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Brian Vickers

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

THE QUESTION OF STYLE

Few literary reputations have oscillated so extremely as that of Francis Bacon. As a scientist he dominated the seventeenth century to an extent which has still to be fully realised, despite the admirable study by Richard Foster Jones (B 51). His European reputation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was hardly less brilliant, and, though his star fell somewhat in England after Newton and Locke, it rose again very powerfully for the Romantics (Coleridge and Shelley in particular had an almost personal relationship with his work), and to the Victorians he once again became an object of serious philosophical investigation, in particular for his concept of induction (B, §v). But it is hard not to think that both extremes of his reputation were excessive. In the seventeenth century men were inspired by his call for a rebirth of science based on observation, experiment, and co-operation. This general appeal was, historically, correct and well formulated, but it was only a leitmotiv in Bacon's thought, and the more detailed exposition of his theories of induction, negative instances, the laborious collection of natural data before any attempt at evaluating them—theories to which he devoted the bulk of his work and time in the last ten years of his life—these were almost totally ignored in the seventeenth century, and rightly so. Modern investigation of his sources (B, §iv)¹ has shown not only the expected result, that he was derivative (we have yet to be shown how he consistently reapplied old ideas to new purposes) but that he was contradictory to an extent unusual even in that age of contradictions: he castigates other scientists' natural histories for including legendary material which has not been tested by experiment and then does the same thing himself. He attacks Aristotle, but is in fact dependent on him for many ideas and methods, and his concept of magic and alchemy is fundamentally medieval.

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The closer we look at Bacon's performance as a scientist, the more disappointed we become. Bacon was unaware of many of the new developments of his age¹ and when he did hear of them he rejected them out of hand to return to the traditional theories—so he was either ignorant of or indifferent to the work of Kepler, Copernicus, Galileo, Napier's logarithms, Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood, and William Gilbert's *De Magnete*, one of the few pieces of empirical research in the Renaissance, which he rejected scornfully. Gilbert, he said, 'hath made a philosophy out of the observations of a loadstone' (3. 293). F. R. Johnson has shown that Bacon knew less about astronomy than Donne² (though his ignorance of mathematics was probably more serious), and it is no wonder that accounts of seventeenth-century science tend increasingly to abandon Bacon as a figure of serious interest.³ It is a commonplace of criticism that the inductive process as he formulated it undervalued the hypothesis and was incapable of playing any valuable part in scientific development: the significance of this theory was also overvalued in the nineteenth century, and it was left to C. D. Broad, speaking in Cambridge at a celebration of the tercentenary, to provide a witty and elegant exposure of its weaknesses.⁴ More balanced estimates of Bacon's place in the history of thought have been provided by Hiram Haydn (B45), and by N. W. Gilbert, who in his study of Renaissance methodology (B37) insists that credit must be given to Bacon in that 'the notion of experimentation begins to be formulated expressly' by him first of all. Even more impressive is the testimony of Hardin Craig, who in his classic study of 'The Elizabethan Mind in Literature' (B22) gives Bacon a high place, not only as a witness to contemporary thinking, but as a man who has completely digested it—he writes at one point that 'Bacon, as usual, sees the situation with great clarity; he always discovers or re-discovers the truth'. The reassessment of Bacon in our time has produced reliable expositions of his thought from a purely philosophic point of view by F. H. Anderson (B3), and from a more technological position by B. Farrington (B27), though one could wish that both writers had devoted less space to the sum-

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mary, and more to the discussion and criticism of Bacon's views. Other aspects of Bacon's work have been well handled: Karl Wallace continues his useful studies of Bacon's theory of rhetoric (B93–6), and John L. Harrison has provided an excellent defence of Bacon's much-abused references to poetry (B44). But with the exception of Anne Righter's sensitive though necessarily limited paper (B77) there has been no extended discussion of Bacon's style—indeed with this one praiseworthy exception what has been done is either unsympathetic or inaccurate, or both.¹

If we can no longer estimate Bacon the scientist very highly, justice has certainly yet to be done to him as a writer. This situation is not only the excuse for writing a book on him, but points to a deeper truth: one cannot ascribe Bacon's remarkable hold over men's minds in the seventeenth century and after to any other source but his ability as an imaginative writer. Bacon himself defined 'the duty and office of Rhetoric' with a clear grasp of the psychology of persuasion: 'to apply Reason to the Imagination for the better moving of the Will' (3. 409), and his own theory of rhetoric is both highly detailed and original. In effect, his whole life's work was dedicated to persuasion, and he shows himself to be very aware of the importance of persuasive writing, interpreting a proverb of Solomon in *The Advancement of Learning* as 'signifying that profoundness of wisdom will help a man to a name of admiration, but that it is eloquence that prevaieth in an active life' (3. 409).² His normal references to his work and its style do not range beyond modest descriptions of it as 'clear' or 'not harsh or unpleasant' (3. 352; 4. 42), but in the letter to Playfere proposing a Latin translation of the *Advancement* Bacon recognises metaphorically the need for his scientific programme to reach and persuade as wide an audience as possible, and he visualises the process in terms of sowing a seed, lighting a fire, and ringing a bell, all powerful images for ideal communication. To 'excite men's wits' the sooner, he writes, he intends to utter his ideas 'as seeds' rather than wait for them to mature further; he will distribute them even better, in the words of the proverb:

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by sowing with the basket, than with the hand. Wherefore, since I have only taken upon me to ring a bell to call other wits together, (which is the meanest office) it cannot but be consonant to my desire, to have that bell heard as far as can be. And since that they are but sparks, which can work but upon matter prepared, I have the more reason to wish that those sparks may fly abroad, that they may the better find and light upon those minds and spirits which are apt to be kindled. (10. 300–1.)

Another more famous metaphor for this process of communication is that of himself as the trumpeter heralding a new age, the ‘buccinator novi temporis’.

The trumpet was heard, the sparks caught fire, and the results belong to the history of thought. But the nature of this communication, the literary creativeness which produced such a remarkable effect, have yet to be analysed. Not that their power has not been felt—indeed it is remarkable how many studies of Bacon¹ pay incidental tribute to his literary art, to ‘the marvellous language in which Bacon often clothes his thoughts. His utterances are not infrequently marked with a grandeur and solemnity of tone, a majesty of diction, which renders it impossible to forget, and difficult even to criticise them. He speaks as one having authority, and it is impossible to resist the magic of his voice.’ Even an unsympathetic writer speaks of ‘Bacon’s gorgeous rhetoric’, and a study of his place in the ‘counter-Renaissance’ finds the distinction between his confidence and the bombastic egotism of men like Paracelsus, in Bacon’s ‘superior mastery of words, his truly wonderful capacity to keep his trumpet clean of overly brassy notes’ and the ability to sound ‘the sonorous peal of genuine dignity’, in hearing which ‘we are captured and acquiescent’. The power in Bacon’s writing which moves his commentators to such eloquence derives initially from a strong imagination capable of presenting abstract ideas in a concrete but flexible form. D. G. James has accurately described ‘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 more poetical’. Indeed the whole end of his philosophy is a non-rational

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vision of man's unlimited capacity to dominate the universe, a vision which Harold Fisch rightly defines as a 'fundamentally religious and poetical view of the world', created by 'the transference of the energies of Faith into the region of technology. Bacon makes Physics not a technique but a religion, and Induction becomes for him not so much a useful mechanism for the discovery of certain limited axioms, but rather a mystic path, an ultimate revelation and a millennial hope.'

II

Given the potency of this poetic vision a stylistic analysis—which, with certain limitations, is a valid critical approach to any writer—becomes an urgent necessity for Bacon, for I think it could be said that the disparity between the meagre, confused and inaccurate contents of his scientific programme and its overwhelming effect can only be explained by his mastery of style (though not thereby discredited for, as both H. Fisch and A. N. Whitehead point out, 'Bacon's Faustian dream of magical power over the world continues to drive us on'). However, the concept of style, and the most profitable way of analysing it are topics of considerable complexity, and I think it right that this study, which works on certain principles of method that have been gradually developed, should at one point announce what these principles are, and discuss the theoretical issues involved. Indeed the failure to state one's principles may be misleading, while the deliberate withholding of them can have sinister implications. I have tried to benefit from the most enlightened modern discussions of stylistic analysis that I could find¹ and, although I may seem to be embracing an impossibly wide field, the task seems worth while. However, the study of style is still a complex and indeed a confused topic, with much overlapping and repetition, and as an attempt to introduce some clarity I have therefore extracted what I take to be some essential stylistic principles and organised a brief discussion around each of them, juxtaposing what seem to me erroneous approaches with more enlightened ones. The principles are set out

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not with the generalising intent of the analytical theorist such as Aristotle or I. A. Richards but for more humble reasons, partly to clarify my own ideas and partly to expose the kinds of choices and alignments that I have made. They are informative, heuristic, and do not aspire to the profundity of fixed laws: it would be easy to quarrel with them, for they perhaps raise more questions than they answer, but that would be to mistake the spirit in which they are offered. Some working clarification of stylistic method seems necessary, but inevitably other assumptions have to be left unanalysed—this is hardly the place to attempt to define what we mean by ‘literary values’.

The concept of ‘style’ itself should, I think, be as broad as possible (in practice, it is usually as narrow as its opponents care to make it) and to a literary student it should certainly include the concept of structure—so a linguist’s complaint that ‘to consider structure a *component* of style, except perhaps in a short poem, stretches the meaning of the term “style” to its limits’ (Ohmann, 8, p. 425*) means simply that we must use a broader definition. My own working definition, which does not claim to be exclusive, would assume that a writer’s style is an individual selection from the language available at the time (either in the widest sense or in the more limited form of ‘literary’ language); that his choice is made either subconsciously, so showing some habitual tendencies which may be significant, or consciously, that is according to a variety of principles which will depend at one level on his attitude to his reader and at the other on his concepts of the proper nature of (and the connections between) form, meaning and language in the developing work of art. I think that our analysis of style should go far beyond its commonly accepted aim, that merely initial stage of determining the individualising characteristics of a writer, and should consider the relation between the style of a particular passage and, loosely speaking, the argument or overall intention of the whole work, and indeed its degree of excellence. This is a functional view of stylistics, and above all a literary one, as what follows will explain.

* For sources given in full see pp. 267–8 n. 1.

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My first principle is that the study of a writer's style is only one of several possible critical approaches: this may seem unexceptionable if stated so, but even discursive reading in this field will show that many 'stylisticians' regard their approach as being the best if not the only way of dealing with a literary text. The attitude shown here is often connected with the apparently inevitable methodological split between form and content, and usually such critics affirm that the approach through style leads from form to content by the best possible route. So, for Leo Spitzer,

language is only one outward crystallization of the 'inward form', or, to use another metaphor: the life-blood of the poetic creation is everywhere the same, whether we tap the organism at 'language' or 'ideas', at 'plot' or at 'composition'. (16, p. 18.)

R. A. Sayce says much the same thing, though with less vivid images: by studying style

We shall in fact be studying the content, but instead of approaching it from the outside, more or less superficially, we shall come to it from the inside, through the texture and substance of the writing, in a word through the medium of the artist... Viewed in this light, the study of style should not be an accidental appendage but the first and most important stage in the total assessment of the work (13, pp. 6, 134).

This is certainly true of many literary works (and, one might suppose, of most great ones), but there are, equally, those where other approaches are not only prior, but more important. In some cases (Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, say) the analysis of the artist's creative adaptation of his sources may be a more valuable clue to his intentions and implicit valuations than the work's styles. In others the presentation of a human situation and the interrelation between characters and their moral and psychological states is clearly the dominant artistic achievement and is not much dependent on the particular details of language. Such considerations may even apply to a whole genre—as René Wellek says, 'Many novels seem not to require any close attention to style' (Sebeok, 15, p. 416).

I do not want to deny the validity of an approach through style

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—far from it, for I think that it is a potentially valuable approach which has been neglected. Indeed, in the majority of extant criticism, as Floyd Gray has said:

On s'attache plus aux idées des écrivains qu'à leur façon de les faire vivre, sans toujours se rendre compte que l'art commence aux confins de l'idée, qu'on est écrivain non pour ce qu'on écrit, mais parce qu'on sait écrire. (3, p. 9.)

That may be too bluntly put, but it does point to one important aspect of literary art which the stylistic critic undertakes to evaluate. His task is more sensitively stated by Paul Valéry:

En somme l'étude dont nous parlions aurait pour objet de préciser et de développer la recherche des effets proprements littéraires du langage, l'examen des inventions expressives et suggestives qui ont été faites pour accroître le pouvoir et la pénétration de la parole. (Quoted, Sayce, 13, p. 7, from *Introduction à la poésie* (Paris, 1938), pp. 12–13.)

It seems to me undeniable that a study of the *effets proprements littéraires* can help our appreciation of a work of art, but I do not want to elevate this discipline to a superior position, and would prefer to conclude more modestly, with Amado Alonso, that 'every study which contributes to the better comprehension and interpretation of a literary work is legitimate' (1, p. 489), and that stylistics is certainly one such approach. However, even within this discipline there will be variations, for 'like other high-order abstractions the concept of style has many facets' (Ullmann, 17, p. 1) and so the critic should not impose one method only—hence it is unwise of R. Ohmann to complain that there are too many 'critical methods', 'all apparently defective, and which should all be replaced by 'Generative grammar' (8, 423–5 *et seq.*).

The second principle is that the study of style is a literary, not a scientific discipline, and thus the choice of material for analysis, the conduct of the analysis, and the evaluation of the results should be conditioned not by ease of availability or adaptability to 'scientific' manipulation, but by a framework of literary values. Some linguists want to elevate stylistics to a science and disparagingly compare the 'unscientific' and 'impressionistic' method of a critic like Spitzer to the accuracy of 'rigorous and exhaustive

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linguistic analysis', such as 'the kind of inventory of linguistic items that forms the basis of modern structuralism' (Enkvist, 2, pp. 7–9, a technical-looking sentence which means no more than 'the counting of heads'). Certainly stylistic analysis, if performed with conscientious detail, should be one of the most objective of critical approaches, and with it (unlike some other methods) the data referred to will be available for checking; but the interpretations put on these data, the relating of them to aesthetic evaluation, is a critical process which is hardly susceptible to scientific methods. The linguist may be concerned with the single process of stylistic definition, but the literary critic will want to go on from there to make judgments of value; and despite the linguist's *caveat* (Riffaterre, 10, p. 163) the critic may have started from these value judgments, for he will only be undertaking stylistic analysis if he is convinced that the work concerned is either aesthetically valuable in itself, or of historical significance. And any literary reader of modern linguistic discussions of style is bound to be depressed by the way in which linguists, in order to illustrate their principles, frequently retreat into the pre-linguistic stage of signs and symbols ('AR', 'SB', for examples, or 'Vt+NP', 'Be+Adj', 'O-I', 'MHQ', etc.), or to a few simple sentences which can be endlessly manipulated ('Dickens wrote *Bleak House*', say, or 'John loves Mary'), or at best to a highly simplified scale of utterance (American Folk-Tale narrative, Marathi baby-talk, or Californian suicide-notes). I am not wanting to score easily off the methods of linguistics: I realise that the first two groups consist of attempts at conventional representations of concepts, but they are in practice given too much attention at the expense of any literary analysis, and the poverty of imaginative resources available in the third group is symptomatic both of the crisis in linguistics, which is still producing conflicting theories of language so quickly that few of them seem to get developed in much practical detail, and perhaps even more of the fundamental difficulty of applying 'rigorous and exhaustive' linguistic analysis to literature—the concepts and methods evolved with such theoretical rigour are just too simple and too rigid to admit of any varied and flexible application

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to the endlessly subtle phenomenon of literary language. It may well be that linguistics will develop adequate methods for analysing complex styles, but in its self-limitation to scientific description it must always be regarded as the servant of literary criticism.

Another discipline which approaches the study of style in a scientific way is psychology, and here again the results so far achieved show how wide the gap is between the carefully formulated scientific method and its possible application to a complex literary text. So one psychologist in a paper entitled 'Vectors of Prose Style' (Sebeok, 15, pp. 283–92) performed an experiment in reading, asking 8 different judges to comment on 150 passages of about 300 words each, according to 29 different criteria, but his 'laborious calculations', as René Wellek says, 'lead only to such obvious results as that the "humorous-serious" distinction is more reliable than the "good-bad" or "weak-strong" distinction, (Wellek, 20, p. 409). Other psychological papers at this conference produced equally predictable results, albeit now established statistically—so a study of suicide notes showed that such notes 'contain more *mands*', that is demands, pleas, requests such as 'take care of the house', 'bury me' in this or that cemetery, and more 'distress-expressing' phrases than other letters (*ibid.*—what else would one expect?), and the author of the paper records with some surprise the result of an experiment to differentiate genuine suicide notes from false ones (that is, where the writers had not actually killed themselves): his team of subjects correctly assigned only half of the sample, whereas he and his co-investigator, who had been working on the project for some time, spotted nearly all of them, so suggesting that they had 'picked up a feeling for the suicidal style' (Sebeok, 15, p. 304). The literary student finds this quite a normal event, and wonders how the psychologist would have gone on to analyse this 'feeling', or to account for it statistically.

The desire for quantification dominant in modern psychology joins up with the wish to make stylistics a science, complete with experimentally verifiable procedures, which seems to have affected linguists too. This we see from the example of Michael Riffaterre, who had performed in 1957 an excellent stylistic