

the fact that he clarifies Wespřemi's relation to Enlightenment and gives a punctual description of his personality and work in the mirror of his contemporaries.

As it has become clear, Szelestei deals with his topics in the correlation of the characteristic connection-systems of that age. He does not make prosaic, theoretical statements, but gives lifelike presentations with a critical attitude. Utilizing human relations in his analysis, he modifies the 18th century image of Hungary in certain views. As he creates occasions to get acquainted with a personal destiny or career, the ideological background unfolds in an authentic, experience-like representation. It is also typical that studies follow the logical line of a literary detection or debate, so the interest of the reader is continuously maintained.

Apart from the constant contextualizing, the historical background will help the reception, and it is expectable that Szelestei's data and discoveries will be processed in the Hungarian literary histories.

**The Reign of Spirit and the Wandering of the Wise. Observations on the
Volume *La prudence de l'homme d'esprit. L'éthique de Pierre Charron*
by Claudiu Gaiu**

*Paula TUDOR
Université de Neuchâtel
Faculté de Lettres et Sciences humaines*

Keywords: Pierre Charron, scepticism, a modern intellectual, Reformation, ethics, power, politics

E-mail: tudor.paula@ymail.com

*

The university traditions dominant through textbooks and lectures have got us used to considering modern philosophy as beginning from Descartes. The merit of Claudiu Gaiu's work, *La prudence de l'homme d'esprit. L'éthique de Pierre Charron*¹ is that of treating a corpus of ideas using the means of the history of philosophy, while it is usually treated within the confines of literary analysis and the history of ideas, or it is attributed to the field of the anecdotic. Being a follower of the French–Italian tradition – as it is also suggested by the systematized bibliography at the end of the book – the author gathers around Pierre Charron's figure the moral ideas of Erasmus, Jean Bodin, Justus Lipsius, Jean Calvin and, of course, Montaigne. Among the Anglo-Saxon researchers, Richard H. Popkin is the

¹ Claudiu Gaiu, *La prudence de l'homme d'esprit. L'éthique de Pierre Charron*, With a Preface by Denis Kambouchner (Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2010), 360 p. ISBN: 978-973-1997-83-4.

one who determines Claudiu Gaiu's image of the pre-Cartesian era of modern philosophy.¹ The American philosopher reads modern philosophy as a rediscovery of Antique scepticism and as an attempt to get ahead of it. With Popkin's volume always at hand, in his first book, Gaiu sometimes "forgets" about other traditions surely as important as Pyrrhonism, especially those of stoic mentality which is present in the texts written by Charron and his master, Michel de Montaigne. Pierre Charron is known to the historians of philosophy for his *Book of Wisdom*,² a great summary of anthropological, moral, psychological and political knowledge of the 16th century. At the same time, the young historian from Cluj also attacks the fortress of theological writings and works on anti-protestant disputes built by the priest from Paris.

Aside from the introduction, the volume presented here contains five chapters, each treating different topics. First, we have an ethical-metaphysical analysis of the theory of the four virtues, prudence, justice, strength and temperance, which are celebrated by western civilization through statue representations and philosophical treatises, the four virtues also being the factors that organize Pierre Charron's anthropology. Additionally, political philosophy is approached, Charron being a defender of monarchic centralism as a means of modernization. We would have liked to read a deeper analysis of political neo-stoicism, and perhaps a dialogue created between it and Machiavelli, but the author's interest turns towards another direction: the Renaissance intellectual's relation to power. The third chapter is dedicated to the deaf and proscriptive battle between theology and philosophy, and it is shown how the latter is compelled to work clandestinely without directly admitting its incompatibility with the doctrines of the clerical authority. We are still far from the anti-clerical tones of Scottish and French Enlightenment. However, Montaigne's and Charron's thinking constitute one of the roots of the philosophy of the Enlightenment era – as we risk to add to Claudiu Gaiu's presentation – the method and spirit of which make him turn back again and again to investigate where certain ideas originate from, leaving the reader with the challenge of subsequently remaking the chain of philosophic thought. Surely, we could have profited more from a work on philosophic clandestinity, starting from the mysterious and famous Cartesian statement "larvatus prodeo" (I advance masked), but the monographer rarely considers the evolution of ideas after the 16th century. Our opinion is also supported by the next step of the monograph which studies how modern French language created its own philosophic manner of speaking starting from poetic and religious-spiritual experiences or legal codifications. After all, it was just in the final chapter, which is more than a simple conclusion, when Gaiu decided – and it was high time! – to give up the cramped circumspection self-imposed by using the academic style and to reveal the real topic of the volume: the portrait of the intellectual at the rise of modernity. It frequently happens that a research leads us towards another topic, a different one from that of our original topic. In our opinion, this is the case of the discussed work, too.

¹ See Ibid., 172–179.

² Pierre Charron, *Les trois livres de la Sagesse* (Bordeaux: S. Millanges, 1601), henceforth: *De la Sagesse*.

Starting from the aim of composing a monographic study about the philosopher Pierre Charron, the author little by little reveals the theme of this path: the modern scholar's condition. We ask ourselves with some regret, how Claudiu Gaiu's study would have turned out, if he had been writing from the beginning or had re-written his book starting from what seems to be the main stream of his investigations. What has been said here justifies a more detailed approach of this idea, which we attempt to do below.

We find the first configurations of the modern intellectual (late Renaissance) in the half-light of the pedagogical-political writings addressed to the prince, in which the author, describing sovereign authority and proclaiming his obedience, craftily portrays himself, the erudite advisor. At the same time, there are direct descriptions in which the scholar projects an ideal self in the form of a worldly wise man who builds his inner life through austerity in the centre of the community. There also is a redefinition of the intellectual's role in the fortress of faculties which, beginning from Plato, had been reigning as monarchs above the lower class of senses and the aristocracy of emotions. The question has an even more radical form: what rights does this monarch still have, and does this fortress – left as a legacy by the Greeks, then fortified by Christian theologies – still exist? Have its walls not been broken down by now, the old king becoming a wanderer?

This image of the citadel kept the metaphysical illusion of the human capacity to mentally rebuild the hierarchy of the world starting from the first principles and then getting to the last details. An example of this is *Universae naturae theatrum* by Jean Bodin, published in the year 1596. Bodin's *Theatre* is a general encyclopaedia that aims to represent the whole universe from the first elements to the highest principles, from the inanimate to the speechless entities, up to angels and God.¹ This scale of the world is extremely widespread among humanists. In the 15th century, Bartolomeo Fazio, Giannozzo Manetti, Pico de la Mirandola composed works on the intellectual dignity of men, capable of reproducing the structure of the Universe through knowledge. Later, Italian metaphysical prose conquered the rest of the continent, Hernán Pérez de Oliva presenting the *Diálogo de la dignidad del hombre* (1548), and somewhat later, in France, Pierre Boistuaud, after saddening the readers by describing the mess of human life presented in *Théâtre du monde* (1558), gave their faith back by a *Short discussion on the excellence and dignity of man*, published in the same year. These texts are based on antique philosophy and the reflections of Church Fathers. People of Renaissance evoke the pitiful condition of men, a consequence of the original sin and of intellectual grandeur as well. If God creates, men gain knowledge.

At the end of Renaissance this type of vision began to be challenged. Montaigne and, as his follower, Pierre Charron identify in this kind of philosophy a profound tendency of the human spirit which supposes that everything is accessible to him and constructs a representation of the Universe according to his own measures.

The topic also provokes a reflection on the appearance of modern philosophy in the vernacular language. In the philosopher's workroom we find

¹ Gaiu, *La prudence de l'homme d'esprit. L'éthique de Pierre Charron*, 71–94.

attached meditations on the Scriptures, on antique and modern poetry, on Greek and Latin thinking, and on scholastic theology. Quotes and ideas are borrowed from diverse sources to be fused in the logical joints and the narrative flow of an innovative conception. Pierre Charron is one of those who analyze the intellectual resources and strategies which create the idea of man as a microcosm that reproduces the macrocosm through his intellect. His criticism is articulated in two times. Firstly, he accepts the universality of the intellect that manifests itself in the total liberty of judgement, and secondly, he negates people's capacity to use this liberty to direct the total theatre of nature.

Naming the wise (the character that guides the structuring of his treatise about Wisdom) *spiritual*, Pierre Charron refers to the scriptural opposition between the *man of flesh* and the *man of spirit*. This way, the author resumes a terminology familiar to the era. The wise self-determines himself in opposition to the exterior without this separation being considered an abandonment: "the skilful man will fulfil his duty but will not stop judging the nonsense, vice and wickedness included in it. He will fulfil it because it is in use in his country and it is useful to his country and perhaps to himself, people live like this, nothing has to be stopped. You have to benefit from the world as it is. However, you have to consider it as being something strange to you."¹

The author of the *Book of Wisdom*, in Claudiu Gaiu's opinion, sometimes applies the vocabulary of the *spirituals*, a name that, in the era, referred to different religious orientations represented by either Catholics like Jacques Lefèvre d'Etaples and Marguerite de Navarre, or by Protestants like Bernardino Ochino or Sébastien Castillion. *Spiritualized* by the Christian message, they dissimulate themselves from the hostile world respecting its ecclesiastic and civil external rituals and ceremonies. We know about them from Calvin's anathemas against them:

"Now I am talking only to those who, in order to legitimate themselves, are searching for the most convenient wiles: and they mock the blames that are put on them, or they get so upset and angry that they swear at God. Because they borrow the name of Nicodemus to be shielded, as if they were his imitators: I will call them this way for the time being until I show that they do a great injustice to this holy

¹ Pierre Charron, *De la Sagesse* II, 2. (modern edition: Paris: Fayard, 1986), 415. "Au reste il faut bien sçavoir distinguer, et separer nous mesme d'avec nos charges publiques; un chacun de nous joüe deux roolles et deux personnages, l'un estranger et apparent, l'autre propre et essentiel. Il faut discerner la peau de la chemise: l'habile homme fera bien sa charge, et ne laissera pas de bien juger sa sottise, le vice, la fourbe qui y est. Il l'exercera, car elle est en usage en son pays, elle est utile au public, et peut estre à soy, le monde vit ainsi, il ne faut rien gaster. Il se faut servir et se prevaloir de monde tel qu'on se trouve; Cependant le considerer comme choses estrangere de soy; sçavoir bien de soy joüyr à part, et se communiquer à un sien bien confident, au pis aller à soy mesme" – fragment discussed by the author in Gaiu, *La prudence de l'homme d'esprit. L'éthique de Pierre Charron*, 95.

character pulling him down to their level, boasting with his example.”¹
or:

”One of the main doctrines of their theology is exactly that you need to own the art of pretending in order to deceive the world. I do not even know whether to call this shamelessness or wickedness. Because the main virtue that we need to have is Simplicity. It is a sign of perversity when a man gets to do this: fluttering here and there in order to escape from the hands of those who think they have him. On the other hand, it has to be done because they are extremely outrageous, they are not ashamed when they get blamed for having no words. From this source comes the simulation that permits them to pretend in everything that we want as long as we like it.”²

It is hard to measure the influence of Erasmus’ different works in the era. However, the author of this monograph tries to do so.³ The Flemish thinker’s productivity and success feed the spiritual searches and community life strategies of these groups. It is about finding a way of living in the world escaping from its influences, and about repressing their personalities waiting to get the light of Spirit. To Erasmus of Rotterdam, any recipe, any spiritual exercise proposed by ancient philosophy, Stoic or Epicurean, is nothing but coming to terms with vice, with the sin that is essentially part of the world. In *The Christian Soldier’s Manual*, he calls for an urgent spiritual reform through which Christ’s soldier gets ready to unconditionally submit to a *dictatorship of the Holy Spirit*. The old Platonic republic of the spirit’s faculties reformed this way condemns the high potencies

¹ Jean Calvin, *Excuse de Messieurs les Nicodémites sur la complainte qu’ilz font de sa trop grand rigueur* (Genève: Jean Girard, 1544), in *Corpus Reformatorum* 34. *Ioannis Calvini Opere Quae Supersunt Omnia* 6, eds. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, Eduardus Reuss (Brunsvigae [Braunschweig]: 1867), 595–596. “Je m’adresse seulement à ceux qui pour se justifier cherchent de subtrefuges qu’il leur est possible: et se moquent des remonstrances qu’on leur fait, ou on sont marriz et s’en despitent jusque à blasphemer Dieu. Pource qu’ilz empruntent le nom de Nicodeme, pour en faire en bouclier, comme s’ilz estoient ses imitateurs: je les nommeray ainsi pour ceste heure jusque à tant que j’aye montré combien ilz font grand tord à se saint personnage, en le mettant à leur ranc, et qui plus est se glorifiant de son exemple.” – fragment analyzed by the author in Gaiu, *La prudence de l’homme d’esprit. L’éthique de Pierre Charron*, 247, footnote 400.

² Calvin, *Excuse de Messieurs les Nicodémites sur la complainte qu’ilz font de sa trop grand rigueur*, 50–51. “Mesme c’est un des principaux articles de leur theologie, qu’il faut avoir l’art de se contrefaire pour tromper le monde. Je ne say si je dois appeler cela impudence ou malice. Car puis que c’est la principale vertu que nous devons avoir en recommandation, que Simplicité: c’est signe d’une nature du tout perverse, quand un homme s’adonne ainsi à se plier çà et là, comme un serpent, pour glisser des mains de ceux qui le pensent tenir. Et d’autre costé, il faut qu’ilz soyent merueilleusement effrontez, de n’avoir nulle honte, qu’on leur puisse reprocher qu’il n’y ait aucune tenue en leurs parolles. De ceste mesme source vient la simulation qu’ilz se permettent à faire semblant de tout ce qu’on voudra pour complaire aux hommes” – quoted by Gaiu, *La prudence de l’homme d’esprit. L’éthique de Pierre Charron*, 249., footnote 405.

³ Gaiu, *La prudence de l’homme d’esprit. L’éthique de Pierre Charron*, 205–263.

who were very respected in the ancient settlements: solicitude for parents, brotherly love, benevolence towards friends or mercy for those who suffer are deprived of rights and disclosed by the new military regime for being consubstantial through their nature characterized by rebellious elements of sensuality, dissipation and desires of all kinds. The urgency of salvation does not allow any moment of silence, silence being the moment when either pride or flesh – temporarily or definitively – take over the control in the town of Spirit. The state of never-ending anxiety, searching, annihilation can only be defined through paradox, namely, with Erasmus' words: "peace in war, war in peace, life in death, death in life, freedom in slavery, slavery in freedom".¹

However, Charron changes the meaning of the term "spiritual". What distinguishes the wise is his particular privilege of expressing judgements about everything:

"Primarily, wisdom which is neither common, nor popular, has this freedom and authority, *Jure suo singulari*, to judge everything (it is the privilege of the wise and the spiritual: *Spiritualis omnia dijudicat, et a nemine judicatur*) and, while judging, to censor and condemn the common and popular opinions (as mostly being untrue). (...) Or doing this he is not able not to raise the hostility and envy of the world."²

The split between the community obligations and the inner life lead him towards a culture of the self which condemns both the superstitions of those from the outside, and the personal pride. Similarly to Erasmus, he knows that the enemy is already inside the fortress. The change that it produces is that the intellect, the receptacle of the principles of Creation, is no longer representative for the life of spirit, but judgement, the capacity of estimation and appreciation, the principles of which are reconstituted at each new operation. If we are allowed to use a metaphorical expression inspired by the present study, we could say that Monarch Intellectual, reigning over emotions and senses, is substituted by the Cosmopolitan Wanderer, a nomadic character that embodies the faculty of judgement moving from one jurisdiction to another, registering different kinds of customs and government systems.

The spiritual variety of men is infinite, however, the author of *The Book of Wisdom* thinks that he can determine three great human typologies. On the lowest stage of the intellectual scale there are the weak spirits, whose brains are affected

¹ Erasmus, *Manuel du soldat chrétien (Enchiridion militis christiani)*, trans. A. F. Festugières (Paris: Vrin, 1971), 46–47. – quoted by Gaiu, *La prudence de l'homme d'esprit. L'éthique de Pierre Charron*, 258.

² Gaiu, *La prudence de l'homme d'esprit. L'éthique de Pierre Charron*, 243. "Premierement que la sagesse qui n'est commun ny populaire, a proprement cette liberté et autorité, *Jure suo singulari*, de juger de tout (c'est le privilege du sage et du spirituel, *Spiritualis omnia dijudicat, et a nemine judicatur*) et en jugeant, de censurer et condamner (comme la plus part erronnées) les opinions communes et populaires. Qui le fera doncq? Or ce faisant ne peut qu'elle n'encoure la malle grace et l'envie du monde."

by the qualities of cold and humidity, inadequate for intellectual development. These are people who cannot be relied on, because their feelings and desire of association are inconstant. Yet they are the ones who must “listen, serve and be led” constituting the lower class.

The “mediocres” are somewhat higher on the scale. If in the case of the first class, judgement seems to be totally lacked, these ones are distinct through capacity, knowledge and ability, but their rationality does not reach the last consequences, and they do not acknowledge the cultural diversity of law and customs:

“On the second level, in the middle, there are those who do not judge enough, they stop at what they are commonly told and what they are given from the beginning, without searching for the truth and the source of things; even more, they think that this is forbidden, and they do not look further than where they are; they think that things are the same everywhere and if somewhere they are different, it must be because the people there are misled and are barbarians. The *mediocres* are enslaved by the opinions and city laws of the place where they are and, consequently, in which they are enclosed, not only through respect and customs, which they all have to follow, but through their heart and soul, too: and they think that what is thought in their village is the real foundation of truth (this does not apply to the revealed divine truth or to religion), the one, namely the best order of life.”¹

Their sufficiency has consequences in their philosophical options. For Charron, these can be found in “Aristotle’s school”: they adhere to a dogma that they do not question, mistaking truth for utility. Depending on their ability, the political leaders of our world are chosen among these people.

Finally, at the last level of intelligence there are the “living and clear” spirits equipped with a “strong, determined and solid” judgement. They constitute the rare category of people who do not stop at the first impression, at the opinions they get and the actual morals, but they show a great curiosity for history and the institutions of distant foreign nations:

“... they are not satisfied with what is said, they do not stop at the common opinions and ready-made data, and they do not let themselves

¹ Pierre Charron, *De la Sagesse*, 291. “Au second et moyen estage sont ceux, ... qui ne jugent pas assés, s'arrestent à ce que l'on tient communement, et l'on baille du premier coup, sans d'avantage s'enquerir de la verité et source des choses, voire pensent qu'il ne l'est pas permis: et ne regardent point plus loin ou ils se trouvent; pensent que par tout est ainsi, ou doit estre: que si c'est autrement, ils faillent et sont des barbares. Ils s'asservissent aux opinions et loix municipales du lieu ou ils se trouvent deslors qui sont enclos, non seulement par observance et usage, ce que tous doivent faire mais encores de cuer et d'ame: et pensent que ce que l'on croit en leur vilage, est la vraye touche de verité (ceci ne s'entends de la verité divine revelée ni de la religion) c'est la seule ou bien la meilleure regle de bien vivre.”

caught by public beliefs, of which they are not surprised at all, knowing that they contain many inventions, forgeries and impostures received by the world with consent and cheers, if not even exaltation and public worship. They research anything that turns up, they deepen it with consideration, search its cause, motive and principle without passion, even preferring doubt and the protractment of the conclusion to letting themselves be captured by falsity through light-mindedness or hasty judgement asserting and accepting something that does not have a clear basis.”¹

Charron places into this caste the skeptics, who do not get embarrassed by the suspension of conclusions in their reasoning if the arguments are not satisfactory. In opposition to the mediocres, these people belong to "Socrates' and Plato's school", that is, the philosophers who prefer debate and conflict of ideas instead of unconditionally supporting a ready-made theory or a useful truth. In spite of their honesty, they are ill seen because their presence always questions the most widespread opinions. Being aware of the distrust that surrounds them, spiritual people do not make noise living disguised by paying full respect to the morals of their country. In fact, the changes and disturbances of the world are due to the mediocre who, because of their presumption and ambition, consciously or not, are always looking for a superior position. If the mediocre are the best in managing their social rank, the wise can respond to the dangers of the spirit. The first danger comes from the permanent agitation of the mind. If it is not engaged in a precise purpose and its attention is not disciplined, the mind wanders among extravagant imaginations and dreams. The second danger comes from its universality. The spirit is everywhere at home, both in the most important topics, and in the most goalless ones, without any discernment in the importance of things. To all these is added its spontaneity which seems to suspend time through the rapidity of varying between domestic affairs and celestial ones. All these characteristics predispose spirituals to insanity, an impairment of spiritual life and not an assault of flesh or betrayal of emotions. The author draws attention to the strange closeness of wisdom and madness, both representing fulfilments of spiritual life. At this point we feel that the author of the book *La prudence de l'homme d'esprit*, little by little, substitutes Charron transforming the modern beginnings of a modern theory of a topic into a personal interpretation of contemporary subjectivity. It has to be instantly stated

¹ Ibid., 292. "... ne se contentent pas d'un ouy dire, ne s'arrestent aux opinions communes et recëues, ne se laissent pas gagner et preoccuper á la crance publique, de laquelle il, e s'étonnent point, sçachant qu'il y a plusieurs bourdes, faucetés et impostures receuës au monde avec approbation et applaudissement. Voire adoration et reverence publique: mais examinent toutes choses qui se proposent, sondent meurement, et cherchent sans passions les causes, motifs, et ressorts jusques á la racine, aymant mieux douter et tenir en suspens leur creance, que par une trop molle et lasche facilité, ou legerté, ou precipitation de jugement, se paitre de fausseté, et affirmer ou tenir asseurez de chose de laquelle ils ne peuvent avoir raison certaine." Ibid., 292.

that this hermeneutical leap is permitted by an attentive reading of the Charronian treatise.

The first thing that has to be embedded in the judgement of the wise is that the spirit has no limits. Instead of deploring this situation, it adopts a sceptical posture. It will not find its peace searching for the truth, but through negating any definitive conclusion. The wise knows the value of human arguments produced by this instrument of “lead and wax” that is the human spirit which can occupy any place and justify any action. The art of wisdom is to keep away from its decisions and conclusions, and from public acceptance of scholarly or political dogmas. It is a paradoxical individualization in which the detachment from community principles is charged with a complete dissolution of any final decision of the mind. The wise man’s apparent respect for the customs and ordinances of his country has no other goal than that of protecting him from the distrust of the crowd and of the princes. At the same time, it is a means of arming himself against the self-destructing force of the spirit which does not have natural landmarks and constraints. What distinguishes the wise is the flexibility of thinking in which the admitted truth or the laws of society are not immutable, but they are only points of orientation and support that suggest to the mind new ways of research. The natural knowledge of people, to Charron, crowned by a sceptical psychology, refers to an anthropology of authority present in religion, science, law and customs. The position of the wise, similarly to that of the fool, by the way, is to capture the conventional nature of these principles of unity. After denouncing the illusion of the natural character of human institutions, the monarchic model assigned to the internal structure of the spirit cannot hold for a long time either. It is replaced by a “passing topic”,¹ which self-constitutes in each situation similarly to how destiny is being written in each moment.

We welcome the appearance of this monograph which inspires replies and arguments coming from the perspective of anthropology and contemporary philosophy. The value of the study on the history of ideas and the history of philosophy, undertaken by Claudiu Gaiu, is illustrated precisely by these critical responses which create an atmosphere of dialogue and tolerance, the probe of the philosophical spirit, according to Pierre Charron.

Translated by Boglárka Németh

¹ For a detailed discussion of this “sujet fuyant,” see Gaiu, *La prudence de l'homme d'esprit. L'éthique de Pierre Charron*, 54.