The Melancholy of the Revolution: Maine de Biran Facing Napoleon’s Hundred Days

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This essay will examine the reaction by French élites to Napoleon’s Hundred Days by focusing on one specific case: that of Marie-François-Pierre-Gonthier de Biran, better known as Maine de Biran (Bergerac 1766—Paris 1824).

The case of Maine de Biran can be seen as emblematic for a series of reasons. Biran is known today as the philosopher of will and effort, but he was known amongst his contemporaries above all as a politician and statesman. A royalist all his life, Biran was part of the King’s life guards until their dissolution in 1792. After 1795, he embarked on a political and administrative career; notably, he was appointed administrator to

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the department of the Dordogne and elected a member of the Council of Five Hundred in 1797. He was 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. The numerous institutional and administrative positions he held enabled him to follow at close quarters, as a major player and direct witness, the alternating events of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods. Various occasional political writings and public speeches, now gathered into the collection of his works edited by François Azouvi, provide us with precious testimony of Maine de Biran’s political roles and of the official position he held during the various stages of the Revolution and the Bourbon Restoration.

However, it is not really my intention here to examine the reactions of the politician and statesman. Even more worthy of attention than his occasional political writings is the diary that the Bergerac philosopher kept regularly between 1814 and 1824. Biran was a member of the Chamber of Deputies of the restored Bourbon monarchy, and the pages of this diary became denser during the Hundred Days. These pages present an account of what was a profoundly traumatic experience for those who had opposed Napoleon’s rise and had supported the restoration of the monarchy.

As Henri Gouhier observed, Maine de Biran’s diary is not so much a journal intime (as François Naville initially called it), nor is it a cahier de souvenirs (as Victor Cousin hurriedly classified it); rather it is a journal métaphysique, wherein psychological, philosophical, and political considerations are entwined on a daily basis with everyday experience, thus creating a tapestry in which the various threads become inseparable and almost indistinguishable. Hence the interest in the pages written during the Hundred Days. They do not merely document the private reaction of the homme publique; they offer an interpretation, both political and philosophical, of an affair that irreparably shook the certainties of the monarchical and conservative élite. As Gouhier observed, if Maine de Biran’s Journal can be considered a valuable testimony for reconstructing the history of public opinion in France and, specifically, the position of certain “notables” in the ambit of Napoleon’s Hundred Days, it is because it is the diary of a philosopher; more particularly, as we will see, it is the journal of a post-sensationalist and post-revolutionary philosopher who had believed in the possibility of a restoration that was no less philosophical than political.
Prompted by various studies that have highlighted the centrality of the relationship between politics and philosophy in the Journal, this essay examines how this relationship is expressed specifically in those pages written at the time of Napoleon’s return from Elba. Despite their importance, these entries have not yet been closely examined and given due attention. My thesis is that the political and philosophical significance of this affair was interpreted and articulated by Maine de Biran through the grammar of “melancholy,” the chronic disease from which he believed he suffered and the symptoms of which were used in his description of the nation when it experienced the revolution of Hundred Days. By comparing his own diseased body with the social body of the revolution, the author of the Journal offers us a precise picture of what the Hundred Days meant for a part of French high society: the impotence of reason and will embodied by the sovereign faced with instincts and passions that originated from below. As we will see, these events were so decisive as to drive Biran himself to revise his philosophy.

It is worth making a methodological clarification regarding the juxtaposition proposed here of melancholy with revolution. The post-revolutionary period has often been read in the light of the notion of “melancholy,” the romantic sentiment par excellence that is so well suited to defining the way in which the conservative élite of the whole of Europe expressed the mourning that was produced by the end of the ancien régime. However, by speaking of “melancholy” I do not wish to refer to a notion derived from specific more modern psychological or psychoanalytical theories that are seen as applicable to Maine de Biran’s case. I will refer, rather, in the strict sense, to the nervous disease that, under the name of “melancholy,” appeared in medical and nosological treatises between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. This was the disease that, during the Hundred Days revolution, emerged as the real mal du siècle that afflicted society no less than the individuals who belonged to it.

**Politics and Philosophy in the Restoration**

Various studies have stressed the importance of the relationship between politics and philosophy in the thinking of Maine de Biran. Dwelling in particular on the Journal, Agnès Antoine showed how there is a real analogy between the plane of psychological and metaphysical considerations about the self and the plane of political considerations
about monarchical government.\(^8\) Just as the self, that is one with reason and will, must govern the body (consisting of impulses, passions, and instincts) to ensure that the person does not disintegrate into the anarchy of sensations, so too must the sovereign govern the social body (the people) so that the nation does not fall apart in democratic folly:

In the government of moral man, as in that of a well-formed society, \textit{power (imperium)} must come from above, or from what is established as superior by nature and by convention, to be applied to what is \textit{inferior}. If power comes from \textit{below}, everything is confused and in disarray; anarchy reigns in the ideas and passions of the individual as well as in the movements and relations of society: the sovereignty of the people is to politics what the supremacy of the sensations and the passions is to philosophy or morals. (J. II, 307, January 1821 [italics in the text])

In this physiology of the political body, health corresponds with the monarchical regime, in which the power that comes from above takes the reins from impulses that come from below. In contrast, Napoleon Bonaparte represented a form of disease that was apparently opposite but effectively the same as that of democracy.\(^9\) He was the incarnation of the most inauspicious and tyrannical outcomes of the French Revolution, which—by overthrowing the legitimate sovereign and encouraging the advance of a popular power—produced nothing other than folly, disorder, and disintegration.

The central problem that tormented Maine de Biran was thus, according to Antoine: that of \textit{souveraineté}. It was a fundamental problem, common to many thinkers of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period, but it was one on which Biran placed particular focus and articulated in his dual political and philosophical capacity. The problem of legitimate government reflected and reproduced on a greater scale the “government of the self.”\(^{10}\) Just as a virtuous man carries within himself a monarchy, which is the most suitable regime for the government of men, so the sovereign must be to the people what reason and will are to the instincts and the passions: a guide that is firm but magnanimous based on the model of that exercised by paternal power. The principal difference between a king and a tyrant consists of this: the former \textit{governs}, whereas the latter \textit{dominates}.

Albeit on the same wavelength as questions raised by Antoine, Jan Goldstein’s approach is slightly different.\(^{11}\) The analogy between
individual body and social body is set aside in favour of a focus on the intrinsically political logic that guided Biran’s philosophical project (subsequently perfected by Victor Cousin) to reconstitute the self that had been disintegrated by sensationalist psychology. Condillac, in the wake of Locke, had reduced the self to a simple aggregate of sensations of which one has memory. Biran reacted to that minimalist conception of a passive and fragmented self by seeking to restore a unitary and transcendent vision of the self as will. Biran’s self was not so much a thinking substance (Descartes’ *ego cogito*) as an acting force that creates experience of itself in the muscular effort in which it meets the resistance of the body.

However, for both Antoine and for Goldstein, Biran’s philosophy is placed explicitly under the aegis of a “restoration” that is simultaneously philosophical and political. It is a question first of cancelling the philosophical revolution brought about by Locke and then taken up by Condillac in which thought is subordinated to the faculty of sensation. By reducing the self to a simple aggregate of sensations that originate from the body, sensationalism annulled the difference between what is high (the soul) and what is low (the body). On a philosophical plane, it overturned and de-hierarchized in the same way as the French Revolution did on a political plane through the idea of equality. Sensationalism was for philosophy what the French Revolution was for politics: the intrusion of a headless power that came from below and that produces disorder and anarchy on both political and psychic planes.

Against this background, we can already grasp the double political and philosophical crisis caused by the Hundred Days. If the Bourbon Restoration was an attempt to restore order and reason from above, the return of Napoleon in March 1815 represented a sudden and devastating fall back into the irrational. Biran, and all those who had supported the return of the Bourbon monarchy, were impotent witnesses to the dissolution of the French “people” (*peuple*) into a “multitude” of isolated individuals deprived of any common will. The revolutionary passions that were believed to have been allayed had once again erupted with unexpected violence. The same French citizens who had enthusiastically welcomed the restoration of the king abandoned themselves without restraint to their most unbridled instincts aroused by the return of the tyrant. In the daily notebook that he kept in parallel with the diary, Biran wrote: “I reflect a lot on the events, on my blindness regarding men and the matters of the Revolution; the men hadn’t changed and were ready to begin again” (J. III, 82, April 1815).
The Hundred Days reveal the fragility of the political and philosophical assumptions of the Bourbon Restoration and made it clear how easily, like a diseased body, a people corrupted by philosophical ill-fated ideas and by bad habits reinforced by years of revolutions and instability, could rebel against the guidance of reason and will. Moreover, in the same months that Napoleon’s return unsettled the apparent equilibrium of the restoration, the same type of problem started to emerge for Maine de Biran with respect to the government of the self. In comparing his own cases with those of Montaigne, who like him had lived in an era of significant political unrest, Biran reached the conclusion that he was a weak and ill individual, incapable of trusting the inner *appui* that had been the main source of stability and consolation for the author of the *Essais*. In the midst of the Wars of Religion, Montaigne had written:

> [I]t was safest for me to trust to myself in my necessity [...] Men on all occasions throw themselves upon foreign assistance [appuis] to spare *their own*, which is alone *certain* and *sufficient* to him who knows how there-with to arm himself [...]. The true liberty is to be able to do what a man will with himself: *Potentissimus est, qui se habet in potestate*.

In April 1815, while commenting on this passage from the *Essais*, which he transcribed precisely into the *Journal*, Biran observed: “I sometimes feel that this assistance [*appuis*] escapes me, as my stomach churns and my mind languishes with my nerves” (J. I, 70). It was in these months that Biran started to become aware of the weakness of his own self and of the inefficacy of his will due to the *resistance* of a diseased body that had failed him on all sides, condemned him to dispersion, and made him incapable of the free exercise of thought. Once again commenting on a passage of Montaigne, which stated that study and education could suffice to make men serene and happy, Biran observed how that frame of mind depended rather on temperament and character, which were linked to precise organic conditions that over time gradually became less and less modifiable. This makes happiness and inner stability inaccessible to those, like him, who experience every day “certain disruptions of their organic functions”: “when digestion, the secretions, etc... are laborious, when the vital principle encounters *resistance* on the part of all the organs: it is quite impossible for the mind to be free, at ease and quick to act” (J. I, 95, September 1815 [my italics]).
The destiny of France, which Napoleon’s return had once again plunged into anarchy and revolution, was like a larger-scale reproduction of Maine de Biran’s own fate (what he sometimes referred to as organic *fatum*). Just as the Hundred Days were a demonstration of the vulnerability of the nation, always on the brink of falling prey to an acephalous power that derives from below, so Biran’s chronic disease experienced the inadequacy of the self and of the will in its efforts to contain the overbearing power that derives from the body.

**Melancholy and Revolution**

In their relative coherence and uniformity, which crystallised around the decisive episode of Napoleon’s return from Elba, the pages written during the Hundred Days represent almost a separate section of the *Journal*. In the urgency of events, the relationship between politics and philosophy became closer, and their parallels emerged with greater clarity.

As has been observed,17 the bond that kept politics and philosophy together in Maine de Biran can be seen above all in his language, which moves continually from one semantic field to another. For example, terms like *gouverner*, *regner*, *souveraineté*, or *dominer* were central, with each having a double significance—not only political but also philosophical and psychological—and connected with the idea of self-control through reason and will. During the Hundred Days, another term with a double meaning took on especial importance: the term *révolution*.

Maine de Biran learnt of Napoleon’s landing on the French coast on 12 March 1815, when he was in his country residence in Grateloup, not far from Bergerac, seeking shelter from the distractions of the capital and for the composure that philosophical work requires.18 Only a few days earlier, in Périgueux, he had taken part in the celebrations in honour of the Duke and Duchess of Angoulême. The news of Napoleon’s return from exile took Biran completely by surprise. He immediately left for Paris the next day and, after a very troubled trip, reached the capital late on the night of 14 March, just in time to witness the retreat of the King to Lille and the dissolution of the Chambers on 20 March.

Maine de Biran describes the inner tumult he experienced when he received the news of Napoleon’s return as a “revolution” that shook every fibre of his being, that threw him into a state of agitation, and deprived him of all self-control:
I was calmly seated in my study, rereading my metaphysical manuscripts, when I was interrupted at 3 o’clock by the arrival of the post from Paris. I finish a note that I had begun and I proceed to open a letter that tells me that Bonaparte is in France, that the Chambers have been called and that I am to take up my place immediately. **Instantly my entire being undergoes a revolution. I rapidly pass from the most profound calm to the most vivid agitation; my mind is disoriented, my stomach comes to a halt** [mon estomac se ferme]; I dine quickly and order preparations to for my departure the following morning. (J. I, 44 [my italics])

Placed in this context, the lexical choice of the word “revolution” to define a psychological upheaval creates an immediate short circuit to the political events of the moment that, in the following pages, are referred to using the same term: “This day brings with it all the signs of new misfortunes and revolutions” (J. I, 45), “everything already heralds the revolution” (J. I, 46). It is significant that the Journal regularly uses that term to refer to the 1815 coup d’état. According to Biran, Napoleon’s return produced a revolution: one that was even more shocking for its double political and psychological impact: “*Tout présage que la révolution est faite dans les esprits de ce pays*” (J. I, 47). Not by chance, a few pages later, these two planes (political and psychological-philosophical) are explicitly superimposed and made to work together. Napoleon had done nothing short of enacting a revolution that already existed in the souls of the French people:

> Here we have the assistants of Bonaparte and his army, who alone has carried out a revolution that had already existed in people’s minds without anyone noticing. Today all minds are surprised by this sudden movement, by this extraordinary revolution, that in a single moment seems to have overcome all resistances in opinion. (J. I, 56, April 1815)

With the term “revolution” Biran refers on both the psychological and the political plane, to a sudden movement (*mouvement subit*) that completely overwhms and subverts the previously existing order (the tranquillity of Grateloup, the calm of the Bourbon Restoration), thus revealing its extreme fragility and precariousness. This is a movement that removes all control from above (from reason, from will, from the self or from the sovereign), and it triggers the blindest and most uncontrollable reactions that originate from below (whether these be political unrest or physiological reactions).
Along with words such as *gouverner, dominer, souveraineté, révolution* is thus a key term for Biran to express the analogy between philosophy and politics and between individual and collective. As much on the political as on the psychological plane, the term “revolution” describes a diametrically opposite movement to the centralising action of “*gouverner*”: a movement of *subversion* (between high and low, between what should govern and what should be governed) that generates *disintegration, dispersion, and anarchy.*

In these pages, Maine de Biran describes this movement of *subversion* and *disintegration,* referred to with the term “revolution,” as a pathological state that strikes both the individual body and the collective body of the nation. Moreover, the representation of this pathological state retraces in particular the symptoms of melancholy; the medical description of melancholy structures and organises the way in which Biran refers to the revolution on both psychological and political planes. In other words, melancholy, the chronic illness from which Biran felt he suffered, provided, by analogy, the language and the logic to describe the disease that had struck the political body.

Pierre Montebello has already highlighted the centrality of melancholy as a fundamental element at the base of Biran’s philosophy. In his opinion, the *Journal* has only one principal theme: melancholy as an experience of passivity and the vacillations of thinking that is constantly invaded by the affective repercussions of the world.* I have shown elsewhere that the melancholy in question is not so much a romantic sentiment (the sweet sadness that kindles the inspiration of poets) but the pathological state that the medicine of that era, drawing on the inheritance of the four humours, considered a psycho-physical disorder related to the dysfunction of the nervous system and classified among the main forms of madness or alienation.*

Maine de Biran was very interested in the study of mental illnesses, which he saw as limit cases for understanding the relationships between *physique* and *moral* in man and, more particularly, the origin of the self and of consciousness.* His philosophical research in this area brought him into contact especially with the writings of Pierre Cabanis and Philippe Pinel, in which he could find ample discussions of melancholy.* Cabanis in particular ascribed decisive importance to melancholy as a pathological state that enabled the study of “the physical artifice of thought” (*l’artifice physique de la pensée*).* We can suppose that these readings, which Biran indulged in out of purely scientific
and philosophical interest, would nonetheless not have failed to stir his hypochondriac sensibility, which brought him, as the *Journal* reveals, to engage in obsessive self-examination of the smallest psycho-physical oscillations in his being.

The pathological picture of melancholy can be seen in Biran’s self-depicting in his diary. Day after day, the *Journal* displayed and in a sense *staged* (in the sense of a real *performance*) the symptoms of melancholy even where there were no explicit references to the disease. He also complained on various occasions about being ill, about being affected by a condition that he cursorily described as an “intellectual and moral illness” (J. I, 20, October 1814) of organic origin that concerned mainly the liver, the stomach, and the brain. Albeit consisting of no more than a “partial disorder of the faculties” and “intellectual anomalies,” this disease, in his view, absolutely deserved medical attention. It is sometimes described as a “nervous state” in which the mind becomes foggy (*remplie de brouillards*: J. I, 34, January 1815) and incapable of attentiveness: “I have trouble concentrating on anything, my head is empty, my ideas drift” (J. I, 53, April 1815). The use of certain expressions and the identification of specific symptoms (such as distraction, nervous mobility, mood changes, bad digestion, sadness, worry, fear, restlessness, agitation, desire for solitude, inertia, obsession) are not casual: they reveal an awareness of a specific clinical picture that corresponds to the pathological state known at the time as “melancholy,” which Biran must have associated with his own condition.

Between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the medical description of melancholy defined complex and variegated symptoms, which were further complicated by the influence of circumstances (such as climate, sex, age, intake of certain types of foods and drink) that could modify the way in which the illness manifested itself in each individual. Not by chance, when melancholy moved outside the medical sphere, its classification started to include diseases as different as monomania, neurosis, schizophrenia, and depression. However, beyond the variety of symptoms that the condition could display, the various medical descriptions of melancholy generally had in common a sense of the complete *passivity* of the melancholic person, who is unable to control reactions and impulses deriving from the body. Those affected are generally weak, unstable, changeable, and constantly driven outside themselves, and they fall prey to involuntary and unconscious processes that they cannot dominate. One of the
characteristic traits of this disease, also to be found in the *Journal*, is effectively a lack of will (it is not by chance that melancholy was traditionally associated with the sin of acedia or torpor\textsuperscript{29}) that prevents the free exercise of thought and makes intellectual activity completely subordinate to the body. We could say that melancholy is a pathological state in which the “democracy of sensations” is founded, where the power that comes from below (passions, affections, instincts, purely physiological functions) rebels against the power that comes from above, thus condemning the person to dispersion and fragmentation. In this sense, as Jan Goldstein observed, we can maintain that the disease from which Maine de Biran suffered was nothing other than a psycho-somatic translation of the aberrations produced by sensationalist philosophy, in which the self is reduced to a simple aggregate of impressions originating from the body.\textsuperscript{30}

Weakness of will, psychological instability, changeability and—more generally—a tendency to be driven by every slightest external or internal change are the essential traits of melancholy found in the *Journal*. It is to the latter that we can attribute the obsessive attention with which, day after day, Biran noted the atmospheric conditions—the temperature, the level of humidity in the air—before describing his own corresponding psycho-physical state. A recurrent image that Biran uses to refer to his pathological *faiblesse* is that of *mollesse*: the feebleness and malleability of his constitution (*constitution molle*), continually subjected to the smallest variations coming from the body and the outside world.

In correspondence with the pages written during the Hundred Days, two phenomena can be observed. Occurrences of political disorder perceptibly aggravated the chronic illness from which Biran believed he suffered, with the symptoms becoming more intense (the same word “melancholy” recurs with significant frequency in the space of just a few pages). In addition, the grammar of melancholy, focussed, as we have seen, on the idea of passivity, *mollesse*, lack of control, weakness of will, begins to give shape not only to the way in which Biran represents himself but also to the way in which he describes the political and social situation of France as shaken by the revolution caused by Napoleon’s return.

On 26 March, Maine de Biran finally returned to Grateloup after a hurried and dangerous trip that tested his fragile health. Two days later, the local celebrations organised by the supporters of Napoleon officially marked the proclamation of the Empire in Périgeux; only a few weeks
earlier the same people had applauded the Duchess of Angoulême, daughter of Louis XVI. On 30 March, Maine de Biran attempted in vain to reach Bordeaux, where a fringe of loyalists, rallied by the Duchess, continued to resist, but he returned to Grateloup only a few days later. After eluding a warrant, issued for his arrest by the Bonapartist sub-prefect Trompéo on 7 April, he finally withdrew to Grateloup, resigned to retreat in solitude, and resumed his intellectual work.31

It is somewhat significant that instances of the words “revolution” and “melancholy” multiply and accumulate on the same pages written during the month of April 1815.32 Biran seamlessly passes from considerations of his own pathological state and ineptitude to descriptions of the moral and political degeneration in which France finds itself. In both cases, he adopts the same language and the same metaphors, all linked to the idea of mollesse. Medical and psychological terms are continually mingled with those of politics. Melancholy, the illness that best embodies the schisms and fragmentation of the self promoted by sensationalism, becomes the illness par excellence of democratic society taken as a whole.

The revolution that was once again passing through the social body, casting it into the anarchy of an uncontrollable power coming from below, is described as a real melancholic evil attacking the whole nation. Just like a melancholic person, the nation that had fallen prey to the revolution of the Hundred Days was traversed with irrational impulses as well as contradictory pressures and had completely fallen prey to blind and irrational movements. On 12 April, one month after receiving the news of Napoleon’s landing on the French coast, Biran wrote in his Journal:

The return of the Bourbons and of the previous government seems less and less likely to me. The healthy and properly moral part of the nation is the only one that desires and ardently calls for them; but this part is the least considerable, the one least likely to act, the least influential. The mass of this generation is revolutionary, and the Bourbons, above all Louis XVIII, this philosopher king, so wise, so good, so just, so moderate, will never solidly govern over a generation that no longer recognises legitimate power, that is used to considering everything from the point of view of relations of force, that needs movement, agitation, the false brilliance of conquests, that no longer endures order and peace. (J. I, 64 [italics in the text])

The political disorder running through France is described as a pathological state that is attacking the whole social body, the “healthy part” of which (the king and his supporters) is too weak to oppose the diseased part.
Biran insists on the feebleness, changeability, and instability of a generation without moral strength, corrupted by bad habits and, like the melancholic, betraying its needs for movement and agitation, unable to bear the guidance or restraint that comes from above and creates order and peace.

The analogy between individual and collective highlighted previously now represents the melancholic person on the one hand and democratic or revolutionary society on the other as prey to a blind and uncontrollable power that comes from below and condemned to the disintegration and anarchy of the passions and instincts. Left to itself, the people is no more than “a collection of ignorant and passionate individuals who only act when pushed by blind sentiment” (J. I, 53, 4 April 1815); endowed with physical strength, these isolated individuals are completely lacking in wisdom and reason. Politically they correspond to the purely affective and obscure impressions that, on a philosophical plane, stand opposed to the conscious and reflective activity of the self. Although remaining below the threshold of consciousness and unknown to the self, these impressions emanating from the body (from the “animal life” or “sensitive life”) have the power to dominate our behaviour.

The revolution occasioned by Napoleon’s return had only strengthened and reinvigorated these blind instincts coming from below.

**Conclusion**

18 June 1815 saw the defeat of Waterloo. Maine de Biran had already been back at Grateloup since the beginning of April. The news only reached him on 27 June. The pages of the diary provide us with a dry and essential account of the events after Napoleon’s capitulation: the return to Paris, the abdication, the initial plan to retire to England with his family. Biran describes the end of the revolution of the Hundred Days with the caution of a convalescent patient who is still uncertainly observing the signs of possible recovery, conscious of the fact that the illness is still lurking and precisely at this stage could unleash decisive blows:

The revolutionary party is becoming agitated; the allies are advancing towards the capital and threaten it; the resistance of the army brings with it new misfortunes. On the 3rd of July, capitulation is agreed between the allies and the French army; the latter retreats behind the Loire. Paris is saved but the provinces of the Midi are exposed to all evils. (J. I, 94 [my italics])
The term *résistance*, here referring to the last attempt by the revolutionary party to hinder the advance of the allies toward Paris, is a key word in Maine de Biran’s political physiopathology and reappears in subsequent pages with a purely medical meaning, i.e., to indicate the *organic resistance* of the diseased body that is the principal obstacle to the government of the self, the freedom of the spirit, and the exercise of will.\(^\text{35}\) It was only on 8 July, when the king re-entered the capital, that Biran appeared to abandon himself to the general enthusiasm for the recovery from the revolutionary evil. On 20 July, he returned to Paris himself to resume his position as a member of the Chamber of Deputies.

This is where the pages of the *Journal* on the Hundred Days officially come to a close. His diary entries, made for four months practically without interruption, only started again regularly on 1 January of the next year. Biran had attempted a brief reprise in September 1815, annotating a small number of pages in which he reflects on how, despite Napoleon’s defeat, the illness was still circulating: “the revolutionary principles,” the germs of the democratic pathology that wanted the power to come from below or from the multitude, “remain and will remain” (J. I, 96). From the few, meagre notes that appear in his daily diary,\(^\text{36}\) we learn that the months of silence were full of political and institutional commitments. This, however, does not explain his suspension of the writing of the *Journal*, which he had continued even at times of equally demanding public engagements in the past. This long period of silence, after months of regular and intense writing, is a sign of the profound political, philosophical, and existential crisis that the Hundred Days created. By suspending the writing of the diary, which until then had been the main instrument for a possible government of himself,\(^\text{37}\) it was as if Biran was putting aside that project or felt the need to profoundly rethink its premises.

When Maine de Biran started to write again in the *Journal* in 1814, the so-called “Biranism” (the idea that the self and the consciousness of the self derive from the *sens intime* acquired through an immediate apperception in the voluntary effort) had by then been completed.\(^\text{38}\) In keeping with the essential nucleus of his philosophy, Biran was still confident that the foothold for the government of the self could be found in the will and in the self as *effort*. The year 1815 marked a decisive political and existential threshold that would bring with it a philosophical turning-point. Taking overall stock of the year that had just passed, in December 1815 Biran wrote:
In reviewing the events of that year and the various sentiments or modifications of my existence that accompanied them, I find that no other period of my life has been fuller or more varied [...]. I feel every day that the weakness of my physical and moral organisation does not support the shock of the passions, of the opinions and disagreements that surround me; I am overwhelmed; my entire existence is disrupted [...]. My ideas and my manner of judging the Assembly, the men and things with which I have relations have undergone a revolution, and the loss of several illusions make me desire ever more ardently to distance myself from business, to return to my solitude, and to live independently. My declining health and my old age, which has begun to show above all last year, tell me that is time to think of my retirement. (J. III, 143)

The year 1815 was the year in which ideas began to take root that would bring Maine de Biran to deepen, from 1818, his religious convictions.39 The Journal reveals how the progressive conceptualisation of that dimension, which was to correspond to la vie de l'esprit, started to define itself in precisely the months when Biran withdrew to Grateloup to escape the political disorder caused by Napoleon’s return:

We have abandoned ourselves long enough to the torrent of events, of opinions, of the continuous flux of external and internal modifications, of everything that passes like a shadow… We have to hold on now to the only being that remains immutable, that is the true source of all our present consolations and of all our future hopes [...]. Whoever does not always have this idea present in the midst of the continuous upheavals of all things, when crime triumphs, when virtue sighs, beaten, outcast, defamed, denatured, whoever has a moral sense and, witnessing all these things, does not think of God, of the eternal and unchangeable rule of the just and the unjust, and of the necessary consequences that flow from this rule, should, I say, despair. (Journal, I, 66, April 1815 [italics in the text])

It is significant that the first signs of his future religious “conversion” are visible precisely between April and June 1815. The quoted passage establishes an immediate link between the political events (torrent des événements, bouleversements de toutes choses) and the need for a point d’appui that could offer an outer soutien that was finally fixed and stable. A few pages later we read again: “It is today and in these terrible circumstances that we momentarily see injustice, crime, madness, and impiety triumph; it is today that we are happy to experience this feeling of trust in God” (J. I, 86).
It was precisely the experience of the Hundred Days, in its dual political and philosophical capacity, that acted as the catalyst for the conceptual reshuffle that was to bring Maine de Biran to search for a transcendent foundation beyond the will.\textsuperscript{40} Even more than an authentically religious necessity, it was a philosophical consideration, which arose from political experience, that drove him in that direction. If it is true that Biran conceived the Bourbon Restoration as a “philosophical problem” that represented “the equivalent in the collective context of government of the self being sought […] for one’s own self,”\textsuperscript{41} we cannot underestimate the importance of the Hundred Days on a psychological–philosophical plane.

By revealing the precariousness of the restoration of the monarchy, the Hundred Days showed the fragility of the idea of \textit{souveraineit\e} that Biran had embraced until then as much on a political as on a philosophical level. The ease with which the people of France fell back immediately under the sway of passions and irrational instincts re-awakened by the tyrant reflected the ease with which the diseased body rebels against the self that wishes to govern it. As we have seen, 1815 was also the year in which Maine de Biran began more acutely to feel the effects of his chronic disease and started to doubt that reason and will alone could constitute a guarantee of a certain degree of stability. During the course of the Hundred Days, he discovered that he was not in full control of himself, even in the solitude of Grateloup, where he continued to be distracted, carried to dispersion, incapable of composure or concentration,\textsuperscript{42} and completely overwhelmed by the flow of events.

Just as Napoleon’s definitive defeat was only possible by means of the intervention of external powers, so too man can hope to obtain stability and control only by trusting in a transcendent entity. The Hundred Days showed, as much on a political as on a philosophical plane, the need for a \textit{point d’appui} that is independent of internal and external fluctuations to which an individual is subordinated.

Signalling a turning point in Biran’s philosophy, the pages of the \textit{Journal} written during the Hundred Days also provide eloquent testimony to the political, philosophical, and psychological importance of this experience for the monarchical and conservative élites who had believed in the Bourbon Restoration. The downfall of the regime, which confirmed its fragility, forced those loyal to the King to turn, after the second restoration, to other forms of support such as religion.
Melancholy established itself as the disease *par excellence* of the post-revolutionary period. It was not only the evil of the democratic and restless man who had lost his certainties and his place in the social order, it was also the disease that had struck democratic society as a whole. “Melancholy” was the other name of the revolution. The melancholy that afflicted Maine de Biran as a post-sensationalist and post-revolutionary thinker became the pathological state of the collective political body, totally traversed and dominated by an unconscious and underground *vie animale*.

**Notes**

1. During his lifetime Maine de Biran published only three works: The *mémoire* on the *Influence de l’habitude sur la faculté de penser* (1802), a pamphlet entitled *Examen des “Leçons philosophique” de M. Laromiguière* (1817), and an article with the title “Exposition de la doctrine philosophique de Leibniz,” which appeared in 1819 in the periodical *Bibliographie universelle* by Michaud.

2. For detailed information on Maine de Biran’s political career, cf. Jean Lassaigne, *Maine de Biran homme politique* (Paris, 1958).

3. Cf. Maine de Biran, *Oeuvres*, publiées sous la direction de François Azouvi, tome XII: *L’homme public*, édité par André Robinet et Nelly Bruyère (Paris, 1999).

4. Cf. Henri Gouhier, *Introduction* to Maine de Biran, *Journal*, édition intégrale, 3 vols. (Neuchâtel, 1954–1957), vol. 1, VII–XXXIV. The passages from the *Journal* to which I refer are quoted from this edition (signalled hereafter as J., followed by the volume reference, the page number, and the date) and were translated into English by Elisabeth Wallmann. By Henri Gouhier see also “Maine de Biran et son ‘journal metaphysique,’” in AA. Vv., *La diaristica filosofica* (Padua, 1959), 61–71.

5. Cf. Henri Gouhier, “Autobiographie et philosophie: ‘le journal’ de Maine de Biran,” *Formen des Selbstdarstellung, Analysen zu einer Geschichte des literarischen Selbstportraits*, Festgabe für Fritz Neubert (Berlin, 1956), 95–103 (96 and 99).

6. Cf. in particular Thomas Pfau, *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790–1840* (Baltimore, 2005).

7. Cf. *Difficulté d’être et mal du siècle dans les correspondances et les journaux intimes de la première moitié du XIX siècle*, textes réunis et présentés par S. Bernand-Griffiths avec la collaboration de C. Croisille ( Clermont-Ferrand, 1998).
8. Cf. Agnès Antoine, *Maine de Biran, Sujet et politique* (Paris, 1999). The two essays by Elizabeth G. Sladziewski, “Maine de Biran devant la révolution” and “Maine de Biran (1766–1824) et la dynamique du sujet”, Id., *Révolutions du sujet* (Paris, 1989), 163–181 and 183–195, are also focused on the relationship between philosophy and politics.

9. Cf. Antoine, *Maine de Biran*, 16.

10. For the use of this Foucauldian concept in the case of Maine de Biran, cf. Marco Piazza, *Il governo di sé, Tempo, corpo e scrittura in Maine de Biran* (Florence, 2001).

11. Her study on Maine de Biran is included within a broader study on the relationship between politics and psychology in France between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: cf. Jan Goldstein, *The Post-Revolutionary Self, Politics and Psyche in France, 1750–1850* (London, 2005), 103–138.

12. Cf. J. III, 158, June 1815. On the distinction between *peuple* and *multitude* cf. also J. III, 150, August 1815.

13. On 28 March 1815, Biran noted in his diary: “Crime and banditry triumph. The causes of virtue, of honour, of justice are abandoned. If one believes the papers, the capital is at the feet of the despicable monster, which it had banished: it entered triumphantly. Not one voice rose against it, not one arm tried to slay it. Oh shame! […] there is no more French nation; it was not worthy of a good king […]. The French people deserves only to be conquered. There it is, under the yoke of soldiers and even more ferocious Jacobins. The present generation, born in the midst of the storms of the Revolution, depraved and profoundly immoral, is not susceptible to a good government” (J. I, 48–49).

14. As Antoine has suggested, *Maine de Biran*, 54, it is probable that Maine de Biran derives from *De l’Allemagne* (cf. in particular Madame de Staël, *Œuvres complètes*, Geneva, 1967, III, 4–113, 115), the reading of which dates precisely to these months, regarding the idea of a connection between sensationalism and the degenerate morality of the French.

15. Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, III, 12 quoted in J., I, 69, April 1815 [italics in the text] (English edition: *Essays of Montaigne*, vol. 9, transl. by C. Cotton, revised by W. Carew Hazlett, New York, 1910). The Latin quotation is taken from Seneca, *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, letter CX.

16. Cf. Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 26.

17. Cf. in particular Antoine, *Maine de Biran*, and Piazza, *Il governo di sé*, cit.

18. Cf. Marco Piazza, “Fra camere e torri, in vista di se stessi. Maine de Biran, Xavier de Maistre e Henri Bayle,” M. Bettetini and S. Poggi (eds.), *I viaggi dei filosofi* (Milano, 2010), 161–176.

19. It may be of interest to compare the use and meaning of *révolution* in Maine de Biran with that of *rivoluzione* in Giacomo Leopardi
(1789–1836), another post-sensationalist and post-revolutionary thinker who gave consideration to problems that were similar to those of Maine de Biran, reaching, however, an opposite conclusion: cf. Alessandra Aloisi, ‘Rivoluzione’, N. Bellucci, F. D’Intino and S. Gensini (eds.), Lessico leopardiano (Rome, 2016), 109–114.

20. Cf. Pierre Montebello, ‘Mélancolie et vacillation de la pensée dans le Journal de Maine de Biran’, Id., Nature et subjectivité (Grenoble, 2007), 110–130.

21. Cf. “Maine de Biran e la fisiologia della malinconia,” presentation given at the conference Melancolia, Metamorfosi dell’umor nero, University of Pisa, June 2105, and “Maine de Biran’s conception of melancholy. Between physiology and philosophy,” presentation given at the conference Mood, Aesthetic, Psychological and Philosophical Perspectives, University of Warwick, May 2016. The essay I present here is part of a larger research project that I am conducting on melancholy and distraction between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with particular reference to Maine de Biran.

22. Cf. in particular Mémoire sur la décomposition de la pensée (1804) and De l’apperception immédiate (1807), in which ample sections are devoted to mental illnesses.

23. Cf. Pierre Cabanis, Rapport du physique et du moral de l’homme (1802), Mémoire VI (however, various considerations about melancholy are spread throughout nearly all the mémoires) and Philippe Pinel, Nosographie philosophique ou la méthode de l’analyse appliquée à la médecine (1798), Traité médico-philosophique sur l’aliénation mentale ou la manie (1801).

24. Cabanis, Rapports du physique et du moral de l’homme (Paris and Geneva, 1980), 94, about which cf. Mariana Saad, “La mélancolie entre le cerveau et les circonstances: Cabanis et la nouvelle science de l’homme,” Gesnerus 63 (2006), 113–126 (114).

25. ‘We only pay attention to mental illnesses that cause the loss of reason or of the superior faculties such as mania, delirium, etc. Moral medicine does not take into account the partial disorders of the faculties, the intellectual anomalies that are to the moral what disruptions of health are to the physical’ (J. I, 37 January 1815). On melancholy as “partial” delirium cf. in particular Michel Foucault, Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique (Paris, 1972), 282, that refers in particular to Jean-François Dufour, Essai sur les opérations de l’entendement (1770).

26. For a more detailed treatment of this subject, please refer to my essay “Maine de Biran e la fisiologia della malinconia,” Odradek. Studies in Philosophy of Literature, Aesthetics and New Media Theories I/1 (forthcoming: 2017).
27. On the centrality of the circumstances in medicine at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century cf. Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la Clinique. Une archéologie du regard médical* (Paris, 1963). On the importance of the circumstances in relation to the symptoms of melancholy, cf. Saad, “La mélancolie entre le cerveau et les circonstances.”
28. Cf. Foucault, *Histoire de la folie*, 281–296, wherein Foucault showed in particular how eighteenth-century melancholy started to absorb the symptoms of the mania, which previously had been seen as opposed to it, and Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify. The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1987), 156–157.
29. Cf. Jean Starobiski, *L’encre de la mélancolie* (Paris, 2012), 51.
30. Cf. Goldstein, *The Post-Revolutionary Self*, 134.
31. Cf. Jean Lassaigne, *Maine de Biran homme politique*, 100–111.
32. Cf. J. I, 63–66, April 1815.
33. Cf. J. I, 19, September 1814. On the developments of this idea of an alliance between psychic anarchy and political anarchy (founded on the establishment of a hierarchy between the obscure field of pure impressions and the clear consciousness that guarantees order) in a subsequent era, particularly in Charles Blondel, cf. Andrea Cavalletti, *Classe* (Turin, 2009), 22–25.
34. Cf. J. I, 25, October 1815. On the notions of “animal life” and “sensitive life,” partly derived from Xavier Bichat, *Recherche physiologiques sur la vie et la mort* (1800), and on their political implications, see Roberto Esposito, *Third Person. Politics of Life and Philosophy of the Impersonal*, transl. by Z. Hanafi (Cambridge, 2012), 20–63.
35. “I feel something constrained in myself that keeps me in a state of habitual effort, that prevents me not only from doing difficult things, but also from easily and naturally fulfilling the simplest tasks. This moral state is linked to a kind of disruption in the organic functions... When digestion, the secretions etc. ... are laborious, when the principle of life meets resistance on the part of all the organs: it is quite impossible for the mind to be free, at ease and quick to act” (J. I, 95, September 1815 [my italics]).
36. Cf. J., III, 107–143.
37. Cf. Piazza, *Il governo di sé*.
38. Henri Gouhier, *Les conversions de Maine de Biran* (Paris, 1947), 169, dates Biran’s conversion to Biranism to 1804.
39. What Gouhier, *Les conversions*, 310–422, defined as his “last conversion.”
40. Cf. Antoine, *Maine de Biran*, 85.
41. Piazza, *Il governo di sé*, 32.
42. Cf. J. I, 93 e 74.
43. Cf. Agnès Antoine, “Le mal du siècle dans le journal intime de Maine de Biran,” *Difficulté d’être et mal du siècle*, 43–56.