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# Introduction: Maine de Biran and the Afterlives of Biranism

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## I.

François-Pierre-Gontier Maine de Biran (1766–1824), better known as Maine de Biran, has often been described as the man of a single book—a book that, nevertheless, he never wrote.<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact, he was a prolific and indefatigable writer, whose ideas, however, took a long time to be made public. If Biran himself published very little during his lifetime<sup>2</sup>, the considerable number of manuscripts that he left behind had several editorial vicissitudes. The first, partial, edition of his works, edited by Victor Cousin<sup>3</sup>, only appeared in 1834, ten years after Biran's death. Titled *Nouvelles considérations sur les rapports du physique et du moral*

1. For this definition, see Gouhier 1947, p. 22.

2. During his lifetime, Biran only published a few texts: *Influence de l'habitude sur la faculté de penser* (*Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking*), Paris: Heinrichs, 1802, *Examen des "Leçons de philosophie" de M. Laromiguière* (*Examination of the Philosophical Lessons of Pierre Laromiguière*), Paris: Fournier, 1817, and *Exposition de la doctrine philosophique de Leibniz* (*Exposition of the Philosophical Doctrine of Leibniz*), Paris: Michaud, 1819.

3. Who was Victor Cousin (1792–1867) in 1834? A very powerful man indeed: he was part of the French *Conseil supérieur de l'instruction publique*, president of the *Agrégation de philosophie* and of the *Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques*, and part of the administration of the *École Normale Supérieure*. He considered himself the undisputed leader of a new eclectic spiritualist school that exercised its power institutionally, not only in the teaching programs but also in the teachers' recruitment. In short, Cousin's philosophy was the dominant philosophy, or the philosophy of the State. He also presented himself as the French founder of a modern historiography that placed at its center the Cartesian cogito considered as the absolute foundation of an experimental and rational psychology (see Vermeren 1995). For a study of Cousin's main interventions on Biran's texts, and for the accusations of "mutilation" of which he was accused, see Antoine-Mahut 2016.

de l'homme (*New Considerations on the Relations of the Physical and the Moral of Man*) (Paris: Lagrange), this edition only included a very limited selection of Biran's texts.<sup>4</sup> In a second edition in four volumes, published in 1841 with the more comprehensive title *Œuvres philosophiques de Maine de Biran* (*The Philosophical Works of Maine de Biran*) (Paris: Lagrange), Cousin finally added other key texts, such as the essay *Influence de l'habitude sur la faculté de penser* (*Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking*), already published by Biran himself in 1802, and the *Mémoire sur la décomposition de la pensée* (*Dissertation Concerning the Decomposition of Thought*, 1804), which became known for the first time.<sup>5</sup> However, it wasn't until the 1859 edition in three volumes, *Œuvres inédites de Maine de Biran* (*Unpublished Works by Maine de Biran*) (Paris: Dezobry, E. Magdeleine), edited by Ernest Naville and Marc Debruit<sup>6</sup>, that we get a more accurate idea of what, from this moment on, will be called "Biranism," meaning the proper Biranian doctrine supported or even shaped by the different layers of its reception. Together with the *Essai sur les fondements de la psychologie et sur les rapports avec l'étude de la nature* (*Essay on the Foundations of Psychology and its Relationship to the Study of Nature*), this new edition also revealed to the public for the first time other key texts, such as the *Examen critique des opinions de M. de Bonald* (*Critical Examination of the Opinions of Louis de Bonald*) and the *Nouveaux essais d'anthropologie* (*New Essays on Anthropology*), Biran's final and comprehensive work, which nevertheless remained unfinished. Likewise, Naville and Debruit's edition also made available the first complete and systematic catalog (*Catalogue raisonné*) of the philosophical works by Maine de Biran, drawn up for the purpose of allowing the foundation of a new "spiritualism" in line with what Biran

4. Besides the text that appears in the title, this edition also included the *Examination of the Philosophical Lessons of Pierre Laromiguière* (already published by Biran in 1817), an appendix on the nature and idea of causality in Hume, an appendix on the origin of the idea of force in Engel, the aforementioned *Exposition of the Philosophical Doctrine of Leibniz*, and a text called *Réponses aux arguments contre l'aperception immédiate d'une liaison causale entre le vouloir primitif et la motion, et contre la dérivation d'un principe universel et nécessaire de causalité de cette source* (*Replies to the Arguments against the Immediate Apperception of a Causal Connection between the Primitiv Will and Motion, and against the Derivation of a Universal and Necessary Principle of Causality from this Source*).

5. This edition also included a fragment of the essay on *The Relations of the Physical and the Moral in Man* and a text titled *Considérations sur les principes d'une division des faits psychologiques et physiologiques, rédigée à l'occasion du livre de Frédéric Bérard (1789–1828), médecin de la Charité et professeur de médecine dite pratique* (*Considerations on the Principles of a Division of the Psychological and Physiological Facts, written on the Occasion of the Book by Frédéric Bérard (1789–1828), Charity Doctor and Professor of So-called Practical Medicine*).

6. Ernest Naville (1816–1909) was a Swiss philosopher and theologian from Geneva, and Marc Debruit (1833–1911), at that time a student in theology, would later turn to philosophy and literary criticism.

himself had called, in his *Critical Examination of the Opinions of Louis de Bonald*, “the important problem of man.”<sup>7</sup>

While his thought had never explicitly resulted in the establishment of a school and his philosophy remained for a long time outside institutional channels, Maine de Biran was well known among his contemporaries. During the nineteenth century, his ideas circulated widely in France and in Europe, often anonymously, crossing paths with and sometimes determining the developments of modern and contemporary philosophy, from Théodore Jouffroy (1796–1842) or Félix Ravaisson (1813–1900)<sup>8</sup> to Gabriel Tarde (1843–1904)<sup>9</sup> up to Existentialism and Phenomenology. According to Henri Bergson, Biran was the greatest French metaphysician since the time of Descartes and Malebranche and the undisputed founder of French spiritualism.<sup>10</sup> In *L'être et le néant (Being and Nothingness)*, 1943), in the chapter devoted to the body and the structures of consciousness, Jean-Paul Sartre cannot overlook, even while criticizing it, the “famous ‘sensation of effort’” theorized by Maine de Biran.<sup>11</sup> In his 1959 lecture on “What is psychology?,” Georges Canguilhem proposed a well-known analysis of Biran’s psychology of interiority, in which Biran is presented not only as an exemplary figure at the intersections between psychology, anthropology, and epistemology but also as an essential milestone for an epistemology of the “Science of Man” in which psychology can properly resist its appropriation by physiology.<sup>12</sup> At the end of the twentieth century, Gilles Deleuze still referred to Maine de Biran in his lectures as well as in his writings, in particular in the last essay published in his lifetime, “Immanence: A Life ...”, where Biran’s “last philosophy” is evoked in dialogue with the reflections of Husserl and Sartre.<sup>13</sup> But it is, above all, with the phenomenological movement, from Michel Henry<sup>14</sup> to contemporary Eco-Phenomenology<sup>15</sup>, that philosophers have continued to look at Maine de Biran. If Merleau-Ponty owes to him the fundamental notion of *corps*

7. On the main aims and characteristics of Naville and Debrit’s edition, see Antoine-Mahut 2023.

8. On Jouffroy and Biran, see Antoine-Mahut 2023, which also addresses the problem of the foundation of a spiritualism that is alternative to Cousin’s. On Biran and Ravaisson, see Janicaud 1997.

9. On Biran and Tarde, see in particular Devarieux 2004.

10. See Bergson 1897 and 1915 respectively.

11. See Sartre 1943, pp. 414, 440.

12. See Canguilhem 1958.

13. See Deleuze 2003. On Deleuze’s references to Maine de Biran also in other texts and lectures, see Aloisi 2023a; see also Montebello 1994.

14. See Henry 1956. On Henry’s reading of Biran, see Devarieux 2018.

15. See Bégout 2020, pp. 153–179.

*propre* (one's own body)<sup>16</sup>, Paul Ricoeur and Marc Richir see in Maine de Biran the first to have grasped the relational structure of consciousness and the importance of the purely affective and intersubjective dimensions of our existence.<sup>17</sup>

Even though Biran's name is still largely forgotten today, this scattered constellation of references allows us to grasp, despite its lack of systematicity, the decisive although hidden importance of Biranian thought in its intermittent resurfacing.

## II.

If it is true, as Walter Benjamin argued, that for every work of the past there is a “now of knowability” (*das Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*)<sup>18</sup>—a moment of readability in which it discloses a meaning that had until then remained blocked or forgotten,—it seems to us that the time is ripe for a complete resurfacing of Biranian philosophy, now finally freed from interpretative preconceptions and the various political, religious, and ideological frameworks that had hitherto prevented its full reception. Among these preconceptions, in particular, the idea of Maine de Biran as the “French Fichte,” according to a well-known formula first introduced by Victor Cousin.<sup>19</sup> The association with Fichte and with German Idealism has for a long time concealed the originality of Biran's philosophy, which goes hand in hand with the centrality assigned to the body and to the vital and physiological dimension of our existence.<sup>20</sup> As Mark Sinclair noted, Maine de Biran is certainly not the first philosopher to have affirmed that consciousness or the self are founded on will; in his *Dissertation Concerning the Decomposition of Thought*, it is Biran himself who cites in this regard the names of Schelling and Fichte, whom he knew indirectly through Joseph-Marie Degérando (1772–1842) and the first edition of his *Histoire comparée des systèmes de philosophie, relativement aux principes des conanissances humaines* (*Comparative History of the Systems of Philosophy, in Relation to the Principles of Human Knowledge*) (Paris: Heinrichs, 1804). If Biran mentions them, however, it is not so much to recognize a filiation but rather to distance himself, because they did not see that “free, voluntary activity can be the origin of consciousness only insofar as it meets a resistant term. In pure activity without resistance [...], as much as in pure passivity, consciousness would be absent.”<sup>21</sup> This “resistant term,” however, is not an external body, for example

16. See Engel 2009.

17. See Ricoeur 1990, pp. 371–372; Richir 2000, pp. 350–351, 419–420. For a phenomenological reading of Biran, see also Kerszberg 2016.

18. Benjamin 1999, N, 3, 1.

19. See Radrizzani 1997.

20. See Antoine-Mahut 2016, p. 44.

21. Sinclair 2001, p. 189.

a surface—as Sartre mistakenly believed when criticizing Biran—but our own body. Despite various attempts to bring Maine de Biran closer to German Idealism, he remains a thinker fundamentally alien to this tradition. Together with Montaigne, of whom he is a successor<sup>22</sup>, Maine de Biran is, in the French tradition, one of the first philosophers of the body. Putting the body back at the center of Biran’s philosophy—not only the lived body, which is the correlative of the self and consciousness, but also the living body, which is the origin and location of affective life—is therefore the first step towards a full rediscovery of the original meaning of his thought. This meaning would remain hidden without an examination of the ties between Biran’s philosophy and the medicine and physiology of his time.

It is only recently, thanks to the monumental critical edition of Biran’s works in thirteen volumes, directed by François Azouvi (Maine de Biran, *Œuvres*, Paris: Vrin, 1984–2001), that scholars have started to acquire a growing understanding of the importance of this neglected thinker and of the transdisciplinary significance of his philosophy. The recent English translation of two of Biran’s major works—the 1811 *Rapports du physique et du moral de l’homme* (*The Relationship between the Physical and the Moral in Man*, edited by D. Meacham and J. Spadola, London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2016) and the 1807 essay *De l’aperception immédiate* (*Of Immediate Apperception*, edited by A. Aloisi, M. Piazza, and M. Sinclair, London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2020)—has confirmed that interest and attention are growing also on an international scale. Prior to these two recent translations, the only Biranian text available in English was the 1802 essay on the *Influence of Habit on the Faculty of Thinking*<sup>23</sup>—one of the few texts published by its author and the only one to circulate widely among his contemporaries (Stendhal, for instance, was among its passionate readers).<sup>24</sup> Despite its importance, which has not escaped twentieth-century psychologists, neuroscientists, and cognitive scientists<sup>25</sup>, the essay on habit has given us, up until today, a quite embryonic image of Biran’s thought, still close to the Ideological philosophy of Antoine Destutt de Tracy (1754–1836) and Pierre Jean Georges Cabanis (1757–1808). These new translations, whose impact in the English-speaking world we have yet to measure fully, are contributing to a broadening reception of Maine de Biran internationally.

22. Biran quotes Montaigne on several occasions in his *Journal* as well as in his philosophical works, such as *Of Immediate Apperception*. See for instance Maine de Biran 1995, p. 72, which contains a quotation from Montaigne’s *Essais*, Book I, chapter 21, *De la force de l’imagination* (*On the Force of Imagination*).

23. Translated by Margaret Donaldson Boehm and published in 1970 by Greenwood Press.

24. On Stendhal and Maine de Biran, see Alciatore 1954; Pion 2010; Aloisi 2023b.

25. See Schacter 1987; Eichenbaum 1999; Evans and Frankish 2009, p. 6.

This special issue intends to be part of (and to contribute to) this renewed vitality of Biranian studies. It is the outcome of a recent international event: the conference *Maine de Biran et le Biranisme. Enjeux d'une histoire complexe entre physiologie, psychologie, philosophie et littérature* (*Maine de Biran and Biranism. Stakes of a Complex History between Physiology, Psychology, Philosophy and Literature*), which took place on January 22, 2021 and was organized by Alessandra Aloisi and Delphine Antoine-Mahut, editors of this volume, in a collaboration between the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon, the University of Oxford, and the University of Roma Tre. The aim of this conference, which was attended by some of the most internationally renowned Biranian scholars, such as François Azouvi, Bernard Baertschi, Anne Devarieux, Marco Piazza, and the medical anthropologist Samuel Lézé, was to explore the philosophical, psychological, physiological, and psychopathological origins and dimensions of Biranism, as well as the traces of its multifaceted cultural afterlife—direct and indirect, philosophical and literary—between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Graduate students were active and enthusiastic participants, and this online conference had more than forty attendees from all over the world, including Europe, Canada, the US, and South America. Among the various fields of investigation that this study day aimed to investigate, there was in particular the question of the unconscious. Characterized by an essentially heterodoxical position in relation to medicine and between philosophy, psychology, and literature, during the nineteenth century and beyond, Biranism was the ideal laboratory for the theorization of specific conceptions of the unconscious which resist its systematization by psychoanalysis.<sup>26</sup> These conceptions prove to be particularly relevant and cutting-edge today, now that the centrality of the psychoanalytic paradigm, which widely dominated our representation of the unconscious over the course of the twentieth century, has been profoundly put into question by the emergence of the cognitive sciences and by a growing understanding of the historical and cultural dimensions of psychoanalysis.

### III.

It is often underlined, as if to diminish its significance, how Biran's philosophical writing was often determined by external circumstances, such as the participation in competition prizes. This is the case not only with the essay on *The Influence of Habit*, but also with the *Dissertation Concerning the Decomposition of Thought*, the essay *Of Immediate Apperception*, and *The Relationship between the Physical and the Moral in Man*, which were all written in

26. See in particular Romeyer-Dherbey 1974, pp. 79–81; Azouvi 1995, pp. 196–206.

response to competition questions proposed by the *Institut de France*, the Academy of Berlin, and the Academy of Copenhagen, respectively. The fact is that Maine de Biran, who was neither a philosopher by profession nor ever had an academic post, was always in search, throughout his life, of *points d'appui* (points of support) to anchor his philosophical reflection in the turmoil of the institutional and political commitments that marked his existence in one of the most turbulent periods in French history.<sup>27</sup> This same search, of which Biran's *Journal* offers a daily account, also inspired various initiatives, both private and public, that he undertook with the aim of creating spaces for free and independent philosophical and scientific discussion and exchange. Among these initiatives, the *Société Philosophique* (Philosophical Society) that, starting from 1814, Biran periodically gathered in his house and whose meetings were also attended, among other prominent intellectuals and scientists, by Victor Cousin, at that time a "young professor of philosophy,"<sup>28</sup> or the *Société médicale de Bergerac*, a proper multi-disciplinary scientific community that Biran founded, together with local doctors and practitioners, when he was sub-prefect of Bergerac. Some of Biran's most important philosophical contributions are indeed linked to the activities of this Society, active between 1807 and 1810, and animated by the wish to encourage dialogue and the circulation of knowledge between different scientific fields: the *Mémoire sur les perceptions obscures* (*Dissertation Concerning Obscure Perceptions*, 1807), the *Observations sur les divisions organiques du cerveau* (*Observation on the Organic Divisions of the Brain*, 1808), and the *Nouvelles considérations sur le sommeil, les songes et le somnambulisme* (*New Considerations on Sleep, Dreams, and Somnambulism*, 1809). It is above all in these texts—at the intersection between medical and philosophical debate, and between psychology and physiology—that the interest of Biran's philosophy in relation to the question of the unconscious starts to emerge.

As in other areas of his philosophical reflection, also with respect to the question of the unconscious, Biran proves to be one of the most acute, original, and yet unorthodox successors of Leibniz in France. According to Jeremy Dunham, throughout his philosophical career, and especially

27. Biran was part of the King's bodyguards until their dissolution in 1792. After 1795, he embarked on a political and administrative career: he was appointed administrator of the department of the Dordogne and elected a member of the Conseil des Cinq-Cents (Council of Five Hundred) in 1797. He was also a member of the Legislative Body under the Empire. After the restoration of Louis XVIII, in 1814, he was re-elected as a deputy of the department of Dordogne and occupied a number of prestigious offices, including that of member of the Chamber of Deputies.

28. Maine de Biran 1954–57, vol. 1: 126 (8 May 1816). For further information concerning the *Société philosophique*, later called, starting from 1817, *Société métaphysique* (Metaphysical Society), see Gouhier 1947, pp. 226–27.

towards the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century, Maine de Biran never stopped *thinking with* Leibniz, carrying out a strategic operation of “selection” and “expansion” of those aspects of Leibniz’s philosophy that he considered most functional to his own philosophical questions and problems.<sup>29</sup> If Leibniz’s theory of force shaped Biran’s understanding of self-consciousness, the Leibnizian theory of small perceptions, revisited in the light of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century physiology, shaped Biran’s understanding of the unconscious, giving rise, at the same time, to a form of spiritualism which is different from that of Cousin’s and whose effects have not yet been fully measured.<sup>30</sup>

Bernard Baertschi’s contribution, which opens this special issue, addresses the “reform of metaphysics” that Maine de Biran carried out in the last decade of his philosophical activity: this is when, thanks to his engagement with Leibniz’s philosophy, Biran could rediscover the notion of substance, dismissed by the anti-substantialism of Condillac and the Ideologists. It is precisely Leibniz’s idea of a “virtual force” that allowed Biran to go beyond Descartes, reconciling the idea of substance with that of force and linking it to the primitive fact of consciousness. Baertschi reconstructs step by step the way in which this fundamental move took shape throughout Biran’s intellectual trajectory, from his early-text *Dissertation Concerning the Decomposition of Thought* (1805), in which he still claims his belonging to the Ideological school inspired by Condillac, to his last texts written in 1824, such as the *Note sur l’idée d’existence* (*Note Concerning the Idea of Existence*) and the *Nouveaux essais d’anthropologie* (*New Essays on Anthropology*). Here, definitively leaving behind a Cartesian-inspired metaphysical dualism, Biran embraces, as Baertschi maintains, a spiritualist monism that owed much to Leibniz. If Leibniz reformed Cartesianism by putting force at the very core of substance, Biran in turn reformed Leibnizianism by rejecting the idea of a pre-established harmony and by founding Leibniz’s dynamics on the primitive fact of consciousness.

The second contribution, authored by Grégoire Sanchez, covers a similar chronological period, which goes from Biran’s early writings to his last texts, allowing us to follow the evolution of his philosophy. Sanchez chooses to address one of the most fascinating and partly unresolved problems of Maine de Biran’s philosophy: that of the articulation of the self with affective life in its intersubjective dimension. Sanchez focuses in particular on the concept of “sympathy,” which underwent profound and almost conflicting re-elaborations throughout Biran’s intellectual journey. Whereas in the essay on *The Influence of Habit* “sympathy,” despite

29. See Dunham 2015, 157–192.

30. See Antoine-Mahut 2015.



having a moral significance, is mostly identified and explained through the pre-reflexive phenomenon of imitation, in the *Dissertation Concerning Obscure Perceptions* it acquires a more distinctively organic and physiological connotation. Partly revisiting Cabanis' reflections, here Biran links sympathy to instinct and analyzes it with particular reference to the immediate communication between mother and child in the womb. Finally, Sanchez shows how, in the last phase of his philosophy, corresponding to the *Fragments relatifs aux fondements de la morale et de la religion* (*Fragments Concerning the Foundation of Morality and Religion*, 1819), Biran introduces a completely different conception of sympathy, which is based on the activity of the self and can therefore provide, in Sanchez's view, a proper foundation for morality and sociability.

Alessandra Aloisi's article focuses on Maine de Biran's encounter with the notion of "coenesthesia" in the last phase of his philosophical activity (1823–24), when this physiological notion is employed to indicate the immediate feeling of existence in its essential difference with respect to the feeling that *the self* has of its own existence (or immediate apperception). A term that has fallen into disuse today, and often confused with other almost homophonous terms, such as "synesthesia" or "kinesthesia," between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, "coenesthesia" was a concept at the forefront of the most recent theories developed in the field of medical physiology. It indicated a specific type of bodily sensation corresponding to a generalized perception of the living body, stemming from the nerves. Until the end of the nineteenth century, before being eclipsed with the arrival of psychoanalysis, this notion circulated widely not only in Germany, but also in France, contributing to the theorization of the unconscious. Maine de Biran, however, was the first to speak of "coenesthesia" in France. The aim of Aloisi's article is to show how this notion provides Biran with conceptual tools for conceiving a form of bodily unconscious understood in Leibnizian terms.

Romain Hacques' article focuses on the reception of Maine de Biran by the anti-cartesian philosopher Alexis Bertrand (1850–1823). An Exponent of a form of panpsychist vitalism inspired by Leibniz, Bertrand saw in Maine de Biran one of the first theorists of the unconscious.<sup>31</sup> Hacques examines in particular Bertrand's thesis, *L'aperception du corps humain par la conscience* (*The Apperception of the Human Body through Consciousness*, 1880), which represents an interesting attempt to introduce a new form of spiritualism inspired by a specific reception of Biranism. After showing how the study of the notion of *corps propre* (one's own body) becomes

31. See Bertrand 1888.

pivotal for a reorientation of spiritualism, Hacques examines its phenomenological relevance as well as its epistemological and moral consequences. Biran's philosophy allows Bertrand to conduct a critique of mechanistic epistemology, which makes it possible to connect the genesis of the concept of one's own body with the history of physiology and vitalism. Hacques concludes his article by showing how this leads Bertrand to propose an animistic metaphysics, the aim of which is to reconcile Biranism with the most recent scientific developments.

Even though Maine de Biran never gave a definition of the "unconscious" (as a noun, this term was introduced only at the end of the nineteenth century), Biran's early readers, such as the philosopher Paul Janet and his nephew, the psychologist Pierre Janet, or editors, such as Pierre Tisserand, were very much aware of the importance of this aspect of his philosophical reflection.<sup>32</sup> According to François Azouvi, one of the undeniable merits of Biran's reflection consists of having highlighted the existence of an "unconscious brain," that is to say the non-coincidence between consciousness and cerebral functioning.<sup>33</sup> There is an ongoing debate among scholars regarding the nature of the Biranian unconscious, whether it is to be considered as organic (that is, physiological) or psychological.<sup>34</sup> The contributions of Sofia Sandreschi, Denise Vincenti, and Marco Piazza fit into this area of discussion and trace the legacy and afterlife of Biran's conception of the unconscious in European literature, psychology, and psychiatry.

Sandreschi's article focuses on the phenomena of tics and slips of the tongue and shows how, before becoming key concepts of psychoanalysis, these phenomena were first identified and described by Maine de Biran and Victor Egger (1848–1909), one of the leading exponents of nineteenth century French psychology and the spiritualist tradition, who owed much to Biran's reflection on habit and automatism. Comparing the two thinkers, Sandreschi highlights the similarities but also the differences between the two. Whereas Maine de Biran sees habit tics as the manifestation of a tendency according to which, through habit, voluntary and conscious actions become involuntary and unconscious, Egger defines slips of the tongue as an involuntary and unconscious event that determines the birth of new habits. However, in both cases, as Sandreschi maintains, tics and slips of the tongue reveal, each in its own way, one of the most distinctive characteristics of habit as it was described by Maine de Biran: that of being defined by the dual dialectic of the voluntary and the involuntary, and of the conscious and the unconscious.

32. See for instance Janet (Paul) 1883, pp. 363–403; Tisserand 1924.

33. Azouvi 1995, pp. 196–206.

34. Besides Azouvi 1995, pp. 196–206, see also Piazza and Vincenti 2023.

Pierre Janet (1859–1947), author of *L'automatisme psychologique* (*Psychological Automatism*, 1889), can be regarded as one of the most well-known successors of Biran's ideas concerning the unconscious in French psychology. Like Freud, Janet was one of Charcot's collaborators at the mental hospital of La Salpêtrière and, according to some scholars, Freud himself received many of Biran's ideas through the study of Janet's *Psychological Automatism*.<sup>35</sup> Denise Vincenti's article looks at the influence that Maine de Biran played on Janet's theorization of the unconscious. In Janet, Biran's conception of the unconscious undergoes a shift from the physiological to the psychological dimension—a shift that according to Vincenti can be explained in two ways: first, by looking at the sources (both philosophical and non-philosophical) through which Janet approached and read Biran's texts, and, second, by taking into account Janet's own strategic use of Biran's reflection in the development of his own psychological perspective. Combined together, these two aspects allow Vincenti to understand Biran's role in the history of French reflection on the unconscious, together with the philosophical roots of Pierre Janet's doctrine.

Our volume concludes with Marco Piazza's contribution, which explores the conception of the unconscious as it was expressed by Marcel Proust (1871–1922) in his famous novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) and in a series of preparatory documents and texts. Piazza's aim is to assess the extent to which Proust, whose conception of the unconscious remains pre-Freudian, could be regarded as part of a tradition of French thought that begins with the work of Maine de Biran and culminates in the reception of Biranism by French alienists in the second half of the nineteenth century. Piazza takes into specific account both Proust's secondary and university education, which took place in a moment in which the question of the unconscious was receiving greater attention, and Proust's knowledge of experimental psychology, to which he was introduced by his father, Adrien Proust, professor of hygiene at the Faculty of Medicine in Paris and author of several medical treatises.

We hope that this special issue will be only the first step towards a rediscovery of Maine de Biran's philosophy and its cultural afterlife. Much work remains to be done, not only with respect to the French philosophical tradition, but also in relation to the wider European and Anglo-American context.<sup>36</sup>

35. See Voutsinas 1966.

36. See for instance Jeremy Dunham's recent study on the influence of the French spiritualist tradition (and of Maine de Biran in particular) on William James' philosophical thinking, with special reference to the last few years of his life (Dunham 2018).

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