

Maine de Biran  
*Of Immediate Apperception*  
edited by A. Aloisi, M. Piazza and M. Sinclair,  
Bloomsbury, London-New York 2020, 184 pages.

by Denise Vincenti

The philosophy of Maine de Biran (1766-1824) has received, in the contemporary era, less attention than it deserved. Paradoxically, this original thinker, who Jules Lachelier defined “the French Kant” (J.-A. de La Valette-Monbrun, *Essai de biographie historique et psychologique. Maine de Biran*, Fontemoing, Paris 1914: 513) and Henri Bergson ranked among the pioneers of French modern philosophy (*La philosophie française*, «La Revue de Paris», 15 mai 1915: 247), has remained for a long time outside the purview of philosophical historiography, and his name has often been neglected. Such an inauspicious fate seems nevertheless coming to its end. In recent times, we are witnessing a progressive rediscovery of Biran’s thought, and of its pivotal influence on the development of nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy. His reflections on the concepts of “effort”, “habit” and “self-apperception”, along with his strains towards the definition of a new “science of man”, opposed to Condillac’s sensationism and focused on the mind-body nexus, are at the centre of several researches and studies, ranging from philosophy to psychology, sociology, ethics, and so on. One of the factors underlying this step change in philosophical historiography has been the publication of critical editions of Biranian works, enabling rigorous, in-depth analyses on this theory. In the wake of the monumental work of François Azouvi, under whose direction the publication of Biran’s entire *corpus* was achieved between the 1980s and the early 2000s, various translations appeared in the last decades, contributing to the spread of this philosophy on an international level. It is mainly in the light of this revaluation of Biran’s philosophy that we should consider the first English translation of Biran’s 1807 essay, *Of Immediate Apperception (De l’apperception immédiate*, a.k.a. *Mémoire de Berlin*), edited by Alessandra Aloisi, Marco Piazza and Mark Sinclair, and published by Bloomsbury in 2020. This recent translation, beside fostering the penetration of Biranian reflection within the Anglophone *milieu*, brings to the attention of the international community one of the most important works of the French philosopher. Marking, alongside the *mémoire* on

habit (*Influence de l'habitude sur la faculté de penser*, 1802) and that on the decomposition of thought (*Décomposition de la pensée*, 1804), the transition from his early sensationist phase to his mature philosophy, *Of Immediate Apperception* represents a milestone of Biran's *corpus*, and also an essential reading for the understanding of his philosophical project.

As the curators point out in their detailed introduction, the occasion for writing this essay came to Biran in the form of a competition announced in 1805 by the Académie des Sciences et Belles-Lettres of Berlin (A. Aloisi, M. Piazza, *Introduction*, in Maine de Biran, *Of Immediate Apperception*, Bloomsbury, London-New York 2020: 3). The Berlin Academy programme was centred in particular on the search of the "primitive facts of inner sense", to be found by answering four questions: "Are there internal immediate apperceptions? In what way does internal apperception differ from intuition? What difference is there between intuition, sensation and feeling? What are the relations of these acts or states of mind with notions and ideas?" (*Of Immediate Apperception*: 23). Such a quest could not but capture the interest of Biran, who had been searching for a long time the origin of the facts of consciousness. Despite Biran's expectations, the *mémoire* did not receive the desired success and the prize was given to the Schellingian Suabedissen; Biran, instead, was awarded a special medal. This circumstance should not however overshadow the actual value of this work, which represents a benchmark of Biran's doctrine and, more in general, of nineteenth-century French philosophy.

Although often conceived as a mere reworking of the *Décomposition de la pensée*, this essay plays a key role in the elaboration of Biran's mature philosophy. That the 1807 essay was "extremely superior [to the previous one] in terms of clarity, precision and style vigour" was immediately clear to the first curators of Biranian *corpus* (E. Naville, *Notice historique et bibliographique sur les travaux de Maine de Biran*, Genève 1851: 7). But, besides its stylistic superiority, it is worth asking what makes this *mémoire* so important in the constitution of Biran's philosophical project. The answer has to be found, we believe, in the epistemological revolution achieved by this essay within the philosopher's theory. The continuity with the essay on the decomposition of thought is marked by a shared *project* (the constitution of a science of man, as a synthesis of organic phenomena and voluntary activity) and by a *revolution*, both epistemological and metaphysical, aimed at analysing the genesis and origin of the intellectual facts. This search for the primitive facts of consciousness is what, in *Décomposition*, is named "subjective ideology" and, in *Of Immediate Apperception*, "science of principles". Now, it is true that Biran borrowed the label "science of principles" by the Berlin Academy Programme and that he employed this term in its traditional meaning (metaphysics or first philosophy),

but this terminological difference helps to understand the gradual evolution of his reflection. In this text, indeed, the science of principles relies essentially on the concept of *causality*. Already in *Décomposition*, Biran had postulated that the principle of causality had to be found in “the spreading of this effort [...] in which the subject can apperceive themselves as antecedent” (*Décomposition de la pensée*, in *Œuvres*, ed. F. Azouvi, Vrin, Paris, v. III, 1988: 34). The aim of the 1807 essay is precisely to describe and examine in-depth this active force, this *immediate internal apperception*, which is the prototypical form of every causality. When, Biran specifies, “the movement, having become voluntary, begins to be apperceived has to be attributed to the action properly so called of an individual force or cause other than the sort of vital energy or blind force that the physiologists are in the habit of drawing back to the cerebral centre” (*Of Immediate Apperception*: 97). It is thanks to apperception that metaphysics can find an actual foundation for its abstract ideas of substance, cause, being and I, because through this subjective experience such ideas are grasped in their concrete and actual forms.

Biran’s science of principles is, thus, first and foremost a science of faculties, in the sense that it aims at retracing the generation of all cognitive acts, from perception to the most sophisticated workings of the mind. Since 1804, Biran had steered away from any physiological explanation of faculties, furthering rather an introspective analysis of consciousness. Unlike Condillac or the *idéologues* Cabanis and Destutt de Tracy, he does not conceive conscious acts as localised in a specific organic seat, but as psychological phenomena, through which the individual constitutes himself as a unique, permanent and active I, despite the variability of external stimuli. But the independence of the apperception from the cerebral centre also entails a reflection on the nature of this active power of the subject. If not ascribable to the organic side, what is then its nature? In those years, Biran starts reflecting on this problem and introduces his renowned concept of *hyperorganic force*.

It is interesting to remark that Biranian theorisation of the hyperorganic force, notoriously due to his reading of Bichat’s *Anatomie générale appliquée à la physiologie et à la médecine* and Dumas’ *Principes de physiologie*, is simultaneous with the redaction of *Mémoire de Berlin*. Indeed, in the essay on the decomposition of thought, the only references to the hyperorganic force are included in the revised version, namely in the copy written for publication, which chronologically coincides with the composition of *Immediate Apperception*. On these grounds, André Robinet speculated that Biran’s sudden decision of interrupting the publication of the 1804 essay could be ascribed to the emergence of a new philosophical perspective: since the theorisation of a hyperorganic force had changed the entire structure of his thought, it was necessary to lay the

foundations of a new project, then achieved in the *mémoire* sent to the Berlin Academy (*Introduction*, in Maine de Biran, *Œuvres*, éd. Azouvi, cit., v. XIII-1, 1993: 11-12, footnote 4). Indeed, it is in *Of Immediate Apperception* that we read that “this *hyperorganic* as well as *hypersensible* force” is “present to me in the inner and radical feeling that accompanies its exercise in the actual effort that *I* create”, and that “it is therefore from here, in this origin of all *practical* and not absolute reality, that I take the idea of force or of will, of the *self*” (*Of Immediate Apperception*: 97).

Alongside its original conceptualisations, *Of Immediate Apperception* presents a further element of interest: Biran’s encounter with Kant’s doctrine. Now, Biran was not well acquainted with Kantian critical philosophy. He had solely read *De mundi sensibilis atque intelligibilis forma et principiis* (1770), while he knew the first *Critique* only thanks to Kinker’s exposition. Nonetheless, in the first part of the 1807 essay, he ranks Kant’s philosophy among the main philosophical systems of the time. He furthermore devotes a wide footnote to *De mundi*, in which he eulogies the Kantian notion of *abstrahens* (in opposition to that of *abstractus*), as the perfect representation of the active power of immediate apperception (37-38, footnote 5; see also *Introduction*: 12-13). This encounter with Kant represents a fundamental step for Biran’s reflection. Indeed, Biran will continue his examination of Kantian doctrine during the subsequent years, and in 1815, at the suggestion of his friend Ampère, he will read the three *Critiques*, in view of the composition of *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie* (see also Biran’s *Notes on Kant* [1815-1816], whose English translation appeared on «Philosophical Inquiries», 4, 1, 2016: 115-134).

All these elements make *Of Immediate Apperception* not only a milestone of Biran’s production, but also a text worth reading and discovering. The publication of its English translation has thus the merit of introducing the work of such a seminal figure of nineteenth-century France to the international community, providing it with a set of interpretative tools and historiographical analyses. Indeed, by merging Biran’s early reflections with new conceptualisations and ideas, the 1807 essay allows the reader to grasp the evolution of an original philosophy, and to penetrate one of the tenets of Biran’s doctrine, the notion of immediate apperception.

Denise Vincenti  
denise.vincenti@unimib.it  
University of Milan-Bicocca