

—Essay—

## An Invitation to Literature

Takeaki KUSUNOSE

*Osaka University of Pharmaceutical Sciences, 4-20-1 Nasahara, Takatsuki, Osaka 569-1094, Japan*

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What is literature? What use can we make of this knowledge in our life? Do we really need literature courses in our curriculum? We often hear these questions, or unrelenting criticism against literature, in this age of science and economy.

The first question looks easy to answer. Some famous writers such as Terry Eagleton, Charles Du Bos, or Jean-Paul Sartre have written on it, so if we read through them, we can get some idea. Or we can find some satisfying answers if we consult any dictionary or encyclopedia. According to Dictionary.com, 'literature' means:

1. The body of written works of a language, period, or culture.
2. Imaginative or creative writing, especially of recognized artistic value: "Literature must be an analysis of experience and a synthesis of the findings into a unity" (Rebecca West).
3. The art or occupation of a literary writer.

At least we can have a vague idea of literature, if we look at where there is some definition of it. However, if we are to define literature precisely, we will have some difficulty in grasping what literature is. There seems to be no clear difference between what literature is and what literature is not. What is 'imaginative or creative writing' and what is not? It depends on who decides and it varies across the ages. So in some sense,

it seems useless to attach our mind to the first question. Nevertheless, when we think of the second question, the first question will bloom and vanish in our mind.

These days to achieve our goal, whatever it is, we tend to keep away from what seems unnecessary to us, and concentrate on what looks necessary at first sight, to increase efficiency. Though it sometimes does not look useful, something unexpected often supports what we are doing today as heavy posts are needed to sustain a bridge. In that sense, we need to share various basic subjects with students in our course of study. That is the answer to the third question. First and foremost, we must be educated human beings. We are not to be machines equipped with technique and knowledge to do our jobs.

Rachel Carson, famous for her classic publication on environmental issues, *Silent Spring*, was a scientist and writer, a lover of nature and a woman of integrity. Terada Torahiko was a physicist and essayist, who harmonized science and literature quite well in his essays. We know some doctors are also writers. Hinohara Shigeaki has been writing quite a few essays on various topics and published a lot of books. Among those who are scientists and lovers of literature, Koshiba Masatoshi has recently been among the most impressive.

Koshiba, a professor emeritus at the University

of Tokyo, was an ardent lover of poetry in his high school days. He read Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Thomas Mann, and German literature started to fascinate the young Koshiba. Though he parted with the sweet dream he cherished in his salad days during and after the Pacific War, we are sure the memory and experience still lives in his heart. It is no wonder he was able to discuss overwhelmingly important issues today with other Nobel laureates in Sweden. When we watched the scene on television, he was just listening to other distinguished scholars, and we feared he wouldn't speak a word of English. We even suspected that he did not understand what was being discussed in the session. However, once he was asked to advance his opinion, the reserved old man, in his fluent and polished English, summarized the discussion and expressed his own views on the matter. After his remarks some other Nobel laureate questioned his statement and he countercharged in a dignified manner, which appeared to impress the other people around the table.

We suppose literature is one of the elements that have made what Koshiba is today. Whatever profession we adopt, we will be judged not only by what we can do as an expert but also what we are as human beings. Of course, we do not have to learn the abstract theory of literature. The point is that, by reading books, we will be able to experience every possible life that we might not experience in our own life.

Literature still lingers on, though literature departments in colleges and universities are decreasing in number. Kojima Nao, a young tanka poet, writes tanka using her mobile phone. She saves what impresses her in her daily life in her mobile phone and completes her tanka at home by writing it down on her notebook and elaborating on it. It is possible to read even short stories on your mobile phone. Times are changing, but

people still love to write and read literature.

Even ordinary people have the chance to write poems of some kind. Poetry is the easiest way to express yourself. There is nothing but words you need. We have our own rhythm and vocabulary, our own way of breathing our own language. It cannot be analyzed or summarized. It does not matter whether your production will be highly estimated or not. How it sounds to you is what matters. By using words you can jump out of your daily routine, and at that time poetry will be born. We need poetry in this world of closed circles, where we feel hopeless. We are too far removed from the nature and too much a part of this world of information technology. We are discouraged to think and feel free. We cannot breathe properly, when we feel we need poetry, which means to make what we see, what we hear, what we feel, and what we think into some form and rhythm. Poetry is a human cry out of the dark forest in our mind which is what we cannot always grasp. However, if we put what we have on our mind into some form, there will be a lot to be seen. Some people are willing to write poems as well as read poems.

In this world with a monolithic society where everything looks cavitated, we need novels to read. John Lennon tells us to imagine all the people living life in peace and so on. But how can we imagine like John? Through reading books, it may be possible. When we read novels and fiction, we use imagination without realizing. It means that we capture the story on our own, imagine, and produce images by ourselves, then experience the story more deeply. By doing so, we can cultivate our imagination to know and think how to live our life and how complicated things are. If you know there are different aspects in the world and the world is complicated and diverse, then you can use your imagination, and not judge only by what you can see close at hand. Novels will show you how deep and

varied human minds are. Novels will save us from freezing and non-thinking.

Is literature useful? We should not judge the value of literature by the poor criterion of whether it is useful or not. Literature can criticize a modern society which believes only in machine civilization. Literature is something that touches our mind. It can make our life rich. The role of institutions of higher education lies not only in drilling knowledge into the students but also in cultivating abilities to understand, deduce, and meditate. Those who have the capacity to think clearly and logically will be highly appreciated in any system.

How can we read literature? In short, to read literature is to interpret messages expressed verbally, answers to such questions as "What is life?" or "What are human beings?" When we talk about novels, we should talk about the details specifically. We can decipher the ideas embedded in the story through details, when we realize that the work is living just as the readers are living. We must also know that literary truth varies a great deal: unpredictable quality of expressions and indeterminacy of meanings. We can enjoy the wonder and excitement that languages basically have. We should respect the semantic ambiguity of language and enumerate every possible proper interpretation. And of course it is necessary to demonstrate strictly and fairly on some evidence and according to some method.

What kind of society should we aspire to? U.S. President Barack Obama received the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize because of his promotion of nuclear nonproliferation. It seems that he declared the U.S.A is going to seek for a world free from nuclear weapons. Japanese Prime Minister Kan Naoto says that he is aiming for a society in which human suffering is reduced to a minimum. What they say is good, but how can they attain these goals?

Economic growth and scientific progress are not the only answers. We are now still an affluent society, despite the bursting of the economic bubble. We can share what we have and all can be happy, if we want to. Our earth is rich enough to support everyone here, still the reality is not so simple. And in the future we will not be able to hope for the economic growth which we had in the past. He is rich that has few wants. Science has made progress at an accelerated rate, which has not necessarily made us happy. We must admit science plays a great role in our society. Nevertheless, keep in mind that atomic bombs killed hundreds of thousands of people in a twinkle. Keep in mind that the sarin gas attack killed and scared commuters. Keep in mind that the worst nuclear accident in history, at Chernobyl, poisoned the world over.

Literature helps us to live with these difficulties and others. We know we are not suffering alone. The works of Shakespeare tell us almost all that happens under the sun. We are now coming into the age of confusion, when once more we should turn back to literature and foster the ability to imagine.