Before National Literary History

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Unlike the “missing” twelfth century, recalled in Linda Georgianna’s essay in this issue, the last two decades of the sixteenth century have always been very well treated by English literary history. These are, after all, the decades of Edmund Spenser and Philip Sidney, of Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare, of Ben Jonson and John Donne. But if the 1580s and 1590s saw the extraordinary outpouring of poetry and drama that have won them their prominent place in subsequent histories, they themselves produced no work that could be fairly termed a national literary history. Indeed, by most accounts, it was not until Thomas Warton’s History of English Poetry, whose first volume appeared in 1774, that English literature found a historian.¹ What, then, am I doing discussing Elizabethan England in a collection of essays devoted to national literary histories? What can that distinctly prehistorical moment contribute to the examination of a phenomenon that belongs more to the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries than to the sixteenth?

My answer is, “Quite a lot.” If the sixteenth century produced no national literary history, it did spend much energy thinking and writing about the need for a national literature—for what it called, as Warton still did two hundred years later, an “English poetry”—whose history could one day be written. Perhaps the best-known of these expressions of need is Philip Sidney’s anxious inquiry into “why England (the mother of excellent minds) should be grown so hard a stepmother


to poets,” but there were many others. Just a few years earlier Spenser’s friend E. K. had complained “that our mother tongue, which truly of itself is both full enough for prose and stately enough for verse, hath long time been counted most bare and barren of both,” a complaint directed still more specifically at poetry by E. K.’s follower William Webbe. “It is to be wondered at of all,” writes Webbe, “and is lamented of many, that whereas all kind of good learning have aspired to royal dignity and stately grace in our English tongue . . . , only poetry hath found fewest friends to amend it.”

What these and other similar complaints make clear is that there was an intense and unprecedented feeling of national lack in the generation of Sidney and Spenser. Now this may have been little more than an advertising campaign for the poetry these young men and their friends were then writing. After all, across the Channel in France, du Bellay, Ronsard, and the other members of the Pléiade had engaged in a similar campaign just a few decades earlier. They, too, had declared a need and then rushed in to fill it. But in both countries the terms in which the declaration was made are nevertheless significant. In both


3 No such lack had been apparent a generation earlier when John Leland and John Bale compiled their lengthy lists of English writers, Leland’s *Commentarii de scrip- toribus Britannicis* (1545) and Bale’s *Illustrium majoris Britanniae scriptorum* (1548, 1557). What happened in the interim was the emergence of a category familiar to us but not to Leland or Bale, that of specifically “literary”—that is, imaginative or poetic—writing in the vernacular. That, as Sidney, E. K., and Webbe lamented, was a category thinly represented in English, however many Englishmen may have written in Latin of theology and other learned topics.

cases, the honor of the national vernacular is at stake. A distinguished national poetry will prove that French and English are not the barbarous tongues many accused them of being. But for us, coming to these declarations after more than two centuries of Romantic and post-Romantic nationalism, they contain a surprise. Contrary to what we might expect, there is no thought here of expressing a specifically national experience or of giving voice to a uniquely national self. Their ambition is rather to do what others have done, to be what others have been. The models of civility are elsewhere. A truly national literature must therefore strive to emulate those foreign models. Likeness, not difference, will be the measure of success.

Applied negatively by Sidney, E. K., and Webbe—why, they ask, don’t we have what others have?—that comparative measure was almost immediately turned around and applied positively by other English writers. Yes, they answered, we do have (or we can soon have) what others have. In his Art of English Poesy (1588), for example, George Puttenham writes, “Our nation is in nothing inferior to the French or Italian for copy [abundance] of language, subtlety of device, good method and proportion in any form of poem, but that they may compare with the most and perchance pass a great many of them,” and proves his point with a roughly chronological account of the English poets from Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate to his own contemporaries Sidney, Spenser, Ralegh, Dyer, Gascoigne, and Queen Elizabeth herself.4

Puttenham’s few pages come as close as anything written in the sixteenth century to fulfilling the criteria for what we might now call a national literary history, though others were already moving that way. Two years earlier, in 1586, Webbe had presented a similar, but slightly shorter, account, and in his Apology Sidney produced a still shorter one, covering just five works, to show not how much the English had accomplished but how little. What all three share, whether they are praising or blaming, is the comparative perspective, a perspective which takes over completely in the only two English literary inventories of the 1590s, Richard Carew’s in 1595 or 1596 and Francis Meres’s in 1598.

Though they look much less like literary history, as we understand

it, than the chronological accounts we find in Sidney, Webbe, and Puttenham, these two very odd, head-to-head listings of English writers with their foreign counterparts reveal even more clearly the competitive mind-set that governed the English sense of what it would take to have a national literature of their own. Carew’s list, which appears at the end of his little essay “The Excellency of the English Tongue,” is short enough to be quoted almost in full. “Whatsoever grace,” Carew writes,


With a little imagination, we can guess why Carew made these particular connections. Plato wrote The Republic, and Sir Thomas Smith wrote De republica anglorum. The Ionic and Sir Thomas More share philosophy; Cicero and Ascham, eloquence; Varro and Chaucer, Menippean satire; and so on. But the strain is more obvious than the fit. And that is really the point. Whether Carew started with ancient names and found English ones to go with them or the other way around, or (more probably) a bit of both, the need was to show that every accomplishment in Greek or Latin could be matched by something in English. For that purpose, almost any connection, however thin and unlikely, was pressed into service.

Meres pursued the same objective at much greater length. His “Comparative Discourse of Our English Poets with the Greek, Latin, and Italian Poets” presents no fewer than fifty-seven distinct categories in which the English have matched or bettered their foreign predecessors. Here, to give a flavor of his enterprise, is the first of Meres’s comparisons: “As Greece had three poets of great antiquity, Orpheus, Linus, and Musaeus; and Italy, other three ancient poets, Livius Andronicus,

Ennius, and Plautus: so hath England three ancient poets, Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate.” And here, to show how far Meres is willing to go in his search for similitudes, is the last: “As the poet Lycophron was shot to death by a certain rival of his, so Christopher Marlowe was stabbed to death by a bawdy servingman, a rival of his in his lewd love.” 6 In this obsessively comparative scheme, even a sordid murder counts as a plus for English poetry.

A few of Meres’s contemporaries may have noticed what seems obvious to us: he was carrying the game of competitive analogy a little too far. Just the year after the appearance of Meres’s book, Shakespeare, who got very good billing from Meres as the equal of both Plautus and Seneca, returned the favor with friendly mockery. In Henry V he has the Welsh captain, Fluellen, compare King Henry to Alexander the Great, Henry’s ancient predecessor in the conquering business. Alexander, Fluellen helpfully points out, was born in Macedon and Henry in Monmouth. Despite the telling alliteration—Macedon and Monmouth—we may not think that this amounts to much. But Fluellen has more. “There is a river in Macedon, and there is also moreover a river at Monmouth . . . and there is salmons in both.” Nor does he stop here. Sounding still more like Meres, he adds that, “as Alexander killed his friend Clytus, being in his ales and cups, so also Harry Monmouth, being in his right wits and good judgments, turned away the fat knight with the great belly doublet [Sir John Falstaff].” 7 If you buy the Lycophron-Marlowe connection, why not this?

But even if they made fun of Meres, the Elizabethans could not do without something like his comparative method. It defined their national ambition in poetry, as in all other fields, and provided them with a way of tracking their progress. If they were to have a national literature, and thus eventually a national literary history, it would only be by emulating a pattern that had already been established elsewhere. As Roger Ascham, who in many ways served as the prime humanist schoolmaster to the generation of Sidney and Spenser, had put it twenty years

earlier, “Because the providence of God hath left unto us in no other
tongue, save only in the Greek and Latin tongue, the true precepts and
perfect examples of eloquence, therefore must we seek in the authors
only of those two tongues the true pattern of eloquence.” In opposi-
tion to Ascham, who warned against succumbing to Italian influence,
the younger Elizabethans added Italy to his list of appropriate models.
But they nevertheless agreed that the English poetry, whose lack they
so urgently felt, would have to be constructed according to a foreign
plan. For them, a national literature could not begin at home. It had,
on the contrary, to take the form of a translated import.

Now it is easy to think of this Elizabethan experience as a quaint
and largely irrelevant forerunner to more recent national literary his-
tory, which has emphasized national particularity, a uniquely national
self, whose essence can be discerned in the distinguishing features of
the nation’s poetry, fiction, and drama. After all, it has been two cen-
turies since imitation gave way to originality as the mark of literary
excellence, and national literary history has inevitably followed suit.
Even in accounts of the Renaissance, what literary historians have found
compelling, however intently the writers themselves may have pursued
imitation, is their originality, which has often been seen to bear national
markings. Where they wanted only to strip away the barbarity of their
native customs and put on the elevating raiment of foreign civility,
national literary history has made its prime goal keeping the native fully
in view.

But perhaps the Elizabethan experience is less odd and irrelevant
than it at first appears. Though the tone has changed from hopeful
ambition to rueful admission of defeat, the Renaissance sense that
models for national histories of all kinds can only be found elsewhere
has been frequently, if unconsciously, echoed in the postcolonial criti-
cism of the last several decades. Here, plucked out almost at random,
is a sentence from an essay by the South Asian historian Dipesh Chak-
rabarty, titled “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History”: “Only
‘Europe’ is theoretically (i.e., at the level of the fundamental categories

8 Roger Ascham, *The Scholemaster*, ed. R. J. Schoeck (Don Mills, Ont.: Dent,
1966), 119.

9 For some wonderfully telling examples of this tendency in English literary his-
tory see Margit Sichert’s and Herbert Grabes’s essays in this issue.
that shape historical thinking) knowable; all other histories are matters of empirical research that fleshes out a theoretical skeleton which is substantially ‘Europe.’” How far, really, is Chakrabarty’s “only ‘Europe’” from Ascham’s “only . . . Greek and Latin”? Ascham recommends what Chakrabarty, with a perhaps unfounded sense that at least Europe was a model unto itself, deplores. But the similarity remains striking. Like Indians, Africans, and Southeast Asians in the latter part of the twentieth century, sixteenth-century Englishmen (and, for that matter, Frenchmen and Spaniards) were, to borrow the familiar phrases of postcolonial discourse, “hybrids,” “mimic men.” They were busily fashioning their national literatures and their national selves by fleshing out a theoretical skeleton that was, as they were quick to acknowledge, substantially foreign.

To cite an especially telling example, Chakrabarty’s image of skeleton and flesh describes with uncanny accuracy the project Ascham had most particularly in view, the reform of English versification. Only by abandoning the riming verse England had inherited from barbarous Goths and ignorant friars and by adopting the quantitative meter characteristic of classical Greek and Latin versification, Ascham insisted, could the English hope to have an art of poetry worth the name. Persuaded by his arguments, Sidney and Spenser did their best to invent an English prosody that conformed to classical precedent, and the greater part of Webbe’s Discourse of English Poetry is given over to the same project. The effort was, as they quickly discovered, seriously misplaced. The English language could not be made to fit into the classical frame. But though rime survived, the terms English-speaking peoples still use to describe their incorrigibly accentual verse—words like iambic, trochaic, anapestic, dactylic, tetrameter, pentameter, and hexameter—remain true to Ascham’s classicizing ideal. If England could not have quite the same poetic art as the Greeks and Romans, it could have a closely comparable art, one that could be known only in language supplied by ancient poetic theory. And what was true of versification was


also true of both genre theory and ideas of poetic vocation. The flesh might be English, but the theoretical skeleton, whether ancient Greek and Latin or modern Italian, remained foreign. To paraphrase Chakrabarty, at the level of the fundamental categories that shaped literary thinking, only that foreign model was truly knowable.

Nor, as the early moderns understood their own situation, is the postcoloniality of recent decades irrelevant to their experience. Why, after all, were the sixteenth-century English, French, and Spanish so acutely aware of their need for a national literature? Why did they suddenly discover a lack where none had been apparent before? It was, I would argue, because full national sovereignty—what they, in imitation of the Romans, often called “empire”—mattered so much more than it had in earlier centuries. The Spanish example is particularly striking in this regard. It was in 1492, just months after the Spanish conquest of Granada had freed the last bit of Iberian soil from Moorish control, that Antonio de Nebrija published the first grammar of a European vernacular with the declaration that “language has always been the companion of empire.”

And it was some eighty-eight years later that, echoing Nebrija, Francisco de Medina introduced the deliberately Italianate poems of Garcilaso de la Vega as proof that Spain had finally thrown off the yoke of Moorish ignorance and attained full imperial status. Similarly in France and England, having a reformed, grammatically describable national language and a theoretically knowable national literature (i.e., a literature that conformed to the patterns of Greek, Latin, and Italian) provided much-needed evidence that true national sovereignty had been achieved, by a process that necessarily combined—and this is an important qualification—imitation with upstart rebellion. To take the most obvious example of this rebellious spirit, du Bellay’s call in the closing lines of hisDéfense et illustration de la langue française for a new sack of Rome: Not only did the French have to borrow, as du Bellay insisted they must do, from their ancient imperial overlord, but they had to demolish the last vestiges of that Roman power and become new

Romans in their place. Imitation of this sort goes with what we might think of as an oedipal killing off of the imitated. Strong nations, like Harold Bloom’s strong poets, overcome the anxiety of their own belatedness by supplanting the predecessors whose accomplishments make their own undertaking conceivable, a process that is repeating itself in postcolonial discourse. When Chakrabarty incorporated into a book his essay on the way that newly independent countries like India depend for their self-understanding on European models, he called that book *Provincializing Europe.* As du Bellay displaced Rome, so Chakrabarty strives to displace—to “provincialize”—Europe.¹⁴

Having only recently thrown off the papal yoke and emerged from what they continued to call their Babylonian captivity, the English, who also remembered a Norman yoke and a still earlier Roman yoke, were no less intent than the Spanish and French on a project of postcolonial liberation. Richard Mulcaster, who had been Spenser’s headmaster at the Merchant Taylors’ School in London, laid out this program with remarkable clarity. Mulcaster’s particular concern was the standardization of spelling, but his broad ambition was so to reform English that it could replace Latin as the language of learning, including poetry. “For,” he asks, after recalling that “the Roman authority first planted the Latin tongue among us here by force of their conquest,” “is it not indeed a marvelous bondage to become servants to one tongue for learning sake . . . whereas we may have the very same treasure in our own tongue, . . . our own bearing the joyful title of liberty and freedom, the Latin tongue remembering us of our thralldom and bondage?”¹⁵

But again, such liberty and freedom, such empire over oneself, can be achieved only by imitation. After all, “the very same treasure” others have had is here in question, not some wholly original treasure of one’s own making. What Romans had, we must now appropriate. Our national sovereignty depends on it.

Why the English, French, and Spanish, as late as the sixteenth cen-


tury, a millennium after the dissolution of the Roman Empire, would have felt the Latinity of their learning as an oppressive imperial burden robbing them of their liberty is suggested by a passage from a book that was well known in all three countries, Lorenzo Valla’s *On the Elegance of the Latin Language*. Identifying himself with Rome, Valla insists that “subject peoples may have thrown off the yoke of Roman arms, but they remain under the yoke of the Latin language. . . . Italy, France, Spain, Germany . . . and many other countries are still ours. Wherever the language of Rome dominates, the Roman Empire lives on.”\(^{16}\) Sixteenth-century Europeans thus had a double task were they to achieve something like the imperial status they dreamed of. They had first to rid themselves of the Gothic or Moorish barbarism that had for centuries dominated their cultures. This they could do only by following the model offered by Greece and, especially, Rome, a model that humanists like Valla were making inescapable. But they had then to supplant those ancient models, to take the place of their predecessors in the project of imperial civility.

Generalizing, with the help of Chakrabarty’s postcolonial perspective, on this early modern experience, I would venture that all national literary histories participate, at least to some degree, in the condition of mimicry, hybridity, and postcoloniality. All are built on a theoretical frame supplied by some foreign other, and usually by a foreign other that once enjoyed a large measure of political or cultural overlordship. This is not to deny the reality of significant historical change. It makes, for example, an enormous difference that the English, French, and Spanish in the sixteenth century were heirs to Renaissance humanist notions of imitation and classical rebirth, while twentieth-century postcolonial peoples have been heirs to ideas of originality and Romantic nationalism. Where the former peoples could readily embrace, even celebrate, their hybridity, the latter can only feel compromised and belittled by theirs. (They might feel different, however, if they knew how similar their situation is to what their former colonial masters experienced centuries earlier.) Of course, it matters as well that to sixteenth-

century Europeans “empire” meant not only sovereignty at home but vast territorial expansion abroad. For all the threats that continued to menace them, the early modern Spanish, French, and English were undeniably growing in strength, which allowed them to foresee, as few of the twentieth-century’s postcolonial peoples can, a time when their languages would spread through distant lands. (Again, there is a necessary qualification in that, culturally, the empire has been striking back as a postcolonial perspective changes the way we understand Europe itself—something one can see happening not only in Chakrabarty’s “provincializing” of Europe but in this very essay, with its postcolonial reinterpretation of the European Renaissance.) But for all the differences and all the qualifications of those differences, national literary history, wherever it occurs, remains an exercise in generic mimicry, an attempt to put homegrown flesh on a skeleton that once lived elsewhere.