

# A B C of Reading

by

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## Chapter Two

*What is literature, what is language, etc.??*

Literature is language charged with meaning.

'Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree' (E. P. in *How to Read*).

But language?

Spoken or written?

Spoken language is noise divided up into a system of grunts, hisses, etc. They call it 'articulate' speech.

'Articulate' means that it is zoned, and that a number of people are agreed on the categories.

That is to say, we have a more or less approximate agreement about the different noises represented by

a, b, c, d, etc.

Written language, as I said in the opening chapter, can consist (as in Europe, etc.) of signs representing these various noises.

There is a more or less approximate agreement that groups of these noises or signs shall more or less correspond with some object, action or condition.

cat, motion, pink.

The other kind of language starts by being a picture of

the cat, or of something moving, or being, or of a group of things which occur under certain circumstances, or which participate a common quality.

## APPROACH

It doesn't, in our contemporary world, so much matter where you begin the examination of a subject, so long as you keep on until you get round again to your starting-point. As it were, you start on a sphere, or a cube; you must keep on until you have seen it from all sides. Or if you think of your subject as a stool or table, you must keep on until it has three legs and will stand up, or four legs and won't tip over too easily.

## WHAT is the USE OF LANGUAGE? WHY STUDY LITERATURE?

LANGUAGE was obviously created, and is, obviously, USED for communication.

'Literature is news that STAYS news.'

These things are matters of degree. Your communication can be more or less exact. The INTEREST in a statement can be more or less durable.

I cannot for example, wear out my interest in the *Ta Hio* of Confucius, or in the Homeric poems.

It is very difficult to read the same detective story twice. Or let us say, only a very good 'tec' will stand re-reading, after a very long interval, and because one has paid so

little attention to it that one has almost completely forgotten it.

The above are natural phenomena, they serve as measuring-rods, or instruments. For no two people are these 'measures' identical.

The critic who doesn't make a personal statement, *in re* measurements he himself has made, is merely an unreliable critic. He is not a measurer but a repeater of other men's results.

*KRINO*, to pick out for oneself, to choose. That's what the word means.

No one would be foolish enough to ask me to pick out a horse or even an automobile for him.

Pisanello painted horses so that one remembers the painting, and the Duke of Milan sent him to Bologna to BUY horses.

Why a similar kind of 'horse sense' can't be applied in the study of literature is, and has always been, beyond my comprehension.

Pisanello had to LOOK at the horses.

You would think that anyone wanting to know about poetry would do one of two things or both. I.E., LOOK AT it or listen to it. He might even think about it?

And if he wanted advice he would go to someone who KNEW something about it.

If you wanted to know something about an automobile, would you go to a man who had made one and driven it, or to a man who had merely heard about it?

And of two men who had made automobiles, would you go to one who had made a good one, or one who had made a botch?

Would you look at the actual car or only at the specifications?

In the case of poetry, there is, or seems to be, a good deal to be looked at. And there seem to be very few authentic specifications available.

Dante says: 'A canzone is a composition of words set to music.'

I don't know any better point to start from.

Coleridge or De Quincey said that the quality of a 'great poet is everywhere present, and nowhere visible as a distinct excitement', or something of that sort.

This would be a more dangerous *starting-point*. It is probably true.

Dante's statement is the better place to begin because it starts the reader or hearer from what he actually sees or hears, instead of distracting his mind from that actuality to something which can only be approximately deduced or conjectured FROM the actuality, and for which the *evidence* can be nothing save the particular and limited extent of the actuality.

# Chapter Three

## 1

Literature does not exist in a vacuum. Writers as such have a definite social function exactly proportioned to their ability AS WRITERS. This is their main use. All other uses are relative, and temporary, and can be estimated only in relation to the views of a particular estimator.

Partisans of particular ideas may value writers who agree with them more than writers who do not, they may, and often do, value bad writers of their own party or religion more than good writers of another party or church.

But there is one basis susceptible of estimation and independent of all questions of viewpoint.

Good writers are those who keep the language efficient. That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clear. It doesn't matter whether the good writer wants to be useful, or whether the bad writer wants to do harm.

Language is the main means of human communication. If an animal's nervous system does not transmit sensations and stimuli, the animal atrophies.

If a nation's literature declines, the nation atrophies and decays.

Your legislator can't legislate for the public good, your commander can't command, your populace (if you be a democratic country) can't instruct its 'representatives', save by language.

The fogged language of swindling classes serves only a temporary purpose.

A limited amount of communication *in re* special subjects, passes via mathematical formulae, via the plastic arts, via diagrams, via purely musical forms, but no one proposes substituting these for the common speech, nor does anyone suggest that it would be either possible or advisable.

UBICUNQUE LINGUA ROMANA, IBI ROMA

GREECE and Rome civilized BY LANGUAGE. Your language is in the care of your writers.

[‘Insults o’er dull and speechless tribes’]

but this language is not merely for records of great things done. Horace and Shakespeare can proclaim its monumental and mnemonic value, but that doesn’t exhaust the matter.

Rome rose with the idiom of Caesar, Ovid, and Tacitus, she declined in a welter of rhetoric, the diplomat’s ‘language to conceal thought’, and so forth.

The man of understanding can no more sit quiet and resigned while his country lets its literature decay, and lets good writing meet with contempt, than a good doctor could sit quiet and contented while some ignorant child was infecting itself with tuberculosis under the impression that it was merely eating jam tarts.

It is very difficult to make people understand the *impersonal* indignation that a decay of writing can cause men who understand what it implies, and the end whereto it leads. It is almost impossible to express any degree of such indignation without being called 'embittered', or something of that sort.

Nevertheless the 'statesman cannot govern, the scientist cannot participate his discoveries, men cannot agree on wise action without language', and all their deeds and conditions are affected by the defects or virtues of idiom.

A people that grows accustomed to sloppy writing is a people in process of losing grip on its empire and on itself. And this looseness and blowsiness is not anything as simple and scandalous as abrupt and disordered syntax.

It concerns the relation of expression to meaning. Abrupt and disordered syntax can be at times very honest, and an elaborately constructed sentence can be at times merely an elaborate camouflage.

## 2

THE sum of human wisdom is not contained in any one language, and no single language is CAPABLE of expressing all forms and degrees of human comprehension.

This is a very unpalatable and bitter doctrine. But I cannot omit it.

People occasionally develop almost a fanaticism in combating the ideas 'fixed' in a single language. These are

generally speaking 'the prejudices of the nation' (any nation).

Different climates and different bloods have different needs, different spontaneities, different reluctances, different ratios between different groups of impulse and unwillingness, different constructions of throat, and all these leave trace in the language, and leave it more ready and more unready for certain communications and registrations.

THE READER'S AMBITION may be mediocre, and the ambitions of no two readers will be identical. The teacher can only aim his instruction at those who most *want* to learn, but he can at any rate start them with an 'appetizer', he can at least hand them a printed list of the things to be learned in literature, or in a given section thereof.

The first bog of inertia may be simple ignorance of the extent of the subject, or a simple unwillingness to move away from one area of semi-ignorance. The greatest barrier is probably set up by teachers who know a little more than the public, who want to exploit their fractional knowledge, and who are thoroughly opposed to making the least effort to learn anything more.

# Chapter Four

## 1

**'Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.'**

**Dichten = condensare.**

I begin with poetry because it is the most concentrated form of verbal expression. Basil Bunting, fumbling about with a German-Italian dictionary, found that this idea of poetry as concentration is as old almost as the German language. 'Dichten' is the German verb corresponding to the noun 'Dichtung' meaning poetry, and the lexicographer has rendered it by the Italian verb meaning 'to condense'.

The charging of language is done in three principal ways: You receive the language as your race has left it, the words have meanings which have 'grown into the race's skin'; the Germans say 'wie in den Schnabel gewachsen', as it grows in his beak. And the good writer chooses his words for their 'meaning', but that meaning is not a set, cut-off thing like the move of knight or pawn on a chess-board. It comes up with roots, with associations, with how and where the word is familiarly used, or where it has been used brilliantly or memorably.

You can hardly say 'incarnadine' without one or more of your auditors thinking of a particular line of verse.

Numerals and words referring to human inventions have hard, cut-off meanings. That is, meanings which are more obtrusive than a word's 'associations'.

Bicycle now has a cut-off meaning.

But tandem, or 'bicycle built for two', will probably throw the image of a past decade upon the reader's mental screen.

There is no end to the number of qualities which some people can associate with a given word or kind of word, and most of these vary with the individual.

You have to go almost exclusively to Dante's criticism to find a set of OBJECTIVE categories for words. Dante called words 'battered' and 'shaggy' because of the different NOISES they make. Or *pexa et hirsuta*, combed and hairy.

He also divided them by their different associations.

NEVERTHELESS you still charge words with meaning mainly in three ways, called phanopoeia, melopoeia, logopoeia. You use a word to throw a visual image on to the reader's imagination, or you charge it by sound, or you use groups of words to do this.

Thirdly, you take the greater risk of using the word in some special relation to 'usage', that is, to the kind of context in which the reader expects, or is accustomed, to find it.

This is the last means to develop, it can only be used by the sophisticated.

(If you want really to understand what I am talking about, you will have to read, ultimately, Propertius and Jules Laforgue.)

IF YOU WERE STUDYING CHEMISTRY you would be told that there are a certain number of elements, a certain number of more usual chemicals, chemicals most in use, or easiest to find. And for the sake of clarity in your experiments, you would probably be given these substances 'pure' or as pure as you could conveniently get them.

IF YOU WERE A CONTEMPORARY book-keeper you would probably use the loose-leaf system, by which business houses separate archives from facts that are in use, or that are likely to be frequently needed for reference.

Similar conveniences are possible in the study of literature.

Any amateur of painting knows that modern galleries lay great stress on 'good hanging', that is, of putting important pictures where they can be well seen, and where the eye will not be confused, or the feet wearied by searching for the masterpiece on a vast expanse of wall cumbered with rubbish.

At this point I can't very well avoid printing a set of categories that considerably antedate my own *How to Read*.

## 2

**WHEN you start searching for 'pure elements' in literature you will find that literature has been created by the following classes of persons:**

**1 Inventors. Men who found a new process, or whose extant work gives us the first known example of a process.**

**2 The masters. Men who combined a number of such processes, and who used them as well as or better than the inventors.**

**3 The diluters. Men who came after the first two kinds of writer, and couldn't do the job quite as well.**

**4 Good writers without salient qualities. Men who are fortunate enough to be born when the literature of a given country is in good working order, or when some particular branch of writing is 'healthy'. For example, men who wrote sonnets in Dante's time, men who wrote short lyrics in Shakespeare's time or for several decades thereafter, or who wrote French novels and stories after Flaubert had shown them how.**

**5 Writers of belles-lettres. That is, men who didn't really invent anything, but who specialized in some parti-**

cular part of writing, who couldn't be considered as 'great men' or as authors who were trying to give a complete presentation of life, or of their epoch.

## **6** The starters of crazes.

Until the reader knows the first two categories he will never be able 'to see the wood for the trees'. He may know what he 'likes'. He may be a 'complete book-lover', with a large library of beautifully printed books, bound in the most luxurious bindings, but he will never be able to sort out what he knows or to estimate the value of one book in relation to others, and he will be more confused and even less able to make up his mind about a book where a new author is 'breaking with convention' than to form an opinion about a book eighty or a hundred years old.

He will never understand why a specialist is annoyed with him for trotting out a second- or third-hand opinion about the merits of his favourite bad writer.

Until you have made your own survey and your own closer inspection you might at least beware and avoid accepting opinions:

**1** From men who haven't themselves produced notable work (vide p. 17).

**2** From men who have not themselves taken the risk of printing the results of their own personal inspection and survey, even if they are seriously making one.