



FRANCIS BACON'S WORKS AND PROSE STYLE

DR. ANAND KUMAR MINJ¹

¹ ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, GOVT. GAJANAND AGARWAL PG COLLEGE, BHATAPARA (C.G.)

ABSTRACT:

Francis Bacon was not only the father of the English essay, he was also the father of modern prose style. He was the first to set up a model at English prose which had hitherto been non assitant. A comparison of his style in his Essays with the style of his contemporaries and immediate predecessor's such as Ascham, Lyly and Hooker will convince one of the very important step that he took in the direction of modern science.

In spite of his convincing mastery of the English language, Bacon, surprisingly enough, despised English as a vulgar, unworthy language doomed to oblivion and impermanence. It is clear that he did not seriously endeavor to write a consciously elegant and polished style in the language he openly despised. It was almost with an air of condescension that he seems to have reconciled himself to expressing himself in English. He wrote his serious philosophical works in Latin of whose survival value he was perfectly confident and not in English which he thought "Would one day play the bankrupt with books." About Latin he observed: It will last as long as books last." In the beginning he did not take his Essays seriously. That is why he penned them in English. Later, however, on realizing their popularity, he published a Latin version of them so that they could also survive along with his philosophical works. The Latin version of his Essays is just another curio for the collection of the antiquarian. As regards his mastery of English prose, we cannot but agree with Legouis that he proved a master of English "in spite of himself."

Lord Bacon, the great philosopher, thinker and writer, whose acuteness of observation and profundity of views and directness of style have been admired throughout the world, is a man of versatile genius. His bewildering variety of abstract subjects and encyclopaedic range of mind bring him close to Aristotle. His essays, generally abound in lofty sentiments and noble thoughts and have been admired for their inherent practical wisdom universality of appeal, sane advice and wide learning.

This paper is to interpret and evaluate achievements of the magnanimous Bacon in a particular literary genre. A close examination of the miscellaneous sources of inspiration of Bacon's prose right up to his time will demonstrate that to emerge predominantly as a classicist in English prose was his manifest destiny under the prevailing political, social and moral conditions and controversies.

KEYWORDS:

PROSE, CONTEMPORARIES, PHILOSOPHER, PHILOSOPHICAL WORK, ACHIEVEMENTS, LITERARY GENRE, ENCYCLOPAEDIC.

PAPER ACCEPTED DATE:

27th March 2024

PAPER PUBLISHED DATE:

29th March 2024

INTRODUCTION

The age of Socrates and Sophists in Greece is an age of intellectual and moral development of mankind, when the belief in an old mythology was being shattered and tradition, authority and custom were no longer accepted as adequate sanctions for moral rules and political institutions. Such a period of promise visits England in sixteenth century. With the sixteenth century modern world begins. The dawn of Renaissance brought in that century a spirit of rational inquiry and criticism which started to replace childlike faith and ignorant reverence of authority in both secular and religious matters. The Revival of learning is responsible for injecting into people a new interest in this world and its affairs. Gone are the days of scholasticism and religious curiosity. The star

gazers of the past give place to the earth gazers of the new times. And the reformation is largely indebted to the Greek and Roman culture.

If Bacon loved brilliance, lavishness, show, he loved also beauty, elegance and refinement. We see it in his language, in that rich, yet limpid, exquisite style; we see it in the world he created around himself. Bacon's essays throw a lurid light on the crookedness of Elizabethan statesmanship, when corruption and intrigue prevailed everywhere and nobody could rise to high place at court without possessing the arts which a satirist of his time has expressed in the rhyme:

"Cog, Lie, flatterer and face Four ways in Court to vie

the place"

So Bacon rose, as every politician rose in those days. He followed Essex not merely as long as Essex promised success but as long as his methods were legal and justifiable. Over and over again, Bacon insists that knowledge is to be judged by its result "By its fruit you shall know it." He takes study as a certain duty imposed upon us by the possession of our talent, that is a source of innocent pleasure. That is the handmaid of religion, and that is the condition of all moral and spiritual perfection. The shadow of ignorance has spread barbarism, made men miserable and even disgraced God.

Bacon's literary fame rests on his essays. In them, he is brief, pithy and brilliant with a full share of Jacobean wit. There are metaphysical qualities in his prose that link it to early seventeenth century verse. The importance of Bacon lies in the fact he provided a plain model of English prose. He writes a kind of style never written before, and perhaps never written thereafter. The faults of the prose of his contemporaries are found even in Bacon's prose in which he couched his more serious work. But in his Essays he did give the model. The new style of Bacon was pliant enough to cope with such low topics as pecuniary dealings and also the high ones such as truth and death. It was his prose which with a few changes, that inevitably come with time, ultimately became the commonly accepted model of prose later used by Dryden, Addison, Steele and Thane who came thereafter.

BACON'S WORKS

It is not the matter but the manner that matters in the essay. Bacon's manner is intermediate between that of Montaigne's essays and that of Maxims of La-Rouche-foucauld. He supplies short dissertations wholly sententious in form, supported by quotations from the ancients but founded on direct observation. The rich essays are rich products of his genius. That is the fullest and finest expression of his practical wisdom, he has acquired from study, experience, meditation and rich meditative eloquence.

"Bacon is", in the words of Douglas Bush, "the theoretical and practical leader of anti-ciceronian movement in England." The anti-ciceronian movement aimed at furthering the cause of simplicity, naturalness and straight forwardness in expression. As regards syntax, it favoured short sentences and disapproved of long sentences which went 'five miles wandering with amazing motion. It favoured conversational ease against strained artificial expression. There is nothing in the style of his essays which may put one in mind; of grand railing, finished periods of lumbering length, rich with majestic harmonies. Bacon's style is aphoristic rather than Ciceronian. Cicero has a number of styles colloquialism in his private letters, half formal dialogue in his philosophical treatise and a tremendous variety of modes of oratory in his speeches. But the style in which he is more powerful is full flowing, ornate in which emotion constantly swells up and is constantly ordered and disciplined by superb intellectual

control. Ciceronian style has characteristically balanced profundity with a turn towards Atticism. In *De Argumentis Scientiarum*, after repeating the criticism of Ciceronianism from "The Advancement of Learning", he adds some comments on the new sharp pointed Attic style.

Through the prose of his essays, Bacon set new standards of simplicity and precision which were latter to be accepted as the hall-marks of good prose. Being a scientist himself, he was critical of all ambiguity, prolixity and circumlocution and needless ornament which will go ill with everyday prose. His attitude towards words was the same as his attitude towards knowledge that is the subservience of utility. "It is", said he, "the first distemper of learning when men study words and not matter for words are but the images of matter as they have life of reason and invention. To fall in love with them is all the same as to fall in love with a picture. He was an economiser as regards words and never used two of them where one would suffice. This is particularly true of his earlier essays in which his style borders upon the bald.

Bacon is an Empiricist and many of his sayings have passed into proverbs. Like Burke, Bacon was a conservative of conservatives. A thing to him is good if it can be used in helping one materially in the world. If it does not fulfil the condition, it is useless, however, it may be good from so many other points of view. 'True wisdom' according to Bacon, consists 'in making use of them. The emphasis, obviously, is on 'use'. His essays are certainly useful from the point of view of guiding one to worldly success.

Many of Bacon's opening phrases are as arresting as of Donne's poems. Though in precision and clarity of prose Bacon looks forward to the modern yet he is not altogether modern. His prose is still tinged with a bit of Elizabethan colour. Plutarch had pointed out the danger that the aphoristic style, no less than Ciceronian, could prise words over matter. Similarly as R.F. Jones comments, "although Bacon's prose is full of distinctive anticiceronian rhetoric, his scientific spirit implicitly contains a plea for utter simplicity and lucidity. which became a recognised ideal of prose style latter in seventeenth century. Bacon achieves the extreme conciseness of expression with transparency of meaning by developing crisp, firmly knit epigrammatic and well placed figures of speech.

Selby writes "Part of Bacon's influence is of course due to the charm of his style". Carlyle also strengthens the point "The style is not the coat but the skin of a man. It is an unmistakable proof of Bacon's influence on writers of the succeeding generation and of his untarnished image of undiminished brightness as an essayist. Let us assess some of individual essays to confirm the view.

OF RICHES

The essay 'Of Riches' reflects the co-existence of the two attitudes to wealth in English Renaissance. Riches are a hindrance to a virtuous life. Besides if a man had great wealth, much of it will be superfluous. He needs only a certain amount of riches for the satisfaction of his desires,

but beyond that whatever he has got will give him only an imaginary pleasure. Bacon cautions his readers against the danger of wealth by pointing out that wealth is a hindrance to virtue. Bacon's attitude towards the subject of riches is sound and healthy. He gives us a shrewd analysis of the business world. He is right in pointing out that fraud and cheating are the only means to a speedy gathering of riches and that he who believes in honest, labour and fair means will take a long time to become rich. We clearly see Bacon as a moralist in this essay. The essay contains a number of moral precepts and sound maxims. Bacon's gift of turning out aphorisms and epigrams is also evidenced here.

OF REVENGE

This essay is an excellent example of Bacon's tend to dilute high ideals with expediency and a utilitarian approach to life. When Bacon says that a man, who pardons his enemy, reveals a noble heart, he certainly aims at a high ideal. But he dilutes this high ideal with revenge. He shows his worldly wisdom when he cautions a man wishing to take revenge by saying that the revenge should be such as there is no law to punish. In other words, Bacon would not mind a man's taking revenge for those wrongs which there is no law to remedy. He would suggest a revenge which law cannot take cognizance of. This is indeed strange morality.

OF SIMULATION AND DISSIMULATION

It is one of those essays which shows Bacon as a man of the world. It is clear from the contents of this essay that Bacon is not a believer in any ideal morality but that he is a believer in what may be called "prudence". This essay is full of worldly wisdom. It offers practical guidance to men in their day to day life. Thus it is a contribution to the art of getting on in life. This essay is a mixture of certain moral truths and hale truths. Bacon is certainly right when he tells us that it is the weaker set of politicians that are the greatest dissemblers. He is also right in distinguishing between policy and dissimulation. But when he suggests the occasional use of dissimulation even by persons, who have established a reputation for openness and frankness of dealing: he goes away and then we lie our respect for him.

OF PARENTS AND CHILDREN

The essay belongs to the category of those in which Bacon views men in relation to the world and society. The subject here is of common and widespread interest. Every parent would like to know how to bring up, or deal with his children. Rightly did Bacon call his essays "counsels civil and moral". This essay contains some good advice for parents. Parents are, for instance, taught not to discriminate between one child and other. In other words, it is not proper for parents to show their preference in respect of their children. However, it would be difficult for parents to follow this advice in cases where certain children show sign of exceptional merit and thus give rise to a feeling of pride in the hearts of parents. Bacon is on surer ground, when he points out that it is wrong for parents to be miserly in the matter of the pocket allowance for their children.

OF LOVE

Here in this provocative essay. Bacon underrates the emotion of love. The Baconian theory of love is diametrically opposed Shakespeare's. Bacon's tone is cynical. He says that love plays a greater role in theatre than in actual life of man. . This essay is bound to have a wide appeal because of the subject it deal with. But Bacon's treatment of this important subject is somewhat disappointing. It is essentially a rationalist speaking in this essay. Bacon speaks of the negative side of love. He dwells mainly on the disadvantages of love. It plays the role of a siren and sometimes that of fury. Speaking like a moralist and puritan, he observes that no great eat and worthy persons of ancient or modern time has ever been driven to the mad degree of love.

OF EMPIRE

This is one of the political essays of Bacon. The ideas of the essay have now become obsolete. This essay cannot be said to be a collection of "dispersed meditation." The ideas here naturally flow from one another. Like several other essays of Bacon, this one opens with an arresting generalization: "It is a miserable state of mind to have few things to desire and many things to fear, and yet that commonly is case with kings...." Bacon's genius for condensing his ideas in a few words is clearly seen in this essay.

OF THE TRUE GREATNESS OF KINGDOMS AND ESTATES

There are certain counsellors and statesmen who have the capacity and the aptitude to work for the welfare and the advancement of their country. This essay shows usual characteristics of Bacon's style. We get a number of quotations. There is one from Themistocles, another from Virgil then from Cicero (This quotation from Virgil Latin) and so on. There are a number of allusions and illustrations. There is an allusion to solon who said to Croesus: "Sir, if any other come that hath better iron than you, he will be master of all this gold."

OF AMBITION

It is one of those essays which go straight to men's heart and bosoms. There is nothing very deep or philosophical about its ideas. It is a probe into the psychology of ambition and shows Bacon's great knowledge of human nature which, of course, he derived from his personal experience of men and affairs. Although Bacon's essays abound in allusions also. We have only one allusion in this essay a king can make use of ambitious men in pulling down those who have become too powerful. Bacon's essays are generally studied with similes, metaphors and illustrations. Here we have a simile in the very opening sentence and a very appropriate one it is. "Ambition is like Choler" says Bacon and goes on to explain the point of comparison.

OF TRAVEL

Bacon gives us some very useful hints in this essay on the

subject of travel. Like his other essays, this one has a lot of practical value. Bacon tells us what places and scenes one should visit when travelling in a foreign land. He tells us what the object of travel should be...education in the case of younger people and experience in the case of older ones. He advises us to acquire some knowledge of the language of the country which we propose to visit. He wants us to keep a diary or a record of what we see. He tells us the kind of persons whose acquaintances we should make in a foreign country. He urges us to avoid quarrels while travelling to foreign lands. And, finally, he tells us how we should behave when we return to our own country from our foreign travel.

OF GARDEN

In his other essays, Bacon speaks of politics, war, religion, riches, ambition, death, revenge, friendship, marriage, health, travel, studies and so on but here is an essay in which he describes the design of a garden. It shows Bacon's sensuous approach. It provides feast for our senses of sight, smell, touch and taste. The described English trees, plants and flowers fill the essay with a rich fragrance and delight us. Indeed, perhaps, Bacon's garden is in no way inferior to the Garden of Eden which was planted by God. This essay also shows Bacon's descriptive skill. He describes the plant of his garden in great detail. We are struck by its vividness and relish Bacon's account of the garden. We are made to feel that we are actually visiting the various parts of this garden. Much of what Bacon describes in this essay reminds us of Buddha Garden in New Delhi which has most of the features that Bacon thinks desirable.

BACON'S PROSE STYLE

Bacon Provided a Model: The importance of Bacon lies in the fact he provided a plain model of English prose. He writes a kind of style never written before, and perhaps never written thereafter. The faults of the prose of his contemporaries are found even in Bacon's prose in which he couched his more serious work. But in his Essays he did give the model. The new style of Bacon was pliant enough to cope with such low topics as pecuniary dealings and also the high ones such as truth and death. It was his prose which with a few changes, that inevitably come with time, ultimately became the commonly accepted model of prose later used by Dryden, Addison, Steele and Thane who came thereafter.

Varied Style: Bacon like Ruskin, was a master of more than one style. He changed his style in accordance with the topic. The history of Henry VIII, his philosophical work and the Essays have each a style different from others. In the beginning Bacon's style was bold, unornamental Jerky on account of the absence of connectives, highly condensed, almost stenographic. Later, however, he added to it some connective, images and figures of speech and made it less curt but more persuasive. Nevertheless the basic strength, simplicity and straightforwardness of his early style continued in a good measure in the late.

Simplicity: Simplicity is the keynote of Bacon's style, both

the earlier and the later. His prose is the prose of an analytical, precise scientist. Hence, it is bound to be clear and straightforward. However, he is a scientist of the Elizabethan and Jacobean times. Naturally, his prose is not completely clear and straightforward. It is not surprising that Bacon does indulge here and there in figures of speech, scholarly Latinisms and imagery which distract from the simplicity of his style. According to Macaulay, Bacon's aim was first, to be clear, and only second, to impress. It is really surprising that such an erudite philosopher and scholar as Bacon did not mind using very simple and sometimes, vulgar words. Take for example, his use of the word "push" in the sense of "pimple", "trush" in the sense of "Money". Simplicity, however, is not equivalent to vulgarity, poverty of thought or barrenness of expression. Bacon's simplicity is a kind of intellectual simplicity for he wrote mainly for the intellectual, go-ahead type of individuals and not for the vulgar for whom he had nothing but open contempt. So the simplicity of his language is not an evidence of the lowness of his thoughts.

Terseness: Closely allied with simplicity, directness and clarity of Bacon's style is its terseness. This quality is more pronounced in his early essays than his later ones. Terseness of expression arising from condensation of thought was a single great virtue of Bacon and he possessed it in a greater measure than any other writer, ancient or modern, with the possible exception of Tacitus. This terseness is obtained by:

- (i) The use of the weigh test and simplest words,
- (ii) A persistent avoidance of superfluous words and, very often connectives.

Bacon's Wit Imaginative Insight and Poetry: The emphasis on the simplicity of Bacon's prose should not be taken to be mean. That his prose is bold and barren. His style is also coloured by wit, imaginative, insight and a "poetry" of his own-particularly in the later essays. In wit, that is power of perceiving similarities in apparently dissimilar objects, Bacon, as Macaulay says, had no equal not even Cowley, not even the author of Hudibras. The opening of his essays are very often striking for the use of analogy, metaphor and simile, consider for instance.

- (i) Men fear death as children fear to go in the dark. (Of Death)
- (ii) Fortune is like the market, where many times, if you can stay a little, the price will fall. (Of Delays)

Bacon's images, similes and metaphors do not grow out of their context and enjoy an independent life of their own as is the case with metaphysical conceits. A school of critics has gone to the extent of crediting all of Shakespeare's plays to Bacon. The point that we want to make here is that Bacon's prose is not very prosaic as is often given out. It has "poetry" of its own.

Quotations- A word now about Bacon's quotations: Himself one of the most quotable of prose writers, he often draws illustrations and quotations from many books

notwithstanding his assertions about his Essays that they are of a nature whereof a man shall find much in experience, little in books. It must be noted that he often misquotes, transferring words (which are also often inaccurately transcribed) from one author to another and sometimes misinterpreting the author by wrenching him off his original context. This is in his essay of "friendship" he misinterprets and misrepresents Aristotle consciously intending a parody. A fact worth noting about Bacon's quotations is that he does not quote any English poet, not even Chaucer and Shakespeare, and even of the later poets he quotes from only three - Virgil, Ovid and Lucretius.

CONCLUSION

Bacon is universally acknowledged with pride as the pioneer of essays in English Literature. The importance of Bacon, in fact, lies in that he produced a pliant model of English prose. He evolved a style never written before and perhaps never thereafter. The new style of Bacon is pliant enough to cope with such low topics as pecuniary dealings and also the high ones as Truth and Death. In the essay 'Of Truth', he urges his readers to develop a love of truth because falsehood will only bring disgrace and degradation to them. He admits that lies are often attractive. But he warns against the punishment which befalls in its consequence.

However, his analogies, similes, and metaphors are not like the conceits of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors. His prose has tenacious adherence grammatical rules, but at times, it becomes ungrammatical. Bacon's each saying is regarded as a grain of salt and it can be conveniently expanded into a full-fledged essay by itself. The frequent presence of provocative aphorisms keep the interest of readers sustained. They serve as intellectual appetizer rather than heavy coined dishes. Unlike Montaigne or Romantic essayists, Bacon did not aim at self revelation. A man like Bacon, an intellectual colossus with such an endless variety of tastes and

interests and with prodigious intelligence cannot be a bore. Bacon is through and through a pedagogue.

Thus, the appeal of Bacon's prose is not ephemeral but eternal because they are highly literary compositions. They are enjoyable for aesthetic and utilitarian value, but offer immense profit and delight. To conclude with the words of James Stephens "Bacon speaks like an oracle. Moral and civil knowledge like Orpheus music for the beasts it less important to Bacon than natural philosophy, bet writing of it in essays gives him an opportunity to perfect the style that will carry his greatest contributions to what hoped would be a receptive audience".

REFERENCES

1. Abbot, E.A. a. Bacon's Essays. b. Bacon, An Account of his Life and Work (1885).
2. Cook, A.S. The Bible and English Prose Style (Boston, 1892).
3. Vickers, Brian Francis Bacon and Renaissance Prose (Cambridge, 1968).
4. Brian Vickers Essential Articles for the Study of Francis Bacon (Hamden Connecticut 1968. London 1972).
5. Stanley E. Fish Essays in Criticism (New York, 1971).
6. The Study of the Essay, An Introduction to the Study of Literature. p. 332.
7. Essays on Prose, Quinlence of Literary Essays. p.1.
8. Selection from Francis Bacon. p. 115.
9. Wks 1 452 Tran Croll in Attic Prose.
10. Bacon's Work. Vol. VII. Ed. by Ellis & Spedding Heath. p. 321.