

THE OLD AND THE NEW: BRITISH CONCEPTS OF WRITING THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AFTER POSTMODERNISM

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As is well known, in the 1980s and 1990s the canon wars¹ were raging and the writing of literary histories became so doubtful that one of the pertinent studies carried the title “Is Literary History Possible?”² It seems all the more amazing that, almost untouched by the harshest criticism ever, not only large literary histories were projected, but also new literary histories of just one volume for a broader readership continued to be written.

By hindsight it seems touching that an author and critic like Malcolm Bradbury became a promoter of the writing of literary histories – in spite of the battle or because of the battle: in 2000, the year he died, Bradbury wrote his fascinating foreword to the second edition of the *Routledge History of Literatures in English*³ – and it sounds like a testament,

like a last wish of an author who wants his kind of writing to be read, honoured and treasured as a part of collective memory – and be a treasure of inspiration for creations of the future:

[...] even in times when the world, general historical and critical ideas, and the canon of literature itself have been undergoing constant deconstruction and reconstruction, sound and intelligent histories of literature still need to be written. (xiv)

The *Routledge History* meets that need – we sense a kind of thankfulness and relief when he states: “It is an up-to-date enterprise, graphically and clearly presented, with good visual support, telling the story plainly, and without the weight of critical jargon that surrounds so much modern academic discussions” (xv-xvi). What he stresses is the attempt to reach the reader, as well the common or general reader – something that was also a primary goal of the literary historians of the nineteenth century.⁴ He further praises this new literary history for being based on a wide reading and a firm sense of cultural history”, and again the literary histories of the nineteenth century were in general not only

¹ On the “canon wars” see William Casement, *The Great Canon Controversy: The Battle of the Books in Higher Education*; Gregory Jay, *American Literature and Culture Wars*; Lilian S. Robinson, *In the Canon's Mouth: Dispatches from the Culture Wars*; Kurt Müller, “Zwischen kulturellem Nationalismus und Multikulturalismus: Zur literarischen Kanondebatte in den USA”; Herbert Grabes, “The Canon Pro and Contra: The Canon is Dead -Long Live Pick and Mix.”

² David Perkins. *Is Literary History Possible?*

³ Ronald Carter and John McRae, *The Routledge History of Literature in English. Britain and Ireland*.

⁴ See Margit Sichert, “Prominent Values in Nineteenth-Century Histories of English Literature.”

histories of literature, but also cultural histories⁵. Carter and McRae have, however, intensified what their forerunners in the nineteenth century already began with: “They have been highly attentive to cultural and social change, above all to the changing history of the language and what writers have constructed with it” (xiii).

But we find more quotations in this new history than in many literary histories of the nineteenth century. Robert Chambers had written the first complete literary history of English literature⁶ without any adornment in 1836 and then added his *Cyclopaedia of English Literature* in 1843, which is first of all a literary anthology. The *Routledge History* in a way combines those two goals. Besides the many quotations introducing the individual works, there are plot summaries and introductory sections giving historical background.

What becomes so evident in *The Routledge History*, and what is so well expressed by Bradbury, was also felt deeply by the literary historians of the nineteenth century: “Literature is our link with great humane and moral ideas; it is part of the advancement of learning and the imaginative understanding of other people’s lived experience” (xvii).

What is stressed more, though it has been already the opinion of some historians of the nineteenth century, for example Shaw⁷ and Saintsbury⁸, is that “literature is always an experiment, as significant and innovative as any in medicine and science – as well as an

eternal story of the power of human imagination” (xvii). And, of course, it is Shakespeare who serves as the best example, as the literary historians of the nineteenth century had already recognized: “[Shakespeare] was a psychologically acute observer of humanity who had a unique ability to portray his observations, explorations, and insights in dramatic form, in the richest and most exciting language ever used in the English theatre” (88). No wonder he is still the most famous author ever. Though seen with more distance and more knowledge about the history of reception, he is not less admired as a genius of survival: “He can be, as critics have described him ‘our contemporary’, ‘alternative’, ‘radical’, ‘historicist’, ‘subversive’, ‘traditional’ and ‘conservative’” (92).

More than the literary historians of the nineteenth century, Carter and McRae include women’s voices, even for the period of the Middle Ages - for example, Marie de France, or “Hrotsvitha, a tenth-century abbess from Saxony, who is generally seen as the first woman-writer in Europe” (25) and Christine de Pisan. We also find more acknowledgement of the innovative force of women writers, as is shown in the comments on the works of the Brontë sisters or on George Eliot’s work, “[which] was to have a considerable influence on future generations of writers” (271). Such changes are, of course, above all dependent on different world-views. Though Chambers had in his English literary history already seen most of the women novelists as moral saviours, this opinion was soon given up.

Compared with the Routledge history, *The History of English Literature* by Michael Alexander follows very didactic principles – and the publisher seems very proud of it. It is pointed out in the blurb that it gives,

⁵ For an interesting contemporary example see Vera Nünning, ed. *Kulturgeschichte der englischen Literatur*.

⁶ Chambers, Robert. *History of the English Language and Literature*. See also Margit Sichert. “Implanting Literary History in Cultural Memory: Robert Chambers’ History of the English Language and Literature.”

⁷ Thomas Budge Shaw. *Outlines of English Literature*.

⁸ George Saintsbury. *A Short History of English Literature*.

an overview of each chapter,
 boxed biographies of authors
 boxed tables of publications and historical
 events
 quotations to illustrate literary texts discussed
 on-page definitions of key-terms and concepts
 portraits, illustrations and maps
 suggestions for further reading
 an index of authors and works.

Such a didactic trait is already to be found in quite a few literary histories of the nineteenth century. Several handbooks were written that presented an overview of English literature in a way that it could easily be learned by heart for the exams.⁹ From 1856 onwards, the English government demanded something literary historians nowadays can only dream of: entrance exams on literary history for the Civil Service.¹⁰

In spite of its didactic features, this literary history sometimes reads like a novel with a postmodern turn. There is, for example, a lot of distance and irony in Alexander's account of some events in English history: the narrative seems to become an event of words with a postmodern gothic turn. What was real sounds like fiction:

English writers have been unlucky under Henry VIII, who beheaded More and Surrey, Wyatt, a lover of Ann Boleyn, escaped the axe, but his son rebelled against Mary Tudor and lost his head. Mary burnt many protestants as heretics; her father Henry, Brother Edward and sister Elizabeth executed fewer catholics, including in 1587 Mary Queen of Scots as traitors. After 1581, Catholicism was considered a treason; Elizabeth also executed four Puritans. (78)

⁹ See for example Henry Austin Dobson, *The Civil Service Handbook of English Literature*.

¹⁰ For more information about this see Klaus Stiers-
 torfer, *Konstruktion literarischer Vergangenheit*, p. 258.

The cruelty of the historical events is seen, but not felt; it becomes a story located in the absence of sense, some story on the verge of a joke. With Alexander, irony as the central element of a postmodern stance is celebrated in the whole literary history. This way of writing about English history would have been a deadly sin in the literary histories of the nineteenth century. There a deeply serious attitude towards history can be found. With Alexander, there is on the one hand relativity as a criterion, on the other – in total contrast to Carter and Mc Rae – he distances himself, for example, from a writer like Gaskell with the phrase “an age in which Mrs. Gaskell is in the second rank is healthy” (275). There is no further explanation: no why, no what for. The reader is left to guess: is he against Victorian ideals? Is he against too many feelings? Does he find her too traditional in form? Too traditional in content? Does all this come together? Probably. Or? In the literary histories of the nineteenth century Gaskell is highly appreciated. Her humanitarian ideals, her human touch, are acknowledged and admired.

Is Alexander indirectly telling us that the nineteenth century was an unhealthy age? More often than once we find “eine Umwertung der Werte,” a “reversal of values” in Nietzschean terms – and Alexander uses the ironic way of changing or reversing values and evaluations. Is he influenced by Nietzsche's ideal of “the gay science?” At least, he is not very much interested in the human touch. He prefers distance and irony to the expression of pure feeling and sentiment: this leads, for instance, to his high admiration for Jane Austen, mistress of irony.

“Reversal of values”: we find this as well in the presentation of Alfred Lord Tennyson, Wordsworth's successor as *Poet Laureate* in 1850, celebrated as the “voice of England”

(262) and the number one national poetic hero in the literary histories of the nineteenth century. There we would never ever find what Alexander writes about Tennyson's father: "The disinherited eldest son of a landowner, the rector, was an unwilling clergyman. Melancholia, drunkenness, violence, opium and madness visited the rectory, yet it produced three poets amongst its sons" (262–63). Again, just irony as a reaction. No awareness of the close relation between genius and madness, an insight already found in the discourse of romanticism (and, for Chambers, genius was "a species of insanity" and Byron was typical of it).

Alexander celebrates dry humour, a humour that has been a mark of Englishness in its different variants since Chaucer¹¹. But there were limits: for example, do not touch national monuments; do not break the illusion of writing a serious literary history. Yet this is exactly what Alexander sometimes enjoys doing. We read: "More chose justice, Erasmus his books; both died Catholics, Erasmus in his bed"(80). Another example: "Despite Heathcliff's wolfish teeth, Emily's writing is not hackneyed" (275). This is a discourse of fiction, not of facts. Alexander sometimes plays with language in a way postmodern novelists do. Literary history turns into a series of stories, mostly interesting, sometimes absurd, sometimes scandalous, sometimes weird, sometimes funny. And the content of many books is presented like little stories within the great story of literature. And there are many quotations from literary works. But the *grand récit* is undermined, the pathos many literary histories of the nineteenth century esteem highly is broken; irony, a broken view,

¹¹ For humour as a characteristic trait of national character see for example H. W. Garrod, "Humour".

distance, scepticism, ambivalence, play are the substitute. There seems to be a playful fight against the glorification of nationalism, on the other hand British superiority towards other nations is not questioned at all: "Johnson's witty promotion of Shakespeare to semi-devine status was taken seriously in Germany and even in France" (107). Are we dealing with at least a superiority in irony as another kind of national superiority? A kind of hidden nationalism? More than just a postmodern attitude in a literary history of the twenty-first century?

Alexander is not only a teacher of English literature; he is a poet himself and a translator. This explains something, but not everything. There is at last partly a postmodern ambivalent attitude towards history and literary history. We may laugh about it but love it, and we certainly do not want to miss it or forget it. We want to keep it in the collective memory. Even with a postmodern turn. It is one way of helping literary history to survive.

The *Brief History of English Literature* by John Peck and Martin Coyle is advertised as

a different kind of history, providing a dynamic analysis of the story of English literature. Focusing on how poems, novels, plays and other forms of writing both reflect and challenge the periods in which they were produced, it combines close readings of selected key texts with recent critical thinking on the interaction of literary works and culture. (ix)

Innovation in the writing of literary histories – this was their goal in presenting 1) "a clear narrative, with a strong backbone of argument" and "a history of literature in which poems, plays, novels and other forms of writing are seen as functioning in history" (ix), 2) "a more dynamic analysis of the interaction between texts and the era of production" (ix), and

3) “an account, that provides current thinking in the subject” (x).

With their inclusion of theoretical reflections, Peck and Coyle indeed depart from the British tradition of writing literary histories¹². Yet although they share the view of postmodern criticism that history is just an ensemble of stories, that we never can get the real thing when looking back into the past, that we always have a reconstruction of history, never history itself¹³, they want to present a *grand récit*. There is a new self-assurance in their critique of more traditional histories and the will to be less traditional and more up to date. As in all literary histories of the nineteenth century and most literary histories of the twentieth century, there is the self-assured view that we stand on top of the past, on top of developments, looking back: “At the same time, at the start of the new millennium, it looks back across more than a thousand years of English literature, calling upon the past: the past will not illuminate or solve the problems of the present, but has to be considered” (292). The knowledge of and occupation with literature is seen as an insight into the identity of the people of the nation, a view which has been cherished by many literary histories of the nineteenth century as well. And Peck and Coyle use the communal “we” when they present their view that a study of English literature is also a voyage into the self of the English reader:

As we start the twenty-first century, English literature, including works by authors such as Rushdie and Heaney, which, with more than a touch of colonial arrogance, we continue to

appropriate into English literature, seems fixated with self-analysis and self-dissection, as we continue to strive towards an understanding of who we are and where we stand now. (292)

Influenced by literary critics of recent years, “[who] have begun to emphasise a rather different view of how literary texts play a role in the society that produced them, and how they intervene in their culture, rather than just passively reflecting values and ideas” (ix), they see literary texts first of all as cultural documents which interact with the culture and history of their time, preserve values and ideas, threaten them, or do both, influencing the culture to come.

Their critical stance more than once leads to unorthodox and more critical views of the most celebrated authors we do, indeed, not find in other literary histories. There Chaucer’s humour and tolerance are often praised; by some, he is even seen as the ideal Englishman. Here we read: “Chaucer is only ever amused, and never outraged, by human conduct”; [...] “human weakness is inevitable, and the appropriate response is laughter.” This evokes protest on the side of the two more critical and more radical literary historians of the 21st century: “If this is Chaucer’s position, then this also seems the right moment at which to remind ourselves that the second half of the fourteenth century was characterised by increased religious policing on the part of the church authorities.” What follows is a statement not without indignation: “While the church clamped down on waywardness, Chaucer was content to laugh” (26). Indeed, Chaucer negotiates between the past and the future, and he does something of great consequence that Peck and Coyle do not seem to be too happy about: “he creates a new voice, that of poised conservatism, that will remain central

¹² See Ansgar Nünning, “On the Englishness of English Literary History.”

¹³ See Herbert Grabes, “Literary Histories as Fictions of Collective Cultural Memory.”

in English literary culture for hundreds of years” (27). What is transmitted – or what tends to remain – is an ambivalent feeling: What was it? Poised conservatism, poisoned conservatism – both?

Not only Chaucer but also Shakespeare, the star of all stars of the literary histories not only of the nineteenth century, becomes the target of criticism, though he normally receives the highest appreciation possible. “Shakespeare is not in possession of some kind of superior wisdom,” we are told when reading about *Julius Caesar*: “On the contrary, the play is a product of the anxieties and uncertainties of the closing years of the Elizabethan period” (61). Here it becomes quite evident that Peck and Coyle do less to glorify the great authors and put more stress on the importance of the political, social and cultural circumstances. They do not speak of Shakespeare as a genius any more – but do they not replace genius by instinct? It sounds far less elitist, but it might mean exactly what the literary historians of the nineteenth century had called genius, though they only speak of a protagonist that Shakespeare created, not of Shakespeare himself: “In an almost instinctive way, as in Richard II, Julius Caesar senses, teases out, and brings into definition, the undercurrents of thoughts and feelings that, in retrospect, we see as characterising the period” (61). Not the genius of aesthetic creation but the analyst is discovered and accentuated in Shakespeare’s plays: “over and over again he examines the foundations upon which social and political life are constructed, identifying the forces that motivate and shape society.” In this respect, the authors refer to what they call his central insight that “much of social life resembles a performance on a stage, in which people play parts”... “an illusion that is easily shattered” (58). A man of this insight is

also a man of our time – this idea seems to linger around this statement – and Shakespeare is put closer to the reader. This attempt to bring the great literary heroes closer to the people can be found in more than one of the literary histories of the nineteenth century – but there Shakespeare as well as the people are lifted higher; Shakespeare is celebrated as a genius stemming from the lower classes, and the English people are celebrated as a people with a gift for geniality, which seems to be hidden, especially among the “humbler classes of citizens.” In this respect, the English were said to be foremost and special amongst the people of the world.¹⁴

We see that this view, a glorious mixture of democratic and elitist thinking, has been replaced by a more democratic and modest thinking – at first sight? The authors’ democratic view does not show in the presentation of biographical information: all in all, there is little of it in this literary history, in contrast to many older literary histories, which love to let their readers know about their literary heroes’ lives¹⁵ – not only to satisfy their curiosity, but also to show where authors came from and where they went, what difficulties they overcame, what fate met them; and one of the main goals was to find ideal representations of Englishness.

Aesthetic aspects are also of less importance in this short literary history, though this does not exclude the fact that the impact of aesthetic innovation is occasionally discernible: “Tamburlaine the great – why did it make such an impact? Because of Marlowe’s mighty

¹⁴ So, for example, Thomas B. Shaw, *Outlines of English Literature*, p. 232.

¹⁵ See, for example, Theophilus Cibber, *The Lives of the Poets of Great Britain and Ireland*, John Berkenhout, *Biographia Literaria, or a Biographical History of Literature*, and William Francis Collier, *A History of English Literature in a Series of Biographical Sketches*.

blank verse lines” (76). What Peck and Coyle first of all do is to present literary history as a cultural history of literature, and this is a tradition we find already in the nineteenth century and earlier.¹⁶ The histories of English literature were then all cultural histories, histories of written culture, and ‘English’ literature was in fact an imperial term for British literature.

All three short literary histories show different attitudes, different ways of thinking and judging, different ways of writing literary histories. *The Routledge History* is closest to the tradition of literary histories which accentuate literature as a treasure, as a precious literary heritage which can give inspiration, precious insight into human conduct, human passions and ideals, into human ways of feeling and acting and which shows different possibilities of the art of writing. Thus it resembles literary histories with an anthological character like Chambers’ early *Cyclopaedia*. But it goes beyond that – and back to the tradition of combining literary history with cultural history, actualizing it and also going beyond the national concern – this history is also written for foreign readers.

Alexander’s *History* can be seen as being in the tradition of the writing of literary histories created by George Saintsbury: he celebrated being a critic and broke taboos – often with dry English humour. Alexander, however, goes even further than Saintsbury: his literary history has a ‘cool’, often ironical postmodern touch.

¹⁶ See Herbert Grabes, “Literary History and Cultural History: Relations and Differences”, and Margit Sichert, “Henry Morley’s First Sketch of English Literature: Literary History as Cultural History.”

Peck and Coyle go back to the tradition of English literature with a strong cultural bias and treat literary works above all as cultural documents. Their attitude is critical and subversive as well – but presented in a more serious tone.

All three literary histories preserve the core canon: Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Ben Johnson, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Defoe, Scott, Jane Austen, Blake, Wordsworth, Dickens, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy; and, for the twentieth century, Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf. This already shows that all three literary histories include Welsh, Scottish and Irish literature like the literary histories of the nineteenth century, but, in contrast to many of them, they try to give more attention to women authors and to writers from former colonies, from the diaspora.

Regarding the wider canon, only Peck and Coyle depart from the mainstream tradition by concentrating on fictional works only, while Carter and McRae as well as Alexander in the usual way include important non-fiction writers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Edmund Burke, Edward Gibbon or Charles Darwin. And in all three histories, especially in the *Routledge History of English Literature*, quotations are included to bring literature closer to the reader and stimulate interest in reading more of it.

What all three recent literary histories have in common is that, on the one hand, they continue the tradition of the literary histories of the nineteenth century and, on the other, break away from it – go further or beyond, try to find a way which leads straight to the readers of the twentieth or twenty-first century. They all avoid the academic jargon still so cherished these days, which would repulse the general reader. It seems very clear that they

are designed to be readable, understandable, interesting and meaningful for a broader public. The authors seem to feel very deeply that the cultural and literary knowledge they present is a cultural heritage of the nation and belongs to all people. They only choose their individual ways to present it, ways which go back to different traditions and mirror different tendencies of contemporary thinking that exist simultaneously in our culture.

They have different attitudes towards patriotism, yet they all have a more critical and ambivalent attitude towards nationalism. The fact that they have written a national literary history shows very clearly that they find it important to present the literary achievements of their culture, the worthies of British culture, and want them to survive in cultural memory.¹⁷ And it is very interesting, in a period of devolution, that only Carter and McRae call their book “*The Routledge History of Literature in English. Britain and Ireland.*” On the cover the following recommendation by Malcolm Bradbury almost reads like a provocation: “An expansive, generous and varied textbook of British literary history... addressed equally to the British and the foreign reader.”

Alexander as well as Peck and Coyle call their works “*History of English Literature*” and in this respect stand clearly in the tradition of

the literary histories of the nineteenth century: they also included Scottish and Irish literature – but publish it under the heading of ‘English’ literature.

Do we not encounter in the twenty-first century as well “an increasingly diverse range of voices and conflicting interests” as Peck and Coyle found out for the eighteenth century, regarding which they comment: “Under such circumstances nationalism assumes importance as a uniting concept” (126)? And would this insight not also hold true for the England of the present? And, indeed, they point out that with the help of the knowledge of English literature, “we continue to strive towards an understanding of who we are and where we stand now” (292). There it is again: the renaissance of the idea so cherished in the nineteenth century: that knowledge of national literature can create a unifying sentiment and a cultural identity – as well as national self-assurance, pride in the cultural treasures of the nation¹⁸. It comes up “at the start of a new millennium,” when looking back “across more than a thousand years of English literature” (292). This cultural pride is justified – and all three literary histories, with their individualistic touch, celebrating a kind of Englishness, can be warmly recommended.

¹⁷ See also Herbert Grabes, “Canon Making and Cultural Memory: The Creation of English Literature through the Writing of Literary Histories”.

¹⁸ See Margit Sichert & Herbert Grabes, “Literaturgeschichte, Kanon und nationale Identität,” and Margit Sichert, “Functionalizing Cultural Memory: Foundational British Literary History and the Construction of National Identity”.

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