

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-50571-1- French Introspectives: From Montaigne to André Gide

P. Mansell Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

 THE LIMITS OF LITERARY
 INTROSPECTION

I

FEW things in literature are as rare as introspection—as rare, that is, if we decide to give the word a definite meaning. The Shorter Oxford Dictionary defines it as “the action of looking within or into one’s own mind”. By introspection for the purpose of this inquiry I mean that, or as I should prefer to put it, the disinterested investigation of a mind by itself. This would preclude the systematic approach of the philosopher as well as the technical approach of the psychologist. It is advisable also for the delimitation of our field to dissociate at once other mental activities, such as objective reflection, speculation, reverie, rumination, fantasy or dreams, all of which have passed muster, even with devotees, as “introspection”. Some of these activities may rival and even surpass the latter in the light they can throw on the mind of a person under their control. Recent tendencies in psychology make it unwise to assert that what a person reveals of himself by direct conscious analysis is necessarily superior in value or importance to what is indirectly revealed of him in less deliberate and less conscious ways. It is not my purpose to evaluate. I simply propose as an axiom what is really a conclusion: that the best working definition of “introspection”

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-50571-1- French Introspectives: From Montaigne to André Gide

P. Mansell Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 LIMITS OF LITERARY INTROSPECTION

applicable to the literary examples with which we shall here be concerned is the conscious examination of a mind by itself.

Such delimitation has obvious dangers and may need support before it can be accepted as a working basis. Our examples are to be drawn from French introspective literature. It is therefore appropriate to begin by acknowledging a couple of serious studies of a semi-literary character, which have appeared in France within the last decade and which touch this subject closely. I refer to M. Jean Prévost's *Essai sur l'Introspection* (1927) and *De la Personnalité* by M. Ramon Fernandez (1928), both published by the "Sans Pareil" Press. Each draws the depths of personality with a broader and more searching net than I can pretend to manipulate. But the ocean of the self is wide enough to permit one to angle on its shores, while deep-sea fishers operate at a distance, bringing prodigies to light. I shall regard the works of these two investigators as standards or models to gauge the limits I have set my subject and to justify the way in which it has been handled.

M. Prévost himself deals mainly with the limits of introspection, as the general editor of the series points out. The "theory of introspection" which he examines is based on features common to all types of mind. It is, he admits, abstract. He seems inclined to make it include any type of thinking in which the mind is not occupied with external objects. M. Fernandez, on the other hand, is mainly interested in the definition of Personality. The introspective approach to its secrets is only part of his concern. Tacitly he agrees with M. Prévost that introspection has its limits. Both are

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-50571-1- French Introspectives: From Montaigne to André Gide

P. Mansell Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

LIMITS OF LITERARY INTROSPECTION 3

impressed with its uncertainty or its insecurity as a process for getting at the truth of personality. Both are severe judges of the introspective method and habit, regarded from a scientific or from a moral standpoint. But while they are sensitive to the dangers and defects of the inactive state as a means of self-knowing, they agree that withdrawal from the outer world is a *sine qua non*. “For introspection”, writes M. Prévost, “one must suppose the observer inactive, or at least with no other object than himself.” This state is foreign to most people; it is an “état rare” (p. 26). For M. Fernandez, too, introspection begins “when the subject is interested in events which do not demand from him an immediate active response; that is, when, being no longer forced to know himself through action, he is at leisure to consider his intimate consciousness as a sort of book or mirror in which his moral features are being inscribed” (p. 113).

These quotations provide what may be called our premises. But before we proceed, another important distinction requires to be made. “Soyons juste!” exclaims M. Paul Valéry, “Le seul catholicisme a approfondi la ‘vie intérieure’” (*Cahier B*, p. 56). Can we avoid referring to religious literature? Such an exclusion would indeed be arbitrary, had we in view a general investigation into the nature of introspection as variously exemplified in literatures of all types, mystical and philosophical, as well as “secular”. The secular, however, must be our field, not only for the arbitrary reason of fixing practical limits to what might otherwise become an endless inquiry, but more pertinently because “secular”, or as we shall call it “literary”, introspection

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-50571-1- French Introspectives: From Montaigne to André Gide

P. Mansell Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 LIMITS OF LITERARY INTROSPECTION

is, or appears to be, if not a gratuitous act, less consciously motivated, at least, than the religious variety.

The latter depends more or less directly on an effort towards examination of the self imposed by, or in view of, an end which Christianity has called the salvation of the soul. This end is extrinsic and ulterior to the purely intellectual pursuit of self-comprehension. But to affirm that is to raise some of the worst difficulties of delimitation. Is introspection ever a purely intellectual pursuit? Is it ever unmotivated? How near can it come to self-comprehension? A hornet's nest of interrogations!—some of which we shall try to deal with in the sequel; others we shall, in the interests of our purpose, evade if we can. For there is still one more set of distinctions which we cannot ignore, and they bring us to the heart of the subject.

In autobiographical literature itself there are many allied types which must be kept distinct from the truly introspective. Of one of these Benedetto Croce wrote in his *Autobiography*: “Memoirs are the chronicle of one's life and the lives of the men with whom one has worked or whom one has seen and known, and events in which one has taken part; and people write them in the hope of preserving for posterity important facts which otherwise would be forgotten.” Clearly memoirs approximate to history, not to introspection; while the vast majority of “lives” must be classed as private or family history. It has already been suggested that most of what passes for autobiography could better be described as biography written in the first person. One is familiar with the external sequence which the author's wife or valet or an observant friend might have served

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-50571-1- French Introspectives: From Montaigne to André Gide

P. Mansell Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

LIMITS OF LITERARY INTROSPECTION 5

up as a memorial. In contrast to such *reportage* a *journal intime* is, I contend, not the record of a life but essentially a study of the self. Yet the most personal of journals contain much that is external, descriptive, “autobiographical” in the accepted sense; and most good autobiographies have remarkable episodes of self-analysis. The distinction cannot be pressed too far in that direction. It may, however, be resumed in another. An autobiography is a narrative composed after the event. Such intimate episodes as occur are, as a rule, analyses of motives recollected in tranquillity. It is difficult to think of a “life” of this kind which is not preponderantly a tissue of reminiscences. The journal, on the other hand, is contemporaneous by definition.

Nothing intended as *apology* can satisfy our requirements; though here again our limits threaten to become oppressive. If they exclude Rousseau’s *Confessions* and the brilliant but external *Mémoires d’Outre-Tombe*, what of St Augustine’s? And what of Newman’s *Pro Vita Sua*? For Newman and Augustine cannot be disposed of under the religious category. Fortunately, neither was a Frenchman. Jean-Jacques however must detain us a moment.

Lytton Strachey considered that Rousseau had pushed the introspective method to its farthest limit. But where? In the Letters to Malesherbes or the Confessions, in the Reveries or the three Dialogues in which he pretends to judge himself?

Let us first remove an ambiguity. Certain passages in the Confessions which some critics denounce and others ignore seem to have given the author a reputation for introspection which is hard to justify. Introspection

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-50571-1- French Introspectives: From Montaigne to André Gide

P. Mansell Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 LIMITS OF LITERARY INTROSPECTION

should be distinguishable from a type of intimate confession which is merely an indiscreet form of personal disclosure. The confidence may refer to habits not usually discussed and its interest may end there, not in new light thrown on the interior or the reality of the self. The confusion here arises from different connotations of the word “intimate”.

Rousseau’s solitude is a life of reverie lived apart from society and stimulated by contact with nature. It produces: (i) dreams of a better society mingled with memories of happy moments in his experience—“toutes les scènes de ma vie qui m’avaient laissé de doux souvenirs”, and “toutes celles que mon cœur pouvait désirer encore”; (ii) emotional reactions to these dreams and memories—“sentiments exquis”. Together these occupy the heart and mind of the solitary. But they imply only a superficial kind of self-knowledge. They constitute, rather, a mode of life which Rousseau loved to describe. His introspection never pierces their level. The account of his “état moral” given in the course of the Letters to Malesherbes is precisely an account of these experiences. The finest example of all is the fifth of the *Réveries d’un promeneur solitaire*. But here we approach the heights of a new type of lyricism rather than the depths of introspection. Some critics might prefer to say, we approach the mirk of narcissism rather than the clarity of self-knowledge.

In the third Letter to Malesherbes, it is true, Rousseau passes momentarily beyond, but to arrive immediately at a feeling of emptiness (“vide”), which is itself a source of “jouissance”. Every experience of the kind, in fact every experience, ends for Rousseau in a sentiment

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-50571-1- French Introspectives: From Montaigne to André Gide

P. Mansell Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

LIMITS OF LITERARY INTROSPECTION 7

or a sensation, at best in an “étourdissante extase”. The basic moods recur in all the “introspective” parts of his work: they are few and familiar. Far from increasing in the knowledge or revelation of the self, Rousseau evades self-scrutiny and indulges in descriptions of a limited set of moods. As descriptions they are incomparably successful, even when we remember Wordsworth’s. But their motive is self-justification not self-comprehension. The loveliest of the Letters to Malesherbes is prompted by the wish to explain “les vrais motifs de ma retraite et de toute ma conduite”. This it achieves. But do any of them, or the whole of his writings, justify the claim: “Personne au monde ne me connaît que moi seul. Vous en jugerez quand j’aurai tout dit”?¹

It is obvious that a man may “confess” many things which have not required much searching of heart. Open Benjamin Constant’s *Journal Intime*.² It begins in the year 1804. The friend of Mme de Staël, the enemy of Napoleon, is in exile at Weimar. He reads, writes and visits, goes to the theatre, dines with celebrities including Goethe. Most of the entries are brief, masterly annotations of the vicissitudes of an active, agitated existence. Not a touch of repose, hardly a trace of inwardness. This supreme egoist is simply not interested in the self. On

¹ In the second of the Dialogues, called *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques*, the author reproaches his critics with two faults of method: “Il faut rétrograder vers le temps où rien ne l’empêchait d’être lui-même, ou bien le pénétrer plus intimement, *intus et in cute*, pour y lire immédiatement les véritables dispositions de son âme.” How far can Rousseau himself be said to have turned the “innocent eye” upon his youth or to have probed beneath his all too sensitive skin?

² Librairie Stock, 1928. Constant’s early life is recorded in the *Cahier Rouge*, a vivid segment of autobiography, rich in escapades but devoid of intimacy.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-50571-1- French Introspectives: From Montaigne to André Gide

P. Mansell Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 LIMITS OF LITERARY INTROSPECTION

his thirty-seventh birthday he writes: "... Ma vie ne m'a laissé que des souvenirs assez confus. Je ne m'intéresse guère plus à moi qu'aux autres" (p. 104). Yet one illuminating aside does at least show that Constant, publicist, politician, turncoat, gambler and philanderer as he was, had realised the difficulty of making the intimate point of view predominant. One evening he picks up his *Journal* and amuses himself with looking through what he has written. This is his comment: "... En commençant je m'étais promis de ne parler que pour moi, et cependant telle est l'influence de l'habitude de parler pour la galerie que quelquefois je me suis oublié. Bizarre espèce humaine qui ne peut jamais être complètement indépendante! Les autres sont les autres, et l'on ne fera jamais qu'ils soient 'soi'" (p. 119). A later birthday finds him again in a reminiscent mood. But this time the entry turns to comedy: "Aujourd'hui, 25 octobre 1811, j'ai quarante-quatre ans. Ai-je réellement bien employé ces deux tiers de ma vie? Tâchons de mieux faire! J'ai une belle-sœur aigre et sèche. Au fait, cela regarde mon beau-frère. Je n'ai pas mal travaillé. Mon livre avance. Charlotte est douce et bonne. Nous empaquetons pour aller à Göttingen. Déménagement abominable! Que de paquets j'ai déjà faits dans ma vie!" (p. 182).

The sequel sketches with incomparable verve the inner history of Constant's flight from Mme de Staël, his marriage with Charlotte von Hardenberg and his absurd passion for Mme Récamier; but it tells us little or nothing of what Benjamin makes of himself.

Let us return to graver considerations.

In this passage from Maine de Biran's *Journal*, already

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-50571-1- French Introspectives: From Montaigne to André Gide

P. Mansell Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

LIMITS OF LITERARY INTROSPECTION 9

introduced to English readers by Mr Aldous Huxley, we see the French philosopher drawing an acute distinction between the type of man who is capable of meditation and the type who is not. Maine de Biran is commenting on a thought of Pascal. “Would one not say”, he asks, “that the removal of all causes of external sensation or amusement was enough to turn any individual into a deep thinker busy with self-analysis, with meditation on life and death and all that is most distressing in the condition of humanity? Yet, on the contrary, to meditate thus, after having deliberately withdrawn from all sources of impression, one must exert more effort and intellectual activity than is required to follow the course of all the affairs of life. The activity which makes us think of ourselves is only a mode of that activity which, according to Pascal, would prevent us thinking of ourselves by filling our mind with any other thing. Thus from the standpoint that all mental labour tends only to steal us from ourselves, we should only be thinking of ourselves to distract us from ourselves or to forget ourselves: strange and inexplicable contradiction. Remove all sensible impressions, all causes of movement, and there would be left a dreadful void, a nullity of existence, so to speak, for those who know and love only the life of sensations. But thought will fill this void or make it imperceptible for those who are accustomed to the intellectual life: even when they meditate on the nothingness of man, they would have a full life. . . .”¹

This distinction helps us with one more exclusion. But along with the sensationalist we must also dismiss the philosopher whom Maine de Biran thinks of as

¹ Maine de Biran, *Journal Intime*, ed. Valette-Monbrun, II, p. 56.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-50571-1- French Introspectives: From Montaigne to André Gide

P. Mansell Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

IO LIMITS OF LITERARY INTROSPECTION

capable of filling the void left by the withdrawal from sensation. Philosophical meditation is not identical with introspection. This Biran seems to admit. It may lead a thinker as far from himself as sensation could. How far we shall see when we examine his *Journal*. For another example of the appropriation or application of the introspective method comparable in importance to his (though very different in kind), we must make a leap of a hundred years and drop from the study into the arena.

Maurice Barrès brilliantly exemplifies what might be called teleological or purposive self-analysis. His attitude and method are defined in the phrase, *Le culte du moi*. Under this head he grouped the three “romans idéologiques” with which he began. Contemporary protests against their obscurity induced him to prefix a synopsis which figures as the *Examen* in the definitive edition, and makes his intention clear: “Proposing to put into the form of a novel the conception people of our time arrive at of the universe, when their thought is their own and not a repetition of formulas found in their readings, I felt obliged to begin with a study of the Self. . .” (p. 14). The modern young man suffering from lack of energy and objective must learn to know himself, to distinguish his real interests, his instinctive direction, his own truth. Let him take his stand on the Self until an energetic person comes to reconstruct religion for him (pp. 40, 41).

The *Examen* abounds in precepts of self-analysis. But the works themselves are too indirect and symbolical in style to detain us. As the *Cahiers* show, Barrès was not an introspective by nature, but a man of action who had worked back to his own roots in order to devote himself