

Noblest Monument Of English Prose

(By Professor J. L. Lowe)

(From a recent lecture in Sanders Theatre, Harvard, published by the Harvard Alumni Bulletin.)

I have intentionally left out of my title the name of the monument to which the descriptive phrase applies, and I have done so because I wished to leave no question of the one and only aspect of a rich and complex subject which I mean to treat. For the monument of English prose to be considered is the King James version of the Bible. Of its unique significance in the field of English letters there can be no doubt. Its phraseology has become part and parcel of our common tongue—bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh. Its rhythms and cadences, its turns of speech, its familiar imagery, its very words, are woven into the texture of our literature, prose and poetry alike. Yet it is of the Orient; and not of the West; it is a translation, not an original; and it has reached us by way not of one language only, but of three. What is it, then, in this translation which has made it a factor of such power in the development of our speech? What are the qualities which have stamped indelibly its very phraseology upon the literary masterpieces of three hundred years?

Consider for a moment your own familiar, everyday speech—the apt and telling turns of expression, the phrases of homely vigor or happy pregnancy which have become a part of our linguistic stock in trade. "Highways and byways," "nip and tuck," "arose as one man," "lick the dust," "a thorn in the flesh," "a broken reed," "the root of all evil," "the nether millstone," "the sweat of his brow," "heap coals of fire," "a soft answer," "a word in season," "weighed and found wanting," "we are the people"—that is a list of Biblical phrases cited in a recent volume, and most of you could double it or triple it at will. The English of the Bible has a pithiness and raciness, a honeyed tang, a terse acuteness, an idiomatic flavor which comes home to men's business and bosoms. And among the qualities which a saturation in the Bible has always lent to English style is a happiness of incidental phrase and a swift-flingness of diction which only a full saturation in Shakespeare can approach in its effectiveness.

It is not too much to say, I think, that the language of the English Bible owes its distinctive qualities, and that perhaps in no unequal measure, on the one hand to the vast desert spaces and wide skies of the hither Orient, and on the other to the open seas and rock-bound coasts of England. Nor do I mean that in the least as a mere figure of speech. For at the beginning of the long chain of development which makes the very language of the English Bible what it is are the men who, beside the rivers of Babylon or Egypt, or among the hills and pasture lands of Israel and Judah, or in the wide stillness of Arabia, brooded and wondered and dreamed, and left a language simple and sensuous and steeped in the picturesque imagery of what they saw and felt. At the end of this same chain of causes are the theatres of Shakespeare's London and the ships of the Elizabethan voyagers—of men whose language was as simple and as vivid as their lives. And between are the severity at Alexandria and Jerome in his desert—Greece and Rome between Mesopotamia and England.

That which distinguishes the Semitic languages from the Aryan, says Renan, is the fact that the primitive union of sensation and idea persists—so that in each word one still hears the echo of the primitive sensations which determined the choice of the first makers of the language. The writers of the Old Testament—and to a lesser degree those of the New as well—thought and

felt and spoke in images—in a vocabulary compact of nearly all the physical sensations that flesh is heir to. "Paul's words," said Luther, "are alive; they have hands and feet; if you cut them they bleed." He might have said that with no less fitness of the Hebrew words.

Now this characteristic of the Hebrew vocabulary carries certain consequences which are pertinent to this discussion. In the first place it gave to the diction of Hebrew literature an incomparable vividness. There is a famous passage in "Diana of the Crossways" in which Meredith speaks of the art of description: "The art of the pen, he says, 'is to rouse the inward vision, instead of laboring with a drop-scene brush, as if it were to the eye; because our flying minds cannot contain a projected description. That is why the poets, who spring imagination with a word or phrase, paint lasting pictures.'" Well, to a degree unapproached, perhaps, unless it be in Shakespeare or in Dante, the Hebrew writers spring imagination with a word or phrase.

Their very words carry out Browning's curt injunction: "Do the thing shall breed the thought." Instead of merely naming an emotion, they reproduce the physical sensation that attends it—the surging of blood to the face, the tingling of the nerves, the rising of the hair, the palsy of the tongue, the quickening of the breath.

"O God, Thou art my God, my soul thirsteth for Thee, my flesh longeth for Thee, in a dry and thirsty land where no water is; 'As the heart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee'; 'Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep'; 'As a door turneth upon his hinges, so doth the slothful upon his bed'; Thou makest us a by-word among the heathen, a shaking of the head among the people; 'We walk in darkness, we grope for the wall like the blind'; 'I am weary of my crying, my throat is dried, mine eyes fall while I wait for my God.'"

It would be easy to read such passages for the rest of the hour; those are enough to show to what degree the Biblical vocabulary is compact of the primal stuff of our common humanity—of its universal emotional, sensory experiences. The meaning of Hebrew

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words is "carried"—in Wordsworth's phrase—"alive into the heart." The sixteenth and seventeenth century translators of the Bible were happily untroubled by pedantic theories of the technique of Hebrew verse; what they felt was this deep inner rhythm—this alternating surge of thought or feeling—and, untrammelled by any attempt to reproduce with technical exactness its outward form, they responded to its inner spirit in a prose whose rhythms, so molded, have a flexibility, a staleness, a grand freedom, which

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strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. Or again, it is precisely that heaving and sinking as of the troubled heart of which Dean Stanley speaks: "Why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly? Why did the knees prevent me, and why the breast that I should suck? For now should I have lain still and been quiet, I should have slept; then had I been at rest, with kings and counselors of the earth, which built desolate places for themselves; or with princes that had

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and influenced the noblest English style. The King James version of the Bible is "the noblest monument of English prose," but it is more. Crescent though its influence, alas! no longer is it has been, and one may hope will again, a moulding force the worth of which exceeds all computation in the development of our literature and of our speech.

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