozio-kultureller Natur oder solche der Literatur selbst" ("Every literary text inevitably contains a selection from a variety of social, historical, cultural, and literary systems that exist as referential fields outside the text").[32] The literary text, however, it is easy to see, does not contain items from those systems as such. It uses, rather, the names for them, as Iser's phrases *literary systems* and *referential fields* do, after all, imply.

Iser, in the German original cited above, calls these referential fields the *Umweltsystemen*, a word not easily translated into English. "Contextual systems" misses the force of *Umwelt* as "surrounding world." "Surrounding-world-systems" is a more literal translation of *Umweltsystemen*, but is not good English. The fictive set of borrowings from the surrounding world systems, however, does not simply provide new critical perspectives on the real, though Iser allows for the importance of that function of literature. Literature brackets and outstrips reality by using elements from it to give form to the formless imaginary. That is its chief function. "Reality, then, may be reproduced in a fictional text, but it is there in order to be outstripped, as is indicated by its being bracketed."[33] The essential function of the fictive "as if" is to give quasimateriality to the diffuseness of the imaginary: "Our subsequent journey to new horizons translates the imaginary into an experience—an experience that is shaped by the degree of determinacy given to the imaginary by the fictional 'as-if.'"[34] The literary text, as defined by Iser with another quasitechnical term, is "the pragmatization of the

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imaginary."[35] The matrix of the literary text is not the real and it is not fictive language. It is rather "the multiplicitous availability of the imaginary."[36] In giving pragmatic embodiment to the formless imaginary, the fictive outstrips language. Here is another example of Iser's suspicion of language-based theories: "Thus the cardinal points of the text defy verbalization," says Iser in the final sentences of "Fictionalizing Acts," "and it is only through these open structures within the linguistic patterning of the text that the imaginary can manifest its presence. From this fact we can deduce one last achievement of the fictive in the fictional text: It brings about the presence of the imaginary by transgressing language itself. In outstripping what conditions it, the imaginary reveals itself as the generative matrix of the text [*als den Ermöglichungsgrund des Textes*]."[37] *Generative matrix*, as a name for the imaginary, must be read with the full force of the obstetric image in *matrix* as "mothering source." I have given a little of the original German for my citations from Iser because the English translations, accurate though they are, do not give the distinctive idiomatic flavor of Iser's German terms.

This all makes perfect sense. It is a magnificently persuasive and original theory of the imaginary, one that, so far as I know, has no close parallels either in work by other scholars today or in the long Western tradition of wrestling to define the fictive as-if. It does, however, resonate to a considerable degree with Ghosh's transcultural and transcontinental (in)fusionist approach to literature. I stress "to a considerable degree" because both Iser and Ghosh have distinctive ways of expressing what they want to say. Iser's "imaginary" and Blanchot's "image" (discussed below) are not quite the same as Ghosh's "sacredness," but all three do resonate.

Just what human good is achieved by the fictive? Why do human beings need fictions? Iser's answer is unequivocal. Though the fictive may give us new critical perspectives on the real, and though it may also be a pleasure in itself, its most important function is to expand the number of "pragmatizations" of that basic human "plasticity" Iser calls "the imaginary." That human beings are essentially to be defined by their plasticity is Iser's fundamental anthropological assumption. "If the plasticity of human nature allows," he avers in his preface, "through its multiple culture-bound patternings, limitless human self-cultivation, literature becomes a panorama of what is possible, because it is not hedged in by either the limitations or the considerations that determine the institutionalized organizations within which human life otherwise takes its course."[38] Fulfilling as many as possible of the limitless ways to be human is a good in itself. Using fic-

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tionalizing acts as a means of giving form to the formless plasticity of the imaginary is the best way to do that.

This gives one answer to the question of whether literature matters. We should read literature now and at any other time because doing so is the best form of limitless human self-cultivation. How should we read literature? By opening ourselves to the imaginary worlds literary works make available. For Iser, the chief value of literature, the reason literature matters, is the pleasure of the fictive as a pragmatization of the imaginary. It has its source (its generative matrix) in the imaginary, but enjoying it and being influenced by its perspectives on the real can become additional ends in themselves. Iser investigates a signal example of this in the second chapter of *The Fictive and the Imaginary*: the European Renaissance pastoral, as both social critique and a pleasure to read.

The closest thing that I know in Western literary theory of the twentieth century to Iser's idea of the imaginary is Maurice Blanchot's concept of the imaginary in the essays I have mentioned, and in many other of his essays, too. A full reading of Blanchot's idea of the imaginary would take many pages, no doubt a long book. I limit myself to brief and somewhat oversimplifying remarks. In place of Iser's more or less unproblematic word *fictive*, as a name for the nature of literary language, Blanchot puts a subtle theory of "the image." This is his name for the essence of the imaginary as embodied in literary language. For Blanchot, the imaginary is made of images or glimpsed through images. Speaking, for example, in a characteristic torrent of paradoxes, of Proust's breakthrough when two sensations coincided in a time out of time that made it possible for him to become a writer at last, Blanchot says: "Yes, at this time, everything becomes image, and the essence of the image is to be entirely outside, without intimacy, and yet more inaccessible and more mysterious than the innermost thought; without signification, but summoning the profundity of every possible meaning; unrevealed and yet manifest, having that presence-absence that constitutes the attraction and the fascination of the Sirens."[39]

As opposed to Iser's cheerful celebration of fictive pragmatizations of the imaginary as benignly fulfilling limitless human plasticity, Blanchot's imaginary is a dangerous vanishing point within which one might be swallowed up and disappear. This danger is figured in the threat to Ulysses of the Sirens' song. Blanchot tends to indentify the imaginary with death or with an often-repeated motif in his work: the endless process of dying.[40] The imaginary also exists as *le récit* [the narrative], as opposed to the evasions of the novel. Blanchot's examples in the essays I have cited are Ulysses

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in his approach toward, or refusal to approach, the real song behind the Sirens' infinitely luring song, Proust's Marcel in his search for lost time, and Ahab's pursuit of the white whale in *Moby-Dick*. Here I let Blanchot, now a voice from the grave, speak, mostly in English translation, for himself, or itself:

> The narrative begins where the novel does not go but still leads us by its refusals and its rich negligence. The narrative is heroically and pretentiously the narrative of one single episode, that of Ulysses' meeting and the insufficient and magnetic song of the Sirens. . . . Narrative is not the relating of an event but this event itself, the approach of this event, the place where it is called on to unfold, an event still to come, by the magnetic power of which the narrative itself can hope to come true. . . . Narrative is the movement toward a point—one that is not only unknown, ignored, and foreign, but such that it seems, even before and outside of this movement, to have no kind of reality; yet one that is so imperious that it is from this point alone that the narrative draws its attraction, in such a way that it cannot even "begin" before having reached it; but it is only the narrative and the unforeseeable movement of the narrative that provide the space where the point becomes real, powerful, and alluring.[41]

The reader will note how Blanchot's point, like Iser's imaginary, is not entirely unlike Ghosh's sacredness of literature. One might add as further examples of *récit* (narrative) given by Blanchot the ambiguous ending of Proust's great novel and Ahab's climactic death-dealing reencounter with Moby-Dick in Melville's masterwork. You will see how close Blanchot is to Iser, and yet how far away from one another they are in tone and valence. What is for Blanchot a somewhat sinister attraction to a vanishing point that he identifies with death is for Iser a happy materialization of limitless human plasticity. For both, however, a third realm, the imaginary, must be added to the real and to the fictive transposition of that real. For both, the true function of literature is to put the reader in relation either to Iser's imaginary as a "potential" that is "formless and diffuse, unfixed, and without objective reference," "featureless and inactive," or in relation to Blanchot's unknown, obscure, foreign, dangerous point from which the récit begins.

Both Blanchot and Iser, however, allow, in spite of their differences, for two other ways in which literature matters. First, literature gives the reader critical perspectives on the real (including the most urgent political

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and social realities: dangerous income inequality, prolonged global recession and catastrophic climate change today, for example). Literature does this by means of transposing the real into the fictive. Second, literature gives an irreplaceable pleasure in itself, a pleasure Blanchot identifies with the novel: "With the novel, the preliminary voyage is foregrounded, that which carries Ulysses to the point of encounter. This voyage is an entirely human story; it concerns the time of men, it is linked to the passions of men, it actually takes place, and it is rich enough and varied enough to absorb all the strength and all the attention of the narrators."[42] The wonderful specificity of Homer's *Odyssey* is Blanchot's example here. I might well have cited its opening invocation myself except that it was hardly a printed book in its original form. Today all but a few lucky people, moreover, know the *Odyssey* only in modern printed translations. The epic invocations at the beginnings of the *Odyssey* and of *Paradise Lost* are striking examples of the way another voice is experienced as speaking through the author in literary texts. So here is one more open sesame. Homer begins the *Odyssey*, in Robert Fitzgerald's translation, with these words: "Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story/of that man skilled in all ways of contending."[43] The *Odyssey* is not Homer speaking. It is the Muse speaking through him, ventriloquizing him, making him its medium.

I am greatly attracted by Iser's and Blanchot's forceful articulation of their triads, though with awareness of their not-quite-perfect congruence, and with some lingering anxiety about affirming something so far outside everyday assumptions, even by teachers of literature, not to speak of journalists, about why literature might matter today. I have expressed my resistance to Ghosh's use of the term *sacred* to characterize literature, since my own usage of the word is so different. I have recognized, however, somewhat to my surprise, that Iser and Blanchot, neither greatly influenced by Hindu thought about *sahitya*, so far as I know, affirm something not entirely unlike Ghosh's transcultural concept of literature. *Sacred* is a word for secular literature that neither Iser nor Blanchot nor I would use. What they say is nevertheless undeniably in resonance with what Ghosh says. I leave the reader of our two chapters to work out the larger implications of this resonance.

I have stressed in this essay, as does Ghosh, the sheer pleasures of reading literature, along with present dangers to the survival of printed literature. Literature matters because it serves three essential human functions: social critique, the pleasure of the text, and a materialization of the imaginary or an endless approach to the unapproachable imaginary.

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Though human civilization would not come to an end if literature in the old-fashioned sense of printed books were to vanish in an age of prestidigitalization, much would be lost that video games, films, television, popular songs, and Facebook can hardly replace. That is so even though these new media are also, in their own ways, alternative forms conjoining in their dispersal the real, the fictive, and the imaginary.

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