

Paige, Nicholas D.

Being Interior: Autobiography and the Contradictions of Modernity in Seventeenth-Century France. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001. 297 pp.

In part, this is a book about Becoming Interior, for it is an inquiry into the cultural imperatives underlying the emergence in early modern France of autobiography, a nascent practice “not yet institutionalized and still without even a name” (13). Also an exploration of the metaphorical space of “the interior” – space at once homeland and foreign land, liberation and prison, strait confinement and mirror of the vast, unsounded depths of God -- *Being Interior* is an important book. Clear even if at times challenging, it is a well-conceived and highly informed inspection of what one might call *coureurs du bois intérieur* in the oft-neglected pages of non-canonical, first-person spiritual writing.

“Retracing the dawning interest in autobiography,” *Being Interior* “aims to account for how a type of writing came to imply a mode of being, and, conversely, how something people were learning to call ‘inner experience’ seemed to produce, as if naturally, authoritative books.” [The ‘authentic’ hence authoritative testimony of suppressed ‘voices’ whose problematic is appraised (“lending an ear to the Other is not an inherently progressive act”) in the last pages of a rich conclusion.] At the same time, it “anatomizes a culture in which autobiography would always be suspected of not keeping its many promises” (4). Though of course also on display in, say, political memoirs, nowhere in early modern France is the interior so prominently to the fore as in spiritual texts and titles.

Nicholas Paige takes spiritual first-person writing of Jean de Labadie, Antoinette Bourignon and Jeanne Guyon, “three important mystics situated on the embattled fringes of the Catholic Church” (16), and of the Jesuit exorcist Jean-Joseph Surin and others not merely as charts of *terra incognita* but as the very “way in” (12) to a hidden interior. It is a realm that, if it seems to promise utopian refuge, is, as a locus of paradox, all too apt to deliver its

contrary, dystopian alienation. For (in line with Mino Bergamo), “human insides here acquire characteristics commonly associated with the outside – vastness, openness, infinite expansion” (3), so that one finds oneself as it were outside again. Moreover, if the interior should prove a haven and a refuge, the fact of being shut in spawns awareness of its correlate, being shut out, whence a sense of the self as being an exile if indeed not a prisoner.

The study is divided into two parts. “Reading In,” the first, “charts the Western investment in a mode of thinking that associates the first-person discourse of experience with authority, authenticity and self-presence. Part II, “Frictions,” is concerned with the somber under-side of modern subjectivity – difference, madness, marginality and all manners of persecution” (16).

A thematic and historical lead-in is provided by the first chapter, “The History of an Anachronism: Montaigne, Augustine and the Becoming of Autobiography.” If the former’s *Essays* are “interiority externalized...the invisible made visible” [Richard Regosin], they are also less introspection than the reflection of a hermeneutic imperative slowly evolved from antiquity [Foucault]: take care of the self (*epimeleisthai sautou*). To do this is “not to discover a buried truth, but to engage in a daily ascetic regimen” (28.). But corresponding to this “shallow” interiority is a “deep” one signaled, for example, by “Montaigne’s repeated if inclusive gesturing towards an inchoate depth” (33). It is in this light that the *Essays* were received by his *fille d’alliance* Marie de Gournay: “no longer a tool for caring for ourselves so that we may become wise gentlemen” (46), but – mirroring Augustine, whose popularity nonetheless vastly eclipsed Montaigne’s in the second half of the century – a look “as if behind a curtain that one pulls strategically down around one’s true motives [where] evils lurk deep down, in the anatomical depths of a subject driven to come clean” (47). Metaphors of interiority such as those of Montaigne are “inseparable from the development of the autobiographical mentality” (35) in which a dawning imperative to be individual, lacking a tradition of authorizing and enabling exemplars, is transmuted into the imperative need to be interior and percolates into speech. Indeed, though neither the *Essays* nor the *Confessions* is autobiography in

the sense of personal chronology, the awakening autobiographical mentality shows itself in their anachronistic reception as such early in the *siècle classique*.

Although, as the author states, each chapter can be read separately, in addition to the unity of confluent themes there is an echo of ring composition in the whole. The book opens with an account by Surin, exorcist in the famous Loudun possessions, of the (written) experiences of a woman under his spiritual direction, Marie Baron, that reveals the emerging fascination with the interior. It closes with a chapter whose object is to historicize ‘experience’ -- a category far more readily taken ahistorically than ‘interiority’ or ‘autobiography’ – through an examination of Surin’s *Sciences expérimentales des choses de l’autre vie* (1663).

Surin’s book is a husk whose kernel is the story of his “twenty-year battle with aphasia, delirium, and most of all a haunting and painful sense of his own personal difference. [...] Surin’s breakdown occurred precisely at the moment the authority of the church and its entire interpretive tradition was wavering, unable to make sense of the ‘individual’; his difficult task was to theorize autobiography as the book one clings to when all other books fail, a self-authorizing space where one undertakes the analysis of the ineffable quality of experience” (17).

Paige finds in Surin’s account a kind of ‘missing link’ in the evolution of autobiography. His experience, fitting no mold of culturally authorized and hence licensing exemplars, brings profound alienation at a time when to be different is still a vice. To describe his experience, which seems *sui generis*, he slides into a negative lexicon of the sort sometimes used for another individual, God, whose particularity is, as it were, *sui generis* by virtue of being *supra genera*. Like Saint Theresa, Surin “appears to trust in the analogic power of language” that would validate a “rhetoric of unsayability” for inner experience. Yet, he also writes as if to subvert this analysis, “as if . . . by this failure, to demonstrate once again the singularity of the subject’s experience” (210). In his text we see the evocation of ‘experience’ that cannot be “exteriorized

by language.” Indeed, “For Surin experience is not self –evident even to one who has ‘experienced’ ” (216).

Being Interior documents and reveals a fascinating part of an oft-repeated human story wherein a “devalued exterior” prompts a *katabasis* into our own underworld – an Aeneadic voyage of flight and finding, of taking counsel of one’s own ghosts in an attempt to found a new and better (inner) kingdom.¹ Or perhaps, inversely, a Xenophontic *anabasis*, a “going up” from shore to the interior’s higher ground, there to contest for rule and reward.

Consistently insightful and illuminating in its historical analyses, thoroughly engaged with contemporary criticism, *Being Interior* is a disentangling discussion of autobiography and its not wholly determinate beginnings (“unraveled into many component threads . . . [that] can be unraveled further still” (227)). Original in outlook, it not only fills a gap but offers a rich frame and a fruitful *point de départ* for future discussion. Barring a source’s odd sententious platitude, it is enriched by periodic reference to contemporary critical theorists, especially Foucault. Unlike some studies, it has a happy self-consciousness of the status and borders of its metaphors that prevents their being taken equivocally or even *ad litteram* when it would be convenient. Epistemologically savvy, it deftly probes the, for us obvious, mediacy of experience and interiority while posing fruitful questions such as how, in the first place, they had ever been able to become “placeholders for immediacy.” “How did experience come to stand in for immediacy, anyway?” (179).

Issues of mediacy are perhaps most crucial for the autobiographical mentality on the matter of access to interior experience in/via language. For if, as per modern science and philosophy of science, to observe is to alter and to describe is to impose a theory, when all is said does the interior appear in speech – *or disappear in it?* Are we *Being Interior* or *Writing/Reading ‘Interior’?* Even absent the preceding contentions, there remains the truism noted above: mere articulation into speech renders the interior public and exterior, renders it ‘interior’ – in Paige’s apt expression, a “mediacy masquerading as presence” (180). But if pres-

ence [of experience] is such that we cannot encounter it directly, yet we can hope for a sort of encounter in the mist where, though put “into language and communal circulation” (229), “others can – I won’t say re-experience exactly – but at least cross paths with it or retrace it” [Foucault]. *Chaque homme dans sa nuit, chaque nuit dans son homme.*

Mediated by mind, language and culture, interior and experience are no less fundamental than elastic and indeterminate. Hence the unpaid promissory notes mentioned above. Hence their diverse, far from consistent implications for such key cultural determinants as personal identity and possibilities and limits for self-fashioning (cf. 231-3 for “flat” vs. “deep” selves, the “performative,” “depth-less non-subject of pure appearance” vs. the “interiorized subject,” and artifice vs. essence). They and their no less unstable, “endlessly labile” cognates (e.g., identity, individual, private, personal) form a non-homogenous cultural brew that fuels the subtitle’s “contradictions of modernity.”² “Perhaps the only way to use the terms that have fallen within the scope of this study is to remember to hold them under [a] type of erasure....” Yet, “these mirages have oriented centuries of walking, and our cultural wanderings, past and present, are incomprehensible without them” (228). In fine, interiority and the modernity that it heralds and informs are as contradictory as ourselves who inform and are informed by them.

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NOTES

¹ The flowering of Greek philosophy, epitomized by the imperative *gnothi seauton* (know thyself), proceeded apace with the wreckage of Athenian imperial ambition. The spread of Christianity (and other ‘inner-centered’ religions) rapidly accelerated amidst the calamities (and near expiry) of third-century Rome. That with it slowly arose a new type of inner writing – pagan spiritual literature is, begging the indulgence of any nominalist readers, virtu-

ally a species *sans* members – is scarcely surprising. For the inward journey is not just in self but towards a God or Good that is the soul's delight; and, as the author ('Aristotle') of the *Magna Moralia* observed (II xi 6), it would be decidedly strange for anyone to love Zeus.

² One could perhaps complement and reinforce this perspective by considering the constellation of interior and its cognates in particular modern philosophical frames.

For example, while Rousseau's *Confessions* effectively serves as Paige's historical *terminus ad quem*, in the transcendental idealism of his admirer Kant the entire interior/exterior distinction is broken down; all experience is in effect interior since it is mind-mediated and mind-contained (phenomenal).

That interiority, which after all is a fiction to the extent it is a metaphor, is no less illusive than elusive (cf. Paige's "mirages" in the last paragraph above) could be said to be implicit in Hume. His concept of personal identity as constituted by our memories implies that the Self itself is a kind of conceptual peg on which to hang a life-narrative, or perhaps is even the narrative itself. On this view, one writes of oneself as of a story-entity, playing Dostoyevsky to one's Underground Man (cf. Paige's analysis of Surin (194) where "narrator and narratee collapse into one").