

The Familiar Essay,
Romantic Affect and
Metropolitan Culture

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The Sweet Security of Streets

By

Simon Peter Hull

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For Aline, my admirably indulgent and ever-supportive wife, who had to put up with an increasingly distracted husband for the eighteen months that I spent writing this book.

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PREFACE

In the advertisement attached to the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), Wordsworth paradoxically associates with time-honoured tradition a collection of poems which he is about to present as perplexingly radical “experiments.”¹ To justify the controversial use of poetry for depicting the lower orders of society, Wordsworth claims that “It is the honourable characteristic of Poetry that its materials are to be found in every subject which can interest the human mind” (*Lyrical Ballads*, 49). Thus, contemporary readers are asked to bear in mind the poet’s faithfulness to a core principle of poetry, when encountering in the pages that follow a kind of poetry so utterly different to the concept to which they are accustomed, that they might not even recognise it *as* poetry. To reassure readers of the traditionalism of his experimentation, Wordsworth might have mentioned that he had appropriated an ancient, indigenous and inherently plebeian form, the ballad, which pre-dates print and the concept itself of literature. But then again, the kind of tradition the *Lyrical Ballads* was appropriating was *so* old, so out-of-step with the modernity of both neoclassical decorum and the more recent development of print-culture, that the very act of revival was revolutionary.

It is perhaps a truism that the radical and the traditional are not so much opposing concepts, as interdependent entities. So it is, also, with the familiar essay in the Romantic period, which, through a long-standing association with metropolitan culture, seems to define itself against the nature-proselytising poetry of the so-called Lake School. Indeed, Wordsworth’s evolution from radical into establishment figure coincides with the emergence of the essayist as a subject himself of cultural anxiety. Wordsworth’s condemnation of urbanisation and the brutalising mode of affect purveyed by sensationalistic forms in the 1800 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* implicitly attacks periodical writing, hence, in the process, its staple or primary genre, the essay. Yet in its own way the metropolitan essay stirred as much controversy as Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s better-

¹ William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 49-50 (49). Further references are cited in the text. All in-text citations of collected works and anthologies, as in this case, are given as (*Title*, page).

known appropriation of the ballad to a rural poetic. Wordsworth's hostility to metropolitan culture therefore anticipates the more overt and concerted attitude of perplexity over the essay which emerged during the periodical boom of the 1810s and 1820s. The essay may not have been around as long as the ballad, but like the ballad it was a fully-fledged cultural form, with established themes and defining features, prior both to the advent of the periodical press and the seminal Romantic moment of the *Lyrical Ballads*' initial publication in 1798. The familiar essay was condemned, not least of all by essay-traditionalists themselves, as a genre which had been degraded and had become itself a corrupting cultural influence, and so falling from the heights of wit and wisdom achieved by masters such as Montaigne, Bacon and Johnson. The essay's traditional or innate qualities are thus radicalised by their perceived complicity with a modern, hence disconcerting, cultural phenomenon, that of metropolitanism, or the increased influence of the city and its commercial and consumeristic values. As a result, the province of the present study is, on the one hand, the generic or trans-historical constitution of the familiar essay, and on the other, its provocative progeny in the Romantic period, the "essayistic figure."

The essay's relationship with periodicals, a complex one from which it has proved hard to disentangle the essay, predates the Romantic period by a century. It goes back to the 1690s, to the wryly observational and broadly critical papers written for coffee-house publications such as John Dunton's *Athenian Mercury* (1691-97), and Ned Ward's more satirical and short-lived venture, the *English Lucian* (January to April 1698).² The essay's fascination with the diverse life of "the Town," hence an enduring association with metropolitan culture, begins in this period with the genre's assimilation into periodical writing. However, the Romantic period marks a significant development in the essay's relationship with periodicals and metropolitan culture. As I will be discussing further, an expanded and highly competitive periodical market after Waterloo, ranging from cheap, sensationalistic journalism to elite literary reviews, caused the generic features of the familiar essay to become accentuated or exaggerated, with the figure of the essayist becoming more elaborately self-reflexive and assuming the proportions of satirical caricature. Compared to their predecessors, "the Romantic essayists reveal a heightened sense of

² For an informative overview of the essay's formal development and cultural prominence in the period from the 1690s to the 1830s, see the introduction to *The Great Age of the English Essay: An Anthology*, ed. by Denise Gigante (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), xv-xxxiii. Further references are cited in the text.

consciousness about their relation to English literary tradition and the essay form as such" (*The English Essay*, xxix). The new miscellaneous magazine indeed embodied in a single publication the heterogeneity of the larger periodical market, as a heteroglossic site of colluding and conflicting voices,³ to which the culturally aware and novelty-conscious figure of the essayist inevitably responded. The essayist's use of colourful pseudonymous personae begins with Richard Steele's Isaac Bickerstaffe and Joseph Addison's Mr. Spectator, but, as Peter T. Murphy has argued, in an increasingly urbanised world of "vastly expanded readership and far greater actual anonymity," Romantic essayists in magazines such as *Blackwood's* exuberantly exploited this device of pseudo-intimacy to find a greater freedom of expression and opinion than their more socially responsible predecessors had allowed themselves.⁴ Therefore, the term "essayistic figure" in the present study refers to an ambivalent agent of metropolitan culture extending beyond the formal boundaries of the genre into fiction and poetry, in addition to the essay's most immediate textual environment, the periodical.

Often overlooked or undervalued, the so-called "familiar" essay presents a personality-driven and opinionated embodiment of what is, in any case, an intrinsically informal genre. The familiar essay epitomises the genre's overall spirit of dilettante-ism, a spirit which, far from suggesting intellectual shallowness, articulates a broadly sceptical stance over epistemological authority and resistance to the professional compartmentalisation of knowledge. In this respect, the essay provides the ideal vehicle for the Renaissance man, understood both as an historical and popular, trans-historical figure, whose knowledge is eclectic, democratic, and unconfined by academic notions of disciplinarity. For Renaissance pioneers of the modern essay such as Montaigne, Bacon, Burton and Browne, the essay's "tentativeness, openness, and spontaneity" made it ideal for conveying the very "idea of discovery", and a view that "the world was in flux and that knowledge was no longer fixed by authority but in a state of transition."⁵ From the nineteenth-century, a perfect statement of the genre's innate

³ For a reading of the periodical essay as a prime site of heteroglossia, see Mark Schoenfield, "Voices Together: Lamb, Hazlitt and the *London*," *Studies in Romanticism*, 29: 2 (Summer 1990), 257-72. All in-text citations of critical or scholarly studies, as in the present case, are given as (Author date, page).

⁴ "Impersonation and Authorship in Romantic Britain," *English Literary History*, 59 (1992), 625-649 (643). Further references are cited in the text.

⁵ Michael L. Hall, "The Emergence of the Essay and the Idea of Discovery," *Essays on the Essay: Redefining the Genre*, ed. by Alexander J. Butrym (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 73-91 (89).

posture of scepticism can be found in Robert Louis Stevenson's essay, "Crabbed Age and Youth":

We have no more than glimpses and touches [of knowledge]; we are torn away from our theories; we are spun round and round and shown this or the other view of life, until only fools or knaves can hold to their opinions. We take a sight at a condition in life, and say we have studied it; our most elaborate view is no more than an impression.⁶

Against the received wisdom that older people are necessarily wiser, Stevenson's essayist argues that humanity is prone to error at any age, a condition which requires us (in theory if not in practice) to constantly revise previously cherished ideas. This sceptical stance, which is at the crux of essayistic writing, originates with Montaigne. As a result of his own doubts over both the possibility and desirability of fixed knowledge, Montaigne turned his attention closer to home, to the self, to find that even this intimate subject was impossible to grasp: "I am unable to stabilize my subject: it staggers confusedly along with a natural drunkenness. I grasp at it as it is now, at this moment when I am lingering over it. I am not portraying being but becoming ..."⁷ Montaigne's loose, open-ended form of writing articulates an attitude to knowledge which is not in itself uncertain, but in which the certitude typically ensuing from knowledge is questioned.

Engrained within the flexibility and spontaneity of the essay's very form, therefore, is the capacity to challenge the traditional, hierarchical system of knowledge. Theodore Adorno has claimed of the essay that "It revolts above all against the doctrine – deeply rooted since Plato – that the changing and ephemeral is unworthy of philosophy; against that ancient injustice toward the transitory, by which it is once more anathematized, conceptually."⁸ The essay's critical marginalisation is a consequence, Adorno suggests, of its unorthodox and essentially modern interest in the ephemeral and transient, as opposed to the classical values of permanence and finality. As will be discussed in the Introduction, the essay's preoccupation with modernity applies both to new knowledge and to

⁶ *Virginibus Puerisque, and Other Papers* (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1881), 87-114 (97).

⁷ "On Repenting", Book III, *The Essays: A Selection*, ed. and transl. by M. A. Screech (London: Penguin, 2004), 232-246 (232). Further references are cited in the text.

⁸ "The Essay as Form", *New German Critique*, 32 (Spring 1984: original publication 1958), 151-71 (158).

fashion or novelty itself, thus making the genre in the Romantic period symptomatic of a threatening metropolitan culture. In this way the essay becomes a highly contentious form of writing, not only a vehicle for, but the subject itself of, intense cultural debate.

Whether embodying a Renaissance notion of discovery or a Romantic idea of modernity, however, the familiar essay remains fundamentally the same. Seeing the genre in this way, as an essential or paradigmatic model embedded in history, and from which traits, characteristics or habits of discourse are appropriated by other genres, brings much-needed clarity and concision to the essay and any discussion of it. The essay's neglect in literary studies is bound up with, amongst other things, an uncertainty over its definition which stems in turn from confusion over the genre's supposed informality and protean quality. J.A. Cuddon's definition in *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms* both demonstrates and exacerbates this problem:

essay (F *essai* 'attempt') A composition, usually in prose (Pope's *Moral Essays* in verse are an exception), which may be of only a few hundred words (like Bacon's *Essays*) or of book length (like Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*) and which discusses, formally or informally, a topic or a variety of topics. It is one of the most flexible and adaptable of all literary forms.⁹

So, the essay can be in prose or poetry, short or long, formal or informal, and can focus on a single topic or range across a variety of topics. Such an all-embracing account renders redundant the concluding remark about the essay's flexibility and adaptability. In fact, Cuddon does not define the essay at all: he makes no attempt to distil essential qualities, or ascertain what typifies or characterises the essay. Instead, rather less helpfully, he indicates the range of ways in which the essay, as a literary term, can be, and has been, applied, however loose or tenuous the interpretation.

Ironically, given his hostility to periodical writing, Wordsworth refers to the poems of the *Lyrical Ballads* as "short essays" (292), in the 1800 Preface, though without elaborating on this usage. In what sense, then, might an anti-metropolitan poet like Wordsworth have seen his poems as essays, or essay-like? The answer appears to be in the way that Wordsworth presents his ballads as experimental in spirit, the essaying of, in the manner of Montaigne, "the fluxes and refluxes of the mind" (292). But unlike Montaigne and the English essayists who followed him, the mind in question is not the writer's own and the focus is on the emotional part, or

⁹ (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 306-7.

how the mind responds “when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature” (292). Such purposive concentration rejects the wide-ranging and desultory spirit of the essay-proper, with its license to ramble across any or all regions of selfhood. Furthermore, ballads such as “The Idiot Boy” and “The Mad Mother”, perhaps more so than contemplative poems like “Tintern Abbey,” represent essays *at*, rather than about, their subject. They follow a narrative in a more-or-less linear way, and are therefore not desultory or paratactic in the archetypal manner of an essay, although the poet’s treatment is essayistic inasmuch as it is tentative and suggestive instead of comprehensive and authoritative. Most importantly, though, Wordsworth’s recourse to the term “essay” to describe his radically experimental poetry testifies to the prevalence of the essay and essayistic writing in the Romantic period.

The essay may well be “one the most flexible and adaptable of literary forms,” but this does not preclude the existence of paradigmatic features or true essays. Inevitably, some writings are more essay-like than others, because the writer has self-evidently invested in or committed him or herself to the genre, as opposed to using the word “essay” as a term of convenience. Failure to distinguish between the generic and terminological essay, or between investment in the genre and expedient use of the term, leads to the epithets of flexibility and adaptability making the concept of an essay almost meaninglessly diffuse.

A further example of the tendency to overstate the supposed indefinableness of the essay, can be found in O.B. Hardison Jr’s “Binding Proteus: An Essay on the Essay” (1989), which, as the sub-title suggests, is more concerned with being self-consciously essayistic and trying out ideas, than arriving at soundly argued conclusions. Hardison invokes one myth, of the shape-changing figure of Proteus, to perpetuate another, that of the essay’s elusiveness. In his introduction, he claims that “Of all literary forms, the essay most successfully resists the effort to pin it down, which is like trying to bind Proteus”, and later concludes that the essay’s Protean quality is itself a defining feature:

But what *is* the essay? If there is such a thing as an essential essay – a *real* Proteus – it changes into so many shapes so unlike the real one that it requires an act of faith to believe the shapes merely variations on a single underlying identity.¹⁰

Hardison exploits the myth of Proteus to celebrate, and therefore to

¹⁰ *Essays on the Essay*, 11-28 (27).

protect, the genre's slipperiness. Mirroring the reason why Proteus opted for changeability to deal with those who sought knowledge from him, Hardison comes up with the sophistic conundrum that the essay's elusiveness serves to test our faith that the essay exists at all. The underlying assumption of Hardison's meta-essay is that the genre's vital, free spirit of scepticism will somehow be lost if critics *do* succeed in defining the essay, the act of defining being equated to pinning-down or binding, as if the very act of criticism were, by definition, constrictive. Taking this assumption to its logical conclusion, the essay becomes no longer neglected or overlooked, but, on the contrary, beyond criticism, as a uniquely formless and privileged mode of literature. Either way, of course, whether marginalised as *belle-lettres* or exalted as radically indefinable art, the essay does not get the critical attention it warrants.

Bona fide examples of the essay such as Bacon's trenchant declaration of taste regarding Jacobean entertainment in "Of Masques and Triumphs", or Isaac Bickerstaff's meandering dialogue with an upholsterer in Addison's essay in *The Tatler* (No. 155), appear all the more essay-like when compared with the unlikelier interpretations of the essay cited by Cuddon. Locke's *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (to give its short title) is an imposingly comprehensive treatise for an empirical approach to language, while Pope's epistolary verse-satire, *An Essay on Man*, as merely one component of the compendious *Moral Essays*, presents an equally grandiose survey of universal humanity. These latter texts seem to use the essay as a term of convenience, a token of false modesty designed to pre-empt the charges of presumptuousness which the voluminous and authoritative projects in question are apt to attract. Contrary to their titles, therefore, the Locke and Pope examples actually oppose the idea of an essay.

The physically diminutive, ostensibly artless and highly idiosyncratic texts of Bacon and Addison are much closer in spirit to the genre's etymological source, from the French verb *essayer*, to try something out, or offer it in an experimentative and suggestive, rather than affirmative and scholastic, manner. Indeed, although similarly voluminous, Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) still comes much closer than the examples by Locke and Pope to the essential form and spirit of the essay. Burton's *Anatomy* is a substantial text only in the material terms of wordage, paper and ink. It is no more an anatomy of its subject than Locke's treatise is a genuine essay, or, for that matter, Charles Lamb's discussion of roast pig is an actual "dissertation". It is essayistic because it eschews scientific rigour and objective authority in favour of opinionated verve and a self-undercutting subjectivity. Burton uses "anatomy" in ironic

reference to the medical term: instead of presenting a logical dissection of his topic into several parts, as the reader is led to expect, he leaves us with a disorderly, chaotic text, characterised by long, loose sentences and pell-mell, onrushing thoughts. Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* (1643), or "a Doctor's religion," is similarly deceptive, and similarly essayistic in spirit, as instead of the solemn spiritual autobiography and medically clinical self-dissection which the title promises, the reader is presented with relaxed and indulgent self-portrayal, from which emerge opinions and eccentric views on a wide range of topics relating to religious doctrine and practice. As ever with the essayist, and implicit in the genre's playful amateurism, is an attitude of circumspection toward any claims to authoritative knowledge.

Both Burton's and Browne's texts accord quite closely with the essay's defining qualities, as identified by Claire De Obaldia:

The essay is an essentially ambulatory and fragmentary prose form. Its direction and pace, the tracks it chooses to follow, can be changed at will; hence its fragmentary or 'paratactic' structure. Rather than progressing in a linear and planned fashion, the essay develops around a number of topics which offer themselves along the way. And this sauntering from one topic to the next, together with the way in which each topic is 'tried out', suggests a tentativeness, in short a randomness ...¹¹

The familiar essay is implicitly understood as *the* essay, or the essential essay, to the extent that the qualifying term "familiar" is deemed unnecessary. The essay is defined, moreover, in terms of flexibility (of approach and direction), and adaptability (to a range of topics), the very qualities which supposedly frustrate its definition. As De Obaldia notes elsewhere, it is through the idea of the fragment and fragmentariness that the essay, indeed, assumes a formal affinity with Romantic theory and poetry (or, at any rate, a certain kind of Romantic poetry), as the essay and the poetic fragment are equally concerned with "a shift of focus from 'permanence' to 'change,' from 'product' to 'process,' and from 'finished forms and seemingly unchanging timeless substances' to 'dynamic fields of forces'" (De Obaldia 1995, 40). Yet the essay predates Romanticism, and the genre's overall waywardness just as strongly evokes the ever elusive, self-writing subject so influentially articulated by Montaigne. Moreover, Montaigne's image of the self's slipperiness should not necessarily render elusive the self-writing genre of the essay. On the

¹¹ *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 2. Further references are cited in the text.

contrary, the concept of waywardness would seem to greatly assist a scholar of the genre, such as De Obaldia, in defining the essay. Whilst she concedes a unique degree of difficulty with defining the essay – “while a broad agreement does seem to exist as to what is meant by ‘poem’, ‘play’ and, to some extent ‘novel’, the essay always appears as a particularly problematic form of writing” (1) – De Obaldia’s is a study of genre dedicated, as such, to resolving this difficulty. She achieves this by identifying the essay’s essential qualities, or of what an ideal essay would be comprised, regardless of its existence or non-existence in reality, before tracing the incarnation of an “essayistic spirit” in other genres, particularly in the novel.

The kind of ambulatory and sauntering style identified by De Obaldia is exemplified by Hazlitt’s essay “On Old English Writers and Speakers”. Marjorie Garber refers to this trait as “associative thinking,” while describing its manifestation in Hazlitt’s essay as follows:

From “Egyptian” and “Hebrew,” presumably, Hazlitt’s mind moves not only to palm trees in the margins but also to “camels moving slowly on in the distance of three thousand years,” to “the dry desert of learning,” the “insatiable thirst of knowledge,” the “ruined monuments of antiquity,” “the fragments of buried cities (under which the adder lurks),” and so on. No piece of poetry, no historic fact, no detail from the text of an old author is cited---what the reader gets instead is the mind of the essayist, dreaming, or as Woolf says [of Hazlitt], “taking the liberties of a lover.”¹²

There is a principle of pleasure which informs such a leisurely and emancipatory mode of writing. Garber cites Hazlitt’s essay as an example of literature’s Freudian ability to generate an aesthetic “fore-pleasure” through the writer giving literary form to “egoistic daydreams” which portend “still greater pleasure arising from deeper psychological sources” to be found, particularly, in poems about love (Garber 2011, 139-40). The “tabloid journalism” forms of “personal writing” such as “memoirs, confessions, inspirational stories, survivor’s tales, and other self-revealing narratives” (140), are cited as typical sources of fore-pleasure. Although oddly not listed, the familiar essay is implicitly included, being an emphatically personal form with journalistic associations and one which is, indeed, in its sauntering, leisurely manner and subordination of narrative to self-expression, particularly well-suited to the generation of pleasure. However, contrary to Garber’s psychological model, the essay’s mildness of aesthetic pleasure is an end in itself. Essayistic pleasure is

¹² *The Use and Abuse of Literature* (New York: Anchor Books, 2011), 138.

shared by the essayist, who pleases himself as to the direction of his thoughts, and the reader, who enjoys the essay's personality-led freedom from both the dogged linearity of a narrative, and the exhaustive reasoning of a dissertation.

Presenting the essay's mode of affect in this way, as the prelude to a profound psychic experience, amounts to a dismissive or reductive interpretation. Incompleteness is taken not as a sceptical stance toward completeness, but as a sign of ontological uncertainty, as if the essay were preparatory for, instead of *being*, literature itself, a form of writing in which the writer tentatively dabbles in ideas, or sketches experiences which are implicitly embryonic or artistically adolescent because they would be, or actually are, more elaborately and comprehensively expounded in a novel, poem or play. Virginia Woolf cogently makes this point about the essay's complete incompleteness, in her argument that Addison's essays, though in some ways resembling a novel, must not be treated as a prototype of the genre because "their merit consists in the fact that they do not adumbrate, or initiate, or anticipate anything; they exist, perfect, complete, entire in themselves."¹³

Nevertheless, Garber's notion of the generic and recognisable "mind of the essayist" does speak in a significant way to the present study. It suggests the essayist as a psycho-socially determinable figure or type, capable of existing beyond the formal parameters of the essay itself, in other textual spaces and literary genres. Thus captured is the pervasive and provocative presence of the essayistic figure, as I am proposing it. This is a trans-generic progeny of the essay, a self-reflexive and acerbic, unsentimental character in literature, from the review, to the poem, to the novel, which performs as an agent of metropolitan culture.

The essay's flexibility can therefore be acknowledged without dissolving the genre in endless variation. An essay need not be, for example, conveyed through the singular consciousness of an individual writer, as the genre's desultoriness, suggestiveness and informality, or its conversational ease and dexterity, are equally if not better supplied by dialogue. In the case of the *Noctes Ambrosianae*, a series of seventy-one colloquies which appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* between 1822 and 1835, the essays consist entirely of conversations between two or more fictitious characters, most famously, Christopher North, John Wilson's performance of an urbane and gout-ridden critic, and James Hogg's self-educated and bluntly opinionated Scottish-border rustic, the

¹³ "Addison," *The Common Reader*, Vol. I (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), 95-6 (95-105).

Ettrick Shepherd. Situated in an ideal setting for free-flowing conversation, occasioned by dinner at a local tavern (Ambrose's) amongst literary friends, this convivial, familiar format licenses swift changes in direction, tone, angle and topic, thus, again, suggesting the essayistic spirit. A single essay in the *Noctes* series (No. XIV, from 1824), one which I will discuss further, shows the topical chat range widely and change swiftly from the local Highland Games, to Lord Byron's celebrity, to the abstruse logic of Coleridge's *Lay Sermons*, to reflections on the slave trade. The discursive dexterity of the *Noctes* is aided by the essays being divided into several "scenes," involving different combinations of the usual characters, a device which, although borrowed from drama, maximises the series' capacity for breadth rather than depth of coverage, thus, once again, assuming a key characteristic of the essay.

Oscar Wilde later uses the conversational format in his essays, only Wilde's version is much closer to the classical device of dialectic reasoning over a single issue, than a method for broaching multiple topics. In "The Decay of Lying" (1889) the aesthete Vivian's argument for the truth-revealing principle of imaginative transcendence, against the dull factuality and earnest morality of realist verisimilitude, is established in the course of a lengthy dialogue with his sceptical friend Cyril, who is eventually won over to Vivian's point of view. Nevertheless, the deft, sideways or associative movement of thought, the shifting from one angle to another, coupled with the tone of dry or detached wit generated by such discursive dexterity, as archetypal ingredients of essayistic writing, are very much in evidence. Early in the essay, within a single paragraph, Vivian flits dazzlingly through a succession of interrelated, pithy observations on, and approaches to, the essay's defining topic:

If Nature had been comfortable, mankind would never have invented architecture, and I prefer houses to the open air. In a house we all feel of the proper proportions. Everything is subordinated to us, fashioned for our use and our pleasure. Egotism itself, which is so necessary to a proper sense of human dignity, is entirely the result of indoor life. Out of doors one becomes abstract and impersonal. One's individuality absolutely leaves one. And then Nature is so indifferent, so unappreciative. Whenever I am walking in the park here, I always feel that I am no more to her than the cattle that browse on the slope, or the burdock that blooms in the ditch. Nothing is more evident than that Nature hates Mind. Thinking is the most unhealthy thing in the world, and people die of it just as they die of any other disease. Fortunately, in England at any rate, thought is not catching. Our splendid physique as a people is entirely due to our national stupidity. I only hope we shall be able to keep this great historic bulwark of our happiness for many years to come; but I'm afraid that we are beginning to

be over-educated; at least everybody who is incapable of learning has taken to teaching – that is what our enthusiasm for education has come to.¹⁴

The meandering path of Vivian’s train of thought can be traced, as follows. First he complains about nature’s awkward obliviousness to human comfort and its chaotic ugliness, before claiming both “egotism” and the domestic enclosure which nurtures it as the primary sources of “human dignity”, then reverts back to nature to remark its indifference to humanity, to follow this with a *fin de siècle* reflection on the modern disease of thought, which in turn leads to a backhanded compliment on the commensurate healthiness of the desirably stupid English, and ends with a swipe at the intellectual complacency of formal education. Vivian presents an essayistic figure, firstly, by virtue of a predilection for urban or suburban spaces (he takes his walks in the park instead of a field or meadow) and a commensurate valorisation of the self, as a reflection of the dramatised, opinionated subject at the centre of every essay. He also shares the essayist’s traditional scepticism over knowledge and formal education. Stylistically, each observation and angle is rapidly succeeded by another, and is dispensed with aphoristic economy and blithe assertiveness, with the essayist speaking through the character of Vivian to repeatedly and provocatively say to the reader “now, let’s see what you make of *this*.” The essay’s conversational aspect therefore extends to a capacity for “initiating discussion” and “inviting reaction, response”.¹⁵ This is a product of the genre’s fragmentariness and incompleteness, qualities which in turn make the essay “inherently interactive” (Marks 2012, 9), as the reader is prompted or provoked into a response by the discursive space opened up by the essayist. This is as true of Bacon’s or Wilde’s aphoristic certitude, as it is of Montaigne’s or Lamb’s digressive and self-questioning style. Both, equally, encourage discussion, through appetite-whetting morsels of ideas and invitingly tossed opinions.

However, the highly topical, inter-literary and localised preoccupations of the *Noctes* series might seem to set it apart – at a lower qualitative level, moreover - from the more contemplative tenor and wider intellectual range of Lamb’s, Hazlitt’s or De Quincey’s familiar essays, or of those preceding the Romantic period by Montaigne, Sir Thomas Browne or Samuel Johnson. The acute sense of immediacy which Richard Cronin identifies as a dominant feature of Romantic periodical writing seems, particularly in

¹⁴ *The Decay of Lying and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2003), 4. Further references are cited in the text.

¹⁵ Peter Marks, *George Orwell the Essayist: Literature, Politics and the Periodical Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 9. Further references are cited in the text.

the case of the *Noctes*, to have spawned a new, bolder and brasher version of the familiar essay. But it needs to be stressed that immediacy itself is not something created or imposed by the periodical press. It is instead an innate feature of the familiar essay which the new miscellaneous magazines of the Romantic period serve to accentuate. I will elaborate on this issue, of the impact on the familiar essay of a burgeoning periodical press in the 1820s, in the Introduction. Suffice to say, as far as the *Noctes* are concerned, the greater degree of influence from periodicals makes the series seem ultra-essayistic, to the point of parody.

Wilson's and Hogg's caustic commentary on contemporary writers in the *Noctes* is indicative, moreover, of the familiar essay's capacity for varying degrees and guises of cultural criticism, so that it can intermittently resemble a review, but without the singular focus and relative impersonality of the genuine article. Charles Lamb's "Elia" essays are highly adept in this regard, in merging elements of the critical review with the familiar idiom. The several essays in the *London Magazine* celebrating London's "old actors" and the defunct genre of artificial comedy, address their dramatic theme with, on the one hand, personal anecdote, emphatic opinion, disinterested reflection on the artistic merits of escapism, and the paratactic movement itself between these different approaches.¹⁶ On the other hand, however, there are sharply observed evaluations of the strengths and limitations of individual actors and accounts of their most celebrated performances: the assessment of Robert Bensley's unique capacity for capturing the zealotry of Hotspur, for example, the inherent difficulty of playing the part of Malvolio, and the comic actor James Dodd's uncanny aptitude for capturing a state of imbecility. Elia combines impersonal reviewer with engaging personality to parallel the essay series' merging of the professional and the amateur performer, as the celebrated thespians of the London stage appear to be all of a piece with Elia's self-delusive actor-types, who haunt the city's commercial and legal buildings, the South Sea House and the Inner Temple. This in turn makes the Elia essays seem like a thematic, extra-

¹⁶ In his Elia persona, Lamb wrote a series of three essays for the *London Magazine*, in which he recalled actors and performances from the recent past and lamented the demise of Restoration comedy on the London stage. The first of these essays was titled "On some of the Old Actors" and appeared in February 1822, while the two which followed were both called "The Old Actors", and appeared in April and October of the same year. The content of the three essays was subsequently rearranged by Lamb for publication in *Essays of Elia* in 1823, with the titles changed to "On Some of the Old Actors", "On the Artificial Comedy of the Last Century" and "On the Acting of Munden."

theatrical extension of the *London's* actual drama reviews, written by Hazlitt and John Hamilton Reynolds. The old actors' series functions simultaneously as an expression of the Elia personality and a critical appraisal of the London stage. Through the textual, pseudonymous dramatics of Lamb's nostalgic and opinionated persona, therefore, Elia's essays on the old actors present both an exposition and a discussion of theatre. In this light, Leigh Hunt's praise for Lamb's paradoxical and winning way of somehow being critical in an anti-critical way, thus bucking the trend for the kind of scabrous reviewing from which Hunt himself suffered, represents a highly perceptive recognition of his friend's essayistic craft.

The example of the *Noctes* demonstrates why any attempt at defining the essay along lines of quality, or to differentiate between essays tailor-made for the periodical press and those of higher literary aspiration, is, to say the least, problematic. In this manner, Marie Hamilton Law identifies two classes of essay: the "pure literature" of the "personal or familiar essay," those written by Montaigne, Sir Thomas Browne, Abraham Cowley and Charles Lamb, "which possess some distinction of thought and manner and central qualities of permanence, and periodical essays, or "those that are merely topical, ephemeral, journalistic, or technical."¹⁷ Aside from the fact that the intrinsically essayistic features which Law mentions, such as random observation and chance reflection, are themselves no guarantee of quality, her dismissive categorisation of the periodical essay is invalid because even the most literary of essays initially appear in magazines, and are often, indeed, purposely written for the periodical market. Discussed further in the Introduction, this repeats the very same distinction which the Romantic essayist P. G. Patmore attempts, in decrying the shallowness of the magazine writer and conversely eulogising the intellectual depth of the traditional essayist. Such elitist reservations over the literary merit or cultural worth of any writing associated with magazines, let alone magazine writing *per se*, have proved hard to dislodge from the critical consciousness.

But Patmore's and Hamilton Law's respective efforts to distinguish, in both senses of the word, the periodical essay from the essay proper, however flawed they may be in conception, do serve a critical purpose. They highlight the still unaddressed need for the essay to be differentiated from periodical writing, not least of all because the latter is itself such a vague and casual term of convenience referring to any kind of writing,

¹⁷ *The English Familiar Essay in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1934), pp. 7-8

from a sonnet, to a Gothic tale, to an advertisement, which happens to have appeared in a magazine. The diminutive and fragmentary essay is attended by separate, though not unrelated, prejudices to those concerning magazines. Although criticism of periodical writing inevitably includes the essays which appear in periodicals, we should beware of conflating criticism of periodicals with criticism of the essay. To do so is to subsume the essay within the corporate, genre-dissolving body of the periodical text, hence to deny the essay's formal integrity and ignore its own literary heritage. There is no such problem for the relatively well-established and culturally exalted genres of poetry, fiction and drama, which are generally not treated as periodical texts even when published in periodicals. The very fact that periodical essays are often subsequently collected in books (though the more topical examples are often omitted, and ephemeral content edited out), tells us that they have a cultural life outside the magazine, just as the reverse is true, that the periodical context of the essay should not be ignored. In fact, although the enduring omission of the essay from literary studies is now being addressed, this revisionism has mainly taken the form of studies of periodical writing, with focus on the book, as an equally important medium for the essay, still awaiting scholarly attention.

In consequence of this oversight, the present study is very much one of genre, that of the essay. Periodical writing assumes a secondary role, as a cultural and historical context. Yet this is a context in which the essay assumes exaggerated proportions, meaning that its defining properties and propensities emerge more clearly than ever.

In the long-overdue process of defining the essay genre and situating it at the centre of a crucial moment of modernity, the further purposes of the present study are to re-establish the importance to Romanticism of the city and metropolitan culture, and also to reassess the traditional, singular concept of Romantic affect. I will argue that the familiar essay embodies a blithe discourse of callousness or "un-affect", which stands squarely opposed to the affective mode of writing, thus arguing for a more complex or nuanced model than that of a feeling reaction to Enlightenment reason. The emotionally detached, often provocatively *unfeeling* essay emerges to oppose the Lake-School poetry of feeling in the 1820s, just as an emergent, affective model of literature had previously challenged the dominant rational decorum of Augustan neoclassicism in the 1760s and 1770s, through the popularity both of Walpole's gothic fiction and the sentimental novels of Mackenzie and Sterne. Colin Campbell proposes that by the end of the eighteenth century an inevitable reaction to the cult of sensibility was in evidence, citing as a graphic example a cartoon which

appeared in the *Anti-Jacobin Review* in 1789. Here, the figure of Sensibility, wearing a cap of liberty, weeps over a dead robin while trampling on a crowned and severed head, thus implying that over-indulged feelings counteract moral responsibility, deny a sense of proportion and induce, ironically, an egoistic callousness.¹⁸ Three years later, Mary Wollstonecraft attacked sensibility as a male conspiracy for keeping women in subjection, while Jane Austin's fiction opposed sensibility with common sense, thus adopting a less confrontational, more dialectic approach than either the *Anti-Jacobin* or *The Rights of Woman* to express reservations over sensibility's cultural and institutional influence. Two further pictorial indicators of an abrasive backlash against sensibility can be found in the James Gillray print, "The Man of Feeling" (1800), in which a grotesquely leering man gropes a young woman amid a chaotic, semi-orgiastic scene, and - again satirically referencing Henry Mackenzie's sentimental eighteenth-century novel - a similarly-titled Thomas Rowlandson print, "A Man of Feeling" (1811), featuring a lecherous Oxford don fondling the buttocks of a young woman who perches contentedly on his lap.

Viewed collectively, the *Anti-Jacobin*'s perversely gleeful mourning over the death of sensibility and Gillray's and Rowlandson's punning on the dual emotional and tactile meanings of "feeling," illuminatingly parallel the essay's frequent debunking of Romantic affect, through displays of tasteless humour and shocking callousness. The two forms, satire and the essay, frequently combine, as we shall see, in acerbic opposition to the Romantic. Indeed, Steven E. Jones' account of satire's relationship to the Romantic could also, with little or no modification, describe the essay's: "If Romantic poetry is defined as vatic or prophetic, inward-turning, sentimental, idealizing, sublime, reaching for transcendence - even in its ironies - then satire, with its socially encoded, public, profane, and tendentious rhetoric, is bound to be cast in the role of generic other, as the un-Romantic mode."¹⁹ I am clearly following Jones's lead in proposing that the overall concept of Romantic affect be understood not as a unified entity, but a conflict between concurrent, opposing modes played out, in this case, against a dichotomized geo-cultural landscape of the country and the city. Such inherent detachment and its metropolitan source enable the essay in the early decades of the nineteenth century to be viewed in terms of a counter-tradition to the literature of affect, the latter being a dominant mode involving an exploration of intense or unstable emotional and

¹⁸ *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). Further references are cited in the text.

¹⁹ *Satire and Romanticism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 3.

psychological states, usually situated within and initiated by the sublime scene of nature.

However, Jones's study of these mutually defining Romantic and un-Romantic modes describes conflicting kinds of affect chiefly within, and concerned with, poetry. His analysis ranges across canonical or relatively well-known writers such as Southey, Byron and Keats, to those who, like the Della Cruscan poets and the once-popular "Corn Law Rhymers," Ebenezer Eliot, have been consigned to relative obscurity. Jones's book provides an invaluable, new historicist democratization of the Romantic canon, and, equally importantly, illustrates the diversity and disunity within Romantic poetry. In similar vein, scholars such as John Strachan, David Kent and D.R. Ewen have directed attention in Romantic studies to the highly prolific practice, previously almost entirely ignored, of verse parody.²⁰ In keeping with the essay's fragmentary and desultory properties, parody and other forms or manifestations of satire such as mock heroic and dramatic irony pervade the Romantic essay as an elusive or fugitive presence. Therefore, the essayist's own tendency toward the acerbic, argumentative and provocative, or a "socially encoded, public, profane and tendentious rhetoric" – toward satire itself – demands that we look beyond poetry for a more complete picture of the forms and uses of affect in the Romantic period.

²⁰ David A. Kent and D. R. Ewen, eds., *Romantic Parodies, 1797-1831* (London and Toronto: Associated Universities Press, 1992); John Strachan, ed., *Parodies of the Romantic Age*, 2 Vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999).

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NOTE ON THE TEXT

This study has been some seven years in the making. It constitutes modified or adapted journal essays and more recent material purposely written for the book, and has been conceived, reconceived and composed during periods variously spent in Bristol, Riyadh, Penang and Singapore. Consequently, for most of the writers featured – De Quincey, Hazlitt, Hunt, Shelley and Wordsworth - multiple editions of selected and complete works have been used. This is owing, in each case, to the difficulty of access to a single edition, as parts of this book were originally written in locations where one edition was available, and other parts where only a different one could be found. Furthermore, I have made use of anthologies such as the Penguin book of *Romantic Poetry* (2005) and the respective Oxford collections of *Satirical Verse* (1983) and *Travel Writing* (2008), in cases where access was unavailable either to selected or complete works of single authors, or to scholarly editions of individual texts.

In regard to punctuation, the Romantic-era essays often feature liberal or multiple use of an elongated m-dash with no space between it and the words immediately before and after (as in Leigh Hunt's "Getting Up on Cold Mornings", for instance: "Look at Cardinal Bembo's picture---at Michael Angelo's----at Titian's----at Shakespeare's ..."). For the practical convenience of formatting, I have replaced these m-dashes in each case with a single hyphen, spaced on both sides. I am aware that the original is a stylistic mannerism which, as such, forms an integral part of the whole essayistic "character" upon which the notion of affect proposed in the present study is based. I would argue, however, that the Romantic essay's heightened sense of immediacy and observational skittishness, as I am proposing it, is conveyed more-or-less as effectively by a single hyphen as by an elongated m-dash, and that, therefore, little or nothing has been lost in the alteration.

INTRODUCTION

As with any binary concept, the idea of Romantic affect and its antithesis runs the risk of over-simplification. Just as the innately exaggerated affect of the gothic can slide almost imperceptibly into parody, there is more than meets the eye in the literature of sensibility. Daniel Robinson has argued, for instance, that Della Cruscan poetry has been completely misunderstood, from early detractors such as William Gifford onwards.¹ Denigrated for its cloying and contrived sentimentality, this poetry, on the contrary, deploys a ludic form of sensibility for bawdy and erotic effect, thus, in the end, “counteracting” or burlesquing sensibility (Robinson 2011, 170). Poems such as “The Adieu and Recall to Love” and “The Pen” function through either heavy-handed affect or ironic detachment, depending on one’s interpretation of the poets’ use of emotionally heightened language. Demonstrating, for Steven E. Jones, the interaction and interdependence of “satirical and sentimental modes” in the Romantic period, the notion of excessive Della Cruscan affect became used as both “a scare tactic *and* a real rhetorical weapon” against the second generation of Romantic poets, Shelley, Keats and Byron (Jones 2000, 117). For this satirical appropriation of Romantic affect to happen, however, it seems that the Della Cruscans’ innate sense of playfulness and subversion, or the very idea that sensibility could be nuanced or complex, had first to be overlooked.

In the Advertisement to the *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth follows Gifford’s lead in disparaging the Della Cruscans, when the poet refers to the “gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers” (Robinson 2011, 49). Wordsworth thus demarcates his own superior brand of sensibility from their degraded version, yet in the process he defines Romantic affect in antithetical terms, also, to the essayistic model of un-affect. Wordsworth’s differentiation of an artificial and superficial sensibility from his own authentic and socio-politically justified alternative, additionally presents a monologic and self-affirming model of sincerity and feeling to which the innately sceptical and detached essay stands squarely opposed.

¹ “Della Crusca, Anna Matilda, and Ludic Sensibility,” *The Wordsworth Circle* (Spring 2011), Vol. XLII, No. 2, 170-4. Further references are cited in the text.

The binary opposition of “reason and feeling” also requires reassessment. In the interrelated realms of literary studies and psychology, the feeling-cognate “affect” generally refers to “emotional effects or dispositions.”² This interpretation implicitly neglects an absence of emotion, even though such an absence can be conspicuous, hence indirectly emotive. As has been the case with the posthumous formation of the term “Romanticism,” affect (as a feeling or emotional response to art and nature) is defined by both a historicised and conceptualised opposition to the faculty of “reason” (as a guiding principle of the Enlightenment). Again, there seems little room for emotional detachment, a response which does not quite belong either to reason or feeling, or partakes of both. The term “un-affect” is therefore the most suitable one in the present context, because it acknowledges, by naming, the very thing that it denies. On the one hand, un-affect is an un-feeling form of feeling, and on the other, a way of reasoning which plays with or provokes the emotions.

To succinctly illustrate the nature and extent of the essay genre’s mode of un-affect, the following section comprises a highly selective history from the Renaissance to the Romantic period, of the treatment of melancholy in the essay and essayistic writing. As we shall see, the paradoxical *essaying* of this most intense, and literary, of psychological maladies serves as a kind of therapy for the melancholic writer, thereby suggesting the essay’s sheer power of detachment.

Melancholia and the Essay

As the designated father of the modern essay, it seems ironic that Montaigne should have conceived a genre characterised by desultory or immethodical thought, when his immediate purpose was to prevent his own mind from wandering or straying. But as the straying in this case tended toward melancholic delusion, the act of chronicling those delusions in writing, or transferring them from mind to text, worked to impose a crucial distance between Montaigne and his malady, in a form of writing-as-therapy. The speaker of John Donne’s sonnet, “The Triple Fool” (1631) describes a similarly textual means of asserting control over raging emotion, through the conversion of grief into poetry:

I thought, if I could draw my paines,
Through Rime’s vexation, I should them allay,
Griefe brought to numbers cannot be so fierce,

² Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5.

For, he tames it, that fetters it in verse.

(ll. 8-11).³

The speaker's self-therapy is eventually defeated by the prospect of readers taking pleasure in his poeticised pain, so that having his poetry read "by delighting many, frees againe / Griefe, which verse did restraine" (*Complete Poetry*, 14). In Donne's poem itself, therefore, is the idea that poetry (or at least, tightly compacted poetry like the sonnet) works both to subdue powerful feelings and to produce milder ones, by allaying the anguish of the writer himself and delighting the disinterested reader.

But to what extent can the reader interpret in the language, form or content of Montaigne's writing a resistance to melancholy, or, for that matter, any other state of intense or disturbing emotion? And is the loose and informal essay genre as effective as the compact and highly structured sonnet in the taming of emotion? To answer the last question first, the taming of real and raw emotion as part of the writing process should not to be confused with the sense of a controlled and vicarious, literary emotion, as it appears in the written text. The latter is clearly the province of the present study. The former suggests a psychological approach to the act of writing, in the manner of Louise De Salvo's *Writing as a Way of Healing* (1999), which, while it assumes a certain genre, that of narrative fiction, to be especially therapeutic for the anguished writer, is more concerned with self-help than literary criticism. The "whining poetry" (*Complete Poetry*, 14) of Donne's sonnet evokes rather than quells a sense of anguish because the speaker's desperate attempt at "writing as a way of healing" has only made matters worse. Irrespective of Montaigne's personal history, his essayistic persona conversely succeeds in controlling not simply his own feelings, but feeling in general.

Montaigne's essayist distances himself from melancholy not simply by writing about it as a past experience or a mental aberration from which he has now recovered. He also does so, crucially, through a posture of wry rationality, as the very antithesis of the experience itself:

It was a melancholy humour (and therefore a humour most inimical to my natural complexion) brought on by the chagrin caused by the solitary retreat I plunged myself into a few years ago which first put into my mind this raving concern with writing.

(*The Essays*, 15)

³ *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, ed. Charles M. Coffin (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 14. Further references are cited in the text.

Both the prevalent Renaissance malady and the whole undertaking of *The Essays* are debunked in Montaigne's suggestion that he has simply replaced one kind of madness, born of an impetuous plunge into solitude, with another, "a raving concern with [essay] writing." The lucid, drolly reasoned prose hardly seems the product of such monomania because Montaigne is being disingenuously and strategically modest about his project. An acute awareness of the novelty, at that time, of essay-writing, or what he also refers to as a "daft undertaking" (15), in using non-fictional prose not for an authoritative and worldly dissertation but an idiosyncratic journey into the self, through all the vagaries of thought, whim and opinion, induces an apologetic self-consciousness. This apologetic impulse reappears, as we shall see, in the Romantic period, as an anxious self-reflexivity over the essayist's involvement with periodical writing and consumerism. Montaigne's tone, however, is self-deprecatingly humorous, with neither melancholy nor essay-writing being taken very seriously. Thus he exploits the essay form, at its very conception, to make light of an intense and unstable form of emotion.

Robert Burton similarly achieves detached wryness in the treatment of melancholy. His deceptively titled *Anatomy of Melancholy* is less scientific than essayistic, in style and spirit if not length. Burton seems to follow Montaigne's eccentric, ambulatory and emphatically self-centred example, only Burton explicitly deploys an elaborate persona, Democritus Junior, thus anticipating the advent of this device in the essay of the eighteenth century. Burton's self-presentation as the son and intellectual heir of the celebrated "laughing philosopher" of ancient Greece, immediately suggests that the subject of melancholy will not be taken entirely seriously. But this blasé treatment derives equally from Burton's essayistic versioning of the Renaissance man, one who is self-taught and immethodically read, with a "roving humour" and a "running wit, an unconstant [*sic*], unsettled mind," determined "not to be a slave of one science, or dwell altogether in one subject, as most do, but to rove abroad ... to have an oar in every man's boat, to taste of every dish, and sip of every cup".⁴ The essayist's observational humour, insatiable curiosity, flighty or agile thinking and dilettante's attitude to knowledge are all apparent. Therefore, although Burton's book is far from being the scientific study which its title suggests, the term "anatomy" is, in one sense, appropriate. Anatomising and essaying share the same connotation of emotional detachment. Both, in a sense, involve dissection or

² *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, eds. Holbrook Jackson and William H. Gass (New York: New York Review Books, 2001), 17. Further references are cited in the text.