Regulating the Eighteenth-Century Periodical Essay: A Poetics from *The Tatler*, *The Spectator* and *The Rambler*

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Abstract
This paper investigates the concealed manifesto of essay writing that Addison, Steele, and Johnson inserted in some clearly non-systematic, yet crucial, meta-essayistic passages of their periodical works. This 'camouflaged' eighteenth-century reflection on the genre reached its climax with Samuel Johnson's 1755 *Dictionary* entry, where the *arbiter literarum* described the essay as "a loose sally of the mind", quite unexpectedly sanctioning its nomadic and wandering nature in the normative context of a dictionary.

Keywords: the essay (genre), periodical literature, metaliterature, Addison, Steele, Johnson, literary magazines, *Dictionary.*

> He so often varies his Shape, that Proteus, Posture, Clerk and Gerkin, are but Tom Fools to him. But what is most surprising, is that he can change others also as well as himself into what Forms he pleases.
>
> *The Character of the Tatler* (1710)

1. Binding an eighteenth-century Proteus

Among literary genres, the essay unquestionably ranks among the most difficult to define. With recourse to one of the most fascinating classical myths, O.B. Hardison equated the critic attempting a definition to Menelaus binding Proteus: "If there is no genre more widespread in modern letters than the essay", he argued, "there is also no genre that takes so many shapes and that refuses so successfully to resolve itself, finally, into its own shape" (Hardison 1989: 12). Unlike poetical forms, such as the sonnet, and narrative genres, the essay

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has not been systematically regulated by essayists themselves, but has rather relied on reflection by critics. Nevertheless, this paper intends to show that essayists have in fact delineated a poetics of the genre, although in a fragmentary, dispersed and unsystematic way, interspersing their production with metaliterary comments.

Introducing a recent anthology tellingly entitled *Understanding the Essay*, Jeff Porter postulated a hypothetical alternate history that would resolve the often stated, and almost statutory, vagueness of the genre:

> All the confusion concerning the essay's literary status could have been avoided long ago had Homer composed 'On Lying,' or better yet 'On Dying.' A few centuries later, Aristotle would have wrapped his mind around the form in his theory of literature and that would have been that. (Porter 2012: x)

This fascinating statement, however, can be significantly challenged if only we cease to look for a distinctly recognisable "Manifesto of the Essay"and begin to plumb the depths of essay collections in search of remarks made by the essayists themselves about the form.

The guide to and prime enabler of such an investigation is the American critic and essayist Carl Klaus, who has proposed a method of studying the genre through such hidden normative hints. The first germs of his *meta-essayistic* theory can be found in his "On Virginia Woolf on the Essay" (1990) and the following "Montaigne on his Essays: A Poetics of the Self" (1991), which read the works of two of the most influential essayists of all time in search of a poetics of the form. Klaus's choice of Virginia Woolf is presented as a very personal one, more closely connected to his experience as a lecturer than to the self-evident contribution of her 1922 'programmatic' "The Modern Essay" to the history of contemporary essayistic literature. It is thus more interesting to the discourse at hand to focus on Klaus's second contribution, where he reads Michel de Montaigne's seventeenth-century masterpiece from a metaliterary perspective, singling out passages in which the author "indulged in writing about his essays" (Klaus 1991: 1). Klaus's critical path towards a poetics came to a rather remarkable end in 2012, when he edited – with Ned Stuckey French – the anthology *Essayists on the Essay*, where we perceive a sense of culmination and the idea that

his 1990s intuitions about Woolf had finally found their theoretical dimension through a careful investigation of Montaigne's import to such a profitable practitioner's guide to the essay's most inherent characteristics.

This paper seeks to investigate this *in fieri* corpus with the intention of drawing some solid conclusions, given how much and how often – "[t]hough the essay has yet to find its Aristotle – essayists have written about it with the certitude of a poetics" (Klaus 2012: XIV). In particular, it aims to single out the contribution of three specific authors to this many-voiced manifesto: from the two pioneers of the "single-essay periodical" (Italia 2005: 13) Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, to Samuel Johnson, whose periodical essays soon "acquire[d] the status of classics" (Korshin 1997: 65) and enjoyed a steady editorial success when posthumously collected in book form. Starting from the scattered remarks on the form in both the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, building up to the consciously assertive tone of the *Rambler*, and ultimately reaching the much-quoted 1755 *Dictionary* definition of ESSAY as "a loose sally of the mind", we can trace a sort of progression epitomised by the encyclopaedic nature of such a *terminus ante quem*. This time span calls for a further delimitation of the object of study, since attention will be here primarily aimed at periodical essays[1] as the most interesting variety of the genre in order to appreciate their rapid and continuous evolution in the eighteenth century (Basker 2005: 320-5).

The periodical format was, if not the solely significant trait of non-fictional prose during the Augustan age, at least the most significant factor for the diffusion and development of prose literature at that time:

> The eighteenth century witnessed a spectacular rise in the periodical press. As the century wore on, newspapers would comprise only a small portion of this. Instead, the new century saw the establishment of a large number of other publications presented in serial form for a regular subscribing readership: literary, cultural, scientific and learned journals circulating on a weekly or monthly basis. The new periodicals proved to be enormously

[1] I prefer this formulation (DeMaria 2005; Squibs 2014) to "essay-periodical" (Italia 2005), since the main focus here is the essay as a form, and not the periodical as a format.

popular. This was an era of rising prosperity, and rising literacy. (Pettegree 2014: 269)

Within this literary upheaval, it is hard to overstate the importance of Richard Steele and Joseph Addison's first venture. Periodicals offered themselves as repositories for a hidden poetics, fragmented in many scattered pieces and glimpses: in other words, periodicals "invented a space for their authors to think out loud about what it meant to be a professional writer" (Powell 2012: 3), and thus must be carefully investigated in a search for a normative poetics. The meta-essayistic pronouncements interspersed in these texts allow us to appraise the periodical as a novel cultural artefact in eighteenth-century England, as well as to reconsider its position within the contemporary revision of canonical "rise of the novel" studies (Hammond & Reagan 2006: 25). Periodicals can thus be considered the most hospitable habitat for a hypothetical essayistic prototype[2], given their significance on both the sociological (Sherman 1996: 22) and the literary levels, where they were secularly fastened to the "evolution of the professional writer from his or her role as a creature of the court or parliament to his or her reliance on publishers and, through them, on the reading public." (DeMaria 2005: 528).

2. *The Tatler*'s satirical commentary

On April 12, 1709 Richard Steele founded a new publication called *The Tatler*, which he envisaged as a sort of hybrid between newspaper and magazine. Inspired by his role as editor of the London *Gazette* (Calhoun 1964), he was able to merge some of the most common features of these two rather different media (Bond 1971: 1-2). Steele borrowed the *persona* of Sir Isaac Bickerstaff created, exactly one year before the launch of Steele's periodical, by Jonathan Swift to predict the death of the quack astrologer John Partridge. In doing

[2] As noted before, despite its unquestionable pre-eminence, the periodical format was not the only possible vehicle for the essay in this period. Just to name the most blatant exception, Alexander Pope's verse essays seem to pose a serious threat to the supremacy of the periodical (prose). These examples, though, like the Earl of Roscommon's verse *Essay on Translated Verse* (1684), should be seen as continuations of the classical tradition of the verse *epistula*, which started with Horace's *Ars Poetica*.

so, he produced a major shift in the newly established institution of the periodical press, diverting the attention of his readers towards a character with a "fictional identity with more than one twist" (Gigante 2010: 553), who ran a London-based coffee-house social observatory:

> I had settled a Correspondence in all Parts of the Known and Knowing World. And forasmuch as this Globe is not trodden upon by mere Drudges of Business only, but that Men of Spirit and Genius are justly to be esteemed as considerable Agents in it, we shall not, upon a Dearth of News, present you with musty Foreign Edicts, or dull Proclamations, but shall divide our Relation of the Passages which occur in Action or Discourse throughout this Town as well as elsewhere, under such Dates of Places as may prepare you for the Matter you are to expect, in the following Manner. All accounts of *Gallantry*, *Pleasure*, and *Entertainment*, shall be under the Article of *White's Chocolate-house*; *Poetry* under that of *Will's Coffee-house*; *Learning*, under the Title of *Græcian*; *Foreign* and *Domestick News*, you will have from *St. James's Coffee-house*; and what else I have to offer on any other Subject shall be dated from my own Apartment. (Steele 1987a: 16)

This collective commentary, although not the only fictional situation within an essay periodical[3], is one of the most significant features of the periodical essay's entanglement with the issue of personal identity. Given the angle of this study, this issue can be discussed following its relationship with the genre of satire, of which Steele and his later collaborator Addison appear as modern 'domesticators' (McDrea 1989). An overt homage to the satiric tradition can be traced in the quotation that embellished the first forty-odd issues of the magazine: *Quicquid agunt homines … nostri farrago libelli*[4].

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[3] It should be noted, however, that eidolons and eidolon club-centred periodicals enjoyed the most durable popularity, undoubtedly because they problematised and fictionalised the highly complex issue of sociability. "While contemporary novels increasingly refer[red] to their readers as silent and solitary […] the *Spectator* encourages group reading and reading aloud" (Italia 2005: 68). For further ideas on this theme, see Loretelli's study of the evolution of eighteenth-century novels against the backdrop of silent reading (2010) and De Romanis's ideas about the development of a "common reader" (2016).

[4] "Whatever men do … shall be the subject of our book" (my translation). It must be noted that the mode of satire, especially the Menippean one, had been the hallmark of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*'s "Anticke" Democritus Jr. Though a

The maxim is taken from Juvenal's first *Satire*, where he declares the scope of his work – in quite a straightforward equation of intents – to be the acute observation of human nature and human actions. Variety is thus the crucial feature that *The Tatler* borrows from satire, aimed at the creation of a "sociable style" that will eventually evolve into "a civil voice of criticism" where "language is […] simmered and reduced, able to represent the variety of the mundane with a mundane discourse" (Black 2006: 91). This shift "from the ancient literary mode of satire to a modern ethos of politeness" (p. 91) entails the continuance of one of the most remarkable stylistic features of satire: the didactic aim. If Juvenal had, in fact, very little interest in moral correction through his writing, being rather guided by sheer indignation, as the rest of the quotation chosen by Steele aptly testifies – "Si natura negat, facit indignatio versum / qualemcumque potest"[5] (Sat. I, 79 s.) – Steele seems, on the contrary, to have a morally edifying and educational goal, as clearly emerges from the dedication to Mr. Maynwaring:

> The general Purpose of this Paper, is to expose the false Arts of Life, to pull off the Disguises of Cunning, Vanity, and Affectation, and to recommend a general Simplicity in our Dress, our Discourse, and our Behaviour. (Steele 1987a: 8)

This didactic vein is well-attuned to the essence of what is known as "Augustan satire", the impelling "moral assignment […] to chastise folly and to punish vice, a censorious function associated with the Scriblerians and early eighteenth-century satire in general" (Taylor 1997: 831). But in fact, in *The Tatler*, didacticism actually takes centre stage, and, paired with the somewhat scrupulously methodical division of labour envisaged in the first issue, it offers insight into the role periodical essays played in the early eighteenth century. The genre had evidently undergone

melding of satiric commentary and essayistic spirit cannot be fully developed here, it appears clear that periodical essays entailed the impersonation of a role detached from the actual author. This feature is paramount in the case of Johnson, who proposes two very different sketches of the essay as a genre, depending on the literary medium in which he articulates it.

[5] "If craft fails, indignation will make the verses overflow / according to one's abilities" (my translation).

an important metamorphosis since Montaigne's late sixteenth-century avowedly "uninhibited composing process", which led to a "prose […] free from any mechanical or methodical constraints" (Klaus 1991: 8). This skewedness would become a paradigmatic *leitmotiv* of contemporary critical pronouncements on the form (see Adorno's famous methodically unmethodical progression [1984: 161] or Kaufmann's "skewed path" [1989: 224-5]). When Sir Isaac mentions Montaigne in issue no. 83, we can perceive that the gap between the two standards of essay writing has evidently widened:

> It is my frequent Practice to visit Places of Resort in this Town where I am least known, to observe what Reception my Works meet with in the World, and what good Effects I may promise my self from my Labours: And it being a Privilege asserted by Monsieur *Montaigne* and others, of vain-glorious Memory, That we Writers of Essays may talk of our selves, I take the Liberty to give an Account of the Remarks which I find are made by some of my gentle Readers upon these my Dissertations. (Steele 1987b: 26-7)

Steele is not speaking of self-disclosure in a mode comparable to the "subjectivity" (Klaus 1991: 13) of Montaigne's *Essais*, since he is very assertive about the fact that his talk about himself will not involve disclosing his personal features or inward attitudes, but will rather entail a discussion of the fame and currency of some of his most often quoted "lucubrations". This seminal essayistic project is summed up by Steele in the very last issue, the 271st of January 2, 1711, when Sir Isaac is hastily dismissed as Steele finds it more suitable to summarise the whole significance of his periodical life in his own voice:

> to frame Characters of Domestick Life, and put those Parts of it which are least observed into an agreeable View; to enquire into the Seeds of Vanity and Affectation, to lay before my Readers the Emptiness of Ambition; and in a Word, to trace Human Life through all its Mazes and Recesses, and show much shorter Methods than Men ordinarily practise, to be happy, agreeable, and great. But to enquire into Men's Faults and Weaknesses has something in it so unwelcome, that I have often seen People in Pain to act before me, whose Modesty only make them think themselves liable to Censure. (Steele 1987c: 364-5)

The model of essay-writer that can be inferred from these metaliterary comments appears to be quite broadly focused on a satirical commentary of everyday life, with the goal of exercising a didactic and corrective effect on his audience.

3. *The Spectator*'s aphoristic clarity

The *Spectator* ascended to the throne of periodical literature in April 1711, as the natural heir to the *Tatler,* with an even more markedly edifying moral project. In his *Life* of Addison, Samuel Johnson would name *The Spectator*[6] alongside Baldassarre Castiglione's *Il cortegiano,* Della Casa's *Galateo*, and the writings of the French moralists of the previous century, as a work whose prime aim was the instruction of common men (Johnson 2010: 612). Though coffee-houses came to be equated to "a sort of virtual stage on which they might expose the foibles and follies of social life in public spaces" (Cowan 2004: 384), the most striking peculiarity of the new joint adventure was, again according to Johnson, its adherence and receptivity to common life. This orientation ultimately elevated "Mr. Spectator" to the rank of *Arbiter Elegantiarum*, the title of Gaius Petronius Arbiter, author of the proto-novelistic narrative *Satyricon*. This connection to ancient tradition is clearly laudatory, although Johnson was referring less to *The Spectator*'s erudite tone and classical reference replenishment, than to its "middle style":

> His prose is the model of the middle stile; on grave subjects not formal, on light occasions not grovelling; pure without scrupulosity, and exact without apparent elaboration; always equable, and always easy, without glowing words or pointed sentences. Addison never deviates from his track to snatch a grace; he seeks no ambitious ornaments, and tries no hazardous innovations. His page is always luminous, but never blazes in unexpected splendour. (Johnson 2010: 678)

[6] Although Steele's contribution should not be underestimated (DeMaria 2005: 539-40), in the spirit of balance, *The Spectator* is here mainly considered as an Addisonian creation. The choice is based on the fact that this paper's prime focus is to highlight a regulating principle for the essay as a literary form, which is more likely to be detected in Addison's tutoring of his readers in matters of literary criticism, such as Milton's poetry or the aesthetics of *The Pleasures of Imagination.*

Although Johnson's pronouncement has traditionally been read against the backdrop of the "old critical cliché that *The Spectator* belongs to the history of the novel" (Black 2008: 338), it is nonetheless worth reconsidering in a critical discourse on the eighteenth-century essay as a form that actively engaged in a metaliterary conversation with an audience of the "middling sort".

In this perspective, meta-essayistic passages become even more important, since they can be read as audience-oriented descriptive sketches of essayistic experimentation. The first two issues of *The Spectator* present the reader with the *personae* that will voice the enterprise of the journal, i.e. Mr. Spectator and his many associates, among whom Sir Roger de Coverley stands out. When one reaches no. 124, framed by an epigraph from Callimachus' fragments – "A great book is a great evil"– one is introduced to the most important formal feature of the periodical essay, i.e. its brevity:

> those who publish their Thoughts in distinct Sheets, and as it were by Piece-meal, have none of these Advantages. We must immediately fall into our Subject, and treat every Part of it in a lively Manner, or our Papers are thrown by as dull and insipid: Our Matter must lie close together, and either be wholly new in itself, or in the Turn it receives from our Expressions. Were the Books of our best Authors thus to be retailed to the Publick, and every Page submitted to the Taste of forty or fifty thousand Readers, I am afraid we should complain of many flat Expressions, trivial Observations, beaten Topicks, and common thoughts, which go off very well in the Lump. (Addison 1965a: 506)

The first lesson that emerges from this passage is that an essayist must be, in Gricean terms, "brief and orderly" (Grice 1989: 27). Brevity, "the soul of wit" (II.II.90) as Polonius reminds us, was especially important when an author discussed his own "dispersed Meditacions" (Bacon 1985: 317). Francis Bacon, who first set out to continue Montaigne's essayistic venture in England would further underline the importance of brevity in his *Advancement of Learning* (1605), although referring to yet another prose genre, the aphorism. The aphorism's "knowledge broken" (Bacon 2000: 124) is based on multiple processes of reduction, since almost every feature of a methodical discourse is from them "cutte off" (p. 124) until "there remayneth nothinge to fill the *Aphorismes*, but some good quantitie of Obseruation: And therefore no man can suffice, nor in reason will

attempt to write *Aphorismes*, but he that is sound and grounded" (p. 124). This image of essentialness, where the dispensable part of a discourse is simply discarded (p. 124), aptly encapsulates the investment in brevity that will become a recurrent feature of the essayistic tradition.

The other theoretical issue to which *Spectator* no. 124 points is connected more specifically to the rise of the periodical medium in eighteenth-century English literature, and can be described as a sort of "anxiety of novelty" which every writer had to come to terms with. Also relevant is Addison's famous 1712 series, *The Pleasures of Imagination*, where the need to present one's audience with fresh topics can be seen as an interesting eighteenth-century variant of the "anxiety of variety" that loomed over the essay in its earliest incarnations (Murphy 2012: 120-5), as well as Chapter 3 of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, aptly entitled *The Wants of Him that Wants Nothing.* Addison chooses a very powerful simile for the work of periodical essayists who aim to please their readers, comparing it to that of an alchemist:

> An Essay Writer must practice in the Chymical Method, and give the Virtue of a full Draught in a few Drops. Were all Books reduced to their Quintessence, many a bulky Author would make his Appearance in a Penny Paper: There would be scarce such a thing in Nature as a Folio; the Works of an Age would be contained on a few Shelves; not to mention Millions of Volumes that would be utterly annihilated. (Addison 1965a: 506-7).

A sort of decanting alchemist, the essay writer is capable of condensing and concentrating the maximum amount of opinions, ideas, and information into a space limited to the dimensions of a periodical.

Last but not least, one should consider the direct comparison Addison draws in no. 476 with the father of the genre, Michel de Montaigne, completing in a sense his own personal normative parable with another type of anxiety, the more familiarly commonplace "anxiety of influence". Addison's mention of Montaigne has not only a comparative end, but underscores a philosophical concept that Klaus has recognised as one of the most preeminent features of Montaigne's own poetics (connected to his "historical scepticism", Atkins 2005: 5) as well as of the essay as a genre (Kauffmann 1989):

that is, antidogmatism. Addison enters this field referring to the idea of "Wilderness" (Addison 1965b: 185), which he opposes to its most predictable counterpart, method, describing a process of composition in which "it is sufficient [for essayists to have] several Thoughts on a Subject, without troubling [themselves] to range them in such order, that they may seem to grow out of one another, and be disposed under the proper Heads" (Addison 1965b: 186). It is clear from this statement that Addison, although not renouncing completely the moralising and regulating didactical attitude which Steele inaugurated, adopts a more wandering approach towards it, rejecting the straightforwardness of methodical reasoning in favour of a more rhapsodic organisation of thought.

4. *The Rambler*'s philosophy of composition

After Steele and Addison's first canonisation of the genre in the 1710s, many authors produced significant periodical essays, especially amid the "unscrupulous competition" (DeMaria 2005: 535) that followed the lapsing of the Licensing Act. Besides contemporary imitators – such as Delarivier Manley's *Female Tatler* (1709-11) – and the subsequent solo careers of both authors – as for instance Steele's 1714 series *The Lover* and the 40 issues of *The Englishman* –, to gain an awareness of the real import of Johnson's mid-century systematisation in the *Dictionary*, we should take into account the many followers Addison and Steele could boast[7]. Of capital importance is *The Female Spectator* by Eliza Haywood, which was among the most celebrated successors to their pattern not only in establishing a periodical writing society or club, but also in the characterisation of an essayistic eidolon. The legacy that would come into Johnson's hands was thus a rather multifaceted polyphony, to which he himself contributed with *The Rambler*.

A "splendid and imposing commonplace book of general topics, and rhetorical declamation on the conduct and business of human life" (Hazlitt 1903: 100), as the romantic essayist William Hazlitt argued in 1818, *The Rambler* nevertheless departed from

[7] Clear and complete accounts of the plurality of periodical essay output in the years between *The Spectator* and *The Rambler* can be found in DeMaria (2005: 540-41) and Powell (2012: 17-29).

the *Tatler* and *Spectator*'s impressionistic congeries of "notes and memorandums" (p. 100). Presenting itself quite overtly as an "entrepreneurial undertaking" (Korshin 1997: 51) ready to be published in book form, *The Rambler* propagates a more directly Montaignian and Baconian idea of the essay as an organic collection (Hesse 1997: 105). *The Rambler* thus offers itself as a fitting site for investigating the essay form at the crossroads between the ephemeral satirical commentary preferred by Addison and Steele, and a more personal and solipsistic musing in the style of Montaigne's famous "self-centredness" (Atkins 2005: 47).

The first tangible piece of evidence of this shift is the drastic reduction of the number of voices in the pages of *The Rambler*. The eponymous persona being alone on stage, Mr. Spectator & Company's chatty coffee-house club dialogue is replaced by a single voice:

> Some were very angry that the Rambler did not, like the Spectator, introduce himself to the acquaintance of the public, by an account of his own birth and studies, and enumeration of his adventures, and a description of his physiognomy. Others soon began to remark that he was a solemn, serious, dictatorial writer, without sprightliness or gaiety, and called out with vehemence for mirth and humour. (1969a: 128-9)

Yet, the Rambler's solitude on stage should not be mistaken for an indulgence in autobiographical self-centredness[8], since it can in fact be seen as a subtle means to foreground the descriptive drive even further. Lending his profound cognisance of the contemporary literary scenario to an *essayistic persona*, Johnson is thus outsourcing the authorial limelight to a character whose role is in fact impersonating the Manifesto-producer, in a sort of *mise en abyme* refraction of the meta-essayistic discourse[9]. Such is the

[8] As Johnson would later underline through the following quotation from Castiglione's *Il cortegiano* about masks: "The seeming vanity with which I have sometimes spoken of myself, would perhaps require an apology, were it not extenuated by the example of those who have published essays before me, and by the privilege which every nameless writer has been hitherto allowed. 'A mask,' says Castiglione, 'confers a right of acting and speaking with less restraint, even when the writer happens to be known'" (Johnson 1969c: 317).

[9] If in Addison and Steele's case eidolon and author have been considered

case when the Rambler discusses the realistic novel in no. 4, or pastoral poetry in nos. 36 and 37. More glaring are the prescriptive hints concerning the genres Johnson made most use of in his career, namely biography (no. 60) and the essay. Yet the Rambler's stance on literary normativity should not be overstated. In no. 156, he comments on the very practice of establishing the rules of writing, setting himself in opposition to the frequently normative nonsense proffered by excessively rigorous compilers of poetics:

> Criticism has sometimes permitted fancy to dictate the laws by which fancy ought to be restrained, and fallacy to perplex the principles by which fallacy is to be detected; her super-intendance of others has betrayed her to negligence of herself; and like the antient Scythians, by extending her conquests over distant regions, she has left her throne vacant to her slaves. (Johnson 1969c: 66)

This account could be considered as an interesting distillation of Johnson's own meta-essayistic contribution via the *Rambler*. Given the fragmentary and desultory nature of the essay's "ambulatory […] prose […] sauntering from one topic to next" (Obaldia 1995: 2), the genre can be said to preclude any "unifying conception" (p. 2) or coherent and strict manifesto, thus avoiding the risk of fancy straying excessively from its natural domains. An awareness of this somewhat evasive nature enables the Rambler to assume a relaxed normative attitude that – although always in sight of the same "neoclassical scorn" (Klaus 2012: XVII) that permeates some of Addison's meta-essayistic pronouncements – nevertheless reveals unstinting support for the essay, which is not only worthy of description, but also of endorsement and practice by modern writers. This quiet self-assertion of the Rambler-as-essayist inaugurates the very first issue, where he describes his own 'philosophy of composition':

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interchangeable, Johnson's case must be more carefully considered, since in mid eighteenth-century periodical literature the gap between the persona and its creator was widening significantly. Among the most famous examples of non-coinciding eidolons we can find Christopher Smart impersonating a midwife in the eponymous 1750s periodical, or Lady Montagu's masculine masquerade in *The Nonsense of Common Sense*. For more detailed discussions about the distance between authorial and essayistic voices see Klaus (2010: 45-89) and Powell (2012: 131-93).

He that questions his abilities to arrange the dissimilar parts of an extensive plan, or fears to be lost in a complicated system, may yet hope to adjust a few pages without perplexity; and if, when he turns over the repositories of his memory, he finds his collection too small for a volume, he may yet have enough to furnish out an essay. (Johnson 1969a: 8)

The main theoretical tenet under scrutiny in this statement is the interrelation between the unsystematic and erratic nature of his own essays, which alludes to Montaigne's example, and more precisely to the French writer's often-quoted passage from *On Vanity*: "[m]on stile et mon esprit vont vagabondant de mesmes"[10] (Montaigne 2019: 994). Describing himself as an essayist, i.e. a preserver of a time-honoured tradition, Mr. Rambler seems interested not in claiming his role as the compiler of the *Ars Poetica*, but rather in portraying himself as a mere *practitioner*, a "writer whose design is so extensive and miscellaneous, that he may accommodate himself with a topick from every scene of life" (Johnson 1969b: 346). This idea of accommodating is deeply connected to the need for novelty advocated by Addison's Mr. Spectator, and the Rambler enunciates it in no. 184 through a finely detailed portrayal of his own process of composition:

The writer of essays, escapes many embarrassments to which a large work would have exposed him; he seldom harrasses his reason with long trains of consequence, dims his eyes with the perusal of antiquated volumes, or burthens his memory with great accumulations of preparatory knowledge. A careless glance upon a favourite author, or transient survey of the varieties of life, is sufficient to supply the first hint or seminal idea, which enlarged by the gradual accretion of matter stored in the mind, is by the warmth of fancy easily expanded into flowers, and sometimes ripened into fruit. (Johnson 1969c: 201)

This image might appear to underestimate the task of the periodical essayist, but Johnson immediately specifies the reasons for seemingly

[10] See the more extensive passage quoted in Klaus's *Essayists on the Essay*: "My ideas follow one another, but sometimes it is from a distance, and look at each other, but with a sidelong glance. […] It is the inattentive reader who loses my subject, not I. Some word about it will always be found off in a corner, which will not fail to be sufficient, though it takes little room. I seek out change indiscriminately and tumultuously. My style and my mind alike go roaming" (qtd. in Klaus 2012: 4-5).

trivialising the intellectual effort necessary to compose "these petty compositions" by blaming the public's "perpetual demand of novelty and change[11]" (p. 201). These inconveniences are the very essence of the essayist's creative power, which Johnson opposes to the dry intellect and mechanical craft of the compiler of a system, who, as a matter of fact,

> lays his invention at rest, and employs only his judgement, the faculty exerted with least fatigue. […] But he that attempts to entertain his reader with unconnected pieces, finds the irksomeness of his task rather increased then lessened by every production. The day calls afresh upon him for a new topick, and he is again obliged to choose, without any principle to regulate his choice. (Johnson 1969c: 201-2).

The same overwhelming pressure on the essayist is acknowledged in the last issue, where the Rambler takes his leave, declaring not to have merely "complied with temporary curiosity" (Johnson 1969c: 316), but sought to create (as the book publication demonstrated) an enduring contribution to the commonwealth of letters.

5. Regulating the essay in the *Dictionary*

Johnson's *Dictionary* entry of 1755 encapsulates, with the mandatory brevity of an encyclopaedic work, the many features the essay as a genre had been said to possess by its most successful practitioners. The presence of a lexicographical definition seems to represent an ideal completion, the culmination of a process inaugurated by the broad tone of *The Tatler*, passing through *The Spectator*'s pithy sketch of the form in relation to the more structurally stable methodical discourse, and finally reaching *The Rambler*'s consistent description of the essayist's task. Johnson provides a fourfold definition, which is neither exclusively philological nor linguistic, and can thus be translated into the aesthetic domain of genre regulation; in other words, it is a definition that would work as a statement of purpose for a "metaphysical discourse, a fragment of a set of assertions which simultaneously claim to account for the sense of words and terms,

[11] This idea, in addition to the already quoted chapter 3 in *Rasselas*, is to be found again stated in nos. 78 and 80. It will remain a prime intellectual preoccupation of the author, appearing again in no. 67 of *The Adventurer* and in no. 44 of *The Idler*.

for the nature of the corresponding general ideas and finally for the nature of 'things'" (Rey 2000: 1-2):

ESSAY. *n. f.* [from the verb. The accent is used on either syllable]
1. Attempt; endeavor
Fruitless our hopes, though pious our *essays*;
Your's to preserve a friend, and mine to praise. *Smith,*
2. A loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition.
My *essays,* of all my other works, have been most current. *Bac.*
Yet modestly he does his work survey,
And calls his finish'd poem an *essay*. *Poem to Roscommon*.
3. A trial; an experiment.
He wrote this but as an *essay*, or taste of my virtue. *Shak.*
Repetitions wear us into a liking of what possibly, in the first *essay*, displeased us. *Locke*.
4. First taste of any thing; first experiment,
Translating the first of Homer's Iliads, I intended as an *essay* to the whole work. *Dryden's Fables, Preface.* (Johnson 1755: 721)

Looking at the definition itself, some preliminary considerations can immediately be drawn. First, the overall literariness of this accumulation of meanings, which is in full accordance with the "book of books" (DeMaria 1986), features of the *Dictionary* as a whole. Even though it is definition (2) that has generally been considered the most suited to a literary discourse, it is essential to point out that, in fact, definitions (3) and (4) are also literary in their essence, either because their examples are taken from meta-essayistic fragments (Bacon's in no. 2.1 and Locke's in 3.2) or because they refer to literary practices like translation (Dryden's 2.2 and 4), or simply because they implicate Shakespeare, whose use of the word is actually quite scarce[12].

As to meaning (2), being articulated in a three-fold congeries of nominal phrases (Lynn 1997: 433) each revolving around the same unmethodical and unsystematic tendency that has repeatedly been

[12] A quick concordance check reveals that "essay" (or similar terms) appears only in *Henry VI*, part 2 (used to describe the rebels' attack on the Tower) and sonnet 110 (where the "essays" are the trials of fortune over the poet's affection). It can be said, though, that the general connotation of the term is, considering Edmund's use of it, distinctly negative.

highlighted as crucial to the form, it can be proposed as a sort of synoptic compendium of the normative impulse that has been the main focus of this analysis. Yet the accumulative structure implies also a cognisance, on the part of Johnson, of a debate on the form which predates the eighteenth century. "Loose" may seem the most all-encompassing attribute to be found in the definitions of subentry (2), and is certainly the most representative of the original Montaignean intellectual roaming which features in any attempt at defining the essay as a whole (Obaldia 1995: 2). "Undigested", though more lexically precise, occurs at least three times in famous meta-essayistic places. The first is William Cornwallis' "On Essays and Books" (1609), in which essay writing is described as "a manner of writing well befitting undigested motions, or a head not knowing his strength like a circumspect runner trying for a start" (Cornwallis 2019). The second is Ben Jonson's famously harsh critique of essayists in his *Timber* (1640), where he describes them as unpolished writers who "in all they write, confess still what book they have read last, and therein their own folly so much, that they bring it to the stake raw and undigested; not that the place did need it neither, but that they thought themselves furnished and would vent it." (Jonson 1892: 25). Finally, Locke's *Epistle Dedicatory* to the *Essay on Human Understanding* (1690) is described as possessing impromptu features and being composed of "Some hasty and undigested thoughts, on a subject I had never before considered, which I set down against our next meeting" (Locke 1975).

It is certainly tempting to view Johnson's definition as the attempted imposition of coherence on a heretofore scattered dialogue carried out in literary magazines. In this light, Johnson's *Dictionary* becomes not so much a strict *Poetics*, but an encyclopaedic recognition of the genre's fundamental instability, and a testimony to the various attempts to at least offer a recognisable sketch of it. If we are to provide a historically conscious interpretation of this normative drive, we must put these meta-essayistic efforts against a contextual backdrop. We shall thus not run the risk of interpreting this fundamental feature as a mere homage paid to a traditional unformulated poetics, made up by scattered *obiter dicta* by illustrious practitioners, but as an act profoundly conscious of the material milieu in which eighteenth-century essayists did in fact operate. Considering how the lapse of the Licensing Act of 1695 rendered piracy technically legal, writers had to

adapt to an ever-changing context in which novelty, immediacy, and miscellany were highly prized by an increasingly demanding audience (Barker 2004: 108-9). This unstable context prompted writers to "set a standard for the publication of periodical essays that deeply influenced the genre" (DeMaria 2005: 537), becoming "unsystematic legislators" of this protean literary form. Essayists like Johnson, Addison, and Steele were later joined by their Romantic heirs, and their discussions on the essay as a form and on the work of the essayist itself proceeded steadily, if inconspicuously, up to the same Virginia Woolf who, even before Montaigne, stirred Carl Klaus's interest in this metaliterary drive.

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