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‘A Dark Light’: Spectacle and Secrecy in Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis*

Bronwen Price

God bless thee, my son; I will give thee the greatest jewel I have. For I will impart unto thee, for the love of God and men, a relation of the true state of Salomon’s House. Son, to make you know the true state of Salomon’s House, I will keep this order. First, I will set forth unto you the end of our foundation. Secondly, the preparations and instruments we have for our works. Thirdly, the several employments and functions whereto our fellows are assigned. And fourthly, the ordinances and rites which we observe. The End of our Foundation is the knowledge of Causes, and secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible.¹

The utopia offered in Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1627) alludes to and departs from the earlier models of Plato and More. It signals generic hybridity, drawing on the travel narrative genre by beginning with the arrival of a crew lost at sea at the remote island of New Atlantis or Bensalem, and relating the workings of this unknown society through the unfamiliar eyes of its European narrator.² Presented as a ‘fable’ in William Rawley’s preface to the work (151), *New Atlantis* also intersects with the practical concerns of *Sylva Sylvarum*, Bacon’s collection of scientific experiments, to which it was appended; it evokes Old Testament wisdom, yet its depiction of Salomon’s House, Bensalem’s ancient institution ‘dedicated to the study of the Works and Creatures of God’ (167), is often viewed as offering the projection of an advanced scientific research institute.³ It is indeed this moment, the ‘relation of the true state of Salomon’s House’ (177), anticipated in the preface, referred to from early in the narrative and comprising the last and longest part of the text, that appears to represent the core of its utopian vision and marks its difference from any previous ‘Feigned Commonwealth’ (174).

This essay will argue that *New Atlantis* pulls the concept of utopia in opposite directions, particularly through its representation of Salomon’s House, and that this is highlighted through the apparently conflicting modes of spectacle and secrecy.

Numerous commentators have noted that while its concealed elements contribute to Bensalem's quasi-religious resonance, they also produce a sense of disquiet about its utopian features.⁴ However, while this is true, little reference has been made to *New Atlantis's* theatrical attributes and how these underscore its areas of secrecy. Although, as Brian Vickers demonstrates, theatrical imagery pervades Bacon's writing,⁵ this aspect of *New Atlantis* has not been explored in depth.

Each central episode of the text is indeed punctuated by a sense of the performative: from the 'thick clouds' that lift like a curtain to reveal the unknown island (152), to the detailed accounts of the inhabitants' clothing and gestures; from the description of the 'spectacle' of the 'pillar of light' viewed by Bensalem's citizens from boats that 'stood all as in a theatre' (159), signalling New Atlantis's conversion to Christianity, to the elaborate social rituals and ceremonies that underpin Bensalem's society more generally and its artificial manifestations of all things natural. These features are, moreover, delivered to a captive audience, the European crew, which is, in turn, subdivided into further sets of selected spectators in a way not unlike the internal audience of Prospero's manipulative 'magic' in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (c. 1611). And, as in *The Tempest*, such theatrics, which are given a similarly semi-divine air on an island thought by the crew members to be 'somewhat supernatural' (162), unsettle the efficacy of what is presented and how it is interpreted by the narrator.

These theatrical layers of Bensalem's society prepare for what appears to be the text's central utopian moment when Salomon's House, introduced as being 'the very eye of this kingdom' (159), at last takes centre stage. Significantly, this event is heralded by the rare, spectacular visit 'in state' by one of its Fathers, 'the cause' of whose 'coming' remains 'secret' (175). Only after a fulsome description of this public ceremony are the activities performed in Salomon's House revealed in 'private conference' to the narrator (176). The inner workings of Salomon's House are indeed only gradually and partially disclosed: it sees, but remains largely unseen; it surveys, but its operations are shrouded in secrecy.

The Society's name itself indicates ambivalence. We learn from the governor of the Strangers' House, where the crew members are initially lodged, that its founder was the kingdom's ancient law-giver, King Solamona, whose name obviously bears a close resemblance to the Biblical law-giver King Solomon, renowned for his wisdom and set up as an example throughout Bacon's work. However, as Susan Bruce indicates: '[T]he precise relation between the biblical Solomon and King Solamona is left opaque ... as is the relation of the name of Salomon's House to both Solamona and Solomon.'⁶ The governor explains that 'Some think' the Society 'beareth the founder's name a little corrupted' (167), but this is never established, thus signalling the uncertain relationship between signs and meanings that Bacon himself notes in *The Great Instauration*, for 'words are the tokens and signs of notions'.⁷

Salomon's House is first mentioned during the description of Bensalem's conversion to Christianity when one of the society's 'wise men' interprets the pillar of light's arrival as 'a true Miracle' and a sign of God's sanction to allow its members 'to know thy works of creation, and the secrets of them; and to discern ... between divine miracles, works of nature, works of art, and impostures and illusions' (160). They are thus required to distinguish between immanent signs of God, which is how the crew members continually interpret New Atlantis's manifestations, and empty or false signs. But the text also provokes the reader to ponder over this process of discrimination when presented with Bensalem's workings, particularly those of Salomon's House. While Bensalem is described as 'the virgin of the world' (173), being unknown to the rest of humanity and untainted by 'received systems' of knowledge, which for Bacon 'are but so many stage plays, representing worlds of their own creation',⁸ its own operations, as we've seen, are repeatedly described in theatrical terms. Perhaps this is partly a self-referential strategy, reminding us that *New Atlantis* is a fable rather than a straightforward scientific exposition. But it also has the effect of inciting the reader to explore the substance of signs.

In this regard the spectacle marking the Father of Salomon's House's arrival, which follows one of the text's many unexplained interruptions, is especially striking. Initially it appears as a solemn, quasi-religious ceremony. Preceded by what seem to be two ecclesiastical figures, one holding a crosier and the other 'a pastoral staff', the Father himself adopts a priest-like bearing or role of divine mediator: he 'had an aspect as if he pitied men', holding up his hand 'as blessing the people' (175–6). But the procession also seems to incorporate civic hierarchy as 'Behind his chariot went all the officers and principals of the Companies of the City' (176). In these and other respects, the spectacle resembles the lavish state pageants orchestrated by James I, which demanded its spectators behold, marvel at and succumb to the patriarchal authority they witnessed. Bacon himself connects James I directly with Solomon's monarchic wisdom in, for example, 'The Epistle Dedicatory' to *The Great Instauration*, and draws on this link in seeking James's support for his scientific programme.⁹

But the Father, if a patriarchal figure, is not of course a monarch and, as David Colclough notes, the Fathers' 'specific place in the social hierarchy and the precise extent of their authority remains unclear'.¹⁰ Indeed, while the precision with which the narrator documents the event both produces the effect of verisimilitude and suggests emblematic import, like many of the island's rituals, the reader is left asking exactly what it connotes. Such details seem to demand interpretation, but remain enigmatic; connections are signalled but left unexplained.¹¹ The reader is left in the position of continually looking beneath the text's surface in order to gain illumination, but frequently remains in the dark.

Yet what is perhaps most notable when examining the spectacle is the scrupulous attention given to surface detail – the sumptuous clothing and rich

materials through which its effects are primarily produced: from the Father's 'shoes of peach-coloured velvet' to the 'hats of blue velvet; with fine plumes of divers colours' worn by his fifty male attendants (175) – all are recorded with sensuous precision so that superficial adornment seems to empty out substance. Indeed, when explored in depth, the whole event seems stagey and is even described as 'the show' (176).

It is this show, which seems both to signify and be vacuous, to be sacred and glossy, that acts as a prologue to the disclosure of the secrets of Salomon's House and the perspective placed upon them. At this point the performance shifts in scene and tone when the Father invites the European crew 'to his presence' 'in a fair chamber'. Once again, clothing, furnishing and gesture are emphasized: the Father is 'set upon a low throne richly adorned' (176). He resembles a king without actually being one, while his apparently divine role is described in performative terms when he offers the 'posture of blessing' to the crew (176). All but the narrator then depart and it is within this private, but no less theatrical setting, that the reader seems at last to view the 'Light' represented by Salomon's House, being privy to the Father's revelations to this exclusive audience of one.

It is also within this cloistered context of display that features explicitly resonating with the scientific programme Bacon advocates elsewhere find fullest expression. *The Great Instauration's* assertion that 'human knowledge and human power, do really meet in one'¹² is echoed in the Father's twinning of knowledge and power when he defines 'The End of our Foundation' as being 'the knowledge of Causes, and secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible' (177). In identifying each specialist research area within Salomon's House, the Father highlights its overall empirical, inductive approach, in which artificial aids and experiments are constructed to improve sense perception and whose underlying purpose is to promote 'the relief of man's estate',¹³ providing the means to enhance nutrition, health, medicine and longevity, as well as generating Christian virtue and civic order. Moreover, the activities of Salomon's House appear to follow Bacon's model 'of scientific inquiry as a collective, collaborative, and social enterprise',¹⁴ supported by the State and granted divine sanction recommended in *The Advancement*. In all of these respects, Salomon's House certainly resembles Bacon's conception of an ideal scientific community presented in his other writings.

However, some details remain ambivalent, especially when viewed from the perspective of the theatrical preliminaries. The Father's disclosures are indeed encased within yet another performative process, being initiated by a ritualized act of gift-giving. He introduces them by declaring that 'I will give thee the greatest jewel I have' (177) and, having bestowed this treasure, grants the narrator the reward of disseminating his findings: 'I give thee leave to publish it for the good of other nations' (185). Having cloaked Salomon's House's

operations in secrecy throughout, the fable's final lines entrust the narrator with making them public. Furthermore, as if both to symbolize and seal this gift, the narrative concludes with the Father assigning 'a value of about two thousand ducats, for a bounty to me and my fellows' (185). But what exactly is being given and in what ways does it illuminate Salomon's House's 'Light'? Certainly, the Father's inventory of its advanced instruments and investigations, together with his explanations of their beneficial uses, give the impression of both enlightenment and utopian vision.

When examining the Father's disclosures further, however, what is withheld is as striking as what is revealed. The materials used in each research area are often too vaguely identified to be of use to the audience to whom this information is imparted. For example, when the Father states, 'We have also great variety of composts, and soils, for the making of the earth fruitful' (177), he gives no indication of the particular types of material employed or how they are produced. The effects are highlighted, but the specific methods of achieving them remain unclear. Nor is any information given about how the members of Salomon's House are chosen or selected for particular roles.

Elsewhere, the Father makes explicit how some areas remain veiled as the Society's members 'take all an oath of secrecy, for the concealing of those which we think fit to keep secret: though some of those we do reveal sometimes to the state, and some not' (184). However, the premise on which such judgements are made are not divulged, nor is the decision-making process for the publication of 'new profitable inventions' (185). The description of Salomon's House presents a show of revelation, but a sense of uncertainty prevails. Moreover, these apparent polarities of spectacle and secrecy are strangely consonant with those manifestations of knowing questioned as being 'Seeming Wise' in Bacon's essay of the same name. Here he warns: 'Some are so close and reserved, as they will not shew their wares but by a dark light; and seem always to keep back somewhat' and would 'seem to others to know of that which they may not well speak. Some help themselves with countenance and gesture, and are wise by signs'.¹⁵ While *New Atlantis* never directly queries the Fathers' wisdom, it nonetheless resembles both of these extremes in some respects and thus provokes further investigation.

Notably, as the Father's description of Salomon's House progresses, so it becomes increasingly as much an assertion of authority and superiority as about imparting 'Light' to its expectant audience. The narrator's early observation of Bensalem's supplementary qualities reverberates in the Father's 'better than' claims for the inventions of Salomon's House. Each section of his description is prefaced by the cumulative 'We have ...' in contradistinction with the reiterated negatives 'which you have not', 'to you unknown' (182), so that the surface spectacle of gift-giving is underwritten by an insistent reminder of what the audience lacks and cannot reciprocate. Like all acts of largesse within Bensalem, the conventions of gratuity are denied to the recipient and

thus reaffirm the benefactor's primacy. Indeed, having previously been in thrall to Bensalem's account of itself, the narrator is now struck dumb until the final paragraph, subject to the Father's authoritative discourse, to which he seems willingly to succumb. This, again, is supported by a theatrical gesture in which the Father stands 'and I, as I had been taught, kneeled down' (185), suggesting both an act of blessing and submission.

It is significant, however, that, while surrounded by show, the description of Salomon's House is one of the least empirically-centred parts of the text. The narrator does not actually witness the scientific stage-sets – the artificial re-creations of the natural world – that comprise Salomon's House's array of specialized areas of knowledge, but relies solely on the Father's account of them. Ironically, while highlighting Salomon's House's practical approach, the Father discloses its activities through narration alone and, moreover, indicates the limitations of this when he explains why he will not provide details about the 'excellent works' of 'our own' 'divers inventors', for 'since you have not seen, it were too long to make descriptions of them; and besides, in the right understanding of those descriptions you might easily err' (185). The Father himself identifies discursive communication as being partial and unreliable, even while giving the narrator licence to publish what he imparts.¹⁶

However, as I've suggested throughout, the reader is placed in a more active role than the narrator. Bruce indeed argues: 'More and more systematically, the text establishes a split between its narrator and its reader.'¹⁷ Being located at one remove from the Father's address, he or she is enabled to read 'over' the narrator's restricted viewpoint and examine his interpretation. This invokes the more participatory, but also 'self-distanced',¹⁸ reading position that Bacon advises in his essay 'Of Studies': 'Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider.'¹⁹ Here the reader is expected not to be wilfully censorious, nor passively uncritical, nor simply to recount what is presented to them, but rather to take an approach that is both judicious and probing, one that may recognize the merits of Salomon's House without taking them at face value.

It is the insistent repetition of theatrical tropes that highlights this process, as they encourage the reader to look beneath surface gloss and discern the text's ambiguities and their refusal to produce a straightforward reading of *New Atlantis*. In particular, display rarely simply reveals, but rather signals what is hidden, obscure and puzzling so as to demand further enquiry. Just as the core of Bensalem's operations, Salomon's House, is only partially displayed, so *New Atlantis* as a whole is presented as being 'A Work Unfinished' (151), offering itself as a starting point for, rather than a comprehensive account of, an ideal society. It thus remains open to recreation and transformation. Through its theatre of partial disclosure and secrecy, Salomon's House elicits an interrogation of New Atlantis's utopian vision at the moment of its inscription.