

Literature, Text, and Theory: An Interview with Professor William Baker

Li Yafei & William Baker

Abstract: William Baker is Distinguished Research Professor Emeritus at Northern Illinois University, whose scholarly interests include 19th and 20th-century British Literature, Bibliography and Shakespeare. Baker has authored, co-authored and edited over thirty works on amongst others Jane Austen, Wilkie Collins, George Eliot, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, and William Shakespeare. Editor of *George Eliot - George Henry Lewes Studies* and book review editor and consultant for *Style*, Baker co-edits *The Year's Work in English Studies* and also does reviews for *Times Literary Supplement (TLS)* and other journals. During Professor Baker's academic visit to the English Department of Shanghai Jiao Tong University in November 2017, Li Yafei interviewed him on a wide range of issues. In this interview, Baker not only shares his personal experiences of engaging himself in studying literature, but also expresses his penetrating insights into William Shakespeare, Tom Stoppard, and Matthew Arnold. In addition, as a "textual historical critic" and bibliographer, Baker offers his thought-provoking viewpoints on both literary texts and literary theories. Moreover, Professor Baker, with reference to his rich experience as a literary researcher and professor, offers valuable suggestions for young scholars.

Key words: literature; bibliography; Shakespeare; Tom Stoppard; literary theory

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标题: 文学、文本、理论：威廉·贝克教授访谈录

内容摘要: 威廉贝克是美国北伊利诺伊大学杰出研究教授，兼任《乔治艾略特——乔治·亨利·路易斯研究》杂志主编、《文体》杂志书评编辑等，其主要研究领域为 19 世纪和 20 世纪英国文学与文献学，出版著作（编著）三十多部。

2017年11月，在贝克教授来上海交通大学外国语学院讲学期间，李亚飞博士对其进行了学术专访。在访谈中，贝克教授不仅分享了自己从事文学研究领域的经验，而且还围绕威廉·莎士比亚、汤姆·斯托帕德、马修·阿诺德等人的作品发表了自己的观点。此外，作为一名“文本历史批评家”，贝克教授还畅谈了他对文学文本和文学理论的看法。

关键词：文学；文献学；文学理论

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Li Yafei (Li for short hereafter): Good evening Professor Baker, very nice meeting you at Shanghai Jiao Tong University and I am very much honored to have the opportunity to interview you. As a leading scholar in literary studies, particularly in the arena of 19th and 20th-century British Literature, you have published widely on Shakespeare, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Wilkie Collins, Harold Pinter, as well as Tom Stoppard and others. What brings you to engage yourself in studying English literature and particularly what makes you to focus your study on these writers?

William Baker (Baker for short hereafter): That's very interesting and very good question. I'll give you a very personal answer. When I was growing up in post-war Britain, on the radio every Sunday evening, there used to be broadcast adaptations of great nineteenth-century novelists, such as Dickens, George Eliot, Wilkie Collins, and Walter Scott amongst others. My mother always used to listen to these adaptations and my father as well. I got so engrossed in them. There was for instance a broadcast of Walter Scott's novel, *Redgauntlet*. It was the last but one episode. I was so excited by what was happening, and I hadn't the patience to wait for the next episode the following Sunday, so I had a sleepless night, thinking of the possibilities of the ending. Our school was opposite the local library, so in the morning I went to the local library and read the last three pages of the novel. I must say I was very disappointed by how it ended up. I then went to school: the school had a very strict policy about being late for school. The headmaster was a man called Mr. Ralph. I can see him now, and this was sixty years ago. He had a very big head, very big skull, no hair, and he had funny horn-rimmed glasses. If you were late, you would go into his study. He had a cane. He looked at me, and he said: "Willy [I was called by my nick-name] Baker, I'm absolutely amazed, what's your excuse boy?" — Great emphasis on the word "boy" expressed with

considerable contempt. I answered: “Walter Scott, Sir.” “Pardon?” He said, “I don’t believe this, what do you mean by Walter Scott, tell me about Walter Scott.” I told him that I listened to the Sunday evening serial on the radio. He replied: “No, other better things to do, why?” I said it was the penultimate episode, and I was so excited by this on the radio that I had to go to the library and find out how the novel ended, and that’s why I was late for school. He put the cane down, and he said to me: “Was it worth it, Willy?” I said: “Not really, sir; It was very disappointing.” He said: “I’m not interested in the ending, get out of my study, don’t waste my time, and send me the next *boy*.” So that illustrated the fascination which literature had for me from early on: I used to hear it on the radio.

Li: Yes, that’s a very interesting experience. So that can be your very first encounter with literature, and you started with interest.

Baker: Yes. That was more or less the first thing. Secondly, I had very sympathetic school teachers. The English master at the school I was in, the senior English teacher, he encouraged me very much. He thought I was very appreciative of poetry. He loved poetry. He didn’t meet many boys interested in poetry. It was an all-boys school. The school was segregated, unlike today. He used to encourage me and wanted me to stay on at school, because in my generation, you left school very early, at 14 or 15. He wanted me to stay on to take the examinations in English literature, in English language, in mathematics, and in history. And actually five boys were chosen, and I remember Mr. Ralph contacted the parents. Because some of the boys were from poor families, their parents wanted them to go out, to leave school at fourteen to go to work. Mr. Ralph contacted my mother and said: “Can you afford to let your son remain another year at school?” My mother told him: “Yes, study is very important; I don’t mind, let him study.” Many years later I dedicated a book to the teacher, whose name was Mr. Lewis — his nickname was “peanut” because he was very bald—little did I know that I too would lose my hair, as I did in my mid-twenties — because he did this voluntarily. Today Mr. Lewis’s voluntary assistance in his own time wouldn’t be allowed by the teachers Union. There was another boy also, whom I re-connected with 40 years later. He became a very eminent and distinguished chemist at the University of Toronto. He also was at school with me. They asked him to stay on as well. It was quite complicated educational and social situation: we were 11 plus failures. Following the 1944 Butler Education Act, school children in England took an examination at the age of 11. This determined so to speak your fate. If you did well you went to the local Grammar school where there was the chance to stay on until the age of 18 and

apply for University entrance. If you failed, you got sent to a Secondary Modern School where boys left at the age of 14 — it was changed to 15 — and went into menial jobs. I studied literature and language with this English teacher, Mr. Lewis, and he helped me very much. Then, after doing well in Public Examinations I was transferred me to another school, the Grammar School that allowed its students to stay on for University and College entrance.

Li: I totally agree with you on that. Sometimes teachers can play a very crucial and even decisive role in what someone may become in the future, because they can offer guidance with reference to their own personal experience and their well-gained knowledge.

Baker: Yes. That's true. Then I was always reading Shakespeare. My mother, when I was 12 or 13, gave me a copy of complete works of Shakespeare, which I still have. I used to read Shakespeare and the poetry. At the Grammar School I never forget the teacher named Mr. Randall, who used to teach Shakespeare. He was known as a very strong disciplinarian, and everyone was afraid of him. He used to run the school cadet force, he had served with distinction in the thick of the fighting against the Germans during the Second World War, and the school had a sort of military training on Friday afternoons. I had the option, and I took music instead, so I didn't think he would like me. One afternoon, after lunch, you know it's physiological; it is a very sensitive time, because you want sleep after lunch. Subsequently I used to avoid giving lectures after lunch. Randall was reading lines from Alexander Pope's poem 'The Rape of the Lock.' I will never forget this. He threw a book at me and shouted at me in front of all boys: "Baker, you are sleeping, wake up." I denied this saying "Oh No I am not Sir" — we always called the teachers, the Masters "Sir." He then asked: "What were the last two lines I read out?" Maybe someone was watching over me. For some reason, I recited to him from memory the last four lines rather than the last two he had read out. He put his book down, and there was silence in the class, and he looked at me and said: "not a word." I learned a lot from him. He always used to ask me questions on Shakespeare and encouraged me. Mr. Randall liked the history plays and I remember him reading and asking questions about the *Henry IV* plays and especially the character of Falstaff and his relationship with Prince Hal — the young Prince Henry who became Henry V. In short, we had some very stimulating teachers who encouraged us.

Li: That's another very interesting story of your early experience with literature,

which again illuminates the importance of an encouraging and supportive teacher.

Baker: Yes. Then when I wanted to go to university, there was tremendous pressure put on me because of my background to study law. My cousin had become a lawyer. Very few people from my Anglo-Jewish background went to study literature, because their families felt it was difficult to make a living from the study of literature. My uncle by marriage put tremendous pressure on me. He had forced his son to study law. His son is 12 years older than I. Today in his mid-80's with a very clear mind, he still goes to his office in London. His wife told me that he spent his time reading poetry in the office.

Li: So you see, what you really do is the life he envies, because you said “No” to family pressure.

Baker: He was very “successful,” but law was not what he wanted to do. He has a lot of novels, in his collection where I first read for instance Ian McEwan, and Howard Jacobson and he reads a lot of poetry, T. S. Eliot being a particular favorite. After I decided that I was going to study literature, my mother didn't object. She didn't want to say anything. Then I had to find a university. I remember there was a new university which just opening near where I lived. In England at that time, there were several new universities started. One of them was in opposition, basically, to Oxford and Cambridge; this was the newly founded University of Sussex. It was very difficult to get into, and more difficult to get into at the time, believe it or not, than Oxford and Cambridge. I managed to have an interview there. The Professor, who subsequently became somebody I admired very much and published on, was David Daiches¹. He interviewed me. He asked me what my favorite Shakespeare play was. I said *Measure for Measure*. He said that was a very unusual choice. Most people would choose *Hamlet* or the Scottish Play, or something like that. He produced a piece of paper, which I still have over half-a-century later, and wrote down the opening lines of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. We spent a whole hour, discussing these opening lines. Incidentally I still find *Measure for Measure* a fantastically interesting play. Now whenever I teach Shakespeare, I always tell my students that the opening lines in a Shakespeare play are the key important lines. For instance, in *Twelfth Night; or What You Will*: “If music be the food of love,

1 David Daiches (1912-2005) was a prolific Anglo/Scottish literary historian and literary critic, scholar and writer. He wrote extensively on English literature, Scottish literature and Scottish culture. After teaching at the Universities of Chicago, Cornell and Cambridge, he created the School of English and American Studies at the University of Sussex when the university was founded in 1961.

play on.” The opening word “if” implies a “doubt,” a “question” and raises many issues that the play subsequently examines such as the nature of “love,” “deception” personal “identity” and so on. So, to return to the life-changing interview with David Daiches, we spent a whole hour on close reading and discussion: today this approach is called formalism. There is very little that is “new” in literary criticism. It can be a regurgitation of past ideas with new concepts to describe what has previously been thought and said. This maybe a very sceptical and slightly jaded view of it, but a lot of these ideas had been expressed before. You know there is an old saying that “there’s nothing new under the sun.”

Li: So you said that there is very little new in literary criticism, and it’s just a kind of regurgitation of previous ideas with new concepts to describe it. I think that is a very brave claim. Could you illustrate this point more in detail?

Baker: For instance, with Daiches, we discussed the language, the social context, and the politics behind the opening lines of *Measure for Measure*. There are today all sorts of approaches, but then we didn’t describe them as approaches. It was just something you looked at. It was just something you discussed naturally when you discussed literature. Now in a way, names have been put on this, you know such as “formalism,” “new historicism” and so on. When I went to Sussex as an undergraduate, one of the key courses we did was practical close reading, not the history of it, but the actual words on the page. This was a tradition from Cambridge, from Leavis¹, and they still have a final paper on this I understand at Cambridge. I had a similar paper when I went to the University of London as a graduate student, as a master’s and then a doctoral student. They gave you a passage of prose or a poem, and you had to date it, and to discuss it. You had to put a period on it and analyze the social, historical and political implications in addition to the words, the language, everything combined together, in the passage.

Also at Sussex I had courses on the literature of the Industrial Revolution. The literature which was produced when Britain was going through this period of the growth of industry, more or less like your country went through in the late of the 20th century with the growth of industry and urbanization. We discussed in seminars for instance Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Victorian writers responding to the problems of railway, the mechanical age and the age of factory, and the problems in the cities. We discussed these in interdisciplinary courses — with Professors

1 F. R. Leavis (1895-1978) was a highly influential British literary critic of the early-to-mid-twentieth century. He taught for much of his career at Downing College, Cambridge and later at the University of York.

and students from different disciplines, such as history, sociology, which was very popular then. We didn't really didn't study psychological approaches unfortunately for some reason, maybe they didn't have the faculty, but certainly history, because one of our professors was a very preeminent historian named Asa Briggs¹. He wrote many books on Victorian England, calling it, as he did in one of his most distinguished volumes, *The Age of Improvement* (1959) and about English society, social and political forces at work. We were studying literature from that point of view. When I taught a similar course of that nature at my American university, it was regarded as something different. I said "how come?," because that was what we studied many years ago previously as an undergraduate. We also had a course on Contemporary Britain when we studied contemporary British writers, (such as Alan Sillitoe, David Storey and others), people like this, who were writing about social political issues in Britain at that time.

Li: So even as early as your undergraduate years, you approached literature from interdisciplinary perspectives? Does it lead you to believe that there are few things new in literary criticism?

Baker: I said that many of these ideas which are claimed as "new" literary theories have somehow reoccurred previously in different categories. There is a recycling. We develop and refine ideas, but it doesn't mean to say these ideas are any less valid: they are the wisdom of the past. To slightly change the subject, I personally don't agree with Aristotle, especially about the psychological effects of tragedy. I don't think that what's in tragedy watching on the stage, for instance, *King Lear*, and the eyes being put out, makes you a better human being. That's the theory of "Catharsis." I don't think that watching pain on the stage makes one a better human being, but Aristotle did. That's a disagreement with it. This is my opinion.

So let's go back. Have I explained why I became interested in literature? Because it was encouraged by my parents, my father was a publisher, he published books. He published some of the early books of science fiction in England.

Li: Yes, thank you. Let's move to another question. I noticed that you have published bibliographies and chronologies of some literary writers, such as George

1 Asa Briggs, Baron Briggs (1921-2016) was an English historian. He was a leading specialist on the Victorian era, and the foremost historian of broadcasting in Britain. From 1961 to 1976 he was Professor of History at University of Sussex, while also serving as Dean of the School of Social Studies from 1961 to 1965.

Eliot, Harold Pinter and Wilkie Collins¹. Why are you so fascinated with the study of chronologies or bibliographies? Why do you think it is important?

Baker: Ok. Firstly, there is a very practical and serious answer. Palgrave Macmillan publishes a series named “Author Chronologies.” Sometimes you publish because there is an opportunity — the publishers are interested, and there is a series it fits into. That’s the first practical reason. But it’s an extremely laborious work I must tell you, and I don’t recommend it. Secondly, some people accused me of being a “positivist.” I am very concerned with “fact,” and I like there to be evidence. I have been noted for being tough on my students because of this. Students have said: “Professor Baker wants evidence for that statement.” I am very sceptical of value judgments, possibly a legacy of my undergraduate experience; we used to take courses in philosophy. At the time in British philosophy, this is the early 1960s, what was fashionable, for instance in the work of A. J. Ayer², who questioned everything. He wrote a book called *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936). This was compulsory reading and was concerned with verification, that everything had to be verified. What do you mean by this, and what do you mean by that? If you use word such as “truth,” what do you mean by this? This made me very sceptical of literary value judgments. Why do you prefer this author to that author? The literary critics were not being precise enough, or using language sloppily.

When I did my doctorate, I looked at source materials: the topic was George Eliot’s sources for her final novel *Daniel Deronda* (1875-76)- in fact an edition of her manuscript Notebooks. I have always been very concerned with the factual evidence. I taught for many years a graduate course on bibliography and textual

1 For the bibliographies chronologies and critical work published by William Baker, see for instance (1) William Baker and Jeanette Shumaker, *Bernard Kops: Fantast, London Jew, Apocalyptic Humorist* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014). (2) William Baker, *A Harold Pinter Chronology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). (3) William Baker and Gerald N. Wachs, *Tom Stoppard: A Bibliographical History* (New Castle: Oak Knoll Press, 2010). (4) William Baker and Jeanette Shumaker, *Leonard Merrick: A Forgotten Novelist’s Novelist* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009). (5) William Baker, *Harold Pinter* (London: Continuum, 2008) (6) William Baker, *A Wilkie Collins Chronology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). (7) William Baker and John C. Ross, *Harold Pinter: A Bibliographical History* (New Castle: Oak Knoll Press, 2005). (8) William Baker and John C. Ross, *George Eliot: A Bibliographical History* (London: British Library, 2002) (9) William Baker and John Kimber, *F. R. Leavis and Q. D. Leavis: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1989).

2 A. J. Ayer (1910-1989) was a British philosopher known for his promotion of logical positivism, particularly in his books *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936) and *The Problem of Knowledge* (1956).

criticism. What texts are we using? What is the foundation for this text? What about misprints? There are many famous cases of interpretation which are wrong, because they are based on something the author did not ever write. There's a famous case of this. There is an essay by Delmore Schwartz, who wrote an essay on a poem by W. B. Yeats, "Among School Children" containing the line — ("solider Aristotle"). He wrote a lengthy essay, interpreting this line of Yeats, but there was a problem, Yeats never wrote "soldier" but "solider." So this is a lesson that you have to base what you do, whatever you say, in accurate texts.

Li: Yes, that means literary interpretation should be based on actual texts and facts. We can never claim "the death of the text."

Baker: Yes. You can say what you like about something. That's fantastic, but that's a matter of opinion, that's value judgment. So we come back to the philosophical issues. A leading English philosopher during the post-Second World War period in addition to A. J. Ayer was J. L. Austin¹. Both belonged to the Oxford school of philosophy. They were very concerned with actually the way you use language. Now Tom Stoppard is very difficult, because he changes his lines, almost as they are being performed. He is also himself interested in the very issue of what is a "text," what is the base for your theories of poetics, or feminism, or formalism or... what texts are you basing them on. Such issues and these have fascinated me too. So you could call me a "textual historical critic."

When I went to Northern University, there was a tradition there for studying bibliography, and I have a hobby of collecting writer's manuscripts, their letters and first editions. First editions are the authors' initial published incarnation, and there's great deal of difference between which texts you study: is it the first edition, is it a revised edition containing textual changes, or is it a subsequent "edition"? Of course for Shakespeare, this is a very complicated but fascinating issue, because there are no extant manuscripts to speak of. There are "texts" found in the quartos (the early printings for individual plays) and/ or in the First Folio (the First Collected Shakespeare of 1623). The first edition issue is a fascinating one.

For 25 years I taught a graduate course on bibliography and texts. The course included the reference texts in a particular area which students would consult in the library and where they would find materials in the library. Other topics covered included which edition they would use. Projects included an author bibliography, not merely enumerative, a listing but descriptive, and the collation or physical

¹ J. L. Austin (1911-1960) was a British philosopher of language and leading proponent of ordinary language philosophy. He is best known for developing the theory of speech acts.

breakdown of a book, including examining its binding, its signatures and so on. Many of the students published a bibliography of an author, of what an author wrote: I remember that students published bibliographies of the American author Carson McCullers, and the late twentieth century English poet Gavin Ewart amongst others.

Until I worked on the bibliographical histories of George Eliot, Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard for instance, there was no comprehensive, complete an account of their published writings and other texts. Pinter (who was alive at the time) and Stoppard (happily still with us) didn't know themselves what they have written, especially when young. When writers grow older, they tend to forget what they produced when young or they want to throw their youthful work away, or they don't want people to be aware it, as the case of Stoppard. Those are very controversial areas. Textual critics are fighting one another about that, especially today in Shakespearian studies. There are so many controversies. Textual study is frequently a heated area of discussion.

Li: So that is why you focus your study on bibliography?

Baker: I also found another reason. It fascinated me intellectually. I found intellectually that it was more "scientific." I got very disillusioned. I told you earlier, I was very much influenced at high school by critic, as many English people were of that generation, by F. R. Leavis at Cambridge. Leavis was an evaluative critic. He was a moralist. He said that some writers were worth studying and many were not, and there were only four great novelists. He turned to Dickens later on, because his wife loved Dickens. With others I compiled his bibliography as well. Subsequently I reacted against him. When I was young, I was very much influenced by Leavis, and then I found that many of his ideas was very dogmatic. Also some of those he has taught were far from "decent" / "nice" people although Leavis claimed that great literature somehow made its readers better human beings.

Li: F. R. Leavis has been accused by some critics of being a cultural elitist, whose "critical theory and practice both express strong sense of elitism and admiration for literary canon" (Wang, "An Overview" 117). How do you think of that?

Baker: Yes, that's true, because (he believed) some writers are better than others and some people are more educated to teach than others. He worshiped D. H. Lawrence, and he wouldn't let James Joyce into the "Pantheon of the Gods."

Li: So your early study of literature and early literary critical experience were quite

influenced by F. R. Leavis and David Daiches?

Baker: Yes, but I reacted against that, although I did their bibliographies, and David Daiches became my close personal friend after I left university. He kept in touch with me. He was very kind to students he liked for some reason, and he was very encouraging to me. Leavis was a very interesting, very pervasive, and very influential critic. He influenced, for instance, Raymond Williams the well-known historical critic.. Leavis' wife, Q. D. Leavis, was also a very fine critic, who wrote a book called *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), which is about how people read, how criticism is assessed and discussed “popular culture” and “middlebrow” reading and literature. Historically hers is a very important book, which incidentally was her Ph.D. thesis at Cambridge.

Li: In your point of view, why Shakespeare stands out as one of the greatest playwrights?

Baker: Well, I mean, firstly I haven't read many of the others. Secondly, his poetry is superb. Thirdly his subject matter is the great human conflicts, ambition, tragedy, hubris, desire, love, envy, jealousy, hatred, family conflicts, and disguise, and the basic human qualities are also found in Shakespeare. He had such a profound insight into human beings, and he shows their problems on the stage.

Li: Is there any connection between Shakespeare's career as a successful dramatist and the social and cultural circumstances in England at the time?

Baker: That's a very good question. I don't know why Elizabethan and Jacobean England produced Shakespeare. I think that great genius is born in all societies, whether it is allowed to flower depends upon luck — an obsession of Tom Stoppard: see for instance the opening of his *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*. The flowering of genius depends upon the circumstances, the conditions, and the environment. There are theories that the great genius is allowed to flourish because of the society in which they are a product. I don't know, all I know is that there is such genius, and you get it in all the arts, such as in music, in painting, and so on not only in literature.

Li: The English language, to some extent, has been shaped to the modern form by Shakespeare. Even today, he is widely quoted by English language users around the world, and some quotes are even done unconsciously. One of the worldly known “cliché” from Shakespeare is “to be or not to be: that is a question.” As an oft-quoted sentence, it has different Chinese translations, which means that there are

no agreements in the translating on it. Some critics translate it as “to live or to die,” while others translate it as “to exist or to destroy” (P. Zhang 114). So what is your interpretation?

Baker: This happens in many languages, not only in Chinese. The interpretation of the line depends on my mood. Hamlet has a decision to make. I would interpret it within the context of the play. He is in a dilemma. Some people are like that, I mean some people cannot make up their minds. Some people are this kind of human being, and Hamlet is one of these human beings. Shakespeare is a genius, maybe Hamlet is based on somebody he knew. I also believe a lot in the biographical interpretation of literature. This kind of person cannot make up his mind, and it is a very crucial decision he has to make, because the decision is to kill, to take revenge. You don’t do that lightly, and if you do that lightly, there’s a problem. So it depends on how you interpret it on many levels. “To be or not to be” doesn’t necessarily mean you are not going to exist. There can be four or five or six ways of interpreting Hamlet’s lines. These are also among the reasons why he is such a great dramatist.

Li: Some people prefer to interpret this as “to exist” or “to destroy,” because they claim that “to exist” does not simply mean “to live,” while “to live” is different from “to exist.” If we say “to live,” it means “to make a living.”

Baker: Yes, I agree with that, but that’s one interpretation. I agree with the idea of manifold interpretations according to the context and person, and the person who is reading it, because people come to the text from many different backgrounds, different kinds of presuppositions, and all sorts of different things. So it depends on where you are coming from. That’s why it is so fascinating to come to China to teach new students. For instance, I learned so much from teaching an undergraduate course on Shakespeare in Hangzhou at Zhejiang University in the Autumn of 2015 to students, who came to the plays from such a different perspective than my own. They asked me things I’d never even “dreamed of in my philosophy,” to quote Hamlet, you know. You can’t be dogmatic that only one interpretation is right. That’s part of the fascination of studying literature. When you experience in life, when you grow older maybe, you can understand much more. For instance, some writers, whom I didn’t understand when I was 21, and now there are some I still don’t understand, but I do understand some much more than when I was 21. So you yourself change, and you have different experiences, and other people bring different things to you. I don’t believe there’s one set of right-or-wrong interpretation.

Li: Another question is about Tom Stoppard. You know he, in some of his plays, writes back to William Shakespeare. So in these plays, how does Tom Stoppard respond to Shakespeare? Or how does he negotiate with Shakespeare and his works?

Baker: Well, he is very brave. Look at *Shakespeare in Love* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*. Stoppard takes a couple of characters who have been ignored, who have a role as courtiers. Both have a function — they are given orders, and they obey these orders. Stoppard presents them as characters and human beings with emotions and feelings, which Shakespeare doesn't. Yet it's all determined, their life is determined by the dice, by fate. This is a brilliant and almost original take on it. I say "almost," because so much has been written about *Hamlet*, that somebody might somewhere have written something similar, you see, you could never be sure. But Stoppard's version is pretty good. It is a brilliant idea that emphasis should be placed on these two characters. Their function is to get Hamlet killed, but they end up being killed by Hamlet, so it's a twist on Shakespeare. Stoppard is almost toying with Shakespeare, which in itself requires artistic arrogance.

Li: So Stoppard is trying to deconstruct Shakespeare, and some people say that Tom Stoppard is a "deceptive dramatist." The key to his work lies in the idea of "collision" both in form and in intellectuality. He once told a *New York Times* interviewer: "I write plays, because writing dialogue is the only respectable way of contradicting myself."¹ Could you please share your comment on that?

Baker: Oh, that's Tom Stoppard. He's being clever and witty. He loves argument. He loves philosophical argument. You know that he never went to university. If he went to university, he wanted to study philosophy, because he is always debating himself, but never reaching a conclusion. That's a problem of his plays; I mean it's like juggling — one character and one idea versus another. That's how I interpret that observation.

Li: Dan Rebellato once said that Tom Stoppard's "theatrical surfaces serve to conceal rather than reveal their author's views, and his fondness for towers of paradox spirals away from social comment" (576). What do you think of Rebellato's observation?

Baker: Stoppard would probably agree with that, because one of his great preoccupations is disguise. His views can be regarded as juggling ideas, which he

1 This is from the official website of British Council, see <https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/tom-stoppard>. Accessed 18 Nov. 2017.

wants to play with, but he wants to conceal. One of his plays is called *The Real Thing*, and one of his central concerns is “what is reality”? This is a very crucial central philosophical issue in Stoppard who is all too aware of the masquerade, the mask we put on as human beings. We are all playing games socially and in dialogue. We are all having dialogues with ourselves and other people. Above all Stoppard is being very clever.

Li: Has Stoppard’s dramatic writing experienced a kind of transformation and change in terms of themes, style, or something else, throughout his career as a playwright?

Baker: He’s always rewriting, obsessively so. Not only particular lines, words or actions but whole scenes, whole plots. He’s always rewriting, obsessively.

Li: You mentioned that you are quite fond of Matthew Arnold’s poems. Arnold has been accused of being a pessimist and a cultural elitist. Do you agree?

Baker: My interest in Arnold is in his poetry, which is not a fashionable opinion. I think Arnold is a magnificent poet in terms of his poems dealing with nostalgia, place, and sense of perspective. In his poems, he juxtaposes his own situation with classical situations. His concern is not only him but also is preoccupied with classical Greece and Rome with ancient civilizations. He also wrote a magnificent poem an elegy on the death of the great German writer Goethe and a long poem called “The Scholar Gypsy.” Both are wonderful poems on rivers, on time, on the passing of time, on movement, and on the countryside. My interest is mainly his poetry, which is out of fashion rather than with his social or aesthetic criticism. Arnold’s poetry, as I have said, isn’t highly regarded.

I must tell you something else about my literary concerns. I have written a lot on writers, who haven’t been really examined, or aspects of major writers that have been neglected such as Arnold’s or Pinter’s poetry. “Minor” writers also interest me too, for instance the novelist and short story writer, the late Victorian and Edwardian Leonard Merrick, the late twentieth century dramatist and poet Bernard Kops both of whom I have written extensively on. So I suggest to you and others, to study and write on minor writers, you have a clear field, virgin territory. But not necessarily for your Ph.D. topic or relate the “minor,” the neglected author/s to wider themes, such as for instance “Leonard Merrick and Late Victorian and Edwardian Fiction,” “Charles Reade: forgotten Victorian-why?” or “Bernard Kops and post 1956 British Drama.”

Li: Ok, that's very useful advice. I agree with you, and thank you. Harold Bloom comments on Arnold by saying "Arnold is, at his best, a very good, but highly derivative poet, unlike Tennyson, Browning, Hopkins, Swinburne and Rossetti, all of whom individualized their voices" (1-2).

Baker: Harold Bloom is a very interesting and great critic. He wrote *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. Well I don't agree with him over his view on Mathew Arnold. What does he mean by "derivative"? I would have to ask Harold Bloom. He has to explain himself. I can't speak for Bloom. I totally disagree with him. That's his problem, not mine.

Li: Ok. Now, let's move to topics of literary theories. Since late 1970s to early 1980s, "contemporary Western literary criticism began to exert an influence in China and became, gradually, a prominent discipline and the standard for evaluating literary and artistic practice in China" (J. Zhang 6). I was wondering whether Western academia aware of Chinese receptions of its theories?

Baker: Probably not. You have your own great literature. I am surprised at this. I think that Chinese literary critics probably have a very great tradition. This is a very great country culturally. It apparently, I wish I knew more about it, has great literature going back before western literature. I found the attitude towards Chinese literature and culture sad, and I wonder why it should be so. You should be proud of your own literary tradition and culture. Professor Nie, who very recently has moved from Central China Normal University, Wuhan to Zhejiang University at Hangzhou has developed the theory of ethical literary criticism, which is related to China and is very fine. I have studied something about it. I think more of that kind of work should be developed: Chinese literary critics should develop their own theories based on their own literary traditions.

Li: The Chinese critics' warm reception of Western literary theories does not necessarily mean that they are imported in a blind manner. Instead, some scholars critically evaluated the Western theories. Critic Zhang Jiang from China argues that "quite a number of major doctrines and schools in Western literary criticism are detached, to different extents, from literary practice and experience, interpreting both literary texts and literary experience in the light of the ready-made theories of other disciplines and generalizing them as universal literary rules" (7). Could you please comment on that?

Baker: Oh, I hope so. Ok, he's right. He's correct. I think that's most perceptive.

Li: From 1965 to 1980, cultural theories experienced a so-called “golden age” of development, but now “the golden age of cultural theory is long past” (Eagleton 1), and it is claimed that “the contemporary philosophical and humanitarian thinking is in a ‘post-theoretic era’” (Wang, *Literary and Cultural Studies in the “Post-theoretic Era”* 4). What do you think of it?

Baker: Firstly, the development of literary theories. I think there’s something to do with the development of the profession, and the universities. In other words, they’re trying to self-justify their existence. So you develop theories to justify your existence within the universities, but I can’t speak for all universities. Personally I wish there was more attention to the actual text, and I am rather concerned about too much attention in the classroom to theories without relevance to the texts. Secondly, as to the “post-theoretic era,” I don’t know. However, I think the so-called new theoretical ideas are playing themselves out, and I suspect there’s some truth in this, but who knows something around the corner can become highly fashionable. What interests me is why X becomes fashionable when it does. For instance, why did deconstruction take over some very prestigious American universities during the late 1960s and 1970s? Why has it, fortunately or not, gone out of fashion? You see, there’s so much fashion to consider when discussing literary theory.

Li: As one of the most vigorous and powerful voices of constructing Chinese literary critical theory, ethical literary criticism has emerged to be an increasingly important critical approach. Until now, it is more than a decade since Professor Nie Zhenzhao initiated this critical theory, and it is gaining popularity in China and abroad. I know you co-authored with Professor Shang on an article entitled “Ethical literary criticism in the Chinese academe”¹, in which you introduced how ethical literary criticism as a critical approach rises and develops in China. How was it responded in the West?

Baker: Oh, there is your answer — read the article. There were favorable responses after the article about ethical criticism. Nobody wrote to the *TLS* saying we totally misunderstood the theory. That’s what we were afraid of. Somebody, you know, could always write and say “you are speaking rubbish, he never wrote that, and that’s wrong,” but nobody has said that. Well, I have written about this, and that was something I wrote three or four years ago.

1 For the detail of this article, see William Baker and Shang Biwu, “Fruitful Collaborations: Ethical Literary Criticism in Chinese academe,” *Times Literary Supplement, Commentary*, 31 July 2015: 14-15.

Li: One last question, both as a preeminent literary scholar and an encouraging professor. What wisdom would you like to share with young scholars?

Baker: Ok, three things. Number one, publishing in good-refereed journals, and don't be afraid to deal with rejection, because it hurts the ego, and people can be very cruel. However, if you think you got a good idea on something, stay with it. Secondly, make sure it's well written and documented and thought out. Thirdly, this is very cynical, be nice and respectful to your professors. This is because these professors have power, vanity, and ego, they are human. I am talking very seriously. I think all of us make mistakes, and I think looking back, I should have been more respectful towards some of my professors, even though I profoundly disagreed with them, but you don't let them know that. They like their own ideas, and they like to be special. They have big egos. You understand that? Vanity of vanities, that's from the Bible. Ok, I finish the interview by quoting the Ecclesiastes, the Bible!

Li: Once again, thank you, Professor Baker, for taking this interview.

Baker: Ok, you are welcome, but don't classify me as American or British. What I said in a very jet-lagged state as I flew in the day before yesterday from Chicago, are just my own views.

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