2.
Readers and Reading

What do you do when you come across a poem like this?

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

In Percy Bysshe Shelley's famous sonnet 'Ozymandias' (1818) the narrator speaks of meeting a traveller who reports having seen a vast shattered statue strewn across the desert. The statue is of Ozymandias, the thirteenth-century bc King Rameses II of Egypt (Ozymandias is the Greek name for this king). All that remains of the King of Kings and of his 'works' are a few broken fragments, a couple of legs and an inscription which commands the reader to despair. The poem, then, is about monuments, survival and the transience of even the greatest of us. But we might also notice that the poem is about readers and reading – the traveller reads a piece of writing, an inscription on the pedestal of a fragmented statue. The inscription *commands* the reader. And, rather differently, the word 'read' appears in line six, referring to the way that the sculptor understood the 'passions' of Ozymandias and was able to immortalize them in stone. Both the traveller and the sculptor are explicitly figured as readers, and we might also think about the 'I' of the first line as another kind of reader – a listener to the traveller's tale.

The poem, then, concerns a series of framed acts of reading. The sculptor reads the face of the king, the traveller reads the inscription, the narrative 'I' listens to the tale and, finally, we read the poem. One of the things that we might do with this poem is to think about these acts of reading. The poem can be thought about as what Paul de Man calls an 'allegory of reading' (de Man, 1979): it is not only a poem which can be read, it is also a poem *about* reading. One of the crucial questions of reading, for example, is how we can justify any particular reading: how can we tell if a particular reading or interpretation is valid? This is a question that goes to the heart of almost every debate in criticism and theory. In this respect the poem presents a paradox in that the traveller says that only a few fragments of the statue remain, that this is all that is left of Ozymandias and his great works. But if this is the case, how can the traveller know that the sculptor read the king's passions 'well'? In this way,

Shelley's poem can be understood as telling a story or constructing an allegory about one of the central paradoxes of reading. To read 'well' is generally taken as meaning to read accurately or faithfully. But the question of which reading of a text is the most accurate is itself a question of reading.

'Ozymandias', then, opens up a series of questions concerning readers and reading. In addition to the crucial question of how we can validate any reading (how we can know whether it is true or faithful), the poem also engages with other questions. Who is this traveller who reads the inscription, for example? And who is the 'I' who listens to, or 'reads', his story? Is the sculptor's 'mocking' of the king's face a kind of reading? What do such questions lead us to think about the power relations of any reading? Is it in the king's power to command his readers to despair? Or to make them obey? Is the traveller's reading of the inscription different from how that inscription might have been read while the king was alive? And does reading therefore change over time – is the way we read shaped or determined by history? What does all of this suggest about reading more generally? In this chapter we shall begin to explore some of these questions, referring to Shelley's poem as a way of summarizing some important developments in literary criticism and theory of the last few decades.

Some of the most widely publicized developments in literary theory of the second half of the twentieth century went under the umbrella term 'reader-response criticism'. Such developments are usually understood as a reaction against Anglo-American 'new criticism' of the post-war period. Before we discuss reader-response criticism itself, then, it might be useful briefly to outline the position of new criticism with regard to readers and reading. Associated with such US critics as Cleanth Brooks, W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, and indebted also to the principles of 'practical criticism' associated with the British critics I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis, new criticism involved a way of reading that emphasized form – the importance of considering 'the words on the page' – rather than factors such as the life of the author and his or her intentions, or the historical and ideological context in which the text was produced. New critics considered that such questions, while no doubt interesting, were irrelevant to a consideration of the text itself: they thought of literary texts as 'autonomous', as self-sufficient and self-contained unities, as aesthetic objects made of words. Correspondingly, new critics argued that to try to take account of readers' reactions or responses in the context of, for example, a poem, was to introduce an alien and fundamentally extraneous factor. Wimsatt and Beardsley even invented a term for what they saw as the 'error' involved in talking about a reader's response in discussions of literary texts: they called it the 'affective fallacy' (see Chapter 11, below). For new critics, then, what was important was to pay scrupulous attention to the words of texts themselves, thus bypassing the subjective impressionism of the reader's response.

Like all critical movements, new criticism created its own special canon of literary works and authors. Shelley, notoriously, was not much in evidence in the new critical canon: in his influential book *Revaluation* (1936), F.R. Leavis had set the trend by caustically opining that Shelley was 'almost unreadable', and that the effect of his eloquence was 'to hand poetry over to a sensibility that has no more dealings with intelligence than it can help' (Leavis 1972, 171, 175). In his book *The Romantic Poets*, Graham Hough declared rather dismissively that '*Ozymandias* is an extremely clear and direct poem, advancing to a predetermined end by means of one firmly held image' (Hough 1967, 142). Dismissing the poem in this way is odd in view of the fact that irony, ambiguity and paradox are key elements in the new critical weaponry of reading, and that all three are dramatically at stake in lines 10 and 11 of the poem, the inscription on the pedestal. 'Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!' is ironic, for example, from at least two perspectives. First, the line can be read as an example of 'hubris' or excessive pride on the part of Ozymandias, who is thus shown to be absurd. Second, it can be read as ironic from Ozymandias's point of view: knowing that even he will die, Ozymandias inscribes these

words for future generations, reminding us that even the greatest will be forgotten in time. These conflicting ironies produce both ambiguity and paradox – ambiguity concerning which reading is more valid, and paradox in the fact that the inscription appears to say two conflicting things.

Beginning in the late 1960s and becoming increasingly influential in the 1970s and early 1980s, reader-response criticism directly questioned the principles of new criticism. For critics and theorists such as Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish and Michael Riffaterre, questions of the literary text and its meaning(s) cannot be disengaged from the role that the reader takes. Although these and other reader-response critics have widely different approaches to literary texts, they all agree that the meaning of the text is created through the process of reading. What they object to in new criticism is the notion that a certain quality or 'meaning' of a literary text simply lies there in the text waiting for the reader or critic to come along and identify it. Graham Hough's apparently objective assertion that 'Ozymandias' is 'extremely clear and direct', for example, elides the question of 'to whom?' Hough appears to generalize what is, in fact, his particular view of the poem. As we have tried to suggest, the poem may also be read very differently, as tonally and syntactically complex and semantically dense. The new critics' sense that the meaning of a poem is simply *there* involves thinking of meaning (in Terry Eagleton's memorable metaphor) as like a wisdom tooth, 'waiting patiently to be extracted' (Eagleton 1996, 77). Reacting against what we might characterize as the 'dentistry' school of criticism, reader-response critics recognize that the meanings of a text rely, in a dynamic way, on the work of the reader. Given that reading is a necessary dimension of any text, these critics attempt to plot the process of reading and the role of the reader.

Rather than closing down the questions of 'who reads?' and 'what is reading?', however, reader-response criticism has opened a postmodern Pandora's box. Critics such as Norman Holland and David Bleich, for example, are interested in investigating ways in which particular individuals respond to texts, and with exploring ways in which such responses can be related to those individuals' 'identity themes', to their personal psychic dispositions – the individual character of their desires, needs, experiences, resistances and so on. The approach is sometimes referred to as 'subjective criticism' or 'personal criticism'. Such critics would not be interested in deciding which reading of line eleven of 'Ozymandias' is 'correct' because such correctness or accuracy is beside the point. Norman Holland, for example, argues that 'interpretation is a function of identity' and that 'all of us, as we read, use the literary work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves' (Holland 1980, 123, 124). To parody the logic of subjective criticism, we might suppose that a reader whose irregular potty-training has resulted in a pathological hatred of authority-figures will delight in the ironic treatment of the King of Kings in Shelley's poem, while another reader who has early come to associate father-figures with absence and unreliability will see the poem as a poignant confirmation of the inevitable disappearance of all fathers. Although Holland assures us that he is not 'positing an isolated solipsistic self' (Holland 1980, 131), this is precisely the danger that other critics have seen in this kind of criticism: such a reliance on the autonomy of the reader's thoughts and feelings seems to lead to a state of delusion epitomized by Ozymandias's hollow words.

Theorists such as Stanley Fish, on the other hand, argue that any individual reader is necessarily part of a 'community' of readers. Every reader, he suggests, reads according to the conventions of his or her 'interpretive community'. In other words, an individual reader's response, according to this model, is determined by the conventions of reading into which he or she has been educated within a particular socio-historical context. Our recognition of the equivocality of 'Ozymandias', for example, is determined by the fact that we have been taught to look and listen for ambiguity and polysemia in literary texts.

A third influential strand of reader-response criticism is exemplified by the work of Wolfgang Iser.

Iser elaborates ways in which the work of reading involves an interaction between elements of the text and the act of reading itself. He explores ways in which the text is 'concretized' – given shape or meaning in the act of reading. For Iser, neither the text nor the reader should be studied in isolation. Rather, the text produces certain 'blanks' or 'gaps' that the reader must attempt to complete: the reader 'is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said' (Iser 1995, 24). For Iser, the fact that we know nothing about the traveller in Shelley's poem, for example, 'spurs the reader into action' (24). 'Who is this traveller?' we might ask. 'What does he or she think about what is described in the poem?' The text prompts us imaginatively to fill in or fill out such hermeneutic or interpretative 'gaps'.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the political dimensions of reading became increasingly central to critical debate. There was an increasing emphasis on reading in terms of power relations, in accordance with Michel Foucault's suggestion that 'power is everywhere' (Foucault 1981, 93) – even in reading. 'Ozymandias', in fact, produces multiple representations of the relationship between power and reading. Most explicitly there is the sculptor's 'reading' of the power of the king. The crucial lines here are lines four to eight:

> Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
> And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
> Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
> Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
> The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed…

The word 'mocked' means both 'imitated' or 'copied' and 'ridiculed' (a *mis*representation that represents more accurately or more cruelly). The commanding power of the king – his power, not least, to make the sculptor 'read' his face and to copy it on to stone – is resisted in that very reading, in that mockery. The sculptor's 'reading' is both a copy, a faithful representation, and a reading that ridicules. Reading here is figured as *both* faithful, an action of subservience, *and* a subversive act of resistance to power, a transfer and transformation of power. Alternatively, we might consider ways in which the poem suggests that acts of reading are bound up in the historical specificity of power relations. The reading of the statue and the inscription, in this sense, changes over time. Someone contemporary with the King of Kings might read the commanding inscription – 'Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!' – as a statement of omnipotence. By contrast, a reader who, like the traveller, reads the inscription surrounded by the 'lone and level sands', by the *absence* of those works, their *non*-survival, can only read them ironically. What has remained, what has survived, is the work of the sculptor, the *represented* 'passions' of the king (itself a kind of reading), not his works. The power relations of text and reader have shifted decisively over time. Reading, in this sense, is not always and everywhere the same. As Robert Young comments, Shelley's poem 'demonstrates that meaning, like power, is not stable or fixed, and that even power cannot guarantee a tyranny of meaning: although authors may have intentions when they write, once they have written they cannot control and fix the meaning of any reading' (Young 1991a, 238). Finally, we might extrapolate from this to think about the way in which any reading produces a certain relation of power. Shelley's poem might itself be read as a kind of 'cold command' – a command to read. But any reading of the poem must constitute a form of resistance to such a command, a 'mockery' of that command, by the imposition or 'stamping' of its own interpretation on the poem. Reading *survives* the command of the text.

As part of this emphasis on power-relations, recent criticism has also given increased attention to questions of gender and race. Judith Fetterley, for example, has argued that female readers of classic US fiction (and, by implication, of other literary texts) have been 'immasculated', by which she means

that they have traditionally been taught to read ‘as men’ (Fetterley 1978). Writing in the late 1970s, Fetterley argues that women should begin to liberate themselves from the notion of a ‘universal’ reader (who is implicitly male) and from an identification with male viewpoints in reading, and to develop specifically female models of reading. At stake here is, in Jonathan Culler’s terms, the question of what it would mean to read ‘as a woman’ (Culler 1983, 43–64): how might ‘reading as a woman’ be different from ‘reading as a man’? And do we know what it means to read ‘as a man’? It might be possible to think about Shelley’s poem in terms of gendered reading. If we can assume that the traveller is male (after all, few solitary European travellers were female in the early nineteenth century), then one can see that the poem is not only about male pride, but also about male reading. The poem, indeed, is overwhelmingly masculine, a text from which women have been excluded. Yet few critics have been troubled by questions of sexual difference in relation to ‘Ozymandias’: in this respect, we might suggest, the critical response has been ‘immasculated’. From Fetterley’s perspective, we might ask how a non-immasculated reading would respond to the masculine power-play of Shelley’s poem.

Critics concerned with questions of race and ethnicity have also developed specific strategies of reading and talking about reading. Theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Henry Louis Gates Jr and Edward Said, for example, have transformed the nature of contemporary literary studies through their emphasis on questions of colonization, ethnic difference, racial oppression and discrimination, the position of the subaltern, the West and its construction of the ‘other’, imperialism and Orientalism. Edward Said, for instance, argues for what he calls ‘contrapuntal reading’ whereby, in reading a text, one ‘open[s] it out both to what went into it and to what its author excluded’ (Said 1993, 79). Our reading of *Jane Eyre* in terms of race and slavery in Chapter 30 suggests one such ‘contrapuntal’ reading. Similarly, Henry Louis Gates makes questions of reading central to black literary criticism and theory when he argues that black people in the United States have had to develop particular strategies of reading and interpretation for survival:

> Black people have always been masters of the figurative: saying one thing to mean something quite other has been basic to black survival in oppressive Western cultures. Misreading signs could be, and indeed often was, fatal. ‘Reading’, in this sense, was not play; it was an essential aspect of the ‘literacy’ training of a child. (Gates 1984, 6)

A reading concerned with questions of race might start from the fact that this English poem deals with a racial other – Egyptian or African – and explore the way in which such otherness is inscribed in the poem. The fact that the land is referred to as ‘antique’, for example, entirely effaces any possibility of a contemporary civilization and culture there. There is nothing beside the barrenness of the ‘lone and level sands’. For this poem, Africa apparently only signifies in terms of a mythical past.

The recent emergence of ecocriticism has allowed for important new ways of reading such a poem (see Chapter 18, below). From this perspective, ‘Ozymandias’ is concerned with the relationship between the human, specifically in this case an ancient human culture, and the environment. Once you think of the poem in this context, its force immediately alters. It is no longer a poem only about the relationships between *people* – the pharaoh, the sculptor, the traveller, the speaker and his addressee, the poet, the reader – but also about the effect that a civilization has had on its environment, on what is now the wasted landscape so poignantly described. According to such a reading, Shelley’s poem would be understood to respond to the ecological destruction caused by monumental human arrogance. This desolate landscape (‘boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away’) can be seen not as ‘natural’ but as having been produced by human intervention (perhaps by over-cultivation, or through the redirection of water for irrigation or by other geo-engineering

endeavours). After all, we can safely assume that in *Ozymandias*'s time, the land surrounding the statue was able to sustain the life that this poem represents only in its absence. An ecocritical reading would pay attention not only to the poem's engagement with political and aesthetic questions, then, but also to the wider ramifications of its stark analysis of the eco-destruction that has typified human 'civilization' down the ages.

Finally, a poststructuralist or deconstructive reading of 'Ozymandias' might, in addition to these concerns, trace the dispersal or dissolution of the reader's identity in the act of reading and question the very possibility of interpretive mastery. For poststructuralists, there is a dynamic significance in the question of which comes first – the text or the reader? Is reading simply something that happens to a text as if by chance, something that leaves a text fundamentally unaltered? If so, then the role of the reader would appear to be determined by the text itself: each literary text would be like a set of instructions, a kind of recipe, for how it should be read. By contrast, the text may be understood as fundamentally incomplete, to be effected in the act of reading. In this case the text is re-made in every reading. Rather than choosing between these two hypotheses, deconstructive theories of reading argue that *both* models are operative, in a peculiar double bind of reading: the reader makes the text and the text makes the reader. Deconstruction explores the space between these two possibilities and it seeks to highlight ways in which every reading and every text is unpredictable. Thus deconstruction is interested in the fact that while any text demands a 'faithful' reading, it also demands an *individual* response. Put differently, reading is at once singular (yours and nobody else's) and general (conforming to patterns of meaning dictated by the text – a text that does not require *you* in order to function). Through analysis of these and other paradoxes, critics such as Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller suggest ways in which reading is strange, unsettling, even 'impossible'.

How should we read the word 'appear' in line nine of Shelley's poem ('And on the pedestal, these words appear'), for example? What makes these words appear? The word 'appear' might be shown to challenge all conventional preconceptions concerning reading. In particular, it challenges us to rethink the relationship between a text on the one hand simply *appearing*, simply being there like a monument, to be read, appearing from nowhere, and on the other hand a text appearing in the sense of 'seeming', an apparition, made in reading. Is the text *there*, or do we make it appear, do we imagine it? Jacques Derrida has referred to the *delireium* of reading, a pun or 'portmanteau' word that combines the French 'lire' ('to read') with 'delirium', to suggest ways in which reading can be delirious or hallucinatory (Derrida 1979, 94, quoting Blanchot). Just as we can never know how 'well', how accurately or faithfully the sculptor has read the king's passions, neither can we escape the dynamics of reading and delirium. In short, we can never stop reading because we can never finally know if what 'appears' in this poem is us reading or us being read. This is not to suggest we should therefore give up, either in despair or in indifference. Our very lives and identities are at stake. If, as we have argued, 'Ozymandias' is as much about readers and reading as about anything else, then we might see that the relation between reading and being read is strangely twisted: not only do we read the poem but the poem reads us. Like Ozymandias himself, we are fragmented, mute and transient: our 'passions' are read, and perhaps mocked, by the sculptor, in the form of the poem itself. After all, in reading this poem, we perhaps cannot avoid a ventriloquistic articulation, silent or not, of the king's words –

> My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
> Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!

How do you read *that*? What happens to you, to your name?

Further reading

Karin Littau's *Theories of Reading* (2006) is a fascinating book that is alert to the history and to theories of reading. For collections of essays on the theory of reading see Andrew Bennett, ed., *Readers and Reading* (1995) and Suleiman and Crosman, eds, *The Reader in the Text* (1980); Sara Mills, ed., *Gendering the Reader* (1994) approaches reading theory from the perspective of gender and feminism. For an accessible and entertaining history of reading practices and theories from the earliest records to the present, see Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (1997); two collections of essays which consider reading in history are Raven, Small and Tadmor, eds, *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England* (1995) and James L. Machor, ed., *Readers in History* (1993). For a more focused cultural history of reading and publishing practices in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (2007). St Clair's book is in the relatively new discipline of book history: for an important collection of essays in the field, see Finkelstein and McCleery, eds, *The Book History Reader* (2006). A concise and accessible summary of what might now be called 'classic' reader-response criticism and theory is Elizabeth Freund's book *The Return of the Reader* (1987). On a more challenging level, for a brilliant discussion of how reading is figured in literary texts, see Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading* (1979), and see J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading* (1987) for a consideration of the act of reading as a response to an ethical call. Two important books from a psychoanalytically oriented feminist perspective are Mary Jacobus's *Reading Woman* (1986) and Shoshana Felman's *What Does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference* (1993). For introductions to poststructuralism, see Robert Young, 'Poststructuralism: The Improper Name', in *Torn Halves* (1996), and Colin Davies, *After Poststructuralism* (2004). An important recent development in literary studies is cognitive aesthetics: Peter Stockwell's *Texture: A Cognitive Aesthetics of Reading* (2012) offers a polemical but clearly written account, while Paul B. Armstrong's *How Literature Plays with the Brain* (2013) is a challenging book that attempts to bring neuroscience into conversation with literary criticism and theory. On close reading, see Lentricchia and DuBois, eds, *Close Reading* (2003). For a powerful if highly idiosyncratic take on reading, see Harold Bloom's *How to Read and Why* (2000); see also Sarah Wood's exhilarating and original *Without Mastery: Reading and Other Forces* (2014).