

In this module we shall discuss:

- A brief introduction to Francis Bacon
- Discuss three of Bacon's essay
- *A) Of Studies*
- *B) Of Discourse*
- *C) Of Truth*
- Bacon style as an essayist

Knowing Francis Bacon



Francis Bacon, Viscount Saint Alban, Lord Chancellor of England (1618–21) was the son of Sir Nicolas Bacon, Lord Keeper of the Seal. His mother was Lady Anne Cooke Bacon, his father's second wife and daughter to Sir Anthony Cooke, a humanist who was also Edward VI's tutor. Francis Bacon's mother happened to be incidentally the sister-in-law of Lord Burghley. Thus from a tender age, Bacon found himself exposed to an atmosphere of humanist scholarship. Young Francis Bacon began attending Trinity College, Cambridge, from April 1573, when he had been just an eleven year old. After having completed his education from Trinity in December 1575; the very next year he joined a law program at Honourable Society of Gray's Inn. Given his temperament, it was expected that he found the curriculum at Gray's Inn old fashioned. Bacon was strong in his criticism of his teachers who he agreed were surely men of wits but never explored beyond a few authors and were chiefly stagnating themselves with an author like Aristotle. What did then Bacon favour? The answer - the new Renaissance humanism over Aristotelianism and scholasticism: the more traditional schools of thought in England to a more humanistic approach.

Things turned difficult for the talented Francis when his father passed away suddenly and this meant he had to sustain on a meagre inheritance. Desperate he turned to his uncle, Lord Burghley who was in no

mood help the hapless teen. Thus Francis was left with a struggle of earning a decent earning for a living at a very young age! Luck finally knocked on his door in 1581 when he landed a job as a member for Cornwall in the House of Commons. The job allowed Bacon to return to Gray's Inn and complete his education. Next in 1582: he found himself appointed in the position of outer barrister. With his composition, *A Letter of Advice to Queen Elizabeth*, his very first political memorandum in 1584 he gave himself the political leap that he had long desired. Bacon went on to hold his position successfully in the Parliament for nearly four decades that is from 1584 to 1617 and that he spent the tenure as an active political person in the court is well known. In 1603, he was knighted upon James I's ascension to the British throne and quickly moved up the legal and political ranks, becoming solicitor general in 1607 and attorney general in 1613. In 1616, he joined the Privy Council and the next year like his father became the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal and finally in 1618, Bacon was promoted to the lofty title of Lord Chancellor, one of the highest political offices in England. In 1621, Bacon became Viscount St. Albans. But thereafter the meteorical rise of Bacon took a dip in the very year he became Viscount: he stood accused of accepting bribes and was impeached by the Parliament for corruption. There has been some speculation on this aspect of Bacon's life: there is a group of people who believe that Bacon was set up by his enemies in Parliament and the court faction and was unfortunately used as a scapegoat and his impeachment was actually a design to protect the Duke of Buckingham. Bacon was tried and found guilty after he confessed. A hefty 40,000 pounds fine and a sentence to the Tower of London was what the court ordered. Though he went free after four days of imprisonment and the fine was lifted, it took a toll on his reputation and consequently upon his health.

Not many can claim to have used life after such a beating in terms of reputation fruitfully. But Bacon was a breed different. It is only after his forced retirement that Bacon went on to write essays in which he shared the wisdom of his life – the wisdom coming from one who had seen much struggle, rise, fame and the loss. The original number of essays in Bacon's *Essays* (1597) was ten and included titles like *Of Studies, Of Discourse, Of Suitors, and Of Expense*. By the year 1612, there were thirty-eight essays. They were pearls of wisdom though it is known that Bacon's development as a man had left him sadder. Such a man expectedly should have been didactic or even dogmatic in tone, isn't it? Bacon being Bacon, he was none rather he was pragmatic and very friendly in approach. His essays are his observations. So in an essay where he talks of 'envy' he does not sound preachy about envy being bad or destructive. Rather in a matter of fact, he relates incidents and hopes the observational eye will deduce the right conclusion. It is this that brought warmth and acceptance of the wisdom that he mentions in his essays.

Of Studies (1625)

'Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man' – so begins one of the popular essays of the man who brought prose writing virtually in vogue during Renaissance. This one paragraph essay elaborates on the value of learning and reading. He is witty and concise. What catches our attention is his reliance on parallel structures in the essay.

What does study do? Bacon says: 'Studies serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability. Their chief use for delight is in privateness and retiring; for ornament, is in discourse; and for ability, is in the judgment and disposition of business. For expert men can execute, and perhaps judge of particulars, one by one; but the general counsels, and the plots and marshalling of affairs, come best from those that are learned. To spend too much time in studies is sloth; to use them too much for ornament, is affectation; to make judgment wholly by their rules, is the humor of a scholar.'

One interesting facet of Bacon's essays is that many pearls in his essays have become very popular and oft quoted. One such example would be from this essay we are discussing here: 'Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention.'

A century later in 1753 Samuel Johnson's was to write in his essays in the biweekly journal *The Adventurer* which included the essay *On Studies* that explored interestingly some of the themes introduced by Francis Bacon in *Of Studies*. There is a difference though: if Bacon's style is terse and aphoristic then Johnson's more expansive prose.

Another essay that draws our attention when we speak of this essay of Bacon's had appeared in 1719, the same year in which Defoe published the first volume of *Robinson Crusoe*. *The Education of Women* by Daniel Defoe is an essay wherein he appeals to a male audience as he develops his argument that women should be allowed full and ready access to education. Bacon had concluded his essay: 'So every defect of the mind, may have a special receipt'. Study not only whets the wit but is also necessary for growth. Different in texture but Johnson's and Defoe's essay only augments the argument started by Bacon long ago!

Of Discourse

Bacon begins this essay of our discussion thus:

Some in their discourse desire rather commendation of wit, in being able to hold all arguments, than of judgment, in discerning what is true; as if it were a praise to know what might be said, and not what should be thought. Some have certain common-places and themes, wherein they are good, and want variety; which kind of poverty is for the most part tedious, and, when it is once perceived, ridiculous. The honourablest part of talk is to give the occasion; and again to moderate and pass to somewhat else, for then a man leads the dance. It is good in discourse, and speech of conversation, to vary and intermingle speech of the present occasion with arguments, tales with reasons, asking of questions with telling of opinions, and jest with earnest: for it is a dull thing to tire, and, as we say now, to jade, anything too far. As for jest, there be certain things which ought to be privileged from it; namely, religion, matters of state, great persons, any man's present business of importance, and any case that deserveth pity.

This essay tells us how one can lead the way in a conversation without being dominating. The apt spirit of the essay had been caught by Lisa Jardine in her book *The Art of Discourse* (1974): "Bacon's Essays fall squarely under the heading of presentation or 'method of discourse.' They are didactic, in Agricola's sense of presenting knowledge to someone in a form in which it may be believed and assimilated. . . . Basically these essays communicate precepts for the guidance of personal conduct in public affairs, based on Bacon's own political experience."

Bacon observes that it must be understood that there are some who have common places and themes on which they are comfortable talking on. What then is the best way to converse? Bacon puts it thus: "The honourablest part of talk is to give the occasion; and again to moderate and pass to somewhat else, for then a man leads the dance. It is good in discourse, and speech of conversation, to vary and intermingle speech of the present occasion with arguments, tales with reasons, asking of questions with telling of opinions, and jest with earnest: for it is a dull thing to tire, and, as we say now, to jade, anything too far." There are certain topics Bacon argues should be kept out of jest: namely, religion, matters of state, great persons, any man's present business of importance and anything that deserves pity. Also a satirist who makes others afraid of his wit must be afraid of other's memory or else, he can land himself in discomfort. One must know the distinction between bitterness and wit or 'saltiness' as Bacon puts it.

That Bacon inspired and influenced prose writers has been seen when we undertook the discussion on the essay *Of Studies*. The present essay *Of Discourse*, reminds us another of Samuel Johnson's essay called *Conversation*. Poet, critic, and dictionary-maker, Samuel Johnson is considered to be one of the great writers of the 18th century. Johnson had been aptly captured in James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) and the said essay shows he was also a strikingly witty conversationalist and a very entertaining person to be with. Johnson was known to be superfluous in the practice of this art that is conversation and would be presenting it with aplomb in one of the London tavern called the Turk's Head. Simultaneously, another of Swift's essay *Hints Toward an Essay on Conversation* reminds us strongly of Bacon's *Of Discourse*. Johnson's essay on conversation begins thus:

None of the desires dictated by vanity is more general, or less blamable, than that of being distinguished for the arts of conversation. Other accomplishments may be possessed without opportunity of exerting them, or wanted without danger that the defect can often be remarked; but as no man can live, otherwise than in a hermitage, without hourly pleasure or vexation, from the fondness or neglect of those about him, the faculty of giving pleasure is of continual use. Few are more frequently envied than those who have the power of forcing attention wherever they come, whose entrance is considered as a promise of felicity, and whose departure is lamented, like the recess of the sun from northern climates, as a privation of all that enlivens fancy, or inspirits gaiety.

Almost as an extension of the tonal mode of Bacon, Johnson considers conversation as a necessary art because a good conversationalist will not only attract the attention of others but liven up the space that he inhabits! On the other hand, the great Anglo-Irish satirist Jonathan Swift talks of "the faults and errors" of those who lack the ability to participate in an agreeable conversation:

Most things, pursued by men for the happiness of public or private life, our wit or folly have so refined, that they seldom subsist but in idea; a true friend, a good marriage, a perfect form of government, with some others, require so many ingredients, so good in their several kinds, and so much niceness in mixing them, that for some thousands of years men have despaired of reducing their schemes to perfection. But, in conversation, it is, or might be otherwise; for here we are only to avoid a multitude of errors, which, although a matter of some difficulty, may be in every man's power, for want of which it remaineth as mere an idea as the other. Therefore it seemeth to me, that the truest way to understand conversation, is to know the faults and errors to which it is subject, and from thence every man to form maxims to himself whereby it may be regulated, because it requireth few talents to which most men are not born, or at least may not acquire without any great genius or study. For nature hath left every man a capacity of being agreeable, though not of shining in company; and there are an hundred men sufficiently qualified for both, who, by a very few faults, that they might correct in half an hour, are not so much as tolerable.

The three essays prove that conversation is an art that needs nourishment and can get people the kind of attention that they want and desire and need we say who began it all in English. It helps to note in this context that to Romans oratory was an art and oratory a profession looked upon with respect.

Of Truth

Francis Bacon's essay *Of Truth* is one of his more famous essays. The essay begins by making a genial observation: it mocks those who refuse to admit that there is objective truth that needs to be acknowledged by all. Bacon almost laughs as he says that people oft have a natural love of lying even when lying yields no notable advantage. 'Truth' resembles light, but Bacon opines that many people prefer to flirt with darkness because they take some pleasure in lies and take to lying almost without need. Bacon who might have had faced a debacle with allegations labeled against him at the ripe age of 60; however, asserts that truth is the greatest good that a man can possess. Where does Truth come from and why it is so important? Bacon has the answer – he asserts that Truth comes from God and consequently it brings us close to God, and naturally truth provides us with greatest pleasure.

This essay of Bacon is structured in an interesting manner. It begins with the mentioning Pilate, a symbolic Christ-killer and enemy of God, but it ends by elaborately celebrating God's goodness and creativity. Pontius Pilate it is said had interrogated Jesus before his crucifixion, Jesus proclaimed that "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." (John 18:37). To this, Pilate had mockingly replied: "What is truth?" and thereafter left Jesus to address the Jewish clergy who were hell bent on getting Christ crucified even over a Barabbas (v. 38). True there is no official record of Jesus' reply to Pilate but Christians largely believe that Pilate had looked down upon Truth. Jesus does say this to his disciple Thomas, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Pilate was dismissive of truth; God, on the other hand, created truth and personifies truth. The the essay though framed by references especially relevant to Christians, Bacon leads to the conclusion that truth is God. Does it not remind us of the Indian thought: *Satyam Sivam Sundaram* (Truth is God). Bacon does cite various classical authorities and discusses various classical opinions to augment his belief. Not all classical philosophers

believed in the existence of truth but there would be some who like the Christians agreed that truth should be highly valued. Bacon is wit personified. He says lying is found oft attractive and truth pain boring, so people would tell lie even when there is no benefit from it. Bacon takes the essay back to the debate initiated by Plato: Poets told lies. Bacon like most of his contemporaries suggested that the lies told by the poets were not harmful in nature. Almost Aristotelian in argument, he says poetic untruth is shadow lie. Finally he ends the essay by aligning himself to the Christian doctrine of truth. Unlike the two essays of our discussion, this essay sees a number of allusions which are used to drive the basic idea of the essay home. Bacon raises serious questions and pushes the readers to think. Apart from allusion, imagery of light and darkness is used effectively:

Truth may perhaps come to the price of a pearl, that showeth best by day; but it will not rise to the price of a diamond, or carbuncle, that showeth best in varied lights.

What strikes again is the persuasive nature of Bacon and he does it with such smoothness, that he does not sound like a preacher. The essay is not ornamental like contemporary Elizabethan essays but is straight and simple. There is also a moderate use of Latinism in the essay. *Of Truth* is indicative of the greatness of Bacon's mind and art. That he was a philosopher and gifted with practical reasoning sense is also revealed. Bacon talks of subjective truth that is functional in social life. After reading the essay, we are likely to conclude that Bacon is also a moralist. What are the other aspects of Bacon that we will notice is revealed through the essay? He is a keen observer of human mind and behavior. He candidly says that like in the time of Pilate there would be people who do not care about truth. Bacon reasons as to why people do tell lies! First, truth is acquired through hard work and man is not enthusiastic about hard work. Secondly, truth curtails man's freedom. Thirdly Bacon says "a natural though corrupt love of the lie itself." Further he says: "A mixture of a lie doth ever add pleasure." In the bright light of truth, man fears exposure. Bacon states that if deprived of false pride and vanities, the human mind would be deflated and would look poor and sad. He uses the idea of truth to create a utopia suggesting that truth can make the earth a paradise: "Certainly, it is heaven upon earth, to have a man's mind move in charity, rest in Providence, and turn upon the poles of truth." Also Bacon presents the need of truth in civic life: "..... that clear and round dealing is the honour of man's nature; and that mixture of falsehood is like alloy in coin of gold and silver, which may make the metal work better, but it embaseth it." The liar virtually has no salvation. Bacon uses the imagery of a snake to present the state of a liar. Bacon takes to the French essayist Montaigne who is of the view that "a lie faces God and shrinks from man" to reiterate his point. It is with this that Bacon concludes that untruth is equal to wickedness. He uses the imagery of the alloy to pin his point. At no point in the essay does it digress, it is single in tone in trying to prove that truth could only salvage man.

STYLE

Bacon's is noted for his wit and aphorism and that is his style. Again there is lot to be understood about his style in respect to the Elizabethan and Jacobean prose writers. One thing we can deduce from our study of the three essays above is that a number of lines of Bacon's essay have become like proverbs:

Suspicious among thoughts are like bats among birds. (*Of Suspicion*)

The ways to enrich are many and most of them foul. (*Of Riches*)

It is a strange desire to seek power and lose liberty: or to seek power over others and lose power over a man's self. (*Of Great Place*)

Such lines also ooze of practical sense on the part of the essayist. Thoughts are so condensed that reading of Bacon essays should be at such a pace wherein we can sip in the treasure.

The aphoristic style always depends on the device of balance and antithesis and has been seen as synonymous with Bacon. An example can be taken from his essay, *Of Marriage and Single life* Bacon opines that an unmarried man is a good friend, good master and good servant, but not a good citizen! An example of antithesis is: Nuptial love maketh mankind; friendly love perfecteth it; but wanton love corrupteth and embaseth it." (*Of Marriage and Single Life.*)

Critics have largely agreed that Bacon has two styles. One style as we see in his early essays. Macaulay, by contrasting extracts from *Of Studies* (1597) and *Of Adversity* (1625) makes obvious the two styles of Bacon. The first collection of essays of Bacon's is largely illustrative. The original idea of Bacon had been to make the essays into a sort of diary with observations on various topics. These early essays were worked around a central idea. In his later essays, Bacon comes to maturity and his essays achieve more colour and texture. Also in the later essays, the extreme condensation of the early essays was gone. Though a sense of incompleteness accompanies his essays throughout, nevertheless loose thoughts are left out in the later essays and they appear more rounded.

Bacon is a rhetorician who uses it to persuade and dazzle and in this he has a few competitors in English Language. Bacon's style can be summed to be as: a plethora of figures of speech, a master of simile and metaphor. Analogies and allusion also abound in his work and they are used to illustrate a point for example: In *Of the True Greatness of Kingdom*, there is an analogy drawn from the Bible which is rather elaborate: "The blessing of Judah and Issachar will never meet: that the same people or nation should be both the lion's whelp and the ass between burthens: neither will it be, that a people overlaid with taxes should ever become valiant and martial." Again imagery and figurative speeches become more rampant in the later essays. Bacon's learned mind fluently used quotations and allusions drawn from various sources like fables, the Bible, History, the ancient Greek and Roman writers and much more. We have seen in *Of Truth* how he makes references to Pilate, Lucian, Lucretius and Montaigne, or let us remind ourselves how in *Of Great Place*, we encounter allusions to Tacitus, Galba and Vespasian!

Apart from remarkable wit, Bacon is flexible in his approach. Bacon is not wholly difficult. Extreme condensation of idea sometimes demand slow reading of his essays though few Latinism in his essays make it difficult to follow. At best, we can conclude that the style of Bacon was witty, aphoristic, terse and full of brevity. The sentences in the essay reveal astute wisdom and at times they are epigrammatic in nature too. *Of Studies* has many epigrammatic sentences: "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested." Or "Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man." Again in *Of Great Place*, we have it: "The rising into place is laborious, and by pains men come to greater pains." Or "It is a strange desire to seek power and to lose liberty; or to seek power over others and to lose over a man's self." The charm of Bacon's lies in his

ability to deal with a large number of subjects with equal brightness, intellect and spontaneity and of course wit! Bacon at no point was cumbersome, a thing that would be confirmed by Dryden later. To conclude Bacon, the essayist can be summed and paid tribute in his own words:

If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts he shall end in certainties. (Book I, v, 8, *The Advancement of Learning*).

Questions for study

1. Comment on the style of Bacon.
2. Wit and aphorism characterizes Bacon's essay. Do you agree?
3. What is that strikes you about the essay *Of Discourse*?
4. Why do you think makes *Of Studies* one of the most read essays of Bacon?

