BACON AND EMERSON:

Their relation to each other, and the relation of each to Plato.

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Bacon and Emerson: their Relation to Each Other, and the Influence of Plato upon Both.

The conditions of Bacon's time were particularly favorable to the exposition of a new philosophy. The revival of classical learning, the glorious outburst of Elizabethan Literature, and the discovery of the New World, gave to men's minds a breadth and scope which prevented prejudice against innovation. The universal mind was quick and active, eager for new fields upon which to expend its thought. The old speculative philosophy, after its abuse in the fruitless controversies of the middle ages, was, upon its revival in England, the means of awakening the mind to a realization of its possibilities. But, after leading it to a high plane of thought, and after arousing it to a positive eagerness for activity, the old philosophy supplied nothing for the mind to work upon except abstract theories and speculations, which could lead to no definite end, which could never arrive at any positive conclusion. But the time demanded something more definite, some line of thought which could be grasped and conquered, which the mind could assimilate and use as a stimulus to further effort. To supply the needs of such a time Bacon introduced, or rather, revived, the inductive system of philosophy, which met the practical tendencies of the age, and led the mind of civilization to those great scientific researches which still have a dominating influence in the affairs of men.
In formulating his philosophy Bacon chose as his master, not Plato, but the latter's pupil, Aristotle. The doctrines of Aristotle differ from those of Plato chiefly in their efforts for concreteness. Plato maintained that ideas alone were real. He viewed facts as a means of criticism. Aristotle, on the other hand, craved facts, using them in his effort to establish sound doctrine. While Plato deals with abstractions as fundamental and solitary, Aristotle begins with definite sciences, and seeks to reason through them to abstractions,—to the essence of things.

Although Bacon is not an avowed disciple of Aristotle, his philosophy embraces the same fundamental principles as that of the Greek. Bacon was possessed of wonderful insight and it is not improbable that his philosophy was almost an entirely original conception. It is at any rate certain that he saw the need of a more definite philosophy, and met the need with his own profound wisdom. The minds of men needed, not stimulation, but direction, and in his work Bacon gave a bent to civilized thought which has proved of lasting benefit to mankind.

Bacon's relation to Plato must then be regarded as very indirect. Plato's Dialogues, the bible of the transcendental philosophy—Bacon's essays, "a little bible of worldly wisdom," the exponent of utilitarian philosophy. The differences of opinion arise from the essential differences between Plato and the English statesman. Bacon was too practical to think along the high ideal lines which satisfied Plato and his followers. Plato is the exponent of truth; Bacon of expediency.
Plato would make men perfect; Bacon would make them comfortable. With Bacon, philosophy does not stop with its own conclusions, but it reaches down into the life of man to help him though its difficulties. So we have in Bacon's creed, what some of us regard as very loose morals. His dissimulation, for instance, invented to relieve man of petty annoyance, would never stand the fierce light of Plato's truth, which would raise man above his vulgar wants, and so do away with the necessity for dissimulation. Plato's philosophy began in thought, and ended with thought influencing action; "Bacon's creed began in observation and ended in arts." In these arts Bacon supplied to his contemporaries a motive which gave new weight and dignity to the inductive philosophy.

Throughout the "New Atlantis" one is puzzled by an elusive hint of Plato — partly in the form, and partly in the subject matter. The similarity of material comes out most clearly when it is compared with Book 5, Chapter 2 of the dialogue on "Laws." We have in each the same relations of family, the same disposition toward strangers, with this exception, however: the New Atlantis takes into consideration the practical, worldly side, while Plato dwells upon the ideal relationship, for the promotion of ethical good.

In the New Atlantis, we have the child most dear to the parent becoming the "Son of the Vine," a distinction of great honor. In "Laws" Book 5 Chapter 10, Plato admonishes every man to leave his property to the child most dear to him. Bacon speaks of the honor of large family and many descendents, while Plato advises the restriction of
numbers. In both we have the participation of the whole number in
affairs of state.

Bacon: (New Atlantis)

"The end of our foundation is
the Knowledge of causes, and se-
cret motions of things; and the
enlarging of the bounds of hu-
man empire, to the effecting
of all things possible."

Bacon: (Of Atheism)

"I had rather believe all
the fables in the legend and
the Talmud and the Alcoran,
than this universal frame is
without a mind; and therefore
God never wrought a miracle
to convince Atheism, because
his ordinary works convince it.

Bacon: "Of Riches"

I cannot call riches better
than the baggage of virtue. The
Roman word is better. Impedia-
menta. For as baggage is to an

Plato: (The Philosopher)

"Let us declare the cause which
led the Supreme Ordainer to pro-
duce and compose the universe, He
was good; and he who is good has no
kind of envy. Exempt from envy, he
wished that all things should be
as much as possible like himself"

"All things are for the sake of the
good, and it is the cause of every
thing beautiful."

Plato: (The Philosopher) C. 6.

"It is impossible for the earth
and heavens and all the stars and all
the bulky bodies made from them to
subsist, unless a soul were present
to each, or in each."

Plato.

"For it is impossible for per-
sons to be very rich and good, such
at least, as the many reckon rich."

"For it is impossible for per-
sons to be very rich and good, such
at least, as the many reckon rich."
Army, so is riches to virtue.
It cannot be spared, nor left
behind, but it hindereth the
march."

But such passages, which show a similarity of thought between
Bacon and Plato are rare, and seldom occur in the essays. Here Bacon's
wisdom appears of a devious and not over principled kind, in strong
contrast to the idealistic teachings of Plato. Bacon in his late
works, gives more and more of his attention to actualities and affairs,
and one is constantly impressed with the finiteness of his aims.
Worldly consideration comes to be regarded by him as the end of liv­
ing—the best good for mankind. His truth is not the sort which draws
one away from his worst self toward a better, but it confronts a man
with his own weaknesses in such a way that often they appear plea­s­
ing virtues to be encouraged rather than weak points to be strength­
ened. Of course the low morality of Bacon's time must be considered,
and it does much to excuse his doctrine of expediency. But in spite
of these considerations, one is never impressed with the high soul of
the man.

In comparing the style of Bacon and Plato, we find almost as little
in common as in their philosophy. Their very diction gives a clue
to the wide divergence of their thought. Bacon seldom refers to the
soul. It is Plato's one enduring theme. All of Bacon points to the
temporal, just as all of Plato points to the eternal. Both philoso­
phers were masters of the art of writing. In every line of each we find careful finish and perfect form. But Plato lacks that pithiness which is characteristic of Bacon. His syllogisms pale beside Bacon's brilliant epigrams. The very form of Bacon's utterance carries conviction with it. It takes longer to perceive the profound truth in Plato's heavier style, not only because the truth exploited is of a nature more foreign to man's ordinary thought, but because its presentation is longer and less direct. It is for this reason that Plato is seldom quoted. There are few of his sentences which the casual mind would catch and hold, and embody in its own thought, as it does with Bacon's aphorisms. In the New Atlantis, where Bacon's lines are broader and more flowing, we have a hint of Plato's method.

The influence of Bacon's doctrines has continued down to the present time, to be met only recently with another philosophy, which is practically a return to the transcendentalism of Plato. The philosophy of Emerson differs from that of Plato most in its influence, in its effectiveness upon the common run of mankind. Probably the manner of presentation has much to do with this, for their doctrines are in many respects identical.

In the matter of literary style Emerson most nearly touches Bacon, although strongly opposed to him. Emerson, unlike Bacon and Plato, is not a master of style. His methods are distinctly his own and are sometimes unique, but occasionally there flashes out a sentence as clean and clearly cut, as brilliant and convincing, as Bacon's best
utterance. No line of Emerson but carries weight to the student, but only these occasional sunbursts remain in the popular mind. I venture but that for these "catchy" expressions, Emerson's work would have remained to the masses a book as sealed as is Plato today, just as Matthew Arnold's prose has remained unknown, and that the reaction toward the transcendental philosophy would have been further delayed.

The sage of Concord owns no master, and in his vehement self reliance, it is probable that he is independent in his philosophy. But the name most often upon his tongue, the man "who comes nearest being his idol" is the Greek Plato. For Plato he has always the greatest reverence and love, the highest praise. "Out of Plato," he says, "come all things that are still written and debated among men of thought." "In proportion to the culture of men they become his scholars." "How many great men nature is incessantly sending up out of night to be his men." "Without Plato we should almost lose our faith in the possibility of a reasonable book." "He stands between the truth in every man's mind." "Of Plato I hesitate to speak, lest there should be no end. . . In Plato, you explore modern Europe in its causes, and see all that in thought which the history of Europe embodies or has yet to embody." Plato and Emerson agree most closely upon the soul and its functions, and upon the nature of the universe:

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Emerson:

"All the facts of the animal"

Plato;-(Meno.C.I5)

"For the whole of nature"
economy, sex, nutrition, gestation, birth, growth, are symbols of the passage of the world into the soul of man."

Emerson: (The Over Soul)

"Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the Eternal One."

Emerson: Spiritual Laws.

"What your heart thinks great, is great. The soul's emphasis is always right.

Emerson: The Over Soul: "The soul circumscribeth all things.

Emerson: (Ibid) "It is undefinable, unmeasurable, but we know that it pervades and contains us."

being of one Kindred, and the soul having heretofore known all things there is nothing to prevent a person, who remembers, (what men call learning,)—only one thing, from discovering all the rest. . . . For to search and to learn is reminiscence all."

Plato: (Axiochus) C. 5. "For we are a soul, a thing of life, and immortal, pent up in a mortal prison. . . . so that a removal from this life is but a change from evil to good."

Plato: (The Philos.) C. I. (Speaking of wisdom.) "The soul is very confident and divines, as if this wisdom were existing in her by some gift of nature; . . . "

Plato: (The Philos.) "Every soul is older than every body."

Plato: (Ibid) "For there is nothing else which can be generated
Emerson: (Love) "All the world loves a lover."

(Ibid) "The lover cannot paint his maiden to his fancy poor and solitary... she teaches his eye why Beauty was painted with loves and Graces attending her steps. Her existence makes the world rich."

Plato: (Banquet) "For the lover is more of a god-like thing than the loved, as being inspired by a god."

(Ibid) "Love does not follow ugliness. "Love appears to me to be the cause of the most beautiful things in other's beings."

Both philosophers agree in their tremendous influence for ethical truth. Emerson’s creed lacks the well defined outlines of Plato’s syllogisms, yet we find Emerson, in his "Rep. Men", complaining that Plato has not given enough definiteness to his philosophy. It reminds us of Carlyle’s plea to Emerson for greater concreteness in that philosopher’s methods.

Turning now to a comparison of Emerson with Bacon, we find that it must be given largely in contrasts. Emerson was a mystic and a symbolist. He judged life by ideal standards, and his vague Pantheism, while it never instructs, lifts the soul to a higher plane of the life. "No writer was ever more chary of criticisms and rules of conduct, of what, in most cases, makes the moralist". Bacon, on the other hand,
never lifts. He is essentially a materialist. His views are utilitarian in the extreme, and by laying down a definite set of well determined practical outlines, he points out the easiest ways for getting along in the world. It is hard to measure the two in the same scales, so different in their thought, so different their influence, and so widely different the work each had to do. Emerson, with his fine enthusiasm, constantly generates thought, Bacon carefully formulates it. "Emerson is the friend and aider of those who would live in the spirit; Bacon of those who would succeed in purely temporal affairs. Emerson pleads for the life of the soul, Bacon for the life of the creature. But Emerson does not degrade the importance of affairs. He rather strives to point out that they have an infinite and enduring relation, which should be their controlling agent. Bacon exaggerates affairs, as above all other things important in life. While Emerson neglects the physical, Bacon neglects the spiritual.

Emerson, in his reaction from the eighteenth century philosophy did, in all probability exaggerate the tendency of his own mind to so great an extent that he missed much of the wisdom, profundity and fruitfulness of the earlier doctrine. Yet everywhere Emerson speaks of its leader, Francis Bacon, in terms of warm praise. He even refers to him as a follower of Plato, an opinion to which few students can agree. For instance, Emerson asks, "What secret can he (Plato) conceal from the eyes of Bacon?" He refers to and quotes Plato eighty-one times, Bacon forty-seven times. He seems to have great respect
for Bacon, and for his essays, which he characterizes as "a little bible of worldly wisdom, but the similarity of their thoughts is only casual. The contrast of their thought is forcibly exhibited in the attitude of each toward friendship.

**Emerson: (Friendship)** "There is a power in love to divine another's destiny better than that other can, and by heroic encouragements, hold him to his task."

"They (my friends) shall give me that which properly they can not give me, but which radiates from them."

"The laws of friendship are great, austere and eternal, of one web with the laws of nature and of morals. But we seek our friend, not sacredly, but with an adulterate passion which would appropriate him to ourselves."

"The soul environs itself with friends that it may enter into a grander self acquaintance or solitude."

**Bacon: (Friendship)** "A man can scarce allege his own merits with modesty, much less extol them. A man cannot sometimes brook to supplicate and beg; and a number of the like. But all these things are graceful in a friend's mouth, which are blushing in a man's own. When a man cannot fitly play his own part, if he have not a friend, let him quit the stage."

"Solitude has no character of the divine nature, except it proceed out of a love and desire to sequester a man's self for a higher conversation."

(Bacon evidently refers to prayer.)
Differences.

**Emerson:** "Friendship is for aid and comfort through all the relations and passages of life and death."

**Emerson:** "Our intellectual and active powers increase with our affection."

**Bacon:** "A principal fruit of friendship is the ease and discharge of the fullness and swellings of the heart, which passions of all kinds do cause and induce."

Point of similarity

**Emerson:** "A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. Before him, I may think aloud."

**Emerson:** "In the last analysis, love is only the reflection of a man's own worthiness from other men. Men have sometimes exchanged names with their friends as if they would signify that in their friends each loved his own soul."

**Bacon:** "Those that want friends to open themselves unto, are cannibals of their own hearts."

**Bacon:** "And then it will appear that it was a Sparing Speech of the Ancients to say, that a friend is another himself; for that friend is far more than himself. . . . So that a man hath as it were two lives in his desires."

The essential difference is in the attitude of each toward the purposes of friendship—Bacon continually pointing out the worldly ways in which a man may gain through his friend, Emerson, the spiritual development, in thought and life, which comes to a man through his in—
tercourse with his true friend. John Morley, speaking of Emerson, says, "No modern has given so remarkable a place to friendships among the sacred necessities of well endowed character. Neither Plato nor Cicero; least of all Bacon, has risen to so noble and profound a conception of this most strangely commingled of all human affections."

In other essays—points of similarity.

Emerson; (New England Reformers)

"As soon as a man is wonted to look beyond surfaces, and to see how this high will prevails without an exception or interval, he settles himself into serenity. He can already rely on the laws of gravity. . . We need not interfere to help it on, and he will learn, one day, the mild lesson they teach, that our own orbit is all our task, and we need not assist in the administration of the universe. Do not be so impatient to set the town right concerning the unfounded pretensions and the false reputation

Bacon; (Innovations.) "For time is the greatest innovator; . . . It were good, therefore, that men in their innovations, would follow the example of time itself; which indeed innovateth greatly, but quietly and by degrees scarcely to be perceived"
of certain men of standing. They are laboring harder to set the town right concerning themselves, and will certainly succeed. Suppress for a few days your criticism on the insufficiency of this or that teacher or experimenter and he will have demonstrated his insufficiency to all men's eyes.

Emerson; (American Scholar) "When a man can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings."

Emerson; (Self Reliance) "Hence forward I am the truths. I must be myself. I will so trust that which is deep and holy, that I will do strongly before the sun and moon whatever inly rejoices me, and the heart appoints, . . . and if we follow the truth, it will bring us out safe at last."

In spite of the similarity of their utterance, their esti-

Bacon; (Of studies) "For they (studies) teach not their own use; but that is a wisdom without them, and above them, won by observation," (and in Gardens) "God Almighty first planted a Garden. And, it is the purest of all human pleasures."

Bacon; (Of Truth) . . . yet truth, which only doth judge itself, teacheth that the inquiry of truth, . . . the Knowledge of truth, and the belief of truth, is the sovereign good of human nature."
mate of truth, *per se*, differs widely. Bacon's defense of dissimulation would never be tolerated by Emerson's self-reliant soul, which "circumscribeth all things."

Emerson: (Over Soul) "But the soul, that ascendeth to worship the great God, is plain and true, has no rose color, - no fine friends, no chivalry; no adventures; does not want admiration; dwells in the hour that now is, in the earnest experience of the common day."

"The soul believes in itself."

Perhaps Emerson is too mystical, too idealistic - his philosophy too far swerved from the old doctrine. But he is always, to those who sympathize with him, an inspiration, and it must be admitted that the greatest in literature has been produced under the stimulus of the transcendental creed. When the pendulum of human thought has slowed a little from the impetus Emerson gave it, mankind will be brighter and better and wiser for his work, and we may enter again upon one of those eras of great literary production which have followed upon the awakened interest in the transcendental ideals."