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FOREWORD

This book is in three parts with an appendix. Part One is a set of lecture notes upon three different forms of English literature. Part Two contains 11 articles and papers about English literature, written on various occasions. Part Three comprises my correspondence with some foreign friends on my literary productions. The Appendix consists of an autobiographical notice and a story in English, which won an international prize in the early fifties of the present century. All these writings, I hope, may reflect some aspects of my work in teaching and studying English literature as well as my activities related to the subject during past several years.

Liu Bingshan Winter 1997

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PART ONE

LECTURE NOTES **ON ENGLISH LITERATURE**



I. WHY AND HOW TO STUDY ENGLISH LITERATURE?

"Is it necessary to study English literature for a student of English language?" — This question should be put forward and answered at the outset, because it has not yet been solved clearly. To some comrades, the study of English means only learning some English lessons and reading a few books on English grammar. They think that reading a novel, a poem or a play is something superfluous, a waste of time. Language is language, literature is literature, and one can study the former without paying any attention to the latter — this isn't a good way in studying a language.

We may realize this by recollecting our own experience in studying Chinese. Chinese is our mother tongue. But how have we come to use it as an instrument in daily life? Undoubtedly we learned a bit of its grammar in our school days. But we learned the language mainly by using it on all possible occasions, that is, by speaking it every day and by reading all kinds of books written in it. Only in this way can we learn our own native speech tolerably well. It is practice, but not merely remembering a set of grammatical rules that gives us a real knowledge in our own language. The same holds true in our study of English. How can we escape the task of reading English and American authors when we want to study English well? Of course, if you have only a very poor grasp of English

and find too many obstacles on the road to literature, the first thing for you to do is to build a good language foundation. But as soon as you are sure you can read English authors in the original, well, you shouldn't hesitate to plunge into the ocean of literature and try to learn swimming by yourself.

All that is best in a language finds expression in its literature. Dictionaries tell us about the spelling, pronunciation and definitions of words. The commonest way to learn the meaning of a word is to look it up in a dictionary. But dictionaries cannot show all the subtle shades of meaning of a word. The best way to study the meaning of a word is that of learning it between the lines in the works of major writers. For an intimate understanding of language we need to read literary works and to think about what we read.

An author may contribute in various ways to the enrichment of the language he writes. He may do so directly by introducing new words or new usages of words, or indirectly by bringing those existing forms of expression into a general use among people.

Now, let's take a few examples to show what English writers do for the language.

First, the English Bible. Among the literary works that have contributed to the formation of modern English an important place must be given to the English Bible. The translation of the English Bible lasted for 300 years and resulted in the monumental work of the Authorized Version (A. V.) in 1611. The translators of the Bible have given to the English language many beautiful words or word-combinations, such as "helpmate", "peacemaker", "tender mercy", "loving kindness" and "long suffering". Even the indispensable word "beautiful" is brought into general use by a translator

of the Bible in the early 16th century. Many Bible phrases have become English idioms which are often used with no knowledge of their origin. Such are "to cast pearls before swine", "a labour of love", "the shadow of death", "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" and "the eleventh hour".

William Shakespeare also has had a very great influence on the English language. He has not only added a large number of new words to the literary vocabulary of the English language, but also woven a great amount of phrases into the texture of the whole English literature and daily speech. A multitude of Shakespearean usages and expressions, such as "a heaven-kissing hill", "one's pound of flesh" and "to wear one's heart on one's sleeve", may be regarded as "household words" of the English language. One Shakespearean phrase, "to out-Herod Herod", has not only become current in its original form, but has become the model after which a large number of other expressions have been formed to express the notion of surpassing or exceeding somebody in something. "To out-Milton Milton" and "to out-Darwin Darwin" are two of the well-known examples.

In order to perfect his mastery of the English language Marx once picked out and classified the peculiar usages and expressions in Shakespeare's works, in 1848 or later. (Lafargue: Reminiscences of Karl Marx)

The English Bible and Shakespeare are the two most notable examples to show the great influence of English literature on the English language. Almost the same thing has been done by such great writers as Milton, Swift, Defoe, Dickens and Bernard Shaw. That is why we cannot study the English language without learning

English literature which has woven itself into the whole texture of the English tongue. The literature of a nation always shows best what its language can do when it is well used. In learning a language, we should cultivate a feeling for good language. Such a feeling can best be trained by the reading of literature that matters.

Now that the importance of studying literature has been established, the next question is: what to do?

First of all, make yourself love books. If you do not love any books, the study of literature would be a painful business for you. The study of literature is a "labour of love". Once you cherish a love of literature, the love itself will push you ahead in literary studies which, in turn, will repay you with endless pleasure.

The most important thing is to read the representative works of the major writers, or "classics", that is, universally acknowledged good works of literary art. The classics of English literature represent the highest contribution made by the English language to the treasury of human culture. As a student of English, you cannot escape the task of studying them if you want to learn English well. No one can do this for you. You should do it by yourself, with the help of teachers, dictionaries and reference-books. Probably there will be a time of random reading until you make your own choice among the various schools of authors. As soon as you form your own literary taste, your study of the English language and English literature will become spontaneous, natural and "automatic".

Now put my meaning in a nutshell. First, build up your vocabulary and language foundation. Then, try to train your reading ability by studying English authors in the original, with the help of dictionaries and literary histories. And then, cultivate your own literary taste by finding your likes and dislikes in literature and discovering your favourite authors and books. You must go through the whole process, step by step, all by yourself, if you really want to have a good grasp of the English language.

II. ENGLISH POETRY

Whenever we come across the term "poetry", we are always reminded of something "poetical", or something beautiful in one way or another. Why do we think so? What makes a poem "poetical"? To answer these questions we must have some idea about the features of poetry.

1. Poetical Images

Images mean "word pictures", that is, pictures painted in words. As we all know, a poem is not a scientific treatise. A scientific treatise convinces us of some theory through abstract logic and reasoning. But a poem appeals directly to our feeling. A poet is dissatisfied with an abstract account of something. He tries to make it concrete, to write of things we can see or feel or hear. Through the power of imagery, poetry can paint pictures of beauty and truth.

When we are in high spirits, we say, "I feel very happy". That is good enough for us ordinary people. But it is not good enough for a poet. If a poet feels happy, he says: "My heart is like a singing bird." When it is very late at night, we often say, "It is midnight." This is quite correct. There is nothing wrong with the sentence. Neither is there anything poetic about it. But when a poet puts it in this way: "The iron tongue of midnight hath tolled

twelve", we feel as if we were hearing the sound of the clock in the deep night. So, through the force of imagery, poetry can paint pictures of great beauty and truth in words of imperishable power.

We generally say, "The winter is past, and the spring is here." But read the following passage and see how the poet paints a picture of spring and makes us feel the merry atmosphere of the season:

Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.

For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone;

The flowers appear on the earth;

The time of the singing of birds is come,

And the voice of the turtle is heard in our land;

The fig tree putteth forth her green figs,

And the vines with the tender grape give a good smell.

Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

— The Song of Songs

Words seem to be singing and dancing in this poem. Words glitter in the poet's hand as if he had a golden touch. Such is the force of imagery.

2. The Use of Musical Sound of Words

Delight in the beautiful sound of words is a very common thing. But sound divorced from meaning has very little interest. It is when the two, that is, sound and meaning, are joined together, when "the sound is an echo to the sense", that poets can produce skillful effects which compels our admiration.

Following are some striking examples:

1) "The murmuring of innumerable bees."

(The successive use of the sound "m" gives a hint of the humming of bees.)

2) "Break, break, break,

On thy cold, gray stones, O Sea!"

(The word "break" sounds like the beating of waves on the rocks.)

3) "Half a league, half a league,

Half a league onward,

Into the valley of death

Rode the Six Hundred."

(The effect of the successive use of the phrase "half a league" seems to make us hear the clattering of horse-hooves.)

There is a special term for this figure of speech, Onomatopoeia, which means "sound suggestive of sense".

3. Rhythm

Rhythm is the "musical flow of language". But how is rhythm formed in English poetry?

Here we must explain three very important terms: Syllable, Stress (or Accent) and Rhythm.

In English, words of two syllables always contain one that is stressed and one that is unstressed; longer words contain one stressed syllable and two or more unstressed syllables. Unstressed syllables are marked with a curve ""; and stressed, with a dash

"-". Following are some ordinary words with their stressed and unstressed syllables marked:

above suffer around standing

terrible disaster political procession

In a line of poetry, when the stressed and unstressed syllables of all the words are arranged in a definite order, say, in the order of one unstressed followed by one stressed syllable, the line will rise and fall in a musical way like the rippling of waves:

My heart is like a singing bird.

And this musical flow, or the rise and fall of language in poetry, is called "Rhythm".

4. Foot

"Foot" is the unit of rhythm in English poetry. A foot contains two or three syllables, one of which is stressed. There are 4 main feet in English poetry.

- 1) Iambus () consists of one unaccented and one accented syllable. This is the commonest of all feet:

 ap-pear, be-sides, at-tack, sup-ply.
- 2) Trochee (-) consists of one accented and one unaccented syllable:

holy, up-per, grand-eur, fail-ing.

3) Anapaest (cor) consists of two unaccented syllables followed by an accented one:

re-ap-pear, in-dis-tinct, in-com-plete, on the hill.

4) Dactyl (---) consists of one accented syllable, followed by two unaccented ones:

mes-sen-ger, mer-ri-ly, pro-per-ty, ac-ci-dent.

Examples from English poetry: