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Eighteenth Century and the Periodical Essay

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Abstract

Eighteenth-century England is marked by a resurgence in writing for the periodicals that were being written with the twin objectives of educating as well as entertaining the masses. The growth of the periodical essay in the 18th century is a story of the rise of the educated classes in England, women gaining centre-stage in the reading public, and the wave of public discussions and debate that animated the public sphere in England at the time. This essay traces the reasons and conditions for the growth of the periodical essay in 18th century England. It further discusses at the length the distinguishing features of the major periodical writers of the time including Addison, Steele, and Samuel Johnson and their contributions to the growth and refinement of English prose that paved the way for the novel form.

Introduction

In a general sense, the term "periodical essays" may be applied to any grouping of essays that appear serially. Charles Dickens once referred to himself as a "periodical essayist," and various 20th-century columnists whose syndicated work appears with some frequency might be given this designation. The term "periodical essay" appears to have been first used by George Colman the Elder and Bonnell Thornton in their magazine the *Connoisseur* (1754-56). By the time it occurred to them to use these two words to describe the form of publication in which they were engaged, serial essays which shared a number of characteristics with the *Connoisseur* had been published (in England especially) for half a century. So numerous were these serials, so persistent a feature of the reading diet of people throughout English

society during nearly the entire century, and so natural did it seem to an 18th-century author to develop a periodical essay series or at least to contribute a paper or two to a series established by another writer, that any discussion of the periodical essay is most appropriately situated in this period.

The confluence of three separate cultural developments appears to have caused the emergence of the periodical essay form early in the 18th century. The first of these was the rise of publications that conveyed news, commentary, and (frequently) political propaganda to the general reading public. Governmental licensing controls over publishing had been allowed to lapse in the latter years of the 17th century, and by the end of the first decade of the 18th a variety of publications, most appearing weekly or two to three times per week, were serving a wide reading audience. Daniel Defoe estimated the total national weekly circulation of such periodicals at 200,000 in 1711, and the sharing of papers at coffeehouses and within families doubtless created a larger audience even then. The second development was the rise of the informal essay at the same time, undoubtedly influenced by the writings of Montaigne as well as by the recognition that particular kinds of prose style might be more appropriate to some discourses than to others. Ephraim Chambers' entry on the essay in his *Cyclopaedia* (1728) refers to "sudden, occasional Reflexions, which are to be wrote much at the Rate, and in the Manner a Man thinks . . ." A third factor contributing to the popularity of this form was the 18th-century fondness for pseudonymous writing - the adoption of fictitious personae appropriate to the expression of particular views. *Jonathan Swift* and *Richard Steele* are only two of the most visible practitioners of this technique; it is also to be found employed with similar energy by hundreds of other writers.

The publication of journals had been developed in England and other European countries in the seventeenth century. The first printed English journal of news began in 1621 and was licensed only to print foreign news. Thousands of pamphlets appeared from 1640 to 1660 which raised questions of public importance and carried various contemporary debates. In 1665 *The Oxford Gazette* was started which soon became *The London Gazette*. *Richard Steele* became for a time its editor. Towards the end of the century numerous other journals of various kinds had their runs and the English public became accustomed to periodicals of news, political propaganda, scientific information and even gossip. Thus, the instrument had been prepared for the men of genius who raised journalism to literature in the reign of Queen Anne. The age of Queen Anne and the decades that followed were distinguished by a mass of pamphlets, newspapers and lampoons which included those of *Daniel Defoe*, *Addison*, *Steele*, *Swift* and *Samuel Johnson*.

Daniel Defoe

The greatest representative of the middle class culture in the Augustan Age was Daniel Defoe, who has since been known only vaguely as the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, but whose restless and multifarious activities as merchant, manufacturer, journalist, political agent and hack writer made him prominent, and rather notorious figure in the eyes of his contemporaries. Defoe intended to expose the intentions of high-flying Tories who were agitating for extreme measures of persecution against the Dissenters in a satirical pamphlet *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* (1702). The Tories endorsed the pamphlet and the Dissenters were terrified and angered. The government, alarmed over the turbulence decided to prosecute the author for sedition. Defoe remained engaged in mysterious political and journalistic activities after serving a few months in jail being sentenced to pillory.

In 1704, Defoe founded his influential periodical *The Review* as an agent of Robert Harley. Defoe's paper was a major improvement upon the official news reports of the *London Gazette*, the question-answer format of *The Athenian Mercury* and the dialogue form of John Tutchin's *Observer*. As Mr. Review, Defoe often answered letters and even established a mock society, The Scandalous Club, to take care of such material, but for the most part, he wrote essays on politics and trade. Maxmillian E. Novak remarks that the essays published in *The Review* were – “often controversial, occasionally witty, and always written with that particularly lively style that made Defoe the most popular as well as the most prolific journalist of his day.”

Addison and Steele

However, the real success of the period in the field of the periodical essay form was the work of Richard Steele and Joseph Addison (1672-1719) and their masterful creations: *The Tatler* (1709-1711) and *The Spectator* (1711-12). Louis Bredvold remarks that in contrast to Defoe, whose underground activities gave him access to the great only by the backstairs under the cloak of secrecy, Addison and Steele were gentlemen who associated familiarly with the leaders of the Whig party. Many characteristics of these two papers - the fictitious nominal proprietor, the group of fictitious contributors who offer advice and observations from their special viewpoints, the miscellaneous and constantly changing fields of discourse, the use of exemplary character sketches, letters to the editor from fictitious correspondents, and various other typical features - existed before Addison and Steele set to work, but these two wrote with such effectiveness and cultivated such attention in their readers that the *Tatler* and *Spectator* served as the models for periodical writing in the next seven or eight decades. Unlike their contemporary Defoe, whose *Review of the Affairs of France* (1704-13) moved to more general cultural topics from a central engagement with political issues, Addison and Steele devoted themselves to matters of style, fashion, behavior, opinion, and

manners characteristic of middle-class life; it was this rapidly growing and prospering audience that established so solid a readership for periodical essays in several successive generations.

The reasons for their success at the time and their continued popularity helps one to understand the direction of English art, thought and life in this period, for while writers like Defoe and Swift drew much on their experiences in coming of age in the previous century, Addison and Steele were products of a new age of polished manners and reformed morals. Addison and Steele were gentlemen who associated with the leaders of the Whig party. According to Bredvold, their education in the best traditions of the public schools and universities did not prevent them from understanding and sympathising with the new middle class. Addison announced that the intention of *The Spectator* was –“ to enliven morality with wit, and to temper wit with morality.”

Thus , on one hand, they denounced the moral irresponsibility of the Restoration and its attitude towards the stolid bourgeois virtues, on the other hand, they were hardly contented with the prejudices of the merchants who thought that the theatre was a sink of iniquity and most other literature and art mere trifling.

The Tatler was begun on 12 April 1709 by Steele writing under the mask of Isaac Bickerstaff. Like so many literary ideas of the period, the name was suggested by Jonathan Swift. Steele’s Bickerstaff speaks sometimes in his roles as “ astrologer, civilian, and physician with mock authority.” He appears as a person of broad tastes with mock authority. He appears as a person of broad tastes with a wide knowledge of London coffeehouses and somewhat positive in his opinions. From the coffee houses he draws information about foreign affairs , scandal, trade and matters concerning literature and the stage. The title, according to Steele promised light entertainment, but the amusing and agreeable style of the papers did not interfere with Steele’s serious purpose of improving taste and manners. These papers exposed and bantered the foibles and “ false arts of life” as were witnesses in the coffee houses of London. These observations were insinuated with the ideas of what a gentleman should be. As arbiter of manners, *The Tatler* described the varieties of vanity, affectation, ill nature and hard heartedness that had become established in the current social mode. He recommended – “ a general simplicity in our dress, our discourse, and our behaviour.” Steele reviewed current productions of old and new plays and was determined to broaden the social base of English culture. According to Steele, *The Tatler* was – “ a paper which should observe upon the manners of the pleasurable as well as the busy part of mankind.”

The Tatler was immediately popular and copies even reached Dublin where Addison saw through the disguise and began sending his friend contributions. The project appears to have delighted Addison who saw in it the perfect medium for his satire. Nothing could be more definite than the way

in which Addison at once found himself as an essayist. The two men jointly began *The Spectator* on 1 March, 1711.

Addison describes Mr. Spectator and announces his intention of being a “looker on”. In the second number Steele drew the members of the Spectator Club and thus has the credit of furnishing the *dramatis personae* of one of the greatest periodicals of the time. They are the key to all the rest of the papers that bear on the Club and enable us to see that the essays were not rigorously edited. They were not carved and cut into consistency. Steele and Addison and others handled the characters in their own ways and the marvel is that they succeeded in drawing portraits so vivid and convincing.

Addison’s paper was more sedate and composed, like easy conversation within the restraints of decorum; Steele was impulsive, hearty in his laughter, indulgent in his sympathies and unreserved in the expression of his emotions. Andrew Varney observes that *The Spectator* takes up a range of topics in its ambit including the phenomena revealed by science and their implications, while maintaining a tone that varies between the flippant and comic. He further makes two observations. One, *The Spectator* consists mainly of essays which was a discursive form less casual than that of the epistle, but more relaxed than the discourse or treatise. Two, the journal was very successful, and from shortly after its inception the publishing project was extended to make *The Spectator* available in sets, and later in collected volumes.

In view of the professed object of *The Spectator* – to bring “philosophy out of the closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and in coffee-houses.” According to J.H. Lobban, Steele has many claims to be regarded as a great journalist, but none more notable than his resolve to write about women. For instance, in *The Spectator-XXV- ‘Female Orators’* – Mr. Spectator describes different types of female orators- those who could “talk whole hours together upon nothing”, those who are “commonly known by the name of the censorious” characterised by a “fluency of invention and copiousness of expression”, the “gossips” and the “coquette”. John Gay wrote of *The Spectator*- “It is impossible to conceive the effect his writings have had on the town; how many thousands follies they have either quite banished or given a very great check to...”. These papers were esteemed in their own day as both entertaining and educative. Their power of entertainment is perennial and they have now acquired a historical value as the best of all sidelights on the London of Queen Anne.

His irony and urbanity are the two most prominent traits in the essays of Addison. The more ridiculous the folly he attacks, the greater is his air of pretended concern and sympathy. The irony is all the more deadly that it is delivered under the guise of friendship. The other great quality of Addison’s writing is its fine taste and urbanity. It was the type and not the individual that he assailed. His object he tells us was to reprehend – “those vices which are too trivial for the chastisement of the law, and too fantastical for the

cognisance of the pulpit". Pope's description- to " Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer, / And without sneering, teach the rest to sneer" is a brilliant definition of Addisonian irony. Addison's irony is gentle only because it is general and is veiled by humour. Macaulay once wrote- " We have not the least doubt that if Addison had written a novel, on an extensive plan, it would have been superior to any that we possess. According to Macmillan these essays indicate the spirit of sophisticated moralism and refined taste which informed discussions of laughter, wit and comedy in the early eighteenth century. According to Bredvold – " The cult of the Latin classics was a second nature to them, and they were as seriously concerned about taste and good judgement in the arts as in manners and morals". Steele writes of " fine taste" as the " utmost perfection of an accomplished man".

Taken together, both *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* set the style and tone for the many essay periodicals that sprang up in the eighteenth century, not only in England but in all countries throughout Europe. The Tory writers of this period were not of a temper to accept the human race with easy geniality as Addison and Steele could. The Toryism of Swift, Pope and Gay manifested not so much in any adherence to the old order as in their searching criticism of the new. Swift once wrote to Pope – " Life is a ridiculous tragedy, which is the worst kind of composition." Jonathan Swift's authorship of *A Tale of a Tub* and other pamphlets made him a public figure of importance. He made extended visits to London, where his unpredictable manner won him a reputation in the coffee houses as " the mad Irish parson" but where he could also associate with such friends as Congreve, Steele and Addison. He conducted for some months the Tory journal, *The Examiner* and published among other pamphlets. His Tory affiliation lost him the friendship of Addison and Steele. However, his association with Dr. Arbuthnot, Pope, Thomas Parnell, and John Gay was symbolised in the Scribelerus Club which professed to edit the *Memoirs* of the pedant, Martin Scriblerus. Their purpose was to satirise – " all the false tastes in learning, under the character of a man of capacity enough, that had dipped into every art and science, but injudiciously in each." The *Memoirs* were largely composed in 1713 and 1714, although first printed by Pope in 1741 and they contain the germs of various later works by members of the Club, including *Gulliver's Travels*.

After 1714, Swift spent the rest of his years as Dean of St. Patrick's in Dublin. He championed the cause of the Irish and in 1724, with his *Drapier's Letters*, which forced the government in London to withdraw its proposals for a new Irish coinage, he became the hero of the native population. The intellectual and cultural implication of the new science were already satirised in Addison's *The Spectator* and Swift did the same in *Gulliver's Travels*. However, Swift's brief pamphlet – *A Modest Proposal* (1729), according to Bredvold is – " impersonal and almost statistical in tone, with all the horror of its unfolding details suppressed by the tone of scientific calculation." The proposal was that the children of the poor should be raised for slaughter as

food for the rich. He contributed to *The Tatler* a “Description of a City Shower” which rudely mocked the prettiness of the conventional pastoral. In verse as in prose his ideal was – “that simplicity which is the best and truest ornament of most things in life, and which the politer ages always aimed at in their buildings and dress as well as in their productions of wit.”

Addison hailed Pope’s *Essay on Man* as a “masterpiece of its kind” for “wit and fine writing doth not consist so much in advancing things that are new, as in giving things that are known and agreeable turn.” (*The Spectator*, 253) Pope met Addison’s circle and contributed his “Messiah”, a “sacred eclogue” to *The Spectator* in 1712 and several essays to Steele’s *Guardian* in 1713. In 1729, Pope was reported as intending – “to write nothing but epistles in Horace’s manner.” In this category would fall four “Moral Essays” (1731-1735), on the knowledge and characters of men, the characters of women, and the use and abuse of riches. The *Essay on Man* (1733-1734), consisting of four epistles, was rather inconsistent patchwork of various philosophical ideas of the time, most of which he had learned from Bolingbroke, his “guide, philosopher, and friend.” The weakest element in it is its deistic optimism, which explained evil as good when viewed as part of the whole in this best of all possible worlds. This superficial philosophy was later ridiculed in Voltaire’s *Candide* and Johnson’s *Rasselas*.

Towards the later part of the eighteenth century, the periodical essay had declined from the hey-day of *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. Addison and Steele had had many imitators but no equals and most periodicals had been caught up in the political or literary wars of the time. In 1750, Samuel Johnson, known as the author of the magnificently sombre poem, *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749) began a new periodical *The Rambler*, each number consisting of a single essay and costing two pence. Paul J. Korshin in his essay ‘Johnson, the essay, and *The Rambler*’ remarks that as the centrepiece of this decade of immense literary activity, Johnson saw it from the beginning as an entrepreneurial undertaking that would rival the other great collections of English essays, Bacon’s *Essays Civil and Moral* and Addison and Steele’s *The Spectator*.

Samuel Johnson

The Rambler No. I, which appeared on Tuesday, 20 March 1759 conspicuously lacked the lightness of touch of Addison and Steele, despite the author’s expressed intention to “endeavour the entertainment of my countrymen”, and to “follow the national taste through all its variations, and catch the *aura popularis*, the gale of favour, from what point soever it shall blow.” Before beginning, he had written a ‘Prayer on the Rambler’, “... I may promote thy glory, and the salvation both of myself and others: Grant this, O Lord, for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen. Lord bless me. So be it.”

Some readers may have felt that *The Rambler* was more concerned with their “salvation” than their “entertainment”. At any rate, although the essays continued to appear twice a week for two years. Few would disagree that as a periodical to be read over breakfast or in coffee-house *The Spectator* was incomparably superior to *The Rambler*. The latter has less variety, is far less easy and conversational in manner and often discourses on subjects unlikely to provide a pleasant morning’s reading. Charles Peake suggests that *The Spectator* may complain of the wrongs done by society and sympathise with its victims, but *The Rambler* develops a fullness of pity and indignation with a stylistic energy and rhythmical vigour which is quite new to the essay.

Peake further argues that- “the difference in manner reflects a difference in character and experience. Steele and Addison were men of rather conventional piety; Johnson was intensely religious: they knew little of the wretchedness and poverty out of sight of the fashionable world; Johnson had lived in contact with it.” Although his essays vary in kind and quality, they show workings of a powerful mind. The light, casual, conversational writing style of Addison and Steele was replaced by an unrelieved seriousness of the philosophical and religious tone of *The Rambler* which dealt with various literary and moral topics.

This can be felt even in the organisation of the essays. Clearly there is no single pattern of argument, but very characteristic is the scheme where Johnson sets opposing ideas one against the other until he arrives at an embracing generalisation, a maxim of practical morality, or often, an illuminating image or analogy. Written in the Neoclassical manner with subject matters organised from the specific to the abstract, the essays are balanced in a remarkable Augustan way. No.47 on “The proper means of regulating sorrow” is a good example. It begins by differentiating sorrow from other human passions as not leading to some satisfaction: it is “unavailing misery”. Yet, on the other hand, it springs from love, and only the inhuman can escape it. The solution must lie not in the avoidance but in the mitigation of sorrow.

However condensed the argument and generalised the terms, there is always the sense of Johnson weighing each abstraction, his own or others’, against first-hand experience- the quality which perhaps, above all others distinguishes him as a moralist. The *Rambler* essays are the writings most quoted in support of the assertion that Johnson’s style is verbose, polysyllabic, over-manipulated, ponderous and pompous. Similarly, too much is made of his uncommon words. In *The Idler* No. 70 Johnson defended the use of ‘hard words’ on the grounds that they avoid diffuseness and allow the writer to discuss matters for which everyday terms are insufficiently subtle or discriminating.

Peake argues that his occasional use of unusual words should not be confused with his frequent use of generalisations or abstract terms. Imlac’s

observations about the “business of the poet” are typical. According to Imlac, the business of the poet: is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances. He is to exhibit in his portraits of nature such prominent and striking features as recall the original to every mind; and must neglect the minuter discriminations. He must disregard present laws...and rise to general and transcendental truths, which will always be the same.

Thus, what he advocates is universality as opposed to particularity in the inexhaustible variety of life which must be studied by the poet. The fondness for generalisations led to memorable aphorisms, epigrams, brevities of all kinds the function of which according to Johnson was to contract “the great rules of life into short sentences, which may be easily impressed on the memory.”

Johnson believed that the great source of human unhappiness and folly was self delusion, the great precept “which the wisdom and virtue of all ages have concurred to enforce” was “Know Thyself”. Three *Ramblers* (No. 24, 28 and 155) deal directly with this precept. The whole series of moral essays, and particularly those in *The Rambler* can be seen as parts of Johnson’s endeavour to promote self-knowledge and dissipate self-delusion- “He who thinks reasonably must think morally.”

The foundation of Johnson’s morality is his Christian belief. In this he was content to be orthodox and Anglican. Throughout his life he was recurrently troubled by doubts, but he remained convinced that all virtue depended on religion for its authority and its motive. As he had prayed before beginning *The Rambler*, so, in the concluding number, he claimed that the “professedly serious” essays, “if I have been able to execute my own intentions, will be found exactly conformable to the precepts of Christianity, without any accommodation to the licentiousness and levity of the present age.”

All the periodical essays were produced during the ten years between 1750-1760, and exhibit little change in Johnson’s moral position. There is, however, considerable change in his tone and manner. *The Rambler* does contain light and amusing essays, but these are hardly typical; what made the bound volumes of the unsuccessful periodical sell so well, and what sent Boswell to cultivate an acquaintance with Johnson, was the profoundly sincere and serious attitude towards life, the ‘art of thinking’ applied to human behaviour, the earnest desire to enlighten and reform men, the splendid and sometimes sombre rhetoric- in all of which respects *The Rambler* is distinguished from its predecessors and its successors in periodical literature.

One can be sure that Johnson’s periodical essays reached an even wider audience in the century after his death due to advancements and increase in the number of printing press as well as introduction of cheaper paper. The

later readers of *The Rambler* encountered it as a literary work in a complete collection rather than as a periodical or an interrupted series.

Johnson was concerned over the moral effect of the prose fiction and novels which were written – “ chiefly to the young, the ignorant, and the idle, to whom they serve as lectures of conduct, and introduction into life.” (*The Rambler*, 4) The influence of Addison on Johnson cannot be overlooked. Johnson wrote five critical essays on Milton’s versification and laid stress on the role of educating the taste of the contemporary audience for a style of verse that was unimitated and unfamiliar to the readers. Therefore in the manner of Addison , Johnson notes in *The Rambler* 86 – “ The imitator treads a beaten walk..” and thus underscored his search for originality. Paul J. Korshin argues that the “ literary criticism in *The Rambler* is highly practical: Johnson is not simply telling his audience what to prefer, he is setting standards for the authors of his own generation to follow and offering evidence against which he hoped people would judge his writings.”

Conclusion

Periodical essays, therefore, were an important medium to comment, describe, debate and satirise the contemporary issues of the eighteenth century. The developments in the field of new science and philosophy, the ideal manner and style of writing, the contemporary debates around the relationship between men and women etc were all fit subject matters for the periodical essay form which was easily accessible to the audience in coffee-houses and tea-tables. However, the periodical essays of the eighteenth century, even in the golden age of essay writing, from 1710-1775, did not last beyond their first appearance. After 1775, except for the famous collections of Addison, Steele and Johnson, the changing taste of England’s literary audience leads to a lessening of demand for separate collections of essays. The periodical essay form becomes confined to publications like weeklies and monthlies and moves closer to what one refers today as journalism. Thus Korshin rightly argues that while the contemporary periodical essay gradually becomes more journalistic, the outstanding examples of the genre such as Steele, Addison, Swift and Johnson acquire the status of classics. Therefore, *The Rambler* and other classics of eighteenth century periodical writing have a wide circulation as part of entire sets of books. In the first third of the nineteenth century, when the market for Johnson’s writings, in collections of his works, appears to decline, when the most popular collections, like those of William Hazlitt and Charles Lamb, were no longer part of a titled series, his periodical essays reached the widest reading public they have ever enjoyed.

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