Bacon, 'Of Simulation and Dissimulation'

Martin Dzelzainis

For over threequarters of a century, the agenda for interpreting Francis Bacon's *Essays* (1597, 1612, 1625) has been set by a handful of commentators, notably R. S. Crane and Morris W. Croll, whose articles originally appeared together in 1923, and Stanley Fish, whose 'Georgics of the Mind: The Experience of Bacon's *Essays*' was published in 1971 and then expanded into a chapter of his *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (1972). Fish begins by endorsing Crane's suggestion that many of the essays which appeared for the first time in the editions of 1612 and 1625 were written specifically to fulfil the scientific programme Bacon had announced in *The Advancement of Learning* (1605). According to Fish, however, the fact that several of these new essays appear to address the deficiencies in the state of moral and civil knowledge identified in 1605 is not what gives them their scientific quality. For this we must look to the experience of reading them, since 'this experience, rather than the materials of which it is composed, is what is scientific about the *Essays*'. The keynote of this experience is that the reader is left more uncertain and puzzled at every turn – a strategy designed to promote 'a more self-conscious scrutiny of one's mental furniture' and hence to 'foster the curious blend of investigative eagerness and wary skepticism which, according to Bacon, distinguishes the truly scientific cast of mind' (Fish 1972: 81, 95).

For Fish himself, the *Essays* are a crucial exhibit in the case for a phenomenological approach to criticism; that is, 'a method of analysis which focuses on the reader rather than the artifact'. Instead of making a fetish of the 'objectivity of the text', we should accept literature as a form of kinetic art which only operates by virtue of 'the actualizing role of the observer'. The task of criticism accordingly is to analyze 'the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time' (Fish 1972: 387-8, 400-01).

While this has proved a very influential method of reading Bacon's later essays in particular, it also has severe drawbacks. Firstly, it means that no particular significance attaches to the essay topics in themselves since a title 'merely specifies the particular area of inquiry within which and in terms of which the reader becomes involved in a characteristic kind of activity, the questioning and testing of a

commonly received notion'. For these purposes, an essay on, say, received notions of love is indistinguishable from one on, say, received notions of adversity. Fish also equivocates on the issue of authorial intentions: on the one hand he maintains that it is entirely possible to 'analyze an effect without worrying about whether it was produced accidentally or on purpose', but on the other hand the question does not arise since it so happens that he is dealing with 'texts in which the evidence of control is overwhelming' (Fish 1972: 92, 409). He is therefore quite certain that what Bacon intended to achieve by writing as he did was to induce a state of confusion in the reader as a preliminary step towards acquiring a more open and 'scientific cast of mind'. One difficulty with this view is that by the time Bacon came to prepare a new edition of the *Essays* in 1625 he had arguably abandoned the project of a demonstrative civil science – if he ever thought it was feasible in the first place (see Box; Peltonen 1996: 292-5). Another difficulty is that this account of Bacon's aims is hard to reconcile with his intentions in writing as he did (on the distinction between intentions *in* and *by* writing, see Skinner, 260-61). The 1625 volume was clearly a contribution to the genre of the advice book, as is underlined by the two presentation copies intended for the Duke of Buckingham (the dedicatee) and the Prince of Wales (see Bacon 1985: xix-xxxi). But if Bacon's intention in writing and publishing the work was to offer immediately useful political advice, then it is hard to see why he chose to do so in what is, according to Fish at least, a 'style that confuses and unsettles' (Fish 1972: 378).

At the last moment, Fish appears to recoil from his own thesis by revealing that notwithstanding 'their provisionality the *Essays* are finally objects; they are not used up in the reading but remain valuable as source material for future consultation' (Fish 1972: 154). But it is the *Essays* that have failed, not the theory. For as artefacts which are not altogether 'used up in the reading', they fall short of the theoretical ideal of total self-consumption. And even as 'objects' they are drearily literal stuff, 'valuable' only for reference purposes.

The most direct way of challenging this somewhat depressing verdict on the *Essays* is to re-contextualize them and thereby restore their historical identity. Of the essays from the 1625 collection which are discussed by Fish, the one which would benefit most from such an approach is 'Of Simulation and Dissimulation' (for the text, see Bacon 1996: 349-51). The origins of this essay on simulation (pretending to be what you are not) and dissimulation (not seeming to be what you are), lay not in

any scientific programme but in the so-called new humanism of the late sixteenth century. The complicated alignment of leading figures like Lipsius, Montaigne and Bacon in relation to each other and to their classical mentors, the Stoic philosopher Seneca and the historian Tacitus, was first sketched by Croll. But he was looking largely at the prose style(s) that characterized the new humanist configuration, whereas recent scholars have been more interested in the intellectual programme that underpinned it. According to Richard Tuck, the years following the Massacre of St Bartholomew's Eve in 1572, were the time 'when scepticism, Stoicism and Tacitism came together to make a mixture as powerful and soon as all-pervasive as the Ciceronian humanism of the Quattrocento had been' (63).

The crucible for the these developments – at least in northern Europe – was the French court, presided over by the Queen Mother, Marie de Medici, the daughter of the ruler of Florence to whom Machiavelli had dedicated *The Prince*. Italian émigrés were prominent in these circles, and one of their number, the historian Davila, later described how King Henri III would retire

> every day after dinner with *Baccio de Bene*, and *Giacopo Corbinelli*, both Florentines, men exceedingly learned in the Greek and Latine studies, making them read unto him *Polybius* and *Cornelius Tacitus*; but much more often the discourses and Prince of Machiavel; whose readings stirring him up, he was so much the more transported with his own secret plots. (Quoted in Tuck, 42)

The least surprising item here is Machiavelli's *Prince*, a work that systematically inverts orthodox political morality (see Machiavelli, xix-xx). For example, whereas the Roman moral philosopher Cicero advised in his *De officiis* (*On Duties*) that the force and deceit typified by the lion and the fox are alien to human nature, Machiavelli urges in Chapter 18 ('How rulers should keep their promises') that the ruler 'should imitate both the lion and the fox'. And whereas Cicero decreed that pretence and concealment ought to be eliminated from the whole of our lives (*ex omni vita simulatio dissimulatioque tollenda est*), Machiavelli positively insists that one must be a great feigner and dissembler (*gran simulatore e dissimulatore*) (Cicero, 44-5 (1.13.41), 330-31 (3.15.61); Machiavelli, 62). Having in effect rejected Cicero, it is no surprise that this group embraced Tacitus. The writings in which he dissected imperial Rome were increasingly regarded as a storehouse of political techniques to

be employed for the purposes both of setting up a tyranny and surviving under one. Thus the account of Tiberius in the *Annals* dwells repeatedly on his power to manipulate others through the art of dissimulation (see 1.4, 4.71, 6.50). Moreover, in 1574 the Stoic scholar Justus Lipsius published a definitive new edition of Tacitus, and followed this up in 1589 with a political handbook (translated from the Latin in 1594 as *Sixe Bookes of Politickes or Civil Doctrine*) which quoted Tacitus no fewer than 547 times. Lipsius agreed fully with Machiavelli about the importance of simulation and dissimulation; a prince '*having to deale with a foxe*' should '*play the fox*' (113). Finally, Jacopo Corbinelli's involvement suggests that the work of Francesco Guicciardini, another admirer of Tacitus, was also read by this group since in 1576 he published the first edition of Guicciardini's *Ricordi* (maxims) as *Piu consigli et avvertimenti* and dedicated it to the Queen Mother. What made this a key text in the new humanism as much as anything was its aphoristic style; indeed Guicciardini was soon hailed by Francesco Sansovino as 'il primo inventore di queste Propositioni, Regole, Massime, Assiomi, Oracoli, Precetti, Sentenze, Probabili' (Sansovino, 100b).

As a member of the entourage of Sir Amias Paulet, the English ambassador to the French court, Bacon was able to observe this milieu for himself between 1576 and 1579, a period he came to regard as formative in his own development. His awareness of the influences at work on the French monarchy would have been sharpened in 1577 when his brother Edward became one of the dedicatees of the Latin edition of Innocent Gentillet's *Anti-Machiavel*, which, as its title suggests, systematically denounced the Machiavellianism of the Queen Mother and her acolytes (Jardine and Stewart, 62). At one point in 'Of Counsel', drafted after 1607 and first published in 1612, Bacon canvassed various solution to 'inconveniences' such as the lack of secrecy, noting that 'the doctrine of Italy, and the practice of France, in some kings' times, hath introduced *cabinet* councils', which he thought 'a remedy worse than the disease'. Although Kiernan suggests that Bacon was thinking especially of Henri IV, the particular conjunction of doctrine and practice is actually more redolent of his predecessor. Indeed, Bacon's fascination with this Franco-Italian brand of politics shows itself even at the level of etymology. Thus the use here of 'cabinet' in a political sense is one of the earliest recorded, but while in 1612 this appears to reflect the influence of the French *cabinet*, the 1638 Latin translation of the essay employs the Italianate form *cabinetti* (properly *gabinetti*, first used in its political

sense in Italian by Davila) (Bacon 1996: 380; 1995: 216). And the same conjunction is writ large in the title of the 1625 edition: *The Essays or Counsels Civil and Moral*; just as *Essays* gestures towards Montaigne's *Essais*, so *Counsels* gestures towards Guicciardini's *Consigli*. For although Bacon is often associated most closely with just the two genres of essay and aphorism, he was actually familiar with the full repertoire which Sansovino identified as appropriate to civil knowledge; advertisements (*avvertimenti*), rules (*regole*), axioms (*assiomi*), maxims (*massime*), precepts (*precetti*), and sentences (*sentenze*) (for examples, see Bacon 1996: 265, 267, 270, 286).

Judged by its title alone, 'Of Simulation and Dissimulation' identifies itself as a contribution to a well-established discourse, the parameters of which were set by Cicero's earnest repudiation of these complementary forms of deceit, and Machiavelli's satirical endorsement of them. However, Bacon does not wish to sanction either of these positions but to explore a rather different range of possibilities. This is signalled by the opening words of the essay:

> Dissimulation is but a faint kind of policy or wisdom; for it asketh a strong wit and a strong heart to know when to tell the truth, and to do it. Therefore it is the weaker sort of politiques that are the great dissemblers. (Bacon 1996: 349)

What makes this gambit so arresting is that Bacon emphatically chooses to focus on dissimulation alone. That is to say, he splits apart the double formula that was entrenched in the literature both conceptually and linguistically (*simulatio et dissimulatio*, *simulazione e dissimulazione*, *simulación y dissimulación*, and so on), and discards one element of it. Indeed it should be noted that, other than in the title, the two terms are only considered together as a pair in the concluding paragraph of the essay (and arguably not even then). Considered singly, dissimulation is then dismissed as the hallmark not of the strong but of the 'weaker sort of politiques'.

In the next phase of his argument, Bacon persists with dissimulation but now treating it in apposition to 'arts or policy' rather than, as might have been expected, simulation. This new pairing is decisively established on the authority of Tacitus, with a pulverising battery of quotations from the *Annals*, the *Histories*, and the *Agricola* (it is likely that these were taken from the 1595 Lipsius edition; see Bacon 1985: 250):

> Tacitus saith, ‘Livia sorted well with the arts of her husband and dissimulation of her son’; attributing arts or policy to Augustus, and dissimulation to Tiberius. (Bacon 1996: 349)

Once again, however, dissimulation comes off worse, as Bacon finds in favour of the Augustan rather than the Tiberian mode of conduct. This is because those who have ‘that penetration of judgment’ which enables them to decide what matters are appropriate ‘to be laid open, and what to be secreted, and what to be shewed at half lights’, would actually be hampered in their conduct of affairs by a constant ‘habit of dissimulation’. While for those lacking in judgement dissimulation is ‘generally’ the safest option, it is merely one of the choices open to the more able:

> Certainly the ablest men that were have had all an openness and frankness of dealing; and a name of certainty and veracity; but … at such times when they thought the case indeed required dissimulation, if then they used it, it came to pass that the former opinion spread abroad of their good faith and clearness of dealing made them almost invisible. (Bacon 1996: 350)

In short, openness incorporates dissimulation.

However, that is not quite the end of it. For Bacon also appears to be suggesting that openness is not merely inclusive of, but itself actually *is*, a form of dissimulation. This becomes clearer when we consider some of the materials upon which this passage is based. The first is one of Guicciardini’s maxims:

> A truthful, open nature [*natura vera e libera*] is universally liked and is, indeed, a noble thing; but it can be harmful. Deception [*simulazione*], on the other hand, is useful and sometimes even necessary, given the wickedness of man; but it is odious and ugly. Thus, I do not know which to choose. I suppose you ought ordinarily to embrace the one without, however, abandoning the other. That is to say, in the ordinary course of events practice the former so that you will gain a reputation for being a sincere person [*el nome di persona libera*]. And nevertheless, on certain important and rare occasions, use deception. If you do this, your deception will be more useful

> and more successful because, having a reputation for sincerity, you will be more easily believed. (Guicciardini 1970: 107; 1951: 114; see 1576: 39-40)

Here Guicciardini coolly opens up a distinction between nature and reputation, suggesting that, whether or not you actually are sincere, acquiring a reputation for sincerity will certainly facilitate deceit. The second source is Bacon's Latin portrait of Julius Caesar ('Imago Civilis Julii Caesaris'), of unknown date but first published posthumously in 1658. Caesar, Bacon observes,

> was taken to be by no means cunning or wily, but frank and veracious [*apertus et verax*]. And though he was in fact a consummate master of simulation and dissimulation [*summus simulationis et dissimulationis artifex esset*], and made up entirely of arts, insomuch that nothing was left to his nature except what art had approved, nevertheless there appeared in him nothing of artifice, nothing of dissimulation; and it was thought that his nature and disposition had full play and that he did but follow the bent of them. (Bacon 1870: 336, 342)

Caesar's sincerity, however, can have been nothing other than a matter of reputation because his *persona* was artificial through and through. In his case, apparent sincerity was not so much a means of facilitating deceit as the ultimate instance of it – the art which conceals art. The paradox Bacon thus arrives at is that to be open and truthful (or *apertus et verax* or *libera e vera*) is in fact the best way to render oneself and one's dissimulation 'almost invisible'.

For the next phase of argument, Bacon's model is not Tacitus but Lipsius, whose work he clearly admired. (In a letter of *Advice to Fulke Greville on his studies*, nominally from the Earl of Essex but actually from Bacon, Greville was urged to make use of epitomes such as Lipsius' *Politicorum sive civilis doctrinae libri sex* (1589) or *Sixe Bookes of Politickes or Civil Doctrine* (see Bacon 1996: 102)). When discussing political prudence, Lipsius discriminates between 'light', 'middle', and 'great' deceit, of which he urges the first, tolerates the second and condemns the third (Lipsius, 115). Bacon now adopts the same triple structure, considering secrecy, dissimulation and simulation in turn. The first, secrecy, is

> when a man leaveth himself without observation, or without hold to be taken, what he is. The second, Dissimulation, in the negative; when a man lets fall signs and arguments, that he is not that he is. And the third, Simulation, in the affirmative; when a man industriously and expressly feigns and pretends to be that he is not. (Bacon 1996: 350)

Secrecy he finds ‘both politic and moral’, while dissimulation can hardly be avoided if secrecy is to be maintained, but simulation is ‘more culpable’.

The simple arithmetical progression that governs the essay is maintained to the end. Thus the last paragraph rather insistently considers three advantages and three disadvantages of simulation and dissimulation, treated for these purposes not as a complementary pair but as completely synonymous terms. Only in the very last sentence, which recapitulates the argument of the essay as a whole, is its full quadruple structure finally revealed:

> The best composition and temperature is to have openness in fame and opinion; secrecy in habit; dissimulation in seasonable use; and a power to feign, if there be no remedy.

The four elements are thus folded into one ‘composition’. At no point, however, has Bacon allowed the essay to come to rest on the conventional pairing of simulation and dissimulation as promised in the title. But that of course is the point of the essay.

A re-contextualized reading may not seem very different from Fish’s; in both Bacon is intent on rearranging the reader’s ‘mental furniture’. From the phenomenological point of view, however, there can be no consequences other than purely mental ones, such as being confused or troubled. But for Bacon and his readers challenging the conventional categories might well give them an edge in the practical world of politics. After all, what they were living through was not only the era of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, but, as Zagorin aptly terms it, the ‘Age of Dissimulation’ (Zagorin 1990: 330).

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