

The Noblest Monument of English Prose

I HAVE deliberately refrained from naming in my title the masterpiece to which my descriptive phrase applies, because I wish 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, we 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 300 years? What, in particular, is the nature of the long evolution through which the noble

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vehicle of a great and deeply significant literature clothed itself at last in English words? Those, and those alone, are the questions which I shall try in part to answer.

Consider for a moment (to deal with the obvious first) our own familiar, everyday speech — the apt and telling turns of expression, the phrases of homely vigour or happy pregnancy which have become a part of our linguistic stock in trade. ‘Highways and hedges,’ ‘hip and thigh,’ ‘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 us could double it or treble it at will. The English of the Bible has a pithiness and raciness, a homely tang, a terse sententiousness, an idiomatic flavour 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 tellingness of diction which only a similar saturation in Shakespeare can approach in its effectiveness.

But the influence of the English of the Bible is deeper and more pervasive far than that. And it is another aspect of this influence of which I wish particularly to speak. For the Biblical style is characterized not merely by homely vigour and pithiness of phrase, but also by a singular nobility

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of diction and by a rhythmic quality which is, I think, unrivalled in its beauty. And I know no better way of reaching an understanding of the unique position which the King James version of the Bible occupies as a monument of prose than an attempt to reach the secret of its diction and its rhythms. And that, with no pretence of completeness, is what I mean to do.

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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 and 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 virile and as vivid as their lives. And between are the seventy at Alexandria and Jerome in his desert — Greece and Rome be-

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tween Mesopotamia and England. How did the elements fuse?

Once more let me repeat, we are concerned with a *translation*. Now there are certain things which are notoriously untranslatable.

Not poppy nor mandragora,
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world
Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep
Which thou ow'dest yesterday.

Some of you will recall a striking passage in which Dr. Furness takes those lines and points out, word by word, the utter impossibility of reproducing their distinctive music or their subtle connotations in any other language without irreparable loss. The very essence of a piece of literature — its breath and finer spirit — is apt to evaporate in the passage from one language to another, so intimate is the union between the nicer shades of thought and feeling and the delicate, evanescent associations of words. But now we reach the first element in our analysis. For Hebrew was a supremely translatable tongue, and it was so, in large degree, because of certain qualities of its vocabulary, which concern us closely here.

I spoke a moment ago — borrowing the words from Milton's famous phrase about poetry — of the Hebrew vocabulary as 'simple and sensuous.' Let me be a little more explicit, and turn first to English for what my pedagogical friends would call an 'apperceptive basis.' Everybody knows that most of the words we use today to express intellectual, emotional, spiritual concepts had originally