

Sibylle Baumbach, Birgit Neumann, Ansgar Nünning (Eds.)

with the assistance of Isabel Dinies, Madelyn Rittner, Frances Walburg

A History of British Poetry

Genres – Developments – Interpretations

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Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning

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1. AN OUTLINE OF THE CHALLENGES, FEATURES AND OBJECTIVES OF *A HISTORY OF BRITISH POETRY*

SIBYLLE BAUMBACH, ANSGAR NÜNNING & BIRGIT NEUMANN

1. Introducing the Main Features and Objectives of this *History of British Poetry*

Coming to terms with poetry in general and the history of lyrical or poetic genres in particular is by no means easy. To a greater extent than other literary genres, poetry poses a number of challenges to anyone who tries to get to grips with either individual poems or the history of the genre or rather genres, at large. To begin with, poetry is notoriously difficult to define. In his introduction to an encyclopaedia of lyric forms, Otto Knörrich (1992: xii) remarked, “Everyone knows what a [...] poem is; no-one knows what a [...] poem is.” Though paradoxical at first, this observation points to a key difficulty regarding the definition of a ‘poem’: while everyone has an intuitive understanding of what a poem is, nobody is particularly confident about venturing to give an exact definition of a poem. This might be one of the reasons why, especially amongst students, poetry is often conceived as a particularly ‘difficult’ genre, which has to be avoided at all costs.

Addressing these widespread reservations, this volume aims at offering students and further readers with an interest in poetry a compact overview of the key genres and developments in the history of British poetry. It furthermore provides the analytical, interpretive and methodological tools necessary for tackling, appreciating and understanding the features and complex structures of poems both in the independent study of poetry and as preparation for exams or (university) courses in this field.

Let us begin by taking a closer look at ‘poetry’. Following Aristotle’s definition, poetry is *poiesis*: it is something made, constructed out of words, rhyme and rhythm. Moreover, it points to an art form that continuously draws attention to its made-ness (Smith 2005: 9). In addition to describing historical developments of British poetry, this volume will be concerned with the *poiesis* of poetry, how it is made and constructed; how it responds to demands, desires, but also anxieties of its time; how it engages in social, political, economic and existential discourses; how it is adapted and re-adapted to different social and historical contexts and how it is used to both support and subvert trends and conventions dominant at a specific time. Maybe most importantly, this volume puts emphasis on the performative functions of poetic forms. Focussing on different stages in the history of British poetry, it examines how to do things with poetry: it explores the various ways in which poems create poetic worlds and what these aesthetic worlds can do with us. Throughout the ages, poetry has strongly intervened in the social fabric of dominant representations by offering new

aesthetic devices and linguistic patterns that allow us to see and experience our world differently. Taking into consideration various historico-cultural mechanisms that have informed processes of poetic world-making, this volume provides access to a wide variety of British poetry, its developments, contexts and generic changes, while also closely examining formal and aesthetic features in chosen poems of a specific era.

In presenting *a* history of British poetry, the individual contributions are inevitably selective and exemplary. Instead of producing a ‘comprehensive’ survey of British poetry from Geoffrey Chaucer, William Langland and William Shakespeare to Philip Larkin, Seamus Heaney, Carol Ann Duffy, David Dabydeen, Patience Agbabi and beyond, this book is designed to offer a broad and accessible overview of major poetic genres and developments. Even though the volume focuses clearly on lyrical genres, it also takes into consideration some major narrative genres, such as the medieval epic, heroic poetry and the mock-heroic poem, all of which have considerably shaped the history of British poetry. The selection of poets and poems was guided by the need to present examples which students are most likely to encounter in their studies.

Following three key parameters, i.e. genres, periods and major developments, the order of contributions is based roughly on a diachronic sequence of the major eras of British poetry. While individual chapters do not (and indeed cannot) treat their topics exhaustively, they provide an insight into the features, trends and developments of the dominant poetic genre or genres of the time by analysing selected poems and placing them into a greater historical and literary context.

In its design, this volume is firmly oriented towards the needs of students. It addresses both freshmen who seek a concise overview of the history of British poetry and more advanced students who are preparing for their exams or write a BA- or MA-thesis. Keeping in mind the student perspective, *A History of British Poetry* not only offers a rich source of information on the history and development of major poetic genres: it also includes a broad selection of theoretical and methodological models for their analysis (see also Bode 2001; Ludwig 1994 [1981]). It therefore presents both the material *and* the analytical tools for the study of British poetry, drawing on the latest theoretical approaches and methodologies for textual analysis.

While Werner Wolf (2003) could still refer to the lyric as “an elusive genre” about ten years ago, especially during the last decade literary theorists have developed an impressive array of new critical approaches and frameworks for the definition of poetry, for the analysis and classification of poems and even for the investigation of poetry’s cultural performance and functions (see Müller-Zetzelmann/Rubik 2005). One of the most productive approaches in this field is the narratological analysis of lyric poetry (cf. Hühn/Schönert 2002; Müller-Zetzelmann 2002), which has led to an equally impressive number of case-studies that serve to show how such a narratological methodology can be fruitfully applied to the analysis and interpretation of English poetry from the 16th to the 20th century (cf. Hühn/Kiefer 2005). Narratological approaches (cf. Müller-Zetzelmann 2000; Hühn 2004; Müller-Zetzelmann/Rubik 2005) have drawn attention to the fact that poetry possesses an inherently narrative dimension and

frequently incorporates a number of elements that are commonly deemed typical of narrative fiction. More often than not, for instance, poetry presents a temporal sequence of events and mediates this sequence from a particular perspective. Scholars have also suggested that many poems feature a plot. Naturally, this is not the full-blown, temporally and spatially elaborate plot of narrative fiction but a plot that is characterised by features that are specific to the genre of poetry. As Peter Hühn has illustrated, so-called “poetic plots” (2004: 142) typically showcase mental phenomena, bodily involvement and psychological incidents such as individual perceptions, impressions, affects, emotions, imaginations or memories and their development over (usually a brief period of) time. It seems that in much poetry, the eventfulness and sequentiality, key elements of narrative fiction, are constituted by mental and affective experiences of an individual agent and their change from one state to another. Experimentality, i.e. the evocation of consciousness, thus moves centre-stage in many poetic plots (cf. Fludernik 1996; Neumann/Nünning 2008: 168).

2. Reflecting upon the Challenges of Writing Literary Histories

Like all literary histories, this *History of British Poetry* is essentially selective: to provide adequate representations of trends and developments, it concentrates on selected data, facts and contexts and, as a consequence, faces a number of problems (cf. Gumbrecht 2008, Perkins 1992), above all the problems of canonisation, periodisation and genre definition, which we shall briefly address in the following.

Literary histories play an active role in a cultural process that is known as ‘canon formation’. A canon consists of a normative and binding set of literary works which are deemed to be the most important and of the highest aesthetic standards. Literary works do not fall into a canon per se, but are gradually ‘canonised’ through a series of selection processes in which several institutions are involved (e.g., literary criticism, literary awards, booksellers, literary history and curricula) (cf. van Rees 1984). Texts elected to the canon of ‘great works’ have the status of ‘classics’. Although the positive features of a canon cannot be denied – including a certain continuity in the literary tradition – in recent years literary scholars have paid increasing attention to the problematic aspects of the canon.

Since each canon inevitably marginalises and excludes a large portion of literature, there is an intensive and on-going debate about the role of the canon and of canonisation. An important component of this debate has been the various calls for canon revision, based on the insight that the map of literary history presents a distorted and necessarily highly selective image of the literary multiplicity of past eras. Precisely because the literary canon relies on processes of selection and evaluation and is thus inextricably linked to the values of certain groups, there is a need to continually examine and re-negotiate its make-up. This negotiation is “deeply political” (Felperin 1990: xii). It is well known that canons, and maybe particularly canons of poetry, have been shaped by the values, claims and needs of the ruling classes, i.e. of white upper-

class men. In this vein, Harold Bloom (1994: 33), in his controversial book *The Western Canon*, notes that “canons always indirectly serve the social and political, and indeed the spiritual, concerns of the wealthier classes of each generation of Western society”. In the last few decades the awareness of the negative effects of the selectivity of canons and their repressive political potential has surged considerably. After all, the canon regulates which literary texts remain in a society’s cultural memory, which texts are taught in schools and universities, and this again profoundly shapes our understanding of the past, present and possible futures. It is therefore hardly surprising that ‘the canon’ frequently comes under attack, in particular by those groups whose works have long been conspicuously absent or underrepresented. Women, but also postcolonial and black British writers have time and again criticised the Western canon and its selection criteria, drawing attention to the Eurocentric and misogynist values that underlie its formation. This critique has motivated many writers to demand a fairer and more adequate representation, a demand that is most forcefully expressed in the clarion-call to ‘open up the canon’. What is more, female and postcolonial writers have also begun to develop their own poetic conventions and to imaginatively reclaim their socio-political experiences, thereby also reassessing the narrative patterns and norms that conventionally structure the writing of literary histories (Neumann 2010: 11f.). This development does not necessarily imply a new centrality of the marginal; yet it has clearly affected the notion of the centre itself and introduced a multiplicity of voices that foreground difference and plurality, for instance by drawing attention to matters of class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity (Gregson 1996: 5).

Although the history at hand takes a whole number of canonical poetic works into consideration, it also tries to reflect the insights of both feminist literary theory and more recent forms of gender studies by including many more women poets than most other histories of British poetry to date (cf. e.g. Göller 1968; Hühn 1995). Taking our cue from both the clarion-calls for canon-revisions issued by Anglo-American feminist approaches known as gynocriticism and Ina Schabert’s seminal two-volume history of English literature from a gender studies’ point of view (see Schabert 1997, 2006), we have encouraged the contributors to delve a little deeper into the past and acknowledge the important role that women writers have played, and continue to play, in the history of British poetry. This holds true not only for the rich history of poetry of the Romantic Period (cf. Heinen 2006) and the Victorian Age, but also for some earlier and later periods and, most notably, of course, for the contemporary literary scene, in which female poets like Carol Ann Duffy, Wendy Mulford, Jackie Kay and Grace Nichols and many others have considerably enriched our notions of poetry, subjectivity and language (Detmers 2007).

Chapters devoted wholly or partly to women poets include those dealing with the Restoration period, with women writers in the 18th century and the Romantic Age, with poetic genres in the Victorian Age and, of course, the contributions which deal with feminist and post-feminist poetry and new departures and developments in contemporary poetry, respectively. The present volume also takes the increasing number

of black British writers into consideration who, particularly in the last decades, have considerably contributed to revitalising and innovating British poetry and, by so doing, have also challenged the established structures which underlie the construction of literary history. Frequently using black British varieties of English (cf. Mühleisen 2000), i.e. varieties which were often “despised in British society and not considered to be ‘proper English’” (ibid. 2007: 133), poets such as Grace Nichols and John Agard have drawn attention to the political dimension inherent in poetic language use and offered new forms of identification which are clearly directed towards the transformative recognition of cultural difference. However, it is clear that much more work needs to be done in the field of black British poetry and that its history has yet to be written. Rather than proposing a new canon of British poetry, this volume aims at presenting the key stages in the development of British poetry from the Middle Ages to the 21st century.

Besides the canonisation debate, a key challenge any literary history faces is the question of how to structure and arrange the selected material. Most literary histories meet this challenge by resorting to the categories of period and genre. While these categories are no given ‘natural forms’, but classifications which are constructed by literary historians, they serve as important guidelines in the literary landscape insofar as they provide a means for orientation both in the production and reception of literature.

As basic categories, both ‘period’ and ‘genre’ enable us to identify and describe specific phenomena in the field of literary history (*definitional and descriptive function*), to formulate research questions and hypotheses (*heuristic function*) and to differentiate phenomena, synchronically and diachronically, i.e. to structure the material and establish connections between various texts in literary history (*ordering function*). The labelling of a poem as ‘sonnet’ or ‘ode’, or as an example of the Early Modern or Romantic period implies a (more or less) differentiated description of the respective set of features (*shorthand descriptive function*). Period and generic terms also fulfil a *comparative function* insofar as they provide a means for intra- and interepochal comparisons both within and across national literatures, which illustrates the specificities of individual works and literary movements. Finally, these categories are also central to teaching and learning (*communicative and didactic function*) insofar as they offer insight into historical links between literary works and key matters of literary history.¹

Due to these multiple functions, ‘genre’ and ‘period’ have been selected as the main structural principles underlying this history – principles that are, however, discussed in the individual chapters to draw attention to the challenges literary histories are faced with. After all, like any histories, literary histories are also constructed, each providing a history among many possible versions without laying any claim to totality or objectivity. These different *histories* do not differ by their degree of ‘truth’, but by their theoretical perspective, relevance of chosen themes and the logic and range of the chosen categories. As Brian McHale (1992: 9) emphasises, “it is important to distinguish among better and less good stories – ‘better’ not in the sense of objectively truer

1 For a similar line of argumentation see Baumbach/Neumann/Nünning 2011.

(a criterion discredited by the constructivist approach), but in terms of such criteria as rightness of fit, validity of inference, internal consistency, appropriateness of scope, and above all productivity”.

This volume does not only build on such literary-theoretical awareness: it even goes one step further insofar as it approaches the history of British poetry not through one single theoretical framework, but through many. Following an approach suggested by Burkhart Steinwachs, it pluralises literary history while being conscious of its methodology (1985: 320). It is precisely this polyphonic design, the broad variety of perspectives and the wide range of theoretical and analytical approaches collected in this volume that can provide insight into the great diversity and richness of the history of British poetry.

3. Introducing the Concepts of Genre and Poetry

The concept of ‘genre’ is one of the most important and most useful categories in literary study. The distinction of genres allows us to describe, classify and interpret the objects of enquiry, i.e. the variety of literary texts past and present. Genres enable us to order, classify and structure the multitude of texts that we are faced with in literary history. Derived from the biological term *genus*, ‘genre’ denotes a group of literary works that share significant features in terms of content, form and/or function. These ‘generic features’ or ‘generic conventions’ form a classificatory system for literary works, which is based on socio-cultural, literary and social consensus (Voßkamp 2000: 256). As historically conditioned forms of convention, genres are also subject to (historical) change.

Various criteria are employed in order to classify and differentiate between genres, including external form (for example, length; verse or prose composition) and medium (book, stage, radio or film production). Another widespread but more problematic form of generic classification is based on thematic criteria. Content-based genre typologies are useful insofar as they can afford a preliminary thematic and contextual view of a group of texts. However, they are also problematic in that they risk devoting so much attention to sifting through a potentially limitless variety of themes that they neglect the representation techniques and the specific literary qualities of the texts under consideration. Typologies that are based on stylistic and textual aspects, by contrast, focus primarily on the formal characteristics and therefore the specific literary qualities of a text.

As recent contributors to genre theory unanimously agree, genres are “pragmatic constructs through and through” (Fohrmann 1988: 282). If this is the case, special attention has to be paid to the criteria and processes involved in their construction. As Brian McHale (1992: 3) emphasises: “If literary-historical ‘objects’ [...] are constructed, not given or found, then the issue of *how* such objects are constructed [...] becomes crucial.” As the object changes according to the parameters upon which the distinction of genres is based, well-defined categories are required in order to define, typologically account for and characterise the multitude of genre manifestations.