

Bacon and the Renaissance

Introduction:

Tillotson says : "Bacon the man was the product of the Renaissance: man's glory, generous or tense, his opportunities of mind and body, his eye finally rolling across the subtlety and magnificence of the world, his joy in learning, discovering, weighing, creating—all this as it existed in Bacon's mind shifted through into the Essays." The modern world starts with the sixteenth century which was the century of transition from the Middle Ages to the modern times.

The dawn of the Renaissance had brought in that century a spirit of rational enquiry and criticism which started taking the place of childlike faith and ignorant reverence of authority. In both secular and religious matters a spirit of revolt was impinging upon set traditions, authority and custom. Secular interests had started overshadowing religious interests. Interest was now apparent for the cultivation of classical humanistic learning. The "other worldliness" gave place to "this worldliness." A restless spirit of exploration and discovery was aboard. However, the excess of materialism and the weakening of the religious bond also liberated the grosser instinct of some who aimed at material advancement at the cost of conscience and morality[^]. Bacon was an interesting figure of this interesting age. He represents both the splendour and the sordidness of the times. And so do his works. Let us see how.

Bacon's Intellectual Modernity:

Bacon represents the intellectual modernity. so closely associated with the Renaissance. The Renaissance, in intellectual terms, signalled the end of medieval scholasticism and the beginning of the age of dispassionate and rational enquiry and experimentation. With his *Instauratio Magna* Bacon tried to sweep aside the cobwebs of scholastic philosophy which had all along been blurring the light of science and progressive thought. The medieval schoolmen (the protagonists of scholasticism) did nothing but strain their nerves in justifying the tenets of Christianity in the light of Aristotelean principles. Bacon gave his *novum organum* (a new instrument)--induction--which has since played a major role in the progress of experimental science. With his *The Advancement of Learning* he became the first man to put forward a proposal for the establishment of a society of scientists—a proposal which foreshadowed, the establishment of the Royal Society by about half a century. Bacon was an enthusiastic votary of truth. His death was caused by his enthusiasm. He once killed a bird and stuffed it with snow in order to find out the preservative effect of snow on flesh. In the process of this experiment he caught cold, which worsened into pneumonia of which he died soon after. He lived for philosophic and scientific truth, and died as a martyr in its cause.

Love of Learning:

The Renaissance whetted the appetite of the people for learning, especially the Greek and Latin classics which had lain unknown to the Middle Ages. Bacon claimed to have taken all knowledge to be his province. In the *Essays* he shows a keen awareness of several branches of learning. Though none of the essays concerns itself with any formal academic subject, yet in his imagery and style we are constantly conscious of his acquaintance with many branches of learning. He himself referred to his essays as "certain brief notes set down rather significantly than curiously", concerning subjects "of which men shall find much in business and little in books." The topics of the essays are

certainly connected with a man's worldly conduct, but not unoften show his love of various branches of learning, such as astronomy, mineralogy, and geography, in his treatment of these topics.

Consider in this connexion Bacon's-use of analogies. In "Of Seditious and Troubles" we have : "Shepherds of people had need -know the calendars of tempests in state : which are commonly greatest when things grow to equality; as natural tempests are greatest about the Equinoctia" In "Of Faction" he says : "The motions of factions under kings ought to be like the motions (as the astronomers speak) of the inferior orbs, which may have their proper motions, but yet still are quietly carried by the higher motion of primum mobile."

We can easily multiply such instances as convince one of Bacon's familiarity with learning.

Knowledge of the Classics:

This learning has another aspect-that which concerns the Latin and Greek classics with which the Renaissance had come to England. The massive magnitude of Bacon's classical learning is easily sampled by even a cursory glance at his essays. There is perhaps not a single essay which is without some references to and quotations from Latin and Greek writers. He quotes, among others, Lucretius, Cicero, Tacitus, Seneca, Pliny, Livy, and Ovid. No doubt, quite a sizeable number of these quotations are actually misquotations (of course, on account of only slight variations) yet they bespeak Bacon's comprehensive knowledge of the classics. It is a little intriguing to note that Bacon nowhere quotes a dramatist, classical or English. As a matter of fact, towards all English writers he is too full of contempt to quote any.

Political Views:

Bacon's political views as expressed in the Essays have, to a great extent, the stamp of Greek political thinkers. It was Plato who had set rolling the ball of totalitarianism. Bacon pushes it along, In fact, Bacon's whole conception of a state, its relation to the individuals, its supreme authority, his conception of war and commerce, etc. are all Greek in their main features. His plea for centralised power, his undemocratic suspicions about the common masses, and his unqualified faith in the absolute power of monarchs are testimonies of his allegiance to the ancient Greek thought. His ideal was King Henry VII whose history he wrote and who kept up the king's prerogative. Like Machiavelli Bacon wants to keep the authority of the king above question. The duty of all the subjects is to work for the interest of the king who like "primum mobile" carries all the "lesser orbs" along with him, himself unaffected by their "proper motions." Even judges are not to be independent in their judgements, but have to be ruled by the king. His observation about judges in the essay "Of Judicature" is that "let them be lions, but yet lions under the throne"

Materialism and Worldliness:

The dawn of the Renaissance, as we have pointed out above, was responsible for injecting into people a new interest in this world and the affairs of this world. Gone were the days of scholasticism and religious casuistry. The star-gazers of the past gave place to the earth-gazers of the new times. The humanistic culture of the Greeks and Romans was mainly responsible for this new trend. Bacon's essays are a Bible of the new worldly wisdom. Like Marlowe's heroes, particularly Dr. Faustus and the Jew of Malta,

Bacon, with the new learned class, was desirous of material advancement, not only selfless learning.

His essays are a reflection of the new spirit in so far as he deals with the business of providing practical precepts to a man desirous of rising in the world in the materialistic sense. His essays like "Of Simulation and Dissimulation", "Of Cunning," and "Of Negotiating" could have neither been written nor appreciated in the pre-Renaissance times. That Bacon's essays were in accordance with the temper of the times is easily seen by the fact that they immediately created an enormous circle of readers and admirers, so much so that not fewer than six editions of the work were taken out during his life-time itself.

Unscrupulousness:

The Essays are distinguished further by their coldness and lack of moral earnestness-the qualities which marked off their writer as well. Bacon shows a kind of Machiavellian dispassionateness in the treatment of even such subjects as love and marriage. He deals with these subjects in relation to their suitability or otherwise in furthering the material interests of an aspirant for worldly advancement. In this respect he reminds one of the University Wits (like Marlowe, Peele, and Greene)-the most distinguished products of the Renaissance who lived depraved, godless lives. Though he but seldom indulges in irreligious or immoral observations, yet his tone and treatment betray the shallowness of his moral principles. His Essays, in the words of William Blake, are "good advice for Satan's kingdom."