A History of
English Literature

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Preface to Paperback Edition

This new edition has given an opportunity for some corrections. I have also made additions to the last two chapters, and provided suggestions for further reading.

Alastair Fowler
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Preface to First Edition

A history of English literature may well be thought too large a venture for one volume, let alone one historian. But this book may partly excuse itself by concentrating, less ambitiously, on literary forms. Literary contents have obviously changed profoundly, perhaps irrecoverably, over the centuries. Think of the gulf between the literature of medieval Christendom and the doubting, reforming, private literature of the Victorians. It is less obvious how far continuity has been maintained: how far the means of representing life have gradually changed throughout the history of literary forms. I mainly trace the second sort of changes, changes in kinds and forms. Sometimes these have social or economic causes; but more often they are developments internal to literature – shifts of fashion, deeper movements, growth cycles, effects of compensation.

My constant question has been, How have the proportions between the various elements of literature changed? For such changes affect the pleasures of reading more than is usually recognized. As far as possible, I have tried to explain how best to approach each writer: what obstacles to avoid, what allowances to make, what pleasures to expect. Whatever else it may sometimes be, experiencing literature is always an especial pleasure, distinct from others. But the pleasure of an individual author can be so distinct that it needs to be learned. My hope is to enlarge the reader's sense of the variety of literature.

In the present age, attempts to evade the past have led to neglect of older writing. But in creating the future we need access to the widest variety of past literature – not only for perspective, for benchmarks and for values and visions we lack, but also in order to grasp the literature of our own time.

While this book seldom avoids evaluation, it primarily describes. It is written for students coming to grips with unfamiliar parts of literature, or revising familiar ones; and I have had particularly in mind intelligent

adults new to literary criticism. So technical terms are explained, and names and dates set out in full, but hard words are not avoided. Also, the 'schools' and 'movements' are discussed, although I am aware that good literature has hardly ever been written to overthrow (or to follow) a fashion.

Besides explicit evaluations, others can be inferred from the scale of the treatment. However, some *caveats* are called for in this regard. Necessities of exposition (particularly with difficult or neglected writers) have sometimes distorted relative scales. Besides, it needs to be remembered that important writing may not be of comparable interest formally; in a history constructed on other principles, George Orwell might have claimed a larger place. Similarly, popular kinds such as science fiction, in which words are comparatively insignificant, may have received less than their rightful wordage. Another source of distortion is temporal foreshortening. In the modern period names swarm, since posterity has yet to make its selection: here the treatment is inevitably cursory.

For coherence, I have focused on the literature of the British Isles, and specifically of England – although with many necessary side glances at Scotland and Ireland. I bring in US and Commonwealth writers only when they have a direct bearing on the argument; this has meant excluding some who are very considerable, like Mark Twain. In a temporal dimension, I have limited the horizon to works that can still be read with pleasure and without translation; so that I begin, in effect, with Chaucer.

The debts incurred in writing a book like this are many. Indeed, the personal influences are too many even to list. I might begin with C. S. Lewis and F. W. Bateson and E. D. Hirsch and J. F. Kermode; but where would I end? Colleagues and pupils at the Universities of Oxford and Edinburgh and Virginia – and extramural students, among them those in the dedication – will doubtless recognize the impress of their ideas in the pages that follow – indulgently, I hope. But I must thank in particular Wallace Robson and J. C. Levenson and Christopher Butler, whose conversation illuminated my thinking at crucial stages; E. M. Brown and R. D. S. Jack, who read parts of the manuscript; Stuart Gillespie and John V. Price, who drew my attention to some errors; and David Perkins, whose report for Harvard University Press made a number of invaluable corrections and suggestions. I am also grateful to Sheila Strathdee, who keyed and copied much of the book.

In one sense all is due to my wife's love and possibly endless patience. In another, the main debt is to John Davey, the editor, since the book

was his idea. Writing it has been to me a privilege and – however challenging at times – a delectation. I hope that some of this will communicate itself.

Alastair Fowler

A Note on Citations and Abbreviations

Explanations of technical terms are signalized by small capitals. In quotations, old spelling and punctuation have in general been retained – modernized only occasionally, when this was thought desirable; but i/j, u/v, ornamental italics and capitals, and italics for proper names have been normalized throughout. Occasional indications of scansion have been kept or introduced.

ABBREVIATIONS

a.	acted
ch.	chapter
ed.	edited by, edition
par.	paragraph
pt.	part
ptd.	printed
rev.	revised
s.d.	stage direction
st.	stanza
wr.	written

Contents

I

The Middle Ages:
From Oral to Written Literature

A HISTORY of literature can only begin in the middle. The earliest
surviving works in Old English already present highly developed
forms. Structurally, for example, the epic *Beowulf* (?eighth
century; preserved in a tenth-century manuscript) is intricately
wrought, while its allusions presuppose the existence of even earlier
works now lost. And before writing there existed an oral literature,
probably of great antiquity, whose tradition has to some extent
continued down to the present, alongside our relatively belated written
literature. The Celts and Saxons brought oral literature with them to
England, and so did the Normans, Danes and Vikings. The Roman
historian Tacitus wrote of a thriving oral tradition in ancient Germania.
True, a post-Conquest starting point of English literature could be fixed
on linguistic grounds: it is not literature in Primitive Germanic or Old
Norse or Old English (Anglo-Saxon), but in English. (Indeed, even
within Middle English literature – c.1100–1500 – much cannot now be
read, but must be translated.) But one should never forget that such a
beginning is arbitrary. We can deal with only a small part of literature;
and the part's claim to completeness rests on fictions – like the true story
that Chaucer and Gower invented English literature as we know it.

ORAL LITERATURE: BALLADS

Nowadays oral tradition is often underestimated, and assumed to be
simple, limited, unambitious. Literature based on word-of-mouth
tradition needs a comparatively restricted DICTION, or choice of words.
Its syntax and texture have to be loose, with many repetitions, to ensure
ease of uptake. And there is an economy of oral delivery, which calls for
a high incidence of formulaic material. In the Middle Ages, this meant
familiar narrative motifs; stock similes; TAGS or spacers, like 'as I you

say', 'wythoute fable [truly]', 'on day' and 'what nedeth wordes mo?'; and standard FORMULAS like 'the gude red wine', 'the tears blinded his eie', 'gold and silver and precious stones' and 'by aventure or caas [by chance or circumstance]'. These may indeed at first seem bald, even otiose; but they could be used pleasurably with skilful variation, to give a precise effect in performance. Rapport with an audience made possible subtleties of tone that were exploited by literate authors such as Chaucer – whose poems, although transmitted by manuscript, were also performed at court. And even exclusively oral literature could be sophisticated and ambitiously structured. An illiterate Russian of our own time is said to have composed a poem of 40,000 lines.

Some idea of oral literature can be arrived at from the surviving variety of BALLADS or narrative folk songs – popular versions of romances, love tales, tales of devotion and betrayal, or laments based on tragic historical events. Many English and Scottish popular ballads go back to the Middle Ages. But, with few exceptions, they began to be written down only in the fifteenth century. Most exist in seventeenth-century or eighteenth-century texts (often popular versions of earlier professional literature), having been preserved by collectors such as Bishop Percy, Sir Walter Scott, F. J. Child and now The School of Scottish Studies. And the tradition is a living one, as it was for the Elizabethan Sir Philip Sidney, when he heard a blind fiddler sing: 'I never heard the old song of Percy and Douglas that I found not my heart moved more than with a trumpet.' It can still be a peak of one's literary experience to hear a folk singer like Jeanie Robertson, perhaps performing a version of *The Battle of Harlaw* handed down to her by word of mouth.

Much can be learnt by comparing numerous versions of a single ballad, or versions of distinct but similar ballads such as *Edward, Edward* and *Lord Randal*, in each of which a recent tragic event is powerfully implied. One notices the abundant common fund of architectonic devices that enable the singers to order their versions:

> Why dois your brand sae drop wi bluid,
> Edward, Edward?
> Why dois your brand sae drop wi bluid?
> And why sae sad gang [go] yee, O?
>
> O, I hae killed my hauke sae guid,
> Mither, mither:
> O, I hae killed my hauke sae guid:
> And I had nae mair bot hee, O.

Here, besides the repetition of line 1 as line 3, there is the appositional or PARATACTIC structure whereby the last line is simply put alongside, with no more connection than 'and'; the duologue pattern, with four lines answering four; and the symmetry of the short lines, with 'Mither, mither' exactly matching 'Edward, Edward'. On a larger scale, stanzas answer stanzas in a similar way, or else cumulate by threes – as in the sequence *hawk | horse | father* and the later (answering) sequence of consequences: exile for Edward, poverty for his wife and children, but for his mother a curse that opens a quite new perspective on the story. The organization depends so heavily on such merely cumulative and additive structures, in fact, that a fair amount of constructive work is left to the audience to perform.

The additive and cumulative principles also combine in that commonest of medieval devices, the CATALOGUE. Modern readers are often put off by the extent to which older literature consists of lists; for these now seem dull and empty. But they had a vital function in oral performance, being easy to follow and to carry in memory. They usefully reviewed existing knowledge, and – since their syntax was so easy – could make implicit points of some subtlety, for example by varying familiar sets of famous names. Moreover, catalogues were often ordered in a significant way, whether in some meaningful sequence (the first, central and last places being of special dignity) or in relation to schemes like that of the Seven Deadly Sins.

Often a list that seems artless proves to be ordered in an intricate or even problematic way – as for example the haunting description of the living dead in fairyland, in the early fourteenth-century *Sir Orfeo*, a short fairy romance or BRETON LAY:

> Som stode withouten hade [head],
> And som non armes nade,
> And som thurgh the body hadde wounde,
> And som lay wode [mad] ybounde,
> And som armed on hors sete,
> And som astrangled as they ete,
> And som were in water adreint [drowned],
> And som with fire all forshreint [scorched].
> Wives there lay on childbedde,
> Som dede and som awedde [mad],
> And wonder fele [many] there lay besides
> Right as they slepe her undrentides [siesta].
> Ech was thus in this warld ynome [taken],
> With fairy thider ycome.

> There he seigh his owen wif,
> Dame Heurodis, his leef [dear] lif,
> Slepe under an impe-tree [grafted tree] . . .
>   (lines 391–407)

Here the sets are perhaps to be arranged in pairs: two groups of the dismembered; two hurt in body and in mind; the armed sitting on horseback and the disarmed at table; the drowned and the burnt; two women in childbed (dead and mad); and two sleeping (noonday sleepers and Heurodis). Or are we to group by threes – three sets of wounded; three of unwounded; three of victims of sudden natural death (drowning, fire, childbirth); and finally three general categories: dead (l. 400), mad (l. 400) and sleeping (l. 402)? Some of the groupings further hint at sequences – like the progressions from head to arms, and from riding to eating. The net impression is of elusive multifariousness, blurred status. One gets a sense of comprehensive multiplicity far beyond what so short a list might have been expected to give.

Sir Orfeo was refashioned as a ballad with its own variant forms (*King Orfeo*, collected in the late nineteenth century); and so were *King Horn* and several other short ROMANCES, or chivalric narratives. In transmission by word of mouth there could be no completely fixed text at all, in fact, since there was no single order of words. Not the words, but the story, was the thing: if singers were true to that, to the inner shape, they had some degree of freedom to improvise words and in effect compose new versions. It was another world from that of manuscript transmission, in which firmer ideas of a text's detailed determinacy developed, and a scrivener could be blamed (as in 'Chancer's words unto Adam'), for inaccurate copying. Thus in oral literature transmission and composition overlapped. Each new teller's version, if not each performance, might be substantially different. In such a process, a repertoire of formulas and constructional schemes was indispensable. Singers were bound to rely on their memorial stores of well-tried expressions. But that was by no means altogether a disadvantage, since these often had a rugged force: 'Then up spake X . . . ', 'Y had not gone a mile but one . . .'.

From all this follow several large consequences, of import for the character of medieval literature as a whole. First, the reliance on formulaic language implies that from the earliest historical times poets made use of POETIC DICTION – that is to say, a choice of words different from that of ordinary speech. (Diction did not begin as colloquial or natural, and only later became artificial or literary.) Second, almost all medieval writing has the somewhat loose organization of oral literature;

it lacks the power to curtail accumulations, to subordinate elements syntactically, or to condense into complexity. Third, and perhaps the widest consequence of all, authorship itself was different from what it has since become. Instead of being conceived as an individual role, it merely supplemented an original divine authorship.

Few now believe that the people, rather than individuals, created oral literature (in James Grimm's phrase *das Volk dichtet*, 'the folk is the author'), but certainly medieval writers borrowed from one another freely, not only without any sense of plagiary, but even boasting their faithfulness to an admired predecessor. 'Book' commonly referred to a codex containing works by several authors; and there were no terms corresponding to our 'work' or 'poem'. Neither modern pseudonymity nor such oral tradition as survives offers more than a faint analogy of the confusion of authorship in the Middle Ages. Indeed, after the Saxons Alfred and Bede, Chaucer is the first individual figure of any great significance in our literature. Few earlier names, even, are secure, unless through circumstances of locality or anagram signature. On the other hand, for all this uncertainty of identity, medieval authors sometimes show a very accessible intimacy – perhaps because they wrote directly for a familiar audience.

The GENRES or kinds of writing in the Middle Ages naturally reflect the literature's oral character. Thus, much of the best work is in the form of sermons, or hymns, or stories meant for performance. And a favourite genre was the debate – as in *The Owl and the Nightingale* (*c*.1200) – a form closely related to the exercises of academic oral instruction. For if the Middle Ages were an age of faith, they were also a time of controversy, of Abelard's *Sic et Non*.

Another striking feature of oral literature was its fragmentation into many separate local traditions. These cannot be classified (like their modern equivalents) as metropolitan or provincial. Indeed, several areas had an equal claim to preeminence. Particularly in verse, Anglo-Norman (or French) domination continued into the fourteenth century; only towards the end of that century did an English dialect gradually begin to establish itself as central. This was the London–Essex dialect, in which Chaucer wrote. But even as he did so the north was producing a literature quite as sophisticated and varied – and arguably more accomplished. The tradition represented by works like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl* and *Cleanness* was by no means provincial. Indeed, its cultural connections with the south have been underestimated. Only the accident that linguistic development favoured Chaucer's dialect made the northern words come to seem difficult, and

in consequence deprived the northern poems of any great influence on subsequent literature.

The court poetry of this so-called ALLITERATIVE REVIVAL was highly traditional; often employing or finessing on the alliterative formulas of oral literature. Some think, in fact, that its transmission was primarily oral; but the existence of false or 'eye' alliteration, like 'Quere-so-ever I jugged gemmes gaye' (*Pearl* 7) betray a manuscript tradition. The northern poems I have mentioned are unquestionably great works; yet they survive in only a single manuscript. Perhaps no other fact more forcibly brings home how precarious manuscript transmission could be – and how much of medieval literature may in fact have been lost. It is worth reflecting on its evanescent glories, of which only fragments or bare titles remain to us.

MEDIEVAL ROMANCES

In approaching medieval literature adjustment has to be made to the large fact that much of it is in verse – even storytelling and popular exposition, which are now regarded as prose functions. A main narrative kind, at first generally in verse, was the ROMANCE (Old French *romant*), an adventure story of chivalry or love. The romances were of course Christian – part of the great medieval response to the challenge of pagan classical literature. They need not be edifying in any obvious way; none the less, they usually have an inner *sens* or significance, and almost universally sustain an aspiring elevation.

This appears even in description, which is idealized. The *Gawain* poet proposes to tell 'an outtrage awenture of Arthurez wonderez [an exceedingly strange adventure from among the marvellous tales of Arthur]' (*Gawain and the Green Knight* 29), and is soon speaking of curtains 'beten wyth the best gemmes / That myght be preved of prys wyth penyes to bye, / in daye [embroidered with the best gems that money could buy]' (lines 78–80). Idealizatic.. also shows in extremes of emotion; as in Gawain's shame on his return to the court, or the joy at Orfeo's reunion with Heurodis ('For joye they wepe with her [their] eighe [eyes]', *Sir Orfeo* 591), or Lancelot's grief at parting from Guenivere:

> there was never so harde an herted man but he wold have wepte to see the dolour that they made, for there was laementacyon as they had be stungyn wyth sperys. And many tymes they swouned, and the ladyes bare the quene to hir chambre.

And Syr Launcelot awok, and went and took his hors, and rode al that day and al nyght in a forest wepyng.

(Malory, *Morte Darthur* xxi.10)

Similarly idealized are the codes of chivalry (especially loyalty to a lord) and of love (especially 'courtly love', so called). In consequence, the romances have often been spoken of as unrealistic or wishful. It is true that they may explicitly contrast the less than ideal present with 'the olde custome and usage of this londe' (*Morte Darthur* xxi.1). Yet they are morally realistic, to the extent that they often test codes of conduct by probing contradictions within them or between them. And several of the romance writers, notably Sir Thomas Malory (d. 1471), even seem on the whole to lack a romantic sense of wonder. They evoke it, when they do, almost accidentally: not by leaving mysteries unexplained deliberately, but through being unable to make sense of stories they can only repeat.

Several fourteenth-century romances revived the alliterative tradition of Anglo-Saxon literature. In this tradition elaborate stanzas were sometimes used, like the ones in *Gawain and the Green Knight* and (parodied) in Chaucer's Tale of Sir Thopas. Versification was based not on syllable-counting metre but on patterns of stresses. Each line had to have four heavily stressed syllables, arranged in two pairs and so far as possible alliterating (beginning with the same sound, not necessarily the same letter):

> Than glíftis [looks] the gud kýng:
> and glópyns [is sad] in hérte,
> Grónys full grísely [dreadfully]:
> wyth grétande téris [tears of grief]
> Knélis down to the córs: and káught it in ármes . . .
> (*Morte Arthure* 3949–51)

The rhythmic patterns seem to have been those of speech – but speech regularized and reduced to system. Thus, many of the narrative formulas are alliterating phrases, half-lines in effect: 'on body and bones'; 'stif and stronge'. The requirements of alliterative verse promoted the development of a poetic diction of vaguely meaningful (or purely poetic) words like 'clene' (clean, pure, chaste, neat). Similar are the numerous synonyms (poetic or borrowed) for commonly recurring words, such as 'burne', 'freke', 'gome', 'carle' and many others for 'man'. Fragments of this diction survived into later literature; and alliteration itself became an occasional resource for many metrical poets