

An anatomical illustration in a classical style, showing a human hand and forearm. The drawing is detailed, showing the bones, muscles, and nerves. A central text box is overlaid on the image. The background is a light, aged paper color.

**THE BOOK
OF MY LIFE**
GIROLAMO CARDANO

INTRODUCTION BY
ANTHONY GRAFTON

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS
CLASSICS

THE BOOK OF MY LIFE

GIROLAMO CARDANO (1501–1576) was born in Pavia, Italy. A professor of mathematics at Padua, and of medicine at Pavia and Bologna, he was the the author of more than a hundred books on subjects ranging from the natural sciences to medicine, history, and music.

ANTHONY GRAFTON teaches the history of Renaissance Europe at Princeton University. His books include *Joseph Scaliger*, *Cardano's Cosmos*, and *Bring Out Your Dead*.

THE BOOK OF MY LIFE

(DE VITA PROPRIA LIBER)

GIROLAMO CARDANO

Translated from the Latin by

JEAN STONER

Introduction by

ANTHONY GRAFTON

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS



New York

To Mr. Waldo H. Dunn of the College of Wooster, to Mr. G.L. Hendrickson of Yale, to Miss Lucille Rand, my associate at the Dalton Schools in New York City, and especially to my sister, Miss Leah Stoner, also of the faculty at the Dalton Schools, I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness for the help and encouragement they gave me in preparing this translation.

—JEAN STONER
New York, October 1929

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INTRODUCTION

GIROLAMO CARDANO dazzled readers across sixteenth-century Europe. His original and influential books dealt with medicine, astrology, natural philosophy, mathematics, and morals—to say nothing of devices for raising sunken ships and stopping chimneys from smoking. They won the attention of popes and inquisitors, Catholics and Protestants, theologians and playwrights. And nothing did more to enhance their appeal than the polished stories about Cardano's past that glittered like enticing gems in his most technical treatises, or the longer, dramatic retellings of his whole life story that he offered the public at suitable intervals.

Renaissance artists and writers specialized in self-scrutiny. The sixteenth century began with Dürer's hypnotically precise self-portrait, and approached its end with Montaigne's luminously introspective essays. But Cardano outdid all the rest. He pored over his past accomplishments and disasters with obsessive interest. He reread his many books so often, and with such delight, that eventually he explained the myth of Narcissus as an allegory of the scholar who loses himself in the pleasure inspired by his own writings. He also chronicled his own doings and undoings in works of every imaginable kind. Cardano composed a series of short bibliographical essays in imitation of the ancient medical writer Galen and the modern humanist Erasmus. In these, he described his books and their places in his life: numbers of pages, circumstances of composition, inspiring dreams.

Astrologers held that intervals of seven and nine years were especially significant. Cardano, accordingly, drew up, at intervals of about nine years, a series of versions of his own horoscope. In minutely specific, house-by-house commentaries, he told his readers about his stormy family relations, his digestion, his fluxes of urine, and his failures and successes as doctor and writer. He sprinkled many of his works on medicine and other subjects with vivid anecdotes of disease and cure, emergencies and autopsies among the rich and famous, drawn from his own practice as a doctor to the powerful in Milan, the Papal States, and Northern Europe. And in 1575, the last full year of his life, Cardano composed his most detailed autobiography of all, the richly textured, lurid, and sometimes eerie *Book of My Life*, which the French scholar Gabriel Naudé published, from a bad manuscript, in 1643, and which Jean Stoner translated into English in the 1930s. Stoner worked from a corrupt base text, and produced an imperfect version. But her translation reads well, gives a clear impression of both the author and his book, and has the great merit of existing.

Cardano's multiple self-portraits fascinated and alarmed the readers who scrutinized them, from the censors in the Holy Office to magicians in Germany and England. In this age of religious war and intellectual intolerance, courtly service providers like Cardano endured constant scrutiny, much of it hostile, from patrons and rivals alike. Safety lay in absolute reticence. Yet Cardano astonished—and horrified—readers by his frankness. He confessed in public that he had enjoyed the advice and visits of a familiar spirit—and that he had suffered years of sexual impotence despite his best efforts, that he lurched like an archetypal silly professor when he walked, and even that his servants took advantage of him. No wonder many readers—including Cardano's first editor, Naudé, and the great criminologist Cesare Lombroso—have been convinced that Cardano was mad, while others wondered if a

devil had possessed him. *The Book of My Life* challenges, provokes, and amazes, even now.

Unlike most scholars, Cardano had many exciting experiences to record. Born in Pavia in 1501, he grew up in Milan and learned mathematics and astronomy from his father, Fazio Cardano. After studying in Padua and Pavia, he took a doctorate in medicine in 1525 and married in 1531. At first he had to struggle to make a living in Saccolongo, his wife's home, where he settled. As an illegitimate son, he could not gain entrance to the college of physicians in Milan, and made do by giving lectures on mathematics and practicing medicine on a modest, local level. In the 1530s, however, Cardano won the support of an important cleric, Filippo Archinto. Colleagues in Milan began to consult him on medical cases and astrological problems. He wrote a couple of pamphlets on astrology, one of which enabled him to bring off a real coup.

The distinguished Nuremberg publisher Johannes Petreius saw Cardano's pamphlet and sent the astronomer Georg Joachim Rheticus, who worked as one of his agents, to seek the author out. Eventually Petreius published a long series of Cardano's books—most notably his pioneering study of algebra, *The Great Art*, the first treatise in academic Latin to survey the new Italian mathematics of the sixteenth century. This strikingly innovative work, suitably adorned with a portrait of the author and a phosphorescently enthusiastic blurb, appeared on Petreius's list in 1545, only two years after Copernicus's *The Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*. In its own way, *The Great Art* had equally radical effects, revolutionizing the teaching of mathematics and involving Cardano himself in sharp debates about intellectual priority and plagiarism, since Niccolò Tartaglia pointed out that Cardano had violated a promise not to publish Tartaglia's methods. The illegitimate Milanese physician had become a European celebrity. Thanks to a professorship at Pavia, he prospered on the local level as well.

Like other polymaths in that age of universal savants, Cardano wrote, on a dazzling variety of fields, more books than any modern could hope to read. His treatises and commentaries on medicine, natural philosophy and magic, and astrology reached an immense audience, not only in Catholic Europe but also in the heartlands of Protestantism, like Wittenberg itself. Martin Luther made fun of the horoscope Cardano drew up to explain why he had rebelled against the Catholic Church. But Luther's closest friend, Philipp Melanchthon, read Cardano's work with care and taught it to his students. The arc of Cardano's career curved upward even more steeply in the 1550s. He followed his books northward in the mid-1550s, in order to treat Archbishop Hamilton of St. Andrews, in Scotland, for a cardiopulmonary illness. The archbishop's personal physician, a reader of Cardano, had noticed the author's claim that he could cure such diseases. In the meantime, Cardano had lost faith in his original method. Still, he accepted the invitation, and the archbishop survived—for fifteen years, to be executed when Scotland became a Protestant country.

In the course of his travels, Cardano realized that he had somehow metamorphosed into a grandee. In both France and England, the good and the great asked to meet him, had him draw up their horoscopes, and introduced him to other wielders of power and influence. When Cardano arrived in London, he interviewed the scholar John Cheke, the young King Edward, and other grandees, in order to produce accurate horoscopes based on data they themselves provided. His skills brought him into high company: the English astrologer and mathematician John Dee inspected a magic gem with Cardano in the house of the French ambassador to London, and the two of them also investigated a perpetual motion device.

Cardano's in-your-face frankness and penchant for risky claims led him into more than one disaster. In 1554, he pub-

lished his horoscope for Edward of England, which predicted that its subject would marry, rule his country for some time, and live a reasonable span. It appeared in print just after the boy king died, forcing Cardano to make lame and lengthy efforts at self-justification. Three years later, another of his works provoked the longest and most vitriolic book review in the annals of literature—the nine-hundred-page diatribe that an Aristotelian natural philosopher and medical man, Julius Caesar Scaliger, directed against Cardano's treatise *On Subtlety*. Scaliger found a tempting target in every one of Cardano's characteristic boasts (indeed, in every one of his flowery metaphors), and picked them off with contemptuous ease. His massive, compulsively readable polemic—which he described as only one of fifteen that he planned to publish—became an assigned text in many universities. Cardano's book continued to sell, and he wrote a sharp reply—but he clearly came off the loser.

Literary catastrophes at least confirmed that Cardano was worth attacking. But his personal life changed decisively for the worse in the 1550s. His wife died, and he continued to feel lonely and isolated, even as he built up the sort of elaborate household that a man of substance deserved. Nothing came easy to Cardano. Illegitimacy and poverty slowed his rise. Tormented as a young man by sexual impotence, in middle age he found the dangers of medical practice even more terrifying. In a time of plague and high mortality, doctors were always vulnerable. Cardano had more rivals than most, and they did their best to discredit him for every patient's death.

His troubles began to arrive in battalion strength, moreover, just when his career reached its peak. He moved to the ancient university of Bologna in 1562, hoping to find a haven from his colleagues' plots and attacks. But in Bologna too, his colleagues criticized him in public and undermined him in private. His enemies advised his students to study with others, assigned his favorite lecture times to rival teachers,

and then complained about his courses' low enrollments. His eldest son, whom he adored and saw as endowed with immense promise, was arrested, condemned, and executed for poisoning his wife, and Cardano found himself forced to expel his younger son from his house as a thief.

At the same time, the larger social and cultural climate turned increasingly bleak. During his student years in the 1510s and 1520s, Cardano had seen Italy lose its political independence, as French and Imperial armies fought their way up and down the peninsula. But these decades had also been a time of hope and renewal. Bearded prophets stalked city streets and piazzas, calling for a new order in the Church. Peddlers distributed the pamphlets of Savonarola and his followers, not to mention those of Luther and Melancthon. Ignatius Loyola and a host of others—including Cardano's patrons—created new forms of religious life within the Catholic Church, founding new religious orders and reconfiguring Catholic dioceses. Cardano shared the hopes of his generation. He praised Erasmus and other humanists, some of them Protestants, who tried to restore the original message of Christianity. In 1534, he even published an astrological pamphlet that predicted that the church would soon undergo a radical transformation.

As Cardano aged, however, the winds blew colder. The new doctrinal rigor called for between 1545 and 1563 by the Council of Trent—and the new censorship imposed by the Congregation of the Holy Office, through the Index of Forbidden Books—began to hamper free investigation and expression of ideas. Cardano, with his talk of angels and daemons, his provocative books and challenging language, naturally seemed suspect. In 1570 he was arrested and tried and underwent a short period of imprisonment. The Bolognese Inquisition forbade him to teach or publish, but released him fairly soon, and in March 1571 he made his way to Rome. Still passionately articulate, he impressed the Roman physi-

cians and managed to win a papal pension when Gregory XIII succeeded Pius V.

Cardano remained an imposing figure—but he was a deeply frustrated man. True, he enjoyed revising his work (one of his cleverest inventions offered writers an easy way to transform their texts without copying them over). But he hated it when the censors forced him to draft corrections and additions to his early works, and he had little success at convincing the authorities that he was innocent or penitent. In another late work, he remarked that impiety and insanity were both serious charges, but impiety was “more dangerous, especially in these times.” Cardano the astrologer sat in his bare rooms in Rome, decorated only with a banner claiming “Time is my Possession,” and knew that in sad fact his times were out of joint. Still famous and respected when he died in 1576, he might have ended on a pyre like Giordano Bruno if he had lived somewhat longer.

Cardano spent his last year, in large part, writing *The Book of My Life*. It seems a strange book now, and already seemed one when it first appeared. Fluid, chaotic, endlessly digressive, it veers from one subject to another, from organizational scheme to organizational scheme. At times, Cardano narrates his life more or less in order. At times, he lists his publications or his friends. Most often, he analyzes one aspect after another of his life, character, or experience, examining his digestion and his dreams, his marriage and his medical practice, as if he were composing in retrospect the sort of elaborate, luxurious horoscope that he had drawn up for his wealthy clients, which predicted their bodily and spiritual health, domestic relations, and careers, topic by topic.

The Book of My Life, which begins with the astrological details of Cardano’s birth, actually grew from the full commentaries he had written on his own horoscope in previous

decades. Though the book eventually became far longer than any of Cardano's other horoscopes, it adopted their mosaic-like form—a form that other biographers and autobiographers of the time also found suggestive and rewarding. John Aubrey's charming *Brief Lives*, for example, grew from his own collection of horoscopes—and reveal a similar notion of how lives are shaped by temperaments and bodies, and those in turn by the cosmos.

From the start, Cardano tried to meld this technical form of analysis with a much more traditional form of literary self-presentation. As a successful writer who had worked hard to orchestrate the success of his books, and who considered at least some of his works as divinely inspired, he joined the ranks of poets and philosophers, from Petrarch onward, who described their own lives as part of an effort to preserve their memory from the gnawing tooth of time. Petrarch emulated Roman poets like Ovid when he addressed himself, in a formal letter, "to Posterity." He explained that readers centuries later might feel as much curiosity about him as he did about the Latin poets. Many other learned Latinists in their turn wrote autobiographies or dictated extensive autobiographical details to friends. Cardano was hardly the only Renaissance writer to portray himself, at times, as a heroic figure, or to give readers striking details about his financial disasters and emotional depressions. To that extent his book began, at least, as a normal literary enterprise.

In this case as elsewhere, however, Cardano found that too much could never be enough. He went far beyond the bounds of normal discretion when he revealed his experiences with a supernatural being, and far beyond the bounds of normal introspection when he scrutinized every conceivable omen, prodigy, or astrological sign that could have had some oblique connection with his career. As a medical man and an astrologer, Cardano deeply believed that a web of connections and sympathies bound each individual—his bodily organs,

his temperament, even his tastes and interests—to the stars that gave life to everything on earth and to the supernatural beings that populated the heavens. Any sign, however small—the sound of buzzing with no bees to account for it, the smell of wax in the absence of burning candles—could give the astute reader of the world the clue he needed to establish a connection or make a prediction, the indication he could use to change his diet or his habits and avoid a terrible disease.

Reading Cardano's autobiography enables one to feel, intimately, what it was like to inhabit a world designed by a divine intelligence down to the smallest details and strewn with clues to what these meant—a world that hummed with hidden but vital messages, that the scholar spent his life deciphering. Like one of the Italian gardens of the time, with their deep grottos, monstrous sculptures, and hidden water traps that drenched those unwary enough to sit on an inviting bench, Cardano's book was designed to surprise and delight—and dismay—its readers, to make them feel the wonder with which experience continually inspired him.

If Cardano saw himself as the largely passive prey of the cosmos, he never saw autobiography as a passive act of recording. Like many of his contemporaries, he constantly hoped to improve and discipline himself. Renaissance readers knew that ancient philosophers had offered not only systems of ideas, but rules for living, and they tried to internalize these. They read the Stoics, for example, to learn how to survive the worst blows of fate. Marcus Aurelius—whose own autobiographical work became available in Latin not long before Cardano wrote—gave a splendid example of how the philosopher could use introspective writing to examine, and correct, his own character. At the same time, a host of new self-help books instructed Cardano and his contemporaries on what to eat, how much exercise to take, how to dance, and even how to walk. Cardano constantly tried, as he recorded his own experiences, to work out which of these systems had helped

him, and which had not. With his customary air of frankness, he told readers how he had broken the rules of prudence, good taste, and emotional restraint—and yet scored many successes in his career and survived calamities and ridicule in his private life.

The Book of My Life, with its intimate record of despair and exaltation, crisis and triumph, confrontation and debate, recounts the complex history of a tortured soul, one that constantly tried to shape the body it inhabited and the desires that ravaged it. If Cardano never entirely succeeded in attaining the cold humanist self-control that he wished for, he also never stopped functioning, even when his son died or the authorities persecuted him. To that extent, Cardano's book is more than self-advertisement or applied astrology. It is his scrupulous, heroic, and necessarily incomplete effort to instruct the world by turning his soul into a case history. Cardano's unsparing courage, his willingness to examine his own depths, and his passion to find the meaning in the apparently insignificant details and transactions of daily life, remind one of Freud. But Cardano, unlike Freud, made no effort to conceal his own identity or those of his friends and clients: his theories and explanations remained tightly bound to the vivid, particular stories he told so well. These made *The Book of My Life* compelling reading for Enlightenment philosophes and Biedermeier burghers, and they continue to charge it with interest now.

—ANTHONY GRAFTON

