

THE BRITISH ESSAY, FROM ADDISON TO DICKENS: A LINE OF DESCENT

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ABSTRACT

It has become a commonplace for admirers of the well-known periodical essayists of the 18th century to hail their work as a cultural expression of national satisfaction with the Protestant succession, and with the economic and political settlements that laid the foundations for the House of Hanover. Alexander Chalmers' edition of the works of *The British Essayists* (1803) testifies to this power of the form in the previous century, as well as the medium of its continuing influence into the next. Yet the standing of the periodical essay, as an important constitutive medium of a dominant culture, does not remain fixed, but undergoes a transformation before its eventual fragmentation in the late 19th Century. Even within Chalmers' collection, it is evident that the narrative persona of the essay is undergoing a decline in social status. With the handing down of both popularity and moral authority from Addison's genteel Whig "Spectator" and Henry Mackenzie's professional Edinburgh "Lounger" to the likes of Lamb's Cockney "Elia", Leigh Hunt's "Townsmen" and the street-sketching personae of Thackeray and Dickens, the essayist's transformation from patrician to pavement artist is complete. Simultaneously, the force of the essay as a consolidator of British bourgeois ideals may be seen to diminish and reassert itself as a valuable agent of cultural criticism.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Periodical essay--fictional personae--social status--cultural criticism

The settlement of the British crown on the head of a Protestant monarch, constitutionally encouraged to co-operate with agricultural, trading and manufacturing interests in the parliament at Westminster, was an act coeval with the rise of popular literature in the realm, and for any student of literature and society the synchronicity--at this distance--hardly seems accidental. Technical advances such as the invention of stereo-typing, and favourable legislation such as the Licensing Act (1694), were doubtless necessary corollaries of the rise of popular literature, but would hardly have been stimulated but for the increasing market for daily reading matter. This itself was merely one facet of the changing lifestyles and habits of Metropolitan readers, which responded in their turn to the economic policies and social and spiritual orthodoxies encouraged by the new regime. Newspapers--to look at just one cycle of the ecosystem-- were read by merchants, bankers, ship owners, their scribes and dependants in coffee houses such as Edward Lloyd's (birthplace of Lloyd's of London), or by wives and ladies in their salons *du thé*: social gatherings in themselves created by the fruits of overseas trade with the East Indies, that the Protestant succession and the continuing political ascendancy of the indeterminate group known as the Whigs, promised to foster.

As well as the latest shipping and Court intelligence, and columns of polemical journalism, however, early 18th-century readers were provided with probably their first taste of periodical 'fiction' in the form of short essays (Beljame 1881), whose authors masqueraded themselves in prose under a fictional persona. The status and functions of this new public voice and its possible relation, through what have been nicely described as 'the osmotic tissues of history' (Rushdie 1982, 420), to the newly-settled structures of power in the United Kingdom over the following century, form the subject of this paper.

It is hardly necessary to trace the roots of the early essay through Montaigne, Bacon, Abraham Cowley or William Temple, as the hybrid term 'periodical essay', half mode of publication and half genre, describes a form first identified and popularised at precisely this period in the non-polemical journals of Richard Steele and his celebrated collaborator, Joseph Addison. *The Tatler* (1709-11) and *The Spectator* (1711-12, 1714) have achieved the kind of fame which travels far in advance of the original texts, but it should not be forgotten that these present the thoughts and opinions of fictitious characters, and that whatever influence the journals have enjoyed over the years has been asserted through this medium. The origin of 'Isaac Bickerstaff', narrator of *The Tatler* is somewhat complicated by the adoption of the name from that of Jonathan Swift's satirical astrologer whose *Predictions* had appeared in 1708, but Steele quickly identified the functions of his character on the masthead and in the first column of the new paper. *His* Bickerstaff was to be a purveyor of town-talk and tittle-tattle, supposedly picked up at existing London coffee-houses whose locations defined the class of gossip: gallantry, entertainment, foreign and court news from White's and St. James's in the West-end, poetry from Will's off the Strand, learning from the Grecian Coffee House by the law-courts of the Temple, and business news from houses in the City near the Royal Exchange (12 Apr 1709). Later papers help define the "Tatler"'s status as a man about town, of good birth and education and of independent means (nos. 89 [5 Nov 1709] & 181 [8 June 1710]); the friends with whom he meets nightly at "The Trumpet" to converse include a Knight, a retired Major and a lawyer, amongst whom he is referred to as "the philosopher" or "the scholar" (no. 132 [14 Feb 1710]).

These various properties are transferred in 1711 to *The Spectator*, narrated by a character who, lacking a baptismal name, is clearly defined in terms of his rank in society: "I was born to a small Hereditary Estate,... bounded by the same Hedges and Ditches in William the Conqueror's Time that it is at present, and has been delivered down from Father to Son whole and entire... during the Space of six hundred years" (No. 1; 1 Mar 1711). The son

of a Justice of the Peace, university-educated, widely-travelled and well-versed in modern and ancient literature, "Mr. Spectator" declares that he has made himself "a Speculative Statesman, Soldier, Merchant and Artizan, without ever meddling with any Practical Part in Life," having "acted in all the Parts of my Life as a Looker-on". "I never," he emphasises, "espoused any Party with Violence, and am resolved to observe an exact neutrality between Whigs and Tories, *unless I shall be forced to declare myself by the Hostilities of either side*" (my italics). Thus, while stressing his detachment and superiority to controversy, the "Spectator" demonstrates at the outset the extent of his connections through birth and inclination to a wide range of traditional vested interests in the government of English society. Both the later development of the journal and its interpretation by subsequent generations, confirm what might be called, in correct neo-classical terms, the Patrician status and aristocratic functions of the "Spectator," as a spirit directly descended from a small ruling élite, whose right to exert influence rests in hereditary taste and good-breeding. This would appear to place him, like the ideal statesman or monarch, above the petty power struggles of party, but it must be observed that he does not deny holding political views, but simply announces his good-mannered intention to try and hide them (see italics). Polemics are conspicuously absent from *The Spectator*, but opportunities are seldom lost for portraying and exploring the glories of the 1688 "Revolution" and later constitutional modifications, as they extended themselves into the economic and social spheres, catalysing Britain's transformation into the trading centre of the world.

Addison's allegorical vision of the delicate Virgin known as "Publick Credit" in the third number is typical (3 Mar 1711): she sits on a golden throne, surrounded by moneybags and the Parliamentary Acts of Uniformity (1662), Toleration (1689), Settlement (1701) and that which established the Bank of England (1694), on which "she often smiled with a Secret Pleasure". She faints away and withers to a skeleton however, at the approach of anything which might harm them: such as the sudden entry of six phantoms, including "the Genius of a Common-Wealth"--Cromwell--"and a young man of about twenty-two Years of Age" who brandishes a sword at the Act of Settlement, and carries "a sponge in his left Hand". This is a barbed allusion to James Edward Stuart, the "Old Pretender" to the British crown, then twenty-two, and the leader more or less openly espoused by the old Tory faction. Addison's broad "Whig" sympathies, which naturally included a strong anti-Jacobite (anti-Stuart) strain, are in fact never far from the surface in *The Spectator*, yet the narrator's apparent non-party stance, and interest in purely social matters, does much to extend the appeal of the journal to readers without political

interests. Numbers 9 and 69 for example, celebrating "those little Nocturnal Assemblies, . . . known by the name of Clubs" (10 Mar 1711), and the "good" and "useful" works of British merchants which have "given us a kind of additional Empire" (21 May 1711), are typical of the way Whig philosophy secretly underwrites the innocent speculations of the narrator. This naturally extends itself to Mr. Spectator's presentation of the friends who join him for conversation at "Mr. Buckley's in Little Britain" (No. 2 [1 Mar 1711]), and most famously in the treatment afforded to the Tory Baronet, Sir Roger de Coverley, "a gentleman that is very singular in his behaviour". In Steele's hands, as both critics and editors have observed (Aikin 1800; Bond 1965, 36), Sir Roger remains a sympathetic if Quixotic caricature, but in Addison's his "comic" ineptitudes and prejudices are exposed, in a way that did much to undermine the claims of his party to govern the nation (nos. 106-131 variously, 269, 329, 335 & 383).

The impact of *The Spectator's* satire has clearly transcended the brief period of its original publication. By the standards of contemporary journalism, it may indeed have "had nothing in common with the faction and violence which disgraces the political temper of the time" (Green 1898, xiii), but in countless reprints and anthologies over succeeding years, the tastefully indirect sanction it gave, in retrospect, to the dubious legitimacy of both Protestant and Hanoverian successions, worked powerfully to encourage a sense of pride in national stability and progress. Understandably then, over a century later, Addison was still in huge esteem amongst those Victorians who, like Macaulay in his seminal *History of England* (1849-55), wished to trace the peaceful ascendancy of their country to world-leadership back to the wisdom of their Whig ancestors in 1688. Writing in the *Edinburgh Review* in July 1843, Macaulay hailed Addison as "the great satirist" who "effected a great social reform, and who reconciled wit and virtue", praising in particular his essays of 1715, published in the character of *The Freeholder*: "[e]ven in the Spectator . . . [there is] no satirical paper superior to those in which the Tory Foxhunter is introduced" (1843, 245). There seems little doubt that *The Spectator* and *The Freeholder* were prominent among the "lighter literature of [the] age" on which Macaulay claimed he had based his highly partisan conclusion that "the gross, uneducated, untravelled country gentleman [of 1685] was commonly a Tory" (1913, 313 [bk. 1 ch. 3]). A century on, in the twilight of the British imperial adventure in 1945, C.S. Lewis acknowledged that in retrospect "the sober code of manners under which we still live today, in so far as we have any code at all, and which foreigners call hypocrisy, is in some important degree a legacy from the Tatler and the Spectator" (1945).

The narrative voice successfully established in those journals--of the patriotic but seemingly apolitical patrician--has thus had a noticeably political effect on subsequent commentators, manipulating their impressions of a shared past, and affecting the historical interpretations which they in turn have handed on to contemporaries. Not surprisingly then, numerous other writers have subsequently imitated the voice of "Mr. Spectator," but what is perhaps surprising is the way in which, within the tradition, the social status of the narrator undergoes a marked decline over the years, while many of his functions remain the same. The early stages of this development can be well seen in the definitive collection and re-publication of 18th-century journals made by the popular critic and editor, Alexander Chalmers, in 1802. His edition ran to forty-five volumes, and re-published, with generous biographical prefaces, eleven different journals of the previous century, under the generic title of *The British Essayists* (London 1802,3). After the *Tatler* and *Spectator* in Chalmer's anthology, comes the same writers' *Guardian* (1713), narrated by "Nestor Ironside," trusty adviser to Sir Ambrose of Lizard Hall and his household. The aristocratic connection clearly helps establish the credentials of the narrator in the public eye, while the identification with the wise Nestor of Homeric epic, King of Pylos and chief speaker among the Greek besiegers of Troy, preserves something of a patrician aura. Venerable as he may be, however, the "Guardian" is technically an employee, whose position allows him to commute freely between his master's salons and the servants' quarters, and from country to town. His term of employment was short-lived, however, and with internal dissension amongst Whigs reaching a crisis in 1716, Addison and Steele parted company as essayists.

During the long premiership of the great Whig courtier Robert Walpole from the 1720s to 40s, both periodical journalism and English drama became increasingly deployed as media of party and factional propaganda--bought up or corruptly influenced by politicians and patrons, censored or restricted by punishing taxes (Stamp Acts of 1712, 1725; Rodríguez 1992, 259-60)--but publisher Edmund Cave's founding of *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1731, under the suitably town-and-country alias of "Sylvanus Urban," helped establish a viable tone and mode of publishing for the periodical essay in Britain. It avoided censure through the general nature of its satire (the reports on parliamentary debates which Dr. Johnson helped to compile in the early 1740s were presented as if from the Senate of Swift's 'Lilliput'), and pretended to objectivity in the sheer range of its interests. Between the collapse of the Jacobite cause in the '45 rebellion and the return of the exiled "Country" party to royal favour in 1760, the "British Essay" experienced its heyday. Following *The Guardian* therefore, in Chalmer's

edition, come journals known as *The Rambler*, *The Adventurer*, *The World*, *The Connoisseur*, and *The Idler*, all first published between these dates, and all illustrating the changing social qualifications of the essayical narrator.

At first sight Samuel Johnson's *Rambler* (1750-1752) appears to be a misnomer, for as Boswell notes, the title "certainly is not suited to a series of grave and moral discourses; which the Italians have literally, but ludicrously translated as *Il Vagabondo*" (82). On closer inspection however, both "Rambler" and "Idler" are personae well-suited to emphasise the independence of Johnson's thought from prevailing social and political mores, and despite a sentimental Toryism (Langford 1984, 403), Johnson is one of the first English men of letters to achieve recognition without preaching either his own party-line, or that of his patron. Although far from the penniless itinerant which is one connotation of the title, Johnson's "Rambler" makes no attempt to claim social respectability for himself, and displays a roving propensity in finding novel ways of tackling fundamental moral issues: never, as he claims in the final number, exploiting the "topic of the day" (No. 208 [14 March 1752]). This deliberate eschewal of the fashionable is even more apparent in the character of "The Idler," whose columns appeared weekly in Newbery's *Universal Chronicle* from April 1758, for two years. The narrator introduces himself as a creature with "no rivals or enemies," ignored by the successful:

The man of business forgets him; the man of enterprise despises him: and though [both] tread the same track of life full commonly into jealousy and discord, Idlers are always found to associate in peace; and he who is most famed for doing nothing is glad to meet another as idle as himself. (No. 1 [15 Apr. 1758])

Johnson's adoption of a pedagogic rather than patrician role as an essayist did not go unnoticed by his readers. Boswell comments carefully that while "Addison writes with the ease of a gentleman, . . . Johnson writes like a teacher" (1791, 89); others complained of his lack of the very topicality on which he prided himself, of his lack of fashionable tone. "Why," lamented one contemporary reader to a friend,

...does he not write now and then of the living manners of the times?...Humour and the manners of the world are not his fort.
...There are many odd clubs, advertisements, societies, meetings, and devices of various kinds which this age produces; and London swarms with what would afford as amusing subjects as any in the Spectator... (Carter & Talbot 1809, 1: 371)

Plenty of contemporary men of letters were willing to supply Johnson's deficiency in this respect, however, and none more topical than Henry Fielding, whose bi-weekly *Covent Garden Journal* (1752) was initially devised as a means of publicising "The Universal Register Office," a kind of employment agency in Cecil Street. Fielding's main spokesperson, "Sir Alexander Drawcansir, Knight Censor of Great Britain," represents a return to the pro-Establishment patrician narrators of Addison and Steele, with a mission similar to that displayed in Fielding's major novel of the period, *Amelia*: "to restore that true and manly Taste which hath, within these few Years, degenerated in these Kingdoms" (No. 5 [18 Jan 1752]). Despite his grandeur and evident propensity to support the status quo of the Pelham administration, there is nevertheless a touch of the bathetic about Sir Alexander, whose surname Fielding borrows from a mock-heroic soldier in Buckingham's *Rehearsal* (4.1 et seq.). Nor should the other narrative voices audible in the journal be ignored. As well as the leading articles of the lofty Knight Censor, the journal also spoke to readers through the matter-of-fact narratives published in the separate "Covent Garden" columns. Here Fielding, in collaboration with his amanuensis Joshua Brogden, writes directly of experiences gained in his capacity as a Westminster and Middlesex magistrate, presiding at the Bow Street court in Covent Garden. The life and deeds of the lower and criminal classes are faithfully recorded, and the inadequacies of the law sometimes exposed, so that the journal as a whole, as one recent editor has observed, "is strikingly rooted in the everyday life of mid-century London" (Golgar 1988, xxxii), and has a critical edge and broadness of perspective that prevents it from being a mere vehicle for Fielding's business and political interests.

The last of the patrician narrators of the British Essay made his stand shortly before "Sir Alexander"'s demise in November 1752, in the character of "The Adventurer" (sustained variously by Drs. Hawkesworth, Bathurst, Warton and Johnson), a chivalrous spirit who acknowledged his anachronistic nature in the simile which opens the first number:

...A[s] the [ancient Errant] Knights were without fear of death, the Adventurer is without fear of disgrace or disappointment: he confides, like them, in the temper of his weapon...; he knows he has not far to go before he will meet with some fortress that has been raised by sophistry...; some enchanter who lies in wait to ensnare innocence, or some dragon breathing out his poison in defence of infidelity... (No. 1 [? Nov 1752])

Taking their cue perhaps from the successful *Gentleman's Magazine*, the new generation of essayists discarded the persona of the old-fashioned Knight for

that of the modern *caballero* and man about town. The weekly paper known as *The World* (1754-56), narrated by "Adam Fitz-Adam"--a high-society version of Everyman--is typical. Owned by Robert Dodlsey, a footman-turned-publisher, and edited by Edward Moore, a former linen-draper, the journal directs itself almost exclusively to the fashionable echelons amongst which these men of letters now moved: a narrow and exclusive definition of "the world" as the narrator makes clear in the first number: "My design in this paper is to ridicule, with novelty and good-humour, the fashions, follies, vices, and absurdities of that part of the human species which calls itself the WORLD, and to trace it through all its businesses, pleasures and amusements" (4 Jan 1753). Numerous contributions from the Epicurean pens of Horace Walpole, Soam Jenyns and the Earl of Chesterfield ensured that *The World* preserved its *bon ton*, and phrased its satire in terms which flattered rather than attacked its supposed target.

Conversely, the approach of the elitist-sounding *Connoisseur* (1754-56) was far more inclusive. The title of the narrator, "Mr. Town," suggests a man of the world like "Adam Fitz-Adam" or "Sylvanus Urban," but in fact the definition of "Town" taken by authors Bonnel Thornton and George Colman (the Elder) was far wider than the narrow "World" of Walpole and others. Their "town" embraces the whole Metropolis of London, not just the fashionable streets. Thus, after surveying half a dozen coffee-houses--the traditional stamping-ground of previous narrators--"Mr. Town" demands in his début number that

[f]rom these very genteel places, the reader must not be surprised if I should convey him to a cellar, or a common porter-house. For as it is my purpose to delineate and remark on mankind in general, whoever becomes my disciple must not refuse to follow me from the Star and Garter to the Goose and Gridiron, and to be content to climb after me up to an author's garret, or give me leave to introduce him to a route (sic). (19 Dec 1754).

Accordingly, many of the topics dealt with in *The Connoisseur* seem designed to appeal across a broad social spectrum--how citizens spend their Sundays (No. 26), the art of boxing (No. 30), newspaper advertisements (No. 45), racehorses (No. 63), the Public Gardens at Vauxhall (No. 68), and so forth--anticipating the later interest of Dickens and his contemporaries in the so-called "amusements of the people". Reflecting in 1755 on his own "character as an Essay Writer," "Mr. Town" shows that this change of pitch has

been a deliberate reaction against the high moral and social tone adopted by his forerunners:

...I purposely avoided the worn-out practice of retailing scraps of morality, and affecting to dogmatize on the common duties of life. In this point, indeed, the Spectator is inimitable... I have therefore contented myself with exposing vice and folly by painting mankind in their natural colours, without affecting the rigid air of a preacher or the moroseness of a philosopher. (No. 71; 5 June 1755)

If *The Connoisseur* sought to switch the focus of the periodical essay away from the Court and Country values that had dominated the pre-industrial world of English letters, Oliver Goldsmith's exotic narrator, Lien Chi Attangi, seems determined to challenge them. Goldsmith's essays were originally published as "Chinese Letters" supposedly written by or to "a Chinese Philosopher resident in London," and serialised in Newbery's *Public Ledger* (1760-1761). In 1762 they appeared in volume form as *The Citizen of the World*: a title which stresses the general humanity, and deliberately unnationalistic stance of the narrator, whose foreign provenance merely provides a cover for Goldsmith's questioning of contemporary social and political trends. Britain in 1760 was, in Philip Hobsbawm's evocative metaphor, taxiing down "the runway" towards the world's first industrial revolution (1968, 48), and the Crown's aggressive subordination of foreign and domestic policy to assist commercial and manufacturing interests in their bid for take-off, had inevitable and unforeseen side-effects, at a time when population growth was itself accelerating. Writing towards the close of the Seven Years' War, when "British imperial power in North America was at its height" (Roberts 1980, 664), the "Citizen of the World" voices some sharp criticisms of national ambitions in Canada, and objects to the government's encouragement of colonisation, which was "peopling the deserts of America . . . with the waste of an exuberant nation" which "must make exchange of her best and bravest subjects for raw silk, hemp and tobacco" (1934, 44-45; letter 17). A later essay describes the "Citizen"'s amazement "at the ignorance of almost all European travellers who have penetrated any considerable distance into Asia". "They have been influenced," he comments with all the sharpness of 20th-century hindsight, "by motives of commerce or piety, and their accounts are such as might be expected from men of very narrow or very prejudiced education. . ." (1934, 286; letter 108). On domestic issues, Goldsmith's remarks are equally pointed, contrasting Church of England clergymen gorging themselves at a "visitation dinner" with the "hungry beggar, with look of want, peeping through one of the windows" (1934, 160;

letter 58); complaining of the quantity of cattle and animals required "to die for their country" at the inauguration dinner of the new Parliament (1934, 297; letter 112); or satirising contemporary obsession with the banalities of George III's coronation: the "astonishing scene of grandeur" which Art was expected to "produce from the smallest circumstance when it thus actually turns to wonder [at] one man putting on another man's hat" (1934, 280; letter 105).

The critical and unpatriotic sentiments of Goldsmith's narrator, added to his alien nationality, seem to have denied him entry into the ranks of Chalmers' *British Essayists*, though perhaps the epistolary presentation of his reflections would bar him on a technicality. Goldsmith, an Irishman by birth, seems also to have imbued Lien Chi Attangi with something of his own sense of social dislocation; as a young man, Goldsmith had fled in poverty from London, to wander through Europe, busking for bread and lodging: a "singular experience" as one critic puts it, "in acquiring a technique of vagabondage" (Church 1934). The "Citizen of the World" may think of himself as a wandering teacher of morals, but Goldsmith recognises his inevitable similarity to the tramp: "the man who leaves home to mend himself and others is a philosopher; but he who goes from country to country, guided by the blind impulse of curiosity only a vagabond (1934, 21; letter 7).

In Goldsmith's case, the similarity was no pose, but in the case of Henry Mackenzie and Richard Cumberland, whose journals make up the final volumes of Chalmers' collection, a deliberate affectation of social mediocrity and dislocation is apparent. Although Mackenzie is often remembered as the archetypal "man of feeling," from his novel of sentiment which bears that name, contemporaries dubbed him "the Addison of the North" for the style of his moral, though clearly sentimental, essays contributed to *The Mirror* and *The Lounger*, which he edited between 1779 and 1787. Being outside society, and in a position to look objectively upon it, had been a characteristic of essayical narrators since the "Spectator," but Mackenzie seems to build upon Johnson's notion of the non-professional, indolent "Idler," and adds the idea of an enforced withdrawal from public life, for sentimental reasons, with an accompanying decline in social status. Quoting some lines from French dramatist Philippe de Destouches, about the little-known charms of innocent leisure and having nothing to do, the "Lounger" describes himself as "the kind of man whom accident has thrown out of the business of life, and whom temperament, if not virtue, keeps out of the dissipation of it" (no. 1; 5 Feb 1785). There is an irony in this description, given that Mackenzie and his co-writers were all prominent Scottish civil servants: three advocates, two judges of the Court of Session, and Mackenzie himself, the Comptroller of Taxes. Following the persona as it develops through the series of essays, it becomes

clear that what the "Lounger" recommends are not so much the alternative attitudes of the truly unemployed, but the constructive employment of idle moments which even a business-man may learn to make (No. 100; 30 Dec 1786). His essays are to be "transcripts of what I have felt or thought" or "heard or read," together forming a "study of manners" based not--as in Addison or even Chesterfield's day--on artificial courtesies and good-breeding but on the early Romantic emphasis on the "genuine excellence" which "springs from nature" alone (no. 2; 12 Feb 1785). For this reason, the "Lounger" emphasises his natural rather than social qualifications, while at the same time his definition of manners as "the laws of civility, of gentleness, of taste and of feeling" (ibid.), leads him to move most frequently among the upper and middle classes whose behaviour dictates such laws.

The fact that these were Edinburgh upper and middle classes makes little difference to the character of opinions mooted in the journal, as the town had long played host to the same mixture of political and factional interests which characterised so-called "good society" in London. Indeed, in the early decades of the following century, Tory and Whig causes found instruments in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and the *Edinburgh Review* which were in every way as powerful and influential as *The Quarterly*, *Fraser's* and *The London Magazine*. What is more, the future of the periodical essay was to depend to a surprising extent on the growing literary rivalry between the reviews and magazines of the two capitals, of which the northern was to conserve its Augustan, pre-industrial features long into the Victorian era, while the southern was propelled into the modern age, not so much by revolution of its traditional industries, but by the nature of its population problem. Understandably, little of this was apparent at the time of Chalmers' canonisation of the "British Essayists" in 1802, and although the various narrators in the collection are clearly distinguishable as different speakers in a socio-political debate that continued throughout their century, Chalmers himself is instrumental in creating the impression of a static tradition, in which the narrative persona chosen by the author(s) fulfilled much the same functions in the 1790s as it had in 1710:

[t]he views of our ESSAYISTS in the choice of a name, have been either to select one that did not pledge them to any particular plan, or one that expressed humility or promised little, and might afterwards excite an agreeable surprise by its unexpected fertility. (Preface to *The Guardian*; vol. 16)

The succeeding decades make apparent, however, that beneath any continuity of function, the declining or at least ambiguous social status of the essayical

narrator bears a direct correlation to the political tendencies of his "lucubrations".

Perhaps the clearest illustration of the change may be found in the essays of three fellow-contributors to the supposedly non-political *London Magazine*, under the hapless John Scott's editorship: Charles Lamb, Thomas Hood and Leigh Hunt. Other writers, such as the unidentified author of *LONDON UNMASKED: or the NEW TOWN SPY* [1784] or Felix MacDonogh, creator of *The Hermit in London* (1819-20) had already contributed to the broadening of focus of the periodical essay which "Mr. Town" initiated, but Lamb, Hood and Hunt helped fashion it to their own liberal, and sentimentally radical manifesto. As John Gross comments, the *London Magazine* "marked the beginning of a new romantic interest in London folklore," while the antiquarianism of its prominent contributors "was a humanizing force, and their catholicity . . . the sign of a determined liberalism rather than lazy-mindedness" (1969, 23). Such liberalism was a direct response to the socially-motivated criticism of J.G. Lockhart and "Christopher North" (John Wilson), whose essays and reviews in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* sneered at the new "Cockney School" of London poets and essayists. The original prospectus to the *London Magazine* makes clear its intention to pit the suburban wit of London against the lofty sarcasm issuing from "secondary towns of the Kingdom" (Gross 1969, 22-24). Tom Hood's debut paper in the journal, "A Sentimental Journey from Islington to Waterloo Bridge, in March 1821" opens with a typically Augustan dialogue between "a young cockney" and a "philosopher" but quickly changes tone as the narrator, who calls himself simply "a traveller," narrates a ramble by foot through London, which is graphically located in the city streets, rather than in an idealised town-scape. Sentimental expectations are raised but continually thwarted as the narrator idles his way southward, and incidents are introduced with a view to comic realism rather than to point a moral or display the fineness of the author's sensibility. The paper ends abruptly when the traveller arrives at the Thames, and finds that the "the merits and de-merits of [Waterloo] bridge and its architect" may not be determined, owing to "the sudden fall of a very dense fog"--a suitable reminder of the changing face and climate of London life. For this was the age of Nash, town planner to George IV, and architect of Regent Street, Regent's Park, Buckingham Palace, Marble Arch, and the remodelling of Oxford Street, Charing Cross, the Strand and Holborn (Richardson 182-84). The bridge was begun in the first year of the Regency (1811), to the design of civil engineer John Rennie, and was named, midway through its construction, after the last great victory of British over French imperialism. And the fog which fell upon it was the industrial smog of

a city whose hearths consumed the majority of the 8 million tons of coal produced by the industry in 1821 (Williams 1975, 143; Hobsbawm 1968, 46 & 69).

The essays of "Elia"--the persona adopted by Charles Lamb for his contributions to *The London Magazine*--seem designed to celebrate forgotten corners of old London, before such sweeping changes. Two of his earliest papers revive memories of "The South-Sea House" on Threadneedle Street, a formerly prosperous trading company from which the "soul of business" has long since fled (1894, 1 [essay 1, 1st ser.]), and of Christ's Hospital "Five and Thirty Years Ago," a charity school for the sons of the poor (1894, 17-30 [essay 3, 1st ser.]). It soon becomes apparent that "Elia" himself is one of "the few straggling clerks" still employed in the South-Sea House, and that he is a former pupil of Christ's Hospital, who, unable to afford a University education, has to "play the gentleman, act the student" (1894, 12 [essay 2, 1st ser.]). His essays, while every bit as learned and laced with classical allusions as those of the "Spectator," portray the life of an amiable eccentric in the humblest of stations, who instinctively resists the regulatory and uniformative tendencies of his age. His essays in "Praise of Chimney Sweepers" and "Complaint of the Decay of Beggars in the Metropolis" which advocate the preservation of both professions for their picturesque value (essay's 22 & 23, 1st ser.), sound strangely hostile to the movement for introducing social legislation, which is decried as "the all-sweeping [broom] of societarian reformation". But as John Gross observes, "it was something in a world of sermons, prohibitions, juggernaut ideologies, ...to assert so tenaciously the individual's right to his own, unsystematic preferences" (1969, 24).

Leigh Hunt's assertion of individual freedom of speech in his radical weekly *The Examiner* had, by 1820, earned him a two-year spell in prison, for a libel on George IV, and it is perhaps not surprising to find a strain of anti-establishment and politically subversive thought mingling with the fresh Romantic feeling of his familiar essays. A prolific founder of periodicals, Hunt represented himself as "The Reflector" (1810-11), "The Companion" (1828), and even is a non-human entity in "The Indicator" (1819-21), so-called after the recently-discovered *cuculus indicator*, an African bird which indicated to tribesmen the location of wild bees' honey. His revival of Steele's narrator "The Tatler" (1830-32), demonstrates the strength of the literary tradition in which he felt himself to be working, in spite of the vastly different political and social assumptions on which his periodical was launched and continued. Perhaps his most enduring persona however was as a wandering expert on London folklore whose critical papers on the development of the modern city featured in his *London Journal* (1834-35), and in a series of

essays contributed to the ultra-Radical *Weekly True Sun* in the early 1830s. Here, he appears as "The Townsman," strolling on foot through newly-built-up areas of Chelsea and Mary-le-bone, commenting on the advent of "Streetlights, Gas and Illuminations" (23 & 30 Mar 1834) or complaining that only the names of "soldiers and bricklayers" were commemorated in London place names:

[We hope] a time is coming about, when the names of streets shall have some meaning, and people will find out whereabouts Mozart lived in the realms of Eaton and Grosvenor, and the street shall be called Mozart-street, and men shall bless it; as sure as the press is the press; and primogeniture shall go to the devil. ('The Townsman XII: A Walk to Chelsea'; *Weekly True Sun* 17 Nov. 1833)

Hunt's radical sympathies are thus never entirely lost in his occasional essays, although most of his more incendiary polemical journalism was behind him by this date, and he "spoke politically to and for the middle classes" rather than to the mob in the build-up to the great Parliamentary Reform Act of 1832 (Houtchens 1961, 31).

The extraordinary growth in population and physical transformation of London during this period--relative to other non-cotton manufacturing towns of the kingdom--was bringing about inevitable changes in the character of the periodical press which Hunt swears by in the above extract. Frederic Schwarzbach has defined it as "a climate of growing interest in and demand for naturalistic and detailed "sketches" of metropolitan life by an increasingly self-conscious and vocal... middle class public" (1976, 17). It is hard to date the beginning of the process by which the traditions of the "British Essay" are adapted to the needs of the "Urban Sketch," as the essay had always to some extent acted as a mediating agent between the city and its body politic, but by the 1830s, Hunt was merely one of a varied school of London sketchers. Pierce Egan (creator of "Tom and Jerry," the protagonists of *Life in London*), John Wight (the self-styled "Bow Street Reporter"), Theodore Hook, John Poole, James Grant (author of *The Great Metropolis*, and *Sketches in London*): these are merely a few of the journalists who made a name for themselves by employing the respectable format of the periodical essay to popularise their urban sketches. While these are largely forgotten, however, the names of Dickens and Thackeray are not, for the simple reason that, out of their periodically-published urban sketches, grew the periodically-published novels for which, in volume form, they are now famous. As in the well-known case of Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* (1837), such novels were initially little more than a series of linked vignettes or episodes, and the introduction of a comic or

melodramatic plot served simultaneously to arouse the reader's curiosity to read the next number, and to ease the author's desperate search for new topics, by giving him an automatic means of continuation. Notwithstanding the rise of the novel in popularity and literary respectability, both authors remained prolific essayists throughout their careers, and by 1860 were successful author-editors of high-quality literary magazines, with circulations of several hundred thousand.

Thackeray's narrative persona as an essayist plays continuously on the idea of social mobility and snobbery. Writing in *Fraser's Magazine* in the year of Victoria's accession (1837), he introduces the character of "James Yellowplush," an observant, voluble but scarcely literate footman, whose station allows him the same opportunities to spectate on high and low life as Steele's "Guardian" had enjoyed, but with a much greater emphasis on the social pretensions of the industrious lower and middle classes. In later papers, Yellowplush is accordingly transformed by an unexpected windfall, into the hilarious nouveau riche "C. Jeames de la Pluche, Esq.," but Thackeray cannot help signalling in the process that the very possibility of such a change being made and accepted, was an important element in the new dynamics of English society. Collecting up a series of essays for his first volume publication in 1840, Thackeray attributes them to the pen of "Michael Angelo Titmarsh," an aspiring sketcher and artist who has taken his notebook to the streets of Paris, in search of literary and political subjects. The volume itself is dedicated to a French tailor in the Rue Richelieu, who has lent Titmarsh money in an hour of need. Bearing in mind the seriousness with which dedications were composed by struggling authors for aristocratic patrons in the 18th century, Thackeray's light-hearted burlesque is illustrative of fundamental changes in the relations between literature and society since the Revolution.

Dickens, meanwhile, began his sketches shortly after leaving *The Weekly True Sun* for a full-time post as a journalist on the successful daily *Morning Chronicle* (1834; Chittick 1990, 48-49); it seems probable that Hunt's work as "The Townsman" would have been read by him almost before it was published. The *Chronicle* took a decidedly radical, if not Benthamite, line on most political issues, and it is not surprising that Dickens' sketches, which were written under the pseudonym of "Boz" from August 1834, had a strong radical colouring in their original newspaper publication. Dickens' experience of windy, periphrastic and prejudiced debating in the House of Commons during his employment as a shorthand reporter in the gallery (1832-34), also influenced him strongly against the whole notion of the English parliament as a means of implementing social reforms. Although the "Boz" sketches have frequently been hailed as "paradigms of straightforward mimetic realism"

(Miller 1970, 92), their narrator is clearly intended to follow in the traditions of Chalmers' *British Essayists* (Freeman 1977, passim). It is of passing interest that Dickens owned a first edition of the collection (Letters 1: 576 [21 Aug 1835]), and his writings are everywhere peppered with quotations and references to 18th-century and Regency essayists (Drew 26-67). His introduction and development of the "Boz" persona in Autumn 1834 reveals him to be a Londoner, for whom "[c]ity life...has become selfreferential" (Schwarzbach 1976, 15). A clerk or petty office-worker of some description, he makes a "daily peregrination from the top of Oxford-street to the City" ("Omnibuses" 103; Scenes 16), deriving his topics from the "inexhaustible food for speculation" which "the streets of London afford" ("Shops and Their Tenants" 47; Scenes 3). This much Addison's patrician "Spectator" had done in his day, but Dickens permits himself first to emulate Mackenzie's "Lounger"--

We have a most extraordinary partiality for lounging about the streets. Whenever we have an hour or two to spare, there is nothing we enjoy more than a little amateur vagrancy --walking up one street and down another, and staring into shop windows. . . . ("Scenes & Characters, no. 9" *Bell's Life in London*, 29 Nov 1835; Butt & Tillotson 1957, 44)

--and then to add real, rather than artificial, notes of subversion and political discontent, such as the sarcastic suggestion that some enlightened Member of Parliament should introduce a Bill:

"to limit certain members of the hereditary peerage of this country and their families, the privilege of making fools of themselves as often and egregiously as to them shall seem meet". Precedent is a great thing in these cases, and Heaven knows he will have precedent enough. ("Sketches of London, no. 10." *Evening Chronicle*, 23 Apr 15.35; Butt & Tillotson 1957, 46)

As John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson have demonstrated, many such passages of anger and indignation were omitted or toned down by Dickens in his revision of the sketches for volume publication in 1836 and 1839 (1957, 45-56), but something of "Boz"'s political animus is still detectable in the collection as a whole.

This is equally true of most of Dickens' later journalism, which is only now being properly annotated and re-published by Dent in four 'uniform' volumes (Slater 1994-). The final volume of the edition is to be composed of Dickens' long-neglected series of essays from the 1860s, *The Uncommercial*

Traveller. In these thirty-six papers, Dickens' pays his respects to the "British Essay" in his creation of a narrative persona who is "always wandering here and there from [his] rooms in Covent-garden, London--now about the city streets; now, about the country by-roads" who sees many things "which, because they interest me, I think may interest others" (1958, 2). The character is developed, however, in humorous antithesis to the figure of the "commercial traveller" or travelling salesman, formerly known as a "bagman" who, by the 1860s, was a prime example of the kind of counter-jumper ridiculed by Thackeray in his sketches (1840, 14-34). Richard Cobden's notorious Commercial Treaty with France had just been signed in Paris, when the "Uncommercial Traveller" made his debut and by its provisions British commercial houses stood to gain from the abolition of import tariffs on a whole range of fancy goods, brandy and wine (20 Jan 1860; Drew 1994, 206-09). Dickens' narrator doubtless has this in mind when he writes that he "travel[s] for the great House of Human Interest Brothers, and ha[s] a rather large connection in the fancy goods way" (1958, 2). The metaphor simultaneously connects the persona to the commercial realities of the high Victorian era, and indicates that his journeys and speculations are designed not just to amuse and instruct, but to fulfil a humanitarian mission. The essays which follow, as well as witty variations on an old tradition, might equally be characterised as pioneering examples of investigative or documentary journalism, in which the sketch-element serves as the footage and the narrator's comments as the critical soundtrack.

By the time of the "Uncommercial Traveller"'s final paper, barely a year before Dickens' own death in 1870, the periodical essay had entered on an irrevocable and widely-noted decline (Tuckerman 1841, 322; Fitzgerald 1863, 67), its place taken by a plurality of more popular or specialised literary media, among which the novel, the gossip-column, the government report, the newspaper exposé, the sketch, the dramatic monologue and the travelogue were prominent. But in its heyday, the periodical essay, and the familiar tones of its genteel narrator, represented an important constitutive medium of a dominant culture, and long continued to influence the reading public's impression of their own "national" character. Gradually, the essay's power as a consolidator of the bourgeois ideals of British parliamentary monarchy diminished, more or less in accordance with the decline of its narrator's social status--to re-assert itself in the Victorian period as a valuable agent of cultural criticism and social reform. With the handing down of both popular appeal and moral authority from Addison's high-bom Whig "Spectator" to the likes of the cockney "Elia," and the street-sketching and travelling personae of Thackeray and Dickens --sons of the "British Essay"--the essayist's

transformation from patrician to pavement artist was complete. It is to be hoped that students of British culture and society may benefit from this tracing out, across a century-and-a-half, of a line of descent in the British Essay-- an elegant but often neglected genre, which in the years between Ann and Victoria did more perhaps than even the novel, to impose on British readers a sense of their nation and of their class.

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