

ENGLISH LANGUAGE SERIES

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The Movement of English Prose

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IAN A. GORDON

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Professor of English : University of Wellington



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## Foreword

To the writing of *The Movement of English Prose*, Professor Gordon brings the rich experience of thirty years as Professor and Head of an important University English Department, and ten earlier years as a student and teacher in the University of Edinburgh. During this period he has been teaching the history of English language and literature, studying and writing upon the problems of doing so, and publishing the results of notable pieces of research into the work of writers as different as John Skelton and Katherine Mansfield. These brief notes on Professor Gordon's career constitute an explanation of his readiness to tackle so formidable and so rarely attempted a task as an analysis of modern prose from the standpoint of its long and complex history and in relation to the constant features in the fabric of our language from Anglo-Saxon times.

During this same period of forty years, there have been important developments in literary and linguistic scholarship which have deeply affected our assumptions and conditioned our thinking. They include on the one hand the thesis of the late Professor R. W. Chambers which insisted on the continuity of English prose, and on the other hand the emergence of modern linguistics with its special insistence on the analysis of spoken language and with the insights that have resulted from this. Such aspects of modern scholarship, shot through with a healthy controversy which is still with us, Professor Gordon has brought to bear on his accumulated reading and his intimate acquaintance with prose from the ninth to the twentieth centuries.

After stating in Part I the grounds as he sees them for continuity in our prose, the author proceeds with a chronological account of prose style from Anglo-Saxon times, singling out for enlightening comment and evaluation the chief exponents in each period, with carefully chosen examples which excellently illustrate the continuity theme while clearly drawing attention to the important variations introduced because of changing models, fashion, purpose, and language itself.

For the experienced reader, the book gathers a wealth of diverse information into a convenient survey presented with a unified viewpoint. For the less experienced reader, it would be difficult to imagine a more informative introduction – and for him the value of the book is enhanced

by a concluding section containing exercises related especially to prose of the more familiar kinds written within the modern period.

Professor Gordon's book thus makes an important contribution to the series in which it appears. As English has increasingly come into world-wide use, there has arisen an acute need for more information on the language and the ways in which it is used. The English Language Series seeks to meet this need and to play a part in further stimulating the study and teaching of English by providing up-to-date and scholarly treatments of topics most relevant to present-day English – including its history and traditions, its sound patterns, its grammar, its lexicology, its rich and functionally orientated variety in speech and writing, and its standards in Britain, the USA, and the other principal areas where the language is used.

University College London  
December 1965

RANDOLPH QUIRK

## Preface

This study, first planned as an opus, has by degrees dwindled into a book. English prose at the moment is so much in need of a fresh look that the original plan of writing up extensive field-notes, from explorations patiently done on the ground, has given way to what seems a more urgent requirement, a kind of aerial survey of the whole territory. The study of English prose as a medium of expression is beset with complexities, of which sometimes only the specialist is aware. The general reader, the critic, the philologist, and the structural linguist respond to the same page as if to different languages. Not the least of the difficulties is the time it takes even the professional to gain a working knowledge of a large enough range of texts to enable him to venture on an overall judgment. If anything useful is to emerge, one must resist certain short-cuts, notably the question-begging assumption that only important writers write important prose, and secondly the assumption that an area of English prose which for the modern reader is linguistically difficult or critically unfashionable can be safely ignored. Confronted with a library of texts and conflicting interpretations, the student needs a guide which will suggest the main lines of development without implying that all the answers are known.

The limits of this study, therefore, have been set not so much by scope as by scale. This little book is intended to be an introduction, written with coverage and compactness but (I hope) without superficiality, to a study where much remains to be done. My obligations to writers and scholars past and present are so considerable that only a general acknowledgment is appropriate in a work of this nature. I owe special debts to Professor A. McIntosh, Professor L. F. Brosnahan, and the General Editor for critical commentary, and to the Council of the Early English Text Society for permission to quote freely from the Society's publications.

University of Wellington  
December 1965

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*Part one* The Continuity of English Prose



## Chapter 1

### Preliminary Problems

The writer of a historical study of English prose is faced with problems unknown to the writer on English poetry. For the latter the territory has been charted by a series of explorers from Thomas Warton down to the last paperback or the last magistral volume from a university press. The brief history of poetry is confined to the major poets; the multi-volume history gives due space to the minors. Critical fashion, a lengthening historical perspective, or changes in sensibility may alter the status of this poet or that: the reputations of Pope, Donne, Tennyson, and Hopkins have shifted considerably in our own time. But though they may vary on the 'placing' of some poets, critics who adopt a historical approach present a united front, because they all proceed on certain tacit assumptions.

They have no difficulty in recognising what poetry *is*. It is what has been written by Chaucer or Milton or Herbert or Yeats. They do not differ among themselves as to who is or is not a poet. John Clare, Mark Akenside, Edward Benlowes may be of insufficient importance to find a place in a volume of two hundred pages, but the author is well aware that these men were poets. Equally, there is a notable measure of agreement on what a history of poetry should be. It has remained essentially a series of critical studies of English poets in chronological sequence. Critical fashion may differ on the amount of biographical detail that should be included, the amount of political or social history that should be given as background, the extent to which the temper of thought of a period, the intellectual and religious setting of the poet, are worthy of comment and illustration. Today, when even the value of literary history is denied by influential critics, literary histories, exclusively or predominantly a history of poetry, continue to flourish, all bearing a family resemblance to one another because they are based on the same set of tacit agreements.

The critic who attempts a historical study of English prose has no such comforts. Intensive work has been done in many areas – the mapping is almost topographical in its detail – but the whole terrain has never been

charted on a uniform scale. The familiar sweep from *Beowulf* to T. S. Eliot finds no generally accepted parallel in works on the history of prose.

Do we follow the example of the historian of poetry and write a series of critical assessments of prose writers in chronological sequence? If so, who are the major authors? Malory, Milton, Swift, and Johnson? Obviously safe choices. There are others equally acceptable. Who – in a longer study – are the acceptable minors? Who, in prose, correspond to the Clares and the Benlowes and the Akensides? Who indeed?

Where does the history begin? 'The origins of English prose come relatively late in the development of English literary experience',<sup>1</sup> writes G. P. Krapp, who begins his *The Rise of Literary English Prose* in the latter half of the fourteenth century, a starting-point that found general acceptance until quite recently, when R. W. Chambers<sup>2</sup> argued persuasively for the 'continuity of English prose' from Alfred to the Renaissance. Chambers' views had, however, been anticipated in the nineties of last century by W. P. Ker – 'the pedigree of English prose goes back beyond Wycliffe and Chaucer ... it goes back to Alfred'. Ker's essay on earlier English prose,<sup>3</sup> buried in an outmoded anthology, has commanded little attention, and general critical opinion has acceded to Quiller-Couch's vigorous assertion in one of his first lectures at Cambridge<sup>4</sup> 'in words that admit of no misunderstanding' that from Anglo-Saxon prose our living prose has save linguistically no derivation. A recent popular and influential historical anthology, the five-volume *Pelican Book of English Prose*, in spite of Kenneth Muir's disclaimer in the introduction to volume one, 'English prose did not, of course, begin with the Tudors', nevertheless firmly begins at 1550, and so perpetuates a view of English prose that would have received the approval of Quiller-Couch.

By the mere choice of his starting-point, the critic who attempts a historical study of English prose involves himself in controversy at the outset. He has declared his belief (or his disbelief) that English prose before 1400 or even 1500 is part of the picture.

Many readers who accept a mediaeval or an Old English lyric as poetry – worthy of the same kind of consideration as a poem by Keats or Crashaw – almost unconsciously reject English prose written at the same time as the lyric as an affair for the linguistic specialist, a form not merely undeserving of but not even susceptible to the kind of critical attention merited by Swift or Henry James. The spelling, the vocabulary, the syntax, the uncomfortable unfamiliarity of the shapes of some of the letters appear to render it something entirely different from the medium used with such communicability by writers of the past few hundred years. For

the great majority of readers, prose is only tolerable when its physical appearance on the printed page is up to date.

Herein lies a further and perhaps insuperable difficulty for the writer concerned with the movement, through time, of English prose, his only means of communication the printed page. Much English prose is, in essence, a transcription of the spoken word. It is possible to read aloud passages written ten centuries ago, and find that the spoken language of the earlier period still communicates to a present-day listener, who is puzzled if he merely attempts to look at the passage printed in its original spelling. Both reader and listener today can understand immediately the brief sentence in the story of the Prodigal Son in the 1611 Bible – ‘And he arose, and came to his father.’ The Old English version of the same sentence – ‘Ond he aras þa ond com to his faeder’ – looks in print like a foreign tongue. But the Anglo-Saxon sentence has the same words, the same syntax, the same word-order, the same sentence-stress. Read aloud immediately after the 1611 version, it is clearly recognisable. It is indeed the same language, though the values of all but one of the vowels and of at least one of the consonants have changed in the intervening centuries.

It is therefore necessary from time to time in this study to invoke the reader to try to get behind the unfamiliar look of the print and attempt to *hear* the words and sentences. They are usually more up to date than they look. The practice of ignoring the accidentals of older spelling and pronunciation has received universal sanction among editors of Shakespeare, who from Rowe’s time to the present have consistently spelt his text as if Shakespeare were one of their contemporaries. Most present-day readers of Shakespeare are carefully protected against two shocks, Shakespeare’s (and his compositors’) spelling, and the pronunciation of English of the Chamberlain’s Men. Neither would be acceptable today. The reader of older prose must be prepared to make mentally the kind of adjustments that editors of Shakespeare have incorporated into the accepted texts.

To be consistent with the above, it would be logical in this study to modernise spelling in all quotations. But this involves further difficulties. In almost every instance, the reader curious to go to the full text will find that the standard editions of prose authors (unlike the editions of Shakespeare) follow the spelling of the manuscript or the best early printing. Mediaeval authors are, of course, usually printed *literatim* from the manuscript, except for ‘normalised’ excerpts in students’ handbooks. Were I to modernise spelling consistently, my illustrations might make the reader’s transition to more extended reading in the end the more difficult.

There are also, as will appear, certain other advantages in retaining older

spellings. The nettle must be grasped, and generally I have done so boldly, quoting from the 'original' spelling. But on occasion it has served my purpose better to modernise the spelling. Where this has been done, it is indicated clearly by adding the sign '(mod. sp.)'.

Any modernisation that occurs in succeeding pages will be confined to spelling. A text which attempts to go further and modernises words or forms by 'translation' into present-day 'equivalents' introduces inevitable falsification. It would imply that only words not readily recognisable have undergone semantic shifts. The contrary is more often the case. Many of the words not immediately recognisable in an older text are words for ideas or objects which have disappeared with the passage of time. Often the most difficult-looking words are the easiest to gloss. 'Haubergeon', 'Farthingale', 'stomacher', and 'points' have disappeared from the language of today because we no longer wear them as articles of clothing. The *NED* will soon set us right, and the obvious unfamiliarity of the words will drive us to the dictionary. But the case is different when (to remain in the area of clothing) the name of the article is still with us. What are we to make of the heroine of an eighteenth-century novel who appears for dinner in her 'night-gown'? Usually the context will reassure us and suggest – and the *NED* will confirm – that she is dressed for company and not for bed.<sup>5</sup> But with many words only alert reading will rouse suspicions that the meaning is not that of today. Words like 'sad', 'silly', 'shrewd', 'domination', 'gentle', 'smoke', 'wit', 'sentence', all in good present-day usage with precise and specific meanings, have carried very different meanings in past centuries and a careful assessment of date and context is called for, to yield the meaning proper for a particular text.

It is not the function of this book to discuss such semantic shifts, but a by-product of the historical study of English prose must be a continuous awareness of semantic history. The retention of the 'original' spelling is here of considerable assistance. When Sir Ector (in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*) laments the death of Lancelot he says of him (mod. sp.), 'Thou were the kindest man that ever struck with sword.' Here the modernised spelling confirms that a fifteenth-century prose sentence is still good current English in rhythm and word-pattern. But the spelling also allays our semantic suspicions. 'The kindest man'? Kind men ('kind to animals' etc.) do not strike with sword. The spelling of the Winchester MS, 'Thou were the kyndest man that ever strake wyth swerde',<sup>6</sup> while it tends to make us forget that (vowel-changes apart) Sir Ector was using a modern English sentence, nevertheless does, or should, act as a warning signal. 'The kyndest man' was a man in the highest degree behaving according to his

'kynde' or nature, which by Camelot standards implied nobility of mind and bravery in battle. 'Kynde' in this context means predominantly 'noble/brave' and 'strake with swerde' is its proper correlative.

This clearing of the ground is but a preliminary to the major problem. A historical study of prose is a study of what? On the analogy of the standard histories of poetry (which are ultimately histories of poets and their work) it should be some kind of history of prose-writers and their work. By common agreement, one can identify the poets. Great or small, they all write something recognisable as 'poetry'. Can one similarly identify the prose writers, writing something recognisable as 'prose'? It is not impossible to make up a considerable list of such writers, on which there would be a fair measure of agreement. By ranging them in chronological sequence and writing a series of critical analyses of their work, one might produce a work of some interest. As a historical study of prose it would be inadequate.

'Prose' and 'poetry' are not simply different means of literary expression. The two terms are antithetical only within certain limits. Shakespeare and Donne write both poetry and prose. The choice depends on the circumstances, the audience, the genre – Anne More or the congregation of St. Paul's, the lyricism of Richard II or the middle-class mind of Mistress Page. Whichever medium is chosen, the writer is still the conscious artist. But there are great areas of prose which have no corresponding parallel in poetry, where the artistry is unconscious and incidental and usually is entirely absent. The domestic chit-chat of the *Paston Letters*, the bare narration of many entries in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the cautiously observed experiments of Sir Robert Boyle – these are written in prose. If this kind of prose has no relevance, then the history of prose has already been written on many occasions as part of innumerable literary histories of England.

As critical terms, 'poetry' and 'prose' are not strictly parallel. 'Poetry' is simultaneously a description of a way of writing – covering a range of metrical forms – and a value-judgement. To say 'This is poetry' implies that for us what we read satisfies certain criteria – which may be aesthetic, moral, emotional, imaginative, and the rest. If the metrical work does not satisfy these criteria we have an alternative descriptive term at hand in the word 'verse'. 'Verse' has its own ambiguities as a critical term, but when used as the antithesis of 'poetry' it divides off a group of metrical writers, the versifiers who do not break through the sound-barrier that separates them from the poets. 'Prose', on the other hand merely describes a way of writing. As a critical term it makes no judgement. We have no separate

critical term to describe prose which does not measure up to our criteria of excellence. We are reduced (as were Herbert Read and Bonamy Dobrée in their downright 'There is something immoral about bad prose') to the qualifying adjective.<sup>7</sup>

We make demands of poets which we do not make of users of prose. Poets, in T. S. Eliot's phrase, 'purify the dialect of the tribe', and we expect them to. All that the users of prose do is to speak or write the dialect. Some of them may purify it, elevate it into various literary shapes and attain an approved literary status; but while the poet is a member of a small minority writing for a somewhat larger minority, the user of prose is in the end everyone who knows the language. Prose (to cite Read and Dobrée again) is demotic.

A study of prose must be conscious of this enlarged range. Shelley and Tupper do not belong to the same species; *Areopagitica* and the cookery-book are sisters under the skin. Even if one attempts to limit one's consideration to the prose of 'literature', the prose of unadorned record and of natural conversation is often the ground-bass of the melody. From a context of almost cookery-book plainness and factual bluntness emerge some of the noblest passages of Anglo-Saxon; *Robinson Crusoe* on occasion reads like a ship-chandler's store list, and yet the same prose of virtually monosyllabic simplicity quickens to the magic of the discovery of the footprint; and where is one to draw the line between the court-records and depositions of quarrelsome Elizabethan gentlemen-scoundrels and the same scenes captured in the same idiom by Dekker and Deloney? The movement of conversation at various social levels, articulated into the narrative with varying degrees of literary sophistication, is the heart of the English novel, from Richardson and Fielding to Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

This, of course, is not the whole story. The casual speaking voice is not the only tone. The voice may be raised in anger or solemn exhortation or prayer; declamation, oratory, the sermon, the irony of the satirist demand a very different tone. A prose-writer like Jeremy Taylor or Milton may in addition call on the imagination and the imagery of the poet. The prose of Milton is often (though not always) a book prose, controlled by the structure of the written Latin of which he was also a master. But any consideration of English prose which is confined to the approved authors and the literary styles can tell only half the story, and even then leaves unexplained some of the excellence of the great writers.

The history of English prose must be regarded as a continuous development from its beginnings in Anglo-Saxon. R. W. Chambers' essay on



continuity denied the idea of a 'break' in the Middle Ages. He argued that in spite of the official disuse of English from the eleventh to the mid-fourteenth century, prose on the Alfredian model continued in sermons and devotional treatises, and emerged triumphant in the English writings of Sir Thomas More and the successive translations of the Bible. The contention is valid and well documented, but it is not the whole explanation. The literary historian depends often too exclusively on documents. Documents do not in this instance constitute the whole or even the major part of the evidence. If it were so, we should have to accept R. M. Wilson's bleak verdict on the early Middle English period, 'English prose lingers on for some time but it eventually dies'.<sup>8</sup> What did die was the official use of English. English prose did not die but – in the language of the Resistance – went underground. The tremendous fact is that English survived, and re-emerged to become the language of literature and of power. It re-emerged because it had never disappeared. The continuity of English prose is a continuity of spoken English. The presence or absence of texts proves nothing against the weightier evidence, the actual survival of a rich and expressive language, with a sentence-structure that was modified and expanded but always without alteration of its essentials.

Speech is spoken before it is written. The student of English prose, though he is forced to base his study on manuscript and printed texts, must not allow himself to forget that up till the popularisation of printing, communication was almost exclusively oral. The older writer was conscious of the speaking voice and though he sets it down on paper or parchment he is writing for listeners rather than for readers. Anyone who has written a successful radio talk is well aware of the difference. Even when print became the normal means of dissemination, much prose remained oral in conception. The drama, the sermon, and the pamphlet (which can range from the Marprelate controversy to Newman's *Idea of a University*) perpetuate in print what was first conceived in terms of the spoken word. The essay and the novel seldom lose touch with the human voice.

But it would be a mistake to regard writing which is oral in conception as only a transcript of the spoken voice. Good prose of this type preserves the rhythm and shape of speech. It discards the garrulity, the loose ends, the amorphous form, the back-tracking and repetitions characteristic of most speakers. During an important period of our history many prose-writers went even further. They were not content merely to give shape to the prose of contemporary conversation. They studied and assimilated the more formal literary prose of Rome and to a lesser extent of Greece.