

LF1217.5 I5 1954

Archives

ENGLISH STUDIES  
IN THE UNIVERSITY

*Inaugural Lecture of the  
Professor of English Language and Literature  
delivered at the College  
on November 23, 1954*

by

PROFESSOR JAMES KINSLEY  
M.A., PH.D.



UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF SWANSEA



40983.

~~LF 1227~~

LF 1217.5 IS 1954

Archives

SWANSEA UNIVERSITY



1010163483

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF SWANSEA

ENGLISH STUDIES  
IN THE UNIVERSITY

*Inaugural Lecture of the  
Professor of English Language  
and Literature  
delivered at the College  
on November 23, 1954*

by

PROFESSOR JAMES KINSLEY  
M.A., PH.D.



## ENGLISH STUDIES IN THE UNIVERSITY

I ASSUME the responsibilities of this Chair with one regret—that I lost, almost as soon as they were offered, the friendship and counsel of my predecessor. To me, Professor Thomas was ‘too little and too lately known’; and it would be presumptuous of me to add much to what has already been said by many who knew him well. But one could not be a member of a Welsh college for seven years without discovering that in the Swansea Chair of English was one of the ablest teachers and examiners in the University of Wales; and one cannot come here without realizing that with his death the civic and academic communities of Swansea have lost one of their best-loved members. In the Department which was so largely his own creation, he showed himself ‘a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth’; and to succeed him is a privilege and a challenge.

### I

We hear much nowadays of the educative virtues of English literature. The proper study of English, writes the Director of the Department of Education at Oxford, exercises ‘the critical, emotional, imaginative, and creative “faculties” concurrently’; synthesizing intellect and emotion, and coeducating intellect and imagination, it may produce ‘a unified human being capable of a ready and successful adjustment to the complex conditions of modern life, happy and with a sense of spiritual well-being’.<sup>1</sup> These may seem the airy generalities of the educational theorist; but they are strongly reinforced by

<sup>1</sup> M. L. Jacks, *Total Education*, 1946, p. 78.



the confessions of faith of many professional teachers of literature. It is commonly held that the study of English letters enriches the mind, inculcates a true sense of values, and develops sound judgement even in spheres of human action remote from the study. From Cambridge comes the claim of Dr. Leavis that the English discipline is potentially the 'humane focus' of university studies, training

in a way no other discipline can, intelligence and sensibility together, cultivating a sensitiveness and precision of response and a delicate integrity of intelligence—intelligence that integrates as well as analyses, and must have pertinacity and staying power as well as delicacy.<sup>1</sup>

The doctrine of the high utility of letters is with us yet. The gospel, it is true, has been subtilized since the days when, on an occasion similar to the present, a professor of University College, London, could pledge himself with holy joy 'invariably to impart moral, as well as intellectual instruction. . . . In all my lectures I shall esteem it my duty—and I trust shall find it my delight—to inculcate lessons of virtue.'<sup>2</sup> We hear now not of the improvement of mere morals through prolonged contact with great books but of the beneficent influence of literature on the whole human personality.

There is much to attract in this doctrine of the education of 'the whole man' through literature; and those who preach it deserve credit both for the concern with which they contemplate the cultural crisis of our time and for the zeal with which they commend their elixir. But does our salvation, intellectual, cultural, or moral, lie in the proper study of English letters? Other disciplines—the classics, history, philosophy, or any major foreign litera-

<sup>1</sup> *Education and the University*, 1943, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in R. W. Chambers, *Man's Unconquerable Mind*, 1939, p. 347.

ture—may make as reasonable a claim. It is, however, dangerously easy to exaggerate the potency of academic studies in general, and of the arts in particular. Society, said George Gordon thirty years ago in the face of an extravagant Report on the teaching of English,

has other forms of expression than literature, and forms not less noble . . . the place of literature in the world has natural and salutary limits which are not to be extended by exaggeration. There are times when the coolness of Mark Pattison is welcome. 'Cultivation commensurate with the range of the human intellect', he reminds us, is not to be given by means of literature, nor is that nation to be wholly congratulated in which literature and the arts are 'the highest intellectual objects'. I observe, and not only in this Report, the growth of a religious jargon about literature and literary genius, and I observe it with regret as an affront to life.<sup>1</sup>

The great poet may well be, in Mr. Garrod's words, 'the prophet of the world's final causes; the interpreter . . . of a creation groaning and travailing after its proper meaning'. But the company of Parnassus is catholic, and includes Homer the great thunderer and the makers of ballads 'for cottagers and spinners at the wheel'; a Shakespeare, and a Herrick content to sing felicitously

. . . of Brooks, of Blossomes, Birds, and Bowers:  
Of April, May, of June, and July-Flowers.  
. . . of May-poles, Hock-carts, Wassails, Wakes,  
Of Bridegrooms, Brides, and of their Bridall-cakes;

a Milton justifying the ways of God to men, and a Burns writing only 'to amuse himself with the little creations of his own fancy, amid the toil and fatigues of a laborious life; to . . . find some kind of counterpoise to the struggles of a world, always an alien scene, a task uncouth to the poetical mind'. And literature itself is as much a gallimaufry as the congregation of its makers. Genius working in words, and with countless differences of intention, has created art from the blush on a girl's cheek

<sup>1</sup> *The Discipline of Letters*, 1923, pp. 14-15.



and Roast Pig; the battle for Troy and a game of cards; the Fall of Man and the Roman Empire, and the death of a fawn and a Favourite Cat; the *ars poetica* and the *ars amatoria* and the Art of Preserving Health; the laws of Ecclesiastical Polity and the laws of tragedy and the complete art of angling; the Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth and the Anatomy of Melancholy and the Quincunx; the adventures of Sir Galahad and the misadventures of Moll Flanders; the supernatural experiences of Beowulf and Sir Gawain and Hamlet and Tam o' Shanter; the devotions of George Herbert and the orisons of Holy Willie; a host of golden daffodils and the cave of Polyphemus. 'May we not say that everything is, has been, or can be, a subject of English Literature?' It would indeed be astonishing if, from their labours in this vast warehouse, purveying satin and broadcloth, jade and haberdashery, professors of literature were to emerge as unified human beings 'capable of a ready and successful adjustment to the complex conditions of modern life, happy and with a sense of spiritual well-being'.

Yet there is a fundamental unity in literature which makes it appropriate material for an academic discipline. It constitutes a 'tract of reality' as significant as that of the physical sciences. 'The book of Nature is called Science, the book of Man is called literature.' The tract of reality which is surveyed and cultivated and harvested in letters is the range of human experience—the passions of men who *metuunt cupiuntque, dolent gaudentque*, human thought in all its applications, man's experience of himself, his fellows and the world about him, even (as Wordsworth says) 'the remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist . . . if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar . . . and material to us as enjoying and suffering beings'. Literature is a

social art: its matter is humanity, its aim is communication, and its medium is the social instrument, language. A poet's business is 'the selection and synthetic arrangement of . . . the series of relations that one human being can take up, or find himself in, or be forced into, *vis à vis* one or more other human beings'. And a national literature not only mirrors and interprets general human experience; it casts the radical history of a people into significant pattern. Our own literature, in its variety and in its remarkable continuity through thirteen centuries, is the illuminated record of our civilization, and as such is the proper concern of the universities who are the trustees of that civilization.

A university training, says Cardinal Newman, is 'the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end. It aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste.' And that great but ordinary end is to be attained not by any elaborate training of 'the whole man' but only by the cultivation of the mind. 'Taken in its bare idea', a university

contemplates neither moral impression nor mechanical production; it professes to exercise the mind neither in art nor in duty; its function is intellectual culture: here it may leave its scholars, and it has done its work when it has done as much as this. It educates the intellect to reason well in all matters, to reach out towards truth, and to grasp it.<sup>1</sup>

This is as far as we may properly go to meet the educationists. Our fundamental business is disinterested inquiry, and no remote or narrow business it is. For, said A. E. Housman,

knowledge resembles virtue in this, and differs in this from other possessions, that it is not merely a means of procuring good, but is good in itself simply: it is not a coin which we pay down to

<sup>1</sup> *The Idea of a University*, 1943, pp. 171, 117-18.



purchase happiness, but has happiness indissolubly bound up with it . . . the pursuit of knowledge, like the pursuit of righteousness, is part of man's duty to himself.<sup>1</sup>

Literature constitutes a body of knowledge to be studied in and for itself without regard to any educational value it may have. The question, What is literature for, revived in various guises by many modern university teachers, implies a rejection of the traditional ideal of liberal knowledge pursued for its own sake; and when a true end is treated as a means, it is inevitably distorted. From the belief that literary study is capable of *doing* something psychologically or socially valuable to the student, it is a short step to a preoccupation with the kind of literature that does that something most effectively, when we ought to be disinterestedly concerned with all literature as a branch of liberal knowledge. 'Schoolmasters in our time', remarks Professor C. S. Lewis, 'are fighting hard in defence of education against vocational training; universities, on the other hand, are fighting education on behalf of learning.'<sup>2</sup> Literature is not *for* anything; it *is*, and its being is its justification. It needs no apologetics; its ultimate function is fidelity to its own nature. With some pragmatic notion of what literature *does*, the schoolmaster may use it as an instrument of education (and risk destroying it in the process); our only business is to study it—and enjoy it—in its integrity.

## II

The life of a poem—or of any other form of literature—lies in the 'dynamic triad' of poet, poem, and reader. Unless the reader brings to the poem at least something of the sensibility that the poet brought to the making of it, his reading will be sterile. It is through

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Chambers, *op. cit.*, p. 385.

<sup>2</sup> *Rehabilitations and other Essays*, 1939, p. 81.

this perpetual traffic that literature preserves its life, a new creation in the mind of every new reader. The act of appreciation involves not only the comprehension we bring to a theorem or a philosophical treatise but immediate, vital, creative response. But spontaneous reaction to a poem is not necessarily true—true, that is, to the nature of the poem. Perhaps we rate too highly Montaigne's 'heedy reader', who discovers in the compositions of other men 'perfections farre differing from the Author's meaning, and such as haply he never dreamed of'. Responses, to be true and valuable for criticism, must be trained: the basis of our discipline is a right reading, which takes possession of a work of literature but keeps it inviolate. 'If we think of it', says Carlyle, 'all that a University or final highest school can do for us, is still but what the first School began doing—teach us to read.' We may well question whether even the 'first School' in our own day is doing that as single-mindedly as the village school at Ecclefechan was doing in Carlyle's. Few of us, I imagine, now share the attitude of Robert Burton, Ancient of Christ Church, towards undergraduates—'a pack of vile buffoons, ignoramuses wandering in the twilight of learning . . . dolts, clods, asses, cattle, intruding with unwashed feet upon the sacred precincts': but it is no exaggeration to say that most of our students—Scots, English, and Welsh alike—come to us hardly able to construe the English language and unschooled in the patient, critical reading we require of them. They make their silent distinctions between the labours of study and the relaxed enjoyment of literature; they reject editorial aids as pedantries (and impose their own strange pedantries in turn); they heed an author's punctuation and design as little as they do their own; they shirk even the muscular exercise of opening the Oxford Dictionary; and stooping at neither correction



nor explanation, 'read on through brightness and obscurity'. There are times when it seems futile to deplore their increasing lack of linguistic equipment, though without a working knowledge of at least Latin and French the study of most of our literature becomes an idle farce. Professor Sir Walter Raleigh marked down the eunuch in the Acts as the first modern critic. "Understandest thou what thou readest?" said Philip. . . . The eunuch was then baptized (they all are) and served him right. And the business of literary criticism began.<sup>1</sup> But the baptisms must go on, though many of the infants are weakly and fall from grace. The virtues of the competent critic, like those of the competent scholar, are not special virtues; they are human virtues, in which we differ from one another only in degree; and their cultivation is in some measure possible to us all.

Our first concern is with the analysis of literary documents—with meaning. Mr. Bateson recently defined the qualities of the ideal reader as

(i) the ability to effect an *intellectual* relation of the original words, speech-units, allusions, and the underlying social philosophy to their contemporary equivalents, their 'translation', as it were, into modern terms; (ii) the capacity to undergo a *human* reaction to the social situation 'synthesized' in the poem.<sup>2</sup>

The quality of the '*human*' reaction to literature is not only variable; it is beyond the control of the teacher. Many readers who are able 'to effect an *intellectual* relation' have not the degree of human sensibility needed for the complete assimilation of a poem. The language of literature, whether in prose or verse, is seldom the colourless, denotative language of science. It is ambiguous, associative, oblique; it is manipulated in rhythmical designs, and imaginatively exploited; and it communi-

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, 1926, p. 220.

<sup>2</sup> *English Poetry: A Critical Introduction*, 1950, pp. 79-80.

cates with its own supra-scientific precision only to a sensitive mind. As teachers, we can only exercise the sensibility of our pupils by direction and example; we cannot give this faculty to those who do not already possess it, as a natural endowment, in the degree which literary criticism demands.

But the scholarly knowledge which makes Mr. Bateson's '*intellectual* relation' possible is a different matter. Such knowledge is an indispensable condition of sensitive response. Words change subtly from age to age, from one social group to another, and from one author to another, 'a Character of that perpetually revolution which we see to be in all things that never remain the same'. They pass horizontally through all the mutations of time; they move vertically in an unstable hierarchy of merit, and may fall from the palace to the streets, or from high poetry to conversation, and rise again; they wither, and genius revives them with all the mystery of age hung about them. Unless we bring to literature a linguistic scholarship both delicate and precise, our attempts at critical analysis are insolence. Philology, in her rôle of handmaid to literary study, is still an apprentice. Our lexicographical resources are immense; but for the subtleties of connotation and for the complex associations which words draw in their train, the student of Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, and even later poets has still to work for himself. Nowhere are linguistic equipment and a developed sense of linguistic change more necessary than in interpreting English poetry; and nowhere are they less commonly to be found. For this inadequacy, the advocates of 'literary criticism' without 'philology' must take much of the blame. Dr. Leavis writes of 'the *Ersatz* discipline (or grind)—Anglo-Saxon, Latin, Semasiological or what—that is so widely favoured by the academic mind as a way of introducing a stiffening



reality into the literary curriculum';<sup>1</sup> but the reality of literature would be nearer our apprehension, and the precision of our responses would be increased, if we paid proper attention to 'Anglo-Saxon, Latin, Semasiological or what'. George Gordon ended his Inaugural Lecture at Oxford with this declaration:

Grammarians or critics, lexicographers or editors, or *vates sacri*, they are all 'of that ilk', and if they vex one another, as they often do, it is a fault of temper. The Poet Laureate writing poems, and Dr. Bridges inquiring into the nature of our speech, are . . . the same person working in the same material. . . . In this University, and in this School of English, we stand for the loyalty and the discipline of the House.

The English discipline is historical as well as linguistic. Our literature is part of a long cultural inheritance. It reflects the ideas and sentiments and manners of thirteen centuries; much of it derives in some degree from historical events, or from phases in the development of British philosophy, or theology, or politics, or physical science; most of it is woven from social and intellectual patterns remote from our own. It is true that the ultimate worth of a literary work lies in its art and not in its reflection (often merely incidental) of out-worn creeds and attitudes. Its whole meaning was not given in its own time, and cannot be expressed merely in terms of its own time. It receives new significance from every generation of readers, and every generation of poets places it in a new literary context. Yet 'literary criticism' *in vacuo* is as perverse as Biblical fundamentalism. It is not merely that historical knowledge and imagination are necessary in *elucidating* literature: the very artistic uniqueness of a book or a poem will escape us unless we take account of its historical context—unless we cultivate Sainte-Beuve's 'faculté de demi-métamorphose', placing ourselves as

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., p. 65.

nearly as we can with the author and his original public and reading his work 'selon l'esprit qui l'a dicté'. And this involves an imaginative understanding of an author's critical principles and his intentions, a knowledge of the resources of the language in his day, and a knowledge of the habitual attitudes of the society for which he wrote and by which his writing was conditioned.

Historical or sociological preoccupations may of course lead an unwary critic into untenable positions. One of these, apparently common in America, is a relativism which bases the final estimate of a literary work on the extent to which it expresses the sensibilities and conforms to the standards of its own time. Another is the treatment of literature as part of a *Geistesgeschichte*, as a single 'objectification' of an age used to reconstruct the spirit of that age. Here differences become obscured by ingenious analogies—literary criteria are confused with the criteria of other cultural activities; and the historian tends to overlook the vital distinctions between general tradition and individual originality. A third heresy is the treatment of literature as an illustration of the history of ideas: an imaginative writer does not accurately or simply reflect the ideas of his time. 'A poet's thoughts and beliefs are one of the elements that go to make up his poem, but once incorporated in it they lose their specific character and become a part, an aspect, of the intellectual and emotional complex that is the poem.'<sup>1</sup> And this holds good whether a body of belief is merely implicit, or whether it is an integral part of the poet's theme—in *Piers Plowman*, for example, or *Paradise Lost*, or *The Hind and the Panther*.

A fourth heresy, still too common in Britain, is the treatment of literature as a collection of social documents. It is easy to sympathize with this deviation from ortho-

<sup>1</sup> F. W. Bateson, *English Poetry and the English Language*, 1934, p. 12.



doxy, for Chaucer, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Congreve, Fielding, Austen, Dickens, Galsworthy, and many more make apparent contributions to the history of English society. But literature, whether an author's interests are social or not, is never a clear mirror of the times. Art is always in some sense a distortion. Even the social novel and the comedy of manners are far from photographic—one author may incline to satire or caricature, another to idealization, and the art form itself dictates modifications of external 'reality'. To treat Chaucer's *General Prologue*, for instance, as a survey of fourteenth-century English society (the heresy is old, and dies hard) is to ignore all that really matters in his work—his use of conventional 'character', his debts to the popular science of physiognomy, the deliberate variety of his descriptive art, and his transforming sympathy and humour. In Professor Browning's *English Historical Documents 1660-1714*, Dryden's political 'characters' are given a place beside the sober prose portraits of Burnet's *History*. Now while we may think that Bishop Burnet had his shortcomings, and that his portraits are tintured with prejudices personal and political, we may credit him with delineating his contemporaries as they appeared to his shrewd if somewhat jaundiced gaze. But the 'characters' of Dryden do not indicate even his own candid notions of what these men were really like. For Dryden was writing both a political polemic and a witty heroic poem, and his *personae* are imaginative creations drawn partly from the life and partly from character-books and the Old Testament and classical satire and the stock figures of heroic poetry and drama—caricatures and idealizations tricked out as Whigs and Tories. If the historian uses such a poem as a political document, he does so at his peril. The student of literature, on the other hand, *must* go to history if he is to make anything

of the poem. If we do not understand the historical personages represented in *Absalom and Achitophel*, and the poet's own political ideas and their relation to Tory policy (he had refinements of his own), we cannot take up a starting-position anywhere near his original public. And without some appreciation of matters belonging to a very different historical category—the art of character-drawing, the conventions of heroic drama, Dryden's notions of verse satire as a species of heroic poetry, the condition of the language in Restoration times—we are in no position to assess the quality of *Absalom and Achitophel* as art. Ultimately, sound criticism is concerned neither with riddling the social seed-bed in which a literary work has its roots nor with ecstatic description of the beauty of the flower: it is concerned with analysis of the complex relationship between seed-bed and plant in order—and only in order—to understand the peculiar growth and beauty of the plant.

I have remarked incidentally that we cannot treat imaginative literature as philosophy or theology, any more than we can treat it as social history. The poet who 'thinks', says Mr. Eliot,

is merely the poet who can express the emotional equivalent of thought. . . . The people who think that Shakespeare thought, are always people who are not engaged in writing poetry, but who are engaged in thinking. . . . In truth neither Shakespeare nor Dante did any real thinking—that was not their job; and the relative value of the thought current at their time, the material enforced upon each to use as the vehicle of his feeling, is of no importance.<sup>1</sup>

But the *nature* of that material is a legitimate concern of the critic. Any major poet 'symbolizes, in some appropriate form, whatever sense of the significance of life he feels acting as the accepted unconscious metaphysic of

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca*, 1927.



the time'. We cannot properly read, far less undertake to assess the poetry of Chaucer, without at least a feigned sympathy with Catholic theology and the ideals of *amour courtois* and the tenets of medieval science; or that of Shakespeare, without an imaginative acceptance of the Elizabethan 'world picture'; or that of Spenser, without some knowledge of the Renaissance Platonism of which he is the fullest poetic exponent; or that of Milton, without a grasp of the principles of medieval cosmology and Puritan theology—and the catalogue is still four centuries short of our own day. Most of our poets have been in some sense philosophical poets, though possibly none have been truly metaphysical, writing a poetry which is 'the *product* of their learning, transfigured by the imagination'. A grasp of the development of ideas and the physical sciences is an essential part of the honours student's critical equipment, and it is to be regretted that the Scottish emphasis on philosophy as an element in any Arts curriculum has been so rarely repeated in the modern universities south of the Tweed.

Only through a proper attention to the cultural context of literature are we able to begin responding to its art in any adequate way. Such a presentation of English letters lays a heavy burden on a teaching department; and probably, in a modern university, the bulk of this contextual study can be provided only through co-operative experiment within the Faculty of Arts. Indeed, to ask senior undergraduates to approach literature in this way is reasonable only within strict limits: but I am convinced that, whatever the difficulties may be, here is the ideal we should never lose sight of. English Language and Literature is not now the genteel 'soft option' it was when Mr. Linklater's Magnus Merriman enrolled himself with a light heart in the honours school at Inverdoon, partly in obedience to the impulse which had stirred him to

compose improper verses in the army, and partly from a belief that the study of English would entail less work than the study of French or German, the classics, pure science, applied science, law, medicine or divinity.

(He passed four years contented with the charming trivialities of university life, took a second class, and proceeded to a lectureship overseas. But that was in 1923.) For the serious student of literature, ours is a rigorous discipline which again and again forces him out of the purely 'literary' that he may return to it properly equipped. We stand nowadays in danger of forgetting that unity of knowledge in which the special sciences are interdependent parts. Knowledge, says Newman, is the apprehension of one large complex of facts:

And, as all taken together form one integral subject for contemplation, so there are no natural or real limits between part and part; one is ever running into another; all, as viewed by the mind, are combined together and possess a correlative character one with another. . . . Viewed altogether, [the sciences] approximate to a representation or subjective reflection of the objective truth, as nearly as is possible to the human mind, which advances towards the accurate apprehension of that object, in proportion to the number of sciences which it has mastered. . . .<sup>1</sup>

If this ancient ideal of the totality of knowledge which is truth is today more of a dream than ever, the more does our culture depend on our individual endeavours to realize that dream through the imaginative extension of our special disciplines.

### III

The range of English literature, and the number of even its masterpieces, makes selection inevitable. A common university practice is to require the intensive study of a few major authors; and reading in depth at strategic

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., pp. 36, 38.



points has much to recommend it. But there is a danger of the artificial isolation of a book from the contemporary minor literature which is its context and a gauge for measuring its quality. It is well that a man should read deeply in Dryden; but better that he should read five of the eighteen volumes of Dryden's work with the *Oxford Book of Seventeenth Century Verse* than that he should read all of Dryden and nothing else. A strikingly different selective principle has been proposed by Dr. Leavis. He suggests that we select 'a key phase, or passage, in the history of civilization'—the seventeenth century is an obvious choice—and work intensively and extensively in it, taking account of 'the relations between the economic, the political, the moral, the spiritual, religion, art and literature'. Dr. Leavis takes the principle of contextual study too far. There is a distinction to be made between a study of the context of literature, with proper subordination of all other activities to that of criticism, and a study of a passage in the history of civilization, in which literature is only one of innumerable interrelated parts.

A third proposal is that we should begin our studies in the modern period, with literature that 'matters'. I do not propose to offer a defence of medieval literature before a Welsh audience; but it may be worth remarking that, even if we discount the artistic merit of much Middle English (and Middle Scots) literature, the modernist who knows nothing of it *at first hand* is badly equipped for his own work. The roots of our literature run deep into medieval soil. The allegorical mode of vision lived on into the seventeenth century. The medieval conception of tragedy is a far more important strand in the pattern of Elizabethan drama than many of the foreign 'influences' which the historians have worked to death. The codes of chivalry and *amour courtois* persist in

modern literature (and life), their influence subtler and more oblique the farther they run from their source. Ignorant of these traditions, we miss something in Shakespeare and almost everything in Spenser; we cannot truly read the traditional ballads and all that 'literary' poetry to which they gave rise, Restoration comedy with its cynical inversion of the codes, much Romantic poetry and fiction; and we cannot follow one of the richest seams in the poetry of T. S. Eliot. 'Through what wild centuries roves back the rose.'

It is our earliest poetry, however, that suffers the greatest opprobrium. Some of you will recall Quiller-Couch's notorious judgement on Anglo-Saxon literature which, when I first read it as a student, I took to be the isolated folly of a Cantabrigian belles-lettrist. But we often hear from a more modern generation of university teachers of 'the liberation of English studies from the incubus of compulsory Anglo-Saxon with the accompanying apparatus of Germanic philology', and of the need to abandon *Beowulf* in order that our students may devote themselves to *King Lear* or *The Prelude* without impediment. 'I am profoundly convinced', says Professor Dobrée, 'that philology and Anglo-Saxon should flourish in our universities, but not as appendages to schools of English literature.' The Anglo-Saxon poet, it seems, is an immigrant barbarian, smuggled in by Teutonizing professors and nurtured by the harridan Philology whose hand he clutches with a resolution that would shame any true native poet. His speech is recognizably English—even Quiller-Couch noticed that; but he has not read Plato, he has no interest in Virgil, he has never been to the Mediterranean, and cannot be admitted to the company of legitimate English poets. Let him spend eternity with the saga-men whose company he found so mortifying in life.



The association of Anglo-Saxon literature and Germanic philology is not, for most of us, either good or necessary; and one *need* not be more of a philologist to read *Beowulf* than one *must* be to read *The Canterbury Tales* or *Hamlet* or *Paradise Lost*. The only relevant question for us is, Is it worth learning Anglo-Saxon to be able to read Anglo-Saxon? The poetry and prose of the Anglo-Saxons has literary qualities which are only in our own time being properly assessed, and deserve the closest attention of the literary student. Good critical comment on early English poetry is still too rare. Here is a literature of intrinsic merit; and its very historical remoteness makes analysis of it a valuable part of our discipline. Here too is the English embodiment of that heroic tradition which is so important in the cultural history of northern Europe, and it has for many of us an intimate appeal we cannot find in the Icelandic sagas or the *Chanson de Roland*. Professor C. S. Lewis, whom no one can accuse of being a benighted Saxonist, rightly maintains that the man who does not know this literature 'remains all his life a child among real English students. . . . This is our own stuff, and its life is in every branch of the tree to the remotest twigs.'<sup>1</sup>

The opponents of Anglo-Saxon argue that we have no time for it; we give the student *Beowulf* and may have to deny him Mr. Eliot. I do not deny him Mr. Eliot. Contemporary literature resists some of the traditional academic methods of study: the context is confused, and the canons of taste unsettled. But we must try at least to encourage the critical reading of modern literature, for the modern poets have an immediacy and a relevance which few of us will ever find in the literature of the past. There is an element of truth in Mr. Bateson's exaggeration, 'the man who is not prepared to understand the

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit., pp. 92-93.

poetry of his own time must be incompetent to appreciate that of the past'.

When we pick and choose beyond the practical limits of class work, we impose the taste of our own generation, and the limitations of our scholarship, on our successors. Poets who are rejected by one generation of critics may become corner-stones in the house of letters for the next. Areas of literature which seemed tedious or worthless fifty years ago now excite enthusiasm. However extensive the field, we must try to keep it open in its entirety for our honours student. We must help him to satisfy the voracity he brings to literature if he really cares for it, to discover his own interests and exercise his own taste, and—if he has ability—to lay the foundations of some original inquiry of his own. Our first responsibility is to our subject; and as that expands, we must look not for more ingenious methods of selection but for more time in which to do it justice. We may at least hope that what has become an accepted principle in medical science and anti-aircraft gunnery will one day be applied to much less expensive and no less important branches of learning.

Finally, no literary discipline is complete without a training in the techniques of writing. Style cannot be taught: it is 'the image of the parent of it, the mind'. But writing well is a craft, not an esoteric art. It requires, says Ben Jonson, that a man

must first thinke, and excogitate his matter; then choose his words, and examine the weight of either. Then take care in placing, and ranking both matter, and words, that the composition be comely. . . . Seeke the beste, and be not glad of the . . . first words, that offer themselves to us, but judge of what wee invent; and order what wee approve.<sup>1</sup>

This is common sense, but a notable contrast to common

<sup>1</sup> *Discoveries*.



practice; and writing with just such care and self-criticism is part of the discipline of letters. To teach the principles of good writing may bring unexpected rewards. There is in the Welsh student, at his best, an imaginativeness and resilience hardly to be met with anywhere else in the United Kingdom. He has natural endowments which deserve all the discipline he can be persuaded to give them. Swansea, writes my colleague of Aberystwyth (and who knows better?), breeds writers in roe-like profusion. In the miraculous draught of Anglo-Welsh fishes, I do not know whether this College may yet claim active participation; but I am strenuously optimistic.

PRINTED IN  
GREAT BRITAIN  
AT THE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS  
OXFORD  
BY  
CHARLES BATEY  
PRINTER  
TO THE  
UNIVERSITY



