Rabelaisian Beginning

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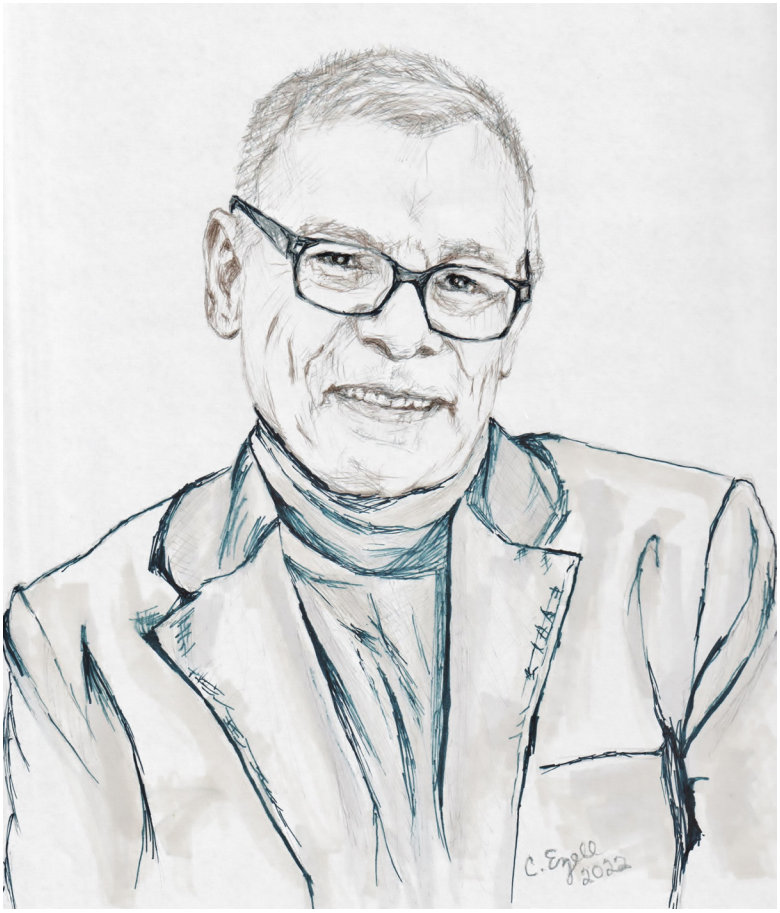

The year was 1957. My sole and elder brother of six years had just returned from his first year of undergraduate study at Lawrence College, in Appleton, Wisconsin. He eagerly reported to me, a dawdling high school sophomore of fourteen, some impressions of college life. He had taken a course titled *Freshman Studies*, that Nathan Pusey, the recent president of the College, had inaugurated shortly before leaving for Harvard. Still a benchmark in the curriculum of required courses Lawrence College (now Lawrence University) requires of its students, *Freshman Studies* has included, among other titles, the *Communist Manifesto*, E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, Werner Heisenberg's *Physics and Philosophy*, and Samuel Putnam's *Portable Rabelais* (Viking Press, 1946). Translated with force and verve—to my mind closer to Rabelais than later translations, rivalled only by that of Thomas Urquhart (1611-1660) and Pierre Le Motteux (1670-1718)—Putnam's *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua* changed my life.[1] Dickens excepted, and some pages of *Vanity Fair* too ("a novel without a hero"), I was suddenly lifted from the schoolmarmish Victorians our English teachers were imposing in their listless classes. My brother, a painter committing himself to a studio and to let college go by the wayside, insisted that *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua* embodied a love of life. It was then, as Pascal (whom I had yet to encounter) would scribble in his notes on the *pari*, I was *embarqué*: embarked on a voyage in French studies that would wend its way through an unmatched canon of poetry, art, architectuanthropology, literary history, and cultural theory.

It began with Rabelais, and begin it did with *Gargantu*a, chapter 13, known as the *propos torcheculatifs*, the account of the child-prince's "experience" and invention of the ideal rump-wiper. The young Gargantua essays (or wipes his bottom with) 68 items, including a bonnet, a pillow, a slipper, a basket (alas, "o le mal plaisant torche-cul"), a piece of taffeta, a satin cloth, a chicken, a rooster, a veal's hide, a hare, a pigeon, a cormorant, etc., crowned by that of the warm neck of a downy goose deftly held between the legs—which I later read in the original: *le cou d'un oyson bien dumenté, pourveu quon luy tiegne la teste entre les iambes*—left me in bodily bliss. Rabelais, it seemed, suddenly freed us from puritan prurience. Like what Hélène Cixous called "le rire de la méduse," to be done with the so-called total social fact dictating that "castration" was at the core of the human condition, he laughed in our face.

Years later, at the University of Minnesota, on the heels of a lecture Marc-René Jung delivered on "La Légende de Troyes au Moyen Âge en France," in the enjoyment of dining in his company (Jung was then Rector of the University of Zürich), conversation turned to Rabelais. He noted astutely that the oeuvre ought to be read in three phases. The first, as it had been in my adolescence, entailed discovery, unabashed laughter, and liberation. In concert with the erudite labors, among legions of others, of Michael Andrew Screech, a scholar and cleric for whom Rabelais was a deeply religious figure in the tumult of the Reform, the second dealt with context and close analysis of the text in respect to murderous events from the 1520s up to the author's death in 1553. So as not to lose the forest from the trees, Jung proposed a third reading, a sublation of wonder and studious application, in which, however oxymoronic the formula may sound, "informed joy" would be a rule and measure. Recalling Leo Spitzer's keystone essay on "Rabelais et les rabelaisants,"[2] in which the linguist reminded the academic world that *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* motivated play of language whose force exceeded meaning and context, Jung's words called back to Alfred Glauser's *Rabelais créateur* (1966), an engaged essay, armed with only one footnote, on what, four years later, in quiet modesty, Roland Barthes would call the pleasure of the text. In 1966 it was Glauser, under whose aegis I began doctoral study at the University of Wisconsin, who merely read the text aloud, *à haute voix*. It was more than pleasure. Glauser made Rabelais come alive.[3]

How and why? Spinning off Panurge's dialogue with Dindenault in the early chapters of *Le Quart livre* (1552), Rabelais's unfinished, late, and presumably—only presumably—last work, *revenons à nos moutons* [let's get back to our sheep]. Or, rather, *revenons à nos torcheculs*: it has been observed that the episode in *Gargantua* belongs to an allegorical design in which a "first," inferior, "medieval," syllogistic education is set in strong contrast to a counterpart, to a renaissance, in which the child is shaped all the art and sciences and, thanks to the printing press, taught not to lose a minute of the day. For that reason, in chapter 24, under the tutelage of a new instructor, Ponocrates, Gargantua learns to philosophize in the outhouse (fig. 2): "Puis sen alloit es lieux secretz fayre excretion des digestions naturelles. Là son precepteur repetoit les poictz [sic] plus obscurs & difficiles. Eux retourans consideroient lestat du ciel, si tel estoyt comme lavoient note au soir precedent…." [Then he went off to the secret places to excrete his natural digestions. In returning they [Gargantua and Ponocrates] considered the state of the heavens, to see if they were such as they had noted the evening before].[4] In noting the difference of style conveying the first and second "institutions" (or educational programs), Glauser ran the risk of asserting that the pleasure of the enumeration in the first or failed education carried wit and vivacity that was somewhat muted in the second. And thus we can appreciate the impish Gargantua punctuating his fecal rhapsody with a *rondeau* whose incipit and refrain are "En chiant" (in shitting and/or in criss-crossing, if the figure of *chiasmus* is seen and heard in the gerund):

En chiant laultre hyer senty
La guabelle que a mon cul doibts,
L'odeur feut aultre que cuydois:
J'en feuz du tout empuanty.

O si quelqun eust consenty
Mamener une que attendoys,
En chiant.

Car ie luy eusse assimenty
Son trou durine a mon lourdoys,
Ce pendant eust avecq ses doigtz
Mon trou de merde guarenty.
En chiant.

[In shitting the other day, I felt the pot I owe to my ass, / The odor was other than I believed: / I was smeared and stunk. / Oh! if a person would have consented to bring the one I'd been waiting for, / In

shitting…. / For I would have plugged my dimwit's pisshole, / However, it was with his fingers / That my shithole was cleaned].

Retorts the precocious poet to his dad, to Grandgousier, "Or dictez maintenant que ie ny scay rien. Par la mer de ie ne les ay faict mie, Mais les oyant reciter a dame grand que voyez cy, les ay retenu en la gibbessiere de ma memoyre. Retournons (dist Grantgoudier) a nostre propos."[5] [So tell me now that I know nothing! By the mother of God/Shit itself I didn't make the [words] my own. But hearing them recited to the grandma [*dame grand*, big lady/great soul] whom you see here, I've retained them in the gamebag of my memory] (np). Where *mer de ie* is concerned, the spacing of the words and letters tells us that *'this' hits* the fan: the mother of God [*mer(e) d (ie) (u)*] puns on *merde* and mother-of-*shit*.

The chapter could not have been better for either an adolescent or a seasoned scholar. From *this* point Rabelais became a vademecum. Not only for the riotous pages of an *adolescence gargantuine*, but for protracted study of the extraordinary changes of tone, tonality and, in a word, style or manner in *Pantagruel* (1532), which preceded, but was not a prequel to *Gargantua*; in the very different work of the next decade, *Le Tiers livre des faicts et dicts hëroiques de Pantagruel : composez par M. Franç. Rabelais docteur en medecine, & calloier des Isles Hieres* (1546, 1547, and 1552), which, for the first time, was authored in the name of Rabelais—a doctor in medicine—and not, as in the books of the years 1532-35 and their final edition in 1542, under the pen name of Alcofribas Nasier, "abstracter of quintessence." In *this* book, by virtue of dialogue and dialogism, the good physician considers the creative character of doubt. Retrieving Panurge, the trickster who became Pantagruel's lifelong companion—or alter ego—in the first book of *Pantagruel* (published as the second in 1532, before *Gargantua* in 1535), Rabelais turns him into a middle-aged bachelor wondering if he ought or ought not marry.[6] The narrative follows Panurge's failed consultations with a variety of monomaniacs until, with Pantagruel at his side, the couple meets the judge Bridoye ("goose-bridle"), who throws dice to let fate go as it goes. And in *Le Quart Livre des faicts et dicts Heroiques du bon Pantagruel* (1552), fortune leads them to take to the high seas in search of the wisdom of the *dive bouteille*. Where the *Tiers livre* located its hero and his other in the author's stomping grounds of the Chinonais, six years later, ostensibly based on accounts of travel to the new world, sailing in different directions and happening upon strange and unsettling islands, the *Quart livre*, portraying Panurge so overwhelmed with fear and trembling that he soils his britches, leaves its reader adrift, in greater suspicion and doubt over the sorry state of the world.

Without proceeding to the fifth book, attributed to Rabelais shortly after his death in 1553, it can be said that the *Tiers* and *Quart livres* are at a far remove from the works that drew its readers into their worlds. For *this* one, 56 years after happening upon *Gargantua* in 1958, reading Rabelais remains a joyously difficult, enriching, unfinished venture. It is hoped that despite the culture in which we find ourselves, the work will continue to inspire and lead us along its ever-changing path.

Notes

1. We can recall that Samuel Putnam, a devoted Communist and columnist for the *Daily Worker*, also bequeathed to us a vibrant translation of *Don Quixote* and was the father of Hilary Putnam, celebrated thinker and writer of *realism*, who shaped Harvard's Department of Philosophy in the years 1976-2000.

2. Leo Spitzer, "Rabelais et les rabelaisants," *Studi francesi*, v. 4 (1960), pp. 401-23.

3. I would add that in her Pléiade edition of the *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), Mireille Huchon graces us with a fourth reading, which she aligns with "steganography," that is, with anamorphosis and slanted entries into the layerings of the text Rabelais continually *alters* in successive or variant editions of the text. Along this line Romain Menini has produced his magnificent *Rabelais altérateur: graeciser en françois* (Paris: Éditions Classiques Garnier, 2014), 1143 pp.

4. See gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8609586k.image, an edition circa 1535, in *lettre bâtarde*.

5. We can take *propos* in the sense of *propulsion*, on which Rabelais elsewhere plays in equivocating on "A propos" (in respect to…) and "Aspre aux pots" (bitter in the pots).

6. In his path funding studies of Rabelais, e.g., *Les langages de Rabelais* (1974), it is François Rigolot who remarks brilliantly and simply that "Pantagruel" carries the characters of "Panurge" + "alt."