“What Do I Know? Who am I?”

Self-Portraits and the Literature of Intimacy in the Eighteenth Century”

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« Que sais-je ? Qui suis-je ? » *Autoportraits et écriture intime au XVIII^e siècle*

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- 1 A key scene in *Letters from a Peruvian Woman* shows the heroine, Zilia, newly arrived in France, overcome by emotion upon seeing a young woman dressed as a Sun Virgin for the first time since she was kidnapped from the Temple of the Sun in her native Peru. This miracle is soon explained when it is revealed to her that she is standing in front of a mirror¹. She thus comes face to face with her own appearance for the very first time. Her description to Aza of the human figure she glimpsed is, in fact, a self-portrait. Françoise de Graffigny intended this scene as a condemnation of the obsession with appearances and artifice so prevalent among her French contemporaries. We should note what this reveals about interior decoration at the time: the proliferation of mirrors, and the increasing opportunities thus afforded to people to see themselves. The greater ease with which one could now observe one's own physical appearance seems to have contributed to the spirit of self-examination which underlies the literature of intimacy. There are many other contributing factors; the publication of Rousseau's *Confessions* at the end of the century being, of course, the foremost. But, let us not get ahead of ourselves.
- 2 In order to explore the question of self-reflection in the literature of intimacy, I shall draw on a broad range of memoirs, diaries and autobiographies in an attempt to examine how women portray themselves, consciously and otherwise, and also to explore their relationship with self-portraiture, whether avowed or denied. I will consider a variety of cases: from physical to psychological portrayals, from direct to allusive depictions, and even examples of self-effacement. In the process, I shall suggest a possible typology. And, I will mention a certain number of analogies with painted portraiture along the way.
- 3 Let me begin by pointing out that for most of the Eighteenth Century introspective writing was not produced with an eye to publication – a man or woman in the Age of Enlightenment would have been astonished by the space taken up by the "Autobiography" shelves in certain bookstores today or by the mere existence of the

Association pour l'Autobiographie. When texts were intended for publication, they were meant to appear much later, either after the death of their author (as in the case of Marie-Jeanne de Staal-Delaunay), or as part of a self-justificatory or public relations enterprise (as in the case of Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, whose *Souvenirs* added further weight to a campaign she had been waging for many years by means of her painted self-portraits).

- 4 Let us take another telling example, that of Mary Robinson, an actress celebrated for her talent, her immense beauty, but above all for her love affair with a very young Prince of Wales. While the caricatures dating from the period of her liaison were often unflattering, portraits that would be repeatedly exhibited or reproduced as engravings attempted to promote a more authentic likeness, as did descriptions of the highlights of Mary Robinson's career in her autobiographical writings. Thus, the memoirs, unfinished at the time of her death in 1801 – completed and subsequently published by her daughter – aimed to set the record straight and to depict Mary Robinson as a virtuous woman, and a victim of circumstances. Aware of the importance of her image, the author went out of her way to describe herself repeatedly dressed in outfits that were widely imitated in her heyday. At the time when she was a fashionable young woman, Mary Robinson was eager to live in the limelight, to be at the centre of attention, making use of the experience she had gained on the stage. Revisiting her youth through writing, she repeated this tactic, but now the emphasis was how, though absent, she could influence others – a change from the clear and present impact she had wanted to make in her younger days. Here is an example of this:

A new face, a young person dressed with peculiar but simple elegance, was sure to attract attention at places of public entertainment. The first time I went to Ranelagh my habit was so singularly plain and Quaker-like that all eyes were fixed upon me. I wore a gown of light brown lustring with close round cuffs (it was then the fashion to wear long ruffles); my hair was without powder, and my head adorned with a plain round cap and a white chip hat, without any ornaments whatever.²

- 5 This allusion suggests a memory for appearances. It shows that Mary Robinson thought of herself as a fashionable character, and even as someone capable of setting trends. She shaped her identity by means of the attention she got from others. She presents herself as someone to watch, and thus to portray, pushing vanity so far as to shun extravagance in order to be better noticed. The subsequent paragraphs of the same passage – and I could have found many other examples – reinforce this point.

The second place of polite entertainment to which Mr. Robinson accompanied me was the Pantheon concert, then the most fashionable assemblage of the gay and the distinguished. At this place it was customary to appear much dressed; large hoops and high feathers were universally worn. My habit was composed of pale pink satin, trimmed with broad sable; my dear mother presented me a suit of rich and valuable point lace, which she had received from my father as a birthday gift, and I was at least some hours employed in decorating my person for this new sphere of fascination: I say some hours, because my shape at that period required some arrangement, owing to the visible increase of my domestic solitudes. [...] I observed two persons, evidently men of fashion speaking to her, till one of them, looking towards me, with an audible voice inquired of the other, "Who is she?" Their fixed stare disconcerted me; I rose, and, leaning on my husband's arm, again mingled in the brilliant circle. The inquiries followed us; stopping several friends, as we walked round the circle, and repeatedly demanding of them, "Who is that young lady in the pink dress trimmed with sable?"³

- 6 Mary Robinson thus created a public persona for herself, one based on a visual identity. These written self-portraits of herself as a young woman were composed when she was prematurely aging and physically diminished. Just as engravings can be used to reproduce a painting, the text can offer the seemingly endless projection of a portrait designed to immortalise a beautiful woman, one who, as it happens, no longer exists. Here the word does the work of the engraver's tool. Moreover, after being duped by several lovers, Mary Robinson, who had written poems and then novels in order to make a living, was skilled in wielding the instruments of self-promotion. The self-portrait in this case is a form of publicity. Its goal is to rehabilitate an image *post-mortem*, thus impressing a version of the truth on contemporary minds – as well as on posterity – from beyond the grave.
- 7 After her heyday as a woman of fashion, Mary Robinson used the artistic medium she had made her own – writing – in order to display herself. Early in the century, a female painter famous for her portraits, wielded both pen and pastel, but to very different ends. She was part of a distinguished tradition of artists who painted themselves, both because they were the cheapest and most available of models, and because a well-executed self-portrait displayed in their studio could serve effectively to advertise their talents and their wares. Such canvasses often included representations of the artist's trade-painters showed themselves at their easel, surrounded by their students or work⁴. Rosalba Carriera depicted herself in this manner, holding a portrait she had made of her sister⁵. We have no equivalent written description in which she refers to her physical appearance. We do, however, have letters and diaries. The latter are mainly concerned with the practicalities of her profession: she records commissions, keeps track of her income, and so on. If we are looking for a portrait in her own words, the best we can do is to try to construe it from some of her personal touches. Just because she includes remedies for earache or rheumatism, we cannot assume that she suffered from either, merely that she was practically minded. Sometimes, she records a little anecdote that reveals a particularly keen sense of observation or, occasionally, of humour. And, might one conclude that she was conscious of her appearance when she mentions lavish outlays for stockings or the purchase of a mirror? Nothing in her words, however, allows us to envision the woman herself as well as her paintings do.

Rosalba Carriera, *Self-portrait holding a portrait of her sister* (1715 or 1709, pastel on paper)

- 8 Rosalba Carriera was exceptional in the eyes of her contemporaries. First of all, there is her unusually high level of professional activity: she was the breadwinner in the household when she lived in Paris with her mother, sister and brother-in-law – himself an artist. Her exceptional talent was recognized by the *Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture* which welcomed her and made her a fellow. The last woman before her to have been granted membership – albeit of a qualified sort, “*académicienne de circonstance*”⁶ –, Catherine Perrot, inducted in 1682 when she was in her sixties, apparently owed the honour to the fact that she had taught the Regent’s daughter painting, as well as to her husband’s social connections – he was apostolic proto-notary. But, it was Rosalba Carriera’s talent alone that earned her this recognition. The minutes of the *Académie* reveal that this was not the sign of a new norm, but rather a case that was clearly intended to remain exceptional: when she was made a fellow of the *Académie*, the decision was “not to constitute a precedent” according to the minutes⁷. This acknowledgement of artistic ability was accompanied – as would be the case with Germaine de Staël later in the century – by derogatory talk about her looks. Everything suggests that in order to reach a level of which a man could be proud, a woman was forced to abandon (or, from the outset, to be deprived of) her femininity. Dezallier d’Argenville was one of those who stressed the link between Rosalba Carriera’s ugliness and her talent as an artist: instead of being beautiful, she apparently had qualities of the soul and artistic gifts, as well being fortunate (!) that she did not run the risk of attracting lovers⁸.
- 9 A second self-portrait speaks for Rosalba Carriera, one which was painted thirty years after the first, and which reflects how much she has aged⁹. The crown of laurel we can make out on her head of greying hair reminds us that we are looking at an exceptional woman. There is, however, no concession to idealisation of any sort. On the contrary, the

uncompromising exactitude of the portrait allows us to spot the eye problems which meant the artist would undergo cataract surgery, followed by a temporary improvement in her eyesight, before going blind¹⁰. The operation took place in 1744. In this extraordinary portrait from 1745 we can detect a slight deviation to the right in the right eye, a discoloured iris, and decentring of the pupil, all signs of progressive degeneration. There is no attempt made to gloss over or improve the appearance. On the contrary, there is a marked effort to get as close as possible to reality, regardless of what it may show.

- 10 The artist's eye was used to scrutinising models. We sometimes find the same merciless attitude in the texts. A case which is exceptional in many respects is that of Victoire Monnard, born in Creil in 1777, the daughter of farmers who spent much of their time living from hand to mouth. She went to Paris and, at the outbreak of the Revolution, was a quasi-illiterate apprentice to a seamstress. She would later learn to read and write. Reading Rousseau made her understand the power of books to open up new worlds and legitimated her own self-narration. Her physical description of herself as a girl is completely free of idealisation:

Though I was five foot two, I was nothing to look at and I seemed much older than my age. I was thin and tall, with big fleshy hands and feet. I walked with a nonchalant spring in my step. My appearance was of the sort to which no one pays the slightest attention. I had small, regular features – not bad really –, black hair and brown, expressive eyes with a piercing and somewhat severe gaze. My teeth were small and regularly spaced, but not very white. I had a nice, sweet little mouth. When I talked, I was lively and expressive. What ruined everything I had going for me was a horrible complexion, not so much really brown as yellowish.¹¹

- 11 This physical portrait – unusual in the memoirs of eighteenth-century women – is tendered to justify an explication given by the author: with a little nest egg and a lot of ingenuity, she opened her first business – neatly wrapped bundles of straw made it look as though she was running a well-stocked store. She explains that suitors came to call. She claims they courted her as they were attracted by her business prospects, not by her looks, which explains her inclusion of the rather unforgiving description of her appearance. It seems to me that the two instances of word portraits, by Mary Robinson on the one hand, and by Victoire Monnard on the other, represent two diametrically opposed approaches, both because one of them is jotting down her memories for herself while the other has propagandistic motives, and also because one considers her physical appearance to have been her stock-in-trade while for the other it was the opposite. I should like to add a further self-portrait, which feigns not to exist, and would seem to indicate how difficult it was for a woman to legitimate self-representation. While in prison, in the shadow of the guillotine, Jeanne-Marie ("Manon") Roland wrote her *Mémoires particuliers* (*Private Memoirs*) for her daughter, Eudora. She describes her (Manon's) return from the wet nurse as a toddler:

No one expects me at this point to describe a little two-year-old brunette, whose dark hair went so well with a bright and lively face, and who was as happy and hearty as any child of her age. There will be a more appropriate time for me to paint my portrait, and I am not so careless as to get ahead of myself.¹²

- 12 When other memoir writers and autobiographers mention their body, it is more often than not at moments when it has let them down: in other words, when they are sick. In these cases, we sense that the hesitation in speaking about such things, a reticence instilled by their education, is being set aside as their body takes over, interfering with their normal way of life. I shall offer two cases in point. The first is Adélaïde de Castellane,

née Rohan-Chabot, an unhappily married woman. Her own mother had died in childbirth. She feared that her second pregnancy would cost her her life:

I am with child, and quite weak; the thousands of hardships I have endured in my life have diminished me. I may, therefore, expire while giving birth, and this is why I am writing these notes on the education of my son. If I am unlucky enough to not be able to bring him up myself, I wish at least to put down my ideas so that they can be of use to him.¹³

- 13 The reference to her person – in cursory fashion – merely serves to legitimise her putting pen to paper. Adélaïde de Castellane appears to have taken on board that it is not appropriate to speak of oneself; and that a woman has no business writing. She reacted in an exceptional manner to a particular set of circumstances – according to her son, she suffered from “dreadful ill-health”¹⁴. In the whole text, she never talks about *herself*, so to speak. This makes another testimony we have, typical of social activities at the time, even more interesting. It is worth noting that in autobiographical texts there are many portraits. Observing others was encouraged. Both physique and character are commented upon.

- 14 So, let us take a look at the anonymous portrait we have of Adélaïde de Castellane, who is referred to by the nickname *Adéla*:

The man who sees *Adéla* for the first time will probably not find her pretty in a conventional way, but if he sees her regularly, if he manages to appeal to her or move her, he will soon prefer her to all those more beautiful than her. He will admire the fine grain and whiteness of her skin, her smallness of foot, her delicate fingers, her expressive eyes and above all her delightful physiognomy, which obeys the movements of her soul so faithfully that the most skilled painter would be incapable of showing it all or even of recording a mere hint of the overall effect. Perhaps he will never even get to experience *Adéla*'s charming physiognomy.¹⁵

- 15 This example shows that most of the time we are forced to rely on a third party for a portrait of a woman during the Enlightenment. Self-portraits were rare and, when they do exist, they are mostly critical.

- 16 Let us return to the idea of the body coming to the fore when it is not in its normal state. Françoise-Radegonde Le Noir, a mystic from Limoges, undertook to write about her life and experiences at the behest of her confessor. She refers on several occasions to her failing health, as in this short passage where she talks about her childhood:

The chronic poor health I suffered from even when I was still being nursed as a baby, played havoc with my temperament and indicated that my future held constant sickness, or even impending death in store for me. At the age of four or five, I could literally say to misery, like the saintly Job: *You are my mother*; and to the worms: *You are my brothers*; for the infection and putrefaction of my body had begotten them in the bed in which I slept.¹⁶

- 17 The nun interpreted her health problems as messages from God. This seemed particularly clear to her, if we go by her account, once she had taken holy orders. Her physical trials are read by her as direct messages from the Lord. So as to render her commitment visible, she mutilated herself, making her body a witness to her faith—a literal martyr. She shaped her own stigmata in order to resemble the Christ of the Passion whom she held to be her Lord. Using a white hot piece of hewn brick, she branded the sacred heart of Jesus over her own heart, the instruments of the Passion on her arms. She did what she could to match her image of Christ or of a being entirely given over to God. Her body had become the communion host, a sacrifice. She wanted to be nothing more than the Lord's servant.

Her physical existence thus became a way for her to express her spirituality and was used by her to proclaim a way of being and thinking about herself.

- 18 Psychological self-portraits occur more frequently than physical ones in female autobiographical texts. Let us return to Victoire Monnard who wrote disparagingly of her looks.

I have a strong, determined character, and base my judgments on my feelings and what I see with my own eyes, not on words, but on actions. I consider and decide what I am going to say or do quite swiftly; when I make a promise, I keep it, and I am unswerving in my commitment to my feelings and projects. I am active, dynamic, hard-working, fearless and enterprising in everything I do; the more ambitious the plan, the better it suits my character and mindset. I feel sadness and pleasure keenly. I am not stubborn, but I am firm in my resolutions, and have the character of a man, more than of a woman. I prefer the conversation of men; that of women does not interest me except if it concerns feelings. I am not haughty, but I do have the pride of a peacock, an ardent and positive outlook. This ardent nature has occasionally led me to judgments I have been obliged later to revise; this can also be put down to the fact that I am a little extreme in my ways of feeling and expressing myself.¹⁷

- 19 The assessment seems objective. It includes qualities and faults. And, it contains the author's surprising statement that she has a character of a man, rather than of a woman. Could this be the flip side of the coin? like Dezallier d'Argenville writing about Rosalba Carriera, Victoire Monnard seems to be indicating that her natural way of being implicitly betrays her ugliness, even if she does not make the latter into a virtue.
- 20 All the evidence is that these women compared themselves to the contemporary standards of beauty. Manon Roland is a case in point:

A broad forehead, with a little fringe at the time, supported by high eye sockets, and in the middle of it a 'Y' formed by two veins that swelled at the slightest emotion, meant that its presence was far from being as unremarkable as it is in so many faces. As for the chin, which is quite perky, it has precisely those characteristics that physiognomists associate with voluptuous natures. Insofar as I am concerned, I doubt that anyone so suited to such a passion ever indulged in it less. The brightness, rather than the whiteness, of my complexion, frequently heightened by sudden blushes caused by my blood boiling and my sensitive nerves being excited; soft skin, curvaceous arms, fair hands which are not too small because their long slender fingers reflect their dexterity and make them graceful, sound and regular teeth, and a healthy figure – these are the treasures that nature had bestowed upon me.

- 21 Beyond normative aesthetic standards, the memoir writer brings scientific – or rather what were taken to be scientific – criteria to bear. She makes use of her unusually extensive education to analyse herself. The self-portrait thus betrays her knowledge. It extends over several lines. Age matters to Jeanne-Marie Roland. We recall that she had described herself as a two year-old while feigning no to do so. Here, she draws vanity, or perhaps consolation, from the discrepancy between appearances and expectations:

The charms, which I still retain, conceal, without any effort on my part, five to six of my years; and even people who see me every day need me to remind them of my real age, otherwise they assume I am thirty-two or thirty-three at most.

- 22 In the case of this cultivated woman, the self-portrait provokes thought, a sort of self-questioning which paradoxically legitimises the various things she has to say about herself:

It is only since I lost what I had that I have come to appreciate it; I did not know the full value of what I had until I lost it, and perhaps that ignorance made it all the more valuable. Today, I do not miss what I had, because I never misused it; but if duty could accommodate desire in order to make what I still have less futile, I would not be displeased.

- 23 Character portraits were perhaps more frequent than physical ones because they fulfilled some of the purposes traditionally pursued in the literature of intimacy – like the self-examination which gave rise to Françoise-Radegonde Le Noir's life narrative. Indeed, self-examination was used in the Protestant tradition, but also occasionally by Catholic confessors, as an instrument to persuade the authors to better themselves or mend their ways. The daughter of a pastor, Suzanne Necker, Germaine de Staël's mother, imagined an "internal spectator"¹⁸, who could be given the task of acting as a critic:

From childhood, we should keep a diary so as to train our mind to be our counsellor, and our conscience to be our tutor – two aids we shall need throughout our lives. In this diary, we would study ourselves constantly; we would compare our character with our principles, our religious beliefs with our faults, our sensibilities with our vanity; we would thus attempt to correct our faults using our qualities, and to avoid wrongdoing using our principles. We would apply the fruits of this experience to all sorts of useful objects, and would thus complete a work, which throughout our life would serve as our code of moral, religious, domestic, emotional and civil conduct; which would guide us, in a word, in all of our dealings, be they ones of affection, gratitude, fortune, health, or happiness. This book, to which we would add observations each day, would help to make us better and happier. We would never read it without profit; it would make any other work of morality and conduct superfluous, with the exception of the Gospels.¹⁹

- 24 The daughter of pastor Curchod was obviously influenced by the protestant tradition. The members of reformed denominations, particularly in the English-speaking world, were encouraged to compose conversion narratives. Their preferred reading material was the same as Suzanne Necker's: the Gospels. It is noteworthy how she turns the cult of appearance into a process of self-inspection and how she channels the worldly energies of the *Spectator* into a capacity for self-analysis aimed at self-improvement.
- 25 In the case of Marie-Aimée Steck-Guichelin, a Frenchwoman who had a Swiss husband and spent the second half of her life in Berne, we get self-examinations that offer a real picture of her interior life. She converted to Protestantism when she married, and her *Cahiers* are probably a reflection not only of her character, but also of a whole social climate. They include remarks such as these:

In order always to act well, one must not scrupulously weigh each of one's actions, but rather strive without respite to purify the source of all action: feelings and thought. It is the inner movements that one must survey with care. It is not exterior acts, but the habits of the soul that make for true virtue.

How many times have I found myself harbouring thoughts which, if not criminal, are at least unworthy of the dignity of my Nature! What terrible effects are wrought by such habits of pettiness, superficiality and frivolity, which I fall into without noticing, such careless abandonment to frequently reprehensible thoughts, to incoherent ideas that lead neither to truth, goodness or beauty?

When will I manage to train my soul to be constant in its pursuit of all that is noble and useful, to acquire that instinct for goodness and beauty which would cause me to avert my eyes and my thoughts, as if involuntarily, from everything that does not display these two qualities? I feel how necessary it is to be able to command one's thoughts, forever to channel them towards a worthy end.²⁰

- 26 In writing where authors deal with their innermost being, there is a rejection of the stasis of the portrait. While painting focuses, by its very definition, on a single moment that encapsulates, as in the case of Nattier's portraits, a certain perfection, which seems, at least superficially, immune to corruption or even evolution – in the process smoothing over the details in order to produce an unified ideal –, writing allows them to gauge change, to express regret about it, and to imagine further transformation in the future.
- 27 One adolescent, who would in her lifetime become the woman who had the most likenesses drawn and painted of her in France – and probably in the world –, Marie-Antoinette, expressed her dismay at the idea of being reduced to one expression consigned to a two-dimensional canvas. Her mother had asked her for a portrait. Proud of her large family and her many children who had survived a variety of diseases which had struck down so many of her contemporaries, she liked having pictures close to hand, much like we carry photos of our loved-ones in our wallets or on our phones. This request of Marie Thérèse also had a political dimension: she wanted a large portrait of her daughter in majestic pose in order to remind her entourage of the success of her matrimonial policy, which remained faithful to the old Habsburgian adage: *Tu felix Austria nube*. The letters between the Dauphine and the Empress return frequently to this demand for a picture. On 13 August 1773, the young woman complains: "I am being painted at the moment. The painters have certainly not yet managed to catch my appearance. I would willingly give all I own to anyone who could convey in my portrait how overjoyed seeing my dear mama would make me feel."²¹ The common idea that appearance is something fleeting and difficult to grasp finds an expression here – the French verb used is "attraper"; in addition, Marie-Antoinette offers a glimpse of a never-to-be realised portrait of her as her mother died before they were able to meet again. Paradoxically, words allowed her to set down something that would never take place, while the brush struggled to capture a satisfactory resemblance.
- 28 When autobiographical texts offer a set appearance, as though frozen in time, they do so in the manner of the preterit referring to a bygone past. Manon Roland picks out what has changed and what has stayed the same. She conveys her current likeness, both relative to shared norms and to what she no longer is:

At fourteen, as now, I was about five feet tall, having already reached my full height. I had good legs, firm feet, well-rounded hips, a broad and gorgeously ample bosom, narrow shoulders, a firm and gracious demeanour, a lightness and fleetness of step – that was the overall picture. My face was in no way exceptional, apart from its great freshness, gentleness and expressivity. If one were to list its features, one might wonder where its beauty lies – none is regular, yet they are all appealing. The mouth is a little big, thousands are prettier, but none has a more tender or seductive smile. The eyes, on the other hand, are not very big, and the iris is brownish grey; however, with their openness, as well as the frankness, liveliness and gentleness of their gaze, which looks out from under well shaped eyebrows of the same brown as the hair, their expression varies in accordance with the affectionate soul which they reflect. Serious and proud, they sometimes surprise, but more often caress, and always stimulate. The nose was an annoyance; I found it a little big at the tip. However, all in all, and above all in profile, it did nothing to spoil the rest.
- 29 Aware of the changes time had brought, the muse of the Girondins managed to see her younger self again – or rather to see herself in a way in which she could not see herself as an adolescent. She was now able to judge with the benefit of hindsight. She made this portrait knowing full well not only that she was no longer as fresh as in her youth, but

also, I think, that her death was imminent. (It is worth remembering that prisoners in the Revolutionary gaols had their pictures drawn or painted – Suvée made portraits of Chénier and Roucher, for instance.) In these cases, it was a matter of saving something from the impending abyss. The instinct was that of preserving oneself from total oblivion.

- 30 The idea of disappearance or erasure seems a useful one to understand further ramifications of the female self-portrait. Indeed, the presence of women of the Eighteenth Century often needs to be sought out as it is hidden in the shadows – we can make it out directly in financial accounts, as in the case of Rosalba Carriera, but also obliquely reflected elsewhere. Let me explain what I mean: the authors of memoirs more often than not give precedence to third-party depictions. As studies of Madame de Genlis among others have shown, one genre enjoyed an unprecedented success at the end of the Enlightenment: the educational diary. Numerous mothers wrote about their children. They only mentioned themselves in passing, when it was absolutely necessary to their depiction of their main protagonist – Adélaïde de Castellane, whom I mentioned above, or Charlotte-Nicole Coquebert de Montbret are good cases in point. They did not obey the rules of traditional memoirs, whose goal was to depict affairs of State about which the author might have some personal insights to offer, but, rather, they placed front and centre an individual in the process of being educated, not yet fully capable of expressing him or herself, a person who was still an *infans*, in the etymological sense of the term: even if the child had learned to speak, he or she still had growing up to do. In such works, more often than not conceived for a small private audience, the author only appears occasionally, mostly in the shadows or indirectly illuminated by the light emanating from the being who occupies centre stage. The pedagogical function of such works is sometimes clearly expressed, as in this case, where Charlotte-Nicole Coquebert de Montbret writes:

I imagine my Cécile aged between twelve and thirteen years of age, reading the notebook which is about her, noticing with interest the remarks I made about her when she was five or six, eager to reach the final page to see what I think of her now. I can see how moved she will be reading all the good things I have to say of her, and her distress if I criticise her. I can look into her heart in advance and read all the resolutions she will make, and if, a few months later, she makes the same mistakes, I will only have to say: "What about the notebook?" I am sure she will not do a good deed just for it to be written down in the notebook, but if she does something good that she suspects I have failed to observe, and then reads about it in my handwriting, she will experience a warm feeling that is legitimate in addition to the reward that doing good already provides.²²

- 31 In this passage, we learn more about the educator than about her pupil. The fact that it is by proxy confers legitimacy on her self-depiction. She places the maternal role at the heart of female existence as a result of social pressures: denying women access to public freedom of expression and to many professions, leads to them indirectly to consider they are forbidden to think of themselves independently from the family.
- 32 In a world which cultivated appearances but refused to idolise them, the female self-portrait was always treated with suspicion. It was acceptable only when in the service of something else: a practical goal, as in the case of Rosalba Carriera, who had professional interests to pursue; or an edifying one, as in Françoise-Radegonde Le Noir's pursuit of self-improvement through the telling of her life. The self-portrait could constitute a stage in one's personal development, as evidenced by the notion of *Internal Spectator* invented by Suzanne Necker. Indirect or implicit portraits show how it was often easier for a

woman to envision herself through a role, particularly that of a mother. Let us leave the last word to Victoire Monnard, a woman who would have been amazed to learn that her memories had been preserved, but who felt herself reborn when she gave birth to her son:

It is difficult to put into words what I felt upon seeing my first child. My heart and my eyes strove to uncover what was going on in those of my visitors. I feared they might not sufficiently appreciate the beauty of what I had produced, and I resented them if they failed to show a desire to contemplate him. If they paid him too much attention, holding on to him for too long, I became worried, jealous, and wanted him back close to me, all to myself. The pleasure at seeing myself reborn made me ecstatic for it is in the very nature of women to reach the pinnacle of happiness by reproducing.²³

NOTES

1. See Françoise de Graffigny, *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (1747, 1752), Rotraud von Kulesa ed., Paris, Garnier, 2014, p. 95-96.
2. Mary Darby Robinson, *Memoirs of Mary Robinson* (1801), Joseph Fitzgerald Molloy ed., Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott Co., 1895, p. 63-64.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 64-65.
4. The self-portraits of Vigée-Lebrun or Labille-Guiard, among others, come to mind.
5. Uffizi, inv. 1786, A 189 https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosalba_Carriera#/media/File:Rosalba_Carriera_Self-portrait.jpg. See Neil Jeffares, « Carriera, Rosalba », *Dictionary of Pastellists before 1800. The online edition*, updated November 2013, p. 2-3.
6. Élisabeth Lavezzi, « Catherine Perrot, peintre savant en miniature : les *Leçons royales* de 1686 et de 1693 », *Femme savante. Savoirs des femmes*, Colette Nativel ed., Geneva, Droz, 1999, p. 230. This article suggest that Catherine Perrot was perhaps elected to close the gap opened by the over-talented Élisabeth-Sophie Chéron, who painted in the major genres.
7. "Academies of Art", in *Dictionary of Women Artists*, Delia Gaze ed., Chicago, Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997, vol. I, p. 46.
8. The reference here is to the introduction to the *Abrégé de la vie des peintres les plus fameux* (Paris, De Bure, 1762, vol. I, p. 314) by Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville: "Beauty, which is the common lot of women, was missing in *Signora Rosa Alba Carriera*. This deficiency, if it is indeed one, was well compensated for by the qualities of soul and by the superior talents with which nature had provided her." A few lines later, we read: "Moreover, love could not divert her from her course; a woman shielded by ugliness is safe from lovers."
9. This portrait is in the holdings of the *Accademia*, inv. 873. <http://www.wga.hu/support/viewer/z.html>, Rosalba Carriera depicted herself in other works too. See Jeffares, *op. cit.*
10. Philippe Lanthony, *Art and Ophthalmology. The Impact of Eye Diseases on Painters*, Piribebuy, Paraguay, Wayenborgh publications, 2009, p. 241.
11. Jeanne-Marie Roland, *Mémoires particuliers*, in C. Seth, *La Fabrique de l'intime*, *op. cit.*, p. 507.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Adélaïde de Castellane, *Notes sur l'éducation de mes enfants*, in C. Seth, *La Fabrique de l'intime*, *op. cit.*, p. 913.

14. Esprit-Victor-Élisabeth Boniface de Castellane, *Journal*, published by Ruth-Charlotte-Sophie, comtesse de Beaulaincourt-Marles and by Paul Le Brethon, Paris, Plon-Nourrit et Cie, 1895, vol. I, p. 4.
 15. See *Ibid.*, p. 909-910.
 16. *Vie de la vénérable sœur Françoise-Radegonde Le Noir*, in C. Seth, *La Fabrique de l'intime*, op. cit., p. 274.
 17. Victoire Monnard, *Souvenirs*, in C. Seth, *La Fabrique de l'intime*, op. cit., p. 1116.
 18. On this notion of the internal spectator, see Dena Goodman, « *Le Spectateur intérieur : les journaux de Suzanne Necker* », *Littérales, L'Invention de l'intimité au siècle des Lumières*, Benoît Melançon ed., n° 17, 1995, p. 91-100.
 19. Suzanne Necker, *Sur un nouveau genre de spectateur* in *La Fabrique de l'intime*, op. cit., p. 259.
 20. Marie-Aimée Steck-Guichelin, *Cahiers*, in C. Seth, *La Fabrique de l'intime*, op. cit., p. 1004-1005.
 21. Letter of 31 August 1773 from Marie-Antoinette to Marie-Thérèse, in *Marie-Antoinette. Anthologie et dictionnaire*, Paris, Robert Laffont, « Bouquins », 2006, p. 31-32.
 22. Charlotte-Nicole Coquebert de Montbret, *Journal d'Ernest et de Cécile*, in C. Seth, *La Fabrique de l'intime*, op. cit., p. 857.
 23. Victoire Monnard, *Souvenirs*, in C. Seth, *La Fabrique de l'intime*, op. cit., p. 1118.
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ABSTRACTS

In their life-writing, Enlightenment women (un)consciously depict themselves. This article examines different attitudes on the basis of texts by Mary Robinson, Victoire Monnard, Adélaïde de Castellane, Françoise-Radegonde Le Noir, Jeanne-Marie Roland, Suzanne Necker and Charlotte-Nicole Coquebert de Montbret, as well as of painted self-portraits by Rosalba Carriera and Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun.

Dans les écrits du for privé, les femmes des Lumières se représentent consciemment ou non. Cet article examine différentes attitudes en s'appuyant sur les textes de Mary Robinson, Victoire Monnard, Adélaïde de Castellane, Françoise-Radegonde Le Noir, Jeanne-Marie Roland, Suzanne Necker et Charlotte-Nicole Coquebert de Montbret, ainsi que sur les autoportraits peints de Rosalba Carriera et de Élisabeth Vigée Lebrun.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Mémoires, autobiographie, Robinson (Mary), Lebrun (Vigée), Carriera (Rosalba)

Keywords: Memoirs, autobiography, Robinson (Mary), Lebrun (Vigée), Carriera (Rosalba)

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