

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Essays or Counsels Civil and Moral (1597-1625)

Francis Bacon. (1561-1626)

General character of Bacon's essays Bacon's collection of fifty-eight mini essays, many of them a page or two long, immediately calls for a comparison with the essays of Michel de Montaigne, who lived and wrote (1533-1592) not long after Francis Bacon. Each of these men occupied a privileged and influential position in his society—that was the great sixteenth and early seventeenth century, in which literary voices often resounded from the high corridors of power. Like Bacon, Montaigne took the essay form as an invitation to explore the human condition 'in your shirtsleeves,' addressing the essential textures of ordinary life, without much preamble or scene setting. Montaigne will probe the wonders and perversities of daily life, the moral quandaries generated by military conflicts, the best procedures for child raising, the dilemmas raised by a thinking life in a society which was settling its complex, and evolving relations to Christianity, or by the kinds of foresight needed to factor fortune, or Lady Luck, into one's game plan for successful living. Opening the floodgates of the daily was a way of starting to look closely at the present.

Bacon in his historical time To this opening of self, Francis Bacon brought fifty-eight small passages of observation and discourse. (He, like Montaigne, only debatably argues for a philosophical stance, or for that matter argues, which was to become the hall mark of 'modern philosophy,' as it evolved through the seventeenth century in Descartes, Leibniz, or Spinoza. Bacon does not argue but stage sets, induces perspectives and insights, the key tonal move of the early essay. Can we say that Bacon (and Montaigne) open purviews onto the intellectual imagination, as did those modernist prose poem writers like Baudelaire or H.D. who in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries taught modern thinkers to express themselves in the description of perceptual emotion?)

Architecture of Bacon's first essay: 'Of Truth' The architecture of this essay seems at first oblique and even convoluted, yet by its conclusion, it thunders with God's voice, having made of truth both the first evidence of sentience in mankind, and the clarion call of the final world-revelation, through which Jesus Christ returns to earth to find it faithless. The argumentation in this essay springs from the characterization of a personality type, the Pilate who 'washed his hands of the whole matter of truth,' when faced with the Jews' demand for a judgment of Jesus, and passes on to a condemnation of that 'giddiness' which allows the serpent of deceit to infiltrate the mouths of fallen men. The easiness of the lie takes over from that point, seducing us with God knows what enhanced facility of manipulation, and obscuring the clear light of day in which God has bathed his first creation. (Interesting, to a 'modern reader,' is the interweave of argumentation with theology; a trademark of the intimacy of belief in the subtlest writing of the early modern stylists.) The humiliation, of being caught naked in a lie, is deep and annihilating to the liar.

Montaigne is called in here, to formulate the condition:

'If it be well weighed, to say that a man lies, is as much as to say that he is brave towards God and a coward toward men.'

The 'coward toward men' bit will speak to all of us whose recourse to lying to others fueled by the dread of creating enemies.

How the discussion is deployed within the first essay 'On Truth' We are looking at an outline of mind-moves powerful for Bacon, in this first of his essays, and perhaps the key ground for developing the foundations of his world sense. Any breach of reliability, in thinking, speaking, or interpreting opens a flawed detour in one's pathway toward full bodied being-here. Like Montaigne Bacon rests his whole case in language on reliability, and intelligent penetration of the world we are trying to understand. To highlight

the nobility of truth, Bacon adopts a perorative movement of thought that subtly grafts part on part: ancient thinkers' reluctance to bind themselves to fixed beliefs; lies as a more attractive version of truths—fresher, more vivid, in fact constitutive for arts like poetry; the tawdriness of this cover up hat lying is exposed in all its shallowness, when compared to 'the sovereign good of human nature.' The directive presence of a concerned Master Creator is sub-texted throughout this discussion, or mind play, or moral stand off, which Bacon, with a small number in his time—Montaigne, Castiglione, More, Erasmus-- were masterfully employing to pass from thematic cluster to thematic cluster. What fills the spaces?

Transitions between essays Bacon has left us fifty-eight essays, with no *single* theme. (We will look at the 'themes' in the final section, ahead.) Perhaps there is a guiding tone, but no single theme, as there is no single theme in Montaigne's far more numerous essays. So what then are the rules of transition from one thought block to another in the process of this essay?

Think of the first five essays: 'Of Truth,' 'Of Death,' 'Of Unity in Religion,' 'Of Revenge,' 'Of Adversity.' There is coherence if not thematic unity. Thanks to the comprehensive treatment of truth, in the first essay, we are readied to value the contempt for death which undergirds the second essay—with its stress on death as a portal to reward, the reward for the faithful servant, who has 'done his job on earth.' An ozone of purity and discipline sets the tonality of the first two essays, while the movement into the unity of religions, in essay three, invokes the human potential for mutual respect, and the abiding centrality of that single god voicing the reverent in the background. Revenge, in the fourth essay, anatomizes the self-punishment, of the man who chooses to equalize himself with his foe, at the cost of 'keeping his own wounds green,' and of course losing the interior balance promised to us by the coherence of truth, freedom (from the fear of death), and unity—our tonal ripening in the first three essays. In his passage into Essay five, on 'Adversity,' Bacon readies us to agree that there is a dark background of pain in the human condition, and that readiness to dismiss that pain will in the end prove to be man's crowning achievement.

Directionality of the essays Neither Bacon nor his model, Montaigne, writes in a linear, Cartesian fashion, with an eye on progress toward a goal. (In that sense both of them have poetic fashions Inside language, write circularly, returning often to enrich points, or digressively, to pick up new themes as they emerge from the internal discussion the writer is carrying on with himself. Each writer is profligate with examples, and crowds the surrounding discourse with private commentary. Bacon is particularly of dense presentation, and Latinate languaging, which keeps the reader—modern for sure, Renaissance too, presumably—gasping at times for intellectual breath. Although there is no 'end' to the course of these essays of Bacon, there are landmark pressures in the developing discussion; we will visit seven of these landmarks, before winding in the spool of Bacon's keen moral weaving. At that point we can try to encapsulate the themes of this diverse collection, which, like Montaigne's, grounds itself in diverse interests and an openness to what comes.

Seven landmark essays of Bacon

#10 Of Love As Bacon makes clear, in his first essay, on truth, he finds that condition, *veritas*, nothing Less than the world as God created it. He is dubious of the imagination, because it embroiders the plain truth. Would we then say that Bacon is a literalist or pragmatic, who looks on dourly at flights of fancy, on what we call the arts? It is in these questions, of the finer movements of mind, that Bacon can easily be misjudged. He is a friend of spirit and discipline, but a Master of the uses of those very virtues, which he takes seriously. His training and inclination are classical. Like Montaigne—to cite a brilliant predecessor—Bacon is addicted to what is pithy, purposeful, and morally ripe about the classical Heritage, as he reads it off the constantly freeing texts of the New Dawn of the Printing Press, which is enlightening the ancient on all sides of him. That salute to the imaginative, which will take wing in Britain (and Western Europe) wo hundred years later, and which Will open vision and nature into a supersensitive single lens, was still to come. And with it would come a cult of love—Romantic, not Biblical—which was still too rich for the narrower optic of the just post classical. Love as cultural romance would need to wait its time.

16 *Of Atheism* 'I can rather believe all the fables in the Legend, and the Talmud, and the Alcoran, than that this universal frame is without a mind.' For Bacon, as for Montaigne, God is more aptly described as the Truth—part of the point of the first essay—than as a Being, and the presence of a personal support, like Jesus Christ, is hardly taken into consideration, when it comes to theology. (The Nicene perspective, with its emphasis on the Trinity, is subordinate to the clean metaphysics of an intelligence-pervaded unity, wholeness.) The deep proof, of the unworthiness of atheism, is this:

'They that deny a God deny man's nobility, for certainly man is of kin to the beasts, and, if he be not kin to God by his spirit he is a base and ignoble spirit.'

Both Montaigne and Bacon see the human condition as flawed, and God a necessary element in the good wholeness of our kind. Just as one finds little recourse, in this natural philosophy, to the human dramaturgy of this cosmic-religious perspective, one finds much of that kind of geometric-piety of Descartes or Pascal, as they will, a century later, find in the natural sciences the most convincing arguments for the order in the universe and in the human being.

34 *Of innovations* *As the births of living creatures at first are ill-shapen, so are all innovations which are the birth of time.*

Given the condition in which human life has its origins, we need to await the power of time to modify and even perfect the stumbling development of the infant human. In medicine, for instance, one must not hesitate to try out the new, 'for time is the greatest innovator.' 'They that reverence too much old times are but a scorn to the new.' The smart move for humans, consequently, is to imitate the practice of time, which is to innovate constantly, but quietly. Custom, as both Montaigne and Bacon elaborately observe, provides resting places in time, serves the purpose of temporal reorganization, and can only be admired under a particular condition, that in giving way eventually to change through time, custom will arrange that true reformation brings the change itself, and not the mere desire for change. We must discover, from within the customary, the straight and narrow way which leads into and through meaning.

27 *Of friendship* Montaigne treasured friendship, as the greatest ennobling pleasure of his life, and In his four years of friendship with Etienne de la Boétie, his young man political ally, and the 'other that was I,' he experienced joy as never again. (Highly doubtful that there was any homoerotic content to this, but closeness of soul and sentiment). Bacon (who was probably an active homosexual, like Desiderius Erasmus, and many other creative Renaissance thinkers) calls his eros by the name of friendship, and devotes one of his Longest essays to the topic.

Love, says Bacon, 'is the essential ingredient to pleasure among human beings.'

'For a crowd is not company, and faces are but a gallery of pictures, and talk but A tinkling cymbal when there is no love.' (Remember Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1970) which expressed the same point in the American sixties, as the author looked out on the greening of America?) It is a mere and miserable solitude to want true friends, without which the world is but a wilderness. The intimacy of true friends to one another, in a society, provides a kind of civil shrift, by which we can confess one another, and relieve one another of those pains imposed by daily existence; 'sharers of cares,' as the Romans put it.

38. *Of Nature in Men* Human nature, thinks Bacon, is hard to counteract, and requires great attention, lest it recur powerfully, and declare itself just when least appropriate. For Bacon, the key to dealing with our human nature—our particular and forceful propensities, like drinking, or gossiping, or ignoring our prayers—is to 'bend nature like a wand,' handling it supply with no expectation of finally subduing it. Good sense, in dealing with one's nature, depends on the individual's willingness not to expect too much of himself, not to be easily discouraged, and above all to plan 'intermissions,' when he is able to indulge himself in that 'glass of wine' or 'tidbit of gossip' which placates nature without turning over the power to it.

42 *Of youth and age* With characteristic finesse, Bacon both contrasts the stages of age and youth, and plants surprises where the discussion of the two life stages might seem to grow hackneyed. Staple

and indisputable notions of the two conditions are laid out with, invariably, the salt of difference which makes for the life of Bacon's insights. The expectations are met: 'young men are fitter to invent than to judge...fitter for execution than for counsel...the errors of young men are the ruin of business...' . Then comes that not too expected twist of insight: Bacon speaks of 'that which doubleth all errors; 'young men' will not acknowledge and retract their errors, like an unready horse that will neither stop nor turn. Men of age,' on the contrary, 'object too much, consult too long, and seldom drive business home to the full period.'

58. The vicissitude of things _This selection of landmarks, from Bacon's essays, underplays the large issue of Fortuna, which in both Montaigne and Bacon—as well as in late mediaeval music, art, and Philosophy is a recurrent concern. We are talking, in Bacon's time, of a period of cultural history in which various threats to human existence are making themselves felt. No doubt this atmosphere of threat—which coincided with much news of the newly discovered worlds to west and east, storms and shipwrecks, and hitherto rarely noted natural disasters in Western Europe. Vicissitudes were obvious by products of the world that was dis-closing itself to science and adventure in the Renaissance.

The Renaissance was a period in which historical and cultural prospects were emerging from the wraps of mediaeval myth-historia, as were the first serious scientific theories, such as those of Roger Bacon (1220-1292). With a scientific optic came the realization that the by and large closed world of the Mediaeval Mind was in part a smokescreen emitted by religious ignorance. While Bacon's astute and cunning observations of mind and morals grew from a uniquely probing mind, it can be said that change and chance and openness, the first fruits of analytical thought, were among the world conditions that the Early Modern mind needed first to cope with.

THE THEMES OF BACON'S THOUGHT

Style Bacon writes with style, and admires style. He thinks clearly, he admires clarity of distinctions; and he sees to it that every sentence has a specific job to do, and must complete it until the following sentence has been initiated. Like Montaigne Bacon believes in taking rich topics as they come, clarifying them and exemplifying all issues, and carrying them through to a resolution. Though he can hardly have known it, soaked as he is in Latin training, his own verbal style reverberates with the eloquence and discipline of Silver Age Latin.

Boldness of Inquiry When Bacon addresses a theme, like youth and age or love and friendship he pursues it fully. He chooses examples which press his point into its finest implications. He writes to startle, to convince, and to force the reader into investigation. Is this a theme or a practice by which Bacon reinforces all his themes?

Common Sense Bacon makes clear, throughout his essays, that he will weigh in on the side of common sense rather than of fancy. By common sense he does not mean 'straightforward' statement, for he is notoriously paratactical in his greatest meaning-conveying sentences, but it means content available to general interpretation.

Belief in Meaning For Bacon, it is unbelievable that the living world in which we find ourselves should not be the product of meaning. Behind that meaning must lie an intelligent and all powerful creator. The very premise of style in writing is coherence in actuality.

Chance Nature, historical transitions, the hunger of time to gobble up the past, the shortness of memory: All these elements of our setting in life conspire to render our present moment in time a tissue of possibilities, of potential existence situations which might have been ours. The fact is that each of us is the byproduct of just the existential elements that define us. We are products of chance, though not products of chaos or lack of meaning, for meaning (and the Creator's pressure in it) is what makes us so much aware of what accident really is.