Title: Conscious Art in Bradford's *History of Plymouth Plantation*

Author(s): E. F. Bradford

Publication Details: New England Quarterly 1 (1928): p133-157.

Source: ***Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800.*** Ed. Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 64. Detroit: Gale Group, 2001. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Critical essay



Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2001 Gale Group, COPYRIGHT 2007 Gale, Cengage Learning

Full Text:

[(essay date 1928) *In the following essay, the critic discusses the "plain style" of* Of Plymouth Plantation, *highlighting the techniques the author employed and the literary influences on the work to argue that Bradford's seemingly artless prose was achieved through careful design.*]

Those who have hitherto made a detailed critical study of William Bradford's ***History of Plymouth Plantation*** have been for the most part historians whose primary interest, naturally, is rather in what Bradford says than in his manner of saying it. Those who have concerned themselves at all with his prose have been content with general remarks about its plainness, sobriety, vividness, and power. It has been most common to compare his language to that of the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress.*1

Bradford's indebtedness to the English translation of the Bible is clear enough. He was familiar with the Geneva version, first published in 1560 and thereafter for a century the most popular of English Bibles.2 Although the King James version was completed in 1611 the Pilgrims in New England, like their Puritan brethren in Old England and Holland, for reasons which they well understood and which were good enough for their purposes, continued to use the Genevan version up to the time of the Restoration and the frequent biblical references in Bradford's History are, as is well known, to this translation. The differences in style, however, between the Genevan and King James versions are not so great that the strong flavor of Bible English in Bradford's prose is missed by the modern reader who is more or less familiar only with the language of the King James or Revised versions.3 Again and again Bradford's words, phrases and rhythm stir echoes in the reader's memory. At times, indeed, when Bradford quotes, the transition from his words to those of the Bible is so easy and the blending so natural that it is scarcely perceptible where one leaves off and the other begins. A notable example of this is the moving passage at the end of the ninth chapter, where the arrival in Cape Cod Harbor is recounted:

What could now sustaine them but the spirite of God and his grace? May not and ought not the children of these fathers rightly say: Our faithers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in this willdernes; but they cried unto the Lord, and he heard their voyce, and looked on their adversitie, etc. Let them therefore praise the Lord, because he is good, and his mercies endure for ever. Yea, let them which have been redeemed of the Lord, show how he hath delivered them from the hand of the oppressour. When they wandered in the deserte willdernes out of the way, and found no citie to dwell in, both hungrie, and thirstie, their sowle was overwhelmed in them. Let them confess before the Lord his loving kindnes, and his wonderfull works before the sons of men.

The hand is the hand of Bradford, but the voice is the voice of the English Bible.

A writer in the *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* makes this startling assertion:

To Bradford, the Old Testament was never truly itself in a translation, and his quotations from it are in the original Hebrew. These Hebrew quotations are numerous in his MSS., but ... the printer of these MSS. has in most cases obscured this Hebraic coloring simply by omitting the Hebrew quotations.4

This certainly does not apply to the manuscript of the ***History,*** except for the eight pages of Hebrew roots and quotations which are in the volume but form no part of the ***History.*** Consider Bradford's own words at the head of these pages:

Though I am growne aged, yet I have had a longing desire, to see with my own eyes, something of that most ancient language, and holy tongue, in which the Law, and Oracles of God were write; and in which God, and angels, spake to the holy patriarks, of old time; and what names were given to things from the creation. And though I cannot attaine to much herein, yet I am refreshed, to have seen some glimpse hereof; (as Moses saw the Land of canan afarr of). My aime and desire is, to see how the words, and phrases lye in the holy texte; and to discerne somewhat of the same for my owne contente.

Note what he says. He is now an old man and desires to learn the original Hebrew of the Bible but cannot "attaine to much herein" beyond a glimpse. Clearly enough he implies that heretofore the Old Testament has been known to him only in translation. However gratifying it might be to Mayflower descendants to feel that their ancestors were gentlemen and scholars, the ideal which Bradford set for himself at the beginning of his ***History,*** namely, "a singular regard unto the simple trueth in all things," compels one to discount the statement of Cotton Mather5 as to Bradford's learning, at least so far as Hebrew is concerned, and we may continue to believe that Bradford's acquaintance with the Old Testament was in its Genevan translation.6

Certain qualities of Bradford's prose, however, which seem commonly to have been overlooked or disregarded, suggest a possible affinity other than with the Bible or *Pilgrim's Progress.* Among these qualities are the striking occurrence of balance, antithesis, and alliteration, and the frequent combination of words similar or nearly identical in meaning.

At the head of his first page Bradford wrote "Of Plimoth Plantation." That this name of the Colony happens to alliterate cannot be ascribed to any predilection of Bradford's. In the next sentence, however, occur two characteristic couplings, one of them marked by alliteration:

And first of the occasion and indusments ther unto; the which that I may truly unfould, I must begin at the very *r*oote and *r*ise of the same.

"Occasion" and "indusments" are sufficiently justified by their difference in meaning, but "roote" and "rise" are there certainly in part for their effect on the ear. That Bradford had style in mind from the very outset of his work is patent from his next sentence:

The which I shall endevor to manefest in a plaine stile, with singular regard unto the simple trueth in all things, at least as near as my slender judgmente can attaine the same.

"High style" was known in England when Chaucer's Host warned the Clerk of Oxford:

Your termes, your colours, and your figures,

Kepe hem in stoor til so be ye endyte

Heigh style, as whan that men to kinges wryte.

Speketh so pleyn at this tyme, I yow preye,

That we may understonde what ye seye.7

That Bradford had occasion to know "high style" through his reading will be shown below. "Plain style" likewise had its definite conventions, especially in Puritan homiletics.8 A plain style Bradford attains. That it is by no means the plain style of a writer blind and deaf to the effects of language as a fine instrument is, in part, what I shall endeavor to show. In order to do this, I shall first point out certain qualities of his style which by some other writers of the age in which he lived have been employed not only as art but have been carried to the point of artificiality.

On the first page of the manuscript we read this sentence:

When by the *b*loody and *b*arbarous persecutions of the Heathen Emperours, he could not *s*top and *s*ubverte the course of the gospel, but that it *sp*eedily over*sp*red with a wonderfull *c*eleritie the then best known parts of the world. ... *S*atan took occasion and advantage to foyst in a number of vile *c*eremonyes, with many unproffitable cannons and decrees, which have *s*ince been as *s*nares to many *p*oor and *p*eaceable souls.

"Occasion and advantage" is a coupling like "occasions and indusments" above, and the repetition of initial *s* and *p* in the accented syllables is noticeable even if unintentional. When alliteration occurs again and again in passages like the following, we begin to believe that it is not unintentional:

The other *p*arties ... endevored to have the e*p*iscopal dignitie (after the *p*opish manner) ... with all those *c*ourts, *c*anons, and ceremonies ... with other such means as formerly upheld their antichristian greatness, and enabled them with lordly and tyranous *p*ower to *p*ersecute the *p*oor servants of God.They *p*roceeded to disturb the *p*eace of this *p*oor *p*ersecuted church.Not only these *b*ase and *b*eggarly ceremonies were unlawful, but also the lordly and tiranous *p*ower of the *p*relates ... which ... would load and burden mens consciences and by their com*p*ulsive *p*ower make a *p*rophane mixture of *p*ersons and things in the worship of God.

Note the redundant coupling in "load and burden." Again, on the same page, we read:

their offices and *c*allings, *c*ourts, and *c*anons, etc., were unlawfull and Antichristian.

In Bradford's long footnote on this page, "a late observation" added about fifteen years after he wrote this part of the text, we find "their *c*ourts, *c*anons, and ceremonies," an indication that these alliterative combinations rang in his ears.

In still another footnote, he wrote:

The reformed churches shapen much neerer the *p*rimitive *p*atterne then England, for they *c*ashered the Bishops with al their *c*ourts, *c*annons, and ceremoneis, at the first.

If this were all, we might think that the writer is merely repeating a conventional phrase which has become crystallized in his memory. But this is not all. Further examples of coupling, some without alliteration, like "load and burden," and some emphasized by it, like "roote and rise," are the following:

(1) Without alliteration:

to kill and take away life

perills and dangers

ruinate and destroy

[and fifteen pages later]

to consume and utterly to ruinate

for their own ends and advancements

quaffing and drinking

they were soon quelled and overcome

covered and overspred

this conspiracie and plots of theirs

to stirr up and incourage the rest to under take and

prosecute

(2) With alliteration:

their lands and livings

trades nor traffique

not any of them were either hurte or hitt

sundrie sad and sorowfull effects

daunted and dismayed

scoffed and scorned9

Such combinations are common in the prose of Bradford's day and had appeared in English long before his time. They have been thought by some to have originated in the bilingual nature of our language, which required the use of a native Teutonic word to explain the meaning of a word of Latin or French derivation immediately preceding. Such an origin is extremely doubtful, however, and Professor Krapp points out that:

Translators were especially given to the use of several words in translating a single word of their original. Lord Berners' translation of Froissart, for example, has such groups as the following: "they show, open, manifest, and declare to the reader"; "what we should inquire desire, and follow"; "with what labors, dangers, and perils."10

Whatever their "roote and rise," it is perfectly clear that with Bradford the coupled words are not to interpret each other. It is not necessary to translate "kill" by "take away life," nor "covered" by "overspread," nor "perils" by "dangers." Their purpose is purely stylistic; they are not felt to be redundant but emphatic; and, what is more, they sound well, for whether marked by alliteration or not, they are noticeably rhythmic.

Further examples of alliteration are the following:

--ruinate and destroy the *K*ingdom of *Ch*rist by more secrete and subtile means, by *k*indling the flames of *c*ontention and *s*owing the *s*eeds of discord--the *sh*ip was *sh*roudly *sh*aken--that *s*ubtill *s*erpente hath *s*lylie wound in himselfe--to leave their native soyle and countrie, their *l*ands and *l*ivings, and all their *f*riends and *f*amillier acquaintance, it was *m*uch and thought *m*arvellous by *m*any.--their *c*ommone *c*ourse and *c*ondition

Sir Christopher Gardiner, we read, brought over with him in 1631:

--a *c*omely yonge woman whom he *c*alled his *c*ousin, but it was suspected, she (after the Italian maner) was his *c*oncubine.

The end of Oldham at the hands of the Indians reminds one, in spite of the seriousness of the event, of the jaw-breaker about "Hercules, the hard-hearted:"

--upon some quarrel they knockt him on the *h*ead with a *h*atchet so that he fell down dead.

Examples of balance and antithesis might be multiplied, but a few will suffice. For example, near the beginning of the second chapter, where Bradford is explaining the dilemma in which the Puritans found themselves in England, persecuted as they were and at the same time forbidden by law to depart from the country, he writes:

--for though they could not stay, yet they were not suffered to goe.

Again, in the last paragraph of the fourth chapter, he weighs the reasons for and against staying in Holland or migrating to America as follows:

... all great and honourable actions are accompanied with great difficulties, and must be both enterprised and overcome with answerable courages. It was granted the dangers were great, but not desperate; the difficulties were many, but not invincible. For though their were many of them likly, yet they were not cartaine; it might be sundrie of the things feared might never befale; others by providente care and the use of good means, might in a great measure, be prevented; and all of them through the help of God, by fortitude and patience, might either be borne, or overcome. True it was, that such attempts were not to be made and undertaken without good ground and reason; not rashly or lightly as many have done for curiositie or hope of gaine, etc. But their condition was not ordinarie; their ends were good and honourable; their calling lawfull, and urgente; and therefore they might expecte the blessing of God in their proceding. ... Yea, though they should lose their lives in this action, yet might they have comforte in the same, and their endeavors would be honourable.

Here we find not only balance and antithesis, but the characteristic coupling, "enterprised and overcome," "made and undertaken," "ground and reason," as well as alliteration, "dangers ... desperate ... difficulties," "feared ... befale," "means ... might ... measure." In a letter written by Bradford in 1621 to Thomas Weston and quoted in the history we find two examples:

--the living were scarce able to bury the dead; and the well not in any measure sufficiente to tend the sick.They cared not, so they might *s*alve their owne *s*ores, how they wounded others.

Euphues, smarting from love, asks the gods if they have ordained "for every maladye a medicine, for every *s*ore a *s*alve, for every payne a plaister."11 That the alliterating *s*'s correspond so exactly in the two passages can be only coincidental, and to cite Lyly would be specious except to illustrate how widespread was the vogue to which he gave a habitation and a name and how the vogue is likely to show itself in unexpected places.

Though *Euphues* was published about ten years before the birth of William Bradford, it is improbable that he ever read the book. In a footnote to a passage in the ***History,*** however, we find reference to a work which may have had a powerful influence in shaping the particular elements of Bradford's style which we are now considering. The passage occurs in the third chapter in the section headed "Their remoovall to Leyden." Bradford is eulogizing the beloved pastor of the Leyden church, John Robinson, whom the congregation held, he says:

--in precious estimation, as his *w*orth and *w*isdom did deserve; and though they esteemed him highly whilst he *l*ived and *l*abored amongst them, yet much more after his death, when they came to feele the wante of his help, and saw (by woefull experience) what a treasure they had lost, to the greefe of their harts, and wounding of their sowls.

A few lines before this, he wrote:

Yea, such was the mutuall love, and reciprocall respecte that this worthy man had to his flocke, and his flocke to him, that it might be said of them as it once was of that famouse Emperour Marcus Aurelious and the people of Rome, that it was hard to judge wheather he delighted more in haveing such a *p*eople, or they in haveing such a *p*astor.

To this Bradford appends a footnote, "Goulden booke, etc."12 The aptness of the comparison and the brevity of the footnote hint at a close familiarity with the book whence the comparison is drawn--Lord Berners' *Golden Book of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius,* a translation of the French translation of Antonio de Guevara's *Libro Aureo,* known in a more extended form as the *Reloj de Principes,* which was later translated by Sir Thomas North in his *Dial of Princes.* By some a considerable share in the responsibility for the vogue which later became known as Euphuism has been placed upon Guevara, but those who so proclaim are not in agreement whether it was Berners or North who popularized the style in England.13 Without becoming entangled in the briars of that discussion, one is inclined to conclude, from the title which Bradford gives, that he was using Lord Berners' translation.14 That he actually owned the book, we have nothing to show, as the title does not appear among the books listed in the inventory of his estate.15 This inventory first lists by title "his books in folio," for the most part theological; another item lumps together "three and fifty smale bookes," valued at one pound, six shillings, six pence. According to the bibliography in K. N. Colville's edition of North's *Dial of Princes,* during the half century from 1535 to 1586 there were five quarto editions of Berners' *Golden Book* and six octavo, but no folio edition. According to the same bibliography, from 1557 to 1619 there were three folio editions of North's *Dial of Princes,* and one quarto (1582). The chances are, then, that if Bradford owned the *Dial* at the time of his death it would have been in folio and included among the books listed by title in the inventory. If, on the other hand, the *Golden Book* was in his possession it would have been in quarto or octavo and included among the "three and fifty smale bookes" unnamed.

That the qualities of parison, antithesis, and alliteration are prevalent in Berners is well established,16 but Bradford needed no such definite model for these stylistic devices, for they were all about him, even in the letters and sermons of the day.17 In both Berners and North, however, as in Guevara, there is an enormously greater concern over these devices for their own sake than in Bradford, who uses them only as an incidental ornament. The contrast is clearly stated by Berners and Bradford. The last of the prologue in Berners reads as follows:

For so hie sentences are not found at this present time, nor to so hie a style they of time past never attained.

And the book concludes:

Thus endeth the Golden booke of the eloquent Marke Aurelie Emperour. ... Written in high and sweet stiles.

But Bradford's concern was rather with the substance; as we have already seen, he would attain to "the simple truth in all things" which he would "manefest in a plaine stile."

A preference for the "plain style" even in the amenities of life is implied in Bradford's comment on the letter of March 9, 1627 (new style) from the Director of New Amsterdam. After remarking that it is "their maner to be full of complemental titles" he quotes the opening of the letter in Dutch. He then says, "The rest I shall render in English, leaving out the repetition of superfluous titles." In their reply, the Governor and Council of New Plymouth accept the good will and friendship of the Dutch, but modestly object that it "is expressed with over high titls, more then belongs to us, or is meete for us to receive." This disturbance of the Governor's sense of the proprieties is mild compared to his embarrassed disgust at the fulsome salutations of the Reverend John Lyford:

When this man first came a shore he saluted them with that reverence and humilitie as is seldome to be seen, and indeed made them ashamed, he so bowed and cringed unto them, and would have kissed their hands if they would have suffered him.

Again, in the account of the robbery by the French of the colony's trading post on the Penobscot in 1631, he remarks ironically on the "many French complements they used and congees they made." Bradford's evident distaste for too much of the "high style" is, in part, what makes his prose better, at any rate by modern standards, than Lord Berners'.

Besides alliteration and antithesis, another ornament highly esteemed in seventeenth century prose is the use of figures of speech. These may be taken, to a certain degree, as an indication of conscious artistry in any kind of writing, and it is pertinent to consider briefly their occurrence in the ***History of Plymouth Plantation.***

A metaphor striking because of its familiarity occurs near the end of the ninth chapter. The Pilgrims arrived, as Bradford says, in the winter:

--and they that know the winters of that cuntrie know them to be sharp and violent, and subjecte to cruell and feirce stormes, dangerous to travill to known places, much more to search an unknown coast.

This balancing of present fears against the terrifying unknown is by itself enough to stir in the mind of the reader a vague reminiscence of Hamlet's dread of "the undiscovered country," that dread which "makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of." But the reader's reminiscence of Hamlet's familiar soliloquy is made strikingly vivid by Bradford's use in the third sentence before the one quoted above of the metaphor "a sea of troubles." Some Shakespearean commentators with more logic than poetry in their souls would alter Hamlet's "take arms against a sea of troubles;" but no one need feel any logical compulsion to alter Bradford's words:

Being thus passed the vast ocean, and *a sea of troubles* before in their preparation (as may be remembered by that which wente before), they had now no friends to wellcome them, nor inns to entertain or refresh their weatherbeaten bodys, no houses or much less townes to repaire too, to seeke for succoure.

There is no evidence that Bradford ever read a word of Shakespeare.18 If, however, a "sea of troubles" and the danger of "an unknown coast" fell in such close juxtaposition in the writing of an author whom we knew to be better disposed towards the drama than some of the Puritans were we should be mightily tempted to regard the occurrence as conscious or unconscious recollection of Hamlet's "sea of troubles" and "undiscovered country" where may lurk ills "that we know not of."

One more example of metaphor will suffice--a vigorous one, justified by the occasion. Morton's irresponsible settlement at Merrymount, so threatening to the peace and security of the Plymouth Colony, has been broken up, and afterwards, says Bradford:

they demolisht his house, that it might be no longer a roost for shuch unclaine birds to nestle in.19

Similes are frequent. Again, it is necessary to cite only two to illustrate their unaffected and illuminating aptness:

Their former afflictions were but as flea-bitings in comparison of these which now came upon them.

And, a more extended one, written in his declining years (under Anno 1644) when it seemed to him that the Plymouth Church for which he had so labored was, like himself, approaching an end:

Thus was this poore church left, like an anciente mother, growne olde and forsaken of her children. ... Her anciente members being moste of them won away by death, and these of later times being like children transplanted into other families, and she like a widow left only to trust in God.

No better example than this can be found of the effectiveness of Bradford's prose in expressing genuine emotion with simple dignity, especially when this passage is contrasted with the first stanza of one of his compositions in verse:

O poor Plymouth, how dost thou moan,

Thy children are all from thee gone,

And left thou art in widow's state,

Poor, helpless, sad, and desolate.

Here was a Puritan to whom the muse was indeed "thankless" when he confined his words within the conventional limits of verse, but who more than once achieved an elevation of prose style truly poetic.20

Closely allied to simile is the use of analogy; for instance, in regard to the "wickedness" which "did grow and breake forth" in the year 1642, the historian reflects that:

... it may be in this case as it is with waters when their streames are stopped or dammed up, when they gett passage they flow with more violence, and make more noise and disturbance, then when they are suffered to rune quietly in their owne chanels. So wikednes being here more stopped by strict laws, and the same more nerly looked unto, so as it cannot rune in a comone road of liberty as it would and is inclined, it searches every wher, and at last breaks out wher it getts vente.

No modern psychologist could understand more thoroughly or express more clearly the destructive action of "suppressed desires."

Personification also occurs, infusing abstractions with the warm breath of life:

The grave mistress experience having taught them many things--Necessity was a task-master over them--We are well weaned from the delicate milk of our mother country--It was not long before they saw the grimme and grisly face of poverty coming upon them like an armed man, with whom they must bukle and incounter and from whom they could not flie--

Of punning (a device highly esteemed in certain kinds of early New England verse, as were also anagrams and acrostics) I have found in the ***History*** only two examples, both in the account of the dissolution of the Merrymount settlement:

They allso set up a May-pole drinking and dancing aboute it many days togeather, inviting the Indean women for their consorts, dancing and frisking togither (like so many *fairies,* or *furies* rather) and worse practises. As if they had anew revived and celebrated the feasts of the Roman Goddess Flora, or the beasly practises of the madd Bacchinalians. Morton likewise (to shew his poetrie) composed sundrie rimes and verses, some tending to lasciviousnes, and others to the detraction and scandall of some persons, which he affixed to this *idle* or *idoll* May-polle.21

As a final indication of intent on the part of Bradford to practise well the author's craft we may examine very briefly his method of organization of the ***History.*** Everyone, of course, notices that the method is, in general, annalistic, but it is not the method of the mere diarist nor of one who summarizes at the close of a year the events of that year. The method allowed, to a certain extent, for "historical perspective," in that though the author lived through the events narrated he writes of them as "recollected in tranquility." This is noticeable from the outset of the book to the very end.22 The early limit of the writing is fixed by a note which the author inserted in 1646 on the back of the third folio of the manuscript, headed:

A late observation, as it were by the way, worthy to be noted. Full little did I thinke, that the downfall of the Bishops, with their courts, cannons, and ceremonies, had been so neare, when I first began these scribbled writings (which was about the year 1630) and so speeced up at times of leasure afterward.

That in this same year (1646) he was working on the events of twenty-five years previous is shown by a passage under Anno 1621; referring to civil marriage by magistrates in the Low Countries, instituted 1590, he wrote:

And this practise hath continued not only among them, but hath been followed by all the famous churches of Christ in these parts to this time,--Anno: 1646.

Two years before this he had been writing of the year 1620, for we are told that the peace with Massasoyt made in 1620 "hath now continued this twenty-four years." That in the actual process of composition the historian looked forward as well as backward may be seen from at least the two passages following.

Near the beginning of the account of the year 1624 he tells of the sinking of a ship near "Damarins cove," ending, "And hear I must leave her to lie till afterward"; twenty folios later we are told of her raising. Again, under the year 1627, after recounting the first passage of letters between the Plymouth Colony and the Dutch government of New Netherlands, he continues:

... and they had some profitable commerce togither for diverce years, till other occasions interrupted the same, as may happily appear afterwards, more at large.

The cessation of writing is fixed at 1650 by a passage in the last year covered by the ***History*** (1646), when Bradford records that Edward Winslow went to England in that year and "hath now bene absente this 4 years." Another part of the account of the year 1646 is worth quoting to show how an event is coupled with its sequel of three years later, and how Bradford, too, had an eye open for "Remarkable" or "Wonder-working Providences." A certain captain, in curbing a drunken and quarrelsome sailor took a:

--rapier as it was in the scaberd and gave him a blow with the hilts; but it light on his head, and the smal end of the bar of the rapier hilts peirct his scull, and he dyed a few days after.

Three years later the captain:

--gott a fall from his horse, in which fall he fell on his rapier hilts, and so brused his body as he shortly after dyed therof. ... Some observed that ther might be something of the hand of God herein; that as the forenamed man dyed of the blow he gave him with the rapier hilts, so his owne death was occationed by a like means.

It is safe to say, finally, that a study of the structural method used by Bradford confirms the statement of M. C. Tyler:

His history is an orderly, lucid, and most instructive work; it contains many tokens of its author's appreciation of the nature and requirements of historical writings.

This examination of the ***History of Plymouth Plantation*** has been confined mainly to two aspects of the work: first, the ornaments of its style,--"couplings," alliteration, antithesis, and figures of speech; next, its structural framework, which shows selection and arrangement not merely on the basis of chronology but also on the basis of cause and effect. Bradford's manipulation of all these elements is clear evidence of his possession of certain standards for historiography and of his attempt to meet these standards by a conscious literary art. Though he began life as a Yorkshire farmer and was without formal education, the generally good quality of his prose is not wholly to be accounted for by his undoubted familiarity with the Genevan Bible. His style may owe something to Berner's *Golden Book;* but it should not be forgotten that, besides the Bible and the *Golden Book,* the *History* refers to at least twenty other books,23 from several of which he could have learned by reading much of the writer's craft as practised in his day. Whatever he learned he could have used either in the direction of the "high style" or in the direction of the "plain style." That he attained a plain style has generally been regarded as due to some sort of accident and not to design, as the following quotations imply:

Evidently he wrote without artistic consciousness or ambition.24Bradford and Winthrop, however, wrote plain, straightforward chronicles, devoid of attempts at literary embellishment.25I might illustrate ... from John Robinson, or William Bradford, or Edward Winslow. Theirs are plain words that without the help of art speak of deep experience, and thus at times approach the highest art of great simplicity.26

A careful perusal of the ***History of Plymouth Plantation*** reveals that this "highest art of great simplicity" is not artless, and that the plain style was an ideal purposefully reached. Bradford well knew that the building of a book is no more a wholly automatic process than the building of a colony and that, once conceived, it requires skillful handling of the materials out of which it is to be shaped. That his style can be compared to that of the Bible and of *Pilgrim's Progress* is by no means entirely fortuitous; a very large share of the responsibility must be ascribed to his art, which, if not deliberate nor circumspect, was at least conscious and intentional.

**Notes**

1For example, A. Cuthbert Blaxland, who as chaplain to the Bishop of London was custodian of the Bradford MS. during part of its sojourn in England, says (*Mayflower Essays,* 105), "The English in which it is written is that of the English Bible, or perhaps we should rather say the more popular language of the *Pilgrim's Progress.*" John A. Doyle, editor of the facsimile of the MS., remarks (Preface, 15), "What Bradford had in common with Bunyan was a mind at once vigorous and thoroughly artistic, and so steeped in the English version of the Bible, that it instinctively and spontaneously found expression in Biblical words, phrases, and modes of construction." C. F. Adams, Jr. (M. H. S. *Proceedings,* xx, 71), "Bradford, at least, is a writer on whose simple, sinewy English it is scarcely less dangerous to try to improve than it would be to try to improve on the English of John Bunyan." *Ibid.,* 179: "As a seventeenth century writer he deserves to rank with Bunyan and Camden." J. Franklin Jameson, (*History of Historical Writing in America,* 13), "To turn from Captain John Smith to Governor William Bradford is like turning from 'Amadis of Gaul' to the 'Pilgrim's Progress'." *Ibid.* 18: The History "is clothed in many passages with that exquisite and singular beauty of expression which a close familiarity with the English translation of the Bible has so often bestowed on writers of little literary art."

2What seems to have been Bradford's personal copy, printed in 1592, is now preserved in Pilgrim Hall, at Plymouth.

See Young, *Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers,* p. 487, note.

Also, *N. E. Historical and Genealogical Register,* xix, 12.

Also, Frances W. Carruth, *Governor Bradford's "Breeches" Bible, Bibliographer,* ii, 400-404.

3"Many phrases and verses that have become the current coin of Christian speech and are stamped with the seal of the Revisers came first from the mint of the Genevan translators." Samuel McComb, the *Making of the English Bible,* 48.

4D. de S. Pool, *Hebrew Learning Among the Puritans of New England Prior to 1700, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society,* xx, 31.

5"He was a person for study as well as action; and hence, notwithstanding the difficulties through which he had passed in his youth, he attained unto a notable skill in languages: the Dutch Tongue was become almost as vernacular to him as the English; the French Tongue he could also manage; the Latin and Greek he had mastered; but the Hebrew he most of all studied, 'because,' he said, 'he would see with his own eyes the ancient oracles of God in their native beauty.'" Mather goes on to say that "he was also well skilled" in History, Antiquity, Philosophy, and Theology. *Magnalia Christi Americana* (Hartford, 1853), i, 113. One item in the inventory of Bradford's estate is "Calvine on the epistels in Duch with Divers other Duch books." See G. E. Bowman in *Mayflower Descendant,* ii, 232-233.

Mather's indirect quotation is close enough to Bradford's words--"a longing desire to see with my own eyes ... that most ancient language in which the ... Oracles of God were write"--to serve as evidence that Cotton Mather had seen the MS. of the *History* and used either the MS. or notes from it while compiling his *Magnalia.* Other passages in the *Magnalia* which closely parallel Bradford's *History* may have been taken from Morton; but not this one. We know that in 1676 the second John Cotton had borrowed the manuscript *History* from the Governor's son William for Increase Mather. (See letter, M. H. S. *Collections,* Ser. 4, viii, 229; also, Increase Mather *To the Reader* in a *Relation of the Troubles which have happened in New-England,* ed. S. G. Drake, Boston, 1864, 44.) How long it remained with the Mathers on this occasion we do not know; evidently not long, however, for it was being used again at Plymouth by Nathaniel Morton in 1679-80. (See his Preface, Young, *Chronicles,* 5.) At about the same time, Hubbard made use of it for his *General History of New England,* completed 1680. The *Magnalia* was published in 1702. From Samuel Bradford's inscription on a fly-leaf, we know that the manuscript was in the possession of John Bradford in 1705. Young, *Chronicles,* 30, footnote, says Cotton Mather "did not derive his information directly from Bradford's original manuscript but from (Morton's) copy of it in the records of Plymouth church, which he cursorily examined when on his visits to his uncle, John Cotton, the minister of that church." Young did not give his reasons for this opinion.

6An actual count of the Biblical citations in the *History* shows a proportion between the Old Testament and the New of about five to two. This preponderance of Old Testament references is partly for the reason that the historian saw a close correspondence between the pilgrimage to the New World and the Exodus of the Chosen People from Egypt and cherished the idea that the hand of God was operative in the colonists' affairs as it had been in the time of Moses. No one can read the *History* without seeing, nevertheless, that it breathes the spirit of the New Testament, and the dealings of the Governor with the Indians and with numerous troublesome members of his own race are sufficient indication that the New Testament injunction to love one's neighbor was constantly with him a motivating force. Note, for instance, the Governor's evident wish to put a charitable construction upon Oldham's conduct in 1624: "Now whether this was in hipocrisie, or out of some sudden pange of conviction (which I rather thinke), God only knows." Also how he writes under 1631: "With pitie and compassion (touching Mr. Allerton) I may say with the apostle to Timothy, I Tim. 6.9." Dr. Murdock's conclusion holds for Bradford's *History,* that "until further evidence is produced, we have facts enough to justify us in discarding the time-honored stock phrase of historians which declares our ancestors to have been more concerned with 'thou shalt not' than with the Sermon on the Mount." See Kenneth B. Murdock, the *Puritans and the New Testament,* Cambridge, 1924 (reprinted from Colonial Society of Massachusetts, *Publications,* vol. xxv).

7*C. T.,* E. 16ff. Cf. the Squire's pun, F. 105f.:

Al-be-it that I can nat soune his style,

Ne can nat climben over so heigh a style, ...

8Note, for instance, John Cotton's struggle between the use of "such florid strains as extremely recommended him unto the most" and "his duty to preach with such a plainness as became the oracles of God." See *Magnalia,* 255-6. That Cotton Mather knew the virtues of a "simple, submiss, humble style" in the writing of history is evident from his "General Introduction," *Magnalia,* 31. Increase Mather, prefacing a *Relation of the Troubles which have happened in New England,* 47, wrote, "I have done what I could to come at the Truth, and plainly to declare it," and quoted "that Maxim," "*Stylus Historicus quo simplicior eo melior.*" Also Nathaniel Morton in his *New England's Memorial* (Everyman's Library, 2), declares (I have) "more solicitously followed the truth of things ... than I have studied quaintness in expressions."

9More rarely we find similar combinations of more than two words, as on page one:

"to continue, maintaine, and defend" and on page three:

"raised, maintained, and continued"

To show the effect of this habitual coupling in an extended passage a portion of Bradford's eulogy of Brewster included in the *History* under the year 1643 may be quoted: "He was tender harted, and compassionate of such as were in miserie, but espetialy of such as had been of good estate and ranke, and were fallen unto want and poverty, either for goodnes and religions sake, or by the injury and oppression of others; he would say, of all men they deserved to be pitied most. And none did more offend and displease him then such as would hautily and proudly carry and lift up themselves, being rise from nothing, and haveing litle els in them to comend them but a few fine cloaths, or a litle riches more then others. In teaching, he was very moving and stirring of affections, also very plaine and distincte in what he taught; by which means he became the more profitable to the hearers."

Again, in the reflections penned on the back of folio 20: "I have been happy, in my firste times, to see and with much comforte to injoye, the blessed fruits of this sweete communion, but it is now a parte of my miserie in old age, to *f*ind and *f*eele the decay and want thereof (in a great measure) and with greefe and sorrow of hart to lamente and bewaile the same." Both of these passages come towards the close of Bradford's activity as a writer and show that this marked characteristic of his prose which we notice in the very beginning of the *History* continues with him throughout.

10See George Philip Krapp, *Modern English: Its Growth and Present Use,* 250-252.

11John Lyly, *Works* (ed. Bond), i, 208.

12The passage to which Bradford refers occurs in Cap. xxxiii of Berners' *Golden Book.* A question arises in the Roman Senate as to whether Marcus Aurelius is dearer to his people than his people are to him, and the Senate turns itself into a debating society and "in sporte and play ... take judges" to settle the question.

13See Martin Hume, *Spanish Influence on English Literature,* 60-61; Charles Whibley, *Cambridge History,* iv, 9; J. W. H. Atkins, *Cambridge History,* iii, 345-348; Friedrich Landmann, *Transactions of the New Shak. Soc.,* No. 9, 241-276; G. C. Child, *John Lyly and Euphuism* (Münchener Beiträge, vii); Albert Feuillerat, *John Lyly; contribution a l'histoire de la renaissance en Angleterre;* Karl Kneile, *Die Formenlehre bei John Lyly,* Einleitung, "Ursprung des Euphuismus," 7-12; José María Gálvez, *Guevara in England* (Palaestra cix).

It is pertinent to quote Feuillerat: "M. Sidney Lee a eu déjà le mérite de faire remarquer que Berners, le premier traducteur de Guevara, présentait les caractères de l'euphuisme parfaitement développés dans le *Prologue* de son Froissart. ... Le *Prologue* du Froissart étant de 1524, cela signifie que Berners 'écrivait euphuisme' cinq ans avant que Guevara eût publié son livre en Espagne," *John Lyly,* etc., 450-451.

14Berners' translation, the earliest known edition of which is represented by a copy of 1534 in the Bodleian, always, throughout its many printings, had the title, the *Golden Book of Marcus Aurelius, Emperor and Eloquent Orator.* North's translation was first printed in 1557 with the title, the *Dial of Princes.* Two other editions appeared with this title; then a third in 1619 announces itself again as the *Dial of Princes* this time containing the *Golden and Famous Book of Marcus Aurelius, sometime Emperor of Rome.* See K. N. Colvile, Introduction to the *Dial of Princes.*

15See George E. Bowman, *Governor Bradford's Will and Inventory, Mayflower Descendant,* ii, 232-233.

16See especially Gálvez, *Guevara in England.*

17In this respect the letters quoted by Bradford in the *History* are worth examination, especially those from Robert Cushman. The following are from his letters:

"His tidings are ill, though his person be welcome." (London, May 8, 1619.) Bradford echoes this when he writes of Standish, under the year 1626, "Welcome he was, but the news he broughte was sadd."

"People came flying in upon us, but monys came creeping in to us."

"Our viage ... hath been as full of *c*rosses, as our selves have been of *c*rokednes."

"He that is in a societie and yet regards not *c*ounsell may better be a *k*ing then a *c*onsorte."

Cushman's discourse to the colonists at Plymouth uses alliteration as a casual adornment: "Pardon, I *p*ray you ... and judge *w*isely of the poor *w*eakling;" "*w*ide *w*ilderness;" "*w*andering *w*ilderness;" "*p*rofit or *p*opularity;" "no *l*abour is *l*ost;" etc. An example of antithesis like those cited from Bradford is the following from Winslow's *Good News From New England* in the passage describing the healing of Massasoyt from his illness: "There they were in the middest of their charmes for him, making such a hellish noise, as it distempered us that were well, and therefore unlike to ease him that was sicke."

18For another Puritan's acquaintance with Shakespeare, see Alwin Thaler, the *Shakespearian Element in Milton, P. M. L. A.,* xl, 645-691, and G. C. Taylor, in *Studies in Philology,* xxiii, 189-199.

19Perhaps suggested by Rev. 18, 2: "It is fallen, the great Babylon, and is become ... a cage of every uncleane and hateful byrde."

20It is interesting to notice how a much more ordinary simile used by Bradford reappears as a metaphor a generation after he wrote it in the *History* in the address of June 5, 1661, from the General Court of New Plymouth to Charles II. In giving reasons for the desire of the Pilgrims to migrate from Holland, Bradford wrote: "Lastly (and which was not least) a great hope and inward zeall they had of laying some good foundation ... for the propagating and advancing of the gospell of the Kingdom of Christ in those remote parts of the world; yea, though they should be but *even as stepping-stones unto others for the performing of so great a work.*" The address to Charles II asks for confirmation of the patent conferred by his "Royall Grandfather" and states that the colonists came to New England "not without hopes that God might make us *stepping stones for others more fit for such a work.*" See *History* (ed. Ford), i, 55.

21Cf. Stubbs, *Anatomy of Abuses* (ed. F. J. Furnivall), 149: "These oxen drawe home this May-pole (this stinking Ydol, rather). ... And then fall they to daunce about it, like as the heathen people did at the dedication of the Idols, wherof this is a perfect pattern, or rather the thing itself."

22The exposition of points of dispute as to church doctrine at the beginning of the first chapter is a highly skillful piece of summary writing, attaining brevity without loss of scope. Of the same sort is his weighing of the difficulties likely to be encountered on removing to America, quoted, in part, above. As indicative of conscious omission for the sake of concision the following sentence is of interest: "But that I be not tedious in these things, I will omitte the rest, though I might relate many other notable passages and troubles which they endured and underwente in these their wanderings and travells both at land and sea; but I hast to other things."

23For a list of nearly forty books cited by Bradford in his polemical writings see Wright, *Literary Culture in Early New England,* 58-59. For a partial list of the books in his library at the time of his death see the inventory of his estate, G. E. Bowman, *Mayflower Descendant,* ii, 232-233. Bradford's use of citations smacks less of what the modern is apt to regard as pedantry and inflation than does that of some of his contemporaries like Cotton Mather, for instance.

24M. C. Tyler, *History of American Literature during the Colonial Time,* i, 126.

25William Roscoe Thayer, *Pen Portraiture in 17th Century Colonial Historians,* A. A. S. *Proceedings,* n. s. xxxi, 62.

26E. K. Rand, *Plymouth Plantation and the Golden Age,* Colonial Society of Massachusetts, *Publications,* xxiv, 182.

**Source Citation**   (MLA 7th Edition)

Bradford, E. F. "Conscious Art in Bradford's *History of Plymouth Plantation*." *New England Quarterly* 1 (1928): 133-157. Rpt. in *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*. Ed. Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 64. Detroit: Gale Group, 2001. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 20 Jan. 2015.

Document URL
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420035333&v=2.1&u=ccl\_deanza&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w&asid=feee817af93c9b1665b1e65d7dab36eb

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|H1420035333