

17th Century Prose

There are a number of prose writers in the early seventeenth century who show an influence of the transitional phase. But there are exceptions like Robert Burton who have retained the ornate prolixity of Elizabethan style. These writers were ingenious.

Robert Burton born in 1577 entered the Christ Church, College, Oxford and later on became the vicar of the College. In 1630 he became the rector of Segrave, Leicestershire. His most famous and popular work is 'The Anatomy of melancholy' published in 1621. The book is as characteristic of the age as is Lyly's 'Anatomy of wit' and Stubb's 'Anatomy of Abuses' characteristic of an earlier period. His second work is 'Philosophaster'. Burton's prose is a mixture of three things - (i) sombre meditation, (ii) serious note and (iii) sardonic humour.

John Selden is another writer whose biggest work is 'Titles of Honour'. His most important work is 'Table Talk' published in 1689. His third work is 'History of Tithes'. One thing that must be remembered is that Selden lives in literature due to 'Table Talk'.

Sir Thomas Browne the son of a merchant, was a physician who practised till the last breath of his life. Browne and Burton both were equally learned. Burton was a cleric deeply interested in and preoccupied with medicine whereas Browne was a physician but so far as taste is concerned, he was a theologian or preacher. His works include 'Religio medici' in which he pours out his complex soul, 'Pseudodoxia', or 'Vulgar Errors' and 'The Garden of Cyrus'. 'Religio medici' is said to be "an excellent prose companion" of the metaphysical verse of

the age. It reflects in little most of the characteristics of his age. His subjects are those of the preacher the vanity of earthly glory and the nearness of death. But according to Legouis, "he breathes new life into these topics with his singular erudition, which rekindles the ashes of a long lost past, and also with his constant reference to the Cosmos. And the result is a curious strangeness coupled with a lofty magnificence which is entirely his own". It is as a stylist of modulated, harmonious prose that we most esteem him. His 'Urn Burial' has been written in a lofty poetical style. His solemn prose rises to its most imaginative and majestic effects. Sir Thomas Browne, though very much religious, was an eccentric and a dreamer. Jeremy Taylor's prose is the example of "harmonious fullness". The Anglicans who

Were once persecutors were now the Champions of freedom. His book entitled 'Liberty of Prophesying' was published in 1646. His most famous works are 'Holy Living' and 'Holy Dying'. But one thing is sure that his sermons take their place above these works.

Jeremy Taylor is a prose poet. As Legouis informs us, Jeremy Taylor has been called the Shakespeare of English prose and the Spenser of the pulpit. He writes in prose with the sensibility of a poet. According to Legouis "The thought of a rose leads him to paint it in detail, an allusion to the rising sun develops into a description of its successive phases. If he compares prayer to the song of a lark, he follows its flight lovingly. Such delicate fancy gives grace and freshness to his sermons, at the risk of hindering their argument, the logician

becomes lost in the poet."

Francis Bacon was a great prose writer of the early seventeenth century whose most of the works are in Latin. It is really a surprise that the greatest prose writer of the day had preferred Latin to English. Whenever he writes about religion, he writes with respect but generally his writing is independent of theology and even Christian morality. His book 'Novum Organum' was published in 1620. The two parts of his chief work 'Instauratio magna' was written in Latin. The work remained unfinished. Bacon was learned, worldly, ambitious and intriguing. His 'History of Henry the Seventh' is a historical work. He takes his place among the great writers of English prose. His 'Essays' and 'The Advancement of Learning' earned him much

name and fame. It is in his 'Essays' that he proves his mastery of his mother tongue. Bacon's works, whether written in English or in Latin, are memorable as they are full of wisdom. The 'Essays' are the "first true English prose - classic."

John Bunyan was the son of a craftsman. It has been said of him that "If Puritanism has Milton as its singer, in 'Sighs from Hell', or 'The cries of a Dammed Soul'. One of his earliest works is his spiritual autobiography 'Grace Abounding'. His other important works during twelve years of imprisonment are 'The Holy City or the New Jerusalem', 'Justification by Jesus Christ' and 'Defense of the Doctrine of Justification'. His most important work is 'The Pilgrim's Progress'. It shows his vitality and narrative power.

Other two works are 'The Life and Death of Mr. Badman' and 'The Holy War'. One of the chief qualities of English language is its lucidity but the seventeenth century writers aimed at grandeur or more than lucidity.

The end.

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