

interpretation

a journal of political philosophy

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BACON'S WISDOM OF THE ANCIENTS¹

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Bacon's *Wisdom of the Ancients* is perhaps his most acroamatic work. The very fact that it was once presented frequently in translations, at the end of popular editions of the essays, indicates that it was once regarded as a book for schoolboys. If great philosophers write books for schoolboys, esoteric or what Bacon prefers to call "acroamatic" writing is usually indicated. The work, written in Latin, is an interpretation of old fables. There are thirty-one fables, plus a lengthy preface. Thus there are thirty-one or thirty-two units, indicating somewhat less than the number of Jesus. Interpretations of old fables do not begin with Bacon. Yet he charges that many, introducing inventions of their own, have tried "To usurp a license in traducing the fables". We may leave for the moment the question of whether that is not what Bacon himself did, and concern ourselves with what he claims to have done.

Bacon's title, *De Sapientia Veterum*, suggests a veneration for antiquity rather surprising in a man known for his attachment to novelty. Bacon followed Bruno in pointing out that the true antiquity was modernity, for modernity was older than antiquity². The ancients who were wise, however, were unknown ancients. They were pre-Greek, they were pre-historic. *Antiquitas primaeva* was shrouded in oblivion and silence, except for Scripture. Fables, fables written by poets, furnish the only penetration of the veil that separates the first things from the historical things. If the wisdom of the ancients is required in order to supplement the scriptural knowledge of the first things, it follows that the discussion of creation in Genesis is incomplete. The wisdom of the ancients may well, therefore, be pre-scriptural, as well as pre-Greek.

Pre-Greek wisdom, however, means a rejection of the sources of the fables generally known to us, like Homer and Hesiod. And Bacon says, in his preface, that most of the fables do not seem to have been invented by those "who recited them and made them famous, Homer, Hesiod." The assumption, and it is difficult to see that it is more than an assumption, that there is a pre-Greek wisdom, finer than Greek wisdom, that is, closer to modern science, particularly in astronomy, algebra, and the scientific method in general, is an assumption by no means confined to Francis Bacon. I say it is an assumption.

¹ I must express my gratitude to the graduate students of Political Science 302 S and Philosophy 302 S who spent a semester reading *The Wisdom of the Ancients* at the New School for Social Research. If I understand this text better than I once did, it is as much because of the thoughtfulness and thoroughness of my students as because of any efforts of mine.

² Bruno, Giordano: *Cena delle Ceneri*, I, in *Opere Italiane* (Bari, 1927), I, p. 31; Bacon: *Novum Organum* I, 84.

Much of the evidence for pre-Greek science has been presented by Jacob Klein, and a statement like the one "That the science of Diophantus exhibits certain non-Greek traits can hardly be denied³", is obviously not an assumption. It is the science or wisdom behind the veil that makes the assumption. Klein has brought forth some of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century statements about pre-Greek wisdom in his book on *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*.

Apart from Bacon himself, we have to mention the golden age of pre-Greek wisdom presented by two mathematicians, discussed in Klein's book: Vieta (François Viète, 140–1603) and Simon Stevin (1548–1620). As I know nothing in Bacon's own work or elsewhere to connect his views of pre-Greek wisdom with those of Vieta and Stevin, it will be sufficient to point out a few things said by Klein and his subjects. In a Prefatory Letter to his *Analytic Art*, Vieta wrote:

Behold, the art which I present is new, but in truth, so old, so spoiled and defiled by the barbarians, that I considered it necessary, in order to introduce an entirely new form into it, to think out and publish a new vocabulary . . .⁴

According to Klein, Vieta's relation to the ancients was "typical for the sixteenth and seventeenth century⁵." Vieta and others depended on Greek learning, like the work of Diophantus, for the study which eventually led to symbolic algebra, but they believed or pretended that something before and superior to Diophantus had been lost by the "barbarians." Stevin is very specific in his claim that the wise age he and others are reconstructing is a second wise age. He says:

We call the wise age that in which men had a wonderful knowledge of science, which we recognize without fail by certain signs, although without knowing who they were, or in what place, or when.⁶

Stevin is also more specific than Vieta, at least in the passages quoted by Klein, as to just when the barbarians lived and who they were:

. . . It has become a matter of common usage to call the barbarous age that time which extends from about 900 or a thousand years up to about 150 years past, since men were for 700 or 800 years in the conditions of imbeciles without the practice of letters and sciences.⁷

Admitting that times preceding the "barbarous" age might be styled relatively wise, Stevin does not consent to call that a "wise age" in comparison with that of which we have "signs." In other words, the true barbarous age

³ *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), p. 127.

⁴ *ibid.* pp. 318, 153.

⁵ *ibid.* p. 154.

⁶ *ibid.* p. 187.

⁷ *ibid.*

extends “from the beginning of the Greeks to the present.”⁸ The signs that Stevin indicated relate to traces in Greek works, as well as Arabic works, of earlier wisdom as to algebra, astronomy, and the development of alchemy, unknown to the Greeks.⁹ Whether Vieta and Stevin found or invented a pre-Greek wisdom, there is some polemical design in insisting that the Greeks belonged to the barbarous age. The suggestion that what may have been known before the Greeks is more important than what the Greeks knew is a hierarchy with algebra and alchemy rated above logic, political philosophy, biology and metaphysics.

Whether Francis Bacon accepts the same hierarchy we shall have to explore. As far as his relation to pre-Greek wisdom is concerned, however, he makes little or no use of the “signs” of Stevin. He was interested in astronomy and wrote two short pieces on astronomy, in one of which he said his design was “to conduct all things to a new trial of legitimate induction¹⁰. The ambiguity of Bacon’s relation to pre-Greek wisdom is further pointed out in the *New Organon*, where he says he does not care whether the new world was the island of Atlantis or just now discovered.¹¹ Of one thing, however, Bacon seems to have been certain: that he would not share the anonymity of the pre-Greeks.¹²

As far as the *Wisdom of the Ancients* is concerned, each of the thirty-one fables has a subtitle. Of these subtitles twenty-five appear to relate to the human things, and only six to the natural things. No one fable relates explicitly to astronomy, algebra, or alchemy. Some, like “Pan, or Nature” may be thought to include the subject matter of these sciences. Two things seem clear. One is that Bacon’s relation to pre-Greek wisdom is not the same as Stevin’s. The other is that not everything which Bacon sought to do, including the method of the *New Organon*, which he expected to guide post-Greek wisdom, was traceable to the ancients.

One must recall the opening sentence of the *Wisdom of the Ancients*: “Primeval antiquity, except what we have in sacred letters, is enveloped in oblivion and silence; the silence of antiquity, the fables of the poets escape.” This silence does not necessarily connote wisdom, though the title of the work clearly connotes it. What the sentence does is to refer to a kind of wisdom, the wisdom of poets. The wisdom is also pre-Greek, because Bacon pretends that nothing good can come out of Greece. Pre-Homeric poets then were wise men. Apart from the polemical intention of destroying Greek (i.e. in particular Aristotelean) thought, there is the notion that another way, also a pre-Greek way, was closer to nature. In one of his numerous divisions of human learning, Bacon elsewhere refers “history to the memory; poesy to

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 188.

⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 188–189.

¹⁰ *Description of the Intellectual Globe*, Ch. 6. in *Works*, (edited by Spedding, Ellis, & Heath, Boston, 1861 ff.), Vol. VII, p. 298.

¹¹ *New Organon* I, 122.

¹² *ibid.* 129.

the imagination; philosophy to the reason." He adds that he means, "here", poetry to be feigned history.¹³ Aristotle also regarded poetry as a kind of "feigned history", that is, as universal history, history as it can or may be.¹⁴ It is not at all certain that Aristotle and Bacon mean the same thing. For Bacon assigns or pretends to assign to the fables the quality of wisdom (*sapientia*). He refers occasionally in the *New Organon* to "my history and tables of invention."¹⁵ History, perhaps even feigned history, contributes to the experiments which will develop the new induction. And since the method of the *New Organon* is intended for all areas of human knowledge, feigned history may deal with all areas of human knowledge.

On a reading of the *Wisdom of the Ancients*, it is very hard to get an interpretation of the first things, or fables which penetrate the veil separating primeval antiquity from history. Consider a subtitle: "Metis or Counsel". Is counsel one of the first things? Many of the human inventions, for example, the alphabet, bread, and wine, are held by Bacon to be historically anterior to philosophy,¹⁶ yet the myth of Orpheus, which is included among the fables, is supposed to present the most complete philosopher before Bacon.¹⁷ Bacon's first things include the first human things, and indeed, are intended to support the assumption that complete philosophy might have developed naturally, were it not for the intrusions of the Greeks, that is, in particular Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, Epicurus, Theophrastus.¹⁸ It was left to Francis Bacon to do what the light of nature might have enabled pre-Greek wisdom to do. Insofar as the *Wisdom of the Ancients* deals with the first things at all, they are somewhat like the first things of Hobbes and others who followed Bacon. They are like the state of nature, but the first postulates of nature are not presented, because Bacon considered them unknown.

Of the subject matter of the thirty-one fables, five are natural, twenty-five human, and one sub-human. Man's conquest over nature is included among the human. Two of the human deal with human concourse with the divine, ten are political, the remaining thirteen are varied. Although only one fable deals with the sub-human, that fable is the sixteenth or central one in the book. Of the ten fables dealing specifically with politics, eight deal with the harsher side of politics. Number 2 deals with rebellion, number 3 with terror, no. 5 with oaths (kept only by necessity), no. 7 with war, no. 9 with rumor (malicious rumor), no. 19 with violence, no. 22 with vicissitude (with the change from better to worse stressed), and no. 23 with battle. Insofar as the work is political, it is almost Machiavellian.

To understand something of the first fable, and why it is first, a word or

¹³ *Description of the Intellectual Globe* Ch. 1 in *Works* VII, 285.

¹⁴ Aristotle: *Poetics* 1451 b.

¹⁵ *New Organon* I, 117-121.

¹⁶ *ibid.* I, 85.

¹⁷ I have tried to show this in *Peace among the Willows: the Political Philosophy of Francis Bacon* (Nijhoff, the Hague, 1968) p. 207.

¹⁸ *New Organon* I, 71.

two must be said about the preface. The assertions that primeval antiquity is enveloped in silence, and that the fables of the poets, with their pre-Greek wisdom, penetrate that silence, are quietly intruded upon by another theme: that fabulous writing is the way to write. "Atque etiam nunc, si quis novam in aliquibus lucem humanis mentibus affundere velit, idque non incommode & aspere, prorsus eadem via insistendum est, & ad similitudinem auxilia confugiendum."¹⁹ This statement, one of the most important in Bacon, makes it clear that the way of the fables is Bacon's way. The significance of this can hardly be overstated.²⁰ This statement in the Preface is supplemented by the first fable. Whereas the preface deals with hiding, the first fable deals with revealing. The first fable is "Cassandra, or Outspokenness." (*Parrhesia*). It confirms and completes the Preface.

One more item from the Preface may be mentioned: "The wisdom of first centuries was either great or fortunate (*felix*), great if through their industry, they made use of trope and figure . . ." What seems to be great is the use of feigned history itself, the use of "trope and figure", implying an ornate style,²¹ a style calculated to hide more than it reveals, an acroamatic style. "Mythology," according to Hegel, is a practice of the imagination, but not of caprice."²² Whether he meant the same thing that Hegel did, it was precisely the non-capricious quality of imagination which Bacon either found or pretended to find.

Let us turn to the first fable, Cassandra. The fable begins with the words, "they say . . ." In the preface, a statement about the past opens the work, the unqualified assertion that "primeval antiquity is enveloped in oblivion and silence." The difficulty of knowing the earliest antiquity is affirmed without hesitation. The authority for the first fable, on the contrary, is nowhere nearly so positive. It is obvious that "they say" carries little conviction as to historical accuracy. Moreover, while the preface is concerned with hiding, the first fable is concerned with the opposite of hiding, that is, outspokenness. The version of the fable is not the Homeric one, for it includes "the gift of divination". Yet the subject matter is not divination, as it is in Bacon's essay "Of Prophecies", but, as I noted, "outspokenness." No matter how profound their judgement, men must submit to Apollo, the god of harmony, that "they learn and observe the modes and measures of things, as well as the tones of words, acute and grave, even the differences between the most skillful and the most vulgar of ears." The reason why nobody believed Cassandra's

¹⁹ *Wisdom of the Ancients*, Preface, "And even now, if anyone wishes to shed new light in any human minds, the same not incommodious and harsh, the same course must be instituted, and must take refuge in the help of similes."

²⁰ *Peace among the Willows*, pp. 108–110.

²¹ It is interesting to note a comment by James Bryce, "The commonest American defect is a turgid and inflated style. The rhetoric is Rhodian rather than Attic, overloaded with tropes and figures, apt to aim at concealing poverty or triteness in thought . . ." (*American Commonwealth*, New York, 1908, II, p. 752.)

²² *History of Philosophy* (Haldane translation, London, 1955). Vol. I, p. 81.

prophecies was that they were spoken to vulgar ears.²³ Therefore the fable is about *parrhesia*, not about divination. Bacon is telling Machiavelli how to speak so that the vulgar cannot hear.

Before moving from the first fable to the middle fable, it should be pointed out that the “they say” formulation for the opening of the fable is by no means atypical. Following are the key subjects and verbs in the opening sentences from each of the thirty-one fables:

Narrant	they say	4
Narrant poetae	the poets say	5
Narrant antiqui	the ancients say	1
Traditur fuisse	it is handed down to be	5
Tradunt poetae	the poets hand down	1
Tradunt antiqui	the ancients hand down	1
Antiqui descripserunt	the ancients wrote down	1
Fabula narratur	the fable is said	1
Dicta sunt a poetis	they are said by the poets	1
Antiqui adumbraverunt	the ancients represented	1
Fabulantur poetae	the poets gossip	1
Memorant poetae	the poets recall	2
Pervulgata est narratio	the tale is common	1
Fabula vulgata	a common fable (is)	1
Sensu vulgatissimo transferitur	it is conveyed in the most common sense	1
(Attributed to no authority)		4

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Three groups are particularly interesting: those including the word “memorant”, of which there are two; the three including the root “vulgata” (common), and the four which are attributed to no authority. If the poets bring something to memory, the argument in the Preface that the fables are older than the poets is underlined. One of these fables is clearly political and deals with rumor. The fable of rumor must be pre-Homeric. Also pre-Homeric must be the impatience of young men of high promise, who seek to rise above their youthful capacity and die early. There are three fables which are held to be commonplace (I have translated the word “vulgata” common, as I think “vulgar” would be too strong). That Styx means necessity, that Orpheus stands for philosophy, and that the Sirens refer to pleasures, all these are held to be commonplace. If a fable is really a commonplace, does it matter whether it stretches back into antiquity or not? Why is it a

²³ Bacon, in the essay mentioned, does speak of what he considers prophecies “from hidden causes”, including the once famous prophecy of Seneca, “There will come a year when the bonds of ocean shall be loosed . . . another Typhon shall disclose new worlds . . .” Even when the new Typhon came, there were “vulgar ears”

commonplace? Is it self-evident? Is it self-evident that the only oath to be trusted is that unbroken by necessity? Yet Orpheus, the “complete” philosopher, presumably the only complete philosopher before Bacon, who failed simply because he was impatient, was certainly considered by Bacon a clear inference, a clear testament to the weakness of the philosophy of the past. The last group is especially interesting. These include no “they say” or “the poets say”, etc., but are taken to be facts. They are not, at least at the outset, called commonplace. They need no other apparent authority than Bacon’s word that they are true. They include the testimony of Icarus that, in politics, the middle way is to be shunned, and the dangerous peering into secrets of Acteon and Pentheus. But after all, what was Bacon doing but what Acteon did before him?

It seems to make sense to move from the first fable to the middle fable. The title of the 16th fable is “Juno’s Sutor or Infamy (Dedecus.). It is interesting that the title does not offer the name of the sutor, Jupiter. In other words, the fable does not deal with the King of the Gods as such, but simply with the king of the gods in wooing. For the purpose of wooing, the greatest king becomes the most abject creature. But kings woo twice; they woo their queens and they woo their realms. (cf. Fable 2) There is a certain analogy between queen and realm, and it is not uncommon to identify Hera or Juno with the realm. In the kingdom of the proud, the ruler pretends to be base, and once again Bacon is speaking of communication. And once again he is telling Machiavelli how to avoid the “ears of the vulgar.”

If one moves from the first and middle fables to the last fable, one sees a subject that is apparently very different from the other two. The title is, “The Sirens, or Pleasure.” Bacon’s treatment of pleasure is severe and ascetic, and the severity of rational hedonism can hardly be more clearly brought out. Winged philosophy made pleasures contemptible. There are, Bacon concludes, three remedies for violent pleasures. One is represented by Ulysses, who stopped his ears; another is indicated by discourse, which remains indifferent to enticement. Both of these are considered philosophical. But the highest is that of Orpheus, whose hymn to the gods drowns out the music of the Sirens, and saves himself from hearing them. It is remarkably like Lucretius, in its praise of discourse for subduing violent pleasure. Though the title suggests any pleasure, it is clear in context that Bacon is not talking about growing roses. Whatever the source, the message of the terminal and central fables appears to be that three things are necessary for the relief of man’s estate, Bacon’s primary goal: caution in speech, insignificance in appearance, and severity in action.

In turning to the more general treatment of the fables, some word might be germane concerning the quotations in the work. There are twenty-three quotations, all quoted in Latin, but not all from Latin sources. Two, the source of which Bacon does not specify, may be found in Vergil, and one, also unspecified may be found in Ovid. Bacon seems to have intended not to make it too easy for the reader to find the sources of the wisdom of the ancients. There are six quotations from Vergil (including the two unspecified),

five from the Bible (three of which are from books now or once attributed to Solomon, Bacon's Biblical hero²⁴), three from Tacitus, two from Cicero, two from Catullus, one each from Iphicrates,²⁵ Lucretius, Ovid, Seneca, Heraclitus. Fourteen of the twenty-three are from Latin authors, and nine of those fourteen are poets. Primeval antiquity, while it does not include Homer and Hesiod, does include, interestingly enough, Vergil, Ovid, and Lucretius. There seems to be an attempt, quite a deliberate attempt to elevate Rome against Greece. In discussing a philosopher of Bacon's stature, it would obviously be insufficient to acknowledge that the Elizabethans and Jacobeans were fond of the Roman poets, that they generally sympathized with the Trojans, and that they emulated the Roman Empire. Bacon himself considered that Rome's was one of the great ages of learning.²⁶ But who compares Roman learning with Hellenic, or Roman art with Grecian art? The one thing which may justly be compared, to the advantage of Rome, is certainly politics. One could add law, but Bacon probably subsumed that under politics.²⁷ Yet, in any literal sense, the first things could neither be the Roman things, nor, more broadly, the political things.

Looking at the *Wisdom of the Ancients* as a whole, and recalling that five fables are natural, one is sub-human, two deal with concourse between the human and the divine, ten are political, and the remaining thirteen deal with the human, but are varied. If the concourse between the divine and the human is or is not among the first things, the divine must be. It seems to make sense, in discussing the first things to deal with the remaining fables in this order: divine-human,²⁸ natural, non-political human, political.

The divine-human fables are entitled "Acteon and Pentheus, or the Curious", and "Diomedes, or Zeal." The first of these fables is a dual fable, for the curiosity of Acteon is accidental; that of Pentheus is deliberate. Acteon sees Diana naked, and he has clearly some concourse with the divine, but nakedness is natural. Pentheus, on the other hand, deliberately seeks the religious ceremonies, where he is not wanted. Bacon tells us that the secrets that Acteon saw were royal or political secrets; the secrets which Pentheus saw were divine mysteries. The accidental knowledge of political secrets and the deliberate knowledge of divine secrets were punished. As to the deliberate

²⁴ The scientific fraternity of the *New Atlantis* is called Solomon's House; Henry VII is called the English Solomon. For references see *Peace among the Willows*, pp. 48, 55, 60, 93, 121, 122, 144, 152-53, 162, 232, 245. It is interesting that Bacon should be so fond of *Ecclesiastes*, "there is no new thing under the sun," an interesting commentary on the *Wisdom of the Ancients*.

²⁵ The source of the Iphicrates quotation is not given. It may be Xenophon or Plutarch, but I have not found it to date.

²⁶ *Advancement of Learning* I, Section II, par. 9 (Oxford paragraphing), *ibid.*, I, vii, 4; *New Organon* I, 78.

²⁷ *The Advancement of Learning* does not include law as an independent category of learning.

²⁸ Numbers 10 and 18.

knowledge of political secrets and the accidental knowledge of divine secrets, nothing is said. Certainly, however, Pentheus' invasion of privacy is the greater. No one may seek to know the divine secrets. Such knowledge, if it comes at all, may come only by accident. That both Acteon and Pentheus are punished, the one by death, and the other by being driven to madness, is an indication that even the accidental discovery of secret things is dangerous. That is obvious if we refer to Bacon's specific treatment of the Acteon fable, as dealing with "royal secrets." But Diana is not only royal; she is also divine.

The other fable concerned with human concourse with the divine is that of Diomedes. Diomedes wounded Venus, at the instigation of Pallas Athene. Here and elsewhere²⁹ Bacon calls the goddess of wisdom by her Greek name. Usually he prefers the Roman name, if one is available (Jupiter, Juno, Venus, etc.). In one fable, Bacon uses the names, "Bacchus" and "Dionysus" interchangeably. Apollo is fully adopted, but Apollo was a Roman as well as a Greek god.³⁰ The fact that Bacon mentions Minerva in one fable, and Pallas in four is not insignificant. True, he does not use the full Greek name, calling the goddess "Pallas" rather than "Pallas Athene," but he definitely makes the goddess of wisdom Greek. So did Vergil, and Bacon may have merely been following his sources.³¹ Even with the specifically Athenian part of her name gone, Pallas is still Greek, and it seems to be Greek wisdom which instigated Diomedes to wound Venus. Bacon makes a strong point of the fact that Diomedes is the only mythical figure to wound a god. The sub-title of the fable is "zeal", and Diomedes is seen as warring upon a goddess out of religious zeal.

Knowing, however, how much Bacon despised religious warfare,³² either Pallas, who instigated this warfare, was unwise, and the fable is simply another attack on Greek wisdom, or there must be some other reason for finding wisdom in this fable. Most of Bacon's analysis is taken up with an attack on those who followed Diomedes, men made immoderate by zeal rather than vice. While this is eloquently put, it offers us nothing new beyond what Bacon had said elsewhere. What is new is that the ancients, as Bacon claims, had no experience of religious warfare.³³ The wisdom of the ancients is prophetic wisdom. There is a nice epistemological problem here, and it certainly limits the common interpretation of Bacon as an empiricist. If the ancients (Greek or pre-Greek) could know religious warfare without experience of that, they could know other things. They could presumably know the character of prophetic religions, without which religious war is unlikely.

²⁹ Fables, 2, 7, 30.

³⁰ Vergil: *Eclogues*; Ovid: *Metamorphoses* – the mentions are numerous.

³¹ In Aeneid I, "Juno", not "Hera" refers to "Pallas", line 39. In general, both Vergil and Ovid appear to refer to Pallas and Minerva interchangeably.

³² See especially *Advancement of Learning* II, xxv (Oxford numeration), Essay 3; and *Works* I, 208; VI, 448.

³³ Cf. Rousseau: *Contrat Social* IV, viii.

Yet there seems to be no way for Bacon to know that somewhere in the veil between creation and history, there was genuine knowledge of the character of religious war. What has, on the contrary, to be taken seriously is that there is such a thing as prophetic knowledge, even prophetic wisdom. That tells us not so much what the ancients knew as what Bacon knew. If the ancients could be claimed to have known, without experiencing it, the character of religious war, Bacon could claim to know, without yet experiencing it, the cure for religious war. Concerning that prophetic knowledge, two things may be said. The one is that the knowledge is knowledge of something as yet un-created, but something to be created. The other is that the cure for religious warfare is in some form a civil religion, replacing prophetic religion, such as is available in the *New Atlantis*, but it is kept deliberately vague as to details, for full knowledge could come only with its creation. This is really concourse of the human with the divine. While we may now be closer to the divine, we have moved away from the first things to the final or future things.

The two fables which deal with the concourse between the human and the divine end in tragedy. The first tragedy occurs because inquiry into the divine things is inquiry into secret things, suggesting that divine inquiries may end in destruction. The other tragedy occurs because the human, even though abetted by the divine, also wounds the divine. In seeking for the first things, we cannot go too far back. We cannot seek the divine things, only the veil which separates the divine from the historical. It is therefore proper that we turn to the six fables dealing with nature.³⁴ The first of these is the fable of Pan, which is sub-titled "nature," and which is the sixth fable in the collection. As is well-known, the Biblical creation is the work of six days. Bacon calls his foundation in the *New Atlantis* "the college of six days' work", though its customary name is "Solomon's House". Since it was the function of Solomon's House to study all things natural, the choice of number six for the fable of Pan is perhaps not accidental.³⁵ Some of the other numbers of these five fables may not be insignificant, since we know that Bacon used numerical symbols.³⁶ The next fable dealing with nature is number twelve, "Coelum or Beginnings", and twelve may deal with the double of six days' work, or with the completion of the day. Both twelve and thirteen (Fable # 13) may deal with fortune and misfortune, Jesus and the twelfth disciple, or simply the Thirteenth man. As to the number 17, I have elsewhere tried to show its importance in Pythagorean number symbolism.³⁷

Bacon uses it in *The New Atlantis* to suggest the relation between health and the knowledge of nature. Its meaning is derived from the number of consonants in the Greek alphabet. Three groups of seventeen each were once

³⁴ Nos. 6, 12, 13, 17, 21, 29.

³⁵ *New Atlantis* (Gough edition, Oxford, 1924) pp. 24, line 6 ff.

³⁶ Consider the use of 40 (the Biblical number for fate), 36 (the number of the ruling body in Plato's *Laws* minus one, because a majority was not needed in Solomon's House).

³⁷ *Peace among the Willows* pp. 191-192.

said to have stood at the gates of Haran, the one-time center of the Pythagorean school.³⁸

The six fables dealing with nature may be taken as a unit, but that should not diminish their importance. The "Pan" fable is also used by Bacon to illustrate "paraboli cal poetry" in the Latin and enlarged version of the *Advancement of Learning*.³⁹ In another work there is another version of two fables, "Coelum", Number 12, and "Cupid", Number 17, there combined into one and made the foundation of that work, "Concerning the Principles and Origins."⁴⁰ These five fables really participate in the search for the first things. The poets, we are told, treat Coelum (Uranos) as the most ancient of the gods. The poets (whether the same or other is not clear) also say that Cupid (Eros) was the oldest of the gods. The problem is further complicated by the alleged existence of another Cupid, the youngest of the gods.⁴¹ Perhaps we can consider first the two most ancient gods. Let us consider first the ancient Cupid: "Quare Cupido ab antiquis sapientibus ponitur in parabola sine parente, id est, sine causa. Neque nihil in hoc est; imo haud scimus an non res omnium maxima."⁴² Whether Cupid was put in antiquity as without parents may be the greatest thing of all. Bacon claims not to know. The attachment to the first things is clear. These fables really deal with the first things, though there be may difficulty in identifying them. If, however, Cupid is not the first thing, the alternative appears to be Coelum, or Uranos, the oldest Greek god, or heaven.⁴³ Of this knowledge, of which Bacon claimed to be ignorant, future generations would have to be ignorant, since they could get not closer to the first things that Bacon could. Whether the statement of the possibility that the first things are the greatest things can be reconciled with the statement elsewhere that the final things are the greatest things⁴⁴ we shall have to see later.

Perhaps we must look at Coelum, and then back at Cupid. In the organization of the *Wisdom of the Ancients*, Bacon first presents a fable, in greater or less detail, and then interprets it. Between the presentation and the interpretation there is usually a transitory sentence, such as "The meaning of the fable seems to be . . ." In two fables, this sentence seems to be equivocal, but in twenty-two the formulation is similar to "The meaning seems to be . . .". In seven, the word "seems" is conspicuously absent, and Bacon is much less equivocal, saying, for example, "The meaning of the fable is of this nature"

³⁸ Aristotle: *Metaphysics* 1093 a 29 ff; Plutarch: *Isis and Osiris* 356 B, 364 C; Kraus, Paul: *Jabir Ibn Hazzem*, Vol. II, *Jabir et la Science Grecque*, Cairo, 1942, pp. 207 ff.

³⁹ *Works* II, 226-39.

⁴⁰ *Works* V, 289-346.

⁴¹ Fable 17, *Works* XIII, pp. 22-25.

⁴² *Principles and Origins*, *Works* V, p. 291. "Whereby Cupid was placed in the parable by the wise ancients without parents, that is, without cause. Nor is this nothing; no indeed, we know not whether it be the greatest thing."

⁴³ Fable 12, *Works* XIII, p. 15.

⁴⁴ *New Atlantis* p. 13, lines 1-2.

which is the formulation used in the Coelum fable.⁴⁵ In other words, in a large majority of cases, Bacon seems to be content with a seeming interpretation, or with appearance. In seven cases, he claims a knowledge of reality, and those seven cases include both Coelum and Cupid. The subtitle of the Coelum fable is *Origines*.

That Coelum or Uranos is the oldest of the gods is generally supposed. The fable tells also of Saturn, son of Coelum, cutting off his father's genitals. Bacon says that this fable shows how all things have their being. "The meaning . . . is of this nature." Bacon therefore seems quite sure that Coelum is the concavity or circumference that comprehends all matter, and that Saturn is matter itself. Saturn's cutting off the genitals suggests that heaven has no further power of begetting matter. This view is not original with Bacon, and he calls attention to the similarity of the fable and the teaching of Democritus.⁴⁶ Bacon means that matter, not the world, is eternal. For the body of matter to achieve form, some appetite seemed to be needed. In this fable, Bacon refers to Venus; in the other to Cupid. The birth of Venus, or the birth of Cupid, means the substitution of the prevalence of concord for the prevalence of discord.

Let us turn back to the fable of Cupid to see the alternative origins. Bacon seems to be equally certain of each. Of Cupid he says, "This fable pertains to and penetrates the cradle of nature."⁴⁷ A cradle is obviously not and does not contain a first thing, but, as this is the seventeenth fable, there is some reason for considering it close to nature. Actually the first thing is not love; but love is an appetite belonging to matter. Thus the fables of Coelum and Cupid are only apparently inconsistent. Whether there is a circumference comprehending matter, and Bacon, as usual, pretends to defer to the Biblical view, there cannot be earth without matter having an appetite, that is, the passion of love must prevail over the passion or passions making for discord. In the Coelum fable, Bacon admits that the prevalence might not be permanent. He quotes Lucretius who pleads that we may know of the return to chaos rather from reason than from the thing itself.⁴⁸ It is a strange thought from Francis Bacon, one of the founders of the idea of progress. It is unhappily not strange to us.

Even if love is indigenous to matter, that is, even if Coelum precedes Cupid, Cupid need have no parents. Recalling that Bacon has said that the knowledge that Cupid has no parents may be the greatest thing, "For nothing has

⁴⁵ The usual formulation is "ea sententia videtur esse", but the objective determinant which joins the twenty-two fables together is simply the word "Videtur", it seems. The seven fables where the absence of seeming appears to be decisive do not necessarily have the formulation of *Coelum: Sententia fabulae huiusmodi est*, but the expression is at least as strong, and does not suggest appearance or seeming. Those fables are Pan (6), Coelum (12), Juno's Suitor (16), Cupid (17), Achelous (23), Prometheus (26), Icarus volans . . . (27).

⁴⁶ *Principles and Origins*, in *Works V*, p. 290. Contrast Aristotle: *De Caelo* 277 b 27-30.

⁴⁷ "Fabula ad cunabula naturae pertinet & penetrat".

⁴⁸ Lucretius V, 106-107.

corrupted philosophy so much as the search for the parents of Cupid.”⁴⁹ That means, as Bacon goes on to say, that philosophers have not taken the principles of philosophy from nature, but from laws of disputation (including not only dialectics but also mathematics). In other words, the parents of Cupid are unknowable, and the search for the unknowable is corrupting. What must be sought comes after Cupid, that is, the study of “six days’ work”; that requires faith in experiment. As Bacon’s followers sometimes forget, experimental faith is still faith.

Bacon’s authority for this fable goes far back, at least as far as Hesiod, who claimed that chaos came first, then earth, then eros.⁵⁰

Bacon, however, had to have a second eros, both for parabolical and for philosophic reasons. The parabolic reason is that it is well known that the customary little naked chap with the arrow is not ungenerated, but the son of Venus. The philosophical reason is that something has not been accounted for, and that something is species. Therefore there is another appetite, another eros, for species had to come, and the appetite in species may not be the same as the appetite in matter. Indeed it could hardly be the same thing, for, if inorganic life has eros, it has no consciousness. The younger Cupid could not come in without species. But in the *Coelum* fable it is said that Venus could not come without species, and she seems to fulfill the same function.⁵¹ Bacon gives an answer at the end of the Cupid fable, that Venus stirs up desire, which Cupid individualizes. It is hardly satisfying to suggest that male cats love female cats because of Venus, while a particular cat loves another cat because of Cupid. Still Bacon did not write the fable; he had to twist it to his purposes, as Satan is said to do with Scripture. But what happens to species, and what happens to man? They come from an appetite, an appetite analogous to but not identical with the appetite of matter. Created, Bacon knows not how, sometime after chaos, matter, eros, man stands a lonely figure in the history of the things following the first things, a lonely figure who may sometime again revert to chaos.

It must be clear from the treatment of the first, the ungenerated Cupid, that nature is not fully comprehensible. Moreover, it cannot be made fully comprehensible, because of the veil separating it from history. The dogmatic scepticism about the parents of Cupid must lead us to give them up. Again it may be questioned whether the *Wisdom of the Ancients* is really about the first things. There are a few things in the other fables dealing with nature which should be mentioned. Proteus, Neptune’s herdsman, was able to turn himself into all different shapes. He also divined the past, as Bacon does in the *Wisdom of the Ancients*, and he is a prophet, divining the future.⁵² The subtitle of Bacon’s fable of Proteus is “Matter”. It is matter then which is

⁴⁹ *Works* V, 291.

⁵⁰ Hesiod: *Theogony* 116–122. Cf. Aristotle: *Metaphysics* 984 b 27–29.

⁵¹ *Works* XIII Compare p. 16 with p. 25.

⁵² Fable # 13, *Works* XIII, pp. 17–19.

thrice great,⁵³ like Proteus, knowing past, present, and future. Here Bacon repeats what he says elsewhere: matter dwells in the concavity of heaven. But added to that is the Protean shape of matter, which can be turned into many shapes. Bacon cannot very well claim, however, that Protean matter, or Protean nature, has knowledge of past, present, future. Therefore, there occurs one of the most remarkable statements of the work: "For it is necessary, that he who would know the passions and process of matter, should comprehend the sum of things, and those which have been, and which are, and the future besides; though it is not permitted to extend cognition to parts and to singular things."⁵⁴

Two things are unknowable: what is before nature, and singularities. Just what kind of singularities Bacon means, it is hard to tell, especially when he urges that science must "descend to particulars."⁵⁵ What is meaningful for us, however, is that the history and future of matter are comprehensible, and their comprehension is necessary to understand the "passions" and "process" of matter. Therefore study, if not the first things, the first things since Cupid. And study also the future things. If nature is not fully comprehensible, it is fully conquerable.

Let us turn to Pan, a fable that is also interpreted in the Latin version of the *Advancement of Learning* as an example of parabolical poetry.⁵⁶ Pan means universal nature. One thing Bacon says about the Panick terrors is that nature has bred in all living things care and . . . a dread (*formidinem*) for self-preservation. Here is a foreshadowing of Hobbes and the state of nature. Yet there is that in the fable which takes us beyond nature to the human things. In the version from the *De Augmentis*, Bacon points out that "Fortune is the child of the vulgar, and pleases only the lighter kind of philosophers."⁵⁷ But this is part of the discussion of fate, and Bacon distinguishes fortune and fate. Though Bacon admired Lucretius, he had no use for Epicurus, to whom Lucretius owed much. The passage about fortune and fate continues "Epicurus seems not only to bring in profane words, but even to be silly when he says 'it is better to believe in the fable of the gods than to assert fate.'⁵⁸ The passage suggests that to be silly is guiltier than to profane. To assert fate is to be silly and fate seems to be equivalent to fortune, whereas to believe the fable of the gods is still to make the relief of man's estate possible. To Bacon, as to Machiavelli before him, fortune does not rule the world.⁵⁹

⁵³ Bacon himself may be thrice great, "veluti ter maximum", or the reference may be to Hermes Trismegistus.

⁵⁴ "Necesse est enim, ut qui materiae passiones & processus noverit, rerum summum & earum quae factae sunt, & quae fiunt, & quae insuper futurae sunt, comprehendat, licet ad partes & singularia cognitio non extendatur."

⁵⁵ *New Organon* I, 22. 102, 103, 118.

⁵⁶ *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, II, in *Works* II, pp. 226-239.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 230. "Nam Fortuna vulgi filia est et levioribus tantum philosophis placuit."

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ See Leo Strauss: *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago, 1957) especially pp. 205-221 and citations therein.

Fates, however, are the sisters of Pan, that is, sisters of nature.

What Bacon's attack means is that Epicurus would not willingly accept anything that troubled the mind, and fate is more troublesome than fortune. This seems to be another way of saying that Epicurus accommodated his natural philosophy to his moral philosophy. Bacon, of course, does the opposite, at least methodologically. The mastery of nature does not accept the limits of fortune; it may be compelled to accept those of fate. It is clear here that we are moving from the natural to the human, or at least to the mixture of natural and moral philosophy. Since we have seen that Bacon associates Venus, as well as Cupid and Coelum with the nature of things, we are reminded of Lucretius and his opening praise of Venus.⁶⁰ As Leo Strauss says of Lucretius' teaching, "The Romans are descendants of the goddess Venus who alone guides the nature of things."⁶¹ A movement then from natural philosophy to moral philosophy may be seen as a movement from Venus to Rome. Bacon does not move, as Lucretius did, from Venus to nature.⁶² The order of speech in the *Wisdom of the Ancients* does not move in a comparable way at all. But the order of understanding seems to move from nature to human nature. We have classified the fable of Pan as one of those dealing with the natural. One part of the fable, however, is definitely related to the political. As it is supposed to be connected with the "all", that is not surprising. He has in his hands two insignia, the one for harmony, the other for empire.⁶³ It would be hard to find more fitting insignia for Rome.

If harmony and empire seem related to universal nature, they are obviously not natural in the sense in which the appetite universal in matter is natural.⁶⁴ Men create empire, and they may create harmony. Returning to Pan, the pipe represents harmony, and the seven reeds stand for the seven planets. That is, of course, not man-created harmony, but when Bacon speaks of the other insigne he clearly relates God-made harmony to manmade harmony. The sheep-hook of empire is crooked, because of the "*ambages et circuitus*". Likewise in human rule, pretext and oblique ways are most felicitous.⁶⁵ We have seen the relation of indirectness and rule in the fables of Cassandra (#1) and Juno's Suitor (#16), and we have seen the importance of indirectness in the rule over the empire of knowledge in the preface. It is not surprising that the passage which seems to furnish the transition from nature to rule should stress the secret character of nature, or the indirect character of rule.

Harmony and empire are related to politics, in the ancient sense in which politics is seen as encompassing the human things. A study of the organization of the *Advancement of Learning*, however, will indicate Bacon's demarca-

⁶⁰ I, 1-43.

⁶¹ "Notes on Lucretius" in *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern* (New York, 1968), p. 76.

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 83.

⁶³ Bacon: *Works* XII, p. 445.

⁶⁴ cf. *Works* V, pp. 63-64.

⁶⁵ *Works* XII, pp. 445-446.

tion of the political and the moral. We must therefore turn to the non-political. When Bacon says that Aristotle handled the "affections" well, as to number, but handled them in the wrong place⁶⁶ (that is rhetoric rather than ethics) we may expect Bacon to include affections, passions,⁶⁷ as well as virtues and vices together all in a work on moral philosophy. Is the *Wisdom of the Ancients* such a work? It does not appear to be an exhaustive treatment of moral philosophy. In fact, it is doubtful whether Bacon deemed it possible to write such a work, for he thought that the then current state of science would not permit it. Nevertheless while it may not be possible to know what to wish, it is possible to identify the vices which make it more difficult for man to find what to wish.

Consider the vices predominant in the fables, as Bacon understands them, that is other than the political vices, which must be understood differently. The vice of Narcissus is self-love, and self-love is seen by Bacon chiefly as a vice which impedes science: "For that from which no fruit comes, but (like the path of a ship in the sea) passes and glides, the ancients were accustomed to consecrate to the shades and gods below."⁶⁸ The vice of Orpheus was impatience, and that is clearly a defect that impedes science. Indeed, impatience is again the vice stressed in the fable of Erichthonius, and again Bacon is speaking of the effect of impatience on science. We may compare this with the description of Epicurus as "*indulgens potius quam veritatis patiens*," in one version of the Pan fable.^{68a} The vice of Memnon is *hubris*: the vice of Acteon and Pentheus is that they are busybodies. The vice stressed in the Promethean fable is perturbation, and, following Lucretius, Bacon sees philosophy as freeing the mind from perturbation. Added to these vices, there are two fables dealing with passion, and passion is, to Bacon a vice, for it means not all emotions, or "affections", Bacon's term, but perturbed emotions. One fable is that of Tithon, or "satiety." The other is the fable of Dionysus, with the sub-title, *cupiditas* or passion. The fable of Dionysus is also included as an example of parabolical poetry, in the Latin *Advancement*, in a slightly variant version.⁶⁹ The fable of Dionysus is particularly important. Although the fable only "seems" to pertain to morals, "nothing better in the philosophy of morals has been invented."⁷⁰ While not the "greatest thing", as the knowledge that Cupid has no parents may be, it is at least equal to the best in moral philosophy. It is perhaps to moral philosophy as Cupid is to natural philosophy. Moreover, it has been "invented", which tells us something about the difference between natural and moral philosophy. Fables, of course, may be invented, but the statement raises the possibility that moral philosophy in general is invented. Moral philosophy therefore cannot be one of the first

⁶⁶ *II A of L XXII*, par. 6.

⁶⁷ "Affection" or *affectus* differs from "passion" or *cupiditas*, as will appear.

⁶⁸ *Works XII*, p. 439.

^{68a} *De Augmentis*, *Works II*, p. 230.

⁶⁹ *De Augmentis*, Book II, Ch. 13 in *Works II*, pp. 245-250.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 246; also *Works XIII*, p. 37.

things, but recalling that the subtitle of the fable of Dionysus is “passions”, these may be among the first things. It is clear that the strictures against Aristotle’s handling of the passions in the *Rhetoric*, have been hardened to by Bacon himself, for here the passions are in moral philosophy. Indeed, they seem to be, if not the whole, the best part of moral philosophy. To see whether there are virtues independent of the passions, we shall have to consider other fables as well.

What is it which is one of the best inventions of moral philosophy? Bacchus (for in this fable the Greek and the Latin names are interchangeable) represents passion, or affection and perturbation,⁷¹ and the mingling of affection with perturbation is the object of apparent good. Nothing here is said about affection without perturbation. Men may have appetites for real good: roses, friendship, justice, wisdom. Bacon discusses the disturbed passions, their relation to wine, to the Muses, to ivy.

Yet in the discussion of passion something of the nature of affection is seen. It is all affection, not just passion, in Bacon’s interpretation, which may seem to be asleep, and extinct, but may be revived when the matter and the occasion revive it.⁷² Affection, moreover, is ingenious and wise in finding out what nourishes it. It finds wine as what most excites passion. In other words, all affection finds what nourishes it, but it is passion which finds wine. Running throughout the fable there is the distinction between affection and passion which is at the root of Baconian morality, but it is extremely difficult to tell why, on Bacon’s terms, affection has any higher standard than passion. Neither is virtue, and the apparent difference is the presence or absence of perturbation.

We cannot, however, neglect the most difficult passage in the fable, and that passage deals with affection, not necessarily passion: “It is most certain that affection seeks and strives for what experience has rejected. And everyone who has been servant and indulgent to his own affections should learn, augmenting immensely the price of mastery, that, whether honor, or fortunes, or loves, or glory or knowledge, or any other things he seeks, are things that have been abandoned, and, through all generations, and by most (people) dismissed and despised after a test.”⁷³ It is possible that this passage is Baconian tongue-in-cheek reflection on the vanity of this world. However, Bacon calls it a particularly noble allegory. It is unlikely that Francis Bacon, a man whose life, apart from his ambition, was dedicated to the advancement of learning for the relief of man’s estate, would have considered knowledge a thing to be despised, or even the affection for knowledge as such a thing. Where Orpheus failed, in the Orphic myth, or in Bacon’s treatment of it, was in the impatience for knowledge, and that may be intended here too. All

⁷¹ *Works* XIII, p. 37. “natura Cupiditatis, sive affectus et perturbationis.” If the passage is translated, as it sometimes is, “the nature of passion, affection, and perturbation”, the meaning is badly mangled.

⁷² *ibid.* pl. 38.

⁷³ *Works* XIII, p. 39.

that I can further suggest, at the present stage, is that affection misleads, and that one should seek knowledge, but curb one's affection, for the affection may lead us to accept what experience (or testing) rejects.

Leaving this admittedly incomplete interpretation of the Dionysiac myth, perhaps we can gain some clarity by turning to the question of virtue. The myth of Orpheus, the subtitle of which is "Philosophy" may be expected to present an apotheosis of the contemplative life.⁷⁴ Indeed, Orpheus is called a "complete philosopher", and that is more than can be said of any actual, historical philosophers, before Bacon.⁷⁵ Orpheus sought Eurydice. He looked behind him before he had returned to the world, and, as a result, he lost her. Orpheus then turned to subjugating beasts and stones, with his lyre. What Orpheus failed at, because of his impatience, was natural philosophy. What he succeeded at, the subjugation of beasts and stones, was political philosophy. What finally drowned out his lyre, the din of the Dionysiac women, was religious strife. The impatience of men over finding the completion of natural philosophy had led to political philosophy. At this, men had some success, but one problem political philosophy had not resolved, the problem of religious warfare. The implication is that if natural philosophy is rooted in Bacon's method and is patient, its success will in turn lead to the success of political philosophy and the cessation, in the New Atlantis, of religious warfare.

Orpheus is probably the link to political philosophy. There is however, one more fable which should be discussed, before coming directly to politics, that of Prometheus. Prometheus signifies providence, an extremely bourgeois virtue. The most important thing about the fable is, however, according to Bacon, the teaching "that man is like the center of the world as far as we look towards final causes."⁷⁶ The revolutionary character of this statement may be obscured if we do not recall that final causes, the good at which all things aimed, were once far higher than man. If man is the center of the world as related to final causes, then final causes are not in nature, but in man, that is, not in the nature of man, but in man's work. Moreover, if man is the center of the world, the final causes are man-made final causes. They can be understood by man, for the same reason that the universe may be understood by God, as God made it. Bacon's statement means, however, that only the things man makes can really be understood. The search for the first things has reached its limit. While it is true that something of the first things, like the knowledge that Cupid has no parents, is essential to pursue the final causes, the search stops there.

The order of future exploration seems to be clear. One should not search further for the first things, for we cannot find something before matter and the common appetite. Yet natural philosophy must do its work, must descend to particulars, with the aid of Bacon's induction, before we may in fact

⁷⁴ *Works XIII*, pp. 11-14.

⁷⁵ Discussed at greater length in *Peace among the Willows*, pp. 207-217.

⁷⁶ *Works XIII*, p. 44.

turn to final causes. But, though natural philosophy must precede political philosophy, it can never be as comprehensible as political philosophy, for the incomprehensibility of nature contrasts with the comprehensibility of self-created man.

The fable of Prometheus is, in Bacon's narration and interpretation, the longest one. Mention must be made, however, of the strange virtue of ingratitude. It is said that when Prometheus stole the fire, men were ungrateful, and this ingratitude made them more bounties. Ingratitude is, to Bacon, a virtue in the study of art and nature. Men should be dissatisfied with what they have, ever seeking more. The accusation of art and nature brings science. Remember that this is the same Francis Bacon who held that inventions deserved greater acclaim than the work of kings and statesmen.⁷⁷ Moreover, gratitude was the principal political virtue, according to Machiavelli, whom Bacon often followed.⁷⁸ Yet one can see that, in inventions, or in science generally, gratitude is a virtue, because those who bring benefits to man for the relief of man's estate deserve eternal glory, including, of course, Bacon himself. Ingratitude, however, is also a virtue, because it brings progress to science. Might not the same be true of politics? Bacon must have known that the same ambivalence could exist in political things. Consider the irony in the title, *Daughters of the American Revolution*. The members are doubtless so grateful to their ancestors that they despise all subsequent revolutions. The true revolutionary is ungrateful. It need hardly be said that such is a dangerous ambivalence.

The fable of the Sphinx takes us farther into the distinction between natural and political philosophy.⁷⁹ The riddles (*aenigmata*) of the Sphinx were of two kinds: riddles concerning the nature of things, and riddles concerning the nature of man.⁸⁰ Two kinds of empire (*imperium*) are offered to those who solve them: the empire over nature, and the empire over man. The first empire must overcome the opposition of the Schools, and the emperor is probably Bacon himself. It is the second kind of empire which Oedipus gained, and the exemplar par excellence of that empire is Augustus Caesar. Augustus Caesar, "in the course of his life, solved many new riddles concerning the nature of man." This then is our just transition to the political fables.

There is the harsh side of politics, and there is the gentle side, as the student of Plato knows. Bacon is generally concerned with the harsh side of politics, except in *The New Atlantis*, where the ship of hope reaches the utopia of the future. In *the Wisdom of the Ancients*, politics is almost entirely harsh,

⁷⁷ See among others I *A of L VII*, 1. It is also true that in *The Wisdom of the Ancients*, Daedalus # 19 in *Works XIII*, pp. 28–31, Bacon grants that mechanical inventions can be perverted to evil ends, a much stronger statement than the more famous one, *New Organon I*, 129. This may be accepted only on the faith that new inventions will be salutary because of Bacon's method, and that they will be controlled by the Fellows of Solomon's House.

⁷⁸ *Discourses I*, 2. Compare Polybius VI, 6 ff.

⁷⁹ *Works XIII*, pp. 54–57.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 57.

as it is Machiavelli. Yet the expression is more cautious, modifying harshness with Bacon's customary emphasis on serpentine wisdom. Of the ten fables which are classified as dealing specifically with politics (though some others include politics, as I mentioned, for example, in the discussion of the fable of Pan), seven deal either explicitly or implicitly with monarchy. The other three are open. In the interpretation of Typhon (# 2), Cyclops (# 3), and Metis (30), the word *rex* (king) appears in the initial statement of the interpretation. In the fable of Styx (# 5) Endymion (# 8) and Sister of the Giants (9) the word *princeps* appears in the same position. The fable of Nemesis (# 22) does not include such an initial sentence, but it is obvious in context that it regards kings and princes.

The first fable, Cassandra, has been discussed, but it could be a political fable. Insofar as it is political, its setting is the Roman republic, and the republican Cassandra is Marcus Cato. Cato saw the ruin of the Roman republic, but he did no good in foretelling it. Bacon quotes Cicero to the effect that "Cato spoke as if he lived in the republic of Plato, not in the dung of Romulus."⁸¹ Outspokenness is more likely to be characteristic of a republic than of a monarchy. Rebels, the subtitle of fable # 2, and Ministers of Terror, the subtitle of fable # 3, are both related by Bacon to monarchy. Let us look briefly at fables # 2 and # 3.⁸² Obviously, rebellions are not restricted to monarchies. Bacon's treatment, however, sees kingdoms, regimes with varying fortunes, where the king is wedded to the realm, as Jupiter was wedded to Juno. Kings who neglected their kingdoms became tyrants, as Jupiter did when he both bore and begot Pallas, without the cooperation of Juno. Thereupon Juno brought the monster Typhon out of earth. Typhon made war on Jupiter. Bacon, who distrusted the policies of kings, and who helped to teach them evil arts, and who wanted to subvert so much of the ancient ways, both of Christianity and the Socratic tradition, was in great fear of civil war. Yet he knew, obviously, that civil wars are often caused by both sides. Kings became tyrants, yet he refers to the "depravity and malignant nature of the plebeians."⁸³ The very fact that Bacon uses the word *plebs* rather than *populus* or *vulgus* indicates that he may refer specifically to the common people of Rome. Bacon uses similar terms in the fable of Nemesis, referring to the "invidious and malignant disposition of the common people."⁸⁴ Here Bacon uses the word, *vulgus* rather than *plebs*. That fable also takes illustrations from Rome, but includes Troy and "Ethiopia" as well. As far as Typhon is concerned, it seems to speak of rebellion, Roman style. Bacon's fear of civil war was great, and rightly so. Therefore he feared the action of the plebeians. Yet he also knew who it was who put down the plebeians.

The monarchical emphasis is continued in fable # 3. In this fable, according to Bacon, Jupiter is supposed to have treated the Cyclops much as Cesare

⁸¹ *Works* XII, p. 434.

⁸² *Works* XII, p.p. 434-437.

⁸³ *Works* XII, p. 435.

⁸⁴ *Works* XIII, p. 34.

Borgia is supposed, according to Machiavelli, to have treated Remirro de Orco.⁸⁶ Kings employ ministers of terror. Then, knowing they can get more such instruments, leave them to the law, friends, or the people. For this, the people acclaim the kings. As for the terrorists, they perish, rather late than undeserved.⁸⁶ Bacon does not say that kings should not employ terrorists. If anything, Bacon is teaching kings to employ terrorists, and, while he does not go so far as Machiavelli in citing the execution and dismemberment of Remirro as an example to be imitated, the phrase “rather late than undeserved” applies to the fate of the minister, not to that of the king. Leo Strauss suggests that one compare in Machiavelli’s *Prince* the description of the ordinary prince with that of the extraordinary prince. The latter is Cesare Borgia, who employed and destroyed his minister of terror.⁸⁷ Bacon, who knew Machiavelli well, was not unaware of this distinction.

We have seen that the first fable is partly political, and that the next two fables are wholly political. Considering that the fables are intended to help break the silence of primeval antiquity, which is otherwise broken by sacred writings, and only by sacred writings, we are faced with the startling conclusion, that sacred writings are silent about politics.

Mention should be made in passing of fable # 4, Narcissus.⁸⁸ It is not political, but, indirectly, it is an attack on the apolitical. Narcissus was solitary and private, and Narcissus, in Bacon’s version, was either Aristotle, or Epicurus, or both. The fifth fable is linked to the second and third, because it too, though in a different way, suggests ruthless conduct for princes to imitate. The allegory is of the river Styx, and the subject is of oaths. We know from elsewhere that Bacon distrusted oaths. “Children are to be deceived with comfits, men with oaths.”⁸⁹ The statement is attributed to Lysander. But there is one pledge that an oath will be kept. That pledge is necessity, allegorized by the River Styx. Only an invocation to the Styx, the wise ancients realized, was a reliable oath. Princes make treaties, but their words are not to be depended on. Only necessity binds a prince. “There is only one true and proper prop of faith; it is not a celestial deity.”⁹⁰ In fact it is, at least allegorically, a sub-terrestrial or infernal deity. Bacon knew what an oath meant to a Christian. Yet in this case, Bacon goes farther than Machiavelli. He forgets Regulus. He forgets the republic, at a time when a Roman’s word was absolutely to be trusted. Citizens, said Machiavelli, remained in Italy because of an oath they were forced to take. That was, according to Machiavelli, a result of the religion of Numa.⁹¹ Bacon was cynical about the sanctity of treaties,

⁸⁵ *Prince* Ch. 7.

⁸⁶ *Works* XII, p. 437.

⁸⁷ *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, p. 60; also the reference to Cesare Borgia on p. 58. Chapter 22 of the *Prince* deals with the ordinary prince, chapter 7 with the extraordinary prince.

⁸⁸ *Works* XII, pp. 438–9.

⁸⁹ *Advancement of Learning*, Book II, xxii, 45. (Paragraphing from Oxford edition.)

⁹⁰ *Works* XII, p. 440.

⁹¹ *Discourses* I, Ch. 11.

and of oaths in general, but it must be granted that the oaths were monarchical. In the *New Atlantis*, something of a republic, oaths are taken seriously.

The seventh fable, that of Perseus, deals with war. Since Bacon's definitive teaching deals with peace, that is, presents the peaceful regime of Bensalem, there is some question as to how definitive the arguments of the seventh fable are, especially since seven is the number of convention. However, the argument of the seventh fable is completely Machiavellian, and asserts that, while there must be a cause of war, it should be a cause winning favor, but there is no more just and pious cause of war than the overthrow of tyranny. There is more, especially about kings. There is the fable of Metis, which is used to show that kings demand all honors for themselves, and attribute all distasteful actions to their ministers.⁹² Metis, being with child, was eaten up by Jupiter, who thereupon bore and begot Pallas, armed. This fable is said by Bacon to contain a secret (*arcanum*) of government. The secret, however, is revealed by Bacon. Kings call on their councils. When a matter has been almost resolved, they take it away from their councils, and make it look as if they did the whole thing themselves. Bacon does not say that kings are tyrants. But they tend to become tyrannical. He is certainly aware of their vanity. There is the central fable, # 16, which has already been discussed. Here is abjectness, the political method of wooing the proud and the malignant.

Yet, while the *Wisdom of the Ancients* is critical of monarchies, his ultimate republicanism comes out only in the *New Atlantis*, his inchoate (deliberately inchoate) utopia. There are two very short pieces, which were published posthumously, which may help us here. They are called "The Civil Image of Julius Caesar" and the "Civil Image of Augustus Caesar."⁹³ The latter is apparently incomplete. Of Julius Caesar, Bacon wrote, "For neither fatherland, nor religion, nor services, nor kinship, nor friendship held back his destiny."⁹⁴ Further, "He cultivated dignity and fame, not for themselves, but as instruments of power (*potentia*)."⁹⁵ This accusation of such lust for power is accompanied by measured praise, and elsewhere Bacon refers to Julius Caesar as "the most excellent among natural men."⁹⁶ The praise of Augustus Caesar is much less measured. "A greatness of mind belonged to Augustus Caesar, if to any mortal, undisturbed, serene, and well-ordered."⁹⁷ If the *Wisdom of the Ancients* may be said to have a hero, the hero must be Augustus Caesar. In the fable of Nemesis, Bacon tells us that he thought Augustus Caesar of all people the happiest.⁹⁸ Nemesis comes in when Bacon finds, in Pliny, references to the miseries of Augustus. In spite of that, however, Augustus had a mind "neither swollen, nor light, nor soft, nor confused, nor melan-

⁹² *Works* XIII, pp. 62–63.

⁹³ *Works* XII, pp. 27–44.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 27–28.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 28.

⁹⁶ *De Aug* in *Works* III, p. 45. Compare *II A of L XXII*, 13.

⁹⁷ *Works* XII, p. 33.

⁹⁸ *Works* XIII, p. 33.

choly." In the fable of the Sphinx, as noted above, we are told that Augustus Caesar had the sphinx as his emblem. He solved riddles, riddles about the nature of man.⁹⁹ Just as Machiavelli learned from Chiron, half-man and half-beast,¹⁰⁰ Augustus, and Bacon after him, learned from a monster of many forms, learned at great risk, for the monster, undefeated, would destroy them. And in one sense Bacon is here dealing with the ancient fact that new thoughts, unless brought in quietly, can be self-destructive.

Just before the praise of Augustus, in Bacon's allegory of the Sphinx, there is a quotation from Vergil, reminding the Romans to rule their empire. "These will be your arts."¹⁰¹ As we have seen, quotations from the Romans are the most frequent in the work, and those from Vergil are more frequent than those from any other writer. The relation between Vergil and the star of Augustus is well known and requires no elaboration here.¹⁰² One is compelled, I believe, to conclude that, as far as the *Wisdom of the Ancients* is concerned, Rome is the most admired part of antiquity, but it is not so much republican Rome, so much admired by Machiavelli, as the Rome of Augustus. It is ironic that the philosopher who expects nothing great to come from Homer and Hesiod, and pretends to look at remotest antiquity, claims to find one part of the wisdom of the ancients in an epoch much later than Homer and Hesiod.

This conclusion, however, is subjected to a very grave objection. Despite the warlike people who play so great a role in his provisional teaching, Bacon's ultimate goal is peace, foreshadowing Hobbes. Like Machiavelli, he sponsored a civil religion, but the religion of Bensalem is peaceful, and its gods seem rather to be Isis and Osiris than Juno and Jupiter.¹⁰³ Yet how could everyone accept the peaceful religion of Bensalem, and the rule of a science, remote, and to the plebs, incomprehensible? Bacon knew that. But Caesarism had overcome patriotism. Unlike the peace of Hobbes, who followed, the peace which Bacon revered could be brought about only by imperial power. Otherwise, why would the fellows of Solomon's House, in the *New Atlantis*, have engines of destruction which they never used?¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁰⁰ Leo Strauss: *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, p. 78.

¹⁰¹ *Aeneid* VI, lines 851–852.

¹⁰² *Aeneid* VI, lines 790 ff; VIII, lines 678–681.

¹⁰³ *Peace among the Willows*, pp. 168–79.

¹⁰⁴ Of course, they could be used for defense, but the remoteness of the island makes that unlikely.