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Spirit of Controversy and Prose in Early 18th Century

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Abstract:

When Matthew Arnold the poet and critic described Pope and Dryden as classics of English prose, he might be admiring or deriding them. In his criterion of poetry Pope and Dryden are difficult to be accommodated. Therefore, Arnold attributes to them the mastery of prose. The nature of literature is largely related to the demands we make and the function it has to serve. The English prose attained perfection of form as it became easy, simple and useful for daily means of communication. The poetry of the period too developed certain qualities of prose such as clarity, perspicuity and beauty of expression. The century with all its multitude interests demanded expression that could not be met simply through books. The social economical and political conditions of the period required other means such as pamphlets, magazines, newspapers etc. Poetry was thought to be inadequate for the tremendous task namely to fulfil the expectations of the expression of ‘indispensable Eighteenth Century’. The present paper attempts to study the social milieu of early eighteenth century and its effect on prose style. The nature and extent of prose in 18th century cannot be gauged in view of its quantity and variety. Its quantity is not doubt vast, but its quality is superb. Of course, the vast quantity and quality too cannot come under the ambit of present study. Therefore, the selection of representative works and authors is attempted in best possible manner in order to arrive at conclusion.

Keywords: Controversy, prose, social, religious, philosophical.

The early years of 18th century are characterised with the spirit of controversy. The spirit did not only confine to a particular sphere but to every walk of life. The strife generally leads to another strife and generates scepticism. In the milieu when the clashes of ideas are generally filled in the air, the average mind drifts away with apathy. But the intellectuals in 18th century did respond the situation. John Dryden in discovering a prose style which answered his own purposes also provided eighteenth century witters with effective platform. Undoubtedly, the restoration prose proved the foundation but the perfection had been

achieved by the genre in 18th century where it became the handmaiden of daily communication. During the early decades of the century the drift away from the ornate prose was more pronounced than ever. The ideals of 'wit' and 'common sense' were more zealously pursued and the writers cared for neatness and perspicuity, lucidity and colloquialism, ease and naturalness.

Before proceeding it is essential to have a cursory glance at the background of early 18th century. Soon after the Restoration of Charles II on throne Englishmen realized that it (Restoration) was merely another extreme. For, the King and his supporters who returned from France brought all kind of sensuality and profligacy. Most of the Cavaliers were themselves writers. Therefore, the clash of these wits and court wits was inevitable. The same history was repeated when James II ascended the throne after Charles II death. King James II himself was a Catholic who poured oil into already inflaming animosity between Protestants and Catholics. The need of Revolution once again felt which culminated in the revolution of 1688. Besides, the religious antagonism between Catholics and Protestants during the time was bitter than ever. The people began to realize that every controversy in religion affects social and political progress also. Therefore, their earlier excessive zeal was tempered by a spirit of moderation. The nation by the time was already divided into two political parties, Whig and Tory. In matters of religion, Tories were High Churchmen and the Whigs were Low churchmen. Needless to mention, these parties influenced social life of the time. As the party feelings grew bitter and hostile, it influenced even moral principles of the politicians. This necessarily entered into literature. The relation between politics and literature became more intimate and closer. The party feud turned genuine commitments and individual principles upside down. The Whigs and Tories endeavoured to change political system as per their ideology. When they wished to propagate their ideas among people they resorted to the help from writers to write for them. A writer who had some means and skill to write was ready to hire his pen for patron. Political rivalry provided fertile ground for such hirelings. Besides, political rivalry and religious controversy it was a period of moral and philosophical speculation too.

The critical spirit of the age created favourable atmosphere for satire to flourish by leaps and bounds. It was a period of political and personal contention, subdued enthusiasm, sharp wit and intense discrimination. The stress on 'reason' was complimentary factor to popularity of satire. So omnipotent and powerful was satire in the Augustan Age that more than one literary history has referred it as the "Age of Satire".

Jonathan Swift represents close relationship between politics and literature in the Augustan age. He is a genius, great intellect and unrivalled prose stylist with conception that “Simplicity without which no human production can arrive at any great perfection” (Jefferson 230). Swift explored the possibility of bringing allegory into the orbit of satire. The form of allegory in the past was useful in the religious discourses and fiction. But by bringing allegory in to the orbit of satire Swift opened new avenues for a satirist.

His *The Battle of Books* has history of its own. There was much fuss over the question of superiority of modern learning and what was known as classical learning of Greece and Rome. This controversy, born and begotten in France at the end of seventeenth century, found its way into England in its miniature. When Sir William Temple published his essay “Of Ancient and Modern Learning” in 1690 his favour to classical learning was answered by Richard Bentley and William Wotton. Temple’s associates again attacked ‘moderns’ and thus critical wrangling continued. Interestingly, Swift by then was a secretary to Temple but was not among the participants. But the quarrel more likely provided spur to his fertile mind resulted in creation of *The Battle of Book*.

The Battle of Book proved the fine piece of literary criticism under the garb of allegory. The book is based on burlesque controversy on relative merits of ancient and moderns. The Battle in the Book originates from the plea of moderns that ancient should evacuate the higher of the two peaks of mountain. Swift treated the whole matter with satirical humour. The ancients are represented by Homer, Pindar, Aristotle, Plato and Others. Moderns are represented by the personalities like Dryden, Milton, Hobbes and the others. Before the actual battles begin in the book we are told the story of the bee and the spider. Despite of its synchronic value the book has distinct appeal even today. If the book had only dealt with “an ephemeral literary controversy it would long ago have passed into the limbo of forgotten things” (Tyrrel XXXV).

As a devout Christian of Anglican Church Swift published his *Tale of a Tub*. The book is considered to be his best literary achievement and it is still inimitable. In the preface of the book Swift refers to the practice of mariners. Mariners throw tub at the whale to divert its attention from the ship. *A Tale of Tub*, therefore is a kind of tub (defence) thrown at the enemies of English church. The three brothers in the tale Peter, Martin and Jack symbolize Roman Catholicism, Anglican and Dissenters respectively. They were bequeathed with a coat by their father. They were also instructed not to make any alteration so far as to its design. The ‘will’ (New Testament) of the father was their guide. They were supposed to observe the purity. All the three brothers become wayward, make alteration to the coat, and thus defile

the 'will'. Swift's famous work, *Gulliver's Travels* was published in 1726 gave vent of his thwarted ambitions, ingratitude of political parties. It is written in the form of travelogues where the protagonist make long journeys to imaginary lands, meets strange and miraculous people. The satire deepens as the adventure proceeds. The book is a fine political allegory that really manifests the political intrigues, moves and countermoves in eighteenth century in its subtle nuances and detail.

Simplicity, clarity, precision are the hallmarks of Swift's style. His style reveals the impression of tense energy. An element of morbidity may have been found in his writing but that was result of unrest. This unrest of mind dominated by clear intellect, knew how to command and direct itself. In his book *On English Prose*, Prof. Sutherland admires Swift's use of simple and plain English:

Prose, it may be said, should be heard and not seen; when the reader begins to see too clearly what made it work, it is no longer working ... It is good prose when it allows the writer's meaning to come through with the least possible loss of significance and nuance, as a landscape is seen through a clear window. Something very near to this was achieved by many eighteenth-century writers, and notably by Swift. We can read page after page of Swift, absorbing the ideas completely and continuously, and scarcely conscious of the author. Scarcely conscious, but never quite unaware of him: Swift still has his own unmistakable voice, and no good prose has the transparency or anonymity of a window pane. What it is that we recognize when we say 'That is Swift', would be hard to define; but I suspect that in the final analysis what is most personal to a prose writer is an individual rhythm, a rhythm of both thought and language.(qtd in Warner 110-111)

Prof Sutherland finds the essence of good writing in Swift's prose. If we consider an Elizabethan writer, he seems to be self absorbed and most of the time has nothing to do with the reader. The language of Swift is the language of reason itself. He was sensible to reality and therefore possessed concrete world and knew how to exploit it. His essay on "Good Manners and Good Breeding" is yet one finer instance of Swift's use of simple language.

I make a difference between good manners and good breeding: although, in order to vary my expression. I am sometimes forced to even found them. By the first, I only understand the art of remembering and applying certain settled forms of general behaviour. But good breeding is of a much larger extent; for besides an uncommon degree of literature sufficient to qualify a gentleman for reading a play, or a political

pamphlet, it takes in a great compass of knowledge: no less than that of dancing, fighting, gaming, making the circle of Italy, riding the great horse and speaking French: not to mention some other secondary, or subaltern accomplishments, which are more easily acquired..(n.p.).

His vision is broad so also his simplicity and clarity “however widely his vision may extend, however deep his insight, his expression remains simple and single, and clearly comprehensible” (Jefferson 230). As a writer of prose, the importance of Swift is historical. The seventeenth century writers like Sir Thomas Browne, Fuller, and Jeremy Taylor had written ornate style where heavy use of Latinism characterized their writing. To emphasize the simplicity of Swift “is to emphasise the difference between his art and that of the early seventeenth century writers, and hence to deflect attention from the qualities he shares with them” (Jefferson 231). Swift’s style reveals his individually. “A style must be individual, because it is the expression of an individual mode of feeling” (Murry 14).

Like Swift, another prominent author and the man of versatile genius, Daniel Defoe deserves attention. Born in the same year of Restoration, Defoe was endowed with puritan background by birth, and he was sent to Dissenting Academy in Navigton. But he withdrew when finding himself unsuited for ministry. He was one of several Whig pamphleteers till 1701. His genius at the beginning found expression like that of Swift in satire. Defoe achieved fame by satire *The True Born Englishman* which also won him the favour of William III. The trouble started when he published his “The Shortest Way with Dissenters”. This work of irony infuriated all including friends. Tories used the power to persecute him, put him behind the bar, and exposed him to pillory. By Queen’s mercy Defoe was pardoned. Here his life takes a different mode. Defoe’s “Hymn to Pillory” was hawked outside the prison and his humiliation turned into popular triumph. After release Defoe became a secret agent of Harley and through Harley he became secret agent of the Government itself. Defoe was sent to Scotland in 1706 where he drafted the economic terms of the Act of Union. His periodical *Review* started in 1704 he was chiefly engaged in political journalism

Born as dissenter he remained faithful to it yet had modern outlook and perspective. Defoe’s caricature of the ferocious High flyer (Tories) in his “Shortest Way with Dissenters” is so near to life that at first people doubted whether the work was the work of satirist or fanatic. When the truth leaked out, the dissenters were hardly pleased that while they learned that the proposal was serious. The very title was enough to make them tremble. The only people who were in position to enjoy jest were Whigs. The high churchmen at first express their warm approval. They became furious when they discovered the trick. On the face of the

pamphlet its authorship was unknown. When the author's identity became open secret the ministers of the Queen felt themselves bound to take action. The work showed Defoe's dauntless courage.

It was indeed very difficult to identify the figure of speech which proceeds strikingly and to the end not easily understood. A look at a following piece reveals his mastery in using irony:

It is cruelty to kill snake or toad in cold blood, but the poison of their nature makes it charity to our neighbours, to destroy those creatures not for any personal injury --- received, but for prevention, not for the evil they have done, but the evil they may do---- You had opportunity to root out this curse from race from the world under the favour and protection of a true Church of England Queen! And out of your foolish pity you spared them.(n.p.)

Like the above passage Defoe's prose in general is simple, unadorned and colloquial. Defoe left a legacy of staggering bulk of writing. His contemporaries called him 'illiterate scribbler' as the authors of the time cherished polish in writing which Defoe had none. Moreover, he was criticized for being a hireling. The abundant creation hardly gave him time to polish what he wrote. He wrote as the words come to him. There may not be elegance of Addison or force and simplicity of Swift but Defoe's prose has directness and simplicity beyond comparison.

Defoe was conscious of the attempts being made to make the contemporary prose more prosaic. Edward Locke (1632- 1704) the great empirical philosopher asserted that "If anyone among us have a facility or Purity more than ordinary in his Mother Tongue, it is owing to Chance, or his Genius, or anything rather than to his education, or any care of his teacher"(qtd.in Evans 297). The spirit of Lockian conception of language and the need to make common man understand, were the factors that made Defoe to write a simple and direct style. He knew he was writing about the people like Crusoe and Flanders and the readers like them, so he must use the language of this class and category.

The "Indispensable Eighteenth Century" saw the men of wide and varied talents. Some writers have shown multi-dimensional aspects of their personality. Some were politicians themselves and enjoyed their dominance in political sphere. Some of these were both men of letters and patrons of literature. The hostile party-spirit or attachment to a particular party many times obstructs their smooth graph of creation or their rising in position. In such situation they had to submit or accept forced retirement from active life if the rival party seized the power. Among such personalities in question St. John (Viscount

Bolingbroke) (1678- 1751) deserves appropriate place to be mentioned. Bolingbroke's greatness lies in his rational attitude, sense of history, analytical faculty and his response to the need of political reforms. His writing is remarkable for its polished calm and devoid of prejudice. His stress on constitutional methods of opposition showed his democratic leanings. His prose style apart from little ornaments is marked with clarity, lucidity and balance.

Being political writer, historian and moralist Bolingbroke has displayed super indifference towards personal disappointments and assigned a great role in literature and life of the classical age. It might be true that his ethics or philosophy has no originality in it but his thought had sharp penetration even his *Letters on the Study and Use of History* (1735) belong to literature rather history. In writing "Letter on the Spirit of Patriotism" (1736) Bolingbroke had particular aim in mind, viz to merge factions into a national party, steadfast opposition to existing corrupt government, and to reform government system in England. It is obvious, then, the theme of the Letter was to demonstrate the failure of Walpole's adversaries and the divisions among the Bolingbrook's allies. The essay is strong personal invective against Walpole. The Tories were shown as sour and waiting for a messiah which was in fact a mirage. Then Bolingbroke indulged in long tirade about the true spirit of opposition and the spirit of patriotism. The spirit of patriotism, Bolingbroke held, can be compared to those attending discoveries of Newton and Descartes. According to him, the spirit was lacking pride and became submissive in England as compared to France. This lack of spirit of patriotism caused increasing social evils. However, Bolingbroke did not trust his own generation that could bring any change. On the other hand he relies on next generation, the generation which would despise differences between Big-Endians and Little- Endians.

By the year 1738, when Bolingbroke realized the futility of his returning to power, he composed his most notable contribution to political literature of the time *The Idea of Patriotic King* (Published 1749). The concept of liberty, the role of opposition party, the role of king / prince towards the subjects and the constitutional methods etc are dealt here with rare fidelity and superb skill. He believed that the opposition party can control the excesses of ruling party. The liberty of nation could be safeguarded by alertness of opposition party. The opposition party should use only "constitutional methods and legal course of opposition to the excesses of legal and ministerial power". (Wikipedia 07)

Bolingbroke's paper "Of the State Parties at the Accession of George I" is a clarification of his role in Jacobite movement. In it he pleads his argument in eloquent manner and with the virtue of direct simplicity. The literary qualities of Bolingbroke are superb. There was intrinsic force in his statesmanship and inner veracity in his arguments.

His “Language, a trifle ornate, is full without losing firmness, and has a natural rhythm, an easy, harmonious sense of balance, which secure a place for it among the brilliant examples of classical prose” (Cazamian 750). There is a remarkable oratorical element in his style. He was one of the most effective speakers during Anne’s reign. His style has perfect lucidity without exuberance. It may be difficult to decide whether the lucidity in his writing owes to his early close familiarity with French. “Bolingbroke’s prose is not only clear; it has the strong flow of river fed from many contributory sources and yet a flow diversified by currents and eddies of all sorts; movements of anger, scorn and dignified withdrawal into self, of irony and sarcasm, of witty turn or opportune anecdote”.(Ward and Waller n.p.)

The period is also known for proliferation of periodical essays. Almost every writer; major or minor contributed the periodical essay. The essays dealt with variety subjects but there grew up a tendency to avoid politics. There were several reasons for which essayists were disinclined to discuss politics or political comments. The important reason might be the fact that “the culminating victory of Malplaquet presaged the Marlborough’s long campaigning” (Jack 218). Addison in the Spectator no. 18 declared that the main scenes of actions in the papers are the common places like coffee houses; play houses, his own apartment etc. He no longer thought camps, fortifications, field of battle etc to support him or deal with. The Licensing Act of 1647 expired in 1695 and publications sprang up. Steele discovered that politics was “still not a safer subject for writers” (Jack 219). It is worthwhile to note that within six months of its publication, the Tatler of Steele was devoid of political news and comments. Addison in his essay “Mischiefs of Party Spirits” exposes the danger of hostile party spirit.

The age of reason, as it is known in the history of literature, was all set to discover riddles of religion. The controversy of supremacy of particular sect, creed over the other forced the advocates of that particular creed or sect to propagate its ideas through pamphlets and other kind of writing and that in turn, has a good effect on prose style in general. The writers in general began to express their views in simple language. The sectarian tenets therefore did not remain confined to scholarly few rather they were open to the knowledge of common man. The Deist debate and the reaction against it is the fine instance of this. The movement of Deism indicates the great interest of the age in controversies.

In England, the term Deist first appeared in Burton’s work *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). The critical elements of Deist thought includes the rejection of all books based on religion which claim to have revealed word of God and rejection of religious mysteries, miracles, supernatural etc. Whereas the constructive aspects of Deism includes the belief that the

god exists, created and governs the universe. It is God who allotted humans with reasoning faculty and therefore God wants moral behaviour from human being. Lord Herbert of Cherbury is generally regarded as the 'Father of English Deism'. His thought was pursued by Mathew Tindal and Tolland. It is obvious that even in religion; the dominant notions were utility, logic and rationalism

The debate started with John Tolland's *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696) and Middleton's *Free Enquiry* signalled its close. Specially noteworthy in Deistic thought is Matthew Tindal's *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1730). Soon after the publication the work evoked controversy. The book is often called "Deist Bible". The Deistic quarrel was assuming more violent turn in early Eighteenth Century. The philosopher and moralists like Samuel Clarke (1675-1729), William Warburton (1698- 1779) and Joseph Butler refuted the Deism in the name of logic and metaphysic. Interestingly, orthodox defenders of Christianity were also rationalistic in their spirit as their opponents.

There was a sincere interest and enthusiasm for speculating and discussing the religious problems during the time. Actually, this trend started with Locke. Locke's ideas led philosophers to various directions. George Berkley in his books explained deeper consequence of the religious speculation and its relationship to metaphysics. The idealism of Bishop Berkley (1685-1753) is an idealism of metaphysician. His philosophy may not be entirely rational but it proceeds from logic and reasoning rather from intuition. The grace, clarity and beauty of expression were the cherished characteristics of his writing. His *Towards a New Theory of Vision* (1709) is significant philosophical publication which reveals essential elements of Berkley's immaterialism. *New Theory* contains Berkley's attempt to provide a theory of perception of truth. Berkley relates the idea to language.

No sooner do we hear the words in our ears, but the ideas corresponding thereto present themselves to our minds; in the very same instant the sound and the meaning enter the understanding so closely are they united that it is not in our power to keep out the one, except we exclude the other also. (12)

Berkley prose is clear and perfectly simple. The way he explains subtle theories has almost the glow of classics.

The philosophers, thinkers and moralists in early eighteenth century were concerned with practical aspects of life. The philosophical activity during the time was not mere an executive domain of erudition and scholarship prominent thinkers of the time too expressed their thinking and philosophy in simple and lucid manner. Their philosophical arguments manifest their depth as well as intellectual heights. Their interest in reasoning and analysis of

contemporary thought shows their concern for the phenomenon that surrounded them. The philosophers and thinkers like Bernard Mandeville and Earl of Shaftesbury exhibited their conversational abilities in what were hitherto riddle-some subjects.

Being both philosopher and moralist, Mandeville applied analytical methods to examine the political and moral crisis of the time. His thoughts startled thinkers but they were the outcome of his moral modesty and practical wisdom. His thoughts seem directed against austere puritans and against Shaftesbury. They are a prelude to denunciation of Rousseau to anticipate the inward filthiness at the wake of Industrial Revolution. They seem to be the thoughts of liberal economist and influenced Adam Smith and many others. “Finally, there are in his work the germs of a revolutionary criticism of the established order; he allows us to see inequalities, the injustice, and the lies upon which this order rests. As a political theorist, he gives us a lesson of intellectual liberty, and throws new light upon the complexity of social facts as a psychologist and moralist; he belongs, except in the matter of literary talent, to the line of Machiavelli and Nietzsche”(Cazamian 751). In Mandeville there is juxtaposition of cynicism and optimism. He sometimes exploits the irony in Swiftian manner other times it seems he writes plainly without any complacency for keeping things as they are. This assured his philosophical work great literary distinction. Mandeville in short “is a paradox emblematic of the age”(Daiches 772).

Earl of Shaftesbury’s (Anthony Ashley Cooper) religious opinions and his defence of Tolland linked him as one of the Deists. His attitude to Deists and other religious sects and matter, is one of onlooker, detached and sceptical. Less interested in politics, Shaftesbury aspired to be great literary artist. Shaftesbury greatly succeeded in clothing his ideas in the language of literary distinction. His writing is characterised with delightful care, avoiding ornaments and affections.

Shaftesbury’s treatise *Characteristics of Men, Manners and Opinion* appeared in 1711 and enjoyed wide popularity throughout Europe. Shaftesbury’s philosophy faithfully commingles Stoics and Plato. He dissociated himself from Locke in that he was against utilitarian theory of ethics. He propagated altruistic instinct of human nature. He believed in essential goodness of human life, affection and happiness of others. He advocates balance between egos and self on which the human life can be framed. Shaftesbury regards moral sense as the only aesthetic sense and Conscience as the guide. Shaftesbury’s elaborate style is the result of great labour he took to make his meaning more transparent and clear. He was careful not to be taken for a pedant or the vulgar. The utmost care he took to be understood resulted in the popularity that his works enjoyed in the eighteenth century.

The description that “spirit of controversy” forms one the important factors for the great achievements of the Eighteenth century in prose is evident. If we survey the prose before 18th century there appears a yawning gap between the prose of Richard Hooker, John Milton and Thomas Brown on one side and Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe and Joseph Addison on the other. The Elizabethan diffuseness, the Renaissance personal passion for liberty or the Jacobean speculative zeal are writ large in their works like the *Ecclesiastical Polity*, *Areopagitica* or the *Urn Burial*. Their vast and fantastic knowledge and inimitable arguments are amazing but the long winding sentences, the periodic rhythmic cadences, the flights of imagination, fanciful imagery, or the absence of full-points for pages, make these authors glorious but obscure islands in the sea of prose. In short, theirs was not prose, in the sense that it is not that instrument useful for daily communication or for common needs. But they reflected their age and temperament.

The variety of excellence of prose is the chief glory of Eighteenth Century. Along with literary text, the non-literary text too greatly contributed to the exposure of eighteenth century in its subtle shades. The reason of sudden emergence of writers and writing is novel. But the simplification of prose with common reader in mind is the outcome of spirit of controversy during the age. Before 1688, the profession/vocation of writing was limited either to rich and leisurely or to the absolute professionals. The persecuted Puritans, the poor working class could never write for sheer expression or joy. But the peculiar ease and openness resulting from the Hanoverian rule inspired many to write for pleasure. The controversy of Ancients and Moderns is a good example in which William Temple, William Bentley, Dennis were involved. Swift’s entry in to the world of letters was caused by such conditions. The propagators and also those who held opinions different to Deism were not men of letters as such but they have greatly contributed to enrich the eighteenth century prose. So also the philosophers, moralist, natural scientists did their best to convey their ideas among the common reader. If the Elizabethan age was an ‘age of spoken word’, the eighteenth century becomes the “age of written word”. A written treatise survives on lucidity and the authors attempted to fulfil this minimum qualification. The result is rational prose with simplicity and lucidity. The social milieu of the early 18th century provided the writers with the fertile ground and enough material for its exposure.

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