

I. THE ESSAY

Wordsworth wrote a famous sonnet on the Sonnet, and many novelists have given us, somewhere in their works, their conception of a novel. An essay on the Essay would have to begin with a definition. Johnson, in that downright, blundering way which even Boswell comments on, called it "a loose sally of the mind," and so damned it with faint praise. Yet he wrote more than half a truth. The essay is a "loose sally," a spontaneous leap of the thought. It has nothing to do, in the first place, with the acquisition of facts, the formal arrangement of ideas, the intricate weaving of a plot. The essayist is a lyric writer in prose; he is the recorder of his own "moods," as they come unawares, arousing his interest in this and that. Right at the beginning Bacon, following Montaigne in French, chronicled in that odd, stilted, sturdy way of his, a serious philosophy of life and a host of little interests. Cowley followed him in a style that was more homely and familiar; and after him, when the eighteenth century saw the perfecting of our English prose, the essay found that place in literature which it has never lost. It linked itself with journalism; it became the vehicle of day by day commentary.

Since then the essay has, as it were, kept pace with life; at its best it has had a brief transience that, touched with genius, suddenly became immortal. Long formal treatises, solemn philosophies, gigantic reviews, if they have survived, have survived on other merits—they are called essays only in error or by courtesy. The essay is best brief, lightly serious, pleasantly earnest. It laughs or is sad, reflects sunlight or shadow, gives back the swift movement of the street or the quiet of the countryside, is wise or witty, charitable or touched with all uncharitableness. Satire, humour, pathos—all these belong to it as they belong to life; since the essay is the crystallising of some tiny fragment of life itself. Its form must be all

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-66546-0 - The Threshold of English Prose

Selected & Edited by H. A. Treble

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the more finely wrought and perfect in detail for being little—there can be nothing really “loose” about the construction of an essay. Yet no trace of scaffolding must remain. The essay demands an artist in miniature, who can make perfect the trifles.

So the best essays, since the beginning of the eighteenth century, have been contributions to periodic literature. All those printed in this book were first published in magazines, for the readers of their own day. The first one is dated 9 July, 1711, and appeared in *The Spectator*, the earliest of all literary journals; one or two of them belong to the Reviews of the early nineteenth century, when Elia was the talk of the town; and the last one, a perfect essay by the tests outlined in this note, was published in *The Saturday Review* in January 1929. We have only to glance at the journals of to-day to realise that the essay is among the greatest of modern literary forms. It is, perhaps, ephemeral, passing, as the magazine essay is bound to be; but the touchstone of genius turns this one and that (as it has done for the past two hundred years) into the gold that survives the refiner's fire.

JOSEPH ADDISON

1672–1719



SIR ROGER AT CHURCH

Ἐθανάτους μὲν πρῶτα θεοῦς, νόμῳ ὡς διάκειται,
 Τίμα——. PYTHAGORAS.

*First, in obedience to thy country's rites,
 Worship th' immortal Gods.*

I AM always very well pleased with a country Sunday; and think, if keeping holy the seventh day were only a human institution, it would be the best method that could have been thought of for the polishing and

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SIR ROGER AT CHURCH

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civilizing of mankind. It is certain the country-people would soon degenerate into a kind of savages and barbarians, were there not such frequent returns of a stated time, in which the whole village meet together with their best faces, and in their cleanliest habits, to converse with one another upon indifferent subjects, hear their duties explained to them, and join together in adoration of the Supreme Being. Sunday clears away the rust of the whole week, not only as it refreshes in their minds the notions of religion, but as it puts both the sexes upon appearing in their most agreeable forms, and exerting all such qualities as are apt to give them a figure in the eye of the village. A country-fellow distinguishes himself as much in the church-yard as a citizen does upon the Change, the whole parish politics being generally discussed in that place either after sermon or before the bell rings.

My friend Sir Roger, being a good church-man, has beautified the inside of his church with several texts of his own choosing: he has likewise given a handsome pulpit-cloth, and railed in the communion-table at his own expense. He has often told me, that at his coming to his estate he found his parishioners very irregular; and that in order to make them kneel and join in the responses, he gave every one of them a hassoc and a Common Prayer Book; and at the same time employed an itinerant singing-master, who goes about the country for that purpose, to instruct them rightly in the tunes of the psalms; upon which they now very much value themselves, and indeed out-do most of the country churches that I have ever heard.

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As Sir Roger is landlord to the whole congregation, he keeps them in very good order, and will suffer nobody to sleep in it besides himself; for if by chance he has been surprised into a short nap at sermon, upon recovering out of it he stands up and looks about him, and if he sees anybody else nodding, either wakes them himself, or sends his servant to them. Several other of the old knight's particularities break out upon these occasions: sometimes he will be lengthening out a verse in the singing-psalms, half a minute after the rest of the congregation have done with it; sometimes, when he is pleased with the matter of his devotion, he pronounces Amen three or four times to the same prayer; and sometimes stands up when everybody else is upon their knees, to count the congregation, or see if any of his tenants are missing.

I was yesterday very much surprised to hear my old friend, in the midst of the service, calling out to one John Matthews to mind what he was about, and not disturb the congregation. This John Matthews, it seems, is remarkable for being an idle fellow, and at that time was kicking his heels for his diversion. This authority of the knight, though exerted in that odd manner which accompanies him in all circumstances of life, has a very good effect upon the parish, who are not polite enough to see anything ridiculous in his behaviour; besides that the general good sense and worthiness of his character, make his friends observe these little singularities as foils that rather set off than blemish his good qualities.

As soon as the sermon is finished, nobody presumes

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to stir till Sir Roger is gone out of the church. The knight walks down from his seat in the chancel between a double row of his tenants, that stand bowing to him on each side; and every now and then he inquires how such an one's wife, or mother, or son, or father do, whom he does not see at church; which is understood as a secret reprimand to the person that is absent.

The chaplain has often told me, that upon a catechising-day, when Sir Roger has been pleased with a boy that answers well, he has ordered a Bible to be given him next day for his encouragement; and sometimes accompanies it with a flitch of bacon to his mother. Sir Roger has likewise added five pounds a year to the clerk's place; and that he may encourage the young fellows to make themselves perfect in the church-service, has promised, upon the death of the present incumbent, who is very old, to bestow it according to merit.

The fair understanding between Sir Roger and his chaplain, and their mutual concurrence in doing good, is the more remarkable, because the very next village is famous for the differences and contentions that rise between the parson and the 'squire, who live in a perpetual state of war. The parson is always at the 'squire, and the 'squire, to be revenged on the parson, never comes to church. The 'squire has made all his tenants atheists and tithe-stealers; while the parson instructs them every Sunday in the dignity of his order, and insinuates to them, almost in every sermon, that he is a better man than his patron. In short, matters are come to such an extremity, that

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the 'squire has not said his prayers either in public or private this half year; and that the parson threatens him, if he does not mend his manners, to pray for him in the face of the whole congregation.

Feuds of this nature, though too frequent in the country, are very fatal to the ordinary people; who are so used to be dazzled with riches, that they pay as much deference to the understanding of a man of an estate, as of a man of learning; and are very hardly brought to regard any truth, how important soever it may be, that is preached to them, when they know there are several men of five hundred a year who do not believe it.

SIR RICHARD STEELE

1672-1729



THE SPECTATOR CLUB

*Ast alii sex**Et plures uno conclamant ore.*JUV. *Sat.* VII, 167.*Six more at least join their consenting voice.*

The first of our society is a gentleman of *Worcestershire*, of ancient descent, a Baronet, his name Sir ROGER DE COVERLEY. His great-grandfather was inventor of that famous country-dance which is called after him. All who know that shire are very well acquainted with the parts and merits of Sir ROGER. He is a gentleman that is very singular in his behaviour, but his singularities proceed from his good sense, and

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are contradictions to the manners of the world, only as he thinks the world is in the wrong. However this humour creates him no enemies, for he does nothing with sourness or obstinacy; and his being unconfined to modes and forms, makes him but the readier and more capable to please and oblige all who know him. When he is in town, he lives in *Soho-Square*. It is said, he keeps himself a bachelor by reason he was crossed in love by a perverse beautiful widow of the next county to him. Before this disappointment, Sir ROGER was what you call a Fine Gentleman, had often supped with my Lord *Rochester* and Sir *George Etherege*, fought a duel upon his first coming to town, and kicked Bully *Dawson* in a public coffee-house for calling him youngster. But being ill-used by the above-mentioned widow, he was very serious for a year and a half; and though, his temper being naturally jovial, he at last got over it, he grew careless of himself, and never dressed afterwards. He continues to wear a coat and doublet of the same cut that were in fashion at the time of his repulse, which, in his merry humours, he tells us, has been in and out twelve times since he first wore it. He is now in his fifty-sixth year, chearful, gay, and hearty; keeps a good house both in town and country; a great lover of mankind; but there is such a mirthful cast in his behaviour, that he is rather beloved than esteemed. His tenants grow rich, his servants look satisfied, all the young women profess love to him, and the young men are glad of his company: When he comes into a house he calls the servants by their names, and talks all the way upstairs to a visit. I must not omit, that

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Sir ROGER is a justice of the *Quorum*; that he fills the chair at a quarter-session with great abilities, and three months ago gained universal applause by explaining a passage in the game-act.

The gentleman next in esteem and authority among us, is another bachelor, who is a member of the *Inner-Temple*; a man of great probity, wit, and understanding; but he has chosen his place of residence rather to obey the direction of an old humoursome father, than in pursuit of his own inclinations. He was placed there to study the laws of the land, and is the most learned of any of the house in those of the stage. *Aristotle* and *Longinus* are much better understood by him than *Littleton* or *Coke*. The father sends up every post questions relating to marriage-articles, leases, and tenures, in the neighbourhood; all which questions he agrees with an attorney to answer and take care of in the lump. He is studying the passions themselves, when he should be inquiring into the debates among men which arise from them. He knows the argument of each of the orations of *Demosthenes* and *Tully*, but not one case in the reports of our own courts. No one ever took him for a fool, but none, except his intimate friends, know he has a great deal of wit. This turn makes him at once both disinterested and agreeable: As few of his thoughts are drawn from business, they are most of them fit for conversation. His taste of books is a little too just for the age he lives in; he has read all, but approves of very few. His familiarity with the customs, manners, actions, and writings of the ancients, makes him a very delicate observer of what occurs to him in the

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present world. He is an excellent critick, and the time of the play is his hour of business; exactly at five he passes through *New-Inn*, crosses through *Russel-Court*, and takes a turn at *Will's* until the play begins; he has his shoes rubbed and his periwig powdered at the barber's as you go into the *Rose*. It is for the good of the audience when he is at a play, for the actors have an ambition to please him.

The person of next consideration is Sir ANDREW FREEPORT, a merchant of great eminence in the city of *London*. A person of indefatigable industry, strong reason, and great experience. His notions of trade are noble and generous, and (as every rich man has usually some sly way of jesting, which would make no great figure were he not a rich man) he calls the sea the *British Common*. He is acquainted with commerce in all its parts, and will tell you that it is a stupid and barbarous way to extend dominion by arms; for true power is to be got by arts and industry. He will often argue, that if this part of our trade were well cultivated, we should gain from one nation; and if another, from another. I have heard him prove, that diligence makes more lasting acquisitions than valour, and that sloth has ruined more nations than the sword. He abounds in several frugal maxims, amongst which the greatest favourite is, "A penny saved is a penny got." A general trader of good sense is pleasanter company than a general scholar; and Sir ANDREW having a natural unaffected eloquence, the perspicuity of his discourse gives the same pleasure that wit would in another man. He has made his fortunes himself; and says that *England* may be richer than

other kingdoms, by as plain methods as he himself is richer than other men; though, at the same time, I can say this of him, that there is not a point in the compass but blows home a ship in which he is an owner.

Next to Sir ANDREW in the club-room sits Captain SENTRY, a gentleman of great courage, good understanding, but invincible modesty. He is one of those that deserve very well, but are very awkward at putting their talents within the observation of such as should take notice of them. He was some years a captain, and behaved himself with great gallantry in several engagements, and at several sieges; but having a small estate of his own, and being next heir to Sir ROGER, he has quitted a way of life in which no man can rise suitably to his merit, who is not something of a courtier, as well as a soldier. I have heard him often lament, that in a profession where merit is placed in so conspicuous a view, impudence should get the better of modesty. When he has talked to this purpose, I never heard him make a sour expression, but frankly confess that he left the world because he was not fit for it. A strict honesty and an even regular behaviour, are in themselves obstacles to him that must press through crowds, who endeavour at the same end with himself, the favour of a commander. He will however, in his way of talk, excuse generals, for not disposing according to men's desert, or inquiring into it: For, says he, that great man who has a mind to help me, has as many to break through to come at me, as I have to come at him: Therefore he will conclude, that the man who would make a figure,