

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **English Prose: An Introduction with Examples**

The oldest form of written English is usually referred to as ANGLO-SAXON and it is very different, in both vocabulary and grammar from the language we speak today. Here is an example of Anglo-Saxon which gives us some idea of that difference. The following lines are taken from the Old English version of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*:

*thaes wordum oðer cyninges wita and ealdormann gethafunge sealde, and  
to thaere spraece feng and thus cwaeth: thyslic me is gesewen, thu cyning, this  
andwearde lif manna on eorþoan to withmetenesse thaere tide, the us uncuth is,  
swylc swa thu aet swaesendum sitte mid thinum ealdormannum and thegnum on  
wintertide, and sie fyr onaeled and thin haell gewyrmed, and hit rine and sniwe  
and styrme ute; cume an spearwa and hraedlice thaet hus thurhfleo, cume purh  
othre duru in, thurh othre ut gewite*

That was written about 1000 years ago and it is certainly a long way from the modern language of English. In order to see just how far away, let us compare it with the same passage in modern English:

*Another of the king's counsellors. one of his chief men, agreed to his words and,  
continuing the discussion, said this: "O king, the present life of man on earth,  
compared to the time unknown to us, seems to me as if you sat at table with your  
chief men and followers in wintertime, and a fire was lit and your hall warmed,  
while it rained and snowed and stormed outside; and there came a sparrow and  
quickly flew through the house, entering it at one door and passing out through  
the other."*

There are, of course, some words which are recognisably the same: "word" itself in the first line, "cyning" for king, "lif" for life, "fyr" for fire, and "spearwa" for sparrow. These are all nouns but there is a complete sentence which we can extract and it reads very similarly to the modern version:

*and hit rine and sniwe and styrme ute.*

In modern English, this is:

*and it rained and snowed and stormed outside.*

Despite these similarities in vocabulary, there are significant differences in the grammar. The word “ealdormann”, meaning counsellor, for instance, appears twice but on the second occasion it is written thus: “ealdormannum”. Why are there two letters added? This is an example of INFLEXION, that is, the changing of a word in accordance with its grammatical function. In Latin, and many other languages, this is essential; otherwise we would not know whether the word is the subject or object of a sentence, since word-order, in inflected languages, is not the determinant of grammatical function. In Anglo-Saxon, there are the vestiges of inflexion. In the case quoted above, for example, “ealdormannum” occurs after a preposition “mid” (meaning “with”) and is therefore in the accusative case.

If we now look at a passage of English written about four hundred years later than the Anglo-Saxon, we shall notice not only a great change but that it is much closer, both in vocabulary and grammar, to our present language. Here is a passage from Sir Thomas Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* published by Caxton in 1485 but written much earlier than that date:

*“Now, fayre nephew,” seyde the kyng unto sir Gawain, “assay ye for my love.” “Sir,” he seyde, “sauff youre good grace, I shall nat do that.” “Sir,” sede the kyng, “assay to take the swerde for my love and at my commaundement.” “Sir, your commaundement I woll obeye.” And therewith he toke the swerde by the handyLe, but he might nat stirre hit. “I thanke you,” seyde the kyng. “My lorde sir Gawayne,” seyde sir Launcelot, “now wete you well thys swerde shall touche you so sore that ye wolde nat ye had sette youre honde thereto for the best castell of thys realme.”*

This is much more easily understandable than the Anglo-Saxon and the language, which is referred to as MIDDLE ENGLISH, is much closer to modern speech. If we write out the same passage again as we did with the Anglo-Saxon, this is what we have:

*“Now, fair nephew,” said the king unto Sir Gawain, “try for my love.” “Sir,” he said, “save your good grace. I shall not do that.” “Sir,” said the king, “try to take the sword for my love and at my command.” “Sir,” said Gawain, “your command I will obey.” And therewith he took up the sword by the handle but he might not stir it. “I thank you,” said the king to Sir Gawain. “My lord Sir Gawain,” said Sir Launcelot, “now know well this sword shall touch you so sore that you will wish that you had never set your hand to it for the best castle in the realm.”*

The differences are not of vocabulary and grammar, but only of spelling. The Middle English words seem often to end in “e”; “nat” and “woll” become “not” and “will”; the words have a French flavour to them: “sauff” which in French means “except” and the spellings of “castell” and “commaundement” are much closer to French words. When we come to consider verse in the next chapter, we shall see why this is so, but for the moment let us consider those pervasive final “e’s”. In particular, look at the word “toke”:

*And therewith he toke the swerde by the handyle.*

Any beginning student of English finds that one of his main problems is mastering irregular verbs. We can say “I look—I looked”. Why, then, he wonders, cannot we say “I take—I took”?

Here is the answer. The irregular forms of verbs are modern spellings of the vestigial remains of inflexion—a process we saw in evidence in the Anglo-Saxon passage.

In 1611, the Authorized Version of the Bible was published. The language of this book has had more influence on our present day speech, not only in its form but in several of the actual phrases that are commonly used, than any other single influence. Let us look at an example of the language of the Bible and make the same comparisons between it and modern English as we have done with our first examples:

*Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years grow nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them. While the sun, the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain: in the days when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened, and the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of Musick shall be brought low: also when they shall be afraid of that which is nigh, and fear shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because a man goeth to his long home and the mourners go about the streets: or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return to God who gave it.*

No second version is necessary because of the close similarity between it and modern English. We can read it quite easily and no special study is necessary before it can be understood. But there are slight differences and these are: the placing of the negative after the verb in “came not”, the use of “thou” for “you” as the second person, the “eth” form of the third and the spelling of “music” with a ‘k’. They are differences mainly of expression and spelling, and the language is almost itself modern English. Indeed, it can be said that the language of the Bible establishes a model for good, clear English, well-balanced and unambiguous in meaning.

From now on, then, what we can expect in the language used by writers are not differences in vocabulary and grammar, but differences in STYLE. Such differences are considerable. Here, for example, is a piece written in the eighteenth century and it has been chosen for its qualities that make it typical of that era.

*When I am in serious humour I very often walk by myself in Westminster Abbey: where the gloriousness of the place, and the use to which it is applied, with the solemnity of the building and the condition of the people who lie in it, are apt to fill the mind with a kind of melancholy, or rather thoughtfulness, that is not disagreeable ... For my own part, though I am always serious, I do not know, what it is to be melancholy; and can, therefore, take a view of nature in her deep and solemn scenes, with the same pleasure as in her most gay and delightful ones. By this means I can improve myself with those objects, which others consider with terror.*

What are these qualities? First, the length of the sentences, which are sometimes known as PERIODS. The subject of the second clause of the first sentence, for example, is “the gloriousness of the place, and the use to which it is applied, with the solemnity of the building and the condition of the people who lie in it.” This piling-up effect is common in prose of the eighteenth century. It is evident again in the qualified phrase “melancholy, or rather thoughtfulness”.

This periodic structure would be very long-winded and monotonous to read if the sentences were not balanced and arranged in some way. We can see this kind of balance in the next para-

graph where Addison, the writer of the piece, compares a “view of nature in her deep and solemn scenes with the same pleasure in her gay and delightful ones.” “Deep and solemn” (a short word and a long one) exactly balance “gay and delightful” (a short word and a long one). This sentence and the following, in which “I” and “others” stand in balanced contrast are examples of ANTITHESIS and as such, typify the balanced, controlled and rational tone of writing in the eighteenth century, often known as the age of Reason.

A few years later, this tendency begins to change and here, in a passage by William Wordsworth, we can see the beginnings of revolt against the careful rational balance which was thought to be too controlled, too artificial. Here Wordsworth explains his purposes in writing and his attitude to language and its use:

*The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate them or describe them throughout, as far as possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and at the same time to throw over them a certain colouring of the imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way.*

This is a statement of artistic intentions written as the preface to a book of poems called “Lyrical Ballads” by Wordsworth and Coleridge and published in 1805. In the next chapter when we look at some examples of verse, we shall see how successful Wordsworth was in putting his principles into practice.

As a final example of prose, here is a passage from the autobiography of another poet, John Clare, and it was written slightly later than the piece by Wordsworth.

*“I wish I lived nearer you at least I wish London would creep within 20 miles of Helpstone I don’t wish Helpstone to shift its station. I live here among the ignorant like a lost man in fact like one whom the rest seem careless of having anything to do with—they hardly dare talk in my company for fear that I mention them in my writing & I find more pleasure in wandering the fields than in mixing among my neighbours who are insensible of everything but toiling and talking about it & that to no purpose.”*

The tone here is far from balanced and artificial. The negative is made as in modern English and Clare has no hesitation in writing the short form; he casually ends a sentence with a preposition and the overall tone is colloquial, “the language really used by men”. But, nevertheless, there are differences between his writing and the way in which a modern writer would express himself. The word “insensible” would no longer be used in this meaning; a modern writer would say “unaware”. Similarly, “toiling” would be “working”.

Despite these differences, the passage is very easy to read compared with our opening passage of Anglo-Saxon and the English language has gone through a long process of change between these two examples. The passages quoted in this chapter represent the extent of that process and the astonishing range of expression of which the literature of England is capable.