ESSAYS

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

TACET BOOKS

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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

By George Saintsbury[2]

Michel de Montaigne was a French essayist, was born, as he himself tells us, between eleven o'clock and noon on the 28th of February 1533. The patronymic of the Montaigne family, who derived their title from the chateau at which the essayist was born and which had been bought by his grandfather, was Eyquem. It was believed to be of English origin, and the long tenure of Gascony and Guienne by the English certainly provided abundant opportunity for the introduction of English colonists. But the elaborate researches of M. Malvézin (*Michel de Montaigne, son origine et sa famille*, 1875) proved the existence of a family of Eyquems or Ayquems before the marriage of Eleanor of Aquitaine to Henry II. of England, though no connexion between this family, who were sieurs de Lesparre, and the essayist's ancestors can be made out. Montaigne is not far from Bordeaux, with which the Eyquem family had for some time been connected. Pierre Eyquem, Montaigne's father, had been engaged in commerce (a herring-merchant Scaliger calls him, and his grandfather Ramon had certainly followed that trade), had filled many municipal offices in Bordeaux, and had served under Francis I. in Italy as a soldier. He married Antoinette de Louppes (Lopez), descended from a family of Spanish Jews. The essayist was the third son. By the death of his elder brothers, however, he became head of the family. He had also six younger brothers and sisters. His father appears, like many other men of the time, to have made a hobby of education. Montaigne was not only put out to nurse with a peasant

woman, but had his sponsors from the same class, and was accustomed to associate with it. He was taught Latin orally by servants (a German tutor, Horstanus, is especially mentioned), who could speak no French, and many curious fancies were tried on him, as, for instance, that of waking him every morning by soft music. But he was by no means allowed to be idle. A plan of teaching him Greek by some kind of mechanical arrangement is not very intelligible, and was quite unsuccessful. These details of his education (which, like most else that is known about him, come from his own mouth) are not only interesting in themselves, but remind the reader how, not far from the same time, Rabelais, the other leading writer of French during the Renaissance, was exercising himself, though not being exercised, in plans of education almost as fantastic. At six years old Montaigne was sent to the collège de Guienne at Bordeaux, then at the height of its reputation. Among its masters were Buchanan, afterwards the teacher of James I., and Muretus, one of the first scholars of the age. At thirteen Montaigne left the collège de Guienne and began to study law, it is not known where, but probably at Toulouse. In 1548 he was at Bordeaux during one of the frequent riots caused by the gabelle, or salt-tax. Six years afterwards, having attained his majority, he was made a counsellor in the Bordeaux parlement. In 1558 he was present at the siege of Thionville, in 1559 and 1561 at Paris, and in 1562 at the siege of Rouen. He was also much about the court, and he admits very frankly that in his youth he led a life of pleasure, if not exactly of excess. In 1565 he married Françoise de la Chassaigne, whose father was, like himself, a member of the Bordeaux parlement. Three years later his father died, and he succeeded to the family possessions. Finally, in 1571, as he tells us in an inscription still extant, he retired to Montaigne to take up his abode there, having given up his magistracy the year before. His health, never strong, had been further weakened by the hard living which

was usual at the time. He resolved, accordingly, to retire to a life of study and contemplation, though he indulged in no asceticism except careful diet. He neither had nor professed any enthusiastic affection for his wife, but he lived on excellent terms with her, and bestowed some pains on the education of the only child (a daughter, Léonore) who survived infancy. In his study—a tower of refuge, separate from the house, which he has minutely described—he read., wrote, dictated, meditated, inscribed moral sentences which still remain on the walls and rafters, annotated his books, some of which are still in existence, and in other ways gave himself up to a learned ease.

He was not new to literature. In his father's lifetime, and at his request, he had translated the *Theologia naturalis* of Raymund de Sabunde, a Spanish schoolman (published 1569). On first coming to live at Montaigne he edited the works of his deceased friend Étienne de la Boétie, who had been the comrade of his youth, who died early, and who, with poems of real promise, had composed a declamatory and school-boyish theme on republicanism, entitled the *Contr' un*, which is one of the most over-estimated books in literature. But the years of his studious retirement were spent on a work of infinitely greater importance. Garrulous after a fashion as Montaigne is, he gives us no clear idea of any original or definite impulse leading him to write the famous *Essays*. It is very probable that if they were at first intended to have any special form at all it was that of a table-book or journal, such as was never more commonly kept than in the 16th century. It is certainly very noticeable that the earlier essays, those of the first two books, differ from the later in one most striking point, in that of length. Speaking generally, the essays of the third book average fully four times the length of those of the other two. This of itself would suggest a difference in the system of

coniposition. These first two books appeared in 1580, when their author was forty-seven years old.

They contain, as at present published, no fewer than ninety-three essays, besides an exceedingly long apolog for the already mentioned Raymund Sabunde, in which some have seen the kernel of Montaigne's philosophy. The book begins with a short *avis* (address to the reader), opening with the well-known words, “ C'est 'icy un livre de bon foy, lecteur," and sketching in a few lively sentences the character of meditative egotism which is kept up throughout. His sole object, the author says, is to leave for his friends and relations a mental portrait of himself, defects and all; he cares neither for utility nor for fame. The essays then begin, without any attempt to explain or classify their subjects. Their titles are of the most diverse character. Sometimes they are proverbial sayings or moral adages, such as “ Par divers moyens on arrive à pareille fin," “ Qu'il ne faut juger de notre heur qu'aprés la mort,” " Le profit de l'on est le dommage de l'aultre.” Sometimes they are headed like the chapters of a treatise on ethics: “De la tristesse,” “De l'oisiveté,” “ De la peur," “ De l'amitié.” Sometimes a fact of some sort which has awaked a train of associations in the mind of the writer serves as a title, such as “ On est puni de s'opiniastrer à uno place sans raison." “ De la bataille de Dreux," &c. Occasionally the titles seem to be deliberately fantastic, as “ Des puces," “ De l'usage de se vestir." Sometimes, though not very often, the sections are in no proper sense essays, but merely commonplace book entries of singular facts or quotations, with hardly any comment. These point to the haphazard or indirect origin of them, which has been already suggested. But generally the essay-character—that is to say, the discussion of a special point, it may be with wide digressions and divergences—displays itself. The digressions are indeed constant, and sometimes

have the appearance of being absolutely wilful. The nominal title, even when most strictly observed, is

rarely more than a starting-point; and, though the brevity of these first essays for the most part prevents the author from journeying very far, he contrives to get to the utmost range of his tether. Quotations are very frequent.

In 1571 he had received the order of Saint-Michel; in 1574 was with the army of the duke de Montpensier; two years later was made gentleman-in-ordinary to Henry III., and next year again to Henry of Navarre. He visited Paris occasionally, and travelled for health or pleasure to Cauterets, Eaux Chaudes and elsewhere. But his health grew worse and worse, and he was tormented by stone and gravel. He accordingly resolved to journey to the baths of Lucca. Late in the 18th century a journal was found in the chateau of Montaigne giving an account of this journey, and it was published in 1774; part of it is written in Italian and part dictated in French, the latter being for the most part the work of a secretary or servant. Whatever may be the biographical value of this work, which has rarely been reprinted with the *Essays* themselves, and the MS. of which disappeared early, it is almost entirely destitute of literary interest. The course of the journey was first northwards to Plumblères, then by Basel to Augsburg and Munich, then through Tirol to Verona and Padua in Italy. Montaigne visited most of the famous cities of the north and centre, staying five months at Rome, where he had an audience of the pope and was made a Roman citizen, and finally establishing himself at the baths of Lucca for nearly as long a time. There he received news of his election as mayor of Bordeaux with a peremptory royal endorsement enjoining residence, and after some time journeyed homewards. The tour contains much minute information about roads, food, travelling, &c., but the singular condition in which it exists and the disappearance of the MS. make it rather difficult to

use it as a document. The best argument in its favour is the improbability of anybody having taken the trouble to forge so bald and awkward a heap of details. Of the fact of the journey there is no doubt whatever.

Montaigne was not altogether delighted at his election to the mayoralty, which promised him two years of responsible if not very hard work. The memory of his father, however, and the commands of the king induced him to accept it; and he seems to have discharged it neither better nor worse than an average magistrate. Indeed, he gave sufficient satisfaction to the citizens to be re-elected at the close of his term, and it may be suspected that the honour of the position, which was really one of considerable dignity and importance, was not altogether indifferent to him. Unfortunately, it cannot be said that " nothing in his office became him like the leaving of it." It was his business, if not exactly his duty, to preside at the formal election of his successor, the maréchal de Matignon; but there was a severe pestilence in Bordeaux, and Montaigne writes to the jurats of that town, in one of the few undoubtedly authentic letters which we possess, to the effect that he will leave them to judge whether his presence at the election is so necessary as to make it worth his while to expose himself to the danger of going into the town in its then condition, " which is specially dangerous for men coming from a good air, as he does." It may be urged in his favour that the general circumstances of the time, where they did not produce reckless and foolhardy daring, almost necessarily produced a somewhat excessive caution. However this may be, Montaigne had difficulty enough during this turbulent period, all the more so from his neighbourhood to the chief haunts and possessions of Henry of Navarre, who actually visited him at Montaigne in 1584. He was able, despite the occupations of his journey, his mayoralty, and the pressure of civil war and pestilence, which was not confined to the

town, to continue his essay-writing. His second term of office terminated in 1585; and in 1588 after a visit of some length to Paris, the third book of the *Essays* was published, together with the former ones considerably revised. The new essays, as has been remarked, differ strikingly from the older ones in respect of length; and the whimsical unexpectedness of the titles reappears in but two of them: “ Des Coches ” and “ Des Boiteux." They are, however, identical with the earlier ones in spirit, and make with them a harmonious whole—a book which has hardly been second in influence to any of the modern world.

This influence is almost equally remarkable in point of matter and in point of form. The latter aspect may be taken first. Montaigne is one of the few great writers, who have not only perfected but have also invented a literary kind. The essay as he gave it had no forerunner in modern literature and no direct ancestor in the literature of classical times. It has been suggested that the form which the essays assumed was in a way accidental, and this of itself precludes the idea of a definite model, even if such a model could be found. Beginning with the throwing together of a few stray thoughts and quotations linked by a community of subject, the author by degrees acquires more and more certainty of hand, until he produces such masterpieces of apparent desultoriness and real unity as the essay “ Sur des vers de Virgile." in matter of style and language Montaigne's position is equally important, but the ways which led him to it are more clearly traceable. His favourite author was beyond all doubt Plutarch, and his own explicit confession makes it undeniable that Plutarch's translator, Jacques Amyot, was his master in point of vocabulary and (so far as he took any lessons in it) of style. Montaigne, however, followed with the perfect independence that characterized him. He was a contemporary of Ronsard, and his first essays were published when the innovations of the Pléiade had full

esta lished themselves. He adopted them to a great extent, but with much discrimination, and he used his own judgment in latinizing when he pleased. In the same way he retained archaic and provincial words with a good deal of freedom, but b no means to excess. In the arrangement, as in the selection, of his language he is equally original. He has not the excessive classicism of style which mars even the fine rose of Jean Calvin, and which makes that of some of Calvin's followers intolerably stiff. As a rule he is careless of definitely rhythmical cadence, though his sentences are always pleasant to the ear. But the principal characteristic of Montaigne's prose style is its remarkable ease and flexibility. A few years after Montaigne's death a great revolution, as is generally known, passed over France. The criticism of Malherbe, followed by the establishment of the Academy, the minute grammatical censures of Claude Favre Vaugelas, and the severe literary censorship of Boileau, turned French in less than three-quarters of a century from one of the freest languages in Europe to one of the most restricted. During this revolution only two writers of older date held their ground, and those two were Rabelais and Montaigne—Montaigne being of his nature more generally readable than Rabelais. All the great prose writers of France could not fail to be influenced by the racy phrase, the quaint and picturesque vocabulary, and the unconstrained constructions of Montaigne.

It would be impossible, however, for the stoutest defender of the importance of form in literature to assign the chief part in Montaigne's influence to style. It is the method, or rather the manner of thinking, of which that style is the garment. which has in reality exercised influence on the world. Like all the greatest writers except Shakespeare, Montaigne thoroughly and completely exhibits the intellectual and moral complexion of his own time. When he reached manhood the French Renaissance was at high

water, and the turn of the tide was beginning. Rabelais, who died when Montaigne was still in early manhood, exhibits the earlier and rising spirit, though he needs to be completed on the poetical side. With Montaigne begins the age of disenchantment. By the time at least when he began to meditate his essays in the retirement of his country house it was tolerably certain that no golden age was about to return. As the earlier Renaissance had speciall occupied itself with the practical business and pleasures of life, so the later Renaissance specially mused on the vanity of this business and these pleasures. The predisposing circumstances which affected Montaigne were thus likely to incline him to scepticism, to ethical musings on the vanity of life and the like. But to all this there had to be added the peculiarity of his own temperament. This was a decidedly complicated one, and neglect of it has led some readers to adopt a more positive idea of Montaigne's scepticism than is fully justified by all the facts. The attitude which he assumed was no doubt ephectic and critical chiefly. In the “ Apologie de Raymund Sabunde," he has apparently amused himself with gathering together, in the shape of quotations as well as of reflections, all that can be said against certainty in aesthetics as well as in dogmatics. It is even said by some who have examined the original (*vide infra*) that the text and alterations show a progressively freethinking attitude, side by side with a growing tendency to conceal it by ambiguity and innuendo. But until all the documents are accessible this must remain doubtful. The general tenor of the essays is in complete contrast with this sceptical attitude, at least in its more decided form, and it is worth notice that the motto “ *Que scai-je?* ” does not appear on the title page till after the writer's death. Montaigne is far too much occupied about all sorts of the minutest details of human life to make it for a moment admissible that he regarded that life as a whole but as smoke and vapour. And it is almost certainly wrong, though M. Brunetière may have

given countenance and currency to the idea, to regard his philosophy as in the main intended as a succour against the fear of death. The reason of the misapprehension of him which is current is due very mainly to the fact that he was eminently a humorist. Perhaps the only actual parallel to Montaigne in literature is Lamb. There are differences between them, arising naturally enough from differences of temperament and experience; but both agree in their attitude—an attitude which is sceptical without being negative and humorous without being satiric. here is hardly any writer in whom the human comedy is treated with such completeness as it is in Montaigne. There is discernible in his essays no attempt to map out a complete plan, and then to fill up its outlines. But in the desultory and haphazard fashion which distinguishes him there are few parts of life on which he does not touch, if only to show the eternal contrast and antithesis which dominate it. The exceptions are chiefly to be found in the higher and more poetical strains of feeling to which the humorist temperament lends itself with reluctance and distrust, though it by no means excludes them. The positiveness of the French disposition is already noticeable in Rabelais; it becomes more noticeable still in Montaigne. He is always charming, but he is rarely inspiring, except in a very few passages where the sense of vanity and nothingness possesses him with unusual strength. As a general rule, an agreeable grotesque of the affairs of life (a grotesque which never loses hold of good taste sufficiently to be called burlesque) occupies him. There is a kind of anticipation of the scientific spirit in the careful zeal with which he picks up odd aspects of mankind and comments upo n them as he places them in his museum. Such a temperament is most pleasantly shown when it is least personal. A dozen generations of men have rejoiced in the gentle irony with which Montaigne handles the ludicrum hurnani saeculi, in the quaint felicity of his