

## **11. A Noble Heart**

*"You would pluck out the heart of my mystery"*

*"Here cracks a noble heart"*

—Hamlet

### ***Mind of Mystery***

The external details of a human life do not really reveal the mind of the individual, especially if that person is secretive by nature and, more especially, if the individual is a unique genius. Both of these characteristics apply to Francis Bacon. When Nicholas Hillyard did a miniature portrait of him at the age of 18, he wrote in Latin around the picture of his face: "If only one could paint his mind". Clearly, the man's outstanding abilities were recognised at an early age. As for secrecy, in his biography of Bacon, published in 1884, R.W. Church writes that "he lived very much as a recluse in his chambers, and was thought to be reserved, and what those who disliked him called arrogant" (*Bacon*, 1884, p9). Naturally, this contributed to an air of mystery about him, a quality which remained throughout his life. It was noted by Ben Jonson in the poem on Bacon's 60th birthday quoted earlier.

The secrecy was admitted by Bacon himself on several occasions. In *The Refutation of Philosophies*, a work he never published, he remarked that "every man of superior understanding in contact with inferiors wears a mask". His essay *Of Simulation and Dissimulation* also throws some light on this important facet of his personality. About secrecy, he writes:

"It is indeed the virtue of a confessor; and assuredly the secret man heareth many confessions; for who will open himself to a blab or a babbler? But if a man be thought secret, it inviteth discovery, as the more close air sucketh in the more open; and, as in confession, the revealing is not for worldly use, but for the ease of a man's heart, so secret men come to the knowledge of many things in that kind; while men rather discharge their minds than impart their minds. In few words, mysteries are due to secrecy. Besides (to say truth), nakedness is uncomely, as well in mind as body; and it addeth no small reverence to men's manners and actions, if they be not altogether open".

He goes on to say that there are three advantages of simulation and dissimulation:

"First, to lay asleep opposition, and to surprise; for where a man's intentions are published, it is an alarm to call up all that are against them:

the second is, to reserve to a man's self a fair retreat; for if a man engage himself by a manifest declaration, he must go through, or take a fall: the third is, the better to discover the mind of another; for to him that opens himself men will hardly show themselves adverse; but will (fair) let him go on, and turn their freedom of speech to freedom of thought; and therefore it is a good shrewd proverb of the Spaniard, Tell a lie and find a truth; as if there were no way of discovery but by simulation".

Bacon ends the essay by concluding that "the best composition and temper is, to have openness in fame and opinion; secrecy in habit; dissimulation in seasonable use; and a power to feign if there be no remedy".

'Secrecy in habit' certainly describes much of his own behaviour. His public life as a statesman and lawyer is well known, but it is almost impossible to catch a glimpse of him in his parlour, or study, or bedroom. His private letters have nearly all disappeared, and the recollections of contemporaries do little to enlighten us in this respect. Spedding writes: "While he has left the records of the business of his life for our inspection in such abundance and with little reserve—while he makes us welcome to attend him to the Court, the palace, the Parliament, and the council-board—he seldom or never admits us to his fireside".

One possible reason for this 'secrecy in habit', as he himself tell us in the essay, is to 'lay asleep opposition'. If Bacon was secretly writing poetry and plays, then he may be thinking of the opposition of his mother and the authorities. Indeed, he does actually tell us that these were among his secret activities in the letter to Sir John Davies in which he calls himself a 'concealed poet'. We have seen too that he referred to a written work which 'though it grew from me, went after about in others names'. Again, he also told Burghley in the famous 1592 letter that his mind had two sorts of rovers, the second of which was "blind experiments and auricular traditions and impostures", and he told Essex in a letter that the law took up too much of his time which he had "devoted to better purposes". These are only three of several intriguing statements found throughout his correspondence which seem to allude to his secret activities. Again, in a letter to Tobie Matthew in 1611 he wrote that: "My great work goeth forward; and after my manner, I alter ever when I add. So that nothing is finished till all be finished". Immediately Swinburne's description of the revisions of *Hamlet* spring to mind: "Scene by scene, line by line, stroke by stroke, and touch after touch, he went over all the old laboured ground again".

The letter in which Matthew wrote the above accompanied a copy of Bacon's *De Sapientia Veterum* (1609), his account of ancient myths,

which was translated by Sir Arthur Gorges in 1619 as *The Wisdom of the Ancients*. Gorges includes a poem 'To The book' prefaced to his translation, which begins:

*"Rich mine of art: minion of Mercury;  
True touchstone of the mind of Mystery".*

Bacon's own preface is itself fascinating. He writes: "Above all things this prevails most with me, and is of singular moment—that many of these fables seem not to be invented of those by whom they are related and celebrated, as by Homer, Hesiod, and others". Now, superficially, this statement can be taken as a reference to the fact that many parables and myths were not invented by the writers who first told us about them. But he could also be alluding to the doubts about whether there were real men known as Homer or Hesiod, or whether they were more than one, or if instead the poems attributed to them were composed over time, by a series of storytellers, and were eventually written down. This interpretation is supported by a later quizzical remark about his own works: "As concerning my labours, if there be anything in them which may do good, I will on neither part count them ill-bestowed, my purpose being to illustrate antiquity, or things themselves". By 'bestowed' he could mean 'presented to the public', but he could also mean 'passed off to the public under someone else's name'. The latter meaning is strengthened by the explanation of his purpose. He wanted to 'illustrate ...things themselves'. In other words, he wanted to depict reality as he saw it. And here we are reminded of Jaques' 'motley' speech. Bacon wished to conceal his identity, and publish his work under another name, in order to speak his mind freely and tell the truth without fear of persecution, censorship or imprisonment.

### ***Creeping Snake Or Soaring Angel?***

One common objection to the Baconian theory is that, whatever concealed poetry Bacon wrote, it could not have been Shakespeare because that author had an essential nobility of mind, whereas Francis Bacon was a "creeping snake" in Macaulay's colourful phrase or a "glittering serpent" in Lytton Strachey's. In other words, the contention is that Shakespeare was clearly a better person than Bacon, a self-seeking, scheming political opportunist, who was obsequious to the Queen, always in financial difficulties (which must have had their roots in some evil cause), ungrateful to his friend Essex, and a crook convicted of corruption, and so on. This is an important accusation, for nobility of mind is certainly one of the chief characteristics of Shakespeare as revealed in the works and one of the keys to their enduring and universal appeal.

Leaving aside whether such a claim of nobility could ever seriously be made about William of Stratford, let us examine this objection more closely. Bacon's moral character suffered an onslaught which began in the 19th century and was led by Macaulay who commented that "his faults were—we write it with pain— coldness of heart and meanness of spirit". In his biography published in 1884, Dean Church echoed these sentiments: "He was willing to be employed to hunt to death a friend like Essex, guilty, deeply guilty to the State, but to Bacon the most loving and generous of benefactors. With his eyes open he gave himself up without resistance to a system unworthy of him; he would not see what evil was in it, and chose to call its evil good; and he was its first and most signal victim" (*op.cit.*, p2). The indictments tend to focus on two events in Bacon's life: the Essex affair and his fall. In *Elizabeth and Essex* (1928) Lytton Strachey portrays Bacon as a monster of treachery and ingratitude for his treatment of the Earl. Church puts it bluntly: "In cold blood he sat down to blacken Essex, using his intimate personal knowledge of the past to strengthen his statements against a friend who was in his grave, and for whom none could answer but Bacon himself" (p54).

This judgment is very unfair. Bacon initially believed that Essex was someone who could bring fresh energy and ability to deal with the country's problems. He admits as much himself: "I held at that time my Lord to be the fittest instrument to do good in the state". Essex had great emotional gifts and Bacon had hoped to strengthen the rational side of his nature and thus bring the two into balance. But this hope was not fulfilled. As Essex grew older, he grew more emotional and neglected his powers of political thought and organisation. Indeed, Bacon had seen that this was happening and warned him against it in the letter of 1596 which urged Essex to shun any appearance of popularity or "impression of martial greatness" and instead seek the favour of the Queen alone by taking up some quiet post at court. He later admitted: "I have spent more time in vain in studying how to make the earl a good servant to the Queen and state than I have done in anything else". According to J.G. Crowther, "In the world of the twentieth century, Essex would have tended to be a fascist. Bacon's attitude towards him, trying to cure him of his faults and help him while there was hope, and when all hope had gone, firmly detaching himself and following a rational policy however unpleasant, has been justified by subsequent history" (*The First Statesman of Science*, 1960, p209).

In *The Winding Stair*, Daphne du Maurier sums up Bacon's role in the affair and adds another possible reason for his behaviour:

"When the earl stood trial for treason in Westminster Hall, Francis Bacon spoke for the Crown at the express command of Her Majesty the

Queen, a summons he could not disobey. If his words, spoken without malice and with great sincerity—for he believed the rebellion to have been a genuine attempt to seize the reigns of government—had helped to send the misguided earl to the block, then such had been his distressing, painful duty. The earl had been his patron and friend, and had rendered him many a service, which he repaid in kind. But his loyalty to the monarch came before friendship or gratitude. He had learned that loyalty at his father's knee. Sir Nicholas Bacon, Lord Keeper of the great Seal, held the Crown paramount after God. Francis had a double motive for demonstrating loyalty. He knew that if he used all the powers of oratory at his command—and it was for this skill that he, a junior counsel, had been chosen to speak on such a grave occasion—the fact that his brother Anthony was a close friend and confidant of the accused earl, and could well have been privy to the rebellion even from his sick bed, would not be mentioned at Westminster Hall. Francis might be instrumental in helping to send the Earl of Essex to the block, but in doing so he would save his brother Anthony from the gallows" (pp15-16).

As for his fall, in 1621 Bacon was indicted on charges of bribery and forced to leave public office as Lord Chancellor. Yet his moral integrity had never been questioned in 30 years in the Commons, and the charges appeared suddenly at a time when the King and his favourite Buckingham faced a storm over monopoly patents. On the same day, two men, Christopher Aubrey and Sir Edward Egerton, presented petitions to the Commons claiming that up to three years previously the Lord Chancellor had accepted gifts from them while he was dealing with their cases. The curious feature of these two charges is that the two men apparently had nothing to gain from making them apart from revenge because, although they had given bribes in the hope that their suits would succeed, Bacon had actually ruled against them! Nevertheless, investigations revealed other instances of gifts until the final charges numbered twenty-eight. The case was referred to the Lords and, while they were deliberating Bacon, apparently on the king's advice, sent them a confession in which he pleaded guilty to receipt of gifts, though nowhere did he admit that he ever accepted a fee or reward to pervert justice.

Clearly, Bacon was entirely innocent of the bribery charges. The acceptance of gifts by high officials was a recognised custom, and every Lord Chancellor from the time of Sir Thomas More depended very much on this 'fee' system to supplement the meagre incomes granted by the state. Bacon acknowledged that he or his servants had received gifts but maintained that this custom never influenced his judgments. However, he was found guilty, fined £40,000, imprisoned in the Tower during the

King's pleasure, and lost all his offices and his seat in Parliament but retained his titles and his personal property. Two days later Bacon wrote to Buckingham from the Tower: "Good my Lord, procure the warrant for my discharge this day"—hardly the words of a guilty man. He was then released and the fine remitted—in other words, the verdict was more or less quashed. Nieves Mathews, in her book, *Francis Bacon: The History of a Character Assassination* (1996), shows that Bacon was completely innocent of the charges and that opportune writers such as Macaulay were themselves guilty of slandering Bacon's reputation and unfairly influencing later generations.

One of those who wrote an account of the affair was Bacon's servant Thomas Bushell in *The First Part of Youth's Errors* (1628). He seems to have had a complete breakdown after Bacon's fall, a disaster for which he held himself partly responsible, and lived for a period in a cave on a cliff in the Isle of Man. He wrote: "Myself and others of his servants were the occasion of exhaling his virtues into a dark eclipse; which God knows would have long endured both for the honour of his king, and good of the commonalty; had not we whom his bounty nursed, laid on his guiltless shoulders our base and execrable deeds to be scanned and censured by the whole Senate of a state, where no sooner sentence was given, but most of us forsook him, which makes us bear the badge of Jews to this day". He continued that it "grieves my very soul, that so matchless a peer should be lost by such insinuating caterpillars, who in his own nature scorned the least thought of any base, unworthy, or ignoble act, though subject to infirmities, as ordained by the wisest". In Bushell's view, Bacon was the victim of a political campaign "to select some man of worth for allaying clamour of the vulgar, and congratulate the giddy multitude" (Bushell quoted in Jardine & Stewart, *op.cit.*, pp462-3).

Far from being a crooked judge, Bacon was a man of deep integrity. He himself wrote: "I was the justest judge, that was in England these last fifty years. When the book of all hearts is opened, I trust I shall not be found to have the troubled fountain of a corrupt heart. I know I have clean hands and a clean heart. I am as innocent of bribes as any born on St. Innocents Day". Thus while many prominent politicians, including Cecil, received large pensions from Spain during the early years of James's reign, no attempt was made by the Spaniards to bribe Bacon. As Crowther comments, "Like Elizabeth, Essex and Salisbury, the Spaniards no doubt judged that he could never be theirs; that he was incapable of putting himself entirely into any other person's power; and was fundamentally incorruptible" (*op.cit.*, p225). Indeed Bacon was almost alone among leading politicians in not paying James I for his offices and promotions.

The best judges of Bacon's character are those nearest to him. His close friend Sir Tobie Matthew confessed that "I have never yet seen any trace in him of a vindictive mind, whatever injury were done him, nor even heard him utter a word to any man's disadvantage, which seemed to proceed from personal feelings against the man... it is not his greatness I admire, but his virtue; it is not the favours I have received from him (infinite though they be) that have enthralled and enchained my heart but his whole life and character". To his apothecary Peter Boener he was "a memorable example of all virtue, kindness, peaceableness and patience". To his editor Rawley, "if ever there were a beam of knowledge derived from God upon any man in these modern times, it was upon him". Aubrey tells us that "all who were great and good loved and honoured him".

Perhaps the best proof of these judgments is the fact that Bacon bore his undeserved fall with great nobility. There was a total absence of resentment against his enemies. Bushell, his servant, said he forgave him and "received me into favour". Spedding, his major biographer, wrote: "Had he not fallen, or had he not fallen upon a future less desolate in outward conditions, I should never have known how great and invincible a thing intrinsic goodness really is".

Even Macaulay concedes that "he was seldom, if ever, provoked into treating any person with malignity and insolence. No man more readily held up the left cheek to those who had smitten the right" ('Lord Bacon', 1837; reprinted in *Critical and Historical Essays*, pp346-414).

And it must not be forgotten that Macaulay has a good deal to say in praise of Bacon. His 1837 essay was prompted by an introduction to Bacon's works by Montagu, who believed that he was a good man who desired power only in order to do good for humankind, and Macaulay agreed that, while in his life he may have been a 'creeping snake', in his writings he was a "soaring angel". Macaulay was deliberately exaggerating to invent a man whose life was in striking contrast with his teachings. So Bacon had "the most exquisitely constructed intellect ever bestowed on any of the children of men" and was "the most devoted worshipper of speculative truth" and "the boldest champion of intellectual freedom".

Church, too, says: "in honesty, in labour, in humility, in reverence, he was the most perfect example that the world has yet seen of the student of nature, the enthusiast for knowledge" (*op.cit.*, p177). Reading these phrases of Macaulay's and Church's, we are reminded of Jonson's description of the man who shook a lance at the eyes of ignorance, for they are apt descriptions of the Shakespeare mastermind.

At the height of the crisis over his fall, Bacon wrote a prayer, found in his papers, part of which states:

"Remember, O, Lord, how thy servant hath walked before thee: remember what I have first sought and what hath been principal in mine intentions. I have loved assemblies, I have mourned for the divisions of thy Church, I have delighted in the brightness of thy sanctuary. This vine which thy right hand hath planted in this nation, I have ever prayed unto thee that it may have the first and the latter rain: and that it might stretch her branches to the seas and the floods. The state and bread of the poor and oppressed have been precious in mine eyes: I have hated all cruelty and hardness of heart: I have (though in a despised weed) procured the good of all men".

What was this 'despised weed' in which he had procured humanity's praise? The lawyer's gown? The actor's garb? Edmund Spenser uses the word to mean disguise in *The Fairie Queen* where he refers to his "lowly shepherd's weeds" of Colin Clout in which he masked his Muse. But so does Bacon himself. In his *History of Henry VII* Bacon uses the word 'weed' to mean a disguise when he writes of someone that he "clad himself like an Hermite and in that weed wandered about the country". Shakespeare talks of keeping invention "in a noted weed" (Sonnet 76). Of course—since a weed is also a worthless person—the question also arises: was 'the despised weed' the man from Stratford?

Bacon strongly believed that both 'power and knowledge' should be dedicated to 'goodness or love'. Above all, this means doing everything possible to relieve 'the immeasurable helplessness of the human race'. This aim, as Nieves Mathews indicates, was the *leitmotiv* of Bacon's life, and his whole new concept of science was geared to it. He had seen the effects of hunger at first hand as a young legal counsel, when examining a band of rebel yeomen. Shocked by what he found, he had set out to study their condition, and had defended, in Parliament after Parliament—with a heat that surprised fellow Members—a Statute for the Relief of the Poor that was to last for centuries, introduced his two bills against the enclosure of common lands which, he rightly insisted, "destroyed the bread of the poor" (contrast this with William's refusal to oppose enclosure in Stratford). Bacon believed that poverty could best be eliminated by achieving abundance for all, and it was to remedy "the pinched and narrow state of human fortunes" that he wanted to multiply the discoveries of science.

### ***Scientist or Artist?***

Certainly, Bacon regarded himself as a unique genius, and there is no shortage of support for this judgment of himself. To his friend Ben Jonson he was "one of the greatest men, and most worthy of admiration, that had been in many ages". According to Archbishop Tenison, "nature gives the

world that individual species but once in five hundred years". To Robert Hooke, he was "the incomparable Verulam". Izaak Walton regarded him as "the great secretary of nature and all learning". Alexander Pope described him as "the wisest, brightest, meanest of mankind" (by 'mean' Pope meant humble). Henry Hallam called him "the wisest and greatest of mankind". Church in his biography says that he was "endowed with as rare a combination of noble gifts as ever was bestowed on a human intellect" (*op.cit*, p1). In 1960 Crowther describes him as "the greatest prophet of the modern world".

Yet it is not easy to define precisely wherein Bacon's genius lies. He has been regarded as a philosopher, a scientist and a writer. A common approach is to grant him a permanent place of importance in the philosophy of science as the founder of the modern inductive method. In shifting the emphasis away from the medieval preoccupation with reasoning from a very small series of observations in favour of the painstaking collection of facts about the real world, Bacon can rightly be regarded as the man who, in Schweitzer's words, "drafted the programme of the modern world view". As Church aptly puts it, "what he did was to persuade men for the future that the intelligent, patient, persevering cross-examination of things, and the thoughts about them, was the only, and was the successful road to know. No one had yet done this, and he did it" (*op.cit*, p199).

Nevertheless, even in the realm of science, to see Bacon merely as the founder of inductive reasoning or even as the prophet of utilitarianism and the technological revolution is to distort the complex nature of his genius. As Benjamin Farrington suggests in a lecture on *The Christianity of Francis Bacon*,

"his greatness lies, not in the inductive process he made an abortive attempt to describe in his *Novum Organum*, but in his conception of the true goal of science, the spirit in which it must be undertaken, and the manner in which it must be organised. Its goal must be, at least until this object has been attained, the relief of man's estate. The spirit in which it is pursued must be humble, sincere, unpretentious. The organisation must be public, democratic, co-operative" (*Baconiana*, October 1965, pp15-33).

In other words, far from being a mere utilitarian, Bacon was deeply aware of and eager to assert the ethical responsibility of the scientist to society. Unless it is utilitarian to be deeply conscious of the needs and pains of life, and to be anxious to lighten and ease them, Francis Bacon was certainly not utilitarian.

We can let Bacon speak for himself on this matter. The spirit of sympathy and pity for mankind permeates this as indeed it does all his

writings. It is from his preface to *Historia Naturalis*:

"If, therefore, there be any humility towards the Creator, any reverence for or disposition to magnify His works, any charity for men and anxiety to relieve his sorrows and necessities, any love of truth in nature, any hatred of darkness, any desire for the purification of the understanding, we must entreat men again and again to discard, or at least set apart for a while, these volatile and preposterous philosophies which have preferred theses to hypotheses, led experience captive, and triumphed over the works of God; and to approach with humility and veneration to unroll the volume of Creation, to linger and meditate therein, and with minds washed clean from opinions to study it in purity and integrity. For this is that sound and language which 'went forth in all lands', and did not incur the confusions of Babel; this should men study to be perfect in, and becoming again as little children condescend to take the alphabet of it into their hands, and spare no pains to search and unravel the interpretation thereof, but pursue it strenuously and persevere even unto death..."

Of course, it would be a mistake to regard Bacon as a scientist at all in our narrow conception of that term. No scientific discovery can be traced to him, nor even to the observation of his inductive rules. Rather, as a true man of the Renaissance, who took all knowledge to be his scope, Bacon's interests ranged over wide fields, most of which he believed were interrelated. As Macaulay put it: "The knowledge in which Bacon excelled all men was the knowledge of the mutual relations of all departments of knowledge". The division between arts and sciences is a modern false dichotomy and one totally foreign to Renaissance thinkers like Bacon. He himself makes it clear, for example, that the inductive method should apply to the sciences of man as well as to the sciences of nature: "I form a history and tables of discovery for anger, fear, shame, and the like; for matters political; and again for the mental operations of memory, composition and division, judgment and the rest; not less than for heat and cold, or light, or vegetation, or the like". It is interesting to speculate on where Bacon fulfils this promise. The plays of Shakespeare would certainly perform both the historical and inductive tasks which he claims he does.

In any case, we should say that in many respects it is more legitimate to regard Bacon primarily as an artist, with the artist's dream of the future direction of knowledge. If art arises from the desire to escape from circumstances to give life a shape and purpose, then Bacon has the artistic vision. Take his Utopia, the unfinished *New Atlantis*, published posthumously in 1626. The city of Bensalem is totally suffused by Christian *caritas*: the love of God for man, the love of man for man, benevolence, good-will. If, perchance, some research led to a discovery the application of which was deemed inimical to *caritas*, the censor, at the apex of the

House of Solomon would suppress the discovery. Science is not left to itself. Social and spiritual values prevail in Bensalem.

He also possessed the artist's powers of expression. We must not forget that Bacon's abilities were not confined to his writing. He was also a great conversationalist, mimic and debater. Ben Jonson notes: "His language (where he could spare, or pass by a jest) was nobly censorious. No man ever spoke more neatly, more pressly, more weightily, or suffered less emptiness, less idleness, in what he uttered... His hearers could not cough, or look aside from him, without loss. He commanded where he spoke; and had his judges angry, and pleased at his devotion. No man had their affections more in his power. The fear of every man that heard him was, lest he should make an end". His power of mimicry was noted by Mallet in 1740 in his *Life of Bacon*: "In conversation he could assume the most different characters and speak the language proper to each with a facility that was perfectly natural".

Nor must it be forgotten that Francis Bacon was a parliamentarian whose career in Parliament spanned over 36 years. There were no parliamentary reports in those days and accounts of Bacon's speeches are often fragmentary. But it is clear that his authority there was great. Sir Walter Raleigh, contrasting him with Cecil, who could speak but not write, and with Northampton, who could write but not speak, considered Francis eminent both as a speaker and a writer. In the few speeches he did take the trouble to write down, we perceive a compelling authority both in their structure and grasp of the subject at hand. Being also a lawyer, he was well experienced in the art of advocacy. A good example of his public speaking talents was his performance at the Essex trial. Coke, as Attorney-General, conducted the prosecution. Bacon was at that time merely a 'learned counsel', but he was given second prominence, presumably because he had been a friend of Essex and so could do damage to him. In fact, Coke made a hash of presenting the evidence, and Bacon retrieved the situation in brilliant fashion.

These qualities are important for our purposes, firstly, because they emphasise the dramatic features of Bacon's mind and show that he was a gifted performer. Few contemporaries would have been more qualified to write the great speeches in Shakespeare than Francis, who was himself an eloquent speaker. Again, his power of mimicry suggests an ability to create character. Secondly, the dramatic quality pervades his prose writings, both in his stated aims and in his expression. Taking the latter first, it has been remarked that his style, in so far as one style can clearly be discerned, is a much less elaborate and written style than many of the period. It is almost as if he was talking directly to the reader. Regarding his goals,

Bacon continually views the progress of knowledge in concrete rather than abstract terms. He is obsessed by the portrayal of intellectual endeavour in terms of an heroic struggle.

Brian Vickers comments on this aspect of his writing:

"Bacon dramatises intellectual inquiry, in those metaphors of being faced with an uncharted journey, the roads either blocked, non-existent, or misleading; a ship avoiding rocks and weathering storms; light piercing darkness, growth and fruition conquering barrenness and blight. Bacon's images are so exciting, now as then, because there is always this feeling of triumph, the successful outcome of a struggle on which the fortunes of both the individual in the dramatised situation, and the human race looking on, depend. The contest is presented in strongly conceived human terms, and Bacon not only sets the scene with great particularity but produces himself as the chief actor, urging others to imitate him—he is not only the architect, but the labourer in the fields, and the pioneer in the new path of learning—there is a sense of heroic endeavour here, which, when we consider the magnitude of the attempt, is not misplaced" (*Francis Bacon and Renaissance Prose*, 1968, pp200-201).

### ***Philosopher Or Poet?***

Bacon's vision of man's capacity to dominate the universe is fundamentally a religious and poetical view of the world. It is the Faustian dream of magical power over nature. He calls his project for the reconquest of the universe the 'great instauration', by which he means the restoration of man to his place before the Fall: "Man by the Fall fell at the same time from the state of innocence and from his dominion over creation. Both these losses, however, can even in this life be in some part repaired; the former by religion and faith, the latter by arts and sciences". Thus he writes in the *Novum Organum*. And, of course, he himself is the trumpeter or bell-ringer who will 'call other wits together' to achieve this restoration. But all this is an essentially individual dream, far beyond any one man's achievement. To repeat, it is a poetical vision, and many discerning critics have realised that Bacon's thought and genius lies more in the realm of imagination for all his talk about the anonymity of science and the rightness of the inductive method. In his *History of English Literature* Taine surely gets it right when he says that "he has thought in the manner of artists and poets, and he speaks in the manner of prophets and seers".

But the poetry is not confined to the passion—it also saturates the expression. It is not only Baconians who have discovered the poetry of Francis; many have found it in the prose. As we noted earlier, William Hazlitt's judgment is highly relevant: "He united the powers of imagination

and reason in a greater degree than almost any other writer. He was one of the strongest instances of those men who by the rare privilege are at once poets and philosophers, and see equally into both worlds". Bacon himself was fully aware of the dual nature of his abilities but claimed it as an integral part of all thinking. In the *Advancement* he writes: "He who recollects or remembers, thinks; he who imagines, thinks; he who reasons, thinks; and in a word the spirit of man, whether prompted by sense or left to itself, whether in the functions of the intellect or of the will and affections, dances to the tune of the thoughts".

Shelley in his *Defence of Poetry* is even more emphatic than Hazlitt. As a poet himself, Shelley recognises the same quality in Francis: "Lord Bacon was a poet. His language has a sweet and majestic rhythm, which satisfies the sense, no less than the almost superhuman wisdom of his philosophy satisfies the intellect; it is a strain which distends, and then bursts the circumferences of the reader's mind, and pours itself together with it into the universal element with which it has perpetual sympathy". A little further on, he writes: "Shakespeare, Dante, and Milton (to confine ourselves to modern writers) are philosophers of the very loftiest power" (*Defence of Poetry*, 1819). Thus Shelley sees the philosopher Bacon as a poet and he sees the poet Shakespeare as a philosopher. Shelley knows that great poetry, whatever form it takes, appeals to both the intellect and the senses, and in so doing enables the reader better to understand universal truths.

According to Macaulay, "the poetic faculty was powerful in Bacon's mind". Bulwer Lytton offered his testimony thus: "We have only to open *The Advancement of Learning* to see how the Attic bees clustered above the cradle of the new philosophy. Poetry pervaded the thoughts, it inspired the similes, it hymned in the majestic sentences of the wisest of mankind". Spedding, Bacon's biographer who edited his works, stated: "The truth is that Bacon was not without the fine frenzy of a poet". He had, says Spedding, all the natural faculties which a poet wants—a fine ear for music, a fine feeling for imaginative effect in words, and a vein of poetic passion. And he adds: "Had his genius taken the ordinary direction, I have little doubt that it would have carried him to a place among the great poets". Charles Knight speaks of "that high poetical spirit which gleams out of every page of his philosophy".

Let us turn to more modern testimony. According to G.L. Craik, who described Bacon as "one of the most colossal of the sons of men", he brings to the *Advancement* "every species of poetry by which imagination can elevate the mind from the dungeons of the body to the enjoying of its own essence... metaphors, similes and analogies make up a great part of

his reasoning... ingenuity, poetic fancy and the highest imagination cannot be denied him" (*Lord Bacon, his Writings and his Philosophy*, 3 vols., 1846-1847).

In his book *A Dream of Learning* (1951), which is the phrase Bacon himself used to describe poetry, D.G. James refers to "the recoil, in Bacon's mind, from abstraction; his imagination did not go on to grasp firmly a world which lent itself to mathematical treatment; instead it clung to a mode of apprehension that would ordinarily be called poetical". And Brian Vickers notes that "to describe some qualities of Bacon's prose as 'poetic' may seem the excessive enthusiasm of the enlightened, but it could be defended both as a fair comment on the deliberate imaginative artistry with which he wrote and as a historically correct observation on the closeness of the two media".

The prose of Bacon certainly employs all the customary poetic techniques, including rhythm, periodic structure, equal line or clause length, imagery in abundance and aphoristic expression. For him an idea invariably becomes an image, and his writings are suffused with similes, metaphors and analogies of all kinds. Frequently, as it has been remarked, his images take on a life of their own. A famous example is this extract where he is discussing the average man's attitude to the 'dry light' of pure philosophy:

"The part of human philosophy which is rational, is of all knowledge, to the most wits, the least delightful; and seemeth but a net of subtlety and spinosity. For as it was truly said, that knowledge is *pabulum animi* (the food of the mind); so in the nature of men's appetite to this food, most men are of the taste and stomach of the Israelites in the desert, that would fain have returned *ad ollas carniū* (to the flesh-pots), and were weary of manna; which, though it were celestial, yet seemed less nutritive and comfortable, so generally men taste well knowledges that are drenched in flesh and blood..." (*Advancement*).

Bacon's aphorisms have become popular mottoes and household sayings. It is in the aphorism where prose approaches the condition of poetry in its compression and suggestiveness; and, needless to say, Shakespeare is the most aphoristic of all poets. In his *Essays* Bacon turns the aphorism into an art: "What is truth? said jesting Pilate; and would not stay for an answer"; "all colours will agree in the dark"; "revenge is a kind of wild justice"; "in charity there is no excess"; "money is like muck, not good except it be spread"; "the remedy is worse than the disease"; "cure the disease and kill the patient"; "God almighty first planted a garden; and, indeed, it is the purest of human pleasures"; "for a crowd is not company; and faces are but a gallery of pictures; and talk but a tinkling cymbal, where there is no love".

### *The Advancement of Learning*

All his life, Francis Bacon worked ceaselessly to acquire knowledge and to use it for the benefit of mankind. As he put it, "power to do good is the true and lawful end of all aspiring". In one his famous aphorisms, he averred that "knowledge itself is power", by which he meant not worldly success or useful technology but the proof of scientific theories: "Human knowledge and human power meet in one; for where the cause is not known, the effect can be produced. Nature to be commanded must be obeyed; and that which in contemplation is as the cause is in operation as the rule" (*Novum Organum*). In short, only by making nature act in a certain way—exercising power—can we be sure that we understand how it does act, and only by knowing that can we control it. Bacon realised that science could be useful for the good of mankind but he also believed in knowledge and research for their own sake as 'pledges of truth'.

A number of writings provide the keys to his lifelong concerns. The first is the famous letter to Burghley in which he confesses that "I have taken all knowledge to be my province". 'All knowledge' embraces both the arts and the sciences. Indeed, a 'Renaissance man' is someone who has broad intellectual interests and is accomplished in both these spheres. Leonardo is a paradigm case. Yet if Bacon means 'arts and sciences', as he surely does, then we have to ask what were his works of 'art'? He also admits to "vast contemplative ends" which would be assisted by a position in government because that "doth bring commandment of more wits than of a man's own". So the consuming passion of Bacon's life was how really to know, to teach men to know and to use their knowledge for the benefit of humanity.

The second key is a *Proem* written in Latin which he never used but which states his mission. It begins:

"Believing that I was born for the service of mankind, and regarding the care of the commonwealth as a kind of common property which like the air and the water belongs to everybody, I set myself to consider in what way mankind might be best served, and what service I was myself best fitted by nature to perform.

"Now among all the benefits that could be conferred upon mankind, I found none so great as the discovery of new arts, endowments, and commodities for the bettering of man's life. For I saw that among the rude people in the primitive times the authors of rude inventions and discoveries were consecrated and numbered among the Gods. And it was plain that the good effects wrought by founders of cities, lawgivers, fathers of the people, extirpers of tyrants, and heroes of that class, extend but over narrow spaces and last but for short times; whereas the work of the Inventor, though a thing of less pomp and shew, is felt everywhere and

lasts for ever. But above all, if a man could succeed, not in striking out some particular invention, however useful, but in kindling a light in nature—a light which should in its very rising touch and illuminate all the border-regions that confine upon the circle of our present knowledge; and so spreading further and further should presently disclose and bring into sight all that is most hidden and secret in the world,—that man (I thought) would be the benefactor indeed of the human race—the propagator of man's empire over the universe, the champion of liberty, the conqueror and subduer of necessities.

"For myself, I found that I was fitted for nothing so well as for the study of Truth; as having a mind nimble and versatile enough to catch the resemblances of things (which is the chief point), and at the same time steady enough to fix and distinguish their subtler differences; as being gifted by nature with desire to seek, patience to doubt, fondness to meditate, slowness to assert, readiness to reconsider, carefulness to dispose and set in order; and as being a man that neither affects what is new nor admires what is old, and that hates every kind of imposture. So I thought my nature had a kind of familiarity and relationship with Truth" (James Spedding's translation).

Among the many interesting aspects of this gracefully beautiful statement is the description of his own abilities—'a mind nimble and versatile enough to catch the resemblance of things (which is the chief point)'. What does this mean? A mind that catches the resemblance of things is surely a poet's mind for that is indeed the essence—the 'chief point'—of poetry. But note, too, his insistence that the discovery of truth is built on fallibility, doubt and scepticism, the kind of mental disposition which he says he had in abundance; indeed, we might even say, that his "patience to doubt, fondness to meditate, slowness to assert, readiness to reconsider", and so on, encapsulate the very "negative capability" that Keats found in Shakespeare.

*The Advancement of Learning* (1605) and the *Novum Organum* (1620) also provide clues to Bacon's lifelong endeavour. In the *Advancement* he outlines a powerful defence of culture and learning, but it must be genuine knowledge and not mere sophistry: "For the wit and mind of man, as the spider worketh his web, then it is endless, and brings forth indeed cobwebs of learning, admirable for the fineness of thread and work, but of no substance of profit". He was particularly concerned that the sciences, based as they were in his day on Greek philosophy, were practically useless: "The knowledge whereof the world is now possessed, especially that of nature, extendeth not to magnitude and certainty of works". Man's sovereignty over nature had been lost and in place of the free relations between things and the human mind, there was nothing but vain notions and blind experiments.

A basic reason for this failure is that "men despair and think things impossible". They had derived from the Greeks the notion that nature cannot be changed and that all humanity can ever hope to do is to learn some of nature's tricks and copy them. But Bacon believed that it was possible to "shake nature" in "her foundations". A new approach and new goals could lead to "the victory of art over nature". In propounding this philosophy, he saw himself as a pioneer. He even compared himself to Columbus and made a brilliant analogy between the mind and the earth: "It would be disgraceful if, while the regions of the material globe—that is, of the earth, of the sea, and of the stars—have been in our times laid widely open and revealed, the intellectual globe should remain shut up within the limits of old discourses". Yet he was convinced that with his guidance "a new birth of science" was possible.

To break free from a barren scholasticism and embark on this scientific renaissance, we need to adopt a novel approach, two features of which may be cited here. The first is a middle way between empiricism and rationalism. In the *Novum Organum* Bacon says that the good scientist is not a pure empiricist like the ant mindlessly gathering data or a pure rationalist like the spider spinning empty theories out of themselves but instead is like the bee transforming nature into a nourishing product. Yet Bacon is often seen simply as the father of induction. Thus in his *History of Western Philosophy* (1946) Bertrand Russell writes that he was "the founder of modern inductive method and the pioneer in the attempt at logical systematisation of scientific procedure" (9th imp. 1965, p526).

But this is to distort and simplify Bacon's more subtle ideas. Karl Popper in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1959) even goes so far as to decry his "myth of a scientific method that starts from observation and experiment and then proceeds to theories". But Bacon was no naive empiricist and indeed is closer to Popper than he realises. Peter Urbach in *Francis Bacon's Philosophy of Science* (1987) even portrays him as a "precursor to Popper". For Bacon would agree with the latter that the scientist is active in generating experience, that experiment is planned action in which every step is guided by theory, that indeed we have to 'make' our experiences.

The second feature of Bacon's approach focuses on the need for us to return the mind to its pure original state by ridding it of 'idols' that corrupt its natural powers. These are the psychological barriers that we ourselves erect in the way of enlightenment. They must be "rejected and renounced and the mind totally liberated and cleansed of them", he writes (*Novum Organum*), almost as if he was preaching the need for a religious conversion. These prejudices or illusions or "profoundest fallacies" dirty the mind's mirror: "For the mind of man... is so far from being a smooth, equal, and

clear glass, which might sincerely take and reflect the beams of things, according to their true incidence; that it is rather like an enchanted glass, full of superstitions, apparitions and impostures".

Firstly, there are the idols of the tribe, those hindrances to understanding which are inherent in human nature: "the human understanding is like a false mirror, which, receiving rays irregularly, distorts and discolours the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it". These exaggerations and distortions include the tendency to try to make things fit into patterns and the desire to look for evidence to support our conclusions. Secondly, there are the idols of the cave, those hindrances to understanding based on individual shortcomings. People see things in light of their own special knowledge and opinions. Everyone has his own individual den or cavern, which intercepts or corrupts the light of nature. The thoughts of the individual roam about in this dark cave and are variously modified by temperament, education, habit, environment, and accident. Thus some individuals favour differences, others favour similarities; some favour antiquity, some favour novelty. Thirdly, there are the idols of the marketplace, those hindrances to understanding based on words and the nature of language in which words are misused or misunderstood. Thus people imagine and name things that do not exist and words themselves are ambiguous and may have a range of meanings.

Finally, and significantly for our purpose, there are the idols of the theatre, and here it is worth quoting Bacon himself. They are those hindrances—

"which have immigrated into men's minds from the various dogmas of philosophies, and also from wrong laws of demonstration. These I call Idols of the Theatre; because in my judgment all the received systems are but so *many stage-plays*, representing worlds of their own creation after an unreal and scenic fashion. Nor is it only of the systems now in vogue, or only of the ancient sects and philosophies, that I speak; for many more plays of the same kind may yet be composed and in like artificial manner set forth; seeing that errors the most widely different have nevertheless causes for the most part alike. Neither again do I mean this only of entire systems, but also of many principles and axioms in science, which by tradition, credulity, and negligence have come to be received..."

Bacon saw his chief task as a philosopher to be the reconstruction of all knowledge by restoring the glass of the mind to a clear and equal state so that it might faithfully observe the works of nature. But how to eliminate the idols and embark on the Baconian road? It may be necessary to use an insinuating rhetoric which pretends obeisance to the very idols which it intends to overthrow. To persuade the public, the philosopher may have to be also a poet. So the Idols of the Theatre may be conquered by theatrical means.