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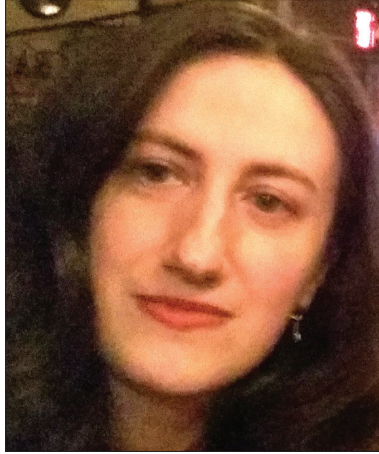
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Book

Politics and Scepticism in La Mothe Le Vayer. The Two-Faced Philosopher?,
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COPING WITH DOUBT IN HISTORY: UNCERTAINTY AND ARBITRARINESS IN THE WRITING ABOUT THE GREAT ORIENTAL EMPIRES (1670'S-1730'S)¹

Abstract

My study is based on a corpus made of three books about the Oriental empires written by the French libertine François Bernier, the Polish Jesuit Judas Thaddeus Krusinski and the Moldavian Prince Dimitrie Cantemir. In analyzing these three works, my research is, on the one hand, interested in their approach to uncertainty in history and, on the other hand, on their emphasis on the importance of arbitrary events, which seem apparently insignificant. In so doing, my article argues that the works belonging to Bernier, Krusinski and Cantemir are not histories with a linear development, exclusively based on heroic figures that perform extraordinary actions.

Keywords: history, doubt, uncertainty, plausibility, arbitrariness

[...] but I intend to push much further my reasoning, and to lead to the obvious acknowledgement of the fact that there is almost no certainty in everything that the most famous historians that we have had so far tell, and that most probably those, who will choose the same activity in the future, will not at all be more successful in all their attempts.

[...] mais je prétends pousser bien plus outre mon raisonnement, et faire reconnaître manifestement, qu'il n'y a presque nulle certitude en tout ce que débitent les plus fameux historiens, que nous ayons eus jusqu'ici, et que vraisemblablement ceux, qui prendront la même occupation à l'avenir, ne réussiront guère mieux en toutes leurs entreprises.²

In *Du peu de certitude qu'il y a dans l'histoire* (1668), La Mothe Le Vayer questions the epistemological pretences of history. Highlighted by contradictory accounts of the same events, the weakness intrinsic to history is, according to him, the result of the unavoidable passions animating its authors and of the conventions of a genre constructed around elevated motives expressed in an elevated style.³ A famous intellectual of his time, whose reputation, based on a vast erudition, brought him, among others, the election to the Académie française (1639), as well as the acquaintance with the most elitist power circles of his time,⁴ La Mothe Le Vayer founds his distrust of history, to which he attributes mostly the value of a moral lesson, on his practice of a Scepticism highly indebted to Pyrrhonism. Despite the irreconcilable differences that separate him from Descartes, La Mothe Le Vayer actually does share with the author of the *Discours de la méthode* the suspicion towards history. Placed outside the realm of "clear and distinct ideas", history can be, at the most, "plausible" and is, therefore, excluded by Descartes from the field of "science".⁵ Coming from otherwise strongly opposed sides, the combined attacks of the Sceptics and the Cartesians provoke a "crisis" of history.⁶

Naturally, it is worth asking what the relevance of the "crisis" undergone by history during the second half of the 17th century and the beginning of the next century is for three works that achieved public recognition precisely because of their narration of historical events. Written by François Bernier, the *Histoire de la dernière révolution des États du Grand Mogol* is included into a work entitled *Voyages* whose initial first edition from 1670-1671 was followed until the end of the century by other editions in French as well as by translations in English, German, Italian and Dutch.⁷ Belonging to the Polish Jesuit father Judas Thaddeus Krusinski, the *Histoire de la dernière révolution de Perse* (The Hague, 1728), a French translation from the original Latin one, was at the origin of other subsequent translations until the 1740's into German, English, Turkish or even, again, Latin.⁸ Authored by the Moldavian Prince Dimitrie Cantemir, *The History of the Growth and Decay of the Ottoman Empire* (1734-1735), an English translation from the original Latin version, was at the origin of two other French and German translations from the 1740's.⁹ In its own particular way, each of the three works enjoyed success. Bernier's work was initially well received by the fashionable circles of the "salons", Krusinski's history left its print on the later versions about the disorders of Persia at the beginning of the 18th century, while Cantemir's book consolidated the reputation of its author as a scholar of the Orient.¹⁰

In accordance with the European tendency to think of the Orient in terms of "large political units",¹¹ the three works deal with three great Oriental empires, namely the Mughal, the Safavid and the Ottoman, which they present in a critical stage of their history (crisis, gradual decline or utter collapse). Though they all belonged to what was broadly known as the "Orient", the three empires previously mentioned were, at the time, clearly distinguished. The Ottoman Empire had been considered for a long time the major threat for Europe and, moreover, dominated Cantemir's Moldavia. Regarded as a possible ally against the Ottomans, the Safavid Empire was highly admired by the Europeans for its ancient culture, refined customs, curiosity for other cultures and relative religious tolerance.¹² As for the Mughal Empire, the farthest in geographical terms, through aspects like its architecture or philosophy, it certainly gained the appreciation of Bernier. The success of the books by Bernier, Krusinski and Cantemir is likely to result from the Western interest in an Orient seen as "our closest Other" ("notre Autre le plus proche") to which the travel accounts provided a "reality flavour" ("saveur de réalité") but did not entirely deprive of the "wonderful strangeness of the romance" ("la merveilleuse étrangeté du romanesque").¹³ Hence, in analyzing the histories by Bernier, Krusinski and Cantemir, my study will not only take into account the fact that they are about an Orient that preserved a part of mystery, but also the objections that history had to face towards the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the next century.

With respect to the "epistemological condemnation" ("condemnation épistémologique")¹⁴ of history, Bernier seems to have been the most audacious of the three writers, since he published his *Histoire de la dernière révolution des États du Grand Mogol* in the Paris of the 1670's, a place and a time when the crossfire of Pyrrhonians and Cartesians against history was intense.¹⁵ Though he does not mention the objections to history that were raised at the time, Bernier is certainly careful to prove that he is a trustworthy author. In so doing, he emphasizes that he was firstly admitted in the entourage of Shah Jahan, the ancient ruler of the Mughal empire, and afterwards became the friend of Daneshmend Khan, whom he considered "the most erudite man of Asia" ("le plus savant homme de l'Asie") and "one of the most powerful and appreciated *omrahs*, or gentlemen of the court" ("un des plus puissants et des plus considérés *omrahs*, ou seigneurs de la cour").¹⁶ Hence, Bernier writes his account as a "privileged eyewitness"¹⁷ who, in addition to the access to the highest power circles of the empire, was also in direct contact with the Indian

world. His observation of the Mughal Empire, which went as deep as the most restricted corridors of power, was certainly facilitated by his knowledge of the Persian language.

On several occasions, Bernier mentions that he had the chance to witness directly some of the most dramatic events which were the outcome of the war that the four sons of Shah Jahan waged against each other in order to become the unique rulers of the Mughal Empire. For instance, after having carefully prepared it, he managed to have a good view of the memorable event represented by the crossing of New Delhi by a defeated and publicly humiliated Dara, the eldest of the four brothers.¹⁸

Though he had the opportunity to observe in an unmediated way some of the most notable events of the fratricide war that devastated the Mughal Empire before Aurangzeb managed to vanquish his three brothers, Bernier was obviously unable to witness all the events that he relates in order to give substance to his history. In order to fill in the gaps in his direct knowledge of the events, he is forced to rely on hearsay. In so doing, he does not try to hide the difficulty to establish the truth which results mostly from the different versions of the same event. In some cases, the fact that there is more than one account of the same event is mentioned as subsidiary information. For example, the temporary defection of Sultan Mahmoud, Aurangzeb's son, to Sultan Shuja, his father's adversary, is given two possible reasons. In addition to Mahmoud's exaggerated ambition, Bernier also mentions, though only "incidentally", Aurangzeb's possible manipulation of his son:

I see myself forced to write here incidentally what several people told me: that the entire escape of Sultan Mahmoud had only taken place because of the artifices and plots of Aurangzeb, who did not care at all that he endangered his son in the attempt to bring about the loss of Shuja and who was very pleased that, in any case, this was for him a specious pretext for putting him in a safe place.

Je crois devoir marquer ici en passant ce que plusieurs m'ont dit: que toute cette escapade de Sultan Mahmoud ne s'était faite que par les artifices et par les ressorts d'Aurangzeb, qui ne se souciait guère de hasarder ce fils pour tâcher de perdre Shuja et qui était bien aise qu'en tout cas ce lui fût un prétexte spécieux pour le mettre en lieu de sûreté.¹⁹

Confirmed by several testimonies, as well as, implicitly, by Aurangzeb's image as an unscrupulous ruler, this latter explanation seems nevertheless

to be considered less plausible than the former one since it is only presented as a side addition to the main argument of Mahmoud's disloyalty to his father. However, the fact that there is a slight uncertainty about the understanding of Mahmoud's real motives for his action is highlighted by the concession connector introducing the next phrase, which focuses on the concrete consequences of the son's betrayal: "In any case, afterwards he [Aurangzeb] showed that he was very disgusted by him [Sultan Mahmoud] and eventually sent him a very displeasing letter by means of which he ordered him to come back to Delhi, while at the same time giving a strict order that he should not come so far [...]" ("Quoiqu'il en soit, il [Aurangzeb] témoigna après être fort dégoûté de lui [Sultan Mahmoud] et lui écrivit enfin une lettre fort désobligeante par laquelle il lui ordonnait de revenir en Delhi, donnant cependant bon ordre qu'il ne vînt pas jusque-là [...]).²⁰

In other cases, the several divergent accounts of the same fact bring Bernier to the open conclusion that it is impossible to understand what really happened. For instance, the disappearance of Sultan Shuja's body after the battle that had probably caused his death was explained in several ways. According to one account, Shuja fled into the mountains in the vicinity of the battlefield accompanied by only a small group of loyal people. Another version held that his corpse had been found, but in a hardly recognizable state. All in all, since he "heard the thing told in three or four different manners by the persons themselves who had been in that place" ("oui raconter la chose de trois ou quatre manières différentes par des personnes mêmes qui s'étaient trouvées en ce lieu"), Bernier concludes that "it is quite difficult to know in truth what became of him [Sultan Shuja] ("qu'il est assez difficile de savoir au vrai ce qu'il [Sultan Shuja] est devenu").²¹

Though it certainly makes the truth hardly reachable, the existence of different reports of one and the same event does not always make it entirely impossible to know what happened, at least to a certain extent. For example, Bernier mentions the two different stories that he heard about the death of Shah Nawaz Khan, whose betrayal during a decisive battle caused Dara's defeat and, eventually, his death. While according to one story Shah Nawaz Khan was killed by Dara himself, according to the other he was murdered by "people from the army of Aurangzeb [Dara's chief adversary], who, being secrets adepts of Dara, found a way to approach him and to get rid of him, fearing that he may have revealed that he had some knowledge of the letters they had written to Dara" ("gens de l'armée

d'Aurangzeb [le grand adversaire de Dara], qui, étant partisans secrets de Dara, trouvèrent moyen de l'aborder et de s'en défaire, appréhendant qu'il ne les découvrit et qu'il n'eût quelque connaissance des lettres qu'ils avaient écrites à Dara").²² Despite avoiding making a clear choice between the two contradictory stories, Bernier expresses a certain preference for the second one, which he considers "more plausible" ("plus vraisemblable").²³

The three examples that have been analyzed prove that Bernier tries neither to fill in the gaps in the stories that sometimes flesh out the history that he writes, nor to hide the uncertainty that is inseparable from some of them. Hence, at times he seems to adopt the Pyrrhonian "suspension of judgement" (*épokhè*), which is the consequence of the impossibility to choose among different views of the same phenomenon. Nonetheless, despite sometimes admitting the uncertainty, in some cases he does opt for one of the various conflicting versions of the same event, the one which he finds more plausible than the others. By accepting the plausibility ("vraisemblance"), which approaches truth but does not coincide with it, he behaves like a disciple of Gassendi, who opened the way for the rehabilitation of history against the Pyrrhonians' and the Cartesians' attacks. In the opinion of Gassendi, since they do not have access to the essence of the world, but only to its appearances, individuals can reach a more modest truth, which depends on a "moral certainty" ("certitude morale") based on greater or smaller degrees of probability.²⁴ Founded on the "more probable" or the "more plausible", the knowledge argued for by Gassendi does not rely only on the direct experience of the senses, but also on the indirect one resulting from the testimonies of others. Among other things, Gassendi elaborates some criteria of acceptance of the testimonies, which underlie the possibility of a historical knowledge that is founded on a balance between confidence and criticism. As far as he is concerned, Bernier, in tune with Gassendi, seeks to convey a more limited knowledge, which derives from an approach that, despite being aware of the impossibility to eliminate uncertainty, does not abandon the quest for all knowledge of the historical events.

Unlike Bernier, who was the adept of an intellectual freedom that made him count among the "libertines" and attracted him to a philosophical thinking which, in some cases, was quite daring according to the standards of the time,²⁵ Krusinki was a Jesuit. Educated in the Polish Jesuit schools and colleges, he was sent to the Safavid Empire as a missionary, in the wide context of the efforts taken by the Polish State in order to include the Persians in a great coalition against the Ottomans.²⁶ During the almost

twenty years he spent in Persia he did not only act in favor of the cause of Catholicism but, thanks to his broad knowledge of Oriental languages, he also fulfilled several diplomatic missions for the Safavid court. Additionally, because of his pretended medical knowledge, he was accepted into the power circles of the Afghan conquerors, to whom he remained close until his departure from Persia in 1725.

Though originally written in Latin, his account of the fall of Ispahan mostly circulated in the French edition of another Jesuit, Jean-Antoine du Cerceau. As he himself acknowledges in the "Preface," du Cerceau did not only translate Krusinski's text, but also changed its structure, in order to make it more chronologically consistent, and complemented it with information from contemporary journals about the events that happened after 1725.²⁷ In so doing, du Cerceau draws the public's attention to the distinction between, on the one hand, the information coming from du Cerceau and, on the other, information from sources:

I make here these observations in order to warn the reader about the fact that he must establish a great difference in terms of certainty between the facts following the year 1725 that I only took from the public news and that I only very briefly dealt with towards the end of my second volume, and the previous facts which are all founded on the certain and faithful reports of father Krusinski.

Je fais ici ces observations pour avertir le lecteur, qu'il doit mettre une grande différence pour la certitude, entre les faits postérieurs à l'année 1725 que je n'ai tirés que des nouvelles publiques, et que j'ai traités fort succinctement sur la fin de mon second volume, et les faits antérieurs qui sont tous fondés sur les mémoires sûrs et fidèles du père Krusinski.²⁸

The sharp superiority of Krusinski's account follows from the fact that it pertains to the "faithful and precise memories of an intelligent and objective man, who only presents either what he himself saw, or what he found out from the mouth of the most well informed and authorized ministers of both parties" ("mémoires fidèles et précis d'un homme intelligent et désintéressé, qui n'expose que ce qu'il a vu lui-même, ou ce qu'il a appris de la bouche propre des ministres les mieux instruits, et les plus autorisés des deux partis").²⁹ An author who understands the events that he writes about, does not have a bias towards any of the parties involved and provides an accurate narration of the facts, the Polish Jesuit founds his history on first-rate testimonies. In so doing, he adds to his

own direct experience of eyewitness the hearsay information obtained from the most reliable sources because of their privileged position in the government.

According to du Cerceau, while Krusinki's history distinguishes itself from other histories of the fall of Ispahan through "the truth and the certainty of facts" ("la vérité et la certitude des faits"), the information from the journals tells the events "in a way quite uncertain and always very vague" ("d'une façon assez incertaine et toujours fort vague").³⁰ As a proof in favour of his argument about the weak credibility of the information in the journals, du Cerceau refers to one of the articles of the peace agreement between Shah Ashraf and the Ottoman sultan, which he found in the news, but which he did not include in his account, because he found it in no way "plausible" ("vraisemblable").³¹ The article stipulated that Shah Ashraf and his emissaries would be received in Istanbul and other towns of the Ottoman Empire like authentic Muslims, "*despite the difference of opinions that made the Turks and the Persians consider each other heretics*" ("*malgré la différence des opinions qui ont donné lieu aux Turcs et aux Persans de se regarder mutuellement comme hérétiques*").³² Making use of his knowledge of the ethnic and religious divisions within the Muslim world, du Cerceau assesses the article and reaches the conclusion that it would have been valid for the Safavid rulers, who were disciples of the Shia Islam, but cannot apply to the Afghans who, just like the Ottomans, practiced Sunni Islam.

Moreover, despite emphasizing the reliability of Krusinski's account, du Cerceau does not hesitate to indicate the corrections that he made to it. For example, concerning the year of Mirwais' death, the charismatic founder of the dynasty that would eventually conquer Ispahan, du Cerceau mentions having settled the hesitations revealed by Krusinki's manuscript itself. By confronting the two dates with other pieces of information from the same work and, moreover, by expressing his awareness of the uncertain identity of the author who added the second date, du Cerceau chooses for his edition of Krusinski's history the year 1717, which has been struck out from the manuscript.³³ In addition to the material elements, another aspect that argues for 1717 as the year when Mirwais died belongs to the chronological coherence of the text: if the Afghan leader had died in 1713 instead of 1717, his son, Mahmud, would have been only fourteen years old when he proclaimed himself prince of Kandahar and leader of the Afghans, a situation which, in du Cerceau's mind, is "beyond any plausibility" ("hors de toute vraisemblance").³⁴

Obviously, in amending Krusinski's text or remedying its omissions, du Cerceau does not try to establish what was certain, but what was merely plausible. In so doing, he may have been influenced not by Gassendi, but by his fellow Jesuits, who also defended history against Pyrrhonians and Cartesians. In their argumentation for history, Jesuits like Rapin and Le Moynes relied on the humanist *Artes historicae*, which elaborated on Cicero's *De Oratore*.³⁵ Consequently, they argued for a history based on a certainty at a human scale, which was different from the sophists' lie or the poets' fiction and was the result of the historians' ability to interpret sources, to write and comment upon events. History was perceived as similar to rhetoric. While rhetoric was seen as a persuasion method founded on a probabilistic reasoning, history was attributed the capacity to provide a knowledge and an ethical instruction that were based on probabilities. Although, in his "Preface", he stresses the informative value of the work which he translates and partly edits, in his concrete approach to it, du Cerceau at least partly relies on what appears plausible or probable.

Unlike the works by Bernier and Krusinski, which enjoyed an immediate success, the book of Dimitrie Cantemir drew the attention of scholars only some fifty years after its publication.³⁶ Contrary to the histories of Bernier and Krusinski, which were accessible to a wide public, Cantemir's history was likely to appeal to a narrower public, with a curiosity that went beyond the interest in exoticism or the spectacular news of the day. Besides that, it is worth highlighting that although Cantemir himself did not belong to the cultural space of Western Europe, during the first decades of the 18th century, when the first translations of his work were published, the Western writing of the Islamic history still struggled to find a place of its own in the intellectual landscape of the time. In so doing, the Western European scholars needed to cope with several major obstacles: in addition to the philological and conceptual challenges inherent to the study of a different civilization, the study of the Islamic history had to face the animosity towards Islam accumulated during centuries as well as the fact that Islamic history was not the classical history which, since humanism, had been considered as a reservoir of moral and political models.³⁷

As far as he was concerned, Cantemir founded his writing of the *History of the Growth and Decay of the Ottoman Empire* on his good acquaintance with the Ottoman world. Because of his family's position as well as the political and diplomatic relations between his native Moldavia and the Ottoman Empire, between 1688 and 1710, he spent around twenty years in Istanbul.³⁸ During this time, besides fulfilling political and diplomatic

functions, he also accomplished the education that he had already started in Moldavia. Moreover, he seems to have been familiar with some of the ambassadors of the great European powers in Istanbul as well as with the Ottoman political and intellectual elites. More precisely, he became close to some prominent Ottoman scholars and, thanks also to his musical talent, managed to gain the appreciation of the Ottoman court. Completed during his exile in Russia, provoked by the defeat in the battle of Stănilești (1711), the *History of the Growth and Decay of the Ottoman Empire* was published only posthumously, through the efforts of his son, Antioh. The original Latin version of the work was found only in 1984 by Virgil Căndea, in the Houghton Library of Harvard University.

Since he only had a mediated and partial access to the Western culture and since, moreover, the precise sources of his scholarship still remain to be studied, it is hardly possible to establish any precise connection between his history of the Ottoman Empire and the “crisis” that history underwent in Western Europe towards the second half of the 17th century and the beginning of the next century. Though he does not make any clear reference to Scepticism, Cantemir acknowledges ever since the very beginning of his work his incapacity to write a history that reveals only the absolute truth:

For, since we would be unable to narrate even what happens in front of our eyes in such a way that our story could be considered, in every regard, accomplished and faultless, who else than a madman would dare to claim that he will depict, without any deviation, things that happened so many centuries ago, among people so barbarian and so devoid of civilization (like the Ottoman one, at its beginnings)?! This will become obvious from the development of the work itself, all the more, since we will depict and struggle to rectify what has been inaccurately said or written by quite a few historians with otherwise great authority. And whether or not we have been successful in our achievement, we leave the assessment to the reader, “he who is most wise”.

Căci, de vreme ce nici cele ce se petrec dinaintea ochilor noștri n-am fi în stare să le istorisim astfel încât povestirea noastră să poată fi socotită, în orice privință, desăvârșită și lipsită de greșeli, cine altul, decât un smintit, ar cuteza să afirme că va înfățișa, fără vreo abatere, lucruri care s-au petrecut cu atâtea veacuri în urmă, printre neamuri atât de barbare și de lipsite de civilizație (cum era cel othman, la începuturile sale)?! Aceasta se va vădi din însuși șirul lucrării, cu atât mai mult, cu cât vom înfățișa și ne vom strădui să îndreptăm cele spuse sau scrise pe dos de către nu

puțini istorici, de altfel cu o mare autoritate. Iar de noi vom fi dobândit o mai fericită reușită, judecata o lăsăm în seama Cititorului [...] <celui foarte plin de discernământ>.³⁹

Pertaining to the convention of *captatio benevolentiae*, the modesty of the historian seems to be the consequence of his awareness of the incommensurable discrepancy between the difficulty of the task that he sets for himself and the weaknesses intrinsic to any human being, from which he is not spared. The humble approach to historical truth is all the more legitimate since his practice of the historical writing is partly based on the audacious criticism of many other illustrious historians, who enjoyed a well-established reputation. In order to avoid complacency, he joins to the criticism of his fellow historians the criticism of himself. In so doing, he resorts to the rhetorical strategy which consists in flattering the readers and leaving to them the final assessment of his possible achievements, from which he modestly seems to refrain.

At times, the uncertainty of history seems to be another rhetorical device, which is used in order to highlight Cantemir's originality. For example, in the case of the Ottomans' origins, he emphasizes that it is almost impossible to choose among the multiplicity of divergent views:

If we stop and search more accurately for the origin of the Ottoman people, who holds now the Turkish scepter, we run into such a diversity of opinions (that we presented more extensively in the Preface) and such an amass of stories entangled by foreigners that for those who are at crossroads there hardly appears a distinction between what would be true and what would be false [...]

Dacă vom sta și cerceta mai curat obârșia stirpei Aliothmanice, care deține acum sceptrul turcesc, ne întâmpină o atare diversitate de păreri (pe care le-am văzut mai pe larg în Prefață), și o asemenea îngrămădire de povești încâlcite între ele de străini, încât abia de mai apare vreo deosebire, pentru cei aflați la răscruce, între ce-ar fi adevărat și ce-ar fi fals [...]⁴⁰

Belonging to Christian historians, the variety of different theories about the Ottomans' origins is caused either by the Christian bias against the Ottomans, or by the Christian ignorance of the Ottomans' language and culture. Though, as already mentioned, it is hardly possible to establish if Cantemir was acquainted with Scepticism, the diverse opinions elaborated by Christians about the Ottomans' origins obviously lead to a challenge

to reach the truth which is likely to be reminiscent of one of the essential precepts of the Academic Scepticism, according to which truth cannot be known. By stressing that it is almost impossible to attain truth among the different versions of the Ottomans' origins, despite being careful to defend himself against possible accusations of vanity, Cantemir is likely to aim at bringing out his solution to the crisis of Ottoman history. The solution consists in relying on the sources represented by the history of the Ottomans written by the Ottoman themselves: "But we, by placing higher, as it is rightful and appropriate (let our thought be far from any conceit!), the testimonies of the writers from home rather than those defended by others, from the historians considered by the Turks the worthiest of trust and more carefully we gather the following [...]" ("Dar noi, punând mai presus, pe drept și după cum se cuvine (fie departe de vorba noastră vreo trufie!), mărturiile scriitorilor de acasă față de toate cele susținute de alții, de la istoricii socotiți printre Turci a fi mai vrednici de crezare / și mai îngrijiiți culegem <următoarele> [...]"⁴¹)

In so doing, he certainly emphasizes the superiority of his history that mostly follows from his use of Ottoman historians which, however, he does not regard as totally free from partiality for their Ottoman fellows. Relying on a critical thinking that is careful to distinguish genuine facts from falsehoods, the quest for truth forces him to limit the scope of his work, at the risk of sometimes leaving unsatisfied the curiosity of the public: "But we, who have no other plan in this work than to research truth, have preferred to depict few, but true, things rather than to deceive the Reader through a long series of stories full of barbarisms and atemporal mistakes" ("Dar noi, care nu ne-am propus nimic alta în această lucrare, în afară de cercetarea adevărului, am preferat să înfățișăm puține lucruri, dar adevărate, decât să-l amăgim pe Cititor printr-un lung șir de povești pline de barbarisme și acronisme").⁴²

Despite the concessions he makes to the search for truth, he does not always claim to reveal it in its entirety. For example, concerning the disputed death of Suleiman, one of the sons of Yildirim Bayezid, the confusion of the Christian historians about Suleiman's identity contributes to make Cantemir choose the version of the Ottoman historians, which does not overlap truth entirely, but is merely nearer to it: "From which we believe that the Turks' opinion lies closer to the truth" ("De unde credem că părerea Turcilor se află mai aproape de adevăr").⁴³ Additionally, in the case of another debated issue, related to the stages of the formation of the dominion of Musa, one of Suleiman's brothers, the inconsistency of the

Christian historians about his identity determines Cantemir to prefer the Ottoman historical accounts which, nevertheless, he does not consider more truthful, but only more plausible : “within such an obscurity of history and of chronology, we preferred to the others the narration from the Turkish Annals, as the more clear and more probable” (“într-o asemenea obscuritate și a istoriei și a cronologiei, am preferat celorlalte istorisirea din Annalele Turcești, ca pe cea mai limpede și mai probabilă”).⁴⁴

Hence, in some cases, like those that divide the Christian from the Ottoman historians, he obviously accepts versions whose superiority consists in the fact that they approach the truth, without entirely identifying with it. However, in other cases that separate the Christian from the Ottoman history authors, like the one of prince Isfindiarbeg, their conflicting arguments are so inconclusive that they lead him to an uncertainty which he invites the public to reconsider and, possibly, unravel: “Let it remain to the Reader to decide about what to establish in this ambiguity” (“Rămână asupra Cititorului judecata despre ceea ce este de statornicit în această ambiguitate”).⁴⁵

Consequently, because of the opaqueness brought about by the contradictory accounts of the same event, he limits himself to a knowledge that only approximates truth. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that the obscurity which makes him plainly acknowledge that the truth is out of his reach is sometimes the result of his own weaknesses, like in the case of the name of the youngest son of the Persian shah Ismail, who played a crucial role in the foundation of the Shia Islam : “I have since forgotten his name, because, through the injustice of destiny, having lost the notes that I had very carefully taken down on the basis of the discussions with the most well-learned Turks, but also from other sources, I must make mention only of what my memory provides to me” (“numele <lui> l-am uitat, căci, pierzându-se, prin nedreptatea Sorții, <însemnările> pe care le notasem cu mare grijă de pe urma convorbirilor cu Turcii cei mai învățați, <dar> și din alte monumente, trebuie să pomenesc ce-mi oferă memoria”).⁴⁶

As already shown, Cantemir emphatically stresses that he searches for truth, which he especially seeks in the “sources” represented by the Ottoman historians. Despite his method which consists in the collation of several sources and their critical assessment, sometimes, in all honesty, he is forced either to content himself with what seems nearer to truth or more plausible, or even to openly admit that he is unable to attain truth. His approach to the truth, classified into several categories (veracity,

plausibility, uncertainty), seems to be more the consequence of a practical concern than of a theoretical thought.

Coming from more or less different intellectual backgrounds and dealing with more or less recent events from the three great Oriental empires, Cantemir, du Cerceau, the editor of Krusinski and Bernier share the openness to sometimes limit their quest for truth to more modest results, which are related to probability or utter uncertainty. The doubts that they have about the exact version of some of the events they include in their histories are likely to argue for a perception of history which cannot be understood in entirely rational terms. The uncertainty about what really happened in some cases seems to open the way for an understanding of history which does not rely on a linear connection between causes and effects. Though they certainly do not exclude heroes, the histories of Bernier, Krusinski and Cantemir cannot be reduced to a series of great deeds that are born out of the great intentions of exceptional characters. Hence, the histories of the three authors previously mentioned are to an extent shaped by causes which, though apparently unworthy to be taken into account because of their implausibility or insignificance, trigger effects of the biggest consequence.

In his *Histoire de la dernière révolution des États du Grand Mogol*, Bernier translates the war among the four brothers in the language of the “reason of State”, which is intimately connected to rational calculation and which, at the time, was specific to the political thought that aimed at acquiring prestige by following the model of the natural sciences. For example, “It was by reason of State that Sultan Shuja had embraced this last sect [Shia Islam] [...]” (“C’était par raison d’État que Sultan Shuja avait embrassé cette dernière secte [le chiisme] [...]).⁴⁷ Additionally,

Aurangzeb, who had left his army behind and who moreover knew that this raja was very fond of Shah Jahan, was as it could be well imagined so astonished and feared that this raja could use the occasion for a coup d’État meant to capture him in order to free Shah Jahan from prison, which would have been at that moment very easy to accomplish.

Aurangzeb, qui avait laissé son armée derrière et qui savait d’ailleurs que ce raja était fort affectionné à Shah Jahan, se trouva assez surpris, comme on peut bien se l’imaginer, dans la crainte que ce raja ne se servît de l’occasion et ne fît un coup d’État, qui était de se saisir de lui pour tirer Shah Jahan de prison, ce qui lui était pour lors très facile.⁴⁸

Related to the Machiavellian intellectual heritage understood as exclusive focus on success, the expressions used by Bernier (reason of State, coup d'État) suggest that, despite probably ignoring the European political culture of their time, the protagonists of the Mughal fratricide war did possess certain political knowledge. Despite the political know-how that was displayed during the conflict among the brothers, the final outcome of their fight was at least partly influenced by causes that seemed trivial. The crucial role played by these apparently negligible causes is likely to be more salient in the case of Dara who, at the beginning of the war, was in a privileged position, because he enjoyed the support of his father, as well as financial and military means superior to those of his three brothers. A dazzling character, he also had some strong shortcomings like the arrogance and the recklessness that certainly contributed to his defeat and death. Unlike Dara, Aurangzeb, the winner of the war, who managed to vanquish his three brothers, succeeded in managing "his secret passion to reign" ("passion secrète qu'il avait de régner").⁴⁹ Aurangzeb's capacity to control his passions was part of his political skillfulness thanks to which, ever since the beginning of his ambitious political actions, he was "secretive, cunning and dissimulating to the utmost extent" ("secret, rusé et dissimulé au possible").⁵⁰ In spite of the subterfuges that he used in order to impose himself on his brothers, according to Bernier's *Événements particuliers*, which follow the *Histoire de la dernière révolution des États du Grand Mogol* in the series of the *Voyages*, he was not a "barbarian" ("barbare"), but a "great politician" ("grand politique") and a "great king" ("grand roi"),⁵¹ who managed to triumph over the circumstances of his condition that gave him no other option than to eliminate his rival brothers or to be eliminated by them.

Combined with Dara's weaknesses, Aurangzeb's strengths certainly provide a rational explanation for the result of the war that opposed them. If fortune is said to have been hostile to Dara and favorable to Aurangzeb, this is also because the latter succeeded in turning it to his advantage, while the former was unable to benefit from it. Nonetheless, the fortune also contains an element of arbitrariness, which manifests itself in crucial moments and completely reverses the evolution of the situation. For example, when he is on the verge of winning the key battle against Aurangzeb, Dara is convinced by a traitor to dismount from his elephant. When his soldiers no longer see him, they are totally disheartened by the belief that their leader has been killed and, instead of giving the final blow to their adversaries, they are terrorized and only think of fleeing

Aurangzeb and his troops. Thinking about the episode, Bernier emphasizes the tremendous effect of a cause that, apparently, looks trifling:

Consequently, for having resisted a quarter of an hour more on an elephant, Aurangzeb finds himself with the crown of Hindoustan on his head, while Dara, for having dismounted the elephant a moment earlier sees himself as if he were thrown from the top to the bottom of the throne and the most unfortunate prince in the world, the fortune having thus enjoyed to make the winning or the loss of a battle and the fate of a great empire depend on a thing of nothingness.

Il faut qu'Aurangzeb, pour avoir tenu ferme un quart d'heure sur un éléphant, se voie la couronne de l'Hindoustan sur la tête et que Dara, pour en être descendu un moment plus tôt, se voie comme précipité du haut en bas du trône et le plus malheureux prince du monde, la fortune ainsi ayant pris plaisir de faire dépendre le gain ou la perte d'une bataille et la décision d'un grand empire d'une chose de néant.⁵²

Obviously, causes apparently so ludicrous that they seem unworthy of being taken into account lead to effects of a scale that can hardly be anticipated. Despite relying on a component that can be rationally explained, the outcome of the life or death battle among the four brothers is also influenced by erratic elements which, because they do not fit into an all-encompassing pattern of a proportion between cause and effect, can be attributed to the unpredictable fate.

While the libertine Bernier accounts for the events he used in order to flesh out his history of the fratricide war that decided the succession to the throne of the Mughal Empire by means of the concept of fortune and the language of the reason of State, the Jesuit Krusinski submits the global explanation of the events that led to the fall of the Safavid Empire to the argument of the divine providence: "Therefore nothing makes us acknowledge more the strong aim of the providence to deprive the house of the Sophy of the crown than the choice and the use that it made of the two usurpers [Afghan leaders] that it placed one after another on the throne" ("Aussi rien ne nous fait-il plus reconnaître dans la providence un dessein marqué de priver de la couronne la maison des Sophy, que le choix et l'usage qu'elle a fait des deux usurpateurs [chefs afghans] qu'elle a mis l'un après l'autre sur le trône").⁵³ However, the divine providence does not exclude a way of presenting the facts which, implicitly, provides a partially rational explanation for the ruin of the Safavids that in some

cases is increased by the language of the reason of State. Hence, the fall of the great Persian Empire seems predictable because of a series of elements which accumulate and gradually undermine it. The excessive and unnatural influence of the eunuchs over the government, the no longer controlled fierce division into two factions of the different people that make up the empire, the endemic corruption of the administration and of the ruling classes, the weakness of the last shah and his immoderate expenses, all had a role in the transformation of Persia into a pale copy of the strong, well organized and trustworthy State that it used to be in its heyday. One of the most telling signs of the decline of the past efficiency of the Persian government is represented by the dangers of the roads whose famous and almost impeccable safety in the former times had contributed to a flourishing commerce.⁵⁴

The broad overview of the condition of the Persian politics is at times further developed by insights that rely on the vocabulary specific to the reason of State. For example, in the case of the minister, Athemat Doulet, who was the innocent victim of a plot provoked by envy, the final condemnation is presented as unavoidable, though unjust: "Therefore the reason of State required that he was guilty, because he had already been treated as such and because he could become like that" ("*La raison d'État voulait donc qu'on le tînt pour criminel, et parce qu'on l'avait déjà traité comme tel, et parce qu'il pouvait le devenir*").⁵⁵ Hence, based on mere suspicions and careful to avoid losing its face, politics functions according to its own logic, "reason of State", which is divorced from any morality or concern for the individual. Additionally, with respect to the removal from Kandahar of a Mirwais seen as dangerous because of his capacity to sap the Safavid rule, the audacious political actions that are born out of the concern for the possession of power are also referred to: "What Georgi-Kan has just performed was a coup d'État, as it has been more than enough justified by the event" ("*C'était un coup d'État, comme l'évènement ne l'a que trop justifié, que celui que venait de faire Georgi-Kan*").⁵⁶ The intrigues against Luft Ali Kan, the gifted Persian military ruler who successfully fought against the Afghans, lead to a conclusion which highlights the opposition between the individual good of the perpetrators and the good of the State: "although they could not destroy him without overturning at the same time the future hopes of the reconquest of Kandahar and of the pacification of this revolted frontier, the thought of their private interest imposed itself on the most important interest of the State" ("*quoiqu'ils ne pussent le ruiner sans renverser en même temps les espérances prochaines*").

de la réduction de Kandahar et de la pacification de cette frontière révoltée, la considération de leur intérêt particulier l'emporta sur l'intérêt le plus important de l'État").⁵⁷

The language specific to the reason of State (reason of State, coup d'État, interest of State) emphasizes that the Persian politics was, on many occasions, based on calculations that did not always consolidate the State, but sometimes also weakened it. Nonetheless, beyond the elements that contribute to a certain rational understanding of it, the disastrous fall of Ispahan, at least as provoked by the attacks of the Afghans, is still partly determined by an arbitrary element. Though they certainly were a potentially dangerous people, who were a constant danger to their neighbors, the Afghans could have hardly been seen as a serious threat to the central Persian power for a sum of reasons: their situation in a distant and backward frontier of the empire, their relatively small number of soldiers, their ignorance of the siege warfare necessary for occupying Ispahan and, eventually, their lack of interest in the conquest of the Persian Empire caused by their awareness of their limited capacities. Rather than terrifying, the first major attack of Ispahan by the Afghans looked actually more like the parody of a real battle: "Concerning the general attack, if it is worthy of this name, it lasted for three hours and served as an amusement show for the inhabitants of the town itself against which it pretended to be directed [...]" ("À l'égard de l'attaque générale, si pourtant elle mérite ce nom, elle dura six heures, et servit d'un spectacle d'amusement aux habitants de la ville même qu'on prétendait attaquer [...]").⁵⁸ Hence, the Afghans behave more like burlesque characters than like heroic conquerors. Throughout the duration of their siege of Ispahan, their victory seemed to be far from certain. The fact that, eventually, Ispahan surrendered to them, was as surprising for the Afghans as it was for the rest of the world.⁵⁹

Sapped by the venality and the incapacity of its political elites, the Persian Empire resembled a giant with feet of clay. Nevertheless, the fact that it was conquered by the apparently insignificant Afghans is likely an argument for the fact that petty causes can bring about immeasurable effects. Though, to a great extent, it can be understood in rational terms, the history narrated by Krusinski is also influenced by an element of unpredictability, which can be related to the divine providence. The logical connections between the causes and the effects that give substance to Krusinski's history cannot entirely eliminate the arbitrariness that is likely to derive from the global impact of the divine providence on the world.

As far as he is concerned, Cantemir highlights time and again the unexpected twists of fate, termed "Fortuna", which affected the lives and careers of the Ottoman political elites. Nonetheless, until the battle of Vienna, these twists of fate seemed to influence more the existence of individuals than that of the empire itself. As a matter of fact, the unexpected situation changes seemed to be part of the instability which, though at the core of the Ottoman political life, was not necessarily a threat to the empire itself. The moral corruption and the atmosphere of generalized suspicion were at the origin of political practices which were based on treachery and the annihilation of rivals. However, it is worth mentioning that the elimination of political adversaries did not necessarily entail a selection of officials which systematically excluded the worthiest ones in order to promote those whose only attribute was immorality.

According to Cantemir, the battle of Vienna, the capital event which was at the origin of the decline of the Ottoman Empire, was decided by an "ex machina" strategy to which the "Great Judge of luck" ("Marele Judecător al norocului")⁶⁰ resorted because he was merciful to the Christians. Significantly attributed to the divine providence and not to "Fortuna", as in many other cases of lesser importance, the unexpected cause that provoked the dramatic defeat of the Ottomans was represented by the "foolish plans" ("planuri prostesti")⁶¹ which took hold of the great vizier, Cara Mustafa Pasha. By no means an incompetent military leader, since he possessed both wisdom and experience, he nevertheless fell victim to his ambition and extreme vanity. In so doing, he developed "such monstrous thoughts" ("gânduri atât de monstruoase")⁶² that he believed himself able to use the battle of Vienna in order to create another Muslim empire in Europe, comparable to the one in Asia, which he aimed to rule as a sultan. The vizier's recklessness caused a disaster for the Ottoman troops, which sparked a series of other major defeats that considerably weakened the Ottoman Empire and provoked its final decay.

Whether attributed to "Fortuna," "fortune", or divine providence, the arbitrary element which appears in key places of the histories by Bernier, Krusinski and Cantemir overthrows a sequence of events that seemed initially predictable. Likely to result from a conception of history that accepts the existence of different levels of uncertainty, the unexpected aspect that completely changes the face of history is likely to open the way for a writing of history which is not exclusively built around the figure of morally exceptional political actors and their constantly efficient actions.

NOTES

- 1 My study is highly indebted to the NEC seminar devoted to my research project. Moreover, my analysis of Cantemir strongly benefits from a discussion with Dr. Emanuela Timotin and Dr. Ovidiu Olar, who generously accepted to share with me their knowledge of the Moldavian prince.
- 2 La Mothe Le Vayer, *Du Peu de certitude qu'il y a dans l'histoire*, Œuvres, V/II, Dresden, Michel Groell, 1756-1759, 444.
N. B. All the translations from French and Romanian into English are mine. In the original French version I have modernized the orthography.
- 3 Peter Burke, "History, Myth, and Fiction: Doubts and Debates," in J. Rabasa, M. Sato, E. Tortarolo, D. Woolf (eds.), *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, vol. 3 (1400-1800), Oxford University Press, 2012, 261-281.
- 4 See, for example, Florence Wickelgren, *La Mothe Le Vayer. Sa vie et son oeuvre*, Paris, Droz, 1934, 8-16.
- 5 See, for example, Gérard Ferreyrolles, "Introduction générale," in Gérard Ferreyrolles (ed.) with the collaboration of Fr. Charbonneau, M.-A. de Langenhagen, B. Guion, A. Mantero, Ch. Meurillon et H. Michon, *Traité sur l'histoire (1638-1677). La Mothe Le Vayer, Le Moyne, Saint-Réal, Rapin*, Paris, Champion, 2013, 38-39.
- 6 Peter Burke, "History, Myth, and Fiction: Doubts and Debates," 265.
- 7 See, for example, Frédéric Tinguely, "Introduction," in *Un libertin dans l'Inde moghole. Les Voyages de François Bernier*, ed. by Fr. Tinguely, Paris, Chandeigne, 2008, 18-23 and Faith Beasley, *Versailles Meets the Taj Mahal. François Bernier, Marguerite de La Sablière, and Enlightening Conversations in Seventeenth-Century France*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2018, 40-48.
- 8 Rudi Matthee, "Introduction" to *an Eyewitness Account of the Fall of the Safavid Dynasty*, by Judas Thaddeus Krusiński, London, New York, Tauris, 2018, x-xi.
- 9 See, for example, Virgil Cîndea, "Prefața traducerii românești," in Dimitrie Cantemir, *Istoria Creșterilor și a Descrășterilor Curții Othman[n]ice sau Aliothman[n]ice*, traducere românească și indice de Dan Slușanschi, 2nd ed., Paideia, București, 2020, 7-8.
- 10 Beasley, *Versailles Meets the Taj Mahal*, 40-48; Matthee, Introduction to *an Eyewitness Account of the Fall of the Safavid Dynasty*, xii; Hugh Trevor-Roper, "Dimitrie Cantemir's Ottoman History and its Reception in England," in *History and the Enlightenment*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2010, 54-70.
- 11 Diogo Ramada Curto, "European Historiography of the East," in Daniel Woolf (ed.), *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, 549.
- 12 See, for example, Rudi Matthee, "The Imaginary Realm: Europe's Enlightenment Image of Early Modern Iran," *Comparative Studies of South*

- Asia, Africa and Middle East*, vol. 30, n° 3, 2010, 449-462 and "Savafid Iran through the Eyes of European Travellers," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, vol. 23, n° 1-2, spring-summer 2012, 10-24.
- 13 Michel Delon (ed.), *Dictionnaire européen des Lumières*, entry "Orient," Paris, PUF, 807-808.
- 14 Gérard Ferreyrolles, "Introduction," 41.
- 15 My analyses of Bernier are partly based on my article "*L'Histoire de la dernière révolution des États du Grand Mogol de Bernier au carrefour de la vraisemblance et de la tragédie indienne*", in Sylvie Requemora-Gros, Mathilde Bedel, Mathilde Morinet (eds.), *Les Actes de la Journée d'étude «Le Voyage en Inde à l'Âge classique»* (forthcoming in 2022).
- 16 Bernier, *Histoire de la dernière révolution des États du Grand Mogol, Un libertin dans l'Inde moghole*, 45.
- 17 Beasley, *Versailles Meets the Taj Mahal*, 54.
- 18 Bernier, *Histoire de la dernière révolution des États du Grand Mogol*, 121.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 110.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*, 130.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 113
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 See, for example, Marc Fumaroli, "Historiographie et épistémologie à l'époque classique", in Gilbert Gadoffre (ed.), *Certitudes et incertitudes de l'histoire*, Paris, PUF, 1987, p. 87-104 and Carlo Borghero, *La Certezza e la storia. Cartesianismo, pirronismo e conoscenza storica*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 1983, 46-57.
- 25 Tinguely, "Introduction," 9-11.
- 26 Mathee, Introduction to *an Eyewitness Account of the Fall of the Safavid Dynasty*, viii-x.
- 27 Judas Thaddeus Krusinski, *Histoire de la dernière révolution de Perse*, vol. I, La Haye, Gosse et Neaulme, 1728, xiv-xvii.
- 28 *Ibid.*, xiii-xiv.
- 29 *Ibid.*, x.
- 30 *Ibid.*, x-xi.
- 31 *Ibid.*, xii-xiii.
- 32 *Ibid.*, xii.
- 33 *Ibid.*, xx.
- 34 *Ibid.*, xxii-xxiii.
- 35 Fumaroli, "Historiographie et épistémologie à l'époque classique," 92-93.
- 36 Trevor-Roper, "Dimitrie Cantemir's *Ottoman History* and its Reception in England," 54-70.

- 37 Alexander Bevilacqua, *The Republic of Arabic Letters. Islam and the European Enlightenment*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018, 136-166.
- 38 See, for example, Ștefan Lemny, *Cantemireștii. Aventura europeană a unei familii princiare din secolul al XVIII-lea*, 2nd ed., prefață de Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, traducere de Magda Jeanrenaud, Polirom, 2013, 52-96.
- 39 Dimitrie Cantemir, *Istoria Creșterilor și a Descreșterilor Curții Othman[n]ice sau Aliothman[n]ice*, 13.
- 40 Ibid., 49.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ibid., 186.
- 43 Ibid., 208.
- 44 Ibid., 207.
- 45 Ibid., 208.
- 46 Ibid., 247.
- 47 Bernier, *Histoire de la dernière révolution des États du Grand Mogol*, 48.
- 48 Ibid., 100.
- 49 Ibid., 91.
- 50 Ibid., 48.
- 51 Bernier, *Événements particuliers, Un libertin dans L'Inde moghole*, p. 196.
- 52 Bernier, *Histoire de la dernière révolution des États du Grand Mogol*, 86.
- 53 Krusinski, *Histoire de la dernière révolution de Perse*, vol. II, 321.
- 54 Ibid., vol. I, 95-106.
- 55 Ibid., 348.
- 56 Ibid., 177.
- 57 Ibid., 302.
- 58 Ibid., vol. II, 113.
- 59 Ibid., vol. I, 1-2.
- 60 Cantemir, *Istoria Creșterilor și a Descreșterilor Curții Othman[n]ice sau Aliothman[n]ice*, 346.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Ibid.

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