
THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROSE STYLE

English writers of the sixteenth century were self-consciously puzzled about the state of their language. They knew that it had changed markedly in the past two centuries, but they were not sure whether too rapid a change was good. They were aware also that its vocabulary was being influenced by other modern languages, especially French and Italian. They wondered whether it should be more like Latin, the international language of learning, or whether it should be true to its own native genius. The spread of printing meant that people who were not learned (who did not know Latin) could afford English books and would therefore read, as they had not done before. Notable defenses of the vernacular tongues of Italian and French had been published; some Englishmen felt that an equally valid defense of English could be made.

As early as 1543 a translator, Peter Betham, proclaimed that he thought translators ought to use the usual terms of our English tongue, not borrowing terms from other languages, because, as he said, continual borrowing without repayment would make the language, as it would make a man, bankrupt. Furthermore, he deplored what he called "inkhorn" terms, learned words derived from Latin or invented by authors—words so obscure that he thought the ordinary Englishman would not be able to understand them. To be sure, he admitted, a few words of foreign origin must be allowed, since languages are clearly interlaced with each other, but the good writer of English is the one who follows Chaucer and other old writers, keeping English in its native tradition. The most notable theorist of language reform in the middle of the century was the famous classical scholar, Sir John Cheke, Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge. His theory of phonetic spelling is demonstrated in his letter to the translator Sir Thomas Hoby.

The most important translations of the sixteenth century were the renderings of the Bible into the vernaculars. In England William Tyndale began his translation in 1523; he had to do it surreptitiously and outside the country; he finally suffered martyrdom for his efforts. In 1530 a royal proclamation condemned Tyndale's translation and all other versions in the vulgar tongue. Then in 1535 Miles Coverdale published, in Zürich, the first complete Bible in English. By this time the official attitude was changing, and in 1540 the so-called Great Bible was published, the first English Bible issued with official sanction—evidence of the extent of the breach between the English church and the Church of Rome.

The Geneva Bible (1560) was the work of Protestant refugees who fled to the Continent in the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary. It was the first Bible to divide the chapters into verses in the modern manner, and the first English Bible to be printed in Roman type rather than the old black letter or Gothic type. It was handy in size, and in many instances more accurate than its predecessors, but the marginal commentary was strongly biased in the Protestant direction. The Bishops' Bible (1568) was an attempt on the part of the Elizabethan church to counter the extreme Protestantism of the Geneva Bible. The bishops who sponsored it could indeed insist that their Bible be the official one used in churches, but the people continued to read the Geneva Bible at home, and its influence remained very great throughout the century. A Catholic translation into English, based upon the Latin Vulgate, was a belated concession to the demand for the Scriptures in the vernacular. It was published by English refugees abroad, the New Testament at Rheims in 1582 and the Old Testament at Douai in 1609–10. Though it was outside the main English tradition, it was not without its influence upon the King James Version which was to follow.

King James did not like the popular Geneva Bible (some of its commentary was not

highly favorable to kings). As a part of the religious settlement which took place early in his reign, he authorized a group of translators to make a new version of the Bible in English. The resulting work has been called "the noblest monument of English prose"; it owes more to Tyndale than to any other predecessor, but it has extraordinary beauties of its own. Where the Bishops' Bible reads, "He is such a man as hath good experience of sorrows and infirmities," and the Geneva Bible reads, "a man full of sorrows and hath experience of infirmities," the King James version reaches the final perfection of "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah liii.3).

Most educated writers learned their prose style, however, not from English models but from Latin, since the study of grammar in school was the study of Latin grammar, and the models and examples were from Cicero and other Romans like him. James Sutherland in *On English Prose* has suggested that this training was not wholly bad: "If you wish to raise the general level of prose composition, you cannot do better than base your style on the artificial, periodic prose of the Ciceronians, for that sort of writing is easiest to learn and to teach." He goes on to quote an "eagerly attempted but only half-learnt" exercise in Ciceronian English, the first sentence of Edward Halle's chronicle, *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York* (1542):

What mischief hath insured in realms by intestine division, what depopulation hath insured in countries by civil dissension, what detestable murder hath been committed in cities by separate factions, and what calamity hath insured in famous regions by domestical discord and unnatural controversy, Rome hath felt, Italy can testify, France can bear witness. Beame [Bohemia] can tell, Scotland may write, Denmark can show, and especially this noble realm of England can apparently declare and make demonstration.

By 1570 Halle's English was denounced as "indenture English" by Ascham, and all through the period certain writers carried on a sporadic campaign for more direct, plain prose that could be understood by the ordinary man. Among the learned, moreover, an anti-Ciceronian element preferred the Latin style of Seneca and Tacitus or the French style of Montaigne. These writers wished to put more emphasis on matter and less on manner; they believed the cast of mind of the writer, the individual turns of his thought closely revealed in his phrases, to be infinitely preferable to the rhetorical flourishes of a Roman orator.

Classical eloquence survived, of course, down to the prose of Browne and Milton in the next century. It had long outgrown the crudity of the time of Edward Halle. The periodic sentence which begins our selection from Richard Hooker's essay on the law of nature is almost 200 words in length; it contains half a dozen dependent clauses before the main clause is reached, several of which have lengthy subordinate elements within them; yet Hooker's sentence is not too long for the matter it contains, and he has the artistic tact to follow it with short sentences and to vary sentence structure as well as length. The change in the course of 50 years is notable, aside from the fact that Hooker was a genius and Halle was not.

Problems of style are of course related to the kind of audience a writer is attempting to reach. In the 1580's John Lyly delighted ladies at court with an elaborately ornate style called "Euphuism" (after the title of Lyly's book *Euphues*). The style existed before and after Lyly, but he brought it to its extreme and his success made a fad of it. The style is based upon classical and medieval rhetorical devices such as *isocolon* (successive phrases or clauses equal in length), *parison* (successive phrases or clauses identical in structure), and *paromoion* (successive phrases or clauses, or corresponding syllables, alike in sound). These schemes are used in combination, and the additional effects of repetition, antithesis, rhetorical questions, and exclamations are also combined with them. The content as well as the style is ornamented, particularly in three ways: *exempla*, or incidents from history or poetry, are used to illustrate a point; *sententiae* or proverbs are frequent; and *similia*, or similes, are drawn from science

or pseudo-science, either traditional or invented by the author himself. Less artificial than Euphuism, but still formal and suited to a courtly taste, is the style of Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*. One can see how much Sidney felt that a romance intended for courtly ladies like his sister, the Countess of Pembroke, required a special style, by comparing the artificial style of the *Arcadia* with the directness of his *Apology*.

Of course pamphleteers and journalists, appealing to a popular rather than a courtly audience, much more nearly approximated the style of everyday English speech. The Puritan Philip Stubbes, in attacking the popular sport of football, may string many epithets together as though he were orating or preaching, but he keeps his sentences short and uncomplicated and he uses vigorous active verbs. And a popularizer like William Bullein, appealing to quite unlearned readers, casts his matter into the form of a dialogue in common speech.

SIR JOHN CHEKE: [Our Own Tongue
Clean and Pure]¹

A LETTER OF SYR I. CHEEKES TO HIS LOUING FRIND
MAYSTER THOMAS HOBY

For your opinion of my gud will vnto you as you wriit,² you can not be deceiued: for submitting your doinges to mi iudgement, I thanke you: for taking this pain of your translation, you worthilie deseru great thankes of all sortes. I haue taken sum pain at your request cheffie in your preface, not in the reading of it for that was pleasaunt vnto me boath for the roundnes of your saienes and welspeakinges³ of the saam, but in changing certain wordes which might verie well be let aloan, but that I am verie curious in mi freendes matters, not to determijn, but to debaat what is best. Whearin, I seek not the bestnes haplie bi truth, but bi mijn own phansie, and shew of goodnes.

I am of this opinion that our own tung shold be written cleane and pure, vnmixt and vnmangeled with borowing of other tungen, wherein if we take not heed by tijm, euer borowing and neuer paying, she shall be fain to keep her house as bankrupt. For then doth our tung naturallie and praisablie vtter her meaning, whan she bouroweth no counterfeitnes of other tungen to attire her self withall, but vseth plainlie her own, with such shift as nature, craft, experiens and folowing of other excellent⁴ doth lead her vnto, and if she want at ani tijm (as being vnperfect⁵ she must) yet let her borrow with suche bashfulnes that it mai appeer that if either the mould of our own tung could serue vs to fascion a woord of our own, or if the old denisoned⁶ wordes could content and ease this neede, we wold not boldly venture of vnknown wordes. This I say not for reproof of you, who haue scarslie and necessarily vsed whear occasion serueth a strange word so, as it seemeth to grow out of the matter and not to be sought for: but for mijn own defens, who might be counted ouerstraight a deemer of thinges, if I gaue not thys accompt to you, mi freend and wijs, of mi marring this your handiwork. But I am called awai, I prai you pardon

1. Sir John Cheke (1514–57) was tutor to King Edward VI, Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge, and an ardent reformer of Greek pronunciation and English spelling. His letter to Hoby, prefixed to Hoby's translation of Castiglione's *Courtier* (not published until 1561), is here printed in its original spelling, to show Cheke's attempted reforms. His purist doctrine about diction (using only native words) was fortunately not followed by Elizabethan writers; although a pedantry, it reveals the concern of early humanists over English prose

style.

2. Write. A double vowel (including *ij*) indicates a long sound in Cheke's attempt at phonetic spelling.

3. Cheke's native equivalent for the word "eloquence," borrowed from the Latin *eloquentia*. See the doctrine in the next paragraph.

4. Supply the word "models."

5. Unperfect.

6. Admitted to citizenship.

mi shortnes, the rest of mi saienges should be but praise and exhortacion in this your doinges, which at moar leisor I shold do better.

From my house in Woodstreete

the 16. of Iuly, 1557.

Yours assured

IOAN CHEEK

THE BIBLE: Translations of the Twenty-third Psalm⁷
From *The Great Bible*

The Lord is my shepherd; therefore can I lack nothing. He shall feed me in a green pasture, and lead me forth beside the waters of comfort. He shall convert my soul, and bring me forth in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff comfort me. Thou shalt prepare a table before me against them that trouble me; thou hast anointed my head with oil, and my cup shall be full. But thy loving-kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

1539–40

From *A Latin-English Psalter*

The Lord governeth me, and I shall lack nothing; in a place of pasture even there hath he set me.

Upon the water of refection hath he nourished me; my soul hath he converted. He hath led me forth upon the paths of righteousness, even for his own name's sake.

For though I walk in the midst of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.

Thy rod and thy staff, those have comforted me.

Thou hast prepared a table before me, against them that trouble me.

Thou hast soupled⁸ my head in oil; my cup is also full and exceeding fair.

And thy mercy shall go with me all the days of my life.

That I also may dwell in the house of the Lord long and many days.

1540

From *Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins' Psalm-Book*

My shepherd is the living Lord; nothing, therefore, I need.

In pastures fair, with waters calm, he set me for to feed.

He did convert and glad my soul, and brought my mind in frame

To walk in paths of righteousness for his most holy name.

5 Yea, though I walk in vale of death, yet will I fear none ill;

Thy rod, thy staff doth comfort me, and thou art with me still.

7. To demonstrate the stylistic problems involved in Bible translation, we print the familiar Twenty-third Psalm as it appeared in the Great Bible, in a contemporary Latin-English psalter, in the popular

or vulgar versified psalmbook of Sternhold and Hopkins, and in the Anglican Bishops' Bible of 1568.

8. Anointed.

And in the presence of my foes, my table thou hast spread;
Thou shalt, O Lord, fill full my cup and eke anoint my head.

10 Through all my life thy favor is so frankly showed to me
That in thy house forevermore my dwelling place shall be.

1567

From *The Bishops' Bible*

God is my shepherd, therefore I can lack nothing; he will cause me to repose myself in pasture full of grass, and he will lead me unto calm waters.

He will convert my soul; he will bring me forth into the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff be the things that do comfort me.

Thou wilt prepare a table before me in the presence of mine adversaries; thou hast anointed my head with oil, and my cup shall be brimful.

Truly felicity and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of God for a long time.

1568

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY: *From Arcadia*⁹

* * *The joy which wrought into Pygmalion's mind, while he found his beloved image was softer and warmer in his folded arms, till at length it accomplished his gladness with a perfect woman's shape (still beautified with the former perfections), was even such, as by each degree of Zelmane's words creepingly entered into Philoclea: till her pleasure was fully made up with the manifesting of his being; which was such as in hope did overcome Hope. Yet Doubt would fain have played his part in her mind and called in question how she should be assured that Zelmane was Pyrocles. But Love straight stood up and deposed that a lie could not come from the mouth of Zelmane. Besides, a certain spark of honor, which rose in her well-disposed mind, made her fear to be alone with him, with whom alone she desired to be (with all the other contradictions growing in those minds, which neither absolutely climb the rock of virtue, nor freely sink into the sea of vanity), but that spark soon gave place, or at least gave no more light in her mind, than a candle doth in the sun's presence. But even sick with a surfeit of joy, and fearful of she knew not what (as he that newly finds huge treasures doubts whether he sleep or no; or like a fearful deer, which then looks most about, when he comes to the best feed) with a shrugging kind of tremor through all her principal parts, she gave these affectionate words for answer. * * *

1590

9. In this passage Sidney relates the feelings of one of his heroines, Philoclea, when she realizes that Zelmane, the Amazon, is really her lover Pyrocles in disguise.

PHILIP STUBBES: *From The Anatomy of Abuses*¹

* * * For as concerning football playing, I protest unto you it may rather be called a friendly kind of fight, than a play or recreation; a bloody and murdering practice, than a fellowly sport or pastime. For doth not everyone lie in wait for his adversary, seeking to overthrow him and to pick² him on his nose, though it be upon hard stones, in ditch or dale, in valley or hill, or what place soever it be he careth not, so he have him down. And he that can serve the most of this fashion, he is counted the only fellow, and who but he? So that by this means, sometimes their necks are broken, sometimes their backs, sometimes their legs, sometime their arms, sometime one part thrust out of joint, sometime another, sometime their noses gush out with blood, sometime their eyes start out, and sometimes hurt in one place, sometimes in another. But whosoever 'scapeth away the best goeth not scot-free, but is either sore wounded, crazed,³ and bruised, so as he dieth of it, or else 'scapeth very hardly. And no marvel, for they have the sleights to meet one betwixt two, to dash him against the heart with their elbows, to hit him under the short ribs with their gripped fists, and with their knees to catch him upon the hip, and to pick him on his neck, with an hundred such murdering devices. And hereof groweth envy, malice, rancor, choler, hatred, displeasure, enmity, and what not else: and sometimes fighting, brawling, contention, quarrel-picking, murder, homicide, and great effusion of blood, as experience daily teacheth. * * *

1583

WILLIAM BULLEIN: *From A Dialogue Against the Pestilence*⁴
[*Travelers' Tales*]

CIVIS. I pray you, gentle master, I cannot tell what to call you, nor of what country you are.

MENDAX. Sir, I was born near unto Tunbridge, where fine knives are made; my name is Mendax, a younger brother lineally descended of an ancient house before the conquest. We give three whetstones in gules, with no difference,⁵ and upon our crest a left hand, with a horn upon the thumb, and a knife in the hand. The supporters are a fox on the one side, and a friar on the other side. And of late I traveled into Terra Florida, whereas⁶ I felt both wealth and

1. Philip Stubbes (ca. 1555–ca. 1611) was a writer of edifying books of small literary merit but of considerable popularity. His famous *Anatomy of Abuses* is a Puritanical attack upon all of the popular amusements of the time. Stubbes is a good example of the Puritan preachers and propagandists, who often developed a vigorous, plain prose for purposes of controversy.

2. Throw.

3. Crushed.

4. William Bullein was a physician and writer on medical subjects for ordinary middle-class readers. He died in 1576. The title of one of his books will give a good idea of his purpose and method: *A new book entitled The Government of Health, wherein is uttered many notable rules for man's preservation, with sundry simples and other matters, no less fruitful than profitable, collect out of many approved authors. Reduced into the form of a dialogue for the*

better understanding of the unlearned. In his attempt to simulate actual speech in his dialogue and to appeal to unlearned readers, Bullein used short sentences, proverbs and familiar expressions, and a simple vocabulary. He was not without literary skill, however, as his satire on the lying traveler shows. Here, "Civis" (Latin, a citizen) learns about the wonders of travel from "Mendax" (Latin, a liar).

5. We bear on our coat of arms three whetstones (symbolic of lying; an old custom was to hang a whetstone around the neck of a liar); "gules": red; "difference": an addition or alteration in a coat of arms. The "horn upon the thumb" and "knife" are the tools of a pickpocket (the horn was to protect the pickpocket's thumb while cutting a purse). The "fox" and the "friar" represent cunning and deceit.

6. Where.

woe; the black ox never trod upon my foot before; a dog hath but a day. We are born all to travail, and as for me I have but little to lose. Yet I am a gentleman, and cannot find it in my heart to play the slave, or go to cart; I never could abide it, by the mass.

CIVIS. You speak like a wise man. I perceive by your behavior that you have been well brought up. I pray you, where is that land?

MENDAX. Many hundred miles beyond *Torrída Zona*, or the equinoctial line, in the longitude near unto the pole antarctic; it is seventeen thousand miles long, and is in the part named *America*; and by the way are the islands called *Fortunata* or *Canaria*, whose west parts be situated in the third climate.

CIVIS. It was a dangerous travel into that country. Where landed you? At what place?

MENDAX. We sailed to the islands of *Portum Sanctum*, and then to *Madeira*, in which were sundry countries and islands, as *Eractelenty*, *Magnefortis*, *Grancanary*, *Teneriffé*, *Palme Ferro*, etc. And our captain went with his soldiers to land. And at our first coming near unto a river in one of these islands, as we refreshed ourselves among the date trees, in the land of the palms, by the sweet wells, we did, to the great fear of us all, see a great battle between the dragon and the unicorn; and, as God would, the unicorn thrust the dragon to the heart; and, again, the dragon with his tail stung the unicorn to death. Here is a piece of his horn; the blood of dragons is rich; that battle was worth two hundred marks to our captain. Then we traveled further into *Teneriffé*, into an exceeding high mountain, above the middle region, whereas we had great plenty of alum, and might well hear an heavenly harmony among the stars. The moon was near hand⁷ us with marvelous heat; and when we came down, at the hill-foot grew many gross herbs, as *lovage*, *laserpitium*, *acanthus*, and *solanum*: and whether it was by the eating of *solanum* or no, there was a very mighty man naked and hairy, in a great sleep, whom we gently suffered to lie still. He had a great beard in which a bird did breed and brought her young ones meat. Our captain declared unto us that the spials⁸ had viewed the land, and how that our enemies were at hand. The next day most fearful people painted with sundry colors approached in strange beasts' skins, with flint so were their shafts and darts, with whom we fought and slew and took some, and yet the people so assaulted us that with much difficulty we recovered our barks. And then we sailed forth, and chanced to let fall our sounding-lead new-tallowed, whereupon did stick gold. With all speed we sent down our divers, and so within three days we gathered thirty hogsheads of fine gold, besides two butts of orient pearls; all the shore was full of coral. From thence we sailed to the great isle called *Madagastat*, in *Scorea*, where were kings, *Mahometans* by religion, black as devils. Some had no heads, but eyes in their breasts.⁹ Some, when it rained, covered all the whole body with one foot. The land did abound in elephants' teeth; the men did eat camels' and lions' flesh. Musk and civet in every place did abound, and the mother of pearl, whereof the people made their platters to put in their meat; they dwell among spice; the ground is moist with oil of precious trees. Plenty of wine out of grapes as big as this loaf; much pepper; they cannot tell what to do with sugar; but that their merchants of *Maabar*, twenty days' journey off, do come and take of their

7. Close by.

8. Spies.

9. Shakespeare's *Othello* told *Desdemona* about

seeing such fabulous men as his travels. See *Othello* 1.3.144-45.

goods frankly for nothing; but some of them do bring iron to make edge tools, for which they have for one pound twelve pound of fine gold. Their pots, pans, and all vessel is clean gold garnished with diamonds. I did see swine feed in them.

CIVIS. Did you see no strange fowls there and fishes?

MENDAX. In the isle called Ruc, in the great Can's land, I did see mermaids and satyrs with other fishes by night come four miles from the sea, and climbed into trees, and did eat dates and nutmegs, with whom the apes and baboons had much fighting, yelling, and crying. The people of that land do live by eating the flesh of women. In this land did I see an ape play at tick-tack¹ and after at Irish on the tables with one of that land; and also a parrot give one of their gentlewomen a checkmate at chess.

CIVIS. God keep me from those cruel people.

MENDAX. But, sir, as for birds, they are not only infinite in numbers, but also in kinds; some voices most sweet and some most fearful; nightingales as big as geese, owls greater than some horse; and there are birds that do lie in a rock where dragons are, whose feathers on their wings are thirty foot long, the quill as big as a cannon royal. Also I heard parrots dispute in philosophy, fresh in Greek.

CIVIS. I pray you is there any plenty of precious stones?

MENDAX. Very many, but hard to come by; but in the island Zanzibar is much plenty of ambergris, that they make clay for their houses withal; there, if we had holden together like friends, we might have gotten a great kingdom. O my heart, it maketh it bleed when I do remember it; every man is but for himself; you may consider what division is; emeralds, rubies, turkies,² diamonds, and sapphires were sold when we came thither first for the weight of iron; a thousand rich turkesses were sold for fourpence, to be short, one with another, after three shillings³ fourpence a peck. Our men gathered up carbuncles and diamonds with rakes under the spice trees.

CIVIS. How chance you brought none home into this realm?

MENDAX. Oh, sir, we filled two ships with fine gold, three ships with ambergris, musk, and unicorns' horns, and two tall barks with precious stones, and sailed by the adamant stones, which will draw iron unto them, and so cast away the greatest riches in Heathenness or Christendom. After that cruel chance, we came upon the mainland of Cuba, in the great and mighty land of America, whereas the people called the Cannibals do dwell in caves, rocks, and woods; thereas women will eat their own children, and one man another, and they are giants most high and fearful. All go naked; they neither know good humanity, human policy, religion, law, nor chastity. One is equal with another; the strongest of body are chief, for there all is ruled by force, and not through reason, after the manner of swine. Children love their fathers no more than pigs do the boars, for they say lust causeth generation. And when their parents are very old, they bring them to an exceeding high mountain whereas is a great tower builded upon a rock, under which tower is the golden mine, in which mine there be two great monstrous dragons keeping the same, which will never suffer the children to come to receive the benefits of that place until such time as they have slain their parents and cast their flesh into the cave

1. An old form of backgammon. "Irish": a similar game.

2. "Turkies" and "turkesses" both mean "tur-

quoises."

3. In fact, wholesale, about three shillings.

and wash the dragons' images, which are within that tower, made of precious wood, with the blood of their said parents. From thence we traveled into an island whereas it never raineth but once a year, and that is in the month of July, whereas Nilus runneth by giving benefit unto the plain country, whereas spice of all kinds doth grow. In that island doth grow hops most plentifully, which they do call Lupilum. A little before our coming was a great wind which had shaken down much fruit and precious spice and many hundred cartloads of good hops, after which fell down plenty of rain, raising a mighty flood; incontinent succeeded a burning heat, for it is under the equinoctial line, or *Torrída Zona*. In fine, through this concoction⁴ of the sun moving this boiling of the water, through the help of much spice, I never drank such hippocras,⁵ wine, nor beer. The Flemings have found out the commodity, and care to transport no more hops hither unto us. And if good luck had been our good lord, we had made ourselves and all the Christian kingdoms forever. * * *

1564

4. Alternation of matter by moist heat.

5. Wine flavored with spices.