

Providence and Contingency in the Autobiography of Miklós Bethlen

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ABSTRACT

The distinction between the necessary and the accidental, between events that serve a purpose and those that are meaningless, can be found in the semantics developed by a wide variety of cultures to interpret the world. In the religiously dominated culture of the Middle Ages and the early modern period, the question of contingency was thematized primarily in relation to the concept of providence, and its most typical manifestation was the ancient-rooted notion of fortuna. However, the fortune concept lost its explanatory power during the 17th century, in connection with scientific, economic and social changes. There are many signs that, at the same time, ideas about divine providence were transformed. Although there are signs of this already in the 16th century (such as in the popular *Fortunatus*), especially from the end of the 17th century onwards there is a noticeable erosion of the traditional metaphysics based on the centrality of the providential God. Literary studies can also contribute to the study of changing ideas about providence, since it is often in genres that provide a more flexible framework than theological or philosophical discourse that the first signs of change appear. Miklós Bethlen's autobiography, written in the early 18th century is a good example of this. The overall framework of the self-interpretation of the autobiography is a belief in providence, yet there are also elements that are in tension with it. These have so far only been referred to in a few scattered references in the literature, but have not been comprehensively examined and interpreted. An examination of the literary conceptualisation of providence and chance can show how traditional conceptual frameworks become problematic in the face of new experiences, while their meaning is also modified.

Keywords: providence, contingency, autobiography, Miklós Bethlen, early modern

The distinction between the necessary and the accidental, between events that serve a purpose and those that are meaningless, can be found in the semantics developed by a wide variety of cultures to interpret the world. A predominant feature of premodern European culture, shaped by religion, is the belief in divine providence, the notion that events on earth unfold according to a deliberate and purposeful order decreed by the will of a supreme being. In contrast, the modern world is

characterized by the prevalence of the experience of contingency, which posits that events on earth could unfold differently, whether in history or in the destiny of the individual.¹

As with all great, teleological historical narratives, however, there are many theoretical questions and objections to be raised about the grand narrative of the disintegration of the world order based on the idea of providence. For the purposes of this essay, the most relevant question is whether there exists a discernible shift in the prevailing attitude towards providence in early modern culture, whether it is feasible to delineate distinct periods based on this criterion. In his book on providence and contingency, Werner Frick examines the interpretations of fate in 17th and 18th-century German, French and English novels and concludes that from the late 17th century onwards there are increasing signs of a crisis, erosion and eventual disintegration of the traditional metaphysics based on the centrality of the providential God. Frick stresses that the belief in providence did not disappear suddenly and completely with the Enlightenment, but that there is a shift both in theoretical reflections and novels, the signs of which can be seen in the emergence of competing explanations, and in the reinterpretation or emptying out of the concept of providence. Frick presents Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, published in 1719, as the first example of this shift in the history of the novel. The transitory nature of this novel, according to him, is due to the heterogeneous discourses that can be discovered in the protagonist's self-interpretation: while the novel repeatedly evokes the Puritan concept of providence, there are also moments in which the fictional autobiography provides a secular interpretation of the hero's fate. The novel transforms the understanding of providence in such a way that providence and rational, autonomous action are not in conflict, but rather providence is in the service of secular reason. Robinson's success is therefore both a gift from God and the result of his own efforts (Frick 1988, 103–152).

Frick's analysis fits in well with the view that the early phase of the Enlightenment began in the 1690s, and convincingly demonstrates that the study of the interpretations of fate can provide a more nuanced approach to the literature of this period. At the same time, as many have pointed out, signs of the erosion of the belief in providence can be observed already in Renaissance culture. According to Romance studies, the discovery of the experience of contingency can be observed already in Boccaccio's novels (Neuschäfer 1969). Research in German studies points to the popular *Fortunatus* chapbook as a place where the eclipse of the belief in providence and the overall experience of contingency are shown (Friedrich 2011). And in the field of the history of philosophy, the writings of Machiavelli and Montaigne in particular show strong signs of a move away from the traditional belief in providence (Sanders 2013).

1 For a summary, including different philosophical, sociological and historical approaches to the problem of contingency, see Reichlin 2011.

The way out of the dilemma posed by the different possible starting points is hardly to commit oneself to one or the other, the Renaissance or the early Enlightenment; rather, the lesson to be drawn is that in the case of the early modern period, different, parallel models of the relation to providence and contingency must be reckoned with, and that in the case of the erosion of providentialism, it is not possible to develop a homogeneous, linear narrative. This does not imply, however, that it is impossible to derive valuable insights by examining the texts of early modern culture from the perspective of the relationship between providence and contingency. Rather, it suggests that it is challenging to establish a clear boundary between the periods, at least in this respect. Literary studies can contribute substantially to the study of changing ideas about providence, since it is often in genres that provide a more flexible framework than theological or philosophical discourse that the first signs of change appear. Miklós Bethlen's autobiography, written in the early 18th century is a good example of this.²

Hungarian literary history has not paid much attention to the study of early modern ideas of providence and contingency. However, Tibor Klaniczay's dissertation on Miklós Zrínyi's concept of fate and fortune is an important contribution to the subject (Klaniczay 1947). Klaniczay pointed out not only that for Zrínyi the interpretation of fortune and fate was a central problem, but also that he was influenced by Machiavelli's concept of fate, which differed from the traditional Christian one, as he attributed a decisive role to the individual's skill and excellence in the shaping of his fate. That the dichotomy of providence and fortune was not only a preoccupation of Zrínyi can be seen, for example, in the epic poem by another great Hungarian poet of the century, István Gyöngyösi, entitled *Phoenix rising from the ashes, or the memory of János Kemény*, published in 1693 (but probably written earlier, in the 1670s), which ultimately leaves open the question of whether the will of God or the changing fortune is responsible for the tragic fate of the poem's hero:

Tündérségébül-é a szerencsének,
Jobbrúl balra hamar térő kerekének,
Vagy az örök Isten bölcs rendelésének
Végzésébül esett, hogy ezek így lének.³
(Gyöngyösi 1999, 123)

As this example shows, in early modern culture the experience of contingency was described primarily through various derivatives of the ancient-rooted notion of fortuna. Research on the history of the concept of fortune shows that in the 17th century (at least in Western

2 For a general evaluation of Bethlen's autobiography see Tóth 2012.

3 "Whether it is the vicissitudes of fortune, / the wheel of fortune turning suddenly from good to evil, / or the wise decree of the eternal God, / that has caused these things to happen."

Europe), scientific, economic and social changes led to the loss of its explanatory power and its replacement by other concepts such as chance, risk and hazard (Brendecke 2017). The fact that the wheel of fortune or the goddess Fortuna does not play a significant role in Miklós Bethlen's autobiography, is perhaps also related to this historical transformation.⁴ But his Protestant religiosity, based on the doctrine of predestination alone is sufficient explanation for the fact that the search for and recording of the signs of providence play a decisive role in his interpretation of fate.⁵ While the overarching framework of the interpretation of fate in the autobiography is rooted in the belief in providence, there are also elements that are in tension with this belief. Consequently, a more thorough examination of the text from this perspective may prove beneficial.

On the question of divine providence, there is little support in Bethlen scholarship. Yet a good starting point is an observation by Géza Orlovsky. Orlovsky's main idea was that the autobiography of Bethlen is not a completely uniform composition, which is evidenced, among other things, by the fact that it reveals traces of different genre patterns. The differences between the genre patterns are reflected among others in the different – even incompatible – ways Bethlen talks about sexuality in two sections of his life writing, in his autobiography proper and in his book of prayers. In the former, he confesses his youthful carnal desires within the framework of a spiritual autobiography, as part of his repentance, while in the latter, coincidence and comic elements play a dominant role: "The parallel narrative of the *Autobiography*, however, is completely incompatible with this trope, since the passions of the flesh are here not silenced by the hero's repentance and his struggle against sinful temptation, but by the practical application of the biblical Onan's practice. The fact that he finally manages to preserve his virginity, at least to some extent, until the age of twenty-four and a half, until his marriage, is achieved by divine grace through a series of accidents, misunderstandings and clumsiness, and the shaping of the narrative is almost comic. The structure of the chapter on the sins of youth might remind the late reader of the irony of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*" (Orlovsky 2017, 187).

Ultimately, Orlovsky argues that the narrative of the autobiography, at least in the chapter describing the sins of youth, is not based on the belief in providence, or at least presents this interpretive framework in a comic or ironic fracture. Unfortunately, he has not supported this

4 Although Bethlen uses the notion of fortune several times in connection with the favourable or unfavourable turns of his own fate, the connection with the traditional fortune topos disappears completely.

5 English studies of the early modern history of the doctrine of providence point out that it was widespread even during the early Enlightenment, and that it was precisely at the time of the rise of deism that a greater number of writings defending the doctrine of providence appeared as a kind of defensive reaction. See Hunter 1966; Thomas 1973, 90–132.

view with a detailed argument, and it is therefore worth examining the issue raised in more detail. What specific passages might support this interpretation? Are there other passages in the autobiography that indicate a similar contradiction? Are there differences in the approach to providence between the prayer book and the autobiography, and if so, are they compatible?

To shed light on these questions, the observations of historical narratology on the early modern period can provide a good starting point. From a narratological point of view, two main types of early modern narratives can be distinguished: on the one hand, providentially driven narratives, moving towards a predetermined goal, and on the other hand, open-ended, causally motivated narratives, in which the development of the plot is not determined by providence but by the intentions of the characters and by chance (Werner 2018, 90–99). From this point of view, the analysis should explore whether Bethlen's autobiography contains traces of a causally motivated narrative. A major difficulty in doing so, however, is that, being an autobiography, the text does not contain any instance that would allow us to judge the characters' intentions, thoughts and actions from an external perspective. The text contains only the autobiographer's interpretation of his own fate. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that the belief in providence is a closed system capable of explaining all events. What may seem coincidental to the secular modern reader, was not contrary to the omnipotence of God to the early modern man who embraced the belief in providence. For, in a worldview based on providentialism, as Leibniz, among others, put it, chance is only apparent, but in reality it is a matter of the absence of knowledge of causes. (Frick 1988, 80) The analysis must therefore examine whether there are traces in Bethlen's self-interpretation that open up perspectives other than those based on the belief in providence.

Bethlen first addresses the subject of the passions of the flesh in chapter four, speaking of his guilty inclinations. First of all, he emphasizes the physical reasons for his carnal desires, thus obviously excusing his own sins, since in this approach, carnal desires are not analysed as a moral fault, but as a consequence of character, temperament, and are considered natural. The discussion of the subject then turns to the struggle with carnal desires: as a practical antidote, he initially tries fasting, but abandons it, as it does not help the problem but is bad for his health; after a careful consultation of the Bible, he then adopts the practice of Onan, convincing himself that it is not a sin in itself. Yet, after these practical considerations, he refers to God's grace above all as a factor that has prevented him from committing a greater sin:

Suffice it that the mercy of God above all things, for which reason glory be to His Holy Majesty, and then the fear of syphilis, and thirdly that filthiness, brought it about that, apart from my two wives, I never consorted with any, and even less indulged in sodomy or other uncouthness (Bethlen 2004, 128).

Bethlen does not claim that he did not commit carnal sins, in fact, he stresses that his life was a constant struggle with sin; however, he insists that he was different from the vast majority of people, and that this was by the grace of God: “Priest, monk, hermit, let none glory in his celibacy, for not one in a thousand is to be found as I was; but most assuredly I do not glory in it, but in God’s wondrous mercy, which shall be clearer yet hereunder in my life.” (Bethlen 2004, 128).

In this way, the fourth chapter of the first book, on the dispositions, anticipates the twentieth on the sins of youth, and the confession of the *Book of Prayers*. In both, divine grace is shown to be the main protector from sin, whereas in the *Book of Prayers* the emphasis is on the harsh revelation of sinfulness, and in the *Autobiography* on the virtue preserved in spite of sin. The struggle with carnal desires and the confession of sins can thus become a sign of virtue, of election. Today’s reader should bear in mind that Bethlen’s ideas of masculinity differ greatly from the prevailing ideal of our time: the autobiographer sees sexual adventures as the opposite of masculinity, whereas today they are often considered the very characteristics of masculinity.

At the end of the chapter on inclinations, in his advice to his son about the struggle against carnal desires, Bethlen adds to what he said by naming a few more remedies: “The greatest medicine for this is three or four prayers, sobriety, good company and industry” (Bethlen 2004, 128). Later, in a section dealing with his own suffering during his wife’s prolonged illness, he also emphasizes sobriety as a remedy for bodily temptations; here he calls a sober, temperate life a divine gift, ultimately acknowledging God’s merit, divine restraint, for not having committed infidelity: “God alone knows what pains she suffered, and what temptations and bitterness of body and soul I went through those six years. It is certain that had God not protected me especially by a sober, moderate way of life, I would have declined morally, as it was harder then to be without a woman than before my marriage; much temptation, desire and lewdness came upon me, but all the same I consorted with no one, indeed, I did not even attempt to, although there was an army of beautiful maids in the house. To God be the glory that He restrained me and forgave my uncleanness” (Bethlen 2004, 322).

Likewise, in the chapter describing the sins of his youth, he emphasizes that his confessed sins can not only teach the reader a lesson, but also testify to the glory of God. And Bethlen also stresses in the often quoted lines that open the chapter that the adventures described here reveal divine providence: “I am not ashamed with Augustus and Petrarch to confess the blemishes of my youth, and in the midst of them to wonder at and glorify my God’s gracious providence for me which surpasses human believing [...]” (Bethlen 2004, 223). The efficacy of grace is further exemplified in the section of his prayer written for Lent and Sundays, which addresses the temptations experienced by youth. However, the emphasis in this section is on regret for past transgressions. In his book of prayers, Bethlen conveys a sense of remorse for his sins.

Conversely, in his autobiography, he asserts that, in the eyes of the world, his actions were not of a particularly egregious nature and that he was superior to others.

The list of the sins of the youth in the autobiography is a series of stories presented in varying degrees of detail. At greater length, he only tells of a relationship in Kolozsvár,⁶ a love affair in Huszt, and of his adventure in London, after a very brief summary of his first attempts to have sex with women. Among his attempts to have carnal contact with women, there is one where he is laughed at; one where he is told no; in another case Bethlen says no to the woman who makes him an offer; there is one where she does not understand what he wants; and there is one where the accidental appearance of a servant thwarts his attempt. He also describes a case which, by today's standards, would probably be an attempted rape.⁷ These incidents are presented by Bethlen in a very brief and objective manner, without any commentary to help their interpretation. The interpretative framework set out in the introduction to the chapter, i.e. that these cases are evidence of providence at work, reflect the perspective of the elderly Bethlen, who was writing his autobiography: the young man obviously did not interpret his failures as a sign of providence, which is why he could continue his attempts. In retrospect, the young man's attempts, his former failures, his upsets, can be interpreted as fortunate turns which, despite his intentions, helped Bethlen to maintain his purity until his marriage. While the young man's actions may appear to be a series of contingent events, the interpretive framework situates them within the context of providence. Given the series of failures and the duality of viewpoints, it is not unreasonable to assume that today's reader would perceive the text as comic or even ironic; however, Bethlen does not violate the coherence of the providential interpretative framework.

In his descriptions of the cases of Kolozsvár, Huszt and London, Bethlen already makes several references to the way providence was manifested in his relationship with women. In Kolozsvár, first, during an erotic dalliance, the woman runs away: "It was a miracle of God's restraint, especially that he held in check her immodest forwardness." Later, after they agree to go further than kissing, "God would not allow it" (Bethlen 2004, 224). Bethlen directs the reader interested in details to chapters XII and XIII, where he recounts that in the summer of 1659 he nearly drowned in a stream in Kolozsvár, but thanks to God's providence he escaped, and then left Kolozsvár with his mother because of military incidents. The key to his escape from the stream is that the footman Jancsi, who was trying to follow him, falls into the same hole as his master and pushes him to the surface with his head (Bethlen 2004, 182). Bethlen attributes the appearance of the footman not to providence but to chance, and we can therefore assume that this

6 Today: Cluj, Romania.

7 "I chanced upon a woman in the privy, and if I could, and if she had permitted me, I would have defiled her, [...]" (Bethlen 2004, 223).

lucky turn of events, interpreted as chance, also played a role in the preservation of his virginity.⁸ Bethlen does not specify the relationship between the events at the stream and his rejection of the woman. However, the occurrence is also documented in the *Book of Prayers*, and the reflection therein suggests that Bethlen attributes his decision to lead a more virtuous life to divine inspiration, prompted by the fear of God.⁹ However, the extent to which this played a role in the dissolution of the relationship with the woman remains ambiguous. The justification provided for the dissolution of the relationship is, in the final analysis, his departure from Kolozsvár for reasons that were external to his control.¹⁰ In this passage, Providence is depicted as a divine admonition; however, the role this phenomenon plays in the dissolution of the romantic relationship remains ambiguous. It is uncertain whether the cessation of the relationship can be attributed to contingent reasons or if it is indeed influenced by the divine intervention depicted in the text.

The relationship with the married woman he met in 1660 in Huszt did not become consummate because she did not want an extramarital affair, while Bethlen did not want to marry and thus give up his studies abroad. Here the autobiography refers back to Chapter XII, where we read that, by the grace of God, Bethlen's desire for peregrination was so great that he rejected the love of a beautiful young lady (Bethlen 2004, 180). In addition, it also refers to the serious illness he experienced in Huszt, described in Chapter VII. Chapter VII, which details Bethlen's drinking habits, tells of a two-day bout of vomiting and diarrhoea, which was finally stopped by eating "two or three fragments of white bread soaked in Tokaj wine from the finest aszú grapes" (Bethlen 2004, 145). Bethlen gives a detailed account of his recovery. At first, he attributes his healing to God's help, then to the rebarbarum given by Isaac Basire, his professor at the reformed college in Gyulafehérvár.¹¹ Bethlen's recovery from the illness is regarded by him as a pivotal moment in his life story, as it precipitated his decision to lead a sober and modest life. He attributes a substantial degree of influence in this transformation to the counsel provided by Basirius, who recommended the consumption of a glass of water following every lunch and dinner, even though he had previously called it a gift from God (Bethlen 2004, 143). It is only clear from chapter six that, having recovered from this illness, Bethlen had made a vow to avoid drunkenness and fornication (Bethlen 2004, 137).

8 Of course, the reference to chance can be interpreted as the young Bethlen's personal interpretation, reflecting his inability to perceive the actions of providence. However, even within this context, it is noteworthy that the narrator does not refer to providence, but rather to chance.

9 "Thy majesty in those two great evil occasions did wondrously restrain me, so I was soon there frightened with the danger of being drowned, and in a little while thou didst carry me so far away and separate me from that person." (Bethlen 1955, II, 156). All the citations from works not published in English are my translations: Gy. L.

10 His mother removed him from Kolozsvár in light of the evolving war situation.

11 Today: Alba Iulia, Romania.

Géza Orlovsky, studying the autobiography in relation to Bethlen's wine drinking habits, interprets the change in Bethlen's attitude as a purely secular education: "The purification from a sinful lifestyle is interestingly not religiously and morally motivated, but rather a process of learning and education, the logical result of »Bildung«. The highly influential teacher of his lower school, Pál Keresztúri Bíró, is himself a character prone to drunkenness; it will be Basirius, a representative of the higher level, who will provide him with lifelong advice, laying the scientific foundations for the long-mature process of conversion." (Orlovsky 2017, 230).

However, if we consider Bethlen's moral purification, which corresponds with his coming of age, as a purely worldly development, we overlook the fact that he attaches equal importance to divine admonition and worldly advice: "Indeed, I would have become a wicked drunken man had not my mother, who did not drink alcohol and despised drunkards, restrained me, and had not God in anno 1660 by a severe and life-threatening illness, by the loss at that time of Várad, and the advice of my sometime tutor Isacus Basirius, Doctor of Theology (of whom more anon), restored me to a healthy life." (Bethlen 2004, 137).

The passage presents the reader with a similar interpretative dilemma to the famous scene in Defoe's novel where Robinson, suffering from a severe fever, attempts to cure himself by smoking tobacco on the one hand, and by reading the Bible and praying on the other. It is not possible to ascertain which he attributes his cure to.¹² Bethlen's text also allows for different readings, but we do not necessarily have to choose between secular and spiritual interpretations: the historical place of the autobiography is marked by the juxtaposition of the two approaches to the cure.¹³ A similar phenomenon can be observed in Bethlen's justification of his peregrination. It is possible to explain it by psychological factors, as Orlovsky does: "the peregrination to which he then definitively committed himself was both an escape from political and private turmoil" (Orlovsky 2017, 231). But we cannot completely ignore the fact that Bethlen sees in his autobiography (in retrospect) this as a manifestation of providence: he longed to go abroad "by the direction of God" (Bethlen 2004, 180). Let us not forget that these

12 About the interpretation of the scene, see Seidel 2021, 179-201.

13 The ambivalent and changing perceptions of the possibilities of early modern medicine are reflected in Keith Thomas' observation. In discussing the view of providence in early modern England, Thomas notes that it was a common view among English Protestant theologians and physicians in the mid-17th century that remedies should not be over-reliant: without God's help and prayer they would not be of any use in themselves; but in practice, physicians and patients alike often regarded illness as a purely natural, material phenomenon (Thomas 1973, 99).

lines are written by Bethlen who had already repented of his sins in prayer and had confirmed his election.¹⁴

There is no mention in the autobiography of the connection between the taking of vows and the development of the affair with the married woman, nor is the chronology of these events entirely clear. In any case, Bethlen's carnal desires remain unfulfilled not because he recognises that they are sinful, but because she does not want an extramarital affair and he does not want to marry.¹⁵

Ultimately, Bethlen does not claim that the illness, understood as a divine admonition, played a role in the break-off, citing as its cause – also contradicting himself – on one occasion the desire for peregrination, on another occasion the woman's resistance (in both explanations, he cites divine providence as the final cause). According to Bethlen's account, four years later (i.e., after his return home), she made a second proposal of marriage, which was endorsed by Bethlen's father. However, Bethlen declined, offering no rationale for his decision, but instead attributing it to divine will: "I was unwilling because God did not wish it, at which all were amazed" (Bethlen 2004, 225). An explanation can be found in Chapter XVII: here Bethlen reports that on his return home in 1664, "my head was more full of Mars than of Venus"; instead of marriage, he joined Miklós Zrínyi as a soldier (Bethlen 2004, 207). Here, as in the case of the reference to the desire for peregrination, the guidance of Providence is in line with Bethlen's own plans.

In recounting his visit to a brothel during his sojourn in London, Bethlen again claims that it was God who prevented him from engaging in intercourse with a prostitute. However, he subsequently states that had he not heeded the counsel of a paternal friend in England and had not feared contracting venereal disease, he would not have abstained from fornication before and after the incident (Bethlen 2004, 235). If the reader follows Bethlen's guidance and goes back to Chapter XV, he will recall that during his stay in England Bethlen "had a tendency to slip into drunkenness and lechery", and that he left England on the advice of Wilhelm Curtius (Bethlen 2004, 198). However, even taking this into account, it remains unclear whether fear of venereal disease played a role in Bethlen's refraining from sexual intercourse during the

14 Levente Nagy sees that Bethlen, because he was not freed from his captivity, could not experience election, and he was struggling all the time (Nagy 2017, 189; Nagy 2020, 241-256). Autobiographies, by their very nature, cannot portray the fate of the individual in the afterlife. From the reader's point of view, this alone may leave room for some doubt as to whether the autobiographer's life was indeed guided by Providence or whether it was a series of contingent events.

15 The prayer book clearly indicates that the reason for the break-up was not Bethlen's vow, but her behaviour: „thou hast wonderfully restrained me, and preserved me from the commission of sin, by the very person who first gave himself over to the occasion of sin, and thy Majesty gave her a better mind. And me, being then chastened with a deadly disease, thou didst vow, I think, that I would keep myself from drunkenness and fornication [...].” (Bethlen 1955, II 156).

visit to the brothel addressed to the Saracen King, or if other factors were at play.

In order to comprehend the chapter about the sins of the youth of the autobiography, it is necessary for the reader to recall the preceding chapters or to revisit them. The links with the earlier chapters demonstrate the coherence of the autobiography, but also highlight that providence often works in an indirect way. The unraveling of the details also reveals that in the narrative of the autobiography, some events are already interpreted as divine signs in the narrated past. Thus, the serious illness in Huszt is already interpreted as a divine sign in the narrative past, since the young Bethlen takes his vows precisely because he understands his illness as an exhortation from God. In other cases, however, the situation is not clear. However, in the confession of sins in the book of prayers, it is exclusively from the perspective of the repentant sinner, the new man, that the signs of Providence in the life of the old men can be discerned.

In both his autobiography and his prayer book, Bethlen ascribes his chastity before his marriage to the grace of God. The concept of chance as an explanation for his actions appears only once, albeit indirectly. Also relevant to the question of providence, however, is the dichotomy in the way the fear of syphilis is judged. The *Autobiography* acknowledges it (and onanism) as a beneficial tool in the battle against carnal desires; however, within the strict moral theological framework of the *Prayer Book* it is a source of guilt that he remained virtuous out of fear of disease and not out of love of God. This dichotomy bears a resemblance to the somewhat contradictory assessment of secular honour in the different chapters of the *Preface*. Bethlen first strongly condemns all forms of seeking worldly honour, but later takes the view that seeking worldly honour, avoiding shame and disgrace, can be morally beneficial. The dichotomy between a strict moral theological position and a secular, worldly, practical perspective can also be seen as a sign of a shift in mentality, as a sign of the early Enlightenment.

The question of providence is explicitly thematised in several places in the autobiography. For instance, in the chapters concerning his peregrination, he ascribes various occurrences to divine intervention, underscoring the significance of recording events that exemplify God's benevolence.¹⁶ He perceives divine providence in his survival after being swept away by a stream; in his recovery of lost gold; and in the fact that he happened to go to the same inn as Jászberényi upon his arrival in London (Bethlen 2004, 182, 183, 196). However, at the onset of Book 2, he underscores the significance of documenting these signs of divine providence: "Henceforth I shall record, therefore, that my posterity may have evidence, the more noteworthy achievements, endeavours,

16 "I could write many pleasing and amusing things about my journey, but I am loth to cover the paper with even greater trivia, and will only record these, which testify to God's care for me." (Bethlen 2004, 181) Bethlen may be writing here from earlier records in which he collected instances of divine providence.

obstacles and sufferings of my life, and as best I may shall abbreviate and summarise them, taking due note in particular, at all times and in all respects, of the providence of God towards me and of his consolation among the ceaseless persecutions of the devil and the world which the perceptive reader will everywhere observe throughout my life [...].” (Bethlen 2004, 251).

Bethlen also alludes to providence on multiple occasions in relation to his financial prosperity. He himself acknowledges a pronounced predilection for trade, although he reports being censured by his malefactors for engaging in such activities, allegedly as a practice deemed incongruent with a noble existence (Bethlen 2004, 216). The issue of trade and material prosperity is a recurring theme in the pages of the life writing that depict the actions of the mature man. Bethlen frequently attributes his material successes to divine intervention, attributing his prosperous wine trade to divine favor and attributing the expansion of his estate to divine assistance: “At this time too God took pity on me, and gave me Zabola instead of Örményes, and the little estates at Bénye and Medves, so that my prosperity at Szentmiklós was established, indeed grew greatly, and later Örményes too returned to me together with a son. Such are the works of God.” (Bethlen 2004, 253). Bethlen’s successes in trade, which he later repeatedly reports, are an integral part of his self-characterization as living up to the ideal of a good merchant.¹⁷ The following incident in 1674 is particularly insightful in terms of the relationship between providence and chance: “At that time too God was exceptionally and wonderfully gracious to me. My wife came from Zabola and gave me no peace, but contrary to our custom we went from Holdvilág to Szentivány, in terrible rain and mud. About the ninth or tenth of September I was looking over the grapes, and they were like gooseberries, there was not a soft berry among them and very few bunches. I said to Simon, my Saxon bailiff: Old man, St Mihály’s day is only two and a half weeks off, what do you think? He replied: God only knows, no one has ever seen the like; but I fear that these will not ripen in the time, and there are no bunches, I do not know what we are to do. I did not say much but that day at once bought twenty-five barrels of old wine in Szentivány and Örményes at twenty-four forints a ‘forty’. I went home, asked my friends for money, and bought sixty barrels of old wine at Ekemező, Szászsebes and Sárd.

17 For example: “My profit in the campaigning was as follows: the Prince sent a horse by my hand as a gift to the pasha of Temesvár, the son of the famous Seydi Ahmet, sometime vizier of Buda; he gave it to an equerry and interpreter, but to me as gift-bearing emissary he gave ten ells of fine pink English cloth; my forty-thaler pair of pistols, a gift from the Elector in Heidelberg (which I would not have sold for a hundred thalers) were stolen from my saddle-bow in the night. I took so much profit from the inn that the six or seven hundred forints that I had taken with me was a hundred more at Szentmiklós when I reached home, although I had certainly spent much, bought things, paid my servants, and paid in cash for fodder so that forty-five horses should have fodder three times daily, which they really did.” (Bethlen 2004, 334).

They became good wines in anno 1674, and I had bought them for twenty-one forints. People were astonished at it, and even my good lord Zsigmond Bánffy wrote to me: would I tell him what was the point of my buying old wines. I wrote back: I will tell you myself at the Parliament in November. The Parliament assembled, and the poor fellow said: I understand now, do not tell me. I have had quite enough; the egg is teaching the hen. I gained on this almost twice as much in anno 1676.” (Bethlen 2004, 282).

While he ascribes the successful speculation, in retrospect, to divine intervention, his detailed description of the process underscores the pivotal role of his perspicacity, astuteness, and skillfulness. Consequently, a contemporary reader might be inclined to interpret the narrative from a wholly secular perspective, regarding the allusion to God’s grace as a superficial formality. However, given the historical context, we need not necessarily take this view, since the Protestant view of the time did not necessarily see a contradiction between faith in divine providence and recognition of individual mercenary achievement. Indeed, as Max Weber noted, a fundamental tenet of Protestant ethics was the connection between material success and divine favor.¹⁸

One wonders, of course, whether the business action in question is fully in line with the Protestant ideal of honourable commerce.¹⁹ This question may also arise because in his prayer book Bethlen is very vehement in his scourging of his own acquisitiveness, the source of which he identifies with self-love that is alienating him from God: “In what thousands of ways and means I have drawn, stolen, cheated my neighbour, only when that bad money was deposited in this country, how many people have I corrupted by my many-coloured and many-formed miserly dealings, my usury, my many borrowings, my difficult, late and harmful payments, my acquiring wealth by the damage of goods, inheritances and all other things, etc.” (Bethlen 1955, II 176).

The reference to the depositing of bad money clearly recalls the events of 1674, since Bethlen used his political insider and landlord status to turn the income from the sale of wine, which had lost value due to the minting of money, into real value. One might therefore also assume that the subject of the prayer regards the purchase of the wine itself as a miserly trade, i.e. that Bethlen takes a more austere view in

18 “For if God, whose hand the Puritan sees in all the occurrences of life, shows one of His elect a chance of profit, he must do it with purpose” – writes Weber, referring to Richard Baxter’s views. (Weber 2001, 108). About the relationship of providentialism and individual activity in Puritanism see further: Cohen 2022, 93.

19 Weber stresses that the Puritans, while approving of the business successes of the rational bourgeois self-made man, condemned adventurist capitalism based on speculation (Weber 2001, 111). Among the theologians, Ames and Perkins strongly cautioned against excessive profiteering. See: Ryrie 2013, 102. According to Molnár, Bethlen’s trading activities were not driven by the continuous, business-like profit-making model described by Weber, but rather by speculation (Molnár 1994, 112).

the prayer than in the autobiography. It is more likely, however, that Bethlen is consistent, and that he considered the wine business to be fundamentally honest. While his sins of carnal passion are described in great detail in the autobiography, his financial sins are barely mentioned, and it is therefore difficult to judge where he saw the line between honest gain and excessive profit-seeking. In any case, in the autobiography Bethlen allows considerably more room for individual activity, skill and the resulting material gain than in the prayer, where he unrelentingly scourges all forms of self-love.

The predominant trope of the self-interpretation given by Miklós Bethlen in his life-writing is the belief in the power of providence; at the same time, however, in several cases secular considerations, worldly motivations and individual activity also play a role in the development of his life's path. This does not mean, however, that the references to providence in the autobiography are a purely formal addition on the surface of the secular narrative, nor is it just a question of the genre dichotomy between the prayer book and the autobiography; rather, the reasons are to be found in the tension between the belief in providence and the new experiences and patterns of thought of the incipient modernisation.

Given the presence of elements that challenge the validity of providentialism, the interpretation of Miklós Bethlen's autobiography raises somewhat similar questions to Defoe's *Robinson*. For a long time, the evaluation of the English novel has been characterised by the duality of secular readings, which focus the *homo economicus* and spiritual readings, which focus the *homo religiosus*, and attempts to resolve this duality (Monk 1993, 15–45, McKeon 2002, 315–337). Somewhat similar dichotomies can be seen in the more recent Bethlen literature: while Zsombor Tóth (2007), drawing mainly on the *Prayer Book*, painted a picture of the Puritan Bethlen and emphasized the soteriological features of the autobiography, József Simon (2022), in his analysis of the *Preface*, pointed to the secular tendencies of Bethlen's thinking, above all the emergence of self-interest as a positive category. These two approaches are both firmly grounded, but further analysis is needed to clarify the relationship between the secular and spiritual dimensions in different parts of the autobiography.

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