Chapter Six

JACQUES ESPRIT

AT NO MOMENT of French literary history has Jacques Esprit been favored with critical appreciation. Twentieth-century critics, if they mention at all his work *La Fausseté des vertus humaines*, usually dismiss the Jansenist writer as being too didactic and consequently of little interest to the modern reader. Even if this were the case, it would not explain why we read and study the works of other moralists whose tone is scarcely less didactic than that of Jacques Esprit. Among the seventeenth-century prose writers, Esprit has indeed been virtually ignored. But the reason lies perhaps not in his didactic style, so common to the time, but rather in the position his work occupies in relation to La Rochefoucauld’s *Maximes*. The two writers were close friends over a long period of time, and unquestionably, a mutual influence exerted itself in their writings.¹

The *Maximes* is surely the stylistically superior work. Its barbs, its stings, its highly structured, terse sentences overshadow the long-winded and frequently repetitious pronouncements on human behavior in *La Fausseté des vertus humaines*. Esprit’s book, pontifical and heavily dosed with Jansenist doctrine, becomes a foil against which the critics can better measure La Rochefoucauld’s
finesse. When he is not tightly bound to the author of the
*Maximes*, Esprit is grouped among several “moralistes
jansénisants” whose ideas are then studied collectively.
Neither method does justice to Esprit’s work.

My analysis of *La Fausseté des vertus humaines* is
necessarily limited here to the ideas on human relation­
ships, which form perhaps the most vital parts of the work,
for terrestrial love constitutes the greatest threat to man’s
tie to his God. Before entering into that subject, how­
ever, it is necessary to situate more fully M. Esprit’s work.

Published in 1677 and 1678, the two-volume work
lashed out above all at devout humanism. The belief in
man’s “good nature” is systematically destroyed, as are
all notions of the human creature rivaling God for ultimate
worth. Man’s “virtue” (understood to mean his generosity,
his kindness, and all other humanistic elements forming
the composite *homme vertueux*), is shown to be an un­
mitigated sham. Underneath the appearances, below the
surface, there are hidden motives and concealed reasons
that have always our own well-being at stake.\(^3\) *L’amour­
propre* is the leitmotiv of *La Fausseté des vertus humaines*
and, for Esprit, the central pivot of all human behavior.
Man is a monster of self-interest, and Esprit digs in hard,
seizing every opportunity to rip off the mask of virtue.\(^4\)
In fact, the criticism that has long centered upon La
Rochefoucauld’s effort to strip man bare, to reach the ir­
reducible unit of *l’amour-propre* (a theory questioned in
my chapter on the author of the *Maximes*) is far more
applicable to Esprit, for whom self-interest does consti­
tute the one most fundamental element of human be­
havior.

What emerges is an attack against man’s *volonté*, what
Esprit sees as his wish for strong moral fiber, as well as
his *bonne volonté*, which man believes generously leads
him into relationships with his fellow men. Stoicism is
laid to rest, as is the flexible Christian doctrine of the
devout humanists, offering room for both man and God at
its center. Esprit demands a constant stripping bare, a
persistent awareness that appearance and reality share nothing at all. His center of authenticity is always situated in le coeur, whereas modern-day psychology postulates a more complex and less regionally specific division (although generally mental) between act and motivation—the subconscious. Nevertheless, both reflect a constant trend in Western thought, the wish to somehow attain the “true” self. Indeed, it appears that Jacques Esprit expressed the entire concept of authenticity as fully as contemporary psychology, perhaps with less verbal acumen but with no greater degree of abstraction. Modern psychology and psychoanalysis have merely strengthened a culturally significant phenomenon, that of a functioning system independent of, and separate from, a center of conscious behavior. It has not yet explained or proved anything. The supposition of an unconscious remains hypothetical, although centuries of Western thought—through one vocabulary or another—have solidified it enough for us to schematize whole patterns of behavior.

But it would be erroneous to suggest that La Fausseté des vertus humaines is simply a psychic denuding, where fifty-three “virtues” are denounced as false for masking and hiding the one real motivating force in man, his self-interest. What also emerges from the work is a strict effort at controlling human behavior on all levels, from thought to act, through the word. It seems quite possible that at some junctures the severe Jansenist doctrine was in agreement with the prevailing social mood. Critics of the period have suggested that the general turbulence of the second half of the seventeenth century was a disturbing factor to large segments of the French population, and the sense of moral decay was eventually linked, unjustifiably or not, to the flexible complacence of the clergy. The civil disorders had brought about a general awareness of society's fragile vulnerability, and the Jansenist tendency toward control, individual and social, matched the prevailing mood of restraint. For the Jansenist writers, what was needed were not the optimistic ideas that the church had
readily espoused as a reconciliation between two totally distinct moral systems (the rivaling prerogatives of God and the self), but a rigorous separation of earthly and divine. In Jacques Esprit's work there is indeed no transition from one domain to the other.

He avoids a chapter directly on love, since Jansenism could not envision any terrestrial competition for adoration of God. Love, then, for Esprit, would not be considered a false virtue; it would simply be hors du jeu. But the truth is that Jacques Esprit does devote several pages to the subject in three different chapters of the second volume: “La Tempérance,” “La Modestie des femmes,” and “L'Honnêteté des femmes.” The first discusses love within a rather general context of sentiment and emotion, whereas the latter two chapters focus specifically on l'amour. It is significant that Esprit is concerned with physical love in these chapters. He leaves Platonic relationships for the section on friendship.

Writing on temperance, he pits himself directly against Aristotle, for whom desires were dangerous only if uncontrolled by a moderating spirit. For Esprit, however, desire, no matter how weak, is dangerous to man's psychic well-being. He decries most vehemently, however, the alienation that results from intensely experienced emotion. The individual who allows himself to be governed by the reign of passion denies that which is, for Esprit, most fundamentally human: reason. Within the context of the work, such a shift is basically a deviation from the psychic norm and is considered therefore as highly undesirable. Unable to control himself—unable, perhaps more importantly, to be controlled—man succumbing to the sway of violent feelings becomes not only asocial but inhuman. As protection against these psychologically and socially destructive impulses, the individual must combat them from incipience:

[L'expérience] apprend à tout le monde que les passions sont séditioneuses et dérégélées en quelque état qu'on les considère: car si on les considère dans leur naissance, les
plus faibles de même que les plus violentes préviennent la raison, et n'attendent pas ses ordres pour s'élever. Or c'est un dérèglement manifeste, puisque c'est à la raison à donner le branle à toutes les puissances de l'âme, et que pas une ne doit se remuer que par sa direction, que si l'on examine ce qu'elles font dès qu'elles sont élevées, on voit qu'au lieu d'être souples et obéissantes à la raison, elles lui sont rebelles; qu'elles la combattent et qu'elles lui ôtent la liberté de juger, ou corrompent ses jugements. De plus, chaque passion après avoir aveuglé l'homme, l'asservit et l'attache à son propre objet.

The servile state of man ruled by his emotions is rejected by Esprit, who seeks to install, or to reinstall, the reign of lucid reason. (Like Rousseau, a century later, he creates a myth-like fantasy of a golden time before man's essential corruption, an era, for Esprit, when man loved God alone, and the human creature was no rival.) Felicity is calm, sure, steady; and only a true Christian, one who abstains from sensual pleasure for love of God, not for a "false" reason such as avarice, can find such happiness.

His attack is a major thrust against the prerogatives of the self and the aristocratic code. As Paul Bénichou has written, noble society had never considered the censuring of passion, of the passions, as a condition of human worth. For the aristocracy, from the Middle Ages through the seventeenth century, "virtue" (grandeur of soul and spirit) was not in the denial of the passions but rather in their full expression. Medieval Christian moralists had found it necessary to denounce this "natural" moral, for it was in direct contradiction to the Bible's teachings. In the seventeenth century a flexible form of Christianity, granting a high place to terrestrial love once freed from its grosser elements, combined with, or at least leaned upon, the courtois idea of love and its sublimated impulses, and thereby offered a successful compromise between a natural moral and a rigorously Christian one. For Jacques Esprit no such reconciliation is possible. His is a total rejection of nature's way, and sexual abstinence is requisite.
Although the chapter on temperance contains several pronouncements against the dangers of *la volupté*, Esprit's strongest attack and censure appear in two other chapters: “*La Modestie des femmes,*” and “*L'Honnêteté des femmes.*” In *La Fausseté des vertus humaines*, the burden and guilt of loving fall directly upon the woman, and Esprit's attitude contrasts sharply with the portrayal of women and love in the novels of the century, which were direct descendants of medieval *courtoisie*. The dependent position of women in seventeenth-century French society has been detailed by many critics and scholars, perhaps most thoroughly by Gustave Fagniez. It is not my intention here to repeat that position. But Esprit's ideas are unquestionably more in accordance with prevailing social standards for women than with the *romanesque* picture. Traditional ideas on woman's submissive role were strong, and as Molière expressed in *L'Ecole des femmes*, signs of revolt—fine clothing, makeup, flirtations—were vehemently condemned.

In both chapters Esprit is eager to explain the close attention he accords to women and their societal role. He clearly states that there are virtues appropriate to men and others that are the lot of women. Modesty is among the latter, for women have a “natural timidity” and coldness that are conducive to such caution (p. 91). The chapter on *l'honnêteté* begins with a bitter denunciation of woman's position in society, only to change quickly into a facile acceptance of the status quo:

Mais peu de gens s'aperçoivent que l'amour propre a rendu tous les hommes de vrais tyrans, et que leur tyrannie, qui est cachée dans leur coeur, éclaterait par leurs cruautés si l'impuissance ne retenait leur féroce et leur violence. . . . Si quelqu'un trouve de la difficulté à croire qu'il soit généralement vrai que le naturel de l'homme est fier, farouche et inhumain; il n'a qu'à jeter les yeux sur tous les endroits du monde; il verra que les personnes riches et puissantes oppriment partout celles qui sont pauvres et sans appui; il verra que les hommes se prévalent partout des avantages que leur sexe leur donne sur celui des femmes;
qu'ils les traitent avec tyrannie, les font vivre sous des lois injustes et rigoureuses. . . . Ainsi le joug du mariage qui assujettit aux mêmes lois les femmes et les maris, n'asservit plus que les femmes; ainsi la chasteté qui doit être commune à l'un et à l'autre sexe, est devenue la vertu des femmes et des filles; et c'est ce qui m'oblige à leur attribuer particulièrement, et à parler de l'honnêteté comme si c'était une vertu qui ne fût propre qu'à elles. (Pp. 100-102)

A bit too prompt to accede to the “way things are,” Esprit's early criticism dissolves in face of his severe standards for judging women's conduct. Perhaps he felt self-exonereated after his profession of innocence. However, it is easy to penetrate beneath the surface protestation and glean a quick acceptance of the double standard. Since passion is woman's business, Esprit will offer her ways of protecting herself and, consequently, society against its demands.

It is against the tradition of la courtoisie and l'amour honnête that Esprit directs his anger. Seventeenth-century fiction writers are to be held responsible for the current vogue of sentimentality, for the depiction of love as a pure and generous sentiment: “Les Auteurs des Romans ont réussi dans l'entreprise qu'ils ont faite de persuader au monde que les femmes peuvent être galantes vertueusement et faire l'amour avec innocence . . .” (p. 105). For Esprit, this mixed moral of love and virtue is a radical impossibility, since the woman involved in a love relationship is “possessed.” No longer governed by reason, subject to insensate anxiety, she is alienated from virtue. The marks of her soul are rage and jealousy: “Dire que l'amour est une passion honnête, c'est assurer qu'il est honnête d'ètre tourmenté par une furie, et de sentir tous les traits de la jalousie, de la rage et du désespoir” (p. 106).

Terrestrial passion, far from being innocent, is guilty of the most monumental of crimes: it detracts from divine love. There is no question for Esprit and the Jansenists of viewing love relationships, even chaste, as an imperfect form of divine love. Such affection is a rival, a serious
threat to man's devotion to God; energy and time that might be used for religious worship are consumed in unworthy occupations directed toward the "other."

In "L'Honnêteté des femmes," Esprit returns to his leitmotiv of self-interest. Enumerating "false" motives for woman's wish to appear virtuous to the world, he methodically destroys whatever pride she may have in her conduct. Outside controls—a sound moral education, fear of punishment, desire to marry and remove herself from parental control—are not sufficient in Jacques Esprit's moral universe. He demands control from within, unmotivated by self-interest; and although his ideas at first reading sometimes appear banal, his thought, as it develops, frees itself from empty terms and becomes indeed a potent expression against immodesty.

Thus he first predictably states that "il n'y a que la modestie des femmes Chrétiennes qui soit une vertu véritable" (p. 98). Nevertheless, pushing further, he constructs an absolute standard for self-governance: "L'on peut . . . dire qu'une femme véritablement honnête ne doit pas seulement imposer silence aux vaines passions, mais aussi les étouffer dès leur naissance, et même les empêcher de naître" (p. 109). Esprit is now at antipodes from the more-or-less refined love of the courtois novel and from "le christianisme de sublimation" with its emphasis on adoration of saints and mystics. His vocabulary is one of total sexual repression—"imposer silence," "empêcher," "étouffer."

Nor does Esprit stop there. Not only must a woman (he never varies from the emphasis on female conduct after his lengthy self-exonerating introduction) appear so morally severe that no man dares approach her, she is also responsible for banishing all verbal expressions judged "impure" from her conversation: "Il faut encore qu'une femme véritablement honnête fasse comprendre . . . qu'elle n'entend pas le langage de ces passions, ni les signes qui font l'office de ce langage" (p. 110).

It is perhaps a result of the Cartesian revolution in the field of language that Esprit's work is so heavily impreg-
nated with allusion to the spoken and written word’s enormous force. For him *la parole* is concomitant to *l’acte*, no less powerful or significant. Esprit clearly saw that the emotional charge of a word is as conducive to “immodest” desire as actions themselves. What he calls *des paroles sales* were invented by “les voluptueux . . . pour regoûter leurs sensualités par leurs entretiens, et pour allumer et irriter leur passion brutale” (p. 83).

Esprit delves even further. The stripping off of “layers” never reaches an end. There is always one more level underneath. Authenticity seems to be fleeting, at best. Unsatisfied with dissolving the layer of outer manifestation—first act, then word—Esprit comes to exact absolute control over the thought process, with God alone as judge. Following a semi-Platonic view, he states that thoughts, like words, are images of things, and therefore to be reckoned with as active, powerful forces. The secret language that is thought must be as free of longing and desire as the words and actions that interpret them.

Even with this, he has not reached the final “layer” of the self. “Below” the levels of action, word, thought, there is the motive for all these, and it too must be chaste, pure: “Il ne faut pas se contenter de savoir que leurs moeurs et leurs sentiments sont honnêtes; l’on doit encore tâcher de découvrir par quel motif elles gardent l’honnêteté, et établir auparavant quel est le motif qui la rend vertueuse” (pp. 115-16). In other words, there can be no distance between action, word, thought, and cause. No false motive must interpolate, and God alone shall judge: “Le coeur humain est un grand mystère. Les pensées et les désirs s’élèvent sur sa surface, et peuvent être apercus. C’est pourquoi il n’y a personne qui ne sache ce qu’il pense et ce qu’il désire; mais les motifs des pensées et des désirs sont cachés dans sa profondeur, qui n’est pénétrée que des yeux de Dieu” (pp. 113-14).

What Jacques Esprit posits here, in his ultimate bow to divine wisdom, is essentially the same control modern psychoanalysis would see in the authoritative domination by the “superego,” a construct no less questionable than “the eyes of God.” In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud,
tackling the same problem as Esprit, that of the conflicting demands between the erotic and the social, hypothesizes a mental process akin to what Esprit had formulated in his work:

The super-ego is an agency which has been inferred by us, and conscience is a function which we ascribe, among other functions, to that agency. This function consists in keeping a watch over the actions and intentions of the ego and judging them, in exercising a censorship. The sense of guilt, the harshness of the super-ego, is thus the same thing as the severity of the conscience. It is the perception which the ego has of being watched over in this way, the assessment of the tension between its own strivings and the demands of the super-ego.⁹

All this is not to suggest, of course, that Freud and his followers accorded the same moral supremacy, as if by right, to such “authority.” They clearly saw the dangers for the individual in denying sexual fulfillment. What is significant is the similarity of the schematization drawn by seventeenth-century moralists and modern psychologists. The essential divisions of control and subordination, differing only in context (religious and “scientific”), remain the same.

There is at least one other important similarity between Esprit’s ideas and the concepts of twentieth-century psychology and psychoanalysis. Both schemas seem to show that by stripping off the “layers,” by probing “deep down,” by peering beneath the surface to reach the hidden motives, we will eventually dispel them. Once a state of psychological transparency is achieved, the individual will return to a healthy state of mind, able to control impulses that may threaten his equanimity. Esprit’s book is consequently a careful, explanatory work, showing the way to total self-knowledge, leading the reader step by step from action to motivation, toward ultimate personal frankness. Self-deception can be chipped away, and the individual can achieve heightened awareness, allowing him to govern his strong desires.
1. Antoine Adam, in the fourth volume of *Histoire de la littérature française au XVIIe siècle*, 5 vols. (Paris: Donat, 1948-62), and more recently, Louis Hippeau in *Essai sur la morale de La Rochefoucauld* (Paris: A. G. Nizet, 1967), have shown the literary and philosophical debts Esprit and La Rochefoucauld owed each other. Hippeau, however, in stressing Esprit’s allegiance to Jansenism, evokes the great gulf that ultimately divided the two writers. In *La Religion des Classiques* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1948), Henri Busson accentuates the psychological rather than the religious bent of *La Fausseté des vertus humaines*, showing how close Esprit’s ideas were to those of La Rochefoucauld.


3. The vocabulary of “layers” is extremely important to Jacques Esprit’s writings, as it is also to twentieth-century psychology. Perhaps it is the best conceptualization of authenticity, of “true self-ness” that can be offered. Of course, the être-parahre distinction runs rampant through seventeenth-century literature, especially after Corneille. Thus Esprit’s constant use of “layered” vocabulary can be seen as a psychological fabrication, which stuck, and as a variation of a particular socio-literary theme.

4. As other critics have all carefully explained, the frontispiece of *La Fausseté des vertus humaines* shows the mask of virtue falling from Seneca’s face, thereby leaving exposed the true visage of the philosopher. But the man who discovers it is shown averting his eyes, turning them toward another figure whose name is “Vérité” and who signifies the only true path, Christian virtue and grace. This goes one step further than the frontispiece of the *Maximes*, where Seneca’s unmasked face is the ultimate truth: there is no Christian rival.


6. It is perhaps in the chapter on friendship that Esprit is more clearly inspired by his friend La Rochefoucauld. *L’amitié* is denounced as a false virtue, for self-interest alone prompts us to seek out the companionship of others. What is most interesting in the chapter is the analysis that Esprit offers of Montaigne’s close, intense relationship with Etienne de la Boétie, one that Esprit perceives as bordering on feelings of love.

7. Jacques Esprit, *La Fausseté des vertus humaines*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1678), 2:25-27. Subsequent references are to this edition, and will be found in the text; all quotations are from volume two.

