

BACON'S CONTRIBUTION TO ENGLISH PROSE STYLE

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In the development of modern prose style, there were two traditions, one being the more ornate and figurative, carried to an excess by John Lyly, and called the Euphuistic style after his long novel, *Euphues* and the other more plain and direct style derived from Sir Thomas Malory and John Bonners. The ornate style has continued as a literary fashion and in some hands such as that of Charles Lamb achieved great heights. But the plain and direct style has been the one that has been of much wider and greater significance and has been used and admired widely, both for literary and other purposes. Bacon's contribution to this simple and direct style has been admired from his own time to the present day and has had influence on speech in the houses of parliament, argument in the courts of law, and in literature as well as in scientific writing. Although it is easy to say that the style is direct and simple, on analysis we find that there is a great deal of art behind its formulation. It is art that conceals art. In fact, any student who endeavours to imitate Bacon will find it extremely hard to do so. This remark does not apply merely to the fact that is somewhat archaic, but that its very simplicity and denseness is of a quality that is not easy either to imitate or copy. Modern journalism owes much to Bacon's contribution to English prose style.

When we discuss style we have to take into account the whole of the writing or of the particular piece that we are studying. We must consider the style of an essay as a whole, and of the total volume of essays. We have indicated briefly in the introduction how Bacon developed his prose style and where he obtained his education to some extent. Now we may analyse the style in greater detail.

Bacon's Regard for structure

One of the topics that were prescribed for study at the universities in Bacon's time was rhetoric or the art of using language. The art of rhetoric had been studied and analysed by the writers of the Classics-namely Greek and Roman masters of prose. It was this form of rhetoric that was taught in the university, and since it included study of both Greek and Latin as well as English for translating Greek and Latin texts, the students learned the rudiments of rhetoric both in theory and practice.

Secondly, at the universities in those times, examinations were oral, and not written. There were severe examinations in which the students had to deliver an address, or debate a subject that he had studied with another student in the presence of

the Master and Fellows of his college and the university. Students had therefore to be proficient in the organisation of their addresses and to be well prepared for debate and argument. The result of this training was that many students and many of the best writers of that time had a good grounding in rhetoric and in the arrangement of structure of their compositions.

The main stress laid on the student was of course to present cogent argument. The main function, of course, was to be able to persuade or convince the listener of the correctness of his stand. The same training was given in the Inns of Court where again even the teaching was in the form of debate and argument. A statute or set of Laws was taken up presented and commented upon by the reader and then argued out in its details by the other members of the Bar for the benefit of the students. Bacon was a trained lawyer and had therefore gone through this training at an early date. But he had profited by it more than others because of the peculiar bent of his mind.

Bacon's interest in science and scientific accuracy also had a great influence in the formation of his style. In science as in law, it is necessary to divide the material under various heads and to arrange them in due order of preference. Systematization is of essence in science also. So Bacon's mind was attuned to the kind of organisation demanded by law and science. This forms the basic structure of his writing.

1. All his works including his essays show a strong organic unity of structure like a tree with its various branches. From the main trunk of the basic concept arises the growth and evolution of a series of related ideas that are structured accordingly one leading to and sometimes generating the other or explaining the other or explaining and justifying what had been said earlier.
2. Bacon's division into paragraphs is not like the modern system of paragraphing, where we set one idea and its relationship in a single paragraph. If Bacon were to do this many of his essays would consist of a series of single sentence paragraphs. The idea in his time was to present a group or cluster of ideas that were to be assimilated at the same time. Hence we find that his paragraphs are long and sometimes contain a whole series of related ideas which we would break up into separate units.
3. The purpose of the organisation and structuring of the material of the essay is to present a convincing argument and to persuade the reader of his point of view. Yet the material is so presented that it is suggestive and of can lead to argument on each point as in the system of debate referred to earlier.
4. Sometimes Bacon himself tells us how he is mapping out the subject or under what heads he is going to treat it, so that we know what exactly is to follow. This system prevents any digression and we know exactly much of the material is to be presented. Today we

know from our study of style that it is not only necessary to choose what we mean to say but also to eliminate what we do not wish to include the exclusion of all extraneous material is the essence of Bacon's structure. There is nothing but the barest truth of what he desires to present.

5. The logical division into its several aspects and parts and the due and proportionate presentation of each is the method behind the structure of Bacon's writing. It is also necessary to preserve perspective not giving unique prominence to anyone portion of the material. It is here that Bacon is a master in that he does not allow himself any freedom to roam around the subject but is only interested in presenting the truth nothing but the truth as he sees it.

In concluding this section we quote from Bacon himself.

Above all things, order and distribution and singling out of parts is the "life of dispatch; so as the distribution be not too subtle for he that will not divide will never enter well into business and that divideth too much will never come out of it clearly" (Essay "On Despatch").

Bacon's Use of Aphorism

Bacon's use of structure also extends to the paragraphs and to individual sentences. It is however the structure of individual sentences that caught the attention of stylists. His style has been called aphoristic and is based on his use of aphorism. It is the use of aphorism that seems to give firmness and yet flexibility to the style. Bacon here makes use of a pattern which had been known for a long time and was much respected in his time, but not used as he did as a quality in prose writing. The phorisms to be found for instance in the Bible in the Book of Proverbs are to be seen in some of the pronouncements of Moses especially in the laws. The aphorism was also to be seen in the writings of the Greek and Latin writers of the Classic times who used it with great effect. So it was no new method that Bacon had invented it was rather one that he knew and had appreciated and it had appealed to him as suitable to tie together the sayings and meditations which he wished to put together.

An aphorism suggests profundity and intellectual authority, which are exactly the qualities that Bacon wished to endow his essays with for the desired that they should contain wise advice or counsel for those who read them on all kinds of subjects. The idea was that the aphorism can be easily memorized and quoted and provided a kind of wisdom on occasions that could not be achieved in any other manner. Such maxima were prevalent in medicine and in law but now Bacon tried to enlarge their scope and give them a new form and lease of life.

Bacon found that they suited his bent of mind because he was especially interested in practicing 'inductive' thinking; He felt that just as Machiavelli in *The Prince* had been able to give reasons for his statements and end with a moral wise piece of advice so also he would use the form in his essays to add up to some pieces of advice that would remain in men's mind. The simplest form of this inductive kind of reasoning is of course found in the Fables of Aesop which end with a moral.

The precision of the aphorism for reasoning and persuasive power was accepted in his time. To use it in the form of very short dispersed meditations was Bacon's contribution and it was at that time something novel in English. That he was conscious of what he was doing is seen from a passage in the *Advancement of Learning* when he says: "Regarding the aphoristic method, it cannot deceive because its truth the writer whether he be superficial or solid except that should be ridiculous cannot be made but of the pith and heart of sciences for discourse of illustration is cut off recitals of examples are cut off so there remained nothing to fill the aphorism but some good quantity of observation and therefore no man can suffice nor in reason will attempt to write aphorisms but he that is sound and grounded."

He has seen that it is flexible, relevant to the situation of his time and has its basis in inductive argument and empirical data. He sees it as a condensation of wisdom and knowledge and therefore the emblem of truth which he was always aiming at. In an age which valued precepts and aphorisms Bacon provided exactly what they needed and had the knowledge and wisdom to do so. It is probably for this reason that his work was so popular. Examples of aphorisms that are found in the text:

- (a) For a lie faces God and shrinks from man ("Of Truth")
- (b) This is certain that a man that studied of revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise heal and do well. ("Of Revenge")
- (c) Revenge is a kind of wild justice. ("Of Revenge")
- (d) Besides (to say the truth) nakedness is unseemly as well in mind as a body. ("Of Simulation and Dissimulation")

So we find that Bacon used the short pithy style so peculiar to him for a particular purpose. He desired to impress what he said upon the reader as forcibly and memorably as possible.

Bacon's Use of Image, Metaphor and Analogy

1. Strange though it may seem, many have pointed out that Bacon's prose is poetic among them the most poetic of poets Shelley in his *Defence of Poetry*. This may be attributed to Bacon's use of imagery, metaphor and analogy and other rhetorical

devices in his prose. When Bacon decides to use such devices he does so with great attention and care having studied their value and effect. As we have pointed out his first purpose was persuasion and argument and Bacon knew very well that unadorned statements would not be. So easily acceptable as these rhetorical devices. So he uses them sparingly but with powerful effect.

2. The purpose of these devices was to make the words signify actuality or to call up a picture before the eyes of the imagination of the reader. This has a more immediate effect than a purely intellectual approach. Image, metaphor and analogy all perform this function well either in prose or in poetry. The work of the image is obviously to create an image in the imagination. The metaphor speaks of a concrete situation in terms of the abstract and an analogy gives a simple parallel which makes for simpler understanding. Bacon himself says in the Advancement of Learning, there is no proceeding in invention of knowledge but by similitude. "So Bacon himself sought out similarities between natural phenomena and human situations which he could use with telling effect.
3. In the very first essay, "Of Truth", Bacon opens with an image: "What is truth? said jesting Pilate: and would not stay for an answer." Immediately he is able, by this image, to call up the picture of the trial of Jesus Christ, and the incident of Pilate not taking seriously the statement of Jesus that he had come to bring truth into the world. He further uses this image to point out that there are a type of people who will not take anything particularly truth seriously.

In the essay "Of Revenge", he uses as a closing image, that of witches. In Elizabethan times, witches were feared because they could cause evil to come upon their enemies and often if some evil did befall people in a rural community, they ascribed it to the evil work of the witch and hunted her and either drowned her or burnt her. It is this image that he draws upon when he says in his closing sentence: "Nay rather, vindictive persons live the life of witches; who, as they are mischievous, so end them unfortunate." In other words vindictive persons will come to no good end just as witches will come to harm. In his own time this would have been a very powerful image to present and unforgettable in its impact on the reader. Thus we may note that Bacon does use images very skilfully and powerfully in his essays to affect his purposes.

1. Bacon's use of metaphor is effective though it is not so obvious. Examine this sentence from "Of Simulation and Dissimulation": "For if a man has that penetration of judgment as he can discern what things are to be laid open, and what to be secreted and what to be showed at half lights and to whom and when to him a habit of dissimulation is a hindrance and poorness." Bacon is using several words in a metaphorical sense in this passage: a) "Penetration of judgment" the word

penetration is used metaphorically, meaning keen or deep judgement; Things are to be laid open" is again a metaphorical phrase, which does not refer to material things but to thoughts, and these are to be said open. 'As though they are being exposed for sale in the market: c) "what is to be showed at half-lights" again if a merchant has some inferior goods, he does not show them to the customer in bright light when the defects can be seen, but in half-light so that hindrance and poorness" is again a metaphorical statement because an attitude cannot be, technically speaking, a hindrance which is an obstacle or a poorness which is a lack of some object. Thus, we see that even in a single sentence, Bacon can use metaphorical language with powerful effect to make matters much more clear and actual to the reader.

2. An analogy is like a simile and is of course also a device that can make things clear and picturesque. In the essay "Of Simulation and Dissimulation" we have the sentence "Where a man cannot choose or vary in particulars there it is good to take the safest and wariest way in general, like the going softly, by one that cannot we'll see". Here we have an example of the simplest form of analogy. A man who has no alternatives must be very careful to see that nothing goes wrong with his plan. Another kind of analogy is found in the same essay when Bacon says: "Nakedness is uncomely, as well in mind as body." We can be naked in body but that is used as an analogy for being too open in mind or as he says naked in mind as well. So we find that the prose of Bacon does contain many examples of this kind of rhetorical device in almost all his essays which makes his prose imaginative and poetic. It certainly adds depth and richness to his prose and clarity to what he wishes to express. He is able to bring home what he means to express much more powerfully because of the use of these methods. Moreover they seem to come naturally to his mind and do not look forced or unnatural. That is why Shelley thinks of him as a poet-because his mind works imaginatively like a poet's mind. But unlike the normal poet, Bacon uses his poetic gift for argumentative purpose and to drive home his aphoristic philosophy of life.

Bacon's Use of Allusions and References

1. In almost every one of Bacon's essays we find some allusions or other, either to the Bible, or to the classics or to Nature. During the Renaissance and for long after, these were the sources or terms of reference of the poets and prose writers of Europe. Since these were commonly known to all educated people, the references had some meaning and carried with them some emotional and intellectual content or reverberation. All writing took an added richness when such allusions were

included. It was also a way of relating the new to the old of relating something unknown to what was already known. Bacon also makes use of these terms of reference and uses them most effectively.

2. In almost all the essays that we have for study we have at least one reference to the Bible. The most famous one is the reference to jesting Pilate in the essay "Of Truth." But besides that, he has several references to the famous King, Solomon, who was considered the wisest of the Jewish kings, and to whom are attributed the Proverbs or Aphorisms in the Bible. In the essay "Of Revenge," Solomon is quoted saying that, "It is the glory of a man to pass by an offence". In the essay "Of Riches", he is again quoted saying, "Where there is much there are many to consume it and what hath the owner but the sight of it with his eyes and "He that maketh haste to be rich shall not be innocent". Bacon also quotes the Bible in "Of Atheism" as saying. "The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God". There is little doubt that Bacon knew his Bible and used it with great effect once the official English version, the version authorized by 20r King James I came to be used in all Church of England churches, there is no doubt that most people were familiar with the Bible.
3. As higher education in England was in Latin and Greek, every educated university man had some knowledge of the Classics and Greek and Roman history. This was one of the effects of the Renaissance that the classics brought new learning into Europe. It is no wonder then that as a child of the Renaissance, Bacon should use the classics for reference to a very great extent. Bacon refers freely to Epicures and Plato to Democritus among the Greeks, Cicero and Seneca among the Roman philosophers. In fact some of his inspiration came from Seneca who had tried to provide something similar for his time. Similarly he refers to the Roman Emperors, Augustus Caesar, Tiberius, Vespasian and others. His knowledge of these is extensive because all his education and training must have made him conversant with writings of the great men of Greece and Rome.
4. Besides these references he also alludes to modern writers in Europe, such as Montaigne, from whom he took the idea of calling his work essays. His education and training must have made him conversant with writings of the great men of Greece and Rome.
5. Finally we have references to Nature a tree and its branches, the hills and the sea, precious stones and pearls and he talks about the waves and weathers of time. His appreciation of the beauty and order of the created universe is best seen in his essay "Of Atheism", where he declares: "I had rather believe all the fables in the legend (referring to The Golden Legend, a Latin work of the 13th Century miraculous lives and incidents of the saints and other natural phenomena), and the

Talmad and the Alcoran (sacred books of the Jews and the Muslims) than that this universal frame is without a mind and therefore, God never wrought miracles to convince Atheism, because his ordinary works convince it. The belief in the natural world as against miracles is the attitude of a truly scientific mind."

6. This extraordinary rich frame of reference makes his essays rich and varied and gives us some indication of the knowledge and interests of Bacon. As it has already been suggested his knowledge was almost universal, embracing history and philosophy, geography and science, astronomy and mathematics. His knowledge was encyclopaedic and therefore we have to find some place to respect a man who brings such a weight of information and yet does not impose it upon us, except in stray allusions and references.

Conclusion

It is no wonder then that Bacon's matter and Bacon's method of presentation have become a classic. While it is true that the style represents the man that we can form some impression of his personality from the way he presents his material. We have also to appreciate the way in which he cultivated this style for the purpose that he had in mind and the readership of his time. Certain styles as we know are appreciated at certain periods for example the classic and the romantic but Bacon's style does not belong to such periodic classification. It cannot be called a renaissance manifestation. Though it was a product of the Renaissance it has transcended his time and has become a model for all times. Such an achievement did not go without recognition either in his own time or later. "The power of words in Bacon's hands is directly demonstrated by his dominance of 17th century thought the almost hypnotic way in which his view of the world and the function of learning within it helped to mould English life, to an extent which no writer had achieved before and few since". This achievement was in a great measure due to his formulation of a style to present imaginative eloquence not merely in speech (as in his recorded speeches in Parliament) but in his writing. He was able to present abstract ideas endowed with a kind of life and actuality. It was miraculous because they did not lose their precision and yet were full of emotive meaning. He was called the 'the eloquences that was born in this isle, a flexanious and golden-tongued orator responsible for the final refinement of English prose. His masculine and clear expression of his material, showed that it was not necessary for words to be affected or dominant but that meaning could be made the prime interest without losing the grandeur and dignity of literature.

Ben Jonson, himself a master of English prose and the second of the dramatists of the Renaissance in England said of Bacon: "No man ever spoke more neatly, more precisely, more weightily or suffered less emptiness and less idleness in what he uttered". He draws

attention to the utter absence of self-regard in the style of Bacon. It is not self-consciousness at all. It is the objective style par excellence. Ben Jonson places Bacon at the very top of all the stylists ancient or modern. He adds: "He seemed to me ever by his work one of the greatest men and the most worthy of admiration."

Sprat says: "He was a man of strong, clear and powerful imagination; his genius was searching and inimitable; and of this I need give no other proof than his style itself". "The course of it vigorous and majestically the wit bold and familiar the comparisons fetched out of the way and yet the easiest". This is an excellent judgement of a contemporary who saw the art of Bacon's controlled imagination and images, being closely related to human experience.

Sir Joshua Reynolds in a later age remarked regarding Bacon's Essays that, "their excellence and their value consisted in being the observations of a strong mind operating upon life and in consequence you find there, what you seldom find in other books". Bacon would have appreciated this comment and thought that he fulfilled what he had set out to do. In fact from time to time, great literary figures have appreciated both the matter and manner of Bacon.

During the Romantic Age, De Quincey and Hazlitt have appreciated Bacon's style, and at a later time in the Victorian Age, Macaulay and Ruskin. Some quotations from these may be pertinent. De Quincey affirms the validity and Truthfulness of Bacon's imagery.

The reason is that being always in quest of absolute truth; he contemplates all subjects not through the rhetorical fancy, which is most excited by more seeming resemblances, and such as can only sustain themselves under a single phase, but through the philosophical fancy or that which rests upon real analogies". Hazlitt's comments are even more to point and more valuable in that they afford a wider scope: "He united powers of imagination and understanding in a greater degree than almost any other writer. He was one of the strongest instances of those men who by rare privilege of their nature are at once poets and philosophers and see equally into both worlds".

Commenting upon Bacon's style, Hazlitt says, "His writings have the gravity of prose with the fervour and vividness of poetry. His sayings have effect of axioms and at once striking and self-evident. His style is equally sharp and sweet flowing and pithy, condensed and expansive, expressing volumes in a sentence, of amplifying a single thought into pages of rich, glowing and delightful eloquence." Lord Macaulay makes this statement in his review of Bacon: "He had a wonderful talent for packing wit close and rendering it portable". By wit he meant the power of perceiving analogies between things which appear to have nothing in common in wit he never had an equal. "No imagination was ever at once so strong and so thoroughly subjugated. It never stirred but at a signal from good sense". It

stopped at the first check from good sense. John Ruskin was fond of the quotation "God's first creature", which was light these being 'the words of the wisest of Englishmen. '

The final quotation is from Sir Tobie Matthews, a contemporary of Sir Francis Bacon:

"A man so rare in knowledge of so many several kinds, endowed with the faculty and felicity of expressing it all in so elegant, significant, so abundant and yet choice and ravishing words of metaphors, and allusions as perhaps the world has not seen since it was a world. I know that this may seem a great hyperbole and strange kind of excess in speech; but the best means of putting me to shame will be for you to place any other man of yours, by this of mine. '(Note: There are many editions of Bacon's Essays as a whole or in selections made by foreign and Indian Scholars, which may be used by the student. Since Bacon's Essays are for detailed study, it may be advisable to obtain a copy of these. It will be a useful addition to any personal library).

Reference Books

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| 1. Hanford, J.H. | : | A Bacon Handbook |
| 2. John Bailey | : | Bacon's Essays |
| 3. Craig, H | : | Studies in Bacon |
| 4. Kane, G. | : | Middle English Literature |
| 5. Edmund Blunden | : | Bacon: A Critical Enquiry |
| 6. Walker, H. | : | The English Essay and Essayists |
| 7. F.H. Anderson | : | The Philosophy of Francis Bacon. |
| 8. C.D. Broad | : | The Philosophy of Francis Bacon. |
| 9. Brian Vickers | : | Francis Bacon and Renaissance Prose. |