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A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bib-sacra\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php)

## ARTICLE III.

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH  
PROSE.

BY PROFESSOR THEODORE W. HUNT, PH. D., LITT. D.

As a matter of history, prose is of later origin than verse, both in English and general literature. This refers, however, to standard prose as compared with standard verse, it being true that the initial and immature forms of prose are nearly, if not quite, as early as those of poetry. This is signally true in English Literature. It may further be stated that there is a principle of development in literature, historical and logical; at times, concealed, and, at times, revealed; a development demanding time for its expression and indicating orderly succession and gradation. It is, in fine, the principle of evolution in literature applied to the special province of prose. It is thus that Earle speaks of the first, second, and third "Culminations" of our vernacular prose, as reached, respectively, in the tenth, fifteenth, and nineteenth centuries. By this it is meant that our English Prose must be studied in its regular, historic unfoldings, and, especially, in those standard periods, or "Culminations," where the literary life of the nation came to its fullest expression. Viewing our prose, therefore, as a growth, and emphasizing the term "historical," as applied to it, we may reach our result the soonest by following, chronologically, the course of the centuries, from the days of Alfred to those of Victoria and Edward the Seventh.

The first period is that of Old English, dating from the first

invasion of Germanic tribes, in 447 A.D., to the Norman Conquest of 1066, an initial and experimental period, more vital than national, in every sense preparative and tentative. Old-English Prose did indeed exist centuries prior to the Conquest, but strictly as an Old-English type, expressed in a text and under grammatical forms practically unknown to the modern English student. Earle and others insist, at one extreme, that English Prose dates from the fifth century. "It will, I fear," he writes, "sound strange if I assert that we possess a longer pedigree of prose literature than any other nation in Europe, and that if we seek to trace it up to its starting point we are not brought to a stand until we have mounted up to the very earliest times, past the threshold of English Christianity out into the heathen times beyond, and are close up to the first struggle of the invasion," close up, he would say, to the entrance of the Jutes in the middle of the fifth century. At the other extreme, Matthew Arnold insists that our prose dates its first actual appearance in the seventeenth century, though he concedes that this later prose is a "re-appearance" of what had existed far back of the days of Chaucer. Each of these critics is in error,—Arnold, in deferring the rise of our modern prose to the time of Cowley and Milton; and Earle, in recording its appearance as standard as far back as what he calls "the obscure though well-evidenced remains" of the fifth and sixth centuries. It is especially in the eighth century, he argues, that the valid beginnings of English Prose are seen,—"a time," he says, "in which we can produce a sustained and continuous narrative in prose" and "displayed with something like literary competency." This is a conclusion that must be accepted conditionally, this prose of these earlier centuries being such only as Old English, to be interpreted through grammar and glossary and by way of independent study, which down to the time of Chau-

cer is a study as much linguistic as literary. The very examples adduced by Earle to prove his position are a sufficient refutation. They are taken from deeds and legal documents, from the annals of "The Chronicles," "the syntax of which," he adds, "is not more rugged than that of Thucydides." Of the prose of the ninth century, the age of Alfred, though "full of strength and dignity," and "capable of the attribution of style," the statement must be accepted with a condition that we are using the word "style" in a strictly relative sense, as we must, also, interpret Harrison's phrase relatively when he calls Alfred "the founder of English Prose." Even in the tenth century, which Earle calls "the First Culmination," the extracts are taken from land charters and from the Bible Versions of the time; in the eleventh, from the Homilies of Wulfstan and the Chronicle of Worcester; in the twelfth, from the Peterborough Chronicle, and in the thirteenth, from a monastic production entitled "The Wooing of Our Lord." From these selected specimens, the Bible Versions apart, it will be seen, that, though they bring us down to the fourteenth century and the birth of Chaucer, they are strictly Old-English Prose Specimens, and should be classified as such.

It is not, indeed, till the close of the fifteenth century and the opening of the sixteenth, that we come to the era of Modern English Prose, after the introduction of printing into England, in 1477, and the consequent revival of literature and learning. The prose of Chaucer, Mandeville, and Wiclif appears in this transitional, Middle-English Era, but it is not till we come to the prose of Malory and Fortescue and the Paston Letters, and to that of Caxton, Latimer, and Ascham and to the Bible of Tyndale, in the days of Henry the Eighth, that we clearly discern the dawning of a modern era, the Golden Age of Hooker and Bacon, of Raleigh and Sydney, the age of Eliza-

beth and James. What Earle has called "the Second Culmination" of our prose, at the close of the fifteenth century, is, indeed, its real beginning, when it may be said first to have come to itself and apprehended its literary mission, and first became a true exponent of the people as distinct from scholars and the privileged orders of the kingdom.

Hence it is that Saintsbury, in his "Specimens of English Prose Style," begins aright with the name of Malory, whose transfer of the Arthurian Legends from poetry into prose, in 1485, did much to establish English prose as national. "We begin these specimens," says the editor, "with the invention of printing; not of course denying the title of books written before Caxton set up his press to the title of English or of English prose. In the earlier examples, however, the character of the passages . . . is scarcely characteristic. . . . The work of Malory, charming as it is, . . . is an adaptation of French originals," and he concludes by saying, "It was not till the reign of Elizabeth was some way advanced that a definite effort on the part of writers to make our English prose style can be perceived." All this is true, and yet we are not to forget the fact, that the leading English critics are at one in the opinion, that, from the standpoint of strict historical sequence, what we call Development, this extended pre-Elizabethan period must be taken into account and given its fullest emphasis. Too much stress cannot be laid upon the fact, that Elizabethan Prose, though the first modern form, is inseparably connected with the prose of Alfred and Wiclif, so that, apart from such connection, the later form could not have been what it was. The indebtedness is direct and indirect, general and special, the most valuable inheritance from the older forms being in that inner spirit of vigor and independence that is so leading a characteristic of everything Teutonic. It

is, indeed, this special point which such authors as Green and Freeman are always pressing, but modern students fail to note this historic connection, which becomes more and more marked as we approach the Golden Age.

By English Prose Proper, therefore, we mean, Modern English Prose, beginning in pronounced form in the sixteenth century, induced, as it was, by the Revival of Learning and the opening of the Modern Era. The Essays of Bacon, as Hallam states it, "leads the van of our prose literature." For the first time, in the history of English Literature, prose may be said to have become a serious rival of verse, claiming the suffrages of the people as well as those of the universities, inasmuch that poetry needed such apologists as Sidney and Webbe to vindicate its claims and assure its continued status. In the time of Chaucer, it was so manifestly in abeyance, that his own poems seemed to compass the literary field; while it is due to Shakespeare and his fellow-dramatists that, in the Golden Age, poetry secured and maintained a commanding place, the concomitant growth of sound and vigorous prose marking the era as a comprehensive one, and giving large promise of what the ages following might reasonably expect.

#### SIXTEENTH-CENTURY PROSE—ELIZABETHAN.

Noting the limits of the Elizabethan Age as extending from the middle of the sixteenth century to the close of the reign of Charles the First (1550-1649), we have such prominent names as Bacon, Hooker, Raleigh, Sidney, Jonson, Moore, and others, representing what has been called, "The Early and the Later Elizabethan Prose." These writers, it is to be carefully noticed, simply opened the prose record, so that, with all their merits, as compared with the authors who preceded them, they also had those necessary imperfections that belong to an initial era. Careful students of these earlier efforts are more

and more inclined to examine them in a spirit of literary charity, and, yet, in the interests of truth, they must rate them at their real worth. An examination of these limitations will be of service as proof in point of the Historical Development of English Prose. "The history of our earlier Elizabethan prose," writes Saintsbury, "if we except the name of Hooker, is, to a great extent, the history of tentative and imperfect efforts, scarcely resulting in any real, vernacular style." He gives the explanation, when he calls it "the Period of Origins." The critic might with equal truthfulness have included Hooker, also, and the Later Elizabethan Prose, Bacon and Jonson excepted; while these authors themselves often put the impartial student at his wits' end to justify their rank as standard. They are standard only as related to the age of beginnings in which they lived, and not in the light of those fundamental laws of prose expression by which books and writers must finally be judged. This is especially true of Hooker, author of "The Ecclesiastical Polity." What English reader has been so brave as to read beyond the first or second book of the five, or possibly eight, books that make up the total of this controversial treatise? and this not by reason of its polemic and partisan character, but mainly by reason of its literary defects as a specimen of Modern-English prose. In structure and diction it lies midway between English as inflected and uninflected, breaking away from the old grammatical forms of the fifteenth century and aiming to assume independent function. It is, out and out, an Anglo-Latinic treatise, so that the modern reader is obliged to note the presence, on every page, of words and constructions altogether unallowable in the standard English of to-day. It is true, as Dean Church states it, that his writings "mark an epoch in the use of the English language," but this is only to say that he entered with enthusiasm

into the new Elizabethan movement, and not that he escaped its errors. The same remark is true, though not so fully, of Bacon, who, in order to give a European status to his philosophical writings, and make his books, as he states it, "citizens of the world, which English books are not," circulated them in Latin, the universal language. In fact, the prose of the time was corrupted and, to that extent, un-English, a deliberate compromise, based on supposed necessity, between the scholastic language of the Middle Ages and the ever-increasing demands of the rising English. If to this we add the fact that Euphuism, the current literary vice of the time, more or less affected the prose, we see at once that we are dealing with an order of prose which, though beginning in the Golden Age, was, still, only a beginning, and must be so studied. In the days of Elizabeth, we look in vain for a model of English Prose, Ben Jonson, in his "Discoveries," making the nearest approximation thereto. Still, the historical development was fully under way. No such prose as that of Bacon, Hooker, and Jonson had, as yet, appeared, or could have appeared. That there were gross faults of vocabulary, syntax, and style may be charged to the time and conditions under which these authors lived, far more than to the authors themselves, who, even when writing in Latin or in Latinic phrase, were intensely English in spirit and in aim, and did what they could to establish the prose on an enduring basis.

#### SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY PROSE (1650-1700).

Between the latter part of the reign of Charles the Second, and the opening of the reign of Queen Anne in 1702, we have the latter half of the seventeenth century, and the more important, lying, as it does, midway between the Elizabethan and the Augustan era. Short as the period is, it marks a very suggestive stage in English Prose Development, in that it includes two



widely different, and yet essential, expressions of that development, represented, respectively, in the person of Milton and of Dryden, whose death in 1700 marks the chronological as well as the literary close of the epoch. The first expression of this development is seen in the short period of the Commonwealth (1649-60), in the rise and dominance of Puritan Prose, as chiefly embodied in the vigorous pages of Milton, and also manifested, in more or less impressive form, in Jeremy Taylor, the divine; in Thomas Hobbes, the philosopher; in Sir Thomas Browne, the antiquarian; and in Isaac Walton, the cheerful and contemplative author of "The Angler." Puritan Prose, as the Puritan character, has received its due share of censure at the hands of English and foreign critics, and is coming, more and more, to its due share of praise, the frequent expressions of each of these phases of criticism making it incumbent on every student of English to examine the record for himself and reach his own conclusions. This much, however, must be conceded, and this is all that is necessary for our present purpose.—that the prose of Milton and his contemporaries marks an important stage in English Prose Development, and reveals a new phase of the English mind as expressed in literature. There is an order of prose which, for need of a better term, we call "Forensic," a kind of Political Prose, by which great civic questions are discussed with civic vigor, and authors assume a more pronounced and fearless attitude than at other times and with other aims in view. It was thus with Milton and Hobbes, and even with Browne and Bunyan, in their trenchant, virile way of stating truth. The incisive diction of "The Holy War" is Puritan Prose at its best, and in forensic form, only within the sphere of the distinctively religious. The author of "The Angler" was the only one of these writers who wrote in a more subdued manner.

The second of these expressions is found in the prose of the Restoration and the English Revolution, as these great historic movements stand related, politically and logically, in which literary movement John Dryden stands out as the most conspicuous figure. Such other names as Tillotson, South, and Barrow, in divinity; Cudworth and Locke, in philosophy; Burnet, in ecclesiastical history; Sidney, in political history; Collier, in dramatic criticism; and Temple, in miscellany, added lustre to the era. The fact that Bunyan wrote his spiritual treatises amid the excesses of the Restoration is as anomalous to the student as that Milton penned his epics on God and man in the same unfriendly period. It is at this epoch that Gallic influence came in upon English prose and verse with unwonted force, though not altogether with harmful result. "The Restoration," says Saintsbury, "introduced the study and comparison of a language which, though still alien from English, was far less removed from it than the other Romance tongues." Even to the degree in which French was working injury, such an evil influence was less and less observable as the history developed on toward the time of William of Orange and the Great Rebellion, in that the Rebellion freed English society, the English church and state and literature and speech, from the dominance of the Romanism and the Gallicism of the Stuart dynasty.

Of the epochal and beneficent work of Dryden in this gradational movement of English Prose toward a better type, scarcely too much can be said. It was under Dryden's influence that prose in general, and prose criticism in special, in the seventeenth century, rose to their maximum. He was the Doctor Johnson of his era, the Bacon and Hooker of his age. "At no time that I can think of," writes a living critic, "was there any Englishman who, for a considerable period, was so

far in advance of his contemporaries in almost every branch of literary work as Dryden was in the last twenty years of the seventeenth century. The eighteen volumes of his works contain a faithful representation of the whole literary movement in England for the best part of half a century, and indicate the direction of almost the whole literary movement for nearly a century more." This strong language, applied to Dryden's entire work in prose and verse, is especially applicable to his prose, his specific impress upon literature being best understood when we reflect what English Prose would have been at the close of the era had not Dryden appeared. We are not now dealing with the special department of English Prose Criticism, but the name of Dryden suggests the fact that his best prose work lay in this direction, and that his merit therein is so pronounced that the appellation given him, at times, "The Father of Modern English Criticism," is not undeserved. In his "Critical Prefaces," we have the first extant specimens of genuine literary criticism in the sphere of prose, while his celebrated "Essay on Dramatic Poesy" evinced the fact that he was fully qualified to apply these principles to verse and within the special province of the drama.

#### EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PROSE.

The death of Dryden, in 1700, and the opening of the eighteenth century mark another era in the historic-literary sequence we are studying. Now, for the first time, it may be said with critical exactness that we have come to a period of fully perfected English Prose, when it assumed a form and quality from which there has been no material deviation, and which justly entitles it to the name of standard prose. It has been justly called in this respect "the schoolmaster of all periods to follow," settling, once for all, what our prose was, and indicating as well to what it might attain in the centuries fol-

lowing. This is not to say that, in the prose of the Augustan and early Georgian age, there were not serious defects and infringements of literary law, but that these had now been reduced to a minimum; that the vernacular English was more and more fully asserting itself, and that, when the century closed, in the reign of George III., English Prose could be favorably compared with that of any Continental Tongue.

Some of the *special phases* of this period may be noted. First of all, it is evident, that Augustan and Early Georgian Literature is especially a prose type, differing, in this respect, from that of the Age of Elizabeth, and more in keeping with that of the antecedent reign of the Stuarts, thus preparing the way, moreover, for that copious expression of prose marking the subsequent era.

A further feature is seen in the ever-increasing emphasis of the Vernacular over all competing influences, classical and continental. In so far as this classical influence was concerned, it was as fully embodied in the prose of Johnson, in the so-called Johnsonese of the time, as in any other one writer. Yet, no careful observer of the trend of modern literary judgment can fail to note that the Latinic element in Johnsonian English is not as pronounced as has been asserted, and that, even when present, is not so injurious in its effect as prejudiced opinion has made it to be; less so, indeed, than in the pages of Bacon and Hooker. No less an authority than Johnson's latest biographer, Hill, has come to his defense at this very issue. Conceding, to some extent, his alleged "pomp of diction," he justifies it, in part, on the ground, that with the author of "The Rambler" at the time, and with his special ends in view, he could conscientiously have adopted no other type, in that he came before the age and the world as "a majestic teacher of moral and religious wisdom." "To a writer who is full of the greatness of

such a vocation," says Hill, "as Johnson undoubtedly was, a certain stateliness of language is natural, and, if well conducted, tends to win the confidence and interest of the reader."

The Continental Influence was Gallic, as embodied chiefly in the writings of Gibbon, the historian, who had as much occasion for his Gallicisms as Johnson for his Latinisms, in that he was an accomplished French scholar; published his first book in French, and lived for years under a French environment, at Lausanne. Despite all this, however, it is of Gibbon that Saintsbury writes, "We shall never have a greater historian in style as well as in matter." Be this as it may, suffice it to state, that, in the face of all Latinic and Gallic influence, English Prose gradually worked its way along from point to point away from classical and continental traditions, away from Euphuism and other false ideals, toward a form and function fundamentally English and modern.

An additional feature of this prose is seen in the fact that it marked the substantial beginning of no less than three representative types of prose,—a feature enough in itself to prove the fact of historical evolution, and enough, as well, to establish the literary repute of the age.

It is in this era that Journalistic English may be said to have taken historic form in the writings of Defoe. It is of the journalists L'Estrange and Defoe that a modern critic is speaking, as he calls them "the flag bearers" of the new movement toward a more popular every-day English, as expressed in the pamphlets and brief periodicals of the day. Though to L'Estrange, as the earlier writer, belongs the praise of being "the first representative name in the annals of journalism," the work and influence of Defoe was so much more vital and effective, that the real beginning of journalistic English may be said to be found in him. Journalistic Prose had

its errors then, as it has them now—errors of diction, structure, and general style, often due to superficial thinking, inordinate haste of preparation, and the imperative demands of the waiting press,—but the faults were less prominent than the benefits; so that it must be conceded that Modern Popular English owes an invaluable debt to the author of *Robinson Crusoe*. In fact, the great development of the time in the English Essay under Addison and Steele was but another name for Journalistic English, the famous *Letters of Junius* by Sir Philip Francis being still another expression of the tendency of the time to break away from all forms of classicism, and express its thought in the homely language of the common folk. The “*Tatler*” and “*Idler*,” and even the political pamphlets of the era, such as “*The Guardian*,” and “*Freeholder*,” were newspaper English in the form of descriptive miscellany, the real beginnings in English Prose of the modern periodical and editorial. The current phrase “*A Spectator paper*” is itself a confirmation of this union of literature proper and journalism. A hasty comparison of one of these weeklies or dailies with an essay of Bacon carefully elaborated will confirm the popular character of the former. Essays had existed before Queen Anne. The journalistic Essay had no antecedent history. It was a product of the period. So as to the English Novel in its historic relation to other forms of English Prose, dating its real beginning in the days of Defoe and Fielding, even though, as in the case of the Essay, a kind of fiction existed as far back as the days of Sidney and Malory. For the first time, however, the English Novel gained and held historic place as a permanent form of English Prose which Sterne, Walpole, and Goldsmith developed in ever multiplied forms.

These were the Prose Forms whose beginnings date from the period in question, while all other prose forms already es-

established were enriched and strengthened by the writers of the time,—Theology, by Butler and Warburton; Philosophy, by Hartley, Reid, and Berkeley; Political Science, by Smith and Bentham; and Literary Criticism, by Burke and Alison. In fine, English Prose, if we may so express it, was on its feet and of full age, having passed its novitiate into its majority, brooking no rival and ever aspiring toward better things. It is not strange, therefore, that when we cross the threshold and pass over into the following century, at the close of the Georgian Era, we pass from prose to prose and to ever higher expressions of it as the opening years of the twentieth century are at hand.

#### NINETEENTH-CENTURY PROSE.

Of Nineteenth-Century English Prose, it is sufficient to say, that it records the high-water mark of our prose development; fairly contests the ground for supremacy with the development of English Poetry, and reveals an order and a measure of excellence of which every English-speaking student may be justly proud.

Here and there, as the new century advances, it may change its phases to suit the prevailing temper of the time, and in order to be strictly representative, progressive enough to break away in part from all antecedent conditions, and, yet, conservative enough to be true to all those fundamental principles of prose expression which belong to every age and every standard author.

What a list of Worthies it is as we cite it! In Historic prose, Grote, Hallam, Mill, Buckle, Alison, Green, and Froude; in Fiction, Thackeray, Reade, Bulwer, Dickens, Disraeli, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot; in Philosophic Prose, Whately, Chillingworth, Bently and Cudworth; in Forensic Prose, Burke and Pitt and O'Conner; and in miscellany, Sidney Smith.

Landor, Thomas Arnold and Matthew Arnold, Christopher North and the Edinburgh Reviewers, until we wonder where we can find the dividing line between the first and the second orders—what there is in English heredity and environment to beget so splendid a breed of authors in prose, for a parallel of which we look in vain in any modern European Literature.

Such is the principle of development applied to Prose Literature. Hence, a vital question emerges, Whether Contemporary English Prose is maintaining its historic place; in answer to which we may say, that the expansion is still visible. In History, we have Freeman and McCarthy and Lecky; in Fiction, Macdonald and James and Mrs. Ward; in Miscellany, Mahaffy and Minto and Morley and Dowden and Saintsbury and an ever-widening list. Especially in historical and literary criticism, there is a generation of authors rising to mastery, as yet in the prime of their middle manhood, and producing an order of prose favorably comparing with the best products of the past. Despite all imperfections, English Prose has never been in safer hands than it is at present, nor is there anything like it on the Continent of Europe. Clearer than the German, and more vigorous than the French, and far more copious than either, it is clearly within the limits of truth to say, that no more fitting medium has as yet been found for the expression of thought and taste.