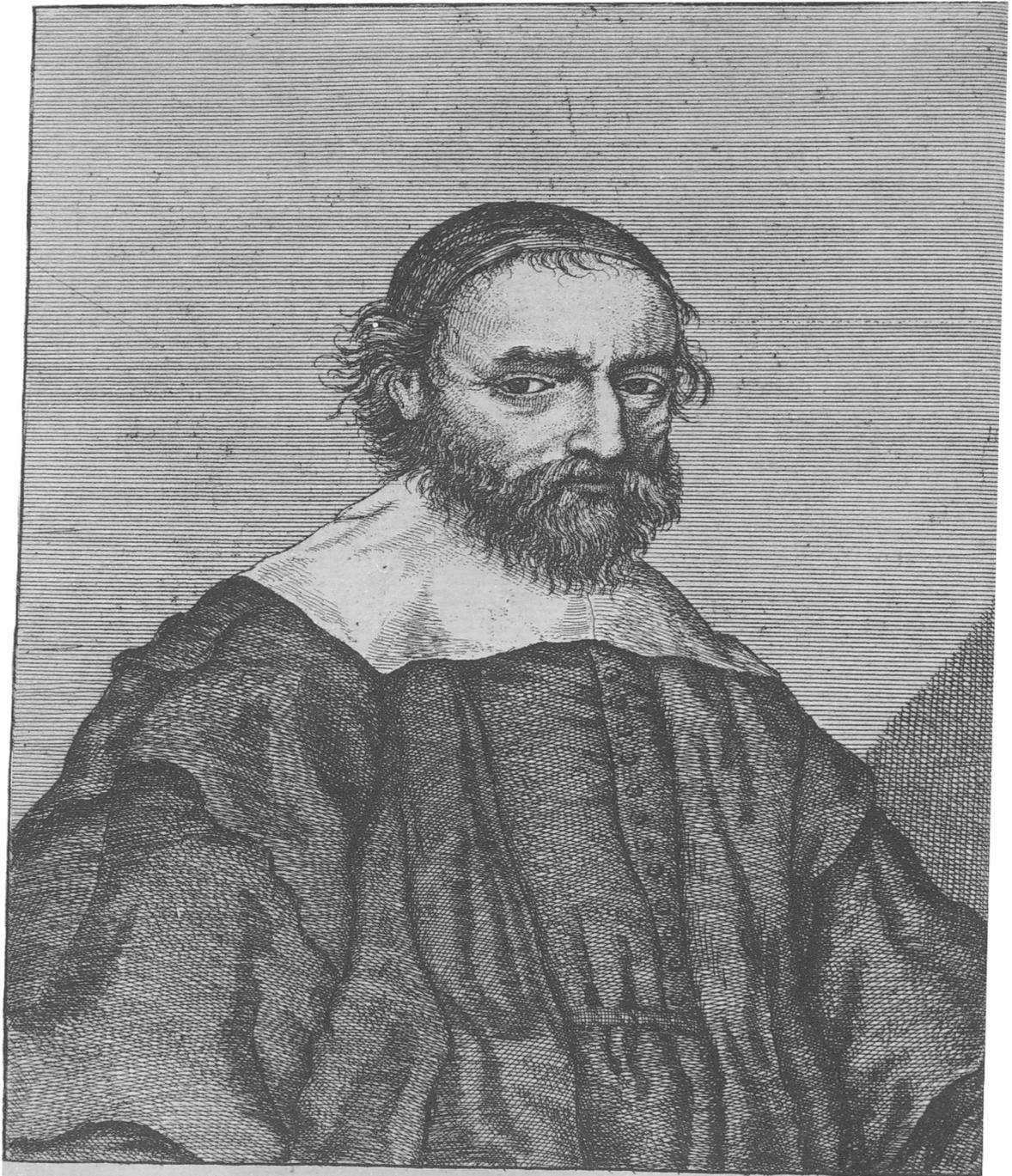


PIERRE GASSENDI

Peiresc
&
His Books

PEIRESC & HIS BOOKS



NICOLAUS CLAUDIUS FABRICIUS
DE PEIRESO SENATOR AQVENSIS

R. Gaywood fecit Lond. 1656

PIERRE GASSENDI

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&
His Books



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PEIRESC & HIS BOOKS · AN INTRODUCTION

The character of Nicolas Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580-1637) as book-collector is no less paradoxical than his reputation as humanist. In an age bristling with abundantly “productive” and self-conscious scientists, statesmen, artists and antiquaries, Peiresc, who pursued all disciplines and left after him little of his own in any, to popular appearance, was lionized and beloved by virtually the entire learned world; and far from being dismissed by subsequent history, he has commanded over forty monographs and biographies, many of recent date, while at least ten volumes of his correspondence have been printed from the vast quantity still preserved in archives at Aix-en-Provence and Paris. The true greatness of Peiresc, as all his commentators declare, lay in the selfless manner with which he forever collaborated and contributed, lent learning and traded in research, put one scholar or scientist in touch with another, carried the news, and in general served tirelessly, by travel and correspondence, as a link between alien disciplines, distant places, and separated personalities. The roll-call of his friends and correspondents is some index of the breadth of his interests and the warmth with which he was received wherever he journeyed: John Barclay (whose *Argenis* he helped to publish), Camden, Isaac Casaubon, Cotton (whose ill-fated *Genesis* MS he transcribed, thus preserving what was lost or charred in the Ashburnham House fire of 1731), William Harvey, Raleigh, Selden, Spelman; Grotius, Daniel Heinsius, Diodati, Justus Lipsius, Meursius, Salmasius, Gruter; Bosquet, Gassendi, Pinelli, De Thou (a long and close friendship), Cardinal Mazarin, Gabriel Naudé, J. C. Scaliger, Barlaeus, Rubens, Fermat, Galileo and Kepler. All in all, declares Léopold

Delisle, he was “an amateur of genius who contributed to the progress of human knowledge, and who carried to the highest point modesty, the desire to oblige, a taste for the beautiful, a passion for reading, and a disinterested love of science.”

Amateur above all, in the earliest sense, and so unstintingly generous that his status as a bibliophile somehow transcends that normally allocated to men, learned or not, who collect and preserve books and manuscripts from the ruin of time. As the following extract from Pierre Gassendi’s biography explains, the exceptional idiosyncrasy of Peiresc’s collecting was his willingness to give away what he had with deliberation and difficulty chosen, obtained, and commissioned to bind. “He was no less than a Maecenas,” wrote the Sieur de Balzac, and for his open-handedness Peiresc left, at his death, a personal library at Aix of modest proportions—5400 volumes, one hundred of which “à choisir” he willed to Gassendi, the remainder passing *en bloc* to the Collège de Navarre, Paris. The manuscripts were more widely dispersed, although many attempts have been made to reconstruct the original holding, as several preserve otherwise lost texts.

It remains to be said that a collector’s duty in the early seventeenth century was not only to choose and procure his books, but to bind them well enough to withstand the normal wear and tear of use as well as the normal risk of subsequent destruction for ugliness. In the former obligation Peiresc was meticulous and judicious—as Gassendi relates, and as a famous letter to the Frères Du Puy substantiates: Peiresc is seriously annoyed that the Paris bookseller Buon has sent him a copy of Barronius which he discovers to have been made up from two different editions. In the latter capacity, Peiresc is, as W. Y. Fletcher allows, “a worthy successor to De Thou.” His very best books, apparently, he consigned to “Le Gascon,” the mysterious craftsman (or

atelier) who reigned supreme in French bookbinding throughout the early seventeenth century. But the majority of his working library he had bound at Aix, principally by a young Parisian practitioner named Simon (or possibly Guillaume) Corberan, whom he maintained in his own house, and to whom gradually he gave over the management of the whole library. Another less skillful resident seems to have aided in this endless task, but it is to Corberan that Peiresc addresses his letters when away from home, whom he praises to the Du Puys as “worth his weight in gold, and capable of equalling the work of Le Gascon or Le Gascon’s workmen, if he had the proper ‘fine tools’,” for whom he begs his brother at Paris to obtain new tools (“primarily for the dentelles and vignettes . . . and the fleurons to put on the spines. The triple fillet [tool] which Tavernier has sent me works very well . . .”), and upon whom the responsibility of protecting the household itself against mob violence in 1629 devolved. Of Corberan we know little else, save his work, and that though wholly faithful to his occupation and master, he inclined to lapses of debilitating drunkenness.

The English translation of Gassendi, here offered with capitalization and orthography retained, but punctuation modernized, is by “W[illiam] Rand, Doctor of Physick” (London, 1657: Wing G 295, Keynes 176), dedicated to John Evelyn as “the English Peireskian.” Evelyn notes the dedication in his diary for 5 March 1657. Its full title is *The | Mirrour | of true | Nobility & Gentility. | Being the | Life | of | The Renowned Nicolaus | Claudius Fabricius Lord | of Peiresk, Senator | of the Parlaiment | at Aix*. The passage transcribed occupies ff. Mm5-8; the copy employed is Yates Thompson -J. R. Abbey.

ARTHUR FREEMAN

MOREOVER, his care was exceeding great, to procure plenty and variety of Books. For to say nothing of Manuscripts, which if ancient, in case he could not procure them, he would cause Copies to be written out (and sometimes wrote them out himself) having by him Catalogues of the most renowned and chief Libraries in the world. To pass over, I say, Manuscripts, he bought up printed Books at Rome, Venice, Paris, Amsterdam, Antwerp, London, Lions, and other places; and that not only after the Mart was over at Francfort, but all the year long, his friends acquainting him with, and sending him such, as were for his turn; for which he caused money to be paid, either by the Bankers and Money-changers, or by friends. Also, where ever any Libraries were to be sold by out-cry, he took order to have the rarer Books bought up, especially such as were of some neat Edition which he had not. And truly 'tis incredible to tell how great a number of Books he gathered together; also, it is incredible how it should come to pass that he left not a most compleat Library behind him: but neither of these will seem strange if a man shall consider that he sought Books not for himself alone, but for any that stood in need of them. He lent an innumerable company which were never restored; also he gave a world away, as I hinted before, of which he could hardly hope ever to get the like again; which he did when learned men had occasion to use them. For as for such Books as were commonly to be had at the Book-sellers, of them he was wonderfully profuse and lavish. For which cause, as often as he was informed of Books newly come forth, he would have many of them; which he would partly keep by him, and partly distribute them immediately among his friends, according as he knew they would like the subject matter thereof.

And whether he gave them away or kept them, he would be sure to have them neatly bound and covered; to which end he kept an industrious Book-binder in his House, who did exquisitely bind and adorn them. Yea, and sometimes he kept many Book-binders at once, for one man was hardly ever able to bind up such store of Books as came trowling in from all parts. Also, it happened frequently that such Books as he borrowed, being neglected by their owners and ill bound, he delivered to his binder to be rectified and beautified, *viz.*, when their subject matter or rarity deserved that cost; so that having received them ill-bound and ill-favoured, he returned them trim and handsome. And so he did get by all the very old Books which he could get, whether printed or Manuscripts. Nor did his care only extend to such as were entire and perfect, but even to the fragments of Books, and Leaves half eaten. And being demanded why he would be at that charge in the Book-binding, he would say the Cause was, inasmuch as the best Books, when they fell into unlearned men's hands ill-accounted, were pittifully used, he therefore endeavoured that they might be prized at least for the beauty of their binding, and so escape the danger of the Tobacconist and Grocer. And those which he bound for his own use he would have his Mark stampt upon them. Which Mark was made up of these three Capital Greek Letters, Ν Κ Φ, which were so neatly interwoven that, being doubted, they might be read to the right hand, and to the left; by which initial capital Letters these three words were designed: *Nicolas, Klaudius, Phabricius*.

As for the Room wherein his Library was kept, it was indeed too small, though the whole walls were filled, and nests were placed likewise on the floore, filled with Books. Also he had Books in the Porch of his Study,

and likewise piled on heaps in several Chambers. And truly he had frequent thoughts to build a large Gallery, but so many things were then to be removed, especially the Library of his Father and Ancestors, in which he had laid up the greatest part of his rarities; also he was always so full of business that he could not accomplish what he intended, but left the House just as he first found it. I omit to say that the Porch to his Study aforesaid, also the Porch to the House, and his Garden and other places were loaded with Marbles, both such as were engraven upon, and such as were formed into statues; and that whereas in the old study he had treasured up an huge Masse of old Coines and weights, especially the lighter sort, and in other places weights, measures, Arms, Statues, and innumerable other things, it must needs be that all things lay as it were confused, to others, but to him that knew perfectly where every thing was, they were orderly placed. He was far from the Practise of those mentioned by *Seneca*, who adorned with curious gold-work such *Corinthian* Vessels as the madness of a few men had rendered estimable; for he neglected even those precious Boxes which he provided at first for his Coines—especially after his losse by Theeves had made him more cautious; so that he made cases of Ebony and such like stuff only for things less subject to be stole, as the [telescopic] Tripod aforesaid, the drinking Cups, and such like things.

Nor was it without cause that I told you how that what might seem to others confused was not so to him. For though he would frequently excuse himself that all in his House was nothing but a confused and indigested Masse, or heap, yet was he never long in seeking any thing in so great an heap, provided that none meddled with his Rarities, Books, or Papers, but himself; and that

some body else, being commanded to fetch this or that, had not put them out of order. For to say nothing of his Books, which were all titled and distributed into certain Classes and proper Places as much as might be, and which he could describe to *Simeon Corberanus*, an ingenious Joyner [i.e. bookbinder], by any the least circumstance, even where they were not methodically digested, he was wont to digest and bind up into bundles with paper, or some other covering, all other things; that with his own hand he would write Titles upon every bundle, intimating whatsoever was therein contained.

And whereas he was accustomed, in a peculiar manner, to bind up into bundles such Letters as he received, according to the variety of Persons, Places, or Times, he first writ upon each who wrote the same, from whence, what year, moneth, and day, and subjoyned a brief Index of the chief matters which in reading he had marked with a line drawn under them: for by this meanes he was holpen both to answer the same more distinctly and speedily, as also to finde the same, if at any time he went to seek any thing in his Letters. And if any new matters were contained in his Letters which others desired to be acquainted with, he did not promiscuously shew them, but caused them so to be written out, that he first enclosed within certain bars or lines what he would have omitted in the transcription, cutting off such names of men, things, and business as he desired to conceal; also changing and sweetening the phrase, that no offence might be taken.

And as he was wont to keep carefully such Letters as were sent to him by others, so did he cause his Scribes to write Copies of such as he himself wrote, which he kept by themselves, according to the variety or condition of the Countries or Persons to whom he sent them. And

being sometime demanded why he did so, he answered, Not because he thought his Letters worth keeping, but because it concerned him many times to see what long since, or lately, he had written or not written, least he might inculcate the same thing after the same manner, and so become tedious; or might omit that which he was uncertain whether he had written or no; or least such things which he had sought out and digested with great care might slip out of his memory, or he might want wherewith to convince such as should deny that he had informed them of this or that; or finally, least in case his Letters should come to miscarry, he must be forced to take pains to compose new ones.

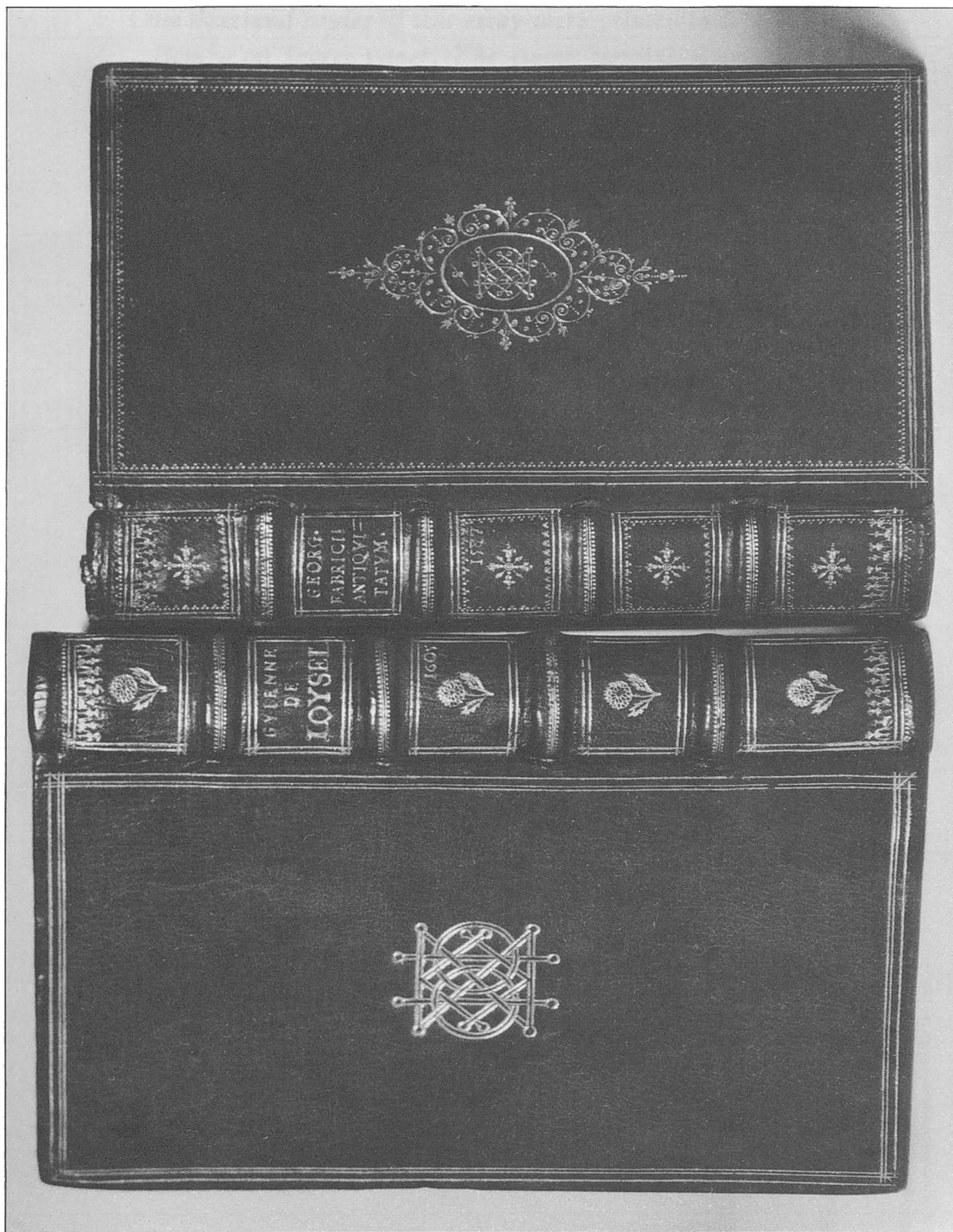
As for the reading of Books, he had truly in his latter yeares little time to bestow therein. For he was wholly in a manner taken up with writing of Letters, and when he did run over any Books, he did it chiefly that he might collect somewhat from them to put into his Letters. And whensoever he gave himself to reading, he was not wont cursorily to slip or run over the difficult places; but he kept a slow pace, and was wont to stop when he met with any difficulty. To which end he alwayes had his pen at hand, with which he drew a line under obscure places, and whatever he thought worthy of observation. For he said that he was thereby put in mind, when he took the Book in hand again, to consider afresh the difficult passages, to inculcate and imprint upon his mind such things as were most observable, and readily to finde what was most for his turn. He was not therefore of their mind, who, having gotten fair Books, are afraid to blot them with such lines, or marginal notes; and therefore he commonly caused all his Books, when they were in Quires, to be washed over with Alum-water, and when he foresaw their Margents would not be large enough,

he caused white paper to be bound between the printed leaves. Also he was wont, when he received any observations from his friends, either to write them into his Books with his own hands, or to cause his said friends, or some others, to write them in.

In like manner, if he had received by gift or had bought Books which had belonged to learned men, he esteemed them so much the more highly by how much the fuller they were of such things as they had inserted with their own hand-writing. And he was exceeding desirous to get into his Hands Books of the Authours own hand-writing, especially such as had not bin printed, when ever he could procure them of the Authours or their Heires, which he would cause to be printed, or, if the Authours were unwilling, he would at least have them written out for his own use. And for this very cause he had alwayes Scribes in readiness (amongst which I must not forget to name his most faithful and laborious Scribe, *Franciscus Parrotus*), that whether in the vulgar Languages, or in Latine, Greek, Arabick or Turkish, or in any other Language, he would have any thing transcribed, he might not fail to have it done to his mind.

For he could never endure that the least invention or observation of any man should be lost, being alwayes in hopes that either himself, or some other, would be advantaged thereby.





TWO BOOKS FROM PEIRESC'S LIBRARY, SHOWING BOTH FORMS OF HIS CIPHER.

BY COURTESY OF HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY

One thousand copies of this essay were printed in Monotype Bembo on Ingres paper. The cover paper is Roma. The illustrations were printed by The Meriden Gravure Company. This is the seventh in the series of poems, tracts & broadsides to be published & printed at the press of David Godine.

