



Crush the Infamous Thing

A REASONED ANATOMY OF RIDICULE
AS AN INTELLECTUAL WEAPON
FROM RABELAIS TO VOLTAIRE

William de France

CLEMENTINIUM EDITIONS

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Collection ESSAI – REV260514 – 10pt-print

*To an old friend,
to whom I once quoted Voltaire's prayer
on a bench of the number 8 line —
it was there that this book put out its first shoot.*

I have always made one prayer to God, a very short one; here it is: "My God, make our enemies thoroughly ridiculous!" And God has granted it.

— *Voltaire to Damilaville, 16 May 1767.*

Clementinium Editions

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Typeset with L^AT_EX, in EB Garamond.

Format: 105 mm × 170 mm (Collection ESSAI, 10 pt print).

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This volume offers a reasoned anatomy of the French tradition of ridicule as an intellectual weapon, from Rabelais (1532) to Diderot (1761-1780). Seven authors are examined: Rabelais, Pascal, Molière, La Fontaine, Fontenelle, Voltaire, and Diderot. They are read through a five-dimensional grid: rhetorical mechanism, target, register, ethical stance, and reflexivity.

The book is organized in three parts. The first follows the four masters in chronological order, through the decisive technical ruptures of the tradition: 1532 with Rabelais, 1656 with Pascal, 1664 with Molière, and 1762 with Voltaire. The second presents the three companions, each of whom gives the device a distinct variation: allegorical displacement in La Fontaine, historical microfabable in Fontenelle, and radicalized reflexivity in Diderot. The third is comparative. It returns to the seven authors through each of the five dimensions and formulates the book's central claims. An epilogue closes the volume with the five failures of ridicule as a civic weapon: four external failures (the shameless target, the industrial target, the fragmented public, avowed cynicism) and one internal failure (Diderotian reflexive saturation). Six annexes – a master cross-table, a glossary of mechanisms, a chronology from 1532 to 1791, an index of targets, an index of names, and a critical bibliography – provide the reference apparatus.

Two claims are specific to this book. The first, formulated in chapter 11, is the structural separation between the public weapon and the private disposition of the person who wields it. Pascal, an Augustinian rigorist, and Voltaire, an anticlerical deist, use much the same toolkit in the service of opposed causes. That separation makes the technical tradition transmissible independently of the ethical stance of the transmitter. The second claim, introduced in chapter

7 and formulated in chapter 12, is the historiographical hypothesis of closure through hyper-reflexivity. The end of the classical age of ridicule, around 1780 in Diderot, is not due to an exhaustion of targets or to the disappearance of external conditions. It is due to the internal saturation of reflexivity within the tradition itself.

The volume belongs to the *Bibliotheca Voltariana* of Clementinium Editions.

The critical apparatus is deliberately light. Direct quotations are controlled in the bibliographical appendix through abbreviated references. Paraphrases, reconstructions of episodes, and interpretive comparisons do not receive separate note calls when they belong to the running commentary. This choice preserves continuity of reading while still providing the necessary points of verification.

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PROLOGUE — VOLTAIRE'S PRAYER

Every prayer says a great deal about the person who makes it, even when that person does not believe in prayer. At seventy-two, Voltaire writes that he has always made the same prayer to God, and a very short one. This book cites it as its epigraph. Under the cover of a devotion he does not practice, he asks neither for victory, nor for the conversion of his enemies, nor even for justice. He asks for one precise thing, and the precision is the point: that his enemies be made *ridiculous*. Then, with his usual smile, he adds that God has granted it.

The choice of ridicule is not a matter of temperament. It is a working method. In his letter to Damilaville of May 16, 1767, Voltaire reduces his whole strategy to a prayer: that his enemies be made ridiculous. The formula condenses a conviction: against intolerance, ridicule does work that neither argument, nor indignation, nor force knows how to do. The sentence comes after thirty years of polemical practice, after the Calas affair, after the *Traité sur la tolérance* and the *Dictionnaire philosophique*. It is a retrospective formula. It sums up a practice rather than laying out a theory.

But the claim is not his alone. It is the tacit conviction of a French lineage running from Rabelais to Diderot. Without school or manifesto, that lineage developed Europe's richest technical corpus for the offensive use of laughter. It has no equivalent in Germany, apart from a few Krausian accents nearly four centuries later; none in England, where Swift is a summit without a continuous tradition and Sterne remains indebted to Rabelais; none in Italy, where the *commedia dell'arte* lacks this kind of literate precision; and not even in classical antiquity, where Lucian comes closest but remains isolated in time, without a continuous tradition around him.

This geographical and historical concentration, from 1532 to 1780, nearly two and a half centuries between *Pantagruel* and the late Diderot, is not a sociological accident. It corresponds to a precise state of French civilization. That state required the coexistence of four historical conditions rarely found together: prestigious authorities still claiming moral dignity; a literate public sufficiently homogeneous to share a norm of shame; a literary language stable enough to carry irony without losing it; and a book market developed enough for a pamphlet to become, within weeks, a European event. When those conditions are present, ridicule as a weapon can do things that rational argument, moral denunciation, and institutional force do not know how to accomplish. That is what this book sets out to show.

INTRODUCTION — WHY AN ANATOMY OF RIDICULE

Ridicule is not an ornament added to argument. It is a distinct operation, and it reaches what argument cannot reach. This opening caution is necessary because contemporary French culture, a diffuse heir to Boileau and to school rhetoric, has often treated laughter as a figure of style or a decorative turn of wit, as though irony were merely a more elegant way of saying what could have been said otherwise. That is false. The irony studied in this book is not an elegant substitute for argument. It is an operation argument does not know how to perform.

The distinction is simple. Argument moves the beliefs of those already disposed to yield. Ridicule, for its part, does not act on belief but on the *social cost* that surrounds it: not by changing what one believes, but by raising the price of the deference granted to the target. Once Pangloss has become laughable, no quantity of Leibnizian erudition can restore him, not because the erudition is false, but because the deference owed to Pangloss has become more costly than the admission of his ridiculousness. Ridicule does not refute. It makes deference expensive.

This operation depends on precise conditions, which must be stated before they can be tested case by case. Ridicule works when (a) the target claims dignity; (b) it remains sensitive to public judgment; (c) a shared norm exists that laughter can activate; and (d) the weapon is aimed upward, at the powerful and never at the already-dominated. These four conditions are not equivalent. The first is the most rigid. Without a claim to dignity in the target, the weapon spends itself in empty air. This is what will distinguish, at the end of the book, the failures of ridicule in the twentieth century (Karl Kraus faced with Hitler, Chaplin reproaching himself

for *The Great Dictator* after the Shoah) from the successes of the two preceding centuries.

Between 1532 (*Pantagruel*) and the last great texts of Diderot, around 1780, France produced a concentration of techniques without equal for its density and continuity. This concentration is neither an accident nor the effect of isolated genius. It corresponds to a specific state of French society: authorities claiming dignity, a homogeneous literate public, and a shared norm of taste. That state lasted for nearly two and a half centuries before it began to fragment in the nineteenth century.

Yet that corpus has never been laid out as an anatomy. There are biographies of Voltaire, theses on laughter in Molière, studies of Rabelaisian humor, commentaries on the *Provinciales*. Many of these works are excellent. But they remain monographic by nature. To my knowledge, no one has made a reasoned inventory of the techniques themselves as transferable, classifiable, transmissible from one author to another. Histories of French comic literature exist; they follow the order of time and juxtapose the authors without isolating the techniques. An anatomy is something else. It cuts horizontally, by function, where history cuts vertically, by author. That is the work undertaken here.

The method is as follows. Seven major authors form the principal corpus: four masters (Rabelais, Pascal, Molière, Voltaire) and three companions (La Fontaine, Fontenelle, Diderot), each carrying one or more distinctive mechanisms that the others take up or modify. Three technical dimensions structure the analysis first: rhetorical mechanism (the *how*), target (the *against what*), and register or temperature (the *in what tone*). Put to the test by the analysis chapters, two interpretive dimensions were added. The fourth is the *ethical stance of the practitioner*, that is, in the service of what the weapon is wielded, against what precisely, and with what distance from the cause itself: it is this that makes Pascal and Voltaire structurally comparable despite the opposition of the causes they serve. The fifth, which imposes itself beginning with the Molière

chapter, is *reflexivity*: does ridicule know itself to be ridiculous, does it also aim at itself? The complete grid thus consists of five dimensions, and these last two are this inquiry's own discovery.

The project is both descriptive and operational. It is descriptive because it establishes what actually worked in classical French prose: which words were written, which effects were produced, which institution was moved, which moral grammar was overturned. It is operational because it also asks *why* it worked, so that the techniques still alive may be practiced knowingly and the dead techniques recognized lucidly as dead.

An anatomy without pathology would be incomplete. In its epilogue, the book closes with the *failures* of ridicule: those moments when the weapon jams and thereby reveals, by contrast, the conditions of its effectiveness. Karl Kraus faced with National Socialism, Chaplin reproaching himself for *The Great Dictator* after the discovery of the camps, the contemporary impotence of ridicule before avowed cynicism and the fragmentation of the public: these are the pathologies of the weapon. They measure, in negative, what it could do in its French golden age. They also allow the reader to grasp, without presentism, the conditions under which the weapon remains, or no longer remains, operational.

*PART I**THE FOUR MASTERS*

RABELAIS, OR COSMIC IRONY

I. LYON, 1532 – A CERTAIN ALCOFRIBAS NASIER

In October 1532, a small book appears in Lyon, printed by Claude Nourry, known as *Le Prince: Les horribles et espouvantables faictz et prouesses du très renommé Pantagruel, roy des Dipsodes, fils du grand géant Gargantua*. It is signed with a name that does not exist, Alcofribas Nasier, a perfect anagram of François Rabelais. Deciphering it is only one more diversion offered to the reader. The book is printed in Lyon rather than Paris for precise reasons: censorship is looser there, printing is freer, and over the previous twenty years the city has already welcomed books by Erasmus and Marot that the Sorbonne regards with suspicion.

Rabelais is about forty-four at the time. His date of birth is not precisely known, which is hardly unusual in the first half of the sixteenth century. He has already passed through several lives. A former Franciscan who became a Benedictine and then, in practice, left the cloister, he lives as a secular cleric under the protection of the humanist bishops of the time. He has studied law at Poitiers, Greek and Latin with Pierre Lamy, and medicine at Montpellier, where he received his bachelor's degree in 1530. Since November 1532 he has been a physician at the Hôtel-Dieu in Lyon. He knows some Hebrew, excellent Greek, and enough Arabic to read Avicenna. He has corresponded with Erasmus, whom he calls his spiritual father. Under his own name, he publishes serious medical editions (Hippocrates, Galen) with Sébastien Gryphe, the great Lyon printer of classical learning.

Alongside that respectable career, and under the cover of a transparent pseudonym, he offers what can only approximately be called a work of popular literature: the parodic sequel to an

anonymous chronicle, *Les grandes et inestimables Croniques du grant et énorme géant Gargantua*, which had sold the previous year at the Lyon fairs. Rabelais takes up Gargantua, invents for him a son named Pantagruel, and builds around this genealogy of giants a universe with no precedent in earlier French prose.

The operation is risky. Since the 1520s, the Sorbonne has been hunting Erasmian humanism as an advance guard of heresy. It has had Lefèvre d'Étaples condemned, Berquin's books burned, and vernacular translations of the Bible forbidden. *Pantagruel* is put on the index as early as 1533; *Gargantua*, published in 1534, is condemned by the theologians in 1543. Rabelais, soon identified despite the anagram, spends the rest of his life moving between publication, flight to Rome, return, silence, and renewed publication. He survives thanks to the successive protection of Jean du Bellay, the humanist cardinal, and Odet de Châtillon, nephew of the constable Anne de Montmorency. He dies in 1553, or shortly after, in circumstances that cannot be reconstructed.

This biographical caution matters. To understand what Rabelais is doing in the five books (the fifth probably posthumous and partly apocryphal), two things must be kept in view at once: he is fighting an adversary that can have him burned, and he is fighting in a language that does not yet exist. Literary French prose in 1532 is still being formed, and Rabelais is one of the two or three men inventing it. The daring is double, technical and political. His genius lies in turning that double daring into a weapon: ridicule.

II. THE STATE OF LANGUAGE AROUND 1530

To grasp what Rabelais does, one must first grasp what he does it against. The target is the Sorbonne: the Faculty of Theology of the University of Paris, the supreme authority of religious censorship for the whole kingdom, guardian of Catholic dogma under the authority of the *Most Christian King*. In 1530, the Sorbonne is the most powerful institution in the kingdom after the crown. In many

respects it is more powerful than individual bishops, more powerful even than the university of which it is formally the summit.

The Sorbonne's power is entirely verbal. It has neither army, nor private fortune, nor territory of its own. What it possesses is a monopoly on definition. To define *consubstantial*, to distinguish *voluntas antecedens* from *voluntas consequens*, to rule on the *filioque*, to classify degrees of predestination, to qualify heresies: religious authority passes through these linguistic operations. Without the precision of definition, the Church can neither recognize orthodoxy nor proscribe error. In sixteenth-century western Christendom, the Sorbonne's language is the very instrument by which the community of the faithful is distinguished from the community of the damned.

That verbal instrument rests on a precise technical language: scholastic Latin, inherited from Thomas Aquinas, refined by Duns Scotus and Ockham, transmitted in the Paris colleges for three centuries. Theologians speak this Latin among themselves; they write in it, debate in it, teach in it. Vernacular French enters theology only through popular sermons, and even then it is always brought back to the Latin matrix. The technical language is so developed, so subtle, so tight, that it almost constitutes a world apart, accessible only to someone who has spent fifteen years in the colleges. More than the theological content it carries, it is this vocabulary that makes the cleric unassailable by the outsider: one cannot argue theology without knowing the terms, and the terms belong to the corporation.

The condition for this verbal power to work is seriousness. If scholastic Latin is taken seriously, one stands disarmed before it: it has an answer for everything, it has distinguished everything, it has already classified the objection before one has even formulated it. But if it ceases to be taken seriously, something collapses. The seriousness of scholastic language is the condition of its authority. From the 1510s onward, that condition begins to give way under the blows of a new generation of humanists, above all Erasmus.

Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* (1511) is, on this point, Rabelais's immediate precedent. Erasmus pretends to praise Folly in order to make that indirect voice say what he could not say in his own name. The device – feigned praise, later one of the great European resources of ridicule – will be taken up as far as Swift, Defoe, and the pamphleteers of the Enlightenment. But Erasmus remains Latin, elegant, restrained. He ridicules scholasticism without leaving its register; the result is almost scholasticism parodied by itself. What Erasmus does not do, and what Rabelais will do, is leave the elevated Latin register altogether and attack scholastic language from its complete outside.

Rabelais fights the Sorbonne with a weapon the Sorbonne cannot recognize. He writes in vernacular French. He mixes languages (Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Occitan, Picard, rural dialects). He invents words. He piles up lists. He amplifies sentences. He brings in the body where theology admits only the soul. This is not, as in Erasmus, an *internal* parody of scholasticism. It is an attack from outside the entire register. The Sorbonne cannot even formulate what is happening, because what is happening is not happening in its language.

III. AMPLIFICATION AS PRINCIPLE

The central mechanism in Rabelais, the one that distinguishes his irony from all the others in the tradition mapped by this book, is *dilation* — a discourse faithfully stretched to its own breaking point. The procedure must be named precisely because it is often confused with its neighbors: hyperbole, rhetorical amplification, comic enumeration. It contains all of them, but it adds something of its own.

Rabelaisian dilation consists in taking the adversary's discourse – the ecclesiastical decretal, the Sorbonne syllogism, the biblical genealogy, the chivalric chronicle, the legal dispute – and pushing it to the breaking point by extending it faithfully, without contradicting it. Rabelais does not say the decretal is false. He writes it

out in all its details, lengthening every clause, multiplying every qualification, following scholastic logic with perfect obedience. After fifteen pages, the reader realizes that the decretal, followed without subtracting anything from it, has become absurd through its own excess.

This mechanism is structurally different from the one Pascal will invent a century later. Pascal quotes the adversary by selecting; Rabelais does not select, he accumulates. Pascal feigns the Provincial's innocence in order to bring out an internal contradiction; Rabelais feigns scrupulous obedience in order to bring out an internal disproportion. Pascal cuts. Rabelais inflates. One proceeds by subtracting context, the other by adding extension.

For the mechanism to work, two conditions are required. First, the adversary must already have a cumulative rhetoric: it must argue through lists of cases, lists of distinctions, accumulations of authorities. Sorbonne scholasticism has exactly this feature: it claims to cover everything, distinguish everything, catalogue everything. Without that claim to exhaustiveness, Rabelaisian dilation falls flat. One can dilate only what is already disposed to expand.

Second, the target must take its own principle of exhaustiveness seriously. The Sorbonne does. When Rabelais writes, in the list of books in the library of Saint-Victor, "Item Bracmardus de Imbustibus, Item Tartaretus de modo cacandi, Item Gerson de auferibilitate Pape ab Ecclesia, Item Sileth de cunno torquente," the trained reader recognizes the exact format of Paris scholastic catalogues. It is the formal exactness, crossed with the semantic absurdity of the titles, that makes the list unbearable. Had the Sorbonne practiced an elliptical rhetoric, Rabelais would have needed another mechanism. He took what the adversary gave him.

In reading, this dilation produces a psychological effect that no other technique of ridicule quite reproduces. The reader of Rabelais does not smile as one smiles at Voltaire, nor smile silently as one smiles at Pascal. He laughs frankly, at length, physically. The Rabelaisian sentence calls on the breath; it needs the diaphragm,

the throat, the reader's whole body. This bodily quality is not an accessory effect of style. It is the instrument by which the weapon reaches its target. Scholasticism claimed to address pure reason. Rabelais answers with a literature addressed to the body. The body enjoys itself, and pure reason, by contagion, is demoted.

IV. THE HYPERBOLIC LIST

The first sub-mechanism of dilation, and the one Rabelais carried to unmatched virtuosity, is the hyperbolic list. Across the five books of *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua* there are hundreds of lists: lists of nouns, lists of adjectives, lists of childhood games, lists of blows struck in battle, lists of insulting epithets, lists of trades, dishes, garments, musical instruments. Each produces a precise effect in its place. But three lists are paradigmatic within the economy of Rabelais's work.

The first is the library of Saint-Victor (chapter VII of *Pantagruel*). Pantagruel, newly arrived in Paris to study, visits the library of the abbey of Saint-Victor, one of the most prestigious institutions in the Latin Quarter, and the narrator lists its books for five pages. The titles are in Latin. From the point of view of scholastic syntax, they are perfectly formed; from the point of view of meaning, they are perfectly absurd. *Bigua salutis*, *Bragueta juris*, *Pantofla decretorum*, *Decretum Universitatis Parisiensis super gorgiasitate muliercularum ad placitum*, *Tartaretus de modo cacandi*. The technical language is respected. Meaning has become obscene, scatological, digestive, genital. To understand the list, the reader must read it in good faith, as though it were an authentic catalogue. As soon as he does so, he is carried into derision without quite seeing how he got there.

This list is one of the purest moments of the Rabelaisian mechanism. No word of commentary, no indignation, no displayed smile. The reader receives the list as a fact: the library of Saint-Victor *is* what the list says it is. The conclusion imposes itself

without Rabelais having to formulate it. If this is Parisian high learning, then Parisian high learning is a learned schoolboy's joke. The Sorbonne, which reads Bracmardus de Imbustibus, can no longer claim magisterial authority.

The second paradigmatic list is Gargantua's series of arse-wipes (chapter XIII of *Gargantua*). The young Gargantua, at the age when he ought to be learning the humanities, spends several years conducting a methodical inquiry into the best possible arse-wipe. He tries velvet, silk, cotton, hay, paper, parchment, the ear of a linen cloth, several kinds of feathers (swan, hen, pigeon, cormorant), the cover of a book, his hat, a cat's tail, various herbs (mallow, nettle, though it stings), parsley, cabbage leaves, purslane, spinach, vine leaves, and finally discovers that the best of all is a well-downy gosling held by the head between the legs, a recipe the narrator recommends to the reader with perfect scientific gravity.

The list is entirely satirical, but its immediate target is not scholasticism. Its target is taxonomy in general: the scholastic intellectual tic that classifies, distinguishes, and enumerates every possible variety of a thing in order to derive a science from it. Gargantua produces a *summa torchecularum* in the exact format of medieval summae. Applied to the lowest possible subject, the format shows by itself that the summa's claim to exhaustiveness becomes ridiculous as soon as it is removed from its usual frame. If science can treat the arse-wipe with the same rigor as grace, rigor is no longer by itself a guarantee of nobility. It guarantees only a certain cast of mind, which can be applied to anything, and therefore does not by necessity apply to anything important.

The third list, the most directly polemical, is Janotus de Bragmardo's harangue (chapter XIX of *Gargantua*). The young Gargantua has, in a fit of fantasy, stolen the bells of Notre-Dame de Paris. The theologians of the Sorbonne, desperate, send Janotus de Bragmardo, their most eloquent doctor, to recover them. Janotus arrives at Gargantua's court in an advanced state of drunkenness, hat askew, gait unsteady. He delivers before Gargantua a solemn

harangue that is one of the great parodic set pieces of European literature. The opening must be quoted at Rabelaisian length:

"Mna dies, Monsieur, mna dies, et vobis, Messieurs. Ce ne seroyt que bon que nous rendisiez nos cloches, car elles nous font bien besoing. Hen, hen, hasch ! Nous en avions bien aultresfoys refusé de bon argent de ceulx de Londres en Cahors, sy avions nous de ceulx de Bourdeaulx en Brye, qui les vouloient achapter pour la substantificque qualité de la complexion elementaire, que est intronificquée en la terresterité de leur nature quidditative, pour extraneizer les halotz et les turbines suz noz vignes, vrayment non pas nostres, mais d'icy auprès. Car si nous perdons le piot, nous perdons tout, et sens et loy."

The passage continues for three or four pages. Macaronic Latin mixed with medieval French, scholastic syntax applied to tavern subject matter, authorities cited out of order, syllogisms whose premises have disappeared, parentheses that open and never close. The more Janotus speaks, the deeper he sinks, and each attempt at theological precision worsens the ridicule instead of saving him. At the end of the harangue, Janotus has lost everything: the bells, the authority, the dignity of the doctor. Yet he believes he has spoken perfectly; he believes he has delivered a masterpiece of eloquence. Gargantua, magnanimous, offers him sausages and Beaune wine, not out of charity but because Janotus's ridiculousness is so pure that it calls, in return, for a paternal gesture.

In roughly twenty pages, Rabelais prepares what twentieth-century sociology will call the crisis of magisterial authority: the learned man who, before public opinion, has lost the capacity to be taken seriously. Janotus is not defeated by an argument. He is defeated by his own voice. This is exactly the situation in which Voltaire will later place Pangloss in *Candide*, and in which Pascal had placed the good Jesuit Father in the fourth *Provinciale*. The

technique is Rabelaisian by invention and classical by transmission.

V. COARSE MATERIALIZATION

The second Rabelaisian sub-mechanism, the one that most radically distinguishes him from all his French successors, is coarse materialization. In his work, all abstraction is sooner or later brought back to the body. Eating, defecating, copulating, being born, dying: for Rabelais, these five bodily functions are the ground on which theological abstraction collapses.

The procedure can seem coarse. It is, and Rabelais knows it. The coarseness is tactical, intentional, calculated. Rabelais does not bring abstraction back to the body because he loves the body like a naturalist or a libertine. He does it because scholasticism, which wanted to be pure spirit, cannot bear that neighborhood. If one can speak of transubstantiation and degraded matter in the same language, one of the two constructions begins to wobble, and scholasticism has much more to lose in that confrontation than degraded matter does.

Several scenes are paradigmatic. Gargantua's birth (chapter VI of *Gargantua*): Gargamelle, his mother, gives birth through her left ear after an astringent, administered against a colic brought on by eating too much tripe, has diverted the child. The narrator then explains learnedly that birth through the ear is not implausible, since it is attested among the ancients and compatible with the Catholic doctrine that the Virgin conceived through the ear. Medieval theologians had indeed maintained that Mary's virginal conception occurred through hearing the angelic word. The juxtaposition is devastating. Rabelais does not refute the virginal conception; he cites it in connection with a birth brought on by tripe. The proximity does its work without needing to be spelled out. The reader understands, and doctrine, placed beside a digestive product, has lost its separation from the lower body.

The meeting of Pantagruel and Panurge (chapter IX of *Pantagruel*) works similarly. Panurge, starving, harangues Pantagruel in

fourteen successive languages – German, Italian, English, Basque, Latin, Hebrew, Greek, Scots, Dutch, Danish, and three invented idioms – in order to ask for food. Pantagruel, charitable but unable to understand a single one of them, finally suggests that he return to French: "Mon ami, ne savez-vous parler françois ?" Panurge replies that he does, thanks be to God, for French is his natural and mother tongue: he was born and raised in the garden of France, that is, Touraine. The polyglot parody of the humanists (Erasmus corresponded in five languages, Estienne in seven) is sharp. All the science of languages, displayed in order to beg for a meal, becomes tavern performance. The moment Panurge returns to the natural, peasant French of Touraine is the moment humanist rhetoric finds itself quietly challenged by its own excess.

Then there is the defense by Frère Jean des Entommeures (*Gargantua*, chapters XXVII-XLIV). While the other monks of the abbey of Seuilly pray in choir and in Latin for divine protection against Picrochole's looters, Frère Jean, the kitchen monk, takes the staff of the cross and goes out to kill thirteen thousand six hundred and twenty-two enemies by himself, "without the women and little children," a number the narrator records with comic precision. The satire of contemplative prayer is immediate: it does nothing when the staff of the cross does everything. Rabelais does not claim that prayer is false. He simply places, on the same page, two modes of action, one verbal and one bodily, and comparative effectiveness decides.

Within the French tradition of ridicule, this coarse materialization is properly Rabelaisian. Pascal will never practice it; his tactical coldness forbids it, since a Jansenist theologian using that register would have lost credit with his literate public. Voltaire almost always avoids it. When he touches it, as in *Le Dîner du comte de Boulainvilliers* or in some of the looser tales, he does so without Rabelaisian cosmic breadth. Molière inherits it indirectly, through the commedia dell'arte, in the scatological scenes of Pourceaugnac or Argan; but the materialization is domesticated, civilized, put

into stage costume.

Rabelais remains the author in whom the coarse body still has a cosmology of its own. The Rabelaisian body is not an anatomical detail. It is the whole universe restored to its respiratory, digestive, genital dimension. This cosmology is what makes his irony unique: warm, fleshly, cosmic, as the section on register will show. It is also what limits the weapon. It can strike only abstractions that *can* be brought back to the body. Faced with purely formal targets – judicial procedure, administrative statistics – Rabelaisian materialization loses its edge because it no longer has anything to seize.

VI. THE TARGET: SCHOLASTICISM AND ITS LANGUAGE

The central target has already been named: the Sorbonne and the scholastic language on which its power rests. What remains is to specify what this target means in the practice of the five books: how Rabelais strikes it, at what points, and through what successive blows.

First blow: technical language. The Sorbonne speaks scholastic Latin. Rabelais parodies it. Janotus's harangue is the central example, but the same operation is scattered throughout the work. Whenever a character claims learning, his Latin betrays him: Bridoye, the doctor of laws who judges by rolling dice and defends his judgments by quoting random fragments of the *Digest*; the Limousin student met by Pantagruel, whose macaronic Latin is so thick that he has to be grabbed by the throat before he returns to the French of Limousin. Each time, Latin is the target. It is displayed as a mask which, once removed or exaggerated, reveals only mediocrity, or worse, emptiness.

Second blow: disputation. The Sorbonne argues through scholastic disputation: proposition, counter-proposition, distinction, subdistinction, concession, recapitulation. Rabelais offers the full parody in the dispute by signs between Panurge and Thaumaste

(*Pantagruel*, chapters XVIII-XX). Thaumaste, an English scholar, comes to Paris to challenge Pantagruel on the deepest questions of magic, alchemy, and cabala. Pantagruel is busy and entrusts the dispute to Panurge. Panurge proposes that it take place not in words, which they have in abundance, but in signs: obscene gestures of the hands, body, and face. Twenty pages of learned gesticulation follow, between Panurge and Thaumaste, watched in silence by the whole court. In the end, Thaumaste declares Panurge the winner. He does not know exactly what he has been defeated in, but defeated he has been. He returns to England to publish the results of the dispute.

The irony is multiple. First, scholastic disputation loses none of its seriousness when translated into gesture: both disputants keep the concentrated expression of scholars. Second, when Thaumaste is asked what he has learned, he stammers that he has seen "the true well and abyss of the encyclopedia," a grand phrase that means nothing but sounds like a certificate of high science. Finally, Panurge's victory – though he has no serious philosophical knowledge – over Thaumaste, who has a great deal, demonstrates that scholastic disputation is a formal skill detachable from substantive knowledge. One can win the dispute without knowing the object of the dispute. If one can win that way, then the form of disputation is, in itself, indifferent to truth.

Third blow: authority by quotation. The Sorbonne argues by appeal to authority: the Fathers, the councils, canon law. Rabelais quotes too, but his quotations wander. The Rabelaisian narrator summons Aristotle to justify absurdities, quotes the Bible about banquets, attributes to the Fathers sentences they never pronounced, gives exact references to chapters that do not exist. The whole mechanism of authoritative citation – which Pascal will later use seriously, to quote the casuists against themselves – is here parodied by excess. The reference becomes a comic ornament, a flourish of seriousness that points to nothing. For scholastic book culture, the attack is lethal. It does not say that the authorities are

false; it says that the practice of citation can be detached from any real authority and still function.

Fourth blow: the totalizing claim. Through its hierarchy of disciplines (theology above the other faculties; within theology, sentences above exegesis, and so on), the Sorbonne lays claim to total knowledge. Rabelais offers, in mirror image, his own totalizing program: Gargantua's famous letter to Pantagruel on education (chapter VIII of *Pantagruel*), where he lists everything Pantagruel must learn – Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Chaldean, Arabic, mathematics, astronomy, geography, natural history (“Que je voie un abysme de science”). In its enormity, the list parodies both the Sorbonne, through the totalizing device, and Erasmian humanism, through the ambition to universal knowledge. By this ambivalent parody, Rabelais shows that he knows every totalizing claim, including that of his own camp, can be ridiculed by the same technique. This is rare self-vigilance. Beneath the appearance of overflow, it shows a controlled lucidity about the conditions of his own weapon.

VII. THE SECONDARY TARGET: Picrochole, OR WAR

Alongside the main target, Sorbonne scholasticism, Rabelais inaugurates a secondary target with considerable posterity: the war of pretension, that is, the war triggered by motives so small that they become obscene. This is the Picrochole episode (*Gargantua*, chapters XXVI-LI), which takes up almost half the book and is, in all French prose, the first serious comic treatment of war.

The affair begins, as Rabelaisian affairs do, with a trivial detail. The shepherds of Grandgousier, Gargantua's father, sell fouaces, flat sweet cakes, to the peasants of the surrounding area. One day, the fouaciers of Lerné, a neighboring town under King Picrochole, refuse to sell their cakes to Grandgousier's shepherds and insult them. The shepherds answer with blows. The fouaciers return to Lerné complaining. Picrochole flies into a rage, mobilizes his army,

invades Grandgousier's territory, takes an abbey, devastates a town, captures a few monks, routs a few tenant farmers. Grandgousier, stunned, sends ambassadors offering full restitution for the fouaces – five baskets of them – and the dowry of one of his best cows. Picrochole refuses. He wants war.

Then comes the stroke of genius: Picrochole consults his counselors on the future of the campaign. The duke of Menuail, the count Spadassin, and Captain Merdaille lay before him a plan for world conquest. Picrochole must take Touraine, then Anjou, then Saintonge, then Gascony, then Catalonia, then Tunis, then Egypt, then Asia Minor, then Constantinople, then Babylonia. The details are precise, the routes drawn, the provisions calculated, the supply lines organized. At no point does Picrochole ask whether he has the means for this campaign. At no point do his counselors mention that he in fact possesses only three villages and four hundred soldiers. They plan universal empire from a quarrel over cakes, and Picrochole listens, nodding, already crowned in his own imagination.

As a target, the episode is pure invention. Before Rabelais, ancient and medieval literature had already staged comic wars (Aristophanes' *Acharnians*) or ridiculous warrior-heroes (the *miles gloriosus* of Plautus). But it had not isolated the proper mechanism of the war of pretension: war as the product of courtly flattery, a tiny grievance inflated into national honor, imaginary conquest substituted for the real situation. Rabelais fixes that target, and it will become, two centuries later, the preferred ground of Voltaire's *Candide*. The war of the Bulgars and the Abares in chapter III of *Candide* is, in its mechanism, an exact rewriting of the Picrocholine war: triggered by nothing, planned by flatterers, ending in desolation.

The target is secondary in Rabelais because it occupies only part of his work; it is primary because it escapes the narrow frame of anticlerical satire and touches one of the hardest human targets: collective cruelty. And here, remarkably, Rabelais succeeds

where his own theory of warm irony might seem to prevent him. Picrochole is ridiculous in the strong sense: his war is a ridiculous failure, his flight ridiculous, his end ridiculous (he finishes as a small-time shopkeeper in Lyon). Yet the episode as a whole is not merely comic. It contains, by contrast, a serious political thought. Grandgousier, the peaceable king, states the principle of just war, distinguishes legitimate defense from conquest, refuses plunder, and seeks a diplomatic settlement to the end. In the Picrochole episode, there is an underlying humanist political discourse, Erasmian in source (*Querela pacis*, 1517), pacifist in aim. The target is ridiculous; the counter-model is serious. This double articulation is what distinguishes Rabelais from mere farceurs and brings him close, on this precise point, to what Voltaire and, to a lesser degree, Pascal will do.

VIII. THE REGISTER: WARM, COSMIC, POPULAR

We can now fully name the Rabelaisian register, the most distinctive in this book because it stands at the opposite pole from Pascal's cold register and Voltaire's elegant one.

Rabelaisian laughter is *warm*. It is expressed physically, through the reader's body. The Rabelaisian sentence is long, accumulative, respiratory; it follows the breath, forces the breath, and finally exhausts it. Rabelais is better read aloud than silently, because the rhythm of his enumerations needs to be physically scanned. This register calls on saliva, diaphragm, voice, and ultimately the whole body.

Rabelaisian laughter is *cosmic*. It includes, in its scenario, humanity as a whole. In Rabelais, one laughs with peasants, soldiers, schoolboys, courtiers, monks (at least active monks like Frère Jean), and good kings (Grandgousier, Pantagruel). Laughter does not separate these classes; it gathers them into the same celebration. Mikhail Bakhtin, who devoted a major book to Rabelais in 1965, called this register the carnivalesque. The cultural function of the

medieval carnival was to suspend social hierarchy for a few days: all statuses were leveled; the master served the slave; the poor man dressed as a bishop; collective laughter dissolved, for a time, the order of classes. Rabelais transposes this carnivalesque device into literary prose and makes that temporary suspension a lasting condition of his writing.

Rabelaisian laughter is *popular*, but in a sense that needs qualification. It is not populist. Rabelais does not write in order to address the people or tell them what they want to hear. He writes for a mixed audience, learned and popular at once, capable of catching erudite references and, at the same time, laughing at peasant jokes. This double address is unique in sixteenth-century French prose and will recur only partially in Molière in the seventeenth. Through it, Rabelais invents a public that literate France did not yet know: a public in which the scholar and the tavern laugher laugh at the same moment, but not necessarily at the same thing. The scholar laughs at Janotus's macaronic Latin; the peasant laughs at drunk Janotus. The two laugh together, on the same page, without needing to spell out what they are laughing at.

This inclusiveness of warm laughter has a central consequence, one that separates Rabelais sharply from all his French successors. Rabelaisian laughter does not *separate*. It does not isolate the target in order to shame it; it includes the target in the general feast. Janotus de Bragmardo is not expelled from the community of laughers at the end of chapter XIX: Gargantua offers him sausages, sends him home loaded with gifts; he is ridiculous but loved. Picrochole, at the end of his disastrous war, is not humiliated like a defeated enemy. He is dismissed, becomes a small shopkeeper, and the narrator says he lives a life gentler than the one he would have had as king. This absence of separation is what Bakhtin calls carnivalesque ambivalence: laughter that degrades and regenerates at once, casts down and raises up, destroys majesty in order to return humanity.

This inclusiveness extends the liberating range of Rabelaisian

laughter. The reader comes out of it more joyful, freer, less willing to be intimidated by the next serious pretension. But it limits the polemical range. Rabelais does not point to an enemy to be struck down. He proposes a world in which pretension, whatever its form, is made less powerful by collective laughter. This polemical dilution is exactly what Pascal will concentrate, a century later, into a sharp weapon. Pascal will exclude; he will shame; he will isolate the target. Pascalian ridicule is cold because it is selective. Rabelaisian ridicule is warm because it is total.

IX. ETHICAL STANCE – WHAT DOES RABELAIS DEFEND?

We come to the fourth dimension of the grid, the one that proved necessary when tested against the preceding chapters: the practitioner's ethical stance. What does Rabelais deploy his weapon for? Against what, exactly, and for what, precisely?

The answer is harder to formulate than for Pascal (Augustinian rigorism) or Voltaire (freedom of conscience against cruelty). Rabelais does not defend a precise theological thesis, a particular moral grammar, or an articulated institutional program. What he defends, in my view, is an Erasmian Christian humanity – a formula that needs unpacking.

Rabelais is Christian. Since the nineteenth century, the question has been raised whether he was sincerely so. Some made him a hidden atheist; Lucien Febvre, in *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVIe siècle* (1942), settled that question definitively: one could not be an atheist in the sixteenth century in the modern sense, lacking the conceptual vocabulary required to formulate that position. Others made him a discreet evangelical; others still a Freemason before Freemasonry. The reasonable position is that he is Christian in the sense in which Erasmian humanists were Christian: favorable to a purified Christianity, centered again on the Gospel, hostile to mechanical devotion and exaggerated sacramental formalism, but without rupture from the Catholic institution.

Rabelais is Erasmian. He corresponded with Erasmus, called him his spiritual father, and shared most of his doctrinal positions: return to the original texts, criticism of popular superstitions, hostility to the excesses of the mendicant monks, hostility to scholasticism, plea for peace among Christian nations, attention to simple evangelical language. In the 1530s, the Erasmian program is a middle path between strict Sorbonne orthodoxy and the Lutheran break. That middle path is precious for understanding Rabelais. He does not attack the Catholic faith; he attacks the degradation of that faith by Parisian scholasticism and surface devotion. The position is fragile and will be crushed by the radicalization of the Wars of Religion, but in the 1530s it is still tenable, at least for someone who, like Rabelais, has cardinal protectors.

Positively, Rabelais defends a certain idea of Christian freedom. It finds its clearest expression in the abbey of Thélème (chapters LII-LVII of *Gargantua*), which Gargantua builds to reward Frère Jean and which is the only moment of pure utopia in the work. Thélème is the exact inverse of a traditional monastery. No outer wall. No clock. "Toute leur vie estoit employée non par loix, statuz ou reigles, mais selon leur vouloir et franc arbitre." No vows. No obligatory common life. One rule only: *Fais ce que vouldras* – do what you will. The narrator immediately adds that this rule, far from producing disorder, produces concord, because free people, well born, well instructed, and keeping honorable company have by nature an instinct and spur that always drives them toward virtuous deeds and draws them away from vice.

This Thélémitic utopia is the key to Rabelais's ethical stance. Rabelais believes, with the humanists, that well-educated human nature tends naturally toward virtue, and that excessive constraints (monastic rules, scholastic devices, Sorbonne obedience) are not merely useless but counterproductive, because they deform that natural tendency instead of cultivating it. The rule of Thélème is, properly speaking, an optimistic anthropological thesis: leave the human being free, and he will behave well. Such a thesis can be held

only if one believes in a certain natural goodness, a certain trust in well-born humanity. That is exactly what Parisian scholasticism, with its emphasis on the corruption of human nature, denied. Rabelais ridicules scholasticism not because he believes nothing, but because he believes something else: something more optimistic, more humanist, more Erasmian.

This ethical stance – the defense of a free, optimistic, anti-scholastic, Erasmian Christianity – explains several features of the Rabelaisian register. It explains why his laughter is warm: it celebrates a humanity capable of goodness, and that celebration cannot be cold. It explains why laughter is inclusive: what is being defended, Christian freedom, does not need to exclude its adversaries in order to establish itself. It is enough to make them lose their claim to authority, and freedom resumes its rights. It also explains why Rabelais does not produce, unlike Voltaire, a durable moral reversal. His position is positive rather than negative, open rather than polemical, and it does not have the edge that topples institutions.

Rabelais produced a *climate*. For three centuries, French prose breathed Rabelaisian air without always knowing it. Every comic, satirical, popular writer who allows himself hyperbole, lists, coarse materialization, mixed registers, joyful irreverence – Molière in part, Diderot often, Hugo in *Les Misérables*, Céline in *Voyage*, San-Antonio later – bears a Rabelaisian imprint. But none inherited from him a precise thesis to defend, an institutional fight to wage, a battle to win. The Rabelaisian ethical stance is transmitted as climate, not as program. That is its greatness, and it is also the limit that must now be named.

X. LIMIT: NOT AGAINST COLD CRUELTY

All the Rabelaisian techniques – dilation, hyperbolic list, coarse materialization – have, beyond their own reach, a condition of application. They work against a target that *pretends*, that

expands of itself, that invests itself with an *importance* the weapon can puncture. Faced with a target that does not pretend, does not expand, does not invest itself, faced with cold, procedural, anonymous cruelty, the Rabelaisian weapon no longer has purchase.

The Inquisition was active in the 1530s. The tribunal of the Holy Inquisition in Zaragoza regularly burned Judaizers. The tribunal of Toulouse, which would judge Calas two centuries later, already sat with its secret procedure. The Reformation was beginning to produce its own pyres, in Geneva and elsewhere. Christian judicial cruelty, in both Catholic and Protestant forms, was a daily reality under which Rabelais worked.

Yet Rabelais never directs his weapon against that cruelty. He laughs at superstitious monks, ignorant doctors, drunken judges, boastful petty kings, and prolix theologians. He does not laugh at the stake. He does not laugh at judicial torture. He does not laugh at the red-hot iron. Why?

A first answer, biographical, is that he had every reason to be afraid, and one does not attack through ridicule a device that can burn one alive. That answer is insufficient. Pascal too was afraid, and Pascal struck hard. Voltaire too was afraid, and Voltaire struck harder still. Fear by itself does not explain the avoidance.

The real answer is technical. Judicial cruelty, in its procedural form, does not *pretend*. It does not swell. It does not present itself as glorious. It presents itself as the mechanical execution of a regulated procedure. The tribunal that condemns a heretic does not boast; it rules. The executioner does not discourse; he executes. The inquisitor who interrogates does not declaim; he compiles the case file. The whole procedural machine shares one technical feature: it has no surface that dilation can burst. There is nothing to inflate, because the machine already presents itself at minimum volume, as the pure execution of a norm.

Voltaire, studied in chapter IV, will invent the weapon suited to this target. His litotes – for instance in *Candide* III, where musket fire removes from the best of worlds some nine or ten

thousand scoundrels infecting its surface – works in precisely the opposite direction from Rabelaisian dilation. It lowers the tone where the cruelty is immense, and the gap produces horror in the reader's conscience. Rabelais enlarges; cruelty, already immense in fact but small in its self-presentation, cannot be enlarged further. The machine is too discreet for Rabelaisian dilation. To attack it, one must pass through the inverse path, litotic contraction, which Voltaire will invent two hundred years later.

This limit is not a weakness in Rabelais. It is the precise adjustment of his weapon to his target: inflated scholastic pretension. Rabelais adapted his tool perfectly to his enemy. The problem is that his enemy was not the only one. There was, at the same moment, another enemy – judicial cruelty – that required another tool. Rabelais did not invent that tool because it was not his fight; and one cannot reproach an ironist for failing to solve every problem of his century.

But from the perspective of this book, one can measure what Rabelais cannot do. Without Pascal to add the sharp precision of coldness, without Voltaire to add litotes against cruelty, the French school of ridicule would have remained incomplete. Rabelais is the first master. He carried warm irony against pretension to an unmatched level. But by himself he is not enough. The French tradition is powerful precisely because, after him, it added complementary weapons to its arsenal.

XI. CODA – TOWARD PASCAL

Rabelais dies on April 9, 1553, in Paris, in the parish of Saint-Paul, at an address that can no longer be reconstructed. His fifth book, the *Cinquième Livre de Pantagruel*, appears partially in 1564 in an edition certainly not authorized by him; the last four chapters especially are of disputed authenticity and were probably reworked after his death. His family (he had two children, legitimate or not) quickly disappears from history. His tomb is unknown.

The work, however, makes its slow way. Formally condemned by the Sorbonne in 1543 and placed on the Roman Index in 1564, it nevertheless continues to circulate, all the more because it continues to be read by the protégés and friends of his former protectors. The second half of the sixteenth century, absorbed by the Wars of Religion, is not favorable to its diffusion. The humanist freedom that had made Rabelais possible is crushed between post-Tridentine Catholic orthodoxy and Calvinist rigorism. The classical seventeenth century, established with Malherbe and the court of Louis XIII, regards Rabelais as a coarse author, a writer of the Gothic age that precedes the polished age. The classical writers feel for Rabelais a distant admiration mixed with embarrassment.

What they retain from him is a register: verve, verbal invention, comic fertility. They do not retain his battle against scholasticism, because Sorbonne scholasticism is no longer, in the classical age, what it had been in the sixteenth century. The battle is no longer current; ridicule no longer has the same object; warm Rabelaisian laughter sounds, in the polished court of Versailles, like an echo from another time.

Yet something remains. Since Rabelais, French prose contains a register that did not exist before him: a register in which one can remain learned and still make the body laugh. That register is available. It awaits its use. The use will come: in 1656, Pascal will open the cycle of the *Provinciales* with a voice that is not Rabelaisian in tone (Pascal is cold, Rabelais warm), but is Rabelaisian in technical possibility: the possibility of writing a serious pamphlet in non-Latinized French prose, with an irony not limited to the register of diplomatic chancery. Without Rabelais, French prose would have remained an instrument either learned (Calvin), narrative (the chroniclers), or worldly (Marguerite de Navarre). Rabelais added a string to it: the polemical string, the one that will allow Pascal to write the *Provinciales*, Molière to write *Tartuffe*, Voltaire to write *Candide*.

Pascal and Voltaire will both acknowledge the debt at precise

moments. Pascal cites Rabelais in the *Pensées*, on the subject of true eloquence that mocks academic eloquence: a direct reminiscence of Janotus's harangue. Voltaire, in his judgments on Rabelais, oscillates between admiration and repulsion. He treats him as "the first of buffoons" while reproaching him for having lavished "erudition, filth, and boredom." The ambivalence is revealing: it recognizes greatness and regrets coarseness. Voltaire admits what precedes him without being able to reproduce the bodily warmth that characterizes it. French classicism, of which Voltaire is the extreme heir, has lost the Rabelaisian body along the way.

It is this passage, from Rabelais's body to Voltaire's elegance, that must now be reconstructed. The technical link is Pascal. He is the subject of the next chapter.

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