



The Latin Tradition in English Literature

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Abstract

The Latin language was the most influential language in Europe during the middle ages. As a language of scholars and Church, it was prominent among the reading public in England. English literature remained under the impact of the language for a long time. This article traces the Latin tradition in English literature from the Anglo-Saxon period to the beginning of the Modern Age. It also underlines the contribution of this tradition in the development of English literature.

Keywords :- Latin Tradition, Latin Language, Philosophy, Christianity, English Literature, Anglo-Saxon

Latin language and literature has remained a long lasting and powerful force in the European literature from the very beginning of the middle ages. The reason for this influence was the spread of the Roman Empire and Christianity. Not only in literature, but its great impact was felt on the European political history too. In the most of the Europe Latin remained the language of scholars for a long time. Church, the symbol of power in the mediaeval period, also used Latin as its language. The influence of Latin was so great that it existed as a cultural continuity in the European history and acquired the form of a great tradition. A big part of the literature written during the Anglo-Saxon period is in Latin. ^[1] Thus, the impact of Latin on English literature is seen from the very beginning of its history.

It was in the year 597 that Augustine came from Rome to England to teach Christianity. The revered man of charismatic personality landed in Kent and got soon 10,000 people converted into Christianity. The commonality of that time was not familiar with the Latin language. Therefore, the evangelizing had to be done in vernacular. It was in the same period that monks came from Ireland with Christian message. Thus, started the Latin tradition in English, one of the longest traditions in the literature.

Venerable Bede [672-735] was the great Christian Latinist before the Norman Conquest. The great **Ecclesiastical History of English Race** which he wrote in the monastery of Jarrow, has remained an oft quoted book by the historians. There is no period in the history of English Church in which Bede is antiquated. In every generation he speaks familiarity. The seventeenth century is less intelligible to the eighteenth, the eighteenth century more in opposition to the nineteenth than Bede to any of them. His good sense is everywhere at home. ^[2] Latin remained the language of Christendom until the Reformation. At the same

time, it existed as the language of reading and contemplation in later centuries of many ecclesiastics, including the protestant belief.

In the works of King Alfred, [848-899], the most remarkable of all English Kings, the influence of English and the importance of Latin appears. He had to face the invasion of Danes, the ruining of towns, villages, and churches by pillaging. No other king of the Dark Ages ever set himself like Alfred, to explore whatever in the literature of the Christian antiquity, might explain the problems of fate and free will, the divine purpose of the world and the ways by which a man comes to knowledge.^[3] Alfred was helped by learned associates in his translations from Latin. The King had to develop English into a prose instrument because of some practical political motives too. He wanted to revive scholarship among the priests to lead them back from his English translation to Latin. Alfred was not thinking of the English language replacing Latin. It is obvious by his writings that he accepted the superiority of the foreign tongue as the lingua franca of England. The admiration was reserved for Latin scholarship of the period in the country. The aim of his translations was that he wanted his works to be the basis from which men could be led back to Latin, and this actually happened in the generation after his death. So Alfred's triumph in the vernacular remains an isolated and unintended incident. But beyond doubt, Anglo-Saxon chronicle inspired by him is a contemporary history of England, with vivid and authentic description of struggles against the Danes.

The continuity of the Latin tradition is obvious in the writings of the 15th and the 16th century prose authors. The greater influence of Latin was on the secular thought and writings of English literature that was produced in the age of Renaissance. Even in the late sixteenth century, Francis Bacon [1561-1626], who was himself a master of English, was anxious to translate his more important works into Latin. He thought that he could secure permanence of his works in that way alone. He was afraid that English would be bankrupt in the future. In the early centuries much of the Latin writing seems to be of unexciting character from the point of view of literature. It consists of books of instruction, philosophy and history. Yet the strength of the Latin tradition can be seen in the popularity and in the survival through the centuries of a volume such as Boethius's **Consolation of Philosophy**.

Boethius [470-525] was a Roman. His work **Consolation of Philosophy** was circulated in England in the Latin original. It was translated into English by King Alfred. The popularity of the Latin version of the book caught the attention of Geoffrey Chaucer in the 14th century, and he made it a point to translate it again. The force and power of the book was also felt in the 16th century and, as a result, the third translation appeared in the time of Queen Elizabeth. This book remained an example of consistent popularity in the flux of literary history of England. It is conspicuous that this book remained popular among the scholars over a period of seven hundred years.

The fact remains that the craze of the book of Boethius continued in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The reprint of Chaucer's translation of the book by William Morris shows that the book was a part of the readings of curious readers and scholars of the nineteenth century. Morris wrote in the preface of the reprint of the book, "No philosopher was so bone of the bone and the flesh of the flesh of the Middle Age writers as Boethius." The famous historian W.P. Ker, tracing the literary immense impact of the book, underlined, Boethius has been traced in English literature from Beowulf to Hamlet and Lycidas. "The last infirmity of human mind" is a quotation in Hemet taken from this book.[2]

Boethius's work was an allegory of philosophy and contemplation. He pictures philosophy visiting him in prison. It was such a good book of the history of philosophy that in Italy Dante remembered him with great honour. That is to say, England naturally could not escape the influence of the book which was powerful enough to overpower the thinking of continental intellectuals.

Apart from this book, there was also the widely diffused influence of Latin in the education and in the reading of writers in England even to the beginning of the twentieth century. The only grammar that the sixteenth century authors could be taught at school was Latin grammar. The first conscious thinking of the sentence as in literature was the form of inflected Latin sentence. The influence of the Latin classic studies can be seen in the prose of John Milton. John Milton was a profound scholar and elegant writer of Latin poems too. His poems in Latin were the expressions of a poet who used the unfamiliar language to artistic accomplishment. "Indeed in all the Latin poems of Milton the artificial manner indispensable to such works is admirably preserved, while, at the same time, his genius gives to them a peculiar charm, an air of nobleness and freedom, which distinguishes them from all other writings of the same class."^[4] It is a well known fact that Milton was a great Latiniser in English literature. Latin was a living language for Dr. Johnson too.

It was through Latin language that England was able to be a part of the Christendom of the Western Europe. Latin language could enable England to join the community of scholarship which existed in the Western Europe up to the reformation. But later on after the revival of learning, the scholars remained interested only in some classical authors rather than in the whole tradition of Latin as a living language within the cultural and educational system.

The arbitrary restrictions hardened itself into a discipline of classical instruction which concentrated upon an artificially selected group of authors, particularly Cicero in prose and Virgil, Horace and Ovid in verse. It can be claimed that from an educational point of view much was gained because those studies led to a lucidity of thought and presented young minds with pattern of precise grammatical structures which their own language did not possess. On the other hand, it had certain adverse effects in that it limited the number of Latin authors that were to be studied. It also insisted that all Latin authors who were to claim attention must belong to a classical period.

It is also conspicuous that there was no professorship of English Literature in England until University College, London established one in the early nineteenth century, and it was left to the same college in the middle of the twentieth century to found a chair which includes the study of the contemporary English Language. It may have been this artificiality in the study of Latin that left the subject so vulnerable that in the twentieth century modern studies began to make their major claim upon the pattern of instruction. And thus the new generation of poets and authors are separated altogether from the study of Latin and from the major long continued tradition in English Literature. But this was the inevitable result of the development of history. This was the same fate that Sanskrit met in India with the advancement of the vernaculars.

REVERENCES

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