ESSAYS

GEORGE ORWELL

TACET BOOKS

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George Orwell

EDITED BY

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Introduction

by Edmund Gosse[1]

As a form of literature, the essay is a composition of moderate length, usually in prose, which deals in an easy, cursory way with the external conditions of a subject, and, in strictness, with that subject, only as it affects the writer. Dr Johnson, himself an eminent essayist, defines an essay as “an irregular, undigested piece”; the irregularity may perhaps be admitted, but want of thought, that is to say lack of proper mental digestion, is certainly not characteristic of a fine example. It should, on the contrary, always be the brief and light result of experience and profound meditation, while “undigested” is the last epithet to be applied to the essays of Montaigne, Addison or Lamb. Bacon said that the Epistles of Seneca were “essays,” but this can hardly be allowed. Bacon himself goes on to admit that “the word is late, though the thing is ancient.” The word, in fact, was invented for this species of writing by Montaigne, who merely meant that these were experiments in a new kind of literature. This original meaning, namely that these pieces were attempts or endeavours, feeling their way towards the expression of what would need a far wider space to exhaust, was lost in England in the course of the eighteenth century. This is seen by the various attempts made in the nineteenth century to coin a word which should express a still smaller work, as distinctive in comparison with the essay as the essay is by the side of the monograph; none of these linguistic experiments, such as *essayette*, *essaykin* (Thackeray) and *essaylet* (Helps) have taken hold of the language. As a matter of fact, the

journalistic word *article* covers the lesser form of essay, although not exhaustively, since the essays in the monthly and quarterly reviews, which are fully as extended as an essay should ever be, are frequently termed “articles,” while many “articles” in newspapers, dictionaries and encyclopaedias are in no sense essays. It may be said that the idea of a detached work is combined with the word “essay,” which should be neither a section of a disquisition nor a chapter in a book which aims at the systematic development of a story. Locke’s *Essay on the Human Understanding* is not an essay at all, or cluster of essays, in this technical sense, but refers to the experimental and tentative nature of the inquiry which the philosopher was undertaking. Of the curious use of the word so repeatedly made by Pope mention will be made below.

The essay, as a species of literature, was invented by Montaigne, who had probably little suspicion of the far-reaching importance of what he had created. In his dejected moments, he turned to rail at what he had written, and to call his essays “inepties” and “sottises.” But in his own heart he must have been well satisfied with the new and beautiful form which he had added to literary tradition. He was perfectly aware that he had devised a new thing; that he had invented a way of communicating himself to the world as a type of human nature. He designed it to carry out his peculiar object, which was to produce an accurate portrait of his own soul, not as it was yesterday or will be to-morrow, but as it is to-day. It is not often that we can date with any approach to accuracy the arrival of a new class of literature into the world, but it was in the month of March 1571 that the essay was invented. It was started in the second story of the old tower of the castle of Montaigne, in a study to which the philosopher withdrew for that purpose, surrounded by his books, close to his chapel, sheltered from the excesses of a fatiguing world. He wrote slowly, not

systematically; it took nine years to finish the two first books of the essays. In 1574 the manuscript of the work, so far as it was then completed, was nearly lost, for it was confiscated by the pontifical police in Rome, where Montaigne was residing, and was not returned to the author for four months. The earliest imprint saw the light in 1580, at Bordeaux, and the Paris edition of 1588, which is the fifth, contains the final text of the great author. These dates are not negligible in the briefest history of the essay, for they are those of its revelation to the world of readers. It was in the delightful chapters of his new, strange book that Montaigne introduced the fashion of writing briefly, irregularly, with constant digressions and interruptions, about the world as it appears to the individual who writes. The *Essais* were instantly welcomed, and few writers of the Renaissance had so instant and so vast a popularity as Montaigne. But while the philosophy, and above all the graceful stoicism, of the great master were admired and copied in France, the exact shape in which he had put down his thoughts, in the exquisite negligence of a series of essays, was too delicate to tempt an imitator. It is to be noted that neither Charron, nor Mlle de Gournay, his most immediate disciples, tried to write essays. But Montaigne, who liked to fancy that the Eyquem family was of English extraction, had spoken affably of the English people as his “cousins,” and it has always been admitted that his genius has an affinity with the English. He was early read in England, and certainly by Bacon, whose is the second great name connected with this form of literature. It was in 1597, only five years after the death of Montaigne, that Bacon published in a small octavo the first ten of his essays. These he increased to 38 in 1612 and to 58 in 1625. In their first form, the essays of Bacon had nothing of the fulness or grace of Montaigne’s; they are meagre notes, scarcely more than the headings for discourses. It is possible that when he wrote them he was not yet familiar with the style of his

predecessor, which was first made popular in England, in 1603, when Florio published that translation of the *Essais* which Shakespeare unquestionably read. In the later editions Bacon greatly expanded his theme, but he never reached, or but seldom, the freedom and ease, the seeming formlessness held in by an invisible chain, which are the glory of Montaigne, and distinguish the typical essayist. It would seem that at first, in England, as in France, no lesser writer was willing to adopt a title which belonged to so great a presence as that of Bacon or Montaigne. The one exception was Sir William Cornwallis (*d.* 1631), who published essays in 1600 and 1617, of slight merit, but popular in their day. No other English essayist of any importance appeared until the Restoration, when Abraham Cowley wrote eleven “Several Discourses by way of Essays,” which did not see the light until 1668. He interspersed with his prose, translations and original pieces in verse, but in other respects Cowley keeps much nearer than Bacon to the form of Montaigne. Cowley’s essay “Of Myself” is a model of what these little compositions should be. The name of Bacon inspires awe, but it is really not he, but Cowley, who is the father of the English essay; and it is remarkable that he has had no warmer panegyrists than his great successors, Charles Lamb and Macaulay. Towards the end of the century, Sir George Mackenzie (1636–1691) wrote witty moral discourses, which were, however, essays rather in name than form. Whenever, however, we reach the eighteenth century, we find the essay suddenly became a dominant force in English literature. It made its appearance almost as a new thing, and in combination with the earliest developments of journalism. On the 12th of April 1709 appeared the first number of a penny newspaper, entitled the *Tatler*, a main feature of which was to amuse and instruct fashionable readers by a series of short papers dealing with the manifold occurrences of life, *quicquid agunt homines*. But it was not until Steele, the founder of

the *Tatler*, was joined by Addison that the eighteenth-century essay really started upon its course. It displayed at first, and indeed it long retained, a mixture of the manner of Montaigne with that of La Bruyère, combining the form of the pure essay with that of the character-study, as modelled on Theophrastus, which had been so popular in England throughout the seventeenth century. Addison's early *Tatler* portraits, in particular such as those of "Tom Folio" and "Ned Softly," are hardly essays. But Steele's "Recollections of Childhood" is, and here we may observe the type on which Goldsmith, Lamb and R. L. Stevenson afterwards worked. In January 1711 the *Tatler* came to an end, and was almost immediately followed by the *Spectator*, and in 1713 by the *Guardian*. These three newspapers are storehouses of admirable and typical essays, the majority of them written by Steele and Addison, who are the most celebrated eighteenth-century essayists in England. Later in the century, after the publication of other less successful experiments, appeared Fielding's essays in the *Covent Garden Journal* (1752) and Johnson's in the *Rambler* (1750), the *Adventurer* (1752) and the *Idler* (1759). There followed a great number of polite journals, in which the essay was treated as "the bow of Ulysses in which it was the fashion for men of rank and genius to try their strength." Goldsmith reached a higher level than the Chesterfields and Bonnel Thorntons had dreamed of, in the delicious sections of his *Citizen of the World* (1760). After Goldsmith, the eighteenth-century essay declined into tamer hands, and passed into final feebleness with the pedantic Richard Cumberland and the sentimental Henry Mackenzie. The *corpus* of eighteenth-century essayists is extremely voluminous, and their reprinted works fill some fifty volumes. There is, however, a great sameness about all but the very best of them, and in no case do they surpass Addison in freshness, or have they ventured to modify the form he adopted for his lucubrations. What has survived of

them all is the lightest portion, but it should not be forgotten that a very large section of the essays of that age were deliberately didactic and “moral.” A great revival of the essay took place during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, and foremost in the history of this movement must always be placed the name of Charles Lamb. He perceived that the real business of the essay, as Montaigne had conceived it, was to be largely personal. The famous *Essays of Elia* began to appear in the *London Magazine* for August 1820, and proceeded at fairly regular intervals until December 1822; early in 1823 the first series of them were collected in a volume. The peculiarity of Lamb’s style as an essayist was that he threw off the Addisonian and still more the Johnsonian tradition, which had become a burden that crushed the life out of each conventional essay, and that he boldly went back to the rich verbiage and brilliant imagery of the seventeenth century for his inspiration. It is true that Lamb had great ductility of style, and that, when he pleases, he can write so like Steele that Steele himself might scarcely know the difference, yet in his freer flights we are conscious of more exalted masters, of Milton, Thomas Browne and Jeremy Taylor. He succeeded, moreover, in reaching a poignant note of personal feeling, such as none of his predecessors had ever aimed at; the essays called “Dream Children” and “Blakesmoor” are examples of this, and they display a degree of harmony and perfection in the writing of the pure essay such as had never been attempted before, and has never since been reached. Leigh Hunt, clearing away all the didactic and pompous elements which had overgrown the essay, restored it to its old *Spectator* grace, and was the most easy nondescript writer of his generation in periodicals such as the *Indicator* (1819) and the *Companion* (1828). The sermons, letters and pamphlets of Sydney Smith were really essays of an extended order. In Hazlitt and Francis Jeffrey we see the form and method of the essay beginning to be

applied to literary criticism. The writings of De Quincey are almost exclusively essays, although many of the most notable of them, under his vehement pen, have far outgrown the limits of the length laid down by the most indulgent formalist. His biographical and critical essays are interesting, but they are far from being trustworthy models in form or substance. In a sketch, however rapid, of the essay in the nineteenth century, prominence must be given to the name of Macaulay. His earliest essay, that on Milton, appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1825, very shortly after the revelation of Lamb's genius in "Elia." No two products cast in the same mould could, however, be more unlike in substance. In the hands of Macaulay the essay ceases to be a confession or an autobiography; it is strictly impersonal, it is literary, historical or controversial, vigorous, trenchant and full of party prejudice. The periodical publication of Macaulay's Essays in the *Edinburgh Review* went on until 1844; when we cast our eyes over this mass of brilliant writing we observe with surprise that it is almost wholly contentious. Nothing can be more remarkable than the difference in this respect between Lamb and Macaulay, the former for ever demanding, even cajoling, the sympathy of the reader, the latter scanning the horizon for an enemy to controvert. In later times the essay in England has been cultivated in each of these ways, by a thousand journalists and authors. The "leaders" of a daily newspaper are examples of the popularization of the essay, and they point to the danger which now attacks it, that of producing a purely ephemeral or even momentary species of effect. The essay, in its best days, was intended to be as lasting as a poem or a historical monograph; it aimed at being one of the most durable and precious departments of literature. We still occasionally see the production of essays which have this more ambitious aim; within the last quarter of the nineteenth century the essays of R. L. Stevenson achieved it. His *Familiar Studies* are of the same class as those of

Montaigne and Lamb, and he approached far more closely than any other contemporary to their high level of excellence. We have seen that the tone of the essay should be personal and confidential; in Stevenson's case it was characteristically so. But the voices which please the public in a strain of pure self-study are few at all times, and with the cultivation of the analytic habit they tend to become less original and attractive. It is possible that the essay may die of exhaustion of interest, or may survive only in the modified form of accidental journalism.

The essay, although invented by a great French writer, was very late in making itself at home in France. The so-called *Essais* of Leibnitz, Nicole, Yves Marie André and so many others were really treatises. Voltaire's famous *Essai sur les mœurs des nations* is an elaborate historical disquisition in nearly two hundred chapters. Later, the voluminous essays of Joseph de Maistre and of Lamennais were not essays at all in the literary sense. On the other hand, the admirable *Causeries du lundi* of Sainte-Beuve (1804–1869) are literary essays in the fulness of the term, and have been the forerunners of a great army of brilliant essay-writing in France. Among those who have specially distinguished themselves as French essayists may be mentioned Théophile Gautier, Paul de Saint-Victor, Anatole France, Jules Lemaître, Ferdinand Brunetière and Émile Faguet. All these are literary critics, and it is in the form of the analysis of manifestations of intellectual energy that the essay has been most successfully illustrated in France. All the countries of Europe, since the middle of the 19th century, have adopted this form of writing; such monographs or reviews, however, are not perfectly identical with the essay as it was conceived by Addison and Lamb. This last, it may be supposed, is a definitely English thing, and this view is confirmed by the fact that in several

European languages the word “essayist” has been adopted without modification.

In the above remarks it has been taken for granted that the essay is always in prose. Pope, however, conceived an essay in heroic verse. Of this his *Essay on Criticism* (1711) and his *Essay on Man* (1732–1734) are not good examples, for they are really treatises. The so-called *Moral Essays* (1720–1735), on the contrary, might have been contributed, if in prose, either to the *Spectator* or the *Guardian*. The idea of pure essays, in verse, however, did not take any root in English literature.

The Author

> *“If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.”*
> *George Orwell*

Eric Arthur Blair (25 June 1903 – 21 January 1950), known by his pen name George Orwell, was an English essayist, journalist and critic. His work is characterised by lucid prose, biting social criticism, opposition to totalitarianism, and outspoken support of democratic socialism.

As a writer, Orwell produced literary criticism and poetry, fiction and polemical journalism; and is best known for the allegorical novella Animal Farm (1945) and the dystopian novel Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949). His non-fiction works, including The Road to Wigan Pier (1937), documenting his experience of working-class life in the north of England, and Homage to Catalonia (1938), an account of his experiences soldiering for the Republican faction of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), are as critically respected as his essays on politics and literature, language and culture. In 2008, The Times ranked George Orwell second among "The 50 greatest British writers since 1945".

Orwell's work remains influential in popular culture and in political culture, and the adjective "Orwellian"—describing totalitarian and authoritarian social practices—is part of the English language, like many of his neologisms, such as "Big Brother", "Thought Police", "Two Minutes Hate", "Room 101",

"memory hole", "Newspeak", "doublethink", "proles", "unperson", and "thoughtcrime".

Why I write

From a very early age, perhaps the age of five or six, I knew that when I grew up I should be a writer. Between the ages of about seventeen and twenty-four I tried to abandon this idea, but I did so with the consciousness that I was outraging my true nature and that sooner or later I should have to settle down and write books.

I was the middle child of three, but there was a gap of five years on either side, and I barely saw my father before I was eight. For this and other reasons I was somewhat lonely, and I soon developed disagreeable mannerisms which made me unpopular throughout my schooldays. I had the lonely child's habit of making up stories and holding conversations with imaginary persons, and I think from the very start my literary ambitions were mixed up with the feeling of being isolated and undervalued. I knew that I had a facility with words and a power of facing unpleasant facts, and I felt that this created a sort of private world in which I could get my own back for my failure in everyday life. Nevertheless the volume of serious—i.e. seriously intended—writing which I produced all through my childhood and boyhood would not amount to half a dozen pages. I wrote my first poem at the age of four or five, my mother taking it down to dictation. I cannot remember anything about it except that it was about a tiger and the tiger had 'chair-like teeth'—a good enough phrase, but I fancy the poem was a plagiarism of Blake's 'Tiger, Tiger'. At eleven, when the war or 1914-18 broke out, I wrote a patriotic poem which was printed in the local newspaper, as was another, two years later, on the death of Kitchener. From time to time, when I was a bit older, I wrote

bad and usually unfinished 'nature poems' in the Georgian style. I also attempted a short story which was a ghastly failure. That was the total of the would-be serious work that I actually set down on paper during all those years.

However, throughout this time I did in a sense engage in literary activities. To begin with there was the made-to-order stuff which I produced quickly, easily and without much pleasure to myself. Apart from school work, I wrote VERS D'OCCASION, semi-comic poems which I could turn out at what now seems to me astonishing speed—at fourteen I wrote a whole rhyming play, in imitation of Aristophanes, in about a week—and helped to edit a school magazines, both printed and in manuscript. These magazines were the most pitiful burlesque stuff that you could imagine, and I took far less trouble with them than I now would with the cheapest journalism. But side by side with all this, for fifteen years or more, I was carrying out a literary exercise of a quite different kind: this was the making up of a continuous 'story' about myself, a sort of diary existing only in the mind. I believe this is a common habit of children and adolescents. As a very small child I used to imagine that I was, say, Robin Hood, and picture myself as the hero of thrilling adventures, but quite soon my 'story' ceased to be narcissistic in a crude way and became more and more a mere description of what I was doing and the things I saw. For minutes at a time this kind of thing would be running through my head: 'He pushed the door open and entered the room. A yellow beam of sunlight, filtering through the muslin curtains, slanted on to the table, where a match-box, half-open, lay beside the inkpot. With his right hand in his pocket he moved across to the window. Down in the street a tortoiseshell cat was chasing a dead leaf', etc. etc. This habit continued until I was about twenty-five, right through my non-literary years. Although I had to search, and did search, for the right words, I seemed to be making this descriptive effort almost