

THE SELF AND THE MODERN WORLD

Osborne is the first of the classic English letter-writers. The intimacy and introspection that complement her powers of observation and judgment exemplify a new element that is modifying modes of self-expression in her time. According to Lawrence Stone, "From the seventeenth century onwards there bursts onto paper a torrent of words about intimate thoughts and feelings set down by large numbers of quite ordinary English men and women, most of them now increasingly secular in orientation." He notes that the separation of close relations caused by the Civil War and their need to communicate by letter was a contributory factor, but he also points out that the phenomenon was rooted in the rise of European individualism that characterizes the Renaissance. Among other cultural heroes, he refers to the author whose example did most to free writers private and public from their inhibitions, namely Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), who admits in his *Essays* that the world may complain, "I speak too much of myself." Erich Auerbach observes that Montaigne composed "the first work of lay introspection," and thus Charles Taylor can see him as the distant heir of St. Augustine, the ancient author famous for his introspective *Confessions*. Michael Levy associates the *Essays* with the rise of the artist's self-portrait, rare before the sixteenth century.

Montaigne's achievement required the availability of a prose style that was familiar without being awkward or vulgar. The development of such a style involves a switch of models among educated writers from Cicero's oratory to the manner of Seneca. For Montaigne, explains James Sutherland, "what is most admirable in Seneca ... is the absence of a formal and artificial balance, and the suggestion in his apparently loose and desultory prose of a mind in the act of thinking." After reading a great deal of Montaigne, Auerbach even thought he "could hear him speak and see his gestures." Only a few years after the pioneer essayist's death, Jean-Pierre Camus held up his work as the perfect model for the letter-writer.

Critics recognize that the effects of prose like Montaigne's are only seemingly artless. While unaffected, spontaneous utterance can result in vivid or moving passages in such correspondences as the Paston and Lisle letters, these are usually written to inform or persuade, not for the sake of

self-expression. The nearest earlier approach to the intimacy of the Osborne letters comes in some of the missives, always dignified and formal, of Sir Thomas More.

The emergence in the seventeenth century of a familiar yet easy and graceful prose among well-educated English writers is ascribed to a number of causes: the need for effective pamphleteering and for the rapid dissemination of news in the Civil War, the efforts of Puritan preachers to spread their message and their belief in the moral rightness of a plain style, the demand of scientists for clear expression, admiration for the contemporary neoclassical French prose, and the influence of the conversation of cultured gentlemen in the Renaissance. The new prose was happily available to Osborne, her contemporaries, and her successors.