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

P. Mansell Jones

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FRENCH INTROSPECTIVES

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FRENCH
INTROSPECTIVES

FROM MONTAIGNE TO
ANDRÉ GIDE

BY

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“Introspections—heureux à tous égards, disait-il, car, même totalement incompris, on ne peut se méprendre sur la direction intus, sur le in....” (From a conversation with André Gide.)

CHARLES DU BOS:

Extraits d'un Journal (1908–1928)

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PREFACE

AUTOBIOGRAPHY is in the fashion, in favour with authors and publishers, popular, to judge by lending-library stocks, with a large proportion of the reading public. Yet it would be a mistake to think that autobiography, especially when serious and intimate, is a type of literature to everyone's liking. Few can resist the attraction of a contemporary's exposure of himself—how he made his fortune or met his fate, why he deserted a party or divorced a wife; and if he can tell us the “secret” of these things he has a reason to be heard. But apart from appeals to curiosity and fillips to prurience, critical discussion of the subject yields only too often to irrelevant personal allusions and pious disapproval.

People of taste usually prefer what is objective in form, if not in spirit; realists, they shudder at realism in the first person. The facile or the profound exhibitionism involved in confession or self-portrayal is equally abhorrent to them. They are irritated by the indiscretions which make the confession genuine. They pounce upon self-criticisms and use them triumphantly to dispose of the matter. This may be why autobiography as an art receives so little recognition; why with a specimen to review a serious judge will concentrate on the life, not on the book; why from Montaigne and Rousseau to Gide, Wells and Middleton Murry, the experience renews itself: to publish one's life is to invite reproach for

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having lived it. The man who writes about himself is a prig, a bore, a sentimentalist, a megalomaniac, a cynical self-adulator or a propagandist for his own *mauvaises mœurs*, before he is allowed to be an autobiographer. Charged with being an apologist, defending instead of arraigning himself, he is grudged credit for having made an effort to understand or explain himself.

Criticism of this type of literature remains, as a result, largely a department of moral or social censure. It may always be so: the type invites it. For what should (such) a book teach but the art of living? Dr Johnson's question must be met with the statement that to extract and present the lesson are affairs of psychology and literary art. It is one thing to blame the autobiographer for the life he has lived; it is another to consider his work in relation to the defects and failures in which it may have originated, or which may have forced or modified its development. I assume that a man intent on self-examination and gifted in self-disclosure can make a distinctive contribution which perpetually evades the verdict, gratuitous or verifiable, passed on his behaviour.

Not that we have to accept his evaluations. In autobiography especially it is significance that counts—significance of data, emphasis, “revelation”; and it is we who judge these things by our own standards. Ultimately, no doubt, the nature of the life and the quality of the person cannot be kept out of the account. But they should be brought in to confirm not to prejudice the verdict.

The real art of the man who writes about himself is to arrange for publication at a favourable moment posthumously. Distance softens the importunity of the

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“I”, and time permits another egoist to discover a genius.

Even that may be too early for judgment.

The nucleus of this book is a short series of relatively independent studies, not designed to present an exhaustive treatment or to sustain a thesis. A common thread, or at least a single intention, runs through them and will, I hope, explain the basis of selection. Put simply, it is the search for examples of introspection in a literature which is reputed to be rich in them.

The first chapter is concerned with distinctions. One of these it seems necessary to mention here, because it has determined my line of approach. It is a discrimination, which could be made absolute only in theory, between the introspective and other autobiographical types of literature. I suggest that most of what passes for autobiography is, in essence, biography written in the first person; while what the French call an “*écrit intime*” is not the record of a life, but essentially a study of the self.¹ I have chosen those specimens of the latter kind which seemed most deliberately and consistently intimate, those which might be expected to present, directly and unequivocally, the authentic results of a study of the self as practised by non-professionals of genius. These are surprisingly few. Even the exiguous group here represented—so scarce are examples of pure introspec-

¹ The rigidity of this distinction will be modified later. The difficulty is largely one of nomenclature. A slight acquaintance with the subject does, I think, show that we lack categories, descriptive and critical, adequate to the extent and variety of kinds roughly grouped under *Autobiography* or *Memoirs*. What attempts I have made to discriminate are tentative.

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tion—contains one philosopher. But the philosophy of Maine de Biran seems to have proceeded from his habit of inspecting his own mind, and not *vice versa*. Another is not directly and unequivocally a diarist. His chief work, *Obermann*, I use as a foil, an example of the *faux intime*.

To deal adequately with the ultimate problem to which these studies obviously lead would require far more philosophy than I possess or am likely to acquire. The method I have adopted has been to watch at work a few artists in introspection and to attempt to judge them on their apparent merits and defects as amateurs. In encouragement and defence of this attitude it is comforting to recall that it was not for philosophers or for any kind of specialist, but for themselves as amateurs that these non-sectarian Solitaries kept watch with themselves and recorded (though perhaps in the last resort for other eyes after and like their own) the gains and losses they experienced in pursuit of their inner quest.

The more serious, not to say the more logical, of Introspectives must sooner or later inquire what they are in themselves. Stendhal asked this question, squatting on the steps of St Peter's on the morning of his fiftieth birthday. Amiel turned it over off and on for forty years. Montaigne, despite his nonchalance, confessed himself to be at all times "préparé environ ce que je puis estre". I do not pretend to know what answer they found, or even what each self-interrogator meant by the "moi" he was at once interrogating and looking for. But it will be agreed, I think, that in each case the question was not, "How do I know myself?" or "What

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is introspection?" An epistemologist might therefore be thought ready to despise them. Most probably he would not. The gift of introspection does not seem to have been so lavishly distributed among Western Man as is apparently the talent for philosophising. And the philosopher would no doubt be wise enough to respect any one whose greater experiential claim could be characterised in Amiel's words, when, registering defeat at all other points, he wrote in his Journal: "Ici tu peux passer du rang d'amateur à celui de spécialité." This claim does not of course contradict what has been said above. By "spécialité" Amiel meant not an acquired specialism, but a special gift developed to a superior degree.

Having recognised the precedence of the philosopher in matters appertaining to knowledge of the Self, I may now express the hope, without too heavy a feeling of presumption, that a few of his kind will allow themselves to be included among those to whom I offer no deep argument of my own, but some observations prompted by a variety of examples which I have found fascinating and in which English readers may find, along with much that is familiar, much perhaps that is new. This is my excuse for having frequently attempted translation. But there is French too for those who like it. Short passages have usually been given in the original form, which has always been kept when the style seemed significant.

Of the friends who have helped with criticism and advice I should like especially to thank Professor F. C. Green and Mr F. W. Stokoe of Cambridge, and Professor J. L. André Barbier of Aberystwyth. Mr T. S. Eliot

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P R E F A C E

has allowed the inclusion of an essay on Amiel which appeared in the *Criterion* for October 1935. Similar permission has been given by Mr R. A. Scott-James in respect of an article called "The Paradox of Literary Introspection" from the *London Mercury* for September of that year. The Librairie Plon of Paris has given consent to the use I have made of passages from a recent edition of Maine de Biran's *Journal Intime*, published by that house.

P. M. J.

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