

ESSAYS OF THE  
PAST AND PRESENT



# ESSAYS OF THE PAST AND PRESENT

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## PREFACE

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DUE recognition has been made in proper places to authors and to publishing houses for the use of copyrighted material. But the glib little formula "reprinted-through-the-kind-permission-of" falls far this side of convincing gratitude. In the case of a book like this, which at best is but little brother to the rich, gratitude should be plural and not singular. John Bartlett most happily prefaced his *Familiar Quotations* with this sentiment from Montaigne: "I have gathered a posie of other men's flowers, and nothing but the thread that binds them is mine own." This is true of all anthologists, and all are grateful, I dare say, for the privilege of levying tax on the minds and resources of others. But none could be more so than I. This book is dedicated to those who made it.

W. T.



## INTRODUCTION

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ON MY bookshelves there are many volumes of essays compiled for the betterment of college students. Some of them are openly, yes, insistently educational, their "choice and massy divinity" making a religion of formal and austere instruction; others are of gayer intent, their collections lighter of heart and head,—fit for the Maytime. Well, is Huxley of greater profit than some latter-day Charles Lamb? Perhaps the answer should be qualified beyond a round "yes" or "no." And further, aside from the matter of relative gravity, the collections tend to register in two other schools of theory, one believing that it is wiser to rely upon the classic writers intrenched in time—preferably those disliked by Mr. Mencken; the other holding to current essayists who mirror the twentieth century. In this contemporary battle of the books, reversing the decision of Swift, the moderns have routed the ancients. I suppose the reason is not far to seek. Whether for better or worse American colleges are of and for the people; and that "extra ounce of nervous energy" which somebody said distinguished us from the British has taken on a quickened vitality through the eager swiftness of American life. It is a time for doing things, with one's cap a-toss. It is well to remember that since Jenny Lind landed in New York Harbor in 1850, the most epic receptions accorded favorites have been granted to Miss Gertrude Ederle of the English Channel and to Colonel Lindbergh of the Spirit of St. Louis. They were both symbols of action in an age of action. Had a resurrected Thackeray, on a third visit to our country, docked on the same boat with

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either of them, what a faint shadow of a man he would have made, for all his bulk.

In a time of encompassing activity we think in terms of what is to come rather than in terms of what has been, and our universities are catching the echoes of the tumult and the shouting round about. When Matthew Arnold defined culture, he assumed that it was the embodiment of the best that had been thought and said in the world. He meant the best of Greece and Rome, the best of the dead people of history. That, I suppose, is still the ideal theory of our colleges, but it is a theory worn thin at its edges through friction with the facts of national life. At any rate, it would be an anachronism if we were to put before our Freshmen an essay anthology drawn uncompromisingly from Huxley and Wallace, Addison, Steele, and Johnson. The time may or may not be out of joint, but autocrats of English class-rooms will, I think, do well to temper a rigid adherence to Matthew Arnold with diplomacy. Of course it is just this that most of them are doing, as witness the many delightful essay compilations of the past five years that owe their being to articles from current magazines. There is justification in this too. Committed as I am, in general, to the "classic" point of view, I believe, even in the face of the two golden ages of the essay—the first half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth—that the writing of prose has reached an excellence beyond debate. Macaulay with his hard, sunshine clearness, Ruskin with his incandescence and flaming diction, Stevenson with his art, made heirs of posterity. Yes, essayists can write to-day.

But from another point of view this is beside the issue. What is it we want our undergraduates to take away from the prose anthologies we impose upon them? If it be a knowledge of what is going on in the literature and in the artistic life of 1927 through material provocative of class discussion; if it be a frank effort to put a student in touch with the thought of his time; if it be an endeavor to prove that current prose is high of quality,—then certainly the practice is of ponderable value.

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And if these attainments be all we can expect from our students, why, then, better fifty pages from the present than a thousand from the past. For one's classes will at least be interested.

But I rather doubt the final value of continued discussions on contemporary affairs, especially when I call to mind the necessitous heterogeny that forms the junior teaching staffs of almost all our prescribed courses in underclass composition: men and women, young and mature, assistants and graduate students, all drawn from the four winds and bringing the four winds with them—all eager, all conscientious, but as a body ill-shapen and dressed in motley. It was so with all of us in our prentice days. We are given to saying glibly that Freshmen in particular should be moulded by the finest and most sagacious minds in an institution. Almost any president will glow to the theory. And yet the "finest minds" display a leveled animosity towards theme reading and towards patient conferences with adolescence. And where, if seasoned brilliance takes over the teaching, is the novitiate instructor going to begin? With the upperclassmen? Not on this side of the millenium. The teaching profession is but a one-way Jacob's ladder; the climbing is not down from the heaven of high places; the first rung is planted in a Freshman English class. And it is more difficult for a beginning instructor to "administer" contemporary essays than those on which criticism is stabilized. The present is always in solution, the past in precipitate. Every age struggles for self-expression; but only through the perspective of some later time can the result be pronounced articulate or merely stammering. And where contemporary opinions waver, like flame in moving air, the older instructor is a safer guide. Knowing that critics of one age have been the sport of the next, he is more likely to stand on this side of final pronouncement. He is under the advantage of having lived longer. Students will listen with greater deference to opinions voiced from behind a beard or from under a bald crown. This is less true, of course, where the subject matter is tangent to the campus itself—essays of college life, of youth

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and the new world, of material having, in general, to do with experiences common to those who teach and those who are taught. But even here it is a matter of relativity.

If the absolute value of the great prose masters had grown slight with the passing of the young men of fifty years ago, of the youths who found them tonic, one would gladly turn exclusively to the brilliant essayists of to-day. But many of them wrote for all time. I should like to quote in this regard from an introduction to a former collection where I made an attempt to weigh the issues. "But in that the tendency of the movement (towards the contemporaneous) has been to ignore the work of the great stylists, of those who lie at the center of English prose, its final value is questionable. It cannot be that the classics have outlived service. The quick—as well as the dead—must still be capable of feeling their power. They are not their own cemetery. I dare say the time has gone by when youth will spontaneously turn to Ruskin and Carlyle and rise to enthusiasm in their company—other times, other customs—but they and their peers had in them the power to say great things greatly. It can be admitted cheerfully that our finest essayists cannot be read as one runs; the sense they show for history, for criticism, for political economy may be perverse or opinionated; the times of which they write alien in innumerable ways from our own. But the mirror of men's thoughts and emotions gives back the same images from age to age. The fine old saying that customs and manners may veer to the opposite, but human nature never changes, holds true, and most of these writers concern themselves with the permanent in human nature. It almost seems like rejecting the best that has been said and thought in the world to turn from them."

From all this one might think that, no matter how freely I admire contemporary essays, I put my whole pedagogic trust in something else. I do not: it is a matter of proportion. I believe that all undergraduates should know what is going on about them, that as part of their cultural legacy they should



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realize the high excellence of the living, and that they should come to an understanding of this excellence through a generous study of what the living are doing. By all means, then, a miscellany of what was and is. I have not, however, aimed in this collection—as a glance at the table of contents with its almost even balance between the dead and the living might indicate—to serve two masters equally. My first concern is with those who come to us regally from the past:

“They are the lords and owners of their faces,  
Others but stewards of their excellence.”

An academic point of view? I think not. It is axiomatic that cultivated people everywhere, in caps and gowns or business suits, recognize the dependence of what is on what has been. To-day is but the airiest spur upon a growing tree, owing its altitude to the limbs below it and conscious that “unborn to-morrows” will climb higher from the ancient roots. Bertrand Russell, with truth and fineness, in his essay “A Free Man’s Worship,” holds an eloquent brief for the times over which History has closed, when he says, “. . . the Past . . . has magical power. The beauty of its motionless and silent pictures is like the enchanted purity of late autumn, when the leaves, though one breath would make them fall, still glow against the sky in golden glory. The Past does not change or strive; like Duncan, after life’s fever fit it sleeps well; what was eager and grasping, what was petty and transitory, has faded away, the things that were beautiful and eternal shine out of it like stars in the night.” And so, tempered with reason, I shall hold for the classics; and again tempered with reason, I shall hold for the writers of to-day.

Primarily the purpose of Freshman English and other basic courses in composition is to teach correct and effective methods of marshalling thoughts on paper. And after that,—well, after that come the factors that make a course memorable. A student will be grateful for being taught to write with accuracy, and,

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so far as in him lies, with power; but this attainment draws in the wake of its memory the sustained labor of enforced theme writing. He is more likely to reserve his higher gratitude for other things. Perhaps more than for anything else for the evolving of a faculty for discernment between the good and the poor, that faculty which makes of him a critic, a judge,—that enables him to appreciate, if only in a dim way, the fineness of fine things, and to see through the pretense of veneer. I doubt the likelihood of developing this sense so well through the agency of current essays: for one thing we are more given to presenting them as articles to be read and discussed merely for content, than as essays to be studied and pondered over. It is this development of appreciation that interests me. It really means in the world of letters what William James meant in the larger world of culture when he said that a college course should enable a student to know a good man when he saw one.

Now just how is one to train this faculty? The field in which the teacher of composition and essays does his work lies far, geographically and æsthetically,—or so it is assumed—from that of the teacher of lyric poetry. But I consider this assumption of polar difference, in part at least, a fallacy in distinction. The greater divinity of poetry is unquestioned; our spiritual and emotional response is deeper, wider. There is more of heaven in our verse. But there is much of the upper air, at least, in our most exalted prose. It is my sense of this beauty that I try to pass on to my classes. Not that I am dealing always with beauty, for Macaulay is not Burke nor Hazlitt Ruskin. And Macaulay and Hazlitt are both honorable men of letters with much to give in manners of their own. Power, grace, sensibility, humor, charm in its many forms, virility,—any epithet you will, may be exemplified by the works of those who presented their messages in prose.

It is a fair question to ask whether these impalpable qualities can be apprehended by undergraduates. Certainly not in all their connotations. But I should go at least as far as

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to say that students should recognize the differences among the most colorful of our stylists—the crimson of Carlyle, the purple of Ruskin, the light blue of Addison, perhaps, even, for the most accomplished, the silver gray of Pater. I do not mean merely sense them, feel them, but actually know them,—be able when the day of reckoning comes and the drear examination sheets demand their interest on the year's investment in study, to assign on the evidence of craftsmanship this unknown passage to Bacon and this to Lamb.

And how is this end to be brought about? There is only one way to do it, I suppose,—through imparting, within the limits of common sense (for the matter can be carried too far with Freshmen) a conception of what “style” in prose literature is. The word itself, taken in all its implications, is shadowed with nuances, misty with controversy—like “beauty” or “virtue.” But from the wandering notions of those who have written so fully on the term, a fairly easy elimination of the non-essentials can be made if a teacher will turn pragmatist. Underclass students are for the most part too unsophisticated to reconcile the famous definitions of the word. Where Buffon tells us that style is the man, Swift states that it consists in using proper words in proper places, and Barrett Wendell that it is the expression of thought or emotion in words. The great Flaubert insists that it is an end in itself, and Alexander Smith seriously contends that “style, after all, rather than thought, is the immortal thing in literature.” Against Flaubert and Alexander Smith, however, you will find a hundred lances leveled, and against the others as many. A consecutive reading of all the outstanding essays on the subject would blunt the edges of preconception.

But for the sake of definiteness one need not be equivocal or hesitant in handling the matter with underclassmen. Stevenson, it seems to me, when he declares in effect that fine style should possess both clearness and beauty, will serve as a common denominator among those who have written so varyingly. “Clearness,” unless one ascends to the metaphysical, is obvious

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enough. But what will one say of "beauty"? For the term embraces everything that makes writing memorable. Now there are many graces snatched "beyond the reach of art," of analysis,—and many teachers, I dare say, prefer to let grace and beauty go as grace and beauty, whether explainable or not. They dislike placing them upon the analyst's surgical table to operate for causes. They prefer not to break their butterflies on wheels. Let silence speak where utterance has deeply moved, they hold. Silence, however, has only remote kinship with pedagogy, nor should it have in general. The student is entitled to his "whys": it is for those who teach him to make their answers definite and understandable. I try to do this myself by arousing a conception of those elements of style that are simplest. It is true that in a sentence like the following from Pater there is so much of the rarefied that its art is concealed by its art, and Freshmen would find it elusive:

Flavian, to whom, again, as to his later euphuistic kinsmen, old mythology seemed as full of untried, unexpressed motives and interest as human life itself, had long been occupied with a kind of mystic hymn to the vernal principle of life in things; a composition shaping itself, little by little, out of a thousand dim perceptions, into singularly definite form (definite and firm as fine art in metal, thought Marius) for which, as I said, he had caught his refrain from the lips of the young men, singing because they could not help it, in the streets of Pisa.

Here one can comment on the "literary quietism," the sensitivity,—and more satisfactorily, perhaps, because more concretely, on the delicate, stippled effect wrought by the retarding commas. Prose like this, though, owes its graces to qualities beyond the apprehension of average Freshmen. Pater is not for them.

But take a Ruskin sentence, and then one from A. C. Benson that attempts to describe Ruskin's style. Ruskin is here speaking of lichen:

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Sharing the stillness of the unimpassioned rock, they share also its endurance; and while the winds of departing spring scatter the white hawthorne blossoms like the drifted snow, and summer dims on the parched meadow the drooping of its cowslip gold,—far above, among the mountains, the silver lichen-spots rest, star-like, on the stone; and the gathering orange stain upon the edge of yonder western peak reflects the sunsets of a thousand years.

And then the Benson period:

And all this is presented not only with a matchless vigour and courage, but with a style that now thunders like a falling cataract, and now croons as sweetly as a dove hidden among trees; a style that can scathe with fiery invective, and stab with piercing truth, that can rouse as with martial music on a day of battle, and can in a moment be as the thought of one who saunters, full of joy, in a day of early spring, among the daffodils and wind-flowers of an English copse.

Whatever of beauty and power inheres in these sentences is largely communicable in concrete and simple terms—their rhythm, their diction, their phrasing, their use of alliteration, assonance, and onomatopœia, their feeling for firm structure, their employment of figurative language, and, especially with the Ruskin sentence, their artistry of punctuation. And it is exactly these elements of style that Freshmen should know,—know well, if their natures admit of an affinity for craftsmanship in letters; know at least partially if their feeling for æsthetics be slight. I think it is unwise to pitch a course too low on the assumption that silk purses are not made from sows' ears.

Perhaps of all these aspects of prose analysis the study of diction has as high a value as any,—of diction from the point of view of denotation for creating a sense for accuracy and a nice differentiation among synonyms, and from that of connotation for stimulating the fancy and the imagination. It is in connection with this latter side that I should like to say a few words. Poetry, of course, is the limitless repository for “words that laugh and cry.” It bears the title; prose is the younger son.

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But one takes exception to the ruling of a well-known contemporary essayist upon his saying: "Word-magic belongs to poetry. In prose it is an intrusion. . . . It (prose) is an art which addresses itself to the mind, and not to the emotions, and word-magic does not belong to its armoury." The diction of his own essays rises against him, for many of his words trail behind them implications of far-off things. English prose is too rich in epithets to be dismissed curtly as wanting in verbal magic. Stevenson says of the great Scotchman, "the words of Carlyle seem electrified into an energy of lineament, like the faces of men furiously moved." A just tribute to the author of, "O evening sun of July, how, at this hour, thy beams fall slant on reapers amid peaceful woody fields; on old women spinning in cottages; on ships far out in the silent main,"—and the rest of the epic period. And for Stevenson himself, well,—Tennyson's necromantic "Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy" reverberates with ancient echoes of the Trojan strife; but put beside it, "the gloom of high-lying, old stone cities, imminent on the windy sea-board," of R. L. S., and they will be found of the same blood. The blood of prose runs thinner, but it runs. One should not take away from the poor the little that they have. Great words are the concomitants of De Quincey's "Literature of Power," "Words that wise Bacon or brave Raleigh spoke."—That Raleigh spoke: "O eloquent, just, and mighty Death! . . . thou hast drawn together all the far-fetched greatness . . . and covered it over with these two narrow words, *Hic jacet*." And on death again from Thackeray "the gallant heart, beating a few hours since, and now in a little dust quiescent." Word-magic is often the key to prose-magic. Hazlitt, with apparent pride, once wrote, "I never invented or gave a new and unauthorized meaning to any word but one single one." When he speaks happily in another place of "the *glad* prose of Jeremy Taylor," is he rising above his principles? Hazlitt did not "finden wordes newe" to the extent that others have, but take his essay on "Mr. Coleridge" and

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listen to the singing of his English epithets. Most of our prose masters, if we waive the eighteenth century, charge their vocabularies with emotion or power.

Now most of the essays I have chosen for this volume, both "classic" and contemporary, use words memorably. And I consider it of real importance that students should understand their justice, power, and beauty. To apprehend them in their fulness signifies a development of the faculty of imagination. For you cannot take the finest words at face value: they have soul values as well. Milton's line, "Innumerable as the stars of night," verse quality aside, is apprehended by the intellect; Galsworthy's "an innumerable rain as of moondust" makes an appeal not so much mental as aesthetic. And engrafting a sense for beauty as well as knowledge of truth is the obligation of good teaching. A sense for verbal beauty, then, such, perhaps, as a student of mine once felt when, speaking of the spectrum colors that dreams take on, she wrote, "But last night the hosting of the words seemed novel. An army of words in companies and battalions and charging ranks gave chase to me. It was as if I ran, ran, forever ran, and the words were forever upon me: strong words, glittering words, words of gloom and darkness."

Aside from special matters of style there is an added reason why elementary composition courses should stress the classic writers of prose. All undergraduates should know the development of English literature, and the study of the essay is the special province of a course in rhetoric where literature is touched upon at all. General survey courses, through the pressure of their calendars and through natural inclinations, are wont to slight the type for poetry, drama, and fiction. It is, perhaps, unfortunate, then, that many of the essays selected should not be so chosen as to allow a student to come into a knowledge of who the greatest of our essayists were and of why they were great.

Since the major aim of the collection has been to arouse understanding and respect, even admiration, for names that

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scholars conjure with, great care has been taken to offer essays that are interesting in their subject-matter and representative in their style. One principle governing the selection has been to ignore such essays as are over-difficult in context or overladen with allusions. If any among them rise above the comprehension of the average college student, their inclusion was a mistake: remoteness of subject-matter or textual barriers would defeat the purpose of the collection.

Six of the seven divisions in the volume are self-explanatory. The remaining section, Essays on the Nature of Gentility, is less obvious. I assembled these essays for the discussional value I think they have. Somebody said once that Oxford and Cambridge aim to produce gentlemen and American colleges Bachelors of Art. Well, what does one mean by "gentleman," by "culture"?—Indeed, a major portion of the essays included in the book were selected because of the supposedly provocative nature of their material, the underlying intention being, of course, to stimulate undergraduate thinking. There are, it goes without saying, innumerable thought-provoking essays suitable for college study. Among these I have chosen those that seemed to me best written.

May I suggest that a special use can be made of the selections from Macaulay and Burke. Both treat of the same subject, Hyder Ali Khan's fierce insurrection against the British in India. The excerpts can profitably be studied in conjunction. There is perhaps no writer of English prose the study of whose style offers a quicker antidote for the anæmia of Freshman sentences than Macaulay. Our greatest master of obvious rhetoric, he can be reduced to mathematical formulæ. He can be more readily absorbed than any other stylist I know. He is iron in the blood. There is no one more beneficent for weak writers—and, one might add, no one more dangerous for young writers of individual promise. At Wisconsin we make use of him early in the year, not for imitation—spending one's days and nights mimicking any writer is not only bootless but un-



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wise—but for creating a feeling—it is no more than that—of swift strength and power. Just as Addison passed on a suave and finished manner, so Macaulay has given us a sense of energy and directness. It is this sense that is so valuable for undergraduates to arrive at. And then compare him with the more spacious Burke, the universal thunders of whose prose reduce to faintness the musketry volleys of Macaulay. Compare their figures and their diction too. “The words in Macaulay,” says Stevenson, “glide from the memory like indistinguished elements in a general effect.” Those in Burke most certainly do not.

W. T.