The Establishment of Modern English Prose in the Reformation and the Enlightenment

Ian Robinson traces the legacy of prose writing as an art form that was theorised in a manner quite distinct from verse. Robinson argues that the sentence is a stylistic as well as a grammatical conception. Engaging with the work of the great prose writers in English, Robinson provides a bold reappraisal of this literary form, combining literary criticism with linguistic and textual analysis. He shows that the formal construct of the sentence itself is historically conditioned and no older than the post-medieval world. The relationship between rhetorical style and literary meaning, Robinson argues, is at the heart of the way we understand the external world.

Ian Robinson was formerly senior lecturer at the University of Wales, Swansea. He is the author of *Chaucer's Prosody*, *Chaucer and the English Tradition*, *The Survival of English*, *The New Grammarians' Funeral*, *Prayers for the New Babel*, and *Swift: Madness and Art*.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521480888

First published 1998

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Robinson, Ian, 1944–
The establishment of modern English prose in the reformation and the Enlightenment / Ian Robinson.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0 521 48088 4 hardback
1. English prose literature – Middle English, 1100–1500 – History and criticism.
2. English prose literature – Early modern, 1500–1700 – History and criticism.
3. English prose literature – 18th century – History and criticism.
4. English language – Rhetoric. 5. English language – Style. I. Title.
PR751.R63 1998
828′.08–DC21 97–35275 CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-48088-8 hardback

Transferred to digital printing 2008

To the Prayer Book Society of England

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Acknowledgements

This book mentions a number of matters one too easily takes for granted, so I begin with the manuscript and rare book services at Cambridge University Library and the British Library. The delights of a reader's ticket—to be able to fill in a simple form and half an hour later be handling priceless and often very beautiful manuscripts! Mrs Gill Cannell, Assistant Librarian of the Parker Library at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and the librarians of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, were especially helpful. I am grateful to the Cost Centre Managers at University College, Swansea for never questioning the large number of inter-library-loan requests I made, and to Miss Pember for tracking so many of them down.

My subject does not belong to any very well-defined category, and I was particularly glad when I was able to find anyone to discuss it with. Professor John Stevens, who supervised my first piece of research, was helpfully perceptive about the early stages of this one. At Swansea, my colleague David Parry was steadily interested and encouraging for several years. I am grateful to some correspondents mentioned below, for answering a curious question; in particular to Duke Maskell, with whom more than anybody I have discussed the book. I am grateful for conversations with Roger Elliott and Howard Mounce. Dr L. R. Leavis put me on to the work of Geoffrey Nunberg, which otherwise I might well have overlooked. The late Geoffrey Strickland also brought a number of relevant essays to my attention, as well as showing a keen and intelligent interest. I had looked forward to showing him the finished product.

The readers for Cambridge University Press really helped with the work. Their detailed and very painstaking criticisms were invaluable, but my main gratitude is for their intelligent understanding.

Some parts have appeared at earlier stages of their development in *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, *The Cambridge Quarterly*, *Faith and Worship*, and *Medieval History*, and I am grateful to the respective editors

for their interest, in particular Mr Arthur Capey, whose unfinished book *Translation* vs *Paraphrase* is a *desideratum* on a related theme.

I am grateful to University College, Swansea for two Research Support Fund grants that made it easier for me to get in some days at some of the Cambridge libraries and the British Library, and for a sabbatical term (Lent, 1995).

Some of the preliminary work that, metamorphosed, has found its way into this book, was done as long ago as 1977–8, when I was fortunate enough to hold a Leverhulme Fellowship. The bulk of that year's work has still to appear, in the book to which this one is pointing, *The Possibility of the Tragic English Novel*, but I am glad of the chance of a preliminary expression of gratitude to the Leverhulme Trustees.

Note on texts

It is sometimes important to my argument for the original punctuation of texts to be quoted. This means, for medieval and early Renascence texts, that most modern editions are unusable. Even in the case of scrupulously scholarly editions one has to watch out. The only twentieth-century collection I know of medieval texts about punctuation does not reproduce their punctuation, and in the act of quoting one source strictly ordering any transcriber to keep the punctuation, replaces it with modern punctuation:

> Iste est liber lectionarius ordinis fratrum predicatorum diligenter compilatus et correctus et punctatus et uersiculatus. Nullus addat, uel mutet, uel minuat, uel subtrahat aliquid transcribendo.
>
> This book, the lectionary of the order of preaching friars, has been diligently compiled and corrected and punctuated and divided into verses. Let nobody add, or change, or truncate or take away anything in transcribing.[1]

The promisingly titled collection *Caxton's Own Prose* does not take Caxton's own punctuation to be part of Caxton's own prose, and discards it.[2] The publications of the indispensable Early English Text Society (EETS) have varied very much, even in recent years. The editor of the Old English Orosius tells us that 'the punctuation, including capitals, has been modernized throughout.'[3] When I was looking for perfectly ordinary medieval prose, cookery books looked a safe bet, but the editors of *Curye on Inglysch* say, not very prominently, 'Punctuation is also purely editorial.'[4] Texts published in the 1990s sometimes still offer editorial punctuation. So I have been all the more grateful for the texts that do follow the original punctuation, in the case of the EETS for instance the series of editions of individual manuscripts of the *Ancrene*

[1] Hubert, *Corpus Stigmatologicum Minus*, p. 140, citing 'Rome Sainte Sabine' f. 142 r. a, which I have been unable to check.
[2] William Caxton, *Caxton's Own Prose*, ed. N. F. Blake, 1973.
[3] *The Old English Orosius*, ed. Janet Bately, EETS SS 6, Oxford, 1980, p. cxvii.
[4] *Curye on Inglysch*, ed. Constance B. Hieatt and Sharon Butler, EETS SS 8, Oxford, 1985, p. 34.

Wisse. I have taken the word of reputable editions that claim to reproduce sources exactly. These are not always recent. The idiosyncratic series of reprints put out by Edward Arber from 1868 onwards is still serviceable. Naturally I have gone to originals when I have had time and opportunity, and have done what I can with facsimiles and with the frontispiece photographs of manuscripts with which editors often garnish their heavily edited texts.

This is not, however, a work of palaeographical research (for which go to Parkes, *Pause and Effect*), and I have aimed only at the degree of authenticity necessary for my argument. To represent medieval punctuation marks in print has meant some conventionalization. The various heights of the *punctus*, three in number in classical theory and early medieval practice, appear to be reduced to two in the late medieval manuscripts I quote, and I have recorded them all as either on the line at the position of our full point, or raised like our decimal for the *distinctio* and *media distinctio*. The *punctus circumflexus* is rare in the texts quoted, though in some distinguishable from the *punctus interrogativus* and signifying a different intonation; both are conventionalized into our question mark, which they often resemble (*?*). The *punctus versus* is so close in shape to the modern semi-colon that I have represented it by the latter (*;*). These two marks are printed in italics, to remind us that they are different from their modern descendants. The punctus, especially the *subdistinctio* on the line, is usually much closer to our comma than to our full stop; on the other hand the *;* was a big boundary, marking the end of a period. The virgule is represented by the modern /, which is more definite than many of the hairline ascenders used by medieval scribes but not actively misleading. The only common medieval mark unknown to the modern world, the *punctus elevatus*, appears as itself ⸮, its unfamiliarity being quite an advantage. All paragraph marks are shown as ¶ though they are of very various shapes in manuscripts and sometimes divide periods rather than paragraphs, and all the symbols that could be represented by modern ampersands are so represented. No effort has been made to represent the colours of punctuation marks.

Manuscript abbreviations have been silently expanded, which involved some discretion or guesswork. The runic characters have been transliterated, *eth* and *thorn* into *th*, *wynn* into *w* and *yok* into *y*, *g*, *gh*, *w* or *z* as appropriate, which last occasionally involves challengeable editorial decisions. I have not tried to reproduce the lineation of prose manuscripts (which has occasionally made virgules appear rather strangely at the beginnings of lines) or variable spaces between words, though both have been noted if relevant. Medieval *litterae notabiliores* may be

anywhere from about the same size as what we call lower case to very big, and they have been conventionalized as our capital size.

Unless reported as edited, texts are otherwise meant to follow sources in spelling, capitalization and punctuation.

Greek quotations are transliterated into roman type, without accents. I am sorry if this is a barbarity; it is done for the sake of readers who may not know Greek but can take an etymological point.

Prosodic marks: ´ marks a syllable more stressed, ˇ a syllable less stressed than others within a defined context, and ` a syllable less stressed than ´ but more than ˇ . Some reasons for putting it this way are given below. | division between feet.

Preface

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer's work on liturgy created a new English prose, which was much changed in the time of Dryden. I only have to support this thesis and to make some suggestions about why it is worth considering. We shall have to go perhaps surprisingly far afield for both.

A book centring on Cranmer that has to bring in prose rhythm, the history of the sentence, and the question how style implies world, may seem both ambitiously vague and to belong to that irritating kind which begins by asserting that its subject cannot be understood without prior treatment of other matters, to which the author forthwith turns, or, worse, refers you to other authors for. Limitations of space, I state frankly, have made me postpone the treatment of some questions about rhythm to a companion volume in progress; further, I shall sometimes just give page references to other works of mine rather than repeat arguments. I do intend, however, to show the coherence of a range of topics by treating them all at once. Literary criticism, I believe, should just get on with it. If I can show why this is not practicable here much of my work is done.

The topic itself arose because it turned out that the book I was trying to write, *The Possibility of the Tragic English Novel*, demanded the present discussions. Not to belittle them unduly, I should say that the bye-products, as well as a few additions to previous scholarship I have made along the way, will include a new slant on fiction, the re-editing of most medieval and many Renascence texts, and renewed attention to the topic of prose rhythm almost universally neglected for three quarters of a century. The main aim, however, is fusion. Persist past the contents page and you will see that the links make the point of the whole; which is an example of what I mean by *rhythm*.

Here or there I have probably been anticipated. If so, I shall be grateful for the proof that I have not been as lonely as I thought. Far be it from me to invoke the one and only hackneyed quotation from Donatus. One thing I do know for sure is that my field is a mine-field, and that after my best efforts specialists on one part or another of it will

find omissions, mistakes and misunderstandings left in my text. I shall be duly grateful for corrections. The assembly of some different kinds of solid evidence does, however, establish the thesis stated above.

Trying to fuse a number of matters, I had some trouble with the title. My first choice, *Cranmer's Sentences*, was overruled. My second has been used already. Maurice Merleau-Ponty did not finish that most interesting book or choose its title, but the copyright laws prevent me from re-using *La Prose du Monde*. The title I have settled for is meant to suggest that there *is* a subject. What to put where must, however, be a question.

All things considered, we had better begin with sentences and their punctuation, because sentences are where both modern prose and the modern world start. The immediate surprise, I hope, is the limitation to 'modern'.

The only 'A'-level paper I ever marked had this rubric:

> All questions require answers in continuous English prose. Candidates are reminded that, as part of the marking criteria, they will be assessed on their ability to organise and present information, ideas, descriptions and arguments clearly and logically, taking into account use of English grammar, punctuation and spelling.[1]

'Continuous English prose', 'information . . . and arguments' 'logically', 'English grammar, punctuation and spelling' go together so naturally that it may take an effort to see them as a historic grouping, not immutable. *Write sentences!* is implied by the whole rubric; but to say that would seem so unnecessary as to be unnatural. The spirit of *sentence* is identically present in this remark of Evelyn Waugh's: 'My education, it seems to me, was the preparation for one trade only; that of an English prose writer.'[2] Waugh at Lancing, unlike any medieval boy at Winchester, was drilled in writing sentences. Shakespeare, unwillingly sitting exams at school, must have understood that rubric as the instruction not to write the verse which in his age might have come more naturally. Chaucer simply could not have understood the rubric, because although he wrote a considerable body of prose he could not have known what was intended by 'continuous'. 'In fact Middle English prose is not written in sentences at all.'[3] After publishing this by-academic-standards-sensational statement in a volume in a very popular series I received a grand total of two (private and favourable) comments.

[1] Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board 9620/1 English Literature Paper 1: Shakespeare and the Drama, Monday 5 June 1995, morning.
[2] Evelyn Waugh, *A Little Learning*, New York, 1964, p. 140.
[3] Robinson, 'Prose and the Dissociation of Sensibility', p. 263.

So I try again, and shall begin by establishing the sensational contention and explaining why it matters.

Before asking what the *clerkes* of the Middle Ages thought they meant by *sentence*, it will be prudent, however, to make sure we know what we mean ourselves.