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Selected with an Introduction
and Notes by

A. C. WARD



THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE BOOK SOCIETY

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INTRODUCTION

EVERYONE WRITES prose; only a gifted few write poetry; therefore prose is easier to write than poetry. That is a fallacy to which most people would mistakenly assent. Let us look at the facts.

When the Royal Society for Improving Natural Knowledge was founded in 1660, 'natural knowledge' meant the unified body of learning which has since branched into the two groups of studies now separately named Philosophy and Science. Science was then called Natural Philosophy.

The Royal Society long ago became the world's most famous fellowship of scientists, and election to its ranks, with the right to add F.R.S. to his name (or her name, for women can now be elected), is a rare distinction and the highest a scientist can achieve, apart perhaps from the Nobel Prize. Only scientists and mathematicians are now admitted as Fellows of the Royal Society, but at first it included authors, and all were desired to have a careful regard for the English language by developing 'a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions, clear senses, a native easiness'.

Among the earliest to be enrolled in the Royal Society was John Dryden, poet, playwright, and essayist, who has been called the Father of English Prose. He had command of an English prose style which observes the principles laid down by the Society, and though it is not to be supposed that he would have written less well if the Society had never come into being, his prose is 'close' (economical, i.e. it wastes no words), 'naked' (free from deliberate ornamentation), positive, clear, and easy. These are qualities we might expect all prose writers

to have; but in fact, while sixteenth and seventeenth century poets had a fine and confident command of language, much prose of those times was either tangled and hard to unravel, or so elaborate that it attracts more by artificial splendour than by ease of understanding. In the middle of the sixteenth century (1553) a statesman named Thomas Wilson wrote a book called *The Art of Rhetoric* in which he urged other writers to avoid stiff pedantic language and foreign phrases. This is an example of his own prose style (the spelling is modernized here):

Some seek so far for outlandish English, that they forget altogether their mother's language. And I dare swear this, if some of their mothers were alive, they were not able to tell what they say: and yet these fine English clerks will say, they speak in their mother tongue, if a man should charge them for counterfeiting the King's English. Some far journeyed gentlemen at their return home, like as they love to go in foreign apparel, so they will powder their talk with oversea language. He that cometh lately out of France, will talk French English and never blush at the matter. Another chops in with English Italianated, and applieth the Italian phrase to our English speaking, the which is, as if an Orator that professeth to utter his mind in plain Latin, would needs speak Poetry, and far fetched colours of strange antiquity.

This passage is by no means as 'outlandish' as some of the prose this writer's contemporaries were accustomed to use, but it can scarcely be claimed that Wilson's own prose is close, naked, or natural, or that it is notable for 'positive expressions, clear senses, a native easiness'.

If we turn onward rather more than a century, and look at the writings of Thomas Traherne, a shoemaker's son who became a clergyman, we find such prose as this:

The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold: the

gates were at first the end of the world. The green trees when I saw them first through one of the gates transported and ravished me, their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things.

This is very beautiful, and English literature would be the poorer if Traherne's prose had been lost to us, as it nearly was,¹ but it certainly is not close, naked, or natural.

Traherne's contemporary, John Bunyan, was also a contemporary of John Dryden. Both Dryden and Bunyan were writing in the Restoration period, and it may sometimes surprise us to remember that the Puritan Bunyan wrote nearly all his great works in the reign of Charles II. The most famous, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, came out in 1678. It is unlikely that Bunyan knew anything about the Royal Society's views on prose style, expressed eighteen years before, but the Society could have found little fault with most of Bunyan's prose—such as:

My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me, that I have fought His battles who will now be my rewarder.

Yet that is still, like Traherne's, *religious* prose, concerned with heavenly matters. What the Royal Society was concerned about was, much more, prose dealing with human knowledge and capable of rendering in plain terms the particular branch—scientific knowledge—which was then developing fast. In this connection it has to be remembered that the seventeenth century in England was a great age of scientific progress; through

¹ His best poetry and prose was not published until 1903 and 1908, the manuscripts having then been found by a London bookseller.

the work of Sir Isaac Newton and others an age as important and remarkable then as the present is to us. What was needed then, as now, was the development of a prose style capable of conveying—positively, clearly, and easily—knowledge of the new scientific discoveries and ideas.

Though Dryden was not a scientist, prose like his *was* capable of being used for all manner of practical purposes. The title of his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* does not suggest that it would also be an essay in the use of plain English. It begins with a description of a trip on the river Thames from London towards Greenwich while the guns of the Dutch fleet were making thunder in the air. On their journey the four friends in the boat discussed not the war with the Dutch and the peril close at hand, but the comparative merits of English and French poetic drama—a fine example of that imperturbability in time of crisis which has brought England through greater perils. The real names of the friends who were with Dryden that day are known, but he disguised them under classical pseudonyms. When their discussion had run its course and they came back up the river in the evening, one of the company was still arguing and oblivious of his surroundings:

Neander was pursuing this discourse so eagerly that Eugenius had called to him twice or thrice, ere he took notice that the barge stood still, and that they were at the foot of Somerset Stairs, where they had appointed it to land. The company were all sorry to separate so soon, though a great part of the evening was already spent; and stood awhile looking back on the water, upon which the moonbeams played, and made it appear like floating quicksilver: at last they went up through a crowd of French people, who were merrily dancing in the open air, and nothing concerned for the noise of the guns which had alarmed the town that afternoon.

We cannot pause here to do more than remark on the straightforwardness of Dryden's style, which is precise in regard both to time and place. But it is also worth noting that the only image he uses is a scientific one: the moonlight on the river made the water look like floating quicksilver. This image could only be a recollection of a personally observed fact, and the purpose of scientific prose is to record, for the information of others, facts which have been observed by the writer.

It is one of the unavoidable shortcomings of this anthology—a shortcoming regretted by the editor—that it contains little that can be called scientific prose. That such prose is not available is all the more regrettable because the majority of people nowadays feel themselves to belong to a different order of humanity from the scientists who govern so much of life—govern it and at the same time threaten it. A long-standing complaint is that scientists, however great, are rarely able to communicate understandably with ordinary people, people who would very much like to know what the scientists are up to with their new sources of energy, and what is man's future in competition with computers. It would no doubt reduce the membership of the Royal Society to a sparse company if no one were admitted as a Fellow until he had written a book or pamphlet in language easily comprehended by non-scientific readers whose intelligence is not below G.C.E. level. That this is a reasonable requirement is shown by the writings in the recent past of such eminent scientists and thinkers as **Sir James Jeans** and **Sir Arthur Eddington**, both of whom wrote popular, understandable books without objectionable vulgarization of their subjects. Jeans and Eddington died in the 1940s and their books were published before

that decade began, so nothing by them qualified for inclusion here.

In defence of present-day scientists it can be said that their work is increasingly a matter of mathematical formulæ and symbols capable of being expressed on paper only algebraically and diagrammatically and beyond the scope of intelligible prose. However inevitable this may be—if it is inevitable—it is extremely and unhappily limiting for the populace at large whose lives are in the hands of men with whom they have no channel of communication.

This is for us, however, a negative approach to the matter of the present book. What we are to consider is not what cannot be conveyed in English prose, but the manner in which what can be conveyed has been conveyed.

This anthology ends at 1960, just three hundred years after the Royal Society's beginnings. To attempt to follow even in bare outline the progress of English prose through those three centuries would make far too long a story here. We can only note in passing that the ease and clarity of Dryden's prose was succeeded in the eighteenth century by a good deal of formality and not a little pomposity, and in the nineteenth century by a congested variety. There is nothing in common in the prose of Dickens, Ruskin, Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, Robert Louis Stevenson and Thomas Hardy, to name only a very few of the many eminent writers of the past century.

Towards the end of that century much attention was given to the Art of Writing. *What* was written tended in some minds to be overshadowed by *how* it was written. Essays on Style were composed by Stevenson, Walter Pater, and Sir Walter A. Raleigh (an Oxford Professor) in

the last twenty years of the nineteenth century; and if we agree that the true purpose of prose is to convey meaning as directly as possible, we must also agree that devotion to Style and the Art of Writing is apt to be a handicap and a barrier if it interposes some element between the writer and the reader, interrupting or slowing down communication. What is produced by Style or Art in prose may be superficially beautiful in sound and sensation, but it cannot be considered good prose unless it is meaningful, conveying its idea or information intelligibly and in an attention-compelling manner.

Every writer has a style of some sort, good or bad; it is the stamp of the writer's mind and personality. Sloppy minded people will write sloppy prose; precise clear-minded people will write clear and precise prose, expressing exactly what they mean with simplicity and brevity. Stevenson and Pater and Raleigh thought of Style with a capital S. The product was often pleasing in sound and in its summoning up of verbal pictures, but it was too consciously dressed-up. In 'An Apology for Idlers', an essay in the volume called *Virginibus Puerisque* (1881), Robert Louis Stevenson has this account of the idler:

His way takes him along a by-road not much frequented, but very even and pleasant, which is called Commonplace Lane, and leads to the Belvedere of Common-sense. Thence he shall command an agreeable, if no very noble prospect; and while others behold the East and West, the Devil and the Sunrise, he will be contentedly aware of a sort of morning hour upon all sublunary things, with an army of shadows, running speedily and in many different directions into the great daylight of Eternity. The shadows and the generations, the shrill doctors and the plangent wars, go by into ultimate silence and emptiness; but underneath all this, a man may see, out of the Belvedere windows, much green and peaceful landscape; many fire-lit parlours; good people laughing, drinking, and making love

as they did before the Flood or the French Revolution; and the old shepherd telling his tale under the hawthorn.

This is fine-sounding 'literary' prose. It is pleasant, if one is a poetry-lover, to catch in the final phrase an echo of Milton's lines in *L'Allegro*:

And every shepherd tells his tale
Under the hawthorn in the dale;

but it would be a hard task to extract and express the plain meaning of Stevenson's prose in this passage. It is a kind of verbal music, and as an exercise in the Art of Writing it permits Art to override Sense, as even Stevenson himself would not have allowed it to be overridden in, say, *Treasure Island*, where he is telling a story, not playing with words. The more he tried to be an artist in words the less he made words in prose do their primary job of saying something plainly.

One of the topics discussed by Sir Walter Raleigh in his short book on *Style* (1897) is the use of slang, which he divides into Good Slang and Bad Slang. The words invented to express or describe technical and scientific ideas and apparatus for which no language terms existed before, he puts into the category of Good Slang (a more recent word for it would be *jargon*). Raleigh continues:

But there is another kind that goes under the name of slang, the offspring rather of mental sloth, and current chiefly among those idle, jocular classes to whom all art is a bugbear and a puzzle. There is a public for every one; the pottle-headed lout who in a moment of exuberance strikes on a new sordid metaphor for any incident in the beaten round of drunkenness, lubricity, and debt, can set his fancy rolling through the music-halls, and thence into the street, secure of applause and a numerous sodden discipleship.

Here we have a writer who, we feel as we read, gradually lets words take command of him instead of keeping them under his own command; the words go to his head and lead him into a fit of verbal drunkenness.

Let us not overlook, however, that such prose as has been quoted here from Stevenson and Raleigh, and a great deal that might be quoted from Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, was much admired in their time and can still be admired when we are in an appropriate mood and more susceptible to sound than to sense.

Meanwhile two World Wars have changed the current of thought and taste and habit for millions of men and women and accustomed them to a rough informality inconsistent with a prose style which formerly paid much attention to a fine literary *art* of writing. Whereas fifty to a hundred years ago dressed-up prose was much admired, today there is a strong tendency to admire under-dressed prose: the crude has displaced the precious. Each age has its fashion in prose as well as in verse. It is one of the misfortunes of the present age that so much of the prose read by millions is fabricated by journalists with an impoverished vocabulary, and by advertisers whose main concern is to turn the public into fashion-fodder for the enrichment of those who tell us what we should eat, what we should wear, what we should read, and even what we should think.

Good prose, like good wine, matures slowly. Though there have been more good young poets than good old ones, it is otherwise with prose. Young men feel more; older men think more. Prose is the literary medium for thought and meditation, poetry of emotion and sensation (but not of sensation in the newspaper-placard sense). There is, of course, much intellectualized philosophical poetry, some of it among the greatest; yet it is not what

most readers expect poetry to be and it is usually hard to take, particularly by younger readers. In the long run we can hardly help but agree with the proposition that prose is a thinking form, poetry a feeling form. But thinking does not exclude fun, and fun is present in a fair proportion of the passages in this book, which offers a representative view of what people were thinking and doing and at what they were working and playing from 1940 to 1960.

In the following pages there is much about young people and their doings, about animals, about the theatre, about history, about distant places and near places. When we examine the prose style (or styles) of the various writers, we find dignified and stately writing in the passages by Winston Churchill, G. M. Trevelyan, Bertrand Russell, Bernard Shaw, T. S. Eliot, and others, and prose with a lighter touch in as many more. What will not be found is prose designed purely as fine writing, nor prose which brutalizes life and degrades ourselves. All the writers are concerned first with having something to say that is worth reading, and among the nearly forty authors represented there is none that would be rejected by critics brought up on original Royal Society standards and requiring 'a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions, clear senses, a native easiness'.

A. C. WARD