

陆谷孙

/ 选编

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*Twenty Essays in Modern and
Contemporary English*

20篇：英美现当代散文

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图书在版编目(CIP)数据

20 篇:英美现当代散文/陆谷孙,丁骏,朱绩崧,张楠选编. —上海:
复旦大学出版社, 2011.8
ISBN 978-7-309-08264-7

I. 2… II. ①陆…②丁…③朱…④张… III. ①英语-语言读物
②散文集-英国-现代③散文集-美国-现代 IV. H319.4:I

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2011)第 135914 号

20 篇:英美现当代散文

陆谷孙 丁 骏 朱绩崧 张 楠 选编
责任编辑/林 森

复旦大学出版社有限公司出版发行
上海市国权路 579 号 邮编:200433
网址:fupnet@fudanpress.com http://www.fudanpress.com
门市零售:86-21-65642857 团体订购:86-21-65118853
外埠邮购:86-21-65109143
浙江省临安市曙光印务有限公司

开本 787×960 1/16 印张 17 字数 307 千
2011 年 8 月第 1 版第 1 次印刷
印数 1—5 100

ISBN 978-7-309-08264-7/H·1739
定价:32.00 元

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Foreword

by Zhu Jisong

This anthology is based on the textbook and notes of Professor Lu Gusun's "Contemporary British and American Essays: Selected Readings for Seniors Majoring in English," a canonical Fudan University undergraduate course that he took over from his poet-advisor, Professor Y. M. Hsü (1906-86), and has been teaching for more than twenty years. I took the course eight years ago, got four credits, and then audited it twice, as I felt sure that revisits would enhance my understanding of the literary texts and, speaking broadly, of human life, past and present, as is reflected in them. Even today, a faculty member myself, I will occasionally sit in his classroom as a "back-bencher," a native returned from the Wasteland of pomo-babble to the Wonderland of sense and sensibility. That he sometimes cracks the same joke for the same topic adds to my secret amusement.

Meanwhile, this peppy polymath, now an early septuagenarian, manages to perform a textual *aggiornamento* of the reading list for the course on a semestral basis, missing neither Noam Chomsky's peacenik interpretation of the September 11 terrorist attacks nor Barack Obama's post-racial Philadelphia speech, "A More Perfect Union," the prelude to the first non-white presidency of the United States. In his own words, Professor Lu finds "a new tide to swim with," as he wants himself and his students to boot to "stay afloat." Yet it is no accident, I am afraid, that his two decades' worth of striking arms in a troubled sea of worldwide words charts a mapping, though not intended to encompass the marine multitudinousness, of the latest century-long rising and receding of a genre that Montaigne named, in his serene *château* life, *Essai*. In this sense, the present volume, an annotated anthology, eloquently bespeaks Professor Lu's art and craft of pedagogy and scholarship.

Etymologically, *anthology*, a word of Greek origin, is the gathering

of flowers. Of flowers, we expect petals, styles, stigmas, and, above all, fragrance. What do we want, then, from an anthology, one of essays in our case, apart from selection, random or with sagacious system, of personal, peculiar writings by divers authors, to the pleasant scent of which the anthologist is allured?

Present-day China, a nation firmly in the grip of English fever, has witnessed a boom of anthologies of English essays. Most of them, however, prove to be loose motleys that, despite their claims about preserving the essence of Englishness, fail to show any insight into the heart and mind of the English-speaking peoples. To me, a non-native speaker of the tongue, such anthologies are but “an vnweeded Garden/That growes to Seed” (*Hamlet* I, ii) in which even an otherwise red, red rose will wither, owing to lack of cultivation and watering by the hand of the gardener. What’s wrong? Bacon, Johnson, Lamb, Hazlitt, Thackeray, and Thoreau—aren’t their names a warranty of intense delight? Most obviously, the problem lies with the anthologist, who used to be looked upon, to quote the formidable C. S. Chien, as “one who makes the good things in literature accessible to many and thus spreads aesthetic joy in the widest commonality.” Indeed, it must not be forgotten that an essay, argues Christopher Morley, is more a mood than a form, a mood in which someone feels impelled to share, in an artfully natural fashion, something touching her- or himself to the quick in real life and that traditionally, it has been the role of the anthologist, as if an avatar of the essayist, to transport readers into the mood. Since in this Age of Information, the Internet has theoretically brought about, once and for all, the universal accessibility to and commonality of literary gems, the anthologist, with her or his communicational burden thus removed, is supposed to concentrate on infecting readers with “aesthetic joy,” or in Virginia Woolf’s introspective description, on shutting them in, not out of, the curtain of esoteric ecstasy that a genuine masterpiece draws around. This shutting-in, this infection, is the atman of any essay anthology worth its salt.

Whereas some anthology-smiths may be living a life of sedentary ease and doing brisk scissors-and-paste work on their laptop, Professor Lu, with

the assistance of his disciples, Ms. Ding Jun, Miss Zhang Nan, and, last and not least, Yours Humbly, has taken strenuous, sometimes hair-splitting, pains to teach the pieces first and then anthologize them, endeavoring to convey to the Chinese who love English for English's own sake the sweet, soul-stirring smell of the "flowers" that he has handpicked for them. By doing so, he is actually doing literary criticism in the Bloomish sense, which is primarily appreciation and fuses analysis and evaluation (Bloom viii).

Most of the twenty essays included here, half of British authorship and half American, were written in the previous century and are of the "familiar" type.* It needs to be further pointed out that although the anthologist famously believes in elitism, some lesser authors, such as James Herriot, Gilbert Norwood, and David Owen, have also found their way into this book, attesting to a soft spot for the plebeian and practical. Ten are provided with annotations of philological, historical, or philosophical nature that, in the electronic proofs for me, fill the margin to the full and often spill out of the page frame, so that readers are well (not over, hopefully) equipped for embarking on a learned odyssey with Professor Lu as their Mentor. To the other ten is left far more space for a hunt for opulent breath to be undertaken largely by readers themselves.

Lo and behold, here come the essays!

"Are they unusual?"

"Do they set you thinking?"

"Do they make you recall things you have seen or read?"

"Do they urge you to find more in your surroundings, and read more, and try to express yourself more clearly and more interestingly?"

John M. Avent raises these questions in the introduction to his *Book of Modern Essays* (xiii). When you find yourself pondering them as you turn over the pages that follow, you will agree with me, I bet, that this tiny anthology—a word of caution—is aromatically contagious.

* For a definition of "familiar essay," see Chevalier 578-81.

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Intensive Reading

Too Many Books¹

by Gilbert Norwood

When Julius Caesar² allowed the Library of Alexandria³ to burn, excellent people⁴ no doubt exclaimed: “Lo,⁵ another cord added to the scourge of war!”⁶ Certainly countless students since the Revival of Learning⁷ have looked upon that conflagration as one of the world’s disasters. It was no such thing,⁸ but a vast benefit. And one of the worst modern afflictions is the printing-press;⁹ for its diabolical power of multiplication has enabled

¹ *Too Many Books*: The most striking feature of this essay is its tinge of British humor, a poker-faced joke told in mock seriousness. Keep this in mind while reading the essay.

² *Julius Caesar*: (100-44 BC) Roman general and statesman, he established the First Triumvirate of Rome with Pompey and Crassus. After a civil war with Pompey, which ended in Pompey’s defeat at Pharsalus (48 BC), Caesar became dictator of the Roman Republic.

³ *the Library of Alexandria*: Once the largest of its kind in the world, it is usually assumed to have been established at the beginning of the 3rd century BC during the reign of Ptolemy II of Egypt. The library is estimated to have contained at its peak 400,000 to 700,000 parchment scrolls. Its destruction has remained a mystery, but one of the most popular beliefs is that when Julius Caesar torched the Egyptian fleet of Cleopatra’s brother and rival monarch, the great library of Alexandria was incinerated with about 40,000 volumes burned, and many grammarians, librarians, and scholars killed.

⁴ *excellent people*: Mark the ironic tone as if the author were talking on behalf of literary snobs.

⁵ *Lo*: archaic and poetic form for “look,” often used in “lo and behold”

⁶ *another cord...of war*: another evil committed by war; *cord* and *scourge* forming a sustained metaphor

⁷ *the Revival of Learning*: the Renaissance

⁸ *It was no such thing*: an emphatic denial

⁹ *one of...the printing-press*: echoing Benjamin Disraeli (1804-81), the British prime minister who said “Books are fatal: they are the curse of the human race. Nine-tenths of existing books are nonsense, and the clever books are the refutation of that nonsense.” Also, he remarked that “[t]he greatest misfortune that ever befell man was the invention of printing.”

literature to laugh at sudden mischance¹⁰ and deliberate enmity.¹¹ We are oppressed, choked, buried¹² by books.



The beginning of the essay gives readers a foretaste of the author's mock seriousness, the tone that is to pervade the entire writing and characterizes British humor as well. On the surface, Norwood stresses in a matter-of-fact way the negative effects of the invention of the printing-press, making the destruction of the Library of Alexandria appear as a blessing in disguise. However, readers will come to find the irony in the author's claims. Bear in mind that the author's proposal is not to be taken at face value.

Let not the last sentence¹³ mislead. I do not mean that we, or some few of us, are asphyxiated¹⁴ by barren learning;¹⁵ that is another story. Nor am I adding yet another voice to the chorus which reviles bad literature—the ceaseless nagging at Miss Ethel M. Dell.¹⁶ I have read none of her books; and in any case that, too, is another story. No; I mean good literature—the books (to take contemporary instances) of Mr. Arnold Bennett¹⁷ and Pierre Loti,¹⁸ of Schnitzler¹⁹ and Mr. Max

¹⁰ *sudden mischance*: primarily such natural disasters as floods and fires

¹¹ *deliberate enmity*: like banning and burning on purpose

¹² *oppressed, choked, buried*: the three consecutive verbs growing in intensity

¹³ *last sentence*: the last sentence of the previous paragraph

¹⁴ *asphyxiated*: a formal word meaning choked or suffocated

¹⁵ *barren learning*: unproductive, useless learning

¹⁶ *Ethel M. Dell*: (1881-1939) British woman writer of popular romance novels; her works are severely criticized by some for their sentimentality and lack of intellectual depth.

¹⁷ *Arnold Bennett*: (1867-1931) British novelist, dramatist, and critic; his most renowned works include *Anna of the Five Towns* (1902), *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908), and the *Clayhanger* series (1902-08), most of which depict life of the lower middle classes.

¹⁸ *Pierre Loti*: (1850-1923) French novelist; his voyages as a naval officer provided the exotic settings for works such as *Pêcheur d'Islande* (1886) and *Matelot* (1893).

¹⁹ *Schnitzler*: Arthur (1862-1931) Austrian dramatist, novelist, short story writer, and critic, known for his psychological dramas such as *Anatol* (1893) and *La Ronde* (1897) and sometimes erotic novels

Beerbohm,²⁰ and countless others ancient and modern, European, American, Asiatic, and Polynesian (an epoch-making novel from Otaheite is much overdue).²¹ And when I say “good,” I mean “good.” I have no intention of imitating those critics whose method of creating a *frisson*²² is to select the most distinguished author or artist and then, not call him bad, but imply that he is already recognized as bad by some unnamed and therefore awe-inspiring coterie.²³ They do not write: “Mr. Hardy²⁴ is a bungler,” but: “Unless Mr. Jugg²⁵ takes more pains, his work will soon be indistinguishable from Mr. Hardy’s.”



The author emphasizes that his focal point is commonly accepted good literature. A list of four writers led off by Mr. Arnold Bennett represents it.

It was a famous, almost a proverbial, remark that Sappho’s²⁶ poems were “few, but roses.”²⁷ What should we say if we found roses on every table, rose-trees along the streets, if our tramcars and lamp-posts were festooned with roses, if roses littered every staircase and dropped from the

²⁰ *Max Beerbohm*: (1872-1956) British essayist, caricaturist, and critic, whose major works include *Caricatures of Twenty-Five Gentlemen* (1896) and the novel *Zuleika Dobson* (1911) criticizing Oxford academics

²¹ *an epoch-making...much overdue*: Otaheite is an old name for Tahiti, an island in the central South Pacific, one of the Society Islands in French Polynesia. The whole sentence is a bitter satire suggesting the abuse of such critical clichés as “an epoch-making novel.” The author means to say that critics have looked for such a novel in the deserted island of Otaheite for too many years but, to their disappointment, in vain.

²² *frisson*: [French] a shiver or thrill

²³ *coterie*: a small and often exclusive elitist circle

²⁴ *Hardy*: apparently Thomas Hardy

²⁵ *Mr. Jugg*: a randomly chosen name, anybody who aspires to a writing career

²⁶ *Sappho*: (early 7th cent. BC) Greek lyric woman poet who lived on Lesbos; called by Plato the Tenth Muse, she had a large following of women.

²⁷ *few, but roses*: a remark by Meleager of Gadara, the compiler of an ancient anthology entitled *Garland*

folds of every newspaper? In a week we should be organizing a “campaign”²⁸ against them as if they were rats or house-flies. So with books. Week in, week out, a roaring torrent of novels, essays, plays, poems, books of travel, devotion,²⁹ and philosophy, flows through the land—all good, all “provocative of thought” or else “in the best tradition of British humour;” that is the mischief³⁰ of it. And they are so huge. Look at *The Forsyte Saga*,³¹ confessedly in itself a small library of fiction; consider *The Golden Bough*,³² how it grows.³³ One is tempted to revolt and pretend in self-defense that these works are clever, facile, and bad. But they are not; far from it. The flood leaves you no breath.³⁴



The author points out the predicament confronting modern readers, that is, their helplessness in face of a surfeit of multitudinous and voluminous good books. One needs only to browse a nearby bookstore to realize the truth of it.

What is to be done? Various remedies are in vogue, none efficacious, indeed—that is my point—all deleterious. There is nothing for it but burning nine-tenths of the stuff.³⁵ For consider these remedies.

²⁸ *campaign*: a sanitary campaign

²⁹ *devotion*: religious sermons or prayers. John Donne is especially noted for this genre of writing.

³⁰ *mischief*: harm, disaster

³¹ *The Forsyte Saga*: a voluminous trilogy written by John Galsworthy (1867-1933). A *saga* means a collection of fiction or an odyssey.

³² *The Golden Bough*: Sir James Frazer (1854-1941) composed it. He collected a host of materials from Polynesian and other tribes. The entire work contains 12 volumes, recording superstitious rituals performed by various primitive peoples in order to conjure up the blessing by God. It is a comparative study of superstitions.

³³ *grows*: The verb is ingeniously selected to collocate with the [*b*]ough, a large tree branch, to form a sustained metaphor.

³⁴ *The flood...no breath*: This brings back the feeling of asphyxiation in the previous text.

³⁵ *burning nine-tenths of the stuff*: Mentioned for the first time is the author's proposal, which is extremist, unrealistic, specious and, above all, made in a jesting spirit.



Pay attention to the author's manner of argument in the following text. He pretends in real earnest in an effort to convince readers of the validity of his proposal of burning the majority of books by refuting available remedies first and then supplying solutions to supposed technical difficulties, putting it in effect in a logical and systematic way. In the process is revealed the quintessence of his humor: his mock seriousness and deadpanning.



Following is an account of four categories of readers that the author classifies: (1) the non-reader, (2) the selective reader, (3) the literary snob, and (4) the cream reader. Try to sum up their respective characteristics.

First, of course, comes the man who simply gives up, who says: "I haven't the time," and goes under.³⁶ Virtue, they say, is its own reward.³⁷ Not for him. He tries to pass it off blusteringly³⁸ but he is ashamed of himself till death.

Second is the man who, swindler though he be, yet merits applause as paying back the "everyone" journalist³⁹ in his own base coin.⁴⁰ He defines in his mind the little patch of literature that he can read, then condemns all the rest on general grounds evolving a formula which shall be vaguely tenable and shall vaguely absolve him. An eager youth asks: "Pray, Sir, what is your opinion of Mrs. Virginia Woolf?"⁴¹ He replies: "No opinion of mine, my dear Guildenstern,"⁴²

³⁶ goes under: disappears from view as a ship being submerged

³⁷ Virtue, they...own reward: an English proverb meaning being honest, as a virtue, is always rewarded

³⁸ pass it off blusteringly: dismiss the issue of reading in aggressive terms decisively

³⁹ "everyone" journalist: those who publish their articles regularly in newspapers and say that everyone must read them

⁴⁰ base coin: "To pay somebody back in his own coin" is an idiom meaning to retaliate somebody by similar means. The word *base* is added to denote the inferior quality of the metal.

⁴¹ Virginia Woolf: (1882-1941) English woman novelist and essayist; for more details, see *The Death of a Moth* in the present anthology.

⁴² Guildenstern: This may be an allusion to the gullible character in *Hamlet* by Shakespeare. Guildenstern and Rosencrantz were Hamlet's friends at the University of Wittenburg, who were sent by Claudius to spy on Hamlet but were consequently trapped by Hamlet.

would be of much use to you, as regards Mrs. Woolf. I fear I am an old fogey. These modern people seem to me to have lost their way. Fielding⁴³ and Jane Austen⁴⁴ are good enough for me." Guildenstern retires, suitably abashed,⁴⁵ and vaguely classing Mrs. Woolf with Mrs. Bertram Atkey,⁴⁶ Alice Meynell⁴⁷ with Ella Wheeler Wilcox.⁴⁸



The second type of readers single out a certain patch of literature that every literate person is supposed to read. Then they justify their neglect of other books on the pretext of personal taste by extolling this limited amount of must-reads. In fact, it is a cunning way to conceal their ignorance.

The third man gallantly faces the insoluble problem by following the fashion.⁴⁹ Setting his jaw,⁵⁰ he specialises in the moderns of whom one reads

⁴³ *Fielding*: Henry (1707-54) one of the earliest British novelists; his works include *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and *Tom Jones* (1749).

⁴⁴ *Jane Austen*: (1775-1817) British female writer, well-known for her penetrating observation of middle-class manners and morality and for her irony, wit, and meticulous style; her novels include *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Emma*.

⁴⁵ *suitably abashed*: The eager youth was embarrassed because he was led to believe that his taste was not classical enough.

⁴⁶ *Bertram Atkey*: (1880-1952) a minor woman writer of crime novels in the early 20th century, a contemporary of Virginia Woolf's. The sentence means that Guildenstern receives the false impression that Virginia Woolf was no different from a cheaper writer from the way she was mentioned by the "old fogey."

⁴⁷ *Alice Meynell*: (1847-1922) English woman poet and essayist, quite influential for a while not only for her literary achievements praised by, say, John Ruskin but also for her involvement in major socio-political issues of her time. Obviously, she is not to be mentioned in the same breath with Ella Wheeler Wilcox.

⁴⁸ *Ella Wheeler Wilcox*: (1850-1919) American woman poet who is commonly regarded as second-rate. *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) once remarked that "she was the most popular poet of either sex and of any age, read by thousands, who, however, never opened Shakespeare."

⁴⁹ *following the fashion*: swimming with the tide, being with-it, jumping on the bandwagon

⁵⁰ *Setting his jaw*: a gesture of painful determination