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A SENTIMENTAL CHARACTER

After the “affair of the robe”, Claude Poullart remained at Rennes. He got to know enough about his father’s affairs to be able to write: “*My father is getting older and he will leave behind a considerable business which few people, apart from myself, would be able to sort out.*”¹ He had been with his family for nearly a year when he decided to make another retreat, during which he wrote two notebooks. The first, entitled “*Reflections on the Truths of Religion*”², is a summary of the conferences given, but often very personalised. The second bears the title, “*Choice of a State of Life.*”³ The beginning of the first notebook and the whole of the second contain biographical details and clues to his character which are of the greatest interest. Without them, we would know about the works of Poullart but would have little idea about his attractive and very human personality.

In the part of the retreat devoted to ‘*the choice of a state of life*’, Claude-François drew up a sort of balance sheet of his qualities and faults, with a view to making a definitive decision about his future life:

“First of all, I must examine my temperament so as to find out what I am capable of doing. I will look at both the good and the bad aspects of my temperament, lest I forget the former and be surprised by the latter. I enjoy excellent health, although I give the impression of being delicate. I have a good stomach and am able to digest any kind of food easily. Nothing gives me trouble. I am stronger and more vigorous than others and am able to stand fatigue and work very well and yet I am fond of rest and relaxation. I apply myself only because I reason things out or because of ambition. I am, by nature, mild and docile and excessively obliging. I do not know how to refuse and this is the only area in which I show some consistency. I am inclined somewhat towards the sanguine and very much towards the melancholic temperament.

On the other hand, although I am rather indifferent when it comes to wealth, I have a passionate desire for glory and for everything that sets a man above others by his personal achievements. When I see the success of others, I am full of jealousy and despair, although I do not reveal that ugly passion, nor do I ever do or say anything to satisfy that inclination.

I am very discreet in the matter of secrets and I am rather diplomatic in the way I behave. I am enterprising in my plans, but secretive in their execution. I want independence and yet I am a slave to grandeur. I am afraid of death and therefore, I am a coward, but I cannot tolerate a deliberate insult. I am always ready to flatter

¹ Cf. Koren : “*The Spiritual writings of Father Claude Poullart des Places*”, p. 99

² Koren, pp. 42-83

³ Koren pp. 86-113

other people and disgusted with myself when I make a mistake in public. I am moderate in my eating habits and reserved as regards the pleasures of the flesh.

I have a sincere admiration for people who are genuinely good. This means that I love virtue but I do not practise it, for human respect and inconsistency are the great obstacles in my way. At times, I am as devout as a hermit, even practising austerities that are beyond the limits of what is fitting for an ordinary Christian. At other times, I am soft, cowardly and lukewarm in carrying out my Christian duties. I am always terrified when I forget my God and fall into sin. I am extremely scrupulous, almost as much during times of laxity as during periods of fervour. I have a facility to discern what is good and what is evil and I receive many graces from God which help me to be aware of my blindness. I am very happy when giving alms and have an in-built compassion for those who are suffering. I hate detraction and I am respectful in church, without being a hypocrite.

Here, then, is a complete portrait of myself which is a fair assessment of what I am really like".¹

In this self-assessment, Claude is obviously sincere, transparent and objective. He draws up a list of the principal traits of his character, but it is only when he talks of his temperament that he gives an overall judgment: *"I am somewhat inclined towards the sanguine temperament and very much towards the melancholic."* This assessment, where he looks at himself in his entirety, is further illustrated by other data in the *"Choice of a State of Life"*, so it would not be imprudent to move from analysis to synthesis to assess which type of person Claude was according to the categories of modern psychology. After all, some of the leading experts in this field (René Le Senne, Emmanuel Mounier and others) employed this biographical approach in their character analysis of various historical personalities.

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In the study of character, the first objective is to establish the orientation of the three fundamental factors: emotionalism, the tendency to action and the duration of after-effects.²

An emotional person is somebody who is troubled when most people would not be, or an individual who is more violently upset in given circumstances than the majority.

An active person is not necessarily the one who acts the most but the one who, all things being equal, acts with the greatest facility. The **inactive person** acts with difficulty, but is not incapable of intense activity.

The idea of the **duration of after-effects** can be subdivided into *primary* and *secondary*. All the feelings that we experience have a primary or immediate effect on us. But once these feelings have left our consciousness, they continue to exert an influence on our way of thinking and acting by their secondary effects. Psychologists call *"primary"* those individuals

¹ Koren, p. 93+

² The works consulted were: Le Senne: *"Traité de caractérologie"*, Paris, 1946 ;

whose emotions act above all in the immediate, while those who experience after-effects for a much longer period are labelled “secondary”.

According to the possible combinations of these three fundamental factors, we can distinguish various types of character which are clearly different: the passionate, the choleric or exuberantly active, the sentimental, the nervous, the phlegmatic, the sanguine, the apathetic and the amorphous.

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The “sentimental” person of today corresponds to the “melancholic” of the past. In affirming that he was “*melancholic*”, Claude Poullart was not mistaken: everything he reveals to us about his character would lead us today to include him in the category of *Sentimental*.

The sentimental person is also emotional, mildly active and secondary. His emotion, strongly restrained in its first occurrence, does not burst into flames as with the exuberantly active person, for example; he is tense and secret to the extent that he can be taken for a phlegmatic.

Often disappointed by the world, he closes in on himself towards a solitude which he tries to maintain, even though it is painful. He keeps falling back on memories which can play a central part in his life. Solitude, like melancholy, is a wall that he builds between himself and the world. To break free from such a painful conflict he resorts to reflection and analysis.

Self analysis is constantly with him so he is, of all people, the one who knows his weaknesses in depth. No one is more easily dissatisfied with himself. He is often oppressed with scruples and his conduct is sometimes weighed down by excessive self-judgement. He is timid, closed in on himself and sometimes melancholic and gloomy.

Honest and conscientious, with a taste for dignity and a repugnance for aggressive words, respectful of laws, guided by long-term rather than immediate results, he nearly always acts according to what he sees as his duty. Although he is careful with money, his practical sense is very weak. He is happiest in reflection, intimacy and secrecy, but he still needs success in the world. His hope is that by examining his obstacles and their causes, he will be able to draw from his feeble activity as large a return as possible.

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With Claude, activity was not easy or spontaneous; it needed a real effort. He saw himself as somebody who worked hard who was also inclined to laziness. But the success of others made him feel very jealous. This “*unworthy passion*”, sometimes verging on despair, shows that he was intensely emotional. But he managed to keep it hidden; he succeeded in neither doing nor saying anything that would strengthen it. Such self mastery managed to block out all trace of his strongest feelings. His tender feelings towards his parents were very strong but remained secret. In all these traits of character, we can see the emotion of a “sentimental” person which was deep but which remained hidden.

In the “*Choice of a state of life*”, Claude gives ample evidence, in analysing his character, that his self control attained great virtuosity. He knew himself perfectly. The passage in which he examines his inclination towards religious life is a masterpiece that would grace

any anthology on character. He writes it in the form of a conversation between his soul and himself:

"I want you first of all to consider the religious life. I know that some view of God must be present in your inclination, but I shall be more enlightened when I know which religious Order you would like to enter and when I know better the reasons that sometimes incline you towards that state.

You reply that you will never take the habit of a monk unless it is to become a Carthusian. I have nothing but praise for your selection of that type of religious life, for I believe your sole motive for entering into that kind of solitude would be to concentrate on your salvation.

Nevertheless, would not sloth have some part in that inclination and might there not be some disappointment because you are not esteemed enough by the world, because you are not of sufficiently illustrious ancestry or do not possess the necessary wealth to rise where you would so much like to be? Are you not afraid that some day it might be discovered that you have not as great a mind as you thought you had? Are there not a thousand other motives of vanity that might prompt you to like that sort of Carthusian solitude?

I do not know what to believe about this, but suppose it is not unsatisfied ambition that makes you think of that state. Have you no other reasons for rejecting that vocation and making a different choice? You are melancholic, a dreamer, given to depression when you are in solitude, although you like to be alone. You prevent your mind from applying itself in those moments to something that is good. For your inconstancy makes you conceive ever new desires, and these new desires give birth to a thousand chimeras which torment you and destroy your peace of mind. At present, you are flighty, you love freedom so much and it seems doubtful to me that you would be satisfied with always looking at the same walls and being perpetually bound by the same chains".¹

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Keeping personal notebooks like these are very popular with people of a 'sentimental' disposition and the *"Choice of a State of Life"* is the most precious of the biographical documents that we possess. Without this source, Claude's life, which was so brief yet so fruitful, would seem to be nothing but a story of unqualified success, but the many different dimensions of this success would escape us. We would over-emphasise the importance of his being the son of the greatest businessman of Rennes and neglect the role of divine Providence, because Claude's character in no way predisposed him to succeed in the ambitious plans he conceived.

But this was not important, because the real founder of religious families is God himself. Those we refer to as 'Founders' are no more than His instruments; He is more than capable of compensating for their deficiencies. What he asks of them is to accept lovingly the grace of his call and place themselves totally at his disposal.

¹ *"Choice of a State of Life"*. Koren pp. 97 & 99.