

On Rabbits, Morality, etc.

Selected Writings of
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now an organised business, and the market values of books are well known to all who deal in books. In the course of a year you may pick up one or two bargains which you could sell again at a profit; but the profit will not pay you starvation wages for the hours and days you have spent without seeing anything worth picking up. The thrill of the treasure-hunter does, unquestionably, enter into the game, but it is not treasure in the vulgar sense. Money-making has nothing to do with it. For instance, I was for years on the lookout for Duncan's *Colloquia Peripatetica*, and when I came across it I rejoiced exceedingly. But it cost me only one shilling, and if I wanted to sell it today I doubt whether I could get my shilling back. Again, I am always keeping my weather eye open for a copy of Henry Ellison's poems. If ever I light upon it—which is unlikely; I am beginning to doubt if a single copy ever came to Australia—it will be, as like as not, in the sixpenny box. I want it badly, but the book-collectors do not want it at all; it has no market value. It is a treasure, but not a treasure in the commercial sense. Hunting for such treasures amid oceans of trash, the frequenter of second-hand bookshops goes on indomitably, still nursing the unconquerable hope, faint, yet pursuing, rummaging among thousands of negligible books for the one good thing that shall reward his endeavours—

One planet in a starless night,

One blossom on a briar.*

But it certainly wastes a lot of one's time, and I think that, when I have lighted upon a copy of Fuller's *Worthies*, I shall bid farewell to second-hand bookshops for ever.

* Winthrop Mackworth Praed, "The Chaunt of the Brazen Head."

THE ESSAY

'Sir, we had a good talk.' There is none of the recorded sayings of Dr Johnson that sticks in your mind more tenaciously. That Boswell thought it worth recording must be counted to him for righteousness; every other biographer would have thought it too trivial. Boswell saw how much of Johnson's character was in it, of his geniality, of the gusto with which he took off his coat for a bout of argument. Talk was meat and drink to Johnson; it was life; he lived for the exercising of his wits against other wits. He counted a day wasted, he said, in which he had not made a new acquaintance; and for him a new acquaintance meant a new antagonist, another person with whom he might hope to have a good talk. Our hearts warm towards the garrulous old philosopher—as they can hardly be said to warm towards philosophers in general.

But, mind you, talk in the Johnsonian sense was a pretty strenuous affair; it was not the kind of talk you hear on the golf

links, or at a bridge party; it was keen argument, much keener than you will ordinarily hear if you stroll into the law courts. A talk between Johnson and Burke, when both were at the top of their form, was a strenuous piece of intellectual gymnastics; so strenuous that when he was ill, and somebody mentioned Burke's name, he called out, 'That fellow calls forth all my powers; were I to see Burke now, it would kill me.' Another phrase that sticks in my mind besides the Johnsonian one with which I started is the close of this sentence of Carlyle's: 'Sterling and I walked westward in company, choosing whatever lanes or quietest streets there were, as far as Knight's Bridge, where our roads parted; talking on moralities, theological philosophies; arguing copiously, but except in opinion not disagreeing.' There is a world of wisdom in those last five words; they contain the quintessence of the truth about conversation. Unless you see that truth you have never had a good talk.

Neither Johnson nor Carlyle, by the way, was an ideal talker, according to my way of thinking. Johnson was a little too much addicted to laying down the law; he was too stentorian; he thumped upon the table and shouted you down, though he did not mean to, and was disappointed when you allowed yourself to be shouted down. As for Carlyle, it seems to have been almost impossible not to start him off on a long diatribe and then, if you tried to put in a word for the other side of the case, Mrs Carlyle would hold up a warning finger, as who should say, 'Don't interrupt the sage!' Still, they were both magnificent talkers, and one could find it in one's heart to wish that the gramophone—is that the way you spell the beastly thing?—had been invented a century or so before its time. You can buy, I am told, a gramophone record which will allow you to listen to

the very voice of Tolstoy; as he spoke in Russian, a language of which I do not know a single word (except Bolshevik), this does not excite me very much. But if one of those black disks would let us listen for five minutes to the club at its best—with Johnson arguing, let us say, about the abominableness of the Scottish race—or would let us hear Carlyle haranguing Mazzini on the blessings of slavery, why, in that case, I think I should swallow my old-fashioned prejudices and buy one of those instruments of torture at once. But, alas, that is impossible; we can never listen to either of those great talkers; nor are their books an adequate substitute. Johnson's writings are not in the least like talk. When—as occasionally in the *Rambler* and the *Idler*—he tries to be conversational with a light and airy touch, he suggests a hippopotamus trying to pass itself off as a sylph.

What started me upon this topic? Well, I have been reading the excellent little volume of *Selected Modern English Essays* which the Oxford University Press has added to its 'World's Classics' series—a collection of cheap books for which we ought to give thanks twice a day. The essays selected are modern with a vengeance; most of the authors are still alive; those who are not are among them that died o' Wednesday; and the later essays in the volume are by men considerably younger than he who now writes. And the subjects cover a wide range—from Walt Whitman to the House of Commons, from 'A Medieval Girl School' to 'Cockney Humour,' from Judas Iscariot to Alphonse Daudet; very fine mixed feeding. And as I read essay after essay (they are all readable), I asked myself:—What is the bond between all these pieces of writing, so different in manner, and in matter so various? and why do we call them all essays? Essays they are—genuine essays, not chapters of books, not sermons,

not newspaper articles, not harangues, but essays. What then is an essay? And I came to the conclusion that a good essay is the best substitute that literature has to offer us for a good talk. The word 'essay' has, of course, been terribly misused. Bacon's bundles of wise saws are not essays—nobody ever talked like that. Macaulay's narratives are little histories or little biographies, but they are not essays. Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is not an essay, but a treatise. Pope's *Essay on Man* is a piece of didactic verse, whereas a real essay is never didactic and never verse. Emerson's *Essays* are not essays, but sermons. Half the things that masquerade as essays are really dissertations. But the real essay—the art whose patron saint is Montaigne—is quite distinct from any other form of literature. It began, in England, with Cowley; flowered in the days of Addison and Steele; faded; revived a little in Goldsmith's time; faded again; flowered again, gorgeously, in the days of Lamb and Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt; faded once more, this time so completely that it might have been thought to be dead. The Victorians—whose virtues I have so often praised—could not write essays. In a sense, it was their very virtue that disqualified them; they were too earnest. It is the mark of the Victorian that when you sit down for a cosy chat with him, before you know where you are you find that he is 'holding forth.' Now an essayist never holds forth. I have sometimes thought we might define an essayist by saying, 'Have you read Ruskin? Well, an essayist is the opposite of Ruskin.'

And now it has revived a little and it is delightful to run through this little Oxford volume and see how many genuine essayists are among us, excellent practitioners of this most delicate and difficult and beautiful art. And what is more, the essay

has actually become popular again, more popular than at any time since the days of the *Spectator*. The essay is, in fact, the one kind of writing that can at present hold up its head and look the popular novel in the face, and say, 'I, too, have a public.' I do not mean, of course, that a volume of essays can hope for the kind of resounding success that a bad novel can command; but I mean that with discriminating readers who know a good thing when they see it the essay has come to its own again. The publishers' lists prove this. Mr E. V. Lucas and Mr Max Beerbohm, Mr Chesterton and Mr Belloc, all genuine essayists, are popular in a sense in which no essayist was popular twenty years ago.

The essay is to prose what the lyric is to poetry; it is intensely personal. It is not a statement of facts, it is not a cold, abstract argument, it is not inflammatory harangue; it is a quiet talk, reflecting the personal likes and dislikes of the author. It never pretends to treat a subject exhaustively; it is brief, informal, modest. The style of an essayist must be, as Sir Edmund Gosse has said, 'confidential,' and 'a model of current cultivated ease of expression and a mirror of the best conversation.' It must have a certain dignity; it must be familiar—not high-faluting—but not too familiar. There are some authors who seem continually, as they write, to be winking at you, and calling you 'old chap,' and pointing their jokes by digging you playfully in the ribs. I do not like being called 'old chap,' and I am sensitive in the region of the ribs. The essayist must behave himself like a gentleman; good manners are more essential to him than to any other kind of writer. He must have a sense of humour, but he must not be a buffoon. He must be wise, too; but with all his wisdom he must never forget that he is talking to the reader, not instructing him. Whatever he talks about—and his range is infinite, from

the philosophy of Hegel to the habits of cats—he must touch it lightly; that is essential. If for a moment he becomes heavy or pompous or pontifical, the charm is snapped, the spell dissolved. It is, as I have said, a most delicate art; it looks so extremely easy and is really so difficult. We have a hundred good lyrics, in English, for one good essay; as good singers are a hundred times more plentiful than good talkers. The editor of this little anthology has chosen some of the best talkers of our time, and has caught them at their happiest moments. I cannot imagine a better book to slip into your pocket when you are setting out upon a walking tour or a finer companion for a railway journey... If the essay should come to displace the novel in popular favour, it would be a clear sign of an advance in civilisation. When we are prepared to sit down and listen to an easy, informal talk by a wise, humorous, kindly observer of life, without demanding that he shall tell us a story, we show that we are growing up.

ON FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

I am fond of marmalade, I always discard from weakness, and I am wearing, at present, a blue necktie with red spots... These statements are made in order to introduce without delay what is called the personal touch, so characteristic of the best modern essayists.

The chief difference between an essay and, say, a leading article is that the essayist is permitted, and even required, to cultivate this personal touch. You never think of the leader-writer as a mere person; you think of him as a vast shadowy abstraction, an oracular voice, an unseen something that measures out lengths of cold, objective truth—or falsehood, as the case may be. If a leader-writer were to break out suddenly into such personal confessions as the foregoing, it would give you the same kind of shock as if you found Euclid interrupting one of his admirable talks about triangles or parallelograms with a tirade against his wife's extravagance; or as if a bishop, in the middle of a sermon