"Deliver Us from Two (or more) Professors of Criticism"

Alan Bacon

The Pall Mall Gazette of 1 November 1886 published a letter from William Morris in which he outspokenly declined to lend support to a campaign to persuade Oxford University to make provision for the teaching of English literature. Morris wrote, “I expect I shall be in a minority among those who answer your letter as to the proposed Professorship of English Literature, for I think the Universities had better let it alone.”

In the previous year, 1885, the Merton chair of English Language and Literature had been established at Oxford, largely in response to growing public pressure for English. However, the title of the chair had been a compromise, and had created much scope for argument. The appointment of A.S. Napier, an Anglo-Saxon specialist, had given rise to howls of protest that Oxford was still ignoring the claims of English literature in order to promote philology. Then, in 1886, it had become apparent that Oxford was considering a new School of Modern Languages, basically philological in nature, with the teaching of literature once again being ignored. It was in these circumstances that there arose the sustained public campaign for English literature at Oxford, led by John Churton Collins, who was an Oxford University Extension lecturer, and supported by the editors of the Pall Mall Gazette and Quarterly Review.

As part of the attempt to win public opinion to the cause, Collins canvassed the views of many eminent people of the day, their replies being published in the Pall Mall Gazette. Collins approached well-known politicians, ecclesiastics, literary figures and educationalists, and it was as a famous poet that Morris’s views were sought. The questionnaire posed three questions:

1. Was it desirable that the universities should provide systematic instruction in English literature?
2. Was it desirable that a distinction should be made between Philology and Literature, and that the instruction provided should be instruction in Literature as distinguished from instruction in Philology?
3. Was it desirable that the study of English Literature should be indissolubly associated with the study of ancient Classical Literature?

Nearly all the responses were satisfactory from Collins’s point of view, in that they gave affirmative answers to all three questions. Indeed, he was later to claim that “there was not a dissentient voice”. However, he was here, with a propagandist’s disregard for inconvenient facts, forgetting William Morris’s assault on the whole enterprise.

One part of Morris’s attack focused on what he suspected would be the content of university courses in English literature. The University of London had already been offering degree examinations in English literature since 1859, but the stress in these London examinations had always been on the history of the literature. This had often led to a rather arid cramming of dates and facts, and what Collins wanted for Oxford was something very different. He hoped for a School that would combine the historical
point of view and the critical approach, but he always gave particular emphasis to
the latter, arguing that “we have absolutely no provision for systematic critical
training”.4 Morris, sensing what he was being asked to support, refused to have any
truck with the teaching of criticism at all. He denied that:

there is any analogy between the proposed study of English literature and the way
that the Universities have dealt with the classics: their study implies that of the
language and history of civilized antiquity; they are not taught as literature, not
criticized as literature, at any rate. If the function of the proposed chair were to
be, or could be, the historical evolution of English literature, including, of course,
the English language, it might be well enough; but I do not think that this is
intended, judging by the outcry raised about the filling of the Merton Professorship.
I fear that most professors would begin English literature with Shakespeare, not
with Beowulf. What is intended seems to me a Chair of Criticism; and against the
establishment of such a Chair I protest emphatically.s

Chris Baldick has recently written, “it is a fact too often forgotten that the real
content of the school and college subject which goes under the name ‘English
Literature’ is not literature in the primary sense, but criticism”.6 Morris could see
that this was so, and did not wish to support it. As a poet and translator, he regarded
himself as a literary man, but like many other writers, he was impatient with critics
and criticism. In his Pall Mall Gazette letter, he attacked criticism primarily on the
grounds of vagueness. He believed that the Slade Professorships of Art at Oxford
ought to be a warning against “establishing chairs whose occupiers would have
necessarily to deal vaguely with great subjects”, this despite the fact that John Ruskin,
“a man of genius”, had been a Slade Professor, and the others had been men of talent.
A Chair of Criticism would result in “merely vague talk about literature, which would
teach nothing”. He predicted that “Hyper-refinement and paradox would be the
order of the day”.7

These words “hyper-refinement and paradox” indicate his view of the subject
becoming increasingly cut off from reality, breathing increasingly rarefied air. It is
a view which is all of a piece with Morris’s attitude towards literary composition
itself. He did not believe in professionalising literature. In an interview which he
later gave to a reporter from the Daily Chronicle, in 1893, he was asked whether
he believed that people should be able to make a living just from producing art,
and he replied that, with certain exceptions, he did not. There were some arts, such
as painting, which used all of a man’s energies, so in these cases he should be paid.
However:

Literature is quite different – a man’s literature will be all the better for his having
some other occupation. A painter, also, is not always drawing his guts into fiddle-
strings, like a man producing imaginative literary work or a poet. Certainly, of all
men, a poet ought not to be paid.8

If a man should not be paid for “drawing his guts into fiddle-strings” writing poetry,
then how much less does he deserve to be paid to be a Professor of Criticism, parading
his hyper-refinement and paradox before the world.

Literary polemics were another aspect of university courses in English literature
which Morris foresaw and feared: “the younger students would be confused by the
literary polemics which would be sure to flourish round such a chair; and all this
would have the seal of authority set upon it, and probably would not seldom be
illustrated by some personal squabble.

A good example lay close to hand. Collins had published in the *Quarterly Review* in October 1886 a review of Edmund Gosse’s book, *From Shakespeare to Pope*. Gosse had recently delivered the Clark Lectures on English Literature at Cambridge, and these had now been published by the university press. The book had been eulogised in many reviews, but was in fact full of errors. Collins had used the review, which was unsparingly vicious, as a springboard for his renewed campaign on behalf of English studies. Referring to Oxford and Cambridge, Collins wrote:

> till they are prepared to take active measures, and to extend to the study of literature, and especially to the study of our vernacular literature, the protection they have extended to other branches of education – so long will this state of things continue; so long will mediocrity, sciolism, and ignorance prevail; so long will our presses continue to pour forth such books as the book on which we have been animadverting, and so long will our leading literary journals continue to pronounce them “volumes not to be glanced over and thrown aside, but to be read twice and consulted often.”

In the event, Collins’s attack on Gosse somewhat backfired, since the attack was so savage that Gosse’s plight aroused a good deal of public sympathy. For Morris, Collins’s article was simply a warning of the literary polemics and squabbles which would arise if Oxford and Cambridge were so unwise as to establish chairs devoted to criticism, and he begged, “Pray, Sir, change your mind, and do your best to deliver us from two (or more) Professors of Criticism.”

Apart from dislike of the content of university English teaching as he expected it would develop, however, Morris also expressed strong distaste for the promoters of “culture”, whom he saw as the main force pressing for English studies. He first of all teased those who were clamouring for English that perhaps “the Professor of Poetry might have his position made a thought less ridiculous by his subject being extended so as to embrace the whole of English literature – but I’m not sure”. If that proposal were not acceptable, he suggested:

> if a new professorship is wanted, might not a humble one of mediaeval archaeology be established, with the definite object of teaching the dons the value of the buildings of which they ought to be the guardians? In the thirty years during which I have known Oxford more damage has been done to art (and therefore to literature) by Oxford “culture” than centuries of professors could repair – for, indeed, it is irreparable. These coarse brutalities of “light and leading” make education stink in the nostrils of thoughtful persons .... I say that to attempt to teach literature with one hand while it destroys history with the other is a bewildering proceeding on the part of “culture”.

Morris’s linking of criticism and culture here is a natural one, since Collins, and more famously Matthew Arnold, had also made this connection. Collins and Arnold, however, treated the term “culture” as positive. For Collins, the men who, like himself, taught English literature on University Extension courses were “apostles” and “missionaries”, taking culture to the people. Matthew Arnold, in his essay, “The Bishop and the Philosopher”, described criticism and culture as indissoluble:

> Literary criticism’s most important function is to try books as to the influence which they are calculated to have upon the general culture of single nations or of the world at large. Of this culture literary criticism is the appointed guardian, and
on this culture all literary works may be conceived as in some way or other operating.\textsuperscript{15}

Morris accepted this linking of criticism and culture, but transformed them from positive to ironically negative terms.

Raymond Williams has argued that Morris usually handled the word “culture” roughly because he associated it with Matthew Arnold’s social and political thought and the idea that “culture could be saved from commercialism by isolating it”.\textsuperscript{16} Morris saw the only hope of saving art as being wholesale political and social change, and he was working for this through his involvement with the Socialist League. He regarded with disdain Arnold’s notion of cultivated “aliens” somehow being able to change the rest of society. In his \textit{Pall Mall Gazette} letter, Morris did not explicitly make any such political point. What he did do, however, was to point out the preposterously limited idea of culture which he believed was being peddled. In the rush to teach criticism in the name of culture, little attention was paid (certainly by the Oxford dons) to the fact that culture, in the shape of ancient buildings in Oxford itself, was being destroyed.

The immediate stimulus for this attack on Oxford’s contempt for history was probably provided by Collins. In his \textit{Quarterly Review} article of October 1886, Collins compared the teaching of history at Oxford and Cambridge with that available for English literature. He believed that in the case of history, “the most liberal and enlightened views”\textsuperscript{17} prevailed, whereas English, although of the utmost value and importance as an “instrument of culture”,\textsuperscript{18} was completely neglected. Morris’s reply to this was that, through the despoliation of ancient buildings, history had been systematically destroyed at Oxford. The university’s treatment of history therefore presented no attractive paradigm for English studies.

It is interesting that Morris was, to a certain extent, off target in his criticism of Oxford here. It was not, on the whole, the Oxford dons who were pressing the university to do something about English. The pressure came mainly from outside the university establishment, and was strongly resisted from within, so that a separate Chair of English Literature was not actually established there until 1904. Morris may well have been partly reacting to Arnold here once again, for Arnold, himself a former Professor of Poetry at Oxford, had repeatedly lauded the university as a great centre of English culture. In \textit{News from Nowhere} in 1890, Morris used the opportunity to make further jibes at nineteenth-century Oxford, and he singled out in particular the way in which it produced so-called “cultivated people”. From the perspective of twenty-first century utopian England, Hammond, the historian, looks back at the universities of Morris’s own day, and tells Guest that “they (and especially Oxford) were the breeding places of a peculiar class of parasites, who called themselves cultivated people”.\textsuperscript{19} Thus, in the face of the campaign for English literature at Oxford, a campaign which he identified as an attempt to advance “culture” through criticism, Morris attacked as though the pressure came from the ironically-termed men of “light and leading”\textsuperscript{20} within the university.
NOTES

5 *Collected Letters*, II, 589.
7 *Collected Letters*, II, 589.
9 *Collected Letters*, II, 589.
11 *Collected Letters*, II, 589. Some confusion has crept into two of the footnotes relating to this letter in the *Collected Letters*. In footnote 2, Norman Kelvin writes in explanation of the background: “The *Pall Mall Gazette*, October 15, 1886, discussed (p.11) the outcome of the search for the first Merton Professor at Oxford”. After giving details of the complaints made in this article concerning the Merton appointment, Kelvin continues: “Morris’s was one of several responses to a discussion that followed Edmund Gosse’s Clarke lecture at Trinity College, Cambridge (reprinted in the *Quarterly Review*, November 18, 1886)”. There are a number of points to be made: the immediate stimulus for Morris’s letter was Collins’s questionnaire, rather than the Merton appointment, which had taken place the previous year, or a “discussion that followed Edmund Gosse’s Clarke lecture”; there was not one “Clarke lecture”, but a series of Clark lectures, and these were never reprinted in the *Quarterly Review*; what was printed in the *Quarterly Review*, in October 1886, was Collins’s review of the published collection of Gosse’s lectures, which had originally been delivered at Cambridge two years earlier; it was Collins’s review, which he used as an opportunity to state his demands for English studies at Oxford, which provoked not so much a “discussion” as an extremely fierce literary row; Morris’s was not one of “several responses” to the questionnaire, but of more than forty that were published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, quite apart from the direct contributions to the Gosse fracas.

Footnote 3 glosses as follows Morris’s reference to the risk of “some personal squabble” enlivening English studies: “Morris may be referring to a controversy between Edmund Gosse and a writer for the *Quarterly Review*”. In fact, what Collins had in mind must be precisely the row referred to above between Collins (not identified in the note) and Gosse, together with their respective supporters.

12 *Collected Letters*, II, 589-590.
13 [John Churton Collins], rev. of *Petition Addressed to the Hebdomadal Council for the Foundation of a School of Modern Literature*, *Quarterly Review*, 164 (Jan. 1887), 245.
14 Letter in *The Times*, 1 Jun. 1887, p.3.


The phrase is Edmund Burke’s, from Reflections on the Revolution in France: “The men of England, the men, I mean, of light and leading in England, whose wisdom (if they have any) is open and direct, would be ashamed, as of a silly, deceitful trick, to profess any religion in name, which by their proceedings they appear to condemn” (London: Dodsley, 1790, p.150). The words had come to be used in connection with men and institutions associated with the diffusion of culture. Thus, in the Pall Mall Gazette, 11 Oct. 1886, an article entitled “The ‘Oxford Movement’ in East London”, dealing with Toynbee Hall, the headquarters of the University Extension Movement in East London, contains the sub-title, “A Centre of Light and Leading” (p.11).