Signs gone wild : the dismantling of allegory

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Signs Gone Wild:
The Dismantling of Allegory

Not long after the beginning of the Tiers livre, Panurge starts wondering if he should get married. Four hundred pages and one hundred ten chapters later, at the end of the Quart livre, he still doesn’t know. This is much ado with not much to show for it.

In each of the two cycles, the consultations of the Tiers livre and the sea voyage of the Quart livre, there is a succession of episodes that more or less follow the same pattern: the friends listen to an opinion or witness an event, whereupon there is a pause in which they take stock of what has just been said or happened, and, since no certainty can be reached, they go on and on and on.

It may have seemed at the outset that Panurge’s query was to serve as a program for this lengthy quest. But the reader soon realizes that neither the character’s future, nor the enigma of woman, nor the complexities of marriage are the only or the real problems. The two-part structure of most episodes consists of the phenomenon and its commentary, suggesting that the real issue is neither psychological nor moral, but about epistemology. To put it more precisely, signs crop up, messages that may be loaded with double meaning show themselves. How should they be handled? I suggest that the question of signs and their interpretation, already active in the first two books and central in the last two, is in fact a constant in Rabelais’s work.

The giants and their friends look around, listen, and ponder the meaning of the data perceived. But even before they start interpreting, they are challenged by a first obstacle: How is one to distinguish
between things that are signs and things that mean nothing more than themselves? How is one to identify from among the undifferentiated objects of experience those that request interpretation?

From one island to the next, the navigators of the *Quart livre* meet with unusual phenomena: strange populations of ill-shaped bodies, weird customs, atmospheric accidents, all this challenges the natural order. The travelers could ignore them as fortuitous and unintentional, but they are not sure. Don’t the peculiar events point to a secret, a supernatural message lying under the surface? For Rabelais’s contemporaries, this is the question raised by monsters. Are they only an error of nature with no other interest than the physical, or are they a meaningful accident invested with hidden values? An extended sequence in the *Quart livre* rehearses the different solutions.1 The sea tempest (*QL* 18-28) turns out to be a “prodige,” a “monstre” (2:120) that cries out for interpretation and is indeed deciphered as meaning something else. The whale (*QL* 33-34) is also called a “monstre” (2:137), but it has nothing to show apart from its enormous size. The first is then a sign, the second is not. The status of two ether monsters in the same sequence, Quaresmepreignant [*Fastilent*] (*QL* 29-32) and the Andouilles [*Chitterlings*] (*QL* 35-42), is much less clear. Their weirdness might be an invitation to look for a higher meaning, unless they are just the crazy and meaningless products of an unbridled imagination.

The hesitation does not apply only to the status of things. It can also affect the status of words, following a scholastic distinction between *allegoria in factis* and *allegoria in verbis.* Does a given discourse hide an indirect message? Should it be deciphered as an allegory? The “Enigme en prophetie” at the end of *Gargantua* (ch. 58) receives two readings: under the “obscure parolles” [obscure words] of the poem, Frère Jean recognizes a mere “description du jeu de paume” [description of the game of tennis (1:30)], whereas Gargantua identifies it as a veiled allusion to the persecution of evangelical thinkers.2 Throughout the *Tiers livre*, Panurge and his friends go on quarreling about problems of reading: Should a given statement be understood at a literal or a-figurative level? For things as well as for words, the picking out of what needs interpretation is no clear-cut matter.

In fact, both message and bearer can be open to doubt. An object claims to be a sign, but how is one to establish its authenticity? Here the question moves from the content to the subject of enunciation and touches on the legitimacy of the messenger. Panurge and his friends ask for the Sibyl of Panzoust’s predictions (*TL* 16-18), and they are submerged by enigmatic words and gestures. But can one take such a show at all seriously? Is the old woman an inspired pythia, a genuine mediator of the gods, or is she a vulgar sorceress, a disturbed mind, an imposter? Here again, we are faced with an uncertain boundary between mystery and mystification, between white and black magic. Some signs are forgeries; they smell of brimstone and would be better ignored.3

Supposing the selection is achieved, the interpreter still has to solve the main difficulty: If a secret lies under the words or the things, how is one to understand it? What is the appropriate code? Here again Rabelais, in his survey of semiological possibilities, acknowledges problems. The famous chapters (G 8-10) on the symbolism of colors, about the young Gargantua’s dress, graphically illustrate conflicts between the available systems. According to the usual interpretation, white means faith and blue, steadfastness. But Rabelais considers these analogies to be arbitrary, attributes them to charlatans, and instead seems to adopt another code: white for happiness and blue for heavenly matters. So will he now stick to this symbolical system and tell us how to deal with these semiological intricacies? Some commentators believe that he has made his choice. Others, such as Rigolot (1976), say that, far from committing himself, he is having a good laugh at everybody’s expense. So the question remains open. Here we have the narrator who stokes up the doubt, whereas in other episodes it may be the characters acting as interpreters and showing their perplexities or disagreements. No matter who is on stage, the path that leads from sign to sense is uncertain.

All these difficulties in the identification and reading of signs are symptoms of a crisis. In the rest of this article, I propose to clarify
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Rabelais's position in the semiological and hermeneutical debate that takes place in his period. Let me apologize now for many simplifications; I will be reducing to its skeleton what in fact should be the matter of a book.

The fathers of the church and the scholastic philosophers established a theory of signs and interpretation that was remarkably coherent. Defended by the church, this theory was transmitted to Renaissance scholars as a massive legacy, which they would have to take into account. I will briefly outline this doctrine as it was perceived by the humanists.4

Medieval semiology is divided into two fields: the meaning of things and the meaning of words. The world is a book through which God talks to men. Natural phenomena on the one hand and historical events on the other are so many divine messages for humans to interpret. But the signs are so diverse and there are so many possible readings of them that the theologians had to build a rigorous symbolism, assigning to each thing one meaning only or a limited number of meanings. In this way, a set of strictly codified correspondences allowed the church to control the interpreter's activity.

Now to the words. The Bible and pagan texts both call for another hermeneutics. The central issue is familiar. How is one to square the teachings, apparently so different, of the Old and the New Testament? How is one to reconcile the classical legacy with Christian thought and morals? In both cases, the solution is in the treatment of words as signs. The Old Alliance is interpreted as a series of prophecies announcing the coming of Christ and the lessons of the Apostles. In the same way, an ancient poem is moralized and, through figurative reading, systematically transferred into the realm of Christian truths. The famous method of quadruple interpretation, whether it is used in the exegesis of the Bible or in the commentary of Ovid's Metamorphoses, allows for the non-Christian to be made to conform to the Christian; it controls the proliferation of the heterogeneous by submitting it to the unique truth of Revelation.

Medieval hermeneutics applies a very particular strategy. Its problem is not what it is about to discover, since this is known in advance, but how it is going to reach it. Non nova, sed nove. A pre-determined telos dictates the choice of method, and method in its turn aims at overcoming the discrepancies and ambiguities in order to minimize the threat of difference or the uncertainties of polysemy. Allegory, insofar as it rests on the general acknowledgment of a network of equivalences between signs and meanings, is perceived by the humanists as a typical expression of a theory that is both narrow and strictly determined.5

The evolution from the Middle Ages into the Renaissance coincides with a major crisis in the semiological and hermeneutical system. Without giving a complete picture, I will look briefly at the developments in two fields that are at the core of humanist philosophy.6

There is no need to recall the utmost importance of Neoplatonist thought in the sixteenth century, but it may be useful to establish that Neoplatonism plays an active part in breaking the univocal relationship between sign and meaning, thus accelerating the liquidation of scholasticism.7 The Supreme Being—the ideal one—of Neoplatonists is conceived as an Absolute, too enigmatic for human language to grasp. Like the God of the mystics, it escapes all logical determination and challenges the signifying power of words. It can be grasped through intuition, but can be talked about only indirectly, through paradoxes and the mediation of figures or signs.

The signs of the divine, then, are no more than inadequate substitutes, which, as bearers of a diffuse revelation, are the better for being ambiguous and opaque. The best language to speak about what cannot be known is a self-defeating language that points to its own object as always beyond its reach. Two consequences can be drawn from this. Because they cannot come to a final stop, signs refer to each other in an endless drift. A given word alludes to another, one thing implies another, so that a statement or object never reaches the ultimate truth, but only fragments and shadows of this truth that have to be completed and that then lead to other fragments and so on. For the same reason, the signs, being absorbed in a network of multiple relations and testifying for a reality that is infinitely complex, are naturally polysemic. Their meanings are plural and escape totalization.8 It is obvious that we are a long way from the univocal relationship between sign and meaning that characterized scholasticism.
from the rational hermeneutics and the neat set of equivalences of scholasticism.

The other witness is Erasmus, because he also takes part in the emancipation of signs, but for reasons connected with the lesson of the Gospels and the need to restore a religious life that should be experienced as a spiritual and intimate adventure. The Word of God, as revealed in the Bible, is infinitely richer and deeper than anything human beings can conceive. It is beyond all expectation. Any attempt to subordinate it to mechanical procedures like the quadruple interpretation is bound to weaken its effect. The genuine Christian should rid himself of all mediations and constraining methods and instead rely on God's grace and, with its help, read the Bible in spirit. The signs of Revelation are saturated with hidden meanings, but only an intuitive quest or a personal meditation will grasp some of these riches, without ever being able to exhaust them.

So there is a convergence in sixteenth-century thought of two central trends that agree on some semiological principles. In Neoplatonism as well as in Erasmism, the semantic density of signs inhibits any attempt to systematize. Instead of the retrospective method of scholasticism, which confirms the already known, humanists assume the risk of a prospective interpretation; there is always something more to be found, not only one meaning or a few, but an indefinite number. Reading can no longer rely on stable procedures and formal methods. It is a very personal, intimate affair; it has turned into an open-ended process and, as a result, has become highly problematic.

Rabelais is closely implicated in this crisis and, through his own strategies, takes part in the liberation of signs. I suggest that the dismantling of allegory, the adoption of polysemny, and the inscription within the narrative of the uncertainties of reading are but one more aspect of his involvement in the debates of his period. For different reasons, the shaking of constraining codes is a major issue for Rabelais. His sympathy for Erasmian evangelism would be enough to pull him in this direction. Against the external rites and superstitions of the church, the Christian humanists, as I have pointed out, plead for a religion that should be lived from within and inspired by faith and by love. In opposition to the scribes and pharisees, to all the advocates of a formalist theology, yoked to a literal respect of the ancient law, they propose freedom of the spirit, according to the example of Christ, who transformed the meaning of signs and injected a new content into the rigid framework of Judaic ceremonies. The ideal of Pantagruelism seems to correspond precisely to this state of mind; it interprets "toutes choses à bien" (1:495) [all things for the good (327)], rejects prejudices and dogmatic principles, and relies on the tenets of trust and generosity.

Rabelais as a writer and composer of fiction is no less concerned with this break. The trend in the Middle Ages was to impose a didactic or edifying meaning on legends, stories, and plays; narratives were meant to illustrate a moral message or the articles of faith. I refer the reader to the moralization of the novella, the writing of history as example, hagiography, and so on. The danger is that a text, when it is subservient to allegorical devices, may no longer be productive or inventive. Instead of holding the curiosity of the reader, it may actually inhibit it. In a way, the Tiers livre is a parody of this situation. Pantagruel listens to a series of oracles and interprets them allegorically. We have the same repetitive pattern: a cryptic discourse is elucidated, an equivalence between sign and sense is given, and each time the same message unfolds—Panurge will be a cuckold. With no surprise, the new is modeled on the old. Truth and morality may profit from this, but the literary gain is nil. Once the predictions have been translated and commented upon, the narrative can stop. If Panurge with his self-deception and Frère Jean with his jokes did not push the text along, it would soon get exhausted and the reading of it would come to a standstill. Rather than solve the enigmas and ignore the difficulties, the plot stays alive through the reader's doubt.

To ensure that the mind is never saturated and that literature may act as a liberating and stimulating force, the reductive devices and the authoritative, exclusive methods must be condemned. Rabelais's narratives are interspersed with episodes that more or less directly thematize the problems of interpretation and unmask the excesses of overconfident readings.
The Papimanes in the *Quart livre* (ch. 48–54) become fanatical through their materialism and literalism. Unable to follow a religion that is not grounded on the evidence of the senses, they replace God with the Pope and the Bible with the Decretals. They worship a visible, tangible God, an idol, and refuse to go beyond the literal meaning of their Holy Book. Thus the supernatural is reduced to the natural in the same way as in the domain of language: signs can have only one meaning, and reading can never be figurative. The book of the Decretals is followed literally and invested with magical power; it imposes blind obedience, a whole ritual of gestures and formulae that, in the same way as the rabbinical legalism condemned by Erasmus, reduces faith to a series of superstitions. But there is another aspect to the story. The words that the Papimanes respect religiously are also imposed on others as an inescapable rule. "Whoever does not bow to the letter of the law is considered a heretic and exposed to the worst punishment. So the words, when they are fixed into one exclusive meaning, become a tool for the repression of others. Restrictive interpretation of texts in this episode leads to intolerance and violence.

The result is similar with allegory, even though the mechanism is different. Insofar as allegory reduces the meaning of a discourse to its figurative value, the paralyzing effect is the same as before. Rabelais suggests that the automatic quest for a hidden meaning is no less dangerous than the cult of the literal meaning. Raminagrobis is a poet, and he is dying. For these reasons, he has access to divine truths and has been consulted by Panurge and his friends (TL 21–22). After he has written a poem, which evades the question, he tells his guests that he has just had to chase away "un tas de villaines, immondes et pestilentes bestes" (1:491) [a bunch of ugly, filthy, pestilential creatures (319)] that were preventing him from dying in peace. Whereupon we have, as usual, the interpretative pause; the identity of the mysterious animals is discussed and once more we have the opposition of the two canonical methods. For Epistemon, the poet "parle absolument et proprement des pusses, punaises, cirons" (1:494) [speaks literally and properly about fleas, bedbugs, gnats (my translation)]. But Panurge doesn't agree; his understand-

ing is based on allegory and he has no doubt in explaining that Raminagrobis was being rude about the "bons pères mendians Cordeliers et Jacobins" (1:492) [good mendicant Franciscan and Jacobin friars (319)]. This explanation is not unlikely but it freezes the poet's words. It does not allow for any possible mistake and resembles terrorism insofar as it imperiously attributes to somebody an intention that he may not have had.

Panurge's allegorical reading, along with the Papimanes' literalism, not only twists the words, it also threatens a man in his liberty and his safety. As a result, the debate on interpretation that seemed innocuous and purely theoretical turns out to be extremely serious, a question of life and death. If Panurge's reading is correct, it follows that the old poet, because he dares accuse monks, is considered by the ecclesiastical authority to be a "heretic," a "blasphemer," and, as such, deserves to be burnt. Once more, hermeneutical excess and the fixation of words, captured by the church, are associated with sectarianism, violence, and the methods of the Inquisition.

As a specialist in the occult sciences, Herr Trippa (TL 25) is an expert in the art of manipulating signs in order to terrorize others. He displays frightening magical tricks and, through his gesticulations and his jargon, attempts to fascinate the good folk. Here the wizard is denounced as an impostor who exploits the mystery, the misleading appeal of the hidden meaning, and thus blackmails ordinary people. This episode is no longer about physical violence, but about intellectual terrorism.

Rabelais himself suffered the pressure of abusive interpretations. His difficulties with censorship show that, when he vindicates polysemy and calls for a generous reading inspired by charity, he is in fact talking about his own situation and safety. His books were condemned by the Paris Faculty of Theology, and the attacks from Geneva were no less violent. The fact that Rabelais spent part of his life in hiding and managed to avoid prison or even the stake with the help of enlightened and powerful protectors can be put down to aggressive critics searching for and eventually finding scandalous and condemnable passages in his works. As with Raminagrobis, he was the victim of readings that were suspicious of him and that used

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the interpretative device of allegory in order to label him a heretic. Those whom he called the "calumniators" claimed to be outraged by innocent wordplay, like âne for âme (TL 22-23), and attempted at all costs to see sacrilege in what was in fact, he says, "folâstries joyeuses" (2:6) [joyous fooleries (423)]. Driven by hate, they see everything in a bad light, "comme qui pain interpretroit pierre; pois­son, serpent; oeuf, scorpion" (2:7) [as if someone interpreted bread as stone, fish as snake, egg as scorpion (423)]. At a time when you could be killed for a few words too many, the choice of method becomes a question of life and death.

In the same text where Rabelais complains about the censor's accusations, he represents himself as the good doctor who, through his stories, heals the sick and comforts the afflicted. As soon as the threats and fears, which for most people were part of daily life, are taken seriously, the project no longer looks absurd. There is no doubt that one of the novelist's main objectives is to demystify impostures, reply to violence with laughter, and show up the complicity of dogmatic interpretative methods and repression. I would like to suggest two ways by which Rabelais achieves this end.

The first is familiar, but so important and so often overlooked by commentators who are all too serious that it deserves a brief mention. The comical acts as both a defense and a remedy. For instance, it allows the terrorised to be neutralized through ridicule. Herr Trippa wanted to convict Panurge of cuckoldry; Panurge returns the compliment. Through laughter, roles are reversed; the powerful man and his tricks are reduced to a farce.

But the liberating power of the comical is not only released through satire. To escape from sectarian intimidation and dissipate sadness or anxiety, the friends sometimes allow themselves a moment of relaxation and recreation; they meet together to attend to their own good pleasure. Instead of employing language as a weapon, they tell stories, reveal their dreams, and play with words. Frère Jean is very good at this; through his jokes, oaths, and tall stories, he exercises tensions and worries. Rabelais put one of these moments of pleasure and rest at the center of the Tiers livre (TL 26-28), where Jean and Panurge tell jokes as if they were trying to escape melancholy and efface all the discourses of power they had heard. These episodes seem frivolous or bawdy and, because they are short on scholarly references, they are often neglected by critics. But this is wrong, insofar as they have an essential part to play in Rabelais's overall project as antidotes to fear.

The dismantling of allegory and the disabling of constraining herme­neutical codes also adopt another device. Rabelais builds up signs or pseudosigns that challenge traditional reading methods, escape any sort of control, and generate meanings that are unexpected, uncertain, and disturbing. He sketches out a kind of wild semiosis, which, by opening our onto obscure regions, sends interpretative systems into a spin. When it comes to giving a name to these irreducible images, he often uses the word estrange. I propose to take a trip into the territory of the strange and stop at episodes where the word effectively appears.

Towards the beginning of the Tiers livre, Panurge puts on a new set of clothes to show that he wants to return to civil life and get married (TL 7). "En tel estat se praesenta devant Pantagruel, lequel trouva le desguisement estrange" (1:430) [In such state he presented himself to Pantagruel, who found the disguise strange (277)]. The friends do not understand or at least are hesitant about the meaning of the message. What has happened? The new dress gives up the breeches and codpiece and replaces them with a robe and spectacles. In other words, Panurge eliminates the sign of masculinity—the codpiece—and instead adopts a disguise that makes him look like a monk—a robe and eyeglasses. His intention was to exhibit his sexual power, but his garment suggests the opposite. It seems as if, when he was encoding his message, he had improvised a private language so personal that it not only distorts the intention of the sender but also sends out information that is misleading and uncontrollable. Medieval semiotics was coherent enough to unite members of a given social group around a common code, and they understood each other. But Panurge is a modern man; he no longer has access to a stable hermeneutical system, he has to put together his own system with signs that are bound to be misunderstood and, worse, signs that
generate disturbing representations beyond his control—a man in
heat who hides his sex, a big mouth who speaks at cross purposes.

Panurge is not alone in being deceived by his own constructions.
Rabelais from time to time also presents himself as a sorcerer's ap­
prentice, so that he and his reader are faced with signs that are too
much for them. The reader is often struck by strange images that are
worrisome and generate a deep resonance somewhere within, with­
out our being able to identify a content and find a key. The giant
Bringueranilles (QL 17), who normally feeds on windmills, has
fallen ill from a surfeit of pots and pans and is finally finished off by a
piece of butter (2:92 [476]). The Sibyl at Panzoust (TL 17) is sur­
rounded by a strange decor. She performs a disturbing ritual and
exhibits her obscene body (r:472 [306]). These abjects are not
innocent: they should normally convey a hidden meaning and, having
performed their function, let themselves be forgotten. But they are
opaque, they strike our imagination, they are like signifiers that
attract all the attention and deny access to the signified. The fascina­
tion of the unheimlich disturbs the usual mechanisms of meaning.

Other signs spread messages that not only escape the dichotomy
between the literal and the figurative but also seem to open a per­
spective onto what we nowadays would call the unconscious: erotic
fantasies, sexual frenzies, visions of strange anatomy or perverse
couplings. As in dreams, shocking or weird images crop up, bring­
ing to light repressed anxieties or affects, all the more powerful for being
normally censured.

The Quart livre has many of these disturbing representations. The
people of Ennasin subvert the system of genders and of family rela­
tions and see no difference between human beings and objects (QL 9); the Chicanois [Shysteroos] earn their living by being beaten
(QL 12–16); the inhabitants of Ruach eat wind and die of farting
(QL 43). The reader is bombarded with symbolical suggestions,
which, because they do not belong to any familiar code, cannot be
rationalized and hence neutralized. The quick fire of disturbing im­
ages is even more intense in the parallel episodes of Quaresmepe­
nant (QL 29–32) and the Andouilles (QL 35–42): on the one hand,
a sinister carcass, in the taste of Arcimboldo, which mingles the
organic and the instrumental; on the other, female warriors in the
shape of phallic sausages. These two monstrous figures seem to be
the outcrops of a primitive and nightmareish world where the human
and the animal, the living and the lifeless are confused, a world
where the fancies and chimeras of a delirious imagination can come
true. These preposterous effigies are the signs of something hidden,
but instead of pointing to an abstract and graspable meaning, they
pull us down into the sphere of instincts and release traces of the
repressed.

One episode illustrates this displacement. Pantagreel has recom­
pended to Panurge the use of Virgilian lotos: you open the text of
Virgil at random and you interpret the passage you have just come
across as a sign of the future (TL 12). This is a tried and tested
method that dates back to antiquity: mythological references are
treated allegorically, they are moralized, so that not only do you
draw a useful lesson from them but you also erase the weird and
worrisome aspects of the primitive version. But what happens here?
Instead of transferring the myth into the domain of the true and the
good, the commentary lets insanities unfold and allows a monstrous
procession of sexual aberrations to emerge. Virgil the wise man
and prophet, when he is no longer domesticated through moralization,
spokes of gods and goddesses transformed into animals, of Jupiter
being fed by a goat or a sow; he pictures Minerva as a warlike and
masculine woman; he draws on Vulcan and the Giants, emblems of
brutal force with their deformed bodies; and finally he mentions two
cases of incest, two stories of castration, and one episode of can­
nibalism. The signs of myth in this chapter release wild images and
build up a representation of mankind overcome by bestiality and set
free from all rules and prohibitions.

This is what l'estrange is about: images that cannot be incorpo­
rated into a preestablished system, wild signs emancipated from
morals that bring to the fore phantasms normally repressed.13 I have
attempted in this article to show that the liberation of signs is not a
modern invention, but corresponds to a historically documented
aspect of sixteenth-century culture. The passage from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, from the rigor of scholasticism to the intellectual uncertainties of humanism, is marked in part by a profound crisis in the way signs and their interpretation work. It seems to me that this crisis has not been considered seriously enough by specialists. When its impact is acknowledged, it will no longer be possible to argue that it is anachronistic to see Rabelais as problematizing interpretation and exploiting polysemy. On the contrary, some of his most powerful effects derive from his concern with the weird workings of signs.