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The river grows muddied: the evolution of English prose

by [Martin Greenberg](#)

Modern English prose is usually dated from the Restoration of the Stuarts in 1660. However, so large a generalization requires qualification. Before the seventeenth century had well begun, Bacon for one was writing in a plain (even if highly figurative) style; in him a new cast of mind was conscious of the need for clear, distinct statements to express truth:

For in a great work it is no less necessary that what is admitted should be written succinctly than that what is superfluous should be rejected; though no doubt this kind of chastity and beauty will give less pleasure both to the reader and the writer.

So modern prose, or something close to it, was anticipated by some writers by a half century. Yet all did not change at once with the lapse of the half century. Milton among others in 1660 was still writing in the elaborate rhetorical style of the earlier time as he struggled to revive the e ...

Martin Greenberg's translation of Goethe's *Faust* is available from Yale University Press.

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