

The Development of the Essay
in Literature.

Alice M. Melton.

In beginning a study of the essay, we should first know something of the nature of this division of literature. The essay is an endeavor to elucidate, within certain limits, the most important facts and thoughts concerning a chosen subject, and present them clearly and attractively to the reader. It is an attempt to attain the truth by grouping and generalizing facts in relation to the subject in hand, but is not usually very extensive or exhaustive. At the present the essay has almost unlimited breadth, and may treat of any subject, and is the name given to literary compositions which have no other specific name. There are two general types of essays: First, the earlier and more original type called the personal essay, in which the writer reveals himself. Studied form and formal processes are avoided, and it is very much like conversation. Second, the didactic essay in which the interest centres in the subject matter, the writer not revealing himself. It is planned, the thought logically developed, and it is addressed to the

understanding.

Now after giving the general characteristics of the essay, we will trace it from earliest times to the present day, and attempt to show its different phases, and the changes of form and purpose. As a distinct form of prose composition, the essay is of modern origin. In the middle ages it was unknown for then the tendency of thought was toward totality; to regard philosophy, truth, and religion each as one. But in modern times the trend of thoughts and ideas is toward separation, particularization, and knowledge of each individual part, in the hope of combining the knowledge of particulars into a sound theory of the whole. The purpose of the essayist is to present new and clearer ideas of his subject, and lead us to think upon it. In the latter half of the sixteenth century, this style of writing was first used or invented by Michel de Montaigne, a Frenchman, who popularized it, and is therefore called the "Father of the Essay".

He wrote entirely about himself, and quoted profusely from the Classics. The Essay in English began with Francis Bacon, whose works appeared in the beginning of the seventeenth century. By an essay he meant the first weighing of a subject. He never attempted to carry the thought to its natural conclusion, so his essays are brief, suggestive, full of feeling, and represent the didactic type. He talks to plain men in common language about things of common interest. There is nothing in the English language superior to his diction, and from his works came a rich, grave, vigorous, and elaborate style. * Fifty years later, Abraham Cowley gave to literature essays which marked an advance in prose composition. He set the example of that graceful and perfectly natural manner which reached its highest polish later under Addison's genius. About the time of the Restoration of Charles II to the English throne, - the beginning of the French influence, - there arose the "greatest man of a little age", John Dryden, who is called the head of the Critical School. "Nothing", said he, "is sublime that is not just and proper", and all his work shows a cold, crit-

ical intellect, and exacting, conscientious care. His object was the improvement of the language, and Johnson says "he found English of brick and left it English of marble". His essays were in the form of prefaces to his dramatic productions and mark a stage in their development. Cowley and Dryden gave richness to the essay and began a style of English prose which is easy, unaffected, and suited to the subject.

During the reigns of William and Mary, and of Anne, the internal repose and natural wealth occasioned the rise of a class of people who had leisure to read and money to buy books, but who wished to be entertained, not roused to think or act. This condition gave rise to a new and peculiar kind of literature, the Periodic Essay, suggested by the vices and follies of the day. These essays, on separate sheets published every few days, were very popular and were read everywhere. Richard Steele was the originator of this new literature, but in his undertaking he was aided by Addison and Swift. To Steele these papers owed their pathos, humor, and variety of character.

His quick, careless writing and naturalness, Addison's perfection, variety, and quiet serenity, and Swift's keen satire and savage indignation combined to make these literary magazines of a bright and interesting nature. They were agents of social improvement, and through them the English learned to read. In their grace and kindness, associated with incidents of common life, gave men a new sense of happiness in performing their duties, and energy in opposing those things which lower the standard of manhood. In Addison's words they "brought philosophy out of the closets, libraries, and colleges to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea tables and in coffee houses." Samuel Johnson was also a worker in periodic literature. He brought in Latin derivatives and synonymous words, and built up a grand and inspiring style, fitted for brilliant intellects, but not suited to ordinary life. He was extremely egotistical, and his prejudices stood in the way of his best work. In a letter to Lord Chesterfield he gave the death blow to patronage and Johnson was the first to live by his pen with the public as paymaster. In his papers we miss the ease and lightness of Addison

and Steele. At this time Benjamin Franklin, the first American essayist, was writing. His style was like Addison's, clear, simple, and of pure English, copied after the periodic papers in England.

Charles Lamb holds his place in literature as an essayist, and wrote in the early part of this century. His essays were published in the "London Magazine", and are among the finest in English. They have taste, humor, and vivacity unequalled since Montaigne. He had wisdom, wit of high order, genuine pleasantness, and heart-touching pathos. His is an easy and entertaining style and the reader is well repaid. With Thomas De Quincey we entered upon the more strictly didactic form of essay. He, too, contributed to the London Magazine and indeed all his writings appeared in periodicals. His style is too scholastic for ordinary readers, but his alone is the power of "sustaining a fascinating and elevated strain of impassioned prose". His works abound in allusions and illustrations, while his range of thought and command of language are remarkable.

Coming now to the nineteenth century, we find the periodic essay represented by the

Edinburgh and Quarterly Reviews, and by the "Editor's Easy Chair" in Harpers, and "Topics of the Time" in the Century and Scribners.

Washington Irving developed a new form of essay in his work, "The Sketch Book" which has a host of appreciative readers. During this century we have had some of the greatest prose writers of all time, and many of these have given us essays. One of the first is Thomas Carlyle, who represents the reaction against the shams, shallowness, and public abuses of the eighteenth century. For scholarship, boldness of expression, and originality, his essays have no equal. His style in thought and expression betrays his study of the German. "Sartor Resartus" with its abruptness, grim humor, and eloquence, contains the author's philosophy, and is well worth diligent study. He gave great impulse to intellectual and moral activity and, in opposition to the tendencies of materialism, he maintained the spiritual dignity of man. Another name written on the wall of this century is that of Thomas B. Macaulay, the "brilliant essayist" in whose hands the essay reached its most finished form. His essays form a library in themselves, they are litera-

ture as well as history and were it not for the knowledge displayed we might weary of the beauty of the diction, but we are charmed by the thought and lured on by the splendor and perfection of style. He is unspiritual, tells what he knows in a positive way, and is never profound or suggestive. His essays are diversified, and in the pleasure of reading them we forget that in them we gain a fund of knowledge.

A son of America holds a prominent place in this department of literature: Ralph Waldo Emerson's style is his own, - short, pithy, sentences each complete in itself so that the reader can commence anywhere and read on through the selection. We find more concentrated wisdom happily expressed in his essays than in any other writings. His originality is more in the manner of expression than in the matter itself. He fought nobly against the manners, sensuality, and materialism of his time and fortified men against temptation, teaching them to aspire to greater things. John Ruskin, the modern art critic, has written essays worthy of notice. He created a new literature, that of art, and

is the revealer of nature in prose. He thinks that true art is the outgrowth of "beautiful conditions", and cannot exist under present social degradation and poverty. He believed men could all be raised to one level, and founded much of his writing upon that idea. So his writings show elevated ideals but are too visionary for matter-of-fact men.

James Russell Lowell has given us two volumes of essays which cover a wide range of thought and observation and show accuracy, thoroughness, elegance and force of language, and a healthful moral tone. They have a finish and style peculiar to this broad minded man.

Oliver Wendell Holmes introduced a new style of essay, the monologue, in his Autocrat Series which have readers at home and abroad. The experience, drollery, and proverbial humor of this "down east" philosopher is unparalleled. His style is straight forward, and we are constantly delighted by the recurrence of thoughts most brilliant and original.

There are many others whose names should be mentioned, but we will leave them and note the essay in its place at the present day. During the later years of this century

the essay has been used as an agent of reform. The weekly and monthly journals have their spirited essays on every subject and question of modern times. Needed reforms and changes are agitated through the medium of periodicals in the form of essays. Our later essayists are still in touch with vital as well as literary things. George William Curtis was one of our ablest writers. He was pre-eminently a teacher of higher civilization in our country, and he presented the generous aims and higher resources of life with literary charm and persuasiveness. One has but to read the names of contributors to our magazines and Reviews to find who are our present essayists.

What is the place of the essay in literature? There are always those who can better express their thoughts in prose than in verse, and especially is this true of our essayists whose thoughts would lose their force and power if clothed in poetic words and phrases. Again there are people who cannot read poetry understandingly but the essay is their food and delight. The needs of all must be met and the essay supplies

substance and thought to many. The essay is usually of an attractive and lucid style and those who wrote such essays have their names written high on Literature's monument. Why are such names as Bacon, Carlyle, Macaulay, and Emerson carved on this everlasting stone? Is it not because their essays hold an undisputed place in time's Library? Is it not to the essayist we owe our sense of the infinite variety and picturesqueness of the human world about us? It was he who first opened the world of modern fiction to man. Essays are the outgrowth of natural tendencies which reflect the practical morality which has filled the last two centuries with dissertations on the rule of duty, and that freedom of discourse asserted for so many ages by the English writers, enforced by public sense, then secured by law. How much would we lose of what is most attractive and valuable in English literature if the productions of the essayists were left out of account! As we read and study more of them we will prize them more, too and they will hold a place equal with poetry in our homes and schools.