

The Influence of the Authorised Version on English Literature

Introduction:

The year 1611 marked the beginning of the period in which the Bible became a truly popular book and the daily reading of almost the whole nation. It influenced alike the peer and the peasant, the noble and the churl, the divine and the layman, the scholar and the man in the street. Edmund Gosse maintains: "Not a native author but owes something of his melody and his charm to the echo of those Biblical accents which were the first fragments of purely classical English to attract his admiration in childhood." We may give here the testimonies of some great English writers. According to Milton there are no songs which can be compared with the songs of Zion, and no orations comparable to those of the prophets. Bunyan considered the Bible to be the best of all books. Swift regarded the style of the Bible as "one of the greatest perfections in any language." Sir Walter Scott desired Lockhart to read the Bible to him when he felt himself to be arriving at his journey's end. For Wordsworth "the grand store-house of enthusiastic and meditative imagination...are the prophetic and lyrical parts of the Holy Scriptures." Ruskin maintained: "I count [the Bible] very confidently the most precious and on the whole the one essential part of all my education". Carlyle said: "In the poorest cottage...is one book, wherein for several thousands of years the spirit of man had found light and nourishment." Newman referred to the Scriptures as "composition which, even humanly considered, are among the most sublime and beautiful ever written." Macaulay regarded the Authorized Version as an adequate example of the power and beauty of the English language. Hallam, very like Swift, considered the style of the Authorized Version as "the perfection of our English language."

Many Kinds of Literary Influence:

The Authorized Version has exerted many kinds of influence on English literature. This influence has been both thematic and stylistic; that is, it has provided the English men of letters Scriptural themes and has also modulated their literary style. Thus Bunyan and Oscar Wilde imitated the simple, rhythmical, repetitive style of the Authorized Version. Further, ideas, sentiments, and even phrases have been frequently drawn upon from the Authorized Version for use in writings of both religious and secular nature. Ruskin, particularly, was fond of packing his writings to the brim with biblical quotations which came to him with amazing facility. Many phrases from the Authorized Version have become a part and parcel of the English language. They are often used in writing and conversation by those who have never read a page of the Bible. Such phrases as "clear as crystal," "arose as one man," "The sweat of his face," and "a broken reed" are instances in point.

Some Specific Writers:

Let us briefly consider the influence of Authorised Version on the literary work of some specific writers. Let us begin with Shakespeare. Shakespeare borrowed no Scriptural theme for any of his works, and yet the influence of the Authorized Version on him has to be taken seriously. As Henry Rogers points out, "no less than three works have been expressly written to trace the influence of the Bible on his genius and writings." Milton was saturated with the spirit of the Bible. His magnum opus, Paradise Lost, has for its theme "man's disobedience" resulting in his fall. Henry Rogers says : "The matchless

energy of Milton's diction in many parts of his prose writings is in no slight degree due to the use he made of scripture." He incorporated in his prose very effective Hebraic cadences. About the influence of the Authorized Version on seventeenth-century prose writers, Compton-Rickett observes in *A History of English Literature*: "The historians, Clarendon and Fuller, catch some measure of the stately rhetoric of the Old Testament; while Sir Thomas Browne in his quaint *Religio Medici*, Robert Burton with his discursive *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and Jeremy Taylor, in varying ways, testify to its influence." As regards John Bunyan, the same critic observes that his style "owes more to the Bible, probably more than does any other man of letters." About Bunyan, Legouis in *A Short History of English Literature*, maintains: "He seems to have lived with the Scriptures alone, indifferent to every production of the human mind, occupied only with the quest for means of salvation. Compton-Rickett further maintains: "Addison's conversational ease is certainly influenced by them [the two Testaments] just as Swift reflects the sterner qualities of the prophetic books. While in our own day, it is sufficient to recall the stormy vigour of Carlyle and the ironic elequence of Ruskin, to realise the spell of Hebraism over our masters of prose." Pope's well-known tribute to Newton:

Nature and Nature's Laws lay hid in Night,
God said, let Newton be, and there was Light

is an obvious echo of

"And God said, Let there be light, and there was Light."

Dryden's reference in his *Absalom and Achitophel* to Shimei (Slingsby Bethel) as one who "loved his wicked neighbour as himself is a near travesty of the teaching of Christ to love our neighbour as ourselves. Of all the English prose writers it is Ruskin who quotes most copiously and most persistently from the Bible. The very title of his greatest work *Unto This Last* is a biblical phrase. The work contains more than fifty direct and indirect quotations from the Bible. Similarly his lecture on *Work* has a pronounced pulpit twang about it. The peroration of this lecture is no more than a torrent of biblical snatches. "Many have disapproved of his "needless text-flinging." However, as he himself observed, his intimate knowledge of the Authorized Version made it impossible for him "to write an entirely superficial or formal English." Among the modern writers Oscar Wilde is the most influenced by the Authorized Version. His allegorical stories like "The Selfish Giant" and "The Nightingale and the Rose" use a language which is highly imitative of the language of the Authorized Version. To conclude with the words of Ifor Evans, the language of the Authorized Version "has so embedded itself in our national tradition that if the Bible is forgotten a precious possession will be lost."