

BOOK REVIEW

François II Rákóczi: *Confession d'un pécheur*. Traduite du latin par Chrysostome Jourdain. Édition critique avec introductions et notes établies sous la direction de Gábor Tüskés. Avant-propos de Jean Garapon. Avec la collaboration de Csenge E. Aradi, Ildikó Gausz, Zsuzsanna Hámori-Nagy, Réka Lengyel, Zsolt Szebelédi, Ferenc Tóth et Anna Tüskés. Édition revue et préparée par Michel Marty. Honoré Champion (Bibliothèque d'études de l'Europe centrale, Série « Littérature », No 25), Paris, 2020. 777 p.

Reviewed by *Gilles Baumont**

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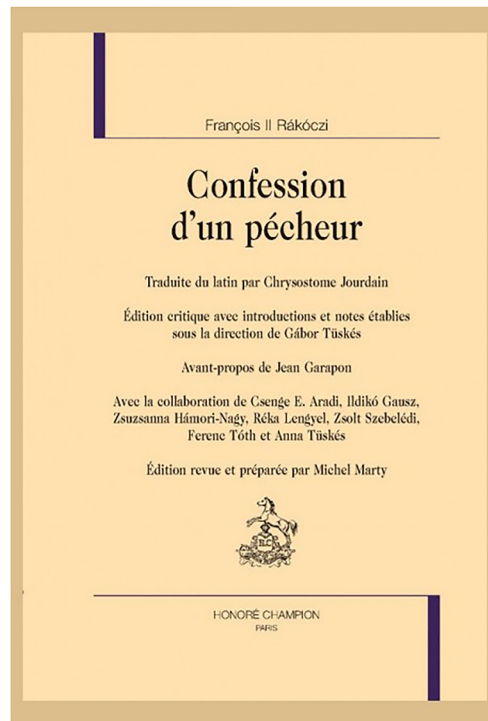


Fig. 1. Cover of the critical edition *Confession d'un pécheur*

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This critical edition fits in well with the recent work carried out by Hungarian, French and German researchers that has made it possible to rediscover and represent to the public certain aspects of the life of Ferenc (Francis) Rákóczi II and some of his writings that had been little studied in the past. This purpose was served, in particular, by a symposium held in Budapest in May 2022,¹ which brought together some twenty specialists of the subject on the initiative of Gábor Tüskés.² Their contributions shed a clear light on the author that Rákóczi was, through research on Jansenist currents and their impact on European literature. But the source that allows us to approach the complex personality of the Prince most intimately is the recent publication of his *Confession Peccatoris*, written in Latin by Rákóczi himself. This scholarly work provides a body of information and food for thought on aspects of his life that may echo contemporary difficulties, as well as a range of universal questions.

Confession d'un pécheur is a translation from Latin into French by Chrysostome Jourdain, Prior of the Camaldolese (1732–c. 1778) at Grosbois (today Yerres).³ He undertook this work long after the death of the prince. This shows that Rákóczi's wish had been faithfully honored by the Camaldolese Fathers.

The Latin *Confessio* was published in Budapest in 1876,⁴ while the complete French translation by Jourdain remained unprinted up till now. A partial edition of Jourdain's translation, together with extracts from the *Mémoires*, was published in 1977.⁵ Historians, philologists and literary critics will likewise be glad to gain access to this highly informative critical edition, as the *Confession* provides an important source on the history of the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires and Europe in general in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.⁶

The edition is enriched with introductory essays and copious textual and editorial material. The first chapter of the *Introduction* (15–38) offers a compact biography of Rákóczi (Ferenc Tóth); the second (39–141) provides a detailed analysis of the *Confession*, discussing questions of sources, motifs and the author's literary program, as well as the structure and themes of the work, the typology and concept of “sin”, problems of language, rhetoric and *écriture de soi*, the

¹Symposium held in Budapest on May 11–15, 2022, entitled “Jansenisms and Literature in Central Europe”. Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yhNHC-dOHA&t=2s> – Thanks to André Bourachot and Alain Vatteville.

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³Yerres, a commune of the Essonne; former parish of the Brie, in the Paris region, where the convent of the Camaldules de Grosbois has been located since 1642. Grosbois is a place surrounded by forests, overlooking the valleys of the Yerres and its tributary the Réveillon. Today, few of the conventual buildings remain, but the district has retained its charm, despite progressive urbanization throughout the 20th century. This is Grosbois, a place to which Rákóczi repeatedly confesses his attachment.

⁴Principis Francisci II. Rákóczi *Confessiones et Aspiraciones Principis Christiani*, e codice Bibliothecae Nationalis Parisiensis edidit Commissio fontium historiae patriae Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae (Budapestini, Bibliopolium Academiae Hungaricae, 1876), (*Monumenta Hungariae Historica*, I. Scriptores).

⁵*L'autobiographie d'un prince rebelle. Confession et Mémoires de François II Rákóczi*, choix des textes, préface et commentaires par Béla Köpeczi, établissement du texte d'après l'édition de 1739 des *Mémoires* et le manuscrit de la traduction française de la *Confession* par Ilona Kovács (Budapest : Corvina, 1977).

⁶The partial English translations of *Confessio* and *Mémoires*: Ferenc Rákóczi II, *Confessio Peccatoris. The confession of a sinner [...]*. Translated from the Latin and Hungarian and with notes by Bernard Adams. Preface by Robert Evans. Essay by Gábor Tüskés (Budapest, Corvina, 2019); Ferenc Rákóczi II, *Memoirs. The memoirs of Prince Ferenc Rákóczi concerning the war in Hungary 1703 to the end*. Translated from the Hungarian and with notes by Bernard Adams. Essay by Gábor Tüskés (Budapest: Corvina, 2019).



balance between fiction and reality and the genre of the *Confession* itself. It also traces the history of the reception of the text and its French translations, as well as its later influence (Gábor Tüskés). Chapter III (143–167) presents a comparative analysis of the Latin and the French texts, based on a selection of some one hundred passages (Ildikó Gausz). Gausz emphasizes the translator's concern with clarity, logic and rigor, "the mastery with which Jourdain handles Rákóczi's popular Latin restores the perfection of this masterpiece that is the *Confession*." In Chapter IV (167–189), Csenge E. Aradi and Zsuzsanna Hámori-Nagy describe the manuscripts of the two translations: Jourdain's autograph text (Médiathèque de Troyes, Ms. 2144) and Jean-Baptiste Bonnaud's excerpt (BnF Ms. Fr. 17690). Jourdain's translation, which takes up the central part of the volume (185–622), is accompanied by explanatory notes and verifications of the quotations and allusions in the text, followed by the *apparatus criticus* of the edition (623–688) and by Bonnaud's excerpt (689–724). The volume is rounded off with a detailed chronological table, an extensive bibliography, two maps with the itineraries of Rákóczi and three indices (725–773).

The *Confession*, a text of more than 400 pages in which Rákóczi describes in detail the events and mood of each period of his life, is a rarity in itself. Without presuming to summarize in a few words a work of such magnitude, it seems a good idea first to recall the historical course that the life of the prince had followed. Born on March 27, 1676 in Borsi (today Borša in Slovakia), Rákóczi died in Rodostó (today Tekirdağ in Turkey) on April 8, 1735 (Good Friday!). Prince of Transylvania, a region of Hungary, Ferenc Rákóczi was heir to a wealthy family of the Hungarian nobility which associated its destiny with a very long tradition of struggle for autonomy against the ruling powers, especially the house of Austria, engaging in a string of ancestral wars against the background of deep religious and territorial quarrels. Uprisings were organized by the entire lineage of this family, from his great-grandfather György I, to his mother Ilona Zrínyi. This history has been well documented by diplomatic archives and studies published as early as the 19th and 20th centuries.

Reflecting on the prince we are reminded of a range of historical facts: ever since the year 1000, when Pope Sylvester II crowned St Stephen to be the first Christian king of Hungary, the kingdom of Hungary had been protected from the claims of the Germanic sovereigns. The Golden Bull issued by Andrew II in 1222 authorized armed resistance and legalized revolts by the nobility, but came to be abolished by the Diet of Pozsony (today Bratislava in Slovakia) in 1687. The Empire pursued a highly repressive policy in these territories, provoking numerous revolts by the Kuruts (the crusaders or malcontents, names given to the Hungarian insurgents during previous revolts). Thus, "the revolt led by Prince Ferenc II Rákóczi from 1703 to 1711 is part of a long line of conflicts between the Hungarian people and the Habsburg dynasty".⁷ But events and reversals of alliances put an end to this military action, which Rákóczi saw as a failure. He arrived in France in 1713, and received help from Louis XIV, who had previously supported the Hungarian cause. He received protection and subsistence. Rákóczi was very close to the court at this time and witnessed the king's agony. The death of the king on September 1, 1715 was a significant event in his life. His seclusion to the convent of Camaldolese at Grosbois, where he started to write his *Confession*, took on a special meaning.

⁷Yves-Marie Rocher, "Louis XIV and the Hungarian War of Independence (1701–1711)", *Revue historique des armées* 263 (2011), 63–74.



The *Confession* contains very instructive information about his moral formation, which echoes St Augustine and foreshadows Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Ferenc had received his first education in 1688 at the Jesuit College in Neuhaus (Jindřichův Hradec, today in the Czech Republic), and then “did” his humanities in Prague. In the *Confession*, he is very critical of the Jesuit fathers, whose teaching and behavior he considers too lenient; the numerous comments of the prince show how he formed his religious thought precisely in opposition to this teaching. Moreover, he denounced their bad intentions and manipulations, *their insincere procedures*, affecting his family. *‘The Jesuits are the despoilers of the will of the Fathers; I often pretended to be in the feelings of these miscreants.’* He describes the beginnings of his life as a child, then as a Prince, as one continual plot against him, even at times when he is not exposed to the adversities of accidents on land or at sea. It is true that his journey as a man of war proved to be very risky, with adventures whose anecdotes sometimes contributed to the creation of his novelistic character.

He relates the episode of stealing objects, for which he now reproaches himself and goes on to specify, *‘besides, it was not in the larceny that I found my pleasure, but in the stolen thing’*. There is a curious resemblance with other instances of the explanations and subtleties of the conscience battling with culpability: with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s remorse regarding the episode of the stolen ribbon or the theft of pears by St Augustine. The latter confessed, *‘and it is not of the object coveted by my larceny, but of the larceny itself and of the sin that I wanted to enjoy.’* St Augustine, another author of *Confessions*, would be the perfect model for Rákóczi. The paths of the two men, leading from the most unbridled lifestyle to one of extreme devotion, have many similarities.

The history of the Camaldolese in Yerres has been well described in a book by Lucia Laporte,⁸ in which the presence of Prince Rákóczi is perfectly documented. Despite the contradictory information provided by various chroniclers, such as Saint-Simon or Dangeau, we can affirm today that Rákóczi, while participating in the religious life of the institution along with the monks, remained the Prince accompanied by his retinue (of a limited size, as the archives of Yerres attest).⁹ It is certain that he remained informed about ongoing diplomatic events involving the great powers, from the Habsburg Empire to Sweden and England, from France to Spain, from Russia to the Ottoman Porte. Rákóczi, despite his retirement to Yerres, had not given up the defense of his homeland.

But it was at Grosbois that he wrote, in Latin, the first part of the *Confessio peccatoris*. He will write the two other parts in Turkey, and will address them to the Camaldolese Prior. He reads the Scriptures, more out of curiosity than out of a hunger for spiritual nourishment. *‘I find obscurities in them that can only be understood by having faith’*. His stay in the convent was quite short, from May 1715 to August 17, 1717, and often interspersed with trips to Versailles or Fontainebleau where the various pleasures of the court, in addition to hunting, made him “fall back” into sin.

In the *Confession*, he himself recounts in great detail his complex journey, and the current work of historians shows that there are very few errors to be found in his writings. One of the original features of the *Confession* is that it mixes chronological facts with the reflections and

⁸Lucia Laporte, *Yerres, les Camaldules au cœur de l’histoire* (Paris: L. Laporte, 2012).

⁹Parish register of Yerres, January 28, 1717; October 18, 1717. Class number E 3 of the Municipal Archives of Yerres.



anguish of a Christian struggling with his conscience as a sinner, subjected by God to human passions. He then reveals his conversion to a Christianity close to Jansenism – although he sometimes denies this. Moreover, the Camaldolese Fathers were sympathetic to the ideas of Port-Royal.

This double strand of presentation in his writing results in a characteristic narrative style: sometimes he is addressing God, at other times “men”, even including his potential future readers. *‘I speak not to men, but to God, and towards the end of the text, I owe my readers everything from my past life [...]. I dedicate my pen to you [...].’* Perhaps this is the point where Rákóczi becomes aware that he had entered the realm of literature.

It is from this perspective that the works of Gábor Tüskés and his colleagues reveal in Ferenc Rákóczi the man of literature. He creates genre in its own right, presented in a range of different styles, a little like a musical work where different climates follow one another, finally to mix and become suffused with a prophetic tone.

Rákóczi develops his thought in several registers: that of the moralist who knows the heart of the man confronted with his passions; that of the theologian who indefatigably analyzes the nature of God and the problematic of free will and grace; that of the philosopher who denounces false pretenses. At times the style becomes inflamed, perhaps approaching the exaltation of the great mystics.

The main title is *Confession of a sinner, who, prostrate before the manger of the newborn Savior, laments in the bitterness of his heart his past life and remembers the graces he has received and the guidance of Providence over him [...].* The entire text of the *Confession* has as its backdrop a constant act of questioning, a conversation with God or Jesus, a permanent prayer and imploration (*soliloquium*). *‘O my Jesus, I feel you within myself’*, these first words refer to St Augustine, who is a model of a kind. Rákóczi seems at times to be inhabited, as mystics are, and one finds in his writing the notions of light and illumination. He lives his relationship with God in the flesh, and knows the throes of the great human passions and the torments of his conscience.

Although it is impossible to know his direct relationships with his entourage and daily conversations, one is curious to understand why he felt the need to write a confession of this kind at all. If Prince Rákóczi as a public man exerted a kind of fascination on those close to him, this could not fulfill his true vocation. What better confidant, then, than a writing in Latin?

In many instances, the contrast between the proud Prince and his extreme humility becomes apparent. *‘Your Providence prepared me to go up to a theater, where I was to play the character, not of a Prince leading a private life, but one who governs men [...]. This is the work of your grace upon me.’* He evokes *‘The abominations of my life; my heart was far from you’*. One of the original features of this text is that the author makes a close link between the historical accounts and the religious elements, constantly alternating the one with the other, sometimes in the same long sentences: *‘the miseries of my people were without number and without measure; all that I did well was evil in your eyes [...].’*

The sinner is often led to dissect the human passions, which relate to his life as a man; one would think one was reading a treatise on the passions, in the manner of Descartes or Spinoza. *‘Profane love creeps into my heart; self-love is my other enemy to fight.’* During a stay in Naples, in front of Vesuvius, he is sensitive to the beauties of nature which *‘can involve the greed which is avid of knowing for the pleasure to know.’*



In his long descriptions of political or military events, and in his strategic arguments, he leads us into long digressions on the secret designs of God. *'It is here that the height of your wisdom surpasses all the powers of human intelligence.'* He questions the nature of faith and sees the contradictions of different religious practices; *'things are as You made them,* he says. *The spirit attaches itself to its God, of whom it is a portion.'* He tries to analyze the use that one makes of his freedom, before God: he states the Jansenist idea that *'the grace does not come from the freedom of the man. But why can't everyone be saved?'*, he asks. He offers us a kind of mystical key: *'I must therefore go beyond myself'*. He denounces false faith: *'we reject flies and aphids, while we swallow camels'*.

At the end of the confession, Rákóczi writes, *'I detest the condemned propositions of Jansenism, I do not deny the freedom of man to do good or evil, nor his cooperation with God in good works. I also recognize that man can resist interior grace. While I hold to the doctrine of St Augustine and St Thomas on predestination, I am far from denying freedom and its cooperation. Man by nature tends to evil, but greed presents this evil as good.'*

In the course of long chains of argumentation developed with an implacable logic one discovers a kind of Rákóczian dialectic, in the manner of Socrates. Rákóczi the prophet proclaims, *'The end of time is undoubtedly near, seeing such a cooling of charity'*.

Without encroaching on the field of the specialists, let us recall that Rákóczi already has the reputation of a great reader. He alludes to this in Grosbois, and his library at Rodostó is well supplied. He describes two ways of reading, either according to the worldly spirit or according to the light of the Lord.

Rákóczi is also a political thinker: *'Besides, the Hungarians are not the subjects of their kings, but of their laws. O Princes who read this confession of a sinful Prince, learn therefore not to consult men until after you have consulted God, if you wish to satisfy your first obligation, which is that of a Christian, and then that of your State'*. In the solitude of the "desert", writing is for him like a new form of action; the prayer and the silence of the monastic rule certainly favored his inspiration. The fact of writing in Latin, the language of his first education, comes to testify, on paper, to the revelation that he had received in Grosbois. And the prince is highly conscious of the importance of his messages, *'I do not write for the worldly, but for the adorers of your providence.'*

The importance of these events, as well as Rákóczi's strong personality, contributed to the formation of a romantic myth from which musicians, writers and filmmakers drew inspiration while accentuating it. Abbé Prévost's *Manon Lescaut*, published in 1731, features François Rákóczi as the *Prince of R* in the novel, and the *Hôtel de Transylvanie*, a Parisian gambling house was frequented by the great lords. The supposed role of the prince, however, is considered an element of fiction. Voltaire portrays Rákóczi in *Candide* (1759): Cunégonde finds refuge with the prince on the shores of the Sea of Marmara where he died. Thus, in 1846, Hector Berlioz played his "March of Rákóczi" or "Hungarian March", a variation of an ancient Hungarian lament, for his opera "The Damnation of Faust". Ferenc Liszt adapted this piece for piano and orchestra.

In Yerres, the presence of Prince Rákóczi has been known since 1936, when the Hungarian Association of Paris wrote to the mayor requesting that a memorial be erected on the site of the Camaldolese convent, where the prince had made a retreat. The request was granted and a stele was created by Hungarian sculptor József/Joseph Csáky and inaugurated on June 12, 1937 near the former entrance to the monastery. In 1978, the more spacious Rákóczi Square was built on the site of the former monks' cells; and the stele was shifted to this spot on the occasion. The



epitaph reads “in memory of Ferenc Rákóczi II, an ally of Louis XIV and leader of the Hungarian War of Independence of 1676-1735, who lived in seclusion in the Camaldolese Monastery from 1715 to 1717”. A touching testimony of the presence in Yerres of Prince Rakoczi is his signature in French: “Francois Prince”, on a parish register of 1717, recorded in the Municipal Archives of Yerres.

Rákóczi had lived an eventful life of travel, struggle and exile. Carried by a fierce conviction against the injustice of the world, he found a peace at Grosbois that he never forgot: ‘I had never enjoyed a softer and quieter life’ (Letter of August 8, 1715) and ‘the contentment in which I enjoy in my solitude is worthy of envy since one year that I am there; my taste, far from decreasing, increases; thus, I begin to accommodate myself and remain ready to finish my days there’ (Letter of October 16, 1716).¹⁰ ‘This holy hermitage where I am now, [...] my happy and quiet solitude’.

In conclusion, a message from the Prince, ‘Listen Princes and Peoples of the earth: the Lord has called me from my mother’s womb, not to establish me as a prophet, doctor, or reformer, but as an example of his justice in my lowliness and of his mercy in my preservation and humiliation. [...] Let me therefore be permitted to raise my voice from the solitude, or rather the dark den of my pilgrimage, and to speak to my children in the outpouring of my heart and the candor of my soul, since I have only this one occasion left where I can and must remember that I am a father. I am undertaking a work that is suitable in every sense, and indeed in keeping with my vocation, but I am going to deal with a subject that offends greed [...]’ This excerpt is the beginning of the prologue of a manuscript that Rákóczi wrote in Latin and himself translated into French – the *Treatise on Power*,¹¹ in which he analyzes first the power of right reason, then the power of charity. Do we not witness, in his life path, as well as in his political message, a delicate search between action and wisdom? The presence of Prince Rákóczi among the Camaldolese monks reveals the Christian that he was – a man of high spiritual value. Was his work inspired by God, perhaps through the word of the Bible? The Christian Prince gives his answer: ‘From You I get what I write.’

For us, readers of the 21st century, his writing, with its rich complexity of dimensions, seems to touch on the timeless. Reading the *Confession*, which can at time be an arduous exercise, is unlikely to leave either the amateur or the researcher indifferent, provided they are patient and curious. The reader is sure to find unsuspected richness and a style, an atmosphere, which gives the reader an uncommon sense of intimacy with the text and results in both discovery and appreciation.

The present edition is an essential aid to such an experience. The last word goes to Gábor Tüskés, “The critical edition of the Latin and French texts will contribute to a renewed international interest in research on Rákóczi. A detailed analysis will not fail to bring many surprises in several disciplines.” This is a book that we must recommend to all who are interested in literature, history and Franco–Ottoman–Hungarian relations.

¹⁰Letters addressed to the cardinal Gualterio, nuncio of the Pope in Paris.

¹¹Traité de la puissance de la charité, 7th booklet (Prologue), Médiathèque de Troyes, Ms 2147.

