

ENGLISH PROSE OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

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IT is, perhaps, paradoxical to commence an essay on English prose by talking about poetry, but when the prose under discussion is that of the seventeenth century, such a digression is by no means irrelevant. No one has ever been able to define poetry, although the pages of literature are strewn with noble attempts. We can usually recognize it, if only by its typographical arrangement, but there is a shadowland on the border between prose and poetry where the one becomes almost indistinguishable from the other. Our classification of such amorphous material depends, as a rule, on what we feel the intention of the writer to have been. More and more, in modern times, due in part, no doubt, to the rise of the daily newspaper, prose has become for us the vehicle for the communication of information in the most direct and lucid manner possible. The common man no longer reads prose for the sheer delight of its style. He wants the facts—the simple, plain, unadorned facts. And that is all he wants.

Factually speaking, that convenient symbol, the common man, not only no longer reads ornate prose, he also no longer reads poetry. This may or may not be a significant commentary upon the society of our day, but it is, undoubtedly, a sufficient reason why the works of the great prose writers of the seventeenth century are kept alive only by the appreciation of the enthusiastic few. Perhaps, as Arnold Bennett contends, it was ever thus. In any event, it seems to me that the merits that make the prose writings of these men memorable are poetic merits. And poetic merits do not seem to enjoy any wide-spread popularity in this twentieth century of ours.

It is my contention, then, that the men whose writings we are considering were really poets in the quality of their imagination, in their love of artistic effect, in their feeling for the power of suggestion and allusion that words possess. One of them was, indeed, one of the great poets of the language. Much of our interest in John Milton's prose writings stems from the fact that he was the author of *Paradise Lost*. Not that some of his prose does not rank high in its own right.

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The *Areopagitica*, for instance, must always claim its place in the annals of our literature. In reading Milton's prose, however, one always seems to have the feeling that Milton could have expressed the same thing much better, say, in blank verse. Admittedly, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* sounds somewhat incongruous as the subject for a Miltonic epic. However, I feel that Milton's genius needed the restrictions that poetic convention placed on his muse. Once the flood-gates of poetic convention were removed, Milton's thoughts tended to rush forth pell mell in some such mighty torrent as the paragraph-long second sentence of *Reformation touching Church-Discipline in England*. His famous verse-paragraph, such as the sixteen-line one opening *Paradise Lost*, is magnificent in poetry, but the same technique tends to become a little disturbing when applied to prose.

In the middle period of his life, Milton deliberately turned his attention away from poetry and devoted his efforts to what he felt to be the best interests of his country. He wrote about topics that demanded a prose exposition, and yet he reacted to his subject-matter with essentially the same passionate individualism that we find in his matchless poems. The excellences of his prose—the balanced cadences, the striking phrases, the happy epithets—are all excellences that we find in his poetry. He wrote in prose from a sense of duty—poetry was his natural medium. "If I were wise only to mine own ends," he says in *Reason of Church Government*, "I should not choose this manner of writing, wherein knowing myself inferior to myself, led by the genial power of nature to another task, I have the use, as I may account, but of my left hand." Many of the things he wrote about have lost their interest for us, except as sources of information concerning the writer. In fact, his material is usually of such a controversial nature that objective criticism of his prose works was impossible for many years after his death. "Except *Areopagitica*," comments Saintsbury, "there is hardly a piece of it that can be said to be, in the common phrase, worthy of its author, as a piece of literature; and there is much in it that is painful, much that is even offensive, to read. Yet it may be questioned whether, from any literary point of view, one can wish that it had not been written."

In *Areopagitica*, Milton found a noble subject on which to expound and, while the personal element is still strong in the resultant tract, the sentiments expressed are on a high plane

and are phrased, for the most part, with a stately majesty. Milton's labyrinthine sentences do not always escape the danger of obscurity, but the meaning is usually quite clear if a little care is taken in reading them. We are not used to taking care in reading prose, but much of the difficulty of style disappears if his writings are read aloud. This may be just one more manifestation of the classical spirit, which is everywhere apparent in Milton's works, for much of the great prose of ancient Greece consisted of the written version of orations. In any event, it is worth taking pains to discover a passage such as: "I cannot praise a fugitive and cloister'd virtue, unexercis'd and unbreath'd, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for not without dust and heat." Characteristically, the prose writers of this period express their thoughts in images as the poet does. Much of Milton's imagery is classical and historical, drawn mostly from the works of antiquity, and his use of it, together with his use of allusive and exotic names, rings his sentences round with vast and shadowy perspectives. "The ancientest Fathers must be next remov'd, as Clement of Alexandria, and that Eusebian book of Evangelick preparation, transmitting our ears through a hoard of heathenish obscenities to receive the Gospel. Who finds not that Irenaeus, Epiphanius, Jerom, and others discover more heresies then they will confute, and that oft for heresie which is the truer opinion." And yet Milton could be clear and direct also, on occasion: "We reck'd more then five months yet to harvest; there need not be five weeks; had we but eyes to lift up, the fields are white already. Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making." In passages such as this we recognize the cadences of the King James version of the Bible.

As a defence of free thought, *Areopagitica* stands beside Jeremy Taylor's *Liberty of Prophesying*, Locke's *Letters on Toleration*, and John Stuart Mill's *Liberty*. Tolerance was by no means one of the major virtues of the seventeenth century, and it is worthwhile noting that the three great prose writers whose works we are considering, Milton, Jeremy Taylor and Sir Thomas Browne, each pleaded eloquently for toleration. We may not entirely agree with their own conduct, at times, in this regard, but we must remember the age in which they

lived and give them due credit for their written expressions of opinion, penned in such intolerant times.

Milton's prose, then, did not possess the brilliant transparency of Dryden's. The illusion that Milton seems to have cherished that the world was peopled with men like himself was hard lost. When, however, disillusion came, it brought no alteration in his style. He still addressed his works to a "fit audience, though few," "by whom, ever so few they be, I, for my part, would rather be approved, than by countless companies of unskilled ones, in whom is nothing of mind, or right reason, or sound judgment." The very title *Areopagitica*, like *Tetrachordon*, must have drawn from the stall-reader cries of "Bless us! what a word on a title-page is this!" Undoubtedly, it has a like effect on countless undergraduates, to whom the standards of modern education have bequeathed a rather nebulous classical background. But we must not allow preconceived prejudices to blind us to the richness of a style that may differ somewhat from those we are used to. The condemnation of the writings of an earlier age without any attempt to understand and appreciate their merits is intolerance of the worst sort. The great works of the past amply repay the slight effort necessary to bring them into focus.

The subject-matter of the writers of the seventeenth century must always prove a stumbling block for the modern reader. We find it hard to become enthusiastic over the religious controversies that played so large a part in their lives. Jeremy Taylor was an Anglican clergyman, and the great bulk of his writings are theological and devotional. However, he is described by Coleridge in a letter as "a miraculous combination of erudition, broad deep and omnigenous; of logic subtle as well as acute, and as robust as agile, of psychological insight, so fine and yet so secure. I believe such a complete man hardly shall we meet again." Lamb and Hazlitt joined Coleridge in placing Taylor alongside Shakespeare, Milton and Bacon, as the four great geniuses of the older literature. But one glance at the nine closely-printed volumes of Jeremy Taylor's collected works is enough to frighten off the modern reader, and it must be admitted that his reputation has declined considerably since its revival by the critics of the Romantic era.

Yet we cannot overlook such high praise from such eminent sources. Why should Taylor's name be mentioned in the same breath as Shakespeare's. The great bulk of his work

certainly does not deserve such high commendation. Indeed, one might browse casually through such formidable tomes as *Ductor Dubitantium*, *Unum Necessarium*, *Dissuasive from Popery*, *The Great Exemplar*, and even *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*, without finding a great deal to justify his claim to a place among the greats of English literature. It actually requires careful pruning to cull out the elements in his work that are of enduring value. Basically, it is his style that has gained for him his great reputation; it is not what he says, but the way in which he says it. Even Coleridge admitted that he "had no ideas" and that his thought is "all weather eaten, dim, useless, a Ghost in marble."

In a fine introductory essay to an excellent selection of passages from Taylor's writings, Logan Pearsall Smith draws attention to the distinction often drawn between style and matter. He traces the significance of Taylor's work to what Matthew Arnold has called "the creative magic of style." "Now and then," Smith says, "as we read him an imagination, radiant and strange, seems to unfold its wings and soar aloft; now and then the painful clergyman, as he writes down his arguments and expositions, seems to dip his pen in enchanted ink; the words begin to dance and glitter, and a splendour falls on the illuminated page." Smith contends, and I am inclined to agree with him, that "form in any work of art cannot be divorced from its content;... cannot be separated from that totality of meaning which his work conveys to our senses and imagination." So, it is not what Jeremy Taylor, the Anglican divine, thought he was saying that is important to us, it is what the poet in him could not help expressing whenever it got the opportunity. It is the enduring glimpses of reality that flow unbidden from his pen every so often, that are of lasting interest.

The charm of style is a difficult thing to analyze. We can, however, note a few of its constituent elements. Verbal music, what Donne calls "the melodious fall of words," is one main ingredient. We could quote many examples of this from Taylor's writings. "No sigh for the folly of an irrevocable word" illustrates his mastery of sound and rhythm, as does his description of the passage of an eagle through the air, "as long as her flight lasted, the Air was shaken; but there remains no path behind her." What Smith calls "audacity of diction," the usage of familiar words in an unfamiliar context, is another technique that he uses. He speaks of the falling tide desert-

ing the "unfaithful dwelling of the sand," or he refers to the "wilder fringes of the fire." His chief gift, however, is one that he shares with Shakespeare, the gift of visual imagery, the ability to personify abstractions. Thus, sin "will look prettily, and talk flattering words, and entice thee with softnesses and easy fallacies." It is this power of thinking in images, possessed in rich measure by Aeschylus and Plato, as well as by Shakespeare, that raises Jeremy Taylor's writings far above the level of those of the other divines of his time. He describes the sunrise thus: "But as when the Sun approaches towards the gates of the morning, he first opens a little eye of Heaven, and sends away the spirits of darkness, and gives light to a cock, and calls up the lark to Mattins, and by and by gilds the fringes of a cloud and peeps over the Eastern hills thrusting out his golden horns, like those which decked the browses of Moses when he was forced to wear a vail, because himself had seen the face of God; and still while a man tells the story, the sun gets up higher, till he shows a fair face and a full light, and then he shines one whole day, under a cloud often, and sometimes weeping great and little showers, and sets quickly: so is a man's reason and his life." Curiously enough we also have a verse of his describing the same scene:

What glorious light!
 How bright a sun after so sad a night
 Does now begin to dawn! Bless'd were those eyes
 That did behold
 This Sun when he did first unfold
 His glorious beams, and now begin to rise.

As Smith comments, "the verse is prose and the prose is poetry—poetry with no formal metre but with a rich music of its own."

It is the music and magic of words, then, for which we value the writings of Jeremy Taylor. "We still read, or still should read, his tremulous pages," Smith says, "for the beauty of the world which hung upon his pen, a world full of sun and the shimmer of water, a world delicately tinted, fleeting, evanescent, and yet fixed and made imperishable by the incantation of his words." It is style, too, the artistry of language that is the special merit of Sir Thomas Browne, the last of the three writers under consideration. Legouis makes an interesting comparison between Browne and Robert Burton: both very learned, both eccentric, both all but forgotten until restored

favour by the enthusiasm of Lamb and the romantics. Whereas Burton, however, was a clergyman with leanings towards medicine, Browne was a physician with inclinations towards divinity. Their prose styles, too, are quite different. In his best works, Browne's sentences are fairly brief and are characterized by a sense of form, a search for the right word to lend sonority and rhythm to his cadences. Words that Burton would leave in Latin, Browne Anglicizes, and they add much to the final effect.

One of the most sympathetic and searching analyses of Browne's style is to be found in Lytton Strachey's essay contained in his collection *Books and Characters*. Strachey criticizes Sir Edmund Gosse for his apparent lack of appreciation of the inner spirit of Browne's prose writing. The quibbling of Gosse over such Browneisms as "the pensile gardens of Babylon," which he feels might much better be referred to as "the hanging gardens," particularly irritates Strachey. "To the true Browne enthusiast," Strachey says, "there is something almost shocking about the state of mind which would exchange 'pensile' for 'hanging', and 'asperous' for 'rough', and would do away with 'digladiation' and 'quodlibetically' altogether. The truth is, that there is a great gulf fixed between those who naturally dislike the ornate, and those who naturally love it. Anyone who is jarred by the expression 'prodigal blazes' had better immediately shut up Sir Thomas Browne."

Like those of Taylor and Milton, much of Browne's writings hold little interest for us today. But in a few works, notably *Hydriotaphia*, the second part of *Religio Medici*, and the concluding chapter of *The Garden of Cyrus*, he produced gems that place him among the masters of one kind of English prose. Perhaps the best approach to an analysis of his style is to quote one or two characteristic passages in order to illustrate the distinctive flavour of his diction. In *Hydriotaphia*, we find the following: "But the iniquity of oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy, and deals with the memory of men without distinction to merit of perpetuity. Who can but pity the founder of the Pyramids. Herostratus lives that burnt the Temple of Diana, he is almost lost that built it; Time hath spared the Epitaph of Adrians horse, confounded that of himself. In vain we compute our felicities by the advantage of our good names, since bad have equall durations; and Therisites is like to live as long as Agamemnon. Who knows whether

the best of men be known, or whether there be not more remarkable persons forgot, than any that stand remembered in the known account of time? Without the favour of the everlasting register, the first man had been as unknown as the last, and Methuselahs long life had been his only Chronicle." In contrast to this, we may note the simple style that he uses occasionally with great effect: "Life is a pure flame, and we live by an invisible Sun within us."

Browne chooses his words with the care of a painter selecting colours and combines them with the artistry of a composer creating a symphony. His use of latinized words enables him to produce strange and remote harmonies, with a subtle blending of mystery and grotesqueness. The famous fifth chapter of *Hydriotaphia*, beginning "Now since these dead bones have already outlasted the living ones of Methuselah," Saintsbury calls "the longest piece of absolutely sublime rhetoric to be found in the prose literature of the world." Professor C. H. Herford comments: "If there is any English prose which it is not wholly profane to compare with a symphony of Beethoven, it is surely the magnificent discourse of the *Hydriotaphia*, with its vast undulations of rhythmic sound, its triumphal processions, its funereal pageants, its abysmal plunges into unfathomable depths, its ecstatic soarings to the heights of heaven."

While Browne achieved his most elaborate rhythms from his classical vocabulary, he also made good use of words of Anglo-Saxon origin. Pater once declared that a dissertation on style might be written to illustrate Browne's use of the words "thin" and "dark." The last paragraph of *Hydriotaphia* is a good example of the remarkable contrasts that Browne could achieve by his choice of words: "To subsist in lasting Monuments, to live in their productions, to exist in their names and praedicament of chymera's, was large satisfaction unto old expectations, and made one part of their Elyziums. But all this is nothing in the Metaphysicks of true belief. To live indeed is to be again ourselves, which being not only an hope but an evidence in noble believers: 'Tis all one to lye in St. Innocents churchyard, as in the Sands of Aegypt. Ready to be anything, in the ecstasie of being ever, and as content with six foot as the Mole of Adrianus." We might particularly note the fine contrast in the final short phrase, between "six foot" and the "Mole of Adrianus".

Browne's scientific interest in curious details often lends

a touch of humour to his writings. He cannot help wondering, Strachey notes, "Whether great-ear'd persons have short necks, long feet, and loose bellies." The dry, subtlety of his wit may best be illustrated by a quotation from *Vulgar Errors*, in which he says of Oppian: "Abating the annual mutation of sexes in the hyaena, the single sex of the rhinoceros, the antipathy between two drums, of a lamb and a wolf's skin, the infirmity of cubs, the venation of Centaures, the copulation of the murena and the viper, with some few others, he may be read with great delight and profit." In the preface to this same book, too, he makes this ironic comment on style: "If elegance still proceedeth. . . we shall, within a few years, be fain to learn Latin to understand English." In *The Garden of Cyrus*, or "The Quincuncial, Lozenge, or Network Plantations of the Ancients, Artificially, Naturally, Mystically Considered," he finds quincunxes everywhere—in the sky, on the earth, in the mind of man, in the notes of music, in the optic nerve, in the roots of trees, in leaves. The number five seemed to have a mystic significance for him, and most of his works are separated into five chapters.

Like Milton, Browne was fond of the use of proper names, and they added one more touch to the elaborate mosaic of pomp and splendour that was the final effect towards which he strove. We cannot profitably abstract shreds of Browne's work from its context. It should be read in its entirety to be best appreciated. Some sentences are perfect in themselves, such as the oft-quoted: "Nor will the sweetest delight of gardens afford much comfort in sleep; wherein the dullness of that sense shakes hands with delectable odours; and though in the bed of Cleopatra, can hardly with any delight raise up the ghost of a rose." But his main artistic effects are gained by an accumulation of subtle brush strokes. Indeed, for our blunted tastes, it may require a number of readings before we are able to savour to the full the exotic charm of his words. Only when we have learned with Strachey to "start out for a long walk with such a splendid phrase upon our lips as: 'According to the ordainer of order and mystical mathematicks of the City of Heaven,' to go for miles and miles with the marvellous syllables still rich upon the inward ear, and to return home with them in triumph" can we begin to understand Browne's consummate mastery of language.

Still, prose today must be lucid and clear, and avoid the precarious heights of imaginative vision. "When we read

prose," says Pearsall Smith, "like the prose of the Prayer Book and the Bible, of Shakespeare and Milton, of Donne and Sir Thomas Browne and Jeremy Taylor, are we, as Hazlitt asks to cut ourselves off from beauties like these with a theory. May we not admit the existence of great writers who, like Plato, were poets but not versifiers, and say of Jeremy Taylor, as was said of De Quincey—and might be also said of Sir Thomas Browne—that he has revealed new capacities of the language, has enlarged our conceptions concerning the possibilities of what Dryden described as 'the other harmony prose.' A study of the writings of Browne led Dr. Johnson to convert "the Doric order of Swift into the Corinthian order of Gibbon." The influence of seventeenth century prose can be traced, too, in the pages of Landor and De Quincey and Ruskin. Henry James used giant similes, like those of Jeremy Taylor, with admirable effect in his novels. The poetic use of visual imagery is becoming a fairly common phenomenon today as modern novelists seek for "new" ways in which to express themselves. So recent a writer as Virginia Woolf made this one of her most effective techniques. Thus the reputations of older writers rise and wane with the ebb and flow of fashion. We cannot avoid being influenced by current trends. Let us strive, however, to maintain sufficient objectivity to be able to appreciate the great works of the past despite the popular prejudices of the moment.

In closing, I cannot do better than echo Sir Thomas Browne's capricious leave-taking of *The Garden of Cyrus*: "But the quincunx of heaven runs low, and 'tis time to close the five ports of knowledge. To keep our eyes open longer were but to act our Antipodes. The huntsmen are up in America, and they are past their first sleep in Persia."