

THE ESSAY AS AN ART FORM

A Study of Selected German Essays

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies
and Research
University of Manitoba

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Irene Isabel Artes

April 1965

© Irene I. Artes 1965



Dedicated to
PROFESSOR K. W. MAURER
in grateful appreciation
of his encouragement and help

THE ESSAY AS AN ART FORM

A Study of Selected German Essays

AN ABSTRACT

In this thesis the attempt was made to consider in the most careful way possible the nature of the essay, and from this premiss to discover and to show whether the essay can claim to be an art form in its own right. It soon became evident that any attempt at a clear-cut definition of the essay as a literary genre would prove futile, if not impossible. The essay writer is attracted to it not least because of the range and freedom it gives him in the handling of his chosen subject.

This genre confronts us with such a wealth of material that a severely, but judiciously selective method is forced upon the critic who ventures to deal with the inexhaustible material which lies ready to hand. In any case, a limited number of essays can throw as much, if not more light on the essay, especially if they claim to be representative of German literature, than a greater number of arbitrarily assembled material. The essays selected in our context have been chosen with this claim to validity in mind. By interpreting them singly and closely, it was hoped that a pattern might emerge from which certain and definite conclusions could be drawn.

To avoid facile generalizations, the best method ap-

peared to be to start with an interpretation of an essay by none other than Montaigne, who established this genre, and to consider it in a comparative way with one by Francis Bacon on the very same topic. Though Bacon took both the idea and the name from Montaigne, his essays differ widely from those of his distinguished predecessor. As time went on essay writing became ever more popular in England, and two separate traditions made themselves felt: the one which may be regarded as the follower of Montaigne, and Charles Lamb might serve as an outstanding example, and the other following the line of Bacon's more formal approach, and here Thomas Macaulay may be called a representative.

The name "der Essay" was first introduced in Germany in the Nineteenth Century by Hermann Grimm, who in his own practice of it, and on his own testimony, owed much to essayists like Bacon, Macaulay, and in particular Ralph Waldo Emerson, with the result that the German essay at that time joined in this English tradition. In the Eighteenth Century the essay was called Versuch, and Lessing may be called its pioneer in Germany. It was taken up by Herder, who made the essay more personal in form and style by using it as a vehicle for the presentation and sorting out of his own experience and responses. The essay, "Journal meiner Reise im Sommer 1769," is an example of this.

As in so many other fields, Goethe proved his mastery

in this new genre also, so that with him it reaches a height unsurpassed before or since. Some of his essays may be taken as supreme examples of what an essay can and should be, namely, "Uber den Granit" and "Winckelmann." The reason for Goethe's artistry must be looked for in his technique, which takes something specific and impersonal, for example, granite, and achieves a wholeness in which the impersonal merges with the personal and vice versa.

Schiller naturally handles this form very differently from Goethe, but again in his own characteristic way. An essay such as "Uber das Erhabene," which may appear to be an abstract and impersonal study, at the same time betrays the fact that Schiller had his subject matter very much at heart.

The next important stage is reached when we come to Kleist and his outstanding achievement, "Uber das Marionettentheater." The essay re-creates a conversation between the writer and a dancer on the subject of marionettes and gives unexpected and always surprising insights, thus illuminating the unconscious and conscious elements in man's nature.

Once more Bacon's tradition becomes evident in the Nineteenth Century, when the essay took on distinctly naturalistic and scientific aspects. The already-mentioned Hermann Grimm and others wrote their essays in this vein, which continued until we come to a representative of the Twentieth Century, Josef Hofmiller, who with his approach succeeded in adding a

new element to essay writing. We have now entered upon the period of our own time, in the course of which the personal element becomes ever stronger due to man's increasing sense of aloneness and isolation. In this context Hugo von Hoffmannsthal's essay, "Ein Brief," is an outstanding example. Even Thomas Mann looks at himself in an essay such as "Im Spiegel," although he uses irony in order to create distance for himself. Hermann Hesse remains avowedly on a personal plane whether he writes essays or Erzählungen. Albrecht Goes extends the approach and method used by Hermann Hesse in that his essays are Auseinandersetzungen mit sich selbst, in other words, revealing Selbstgespräche or interior monologues.

Finally it should be pointed out that the essay may take on various guises; it may be in the form of a letter, a diary, a piece of autobiography or biography, and not least, a critical study. As long as it reveals an inner form, a consciously achieved artistry, the essay is most certainly an art. It is not hampered by strict rules and regulations; the heart and the imagination, together with the artistic determination to create form, help to shape and to raise the essay to the level of valid art.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| CHAPTER | PAGE |
|--|------|
| INTRODUCTION | ix |
| I. BEGINNINGS OF THE ESSAY | 1 |
| Michel de Montaigne | 1 |
| Francis Bacon | 6 |
| The Essay in England | 10 |
| The Essay in Germany | 13 |
| II. THE ESSAY IN GERMAN CLASSICAL LITERATURE | 17 |
| Gotthold Ephraim Lessing | 17 |
| Johann Gottfried Herder | 20 |
| Johann Wolfgang Goethe | 24 |
| Johann Christoph Friedrich Schiller | 35 |
| Heinrich von Kleist | 44 |
| III. THE ESSAY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY | 51 |
| Josef Hofmiller | 54 |
| Hugo von Hofmannsthal | 58 |
| Thomas Mann | 63 |
| Hermann Hesse | 74 |
| Albrecht Goes | 81 |

| CHAPTER | PAGE |
|--|------|
| IV. THE NATURE OF THE ESSAY | 89 |
| Outer and Inner Form | 90 |
| Personal and Impersonal Elements | 96 |
| Reflective and Concrete Elements | 101 |
| The Essay as an Art Form | 104 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 108 |

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this investigation is to discover and to show whether the essay may claim to be an art form in its own right. When we consider the wealth of essay material which exists in German literature, and the fact that the number of essays being written in our time is not diminishing, but increasing, the question naturally arises as to what and how an essay distinguishes itself from other prose forms.

Since the genre as such lacks definition and a clear-cut delineation, the method chosen was to select representative essays and to attempt a close interpretation and analysis of them, so that perhaps a pattern might emerge by which the essay would reveal its meaning and form. It goes without saying, that within the compass of this thesis, it is not possible to be definitive and exhaustive. However, an attempt is made to arrive at and to draw certain conclusions which appear to be called for.

Because of the need to limit oneself in the face of existing material and the desire to do justice to the individual essay, I have chosen a relatively small number. It was imperative to be on guard against a method which would lead to a superficial and statistical survey at the expense of more valuable data and insights. Also I have restricted myself chiefly to the best-known German writers. Some of the

most distinguished names in German literature have made notable contributions in the field of the essay; the names of Herder, Goethe, Schiller, Kleist and Novalis come readily to mind, and in our own time, Thomas Mann, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Hermann Hesse, Gottfried Benn, and many others.

The fact that the essay can and does appear in various guises such as the letter, diary, autobiography, biography, dialogue, interior monologue (Selbstgespräch), has been kept in mind, and examples of these were included. It must also be mentioned that since the interpretation of essays is involved, personal preferences play a role in the selection, too.

Some of the studies on the essay which are available are Hugo Friedrich's book, Montaigne, which deals with the form of the essay in its last chapter; Max Bense's article, "Über den Essay und seine Prosa"; Rudolf Bach's appreciation of Goethe's "Winckelmann," and Josef Hofmiller's "On Goethe's schönste Essays"; a newspaper article, "Essay--zum Wort und zur Sache" by Kurt Wais and Hans Hennecke, as well as Robert Musil's observations on the essay in his novel, Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften. Hans Egon Holthusen deals briefly with "Die Kunst des Essays" in his study of Max Kommerell, and Theodor W. Adorno has written a short treatise on "Der Essay als Form." These are all recent studies published within the last thirty

years. The earliest one available is Georg von Lukács' "Über Wesen und Form des Essays," included in his book, Die Seele und die Formen (1911), and two articles, one by Otto Doderer, "Der dichterische Essay," and the other by Alexander von Gleichen-Russwurm, "Der Essai." All these studies however are either introductions to, or, as it were, essays on the essay. Though they contain illuminating and helpful observations, they are on the whole general and limited; most of them are a searching for, rather than a revealing, the essay's character and form. A book by Bruno Berger, Der Essay: Form und Geschichte (Bern: Francke, 1964), which appears to be a definitive work on the essay, was unfortunately not available to me at the time of writing.

CHAPTER I

BEGINNINGS OF THE ESSAY

The French word, "essai," which literally means an attempt or experiment, derives itself from the Latin "exagium": a weighing or trial. It was first used in connection with a literary work in 1580, when the Frenchman Michel de Montaigne chose it as the title for his book, Les Essais. For Montaigne the word, "essai," was not yet a literary term; he used it to indicate his method of writing, which did not follow externally-imposed rules, but was a casual dwelling^{on} and tasting of the subject, an attempt at it, in contrast to the exhaustive treatment given to it by the traditional scholastic treatise of his day.

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE (1533-1592)

This open form of the "essai" adopted by Montaigne, suited his cast of mind; it allowed him to express his moods and his thought which moved freely from picture to experience to the wise observation. He remarked in one of his essays: "I know by experience this sort of nature that cannot bear vehement and laborious premeditation. If it doesn't go along gaily and freely, it goes nowhere worth going."¹

¹Michel de Montaigne, "Of Prompt and Slow Speech," The Complete Works of Montaigne (London: Hamish Hamilton, [n.d.]), pp. 25-27, 26.

Having this spontaneous quality, do the Essais have a form, and if so, what is its nature? The best way to answer this is to examine an essay by Montaigne, which would at the same time throw light on other aspects of the essay, as it first appeared in literature. The essay chosen is the one, "Of Friendship."

He begins with a reference to an artist whom he has observed and who in

the middle of each wall. . . put a picture labored over with all his skill, and the empty space all around it he fills with grotesques, which are fantastic paintings whose only charm lies in their variety and strangeness.²

In this he sees a comparison to his own method of working, for he continues: "And what are these things of mine, in truth but grotesques and monstrous bodies, pieced together of divers members, without definite shape, having no order, sequence, or proportion other than accidental?"³ He says he can only paint the grotesques, "for my ability does not go far enough for me to dare to undertake a rich, polished picture, formed according to art."⁴ As an afterthought he adds: "It has occurred to me to borrow one from Etienne de La Boétie. . . ." ⁵ by which he means an early piece of writing by his friend, and begins to discuss it, observing that this work was the means by which they first became acquainted. With that the whole

²Montaigne, "Of Friendship," pp. 135-144, 135.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

wonder of his friendship is recalled, "which together we fostered. . . so entire and so perfect that certainly you will hardly read of the like. . . ." ⁶ and he launches out on a new theme, one which constitutes the "grotesques" around the "picture" which he said was to be his subject, and these become the actual subject of the essay.

When he talks about friendship it is in terms of his own experience, telling how he met Etienne de La Boétie and how he felt:

In the friendship I speak of, our souls mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam that joined them, and cannot find it again. If you press me to tell why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed, except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I. ⁷

What he says is concrete and personal. To illuminate certain aspects of friendship, he takes two examples of friendship from ancient times, but adds: "the very discourses that antiquity has left us on this subject seem to me weak compared with the feeling I have." ⁸

The essay reaches a peak, where it becomes an expression of his grief for the loss of his friend:

if I compare it all, I say, with the four years which were granted me to enjoy the sweet company and society of that man, it is nothing but smoke, nothing but dark and dreary night. Since the day I lost him,

Which I shall ever recall with pain,
Ever with reverence--thus, Gods, did you ordain--

Virgil

⁶Ibid., p. 136.

⁷Ibid., p. 139.

⁸Ibid., p. 143.

I only drag on a weary life. And the very pleasures that come my way, instead of consoling me, redouble my grief for his loss.⁹

Feeling fuses with his prose, raising it to the level of poetry. Even the frequent quotations from ancient authors become an organic part of his words to express his sorrow.

The essay breaks off at the height of his grief, and the eye moves back from the "grotesques," as he calls his digressions, to the "picture," the work by La Boétie with which he had started off as his formal subject, and in a calm paragraph about it, the essay ends.

Compared to a formal piece of writing, "Of Friendship" is fragmentary and rambling, a weaving of fancies, about which he says, "And what are these things of mine. . . having no order, sequence or proportion other than accidental?"¹⁰ Strangely enough, however, the impression given by the reading of the essay is one of completeness. He has succeeded in communicating not only the depth and beauty of his friendship but even more so, of friendship itself. There is no need for anything in the essay to be said in any other way or that anything be changed. It is complete the way it is.

The form of the essay is an intuitive one which is as right and true as it is unexplainable. But conscious effort is combined with intuition and feeling, for his approach is a careful one. Hugo Friedrich observes: "Sieht man, wie gründ-

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 135.

lich er über seine Essais nachdenkt, wie er sie immer wieder vornimmt, verbessert, erweitert. . . ."11 Different versions exist of the same essays, showing how he revised and added to them. This is the paradox of the essay, as revealed in Montaigne's work, that it is free and casual and intuitive, and yet carefully wrought.

"Of Friendship" also shows his love for the concrete. Not only is there a basis of personal experience to all his reflection, but even in his style, his frequent use of imagery, he reveals this quality, as for example:

Just as the man who was found astride a stick, playing with his children, asked the man who surprised him thus to say nothing about it until he was a father himself, in the belief that the passion which would then be born in his soul would make him an equitable judge of such an act, so should I like to talk to people who have experienced what I tell.12

He is charmingly personal. The reader responds not just to what Montaigne says, but ^{to} what he is, as he reveals himself, for as he says in his preface, "To the Reader": "It is myself that I portray. . . ."

His essays are a "Selbstgespräch," a dialogue within himself:

In ihrem Kerne sind die Essais ein Selbstgespräch. . . Sie wollen schliesslich nichts anderes, als mit sich selber ins klare zu kommen und nebenbei andere einzuladen,

¹¹Hugo Friedrich, Montaigne (Bern: A. Francke AG Verlag, 1949), p. 407.

¹²Montaigne, op. cit., p. 142-3.

es auf ihre Weise ebenfalls zu tun.¹³

Moreover they go beyond the personal element to acquire a universal significance, for the reader sees himself mirrored in Montaigne's Essais. "One of the mysteries of the Essays is how the portrait of Michel de Montaigne seems to become that of every man. . . ,"¹⁴ says Donald M. Frame, one of Montaigne's modern translators.

In the essay, "Of Friendship," prose statements and poetry, trivialities and profound thought and experience are found side by side, and above it all the reflective tone, a calm and detachment, for the essay is a looking back to an experience.

FRANCIS BACON (1561-1626)

Montaigne's innovation in portraying his own feelings and personal reflections struck a ^hcord in the growing self-awareness of the individual which characterized the Renaissance period. The popularity of Montaigne's Essais spread to England, where John Florio's translation, The Essayes of Michael Lord of Montaigne, appeared in 1603. And even before that, Francis Bacon adopted this word, naming his book, published in 1597, Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall.

¹³Friedrich, op. cit., p. 11.

¹⁴Donald M. Frame (trans.), The Complete Works of Montaigne, p. vi.

Though they have the same name, Bacon's essays differ in form and style from those of his French predecessor. Montaigne's are characterized by concrete examples and constant references to himself, for, as he says in his Preface: "I am myself the matter of my book." Bacon's however, are impersonal and abstract. The style has been aptly characterized by Hermann Grimm as "Diese knappe Art, von Behauptung zu Behauptung zu eilen. . . ." ¹⁵ The aim of Bacon's writings is to teach and to impart his wisdom to others; he himself is hidden behind his words. There is no fanciful weaving of "grotesques" or disarming little confessions of weaknesses characteristic of Montaigne, nor the contrasts or spontaneous expression of feeling achieved by the latter, but an even and serious tone. He uses examples and imagery sparingly, being too business-like to muse long at any point. However when Bacon does use imagery and balanced sentences he does so with telling effect, for example:

You may take sarza to open the liver, steel to open the spleen, flowers of sulphur for the lungs, castoreum for the brain; but no receipt openeth the heart, but a true friend. . . . ¹⁶

Bacon's imagery gives the appearance of being consciously striven for, whereas Montaigne's has a spontaneous effect,

¹⁵Hermann Grimm, "Vorwort," Fünfzehn Essays, Vierte Folge (Gütersloh, 1890), pp. V-XXII, VII.

¹⁶Francis Bacon, "Of Friendship," The Essayes or Counsels (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1922), pp. 80-86, 80-1.

as if he cannot help it.

The form, too, differs from that of Montaigne's essays. This is shown, for example, in the way Bacon handles a similar theme in the essay, "Of Friendship." He begins with a praise of friendship; how necessary it is for a man to have friends; how great men of history have valued it. Then he considers its fruits, of which there are three. He discusses these at length, and concludes: "But to enumerate these things were endless: I have given the rule, where a man cannot fitly play his own part: if he have not a friend, he may quit the stage."¹⁷

He stops when he has sufficiently illuminated the benefits of friendship. His treatment of the subject is general; not once is there a reference to his personal experience, in contrast to Montaigne whose whole essay evolves around it.

The form of the essays shows a straightforward arrangement; there is no inner development. The order is guided by reason, not the muse. Hugh Walker observes that Bacon regarded the essay as a receptacle for detached thoughts, a fact which is evident from the essays themselves, and from Bacon's own words about them, for he speaks of them as "dispersed meditations."¹⁸ Hugh Walker observes that:

We feel that many of his essays might be expanded into treatises; they have not an organic completeness as they

¹⁷Ibid., p. 86.

¹⁸Francis Bacon, quoted by Hugh Walker, The English Essay and Essayists (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1923), p. 16.

stand. But Montaigne's have this organic completeness. . . .¹⁹

Bacon called his writings "essays" because they were not complete treatises. For Bacon, "it was something incomplete, something which ought to bear on its face the visible marks of its unfinished condition."²⁰ For Montaigne it meant more; for him method was as important as the subject.

However, in the sense that the writings present the fruit of Bacon's thought and experience in the world of men, they are personal and share a common ground with Montaigne's Essais. Bacon's essays, too, illuminate his subject from various sides, as do Montaigne's. Perhaps the difference can be summed up in the fact that Bacon has two names for his writings: Essayes or Counsels, showing that the giving of advice and counsels is an essential element. This would also account for the aphoristic and matter-of-fact style.

Bacon was the first to use the name "essay" as a literary term, and his works, which were widely read, established the name in English literature. He did not imitate Montaigne's style of writing, but formed his own. Under his influence it became a "lehrhafte Form der Betrachtung,"²¹ which led to the later periodical essays of Addison, Steele and Johnson. The

¹⁹Hugh Walker (ed.), "Introduction," Dreamthorp by Alexander Smith (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. xvi.

²⁰Ibid., p. 18.

²¹Emil Dovifat, "Essay," Handbuch der Zeitungswissenschaft, Band 1 (Leipzig, Verlag Karl W. Hiersemann, 1940), pp. 938-9, 938.

latter defines the essay in his dictionary as a "loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece. . . ," a definition which would fit more Bacon's essay than that of Montaigne.

The type of essay established by Bacon has a didactic purpose: to pass on knowledge and wisdom gained through experience, reflection and study, and to illuminate a subject from a consciously limited view. The writer is aware that it is a contribution to a large body of knowledge which he cannot exhaust. Hence it is fragmentary and a name meaning "to attempt" is most suitable. Humour, charm and a personal response are not essential; the writer recedes into the background, although he is aware that his selection is based on a personal viewpoint.

Since Bacon's day two traditions have been evident in England: that emanating from Bacon himself, usually referred to as the formal essay, of which Thomas Macaulay's essays are an example, and that of Montaigne, the informal essay, of which Charles Lamb is the most famous representative.

THE ESSAY IN ENGLAND

Abraham Cowley, in contrast to Bacon, was the first to follow the example of Montaigne in his "Essays in Verse and Prose," published in 1668. His essays are personal and discursive.

In the Eighteenth Century the essay became popular through the periodicals, The Tatler (1709-11) and The Spec-