Bernhard ten Brink and German English Studies in Lotharingia

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Preface

Richard Utz and Elizabeth Emery

It is possible [...] to envisage our twentieth century as a return to the Middle Ages, a century of medievalism when the medieval achievement can be better appreciated than at any time since Ariosto and Spenser. To the extent that our age contains partial repudiation of the results of progress, technology, materialism, and secularism, it embodies a return to symbolic thinking, religious anguish, myth making, and even, with film, radio, and television, to a partially oral culture; and that, in our fine arts, thesis, and narrative, we have gone beyond the striving for immanence prevalent in the previous two or three centuries — it is no longer, then, romanesque sculpture or the mystery plays or the Canterbury Tales which are other.

For all these reasons I am convinced that, whatever our political options, we must emphasize the continuity and embrace the present with the past, for either, alone, separated like the honeyuckle vine and the hazelnut tree in Marie de France, will wither and perish.


La primera parte ha rauz eszald segn lei e vol dixe commersons, crena es la Them que hom jera per son commersonas, segn qu’om pot veler cant us savis houns vol parlar solemnisament d’alunc lag, pregon, suppliant, requexen, mandan, endonzen, acausellan o aumenstan, que pran per sa thema et per son commersonen alguna austuritat de la Seny Escritura e de deeg canonie, o civil, o alcun esenhamen o d’alunc savi o d’alunc philosophie autenticita.


Other scholars may fashion their praise of William Calvin in voluminous Festschriften celebrating his impressive achievements in the study of medieval French literature, French poetry, Breton, Scots, and Occitan Studies, humanist critical traditions, and Franco-British literary relations. But for those of us laboring in the vineyard of medievalism, this cahier is our way of expressing gratitude for his accompanying and helping shape the study of the
continuing reception of medievalia in postmedieval times. An internationally recognized Maker of the Middle Ages himself, we would like to praise Bill for inspiring us during many a conference as well as on the pages of Studies in Medievalism and The Year’s Work in Medievalism. His erudition, brilliant insights, able mentoring, and wonderful sense of humor have enriched us all. This book, a compilation of brief essais on artists, scholars, and writers who also played a role in constructing various visions of medieval culture through the ages, is our way of extending a heartfelt gratitude to a friend, colleague, and fellow humanist, on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday.
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Richard Utz

Did you know that “birtherist” thinking is not limited to adherents of the Tea Party? One of the results of the rampant nationalism that infiltrated the academy in the second half of the nineteenth century is that we have developed an obsessive need to attribute national origin to our scholarly forbears based on their place of birth. In fact, the more successful and famous the scholar, the more competition there will be about claiming him pro domo after his passing. Consider the case of Bernhard/Florend Egidius Konrad ten Brink who, born in Amsterdam on January 12, 1841, and son of a Dutch father and a German mother, has been called an eminent Dutch Anglist by English, Swiss, and Dutch sources and a German through and through by his German colleagues. In this, as in numerous other cases, birth places, birth certificates, parents’ nationalities, passports, or nationalist etymologies of first and last names need to be contextualized with the scholar’s own actual pronouncements and practices. As soon as we do that, Bernhard ten Brink reveals himself as a staunchly German figure whose academic work well mirrors the nationalistic fervor of his time.

His appointment as the first chair of English Philology at the Reichsuniversität Straßburg, an institution expressly constructed by the imperial government in Berlin to re-Germanize Alsace-Lorraine after the Franco-Prussian war of 1871, placed him at the center of a fascinating cultural conflict. At first sight, his multilingual background (Dutch, French, German, English) should have made him a conciliatory figure in bilingual and bicultural Straßburg/Strasbourg. Moreover, his decision to keep on lecturing on French subject matter in the absence of sufficient demand for classes in the new subject of English should also have positioned him well with those who saw the new
university on the soil of medieval Lotharingia as a place uniquely predestined to unite, not divide, French and German culture. However, while ten Brink insisted on making incursions into the field of the Straßburg chair of Romance philology, Eduard Böhmer, he sought out his academic allies among some of the most openly Germanizing colleagues, especially Wilhelm Scherer, a Germanist with whom he coedited the book series, Quellen und Forschungen zur Sprache und Culturgeschichte der germanischen Völker. His appointment as Rektor (President) of the university in 1890 would indicate that he made a smart political choice by joining the more influential faction of the Straßburg professoriat.

Of course, a critical view of ten Brink’s nationalist predilections should not keep us from recognizing his substantial achievements as a medievalist. A student of the famed Romance philologists, Friedrich Diez and Nicolaus Delius, his appointment as chair of the first professorship in English philology in all of Europe became the starting signal for English as a university subject to extricate itself from its position as a lesser sister to Germanic, Romance, and Classical studies. Ten Brink’s scholarship, just like Julius Zupitza’s at the Humboldt University in Berlin, was representative of the first generation of modern academic English studies world-wide. Conscious of the scholarly reputation conveyed by publications about canonical texts and writers, ten Brink concentrated his efforts on Beowulf, Chaucer, and Shakespeare, and rather than spending his time on numerous essays and shorter studies, he focused on the monograph and literary history as his preferred media of scholarly communication. Whereas Zupitza made his reputation with the help of Lachmannian manuscript study and a widely-used anthology of Old and Middle English texts for the classroom, ten Brink produced a triad of monographs, Chaucer: Studien zur Geschichte seiner Entwicklung und zur Chronologie seiner Schriften (1870), Beowulf: Untersuchungen (1888), and Chaucers Sprache und Verskunst (1884), all three of which became canonized classics for students of early English literature.

If positivism, (old) historicism, and philology are nowadays in disrepute as dated, drab, and dry-as-dust enterprises, ten Brink’s scholarship discloses the excitement of nineteenth-century philological paradigms could engender among their first practitioners in the young discipline of English studies. While we may want to smile from a distance of more than a century, about his earnest attempt at finding the virtues of Classical verse in Chaucer, his 1870 Chaucer Studies is without doubt the first systematic study of Chaucer’s prosody. As such, it greatly stimulated the study of the father of English poetry in Europe and North America, especially among the members of Frederick Furnivall’s Chaucer Society. Far from erecting a cordon sanitaire between the late medieval writer and his own age, one can sense in ten Brink’s investigations the deep desire to turn his beloved subject of investigation into a premodern philologist, a man who, had he only felt less akin to Dante and Boccaccio and more akin to the (early) modern and philological Petrarca, could have achieved even more than he did.

Unlike many of his scholarly contemporaries, ten Brink keenly recognized that there was an audience outside the universities that was ready to learn about Britain and English literature. In his philological history of English literature (Geschichte der englischen Literatur, 1877), also a first in the academic study of English, ten Brink gave himself leave to connect the rhetorical and linguistic basis of his philological work with some of the aesthetic, biographical, historical, political, and social mainstays of literary history. The result is an enthusiastic melange of the very nationalism and philology already palatable in the pious dedication of his critical edition of Chaucer’s “General Prologue” to the Canterburry Tales to the Emperor Wilhelm I in 1871. In his Geschichte, the aspects of early English texts most celebrated are the ones that seem to lead away from foreign (French) influence and toward a somehow evolutionarily advanced postmedieval Germany. Had Chaucer had occasion to write a story for the Yeoman, ten Brink opines, dim recollections of the Germanic past, including the storm god Wodan, would
have welled up in such a Canterbury narrative.

We find then, in ten Brink’s work, as high a degree of desire for making medieval writers and texts his own as we see in the perhaps more sophisticated approaches of late twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics. If the late-nineteenth-century positivist philologist participated willingly in the dominant nationalist discourse of his day, today’s scholars have found a rich terrain for sublimation within various contemporary historicisms, feminisms and, above all, psychoanalysis. This is why I am convinced that an essay on La(c)neolot would not shock ten Brink, but I know he would be scandalized to find that it appeared in a North American journal and not in Anglia, Archiv für Englische Studien.

Bibliography


