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The Utility of Poetry Versus the Utility of Baconian Philosophy in Victorian Britain

Erika Berg

The Industrial Revolution created a deep split between the capitalistic bourgeois and the laboring proletariat of Victorian Britain. While industrialization allowed the bourgeoisie to accumulate massive wealth, the working class wallowed in abject poverty. The bourgeoisie, represented in literature by Thomas Babington Macaulay, favored the philosophy of Lord Francis Bacon, who detailed exactly how to preserve a monopoly over the working class.

Macaulay also denounced poetry, which he redefined to include any writing that produces "an illusion on the imagination." Following Macaulay's definition of poetry Marx, who uses illusory figures of speech, is as much a poet as Browning and Hood. According to Macaulay, poetry was obsolete because it lacked utility; it effected nothing. Yet, in reality, the works of Marx, Hood, and Browning had a positive affect on more people than did Baconian philosophy. Because the common worker, who toiled an average of twelve hours a day, six days a week, and lived in squalid slums, was illiterate, he or she was unable to denounce these terrible working and living conditions using the articulate rhetoric needed to persuade the bourgeoisie. Therefore, the only informed citizens who could offer critiques of the Victorian social system were writers, who, by applying pressure on capitalists, helped bring about legislation that improved the conditions of the proletariat.

Recognized as "the workshop of the world" (Mitchell 784), Victorian Britain was the site for the Exhibition of 1851. Visitors from all over the world flocked to the Crystal Palace to marvel at the products of British manufacturing and commerce on display. New machines, new sources of inanimate power, and new processes transformed industries into large-scale operations generating tremendous wealth. Technological inventions improved and increased the manufacture of cotton, iron, and coal products (Mitchell 785). Once a crude pumping machine, the steam engine had metamorphosed into "a versatile prime mover used as a winding engine in the coal mines, as a source of power for spinning and weaving machines, as the driving force for steam hammers in the iron and engineering industries, and as a radically new form of transport in the shape of the railway steam locomotive and the steamship"

(Mitchell 785). The number and variety of achievements showcased in the Crystal Palace make "the Industrial Revolution" an appropriate label for Victorian Britain's technological advancement.

Because of the triumphs of the industrial revolution, the British government tried to institutionalize this "invention of invention," through offering incentives and rewards to individuals and enterprises that developed new inventions (Mitchell 785). This institutional approval ensured the transformation and perpetuation of industrial society.

The government's support for industry encouraged politicians, manufacturers, and entrepreneurs of the Victorian era to adopt Bacon's philosophy. Thomas Babington Macaulay summarizes, "[t]wo words form the key of Baconian doctrine, Utility and Progress" (Buckler 37). In his essay *Lord Bacon*, Macaulay explains Bacon's philosophical goals as "the well-being of the people. The means [is]...the establishing of a judicial, financial, and commercial system, under which wealth may be rapidly accumulated and securely enjoyed" (Buckler 50). Macaulay praises "Bacon's love of those pursuits which directly tend to improve the condition of mankind" (Buckler 47) and openly admits that "to make men perfect was no part of Bacon's plan. His humble aim was to make imperfect men comfortable" (Buckler 49). Macaulay revels in the fact that "the aim of the Baconian philosophy was to supply our vulgar wants" and grants that "some people may think the object of the Baconian philosophy a low object, but they cannot deny that high or low, it has been attained. They cannot deny that mankind have made, and are making, great and constant progress in the road which he [Bacon] pointed out to them" (Buckler 52). Macaulay then boasts of the fruits of Baconian philosophy:

> It has increased the fertility of the soil; it has given new securities to the mariner; it has furnished new arms to the warrior; it has spanned great rivers and estuaries with bridges of form unknown to our fathers;...it has extended the range of human vision;...it has accelerated motion; it has annihilated distance;...it has enabled man to descend the depths of the sea, to soar into the air, to penetrate securely into the noxious recesses of the earth, to traverse this land in cars which whirl along without horses, and the ocean in ships which run ten knots an hour against the wind (Buckler 54).

Macaulay, who was the chief spokesman of the Victorian middle class, conveniently omits another fruit, a rotting festering fruit, of Baconian philosophy: it has "changed the lives of the working classes in a radical way by disrupting traditional family relations as well as time-honored habits of work" (Mitchell 392). The power loom made "manual labor irrelevant" and enabled employers "to use the former support personnel—women and children—as their principal workers in factories—workers who were more tractable and who could be paid less" (Mitchell 392). Factory work also meant a six-day week and it was not until 1847 that the work of women

and children was limited to10 hours a day (Mitchell 392). "Prevailing economic thought did not entertain the idea of worker as consumer," hence "factory workers could not afford to purchase the goods that they produced" (Mitchell 392).

Poverty did not simply mean that workers could not save for periods of unemployment (Mitchell 623), "[i]t meant that aggregate family income, even in good times, was either insufficient or barely sufficient to provide the family a subsistence living. Basically, it meant hunger" (Mitchell 623). Many unskilled workers depended on public or private assistance or they went entire days without food. These workers usually lived in fetid, overcrowded slums. "In these surroundings, disease ravaged the undernourished young. Of the babies born in Liverpool in 1851, only about 45 percent survived to the age of twenty" (Mitchell 624).

Just as squalid, or even more so, were the conditions in the factories. The Parliamentary Papers, or "Blue Books," reported the testimonies of child laborers' to official fact-finding commissions and detailed these appalling conditions. "We went in the morning at six o'clock" and "we come out at seven," Hannah Goode, a child textile worker says (Damrosch 10). "I think the youngest child is about seven," Goode guesses (Damrosch 10). She also tells of how the overlooker "beats the little children if they do not do their work right," explaining that "there is no rule about not beating the children" (Damrosch 10). Ann Eggley, a child mineworker, admits, "The work is far too hard for me" (Damrosch 11). According to Goode, she and her fellow laborers never stop to take their meals, except at dinner. All of the girls speak of falling asleep before even crawling into bed at night, and Eggley remarks, "Sometimes when we get home...we have not the power to wash us" (Damrosch 10).

Obviously, Bacon's philosophy was not as pragmatic as Macaulay asserts it to be. The establishing of the judicial, financial, and commercial system suggested by Bacon did not contribute to the well being of all people in Victorian Britain. A monopolizing minority, property owning class, enjoyed the wealth that was rapidly accumulating under this system at the expense of the majority, the working class. Bacon loved pursuits that improved the condition of the bourgeoisie, but did not benefit the rest of mankind. Baconian dogma certainly made the "imperfect men" of the bourgeois very comfortable by supplying their vulgar wants of superfluous wealth and surplus commodities; but it made the humble men of the proletariat very *un*-comfortable by denying them their vital needs of adequate food and shelter. Mankind was making great progress on the road of industry, but it had lost its way and human kindness had perished.

These "contrasts of great wealth and abject poverty, of national prosperity and individual hardships, of democratic theory and oligarchic practice, made the average citizen uncomfortably aware that something was wrong" (Cooke and Stevenson 9). But, if the citizen was of the bourgeoisie, he or she quickly dismissed this awareness, not wanting to denounce a system that favored his or her class. If the citizen was of the proletariat, he or she might denunciate the system repeatedly, but to no avail. "The vote was extended to every man who occupied property with an annual rental

value of ten pounds, thus giving a voice to the lower middle class but not...to the workers" (Cooke and Stevenson 13). The workers simply lacked the education necessary to articulate their plaints in a rhetoric acceptable to the bourgeoisie. In the "Blue Books," Ann Eggley is reported as saying, "I never went to a day school," while Elizabeth Eggley says, "I cannot read: I do not know my letters" (Damrosch 11).

In this climate of bourgeoisie bias and proletariat illiteracy, "the only informed minds that could offer dispassionate analysis and recommendations were to be found in literature" (Cooke and Stevenson 9-10). The writer, whose "conscience told him that he was shirking his duty if he did not offer his quota of advice" (Cooke and Stevenson 10), was not only cognizant of the social evils of his day, but also of the likelihood that worse evils could follow. "The Victorian writers possessed a persistent belief that human intelligence might apply itself successfully to the prevention of such a disaster" (Cooke and Stevenson 7-8).

But Macaulay, who insisted that Baconian philosophy and its manifestations were flawless, argued that poetry was obsolete in an age of industrial revolution: "[a]s civilization advances, poetry almost necessarily declines," (Buckler 845). Poetry declines because it lacks utility; "truth, indeed, is essential to poetry; but it is the truth of madness. The reasonings are just; but the premises are false" (Buckler 847). Macaulay defines poetry in broad terms, "[o]ur definition excludes many metrical compositions which, on other grounds, deserve the highest praise. By poetry we mean the art of employing words in such a manner as to produce an illusion on the imagination, the art of doing by means of words what the painter does by means of colours" (Buckler 846).

Poetry, as it is commonly understood, is literature written in verse that often uses two figures of speech to produce an illusion on the imagination: metaphors and similes. Through metaphor, a poet transfers a term from the object it ordinarily designates to an object it can designate only through implicit comparison or analogy. Employing a simile, the poet compares two fundamentally unlike things, linking them with "like" or "as." Even though Macaulay graciously extends the definition of poetry to include works without meter, one would still assume that the same figures of speech used to produce an illusion in metrical poetry would be effective in producing an illusion in Macaulayan poetry. This is because meter has no significance in these figures of speech; it simply gives the poem rhythm.

A Victorian writer whose language is reminiscent of the metaphors and similes of metrical poetry is Karl Marx, who, while residing in London in the 1850s, composed a massive critique of capitalism and developed theories of scientific socialism. In this critique, Marx often juxtaposes two seemingly independent elements of capitalistic society; a person must already know what each of them is, in its own specificity, to appreciate their unexpected connection to each other. "Labor power...is a commodity" and "the exercise of labor power...is the worker's own life-activity" are two examples of Marx's metaphorical juxtapositions. In discerning the link between Marx's arguably unrelated terms, "what happens is rather that for a fleeting instant we catch

a glimpse of a unified world, of a universe in which discontinuous realities are nonetheless somehow implicated with each other and intertwined, no matter how remote they may at first have seemed" (Jameson 8). Marx's "sociological approach...comes to be thought of as an imaginary or symbolic resolution" (Jameson 8). This unified world, because it is produced in the reader's imagination, can be nothing but an illusion. Thus, Marx's writing fits Macaulay's definition of poetry.

The works of other Victorian poets strengthens Marx's poetic arguments against capitalist society. Both Thomas Hood's "Song of the Shirt" and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Cry of the Children" convey concepts found in Marx's writing. In "Song of the Shirt," Hood describes the worker as "A mere machine of iron and wood/That toils for Mammon's sake-/Without a brain to ponder and craze/Or a heart to feel-and break!" Marx, in *On Estranged Labor*, explains that the worker is related to the product of his labor as to an alien object. "The more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself—his inner world—becomes, the less belongs to him as his own" (Schirmacher 118). The worker in Hood's poem has spent all of herself, so that she regards herself as an object, a "machine," whose inner world is so empty that she no longer feels or hurts.

"It is not linen you're wearing out,/But human creatures' lives," Hood's worker cries. Marx explains, "It is true that labor produces wonderful things for the rich—but for the worker it produces privation" (Schirmacher 119). "Sewing at once, with a double thread,/A Shroud as well as a Shirt," Hood writes. As Hood suggests, this privation, about which Marx also writes, leads to death.

"My labor never flags/And what are its wages? A bed of straw,/A crust of bread—and rags./That shatter'd roof,—and this naked floor—/A table—a broken chair," the worker in Hood's poem sings. In *Wage Labor and Capital*, Marx explains the relationship between labor and wages. Labor-power is a commodity, just like flour or cloth is a commodity. "Their commodity, labor-power, the workers exchange for the commodity of capitalists, for money. . . [a]nd these two shillings, do they not represent all the other commodities which I can buy for two shillings? Therefore, actually, the worker has exchanged his commodity, labor-power, for commodities of all kinds, and, moreover, at a certain ratio," (Marx in Tucker 169). As the worker in "Song of the Shirt" points out, this ratio is unbalanced and unfair. She buys with her very life an uncomfortable bed, a scrap of food, and inadequate clothing.

In "The Cry of the Children," Elizabeth Barrett Browning contrasts child laborers with young animals and the factory with nature. "The young birds are chirping in the nest,/The young fawns are playing with the shadows,/The young flowers are blowing toward the west—/But the young, young children, O my brothers,/They are weeping bitterly!" Children "drive the wheels of iron/in the factories, round and round." Marx enriches Browning's point, writing, "Labor, *life activity, productive life* itself, appears to man in the first place merely as a *means* of satisfying a need—the need to maintain physical existence. Life itself appears only as a *means to life*"

(Schirmacher 122, emphasis original). In contrast, "the animal is immediately one with its life activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is *its life activity*" (Schirmacher 122, emphasis original). The children in Browning's poem are crying because they feel remote from their work and the wheels of iron, while the young animals rejoice in their life activities of chirping and playing and the flowers blowing in the wind.

When the speaker in Browning's poem suggests that the children frolic in the meadows, the children reply, "If we cared for any meadows, it were merely/To drop down in them and sleep./Our knees tremble sorely in the stooping." Marx writes, "Man *lives* on nature—means that nature is his *body*, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature" (Schirmacher 122, emphasis original). Browning suggests that the children have been so far removed, physically and spiritually, from nature that they are about to die. All nature means to them now is a sanctuary in which to stretch out their sore knees and "sleep," or die.

Although the writings of Marx, Hood, and Browning contains imaginative, metaphorical language, it accurately portrays the conditions seen in the slums and described in the "Blue Books." It is not the truth of madness; its reasonings are just and its premises are *true*. Because of bourgeoisie bias and proletariat illiteracy, these and other poets were the only citizens in Victorian Britain to reveal the atrocious working conditions. Therefore, the legislation that improved conditions for the working class can be attributed to pressure these writers applied on capitalists through their poetry.

In 1833 and 1842, the Factory Acts "prohibited the employment of children under nine, and limited those under twelve to forty-eight hours of work per week" (Damrosch 10). In 1866, a new Reform Bill "canceled all property qualifications for voters in the cities, and sharply reduced them for those in rural areas. About a million new voters, all of the laboring class, were thus added" (Cooke and Stevenson 28). The Education Act of 1870 established a state-supported system of schools, making education more accessible to the working class. In the 1870s, a Housing Bill granted power to local authorities to rebuild slums, a Factory Act regulated working conditions, and a Trade Unions Bill legalized the right to strike (Cooke and Stevenson 30). And finally, in 1906, at the conclusion of the Victorian period, the Labour Representation Committee (LRC), "an alliance among the unions and the socialist societies to seek direct labor representation in Parliament" (Mitchell 737), was represented by twenty-nine of its candidates in the House of Commons.

While the Industrial Revolution yielded a variety of useful inventions, it broadened the gap between the bourgeois and proletariat classes by allowing the bourgeoisie to grow exceedingly wealthy at the expense of the working class. Endorsed by Macaulay, who represented the bourgeoisie in literature, Bacon's philosophy voiced the mercenary attitudes of the middle class. While lauding Bacon's advice on how to maintain a monopoly over the working class, Macaulay vilified poetry. Claiming

that poetry was not necessarily synonymous with verse, Macaulay extended the definition of the genre to include any composition that creates an illusion on the imagination. Because he employs illusory language, namely metaphors and similes, in his writing, Marx irrefutably falls under Macaulay's definition of a poet. Furthermore, Marx's observations parallels those of Hood's and Browning's poetry, they all reveal the misery the proletariat suffered. Because writers like Marx, Hood, and Browning articulated the complaints of the illiterate proletariat, they were able to improve the conditions of the working class. This poetry, which provided for the needs of the proletariat majority, had greater utility than the Baconian philosophy, which fed the greed of bourgeois minority. The Baconian philosophy's literal language had the very illusory effect on Macaulay that he ascribes to the metaphorical language of poetry.

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