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CHARLES DE BOVELLES' ENIGMATIC *LIBER DE SAPIENTE*: A HEROIC NOTION OF WISDOM

Tamara Albertini

In his exemplary study on *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom* (1958) Eugene Rice explored the wide range of 'sapientia-ideals' developed in medieval and Renaissance texts. Depending on what ancient and/or patristic sources were consulted, *sapientia* focused on the divine, the divine and the human, or the human realm only. Accordingly, it was viewed either as a divine gift or a naturally acquired virtue. To complicate matters further, wisdom could be an intellectual, moral, and/or civic virtue with either the intellect or the will as the leading faculty. Finally, wisdom was considered the embodiment of *vita contemplativa*, or, on the contrary, of *vita activa*. Moreover, links to related notions such as *scientia*, *pietas*, *prudentia*, or *virtus* also influenced the ideal of wisdom pursued.¹

The present essay proposes to introduce one more notion: the *figura heroica*. The hero not as an alternative to the wise but as another means to implement an ideal of wisdom. In Renaissance philosophy the figure of the hero is usually associated with the thought of Giordano Bruno (1548–1600). After all, he wrote a vibrant dialogue entitled *De gl'Eroici Furori* (*The Heroic Frenzies*, 1585) in which he expressed that true thinking is an act of self-transformation. And since transformation is a form of death, so Bruno argued, true thinking presupposes heroic qualities. Clearly, philosophy as a fatal undertaking in the process of which the philosopher receives – intellectual – death by his or her own hand, challenges the more traditional understanding of philosophy as a quest for wisdom. But there may be an assumption here in that one thinks of having to make a choice: wisdom or heroism, as if there would have to be a crossroad at which one would be compelled to abandon one path for the other. How about wisdom *and* heroism as two intertwined paths? That would be much more in the spirit of the Renaissance with its well-known ideals of *harmonia*, *concordia*, and *reconciliatio*. Could Man thus be wise and heroic? Maybe a wise hero or a heroic wise?²

The following will first discuss Hercules as an example of a powerful hero who symbolized wisdom already in humanistic sources, then work out the heroic dimension in Giordano

¹ E.F. Rice, Jr., *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958). For a lexicographic approach to wisdom in the Middle Ages see C. Brucker, *Sage et sagesse au Moyen Âge (XII^e et XIII^e siècles). Étude historique, sémantique et stylistique* (Geneva: Droz, 1987). For a collection of essays on the medieval concept of wisdom see M-Th. D'Alverny, *Études sur le symbolisme de la sagesse et sur l'iconographie* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1993).

² In fairness to E.F. Rice I should mention that he does applaud Bovelles for having created 'a Renaissance culture hero, heroic in his self-achieved perfection' (*The Renaissance Idea*, 122). Rice, however, does not explore the link between wisdom and heroism nor does he include Bruno in his otherwise extensive study.

Bruno's *De gl'Eroici Furori* in which he presents mythical Actaeon as the embodiment of the philosopher, and, finally, appreciate the ideal of the wise in Charles de Bovelles' *Liber de Sapiente* (1509) where he is hailed as a new Prometheus.

I. HEROIC HERCULES: THE HYDRA AND MAN'S BESTIAL NATURE

Humanist and Renaissance authors who thought of a heroic, larger than life figure pursuing wisdom did exist. To mention but one of the most prominent humanists, Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406), Chancellor of Florence, dedicated an entire work to the wise deeds of an ancient hero. In his *Laboribus Herculis* Salutati thus interprets Hercules's fight against the Hydra as an allegory for wisdom overcoming ignorance, turning the killing of the beast into a noble – intellectual – task.³ In Salutati's stoic-humanistic looking glass the manifest violence of the ancient hero's exploits is ignored. Hercules may be the personification of physical strength but his deeds are to be considered wise. One can thus fathom how heroism and wisdom are compatible ideals in Salutati.

Similarly, one finds Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) take a keen interest in Hercules, a figure so central in Renaissance Florence that it overshadowed St John the Baptist as the patron of the city.⁴ Ficino refers to the ancient hero in several of his works and letters. At times the hero stands, quite appropriately, for the ideal of active life. At others, he embodies reason (*nous*) as in Plato's tripartite model of the soul, while the Hydra is identified with the multi-headed beast of the *Republic* (588c–590c). In this context Hercules represents for Ficino the potentially invincible power of human reason in its fight against desire. The analogy he then draws between the twelve Herculean labors and the twelve houses of the zodiac allows him to present the ancient hero furthermore as the one who achieves victory over astral influences. As Michael J.B. Allen points out in his article 'Homo ad Zodiacum: Marsilio Ficino and the Boethian Hercules': 'Hercules is a symbol of the higher soul's triumphing over not only the lower world, but the influences that rain down upon it and that determine its course, the demonic world of Nessus and his unruly passions.'⁵ The ancient hero thus comes to personify Man's freedom from all powers in the universe by the sole virtue of reason. Although Ficino does not explicitly link the notions of heroism and wisdom like Salutati, it is not difficult to see that being able to preserve one's autonomy on the basis of one's rational powers would have to be a pursuit conducive to wisdom.

II. GIORDANO BRUNO: DOGS, GODDESSES, AND HORNS

Giordano Bruno's depiction of the quest for wisdom in the beginning of the Fourth Dialogue in his *The Heroic Frenzies* is dramatic. It is more than a quest, it is a hunt.⁶ The central figure of

³ C. Salutati, *De Laboribus Herculis*, edited by B.L. Ullman, 2 vols (Zurich: Thesaurus Mundi, 1951), vol. 1, 193. Cf. R.G. Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads: The Life, Works, and Thought of Coluccio Salutati* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1983).

⁴ About the Christianization of Hercules see M. Simon, *Hercule et le christianisme* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1955).

⁵ M.J.B. Allen, 'Homo ad Zodiacum: Marsilio Ficino and the Boethian Hercules', in *Forma e parola: Studi in memoria di Fredi Chiappelli*, edited by D.J. Dutschke, P. Forni, F. Grazzini, B.R. Lawton and L. Sanguineti White (Roma: Bulzoni, 1992), 205–21 (211); reprinted in *Plato's Third Eye: Studies in Marsilio Ficino's Metaphysics and its Sources* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1995).

⁶ This metaphor goes back to Plato's *Phaidon*, 66 c 2. Another important source to consider in this context is Nicholas of Cusa's *De Venatione Sapientiae* (1463).

Bruno's most impressive philosophical poem in that work is also represented by an ancient hero. Not Hercules, rather young Actaeon who is depicted as a passionate, frenzied, 'furious' young man. Taking inspiration from the ancient myth as told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (III, 173–252), Bruno re-interprets the tragic tale of the ancient hunter's transformation into a stag in most philosophical terms.⁷

Special attention is given to Actaeon's dogs. They are an extension of his body *and* his mind. Driven by their master's strong desire for prey, the pack of hounds runs with great excitement into the dense undergrowth of the forest and – although still standing under Actaeon's orders – is quick to take the lead on 'the dubious and perilous path,/near the traces of the wild beasts'.⁸ The 'Actaeon-poem' distinguishes carefully between two types of dogs, mastiffs and greyhounds. As one learns from the dialogued commentary following the poem, the latter stand for the 'swift' intellect, the former represent the more forceful will. Like most Renaissance philosophers, Bruno thinks of these two capabilities as inseparable and complementary powers. Without the will's spurring, the intellect would not act, and if it were not for the intellect preceding the will 'like a lantern', the will would remain without orientation.⁹ The ideal aimed at is one of both contemplation and action.¹⁰

Eventually, Actaeon arrives with his mastiffs and greyhounds at a crossroad 'nel carattere di Pitagora', i.e., it is Y-shaped. He has the dogs run the 'thorny, uncultivated, deserted and arduous' path not too many have tried before. It is, nevertheless, the right path since it is the natural continuation of the original road. The wild beasts Actaeon had hoped to ferret out on his arduous hunting path are called in the commenting lines following the poem 'the intelligible modes of ideal concepts'.¹¹ These are not the actual animals, rather the hunter's own projections, i.e., the thoughts that guide him on his hunt.

Actaeon and his pack of hounds continue to fight their way through the woods, when all of a sudden they approach waters that stand for the 'mirror of similitudes'. Confronted with the goddess Diana's 'most beautiful countenance and breast', Actaeon sees the 'purple of divine power, the gold of divine wisdom, the alabaster of divine beauty' (my emphasis). He realizes that he is looking at the principle that animated his quest. He, the hunter, has an encounter with the goddess of hunt uniting in herself power, wisdom, and beauty. In the light of Diana's crescent moon Actaeon grows horns from his head. He becomes visibly the beast he has been chasing. His own dogs turn against him – they have never been more loyal to their master. Intellect and will have caught up with the concept they had been pursuing. Their madness is Actaeon's own fury. As Paul-Henri Michel points out in his French translation of the text, this is, indeed, reminiscent of Michelangelo's line: 'Who wants to know it ought first to die' (*Chi'l vuol saper*

⁷ For a detailed analysis of the Actaeon myth in Bruno see W. Beierwaltes, 'Actaeon. Zu einem mythologischen Symbol Giordano Brunos', *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung*, 32 (1978), 345–54, and M. Stadler, 'Unendliche Schöpfung als Genesis von Bewußtsein: Überlegungen zur Geistphilosophie Giordano Brunos', *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, 93 (1986), 39–60 (57–8). For a collection of passages relating to Actaeon in European literature see N.O. Brown, *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 31–45.

⁸ G. Bruno, *The Heroic Frenzies*, translated by P.E. Memmo (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 123.

⁹ Bruno, *The Heroic Frenzies*, 124.

¹⁰ About the problem of complementarity of intellect and will see T. Albertini, 'Intellect and Will in Marsilio Ficino: Two Correlatives of a Renaissance Concept of the Mind', in *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, his Philosophy, his Legacy*, edited by M.J.B. Allen and V. Rees (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 203–25.

¹¹ Bruno, *The Heroic Frenzies*, 124.

convien che prima mora).¹² Actaeon dies to himself and is reborn to himself in the face of his own mirroring in the waters. It is his own reflection that triggers the metamorphosis.¹³

In the end of Bruno's tale one learns that

from the vulgar and common man he was, he [Actaeon] becomes rare and heroic, rare in all he does, rare in his concepts, and he leads the extraordinary life. It is there that *his great and numerous dogs bring him death*; thus he stops living according to the world of folly, of sensuality, of blindness and of illusion, and begins to live by the intellect.¹⁴

With intellect and will devouring Man's beastly nature, the hero's highest realization is achieved in a self-reflective act. And life according to the dictate of the intellect signals the beginning of wisdom.

III. CHARLES DE BOVELLES: LADY FORTUNA, LADY WISDOM, AND THE LIGHT OF SELF-REFLECTIVITY

Compared to Bruno's epistemic drama Bovelles' ideal of wisdom presents itself along tranquil, almost idyllic lines. Is this to suggest that his ideal entails no heroic dimension? The best approach to Charles de Bovelles' notion of wisdom is by way of the intricate frontispiece he himself designed for his *Liber De Sapiente (Book on the Wise)*, and that serves as a pictorial introduction to the present publication as well (see figure on p. 257).¹⁵ The frontispiece features two female figures facing one another. The one on the left is blindfolded and seated in a rather unsecured way on a sphere in danger of rolling down any moment the inclined surface on which it is placed. This, of course, is *Dame Fortuna*. And as if this were not clear enough a hint, we find her holding in her left hand the medieval symbol of the wheel of fortune. The implicit message is 'Who is king today, may find himself at the bottom of the wheel tomorrow'. On the left top corner is the fool, the '*insipiens*' (literally the 'unwise'). From his mouth unfolds a banderole with these words: 'We make you, Fortuna, a goddess and we elevate you to heavens' (*Te facimus Fortuna deam celoque locamus*).

¹² G. Bruno, *Des fureurs héroïques*, translated by P-H. Michel (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1954), 31.

¹³ For the centrality of the notion of metamorphosis in Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and Charles de Bovelles see T. Albertini, 'Der Mensch als metamorphische Weltmitte. Reflexionen zu einer Denkfigur der Renaissance', in *Sapientiam amemus. Humanismus und Aristotelismus in der Renaissance (Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Eckhard Kessler)*, edited by P.R. Blum, C. Lohr, and C. Blackwell (Munich: Fink, 1998), 89–108.

¹⁴ Bruno, *The Heroic Frenzies*, 126.

¹⁵ The *Liber de Sapiente* was first published in: Carolus Bovillus, *Que hoc volumine continentur, Liber de intellectu, Liber de sensu, Liber de nichilo, Ars oppositorum, Liber de generatione, Liber de sapiente, Liber de duodecim numeris, Epistole complures...* (Parisiis, Emissum ex officina Henrici Stephani [Henri Estienne the Elder], impensis ejusdem et Joannis Parvi [Jean Petit] sociorum, 1510, primo cal. [1] Februarij [i.e. n.s. 1511]). A critical edition of the *Liber de Sapiente* was prepared by R. Klibansky and printed as an appendix to the first edition of E. Cassirer, *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1927). There is also a bilingual Latin-French edition: Charles de Bovelles, *Le livre du sage, texte et traduction par P. Magnard précédé d'un essai: L'homme délivré de son ombre* (Paris: Vrin, 1982, 2010); another French translation provided by P. Quillet as an appendix to E. Cassirer, *Individu et cosmos dans la philosophie de la Renaissance*, traduit par P. Quillet (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1983); and an Italian translation: C. Bovillus, *Il libro del sapiente*, a cura di Eugenio Garin (Torino: Einaudi, 1943, 1987). Since the 1927 edition of Cassirer's *Individuum und Kosmos* may be hard to find, quotations from the *Liber de Sapiente* refer to the 1510/11 edition of which there is a reprint (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag [Günther Holzboog], 1970) and an online version available at: <<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k54246/f296.image.r=bovelles.langEN>>.

The female figure on the right, traditionally positively connoted, side is *Dame Sapientia*. Above her, in the top corner, facing the fool, one sees the wise presenting the reader with a recommendation: 'Trust virtue: Fortuna is more fleeting than waves' (*Fidite virtuti: Fortunam fugatior undis*). One finds, indeed, the figure of wisdom resting most comfortably on the square seat of virtue. Her feet lie elegantly on a cushion, and she is in no danger of losing her countenance. She too is provided with a round object. Unlike Lady Fortuna, however, she holds it in her right hand. One may call it 'the Mirror of Wisdom'. In it *Dame Sapientia* contemplates her own reflection. However, she is no Narcissus-like figure infatuated with her own appearance (and perishing without perfecting herself) nor does her calm poise suggest that an epistemic torment is about to unfold as in the Actaeon myth. What she does have in common with the ancient hunter is self-reflectivity as the beginning of wisdom. However, in the *Liber de Sapiente* the transformative power of the mirror-reflection brings about a self-knowledge (*scientia sui*) that is not to be separated from the knowledge of the world. A more careful look at the frontispiece reveals thus that while Lady Wisdom beholds herself in the mirror, she also contemplates the world, represented on the mirror's margins in the shape of the sun, the moon, five planets, and stars.¹⁶ As Bovelles clarifies in a later chapter of his *Liber de Sapiente*, the world is a catalyst for self-reflexivity. In the same way as the human soul infers herself by first acquiring a notion of the body, Man 'enters his own self, is present to himself, and beholds himself from the knowledge of the world' (*ex mundi scientia in semet ingredi, sibi adesse seque contueri*) – and forms thereby a new unity Bovelles calls 'universe'.¹⁷

The notion of '*scientia*' as self-knowledge is inspired by Pseudo-Dionysius from whom Bovelles quotes the following line: "If", as he says, "knowledge is the joiner of known and knowers, ignorance of the ignorant is the author of his division with himself" (*Si, ut ait, scientia cognoscentium et cognitorum conjunctrix est: Ignorantia vero ignoranti sue divisionis est author*).¹⁸ The term 'joiner' (*conjunctrix*) should not be misconstrued as being the link of two once divided objects. There is no 'disjunction' between the knowing subject and the known object to begin with. The 'knower' resembles

¹⁶ In other places of the *Liber de Sapiente* Bovelles identifies the sun with the intellect and the moon with memory (XXXII, fol. 137v), or thinks of the sun as the angelic intellect and the moon as the human intellect (XLIII, fol. 143r–fol. 143v). More options come to mind in connection with how Bovelles links divine, angelic, and human intellects but this is not the place to explore this topic.

¹⁷ Here is the larger context of the quoted sentence:

Et ut hominis anima: corpus priusquam seipsam intuetur: et ex corporis agnitione claudit infertque sui noticiam: ita et universi anima homo: mira proportione corpori universi idest sublunari mundo: prior quam sibiipsi adesse comperitur et ex mundi scientia in semet ingredi sibi adesse seque contueri. Et ut ad hominis subsistentiam necessaria probatur anima: ita et ad universi complementum et subsistentiam perquam necessarius et expetendus est homo et precipue sapiens homo: que [Klibansky: qui] est verissima mundi anima' (*Liber de Sapiente*, XXI, fol. 131r).

In my translations of Bovelles-quotations I have chosen to gender nouns and thus reflect the philosopher's own usage in the original Latin. Therefore terms such as 'nature' (*natura*), 'soul' (*anima*), 'reason' (*ratio*), and 'memory' (*memoria*) are rendered as female nouns in English, while body (*corpus*), man (*homo*), and intellect (*intellectus*) are male. As, for instance, his reference to 'Mother Nature' and her most mature daughter 'Reason', or the linking *intellectus*/Adam and *memoria*/Eve indicate, Bovelles is clearly paying attention to gender. Man, however, is capitalized to indicate that Bovelles means the generic man when he speaks of '*homo*' (see T. Albertini, 'Actio und Passio in der Renaissance. Das Weibliche und das Männliche bei Agrippa, Postel und Bovelles', *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie*, 47, 2000, 126–49).

¹⁸ *Liber de Sapiente*, Dedication, fol. 116r. Bovelles is quoting *De Divinibus Nominibus*, IV, 6. Cf. *Le livre du sage*, 54, n. 1.

Janus, the guarding deity the likeness of which was placed at the entrance of Roman homes. He is endowed with two faces looking simultaneously in two opposite directions, one outwardly, the other inwardly. Applied to an epistemic context, this has the true knower look in the same time at the world and at himself. This is captured in the figure showing a ‘*sapiens bifrons*’ whose left face is turned toward himself, whereas his right face is looking in the direction of the world (see figure 1).

In this context too Bovelles insists on the unity of the cognitive act:

If every cognition were the division of the being and the multiplication of its own substance, certainly every cognition would be [only] cognition of the other [i.e. object]. Therefore, nothing will be known by itself, nothing will be able of gazing at itself, beholding itself, or enjoying itself [since there would be no subject with self-knowledge]. There will be no wisdom, since all wisdom consists in the reflection, cognition, and knowledge of one’s own self. Every cognition will, therefore, be cognition of the other [i.e. of the object of cognition]. Further, the extremes of cognition would be divided, separated, and distant from each other. What is called the middle would be torn from the extremes. Yet, as we said, self-cognition by itself is not a division of the same substantial being but its own differentiation into extremes and middle.¹⁹

The two-headed wise is therefore not divided with himself. There is no dualism implied here – Bovelles thinks ‘two’ as ‘three.’ The wise is thus conceptualized as a middle that is co-essential with and contemporary to its extremes. As one learns from Bovelles’ doctrine of opposites, developed in his book *Ars oppositorum* (1509) and to be used throughout his work, extremes do not have to be mediated by a third, external, element – they bring forth their own middle. Similarly, they themselves are created – as opposites – by the middle they produce.²⁰ Applied to the present context, subject and object of cognition are joined in that they are both the result of the middle position connecting them. And the middle position borne from the extremes is the wise placed between himself as the subject and the object of cognition. As if this triad were not complex enough, the *Liber de Sapiente* takes the trifold structure one step further by designing a dyadic middle. The wise becomes ‘*quadrigeminus*’ – a being endowed with four epistemic faces (see figure 2).²¹ The figure shows ‘Abel’ equally contemplating his begetters ‘Adam’ and ‘Eve’. In accordance with Bovelles’ doctrine of opposites the parents, being opposites, can only be perceived as such from the position of the offspring. It would thus be a mistake to identify the wise with *Janus*-like Abel only: the wise is personified by Adam and Eve gazing at each other *and* their being both observed by two-headed Abel.

¹⁹ ‘Nam si omnis cognitio esset entis divisio, et substantie ipsius multiplicatio: utique omnis cognitio, esset alterius cognitio. Nil igitur sibiipsi erit agnatum: Nil intueri sese, seque conspiciari et seipso perfrui valebit. Nulla denique erit sapientia, quandoquidem omnis sapientia: est suimetipsius speculatio, agnitio, scientia. Omnis itaque cognitio: erit alterius cognitio. Divisa insuper erunt, dissita et separata abinvicem: cuiusvis cognitionis extrema diductum erit, et ab extremis: id, quod eorum medium appellatur. Atqui (ut diximus) cognitio eiusdem a seipso: haud est ipsius entis substantialis diductio: sed personalis eius discretio, in extrema et medium’ (*Liber de Sapiente*, XXVIII, fol. 133v).

²⁰ The *Ars Oppositorum* is part of the 1510/11 publication and precedes the *Liber de Sapiente* in the order of books included in that collection for a good reason. For this book too there is a Latin-French edition: Charles de Bovelles, *L’art des opposés*. Texte et traduction par P. Magnard précédé d’un essai: Soleil noir (Paris: Vrin, 1984). As with many more concepts Bovelles draws inspiration from Nicholas of Cusa but sets his own creative accents (see Albertini, ‘Actio und Passio in der Renaissance’, 143–49).

²¹ The fine metaphysician Bovelles thinks not only ‘two’ but also ‘four’ as trifold. For another example see the intricate way in which animal, human, angelic, and divine knowledge are weaved into a triadic scheme (see *Liber de Sapiente*, L, fol. 142v).

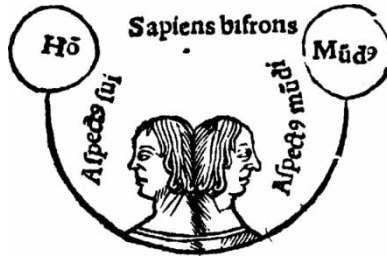


Figure 1. (*Liber de Sapiente*, XXXI, fol. 137r)

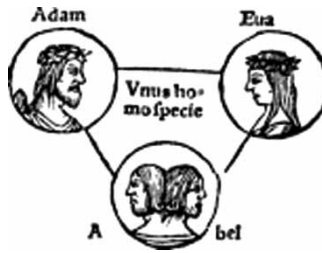


Figure 2. (*Liber de Sapiente*, XXXI, fol. 137v)

IV. FROM NATURE TO ART: PROMETHEAN HEROISM AND SELF-CREATION

Whereas the figure of the fourfold structured wise explains the complex self-reflexive concept underlying the image of Lady Wisdom contemplating herself in the mirror, one still fails to see the link between wisdom and knowledge on one side and virtue on the other, which in the frontispiece was represented by the square seat of *Dame Sapientia*. For this link to emerge, one needs to gather some more of Bovelles' views on human nature. According to *De Sapiente* Man is 'simple' at birth. His humanity consists merely in the specific physical shape and in the potential abilities pertaining to his species. It is only through 'art' (*ars*), as Bovelles says, i.e. through self-cultivation, that Man truly achieves himself:

Nature has conferred upon him [Man] great strength of reason. And he himself, following the direction of reason in all things, endeavors to be rational in governing his life. He chooses reason as his guide, and does not act except by her.²²

In other words, it takes a conscious and deliberate effort to actualize the rational potential given to Man by nature. Or, as Bovelles asserts in his *Book on the Intellect*: 'And just as the angel is perfect by nature, Man achieves himself by art' (*Et sicut natura perfectus est angelus: ita et homo arte*

²² 'Natura illi precipuam rationis vim indulta est. Ipse autem in cuncti rationis moderamini obtemperans: vite functione rationalis esse contendit. Rationem enim sibi proponit ducem: preter eam nichil agit' (*Liber de Sapiente*, VI, fol. 120v).

consummatur).²³ But how does Man accomplish that? In a highly suggestive paragraph, reminiscent of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oratio de Dignitate Hominis*,²⁴ Bovelles states:

Nothing is particular nor belongs to Man, but he has a share in whatever belongs to other beings. Whatever is of this or this, whatever is particular to this or that single (being): it belongs to the individual Man. For he transfers the nature of all beings into himself, he reflects everything, [and] he emulates the entire nature. He absorbs and draws whatever is in the nature of things: He becomes everything. Indeed, Man is not this or that particular being, nor is his nature this or that, but he is simultaneously everything: He is the con-course, the rational chasm, and the summary of everything. And if you wish to achieve and complete Man's nature, receive whatever is in heaven, in the elements, and the entire world.²⁵

Man perfects himself by internalizing the entire world, which implies acknowledging one's need of the world in order to achieve one's Self. Bovelles' notion of virtue is, nevertheless, an intellectual concept. It is an embodiment of the Greek *'arete'*. To the Greek question 'What is the excellence of man?', Bovelles answers: living up to one's full potential by continuously examining one's knowledge and one's Self. This for the French philosopher is the mark of wisdom – a human being's highest possible performance.

To return to the figure of the *quadrigeminus sapiens*: Adam and Eve stand for the natural faces we receive at birth, whereas Abel's two faces, acquired by 'art', are the work of virtue that for Bovelles is interchangeable with *studium* – which is why he often speaks of the wise as the *studiosus seu virtuti homo* (the learned or the Man of virtue). Epistemologically speaking, 'Adam' is the intellect collecting forms from the world and storing them into 'Eve' acting as memory. 'Abel' in turn is the contemplation borne from the interaction between intellect and memory and in the same time an act of understanding without which there would be no awareness of any acquisition of knowledge and, therefore, no basis for self-achievement.

Bovelles' ideal human being is ultimately wise because his self-knowledge permits him to be his own maker. This is where the specific Renaissance conception finds its strongest expression. By contrast, as Eugene Rice comments,

[T]he medieval notion of the wise man was a static conception. He was a man whose perfection came to him as a gift of grace and whose properly sapiential knowledge was confined to divine things. He was rarely a self-consciously isolated thinker, but pursued knowledge as a member of the corporate body of the learned engaged in mastering texts in the interest of a common and received end. He frequently described wisdom as self-knowledge, but the end of self-knowledge was to determine with precision his own place in a fixed and static hierarchy.²⁶

²³ *Liber de Intellectu*, in *Que hoc volumine continentur, Liber de intellectu*,..., I, 5, fol. 3v.

²⁴ Albertini, 'Der Mensch als metamorphische Weltmitte', 104–06.

²⁵ 'Hominis nichil est peculiare aut proprium, sed eius omnia sunt communia, quecunque aliorum propria. Quicquid huius et huius, illius et alterius et ita singulorum est proprium: unius est hominis. Omnium enim in se naturam transfert, cuncta speculatur, universam naturam imitatur. Sorbens enim hauriensque, quicquid est in rerum natura: omnia fit. Nam neque peculiare ens homo est hoc vel hoc: neque ipsius est hec aut hec natura, sed simul omnia est: omnium concurrentia, rationale chasma et congregatio. Et si hominis finire et complecti volueris naturam, suscipe quicquid in celo est, quicquid in elementis et universo mundo' (*Liber de Sapiente*, XXIV, fol. 131v). Many Bovelles-readers have stumbled over the term '*chasma*' in this passage and felt that it was oddly placed between '*concurrentia*' and '*congregatio*.' While it is easy to accuse Bovelles of misunderstanding the term, it is possible that he used it in the sense of a 'wide space' (which is one of the meanings of the Greek *chasma*) channeling knowledge. In a note to this quotation R. Trowbridge, who is preparing a translation of the *Liber de Sapiente*, cites Roman authors who used '*chasma*' to refer to 'a kind of meteor'.

²⁶ Rice, *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom*, 122.

On the contrary, Bovelles emphasizes human beings' own powers. Man is great in that he owes his manifold achievements to himself and himself only. God plays a major role in the way the human, angelic, and divine intellects are linked together in Bovelles' complex epistemology²⁷ but God is not the agent of change in the human realm. Instead, Bovelles compares Man to ancient Prometheus who gave life to a being made of clay by infusing into it divine fire stolen from the gods.²⁸ The French philosopher, however, is not much interested in delving into the mythical tale either, since he hastens to develop the analogy by stating:

In the same way the wise abandons by virtue of contemplation the perceptible world and enters the region of heavens. He brings down to the lower world the most clear fire of wisdom that he finds *in the bowels of his immortal mind*, and this pure and most lively flame invigorates, warms, and animates the natural and earthly Man.²⁹ (my emphasis)

Clearly, Bovelles does not think of Prometheus as the fallen Titan who had to be chained to a rock in the Caucasus, his liver to be devoured by an eagle daily for disobeying the gods. As Emmanuel Faye showed in his article 'Le symbole de Prométhée dans la philosophie de Bovelles et en son temps' Bovelles has a significantly different take on the Titan than Ficino or his prestigious correspondent Guillaume Budé (1467–1540).³⁰ His Prometheus is a triumphant figure: he is Man himself who finds in himself the means to elevate himself to the heights of immortality. As a result, it is Man himself who brings down the heavenly flame of wisdom to give life to his own body of clay. Ultimately, Bovelles' wise is incomparable – a divine hero who is his own maker. He is

a Man by nature and a Man by intellect, a Man in matter and a Man in form, a potential Man and an actual Man, a Man in his beginning and a Man in his end, a Man in being and a Man in appearance. Finally, a sketched Man and a perfected Man.³¹

His increased knowledge does not cause his torment, as in Giordano Bruno,³² but his highest fulfillment. His self-induced transformation brings neither death nor destruction but is a glorious act of self-affirmation and self-creation.

²⁷ *Liber de Sapiente*, L, fol. 142v.

²⁸ For how the Renaissance transformed Prometheus into a human hero see E. Cassirer, *Individual and Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, translated by M. Domandi (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963, 2010), 95. See also O. Raggio, 'The Myth of Prometheus: Its Survival and Metamorphoses up to the Eighteenth Century', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 21 (1958), 44–62; Rice, *The Renaissance Idea*, 93–123; R. Trousson, *Le thème de Prométhée dans la littérature européenne* (Geneva: Droz, 1964); and E. Faye, 'Le symbole de Prométhée dans la philosophie de Bovelles et en son temps', in *Fine follie, ou, La catastrophe humaniste: études sur les transcendants à la Renaissance*, edited by B. Pinchard (Paris: Champion, 1995), 115–38.

²⁹ 'Ita et sapiens vi contemplationis sensibilem mundum linquens penetransque in regiam celi: conceptum ibidem lucidissimum sapientie ignem immortalis mentis gremio: in inferiora reportat eaque sincera ac vegetissima flamma naturalis ipsius tellureusve homo viret, fovetur, animatur' (*Liber de Sapiente*, VIII, fol. 121r).

³⁰ Faye, 'Le symbole de Prométhée'.

³¹ 'Homo inquam a natura: et homo ab intellectu. Homo in materia: homo in forma: Homo in potentia: homo in actu. Homo ex principio: homo quoque ex fine. Homo existens homo et apparens. Homo denique inchoatus: homo et perfectus' (*Liber de Sapiente*, VI, fol. 120v).

³² The full quotation from *Ecclesiastes* I, 18: 'He who increases knowledge increases sorrow' appears in Bruno, *The Heroic Frenzies*, 99.



Figure 3. (*Liber de Sapiente*, XXVII, fol. 133r)

Not surprisingly, the Hydra does not have to be slain in *De Sapiente* – only tamed. Bovelles does mention the killing of the Lernaean beast by the hands of Hercules³³ but then, with his usual optimism, manages to turn Hydra into a positive symbol when he allows for it to be identified with the ancient *ouroboros* emblem (see figure 3), the serpent that bites its own tail (of which he says that it is of Phoenician origin):

Truest wisdom consists in the examination and cognition of oneself, by which in one and the same, undivided, unsevered, and continuously lasting substance a part takes hold of a part, a part is embraced by a part, led and drawn to the inside³⁴

Charles de Bovelles teaches a precious lesson: there is no need of destroying the beast in one's Self. The truly heroic act consists in making Hydra act upon itself and, by doing so, transforming it, as in an alchemical process, into a figure that supports the continuous circle of self-knowledge.

One has to wait for Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) before a thinker of the post-Renaissance period celebrates again heroic features of the mind. Vico thus writes:

Above poetic heroism Plato raised his own philosophic heroism, placing the hero above man as well as beast; for the beast is the slave of his passions, while the hero at will commands his passions; and thus the heroic nature is midway between the human and the divine.³⁵

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³³ *Liber de Sapiente*, XVII, fol. 128v.

³⁴ 'Est enim verissima sapientia suiipsius inspectio atque agnitio, qua in substantia eadem, indivisa, indissecta, una et continua permanente: pars partem apprehendit, pars a parte sublabratur, pertrahitur et ad interiora revocatur' (*Liber de Sapiente*, XXVII, fol. 133r). The *ouroboros* is also an alchemical symbol (see *Le livre du sage*, 329, n. 99).

³⁵ T.G. Bergin and M.H. Fish, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, revised translation of the third edition of 1744 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1948), 157. See also G. Vico, 'On the Heroic Mind: An Oration', translated by E. Sewell and A.C. Sirignano, in *Vico and Contemporary Thought*, edited by G. Tagliacozzo, M. Mooney, and D.P. Verene (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979).