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1

Ancient Influences on the Essay

HENRY POWER

The essay, as Francis Bacon observed, has a classical pedigree. 'The word is late, but the thing is ancient', he says. 'For Seneca's epistles to Lucilius, if one mark them well, are but essays – that is, dispersed meditations, though conveyed in the form of epistles.'[1] Seneca's letters to his friend Lucilius – often referred to as the 'Moral Essays' – are an obvious point of reference for the early essay. These 124 letters have the broad aim of inculcating an understanding and appreciation of Stoic doctrine. The mid-seventeenth century was the high watermark of Neostoicism, and while many early English essayists espoused Stoic as well as other ancient principles, it was from a stylistic and formal, rather than philosophical, perspective that they did so. In his letters to Lucilius, Seneca ranged over a wide variety of topics: there are letters on crowds, on animals, on old age, and on drunkenness, all of which strike a note of sensible and easy conversation. The philosopher, he claims, should aim not for ascetic extremism, but for 'common sense, humanity, and intercourse and society'.[2] Such work as this set the tone for Joseph Addison and Richard Steele.

Although there is no equivalent term for 'essay' in Greek or Latin, ancient literature was instrumental to the development of the British essay in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and this chapter will consider that development through the influence of three ancient sources for the essay tradition: Seneca, Plutarch, and Cicero. I will examine not only the way in which ancient approaches to reading and writing provided a model for early English essayists, but show how the essay became in turn an important route by which readers gained access to ancient texts and ideas.

[1] F. Bacon, manuscript dedication to Prince Henry quoted in M. Kiernan (ed.), *The Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. xlvii.

[2] Seneca, *The Workes of Lucius Annæus Seneca, both Morall and Naturall*, trans. T. Lodge (London: W. Stansby, 1614), p. 168. This text and others below, where indicated, have been modernised.

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Classical Models: Seneca, Plutarch, Cicero

In a verse epistle to his friend Owen Feltham, written in the 1630s, the poet Thomas Randolph offers an overview of the Senecan style:

> I mean the style, being pure and strong and round,
> Not long but pithy: being short breath'd, but sound.
> Such as the grave, acute, wise *Seneca* sings,
> That best of tutor to the worst of kings.
> Not long and empty; lofty but not proud;
> Subtle but sweet, high but without a cloud.
> Well settled full of nerves, in brief 'tis such
> That in a little hath comprised much,
> Like th' *Iliads* in a Nutshell.[3]

Roger L'Estrange describes the Senecan style similarly in the preface to his abridgement of Seneca's Epistles: 'His Excellency Consists rather in a *Rhapsody* of Divine, and Extraordinary *Hints*, and *Notions*, than in any Regulated *Method* of Discourse.'[4] The influence on Bacon is clear enough, both in terms of the wide-ranging and gradually evolving form of the work as a whole ('dispersed meditations') and in terms of this aphoristic approach to communicating ideas.

The fact that Seneca's advice to Lucilius is conveyed in letters means that it unfolds haphazardly over time. Thomas Lodge's 1614 translation drops the greeting and sign-off from each letter, making the work more closely resemble an essay collection, but the epistolary form still shines through. In his eighty-first epistle Seneca offers a theory of prose which stresses the importance of concision and compactness, such that such aphoristic writing takes on the qualities of poetry: 'Those things are heard more negligently, and persuade less powerfully, as long as they are delivered in prose and ordinary discourse, but when as they are shut up in numbers and good sense, be enclosed in certain feet and cadences, that very sentence is darted and delivered as it were an arrow from a strong arm.'[5] Such compressed diction as Seneca espouses was fundamental to the English prose essay from its origins.

[3] T. Randolph, *Poems, with the Muses Looking-Glasse: And Amyntas* (Oxford: F. Bowman, 1638), p. 65, modernised.
[4] R. L'Estrange, Preface to *Seneca's Morals by Way of Abstract: Of Benefits*, Part 1 (London: T. Newcomb, 1679), p. vii.
[5] Seneca, *Workes*, p. 443.

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The similarity of the Senecan and Baconian styles can be seen by comparing two brief passages:

> *Seneca*: Attalus the philosopher was wont to say, that it was a far more pleasant thing to make a friend, than to have a friend; as it is more agreeable to a painter to paint, than to have finished his picture . . . . The youth of our children is more fruitful unto us, but their infancy more sweet.[6]

> *Bacon*: The joys of parents are secret; and so are their griefs, and fears: they cannot utter the one; nor they will not utter the other. Children sweeten labours; but they make misfortunes more bitter: They increase the cares of life; but they mitigate the remembrance of death.[7]

What Bacon has in common with Seneca is his tightness of expression and staccato delivery. Seneca's final line might easily have found a place in Bacon's essay. Yet if one draws out and looks at the essays in their entirety, the same sentences serve a very different function. Seneca's observation about children is put to the service of a broader message: we will never feel a want of friendship if we take pleasure in the present rather than the future. Bacon is certainly sympathetic to that idea, but that is not the subject of his passage. Rather, his sentences lead into a set of quickfire observations on the nature of parenting, which takes in biblical wisdom, classical references, natural history, sociological observation, accounts of cultural difference, and practical advice. As he wrote in *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), while praising the 'excellent virtues' of the aphoristic style, 'Aphorisms, except they should be ridiculous, cannot be made but of the pith and heart of sciences: for discourse of illustration is cut off, recitals of examples are cut off: discourse of connexion, and order is cut off; descriptions of practice, are cut off', leaving one with the broader message.[8]

If Seneca provided the primary stylistic model for the essay, Plutarch provided another influential model of its heterogeneous subject matter. Plutarch's *Moralia*, a collection of seventy-eight short pieces on a wide variety of topics, were written in Greek in the first century CE. Championed by Erasmus and translated into French by Jacques Amyot in 1572, they exerted a strong influence on Montaigne's *Essais*. Yet the title *Moralia* (often translated as *Moral Essays*) is a misnomer. Derived from the Greek Ἠθικά (*Ethika*), it originally referred only to a small group of the writings. Reid Barbour and Claire Preston point out the wide range of English labels attached to the

[6] Ibid., Ep. 9, pp. 174–5. [7] Bacon, *Essayes or Counsels*, p. 23.
[8] F. Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, ed. M. Kiernan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 124, text modernised.

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sections of the work in the early modern period: ‘dialogue’, ‘discourse’, ‘letter’, ‘declamation’, ‘treatise’, ‘apothegm’, ‘symposiac’ – testament both to their variety, and to the lack of any suitable term in English; it is as though Plutarch’s readers were waiting for the word *essay* to enter the language.[9]

Plutarch’s ‘essays’ are in some cases concerned with practical ethics (often reflecting his own Platonist views), but they address a far greater range of topics than Seneca’s: ‘On Talkativeness’, ‘On Bashfulness’, ‘On Whether Land or Sea Animals are more Intelligent’, ‘On the Face which Appears in the Orb of the Moon’. Their most striking feature is what Joseph Addison called their ‘multifarious erudition’; they are full of learning, worn lightly.[10] As Matthew Morgan wrote in the preface to a translation of Plutarch’s *Morals*, ‘he hath spread an entertainment, with provisions suitable to the palates of his guests; so that here is solid Nourishment for those of Strong complexions, and something more delicious for the effeminate Relish’.[11]

Although Plutarch is often dismissed as a derivative writer, much of the pleasure of reading him comes from the sheer range of authors he draws on. In *The Spectator*, Addison famously stated his intention of imitating Socrates, who had ‘brought Philosophy down from Heaven to inhabit among Men’ by bringing it ‘out of Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-Tables, and in Coffee-Houses’.[12] He was consciously echoing Cicero, who makes a similar remark about Socrates in his *Tusculan Disputations* (5.4.10), written c. 45 BCE. He may not have known that he was also closely echoing Erasmus’s praise of Plutarch: ‘Socrates drew philosophy down from heaven to earth; Plutarch brought it into men’s chambers and private apartments and bedrooms.’[13] From a stylistic point of view, Addison may have been resistant to the model provided by Plutarch, but the two authors took a similar approach to classical learning.

The pithy style derived from Seneca and Plutarch was often contrasted with the *copia*, or grandiloquence, associated with the Roman politician and orator, Marcus Tullius Cicero. William Cornwallis, whose *Essayes* were

9 R. Barbour and C. Preston, ‘Discursive and speculative writing’ in P. Cheney and P. Hardie (eds.), *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature*, Vol. 2: *1558–1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 466.
10 J. Addison, *Tatler*, no. 226 (19 September 1710) in D.F. Bond (ed.), *The Tatler*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), vol. 3, p. 176.
11 M. Morgan, Preface to *Plutarch’s Morals: Translated from the Greek by Several Hands*, 5 vols. (London: J. Gellibrand, 1684), vol. 1, sig. A7v.
12 J. Addison, *Spectator*, no. 10 (12 March 1711) in D.F. Bond (ed.), *The Spectator*, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), vol. 1, p. 45.
13 Erasmus to Alexius Turzo (1525), quoted in J. Martindale (ed.), *English Humanism: Wyatt to Cowley* (London: Routledge, 1985), p. 125.

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published soon after Bacon's, suggested that 'the brain should dance a jig at the hearing a *Tullian* sound, and sit in council when it hears the other'.[14] The opposition between them was not so stark as is often suggested in the period; Seneca himself held Cicero up as a stylistic model.[15] Cicero left a vast range of works hardly reducible to a single style or form, and his influence on the essay is far from straightforward. He was a formidable orator, a moral philosopher, and an engaging letter writer. His expansive and often deeply personal letters to his family and friends (*Ad Familiares*) were imitated by Petrarch and other humanist scholars in the fourteenth century. They provided the major model for the familiar letter in Latin, and later in English, and can reasonably be regarded as the ancestor of the personal essay.

The informality of Cicero's letters is often contrasted with the grander rhetorical flights of his speeches, as in this tribute paid by Richard Steele's Sir Isaac Bickerstaff in *Tatler* no. 159: 'Everyone admires the orator and the consul; but for my part, I esteem the husband and the father. His private character, with all the little weaknesses of humanity, is as amiable, as the figure he makes in public is awful and majestic.'[16] This praise of Cicero follows four letters quoted from *Ad Familiares*, in which Cicero writes tearfully to his wife from exile in Thessalonica. The Ciceronian letters are intended to impress on eighteenth-century readers the dignity and significance of marriage (since even the great Cicero 'did not think it inconsistent with the politeness of his manners, or the greatness of his wisdom, to stand upon record in his domestic character').[17] He is important as a great prose stylist unafraid to write informally on domestic topics.

When Cicero is invoked as a counter-example to the Senecan style (as in the remark by Cornwallis quoted above), it is not the author of *Ad Familiares*, but of *De Officiis* ('On Duties'), a collection of philosophical treatises offering an overview of Stoic principles, who is referenced. Yet the latter text combined political commentary with anecdote and personal reflection; it was essentially concerned with the management of the self and had much in common with Seneca's Epistles. Cicero's philosophical and rhetorical writings became a cornerstone of an English grammar-school education

[14] W. Corn-Waleys [Cornwallis], 'Of vanitie' in *Essayes* (London: E. Mattes, 1601), n.p., text modernised.
[15] See Seneca, *Workes*, Ep. 100, p. 423. For Cicero's stylistic influence on Seneca, see M. von Albrecht, *Cicero's Style: A Synopsis* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).
[16] R. Steele, *Tatler*, no. 159 (15 April 1710) in Bond (ed.), *The Tatler*, vol. 2, p. 392, text modernised.
[17] Ibid.

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during the early modern period, despite the fact that his distinctive high style had its critics. John Dryden described the French historian Louis Maimbourg as 'rather Ciceronian, copious, florid, and figurative; than succinct'.[18]

Cicero also became a frequent model for the eighteenth-century essayist. Addison's contributions to *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* were frequently held up as ideal examples of English Ciceronianism, though Addison keenly was alert to the dangers of excessive imitation of the great orator. *Tatler* no. 224 ridicules a grandiloquent advertisement for lavender water 'written altogether in the *Ciceronian* manner'.[19] William Melmoth, who produced a translation of Cicero's *Ad Familiares*, suggested in 1749 (under the pen name of Thomas Fitzosborne) that Ciceronian 'grace' first entered the English language in the essays of Sir William Temple, but that it was perfected by Addison: 'the becoming air which Tully [Cicero] esteemed the criterion of fine composition . . . is the prevailing characteristic' of Addison's prose.[20]

The first person to hold Addison up as a new Cicero was Addison himself. In *The Spectator* no. 476, he drew an extended and elaborate comparison between the two classical models, Senecan and Ciceronian, available to the essayist:

> Among my daily papers which I bestow on the public, there are some which are written with regularity and method, and others that run out into the wildness of those compositions which go by the name of *Essays*. As for the first, I have the whole scheme of the discourse in my mind before I set pen to paper. In the other kind of writing, it is sufficient that I have several thoughts on a subject, without troubling myself to range them in such an order, that they may seem to grow out of one another, and be disposed under the proper Heads. *Seneca* and *Montaigne* are patterns for writing in this last kind, as *Tully* and *Aristotle* excel in the other. When I read an author of genius who writes without method, I fancy myself in a wood that abounds with a great many noble objects, rising among one another in the greatest confusion and disorder. When I read a methodical discourse, I am in a regular plantation, and can place myself in its several centres, so as to take a view of all the lines and walks that are struck from them. You may ramble in the one a whole day together, and every moment discover something or other that is new to you; but when you have done, you will have but a

[18] J. Dryden, *The Works of John Dryden*, Vol. 18: *The History of the League*, ed. A. Roper and V.A. Dearing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 415.
[19] J. Addison, *Tatler*, no. 224 (14 September 1710) in Bond (ed.), *The Tatler*, vol. 3, p. 169.
[20] T. Fitzosborne, *Letters on Several Subjects. By the late Sir Thomas Fitzosborne, Bart.*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: M. Owen, 1749), p. 76.

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> confused imperfect notion of the place: In the other, your eye commands the whole prospect, and gives you such an idea of it, as is not easily worn out of the memory.[21]

Addison initially indicates that *The Spectator* papers fall into both categories, but goes on to express a distinct preference for Cicero's approach. This is not only – or even mostly – about sentences: it is evident that Addison's prose, with its suspended syntax and relative grammatical complexity, is written according to a Ciceronian model. Where he sees himself as alternately embracing both modes is in terms of his organisation of material, and perhaps the most striking aspect of this taxonomy is that Addison claims his approach is Senecan insofar as it is essayistic. The papers which qualify as Ciceronian lack the 'wildness' that would qualify them as essays. Few readers today would hesitate to describe Addison's papers on *Paradise Lost* (*Spectator* nos. 267–86) as 'essays', but Addison apparently categorised them differently, given that their structure is clearly set out (and advertised) in advance. The categorisation is significant, since these are papers in which Addison attempted to persuade his readers towards an appreciation of Milton's poem that would allow for its little 'faults' or 'blemishes'.[22] In other words, their aim was to encourage the broad view enabled by a methodical Ciceronian approach. In *The Spectator* as a whole, we are asked to notice a distinction between the essayistic (Senecan) and rhetorical (Ciceronian) approaches, and to couch that distinction in classical terms.

It is worth adding that while *The Spectator* may have its Ciceronian moments, the work as a whole conforms to the Senecan epistemological model. Addison used the image of landscape 'cut through by abundance of beautiful alleys' in his *Dialogues upon the Usefulness of Ancient Medals* (1721), in which the three interlocutors gradually discover how numismatics can enhance their understanding of classical literature.[23] Whereas that orderly, tripartite work reflects the symbolic landscape in which the dialogues take place, in *The Spectator* there is no possibility for enjoying such a grand vista – despite the series of papers on Milton. The division of authorship between Addison and Steele, and the frequent intrusion of readerly letters, make for a reading experience that is far from orderly. Mr Spectator himself is the

[21] J. Addison, *Spectator*, no. 476 (5 September 1712) in Bond (ed.), *The Spectator*, vol. 4, p. 186.
[22] See D. Gigante, 'Milton's spots: Addison on *Paradise Lost*' in B. Hoxby and A.B. Coiro (eds.), *Milton in the Long Restoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 7–21.
[23] A.C. Guthkelch (ed.), *The Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Addison*, 2 vols. (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1914), vol. 2, p. 377, Addison's text modernised.

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structuring device of the essays, moving casually through the thick of things, but rarely in a position to take the Ciceronian bird's-eye view.

The Mellification and Digestion of the Ancients

In *The Battel of the Books* (1704), Jonathan Swift describes an encounter between a spider and a bee that serves as a model for different approaches to literary production. The bee stands for the Senecan method. His habit, he tells the spider, is to 'visit, indeed, all the flowers and blossoms of the field and the garden, but whatever I collect from thence, enriches myself, without the least injury to their beauty, their smell, or their taste'. The bee's relation to the flowers corresponds to the reading practices advocated by Swift and other self-styled 'Ancients'. He operates 'by universal range, with long search, much study, true judgment, and distinction of things', ultimately bringing home 'honey and wax' – that is to say, sweetness and light. The more modern spider, on the other hand, generates his material from within, possessing 'a genuine store of dirt and poison in [his] breast'.[24]

Swift's bee, fittingly enough, has a long literary pedigree. Bacon had, in his *Instauratio*, identified three categories of thinkers, which he likened to spiders, ants, and bees:

> The empirics, in the manner of the ant, only store up and use things; the rationalists, in the manner of spiders, spin webs from their own entrails; but the bee takes the middle path: it collects its material from the flowers of field and garden, but its special gift is to convert and digest it. The true job of philosophy is not much different.[25]

Swift would no doubt have been familiar with Bacon's analogy, and even more so with Sir William Temple's reuse of it in 'Of Poetry', having served as Temple's private secretary and the editor of his works. Temple compares poets to bees, who 'must range through fields as well as gardens, choose such flowers as they please . . . They must work upon their cells, with admirable art, extract their honey with infinite labour.'[26]

[24] J. Swift, *A Tale of a Tub and Other Works*, ed. M. Walsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 150–1 (italics reversed).
[25] F. Bacon, *Instauratio Magna* in *The Instauratio Magna, Part II: Novum organum and Associated Texts*, ed. G. Rees and M. Wakely (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 153.
[26] W. Temple, 'Of poetry' in J.E. Spingarn (ed.), *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), p. 84.

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