

LEM 2011 - English Poetry (Formas Poeticas) I

The teaching of English Poetry at UFRN is divided into two chronological periods: Origins to 1800 and 1800 to the Present. Setting the origin at the first records of an oral poetry in the Anglo-Saxon language, we will study the line from Beowulf (700) to Chaucer (1400), and then onwards through Shakespeare and the Elizabethans (1600), to the Metaphysicals and Milton (1660), and then onwards to the Enlightenment poets of the 18th century before ending with the pre-Romantics in the 1770s and years following who exhibited the first examples of the new Romantic sentiment which forms the starting-point of the second course in English Poetry.

Although each of these divisions—largely marked by the ruling literary genius—is a historical compartment with its own cultural conventions and inventions, all of them are part of a canon which the modern poet is likely to recognise as the framework of wider forms and meanings in which his or her writing is done today. In this sense it is an echo chamber but it is also an arena in which conflict and antagonism between poets and movements is as common as admiration and influence. Poetry may be, as Wordsworth called it, “a spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” but it is also a calm measure of what has been achieved in the past and what can be achieved in the present. It is an art and, as such, it cannot be unconscious of its antecedents.

The idea of “the Canon of English Literature”—or any other literature—is frequently disparaged today because it suggests an authoritarian approach to readership based on the outlook of a privileged group who see their outlook and their interests embodied by it. As such, it seems to contradict the egalitarian mood of our times as well as the spirit of “free” creation which is so much a part of the ideological tendency of our own period. At the same time, any sample of well-known poets will reveal that they know much about other poets, living and dead, and constantly measure their own achievement against them. In that sense there really *is* a community of English poets across the generations—and this is synonymous with calling it a national tradition.

It is because such a already tradition exists that we study it chronologically though the critics are surely right who say that the study of English was created to supply a cultural alibi for British power in the modern world. This can be said of any nation-building history including those which only exist in opposition to metropolitan power. Yet national traditions do display an obvious coherence in regard to themes and treatments, heroes and villains, hopes, expectations, and tragic losses. Furthermore, they tend to become the arbiters of the language in which they are written and, in that sense, to know English is to know English literature from its origins to the present day.

Having said this, we must remember one overarching fact about our course: we are studying English poets and their poems in Brazil and not in England and those poets and poems much be made to serve the purposes dictated by our own intellectual and imaginative needs. We can judge the literature for its utility to us as well as its inherent merits or demerits—and this is something which I hope you will help me to do by constantly interrogating the poems and the kind of sense they seem to make both for their original audiences and for us today and citizens of another country and—let us not forget—citizens of the world.

We will start the course this week with some reflection on the English people considered as a ethnographical source of the poetry before us. I do not mean to imply that it is a racial matter or the source of some “undefiled” tradition—as one English poet famously did assert when Edmund Spenser called Chaucer a “well of English *undefiled*”—since, in reality, there is no nation more mixed than the English. Even Chaucer was both Saxon and French in his literary composition. No: English Literature is first and foremost the result of endless assimilation of neighbouring traditions and that, perhaps, is what makes it capable of transmitting its models and monuments to other cultures or makes it worthwhile considering what the English poets achieved.

[Bruce Stewart Aug. 2023]