

Rabelais and the Silenic Text: The Prologue to Gargantua

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un homme de bien, un homme de bon sens,
croit toujours ce qu'on luy diet et qu'il
trouve par escript.

Rabelais, *Gargantua*, p. 31

The Mind's eye begins to see clearly when
the outer eyes grow dim.

Plato, *Symposium*, p. 570, 219a1

The accumulation of commentary on the prologue to *Gargantua* is so extensive, the analyses and affirmations so repetitive, so inconclusive, so contradictory, that the text itself seems threatened with misunderstanding and the reader condemned to infuriating and puzzled bewilderment. To be sure, this critical predicament attests to the durability of Rabelais's concotions, those heady "beaulx livres de haute gresse" (p. 7), to the stunning brilliance of his craft, and to the enduring attraction of his vision of the world and of the book as a multiplicity of fertile and compelling interpretations. But teachers and literary critics like to understand, to select, and to explain, and the more a text seems to resist our efforts the more we are apt to grapple with it, especially when the text in question speaks of interpretive reading.

Rabelais's prologue to *Gargantua* does indeed tweak the reader's nose unmercifully by setting up a double bind, creating a sign for the retrieval of meaning and simultaneously questioning its function as sign:

... Fault ouvrir le livre et soigneusement peser ce que y est deduit. Lors congnoistrez que la drogue dedans contenue est bien d'autre valeur que ne promettoit la boîte, c'est-à-dire que les maladies luy traictées ne sont tant folastres comme le titre au-dessus pretendoit. (p. 7)

Croiez vous en vostre foy qu'enques Homere escrivent *l'Iliade* et *l'Odysee*, pensast es allegories lesquelles de luy ont caiffreé Plutarque, Heracleides Pontica, Eustatie, Phormise, et ce que d'iceulx Poillan a desrobé? Si le croiez, vous n'approchiez ne de pieds ne de mains à mon opinion. . . . (p. 8)

L'odeur du vin, ô combien plus est friant, riant, priant, plus celeste et delicieux que d'huile! Et prendrez autant à gloire qu'en die de moy que plus en vin ye despendu que en huyle, que fist Demosthenes, quand de luy on disoit que plus en huyle que en vin despendoit. (p. 9)

In fact, the reader is jostled and manipulated to such a degree and becomes so entangled in the serio-comic trap which has been set for him that he is hard put to know where and how to seize this seemingly ungraspable text.

The prologue so dazzles as performance that readers to date, with few exceptions,² have generally felt compelled to explain its surface discourse on reading and meaning and to settle ultimately for one or the other of its "programmed" lessons: either the prologue and the book it extols are to be interpreted "à plus haut sens" (p. 7), or it is all a wondrous game, a marvelous pastime, merely a question of "gayeté de cuer" (p. 7) and "matieres assez joyeuses" (p. 7). As a result, we have perhaps tended to overlook the means by which the prologue becomes itself. Hence, while it is true that it toys with the problematization of the reading process, we should not overlook the intriguing fact that readings constitute many of the building blocks of the prologue, that indeed much of it is generated intertextually through the reading, interpretation, and dramatization of texts.³ In fact, the prologue trumpets this at the very outset as it proceeds to read and play with the texts of Plato and Erasmus, and the core of this dynamic, three-way interplay is the silenic configuration all three writers confer upon the person of Socrates:

Beuveurs très illustres, et vous, Verolez tres precieux,—car à vous, non à autres, sont dediez mes escriptz.—Alcibiades, ou dialogue de Platon intitulé *Le Banquet*, louant son precepteur Socrates, sans controverse prince des philosophes, entre autres paroles le diet estre semblable es Silenes. Silenes estoient jadis petites boites, telles que voyons de present es boutiques des apothecaires, pinces au dessus de figures joyeuses et frivoles, comme de harpies, sayres, oysons brides, lievrans cornus, canes bastées, boucs volans, certz limonniers et autres telles pinctures contréfactes à plaisir pour exciter le monde à rire (quel fut Silene, maître du bon Bacchus); mais au dedans l'on reservoit les fines drogues comme baumes, ambre gris, amomon, musc, zivette, pierres et autres choses precieuses. Tel disoit estre Socrates, parce que, le voyans au dehors et l'estimans par l'exterieure apparence, n'en eussiez donné un couppeau d'olignon, tant laid il estoit de corps et ridicule en son maintien, le nez pointu, le regard d'un taureau, le visage d'un fol, simple en meurs, rustiq en vestimens, pauvre de fortune, infermé en femmes, inapte à tous offices de la republique, toujours riant, toujours beuvant d'autant à un chacun, toujours se gabellant,

tousjours dissimulant son divin savoir; mais, ouvrons ceste boyte, nussiez au dedans trouvé une celsee et imprecciable éroque: entendement plus que humain, vertus merveilleuse, courage invincible, sobresse non pareille, contentement certain, assurance parfaite, déprissement incroyable de tout ce pourquoy les humains tant veillent, courent, travaillent, navigent et bataillent. (pp. 5-6)

Texts and literary criticism do not exist in a vacuum; unlike Panurge, Rabelais's madcap rogue, they do not appear out of nowhere, like some unexpected and unwanted sidewalk mushroom. A textual reference to Socrates ("Alcibiades, ou dialogue de Platon intitulé *Le Banquet*, louant son precepteur Socrates . . .") opens floodgates, and the transparent suppression of the source of one's material—in this case Erasmus's popular adage, *Silent Alcibiadis*—is an unqualified invitation to the reader to participate in a purposeful game. As a result, in the prologue to *Gargantua*, Socrates and Erasmus provide many of the foils, the accretions, which the reader must pull back in order to discover the kinetic dimensions of the text.⁴

Socrates, in his time, was misunderstood and constantly misjudged, in large part because of the indirectness, the obliqueness of his inquisitive explorations. Spending "his whole life playing his little game of irony" (p. 568, 216e), as Alcibiades tells his listeners, Socrates and his deceptive demeanor put into circulation a number of misreadings about his person and his thinking. While undermining misplaced values and logic, he himself became symbolic of displacement. Hence, even more than the contradiction between his external appearance and his inner features—"so godlike, so golden, so beautiful, and so utterly amazing" (p. 568, 217a)—it is his association with the playful manipulation of the oblique and the allusive, mask and concealment, that dictates his featured role in this prologue.

If Rabelais refuses to credit Erasmus as the most immediate source of his encomium, it cannot simply be because the Erasmian text is better known than that of Plato. Rather, in a prologue that deals with usurpation and the wrongful use of reading, it must be because Plato's text is the mother lode, that is, the source, the original, and the Erasmian text, on the other hand, is a copy of the first and a reading of Plato. In other words, the silenic image, a sixteenth-century commonplace used to indicate anything whose pleasant and comic exterior hides serious matter, doubles here as the vehicle of textual commentary and reinforces the reading matrix of the prologue in that the prologue begins with a reading of Plato as read by Erasmus. Writers and commentators are immediately juxtaposed as the prologue becomes itself a comic commentary on Erasmus and on the production of meaning. And, ironically, while lesser readers (spongers, louts, rascals, and sourpusses) have their textual weight negated by derision

and indefiniteness—"un Frere Lubin, vray croque lardon" (p. 8), "un malastru" (p. 9), "un tirelupin" (p. 9), "un chagrin" (p. 9)—the unnamed Erasmus becomes an unmistakable presence because he is both identified and praised through the lavish incorporation of his reading of Plato.

As a reader and a writer—writing about reading and writing—Rabelais orchestrates and stages the debate of the prologue through a playful reworking of Erasmus. The *Silent Alcibiadis* not only transmits and proffers the silenic image of Plato's text—Alcibiades's *sofism truth* ("I'm simply going to tell the truth. . . . If I say a word that's not the solemn truth I want you to stop me right away and tell me I'm a liar," p. 566, 214e)—it also embellishes it, thus creating a new and different silenic text.

In Plato, the silenic scene cannot be divorced from its contextual preparation. Alcibiades's abrupt and humorous arrival is far more enticing than his spontaneous and disjointed eulogy of the two-dimensional Socrates, and it provides comic counterpoint to Socrates's sobriety: "You mustn't be surprised if I tell them about you just as it comes into my head, and jump from one thing to another. You can't expect anyone that's as drunk as I am to give a clear and systematic account of all your eccentricities" (p. 566, 215a). Indeed, posterity has confused the setting with the image and thus exaggerated and distorted the impact of the image.

In Plato, the banqueters have already gathered when Alcibiades arrives in the midst of flute sounds and festive brawling, shouting and banging on the door, drunk and staggering, flowery wrath atop his head. He is helped to a couch and seated next to Socrates, whom he does not see at first. And when he finally does, he jumps up and says: "Well, I'll be damned! You again, Socrates! So that's what you're up to, is it?—The same old game of lying in wait and popping out at me when I least expect you" (p. 564, 213bc). The guests have been playing at who can give "the best speech . . . in praise of Love" (p. 565, 214c), and it is in this manner that Alcibiades is goaded into eulogizing Socrates.

The comic load in Plato is borne by the figure of Alcibiades. The comparison sequence is an extended one, and it stresses in particular Socrates's mesmerizing eloquence. Thus, Socrates is first compared to molded figurines, "that you see on the statuaries' stalls." These figurines carry "pipes or flutes in their hands" (p. 566, 215b), and their innards reveal godlike sculptures. Second, Alcibiades is also reminded of the satyr Marsyas, and like satyrs Socrates is impudent and a piper; but, unlike satyrs, he does not need an instrument to bewitch his listeners. The only physical attribute the portrait gives him is that he looks like a satyr. What truly distinguishes Socrates for Alcibiades is "the fact that he is absolutely unique; there's no one like him, and I don't believe there ever was" (p. 572, 221c).

In the powerful Erasmian text, there is neither setting nor humor, and gone are Alcibiades and Socrates as characters. We are no longer in the world of play but in that of learned disquisition on the meaning and prevalence of the now proverbial *Silenti* of Alcibiades. The scholarly churchman's lengthy homily on misplaced values strings together a number of comparable *Silenti*—Antisthenes, Diogenes, Epicurus, Christ, the prophets, John the Baptist, the Apostles, 'Bishop' Martin, the Scriptures and, finally, the Church—and ends on an apology for having strayed: "But where is my flow of words carrying me—professing to be a proverb-writer, I am turning into a preacher? To be sure, it was the drunken Alcibiades with his *Silenti* which drew us into this very sober discussion" (p. 296). *Sed quo me sermone cursus obrupit, ut parenthographum professus ecclesiastes esse cooperim? Nimirum in hanc tam sobriam disputationem ebrius Alcibiades sus Silenti nos induxit*, p. 190.⁵ As a result, the rhetorical flourish *drunken/sober* not only pulls it all together very neatly, but it also manages to reintroduce the pillars of duality undergirding the whole.

But what of the *Silenti* image proper? Plato's musical figurines, with "pipes or flutes in their hands," are transformed in Erasmus into "some ridiculous, ugly flute-player" (p. 269; *et quae clause ridiculam ac monstruosam tibicinis speciem habebant*, p. 160), an obvious collocation of flute music and ugliness as found in the representation of a satyr. And while the opened stauettes in both texts reveal the figure of a god (but nothing more in Plato), Erasmus suggests that the inner-outer, divine-ugly sculpting was undertaken "so that the amusing deception would show off the art of the carver" (p. 269; *ut artem sculptoris gratiorem focosus faceret error*, p. 160). Hence, Erasmus drops music and emphasizes ugliness while adding the notions of deception and, especially, artistry.

However, the textual disparities grow greater—even while sentences play with and echo one another—once physical features come to the fore. Alcibiades's only mention of such characteristics comes about once he passes from flutes to satyrs: "And then again, he reminds me of Marsyas the satyr. Now I don't think even you, Socrates, will have the face to deny that you look like them [satyrs] . . ." (p. 566, 215b). Erasmus, for his part, begins his portrait by keenly punning on Alcibiades's *troussaille*: "Anyone who took him at his face value, as they say, would not have offered a farthing for him" (p. 270; *Quem si de summa, quod dicit solei, cute quis aestimasset, non emisset assse*, pp. 160-62). And even La Bruyère could not improve on the delineation that follows:

He had a yokel's face, with a bovine look about it, and a snub nose always running; you would have thought him some stupid, thick-headed clown. He took no care of

his appearance, and his language was plain, unvarnished, and unpretentious. . . . His wealth was small, and his wife was such as the lowest collier would refuse to put up with. . . . In short his eternal jesting gave him the air of a clown. . . . He was apparently unfitted for any public office. . . . But once you have opened out this *Silenti*, absurd as it is, you find a god rather than a man, a great, lofty and truly philosophic soul, despising all those things for which other mortals jostle and sweat and dispute and struggle—one who rose above all insults, over whom fortune had no power, and who feared nothing, so that he treated lightly even death, which all men fear. . . . So it was not unjust that in a time when philosophers abounded, this jester alone should have been declared by the oracle to be wise. . . . (pp. 270-71)

[*Factus erat rusticana, taurinus aspectus, nars sineae mucosae plene, Santionem quemquam bardum ac stupidium dixisset. Cultus neglectus, sermo simplex ac plebeius et humilis. . . . Fortuna tenuis, vxor qualem ne vilissimus quidem carbonarius ferre posset. . . . Denique locus ille perpetuus nonnullam habebat mortalis speciem. . . . Videbatur ineptus ad omnia reipublicae munia. . . . Aequal si Silenum hunc tam ridiculum expituitis, videlicet nomen iuvenissis potius quam hominem, animum ingentem, sublimitatem ac vere philosophicam, omnium rerum, pro quibus coeteri mortales currunt nauigant sudant litigant belligerantur, contempserunt, hilaris omnibus superiorum et in quem nullum omnino fas haberet fortuna et saepe adeo nihil timentem, ut mortem quoque nulli non formidatam contempserit. . . . Proinde non miraria, cum ad temperatis plenisque essent omnia, solus hic mortis sapientis oraculo pronuntiatus est et plus iudicatus est scire qui nihil sciebat quam hi. . . .]*

Erasmus is given a form, a satyr, and a blank page ("look like") and he melds them together in an image wherein mythology (satyr) and carnival (clown, jester) provide the elements of imbecility, animality, and comedy. And whereas Alcibiades gives but a few broad brushstrokes—the inner Socrates is "full of temperance and sobriety," "he doesn't really care a row of pins about good looks—on the contrary, . . . he looks down on them—or money, or any of the honors that most people care about" (p. 568, 216d)—Erasmus depicts a slovenly Socrates, one who not only looks stupid, but who dresses the part as well. Consequently, indifference to beauty, to external things, in Plato brings about an ill-kempt Socrates with a runny nose in Erasmus. And, as if that were not enough, poor Socrates is now saddled with a bitchy wife.

Finally, although Erasmus does not stress the seductive quality of Socrates's speech, he lauds its simplicity:

his language was plain, unvarnished, and unpretentious, as befits a man who was always talking about charioteers, workmen, fullers, and blacksmiths. For it was usually from these that he took the terms with which he pressed his arguments home.

[p. 270]

[*Sermo simplex ac plebeius et humilis, ut qui semper aurigas, ceratores, fullores et fabros habebat in ore. Nom hinc ferre sumebat illas suas eloquia? Quibus vixebat in disputando.]* (p. 162)

Alciades, on the other hand, emphasized the need to listen to Socrates more than once, the fundamental nature yet misleading circularity of his discourse, and, hence, the alertness of mind the true listener must possess:

Anyone listening to Socrates for the first time would find his arguments simply laughable; he wraps them up in just the kind of expressions you'd expect of such an insufferable satyr. He talks about pack asses and blacksmiths and shoemakers and lanterns, and he always seems to be saying the same old thing in just the same old way, so that anyone who wasn't used to his style and wasn't very quick on the uptake would naturally take it for the most utter nonsense. (p. 572, 221e)

Clearly, for Rabelais, an embedded text becomes a depth to be discovered and mined for the enrichment of all; this possibility generates the writer's working metaphor and also provides him with the means to achieve the maximum effect in terms of reader complicity. Rabelais's reader need not, indeed should not, restrict himself to puzzling out the discursive, linear, surface flow of the text. Whatever the outcome of such readings—and, in the main, the prologue to *Gargantua* has been read in this fashion—they cannot account for the drama taking place in and among *les mots sous les mots*, if I may be so bold as to make mine Jean Starobinski's suggestive book title.⁶ Thus, in a critical sense, we can take the narrator's advice at face value, especially the reader at four-centuries remove from the churning and exciting context out of which *Gargantua* emerged. Although his contemporary "suffisant lecteur" need not be alerted to the extent that we require in order to sniff out "la sustantifique mouelle" and savor to the utmost "ces beaulx livres de haulte grosse" (p. 7), we in particular must be "logiers au prochaz et hardiz à la rencontre"—"swift in the pursuit and bold in the attack."⁷ And, it is in this sense, I think, that the playful invitation to imitate the dog can best be understood: the narrator, himself a wily reader, is calling upon the ideal reader as knowledgeable reader, as connoisseur of texts, not as a first-time reader, to ferret out the traces of creativity and to contribute to, and take pleasure in, the dialogue of texts in movement before him.

First in this dialogue is the attention-getting address, "Beuveurs tres illustres, et vous, Verolez tres precieux," a clear reminder that the narrator has yet another text in mind, his own *Pantagruel*, and that the one to be read now, while mindful of its heritage, is making a clean break with the former and taking its distance. No longer "Tres illustres et tres chevaleureux champions, gentilz hommes et autres" (P, p. 215), no longer soothed by the narrator's demure pose, the dramatized readers are now energetic fellows, conversant with the world of the ancients, and friends of Alciades and Socrates. And, of course, Erasmus, not only because of the evocation of Socrates and the Sileni, but also because the opening Invoca-

tion, with its mixture of pulpit oratory and bodily concerns, reintroduces into the silent frame the boisterous, comic, and irreverent thrust of the original, while simultaneously reminding the reader that the Erasmian speaker, carried away by his subject and turned preacher, extracted a "sober discussion" from the "drunken Alciades." On the other hand, the prologue to *Gargantua* restages the original setting, framing the topic between and among the revelling readers of the opening and the merry banquet scene of the closing in which the narrator waxes poetic on the joys of writing, reading, drinking, and eating.

In his reading of Plato, Erasmus has chosen to set aside the convivial atmosphere and Alciades as participant. Rabelais, for his part, recalls this absent context when his narrator states that Alciades compared Socrates to Sileni, "entre autres paroles" (p. 5). Moreover, he animates his prologue with a narrator whose brio and interlocutors remind us that Alciades addresses his cohorts as "friends and fellow drunks" (p. 568, 216d) and that Socrates, wise though he may be, is the best drinker of them all, able to drink most of them under the table, and frequently called upon to put others to bed, as indeed he does at the end of the *Symposium*:

He [Alciades] slept on for some time. . . . He noticed that all the others had gone home or fallen asleep, except Agathon and Aristophanes and Socrates, who were still awake and drinking. . . . But . . . they began to nod, and first Aristophanes fell off to sleep and then Agathon, as day was breaking. Whereupon Socrates tucked them up comfortably and went away. . . . (pp. 573-74, 223cd)

As a result, learned references to Alciades and Socrates immediately upon the heels of jocular "Beuveurs tres illustres" seem to call for one another and are neither startling nor juxtapositional.

The interplay of the texts becomes even more apparent when we examine the portrait and the two-dimensional image. Needless to say, the external features Rabelais attributes to Socrates are no less flattering than those Erasmus fashions, but this is precisely because Rabelais's portrait is a rendering of the Erasmian painting. Erich Auerbach found Rabelais's depiction repulsive, "an insolent and grotesque paraphrase of the passage in which Alciades compares Socrates with the figures of Silenus."⁸ But in which Alciades compares Socrates with the figures of Silenus?⁸ But Rabelais, in following Erasmus in this instance and not Plato, once again pits one against the other and deftly, good-naturedly, and comically interacts with Erasmus and his reading. Playing on the notion of monetary value, Erasmus had converted Alciades's vague suggestion into a face that "Anyone who took him at his face value, as they say, would not have offered a farthing for . . ." (p. 270; *Quem si de summa, quod dici solet, curae quis destinasset, non emisset assae*, pp. 160-62). But Rabelais, improv-

erishing Socrates alliteratively—"pauvre de fortune, infortuné en femmes" (p. 6)—associates Socrates's comic mien with the kitchen and not with money: "l'estimans par l'extérieure apparence, n'en eussiez donné un coubeau d'oignon" (p. 5).

The expression "coubeau d'oignon" could not be more appropriate in that it conveys the Erasmian notion of little worth while realigning the image with the cooking pot, bottle, and odors from the midst of which the narrator extols the virtues of the belly and the bubbly for both the writer and the reader.

But I believe there is more to it than that. Although the "edible character" (Bakhtin's happy phrase)⁹ of the image seasons the comic context, it also draws our attention yet again to the link between inner and outer and the question of revelation, of the need to peel away—as one would an onion—human and textual layers. But while all of the images in the prologue stress reading and penetration, this one, it seems to me, dismantles the visualization of the text as space, a space wherein hidden treasures are to be found. An onion is exactly that, a whole in all of its parts, an *intégrum*, a one, an accumulation of hollow and concentric layers, the "coubeau" being but the last of these. I am reminded of Raymond Queneau, Rabelais's twentieth-century progeny, who conceives of the text-as-onion, the role of the reader being that of a peeler whose exegetical incisions reveal the text—in its peels.¹⁰ As a result, while it is true that the Rabelaisian prologue plays with the traditional topos of inner/outer, when all is said and done, it is to accentuate all the better the text-as-onion, the peeling of which gives forth the text. There is no better configuration of writing and reading as process, and Rabelais's witty and commentative one-upmanship could hardly be more subtle.

Even more striking yet is that the facial features Erasmus imagined—"a yokel's face, with a bovine look about it, and a snub nose always running" (p. 270); *Facies erat rusticana, taurinus aspectus, nares sinnae mucroque plene*, p. 162)—rendered correctly as to face and eyes by "le regard d'un taureau, le visage d'un fol" (pp. 5-6) are now distorted beyond recognition by a very different nose: Socrates, like some early version of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, loses his flat, inelegant, runny nose, as it is transformed into "le nez pointu" (p. 5). One can only imagine Rabelais's self-satisfied, Homeric-like parody of laughter at this pointed flash of wit, but the fact remains that Rabelais's facial reading pierces to the core of intertextual play and humanist discourse on writing and reading. It

should not be forgotten that the narrator's name is Alcofrybas Nasier, Mr. Nose (Lat. *nāsus*) par excellence and progeny of Ovid (Ovidius Nasus), master of masks, playfulness, hoaxes, and transformations. This also

happens to be Nasier's second book, and the capabilities of his namesake are now in full bloom. To be sure, Rabelais is fond of noses, and especially elongated ones it seems. His two best characterizations, Panurge and Frère Jean, are so equipped: "Panurge . . . avoit le nez un peu aquilin, faict à manche de rasoir" (p. 300) and Frère Jean is "bien advantagé en nez" (p. 107). Indeed, he becomes the possessor of the runny nose removed from Erasmus's Socrates, and a philosopher to boot:

"Frere Jean, ousterz ceste trouppie que vous pend au nez" . . .

—Pourquoy (dist Gargantua) est ce que Frere Jean a si beau nez?

—Parce (respondit Grandgousier) que ainsi Dieu l'a voulu, lequel nous faict en telle forme et telle fin, selon son divin arbitre, que faict un potier ses valseaulx.

—Parce (dist Penocrates) qu'il feut des premiers à la foyre des nez. Il print des plus beaux et plus grands.

—Tut avant! (dist le moynel). Selon vraye philosophie monastique, c'est parce que ma nourrice avoit les tetins mollez: en la talleant, mon rey y enfondroit comme en beurre, et là s'eslevoit et croissoit comme la paste dedans la mer. Les durs tetins de nourrices font les enfans carmez. Mais, guay, guay! *Ad formam nasi cognoscitur ad se levavit*... (pp. 153-54)

Frère Jean's garbled psalm tells it all: by the shape of his nose he is known indeed. Like Panurge, whose *braguette* is his trademark, Frère Jean has reason to lift his eyes toward the Lord. His jocular and jumbled psalm (*Ad se levavit*) alludes not only to the length of his nose but gives thanks as well for the generous dimension of its corollary, his penis.¹² Not inappropriately, it is the new shape of Socrates's nose that reveals just how much and how playfully the Rabelaisian text has been *uplifted* by that of Erasmus and has taken its bows before it.

With reason, in the liminary epistle to the *Quart Livre*, Rabelais could say to his patron, Cardinal Odet de Châtillon, "de folastries joyeuses, hors l'offence de Dieu et du Roy, prou (c'est le subject et theme unিকে diceulx livres)."¹³ Like Pinocchio's nose, which grows longer with every lie, Socrates's nose takes on greater dimension and vigor, as it passes from text to text, pointedly sticking out of the portrait—of the page—for all to see in Rabelais: "Tel disoit estre Socrates, . . . tant laid il estoit de corps et ridicule en son maintien, le nez pointu, le regard d'un taureau, le visage d'un fol . . ." The progression from nose, to stupid look, to face of a fool is in the exact reverse order that one finds in Erasmus ("He had a yokel's face, with a bovine look about it, and a snub nose always running," *Facies erat rusticana, taurinus aspectus, nares sinnae mucroque plene*), so that the prominent and preeminent rank of the nose in the Rabelaisian progression not only controls and channels our reading but also endows Socrates with physical powers that equal those of his mind and spirit.

And perhaps the playful compliment and tip of the hat—from one comic cleric to another—extend to Erasmus as well. Hans Holbein the Younger has left us magnificent portraits of Erasmus standing behind a table and standing at his desk and writing (1523/1524). Although both versions depict a definitely elongated, extended nose, one cannot help but notice that the left profile version (Erasmus at his desk and writing) is truly "pointed." To be sure, male noses were prized and noticed—for obvious reasons. Clouet's splendid portrait of Francis I, "Le Roi Grand Nez" as some of his contemporaries called him behind his back, catches the monarch's delight and pride in his good looks. But it should be remembered that Holbein is known for his strikingly lifelike portraiture and careful execution of even the smallest detail.

Finally, Rabelais's facial portrait functions to a degree as a form of *blason anatomique* and, as in the case of so many blasons, it includes—intertextually here—a *contreblason*, so that Erasmus's "snub nose always running" (*nares sine mucosaque plene*) is reversed by "le nez pointu." Equally interesting is the fact that the *contreblason* traditionally spoofs and denigrates the features lauded in the blason, whereas the intertextual play here moves from the ugly to the beautiful.¹⁴

Yes, the beautiful. As Proust puts it somewhere, "le nez est l'organe où s'étale le plus aisément la bêtise," and Erasmus has captured this in "snub nose always running." While flat, snub-nosed individuals are the butt of all manner of disparaging jokes, aquiline noses, pointed noses, so-called Greek and Roman noses, are prized. As a result, Socrates's "nez pointu" not only serves as a serio-comic bridge between the texts of Erasmus and Rabelais but also transforms the dynamics of the facial model: fine, pointed noses do not go with ugly faces. Hence, this ironic reversal of the expected once again scuttles the surface discourse on the distinction between seeming and being.¹⁵ Pascal said that "le nez de Cléopâtre: s'il eut été plus court, toute la face de la terre aurait changé." Likewise, Socrates's extended nose introduces rupture, fissure, distortion, and shifts of perspective within the text, thereby displaying all the more graphically the *mouvance* of the texts.

One element in particular stands out above all the others in this choreography, in this Oulipian interweaving of one text within another, and only a totally inattentive or completely enthralled reader could miss it. The core of the image, since Plato, are the silent, hollow statuettes, associated with sculpting, revealing within additional carvings whose godlike features are not inappropriately trumpeted by the outer musical motif. Erasmus correctly sensed the vagueness and weakness of the image and chose to accentuate the disparity between the enclosure and the form

within the cavity. Hence, his casing becomes "some ridiculous, ugly flute-player," whose purpose is to repel and lead the viewer astray. Obviously, the greater the deception the greater the artistry, for the goal of the undertaking, it will be recalled, was to "show off the art of the carver."

How could Rabelais resist? There never was a better artificer nor greater "Abstracteur de Quinte Essence" (p. 1). Fusing both texts, he drops the flute-player and any mention of music while insisting that his image comes directly from Alcibiades, who "ou dialogue de Platon, intitulé *Le Banquet*, louant son precepteur Socrates, sans controverser prince des philosophes, . . . le dict estre semblable es Silenes." But he never said, as the narrator now glosses, that "Silenes estoient *jadis* petites boites, telles que voyons *de present* es boutiques des apothecaires" (my emphasis). In Plato, there are neither apothecaries nor "figures joyeuses et frivoles, comme de harpies, satyres, oysons bridez, levres cornuz, canes bastes, boucs volans, certz limonniers at autres telles pinçures," each fantastic figure, on the contrary, drawing attention here to the textual distance in the making between *jadis* and *de present*.¹⁶

To be sure, medicine, liquids, containers, and fowl are not foreign to Rabelais's fictional world. But statues do not become boxes, sculptors are not transformed into apothecaries, music does not turn into birds, and gods are not reduced to drugs willy-nilly because they conform to the tapestries the writer usually weaves. Rather, the silent image and its transformations energize the prologue because the original image is a metaphor for reading and reading—both within the original (Socrates tells Alcibiades, for example, that he has "given the argument . . . a subtle twist and obscured the real issue," p. 573, 222c) and of the original by Erasmus—is the challenge and the inspiration that lead Rabelais to write a new book, about reading, while simultaneously delineating his special reader, the silent reader, whose role it is to recover and highlight the intertextual gamesmanship.

In trying to account for the rhetorical texture of the prologue, the words that are there, one must also bear in mind the texts that are not there, the many discourses—religious, philosophic, poetic—re-membered and, so to speak, read and retrieved by the prologue as it produces itself. The many fragments of discourse, literary and textual as well as popular and proverbial, that punctuate the text serve to ground and to propel the prologue in a scriptural configuration, such that the silent text is constantly attracting attention to itself and to its dynamics as hybrid piece and as virtuoso performance.

It is through this interplay of forces in the prologue that Rabelais dramatizes and lays bare various of his preoccupations as both writer and reader. But we can never be sure that we are on the right track and that we have adequately perceived and interpreted this crafty performance because it is staged on the boards of irony, and, therefore, we are never sure as reader/participants about our distance and perspective. Irony—saying one thing but meaning another—is a splendid forum for an ostensible debate on hidden signs, but irony, of course, casts doubt on the very tools of interpretation. The reader is constantly foiled by irony: it slips through his fingers, dissipating itself through its very role of dissolution. Thus, by its very nature it creates the ungraspable text, "ces belles billes vezetes" (p. 9), the laughing text par excellence. But he who can revel and thrive in *le plaisir du texte*, in its very playfulness, who can read "tout à l'aise du corps et au profit des reins!" will not be left empty-handed: "vous souviennent de boyre a my pour la paille, et je vous plegery tout ares metys" (p. 9).

Gérard Genette, one of the most insightful readers I know, remarks that "si on aime vraiment les textes, on doit bien souhaïter, de temps en temps, en aimer (au moins) deux à la fois."¹⁷ I think it safe to say when one deals with Rabelais, a writer whose fertile and uninhibited comic fiction explores the writerly at every turn, that it pays, to say the least, to question everything one finds written down, to eyeball his incomparable book reflectively, and to read at least three texts "à la fois."

NOTES

1. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Bollingen Series, 71 (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961).
2. See, in particular, Floyd Gray, "Ambiguity and Point of View in the Prologue to *Gargantua*," *RR*, 56 (1965), 12-21, and Dorothy Gabe Coleman, *Rabelais: A Critical Study in Prose Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 31-36.
3. See my "Lecteurs et lectures dans le prologue de *Gargantua*," *FRF*, 10 (1985), 261-70.
4. Students of Rabelais have long accepted that the silent opening of the prologue is inspired by the very popular passage from the *Silens' Actioli* although readers continue to credit now Plato, now Erasmus: "a parody of Plato's *Symposium*," Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1968), p. 168; "Rabelais begins, 'Beuveurs . . .'" and proceeds immediately to comment on a passage from Plato's *Symposium*," Barbara C. Bowen, *The Age of Buffs: Paradox & Ambiguity in Rabelais & Montaigne*, Illinois Studies in

Language and Literature, 62 (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1972), p. 53. According to Louis Delaruelle, "Ce que Rabelais doit à Erasme et à Budé," *RHL*, 11 (1904), 220-62. Erasmus collocated Plato and Xenophon in order to arrive at his portrait of Socrates and "Rabelais n'a fait que le traduire librement. . . il n'est, pour ainsi dire, pas une phrase du texte français qui ne corresponde à une phrase du latin" (pp. 222, 223). Although Delaruelle admits that Rabelais "ne suit pas servilement son modèle; parfois il transpose un développement, il insiste sur un détail, il en modifie un autre" (pp. 222-23), he concludes that "jamais il ne perd de vue le texte d'Erasme" (p. 224). However, in order to explain in Rabelais the presence of a trait not found in Erasmus ("toujours beuvant d'autant à un chasseur"), Delaruelle remarks that "Ce dernier trait, qui manque dans Erasme, est conforme à ce que Platon nous apprend de Socrate. Cela nous montre que, pour tracer ce portrait, Rabelais s'est aussi souvent du philosophe grec" (p. 223, n. 3). It should be pointed out that, as far as Xenophon is concerned, Erasmus could hardly have learned anything from him since his mention of the silent image is but a passing reference and not the extended portrait found in Plato: "Qu'est-ce à dire? Socrate, te crois-tu donc plus beau que moi pour te vanter de la sorte? 'Où, par Zeus, répondit Critobule, sinon je serais le plus laid de tous les Silènes que l'on voit dans les drames satyriques. (Il se trouvait en effet que Socrate leur ressembloit.)'" *Xenophon Banquet-Épologue de Socrate*, ed. and trans. François Ollier (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1972), p. 55. As for Plato, Rabelais had more than a passing knowledge of his work; see, for example, Abel Lefranc, "Le Platon de Rabelais," *BGG* (1901), 105-14, 169-81. At all events, the point, of course, is that Rabelais is much more than a translator of the first rank. Indeed, his narrator's pointed question, "A quel propos, en vouste advis, tend ce prelude et coup d'essai?" (p. 6), alerts the reader to the creative reading Rabelais is engaging in and posits playful reading—and of more than one text at a time—as the name of the game.

5. Margaret Mann Phillips, *The "Adages" of Erasmus: A Study with Translations* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1964), and Erasmus, *Adagia*, ed. Felix Heinmann and Emanuel Kienzle, vol. V, *Opera omnia* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1981). All references to the Latin original and English translation are to these editions and will appear within the text.
6. Jean Starobinski, *Les Mots sous les mots: Les Anagrammes de Ferdinand de Saussure* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).
7. François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel, Selections*, trans. and ed. Floyd Gray (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1966), p. 4.
8. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957), p. 245.
9. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 171.
10. See Jacques Bens, "Queneau oulipien," in Oulipo, *Atlas de littérature potentielle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), p. 23.
11. Cf. Delaruelle, p. 223: "On ne voit pas pourquoi Rabelais a mis *potius* à la place de *comand*, qui traduisait littéralement le mot d'Erasme."
12. "Ad te *ksavet*: incipit du psalme CXXII. Il désignait le membre viril. On croyait alors que la grandeur du nez indiquait la grandeur de ce membre," M.A. Sreech, ed., *Gargantua* (Geneva: Droz, 1970), p. 232, n. 97.
13. "A treillustre prince et reverendissime mon seigneur Otes, Cardinal de Chastillon," II, 6-7.

14. A good example of the *contreblason* as part of the *blason anatomique* is Eustorg de Beaulieu's *Blason du Nez*: "Nez joliet, polly, bien faconné, / Ne court, ne long, ains proportionné / . . . / Nez point morveux, seigneux, ne qui degoutte, / . . . / Nez point serré, trop carnis, n'enfoncé." Quoted in D.B. Wilson, *Descriptive Poetry from Blason to Baroque* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 23-24. In addition to Wilson's authoritative and elegant treatment of the subject, see Annette and Edward Tomarken, "The Rise and Fall of the Sixteenth-Century French Blason," *Sym*, 29 (1975), 139-63, for a discussion of blasons as ironic commentary on the genre itself.

15. On the subject of such reversals, see my "Lecteurs et lectures dans le prologue de *Gargantua*," p. 268, and François Rigolot, "Sémiotique de la sentence et du proverbe chez Rabelais," *ER*, 14 (1977), 280.

16. Cf. Abel Lefranc: "Il faut remarquer une inexactitude dans la définition que Rabelais donne des Silènes: ils renfermaient, chez les anciens, non des drogues ou essences précieuses, mais quelque image des dieux. Rabelais, pour mieux expliquer à ses lecteurs ce qu'étaient les Silènes antiques, les compare à ces petites boîtes qu'on pouvait voir de son temps 'es boutiques des apothecaires.'" *Oeuvres de François Rabelais*, ed. Abel Lefranc et al. (Paris: Champion, 1913), I, 7, n. 32. Far more to the point is M.A. Screech's keen comment that "'with artistic originality' (my emphasis), he equates the *Silens* themselves not with ancient statuettes, which only a few of his readers could have known, but with those ugly-ornate boxes containing precious drugs which were to be seen everywhere on the shelves of Renaissance apothecaries." Rabelais (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979), p. 128.

17. Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes. La Littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), p. 452.

Gargantua 4-24: l'uniforme et le discontinu

Michel Jeanneret

1. Sur la méthode

Dans son rapport à la nourriture, le jeune Gargantua traverse trois phases nettement différenciées. Il naît dans la profusion d'un festin et, toujours affamé, toujours altéré, percera d'abord le monde comme la source intarissable de ses plaisirs; saturation, libération des instincts, exhibition des corps: rien ne brida l'appétit de l'enfant. L'intervention des précepteurs, vieux sophistes rétrogrades, ouvre une seconde période. Le régime n'a pas changé: c'est encore le règne du ventre et des poussées végétatives, mais affectées ici d'une valeur inverse. Sous l'effet d'une hygiène morbide, le jeune homme croupit; la gloutonnerie, tout à l'heure joyeuse et légitime, apparaît désormais ambiguë. Viennent enfin Ponocrates, et le menu de Gargantua passera de la réplétion à la frugalité; l'estomac, soumis à une diète raisonnée, ne dicte plus sa loi; les pulsions sont surveillées, le corps est domestiqué, mais le bonheur alimentaire est retrouvé: le héros, à nouveau, peut manger avec bonne conscience.

Entre le mode alimentaire et son évaluation, la relation n'est donc pas constante:

Phase	Régime	Jugement
1	Abondant	Bon
2	Abondant	Mauvais
3	Sobre	Bon

Un même signe est valorisé différemment, un jugement identique porte sur des objets opposés: le système thématique et l'échelle axiologique ne sont pas homologues. Une fois de plus, Rabelais défie l'assurance du commentateur et, même sur un matériel réputé classé, compris, nous invite à interroger notre méthode de lecture.

Par réflexe, l'interprète cherche à surmonter les difficultés et, pour garantir l'unicité du sens, postule la cohésion du texte. Il réduit (ou camou-