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II.—*The Development of English Prose From Elizabeth to Victoria.*

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THERE has been produced up to the present time no complete manual or treatise, exhibiting the origin and development of our prose. The works of Minto and Saintsbury are characterized by marked excellences, but they fail in some points of essential interest and importance. Our standard literary historians ignore, for the most part, this phase of their subject, and there is more of stimulating, suggestive criticism to be gathered from the terse prefaces that accompany Mark Pattison's edition of Pope, than from the elaborate manuals of Morley and Arnold. In discussing the growth of English prose from Elizabeth to Victoria, it is not my purpose to ignore the periods that precede the Elizabethan age. The germ of our English prose antedates by many generations the advent of that era. It may be traced back as early as the epoch of "the blameless King," Alfred, in whose ideal character were concretely displayed those qualities of mind and heart of which the romancers of the Arthurian cycle but dreamed.

The translations executed under the auspices of Alfred during the closing decades of the ninth century, together with the versions of the Anglo-Saxon gospels, the exact date of whose rendering into English is not ascertained, may be regarded as the dim beginnings of that prose which, under many complex influences and through many strange vicissitudes ripened into the incomparable cadence of our Authorized Version, the golden harmonies of Taylor and Newman, the antithetic brilliance of Macaulay. The translations of Alfred from Latin into the vernacular, exhibit a measure of scholarly audacity to which the native tongues of contemporary Europe could present no parallel. The creation of our English prose may then be fixed as far back as the so-called Anglo-Saxon period of our language, and, notwithstanding the dialectic corruptions and variations produced by the Norman Conquest or stimulated by it, the germ out of which all subsequent evolutions of our prose have

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descended, must be referred to this era. There is little to be said in regard to the prose of those intervals that divide the Norman Conquest from the fourteenth century. The English chronicle terminates abruptly in 1154 A. D. and passing by its purely philological interest, there are few passages in the earlier memorials of any literature that excel the graphic portrayal of the Conqueror, whose colossal personality wrought so abiding an impress upon the minds of the simple and artless makers of our most olden history. . . . Mr. Saintsbury is correct in attributing to the process of translation so marked an influence upon the expansion of our prose, but he seems to err in not recognizing that influence in periods antedating those which he assumes as the *terminus a quo* of his investigations.

While not disposed to press the doctrine of historic or literary continuity to any extreme degree, I am unable to detect any sufficient reason for passing over without consideration, the epochs that precede the fifteenth century. Supreme among the earlier influences that gave an impulse to the formation of an English prose was the translation of the scriptures from Latin versions into the vernacular. This effect of this may be discovered, as has been indicated, during the Anglo-Saxon era, but when we approach the epoch of Wickliffe, the preluding season of the English Reformation, the process of Biblical translation becomes a marked and determining feature. The intense conservatism of our Bible English has always been one of its distinctive characteristics. Its function has been both to restrain and to develop, to guard against unseemly innovation while affording the noblest field for the exercise of creative power. Many of its finest features were impressed upon it by Wickliffe: since the admirable translation of Tyndale from the Greek, it has suffered no essential modification, if we except the abuses perpetrated by the revisers of 1881 in the subordinating of rhythmic grace to technical accuracy. Translation, didactic, Biblical, philosphic may be regarded as the earliest form in which English prose expressed itself. Indeed, no external influence has constituted a more potent factor in our literary history, whether in prose or verse. Without this expanding power, Shakespeare would have been "scarce half made up;" had Keats not heard "Chapman speak out loud and bold," he would have "lived forgotten and died forlorn." It is needless to multiply illustrations of this admitted truth. . . . It is, perhaps, an error to assume as

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Saintsbury seems to do, that there was no endeavor to construct an artistic prose before the age of Elizabeth. There was assuredly an advance in the *character* of our prose under the auspicious culture of More, and his great antagonist, Tyndale. The style of Tyndale, revealing the influence of that classic culture which was so potent an element for good during the earlier decades of the sixteenth century, as well as the robust simplicity of Latimer, is a marked advance upon the constrained and rambling prose of Pecock's "Repressor," produced about the middle of the fifteenth century, the first *formal* endeavor of theology to express herself in the vernacular tongue. The prose of More, Tyndale, Latimer, Ascham, is concrete proof of sensible development, partly resulting from the salutary impulse communicated by the first phases of the classical revival, partly the outcome of native vigor inspired by religious fervor. The first impression of the classical culture upon our English prose, was, as we have pointed out, productive of excellent results as the mode of appropriating the graces of ancient art was during the earlier stages of the revival, rational and judicious. When the process went beyond the legitimate end of domesticating acknowledged beauties, and degenerated into a fixed purpose of engrafting upon the logical structure of English, the idioms and the periods of the ancient writers, the result was discord and incongruity in full measure. The perverted imitation of classic graces which distinguishes, in some degree, all our periodic stylists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, despite their occasional passages of unsurpassed brilliance, was in the nature of an artistic or æsthetic aberration, carefully to be separated from the more native diction of More and Tyndale, from the rugged vernacular of Latimer, from the Euphuists and pamphleteers of the Elizabethan day. It was a superimposition upon the natural style, rich in individual or isolated excellences, but still a departure from the genius of our tongue. The continuity of the native style is never lost, even amid the obscuring brilliancy of the classical types, and when the era of our modern prose, the age of revision and refinement, the epoch of Temple, Dryden, Halifax, Swift, Addison and Steele is reached, we encounter an assertion of the consciousness of our speech, a reaction toward the style that had been subordinated, but not repressed, rather than a process of development *out of* the

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elaborate periodic structure of Hooker, Taylor, Clarendon, Browne and Milton *into* the terse syntax of the Augustan masters. . . . The one receded, the other came into the foreground, the former was an exotic, the latter the genuine outcome of native spirit and taste. Like so many developments in English constitutional history, it was rather a reversion to original principles, than a conscious deviation from a recognized and established standard. That the simple style of our earlier prose was immensely developed, that it advanced both in vigor and refinement under the culture of Dryden, Swift, Steele, Addison, and their contemporaries, will be evident at a glance. Yet the proposition appears irrefutable, that they did not create a *new* style, but rather recurred to the natural type of our prose, which had not been entirely effaced, during the ascendency of the classical school. . . . The expansion of our speech during the first thirty years of Elizabeth's reign, both in its prose and poetic phases, has rarely received adequate treatment at the hands of our literary historians. Never has any tongue undergone a more thorough reconstruction in the space of a single generation. Every feature was subjected to a rigid scrutiny, metrical forms, structural laws, the harmony of prose and the harmony of poetry were analyzed with a rigid minuteness that equalled the fastidious procedures of our Augustan era. Wilson, Ascham, Puttenham, Sidney, Harvey, Levin, and a goodly company of others, are entitled to grateful recognition in any scholarly narrative of our literary development. Nor is the strength of our creative age restricted to its noble manifestations of power in lyric and dramatic poetry. The advance in our prose style is conspicuous, and in the superb English of Sidney's "Apologie," there may be discovered several touches of that golden and sunny language which so often lights up the sermons and essays of Cardinal Newman. Such, for example, is Sidney's famous distinction between the world of the poet, and that of nature. Indeed that entire phase of our tongue, so often travestied under the name of Euphuism, assuming its concrete and most polished expression from the culture of Lyly, is the tendency of the language towards its modern and more concise form. However much its growth may have been stimulated by foreign influences, Italian or Spanish, yet the movement was in the direction of simplification of structure, and inherent in the speech, as it is inherent in every speech at some period of its

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development. The antithetical features of Euphuism have been reproduced with great artistic skill in the diction of Lord Macaulay; its influence may be detected in the English of Gibbon, in a more marked degree, perhaps, in his Memoirs than in his History. The style of Bacon's Essays, of the pamphleteers and lighter authors of the time, is suggestive of the same tendency. Note for illustration the famous apology of Chettle to Shakespeare, which followed the appearance of Greene's Groat's Worth of Wit. The strangely modern style of our eminent statesmen of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, men of the world and of affairs, has not been noted with sufficient attention. The History of the World by Sir Walter Raleigh is a splendid illustration of Elizabethan eloquence, but the political tracts produced in connection with his ill-starred South American expedition are models of conciseness, and would scarcely suffer by comparison with Mr. Gladstone's recent pamphlet upon the Irish question. The prose of the Elizabethan drama must have exercised an influence by no means inconsiderable in preparing our language for that simplification of structure which it assumed during the latter half of the seventeenth century. In the compass of literature there is rarely to be found more superb prose than that which sometimes breaks in upon the dramas of Shakespeare: note such passages as Hamlet's eulogy upon man. The critical temper was by no means wanting during this, the greatest of our creative epochs. It is the dominant note of all Ben Jonson's art. The measure of In Memoriam is found with its peculiar sweetness of metrical effect, in Ben's XXXIX. elegy; even in his estimate of Shakespeare, the same critical vein is discernible. The creative and the regulative faculty appear in full vigor during "the spacious times of great Elizabeth," but the *dominant* æsthetic and artistic impulse was creative, as it must needs have been under the peculiar historic influences that shaped the era. Our prose advanced immensely during this period, and the stimulating agencies brought to bear upon it, were varied and most efficient in their action. Many of them are discussed at length in my History of the English Language, Chapters XIX–XXI, and I cannot trespass upon the proprieties of the occasion by reproducing them in this essay. The germs of every succeeding development of our language and literature, may be discovered in the manifold richness of this age. All preceding linguistic

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growth converges toward it, all subsequent literary evolution diverges from it. The culture of the critics and refiners, the school of Euphuists, the novelettes and pamphlets, the essays of Bacon, the strangely modern prose of Raleigh's tracts, the cadence of Sidney, the climaxes of Hooker, the critical note of Ben Jonson, the passionate ardor of Marlowe, are all blended in the versatile luxuriance of the Elizabethan day. . . . It is to be deplored that the history of our literary evolution has not been written with more especial regard to the contemporary or corresponding philosophic evolution of our race. The study of the dominant philosophy of an era, as has been illustrated in the growth of strictly historic composition, will reveal many of the *arcana* of its literary form and character. Let us test the soundness of this principle by its application to the history of our own literary expansion during the first half of the seventeenth century in the sphere of prose. A marked feature of our older classical prose, as adorned and illustrated by Milton and by Taylor, was an individuality of style that has in a measure disappeared since the establishment of the modern typical prose during the last decades of the seventeenth century. The classic influence is conspicuous in the fashioning of our later, as well as our earlier prose form, but the character and the result of the influence is different in the later as compared with the earlier. The distinction is most happily illustrated by a reviewer of Gosse's "From Shakespeare to Pope" in the Quarterly for October, 1886.

It was during the first half of the seventeenth century, that strangely complex and fascinating age, that Bacon was unfolding his philosophic system, a system which, though an admitted failure from the standpoint of practical application, was in accord with the tone and spirit of the modern era. The Novum Organum upon which the Lord Chancellor based his highest philosophic hopes, was intended to supersede all those differences of intellect which God and nature have erected between men: the efficacy of the instrument was to assure the result, not the skill or genius of the operator. Original and essential distinctions are levelled; the method takes precedence of him who applies it; it is the *opus operatum* in its most vicious form. In his conception of this new source of power, Bacon anticipated perhaps, unwillingly, some of the characteristic features of our modern educational empiricism. It is more relevant to our

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purpose to note that the temper of his philosophy is in harmonious relation to the impelling spirit of the seventeenth century as exhibited in the aggressive genius of Puritanism, which despite its inconsistencies and anomalies, is the reflection and expression of the modern spirit. In the advancement of physical science, in the constitutional and religious growth of the seventeenth century, the same spirit is revealed, and he who has failed to study intently the evolution of our history during this complex and bewildering period, is to that extent disqualified for apprehending or appreciating the later developments of our speech, whether in prose or poetry. . . . In no field of investigation is the relation between history and literature more intimate, in none are the fruits of research more easy of attainment. The student of our modern prose must devote his "days and nights" to the Memoirs of the Reign of James I. and Charles I. to the Fairfax Memoirs, and the Diaries of Evelyn and Pepys.[1]

The tendency towards simpler prose form was stimulated by the influences that have been specified, and they may be regarded as one phase in the growth of that modern spirit, under whose expanding power,

"The individual withers and the world is more and more."

When we approach the later decades of the seventeenh century, the labor of revision exercised itself in establishing a more concise form of prose, polished and refined by a judicious application of classic influence, the basis of operation being that original simple type which had never been absolutely lost during the ascendency of the periodic style. The principal achievement of the eighteenth century, so far as it relates to prose, was the culture and expansion of that style, a process which was essentially aided by the development of periodical literature and the rise of the modern novel. . . . It has been frequently observed that the prose of those epochs which immediately follow seasons of great poetic activity is marked by a diction strikingly poetic in character. This has been pointed out by Mr. Saintsbury as distinctive of the era following the Georgian galaxy of poets, and Carlyle, Ruskin and Newman are among the most conspicuous illustrations of this tendency. The same

1 Taylor's Retrospect of The Religious Life of England, and Masson's Life and Times of John Milton, Vol. VI., will amply repay diligent study in this connection.

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phenomenon may be traced in the prose literature of the seventeenth century. . . . The prose of Taylor and Milton succeeded the poetic splendor of the Elizabethan age, as that of Carlyle, Newman and Ruskin followed the epoch of Shelley, Keats, Byron, Scott and Coleridge. In either case it seems to have been a transmitted radiance, an after-glow by which these "warblers of poetic prose" kept alive the spirit of the preceding dispensation. The essay of the late Principal Shairp upon The Prose Poets, will repay a diligent reading by the student of the period now under consideration. . . . Since the advent of this generation of prose poets, the preëminence of our Augustan or Addisonian style has been seriously impaired. Whether it will again become the accepted model of purity and idiomatic grace, is a question that cannot now be determined. The present ascendency of sensational, rhetorical and poetic prose is not productive of hope or enthusiasm in regard to the future. . . . The style of Lord Macaulay has exerted so potent an influence upon that of his contemporaries, and is so unique in character as to demand more than an incidental allusion in the most superficial outline of English prose. He was the product, in large measure, of our Addisonian age, his studies and his sympathies lay largely among the heroes and the writers of that time: with the literary tendencies of his own day he had no genuine sympathy, as is abundantly attested in the fascinating biography produced by his nephew, Mr. Trevelyan. Yet the most efficient agencies that determine intellectual character are sometimes those whose presence is least suspected, or whose activity is least apparent. The obligations of Macaulay to the rhetoric of Burke, which assumed a richer coloring with the advent of declining years, are too clear to be mistaken. Then, too, his most susceptible period (1800–1815) was passed amid the convulsions that followed an unparalleled revolution, which for the time seemed to annihilate all the traditions of the eighteenth century. Still, in spirit and in sympathy, he belonged rather to the days of Pope and Johnson than to those of Wordsworth and Scott. This is pointed out by Shairp with wonted clearness, in his Poetic Interpretation of Nature. . . . My purpose has been to submit to the Association a concise account of the forces that have affected the growth and the character of our prose style during the successive periods of its history.

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The intent is not to exhaust or even to elaborate, merely to suggest and quicken.

The whole subject of melody in its relation to style, is one worthy of minute investigation, and there is a rich as well as fascinating field reserved for him who shall blend literary attainment with technical knowledge of musical science, and shall trace the mutations of our prose and poetic form as determined by changes of musical appetency or phonetic sensibility. Valuable hints may be gathered from the great work of Helmholtz;[2] something has been achieved by Sidney Lanier, Theodore Watts, and R. L. Stevenson in the Contemporary Review. Our language is still marred by an exuberance of cacophony, a prime obstacle in the path of every instructor who deals with the delicate art of composition. We must revive the æsthetic criticism of the Greeks and apply its principles to the elucidation and culture of English prose . . . It is earnestly to be hoped that some rational mode of criticism may counteract the tendency of our prevailing philological style, if, forsooth, it have not already ripened into that "maturity of corruption" so graphically portrayed by Junius, "at which the worst examples cease to be contagious." I make this stricture in the most abstract and impersonal sense, "more in sorrow than in anger," yet its justice and its propriety no dispassionate mind can question. In concluding, I desire to express the hope that the subject, as well as the *subject-matter* of this paper will receive the critical consideration of the Modern Language Association. Its importance from every view-point, scholarly or pedagogic, commends it to the regard and the scrutiny of all teachers and students of the English tongue.

2 Sensation of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music.

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