

AN ALCHEMIST OF THE MODERN AGE

The distinctive qualities on which Montaigne's reputation as an essayist is founded are his conversational voice, his discursive style, his use of both classical reference and personal anecdote to support his arguments and, without which none of these would be of lasting value, his wisdom. The qualities of his close contemporary Sir Francis Bacon (born some thirty years later) are quite different, except for the last, which makes it all the more to be regretted, especially by the English, that his reputation has been overshadowed by the Frenchman's.

The principal characteristics of Bacon's essays are their brevity, their wit, their logical form, their incisive intelligence and their wisdom. Whereas, when we read Montaigne, we feel ourselves in the company of an intelligent, well-read man, whose every digression is as full of interest as his principal argument, and what we enjoy in each essay has at least as much to do with the pleasure we take in his company as with the nature of his argument, with Bacon it is precisely the opposite.

Bacon's essays, the longest of which covers less than six pages, the shortest barely one, are anything but leisurely. His short essays are like extended epigrams, his long ones like abbreviated lectures. 'I do now publish my essays,' he wrote in his dedication to the Duke of Buckingham, 'which, of all my other works, have been most current, for that as it seems they come home to men's business and bosoms.' Montaigne, on the other hand, wrote in his that 'I have dedicated this book to the private benefit of my friends and kinsmen so that, having lost me (as they must do soon) they can find here again some traits of my character and of my humours.'

If the Frenchman's model was the confessional ('I myself am the subject of my book'), the Englishman's was the sermon. In all respects but their brevity, Bacon's essays bear a striking resemblance to the sermons of his age. He begins with a text and goes on, like John Donne in his sermons, to unpick the argument.

Of Revenge: 'Revenge is a kind of wild justice, which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out.'

Of Marriage and Single Life: 'He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune, for they are impediments to great enterprises, either of virtue or mischief.'

Of Love: 'The stage is more beholding to love than the life of man. For, as to the stage, love is ever matter of comedies, and now and then of tragedies, but in life it doth much mischief, sometimes like a siren, sometimes like a fury.'

In his essay *Of Friendship*, he takes as his text an unattributed quotation, 'Whatsoever is delighted in solitude is either a wild beast or a god', with which he proceeds to take issue. Yes, there is something of the savage beast in a dislike of society, but there is nothing divine in preferring solitude to the company of other men, except in those rare individuals who live as hermits in order to be closer to God. In any case, he says, what we mean by solitude is often misunderstood. 'A crowd is not company, and faces are but a gallery of pictures, and talk but a tinkling cymbal, where there is no love.' The only true solitude is not to be alone but to be without friends. 'Whosoever is unfit for friendship, he taketh it of the beast and not from humanity.'

In this, one of his longer essays, he goes on to identify three 'fruits' of friendship. The first is 'the ease and discharge of the fullness and swellings of the heart'. Many diseases, he says, are

caused by ‘stoppages and suffocations’ for which there are various cures, ‘but no receipt openeth the heart but a true friend, to whom you may impart griefs, joys, fears hopes, suspicions, counsels, and whatsoever lieth upon the heart to oppress it, in a kind of civil shrift or confession’. (From which form of words, perhaps, is derived today’s ‘civil marriage’.)

He devotes a page or so to illustrating how important this is by the difficulty that kings have in achieving it. Prevented by their position from mixing freely with their subjects, but needing friends as much as anyone, if not more, ‘they raise some persons to be, as it were, companions and almost equals to themselves’. This leads him inevitably to instances of betrayal, such as that of Caesar by Brutus, and to the fear of it that prevents great men from putting their trust in anyone. ‘Those that want friends to open themselves unto,’ he says, ‘are cannibals of their own hearts.’ This leads him to observe that having a friend to confide in has two contrary effects. ‘For there is no man that imparteth his joys to his friend, but he joyeth the more, and no man that imparteth his griefs to his friend, but he grieveth the less.’

‘The second fruit of friendship,’ he says, ‘is healthful and sovereign for the understanding, as the first is for the affections.’ He identifies two means by which this occurs. The first requires the friend to do nothing but listen, because ‘whosoever hath his mind fraught with many thoughts, his wits and understanding do clarify and break up in the communicating and discoursing with another’. The second requires the friend to offer advice and to do so without fear or favour. ‘For there is no such flatterer as is a man’s self, and there is no such remedy against flattery of a man’s self as the liberty of a friend.’

The last fruit of friendship, he says, ‘is like the pomegranate, full of many kernels’. In other words, your friends can do things for you that you cannot do yourself. ‘A man hath a body, and that body is confined to a place; but where friendship is, all offices of life are as it were granted to him.’ In a phrase rarely used by Montaigne, he reaches his conclusion: ‘To enumerate these things were endless; I have given the rule, where a man cannot fitly play his own part; if he have not a friend, he may quit the stage.’

Bacon’s fifty-nine short essays deal with subjects as varied as truth, death, atheism, travel, ambition, usury, gardens, anger and fame. As literary artefacts they combine elements of both the poems and the sermons of John Donne in that fusion of words and ideas that we now call metaphysical, but which might then have been called a kind of literary alchemy. Bacon was a scientist after all, as well as a writer.

He might not have written the plays of William Shakespeare, but he did turn out to have been a speech writer for Franklin D. Roosevelt. ‘The only thing you have to fear is fear itself’ was a line memorably delivered by the American president during the Great Depression, but written more than three hundred years earlier by the English essayist, Sir Francis Bacon, Viscount St Albans, alchemist of the modern age.