

— The Essay —

— in —

— Literature —

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There is probably no other term in English literature, which is used so indiscriminately, or in such an ambiguous sense, as the term "essay".

It is usually applied to any short argumentative or expository discourse in prose; yet in its true meaning it need be neither short, argumentative nor expository.

The word is in many ways synonymous with the word "attempt", and properly consists in nothing more nor less than an accumulation of ideas upon a certain topic, clearly and correctly stated in a manner intended to force the reader's attention. It is usually, though not necessarily, short, since in prolixity there is waste of strength. The human mind though very comprehensive has its limits of endurance beyond which it is useless to transcend.

Probably it is to its brevity, "point", and unconventionality of style that the essay owes its success in literature, for certainly no literary form ever rose at a more auspicious time, advanced with more rapidity

or wrought a more lasting and important work than it.

When Francis Bacon first brought the true essay into existence, the English language was without a fixed form. It was clumsy, obscure, indirect, deformed by quotations from ancient writers, and valuable only to the most learned and patient literary student.

The work of the essay was to simplify the style, establish a firm basis for future work, and introduce a form at once direct, transparent, pure of diction, free from unnaturalized expressions and within the intellectual grasp of the mass of the people. There is about this work a certain fundamental importance which makes English speaking people forever indebted to those men, who by their peculiar fitness for the work, brought the prose style of our literature to its present, or rather past state of perfection. Since its rise there has been no time when some of the best thought of the age was not published in essay form; and more, there is hardly one of the many subjects of common interest to the people of the last two centuries, on which we may not find at least one essay, valuable

for its perspicuity, comprehensiveness, and sound judgment.

Bacon could never have made his philosophical observations and opinions known to the world with anything like their present degree of clearness, but for the essay.

In it he embodied a style so forcible, a code of morals and a method of scientific research so incomparably great, that Burke has said of him, "Who upon hearing the name of Lord Bacon, does not instantly recognize everything of genius the most profound, everything of literature the most extensive, everything of discovery the most penetrating, everything of observation of human life the most distinguished and refined? He is deservedly the glory of the English nation".

Yet with all its strength and worth, Bacon's work did not have its proper influence during his own age, because it was unavailable to the majority of the people. Books were costly, libraries few and inaccessible and our present facilities for communication were then unknown. Under the existing circumstances none of the strong thought of the age could make itself felt with any degree of completeness.

During the century which followed the life of Bacon, England was kept in a continual state of ferment by internal wars.

The accession of the Stuarts to the throne brought a reign of profligacy, immorality and religious indifference never before nor since equalled in the history of England. Party strife contaminated the literature of the land until it began slowly to lose its wholesome prestige over the public mind.

We shall see how the "Periodical Essayists," affected these conditions both by the nature of their writings and by the manner in which they were placed before the people.

From the little group of prose writers (Steele, Addison, Gay, Swift and others.), whose work marks the close of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, we must select Joseph Addison as the only one who remained free from the party spirit, and stamped the impress of his admirable nature forever upon English prose. His tranquil mind saw nothing but neutrality from political disquiet and it is due to this fact that the influence of his noble life gives a coloring and beauty it otherwise could never possess to the

free, easy, conversational style of his essays. With his co-worker Richard Steele, he published the "Spectator" — a daily pamphlet in which was discussed with perfect freedom and fairness, all the religious, social, and moral questions of the day; also public life, manners and customs. Its popularity may be seen from the fact that its circulation at one time reached as high as fourteen thousand daily — an enormous amount considering the limited means for printing and distribution then at their command.

Addison's influence is acknowledged to be of inestimable value. It corrected to a gratifying extent the vicious tendencies of England's people; it created a religious sentiment that is marked in history; and it moulded the thought of the age and prepared the way in the minds of the people for the more sober, more scholastic and almost equally profound attempts that followed closely upon Addison's life.

From the expression, "more scholastic," it must not be inferred that Addison lacked education and the ability to use it — far from it. He was a master of style and rhetoric, well

versed in the ancient languages, and an excellent judge of human nature; but his style was so simple and clear, so free and easy, so thoroughly Saxon in its composition, that to distinguish it from the sonorous, Latinized style of Dr Johnson, the writer has chosen to call the latter, "more scholastic."

Classical prose attained its highest development, in essay form under Dr Samuel Johnson. His style may be aptly and briefly described in the words of an eminent writer of that day who says, "His phraseology rolls over in solemn and majestic periods, in which each substantive marches ceremoniously, accompanied by its epithet; grand pompous words peal like an organ; every proposition is set forth balanced by another of equal length; thought is developed with the compassed regularity and official splendor of a procession."

It is easy to see what a contrast this forms with the light graceful though elegant style of Addison. Both had their influence; both have contributed to the intellectual food of every strong writer since their age and will doubtless continue to do so for ages to come.

Advancing through the eighteenth century, the essay grew in variety and extent, until, in the latter half English fine writing reached its "golden age", embellished by the pens of Hume, Burke, Gibbon and Adam Smith. Compared with this, the opening of the nineteenth century, though marked by fewer strong writers, was equally fruitful in depth of research, and more so in the production of a style which appealed directly to the heart and the imagination.

Mentioning only the most important writers, first came Charles Lamb with his exquisite pathos, poetry and humor best seen in his "Essays of Elia".

Lamb, though deep and clear as a mountain stream, was a remarkably emotional and childlike writer whose very simplicity and innocence added a novel strength to his work. He forms as great a contrast with De Quincey and Macaulay, strong, rugged writers who followed him, - as Addison did with Dr Johnson, and the work of that trio would certainly prove an admirable illustration of the diversity of style into which the essay may be thrown.

Then came the mighty Carlyle. Of him, although there is much to say, one scarcely knows how to say it. Some authorities maintain that he had no such thing as style - another possibility for the essay. That, however, is great injustice to a writer who was evidently one of the strongest thinkers and most potent factors of this century.

Undoubtedly his style is harsh, jerky and often hard to read; his sentences abrupt, and full of Latin expressions; yet for originality and power he has few superiors in the English prose. It is really as refreshing and strengthening to the mind to read Carlyle as any writer whom I have ever read.

His are typical essays - unconventional, suggestive without introduction or conclusion, yet compact, decisive, and clear to the careful reader. His "Sartor Resartus" is a masterpiece of condensed wisdom.

Opposed to Carlyle and contemporaneous with him stands our great American essayist, Emerson. These two minds were, in rough outline alike; in finer detail essentially different, yet both, intellectual giants.

Emerson was an idealist, Carlyle a realist; Emerson was a herald of the future, Carlyle a reviewer of the past. While the former was purely an optimist and a prophet, the latter was decidedly a pessimist.

Notwithstanding this fundamental difference, their essays are almost equally strong, although Emerson doubtless ranks a little ahead, and both are to literature of inestimable value.

Emerson differed from Carlyle in that he never used argument in an aggressive manner. He simply followed one statement with another in such an unconnected way that Hawthorne has said of him, "His essays read as well backward as forward. Be that as it may there is always in them that uplifting current of thought which thrills the reader with conviction and resolve. On the whole, he stands as one of the few great original forces of nature. Since his sphere was above that of mankind in general, his power is sure to increase as we approach his level; his influence will then broaden and be more discriminatingly recognized."

We have cited these predominant characters in the history of the essay for no other purpose than to show the boundlessness of its field, the diversity of style into which it may be thrown, and the natural force it has upon the public mind.

In the first place, nothing, is outside the field of the essay. Everything is its spoil and the intellect alone is the limit of its advancement.

Secondly, past literary history reveals to us the fact, that every style of prose composition known to men of letters of any and all ages has been successfully used for the material of the essay.

Thirdly this is the most natural and effective way for displaying ideas in a fair and forcible manner—a manner in which they are most easily grasped by the mind. We find that almost every reform that has been placed strongly before the people, whatever its nature, appeared first in essay form. Even at this advanced day we fail to realize what a conspicuous part the essay is playing in our intellectual growth.

It has aided us materially by simplifying our language. It has established a firm basis

for future literary work; it has given us a form, at once direct, transparent, free from foreign expressions, and within the reach of all the people; and it has taken us to a literary eminence from which we may hope to look down into the most intricate problems of life. To-day it is more powerful than ever before. It acts through the platform and pulpit; through the newspaper and the magazine; through every avenue of communication with the public mind wherein power and influence can be wielded.

It is now the strongest of literary forms. What may we hope for its future?