

Bacon's Contribution to English Prose

Introduction:

"A bell ringer who is up first to call others to church"-these words of Bacon himself amply sum up his contribution to the world of letters. He was the earliest to seek (in his Advancement of Learning) the ways and means to unify and consolidate learning; he was almost the first to show (through his History of Henry the Seventh) the possibilities of an authentic historical discourse free alike from the elements of myth and legend as well as strained conceits and stylistic gewgaws; he was definitely the first to forward (through his New Atlantis) the plea for a college of scientific research; then he was the first to naturalise into English a new species of literature, namely, the essay.

But, above all, Bacon was the first to set up through his personal example a model of English prose which had hitherto been non-existent. Referring to Bacon's contribution to English prose Hugh Walker observes : "He took one of the biggest steps ever taken in the evolution of English prose style, a step which set that style on the road which it travelled, though not without divagations, down to the days of Swift and Addison."

Prose before Bacon:

Roughly speaking modern prose begins with Dryden and the writers of the closing years of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth. We, no doubt, agree with Douglas Bush that it is a 'Vulgar error' to suppose that Dryden started something altogether new. He observes: "Literary history has given currency to the notion that prose writing before 1660 was largely ornate and poetical and that a plain, workaday, modern style was first inaugurated after the Restoration chiefly through the efforts of the Royal Society to develop this along with other elements of its Baeanian heritage." In fact, to quote Bush again, "Dryden and his fellows represented a culmination rather than a beginning." Dryden completed the transition of English prose from antiquity to modernity. Several of Dryden's predecessors also contributed towards this transition. Among them Bacon occupies a very important place.

Ascham:

To assess the importance of Bacon in the history of English prose it is desirable to have a glance at the prose of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries, and then to see in what ways he registered an improvement upon it. Among such persons the most important were Ascham, Lyly, Sidney, and Hooker. All of them had some definite achievement to their names. We cannot justly dismiss them as antiquated prose poets who wrote unnatural, over-ornamented, strained, prolix, and turgid prose. Take, for example, the work of Ascham. Ascham's prose is far from ornate. In his Toxophilus he puts forward the claim that he is "writing this English matter in the English speech for Englishmen." He seems to have put special emphasis on English in order to proclaim his independence from the mannerisms imported from Italy and France and so popular with his contemporary prose writers. This claim, as Saintsbury points out" is no mere figure of rhetoric or bit of jingle but a sentence to which the author adheres as far as possible throughout his work. "In his vocabulary and syntax Ascham is racy, direct, and simple. However like most contemporaries, he retains and even abuses the especially English device of alliteration. He is also fond of balance and antithesis which remind one of Lyly, so much so that he has been charged with "Euphuism before Euphuës." Saintsbury lists two defects of Ascham's style as follows:

(i) "It was very ill-fitted for fanciful, gorgeous or passionate expression."

(ii) It tended sometimes "to degenerate into lameness, commonness, insipidity." Nevertheless, Ascham's work constitutes a definite landmark in the history of prose. Saifitsbury observes : "The period of mere... ..experiments in stocking the vocabulary and arranging the syntax, had ceased, experiments in all directions had been made in point of subject, and at length a fairly normal style had been attained, suitable, as Ascham himself showed, for a good variety of literary purposes, if not for all."

Lyly:

John Lyly, dramatist and poet, is best known, however for his prose work Euphues which gave a new example of highly ornamental, gorgeous, and poetical prose. Lyly gave a new word "Euphuism" representing the qualities, including the stylistic characteristics, of his famous work, Euphues. Euphues was followed by Eupheus and His England. Saintsbury calls Lyly "a great mannerist ifi style" who revolted against simple style. Euphuistic-style is marked by various mannerisms such as excessive use of alliteration, often highly artificial, and strained use of similes from all kinds of sources, but especially the "unnatural natural history," and still more especially "the fanciful zoology of the Middle Ages", use of rhetorical question, over-incidence of parentheses, and so on. As regards syntax, it was highly diffuse and loose, or, as it may be called, "Ciceronian." Simplicity was at a discount, whereas uncommonness and remoteness (even unintelligibility) and artifice were exalted. However, one discordant note in Euphuism may also be noted. That is the frequency of typically native phrases, such as "I am of the shoemaker's mind who careth not so the shoe hold the plucking on." Such phrases are, surprisingly enough, commoner in Lyly than in Ascham.

Sidney:

Sir Philip Sidney-courtier, poet, soldier, critic, and prose stylist-was another who helped English prose to come to its own.-He is famous for The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia, a pastoral romance which achieved immediate and immense popularity. A critic observes about Sidney: "He put aside the elaborate affectations of Lyly, and while not free from mannerism struck a happy compromise between the straightforward simplicity of Ascham and the highly coloured complexity of Euphuism." His prose is generally simple though, in cadence and occasional alliteration, somewhat poetical. The syntax, again, is somewhat unorganised and diffuse.

Hooker:

It was Hooker, one of Bacon's contemporaries, who through his Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity gave a model of simple, straightforward, yet grave and elevated prose for the treatment of serious and philosophical subjects. This was not a model for all kinds of subjects, however. Hooker is lucid and grave from the beginning to the end. In his syntax, however, he is the perfection of Ciceronianism. He depends too much on Latinism in his syntax, though much less in his vocabulary. As Goldsmith jeeringly remarked about Johnson's style, Hooker's style is good enough for the mouths of whales, but hardly those of little fishes. Thus it was not a model for all kinds of subjects, but only of a limited kind.

Bacon Provided the Model:

It was for Bacon to provide such a workingmodel. The prose of his essays set up such a model of lucid, straightforward English which could serve as a vehicle for all kinds of subjects, both grave and trivial, high and low. Bacon's prose is free from needless artifice, ornament, prolixity, and diffuseness which are qualities of the prose of most of

his contemporaries and immediate predecessors. Simplicity, lucidity, and flexibility are the keynotes of his style. Though he retained some liking for analogy, antithesis, and such like qualities reminiscent of the prose of his predecessors, yet, on the whole, he recorded an unmistakable break with the past to give a prose which was suitable for the treatment of all kinds of subjects. In his Essays he treats of such elevated themes as justice and truth on the one hand, and, on the other, such trifling themes as masques and triumphs which, in his own words, are no more than "toys." "The new style of Bacon" observes Hugh Walker, "fitted itself as easily to buildings and gardens as to suitors or ceremonies, as to truth and death. It could sink to the familiarity of likening money to muck, not good unless it be spread or rise to a comparison between the movement of the human mind and the movement of the heavenly bodies."

Revolt against Ciceronianism:

Bacon was the first English prose writer who revolted against the highly organised (or Ciceronian) prose style of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors. He was, in the words of Douglas Bush, "the theoretical and practical leader of the anti-Ciceronian movement in England." The anti-Ciceronian movement aimed at furthering the cause of simplicity, naturalness, and straightforwardness in expression. As regards syntax, it favoured short sentences. It favoured conversational ease against strained, artificial expression. It is evident that Bacon in his Essays put forward a glorious example of the possibilities of natural, anti-Ciceronian expression free from stylistic gewgaws, prolixity, circumlocution, intentional "poetisms", and remote analogies. There is nothing in the style of his Essays which may put one in mind of the grand, rolling, finished periods of a lumbering length rich in majestic harmonies. Bacon's style is, on the other hand, aphoristic rather than Ciceronian. Comparing the aphoristic with the highly organised Ciceronian style. Bacon himself pointed out: "Aphorisms representing a knowledge broken, do invite men to inquire farther; whereas Methods [that is. the Ciceronian form] do secure men, as if they were at farthest."

Simplicity and Precision:

Through the prose of his Essays Bacon set new-standards of simplicity and precision which were later to be accepted as the hallmarks of good, prose. Being a scientist himself Bacon was critical of all ambiguity, prolixity, circumlocution, and needless ornamentation which go ill with everyday prose. His attitude to words was the same as his attitude to knowledge, that is, their subservience to 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; and except they have life of reason and invention, to fall in love with them is all one as to fall in love with a picture." Bacon himself never fell in love with "pictures." He was an economiser as regards words, and would never use two where one would suffice. That is particularly true of his earlier essays in which his style borders upon the bald. In succinctness the style of his essays comes close to the standard laid down by Ben Jonson: "A strict and succinct style is that where you can take away nothing without loss, and that loss to be manifest." Bacon's extremely condensed and terse expression is sui generis. None after him seriously tried to imitate the particular flavour of his style, probably because without his massive mind and intellectual equipment it was impossible to do so. Nevertheless Bacon's importance lies in the fact that he imported into English prose a new sense of precision and clarity.

The Elizabethan Quality:

Though in the precision and clarity of his prose Bacon looks forward to the moderns, yet he is not altogether/modern. His prose is still tinged with a bit of the Elizabethan colour, a true child of the age as he is. Take, for instance, his frequent use of Latinisms. That is the legacy of an age in which Latin was the medium of instruction. The Renaissance had brought an awareness of the treasures of Latin and Greek literature. Further, in Bacon's prose there is occasional occurrence of all kinds of analogies so popular with his contemporaries, particularly the Euphuists. However his analogies, similes, and metaphors are not like the "conceits" of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors. Further, some instances of ungrammatical structure can be quoted from his essays. His use of obsolete and obsolescent words is also reminiscent of his Elizabethanism. In short, Bacon belongs partly to the age of Elizabeth and partly he looks forward to the late seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century prose writers such as Dryden, Addison, Steele, and Swift. Redpath says: "It is probably more helpful simply to say that Bacon's prose occupies a position somewhere between the plentiful irregular vitality of the typical Elizabethans and the late 17th century baroque styles."

A New Genre:

Bacon's importance in the history of English prose is also due to his naturalisation of a new genre in English. We are referring to the essay. He borrowed the concept of the essay from Montaigne, the French Writer, whose *Essais* appeared in 1580, seventeen years before the first edition of his own *Essays*. Bacon modified the concept of the essay so as to make it suit his own particular genius. He used it not as a vehicle of self-revelation as Montaigne did, but a repository of dispersed meditations—impersonal, practical, and worldly. Later the essay underwent a substantial change in the hands of his many followers. However, it still holds that it was Bacon who was the father of the English essay. For sheer mass of intellect he remains till now the greatest of English essayists. His importance is, therefore, not only due to precedence but also to excellence. Bushwell compares Bacon followed by his successors to a whale followed by a school of porpoises.