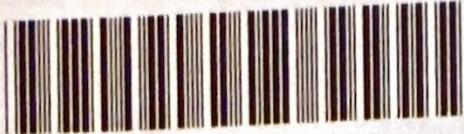


Western Library



752504370X

# Hogarth Essays



## Second Series

3021 f. 22

**CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP**

# THE HOGARTH ESSAYS

*Second Series*

## I. COMPOSITION AS EXPLANATION.

By GERTRUDE STEIN. 3*s.* 6*d.*

## II. ROCHESTER.

By BONAMY DOBRÉE. 2*s.* 6*d.*

## III. IMPENETRABILITY.

By ROBERT GRAVES. 2*s.* 6*d.*

## IV. CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP.

By ROSE MACAULAY. 2*s.*

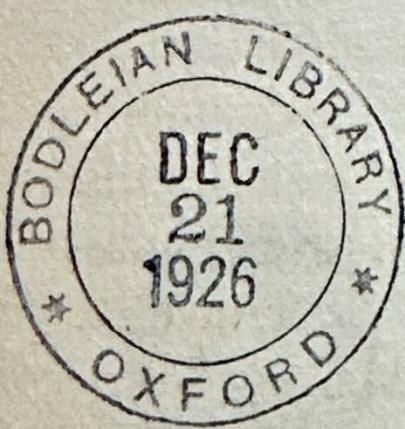
# CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

ROSE MACAULAY



*Published by Leonard & Virginia Woolf at The  
Hogarth Press, 52 Tavistock Square, London, W.C.1*

1926



Printed in Great Britain by  
NEILL & Co., LTD., EDINBURGH



## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

THESE discursive and random comments are the indulgence of a private taste, which finds in language as used one of the most amusing subjects for meditation and speculation. This fantastical currency, minted by the requirements of human thought and feeling, circulated by the urgent desire we have to convey these somehow to our fellows, so precisely, so delicately wrought and cast into exact and minute forms, so skilfully adapted to the commerce which is its purpose, and, having been so shaped, shaping in its turn thought itself, stamping it ever freshly with intricate designs—except that nothing in this curious world can well

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

be selected and labelled as odd, it might seem odd that such a currency should have been coined by our simian race.

But what is not by any means odd is that, having contrived for each feeling, each thought, each fact, its appropriate symbol, beautifully neat and fit, so that we may enjoy ready commerce of ideas, we should proceed, in the perversity of our human nature, to confuse the coins together, using one where another should serve. We prefer, as often as not, to express what we mean in phraseology which means precisely something else. It is, possibly, a revolt against the dominance of established usage, a triumphant assertion that man is lord of language, not language of man, a surging up of the eggish pride which said: "When *I* use a word, it means just what *I* choose it to mean." It is yet one more expression of the

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

free spirit of man striving perpetually against a universe which seeks to enthral him—a triumphant gesture of anarchy. Yet, because prolonged anarchy is impossible to man's law-bound nature, as to that of the universe which bore him, each attempt at it defeats itself, each new sense given to a word or phrase becomes stereotyped, becomes rapidly, not an individual, but a herd sense, the users giving countenance and encouragement one to the other. What the coins originally stood for we forget; we fling them loosely about, sometimes with misapprehension or deliberate misapplication, sometimes merely with a vague feeling that here are words, let them somehow convey our meaning. The psychology behind the various misuses is an interesting study.

Many words, many phrases, seem to acquire nimbus of association, which

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

do rough service for exact meaning. Such a word is *nameless*, which comes to some minds haloed with terror. “Avenging,” cries Shelley, carried away by his distaste for fathers, “such a nameless wrong, as turns black paricide to piety.” He did not mean that the wrong to which he referred had no name; it was, in fact, named incest; he merely meant that the word came into his head with a sinister aura of horror about it that made it seem apt to the case, as it had seemed apt to the writer of the Book of Wisdom to say: “Worshipping of idols not to be named is the beginning, the cause, and the end of all evil.” All those who write of nameless horrors, nameless vices, nameless orgies, know, when they reflect, that none of these things need actually be nameless to those with clear heads and good dictionaries; what they mean is *horrid*, only they prefer

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

a vaguer, less definite, and therefore more terrible adjective. Such another word is *nominal*, which comes so readily to the help of the business man. "A nominal sum," he will say. Does he mean that, though he calls it a sum, there will in point of fact be no sum to be paid? He does not. Rather, in fact, the contrary. What he does mean is "very small." Why, then, does he not say so? There seems no reason but that "nominal" is the inexact rather than the exact word, and therefore sounds smaller, just as "nameless" sounds more dreadful. So with all those words on which pedagogic comment has grown hackneyed—*decimated*, or *annihilated*, for "greatly reduced in numbers," *phenomenal* for extraordinary, and all the like mathematical or philosophic expressions so often inaccurately applied; and, of course, the stock misuse of *liter-*

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

*ally* where “metaphorically” is meant, which is not so much inexact as directly opposed to the meaning it strives to convey, and is an excellent example of man’s deliberate revolt against the rigidity of language. So, in the same way, is a curious use of the word *precedent* which I came on lately in an evening paper: “The event is regarded as a precedent, and is not likely ever to be repeated.” The journalist probably meant “a unique occurrence,” and again has provided a good instance of linguistic oppositionism.

But the inaccurate use of single words can be left to the care of etymologists and lexicographers, who are ever busy in the matter. What has been less investigated is the vague and rhetorical use of phrases and ideas which carry with them certain associations in the mind of the user, and which

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

will, he trusts, carry across similar associations to the hearer or reader. The psychologically interesting thing is the belief that these associations, these meanings in the user's mind, will be more effectively transmitted by a vague phrase than by a precise and accurate one. Sometimes, of course, the inaccuracy arises from a desire to convey not a correct but an incorrect fact, even when the truth is known to be known to the person addressed, so that there is no question of deceit; as when a Frenchman recently exclaimed to an Englishman: "The franc in English money is only worth a sou." One cannot believe that this was the outcome of a belief that the exchange stood at 480 francs to the pound on a day when it actually stood at 170, nor, scarcely, that he hoped to make the Englishman believe it. His statement more likely arose

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

from a feeling that a sou is a small coin, and that he was saying, "The franc is worth scarcely anything at all." Why, then, instead of saying this, did he select a particular and incorrect sum of money? Why did he not say three sous, which would have been approximately correct? The answer in this case is simple: he desired to exaggerate. And here we have what may be called a primary human need, which should be placed by psychologists with the desire for nourishment, for safety, for sense-gratifications, and for appreciation, as one of the elemental lusts of man. Infants exaggerate: they are, indeed, the world's greatest exaggerators. Before they can speak they seek to magnify their woes with louder cries than the situation in which they find themselves placed, lamentable though this usually is, warrants. They give to their grief a

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

rhetorical expression which does not accurately represent it. Feeling a slight discomfort, they exclaim, in the only phraseology as yet known to them, "I am in torment, in anguish, in hell. Amend my situation forthwith, or I perish." A little later, when they can speak, they will apply the largest measures that they know to trifling distances or heights. "Miles wide," they will say of streams, or "miles high" of the elephant. They are using mile as the Frenchman used sou, merely as an extreme measure. They love the imagination of immensity; they revel in extremes. "How small," they inquire, with zest, "would be a quite new Esquimaux baby?" "Why?" responds the indifferent nurse. If the child understood this elliptical counter-question (which he does not) and answered it truly, he would say: "Because I desire to hear of a human

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

creature very, very tiny indeed." So he loves to be told of giants and of dwarfs, to behold elephants, to inquire "How high is the largest mountain in the world?" He is a natural extremist.

Nevertheless, the child's pure and rational sense of logic, outgrown all too soon, keeps him from some of the deliberate excesses of adult life, prevents him even from understanding them. They are to him a stumbling-block. "I shan't be gone more than a minute," says the elder. The child, waiting, perceiving that far more than sixty seconds has elapsed, puts down the adult, probably not for the first time, as a liar. He does not yet know that the word "minute" is a common coin, loosely thrown about, to symbolise "a short time." Though, as to that, the vague idea we have as to the actual length of sixty seconds sometimes induces a contrary procedure.

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

An extraordinary number of novelists puzzled my literal childhood by making their people, engaged in conversation, pause a minute, sometimes even "a full minute," before replying to some remark—a thing seldom done in any ordinary dialogue, and one which would quite break the conversational current. One suspects that the writer often means about ten seconds, which is actually quite a good pause, but, for some reason, sounds short. So he says *minute*, which he regards as an elastic term of time—far more so than hour, day, week, or month.

To return to the desire for exaggeration. This seems to be an immensely important factor in the development of human language, conversation, and literature. It accounts, of course, for the spreading of many strange tales, travellers' and others, for a large proportion of the inaccurate use of words,

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

for a large number of misstatements and loose phraseology, and for a great deal of the daily press. "Exciting developments," "amazing scenes,"—how rarely do these journalistic myths actually either excite or amaze. The favourite word *sensational* one can pass, for every occurrence in the sphere of sense is, of course, that; further, to hear of it doubtless causes some sensation, however mild. But one suspects the intention of being the same as in the other cases—*i.e.* to give an impression that something more exciting, important, or what not, has occurred than is actually the case: in short, to *magnify*. "A *marvellous* honest fellow," we used to say a few hundred years back, meaning, merely, very honest: and, a century or two later, "a *monstrous*, or an *amazingly*, agreeable man." More lately, "an *awfully* nice person," and to-day "a *frightfully*, or *extraordinarily*,

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

good sort." Increasingly down the ages we have shirked the simple "very" as inadequate to its appointed task, and reserved it for mild cases. In order to convey a high degree of the quality on which we are commenting, we feel the need to imply some imaginary feeling of wonder, amaze, awe, or fear, which such an extremity of quality might be supposed to conjure in our breasts.

This tendency to magnify seems most prevalent and most acute when emotion is most strongly roused. It is at these times that the precise and accurate statement of fact seems most inadequate to the situation's ardent demands, and we cannot endure to leave truth in her nakedness to speak for herself. When the situation is epidemic rather than individual, a phraseology of magnification comes into wide use, and is broadcast through the press or other

CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

machinery available. This is noticeable during all wars, revolutions, and other general human troubles. A recent example of such a period in this country was the General Strike of May 1926, and, in a less degree, the ensuing months of the Coal Strike. During the General Strike, eloquence was to some extent fettered by certain restrictions on the press, which had small room for expansive comment, except the Labour press, which was at the time, and indeed often is, a highly interesting and instructive psychological study. The vocabulary of this press is a very profitable field of research for those interested in what may be called the language of emotion, as opposed to that of cold and precise statement. Very similar language may be heard from the Labour benches in the House of Commons during many debates; pedantic accuracy of speech is, indeed,

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

scarcely to be looked for in any part of either House of Parliament, or in the governing assembly of any country; it would probably be unbecoming in a politician, who should rather cultivate the arts of rhetoric. But to the already sufficient imaginativeness of the politician and the journalist, the Labour members and the Labour journalists seem to add an element of sound and fury signifying nothing, which is highly interesting to observe and analyse. It derives partly, no doubt, from lack of precise scholastic training, of which one of the surest results is a nearerer approach to exact speech, a closer fitting together of word and fact, and partly from the strong emotion very naturally engendered by misfortune, by the perpetual oppression of circumstance, by association with, or meditation upon, those who have all the time to be swimming hard in order to keep

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

above water, and even so often sink. The fact that millions of persons lead miserably hard and poor lives, without any of the amenities of a luxurious civilisation, while more fortunate beings spend on pleasures in a month what would keep a poor family for a year, and lavishly squander on personal luxury without apparent consciousness of any debt owed to the less lucky—the hot bitterness of this world-wide and world-old fact has perhaps so enflamed and melted the hearts and brains of many of the spokesmen of the poor that they literally cannot, do not know how to, speak in an accurate sense. They speak as men in a blind passion of pity and rage: furthermore, as men who have had no training in logic or in language, but must needs use the first weapon that comes to hand, be it apt or not. It is a pity, for they thereby often spoil a perfectly good case—and

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

indeed their case, taking it by and large, and apart from detail, is the best case in the world—that of the have-nots against those who have and to spare. But nearly always they spoil it in statement by slip-shod cant and invective. In the darkened confusion of their minds they cry “murder” when there is no question of any taking of life, meaning (one supposes) that here is something they think cruel and hard, that murder is cruel and hard, and that therefore this thing must be murder. It is an elementary fallacy, which a first course in logic would make impossible.

And this leads to the question of words and their haloes. In such minds, excited, untrained, and confused, words seem to be rather symbols of some vague body of associations than the precise outward shapes of definite and clear-cut meanings; phrases rush into

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

the mind haloed with pathos, tragedy, vice, or what not. Such a phrase, apparently, is *women and children*. In *A Passage to India*, Mr E. M. Forster relates the way in which the members of the Anglo-Indian club worked themselves up into a frenzy of excitement and anger by repeating—"the women and children." And, indeed, these words, either severally or combined, do appear to have some curious hypnotic effect. They are called in, these unfortunate women and children (who always seem to be in evil case, threatened by danger, hardship, or sudden death), to do constant duty in emergencies. "Women and Babies Clubbed by Police," ran a heading in a Labour paper during the recent strike. Such police recall less the placid policemen we see about than the brutal constabulary in Ouida's novels, who, as they go about their business, casually

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

brain passing puppies with their batons. "The women and children will be the first to suffer," wrote the kindly persons who published in the press an appeal for help for miners' families. They cannot have believed what they said: they cannot, I think, have intended such a libel on the miner as seriously to mean that he would let his family want before himself. I am sure, in fact, that they meant nothing so unjust or so untrue; they merely sought to strengthen (though they actually weakened) their appeal by the use of a little unconscious claptrap.

"Brass-faced baby-killers," remarked Miss Ellen Wilkinson, M.P., alluding to the Government—I forget the precise occasion of the phrase, and in what manner the Government had at the moment been massacring the innocents, but "baby-killer" was a phrase in great favour during the strike, as

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

during the last European war. It has, indeed, at times been perilously near becoming merely a vague expression of distaste. For *baby* is another of these haloed words, bearing with it infinite associations of pathos and persecuted innocence. “Tighten the binders” was a pathetic slogan of the strike. “A holocaust has only been prevented by the sacrificial heroism of the mothers,” said a newspaper; and mother, of course, is another charmed word.

Why all this stress upon the sufferings of infants, in reality the section of the population most carefully provided for during any emergency? The answer is simple: a baby is a symbol of helpless innocence, and its name makes a good slogan. If a man making a speech to a simple audience should, gruelled for lack of matter, desire to gain time, all he need do is to say, “I appeal to you in the name of your little children,”

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

or, "What about the kiddies?" and he will have the less critical part of his audience cheering long enough to enable him to collect his thoughts and start afresh. So it was during the last European war, and, I dare say, during all the wars that have been. "Go and fight for the women and children" recruiting speeches would exclaim, and alluded with bitter invective to those of our foes who had deliberately selected British babies (or *babes*, which sounds still more moving) as the targets of their bombs. In point of fact, the number of British infants slain by enemy bombs during the war was extremely small, but one might have gathered from the press that they formed the majority of slain non-combatants. In our attacks on conduct we mislike, we wave the corpses of women and children about us like banners as we charge.

The reason for this use of babies

CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

is, obviously, their tender age, inferior physical and mental condition, and small size. Presumably the similar use of women, where it exists, is also based on their comparatively frail physique. But I do not profess to understand the full aura of associations, either comic or moving, which surround the name *woman*; it is said, indeed, and no doubt truly, that no woman can understand them. It is certain that this apparently simple and straightforward word has a considerable element of catchword about it, and has become surrounded by a good deal of claptrap.

So, for that matter, has the word *man*. I have frequently observed the name denoting the male half of humanity to be curiously used, as if it carried with it some kind of association outside its strict meaning. "I said to myself," the wife of a public man recently announced to the world, alluding to her

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

husband, "I said to myself, he is a *man*." She obviously was not merely announcing species and sex, but intended the word to carry to her audience qualities, presumably admirable, associated in her mind with the male adult creature. This, indeed, is a not uncommon piece of symbolism, and produces such remarks as "Quit you like men." "And, what is more, you'll be a man, my son," and so forth. ("What would he have turned into if he *hadn't* been able to do all those things in the poem?" as children inquire.) Anyhow, we may take it (and very creditable it is to us that it should be so, after all these centuries) that the word *man*, like the word *human*, carries an aura of, on the whole, favourable associations, just as (and it is a bad mark to the other animal species that it is so) the names of most of our fellow-creatures on this globe,

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

such as dog, hound, cur, swine, ape, cat, rat, cow, ass, peacock, and the rest (two notable exceptions are duck and lamb—both, it may be added, very good eating and requiring peas) carry such poor associations that they have always had a considerable vogue as uncomplimentary epithets for human beings.

Another haloed catchword, and this time the halo is of the purest gold, is the word *cricket* (denoting the game, not the insect), so that to *play cricket*, in the mouths of some persons, seems to mean to behave in a pure and noble manner. I have understood better how this synonym, which has always puzzled me, arose since I overheard this summer some remarks made to one another by the Australian and British cricket teams and broadcasted by the B.B.C. Allowing for a certain confusion of thought and language due to the fact that most

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

of the speakers were probably more at home with bats and balls than with ideas, and that all had just lunched, it did emerge clearly that some of these devotees of the game believed, or said they believed, in some improving moral effect produced by it. One of them said: "Cricket is an antidote to Bolshevism and degeneracy." The speaker did not explain, nor did others present inquire, in what precise manner this game affects the political opinions of its players, nor how many wickets it takes to turn a Bolshevik cricketer into a Fascist. As to degeneracy, it is not clear whether physical or moral degeneracy was meant. If physical, one imagines that a harder and more active game might be even more effective. If mental, would not a game that left degenerates less time on their hands for their own devices be better? One might, surely, go quite far in the

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

process of deterioration while one's side was in. But still, whether or not the supporters of this moral-improvement theory are able to explain it satisfactorily to others, it is apparent that it is held, and it has very likely led to the curious transference of the word cricket to the sphere of moral behaviour. The other possible explanation, the analogy of good play and good conduct, seems less tenable, for why, among all the games which can be well played, should cricket be selected? Anyhow, one observes that the persons who believe the game to be morally improving are usually the same as those who use the phrase, which looks as if theory and phrase were allied.

As to *Bolshevism*, alluded to thus unfavourably by cricketers after lunch, it is a good example of a catchword bearing the more sinister type of halo. As used by some people, it seems to

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

have lost any accurate connotation, and to imply less a Russian political system than a state of mind. It is, one gathers, a state of mind usually regarded as undesirable by those who use the word, though, if analysed even by these, it seems sometimes to resolve itself into a very natural desire for better conditions of work and wages. Oddly, too, it is often used to denote a supposed anarchic desire to rebel against law, order, and authority, which seems a queer transversal of meaning, when we consider that Bolshevism *de facto* is probably the severest, most rigorous, and authoritative form of governmental oppression under which man has yet lived, and the furthest removed from either anarchy or liberty. Those who use the name in this sense are probably referring back to the time before Bolshevism was the established order, and when, therefore, it had for a period

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

to take a revolutionary line. So liable are words to somersaults, that none seems stable in its firmament, and before long we may have "pacifist" flung about to brand one who is supposed to desire war. There seems no limit to these verbal acrobatics.

Which is to say that, once you step outside precise dictionary values and depend on a nimbus of associations to carry your meaning across, you are on dangerous ground. For nimbuses are vague and tricky things, changing colour all the time, seen differently by different eyes, and the sense you try to convey by a catchword may suffer a change between your mind and your hearer's. Say "Bolshevist," meaning "one who desires to upset the existing order," or "one who desires to acquire more wealth and wages," to someone who sees Bolsheviks as people who firmly uphold an established order and have

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

concentrated wealth into a few governing hands, and you will miss your mark. It is safer, when you invoke the name of a foreign political party, to use it strictly for that foreign political party and for nothing else; just as it is safer, when you say "cricket," to mean merely a game played with bat, ball, and wickets. It is also safer, when we say "capitalist," not to trust to it, as some do, to carry implications of greed, wickedness, and large incomes, for to what may be called dictionary minds it means merely a person who has invested such wealth as he has in some productive undertaking (such as a street taxi, a barrel-organ, a shop, or a dancing bear), instead of keeping it loose and ready to spend. The dictionary mind, in its literal unimaginativeness, cannot understand why capitalism is a bad system, or why capitalists are necessarily wealthy and probably wicked. In half

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

the contexts in which "capitalist" (sometimes called in anger capitalist, as if a cat were spitting) is used as a term of opprobrium, what is meant is "a man richer than he should be," and it is wiser to say this, even though it takes a little longer. I am told, by the way, that this question of taking longer, of space, is an important determining factor in newspaper phraseology, and particularly in the wording of headlines. It often substitutes for "married" the old-fashioned "wed," and, doubtless, often, too, substitutes the wrong word for the right. But, in the main, such substitutions have some psychological basis, which is what makes them an interesting study.

To get back to verbal haloes, these have always been particularly prevalent in the minds of poets and other writers. There is a type of poetic mind which relies instinctively on association, on

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

the repetition of certain words and phrases, to achieve the effect desired, of beauty, desolation, terror, or what not. The verse of the late nineteenth and quite early twentieth centuries, for example, abounds in such words as purple, pale, dim, strange-coloured, opaline, crystalline, chrysoprase, shimmering, glimmering, shadowy, grey, blind, swooning, orchard, honey-coloured moon, repeated again and again like an incantation, as Homer repeated *οἰνόπα ποντον*, of a sea not actually very like wine (the Greeks nearly all loved tags), as Miss Edith Sitwell applies, even when least deserved, such epithets as "creaking," and as the eighteenth-century poets called on nymphs, verdant lawns, enchanting groves, embower'd towers, and the like features of a neat and park-like landscape, to convey the aroma of poetry. Such catchwords have always

CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

been used rather vaguely and voluptuously, so that the “purple” and “shadowy” of the late Victorians both symbolised more a spiritual atmosphere than, respectively, a definite colour and a definite arrangement of light and shade. The intention of such repetitions is rather to hypnotise than to be precisely apt. “A chain of roses threaded on a wire and pressed one against the other” (to quote M. Jean Cocteau on the style of Barrés)—this was the kind of effect aimed at by many of the late Victorian poets. To-day it is less often roses that are so threaded than harder, pricklier, less sweetly-scented objects. The poets of to-day do not escape this pitfall of catchwords, but the catchwords are different, as they are in every age. And, on the whole, they are fewer than at many periods of verse-making. A closer exactitude and realism informs much

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

of the verse of to-day; we have, of course, those elegant, fantastic, and romantic anti-realists, the Sitwells and their imitators, but many poets seem to be inspired with a desire to impart precise and detailed information as to the form and colour of the objects they have observed. Phrase-making is not, for the moment, so much in fashion as usual. Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud are dead, the symbolists have perished on the air, and the days seem far distant when Belgians roamed in conservatories under freezing moons. Most of the better writers of verse and prose, in all countries, seek more or less after precision, and have gained in truth what they have perhaps lost in loveliness. Claptrap, facile and inaccurate symbolism, the repetition of the tag and the slogan, are to be found mainly just now in third-rate literature, in popular speech, and in the less

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

educated press. In these places one finds, on a lower plane, the same intention—the lazy and sentimental desire to convey an effect by using catchwords.

Allied with this desire is an impulse ever busily at work on the English language, the instinct of prudery, of evasion of some fact or object the mention of which may possibly shock someone. Among the more obvious and vulgar of the inaccurate substitutions which derive from this instinct is the curious use, noticeable in newspapers and in courts of law, of the imbecile phrase “in a certain condition” for “going to have a child,” and the lately prevalent and particularly fatuous “intimate.” The fact that, apparently, everyone concerned panders to and connives at this vulgar genteelism on the part of learned counsels and others, and answers them

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

according to their folly, instead of replying, "Everyone is always in a certain condition," or "Do you mean, were we lovers?" is evidence either of the cynical and patient toleration with which we regard the vagaries of the law, or of the wide existence of that deeply rooted prudery for which Britons are famed in Europe.

The instinct for evasion accounts, probably, for more than these obvious inanities. Many a strange phrase strays about third-rate fiction to puzzle literal-minded readers. There is, for example, a remark often made, *he wiped his glasses*. This means that he felt emotion, and the implication is that the moisture which rose to the eyes in consequence of the emotion had settled on and dimmed the glasses. But I am informed by those who wear glasses that this is not what actually occurs, and that, when tears gather in the eyes,

CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

they do not spray out horizontally so as to wet the glasses, but either remain in the eyes unfallen until reabsorbed, or roll vertically down the cheeks; nor do they give out steam or mist; therefore this process of wiping the glasses is not called for more at lachrymose moments than at others. If this is, as seems probable enough, the case, then either those who use this phrase do not know it, or, knowing, they ignore it, and deliberately use the words *he wiped his glasses* as a convenient (because indirect) way of saying "tears were in his eyes." The impulse to do this is probably mixed; partly it is the instinct for evasion, a belief that masculine tears are not the thing (for it is usually male beings, such as colonels, doctors, lawyers, financiers, and the like stern men of affairs, who resort to this superfluous wiping process) and partly a desire to be faintly arch, to imply

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

rather than to state, as in “There was something suspiciously like the sound of a kiss,” and similar facetiæ (I use this word, of course, in its literal, not in its euphemistic booksellers’ sense). Another common evasion of the fact of tears is a narration of how the nose was blown, but this, unlike the other, is a legitimate symbol.

Closely allied to the instinct for prudish evasion, and also hard at work, is the tendency to see evil where no evil is. There are scores of words harmless in etymology and original meaning which are, to quote a frequent dictionary comment, “now used in a bad sense.” Take *conspiracy*, for instance, and *conspire*. Dr Johnson, who confined himself for the most part to meanings current and accepted at the time when he wrote, explains *conspiracy* as “a private agreement among several persons to commit some crime;

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

a plot; a concerted treason. In law, an agreement of men to do anything; always taken in the evil part." The Oxford Dictionary, more historical in aim and scope, yet can, apparently, find in history no instance of men conspiring for good objects, and so we must assume that, from very early days, those who put their heads close and breathed together have been suspected of planning some evil.

Out of the many other harmless and neutral words thus degraded by the mind of man, *spinster* may be selected as a pathetic example. From meaning first a woman who spins, one of Shakespeare's "spinsters and knitters in the sun," then merely an unmarried girl or woman, it seems to have acquired (outside its legal use) some opprobrious cant sense, and to be used often with reference to some regrettable qualities, or to advanced age, or both. There is

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

a tendency not to use it of unmarried girls; a tendency even not to use it of unmarried older women unless they fall, in the opinion of the speaker, into a certain temperamental category. *Bachelor* seems to have escaped, so far, similar opprobrious associations, so much so that the absurd and paradoxical phrase *bachelor woman*, or *bachelor girl*, has been coined to denote an unmarried female whom it would seem inapt, and perhaps harsh, to call a spinster. This impulse to degrade has produced so many cant uses of words and phrases that it must be counted one of the formative instincts in the language.

So, then, we have all these various psychological factors, and, doubtless, many more at which we might easily arrive by further thought, working side by side, towards the same ends of dark confusion. The human desire to magnify; the human instinct of eva-

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

sion; the more obscure human preference for conveying meaning tactically, by a halo of vague associations, rather than by a precise statement; the desire to convey atmosphere by the hypnotism of phrases; the tendency to think evil; and ordinary unlettered human ignorance. And beyond all these, there is the heady human arrogance which makes us determine that words shall be our servants, not our masters, and causes us to dig as wide a gulf as may be between the meanings given them by our ancestors and those we have decided that they shall bear. After all, if you come to that, who were our ancestors that they should have the ordering of our speech? What they did (which was to set accepted meanings continually at defiance) we will in our turn do. Do dictionaries say that a word bears one meaning? We will cause it to bear another. It is, after

## CATCHWORDS AND CLAPTRAP

all, our creature. Language should do anything it is told, undertake any job required, not be a stubborn, one-idead thing, like a household of servants who will each perform only his appointed task. To make each word a maid-of-all-work—here is a task worthy of our endeavours. But the convenience of such a result is a little counterbalanced by the inconvenience of having to expend a good deal of imagination and intuition on guessing at the particular work which has been assigned to any given word at the moment. The fate of language will, perhaps, ultimately depend largely on what proportion of its users object more to taking this trouble than to the rigidity of specialised service. Meanwhile, we have plenty of material for interesting speculation.



# THE HOGARTH ESSAYS

## FIRST SERIES

- I. MR BENNETT AND MRS BROWN.  
By VIRGINIA WOOLF. 2s. 6d.
- II. THE ARTIST AND PSYCHO-  
ANALYSIS.  
By ROGER FRY. 2s. 6d.
- III. HENRY JAMES AT WORK.  
By THEODORA BOSANQUET. 2s. 6d.
- IV. HOMAGE TO JOHN DRYDEN.  
By T. S. ELIOT. 3s. 6d.
- V. HISTRIOPHONE.  
By BONAMY DOBRÉE. 3s. 6d.
- VI. IN RETREAT.  
By HERBERT READ. 3s. 6d.
- VII. FEAR AND POLITICS: A DEBATE AT  
THE ZOO.  
By LEONARD WOOLF. 2s. 6d.
- VIII. CONTEMPORARY TECHNIQUES OF  
POETRY.  
By ROBERT GRAVES. 3s. 6d.
- IX. THE CHARACTER OF JOHN  
DRYDEN.  
By ALAN LUBBOCK. 2s. 6d.

THE HOGARTH ESSAYS—*continued.*

X. WOMEN: AN INQUIRY.

By WILLA MUIR. 2s. 6d.

XI. POETRY AND CRITICISM.

By EDITH SITWELL. 2s. 6d.

XII. ANONYMITY: AN ENQUIRY.

By E. M. FORSTER. 2s.

XIII. A SHORT VIEW OF RUSSIA.

By J. M. KEYNES. 2s.

XIV. NOTES ON LAW AND ORDER.

By J. A. HOBSON. 2s. 6d.

XV. THE REVIVAL OF ÆSTHETICS.

By HUBERT WALEY. 3s. 6d.

XVI. ART AND COMMERCE.

By ROGER FRY. 2s. 6d.

XVII. THE POET'S EYE.

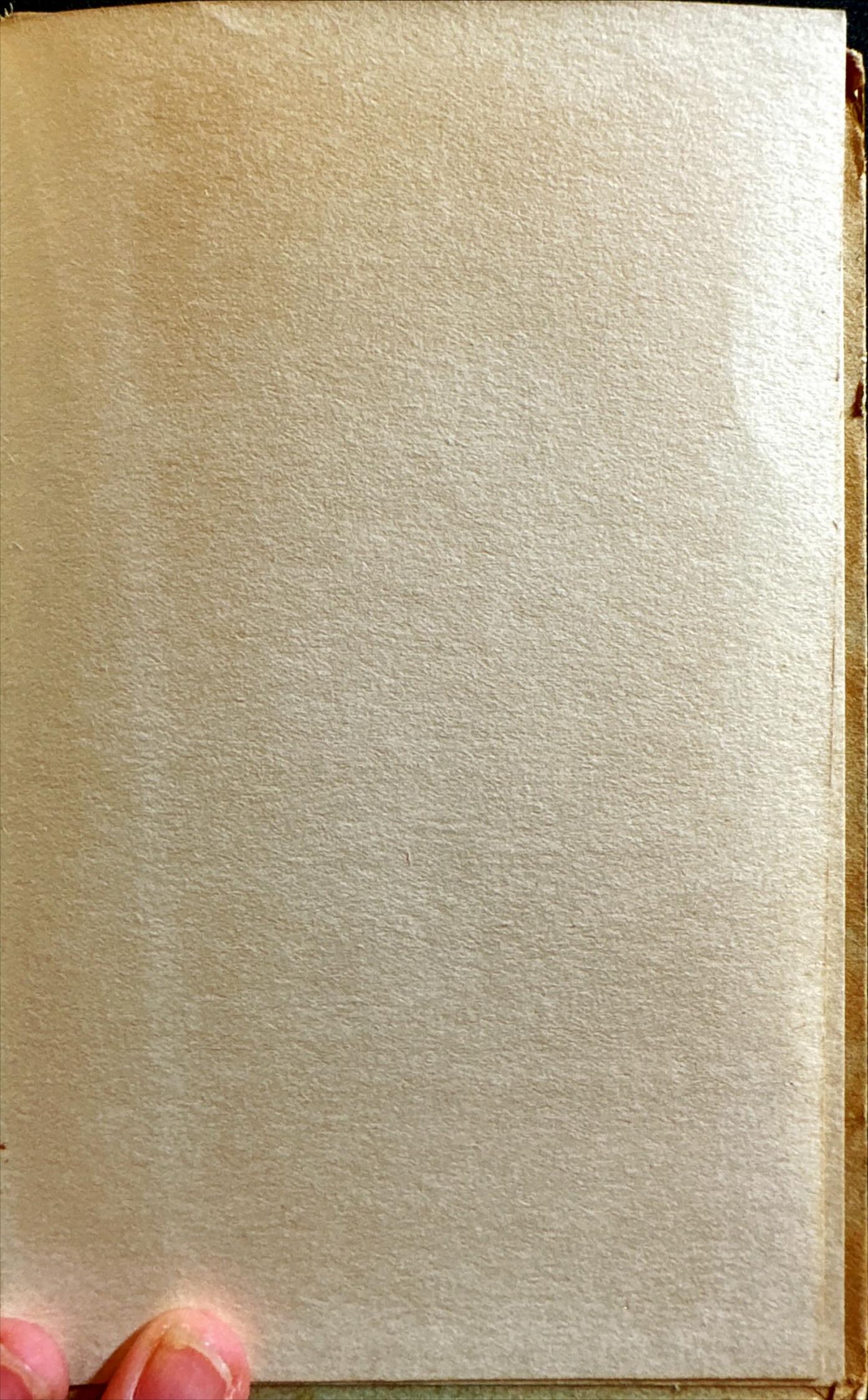
By VERNON LEE, Litt.D. 1s. 6d.

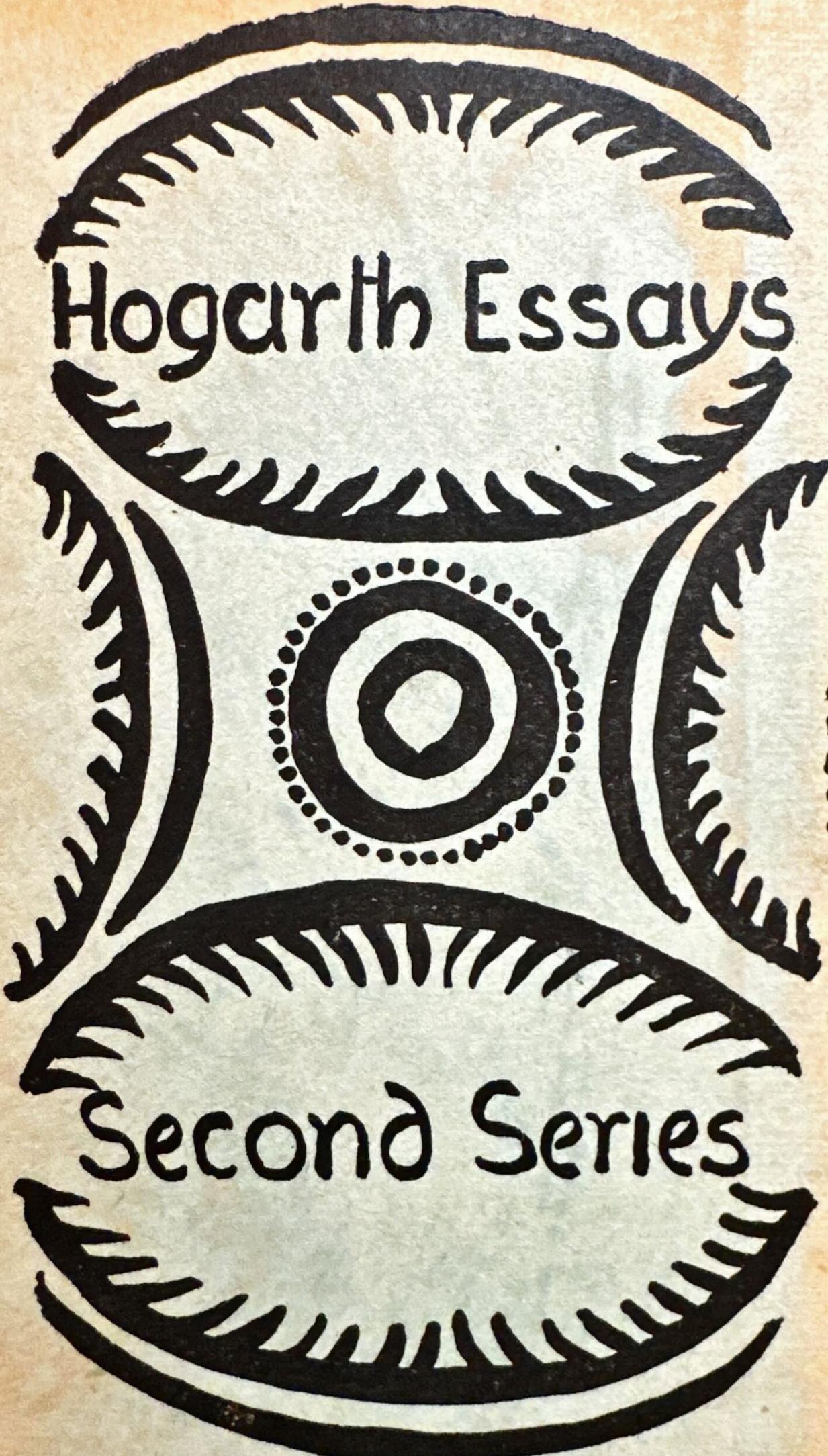
XVIII. ANOTHER FUTURE OF POETRY.

By ROBERT GRAVES. 2s. 6d.

XIX. THE STRUCTURE OF WUTHERING  
HEIGHTS.

By C. P. S. 2s. 6d.





Hogarth Essays



Second Series