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" A STUDY IN THE ENGLISH ESSAY "

A THESIS .

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Burton
Thomas

Please return to Burton

M. B. S.
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A STUDY in the ENGLISH ESSAY.

To button the essay into a definition is as difficult a task as that of bottling the fabled geni. It is too protean a form to lend itself to easy classification. It may deal with historical matter, but it is not history; it may use the material of biography, yet it is not biography; it may criticize life, yet it is not criticism. The materials it takes for its use do not constitute its essence. That is personality.

Personality alone is the keynote of the essay. It is this which takes it from the literature of communication, out of the informational class of writings, which includes text books, works of science, reviews, social and political studies, tracts, and treatises, and puts it into the literature of interpretation. In no other form of literature, unless it be the lyric, is the personal equation more operative. The essayist can give neither truth nor spirit other than himself. The world must be seen through his soul or not at all. "It is with morals as Plutarch regards them, with honors and empire as Bacon values them, with old age and friendship as Marcus Aurelius regards them, that we are concerned." In the essay the quality, the charm, comes from the personality of the artist. The materials are open to all men, it is the treatment which counts.

The essayist does not aim to communicate information, but to reveal himself. He is frankly egoistic. "I have no other end in writing but to discover myself," wrote Montaigne in the preface to his "Essais." Yet the true essayist does not talk of himself for self-love's sake. He sees in himself but all men. Through the fulness of his existence he seeks to induce the sense of all human existence. It is life interpreted through his personality. Of necessity, his personality must be worth while. It takes a man of large calibre to make the best essayist. He

must be a personality of distinction. One need only think of the triviality of the "Long Bow" and chattering columns of our daily papers to be assured of this. In the hands of the ordinary writer, the essay becomes banal. Its familiarity is mere impertinence, its freedom vulgarity.

The essay mood belongs to maturity. It is meditation. The essayist is an observer and a thinker. He is a "Spectator" and a "Locker on," a "philosopher in an easy chair." He is late in the development of civilization because he comes to meditate on what men have accomplished. He must have material to work upon. He has no place in primitive society, but is the product of a riper age, coming after the poet, the story teller, the dramatist, because he needs their work as a part of his material. If he has a forerunner, it is the proverb maker; but the maker of the proverb was master of a limited field. His purpose was homilectic, prudential, and the true essayist is not intent on protecting men from their vices, but on seeing character for the interest of seeing it.

As to subject matter, the essayist's choice is unlimited. He is an excursionist and may go whither he wills. He may write on anything from "Roast Pig" to "Death." He is bound by no confines of a commissioned sort. He has no defined mission. He neither preaches nor commands. He only suggests. He is without the partisan animosity of pamphleteering or the authority of the pulpit. He aims to animate to a certain mood rather than to instigate to action. We care not so much what is written about as how it is done. Mood and manner are everything. "The subject is the occasion rather than the cause or end of writing." Give the mood and the essay grows out of it. Whatever be the subject for departure, the true essay resolves itself into a kind of picture of a man's disposition. "Every opinion is a statement of the writer's soul level. That which he seeks in the world of books and life he is. "Whatever may be his external

subject, himself is the real one."

As to form, the essay is without technical bulwarks. It is a flexible product adapting itself to the quality of the mind which uses it. In the hands of Montaigne it is epigrammatic and colloquial, in those of Bacon formal and concise, and when Johnson takes it, it becomes ponderous and word weighty. Its formlessness is in part due to the fact that it has been a by-product of literature, many of the essayists having been most active in other fields of literature. Thus, Cowley was a poet, Swift a statesman and satirist, Hazlitt a biographer, Thackeray a novelist, and Carlyle and Macaulay, historians. Then too, its beginning was trivial, for it took form from hasty note book jottings of thoughts and fancies, which were without system or minute treatment. It was a collection of fragments, the only thread binding them together being that they were permeated with a given subject. In its development the essay has moved away from this desultoriness in the direction of the formal treatise. Yet it must be remembered that the essay is in its essence emotional and subjective and that as long as it sticks to this lyrical tradition it will escape structural confines. In proportion as it is self revelatory it becomes informal. In its purity it is little more than a delightful confession, a chat with a great person whom one finds accessible and genial.

It was Montaigne who first struck the note of the essay. He did not write to inform of the events of his day, though they were stirring enough, nor to tell of his contemporaries, though he knew the best men of the country, but he put these aside to discourse of his chateau, of his page, of love, of friendship, and above all, of himself. "I have proposed to myself no other than a familiar and private end..I desire..to be delineated in mine own genuine simple and ordinary fashion, without contention, art, or study, for it is myself I portray. Thus, Gentle Reader, myself am

the ground work of my book. It is then no reason thou shouldst employ thy time about so frivolous and vain a subject," he says in his quaint preface to his essays. Montaigne is frankly and genially egoistic. He follows with delighted curiosity the vagaries of his own mind, exposing a temperament capable of many moods. He presents his subtlest emotions, his most amiable weaknesses; in faith we cannot be less interested in them than he is. We see the man, we hear him and stop to listen to his tales of himself. We enjoy that "rare privilege of sharing with a pleasant gentleman the art of thinking."

Montaigne is never other than an essayist. His interest and curiosity carried him everywhere. He was a born traveller. He enjoyed studies and got much strength out of quotations by setting them in a new order. He studied himself by the guidance of Plutarch and Seneca, and though he was strongly autobiographical his interest was not confined to himself alone. He went from a study of himself to a study of man in general. His contribution to the essay was three-fold. He gave it its name, its personal, self-revelatory nature, and lastly its informal, colloquial style. Men before Montaigne had commented on life and human attributes in general, but few had commented, unrestrained, upon themselves.

Bacon, in England, was the follower of Montaigne. It seems odd to say, considering the diversity of their personalities, yet there is little doubt that Bacon took the essay from Montaigne. He went to the same authors for lessons in history and the knowledge of men. A critical study of his works show many parallels of thought and expression, yet the spirit is different. Where Montaigne is provincial and gossipy, Bacon is grave and philosophical. Montaigne, like a good talker, goes from subject to subject, giving the delicate play of his fancy on many points. Bacon elaborated a single topic. Where Montaigne is intimate, Bacon is solemn

with a large display of scholarship. Montaigne is burdened with no mission, Bacon would like to instruct. Bacon cites Julius Caesar, Pompey, Agrippa, Septimus Severus, as illustrations of friendship, but he never cites himself; Montaigne does little else. Bacon is never less than the teacher and infallible. Montaigne is frankly fallible and delights in owning to his errors. We feel the power of Bacon, but we do not love him. His quality of mind, however, was a contribution to the essay. His themes had an educational turn and his language a conciseness which clarified the Elizabethan manner and gave to the English essay a strength it otherwise had lacked.

The English essay, however, started out somewhat bound by the formalities of Bacon's style and its evolution proved to be an enfranchisement towards the freedom of Montaigne. Robert Burton was one of the first to make the English essay more plastic. He paganized it. Up to him it had been the medium of piously philosophic expression. He freed it by putting in whatever it pleased him to think about. He wrote for his own and not for public pleasure. His "Anatomy of Melancholy" was a life's work composed "with a view to relieving his own melancholy", but it increased it to such a degree that "nothing could make him laugh but going to the bridge-port and hearing the ribaldry of the bargemen, which rarely failed to throw him into a violent fit of laughter." Burton did not communicate his thoughts with the nakedness of Montaigne, but he wrote less to instruct others than to please himself and, in that respect, surpassed Bacon. His style is often encumbered, yet his is a companionable book. It is all about himself and in that he shows himself a true essayist.

Thomas Fuller is not an abiding name among those of the essayists. He is chiefly important historically because he was one of the first to recognize the humorous possibilities of the essay, which were later devel-

oped to so high a degree. He was a clergyman and his essays show the ripeness of a sermonic mind, but in his style there is a jocular quality which was new to the essay. He laughs while he preaches and that is quite a step forward for the essay of the 17th century. "Of Jesting" is one of his best. It has in addition to its humorous vein the merit of being free from Latinisms. It is idiomatic and the good old Saxon words go to our hearts.

Perhaps of all the 17th century essayists Abraham Cowley was nearest to Montaigne in spirit. He was not so large a man as Montaigne, but his method was the same. He is one of the kind who is read out of affection or is utterly disregarded. Lamb was a great reader of him and wrote affectionately of him to Coleridge; "I do not know whether I ever heard your opinion of a poet dear to me, now out-of-fashion, Cowley. Favor me with your judgment and tell me if his prose essays in particular, as well as no inconsiderable part of his verse, is not delicious." There is undoubtedly something delightful in Cowley's old world air. In comparison with the 18th century essayists he seems archaic, but there is something pleasantly intimate in his ease and unconcern, something quite suggestive of the familiarity of Montaigne.

The 18th century performed a great service for the essay. It popularized and socialized it. Through the medium of the news-letter it became a thing of the coffee house and tea-table. It was read over the morning chocolate and discussed at the club in the evening. It was a "Tatler" and "Spectator." It observed and gossiped and satirized. Man and his foibles were its subject. It was a comedy of manners. It talked of the coffee house and the card table, the country squire and the city fop, and said many bitter things in a pleasant way. It was noticeably

more objective than the 17th century essay. Though the writer wrote in the first person, he concealed himself under a nom-de-plume, and from the stronghold of this imaginary character said what he willed. In the case of the "Tatler," Steele's paper, the separate sheets bore slight relation to one another, the continuity which the work possessed as a whole being derived from the personality of the supposed author who styled himself "Isaac Bickerstaffe." In the "Spectator", Addison took the idea of a club as a basis, and characters were invented who, as members of the club, were available to appear in every essay. The introduction of the character sketch seems to put the essay on the high road to fiction. Sir Roger de Coverley is undoubtedly an objective creation and he will live forever as a type of the old fashioned country squire, but this does not justify us in saying that the 18th century periodical essay was a story-essay. That is a contradiction in terms. Character interest it had, but never plot interest. Progression of event and inter-play of character it did not possess. In proportion as it became objective it became less the essay.

Of the two essayists, Addison and Steele, Addison was the more refined. His language is more delicate and restrained, his thought more philosophical. Addison cared to moralize and instruct, Steele only to entertain. Steele had more warmth and pathos. He was emotional. Both gave something of value to the essay, Steele in the way of vigor and idiomatic, common speech, Addison in the way of graceful English and a clean standard of humor.

Samuel Johnson came near to ruining the essay. He was really an essayist only in spots. He was too much the majestic teacher of moral and religious wisdom and seldom forgot himself enough to personal and entertaining. His style was against him. He was too anxious about form. Antithesis was his bane. He was ponderous and wordy and only

occasionally does "fancy peep through the chinks of his labored sentences." He cared too much about being hortatory to be a true essayist. Unfortunately, he had a school of followers who imitated his grandiosity. Oliver Goldsmith was one of these. He labored under the spell of Johnson for several years, but when he broke loose from it he proved himself a most delightful essayist. His major contribution to the essay was the broadening of it, the making of it a vehicle for literary and social discussion. There is a note of world-wideness in all he wrote. He had no local prejudice nor any of the barbaric insularity of Johnson. He had travelled much, going a-foot, mixing with the common people. "He was the only English writer of his day," it has been said, "who thoroughly understood the social condition of the continent." Nor was he less observant of English society; the "Deserted Village" has often been quoted by economists in illustration of the change which has gradually substituted large estates for the small holdings of a numerous yeomanry. In this quality of world-wideness he stands alone among his contemporaries. He is in reality a citizen of the world and is large hearted because he had a large acquaintance with mankind. His knowledge of man is set off by the naïvete of his own character, and he is always companionable and friendly, the larger portion of his writing being scarcely veiled autobiography.

The hunter for the true essayist pounces with joy on Charles Lamb. Here is the prince of them all; an essayist ever, always subjective, always self revelatory. He was archaic, but charmingly so. A true philosopher, he was always steeped in the past. He loved nothing better than the old things. He writes of old houses, old friends, old wine, old pictures, old bookstalls. "Whenever a new book comes out I read an old one," he once said. "He seems to have been born a modern man only by accident." He is a city-

dweller, essentially local in spirit who confesses in a day when a new movement toward nature was attracting men like Wordsworth and Coleridge / that he prefers Fleet Street to the country fields. Lamb uses the essay with the utmost freedom; indulges his sentiment and fancy without restraint. He makes the essay accommodate his vagaries. It is richly complex and tremendously simple by turns. He chooses audaciously trivial themes and makes of them something delightful. His fancy and tenderness give them the softness and remoteness of dreams. He was nothing of a thinker and a most inconsequential philosopher. "He does not try to fit all the facts to one theory. That seems to him too economical when theories are so cheap. With large hearted generosity he provides a theory for every fact. He clothes the ragged exception with all the decent habiliments of a universal law. He picks up a little ragmuffin of a fact, warms its heart and points out its great relations. He is not afraid of generalizing from insufficient data; he has the art of making a delightful summer out of a single swallow." His disregard of construction is startling. He takes his full license as an essayist to wander and digress, yet whatever he talks about, he is interesting. He is of the kind whom we love or like not at all.

Leigh Hunt and William Hazlitt are significant as upholders of the old tradition of the essay, extending its gamut by introducing biographical material. Hazlitt was a robust writer, rather violent and headstrong personally. His ambition to be a painter had been frustrated by lack of ability. It was a great disappointment to him and in consequence a sort of exasperation shows in his work, which is displeasing. He wrote often too rapidly, but when at his best he has a concise style which is excellent. He did not, however, have quite the emotional qualities one

would expect in an essayist. He had a strong ego, but not as a strong personality. His essays never possess the charm of Hunt's quiet friendliness. Hunt was a poet as well as an essayist, a sort of happy combination of country poet and town essayist. He loved Hampstead and the fields. His essays are as cheerful as suburban villas, now gay with city visitors, now quiet with the peace of the country. He likes to talk for talking's sake and is chatty and familiar. His essays, though not as deep as Lamb's, are at times so atmospheric and light of touch that he should be classed high among the essayists. His "Old Gentleman and Old Lady" and "Deaths of Little Children" come near to being impassioned prose.

Thomas de Quincey is not always an essayist. He frequently loses the essay touch because of didacticism and a sort of stately eloquence. His essay on "Joan of Arc" might almost be called an oration, for it has all the qualities of spoken eloquence. His great subjectivity is in his favor, however, and there are passages in the "Opium Eater" which are delicately suggestive of the graceful familiarity of Lamb. Yet with him, as with Hunt and Hazlitt, there is a marked tendency against the peculiar virtues of the essay, a moving towards the objective and formally arranged treatise. The essay is steadily growing more argumentative, more expository, more critical, more logical. When we meet it in the hands of Macaulay and Carlyle it is the essay rampant. With Macaulay it became the medium for his strongly objective power. He made it pictorial, a biography, an illumined history, something strongly informational in character. With Carlyle it was the medium for a prophet and a critic. It has a mission and an object, it is sagacious and penetrating, no longer chatty and informal. It is in reality no longer the essay but the rostrum. Strictly speaking, Carlyle and Macaulay are not essayists at all. They are too objective, too purposeful, too informational, to be so classed.

In the later 19th century there was an essayist who maintained the great tradition. That was Robert Louis Stevenson. He inherited the mantle of the true essayist and may be said to be in direct line with Montaigne and Lamb. No man ever chatted more unreservedly or with more charm. Always by genius, a stylist, a master of form, in his essays the genuine man speaks. He is the familiar of all things. The wayside beggar, the children at play, the mule driver, the tavern companion of a night, interest him as much as Burns or Villon. He not only can dress the part up in fresh, warm language, but can make the commonest theme vibrant with spiritual beauty. His essays are large with the virtue of repose and quiet thought and tranquil patience in the life of the spirit.

Looking to American in the past we find many flashes of the essay spirit but few genuine essayists. The reason is not far to seek. America was a young, fighting, doing country. It did not have leisure for reflection and light philosophizing. The great minds must teach, preach, guide. Moreover, America had been founded a religious colony and the tradition was ingrowing. The early American essayists were nearly all preachers. Their quality of mind made them of necessity hortatory and moralistic. They were either reformers or critics of contemporary life. Their service to their country was great, but they can not be called true essayists in the restricted sense that Lamb, Montaigne, and Stevenson are. This is true even of Emerson. He undoubtedly had a vocation for the essay, but as a prophet of transcendentalism he had a greater mission. With less strenuousness of purpose and a more fanciful turn of mind he would have been of the old tradition.

Washington Irving and Oliver Wendell Holmes come nearer to it. Irving is a fictionist, but all his stories have the essay mood. He was nurtured on Addison and Steele and the 18th century models and his character

sketches have the genteel, graceful, air-of good-society manner which the Spectator possessed. Like them, he moves towards the objective, and in the case of "A Rill from a Town Pump" and "The Fat Gentleman" it is difficult to decide whether he is an essayist or a fictionist. The same puzzle is met with in the Autocrat series of Holmes. These have dialogue and dramatic characterization, yet the story interest is slight, and after all the characters are but devices for a freer expression of Holmes' personality. He is an essayist of the social sort, giving one a sense of his relation to others in the social organism, genially satirizing society, not only showing us himself, but life contemporary to him. He is both individualistic and social, a companionable, witty philosopher.

James Russel Lowell undoubtedly could have been a true essayist if he had not given himself to the higher service of poetry and political writing. Many of his papers show the vagrant spirit of the essay. Thus, "A Good Word for Winter" and "A Certain Condescension in Foreigners" are unforced and winsome revelations of himself. He writes from a full mind, yet is never a pedant. He keeps the essay style however scholarlike his quest.

George William Curtis was always too much the moralist to be the true essayist. He felt strongly the intellectual and spiritual needs of young America, and gave his ready pen to the service of clean politics, clean society, clean government. He was a prophet of the higher civilization in this country and did much to lead the vacillating public to wholesome standards of life. His life was filled with political activities and only occasionally does he turn aside from the rush of public service to write unrestrainedly of himself. "Prue and I" is his one pure essay. It reminds us of "The Spectator" in its delicate English and its use of the character sketch. "Prue" and the rusty bookkeeper are very Addisonian devices to reveal the autor's own whimsical fancies.

Donald G. Mitchell and Charles D. Warner are names usually coupled with that of Curtis, being contemporary writers. They were more avowedly essayists than he, yet one likes them less. In Mitchell especially there is a note of insincerity, which ruins his essays. One feels a over-sentimentality and air of pose in all he says. He shows that precocity and talking for talking's sake, which is ever the danger of the essay. Charles D. Warner fails for a different reason. He is too restrained and dispassionate. He lacks the naivete and unconscious egoism which lends charm to other essayists. He writes evenly and well, but with a sort of distrust of his own opinions. He has no queer turns of mind, which we laugh at and love.

From this rather cursory view of the chief English essayists, one can see that the essay has by no means remained an unchanging form. The old traditional essay was that of Montaigne, the personal, intimate, chatty, I-and-thee kind of writing, not autobiographical, not letter-writing, but a kind of informal philosophizing through the medium of one's personal experience. It had no utilitarian purpose. It was a will o' the wisp form of expression, a sort of lyric in prose.

The English essay of the 16th and 17th century did not characteristically follow this model. It was the classical essay. It talked learnedly and quoted largely from the Latin authors. It was educative and formal. It showed the imprint of sermonic minds. There were occass-ional writers like Robert Burton and Abraham Cowley, whose essays gave the errant odors of self revelation, but in general the trend of the essay was towards formalism, away from its birthright of free lyric expression.

In the 18th century the pendulum swung back towards the esoteric and the familiar. Though the essay was more objective, more dramatic

than it had been before in its essence, it was personal, a thing of the heart. It was as much a mirror of the souls of the men who wrote it as it was of the age they satirized. Who is Sir Roger but gentle Addison himself? Can we not read in "Isaac Bickerstaffe" all the virility of Steele? In the 19th century there were cross currents of influence. The essay moved far toward the logical, objective treatise. There were many famous biographical and critical essays produced which were practically not essays at all, except in so far as they were emotional interpretations of great men or great books. Criticism had not differentiated itself from the essay proper and the result was a co-mingling of the two. Opposed to this argumentative, acquisitive trend of the essay there was a marked movement back to Montaigne, represented by Lamb and Hunt who wrote neither to inform nor to criticize, but to give subjective emotions.

In a view of the history of the ^{form} ~~essay~~ one sees that the essay in the restricted sense of the word was produced rarely. The mantle of Montaigne fell only on a few. Many had essay moods, but few were essayists. Criticism, biography, fiction, journalism, used the essay talent and the essay itself became rare. Yet the essay will not die. In our own day followers of the old tradition have sprung up, Crothers and Benson, writers

who have caught the gypsy spirit of the essay.

Arthur Benson is a professor in an English college and by nature something of a hermit. His desire is not to "get ahead" in the world, to strive, to work, to mingle with people, but rather that he may think alone. He describes himself as a hapless bachelor who is professionally occupied for half the year and who decides to spend the rest of his time on the quiet Isle of Ely. He loves his own fireside, his own books, his own way, and he talks of them without restraint. "My desire is but to converse with my readers, to speak as in a comfortable tete-a-tete of experience and hope and patience," he says in the preface of "From a College Window" and thus, from the outset announces himself the essayist. He asks you to detach yourself from the world of rattling business and wander with him in the land of his impressions and fancies, and he proves a most delightful old-world companion. In his subjectivity, his quiet meditateness and charming revelation of himself he shows the hall marks of the true essayist.

Samuel McChord Crothers brings to the essay a freshness of mind and gayety of mood which reminds one of the boyish "Elia." He has a generous liking of all wholesome things, an easy tolerance and a happy way of speech which make us love him at once. He has just that whimsical turn of mind, that faculty of seeing much in common things, which distinguished Stevenson and Lamb. He talks some of books and much of man and in a gently humorous way reveals a heart true gold. Of all modern essayists he is the most companionable.

One is tempted to add the name of Agnes Repplier to the list of the modern contributors to the old tradition. She undoubtedly has an old fashioned devotion to the elder idea of the essay, but her works are

too over-weighted by her voluminous reading to be a true revelation of herself. She says things in a clever and delightful way, but her essays as a whole lack the back bone of a strong sincerity.

Agnes Repplier's failure, or one might say second-rateness, in the field of the essay raises the question why we have no great women essayists. It seems odd when one recalls the famous women letter writers of our literature that no one should have excelled in that kindred form, the essay. Women are more personal in their interests than men, and at first thought it would seem that they would on that account make the better essayists; but such is not the case. Their intense subjectivity rather limits them. They are too much by nature partisans. They take themselves and their views too seriously to handle with humor and impartiality the intimate subjects of the essay. They are not by nature philosophers, nor are they of the meditative mind. In expression they are apt to be more self-conscious and conventional than men. A sort of restraint lingers from their past bound mental life. These things being incompatible with ^{the} spirit of the essay, they in part explain the absence of great women writers of the essay.

Though the essay is not as widely read as the novel and the play, it will always be popular among the quiet readers of the world. It is not as profitable as a philosophical treatise nor as dull as history nor as sublime as poetry, nor as soul stirring as the play, but it has the sweet and gentle mission of friendly wisdom. It is philosophy veiled in a great personality. It has a fair proportion of useful knowledge in it, but it is delicately concealed, not seen but felt. In a quiet sort of a way the essay wheedles us into a knowledge of the world. Through the heart of a man we are brought to the larger vision. We may not enjoy a bare bit of

philosophy moulded into a fixed form," but we dearly love a philosopher, especially if he turns out to be a sensible man who does not put on airs." It is this familiarity and companionableness of the essayist which makes him most dear to us. "He may select any theme, treat it in any way, intrude his own prejudices, pass from familiar gossip to impassioned prose, act in all things as he pleases" and we will not complain as long as he is interesting and companionable. He must write to us not at us. If he gives us his whole confidence, we in turn give him our love. He either wins our intimate regard or he fails all together.

There is a gypsy quality in the essayist, a sort of fugitive, wandering of the spirit, which leads the reader far afield from the rattle of life. There is no exposure of graft, no mention of presidential candidates, no consciousness of any sordid money making schemes in the land whither he takes us. The atmosphere is fresh, tranquil, inducive to reflection rather than action. With the push of life about us it is like the green pastures and the still waters, a haven of quietness where we can retire and say to the world, like the lobster in "Water Babies," "Let me alone. I want to think."

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THE FOLLOWING ESSAYISTS HAVE BEEN READ.

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Francis Bacon

Robert Burton

Thomas Fuller

Abraham Cowley

Richard Steele

Joseph Addison

Oliver Goldsmith

Charles Lamb

William Hazlitt

Leigh Hunt

Thomas de Quincey

Thomas Carlyle

William M. Thackeray

Robert Louis Stevenson

Ralph W. Emerson

James R. Lowell

Washington Irving

Oliver W. Holmes

Henry Thoreau

John Burroughs

Charles D. Warner

George Wm. Curtis

Samuel M. Crothers

Arthur C. Benson.