Annette T. Rubinstein

THE GREAT TRADITION IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

From Shakespeare to Shaw

VOLUME I

英国文学的伟大传统

从莎士比亚到肖伯纳

THE GREAT TRADITION IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

FROM SHAKESPEARE TO SHAW

Volume I

William Shakespeare to Jane Austen

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by

Annette T. Rubinstein

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In 1982–1983 when I first spent a year teaching in the People's Republic of China I was both amazed and pleased to find that almost all advanced English students were familiar with my somewhat polemical 900 page survey of English literature, published in the United States thirty years earlier.

Many colleagues and students complained that there was no comparable study of American literature available, so I promised to begin work on one as soon as I returned home.

The result — American Literature: Root and Flower (1775 – 1955) — *has just been published as a two–volume paperback by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in Beijing. Now the editors have asked my permission to re–issue* The Great Tradition in English Literature: From Shakespeare to Shaw *in a similar format.*

I am, of course, very happy to think that both the English and the American book will be available for a new generation of Chinese students and many other readers here. I hope that this acquaintance with some of the best, most concerned, most independent Western minds of the past four centuries will help build an understanding of what is truly admirable — and what is not — in the two great English–speaking nations.

Annette T. Rubinstein

Beijing, 1988

FOREWORD

The great tradition in English literature is the tradition of those great writers who could, as Shakespeare said, "sense the future in the instant." The future is always stirring beneath the heart of the present and it is therefore those who live closest to the heart of their own time who can most surely sense the pulse of the life-to-be.

The great tradition in English literature is the tradition of the great realists; that is to say, of the writers who know and are concerned with the vital current which moves steadily beneath the innumerable eddies and confusing crosscurrents of life's surface.

This feeling for the essential direction of history, this profound understanding of the significant events and potentialities of one's own age, has little relation to any skill at observing and reproducing its minutiae. Snobbish or sentimental writers like Pope, Thackeray and Trollope, angry and honest ones like Zola or Gissing or Morrison, can often create an impressive facsimile of the life led by the men and women whom they have had occasion to observe. But, as Bacon said in another context, "a crowd is not company; and faces are but a gallery of pictures; and talk but a tinkling cymbal, where there is no love." And it is in the love which makes them sensitively aware of their fellows' needs, in the respect they feel for man's potentialities, that the work of the great realists is rooted. It is this deep assurance of man's strength, this ardent concern for his rights, that has so often enabled them to "look into the seeds of time and say which grain will grow and which will not." It is this which paradoxically makes their work, written out of the most immediate care for contemporary events, most relevant to those of a far distant future.

This seemingly prophetic insight has taken many forms. One was the daring, closely reasoned scientific prevision of a Bacon or a Huxley. Another was the equally daring, less fully conscious, anticipation of a Blake or a Burns. At some periods we find that this central conviction of man's power to shape his own future expresses itself in the common religious mythology of his time, as with Bunyan. At other periods the writer is forced to create his own

myths as Dickens does in his metaphorical use of an apparently factual plot. Often the great humanist was also a fiercely indignant revolutionary like Milton or Hazlitt or Shelley; less often he shared the brief serenity of an optimistic postrevolutionary age like Defoe or Fielding or Jane Austen. But always the great writers have, in one way or another, participated in the essential struggles of their own times. The old miners' song has it, "They say in Harlan County, there are no neutrals here," and that is also so in the great world of art.

True, it has long been a dogma in the academies that art and politics are two separate worlds; that the value of a work of art is unaffected by the artist's relation to the social movements of his own time, his concern with human needs, or his hopes of future progress. And in the last three quarters of a century the artist himself has too often concurred in this belief. But his acceptance of his separation from society, whether melancholy or defiant, was always only a special instance of that alienation of man from himself which has characterized the end of the great bourgeois epoch.

The representative art of the great epochs of human culture have always been political and partisan. Aristotle defined man as *the* political animal, and surely the most human of men—the great artist—are not the least political.

The following pages attempt a rapid survey of one of the greatest of such epochs—that of the expanding bourgeois world in its hopeful youth and its troubled but still rich maturity. The twenty-odd major figures here examined are all chosen from those acknowledged, by the most conservative academicians and critics, to be the greatest writers of their own times, and among the greatest of all time. Yet almost invariably scholarly discussions as well as popular biographies and anthologies minimize, distort, or altogether ignore the political concern and activity which lay at the root of the art they praise. And so, inevitably, they misunderstand and misrepresent vital elements in it, no matter how great their admiration.

A full consideration of the life and work of any of these major figures in the history of English literature soon shows us just how clear, conscious and complete the great writer's consistently progressive partisanship in the political and social conflicts of his own time has always been. But it is difficult for the nonacademic reader to find the time and factual material for such a consideration, and the nonpolitical literary student too often himself unquestioningly accepts the retired tradition of the academies.

This book grew out of one student's attempt first to learn in

concrete detail, and then to teach in convincing summary, the part played by the great writers in man's continuing fight for freedom.

It begins with a brief synopsis of the social and political background for the great literature of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and proceeds to a more detailed consideration of perhaps the two most important Elizabethans—Shakespeare himself and Bacon.

Each of the four succeeding sections similarly opens with a rapid sketch of its age, with emphasis upon those aspects of its history most directly related to the literary development of the period, and proceeds to a more specific consideration of its most representative figures.

There has been little attempt to impose any formal uniformity on the material presented. In some instances a rather full biographical account seemed desirable; in others more space has been devoted to a consideration of certain specific works. Nor is the length of any one chapter an indication of the relative importance of the writer to whom it is devoted. Here again the story to be told determined the manner of its telling. For example, the tragic fact that Keats died at twenty-six, after barely six writing years, made it possible to treat his life and work in less than half the space demanded by Hazlitt or Dickens or Shaw.

In many of the discussions my conclusions as to a writer's political and social attitude necessarily run counter to the conventional impression, so I have thought it best to use the impeccable evidence of direct quotation as far as possible. There are, therefore, substantial extracts from personal letters and diaries as well as from more deliberate literary works included in every chapter but the one on Shakespeare, and even in that there is an unusual amount of such quotation from more or less intimate contemporary sources. I believe that anyone judicially considering these great writers' own statements must conclude, whatever his own opinion may be, that they all felt "that those who are above the struggle are also beside the point."

Finally, although the book presents a continuous development, each of the five major sections of which it is composed can really be read as an independent unit. It may, in fact, be advisable for those readers not well acquainted with the earlier periods of English history and literature to begin with the discussion of the more familiar modern world in the third section, and then to turn back to the Elizabethan Age.

To those lovers of literature who already "think continually of

those who are truly great," the book's approach may suggest a different interpretation of familiar beauty, and reveal another dimension in the well-known lives of many long beloved masters. To those men and women who are themselves deeply immersed in the political life of our stirring and difficult age it will, I think, introduce new allies and fresh sources of strength. That, at least, is the hope with which I here complete this long and rewarding labor of love.

ANNETTE T. RUBINSTEIN

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