

Francis Bacon's *Essays* and Aphorism

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I. Introduction

The aim of this study is to consider Bacon's prose style in terms of aphorism. As Michael Kiernan, the editor of Bacon's *Essays*, says, "Bacon's style has long delighted his readers" (xxxviii), Bacon's prose in the *Essays* has a distinguished feature. The cause of the feature is various: Bacon's use of rhetorical techniques; his construction of argument; his sentence structure; and so on. Bacon's prose style has been studied by many critics, with the most authoritative study among them being Brian Vickers' *Francis Bacon and Renaissance Prose*, which is a full study of Bacon as a writer. Vickers studies Bacon's prose style in the context of the history of rhetoric, referring to classical Latin authors, and cites in the last chapter the judgments of Bacon's style by past critics. His study of Bacon's style is based upon almost all of his works not only English but also Latin works. The rhetorical techniques of Bacon which Vickers notices and examines are: aphorism, syntactical symmetry, and imagery. The present study is greatly guided by and given important hints from Vickers' study. It will first focus on Bacon's aphorism as the most typical and generally acknowledged feature of his style, by quoting Vickers' discussion as the basis. Like Vickers' study, this is intended to become a partial study to understand the characteristics of Bacon's prose as a whole.

II. Aphorism in the *Essays*

As for the literary concept of aphorism, M. H. Abrams explains that the word originates from the title *Aphorisms*, by a Greek physician Hippocrates, and gives, "*Ars longa, vita brevis*---"art is long, life is short," as a best known example (Abram, 219). It is a rhetorical term and means, "the pithy and pointed statement of a serious maxim, opinion, or general truth." In other words, the aphorism in the classical sense indicates any short, pithy, independent statement into which much thought is compressed.

Bacon uses this rhetorical technique in the *Essays*, although he has not mentioned the fact. The modern reader of the *Essays* will easily notice this fact by reading some of his essays, because aphoristic sentences are very frequently scattered. The following passage from the essay, "Of Studies," is a good example for seeing this frequency:

Studies serve for Delight, for Ornament, and for Ability. Their Chiefe Use for Delight, is in Privatnesse and Retiring; For Ornament, is in Discourse; And for Ability, is in the Judgement and Disposition of Businesse. For Expert Men can Execute, and perhaps Judge of particulars, one by one; But the generall Counsels, and the Plots, and Marshalling of Affaires, 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 Judgement wholly by their Rules is the Humour of a Scholler. They perfect Nature, and are perfected by Experience: For Naturall Abilites, are like Naturall Plants, that need Proyning by Study: And Studies themselves, doe give forth Directions too much at Large, except they be bounded in by experience. Crafty Men Contemne Studies; Simple Men Admire them; and Wise Men Use them: For they teach not their owne Use; But that is a Wisdome without them, and above them, won

by Observation. (L "Of Studies" 152-53)

The essay is a short one, of about fifty lines, by Kiernan's edition, and the above passage is the first twenty lines. The very first sentence symbolically presents Bacon's style: powerful and impressive. In the essay Bacon describes the practical utility and function of studies. Any man that has ever studied something seriously in his life will understand and consent to Bacon's words not only of the first line but also of the rest, and at the same time will admire Bacon's composition. Indeed, how well he has expressed his belief in such a short passage! Bacon's words are pregnant and persuasive; the reader will probably find that truths are expressed very concisely in such sentences as:

Studies serve for Delight, for Ornament, and for Ability.

To spend too much Time in Studies, is Sloth; To use them too much for Ornament, is Affectation; To make Judgement wholly by their Rules is the Humour of a Scholler.

Crafty Men Contemne Studies; Simple Men Admire them; and Wise Men Use them.

All three sentences are pithy in sense, concise in structure and independent in context, thus having the qualities of aphorism.

We find such aphorisms here and there in the *Essays*. That is why Vickers, in his *Francis Bacon and Renaissance Prose*, discusses aphorism and image as two conspicuous rhetorical features of Bacon, sparing one chapter for each study (60-95, 141-73). Vickers' study covers almost all of Bacon's writings, including his Latin works. And in chapter 3, where he discusses the aphorism, Vickers gives several pages exclusively to the discussion of this phenomenon in the *Essays* (88-95). Before we proceed to the next discussion we have to know the history of Bacon's *Essays*. Bacon published the first edition of the *Essays* in 1597 at the age of 36. This was a small book, composed of ten essays, and the above quoted "Of Studies" was one of them. In the second edition, which was published in 1612, Bacon revised the original ten essays from the first edition and included most of them into the second edition. At the same time he composed new essays, increasing the total number to 40. The third and final edition was published in 1625; this time new essays were added, old essays revised, and the total became 58. Thus Bacon enlarged each edition, revising old essays at the same time. Since the past editions are included in volume VI of Spedding's *Works*, we can compare older essays with their revised versions; the later quotations are from this volume.

III. Two different styles in the *Essays*

In his study, Vickers calls attention to the fact that Bacon's aphorisms, especially in the later versions, are fairly different from the nature of the classical aphorism. He says:

At all events the two later versions look to be more coherent, and, although Bacon has not systematically tied every sentence together, the style is certainly more fluent, being that of his normal discourse. (89-90)

The words "coherent" and "fluent" suggest that Bacon's style is not very aphoristic, thus he points out the differences in style between the first and the later editions. In later versions the tone of aphorism is weakened, he says. Vickers' observation is contradictory to the impression we have had from the above quoted essay, "Of Studies."

Vickers' concept of "aphorism" seems to be like that of the classical: the short, pithy and independent statement. Vickers's quotations as typical aphorisms in the *Essays* indicates such a judging standard. Here are some examples chosen by Vickers from various essays:

A man that hath no virtue in himself, ever envieth virtue in others.

There is in human nature generally more of the fool than of the wise.

There is nothing makes a man suspects much, more that to know little. (91)

According to Vickers, these kind of sentences are seen frequently in the first edition but not so often in the second and the third.

The formerly quoted essay, "Of Studies," is an old essay existing in the 1597 edition. It was revised in later editions, but still the writing style has not been changed. That is why the previous passage keeps the aphoristic style. But, according to Vickers, the same style is not felt in later versions; he says further:

The aphorism is now in a definite minority amongst other literary aids---in fact, to one looking for admissible condensed sentences it is hard to see how Bacon's style was ever thought to be 'aphoristic' . . . (90)

Then, in which way has the style of the later editions moved? Is there a general tendency which we can call by some name? Yes, and we can name the style, "systematic," in terms of the organization of an essay. The reading impression of this type of essay is more theoretic rather than aphoristic; the argument is well organized and the individual sentences are much more coherent with each other, so that a discussion can proceed smoothly. The hint to judge this way is noticed when we compare the revised parts of an essay; for Bacon's way of correction will tell us what he has intended. A typical example is seen in the essay, "Of Nobility." This essay, when it was first composed for the second edition, was very aphoristic; the starting part goes like this in the original version:

It is a reuerend thing to see an ancient castle or building not in decay; or to see a faire timber tree sound & perfect: how much more to behold an ancient Noble familie, which hath stood against the waues and weathers of time. For new Nobility is but the act of power; but ancient Nobility is the act of time. The first raisers of *Fortunes* are commonly more vertuous, but lesse innocent, then their descendents. For there is rarely rising, but by a commixture of good and euil Arts. But it is reason the memorie of their vertues remain to their posterities, and their faults die with themselues. (Spedding VI, 549)

The beginning sentence is a generalization of the long lasting noble family; the sentence which starts with "The first raisers" is again a general characteristic of the founder of a noble family; and the sentence which starts with "But" generalizes the progress of the noble family. Thus the whole passage is like a collection of definitions to characterize the state of nobility and therefore aphoristic. In the third edition, Bacon revised the essay by adding and deleting some parts. But the biggest change is seen at the beginning of the essay; he put a long introductory passage of about the same length of the original essay in front of the above quoted part. The new version starts like this:

We will speake of *Nobility*, first as a *Portion* of an *Estate*; Then as a *Condition* of *Particular Persons*. A *Monarchy*, where there is no *Nobility* at all, is ever a pure, and absolute *Tyranny*; As that of the *Turkes*. For *Nobility* attempters *Soveraignty*, and draws the *Eyes* of the *People*, somewhat aside from the *Line Royall*. . . .

As for *Nobility* in *particular Persons*; It is a Reverend Thing, to see an Ancient Castle, or Building not in decay; (XIII "Of Nobility" 41-42)

As is seen in the first sentence, Bacon indicates at first the procedure of his discussion by such markers as "first" and "Then." And then he begins to discuss the first topic of the nobility as a social status in the nation, going on to the second topic of the nobility as a condition in particular persons. In the original essay, Bacon discussed only the second topic; but in the new essay, he joined the first topic. From this two-sided viewpoint to the problem of nobility,

the essay has become more theoretical and analytic.

Thus, in some essays in later editions, including those revised from the earlier edition, Bacon's prose has changed from the aphoristic to the systematic style. But it is also true that in some other essays, Bacon keeps the original aphoristic style. For example, "Of Adversitie" is a new essay found in the 1625 edition. The prose style of this essay is acknowledged to be very similar to that of "Of Studies." See the following quotation:

Prosperity is not without many Feares and Distastes; And *Adversity* is not without Comforts and Hopes. Wee see in Needle-workes, and Imbroideries, It is more pleasing, to have a Lively Worke, upon a Sad and Solemne Ground; then to have a Darke and Melancholy Worke, upon a Lightsome Ground: Judge therefore, of the Pleasure of the Heart, by the Pleasure of the Eye. Certainly, Vertue is like pretious Odours, most fragrant, when they are incensed, or crushed: For *Prosperity* doth best discover Vice; But *Adversity* doth best Discover Vertue. (V "Of Adversitie" 19)

Does the reader not find pithiness in such sentences as, "*Prosperity* is not without many Feares and Distastes; And *Adversity* is not without Comforts and Hopes;" "Vertue is like pretious Odours, most fragrant, when they are incensed, or crushed;" or "*Prosperity* doth best discover Vice; But *Adversity* doth best Discover Vertue?" All of these have a pregnant meaning in a brief sentence. When we read the whole essay, we notice also that the structure of argument is not very systematic.

Generally speaking, in the third edition, Bacon's prose style has become more well-ordered than the earlier editions. A good example is, "Of Simulation And Dissimulation," another newly written essay in the 1625 edition. The remarkable characteristics of this essay are; first, its systematic structure of argument and, second, the citation of relative examples. The argument starts with the analysis of the human psychology of hiding the real self, then examining the degrees of the self-disguising, and lastly considering the advantages and disadvantages of this behavior. The systematic procedure will be proved by the following quotation. In order to see briefly the structure of the whole essay, the beginning parts of each paragraph are quoted; the argument markers such as, "the first" and "the Second" will help guess the composition structure:

Dissimulation is but a faint kind of Policy, or Wisdome; For it asketh a strong Wit, and a strong Heart, to know, when to tell Truth, and to doe it. Therefore it is the weaker Sort of Politicks, that are the great Dissemblers. . . .

There be three degrees, of this Hiding, and Vailing of a Mans Selfe. The first *Closetnesse*, *Reservation*, and *Secrecy*; when a Man leaveth himselfe without Observation, or without Hold to be taken, what he is. The second *Dissimulation*, in the *Negative*; when a man lets fall Signes, and Arguments, that he is not, that he is. And the third *Simulation*, in the *Affirmative*; when a Man industriously, and expressly, faigns, and pretends to be, that he is not.

For the first of these, *Secrecy*: It is indeed, the Vertue of a Confessour;

For the Second, which is *Dissimulation*. It followeth many times upon *Secrecy*, by a necessity:

But for the third Degree, which is *Simulation*, and false Profession; That I hold more culpable, and lesse politicke;

The great *Advantages* of *Simulation* and *Dissimulation* are three. First The second is, The third is, There be also three *Disadvantages*, to set it even. The first, The second, The third, (VI "Of Simulation And Dissimulation" 20-22)

Bacon thus divides the psychology of self concealing into three categories: secrecy, dissimulation and simulation, each degree being subsequently discussed in detail. In the last part of the essay, he adds a practical discussion about advantage and disadvantage, and here again we see a smaller division. Thus the argument is composed according to a logical scheme, and the result is like a short treatise on the subject.

Generally speaking, in the third edition, Bacon's discussion has become more systematic as in this case, or more

illustrative as in the essay "Of the true Greatnesse of Kingdomes and Estates" by citing short stories or examples, and easier as is seen in such essay topics as, "Of Building" or "Of Gardens." Vickers' criticism, "it is hard to see how Bacon's style was ever thought to be 'aphoristic,'" can be agreed. However, this point should not be mistaken; namely, in spite of the general tendency, Bacon still keeps writing aphoristic sentences here and there in the composition. The frequency of aphorism has become smaller in later editions, but still we can see the typically characteristic statements in systematically composed essays, as are seen in the following examples:

Houses are built to Live in, and not to Looke on: Therefore let Use bee preferred before Uniformitie; Except where both may be had. (XLV "Of Building" 135)

Whosoever is out of *Patience*, is out of Possession of his *Soule*. (LVII "Of Anger" 170)

The aphorism is closely related to Bacon's belief in communication. We will study his concept of aphorism in the next section.

IV. Bacon's concept of aphorism

The essay was a new literary form in English literature when Bacon first published his *Essays* in 1597; therefore, Abrams gives Bacon the claim as the pioneer of the genre by saying, "Francis Bacon, late in the sixteenth century, inaugurated the English use of the term in his own *Essays* . . ." (s.v. "Essay"). It is probable that Bacon thought much about the way of writing this new type of composition. There remains nothing to show his choice of a particular way of writing except for a few suggestive words. They are seen in the dedicatory epistle to Prince Charles; though it was written for the second edition of 1612:

To write just Treatises requireth leasure in the Writer, and leasure in the Reader, and therefore are not so fitt, neither in regard of yo^r H: princely affaiers, nor in regard of my continuall Services, W^{ch} is the cause, that hath made me chuse to write certaine breif notes, sett downe rather significantlye, then curiously, w^{ch} I have called *Essaies*. (Kiernan ed. 317)

His word "curiously" is an obsolete use, signifying "Nicely, finely, excellently, handsomely, beautifully" (*OED*, "curiously" 5). These words of Bacon, especially the phrase, "certaine breif notes, sett downe rather significantlye, then curiously," may be related to his choice of the aphoristic style.

Bacon had his own theory about the transmission of knowledge. In *The Advancement of Learning*, he discusses this theme (131-46). As for the methods of transmitting knowledge, he states great merits for using an aphorism:

But the writing in aphorisms hath many excellent virtues, whereto the writing in method doth not approach. For first, it trieth the writer, whether he be superficial or solid: for aphorisms, except they should be ridiculous, cannot be made but of the pith and heart of sciences; for discourse of illustration is cut off; recitals of examples are cut off; discourse of connexion and order is cut off; descriptions of practice are cut off. So there remaineth nothing to fill the aphorisms but some good quantity of observation: and therefore no man can suffice, nor in reason will attempt, to write aphorisms, but he that is sound and grounded. But in methods,

Tantum series juncturaque pollet,
Tantum de medio sumptis accedit honoris.
[Such grace can order and connection give;
Such beauties common subjects may receive.]

as a man shall make a great show of an art, which, if it were disjointed, would come to little. Secondly, methods are more fit to win consent or belief, but less fit to point to action; for they carry a kind of demonstration in orb or circle, one part illuminating another, and therefore satisfy. But particulars being dispersed do best agree with dispersed directions. And lastly, aphorisms, representing a knowledge broken, do invite men to inquire further; whereas methods, carrying the show of a total, do secure men, as if they were at furthest. (Johnston 135-36)

The word “method,” as is perceived from the contrastive usage against “aphorism,” is another rhetorical term which usage has become obsolete in present-day English. The *OED* explains the word under the sense group of “II. Systematic arrangement, order,” and gives the definition: “A regular, systematic arrangement of literary materials; a methodical exposition” (s.v. “method”). In this way Bacon regards the aphorism as an excellent style compared with the method. But his recognition does not mean that he created all his compositions using aphorisms. We know that he wrote his representative philosophical work, *Novum Organum*, using aphorisms; for the subtitles of its two books are, “Aphorisms concerning the Interpretation of Nature and the Kingdom of Man,” by Spedding’s translation (Spedding IV, 47, 119). This is a work in which he disclosed his thought of making a kingdom of man by way of exercising man’s power over nature. Some of his aphorisms in *Novum Organum*, especially those in the first part, retain, indeed, such characteristics as he mentions; the statements are short and pithy, giving no examples, and are disconnected. But in most others, the quality of aphorism is not very clear; each one is pretty long and the form is similar to a systematic treatise on some subject, like the case of the 60th aphorism of the first book. Therefore we could say, at least in the case of *Novum Organum*, that Bacon believed in the excellency of the aphorism and tried to use it often, but in reality, he did not keep writing in such a way. We can also think another way and this will be truer: Bacon’s standard of aphorism was so permissive that he referred to a fairly long statement as an aphorism only if some profound observation or truth was described. If so, most of his philosophical writings can be included in his aphoristic composition; *The Advancement of Learning*, his first philosophical work can also be included.

The concept of aphorism, or the extent of acceptability of the term, seems to be different among individuals as a modern critic, Vickers, takes it narrowly, but Bacon probably took it broadly as we see in his *Novum Organum*. The writing style of the *Essays* also spreads from a strictly aphoristic style to such a one as we could call a systematic style. In general, however, we can judge Bacon’s style to be aphoristic, as we saw that even in later essays, which have a systematically organized structure, there still exist here and there witty aphorisms.

V. Conclusion

The aim of Vickers’ study of Bacon’s aphorism is to revalue his use of this rhetorical form by correcting general misunderstandings to his use of the form. One main point of Vicker’s revaluation will be the estimation of Bacon’s aphorisms which are composed in symmetrical structure, namely, those which have a neat parallel syntax in a pithy statement. As a “superbly expressed” example, Vickers chose the following from the *Essays*: “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” (95).

Our study of the aphorism, although stimulated by Vickers’ study at first, has taken a different course: Vickers focuses on the functional study; ours on the general prose style. Necessarily, as a conclusion, we would like to assess Bacon’s aphorism in a larger context than a smaller sentence unit. First, how should we assess Bacon’s style in the *Essays*? We should say that the general tendency is an aphoristic style because in every essay we see aphorisms in spite of the difference of frequency. If scanned from sentence level, aphorisms will be found in every essay, but if scanned from argument level, some essays are not aphoristic. Secondly, why are there two different styles among the essays, then? One answer will be that it is because of Bacon’s advancing of age, in other words, because of the accumulation of experience in his life. When young, namely when he published the first and the second editions, Bacon composed mostly in aphorism, but when he became older and retired from office, he composed in method, a systematic style, as well. This tendency is considered to be a natural course. Thirdly, why has he kept writing aphorisms? One answer will be his belief in aphorisms, that they cannot be made except by a true philosopher and that they can stimulate the reader to inquire further. As for the latter reason, Richard Whately, an editor and

annotator of Bacon's *Essays*, explains the nature in European literary history:

it is necessary to call attention to the circumstance that the word ESSAY has been considerably changed in its application since the days of Bacon. By an *Essay* was originally meant---according to the obvious and natural sense of the word---a slight sketch, to be filled up by the reader; brief hints, designed to be followed out; loose thoughts on some subjects, thrown out without much regularity, but sufficient to suggest further inquiries and reflections. Any more elaborate, regular, and finished composition, such as, in our days, often bears the title of an *Essay*, our ancestors called a *treatise*, *tractate*, *dissertation*, or *discourse*. . . . it ought to be remembered that an *Essay*, in the original and strict sense of the word---an *Essay* such as Bacon's, and also Montaigne's,---was designed to be suggestive of further remarks and reflections, and, in short, to *set the reader a-thinking* on the subject. It consisted of observations loosely thrown out, as in conversation; and inviting, as in conversation, the observations of others on the subjects. (iii-iv)

Bacon was a realistic and practical man; that is why he hated, "the abstract disputation of the scholastics" (*Companion*, "Bacon"). The *Essays* is a book of Bacon's discovery in various aspects of human life and society; the topics are multi-directional: family and social life, politics, social system and custom, philosophy, medicine, psychology, and so on. All these topics are, however, very familiar ones as Bacon himself says, "they handle those things wherein both Mens Lives, and their pens are most conversant" (Kiernan ed. 317). The most remarkable feature is not in the topics but in his way of disclosing his thought. Bacon presents what he thinks in his own mind as an individual. This way of Bacon seems to prove an opening of a new age in the spiritual world. In European history, Renaissance was a period of change in the human view of the earth, of the universe and of religion. Bacon's way of presenting his own contemplation seems to be parallel with the general spiritual movement of the day. Bacon doubtless wanted to make public his thought and to encourage further inquiry of other people. That is why he wrote most of his philosophical works in Latin, a common language of the intellectual world of the day. This expectation will explain his choice of writing style in aphorism as the most appropriate means to "invite men to inquire further."

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