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CHAPTER 2

Rabelais’ Strength and the Pitfalls of Methodology
(Tiers Livre, chapters 7–18)

Michel Jeanneret

The works of Rabelais specialists are like a two-edged sword. They elucidate zones which are obscure and draw out the text’s hidden logic; in teaching as in research, their objective is to understand, to order, to rationalise; scholarly commentary implies, by definition, a will to mastery. I do not doubt the necessity of this activity: the more we know about the possible meanings of Rabelais’ work, the better; moreover, scholarly research is the normal response to a text that, by its enigmas, solicits this type of investigation. But the danger is in thinking that scholarly metadiscourse can overcome all resistance and dissipate all opacity. Proud of their knowledge, scholars risk forgetting that Rabelais’ work does everything to evade, that it plays tricks on the reader to provoke his curiosity, to frustrate his certitudes. Where it allows itself to be explained without anything being left over, where it ceases to produce new readings, it dies; well, it wants to live, and it does live—the proof is in our curiosity and our meeting here, in the pages that I have written and that, if all goes well, you will read.

To maintain his work in motion, Rabelais exploits diverse strategies. I would like to signal one of them here, which, because it is by nature incapable of recuperation by scholarly criticism, has been neglected, or even repressed. It concerns a certain category of signs that defy codes, escape rational explanation and open onto a bizarre and troubling world, which is normally censured. They are at once incongruous and inevitable, they penetrate into layers of the psyche where their impact provokes uncontrollable reactions. Knowing, Rabelais liberates in his reader demons which invade the deepest zones of affectivity. I would like to illustrate this process using a sequence from the Tiers Livre—the Tiers Livre which, more than any other text of Rabelais, has been subjected to learned and edifying interpretations, and read according to a normative grid. The pages that follow present themselves, on the contrary, as a homage to subversion, to strangeness, and to him who incarnates them, Panurge. It is thanks to him that the bizarre infiltrates the text, that what has been repressed by received wisdom returns, and that the narrative, by the disquieting strangeness of its representations, awakens our phantasms, in such a way that it never ceases to intrigue us.

The sequence opens in chapter seven. Panurge wants to get married and he adopts an ensemble of vestimentary signals to express the fact that he is preparing himself for conjugal life. Thus begins a series of episodes which, according to a scenario destined to invade the Tiers and then the Quart Livre, will modulate the question of the sign and its interpretation. Panurge’s accoutrements, according to his own commentary, refer back to five coded messages: (a) he will wear a ring set with a flea in his ear; explanation: to have “la pusse en l’aureille” (“a flea in one’s ear”) signifies “je me veulx marier” (“I want to get married”); (b) he makes his gown out of coarse dark brown cloth, thus indicating that he will be thrifty and “mesnaiger parfaict” (“a perfect householder”); (c) in addition to the choice of the cloth, the gown itself, by its resemblance to a classical toga, manifests his desire to belong henceforth to civil society rather than to the army; (d) Panurge renounces breeches and a codpiece, because one goes with the other, and the codpiece is a part of military uniform and he no longer wants to go to war; (e) he “attacha des lunettes à son bonnet” (“attached spectacles to his bonnet”), so that he resembles a Dominican friar.

Such are the signs revealed by Panurge, so as to show that he wants to get married. But the principal recipient, Pantagruel, is not sure that he understands: he “trouva le desguisement estrange” (“found the disguise strange”), so much so that “n’entendent [...] ce mystere, le interrogea, demandant que praetendoit ceste nouvelle prosopopée” (“since he did not understand this mystery, he questioned him, asking what this new disguise meant”). Panurge will then furnish explanations without, however, dissipating the malaise. Wherein lies the difficulty? The interpreter is troubled because s/he perceives contradictions between Panurge’s intention and the message implied by his costume. “Je grezille d’estre marié” (“I’m sizzling to be married”), he repeats, but the words and the visual signs do not say the same thing.
The gown and the spectacles make him look like a monk; the absence of a codpiece effaces the marks of virility even more and the entire outfit does not correspond to that of ‘gens de bien et de vertus’ (‘men of quality and virtue’). Pantagruel does not fail to note the contradiction: ‘Ce n’est la guise des amoureux, ainsi avoir bragues avalades (…)’ (‘this is not the attire of lovers, thus to have breeches at half-mast’), and later another witness will recognize without fail the attire of a cuckold in Panurge’s clothes.

What is happening? Panurge appears to use a language that he does not control; the code that he adopts is too personal, too eccentric to assure a correct interpretation of the information. That is what Pantagruel reproaches him with: ‘Seulement me desplaist la nouveauté et mespris du commun usage’ (‘Novelty and disdain for common usage alone displease me’). Panurge thought he would be able to construct a new system of signs, without understanding that any system of semiotics rests necessarily on a collective convention. As it has often been said, he is a modern man, a singular individual who no longer adheres to traditionally-established protocols. Because he thinks he can improvise his own language, a breach opens between what he wants to say and what he says in effect, such that an unexpected meaning, an involuntary message, and a disturbing admission slip into his discourse. This unforeseen meaning, uncontrolled and troubling, I propose to call, after a term that Rabelais uses often, ‘the strange’ (‘l’estrange’).

Thus with chapter seven a sequence begins that thematises the dispersal or the disruption of signs. It is true that the following episodes — those that I will comment on: the interpretation of the Virgilian lots, the explanation of the dream, the visit to the sibyl of Panzoust, then those that I will not have the space to treat: the consultation of the mute Nazdecabre and of the poet Raminagrobis — no longer illustrate the surprises of encoding, but those of decoding. The problem, however, remains that of signs which free themselves from received hermeneutics to generate strange values. The perturbation of the semiotic system, as I have said, essentially concerns Panurge, as Pantagruel has a proven method at his disposal, which aims to rationalise and domesticate divinatory images. It is true that this distribution of roles is sometimes uncertain, but it matters little, since we are interested less in the psychology of the characters than in a certain type of signs and the surprises of reading.

Panurge wants to get married, but will he be happy, or will his wife make him a cuckold? To settle his hesitation, he embarks upon a series of consultations, and begins by having recourse to different divinatory techniques. The first method consists of opening at random the work of Virgil and looking for an answer in the passage upon which he chances to fall. Three fragments, all of which come from ancient myth, are examined and commented on one by one. The problem that is found throughout chapter 12 is thus that of the interpretation of fables. This question is not a new one, and refers to a methodology of traditional mythographies — those that were in use at the end of the Middle Ages and those that the Italian humanists, beginning with Boccaccio, bequeathed to the learned public of the Renaissance. Differences aside, one guiding principle underpins all these works: they treat myth as allegory and discover hidden lessons by transferring the stories, through a figurative reading, into the registers of morality, science, of religion, or of science, they gain a new respectability. In this way, the moralisation of myth camouflages the bizarreness and the crudity of primitive narratives. The spirit has triumphed over the letter.

Here then we have Panurge and his friends who open up Virgil, the scholar and sage par excellence. What will they find there? Scabrous tales, insanities, an incredible catalogue of erotic phantasms. The figures of the classical pantheon recover their primitive violence, their frenetic sexuality. Previously attenuated, intellectualised, myth becomes once again the most audacious expression of the obscure contents of the unconscious.

The tendency displays itself right from the beginning of the chapter. The first excerpt of Virgil is from the fourth Eclogue and, as such, involves the paradigm of the Golden Age, the return to original innocence. The commentary itself evokes thunder-darting Jupiter and the Giants’ attack on Olympus — the Giants who, according to Ovid’s Metamorphoses (I, 150 ff.), are figures from the Iron Age. They symbolise, moreover, brute force, the battle of heaven and earth, of mind and nature, of beauty and ugliness. Immediately the reader is confronted with one of the most sombre representations of mythology: the triumph of violence and evil. Two images, a little later, complete the picture of this monstrous race and the evocation of the cosmic upheavals at the dawn of time: the lame and deformed effigy of
Vulcan, the subterranean blacksmith, then that of Atlas, the Colossus who strains under the weight of the heavens.

The disquieting strangeness of this primitive universe becomes even more accentuated by a series of references to metamorphoses which, playing on the mutual transformation of the divine and the animal, imply an unfinished world, where the various species are still indistinct or interchangeable. For example, that curious retinue of ‘déesses desguisées en beletes, fouines, ratepenades, musaraignes’ ('goddesses disguised as weasels, martens, bats, shrew-mice'), or the litany of the avatars of Jupiter, who transforms himself 'en cycne, en taureau, en satyre ( ... ), en aigle, en belier ( ... ), en puse' ('into a swan, a bull, a satyr ( ... ), into an eagle, into a ram ( ... ), into a snake ( ... ), into a flea'). This same Jupiter, Panurge recalls, was 'nourry par une sœur' ('nursed by a sow'), unless it was by a goat, and, later the slave of the worst sexual instincts, merits being compared to a pig, a goat, a ram. Add to this the memory of Lycaon changed into a wolf, complete it with the apparition of several horned gods, and you will obtain a fairly astounding, condensed version of bestiality.

We have, for example, the transposition of the sexes, with Minerva, 'déesse puissante, foudroiante' ('a powerful goddess, thunder-darting'), and Camilla, the Amazon of the Aeneid,' both of them virile warriors who disconcert the reader. Incest also has its place, with Jupiter who 'depuccella junonis se secur' ('deflowered his sister Juno') and Lucius of Thebes, who raped his niece. Still concentrated in the same chapter 12, the list of perversions continues with two examples of castration, Uranus and Attis, and two allusions to scenes of cannibalism, Lycaon who served Jupiter the flesh of a child, and Cambles, king of the Lydians, who devoured his wife.

Obviously, this parade of curiosities is radically opposed to edifying interpretations of myth. Some forays into the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century versions of the Ovide moralisé tell much about the disparities between the two methods. Let us consider the rape of Europa. According to chapter 12 of the Tiers Livre, Jupiter 'belina pour un jour la tierce partie du monde, bestes et gens, fleuves et montaignes' ('for one day's stint he rammed out the third part of the world, beasts and men, rivers and mountains'); curious vision of the god turned bull who, in raping the young girl, makes love to an entire continent. To this unbridled sexuality corresponds, in the allegorical version of the Metamorphoses, the assimilation of Jupiter to Christ: the transformation into a bull, explain the versions of the Ovide moralisé, is the figure of the Incarnation and the symbol of the sufferings of the Passion. Earlier in chapter 8, Panurge had already interpreted another myth in his own way: the codpiece, he maintains, is the 'piece premiere de harnois militaire' ('the first piece of military harness'), because the testicles are, according to Galen, 'le germe conservatif de l'human lignage' ('the preserving germ of the human line'). I would gladly believe, he adds, that the balls 'sont les propres pierres moyennans les quelles Deucalion et Pyrrha restituerent le genre humain aboyé par le deluge' ('are the very stones of which Deucalion and Pyrrha restored the human race, abolished by the deluge').

The moralisation of the fourteenth century was as different as possible, since stones signified at that time the sin that one throws behind oneself, in the fear of God and love for one's fellow man.

One can, of course, consider these inversions as parodies and see in them a simple literary exercise, just one more example of burlesque debunking. To do so would be to ignore the scope of the project. One would first point out that the enterprise, although scabrous, corresponds to an eminently philological gesture. Going beyond censures and sublimations of all kinds, it gives back to myth its real face, it restores its primitive force. To bring sex, metamorphosis, the chthonic powers to the forefront is to deploy the heritage of the ancients in all its enormity, to restore to the text of fable its original vigour and its extraordinary power to defamiliarise. But the return of the repressed operates on two levels. If going back to origins permits a restoration of myth in its purity, it liberates as well the language of phantasms which is usually repressed. Rabelais' text gives voice to the desires and deliriums buried in the unconscious. Far from being simply retrospective, his philology is also turned toward the reader, in whom it strikes such sensitive chords that their vibrations are still perceptible.

It is logical, in this perspective, that the exploration of dream should succeed that of myth (chapter 14), as if Rabelais had perceived the affinity between the two languages. As before, two methods are confronted: the figurative interpretation neutralises the oniric images, while the reading at the literal level exhibits their strangeness.

Panurge recounts his dream: he had a beautiful and affectionate wife; she planted horns on his forehead; he seemed to change into a drum and she into an owl. For Pantagruel, the reason is understood: 'vous serez coqu, vous serez battu, vous serez desrobbé' ('you will be
a cuckold; you will be beaten; you will be robbed'). He has at his disposal a key to dreams, which permits him to interpret the meaning of the signs and thus efface all incongruity. He insistently denies, moreover, the apparent content of the images: 'vostre femme ne vous fera vraiment et en apparence externe cornes on front' ('your wife will not actually, and to outward appearance, plant horns on your forehead'); 'aussi ne sera de vous faict metamorphose en tabourin (...) ne d'elle en chouette' ('you will not be metamorphosed into a drum (...) nor she into an owl').

For his part, Panurge also allows a divinatory value to dream but, inversely, ascribes to it an erotic content: the desire for bliss and for potency, sensual pleasure and a zest for depravity, this is what his dream reveals. First vision: my wife 'me traicloet et entretenoit mignonnement, comme un petit dorelot. (...) Elle me fiaotoit, me chatouilloit, me tastonnoit, me baisonnoit, me accolloit' ('was treating and entertaining me sweetly like her little darling. (...) She was caressing me, tickling me, feeling me, smoothing my hair, kissing me, hugging me'). Understand: I was like a baby, my spouse was like a mother to me, which comes to the same as a nice little Òdipal phantasm. Then come the horns which, Panurge insists, give him the air of a satyr: a libidinous fawn, half animal, and of course, oversexed: 'ainsi auroys-je eternellement le virolet en poingt et infatigable, comme l'ont les satyres' ('thus I'd eternally have my gimlet at the ready and indefatigable, as the satyrs have').

The evocation of several horned gods, in passing, comes to reinforce the imaginary alliance of the human and the bestial. But the representation becomes even more pointed when Panurge, in his dream, asks that the horns be planted 'au dessoubz des œilz, pour mieulx veoir ce que j'en vouldroys ferir' ('under my eyes, the better for me to see what I'd like to butt with them'). The learned reference to Momus in no way reduces the bizarreness of the portrait: here we have Panurge who takes on the appearance of a rhinoceros or some fabulous animal. And the threshold of monstrousy will really be crossed with the double metamorphosis into a drum and an owl; here are sketched the phantasms of the man-instrument and the woman-bird, that we will find again, amply illustrated, among the crossbred bodies of the Songes drolatiques de Pantagruel.

Once more, Panurge refuses the pious deviations of the hermeneutic tradition. The famous classic of the key to dreams, the De somnium interpretatione of Artemidorus, invoked by Pantagruel, furnishes however the appropriate explanations to attenuate the crudity of the images: to see oneself grow horns, the treatise says, 'indicates the decapitation of the dreamer'; as for nocturnal birds like the owl, they 'represent adulterers or thieves or those who work at night'. François Bernier confirms that the general tendency, in the dream interpretation manuals of the time, is to de-dramatise the horror of nightmares, to gloss over lewd visions: 'Sexuality thus loses as well (...) its burden of anxiety; to steal a kiss is to acquire a belonging, to possess the body of another is to exercise economic domination, to see the male sex organ is the portent of social ascension, and if nudity announces poverty to come, the dream of incest is itself asepticised'.

Now Panurge does exactly the contrary. He denies the dream the transcendent origin, the objective value, and the complex symbolism ascribed to it by divinatory science. He is not content either to find there the simple and inoffensive expression of his desire to get married. For him, the dream opens onto the uncertain space of phantasmagoria, it brings to light the unspoken voice of the psyche.

The chapter that follows (chapter 15) inserts into the story one of the breaks where Panurge and Frère Jean, wearied by the difficulties of the inquiry and the fervour of the debates, take a little holiday and give themselves some time off. To ensure the quality of his dreams, Panurge has fasted for a long time; now it is he who invites the monk to feast, and the two friends to evoke together the pleasures of monastic life as well as the savours of 'la marmite claustrale' ('the claustral cooking pot'). For them also, the moment has come to attend to the satisfaction of the body. A deliberate pun on the word 'cabale' indicates the change in priorities. At the end of the preceding episode (chapter 14), with regard to the prophecies of the dream, Pantagruel had invoked the authority of the 'Caballistes et Massorethz interpretres des sacres letres, exposans en quoy l'on pourroit (...) cognoistre la verité des apparitions angeliques' ('cabalists and masorites, interpreters of Holy Scripture, explaining in what way one could make out the truth (...) about angelic apparitions'). The title of chapter 15, which immediately follows, announces an 'exposition de cabale monastique en materie de beuf salé' ('exposition of the monastic cabala in the matter of salt beef'), and the term will be taken up several times to designate the gastronomical secrets of monks. To the hermeticism of Jewish doctors corresponds the sensuality of bons vivants.
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towards itself. The circumstantial installs itself in the centre, the vehi-

Must we then understand that this chapter, dedicated to the
defence of corporeal pleasures, concludes the two preceding episodes,
where Panurge made the voice of carnal desire be heard? It is, on the
contrary, the difference that is striking. Between the innocence of the
monastic festivities evoked here and the strangeness of the phantasms
displayed before, the contrast is telling. Listening to the libido and the
liberation of sexual drives unveil energies that are far more troubling
than the avowal of gluttony. The adventure which follows, the con-
sultation of the sibyl of Panzoust, offers, moreover, some new vari-
ations on the disturbing and ambiguous spectacle of the body prey to
obscure forces.

Panurge will thus consult an old woman who has the gift of telling the
future. The latter listens to his question, abandons herself to inspira-
tion, then delivers four enigmatic prophecies (chapters 17–18). Pan-
tagruel thinks he can settle the question by an authoritarian exegesis,
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desire, in chapter 18, modestly opens with the desire to get married
and to procreate, but soon slips toward the strange idea of double
birth. Panurge imagines coming into the world a second time, carried
by his wife; his wife would thus be his mother - we have already
encountered this phantasm.\(^1\) He adds to this a fellatio scene and a
portrait of furtive couplings, the more voluptuous in that they are
clandestine, then ends his ramblings with the theme of the woman as
flayer, with scabrous allusions to castration and circumcision.

Nothing new on this account. It is the other partner in this episode
who merits our interest; the character of the old woman, with her
aberrant conduct, reinforces the opacity of signs and confirms their
placement into the register of individual destiny.

The visit to the sibyl, in chapter 17, is at first striking due to the
abundance and the detail of the description. There is a good dose of
local colour. The peasant surroundings and the objects of everyday
life, the thatched cottage of the old woman\(^4\) and her gesticulations,
the offerings of Panurge and the unfolding of the ritual, all of this
mobilises our attention without apparent reason. Rather than simply
establishing the scene of the consultation, the material environment
Intervenes. The concrete should serve as a vector, relatively indiffer-
et, in the search for truth; but it resists and diverts our curiosity

The parallel with the description of the Cumean sibyl in the
\(\text{Aeneid}\)^\(^13\) reveals that this profusion of accessories was not necessary.
Though the desolate landscape, the trance and a few more details are
the obligatory \textit{topoi} for marking the transcendental dimension of the
scene, Rabelais adds still more; the strangeness of the surroundings,
in the hovel of Panzoust, is neither justified nor sublimated by the
descent of the god. Something else is at stake here, immanent, mysteri-
ous or mystifying, which escapes received codes but which never-
theless solicits interpretation.

The character of the sibyl herself accentuates the malaise. Here
again, the description serves as a screen: 'La vieille estoit mal en
point, mal vestue, mal nourrie, edentée, chassieuse, courtbasse, roupieuse,
langoureuse, et faisoit un potage de choux verds avecques une
couane de Jard jausne et un vieil savorados' ("The old woman was
ill-favoured, ill-dressed, ill-nourished, toothless, bleary-eyed, hunch-
backed, runny-nosed, languid; and she was making a green cabbage
soup with a rind of bacon and some old broth from a soup bone"). If
the encounter begins with the nauseating spectacle of this decrepit
body, it ends on the foul vision of an obscene body: she 'leur monstroit
son cul' ("showed them her tail"). Neither the parodic project nor the
Carnivalisation of the sacred exhaust this scene, which is much more
powerful than a simple reversal of the high and low. The traditional
signs of ecstasy are not completely effaced, but they suggest instead
madness, dehumanisation, the slide of old age toward an animal con-
dition: 'Que signifie ce remuement de badiuoinces? Que pretend cette
jactitation des espalles? A quelle fin fredonne elle des babines,
comme un cinge demembrant escrevisses?' ("What's the meaning of
this movement of her chaps? What's the point of this shrugging of her
shoulders? To what purpose does she quaver with her lips like a
monkey dismembering crayfish"). The poor old woman is probably
just crazy, a senile mind, a would-be magician, and, instead of a sibyl,
a witch who has been overwhelmed by her humours.\(^15\)

Once again, the mystery has been displaced from the supernatural
toward the human. What to do with the aberrant conduct of the old
woman? If there is a secret to explore, it resides probably in the avid-
ity, in the sexuality, in the babblings of this grotesque figure. The scene
is saturated with meaning, symbolic suggestions abound, but what
The triple structure of the episodes—a message then the commentaries of Pantagruel and Panurge—contains the seeds of a reflection on the status of signs. Each time Pantagruel settles the question in a few words; the terms of divination being fixed, he recognizes the hidden meaning of images and, so as to undercut the disturbing value of their strangeness, he assigns them a second value. He applies the proven method of moralisation.

Many commentators work in the same manner. Compelled by the same seriousness as Pantagruel, they tame and conceptualize the text of Rabelais, they look for—and find without any trouble—the expression of a moral or religious intention, a lesson in psychology, an exploration begins, for which suitable tools are lacking.

The strange text of Rabelais has offered and continues to offer academics inexhaustible opportunities to deploy their erudition and give reign to their sagacity. But this type of commentary risks impoverishing or adulterating works that are infinitely richer and more powerful than what academic discourse retains of them. The danger takes on multiple forms. On the one hand there are those who, through recourse to history, the elucidation of learned references, the identification of intertextual echoes, through an entire body of information which has not, moreover, lost any of its legitimacy or its necessity, help us to understand the text. This danger similarly threatens interpreters who question the meaning or meanings of the narratives—be these moral or spiritual values, reflections on knowledge, or even (we are seeing more and more of this) matters of linguistic and literary importance. But the temptation of academicism also menaces another category of commentary (under which most of my own work falls): those who, exploiting the hermeneutical defiances of Rabelais, insist on the ruses of his writing and the uncertainties of meaning—ambiguities, polyphonic fragmentation, conflicts of the serious and the comic—to conclude that the message is fundamentally unstable. If I do not have the intention to burn here what I have adored, I must, nevertheless, concede that this approach, more than any other, confines Rabelais to a strictly intellectual debate. It recognizes that the text is infinitely productive, but risks limiting its performance to pure mental gymnastics—the identification of the acrobatics of the discourse, the games of language, the fascination of slippages of meaning. But from the moment that reading fixates on textual mechanisms and the accidents of communication, a new scholasticism is put into
The magical effect that he feels when in contact with the great works of antiquity create precisely this type of experience: they touch and destabilize, they speak to the profound layers of sensibility and leave profound marks. When you read the classics, says Du Bellay, it is as if you were on ‘l’ardente montaigne d’Aethne’ (‘the burning mountain of Etna’): ‘... il vous engendreront telles affections, voyre ainsi qu’un Prothée vous transformeront en diverses sortes’ (‘... they will create such emotions in you, that truly they will transform you just like Proteus into different states’).

Reading the Bible properly—the living Word of God—says, for example, Erasmus, is an existential experience that induces an upheaval of one’s entire person. As much as, or even more than, bringing in outside knowledge and intellectual analysis, it requires an intimate adhesion, an understanding by means of the heart and an intuitive grasp. The legitimate perception of the Gospel is based on an act of love and is guided by enthusiasm, such that the reader, inspired by Grace, lets her/himself be possessed and regenerated. It is, of course, incongruous to compare the spiritual impact of the divine Word, according to Erasmus, and the disquiet caused by the strange scoria of the imagination, according to Rabelais. I am only looking to indicate that reading, as it is often conceived during the Renaissance, plays itself out on a stage that is one of empathy and affectivity just as much as one of rational analysis.

To this is added the fact that Humanists were extremely interested in the effects of art on temperament and paid the greatest attention to psychological changes induced by aesthetic experience. The work of art speaks to the soul, it diffuses shock waves, and, by the force of its language—the sounds, the rhythms, the images—brings about intense reactions. Saying is thus the equivalent of doing, a violent performance, an intrusion into the intimacy of the subject, a way to take power:

Du Bellay copies this definition of the true poet from that of the orator, as he finds it, for example, in Cicero. Eloquence consists of pleasing one’s cause by arousing emotions, by exploiting all of the sentimental chords in order to move the audience and to dispose it favourably; Quintilian treats at length the importance of movere in discourse and defines the appropriate techniques for inspiring pathos (affectus in Latin) in the listener. Now rhetoric, as we know, has numerous affinities with other arts and furnishes them with both ends and means. Tragedy, for example, must profoundly touch the spectators, inspire terror and pity in them, make them share in the anger, the hate, the jealousy of its characters; its success is based on its psychological impact; if it neglects to move the audience, it betrays its calling.

Whether it attempts to appropriate the powers of eloquence or draws its inspiration from other models—notably the Greek theory of musical modes, taken up widely in Neo-Platonic circles—poetry also claims this influence for itself, to the point of distinguishing the specific effects particular to each form. By the magic of style, by its sonorous presence and its evocatory force, it reaches the soul and modifies its affectivity. This language, says Montaigne, ‘est plein et gros d’une vigueur naturelle’ (‘is full, pregnant with a sustained and natural power’). It was conceived in enthusiasm and, by the force of its radiance, it communicates this enthusiasm; sublime, supernatural, it overwhelms the reader and gives him/her access to a radically different order of experience. To read Virgil or Lucretius is, for Montaigne, an existential event. The poetic encounter is of the same order as the amorous encounter: love at first sight, the coming together of two partners who emerge transformed.

The magical effect that he feels when in contact with the great authors, why wouldn’t the modern writer, in turn, try to make his own readers feel this? Poets, orators, and, from time to time, Rabelais himself, want to move their audience. They claim to intervene in people’s lives to change their moods, bend their will and, by the efficacy of their words, ensure that the reader is no longer, after...
reading, the same as before. Literature, as they conceive it, is neither a simple diversion nor the neutral vehicle of just any message, but a force that acts upon the emotions, in this zone where the physical and the psychical, interdependent, influence each other reciprocally. In these conditions, reading is no longer merely a mode of knowing, but a mode of feeling, and even a mode of being. The good reader appropriates the message for her/himself by transporting it into a persona! sphere; s/he feels it like a presence and a power. One which cannot be taken into account by scholarly dissertation. This is why it is important to put methods in their place and to measure their limits: to recognise their necessity, but refuse their hegemony.

Thus the risk is that methods function like a quarantine area protecting from the aggressions of the text, reducing the artistic event to an intellectual experience among others. The type of reading postulated by a text like that of Rabelais (and so many others), demands, on the contrary, the greatest receptivity and taste for adventure. Instead of closing itself in behind methodological barriers, it lends a free-floating attention to the work, a curiosity alive to all signals; it exposes itself to surprise. To use literature to assure our comfort and verify our certitudes would be to pass over the essential.

Translated by Amy Wyngaard

Notes


2 'Voyez la la belle médaille de Coqui' ('That's a nice picture of a cuckold'), Diderotaut mocks (Quart Livre, chapter 5). For a concordant analysis of this chapter, see D. Russell, 'Pantagruel and his new clothes', in Études Rabelaisiennes, vol. 14, 1977, pp. 89-104.

3 For instance, at the beginning of chapter 12, where Pantagruel invokes several strange myths.

4 Boccaccio, Genealogia decorum (about 1350), ed. V. Romano, Bari, 1951.

5 Diana, Bacchus, Pan, Jupiter, Ammon, all bearing horns, are evoked in chapter 14.

6 She is evoked indirectly throughout the third passage of Virgil, which concerns Arrune preparing to kill her.


8 See the same editions: verse version, book I, Il. 2351-64; prose version pp. 60-61.

9 Les songes drolatiques de Pantagruel (1565), ed. M. Jeanneret, La Chaux-de-Fonds, Editions ('wva'), 1989. In it figure precisely a man-drum (fig. 65) and a woman-owl (fig. 11).


12 See chapter 14.

13 The thatched cottage resembles 'la case de Hireus ou Oenopion, en laquelle Jupiter, Neptune et Mercure ensemble ne prindrent à desdaing entrer, repaistre et loger; en laquelle officialement pour l'escot forgerent', ('the hut of Hireus or Oenopion, in which Jupiter, Neptune, and Mercury did not disdain to enter, feed, and lodge; in which in a pisspot, to pay their way, they forged'). As above, this comparison invokes a preposterous myth: the three gods, in guise of thanks, create Orion from their urine (Ovid, Fastes V, 499-536).

14 Aeneid VI, 8 ff.

15 'Une Canidée, une Sagane, une phitonisse et sorciere' (A Canidia, a Sagana, a pythoness and witch': chapter 16). In the intertext of Horace (Epodes 5), Canidia and Sagana are hideous figures who have more to do with folly than inspiration.


19 Joachim du Bellay, op. cit. (note 17); II, 11, p. 179.

20 See De oratore I, 8, 30 and I, 12, 53; Brutus 50, 188 and Orator 38, 131.
