



PROJECT MUSE®

Character and Conversion in Autobiography: Augustine,
Montaigne, Descartes, Rousseau, and Sartre (review)

Nicolas Russell

French Studies: A Quarterly Review, Volume 60, Number 3, July 2006,
pp. 385-386 (Review)

Published by Oxford University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/208210>

of doubt in Montaigne's time, a theoretical chapter on the linguistic concepts that interest the author, and a series of detailed analyses from selected chapters of the *Essais*, of which the sections on 'De l'utile et de l'honneste' are perhaps the most ambitious and successful. In this choice of key passages, Sellevold is able to discuss the implications of some of the larger religious, political and ethical questions that loom in the *Essais*. The book is well situated in terms of the literary critical debate that precedes it, with particular reference to the work of André Tournon, Terence Cave and Antoine Compagnon. Although it is useful and illuminating to set the author's readings alongside those of literary critics, the freshness and novelty of the linguistic approach may perhaps have been enhanced if these critics' conclusions were incorporated towards the end of the analysis, rather than framing it from the introductory sections. Despite this, this remains a book that offers an original and thought-provoking approach to Montaigne's text and its inscription of doubt, scepticism and revision.

EMILY BUTTERWORTH
UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

doi:10.1093/fs/knl086

Character and Conversion in Autobiography: Augustine, Montaigne, Descartes, Rousseau, and Sartre. By PATRICK RILEY. Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2004. x + 224 pp. Hb \$42.50.

Patrick Riley's study of autobiographical writing in early modern and modern France focuses on conversion as a schema used by authors to structure both their life and their writing. The archetype for this organization of self and text is Augustine's *Confessions*. In this precursor to the autobiographical genre, Augustine recounts his early life as a spiritual journey leading to a profound religious conversion, a transformation of the self whose nature is in part conveyed to the reader through a transformation in the text itself: at the end of Book 9, the *Confessions* shift abruptly from the narration of Augustine's early life to an atemporal introspective exploration of spirituality. Riley claims that Augustine's use of conversion in shaping both the form and the content of the *Confessions* was imitated or recast by many writers in the Western tradition, including the four he has chosen to illustrate his thesis. In the least compelling of these four studies, Riley describes Montaigne's *Essais* as a counterpoint to Augustine's model of the self; according to Riley, Montaigne replaces Augustine's dramatic moment of conversion with a multitude of 'micro-conversions': 'Montaigne is able to reject the subjective break that radical conversion demands only because he views experience as an unbroken continuum of *micro-conversions*' (p. 61). However, it is not clear that the *Essais* are a response to Augustine rather than simply being a different way of writing about the self. Riley's argument focuses almost exclusively on one essay, 'Du repentir', where Montaigne discusses his self-portrait and the notion of repentance, but even here neither conversion nor repentance strike us as central to Montaigne's project. Riley's thesis is more intriguing with respect to the autobiographical texts of Descartes, Rousseau and Sartre. However, he does not analyse conversion's role in shaping the form and content of these works in sufficient detail. Riley summarizes the content of these works at length but does not adequately explain how these summaries

contribute to his overarching argument. In addition to a more detailed analysis of the texts it treats, this book could have also benefited from a more fully developed theoretical frame. Riley does not thoroughly define and explain the concepts of conversion and character as they relate to his thesis. He does summarize some of the theoretical and historical work that has been done on the concept of conversion in the book's notes, including some that claim it is inappropriate to use the concept of conversion as an analytical tool, but he does not explain or defend his own use of this concept in any detail. Rather he leaves this task to the reader: 'It is for the reader to decide whether the use of the term "conversion" in this book, *both* as a tool and a subject of analysis, as a rubric for thinking about a genre and the contours of a life, appears legitimate' (p. 180). In this book, Riley presents an intriguing thesis and some interesting insights, but he does not defend his thesis thoroughly and conclusively.

doi:10.1093/fs/ksn085

NICOLAS RUSSELL
SMITH COLLEGE

Lumière des martyrs: essai sur le martyre au siècle des Réformes. By FRANK LESTRINGANT. (Études et essais sur la Renaissance, 53). Paris, Champion, 2004. 277 pp. Hb €39.00.

The topic of martyrdom during the early modern period has recently been the focus of several important studies, particularly since the publication of Brad S. Gregory's *Salvation at Stake* (Harvard, 1999), a groundbreaking study that attempted to provide a cross-generic synthesis of the subject; it continues to generate intense critical debate. It is therefore timely that Frank Lestringant has gathered together revised versions of articles produced between 1991 and 2003 under the title *Lumière des martyrs*. In period, chapters cover the beginnings of the Reformation to the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes; the subjects range from early Huguenot martyrs to friars murdered by pirates in Brazil. Despite the apparently disparate nature of its scope and chronology, two major themes underpin, and unite, the different sections. First is the notion that 'les protestants finissent par combattre les catholiques sur leur terrain et en se servant de leurs propres armes'. Vivid martyrdom scenes are a commonplace of Counter-Reformation art; yet, as Lestringant points out, the first illustrated Catholic martyrology only appeared two decades after Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*. The appropriation of a culture of martyrdom is all the more remarkable since the Council of Geneva originally vetoed the use of the term in 1554, believing it indistinguishable from relics and hagiographic excess. For Lestringant, the manner in which the early Protestant martyrs faced their fates is reflected in the sombre garments they wore, this vestimentary difference exemplifying 'la nudité de la cause exprimée dans une parole dont l'origine est antérieure à toute institution humaine'. The attachment to the 'Cause' allowed persecuted religious minorities to transcend the apparent victory of their oppressors: 'Seule la Cause les rend intelligibles et, en un sens que ne peut concevoir d'emblée l'entendement humain, leur donne un début d'explication.' Lestringant's second underlying thread is his refusal to view the sixteenth-century fascination with martyrs as 'une attirance morbide de caractère sadomasochiste'.