

A STUDY OF REPRESENTATIVE ENGLISH ESSAYISTS  
DURING THE PERIOD 1900--1925

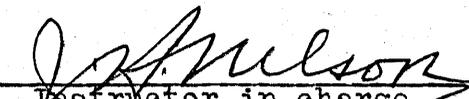
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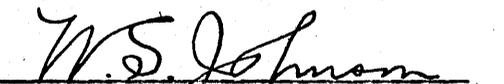
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## PREFACE

My interest in the essay has been keen ever since I attended, as an undergraduate, Professor R. D. O'Leary's essay courses, *The English Essay and Essay Writing*. It was in these courses that I first began to see definitely the characteristics of this form of literature, which I had previously enjoyed reading, but which I had little considered as a type of writing distinct from other types. My study with Professor O'Leary served both to stimulate my enjoyment of the essay and to arouse in me an especial interest in it as a literary type. Hence it was that when later, as a graduate student, I came to search for a thesis subject I was attracted to a topic suggested by the English department, a topic calling for a study of the essay in recent English literature. Knowing that such a piece of work would be to my liking, and feeling that my efforts might be of some value to other students of the essay, I decided to attempt a study of the sort suggested by the department.

It is unnecessary for me to trace here the process by which I limited this broad topic and finally determined the nature of the present study. I do wish to say, however, that in determining the aim and the scope of this thesis I attempted to work toward something that might prove of practical value. I was, of course, aware of the fact that even though I should attain this goal my thesis would probably be of use to few students; for I knew that most

students, both undergraduate and graduate, fail to appropriate for their use the material in Masters' theses. As I gained that knowledge partly from my own experience, I shall have small reason to complain if my thesis is seldom taken from the shelf. It is my hope, however, that any student who may consult this study may find, besides its obvious limitations and faults, something of value to him.

My debt to Professor O'Leary is at almost all points in the thesis obvious to any one familiar with his two essay courses or with his book, The Essay. I sincerely hope that in this work I have made no serious misapplication of the knowledge I gained under his instruction. If my efforts do not disappoint him, I shall be glad. If they meet with his approval, I shall be proud.

My debt to Professor J. H. Nelson, under whose direction I have written this thesis, is also great. From the time of my decision to make this study until my completion of it, he has been a constant aid to me. For his invaluable suggestions, his helpful criticisms, and his kindly encouragement, I am indeed grateful.

E. E. C.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

Aim of the Study

It is the aim of this study to ascertain the developments in the essay as it was written in England during the years 1900 to 1925.

Methods of the Study

The first task attempted in the study is the selection of a definition of the essay as a literary type. Then, after summarizing the chief characteristics of the essay as it appeared in British literature at the end of the nineteenth century, the study proceeds by examining the volumes of essays produced during the years 1900 to 1925 by six men whose writing in this type represents a considerable share of the most significant and representative essay-work published in England in this period. The six writers whose essays are examined here are A. C. Benson, Max Beerbohm, G. K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, E. V. Lucas, and Robert Lynd. The articles on these essayists consist (1) of brief biographical notes, (2) of a short discussion of their non-essay-work, (3) of a critical bibliography of their volumes of essays belonging to the period covered by the study, (4) of a general criticism of their work in the type, with particular attention to its substance and its style, and (5) of an evaluation of their essay-work. By comparing the essay as represented by these six bodies of writing in the

type with the essay as it appeared in English literature during the last years of the nineteenth century, the study finally attempts to determine the nature and the extent of developments in the type during the first quarter of the twentieth century.

## CHAPTER II

## THE ESSAY AS A LITERARY TYPE

The Need of a Definition

When one considers the looseness with which the term "essay" is used, one may wonder concerning the usefulness of the word to literary critics. Ever since Francis Bacon introduced the word into the English language in 1597, it has been employed as a label for many diversiform pieces of writing, some of which are so different from others as regards even the most obvious aspects of composition that the most casual student of literature recognizes the fact that they should not be placed in the same category. There is little advantage to the student in considering together Pope's Essay on Man and Lamb's Essays of Elia. The two are so different from each other both in aim and in method that to consider them as belonging to one literary type is to defy the laws of logic and to put oneself at a distinct disadvantage in one's study of English literature. Yet both are commonly called essays.

A vast number of similar illustrations of such a pointless stretching of the term on the part of many critics as well as writers could be found in the history of English literature. It is not necessary, however, to go to the past for such illustrations. One merely has to glance at a few modern anthologies of "essays" to discover that even critics especially interested in this form of literature

use the term with distressing vagueness. Not only do many of the compilers of these anthologies include in their collections pieces of writing so diverse that they cannot be considered together with propriety or advantage, but they also reveal in their introductions and prefaces in these volumes that they have no clear idea concerning the location of the boundaries of the literary type with which they are dealing. Many of them show that they have no clear-cut conception of the essay by making no attempt at actual definition of the type, being content merely to point out some of its most salient features. Most of those who do attempt to define the term indicate what a shadowy form it is in their minds by offering such vague statements as "the essay is a mood" or such irritating bits of circumlocution as "The simplest and safest definition of the essay is that it is the kind of composition produced by an essayist."<sup>1</sup> To the student who desires a definition which will be an aid to him in his study of literature, such definitions are of little use.

That such vague definitions are of small value to the student is, however, their least fault. What is much worse, is that the criticism of the type which is built upon these unsound definitions is full of contradictions that actually bewilder the student. For illustration one may compare the opinion of Mr. J. B. Priestley, the author of the question-begging definition quoted above, concerning the present

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1. J. B. Priestley, Essayists Past and Present, p. 7.

status of the English essay with the opinion of Messrs. Carl and Mark Van Doren. It is the opinion of Mr. Priestley that there has been considerable essay-work of high rank produced in England during recent years. "Our own time," he wrote in 1925, "has been comparatively rich in essayists. . ."<sup>2</sup> With this opinion Messrs. Van Doren do not concur, or at least it would seem so from the following excerpt from their history of English and American literature covering the period from 1890 to 1925:

Strictly speaking, there is no body of English prose to-day which conforms to the traditional rules of the essay. There is a great wealth of miscellaneous writing by philosophers, historians, critics, economists, and humorists; yet the profession of essayist as such can hardly be said to exist.<sup>3</sup>

Considering the unilluminating nature of Mr. Priestley's definition of the essay and the failure of Messrs. Van Doren to explain what the "traditional rules of the essay" are, one hesitates to say whether these two views of the present status of the essay are as flatly contradictory as they appear to be. It would seem that these critics are at opposite poles, but one cannot be absolutely certain. An attempt to decide the matter leads to the sort of irritation which causes one to wonder concerning the benefits of literary criticism.

One should not, however, be too greatly discouraged by this wide-spread looseness with which the term "essay" is

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2. J. B. Priestley, Essayists Past and Present, p. 28.

3. Carl and Mark Van Doren, American and British Literature Since 1890, p. 248.

employed. One must remember that the task of definition is one of the most difficult that the human mind attempts to perform. The phenomena of the world are so diverse that it is difficult even to distinguish types. Any one honestly trying to make generalizations concerning the nature of the world about him must continually be qualifying his statements. It is not strange that the human mind has difficulty in formulating definitions of the phenomena in such a multiform universe, especially when those phenomena are as intangible as the qualities of literary art. Rather, it is to be expected that men's considerations of these phenomena should be incomplete and full of inaccuracies. A recognition of these shortcomings may serve well in leading one to search for the more complete features and the accuracies of those considerations. When one desires to make a study like the present one, which considers the phenomena of a limited but vaguely outlined field, one should expect to find considerable disagreement concerning the location of the boundaries of that field. But one would expect also to find a definition that is satisfactory for the purposes of one's study. Unless the phenomena one is studying have only lately been discovered by men, keen minds of the past and present have formulated definitions which will in some fair degree at least serve the average student in his quest for knowledge. Of course, if one is equipped with more wisdom and insight than his predecessors and contemporaries who have worked in the field, he may

evolve a definition for himself which is more satisfactory than those he finds at hand. Whether one chooses what is apparently the best definition among those made by others, or formulates a more adequate one than has existed before him, his study should prove profitable if he applies the definition wisely. Even within the shadowy confines of literary criticism some helpful lines have been drawn by the more discerning of the critics.

### The Definition

The most satisfactory definition of the essay that the author of the present study has found is that of Professor R. D. O'Leary, presented in his book, The Essay. The essay, says Professor O'Leary, "is a short piece of prose, expository in general character, literary rather than matter of fact or didactic, and necessarily, therefore, in a style that departs somewhat from the level of plain assertion."<sup>4</sup> This definition, as a careful examination of it and an attempt to apply it in active criticism prove, is a peculiarly adequate one.

Cognizant of the fact that the conception of literary types is necessarily lacking in scientific exactness, Professor O'Leary does not set the boundaries around the essay with such precision that only the most typical work in the type comes within the scope of the definition. Rather, he makes the boundaries flexible enough to render the definition applicable to all work which has most of the

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4. R. D. O'Leary, The Essay, p. 28.

characteristics of typical work in the type, even though the methods of the individual essayists may not be at all points those employed by most essayists. Yet the lines he draws around his subject are not vague ones. Although he realizes that the looseness with which the term "essay" is used has little relationship to the artistic merit of writing within or without the type, he realizes also that to the student of literature vague definitions are of little use. Hence, in his definition he marks the boundaries of the type with sufficient exactness to include all pieces of writing that may most profitably be considered together and to exclude those pieces of writing that cannot profitably be considered as essays. This he manages to do in a description of the type which is at the same time simple and comprehensive.

It is this definition that the present study employs in its attempt to ascertain the developments in the essay as it was written in England during the first quarter of the twentieth century.

## CHAPTER III

## THE ENGLISH ESSAY AT THE END OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Its Status Among Literary Types

Although essay-work of excellence still commanded the attention of a considerable number of readers in England at the end of the last century, the increasing preeminence of the short story in the literary field during the eighteen-nineties had deprived the essay of much of its earlier popularity. Added to this, there was a scarcity of essayists of the first rank in England. There had been produced during the last quarter of a century no great body of excellent work in the type like that which had come from Lamb, Hunt, Hazlitt, and T hackeray during the early and middle part of the century. And though the essays of these earlier masters in the art continued to be read throughout the century, and though the high plane of artistic achievement which the essay had attained under their pens had been sustained by the essay-work of a few writers, such as Alexander Smith and Stevenson, interest in the type was at low tide in England.

At the turn of the century the rise of the short story had resulted in a noticeable curtailment of essay-work appearing in periodicals. Yet the essay had too long been a part of periodical literature to be easily crowded out of that field. As in all periods in the development of the type since the eighteenth century, so at the end of the

nineteenth century most of the essays written in England found first publication in periodicals; for example, Mr. Beerbohm's first volume of essays, More (1899), consisted of papers he had originally contributed to a number of English magazines, such as the Saturday Review and the Outlook. Magazine editors still looked to the essayists for a good share of writing of the sort demanded by their patrons. But even in the periodicals the essay was unable to hold its own against its young but powerful rival, the short story, which came to win many writers and readers who in an earlier era would have written and read other forms of literature. At the end of the century it was evident from the loosening of the long-established alliance between the magazine and the essay that that type was definitely losing its popularity.

#### Its Chief Characteristics

The essay as it was written in England at the close of the nineteenth century represented the results of three hundred years of writing in the type by English men of letters. The form of writing it represented was first introduced into English literature in 1597, the year in which the first edition of Bacon's Essays was published. A comparison of Bacon's writing in the type with the essay-work of any one of the men considered in this study makes it clear that during the three centuries between him and the essayists of the present day important changes in the essay were made. To trace these changes throughout the various stages of

their evolution would require more time than the exigencies of the present study allow. A summary of the characteristics of the subject-matter and the methods of writing in the type at the end of the nineteenth century will, however, indicate the general direction in which these developments have moved.

Ever since the end of the eighteenth century there have been four main developments which have done much to determine the nature of writing in the type. Ever since that time the essay (1) has concerned itself less and less with serious and solemn matters and more and more with matters the consideration of which gives pleasure, (2) has left farther and farther behind conventional topics in its search for fresh subject-matter, (3) has become less formal and impersonal and increasingly informal and intimate. The English essay at the close of the last century represented a culmination of a century of development in the type along these lines.

At the end of the last century essayists wrote much more frequently about gay matters than about grave ones. One cannot say, to be sure, that they entirely eschewed subjects arousing serious thought or deep feeling. There are many essays of the period which would refute such a statement if one were so foolish as to make it. It is true nevertheless that these writers sought chiefly in their writing to entertain their readers and that they therefore usually selected essay-subjects which would be pleasant

for their reader to consider.

As these essayists sought pleasant subjects, so also did they seek fresh ones. It is easy to understand why it was necessary for men writing in the type as late as the last part of the nineteenth century to shy from such conventional topics as ambition, friendship, marriage, and the like. If they were to entertain their readers they could not simply reiterate what their predecessors in the art had written. Few people are regaled by platitudes. Yet it was at least not easy for essayists to say something new about matters that had been discussed by scores of essayists before them. It was much easier to find a subject the edges of which had not been worn smooth by handling. Hence the essayists of the later nineteenth century forsook the conventional topic to carry on the search for fresh material.

In their most typical essays these writers attempted chiefly to point out the interesting and the amusing features of their subjects rather than to use them as points of departure for lessons or sermons. Throughout the whole nineteenth century, indeed, the essay concerned itself less and less with teaching and preaching. The essayist at the end of the century was by no means a mere jester-- though he certainly donned cap and bells more frequently than he donned ecclesiastical robes. The essayists of the nineteenth century did not indulge in mere horse-play. But they certainly were not reformers; they were artists. As

artists they produced work in which didacticism was generally subordinated to whimsicality and wit and the other elements which make writing entertaining.

Just as the essay of the late nineteenth century was less didactic than that of the eighteenth, so was it also less impersonal and formal. By the end of the last century the essay was essentially a medium for intimate communication between writer and reader. Instead of hiding behind pseudonyms as the essayists of the eighteenth century had done, these essayists--most of them, at least--wrote under their own names and made definite attempts to establish as close a relationship between themselves and their readers as possible. Hence, the completeness of the revelation of themselves in their writing--their honest statements of their opinions, their frank acknowledgments of their faults, their unashamed presentations--and sometimes their exaggerations--of their idiosyncrasies. For a century the essay had been becoming more and more dependent upon the charm of the essayist for its success. Following the example of their predecessors in the art, these essayists deliberately avoided formality and all other foes of charm in their writing, and set for their main goal an intimate revelation of themselves to their reader.

## CHAPTER IV

## ARTHUR CHRISTOPHER BENSON

Life

Arthur Christopher Benson was born on April 24, 1862. His father, who was headmaster of Wellington College, in Berkshire, at the time of this son's birth, later became Archbishop of Canterbury. Benson received his education at Eton and Cambridge. As a boy he planned an ecclesiastical career for himself, but upon graduation from college, in 1884, he accepted the mastership at Eton, which he held until 1903. He was a Fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge, from 1904 to 1915, and Master there from 1915 till his death in 1925. He never married.

His Non-Essay Work

Arthur Christopher Benson, like the five other essayists to be considered in this study, has done considerable literary work outside the field of the essay. His essays are unlike those of the other essayists, however, in point of importance in comparison with the rest of his work; for his essays represent, beyond a doubt, the portion of his work which will last longest. Mr. Beerbohm, in the opinion of some critics, has done his best work as a parodist. Mr. Chesterton's poetry is of such high order that it may vie in importance with his essays. Mr. Belloc's special field is history. Mr. Lucas's travel books doubtless contain some of his best writing. Mr. Lynd's literary

criticism is perhaps as significant as his essays. But with Benson the scales tip heavily toward his essay-work. Although a prolific writer throughout a literary career of forty years, trying his hand at poetry, biography, literary criticism, and fiction, as well as at essays, Benson never produced a body of writing in any of these other forms that can compare in literary value with his essays.

A glance at Benson's writing in types other than the essay will serve to show the diversity of the man's talents and interests. The most important of his books in these other types are The Upton Letters (an edition of Queen Victoria's correspondence with Viscount Esher), Walter Pater (for the English Men of Letters Series), The Thread of Gold and Beside Still Waters (novels which are very essay like, but with a narrative thread), and his numerous poems.

In his edition of Benson's Diary Mr. Percy Lubbock, surveying the books which Benson had completed before his death, indicates the great amount of writing which came from Benson's pen:

Since the beginning of his career he had published about fifty books, and I cannot say how many more he had written.<sup>1</sup>

The explanation of Mr. Lubbock's not knowing exactly how much Benson had published is to be found in Benson's habit of publishing his books anonymously. A complete bibliography of his works is not available. It is almost certain,

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1. The Diary of Arthur Christopher Benson; ed. by Percy Lubbock; Longmans, Green & Co., N. Y., 1926. P. 299.

nevertheless, that his most important efforts have been identified. One may be confident that all evidence for and against the judgment already made concerning the lesser importance of his non-essay work is in. And, as has been noted, one may make this judgment concerning Benson's work with less apprehension of erring than concerning the work of any other essayist to be considered in this study.

### Volumes of Essays

#### 1. The House of Quiet (1904).

Benson's emergence as an essayist came in 1904 with the publication of The House of Quiet, which was anonymous in its first edition, but which Benson later claimed, after--as he says in the preface to the third edition--people had already found him out. The book was popular. The second edition came out in 1906 and the third in 1907.

Much of the volume does not consist of essay-work, as one might judge from the sub-title: "An Autobiography." It is by no means, however, an autobiography of an ordinary sort. The incidents in the life story presented in the book are not, for the most part, incidents that occurred in Benson's life; the book in its first edition purported to be the diary of a distant cousin of the author. But the spiritual experiences of the man whose story the book tells are obviously those of Benson himself, and in the presentation of these experiences the author writes what may be accurately termed essay work. Since this vol-

ume represents the author's first attempts in the type it deserves attention in the present study.

Among the sections in the book which are essays are those numbered 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 25, 29, 32, and 33, which range in length from about two thousand to thirty-five hundred words. Introduced discursively into these essays are discursions of typical Benson themes: (1) The joy he experiences in the moments when his "sense of beauty" gives him strange thrills; (2) His struggles against despondency; (3) His desire for knowledge of man's immortality.

## 2. From a College Window (1906).

Benson's next essay-work was in regular essay form. This volume consists of eighteen "essays of the centre," ranging in length from twenty-five hundred to five thousand words, twelve of which appeared in the Cornhill Magazine before being included in this volume.

In the first essay the author describes himself--a middle-aged Fellow in a small college, living the quiet, meditative life he likes--and states his general purpose in writing the book: "I am going to take the world into my confidence, and say, if I can, what I think and feel about the little bit of experience which I call my life, which seems to me such a strange and often so bewildering a thing."<sup>2</sup> The other essays discuss such general topics as books, conversation, beauty, art, education, and religion. Following the beginnings he had made in The House of Quiet,

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2. From a College Window, p. 3.

Benson continues his meditative consideration of traditional essay-subjects. Representative papers are "On Growing Older," "Beauty," "Education," and "Authorship."

Although one of Benson's most popular books, this volume is not as stimulating as some of his later volumes. Naturally lacking in originality, Benson does not fare well when discussing such age-old themes as he discusses here. His style here, however, is at its best--clear, leisurely, and--at times--mellifluous. In the volume there is a great deal of excellent description, which does much to clear up the heavy introspective haze that hovers over the essays. The volume ends with an essay on religion, which definitely introduces the religious element that runs throughout the essayist's work.

### 3. The Altar Fire (1907).

In structure the portions of this book which may be considered to be essays are like those essay like sections of The House of Quiet; like that volume, this one purports to be the diary of some one other than Benson. The entries in the diary (running from five hundred to fifteen hundred words in length) tell the story of a writer who passes through a disheartening period of doubt and tragic misfortune to a final achievement of faith in himself and hope in existence. As is true of The House of Quiet, the spiritual experiences of the man whose story the diary tells evidently represent, or at least symbolize, the spiritual experiences of Benson himself.

Many of these entries--those which carry the slender thread of the narrative along--are not essays; but fully half the book--those parts presenting the sufferer's reactions to his misfortunes--consists of true essay-work. Representative entries in the book are those under the following dates: September 8, 1888; September 18, 1888; November 29, 1888; June 28, 1889; May 10, 1891.

The essays are frequently morbid and at all times full of pathos; and in spite of the fact that its gloom is finally dispersed by a vague optimism, the book is not a pleasant one. It is characteristic of Benson in his more troubled moods, when he shrank from the ills of the world and the insufficiencies of life and groped for the faith and the hope for which he incessantly struggled but which at times seem to have deserted him almost entirely.

#### 4. At Large (1908).

This volume contains eighteen papers and an epilogue, the average length being about 4000 words. Twelve of the papers appeared in the Cornhill Magazine during 1907 and 1908. All are "essays of the centre" except two, "Kelm-scott and William Morris" and "Literary Finish," both of which contain an element of literary criticism.

Beginning with "The Scene," in which he describes his secluded vacation retreat and talks discursively about such subjects as marriage and single life, and the quiet life as opposed to the busy one, Benson goes on to discuss--as he did in From a College Window--conventional essay-subjects,

meditating about the common problems of human existence. Some of the essays, however--among which are "Equality," "Specialism," and "Our Lack of Great Men"--deal with less usual topics. These are the most interesting papers in the volume and are significant in their presentation of the author's attitudes.

The volume is important to the student of Benson for its revelation of the man. Benson continues as the meditative sermonizer. His stock of ideas is richer here than in From a College Window, but the book lacks charm. The author's interest in nature still leads him to introduce considerable description into his writing.

#### 5. The Silent Isle (1910).

Fifty-eight papers and an epilogue constitute this book. Some parts are not essays, among which are the parts numbered XXVII, XLVI, XLVII, XLVIII, and LI, consisting of biographical and literary criticism.

There is more variety here, both in moods and in ideas, than in most of Benson's books. The author as revealed in these essays is not as admirable and attractive as he is in From a College Window; he presents himself at times as somewhat of a misanthrope and also at times as a thoroughgoing egotist. But nevertheless, back of the frequent expressions of black moods and small prejudices Benson remains essentially interesting; sometimes, indeed, he is more original here than in either of his earlier books.

Throughout the essays are scattered passages revealing typical attitudes of the essayist--his natural inclination toward solitude; his liking for quiet, and for industrious living; his desire to increase in his life the "golden moments" when he is most sensitive to beauty and nearest to God. He continues consistently to preach.

Some of the most attractive essays in the volume are numbers XII, XIV, XVII, XIX, XXXI, and XXXVI.

#### 6. Joyous Gard (1913).

This volume contains twenty-seven essays and a preface, ranging in length from about thirteen hundred to twenty-six hundred words. These are not "of the centre" because of the didactic element that runs throughout the book; all contribute indirectly to the main thesis of the book; that every person should build within himself a retreat--a Castle of Joyous Gard like Lancelot's in Morte D'Arthur--where he may go in times of trouble to gain a new zest for living. However, in spite of definite attempts on the part of the author to advise the reader concerning the way of building this "fortress of beauty and joy," all the individual papers have in sufficient degree the marks of the essay to be said to belong to the type.

Some of the most important of the essays, for originality and charm, are "Ideas," "Art and Morality," "Interpretation," "Knowledge," and "Sympathy." As one may judge from these titles, Benson continues to choose common subjects to discuss; yet he displays in this volume an in-

spiriting attitude which raises these essays above the level of the trite. The book contains some of the essayist's brightest, most optimistic writing. The Benson revealed here is at all times attractive--less helpless and hopeless and more virile than usual. The style, however, is uneven, lacking the sustained beauty of the writing in some of the author's early work.

7. Escape and Other Essays (1915).

In Benson's last volume of essays appear fifteen essays with an introduction. Several of the essays, which range in length from about three thousand to four thousand words, first appeared in the Century Magazine and the Cornhill Magazine. One paper cannot be considered an essay--"Walt Whitman," a piece of literary criticism.

Events of the period are reflected in the "Introduction," in which Benson defends publishing in the gloom of war days this book, which was written in the happier pre-war days. In the essay from which the volume takes its title Benson echoes Stevenson's belief that it is better to travel than to arrive, coloring the idea with his own religious attitudes. Among the other essays those of most interest are "Literature and Life," "Charm," and "Authorship," the last of these being especially interesting for its presentation of Benson's attitude toward his writing.

Two vaguely outlined but real departures from his earlier work appear in the book: (1) a genuine interest in and sympathy for other people, and (2) a tendency toward

mysticism. This last element appears especially in "That Other One," a mystical treatment of the author's inner self which is out of keeping with his usual rationality.

These departures from what is more characteristic of Benson are interesting, to be sure; yet the volume, in its entirety, cannot compare in charm with some of Benson's earlier volumes.

### Substance of His Essays

It is likely that one of the things a reader first notices when he begins a volume of Benson's essays is that the titles are of the sort which have headed scores of essays in English literature since the time of Bacon. "Friendship," "Beauty," "Charm," "Optimism," "Conversation," "Contentment," "Joy"--these are typical titles in this essayist's books. They indicate the paths which Benson's thought most naturally followed. These are, of course, the sort of titles that call for typical essay-treatment. Under such titles are frequently--perhaps too frequently--written "essays of the centre." But they are the kind of titles, too, that most people regard suspiciously. The average reader of essays has read so many discussions of "Friendship" that he knows that any new consideration of the subject is likely to prove unsatisfactory--to result at best in little more than a stimulating presentation of old truths, at worst in no more than a dull reiteration of platitudes.

A reader thus apprehensive when turning to some of Ben-

son's essays under these venerable titles will undoubtedly find now and then that his fears were justified. Such a reader will discover, for example, that--as he expected--Bacon has written less tritely about "Friendship" than Benson has. Benson was a man of no great originality; if he had been original, he probably would not have been attracted so consistently to these age-old topics about which all people think and talk at times. He is undoubtedly guilty of the charge, now and then levelled at him by critics, of being platitudinous.

Yet not all in his essays is platitude; all is not dull. Benson, though lacking in charm, was an interesting man. He was not profound, but his mind was active. He lacked humor, imagination, and the ability to observe; and, as a result, his essays are heavy with solemn introspection. Yet in spite of these faults, they are interesting because the man is interesting.

Benson's life, though in outward appearance ordinary, quiet, and colorless, was in reality an unusual one--and, indeed, intellectually an unquiet one. Throughout his life he waged a battle, somewhat like Carlyle's, against doubt and mental depression--a battle in which he seems never to have won a decisive victory. As master at Eton and as Fellow and Master at Magdalene, he led a busy life, entering heartily into both the educational and social activities at these institutions. Yet he was but seldom at peace with himself. And at times his depression became so great as to incapacitate him for work.

This mental unrest which dogged the essayist was accompanied by a great propensity for introspection which made his work predominantly reflective. Of all the essayists considered in the present study, Benson is the least observant. He writes less of things about him and more about himself than almost any other essayist one could find. He did, in fact, make a special effort in his books to reveal himself as completely as possible. In the "Preface" to Joyous Gard he says:

. . . I believe that the instinct to guard and hoard the inner life is one that ought to be resisted. . . . In this book I have said, or tried to say, just what I thought as I thought it.<sup>3</sup>

As a result of Benson's determination to reveal himself to his reader his idiosyncrasies color his writing at most points, counteracting to a great extent the dullness which proceeds from the mediocrity of his mind, and thus lending interest to many discussions of conventional topics that otherwise would be dull. One must admit that many of his essays are obviously the product of an unoriginal mind; yet in spite of this fault, Benson's work usually is made interesting by its revelation of an essentially interesting man.

Notice has been taken of the fact that this writer's essays are predominantly reflective. It is to be expected that such an essayist would reveal many of his attitudes in his work; and this is, of course, what Benson does. He has formulated in his writing no definite system of philosophy; neither has he ever marshalled his mental forces and

3. Joyous Gard, pp. vii-viii.

given one final declaration of any of his beliefs. Yet throughout his essays there run a number of themes which are most characteristic of the writer's view of human existence. The most frequently reiterated of these are:

- (1) That the "golden moments" of life come when the soul is thrilled by God's revelation of himself in the beauties of nature.
- (2) That men may be both useful and happy leading quiet, busy lives outside the main currents of society.
- (3) That the beauty and the peace of nature are an unfailing source of inspiration and strength for men.
- (4) That modern educational methods need to be revised at many points.
- (5) That self-revelation on the part of writers is to be encouraged.
- (6) That he could win a complete victory over doubt and fear if he could know whether there is personal identity after death.
- (7) That men must establish a close relationship with God in order to end pain and despair and to give human existence its highest value.

This short list of frequently recurring themes is enough to indicate Benson's preoccupation with religious matters. Among the other essayists to be considered in the present study Chesterton alone can compare with Benson

in point of interest in religion; and the religious thinking of Benson is as far from that of Chesterton as it could be and remain religious. Entirely incapable of joking about ecclesiastical affairs, as Chesterton is, and lacking, too, the unfaltering faith of Chesterton, Benson was constantly a prey to his intense longing to effect, in spite of his doubting, a satisfactory adjustment with the Christian religion. His discussions of religious problems are so prominent in his writings that one critic, though convinced that Benson was not a preacher but essentially an artist, has declared that he is "first of all, a religious writer."<sup>4</sup> His sermonizings probably make his work unattractive to many readers. But considered in the light of the essayist's incessant struggle against the uncertainty and gloom that threatened his happiness all his life, the religious element in his work is especially significant to the person who desires to gain a true knowledge of the man. Moreover, although the didacticism issuing from this element at times imposes itself too heavily upon his essays, Benson's thinking upon religious matters is a source of the most intense feeling to which he has given expression in his writing, and in this respect represents an important feature of his work.

### Style in His Essays

At its worst, Benson's style has bad faults--unevenness, turgidity, prolixity. His early volumes contain his

4. "The Popular Essayist." The Outlook 85 ('07); 399-401.

best prose. In his later work his style degenerated, as one may learn by reading Escape and Other Essays. Mr. Harold Williams, writing in his Modern English Writers (1918), puts the matter rather harshly:

. . .both in the verse and prose of Mr. Benson too much has been sacrificed to style, for, at last, even style has gone and Mr. Benson's prose, which, at first, had distinction, has slipped into mellifluous garrulity.<sup>5</sup>

Although this criticism overstates the decline in the essayist's powers, there is enough truth in the statement to justify attention to it.

In an entry in his diary for December 21, 1913, Benson expresses dissatisfaction with his style:

It is curious. . .that I can't get a certain acidity of perception and a derisiveness of phrase into my books. In my books I am solemn, sweet, refined; in real life I am rather vehement, sharp, contemptuous, a busy mocker.<sup>6</sup>

He points here to one of the worst faults of his style-- a facile, but none the less pernicious, apathetic movement. It is lack of liveliness in the style that often leads the reader of Benson to think the essayist's ideas are more platitudinous than they really are.

Yet in spite of these faults, his style, at its best, is excellent. Though lacking in economy, his prose is lucid. Even Mr. Williams, whose acidulous judgment concerning the essayist's style has already been quoted, admits that Benson is easy to read.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in some of

5. Harold Williams, Modern English Writers, p. 130.

6. The Diary of Arthur Christopher Benson, p. 263.

7. Modern English Writers, p. 130.

his volumes--especially in From a College Window--Benson achieves real beauty in his prose effects. He is a stylist of the old school. He never employs the journalistic tricks of the sort one finds in Chesterton and Belloc, but instead makes his chief goals melody and perspicacity. And though lacking versatility in matters of style--seemingly unable to catch that "derisiveness of phrase" which he thought he had "in real life", and doomed in his books to be "solemn, sweet, refined"--Benson is, within his limits, a writer of prose that can compare in qualities of style with that of Mr. Lucas or Mr. Chesterton or Mr. Belloc, if not, perhaps, with that of Mr. Beerbohm and Mr. Lynd.

#### Evaluation of His Essay-work

Of all the essayists considered in this study Benson is least read today. It is probable that as time passes he will be read less and less. Lacking in charm--the indispensable quality of this type of prose--his essays fail to hold many readers who dip into his volumes. One must remember, however, that during the years when his earliest and best essays were published Benson had a moderately large audience. An anonymous critic writing in The Outlook (English) in 1907 heads a study of the writer's work with the significant title, "A Popular Essayist," and in his article says: "Very few writers of the serious temper, using chiefly the essay form, have attained popularity

so suddenly as Mr. Arthur Christopher Benson . . ."<sup>8</sup>

The qualifications of this praise, one notes, indicates that the critic was cognizant of the fact that the meditative note in Benson's work limited the range of its appeal.

No one was more keenly aware of the narrowness of his appeal than the essayist himself. In his Diary, under the date of December 31, 1906, appears this statement of bitter self-criticism:

My desire is to write a great and beautiful book-- and instead I have become the beloved author of a feminine tea-party kind of audience, the mild and low-spirited people, who would like to think the world a finer place than they have any reason for doing. Well, I don't doubt that if I were a bigger and a better man I should have more to say--but I am petty, timid, luxurious; and so my faculty of writing runs to waste in quiet pools. What I desire is more reality and more courage, to find some reservoir of strength and patience to draw upon.<sup>9</sup>

It is lamentable that one effect of the writer's self-criticism was to render him helpless and incapable of rising above his faults. Yet in spite of his shortcomings he sometimes turned out, in his happier moods, essays possessing a certain quiet beauty and, in his black moods, expressions of his despair that glow with intensity of feeling. His essay-work, considered in its entirety, represents a fairly successful attempt on the author's part to examine himself, which he did with inexhaustible interest and industry, and to reveal himself honestly and with careful art to his reader. Hence it is that though

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8. "A Popular Essayist," p. 399.

9. The Diary of Arthur Christopher Benson, p. 153.

his essays are not on the high level of artistic achievement where Mr. Beerbohm's and Mr. Lynd's rest, one may say with reasonable certainty that his work deserves the attention of any one who would trace the essay wherever it has appeared in its most interesting and significant forms during the period covered by this study.

CHAPTER V  
MAX BEERBOHM

Life

Max Beerbohm was born in London in 1872. He attended Merton College, Oxford, where he began his writing career as an undergraduate. He visited America in 1895. He was a contributor to The Yellow Book and other London periodicals during the early years of his career. He has gained wide fame as an artist and caricaturist. In 1910 he married Florence Kahn of Memphis, Tennessee. Since 1911 he has lived in Rapallo, Italy.

His Non-Essay Work

Mr. Beerbohm has done more writing outside the field of the essay than in it. He has been praised by many critics for his parodies and his satires. His best efforts in these fields are in A Christmas Garland, Seven Men, and Zuleika Dobson, books which are generally recognized as containing some of the best of modern wit and humor.

Volumes of Essays

1. Yet Again (1909).

In this volume, the first belonging to the period covered by this study, Mr. Beerbohm followed the beginnings

he had made in his first volume of essays, More, published in 1899. That first volume had introduced him as an essayist displaying a sophisticated attitude, a delicate and urbane sense of humor, and a graceful and meticulous style. Yet Again also represents him as such a writer.

The volume contains thirty-one papers, not all of which are essays. The last nine papers in the volume may perhaps be best described as word-pictures. Another paper, "Whistler's Writing," contains too much literary criticism to be considered an essay. These papers were selected from a dozen periodicals, among which are the Saturday Review, the New Quarterly, Vanity Fair, and Harper's Magazine. The essays range in length from about twenty-five hundred to five thousand words.

The first essay, "The Fire," reveals the essayist's capacity for serious emotion and his ability to appreciate delicate nuances of beauty in natural things. In "Seeing People Off" the author displays a gay-humored but sympathetic interest in the vagaries of mankind. "A Memory of a Midnight Express" is interesting for its revelation of one of the essayist's more solemn moods. Other representative papers are "General Elections," "The Naming of Streets," and "Dulcedo Judiciorum." The essayist revealed in this volume is at all times genial and seldom dull in his geniality. The essays do not stir the reader to laughter by any hilarious fun-making, but they do keep him delighted by the delicate yet obvious humor with which they

all are freighted.

2. And Even Now (1920).

In his third and last volume of essays Mr. Beerbohm reaches the height of his achievement as an essayist. The book contains twenty papers written at various times during the years from 1910 to 1920. All these are essays, but not all are "of the centre," among those that are not being "A Relic," and "No. 2. The Pines," both marked by a narrative element, and "A Clergyman," which is part sketch.

"A Clergyman" is one of Mr. Beerbohm's best essays. Others in the volume are also among his best. "Hosts and Guests," a somewhat Addison-like treatment of manners, is urbanely clever. "A Point to be Remembered by Very Eminent Men" illustrates the author's ability in the field of gentle irony. "Laughter" proves that this essayist's fancy can soar above the platitudinous in dealing with conventional subjects.

These essays illustrate well the methods of Mr. Beerbohm. They contain neither controversy nor sentimentality. The author's chief goal is entertainment of the reader. In order to achieve this he selects pleasant ideas, decks them in "fancy's robes," and presents them to the reader with a courteous and good-humored bow. Now and then the play of ideas may be a little too subtle to seem altogether convincing, but usually the reader is entertained.

Substance of His Essays

It is a far cry from Benson's essay-work to that of Mr. Beerbohm. Benson's essays are, to be sure, considerably unlike those of any other essayist to be studied here-- even those of Mr. Chesterton, which most nearly approach Benson's in point of serious social criticism. But of all these men Mr. Beerbohm is most unlike the solemn Benson, least concerned with the more serious aspects of life. Benson struggled almost constantly in his writing with some of the knottiest problems of human existence. Mr. Beerbohm never struggles with anything in his writing; instead of wrestling with problems, he prefers to play with figments of his fancy. He is of all these essayists most concerned with trifles.

It is interesting to note in this connection that both Benson and Mr. Beerbohm were contributors to the Yellow Book. Any one who reads these essayists today can tell almost at a glance which of the two was most at home in the company of such an esthete as Aubrey Beardsley. Although his poems appeared in the same periodical with the work of men like Beardsley, Benson by no means shared their attitudes toward the world about him. He was a Victorian till his death. Mr. Beerbohm was more closely associated with the esthetes, was by nature equipped to be one of them. In the opinion of two American critics, he is "the only surviving writer who carries over to

present times the full flavor of the eighteen-nineties."<sup>1</sup> The difference between the essays of Mr. Beerbohm and those of Benson is to a considerable extent the difference between the spirit of the Victorian era and the spirit of the eighteen-nineties.

The temper of Mr. Beerbohm's mind is reflected in his choice of subjects. Unlike Benson, he seldom writes on such broad topics as beauty, art, conversation, education, and religion. Instead, in his most typical essays he deals with the harmless vagaries of the men about him or expands some figment of his delicate fancy. Typical titles in his books are "The Decline of the Graces," "Seeing People Off," "Hosts and Guests," "The Naming of Streets," and "The Blight on the Music Halls." In such papers as these he playfully exaggerates the importance of trifles. Seldom does he set men and women against the background of the eternal verities and ponder about the consequences of their actions. Rather he is content to observe them, to mark their habits, and to laugh goodnaturedly at their eccentricities. Seldom, also, does he set his own thoughts against the background of a system of philosophy. Rather he is content to let his fancy play with his ideas as it will, and then to present the result as entertainingly as possible.

Mr. Beerbohm is not, however, a mere jester. He is considerably more than a humorist. Now and then in his

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1. Carl and Mark Van Doren, American and British Literature Since 1890, p. 248.

essays one finds good-humor tinged with gravity. For instance, in "A Memory of a Midnight Express" appears this solemn observation:

In every one of us the deepest emotions are constantly caused by some absurdly trivial thing, or by nothing at all. Conversely, the great things in our lives--the true occasions for wrath, anguish, rapture, what not--very often leave us quite calm. We never can depend on any right adjustment of emotion to circumstance. That is one of the many reasons which prevent the philosopher from taking himself and his fellow-beings quite so seriously as he would wish.<sup>2</sup>

Such passages make it evident that this essayist is capable of serious thought and that his moods are not all gay-colored.

It is true, nevertheless, that such solemnity is rare in Mr. Beerbohm's essays. His genial humor is too intimately a part of his personality to allow much that is grave to enter his writing, just as his impeccable good taste keeps out all that is ugly. The real Mr. Beerbohm is to be found in passages like this one from "A Morris For May-Day," in which he pokes fun at Mr. Chesterton:

Though I happen never to have met him out-of-doors, I am sure my friend Mr. Gilbert Chesterton always prances. . . in some wild way symbolical of joy in modern life. His steps, and the movements of his arms and body, may seem to you crude, casual, and disconnected at first sight; but that is merely because they are spontaneous. If you studied them carefully, you would begin to discern a certain rhythm, a certain harmony. You would at length be able to compose from them a specific dance--a dance not quite like any other--a dance formally expressive of new English optimism.<sup>3</sup>

The ludicrous imagery of this passage--the chief source of the humor--makes evident the contribution of caricature to

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2. Yet Again, p. 34.

3. Ibid., pp. 153-4.

Mr. Beerbohm's essay writing.

Of all the essayists to be considered in this study Mr. Beerbohm is perhaps the wittiest. Mr. Belloc's and Mr. Chesterton's essays are full of clever writing, and Mr. Lynd's are shot through and through with quiet humor; but it is in Mr. Beerbohm's that one finds wit of the highest order--wit ranked by two critics "with that of Shakspeare, Congreve, Sterne, and Oscar Wilde."<sup>4</sup> It would be difficult to find particular passages illustrating this quality in his work, although it does epitomize itself now and then in such a cryptic statement as "Pessimism does win us great happy moments."<sup>5</sup> His wit is not the kind which corruscates from a few facets, but rather the kind which makes an entire piece of writing sparkle. When after reading an essay by Mr. Beerbohm one goes back to look for things which have made him chuckle, one often finds that the wit lies not in individual clever sentences but in the facile play of ideas upon the background of a mirth-provoking attitude toward the subject.

Mr. Beerbohm is especially unlike Benson in the matter of self-revelation in his essays. There is no ingrown subjectivity in his books as there is in Benson's. He does not take himself too seriously. He has a keen interest in things about him. His viewpoint is narrow; he is almost completely urban. He has little interest in physical nature, less than any other of the essayists treated in this

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4. American and British Literature Since 1890, p. 252.

5. And Even Now, p. 139.

study. But he is greatly interested in human nature. And though he seldom leaves the city in search of subjects for his essays, what he does write is full of the life he knows; for he is a careful observer and possesses a keen understanding of people. Although he puts himself into his writing without restraint, his unflagging interest in things about him and his light-hearted mock-egotism--evincing itself in such bits of playful self-praise as "I'll be hanged if I haven't a certain mellow wisdom"<sup>6</sup>--make his self-revelation charming to the reader.

#### Style in His Essays

Notice has already been taken of the fact that a result of Mr. Beerbohm's favorite method of developing his discussions by letting his ideas play about against the background of a mirth-provoking attitude toward his subject, is that he writes few sentences that are clever in themselves. Such an observation leads one to the chief characteristic of his style--its unobtrusive efficiency. One seldom runs upon a sentence in these essays that he wants to quote, as one does often in Hazlitt and Stevenson. Mr. Beerbohm's style is so far from being aphoristic that a reader of his essays usually forgets about matters of style. One seldom stops in his books to admire a sentence for its economy or eloquence. When one does critically examine Mr. Beerbohm's prose, however, one realizes that

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6. And Even Now, p. 304.

there are high qualities besides those of economy and eloquence. One realizes that good style is not always confined within the boundaries of individual sentences, but that good style may pervade an entire piece of writing. For such is style in these volumes--as necessary to the essayist as is mortar to a bricklayer.

There are fewer tricks of style in Mr. Beerbohm's essays than in Mr. Belloc's and Mr. Chesterton's. There is nothing in these volumes to compare with Mr. Chesterton's paradoxes or with Mr. Belloc's parentheses. He attempts to express his ideas aptly rather than startlingly, and searches for the facile phrase rather than for the picturesque one. In his first volume of essays Mr. Beerbohm made known his tastes in matters of style. "I love best in literature delicate and elaborate ingenuities of form and style,"<sup>7</sup> he said in the essay on Quida. Such tastes have kept him from employing the heavy-handed methods of the average journalist. At the same time, he has not been mastered by his love for the "elaborate ingenuities" of style. He has acquired no mannerisms. The result is that he is one of the best stylists among contemporary British essayists. Messrs. Van Doren rank him with the masters of English prose style. "His prose," they say, "is as precise and pure as any in the language."<sup>8</sup>

#### Evaluation of His Work

Of the essayists to be considered here Mr. Beerbohm

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7. More, p. 117.

8. American and British Literature Since 1890, p. 252.

has produced the least essay-work. His talents have run more naturally to satire and parody than to the essay, and the result is that he has published only three volumes containing work in this type. Judged from one point of view, the meagerness of his essay-work might be considered advantageous to his reputation; judged from another point of view, it might be considered deleterious. Since he has done most of his best literary work as a parodist and satirist, his essays are sometimes overlooked by critics and, hence, by the general reader who reads the critics. On the other hand, since he has written such a small body of essay-work he has not yet exhausted the resources of his natural equipment for essay writing as some essayists have. An essayist's chief capital is himself. Few prolific essayists avoid the pitfall of "mellifluous garrulity" which lies in the path of any writer who spins his literary web so entirely from his own personality as the essayist does. In the small body of essay-work which he has turned out Mr. Beerbohm has not used up his stock of natural charm, which fact helps to explain why his performance in the type has consistently been high.

He is entertaining almost without fail. One does not go to him for the mellow wisdom that enhances the value of Mr. Lynd's volumes. His essays play about on the surface of things; they are marked by no deep emotion and little serious thinking. Perhaps they are too superficial to satisfy completely the average reader. But his great

genial wit is not to be forgotten. For the man who enjoys most the play of delicate humor Mr. Beerbohm is probably of all the essayists to be considered here the most satisfactory. His contribution to modern prose style, too, is substantial. When any discerning critic surveys contemporary literature for developments in prose style, it is probable that Mr. Beerbohm's essays do not go unnoticed.

## CHAPTER VI

## GILBERT KEITH CHESTERTON

Life

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was born in London in 1874. He was educated at St. Paul's School. Later he studied art, but finally turned to journalism. He first attracted attention as the author of articles in the Daily News and the Speaker. He has been associated with newspapers throughout his literary career, and for years has been one of the leading journalists of England. He is at present editor of a periodical of his own, G. K.'s Weekly. Like Mr. Belloc, his intimate friend, he is an ardent Roman Catholic. He married in 1901.

Non-Essay Work

Mr. Chesterton is one of the most versatile of present day writers. Besides being an essayist of high rank, he has done significant work as a journalist, dramatist, poet, novelist, and critic. His novels and his poetry are especially important. The Man Who Was Thursday and The Napoleon of Nottingham Hill are among his best novels. He is generally conceded a place in the front rank of contemporary poets. His reputation as a writer of light verse is wide, but his serious poetry is of even more significance. The Ballad of the White Horse and Lepanto are two of his most popular poems.

## Volumes of Essays

### 1. The Defendant (1901).

This book, consisting of fifteen papers which originally appeared in the Speaker, represents Mr. Chesterton's initial efforts in the field of the essay. The essays range in length from twelve hundred to two thousand words.

At several important points in these early efforts the essayist gave notice of the nature of the work he was to do later. The most significant feature of these papers is their presentation of unusual points of view--a feature which was to mark all of Mr. Chesterton's later essay-work. Some of the papers defend things that might seem not to need defending; for example, "A Defence of Patriotism." Others, such as "A Defence of Ugly Things," defend things that might seem to be indefensible. The essayist's methods of treating his subjects are also characteristic. Although his points of view are startling because they are stated in paradoxes, his basic attitudes are orthodox. The essays are by no means iconoclastic; neither are they mere whimsicalities. Rather they are actually conservative in regard to substance.

Particularly thought-provoking essays in the book are "A Defence of Penny Dreadfuls," "A Defence of Slang," and "A Defence of Rash Vows."

### 2. Heretics (1906).

This volume contains twenty papers, ranging in length

from fifteen hundred to four thousand words. All are essays except the four pieces of literary criticism dealing with Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, George Moore, and Whistler. All the papers are too didactic to be placed among the "essays of the centre."

Practically every one of Mr. Chesterton's volumes of essays has a main thesis which, though it seldom becomes so noticeable as to make the writing non-essay-work, gives a philosophic unity to the collection of essays. The main thesis here is "that it is a fundamental point of view, a philosophy or religion which is needed" to cure the ills of modern society, "and not any change in habit or social routine."<sup>1</sup> In the light of this belief--which has remained an important part of Mr. Chesterton's social criticism throughout his career--the various problems are reviewed. Representative essays are "On the Negative Spirit," "Christmas and the Aesthetes," "Omar and the Sacred Vine," and "On Sandals and Simplicity."

As in his later books, so here the essayist defends human nature against those who would "improve" it. He is, as ever, a subtle logician and a nimble-witted controversialist. He continues to employ paradoxes frequently.

### 3. Orthodoxy (1908).

In this book "It is the purpose of the writer to attempt an explanation, not of whether the Christian Faith can be believed, but of how he personally has come to

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1. Heretics, p. 140.

believe it."<sup>2</sup> As the author says in the first essay, however, the book is not an "ecclesiastical treatise," but really consists of nine long essays.

In these essays the author continues as an ardent controversialist. As usual he spends a great deal of time defending his views. In "The Maniac" he defends imagination against the charges of the rationalists. In "The Suicide of Thought" he defends faith, and in one of his characteristic paradoxes maintains that reason itself is faith. The book as a whole is a defence of Christianity.

As far as philosophical matters are concerned, this is perhaps one of the author's most important books. It is, of course, a significant book for the student of Mr. Chesterton, for it epitomizes his religious thinking. The didactic element is so heavy in these essays, however, that most of them lack charm.

#### 4. Tremendous Trifles (1909).

In this book Mr. Chesterton proves that he has a capacity for fanciful imagining as well as for logical reasoning. He displays a riotous sense of humor here, too, that provides welcome relief to the reader who is tired of discussions of theology. He preaches, to be sure. Mr. Chesterton has always been a preacher. But here the didacticism is quite often pushed entirely aside, and fancy is allowed to take the center of the stage.

The book contains thirty-eight essays, which appeared

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2. Orthodoxy, p. vii.

originally in the Daily News, and which range in length from twelve hundred to sixteen hundred words. Among these are some of the author's best efforts in the type. In "A Piece of Chalk" and "On Lying in Bed" his whimsicality is delightful. "The Advantages of Having One Leg" and "What I Found in My Pocket" are full of charming humor. "The Giant" represents one of Mr. Chesterton's characteristic attempts at impressionistic description. "A Great Man" is an excursion into the realm of phantasy. All in all, there is much variety in the book.

Tremendous Trifles is undoubtedly one of this essayist's best volumes. In it he reveals himself in a more favorable light than he usually does; he is less dogmatic and much more likeable than in any of his other collections of essays.

##### 5. Alarms and Discursions (1910).

This volume also contains a variety of papers; but while some of the essays are excellent, the book in its entirety is not as charming as Tremendous Trifles. Thirty-nine essays, ranging in length from twelve hundred to sixteen hundred words, constitute the volume.

There is a strong element of mysticism in his treatment of some of his subjects, especially evident in the highly impressionistic description of "The Wings of Stone" and "The Nightmare." This element of mysticism doubtless proceeds from the author's great capacity for wonder at

even the commonest phenomena about him.

"Simmons and the Social Tie," in which Mr. Chesterton's characteristic practice of mingling the humorous and the solemn produces a most entertaining effect, is one of the best papers to be found in his books. "The Man and His Newspaper" and "The Anarchist" reveal a keen interest in the foibles of human nature. In "The Futurists" and "How I Found the Superman" the author's wit is at its deadliest. In some of the essays he displays an active interest in nature, but here--as usual--nature serves chiefly to furnish him parables.

6. A Miscellany of Men (1912).

The thirty-seven essays constituting this volume contain some of Mr. Chesterton's dullest writing. Most of the papers are strongly didactic, and in his teaching and preaching the essayist is less entertaining than usual.

The volume begins promisingly with "The Poet and the Cheese," a paper full of whimsicality and humor; but following this are essays heavy with parables and analogies and arguments of all kinds against Eugenics, Imperialism, Socialism, and various other institutions and movements that Mr. Chesterton opposes. This element of didacticism never becomes so prominent as to make the papers non-essay-work. But it is introduced directly or discursively into most of these essays and in a more heavy-handed manner than is characteristic of the author at his best.

There are, however, a few delightful papers in the

book, among which are "The Hypothetical Householder," "The Romantic in the Rain," and "The Contented Man."

7. The Uses of Diversity (1920).

This collection contains thirty-five short papers, ranging in length from about one thousand to twenty-five hundred words. Several are not essays, among which are pieces of literary criticism dealing with Rostand, George Wyndham, and George Meredith.

Few of the essays are "of the centre." Most of them contain a pronounced didactic element. Typical topics for discussion are divorce, Mormonism, historical novels, and pseudo-scientific books. The best papers in the volume are several "essays of the centre," including "On Pigs as Pets," "More Thoughts on Christmas," "Lamp-Posts," and "On Seriousness." The last of these is especially interesting in the light of the criticism which has been levelled against Mr. Chesterton's gaiety in dealing with solemn matters.

The volume is as a whole, however, lacking in charm. There is little humor to alleviate the didacticism, which at times obscures some of the more pleasing qualities of the writing.

8. Eugenics and Other Evils (1922).

This volume appears to be nothing more than a brochure on the subject of eugenics, but it is in reality a series of seventeen papers, which--although they are all loosely connected with the general theme of the book--may with

propriety be called essays.

Mr. Chesterton's objections to eugenics, introduced discursively into the several papers, are (1) that the practice is basically wrong; (2) that there is no one to enforce the practice; (3) that it is the instrument of capitalism; and (4) that it is a part of the general curtailment of personal liberty.

Throughout the book the essayist's sharp wit alleviates the didacticism which marks the essays to the extent that they cannot be said to be "of the centre." Among the most interesting of the papers are "The Lunatic and the Law," and "The Flying Authority."

#### 9. Fancies Versus Fads (1923).

Mr. Chesterton's last volume of essays in the period covered by this study seems to justify the judgment that he has suffered a decline in his powers as an essayist since the appearance of Tremendous Trifles.

The book contains thirty essays of average length and an introduction. There is considerable variety in the subjects treated in the papers. Yet in spite of this variety in the subjects, there is little in the volume that is new to one who has read the author's earlier books. Several of the essays are nevertheless thought-provoking and pleasant, among which are "Hamlet and the Psycho-Analysts," "Street Cries and Stretching the Laws," and "Much Too Modern History." But the volume, considered in its entirety, is heavy with didacticism--didacticism which

is neither greatly original in substance nor lively in style.

### Substance of His Essays

The most salient feature of Mr. Chesterton's essay-work is its didacticism. Like Benson, Mr. Chesterton takes life quite seriously, though of course in a different way. Although his essays contain a good deal of clowning--so much that some critics have charged the essayist with being too flippant in dealing with serious matters--his writing in the volumes examined here reveals him as essentially a serious thinker and an ardent champion of what appears to him to be the truth.

Such writing naturally proceeds from Mr. Chesterton's conception of the essay as a literary form. His latest volume of essays contains a paper on the essay, in which he laments the fact that the opinions of essayists are not as definite as they should be. In his opinion, the essay, the modern counterpart of the logic-laden thesis of medieval times, is in its irresponsible discursiveness symptomatic of the modern man's inability to think any matter through to a conclusion; that it has, in short, wandered too far away from the thesis.<sup>3</sup> Such a conception of the essay is just what the careful reader of Mr. Chesterton's essays expects him to hold. It is only a feature of the essayist's serious attitude toward all writing. Early in his career he wrote:

. . .no man ought to write at all, or even to speak at all, unless he thinks he is in truth and the

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3. Come to Think of It, pp. 3-4.

other man in error.<sup>4</sup>

The writing of any one who champions dogma as tirelessly as Mr. Chesterton does is likely to be marked by a strong didactic element, even though that writing be in a literary kind of which lightness, rather than heaviness, is typical, both in matters of substance and matters of style.

Mr. Chesterton's essays are no exception to this rule. In line with his conception of this literary type, his essays, more than those of any other essayist considered here, resemble the thesis of medieval times. Throughout his books he makes it plain that he does not consider himself one of those typical modern essayists who cannot think matters through to a conclusion. Conclusions abound in all his volumes--conclusions forcefully, sometimes fiercely, stated and tirelessly defended.

It is not necessary here to survey this essayist's many dogmas. This partial list of his opinions will serve to indicate the general nature of his thought:

1. The Catholic faith is the source of what is best in modern civilization.
2. There is no alternative of reason or faith. "Reason is itself a matter of faith."<sup>5</sup>
3. Human nature is essentially healthy and sound.
4. People today need a fundamental philosophy to clarify their thinking and give meaning to life.

4. Heretics, p. 287.

5. Orthodoxy, p. 58.

5. Personal liberty is dwindling.
6. Science is leading men into error.
7. The aristocrats are the chief source of trouble in democracies.
8. The practice of eugenics is entirely undesirable.

These are among the opinions which one encounters oftenest in the essays. It is obvious from this partial list of his beliefs that Mr. Chesterton's thinking has been influenced considerably by his affiliation with the Catholic church. There is no one perhaps who would dare to say that he is not an original thinker. Yet it is possible that his unusual methods in expressing his opinions-- his startling paradoxes, his scathing sarcasm, his ingenious logic, his militant tone--have led some people to attribute to him more originality as a thinker than he actually possesses. He undoubtedly has an enormously active intellect. His ability in controversy is nothing less than brilliant. But it seems likely that critics who, like Mr. Patrick Braybrooke,<sup>6</sup> consider him to be one of the great thinkers of this century have at some points mistaken original literary methods for original philosophy.

One must not forget, however, that there is more than unvarnished didacticism in this author's essays. If in his writing he were content merely to state and defend his opinions, his work would not be considered in this study. But Mr. Chesterton is by no means a mere controversialist; he is so versatile that even his great natural bent for

6. Patrick Braybrooke, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 119.

debate cannot smother his other talents. There is, indeed, more variety in his essay-work than in Benson's or Mr. Beerbohm's or Mr. Lucas's. Delicate fancy, droll whimsicality, clever wit, light humor, gay-hearted solemnity, and other such varied qualities combine with nimble-witted logic to raise his writing far above the level of the ecclesiastical treatise and the average newspaper editorial. A number of his essays, like "A Piece of Chalk," are ruled almost entirely by genial humor and fanciful imagination, and some--such as "The Wings of Stone"--by mysticism and phantasy. In his best books lighter qualities such as these add charm even to the more heavily didactic essays. It is true, of course, that his didacticism is not always as delightful as it is in Tremendous Trifles, where wit and fancy play alongside the ever-present logic. In his later work, where the elements of controversy and moralizing are especially heavy and light touches are less numerous, there is considerable dull writing. To the reader who desires to be entertained--and most readers of essays do--Fancies Versus Fads and The Uses of Diversity are at times extremely wearisome. If the reader is not an ardent admirer of Mr. Chesterton, or if he is not in sympathy with the essayist's dogmas, he may not only be wearied but irritated by the continual lugging in of arguments and parables and moral-pointing analogies. In the essayist's best books, however, the spice of variety counteracts the tedium of didacticism to the extent that the reader is always kept interested and is usually entertained.

### Style in His Essays

In spite of the fact that Mr. Chesterton is an original thinker, it is probable that his writings would receive less attention if his style were less unusual. His style has many faults, but in spite of those faults it does much to attract and hold the reader's attention.

The chief feature of his style which makes it an unusual one is the author's almost constant use of paradox. The statement, "The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason,"<sup>7</sup> a contention which Mr. Chesterton makes in his defence of faith against the charges of the rationalists, illustrates the essayist's most characteristic way of approaching his subjects. This method of presenting even his most orthodox opinions reflects one of his basic attitudes toward the nature of truth:

But the true result of all experience and the true foundation of all religion is this. That the four or five things that it is most practically essential that a man should know, are all of them what people call paradoxes. That is to say, that though we all find them in life to be plain truths, yet we cannot easily state them in words without being guilty of seeming verbal contradictions.<sup>8</sup>

Whether such a view of truth is sound or not, Mr. Chesterton's paradoxes usually serve him well, adding materially to the interestingness of the essays. They are undoubtedly peculiarly expressive of his unusual personality and for that reason constitute a significant element in his style. Unfortunately, however, he has not used them as moderately as he should. The paradox represents a stylistic trick--

7. Orthodoxy, p. 32.

8. Tremendous Trifles, p. 66.

a departure from the level of straightforward assertion, and as an unusual element, is bound to be noticed by the reader. Since there is no trick which if repeated a sufficient number of times will not grow wearisome to the audience--if not to the performer--the numerous paradoxes in Mr. Chesterton's essays at times detract from rather than add to the inherent interest of the ideas. Although his use of the trick adds much to the brilliance of his writing, he is now and then, in spite of his ingenuity, the victim of his desire to startle the reader; simply because his reader ultimately comes to expect frequent surprises and thus renders himself less sensitive to their force.

Unlike Mr. Beerbohm's style, Mr. Chesterton's style is aphoristic. He is, indeed, the most quotable of all the essayists considered in this study. His delicate humor, trenchant wit, hilarious solemnity, clear insight, and keen critical ability all find apt expression in his essays. Apparently, however, he is too greatly preoccupied in his composition with the search for breath-taking utterances that will linger in the reader's mind, for his style is at times decidedly uneven. In most of his books one finds passages marked by admirable force and facility followed immediately by other passages in which his force has degenerated into ineffective garrulity and his facility been smothered by awkward, sprawling sentences.

#### Evaluation of His Essay-Work

It is probable that Mr. Chesterton attracted more

attention during the years from 1900 to 1925 than any of the other men considered here. His astonishing versatility has expressed itself in so many literary forms that the average reader is bound to run into some product of his pen every once in a while. The exact extent to which his reputation depends upon his essays is difficult to estimate. But one is probably safe in attributing at least as much of his fame to his essay-work as to his work in any other field.

There are several reasons why Mr. Chesterton's essays have attracted considerable attention. His championship of his religion has led many people interested in the ancient feud between Catholics and Protestants to read his books. His nimble-witted logic, his ingenious methods of argument, and his great delight in controversy have won the admiration of many who enjoy debate. His riotous humor, his delicate fancy, and his fantastic imagination have made his essays attractive in spite of their didacticism to those who like to be delighted rather than preached to by their books. There is such a great variety in his best volumes of essays that almost every reader may find something to suit his taste.

Yet in spite of the fact that his essay-work appeals to many types of readers, it seems to fall short of the plane of high artistic achievement where rest the essays of Mr. Beerbohm and Mr. Lynd. When one compares Mr. Chesterton's books with those of these two essayists, one

is forced to recognize serious defects and shortcomings in Mr. Chesterton's essay-work. One sees that his essay-work, considered in its entirety, is heavy with didacticism to the extent that it often lacks charm. One sees that the man revealed by his essays--and this is an important matter in this particular literary form--is not as attractive as the men revealed in the volumes of Mr. Beerbohm and Mr. Lynd. One sees that the faults of his style detract from the artistic value of his writing. And though one can point to many virtues in his work--certainly a sufficiently large number to justify placing Mr. Chesterton's name upon the list of significant essayists of the years from 1900 to 1925--one would hesitate to give him the high praise deserved by such writers of the period as Mr. Lynd and Mr. Beerbohm.

CHAPTER VII  
HILAIRE BELLOC

Life

Hilaire Belloc was born near Paris in 1870. He was taken to England as a child and reared in Sussex. After graduation from Balliol College, Oxford, in 1892, he immediately began a successful career as a writer. He visited the United States in 1896. From 1906 to 1910 he was a member of the House of Commons. Since 1910 he has written almost constantly. He is a Liberal in politics, and a Roman Catholic in religion. He is a devotee of outdoor sports. His home is at King's Land, Shipley, Horsham, about twenty miles from London. He has two sons and two daughters.

Non-Essay Work

Like most of the other essayists considered here, Mr. Belloc is a prolific writer. The author of more than fifty books, he has written fiction, poetry, verse for children, biography, history, and books on political science, as well as essays. His volumes of essays represent some of his best writing, but some of his other books are of considerable significance. Emmanuel Burden is one of his most important novels. His most serious effort in the writing of history is his four-volume History of England.

Volumes of Essays1. Hills and the Sea (1906).

Mr. Belloc's first volume of essays contains some of his best work in the type. Most of these thirty-eight papers, which range in length from about twelve hundred to four thousand words, first appeared in newspapers and periodicals, including the Speaker, the Morning Post, and the Pall Mall Magazine. All are essays, though in some the narrative and descriptive elements are so pronounced that they cannot be said to be "of the centre."

The essayist's broad interest in things about him makes for great variety in the substance of the essays. His love for boating finds expression in many of the papers, among which "The North Sea" is especially delightful. His inexhaustible and sympathetic interest in people is evident in such essays as "The Singer" and "The Onion-eater." His devotion to England evinces itself in "The Valley of the Rother." His sensitivity to nature finds voice in "The Slant off the Land" and "On the Mowing of a Field," the last of which is one of the author's most charming essays. "The Looe Stream" presents his characteristic interest in history.

The book is vigorous with the inspiriting masculinity that marks all Mr. Belloc's best work. There is a little less humor in this volume than in some of his later ones. The style, though lively, is more restrained than the style of much of his later work.

## 2. On Nothing and Kindred Subjects (1908).

The thirty-one essays constituting this book range in length from fourteen hundred to twenty-four hundred words and are all "of the centre." This volume is characteristic of Mr. Belloc in his lighter moods. Several papers, such as "On the Pleasure of Taking Up One's Pen," are delightful in their consideration of trivial matters. "On Getting Respected in Inns and Hotels" and "Of Ignorance" are full of excellent irony. In "On the Illness of my Muse" the author demonstrates the sharpness of his wit. Mock-eloquence rules in "On a Lost Manuscript." In papers such as these the author displays a sense of humor somewhat like Mr. Chesterton's in its irrepressible gaiety. There is more than humor in the volume, however. In some of the papers the fun-making leads to solemn matters, in some to pointed social criticism; but at no point does the didactic element become heavy.

The style, which at most points reflects the nervous, rollicking play of the essayist's wit, is marred at times by stock journalistic tricks which are clearly intended to heighten the fun-making but which often fail to do so.

## 3. On Everything (1909).

This volume contains essays, most of which appeared first in the Morning Post, that are more serious in tone than those in On Nothing. Mr. Belloc is by no means

lugubrious here--he is never that--but there is more sentiment in this volume and less wit, more serious rumination and less concern with trifles than in that earlier book.

The subjects are varied. "On an Empty House" and "The Barber" reflect the author's keen interest in people. His capacity for sentiment expresses itself in "The Missioner." "On Some Little Horses" is marked by true poetic feeling. Such papers as these make the volume a fairly serious one, more like the author's first collection of essays than the second.

At most points in the volume the prose is nervous and racy, but in some of the papers--in "The Missioner," for example--there are passages marked by sustained poetic beauty.

#### 4. On Something (1910).

A considerable number of the papers in this volume are not essays, but sketches and narratives. In the subject-matter of the essays there is the same variety that marks the author's earlier volumes. Whimsicality, humor, satire, phantasy, and criticism all are here. "The Monkey Question: An Appeal to Common Sense" represents the essayist's humor at its best. "A Force in Gaul" consists of serious criticism. In "On Sacramental Things" Mr. Belloc treats one of Benson's favorite themes, the thrill that comes in the moments when one is most sensitive to beauty. This last paper, together with "The

Portrait of a Child" and "On Immortality," are more philosophic than the essayist's most typical work, and because of their revelation of Mr. Belloc's more serious thought are especially significant to the student.

Although most of the essays are interesting by virtue of the variety of subjects and moods they present and a few of them charming both in their aim and execution, the volume, considered in its entirety, is inferior to the essayist's earlier books. There is less significant thinking here than in On Everything and less lively humor than in On Nothing.

##### 5. First and Last (1911).

The forty-one papers in this book range in length from fifteen hundred to four thousand words. Not all are essays; the non-essay papers include pieces of literary criticism, narratives, and sketches.

There is more consideration of broad general topics here than in most of this essayist's books. As ever, Mr. Belloc's broad knowledge is the source of a great variety in subject-matter. Among the more charming of the papers are "On Cheeses" and "The Inventor." "The Decline of a State" and "Reality" are two of the most interesting of the more didactic papers. As usual, the author's patriotism and love of nature find expression in several of the essays.

The volume as a whole is rather dull. A number of the essays are genuinely entertaining, but most of them are unenlivened by the vigor and charm that mark the essay-

ist's best work.

6. This and That and the Other (1912).

Most of the forty papers constituting this volume are essays, but a number of them are anecdotes, sketches, and brief historical narratives. As usual, broad variety in the essay-subjects and in the essayist's moods lend interest to the book; most of the papers, however, do not represent the author's best efforts.

In several of the papers Mr. Belloc departs from his usual practice of selecting original subjects, by writing on such conventional topics as pedantry, atheism, fame, and rest. Here he is often trite. Less dull are his more typical discussions in "The Young People," "Ethandune," "The Storm," and "On Knowing the Past." "The Barbarians" represents one of Mr. Belloc's rare entrances into the realm of controversy.

At several points in the book the essayist's satire is somewhat crude in its savagery, especially in "The Higher Criticism," in which he deals with his especial foes, "the very Learned."

7. On (1923).

Mr. Belloc's last volume of essays in the period is one of his best. It contains thirty papers, ranging in length from two thousand to four thousand words. There are no new developments in regard to substance or style in this volume. The essays concern many different sorts of subjects, treated in ways most typical of the author's methods.

The book begins with one of Mr. Belloc's most delightful essays, "On Achmet Boulee Bey," an essay notable for contagious humor and light fancy, which mark a number of other papers in the volume. Two other particularly charming essays are "On Kind Hearts being More than Coronets," and "On the 'Bucolics' of Virgil, A Café in Paris, The Length of Essays, Phoebus, Bacchus, A Wanton Maid, and Other Matters," this last title being indicative of the extreme discursiveness which is characteristic of much of Mr. Belloc's work. "On an Educational Reform" contains some well-executed irony. More serious than these are "The United Poets" and "On the Cathedral of Seville."

The style here is typical as regards both its good qualities and its faults. There is a good deal of mock-bombast which at times falls short of augmenting the humor, and a characteristic over-striving to secure picturesque word-effects; but at most points the style is lively without too much reliance on journalistic tricks and forceful without being chaotic.

#### Substance in His Essays

The most obvious feature of Mr. Belloc's essay-work is the great variety in its subject-matter. In the volumes of no other essayist considered here does one find treatments of so many different sorts of topics as are dealt with in Mr. Belloc's books. Even the versatile Mr. Chesterton, whose many-sided genius seems to range over

the entire realm of exposition, fails to match this writer in breadth of interest. Unlike Mr. Chesterton, as an essayist, Mr. Belloc is unhampered by dogmas and wanders wherever his indefatigable interest leads him. The result is that to read his books is to travel far and see much; for the essayist seems to be interested in almost everything under the sun.

There are, to be sure, certain matters in which he is particularly interested. Among these are people. Like Mr. Lucas, Mr. Belloc delights in observing human nature in action. A man as ordinary as an illiterate barber in a little Pyrenees village interests the essayist so much as to cause him to declare:

There are people like this all over the world, even on the edges of eternity. How can one ever be lonely?<sup>1</sup>

Throughout his volumes the author's joy in associating with people of all sorts manifests itself in a manner that reveals the gulf between Mr. Belloc and a lover of solitude like Benson.

The essayist's interest in places is equally strong. In his pronounced patriotism he is especially enthusiastic about England, about Sussex in particular. His wide travels, however, have made him acquainted with almost every part of the globe, and in his essays glimpses of the Arabian desert, of villages in the Pyrenees, of Paris, testify to the breadth of his curiosity.

History is perhaps the thing which draws Mr. Belloc's closest attention. Should he consider a rope, he must con-

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1. On Everything, p. 208.

struct for himself a story of the part rope has played in the history of the world. In the midst of an essay on the extreme conventionality of modern people he will present a discussion of the Roman saturnalia. Sometimes his deep interest in the subject of history leads him into abstract considerations of the science itself--in which, incidentally, one finds a trace of the dogmatism for which Mr. Belloc has in late years become notorious, but which he seldom displays in his essays.

This essayist's favorite sport is boating, and around this subject cluster a group of some of his most charming papers. Some of his writing on this topic is a bit too detailed in its presentation of the author's broad nautical knowledge, but most of his essays dealing with the sea are vigorous and not infrequently charged with genuine poetic feeling.

Several others of Mr. Belloc's major interests manifest themselves at many places in his writing. Among them are his interests in wines, in military science, in poetry, in politics, and in nature. Sometimes the essayist devotes entire essays to discussions of these matters; sometimes he merely treats them in discursions in essays on other topics. But in all his volumes they are the source of a pleasing variety in the subject-matter.

Almost as varied as his subjects are the essayist's methods of treating them. Often he is content merely to allow his keen powers of observation and his never-lagging curiosity to explore the thing about which he is writing and

then to point out to the reader the interesting aspects of his subject. Most often, however, he concentrates upon the fun-provoking features of the matter he is discussing, taking advantage of every opportunity to exercise his gay sense of humor and his clever wit. Mr. Belloc is considerably like Mr. Chesterton in his apparently irrepressible desire to be funny. Like Mr. Chesterton he refuses even when dealing with solemn matters to forget about his cleverness. No matter where his discussion leads him he is constantly looking for opportunities to amuse his reader.

Some of his methods for conjuring up humor are not original ones, but even stock tricks he usually uses to advantage. He is continually bantering his reader.

"My dear little Anglo-Saxons, Celt-Iberians and Teutonico-Latin oddities. . .,"<sup>2</sup> an address to his readers in On Nothing, is typical of his efforts to maintain lightness of tone in his essays. Often in footnotes he will refer the reader to fantastic volumes of his, which, of course, do not exist. Even his more seriously critical essays abound in humorous comparisons and extravagant statements calculated to keep the element of didacticism from becoming too pronounced.

Unlike Mr. Chesterton, Mr. Belloc seldom allows his humor to point a moral. He is much more concerned with amusing the reader than with moulding his attitudes toward social problems. In a discussion of the ill effects of

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2. On Nothing, p. 99.

capitalism, for example, instead of following the subject through its more serious ramifications, he shouts to poor people:

Oh! Run, Run! The Rich are upon us! Help! Their hot breath is on our necks! What jaws! What jaws!<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Chesterton's wit, though famous for its gaiety in serious matters, never wins such a victory over his didacticism as Mr. Belloc's does here.

There is, to be sure, more than boisterous humor in this essayist's books. Doubtless related to his gaiety of spirit, yet nevertheless distinct from it, is his healthy, vigorous optimism, another important element in his essay-work. There is in Mr. Belloc's best work an eager appetite for living which is considerably like that of Stevenson's, a robust yet sensitive masculinity that is agreeably inspiriting. Unfortunately, however, this spirit is more active in his earlier books than in his later ones. With the waning of youthful enthusiasm, the essayist has turned more and more from the sea, the mountain trail, and the army camp to the newspaper and the library for his subjects. He has become wittier but less vigorous, although his indefatigable interest in things outside himself has kept his writing from becoming narrow in scope.

### Style in His Essays

Style in Mr. Belloc's essays, like subject-matter, is characterized by a broad variety. In most of the humorous essays the prose is nervous in movement, and makes use of

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3. On Nothing, p. 105.

tricks calculated to heighten the play of wit. The style of these essays is marked by considerable word-play, mock-bombast, colloquial language, slang, and coined words. Here too are such bizarre tricks as that by which he ends the final essay in On Nothing, demonstrating to the reader how to end a book:

Let it be done at once and fixed by a spell and the power of a word; the word<sup>4</sup>

Usually his tricks are successful, but he frequently uses so many in a single essay that they lose their force.

In many of his more serious essays, where the author's desire to display his wit is less active than usual, the style is often marked by vigorous movement and picturesque expression; though at some points Mr. Belloc's seeming dislike for subordination smothers the liveliness of movement in uneconomical and sprawling sentences. Now and then in essays expressing the genuine poetic feeling of which this writer is capable, occur passages characterized by rhythmic power and beauty of language. A sentence from the dedicatory letter to Maurice Baring in On Nothing illustrates these qualities.

It was in Normandy, you will remember, and in the heat of the year, when the birds were silent in the trees and the apples nearly ripe, with the sun above us already of a stronger kind, and a somnolence within and without, that it was determined among us (the jolly company!) that I should write upon Nothing, and upon all that is cognate to Nothing, a task not yet attempted since the Beginning of the World.<sup>5</sup>

Mr. Belloc is the only one of the writers considered here to make such definite attempts to achieve poetic effects in the prose of his essays.

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4. On Nothing, p. 261.

5. On Nothing, p. ix.

### Evaluation of His Essay-Work

Perhaps the highest quality of Mr. Belloc's essay-work is its consistent interest. His broad knowledge, his varied interests, his clever wit, and his versatile talent for lively expression make for an almost continuous variety in his books. His essays hold the interest of the average reader as consistently perhaps as those of any other essayist considered here.

One does not, of course, give the highest praise when one says of a writer that his books are interesting. Such praise, nevertheless, is high, and especially significant when given to a writer whose chief materials are abstractions, which attract the attention of most people less strongly than does the concrete. A volume of essays which keeps the reader as continually expectant of surprises, as intellectually awake, and as continually amused as Mr. Belloc's best books do is a considerable achievement, even though it has shortcomings along with its good qualities. Mr. Belloc's essay-work undoubtedly does have bad faults. Some of the worst of these, indeed, are penalties of the very elements in his personality which are the source of much that is interesting in his work; the inspiring energy which enlivens many of his essays is, for example, sometimes responsible for hurried, careless writing, not well-conceived in its ideas and unevenly executed in its expression. While these many faults and limitations cause him often to fall short of high artistic achievement, there is so much that is excellent in his essays

that one may say without hesitation that Mr. Belloc's essay-work deserves to be considered in any study of recent developments in the type.

## CHAPTER VIII

E. V. LUCAS

Life

Edward Verral Lucas was born at Brighton in 1868. He was educated at University College in London. His literary career began in 1898, with the publication of a volume of verse for children. During the early years of his career he was connected with The Globe; later, he became assistant editor of Punch. He was for years a reader for Methuen and Co., Ltd., publishers, and is now chairman of that company. He has travelled in almost all parts of the world. He is unmarried.

Non-Essay Work

Mr. Lucas is a versatile and prolific author. Like Mr. Chesterton and Mr. Belloc, he has written much in several different fields. His collections of essays and sketches represent his most popular work, perhaps, but other significant volumes of his include biographies, novels, anthologies, books of travel, and books of art criticism. Representative volumes among his travel books are A Wanderer in London and A Wanderer in Florence. Vermeer the Magical is typical of his excellent work as a critic of art.

## Volumes of Essays

### 1. Fireside and Sunshine (1906).

Mr. Lucas's first volume in the period covered by this study is at several points like his later ones. It is made up of nineteen miscellaneous papers, many of which are not essays but sketches. These papers, which range in length from fifteen hundred to four thousand words, first appeared in periodicals, including the Outlook (English) and the Country Gentleman. (English).

The volume is in the main a pleasant one, but most of the essays lack the delightful humor that marks some of the author's later work. Among the more entertaining of the papers are "A Word on Toast," which treats a trivial matter in typical essay manner; "Birds and their Enemies," in which the author displays a genuine interest in nature; "The Poetry of Catalogues," and "Clothes Old and New," which are amusing by virtue of their mild whimsicality.

As in his later books, so here the essayist attempts chiefly to amuse his reader. There are no sermons, no discussions of social problems, no pronouncements of dogmatic opinions in these essays. The air of casualness which marks almost all of Mr. Lucas's writing is the most evident element in the style.

### 2. Character and Comedy (1907).

Only ten of the papers in this book are essays. Among the best of these are "The Search and the Gift," "Meditations among the Cages," "The Beating of the Hoofs,"

and "A Funeral."

The book is considerably more entertaining than Fireside and Sunshine. All the essays just mentioned are enlivened by a pleasing good humor, and their interest is frequently enhanced by light and attractive fancifulness. In essays such as "A Funeral" Mr. Lucas displays a remarkable capacity for understanding people and an ability to appreciate and present, without mawkishness, the pathos about him, two of the chief sources of his charm.

The style is characteristically simple, almost matter-of-fact. As in the later volumes, there is in these papers neither any apparent effort at high artistic achievement nor any use of stock stylistic tricks.

### 3. One Day and Another (1909).

Most of the twenty-six papers in this book appeared first in periodicals. They range in length from five hundred to forty-five hundred words and include a number of sketches as well as essays.

The essays in the volume are for the most part more humorous than those in the earlier books. In "The Dealer," one of his most charming essays, Mr. Lucas displays a delightful sense of humor. "Dr. Blossom" is very clever. "The Sympathetic Whur" demonstrates the essayist's ability to write amusing irony. Not all the essays are humorous, however. "Ginnett's," an essay of reminiscence, and "The Knocking at the Door," on growing old, are lightly tinged with sentiment and serious thought.

This is one of the author's most amusing books.

Throughout he makes a more pronounced effort than usual to be funny. There is no hilariously funny writing here--Mr. Lucas's sense of humor, unlike Mr. Chesterton's and Mr. Belloc's, is never boisterous--but there is much that is genuinely humorous in the volume.

4. Old Lamps For New (1911).

This book contains some of Mr. Lucas's best essay-work. Like the author's other volumes, this one is made up of miscellaneous papers, including a number of sketches and anecdotes.

There is more variety in the substance of these essays than there is in the majority of Mr. Lucas's books. "Thoughts on Tan" and "On Leaving One's Beat," discussions suggested--as many of this essayist's are--by newspaper items, are typical products of Mr. Lucas's sympathetic interest in people. "The Deer-Park" and "The Owl" are among the few papers in which the author displays an interest in the out-of-doors. "The Embarrassed Eliminators," a paper in the form of a colloquy on Charles Lamb's essays, reflects Mr. Lucas's great devotion to Lamb.

The style is typical--fluent, easy, simple.

5. Loiterer's Harvest (1913).

Most of the twenty papers constituting this volume first appeared in Punch, the Pall Mall Gazette, and the

Guardian. They range in length from about one thousand to four thousand words. Like the other books, this one contains a number of sketches and anecdotes.

In "Disappearing London" and "A London Symposium" the essayist expresses a genuine love for London. In "Insulence" he exercises his characteristic keen understanding of human nature. "Persons of Quality" is especially charming in its mingling of serious thought and light fancy. At most points the essayist as he reveals himself is distinctly likable. He is especially attractive in the final essay, "The Worst Prelude to Adventure."

A number of the essays are dull because of the essayist's overmastering propensity for quoting from unusual books. As usual, the papers are enlivened by many amusing anecdotes.

There are no new developments in the author's style.

#### 6. Cloud and Silver (1916).

These papers, among which are a number of sketches and narratives as well as essays, first appeared in magazines, including Punch, The Spectator, and The Standard. The average length of the essays is about fifteen hundred words.

Among the most entertaining of the papers are several "essays of the centre"--"Of Bareheadedness," "Of Slang--English and American," "Of Plans for One More Spring," and "B. or D." A number of the papers reflecting the essayist's attitudes toward the Great War, such as "The

Marne after the Battle," are full of pathos and deep feeling. The volume as a whole, indeed, though containing a number of humorous papers, is marked by a deeper seriousness than is typical of most of Mr. Lucas's work. This seriousness, however, makes itself evident in pathos rather than in didacticism.

7. A Boswell of Baghdad (1917).

Only about a third of the papers in this volume are essays. In these the essayist's work is typical.

"Nurses" is mellow with Mr. Lucas's characteristic mild whimsicality. "A Lesson" reveals the essayist as an attractive and likable man. Other entertaining essays are "The Two Perkinses," "The Oldest Joke," and "Poetry made Easy."

As usual, most of the papers center about some incident in the author's life or about something he has read. Some of these matters are trivial and are not treated in such a manner as to make them seem significant. The result is that the book is rather dull in places.

8. The Phantom Journal (1919).

Nearly half of the thirty-three papers in this volume are sketches. Though the essays are few, however, some of them are among the author's best.

"The Fatherly Force," "The Perfect Guest," "Thoughts at the Ferry," and "On Epitaphs" are typical products of Mr. Lucas's good-natured observation, light fancy, and mild humor. Other papers, such as "The Green among the Grey,"

are somewhat sober with pathos.

The essayist continues in his usual rôle--that of the keenly observant Londoner who is continually interested in the varied life about him, and who comments fluently on the more pleasant aspects of that life.

9. Adventures and Enthusiasms (1920).

Only about half of the sixty-one papers in this volume are essays. In the essays Mr. Lucas continues to treat characteristic subjects in a characteristic manner.

"Aunts" is one of the most humorous of the papers. "The Other Two" is made delightful by an amusing fancifulness. "The Perfect Guest" and "Punctuality" pleasantly discuss some of the more superficial aspects of social conduct. "The Golden Eagle" reveals the essayist's gay-hearted but sympathetic interest in people.

Several of these essays appeared first in some of Mr. Lucas's earlier books.

10. Urbanities (1921).

This is one of Mr. Lucas's most entertaining books. It contains, however, only three essays that appear for the first time--"The Ring," "The Free Pleasures," and "Transformation."

These three papers are among the author's most charming--light, full of amusing illustrative anecdotes,

presenting significant ideas. Like the other papers in the volume, these essays are accompanied by excellent illustrations which represent an innovation in essay-work. No other essays considered in this study are illustrated.

11. Giving and Receiving (1922).

The miscellaneous papers constituting this book range from twelve hundred to five thousand words in length. About one-third of them are anecdotes.

Several of the essays are amusing, but most of them belong to the class of the author's less attractive work. Many of the papers represent careless treatment of ideas that are insignificant, or at least appear to be so as they are presented by the essayist. Among the best are the title essay, "Giving and Receiving," and "On Being a Foreigner," "Signs and Avoirdupois," and "Thoughts on Theft."

As usual, the essayist at most points is content merely to make an easy, casual effort to amuse the reader with whimsical treatments of trivial matters. There are no new developments in the style.

12. Luck of the Year (1923).

This volume, the last of Mr. Lucas in the period, contains only eight essays. The papers constituting the volume are short, ranging in length from about eight hundred to twelve hundred words. They first appeared in Punch in 1922-23.

Among the best of the essays are "Our First Authors,"

"London in June," "Wax," "Last Words," and "Scents." Although these are not among the essayist's best, they represent most of the typical elements in his essay work. An examination of them shows that Mr. Lucas's methods changed little during the years from 1900 to 1925. In substance and in style these papers are similar to the most typical essays of his earlier volumes.

### Substance of His Essays

The most obvious feature of the books of Mr. Lucas which contain his essays is their miscellaneousness of character. In most of these volumes there are almost as many papers that fall outside the conception of the essay accepted in this study as come within it. In some of the books, indeed, there is considerably more non-essay-work than essay-work. Most of the non-essay-work is represented by papers which are either predominantly descriptive or narrative. These do not, of course, come within the scope of the present study; but they are, nevertheless, worth taking note of here because they reflect some important aspects of Mr. Lucas's nature.

Of all the essayists considered here, with the possible exception of Mr. Beerbohm, Mr. Lucas, as his essays reveal him, is the least philosophic--the most concerned with mere observation. There is more than mere attention to particulars in his books, to be sure; if there were not, his writing would be all outside the field of the essay.

But in comparison with Benson and Mr. Chesterton, Mr. Lucas appears to be essentially a recorder of what he sees and hears and feels. If he runs into an amusing advertisement in the newspaper, he is likely to copy it in one of his essays. If he sees a group of urchins swimming in the park, he probably will describe them to his reader. If he hears a funny story, he is almost sure to incorporate it in his writing. Perhaps he will merely paint a verbal picture of the boys in the park, or merely set down the funny story without comment; if so, the results cannot be called essays. On the other hand, he may use the scene or the story to illustrate some generalization in an essay. In either case, the great extent to which Mr. Lucas relies upon his powers of observation for material in his writing is obvious.

This reliance upon observation indicates that Mr. Lucas's interests are chiefly objective. Unlike Benson, he seldom has time for long periods of introspection. From his senses he seems to derive many of his pleasures. It is evident throughout his essay-work that he finds real joy merely in seeing and hearing and smelling and tasting and feeling. In one of his poems Mr. Lucas indicates that he enjoys mere living by this mild statement of hedonism:

"We are but clay," the preacher saith;  
"The heart is clay, and clay the brain,  
And soon or late there cometh death  
To mingle us with clay again."

Well, let the preacher have it so,  
 And clay we are, and clay shall be;--  
 Why iterate?--for this I know,  
 That clay does very well for me.<sup>1</sup>

Usually he puts his reflections into a sentence or two. His thoughts of death, in "A Funeral," is typical of his philosophizing. In that essay he spends most of his time describing the crowd that has gathered to bury a friend of his, interrupting the description only occasionally with a brief consideration of the matters suggested by the solemn occasion, such as

In the midst of death we are in life, just as in the midst of life we are in death; it is all as it should be in this bizarre, jostling world.<sup>2</sup>

This brief, suggestive statement is typical of the essayist's methods of presenting his reflections.

If it were not for the fact that this typical method of presenting his reflections is suggestive rather than exhaustive, much of Mr. Lucas's work would be heavy with pathos, for he is acutely sensitive to the pathetic elements in human life. Coupled with his great interest in people is a keen sympathy for them. Speaking for all parents of sons in the Great War, he says: "My son, when all is said, is the real hero of the war."<sup>3</sup> The sympathetic understanding of people evident in this statement is indicative of the author's sensitivity to the pathetic in human nature. Usually, however, his treatment of pathos is brief, as it is here; and although there is considerable sentiment in his books, there is little sentimentality.

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1. A Little of Everything, p. 85.

2. Character and Comedy, p. 14.

3. Cloud and Silver, p. 67

More common in Mr. Lucas's essays than pathos, however, is humor. Almost every one of his papers attempts to amuse the reader. Mr. Lucas cannot match Mr. Beerbohm in wit. He is not as clever as Mr. Chesterton or Mr. Belloc. Yet at most points his essay work is genial in tone and at times is genuinely funny. Often he attempts to entertain simply by relating a humorous anecdote. Sometimes he provokes chuckles by witty remarks. His humor is perhaps most effective, however, when it is slightly tinged with pathos, as in this delightfully anticlimactic introduction of a billiard champion:

Diverse and wonderful are the gifts of God to man, varied are the manifestations of human genius. This will repeople the world with men and women of his imagination, warm with life, and we call him Shakespeare; this will take brush in hand and evolve from wet paint new and lustrous aristocrats and we call him Velasque; and this again will stoop over a table of slate covered with green cloth and bend the capricious diabolical spirit of ivory to his will, and we call him Roberts.<sup>4</sup>

Mr. Lucas's books all represent consistent attempts to amuse the reader. And although this essayist's wit is not as nimble as Mr. Chesterton's it is almost never inactive. It is probable that though the average reader of these essays will not remember them as hilariously funny, he is almost sure to remember them as consistently entertaining.

### Style in His Essays

Of the six bodies of essay writing considered here

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4. Loiterer's Harvest, pp. 113-14.

that of Mr. Lucas departs least far from the level of matter-of-fact assertion in point of style. His essays do not, to be sure, read like text-books. There is much in them that is obviously the product of conscious literary art. Yet of the essayists considered in this study Mr. Lucas seems to pay least attention to his manner of expression. His writing is considerably like the speech of many men who are interesting and fluent, but not especially versatile, talkers. He seldom enhances the interest of what he says by the way he says it.

Such writing is free from many of the disconcerting tricks and mannerisms of the sort that mar the prose of Mr. Chesterton and Mr. Belloc. Such writing also lacks the high qualities of a flexible and meticulous style like that of Mr. Beerbohm. Like Mr. Beerbohm's style, Mr. Lucas's is pervasive rather than aphoristic. But it does not possess the consistent correctness and the flexibility which are essential to high achievement in writing of the pervasive style. Casualness rather than suitability marks the style of much of this essayist's work. It would seem perhaps that Mr. Lucas composes too rapidly.

The casual manner of the writing, however, is not at all times a hindrance to the essayist's art. Many subjects--for example, the qualities of a good guest, a matter which Mr. Lucas discusses in one of his papers--call for a fluent, easy discussion of the sort that naturally has the air of casualness. In essays on such subjects Mr. Lucas's style is generally quite satisfactory. Many other subjects, however--especially those entailing the

treatment of trivialities--call for a nervous pen that can trace the most delicate nuances of fancy and imagination. One would be foolish, of course, to assert that Mr. Lucas cannot treat such subjects with any success whatever. He concerns himself often enough with trivialities, and usually he handles them well. The point to be made here is that the most typical quality of his style, its constant air of casualness, is so prominent in all his writing that his prose is monotonous, and that this monotony often causes him to fall short of high artistic achievement. When one compares Mr. Lucas's treatments of trivial matters with Mr. Beerbohm's one cannot help seeing that Mr. Beerbohm is the more successful of the two in dealing with this particular sort of subject.

#### Evaluation of His Work

Mr. Lucas's most substantial achievement as an essayist is that he is consistently amusing. He does not afford one the inspiring pleasure of following the delicate nuances of subtle wit, as Mr. Beerbohm does. He does not delight one with the revelation of great personal charm, as Mr. Lynd does. But he does amuse--almost without fail, in his best volumes.

One would judge from his books that this is what the essayist attempts mainly to do. One does not find in these volumes any ostentatious show of broad knowledge or

deep wisdom. Nor does one find any hilarious clowning or boisterous play of cleverness. Mr. Lucas attempts neither to make his reader think profoundly nor to make him laugh uproariously. Rather, he is content to keep his reader in a state of perpetual good-humor. He achieves this end by telling funny anecdotes in illustration of his generalities, by treating his subjects in a mildly whimsical way, by pointing out the obvious humor in the actions of the people about him and in his own.

His essay-work has limitations. One of the most serious of these is its lack of variety both in subject-matter and style. Mr. Lucas's perpetual search for the amusing leads him usually to subjects of the same type. And he treats most of these subjects in the same manner. This lack of variety makes his different volumes too similar to be as striking and as engaging as they might be if the essayist's interests were more varied and his pen more versatile. But in spite of these and numerous other shortcomings, Mr. Lucas's books, though lacking some of the highest qualities of writing in this type, represent a successful attempt to appropriate for essay treatment the most amusing elements of life.

CHAPTER IX  
ROBERT LYND

Life

Robert Lynd was born in Belfast, Ireland, in 1879. He was educated at Queen's College, Belfast, receiving his degree in 1899. His wife, Sylvia Lynd, whom he married in 1909, is also a writer. At present Mr. Lynd is the literary editor of the London Daily News.

Non-Essay Work

Mr. Lynd is the author of more than twenty books. His work has been chiefly in the fields of the essay and literary criticism. Important critical books of his are The Art of Letters, Books and Authors, and Old and New Masters. He has written several books about his native country, including Rambles in Ireland and Ireland a Nation.

Volumes of Essays<sup>1</sup>

1. The Pleasures of Ignorance (1921).

In his first important volume of essays in the period covered by this study Mr. Lynd began the course of high artistic achievement which he was to follow consistently throughout his later career as essayist. All but one of

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1. The present writer has been unable to secure copies of The Book of This and That and The Sporting Life and Other Trifles, two volumes which presumably contain essays.

the twenty-six papers in the book, which is composed entirely of essays, ranging in length from about two thousand to twenty-seven hundred words, first appeared in The New Statesman.

The title essay presents the essayist as a man with a capacity for appreciating matters that heavy minds ignore; it also introduces his great interest in nature, revealed further in this volume in "June," "On Knowing the Difference," and "Enter the Spring." Another of Mr. Lynd's chief interests--his interest in horses and racing--is reflected in "The Betting Man," "The Intellectual Side of Horse-Racing," and "Going to the Derby." The essayist's philosophic reaction to the world about him--evident in all his books--manifests itself in most of the papers, finding fullest expression in "New Year Prophecies" and "The Old Indifference." "Cats" and "On Feeling Gay" are delightful with the play of rich humor. Throughout the volume a constant revelation of the author's likable personality is a constant source of charm.

The style of the essays is at all points restrained but easy, serving well as a medium for the intimate relationship which the author establishes between himself and his reader.

## 2. The Blue Lion (1923).

Twenty-seven essays, ranging in length from about seventeen hundred to twenty-nine hundred words, constitute this volume. In these papers the essayist's subjects and

methods are similar to those of the earlier volume.

In the title essay the author's keen interest in people manifests itself. "The Shy Fathers," "Cigarette Pictures," and "On Being Rather Ill" are enlivened by amusing whimsicality. With these may also be classed "The Sweep," one of the author's most delightful essays. More serious papers are "Good Friday" and "Joy-Bells." Mr. Lynd's unusually keen interest in and broad knowledge of birds is reflected in "The Nuthatch" and "The Morals of Bird's-Nesting." The author's personal charm evinces itself in an especially appealing manner in two reminiscential essays, "On Never Going to the British Museum" and "Enchantment in the Music Hall."

In spite of his interest in nature, the essayist's point of view continues to be essentially that of a city-dweller. Most of the essays have a London setting. There is considerable variety in the subject-matter, however, as the author's characteristic wide-ranging curiosity leads his pen into many fields.

### 3. Solomon in All His Glory (1922).

This book, consisting of twenty-seven essays and dedicated to the essayist's wife, Sylvia Lynd, contains some of Mr. Lynd's best essay-work.

The title essay reflects the essayist's love of birds. "Changing Houses," one of the most amusing of the papers, owes its delightfulness to its whimsical treatment of a common experience. "The Last of the Street Cries"

demonstrates Mr. Lynd's charm in the field of delicate feeling and sentiment. "Keeping the Sabbath" and "The Old Game" reflect his attitudes toward the more serious and solemn aspects of life. "Riding on a Char-a-Banc" shows the essayist to be a sympathetic observer of people. In "A Defence of Superstition" humor and seriousness combine to make a thought-provoking and entertaining piece of writing. In "The Sorrows of Free Love" didacticism makes one of its rare appearances in Mr. Lynd's books; in this essay, however, it is a subordinate element. The negative spirit in the author's philosophy is a constant barrier against didacticism.

There are no new developments in matters of style in the volume. Mr. Lynd's prose continues to be characterized by the careful artistry that is evident in his earlier books.

#### 4. The Peal of Bells (1924).

The essayist's last volume of essays in the period consists of twenty-seven essays, most of which are "of the centre" and which range in length from about two thousand to three thousand words. A number of the papers are among Mr. Lynd's best.

In several of the papers the essayist reveals himself to the reader with even more completeness than in his earlier volumes. Among these are "A Good Hiding," "In the Casino," and "Farewell to Tobacco." "On Being Cruel" is especially significant for its presentation of the

author's sympathetic attitude toward people. "The Mouse: A Problem" is one of the most delightful of Mr. Lynd's essays. "Change" and one or two other papers are concerned with birds and flowers; the essayist's interest in nature is less evident here, however, than in the earlier books. As in all the author's books, so in this one the attractiveness of the author's personality makes the papers delightful.

Mr. Lynd's prose continues to be what one may, perhaps, be allowed to speak of as pervasive in style rather than aphoristic, and at all times sufficiently flexible to make the manner of the writing suitable to the substance, whether the essayist is gaily telling how a mouse in the corner interrupted the story he had been telling to his host, or is seriously considering the unhappy plight of mankind in a bewildering universe.

#### Substance of His Essays

"Charm" is an over-worked word. Yet it is a word that critics of essays must use, since it stands for one of the qualities which all successful writing in this type must possess. And though one must use the word discriminatingly--for, in the first place, the word has a definite meaning, and, in the second place, it carries high praise in literary criticism--one must necessarily employ it in commenting on essay-work of high rank. One needs to use it when one considers the Essays of Elia,

and again when one considers Virginibus Puerisque. So again the word is essential in a criticism of the essays of Mr. Lynd; for the highest quality of Mr. Lynd's essay-work is its great charm.

One may use the word here with strict propriety: the charm of these essays is a definite quality, and the praise which one awards Mr. Lynd by applying the word to his work goes to an essayist who deserves it. Throughout these books the writing is warm with the glow of the author's attractive personality.

One of the most important of these manifestations of personality is in the ring of genuineness which at all points in this essayist's work assures the reader that what he reads truly represents the author's thoughts and feelings. Much essay writing does not have this ring. The reason for this is not that its authors are dishonest in the presentation of themselves and that such dishonesty is apparent in their work. It is simply that few writers have sufficient ability in the art of writing to put themselves into their books in the degree that such masters of the essay as Montaigne and Lamb have. Those who do have a considerable amount of such ability and at the same time possess attractive personalities are equipped to do work of high rank in this literary type. Such a writer is Mr. Lynd.

Not only do these essays represent a genuine revelation of a man; they reveal a man of great personal charm.

In his tastes, in his interests, in his attitudes toward himself and toward the people about him, in his reactions to the universal aspects of human existence--Mr. Lynd is essentially attractive and likable. In his books there is the balance between concern with matters outside himself and with matters within his own life, between whimsical treatment of trivialities and serious consideration of universal truths, that is found in the lives of the fortunate few who are blessed both with great sensitivity and great sanity. It is such a balance which is found in essays that are most satisfying to the average reader.

The equipoise between the serious and humorous elements in these volumes is illustrative of this balance in his work. Mr. Lynd concerns himself often in his essays with the universal aspects of life. Frequently he sets men and women against the background of the eternal verities and considers the significance of their struggles. His philosophy being chiefly one of negation, he does not, like Mr. Chesterton, attempt to tell people how they best may solve their puzzling problems. He does not pretend to know how to solve these problems; hence, he does not try to teach others. He observes stoically the bewildered struggling of men, and knows that the world will wag along in its usual way regardless of what an essayist says. The following statement from "New Year Prophecies" presents one of Mr. Lynd's typical reactions as he surveys the human scene:

What, really, is going to happen in 1921? I think I know. Human beings will behave like bewildered sheep. . . Men will die of disease, violence, famine and old age, and others will be born to take their place. Intellectuals will be pretentious--mules solemnly trying to look like Derby winners. . . And some of us will get a certain amusement out of it all, and will prefer life rather than death. We shall also go on puzzling ourselves as to what under the sun it all means.<sup>2</sup>

Although Mr. Lynd's philosophy is predominantly negative in spirit--as this passage suggests--his essays are inspiriting rather than enervating. He is convinced that nature is entirely indifferent to men, but his insatiable curiosity makes him interested in all natural phenomena. "The world is so full of a number of things," he declares in one of his books, "that no man with a grain of either poetry or the scientific spirit in him has any right to be bored, though he lived for a thousand years."<sup>3</sup> Joy in living is especially obvious in the essays that reflect his interest in birds and his interest in horse-racing. Most active, however, in counterbalancing the weight of serious considerations in these volumes is the essayist's rich humor.

Mr. Lynd never allows his concern with the solemn aspects of life to become heavy. In all his books the writing is constantly enlivened by the play of humor of the most delightful sort. A keen sensitivity to the truly amusing, combined with an ability to present the subtle play of delicate ideas in an appealing manner, make his humor superior to any mere cleverness. It is the sort

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2. The Pleasures of Ignorance, pp. 58-9.

3. Ibid., p. 62.

of humor which manifests itself in this denunciation of people who sing in apartment houses:

I have never been able to understand why love should make such a noise when it is translated into music. In real life lovers whisper; they murmur; they seldom raise their voices except in a quarrel. Let love turn from conversation to song, however, and a man will say "I love you" as though he were megaphoning information about boxers to an audience of ten thousand in the Albert Hall. This is very distressing to those of us who wish to preserve the decencies of love. It is still more distressing to flat-dwellers.<sup>4</sup>

Mr. Lynd's ability to combine humor with pathos, which is even superior to Mr. Lucas's skill in this difficult field, is the source of much delightful writing in his books, as one may judge from this account of how superstition came into existence when a man of the early ages happened to discover a bunch of bananas whenever he found a pine needle:

His brain swam with the sense of discovery. He beat his forehead with his hands--hairy, prehensile hands--for the birth of something absolutely new in his mind was making his head ache. He muttered: "I pick up pine-needles and find sweet bananas! I pick up pine-needles and find sweet bananas!" It was some time before even this conveyed a clear message to a brain unaccustomed to act. But as he repeated the words in a sort of trance, the truth suddenly flashed on him. When he uncovered his face, he was looking ten years older, but he was wearing a smile that was almost human.<sup>5</sup>

It is such rich humor as this which stands in equipoise against the considerations of serious matters in Mr. Lynd's books.

Such a satisfying adjustment between these two opposite qualities is typical of the nice balance in which all the larger elements in this essayist's work rest, a balance

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4. The Blue Lion, p. 42.

5. Solomon in All His Glory, p. 159.

which proceeds only from natures marked both by great sensitiveness and great sanity--from personalities of great charm.

### Style in His Essays

Mr. Lynd's style in his essays, like Mr. Beerbohm's, is obviously the product of careful and skilful art. Mr. Lynd is not as versatile a stylist as Mr. Beerbohm; his style is perceptibly less flexible than Mr. Beerbohm's. His prose is, nevertheless, adequate at almost every point in his books.

Like Benson, he is an essayist of the old school, as far as his manner of expression is concerned. He is obviously more concerned with the style of his prose than are Mr. Chesterton, Mr. Belloc, and Mr. Lucas. There are no traces of hasty or careless composition in these volumes. Mr. Lynd never employs the stylistic tricks of modern journalism to get the reader's attention. He strives especially after aptness and beauty in his diction and spurns the bizarre almost entirely. There is nothing in his writing that is comparable to Mr. Belloc's almost constant use of the involved parenthesis.

Like the styles of most of the other essayist's considered here, Mr. Lynd's style is pervasive rather than aphoristic. Throughout his books the prose moves along easily and steadily, avoiding the diffuseness of Benson's writing and the unevenness of Mr. Belloc's. Its greatest

excellency is that it is so completely pervaded by the charm of the essayist that the manner of the writing at almost all times definitely enhances the interest of what is said.

#### Evaluation of His Essay-Work

In Mr. Lynd's essay-work, more than in that of any other writer considered in this study, there is a continuation of the traditions of essay writing, as established by Addison and Steele, developed in the following century by Lamb and Hazlitt and Thackeray, and finally passed on to the essayists of the present day by such writers as Stevenson and Alexander Smith. Mr. Lynd's subjects, his methods of treating those subjects, his style--all are largely in line with the general developments which have given the type its most permanent characteristics. The mere fact that Mr. Lynd follows in the path of Steele and Lamb and Alexander Smith does not necessarily mean, of course, that his work is superior to that of an essayist such as Mr. Chesterton, who has not followed these masters in the type so closely. It does indicate, however, that Mr. Lynd's aims in his essay-work are to some extent similar to the aims which have led to some of the most excellent work in this form of composition, and that in his work one should find some of the elements that are in this excellent work of the past.

Mr. Lynd has, however, written a body of essay-work which not only carries on the traditions in the type but which also represents, regardless of its relations with the past, a high achievement in literary art. He has been able to do this because he is well equipped for the task. A man of great personal attractiveness, with a thorough knowledge of the possibilities and limitations of the literary type in which he is working, and with an abundant literary skill, he has been able to write essays that satisfy as only essays of great charm do. Beyond all doubt, he may be classed with those half dozen writers of the twentieth century who have done the best work in this form of literature.

CHAPTER X  
DEVELOPMENTS IN THE ENGLISH ESSAY  
DURING THE PERIOD 1900-1925

Its Status Among Literary Types

Though it is obviously impossible to measure with any great accuracy anything so intangible as the popularity of a type of literature among a whole nation of readers, one is pretty safe in pronouncing the essay more popular during the last years of the period covered by this study than at the beginning of the period. The early years of the twentieth century were lean ones for this type of literature. Earlier in the study notice was taken of the fact that the increasing popularity of the short story during the last quarter of the last century had by 1900 begun to crowd the essay from the prominent place it had held on the stage of English letters since the time of Lamb, Hunt, Hazlitt, and Thackeray. During the first few years after 1900 the essay continued to lose in popularity.

Between 1905 and 1915, however, the fortunes of the type changed. During those years there was produced in England a substantial body of essay-work of high rank, the work of versatile and brilliant writers well-equipped to restore the type to a position of prominence in English literature. From then until 1925 the status of the essay among literary types continued to rise. Much work in the

type, both that appearing in periodicals and that published in volume form, was widely read--some of it attracting considerable attention and receiving high praise.

The proportion of essay-work published in periodicals to that which first appeared in volume form is indicated to some extent by the fact that of the forty volumes of essays examined in this study, fourteen consist of papers originally contributed to newspapers and magazines. It is to be remembered in this connection, also, that some of these men have had many essays published in periodicals and never collected in books.

Some critics have perhaps over-estimated the popularity of the essay during those years. In 1926, one critic, Mr. W. A. J. Archbold, declared that "At the present day the essay reigns supreme; no other form of literature, with the exception perhaps of the successful novel, secures so many readers."<sup>1</sup> It is probable that this statement would by most shrewd observers be pronounced over enthusiastic. It is undoubtedly true, however, that by 1925 the essay commanded a large group of readers in England--a larger group, certainly, than that which it commanded at the turn of the century. It is a fact especially significant for this study that the essayists considered here were among the writers most instrumental in attracting English readers back to the literary type they had for some time been neglecting.

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1. W. A. J. Archbold, Recent Essays, p. 9.

### Its Chief Characteristics

Judged by the essay-work examined in the present study, the English essay in 1925 represented, in its main features, a continuation of the developments most obvious in the type in 1900. The analyses of the work of these six writers show important individual differences in the various bodies of essays--differences so great in some instances as to limit the value of generalizations concerning the work of all six men. In their most salient features, however, all these bodies of writing constitute typical essay-work of the last years of the nineteenth century.

In the most obvious physical feature of their writing--its length--these writers made no noticeable departure from the practice of their immediate predecessors. Most of their essays contain between one thousand and four thousand words, the average length being--as nearly as one may ascertain by a rough estimate--approximately twenty-five hundred words, about the same number as were contained by typical English essays of the nineteenth century.

In their choice of subjects also these essayists followed the practice of essayists of the late nineteenth century. There are in some of the bodies of essay-work examined here, noticeable departures from the traditional in this matter; but the most typical subjects of a majority of the men indicate that in this period the essayists in

their quest for material for their pens went in the same direction as did their predecessors--away from the solemn and the serious toward the pleasant. This generalization may seem to be refuted by a number of essays of two or three of the essayists, those of Benson, in particular. But even Benson, much of whose writing is colored by his more serious thinking, seldom forgets that he is an artist, seldom allows the gloom of his philosophy to obscure the brighter aspects of the subject-matter of his essays. Most of the volumes examined in this study clearly indicate that in its development in this period the essay continued to concern itself less and less with grave matters and more and more with matters pleasant to consider.

As these writers followed their immediate predecessors in their search for pleasant subjects, so also did they follow them in their search for fresh subjects. Again there are essays among those considered here that seem to contradict the generalization. Benson's books contain a considerable number of essays on such conventional topics as conversation, beauty, truth, friendship. Even Benson, the least original of all these men, however, in most of his work deals with matters less conventional than these, as the examination of his volumes has clearly shown. And the writing of all the other men is obviously the result of deliberate and unceasing attempts to present new ideas in their books, or to clothe old ideas in new and attractive dress.

To the quest of these essayists for the fresh subject is perhaps due in part the miscellaneousness of much of their work. In their desire to entertain their readers by discussing topics of which their readers are ignorant, some of these writers often forsake the field of typical exposition in their writing. In the examination of Mr. Lucas's volumes, note was taken of the fact that most of his essays are full of illustrative anecdotes, and that often his treatments of particulars are so predominant in his writing as to deprive it of most, and sometimes all, of the characteristics of typical essay writing. The books of Mr. Lucas which contain his essays are considerably more miscellaneous than the volumes of any of the other men studied here; but in the essay-work of the other essayists also--especially that of Mr. Belloc and Mr. Beerbohm--there is considerable attention to particulars. The nature of the essay-work examined here seems to indicate that in their quest for fresh material for their pens essayists of this period wandered much along the borders of the realm of exposition, with the result that their work is noticeably more miscellaneous than that of the essayists of the late nineteenth century.

Given a subject which is pleasant to consider and of a sort to invite original thinking upon it, these writers in their most typical work proceed by pointing out the interestingness or the humorousness of that subject. Following the practice of their immediate predecessors,

most of these essayists seldom attempt to teach or to preach. Most of the essayists, not all of them. Mr. Chesterton's work in the essay type in this period is not in line with the general tendency away from didacticism. Most of his volumes of essays are heavy with attempts to instruct the reader. Mr. Chesterton is or pretends to be essentially a crusader; his essays are perhaps as didactic as those of any other writer in the type of any period. No one can say, however, that there is nothing but didacticism in Mr. Chesterton's books. With all his concern with religion and government, he attempts almost constantly in his writing to amuse as well as to instruct his reader. In spite of its lessons and its sermons, Mr. Chesterton's essay-work is not entirely out of line with the general tendency of the essay to take as its chief function that of entertaining its reader. With this tendency all the other essayists considered here are strictly in line. By far the greatest part of the writing examined in this study attempts to amuse the reader rather than to instruct him or to improve his morals.

Most of this essay-work also definitely represents the usual attempt to establish an intimate relationship between the essayist and his reader. There is little formality in the essays considered here. When one compares the relationship which a present-day essayist like Mr. Belloc establishes between himself and his reader,

one can partially realize how far the English essay has travelled from its source. Imagine Bacon bantering with his reader as Mr. Belloc does! Or imagine Mr. Belloc writing with the coldness and the formality with which Bacon wrote! Not all the essayists considered here, to be sure, adopt the free-and-easy manner of Mr. Belloc in addressing their readers. All of them, however, make a deliberate effort in their writing to establish an intimate relationship with the person who opens their books. In this matter they are, of course, following the example set by their nineteenth century predecessors in the art. The essay-work examined here, however, seems to indicate that these writers have broken down some of the few barriers which remained between the essayist and his reader at the end of the nineteenth century. One is probably safe in pronouncing the essay of this period less formal, less impersonal, and more informal, more personal, than the essay of any previous period.

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