Poetry into Prose: Ronsard and Belleforest

Bodo L. O. Richter

Within the highly permissive copyright laws of the Renaissance, the transmutation of prose passages into poetry was by no means exceptional although the would-be poet, following the instruction of the masters, naturally was much more likely to look for his 'innutrition' among the lyric masterpieces of classical antiquity. We know from du Bellay's Deffence that contemporary or near-contemporary authors were not categorically excluded from the company of their venerable seniors. Thus we find Petrarch, Sannazaro, and Ariosto among those considered worthy of imitation. 'Modern' writers in prose were not similarly recommended as models. Nevertheless, going back some years, we know of the importance of various chroniclers for Jean Lemaire de Belge's poetic vision of the origins of France and, in his wake, for Ronsard. Much more limited is Ronsard's debt to Erasmus and du Bellay's to Aretino, whereas Scève's borrowings from the Dialogi of Speroni, originally pointed out by Parturier and recently reaffirmed by I. D. McFarlane, assume considerable proportions.\(^1\) While it would be easy to extend this list, the opposite route, poetry into prose, is largely untraveled. In fact, the appearance of fragments of Ronsard's poetry in Belleforest's prose may be an aspect of imitation in sixteenth-century France which so far has gone unnoticed.

The name of François de Belleforest (1530-1583) has always remained overshadowed by 'le Prince des Poètes' whose friendship he sought with a sheepish devotion that eventually gave way to frustration. To be sure, Belleforest is not unknown: an author who has left nearly sixty works to the world, some of them folios, must have made a dent somewhere. One can find his entire known production if one combines the entries in Cioranescu's bibliography with those by Saulnier in the Dictionnaire des lettres françaises: Le seizième siècle.\(^2\) Two thirds of the titles represent translations, the rest 'il a escrit de son invention,' as a contemporary bibliographer believed.\(^3\)

In books dealing with history and historiography the erstwhile annalist of Charles IX fares relatively well. Historians of his own age saw in him enough of a rival and dissenter to call him inept and a scribbler. Such was the case with the Huguenots La Popelinière and Du Haillan. Later students, less hindered by religious bias, have shown more equanimity. Augustin Thierry detected in Belleforest streaks of independent thinking: 'Il rejette positivement, dût-il encourir la défaveur du public, la descendence troyenne.'\(^4\) and it is on this very issue, the purported Trojan descent of the French, that the adulation of Ronsard turned into acrimony. In our own century, Geoffroy Atkinson felt that as an 'auteur géographique' our polygraph 'avait ... le sentiment très clair de ce qui était vraisemblable.'\(^5\) Pierre Villey stressed Belleforest's share in the dissemination of ideas in another capacity, that of the translator, and in this domain Villey's Les Sources d'idées au seizième siècle\(^6\) should be complemented by Frank Hook's The French Bandello\(^7\) and Arthur Stabler's recent articles which add new perspectives to the older studies on Shakespeare and Belleforest.\(^8\)

It is as a poet that Belleforest has struggled in vain. Marcel Raymond, in his L'Influence de Ronsard sur la poésie française, has allotted six pages to one of the most prolific 'versificateurs officiels de cette époque,' but, despite an obvious effort to be fair, Raymond
concludes that Belleforest ‘est à cent lieues de l’esprit de la Pléiade.’ The borrowings of this fanatic ‘ronsardisant’ were so numerous and blatant that on one occasion Raymond momentarily forgets the Renaissance clemency towards pirates: ‘[Le Chant pastoral de 1559 est] un des plagiais les plus remarquables que nous ayons rencontrés.’ Only once did Belleforest muster enough insight to confess that ‘Ronsard ... s’est rendu plus admirable qu’imitable.’

In looking over the many Belleforest items owned by the Newberry Library in Chicago I noticed two prose pamphlets that suggested a possible extension of Ronsard’s influence into this unsuspected terrain. Actually, the first hint that this line of investigation might prove useful stemmed from the fact that Belleforest’s historical juvenilia, the Histoire des neuf roys Charles de France of 1568 recalls the title and some of the exhortations of Ronsard’s Institution pour l’adolescence du roy Charles neufiesme de ce nom of 1562. Another guidepost was the inclusion of substantial passages from the Franciade in Belleforest’s ponderous Grandes Annales et histoire générale de France, published in 1579 by Gabriel Buon, the chief printer of Ronsard’s works. The running censure of Ronsard’s epic failure within the rubrics of an annalistic work could hardly be insignificant.

The two pamphlets that concern us here are both dated January 12, 1568 in the Privilège and they appeared during that year. The one that suggests more directly an affinity with Ronsard is Remonstrance au Peuple de Paris, de demeurer en la foy de leurs ancêtres. It comprises thirty-five leaves, being slightly longer than the companion piece, Discours des Presages et des miracles advenus en la personne du Roy, et parmy la France, dès le commencement de son regne. Therefore, as pamphlets go, both of them are fairly long. On Ronsard’s side, our attention is naturally focused on his Remonstrance au Peuple de France. Nor can we fail to look for a kindling of Belleforest’s indignation in the Discours des Misères, in its Continuation, and in the last of Ronsard’s polemical poems of this group, ‘le quatrième volet de ce rentable satirique,’ as Gustave Cohen has called it, the Responce aux Injures et calomnies, de ie ne sçay quels predicans, et ministres de Genève, where vitriol and honey are poured forth in such a curious mixture. Finally, we must remember that Belleforest’s appetite was so voracious that no part of Ronsard’s oeuvre could be considered safe.

The original imprint of the Remonstrance au Peuple de France, Gabriel Buon, 1563, did not carry the author’s name, the rule rather than the exception where pamphlets are concerned. Ronsard clarified the subject of his tract by adding, right on the title page, the final admonition of St. Paul in his Epistle to the Romans: ‘Je vous prie frères, de prendre garde à ceux qui font dissensions et scandales contre la doctrine que vous avez apprise, et vous retirés d’eux.’ This eagerness to defend the traditional belief and to ward off the subversive influence of ‘une secte nouvelle (Institution, v.70) finds expression in several poems of this group. In the Remonstrance we read, ‘de tant de nouvellez je ne suis curieux;/ Il me plait d’imiter le train de mes ayeux’ (vv. 89-90); in the Continuation Ronsard indigently rejects the accusation of atheism leveled at him by the two ‘surveillans,’ the Huguenot spies: ‘... apellés vous Athée / La personne qui point n’a de son coeur ostée / La foy de ses ayeux? ... (vv. 159-161); or in the Discours à Guillaume des Autels where the poet warns of the danger to ‘la loy des vieux’ (v.45).

Belleforest echoes Ronsard’s conservatism in the very title of his Remonstrance, where he exhorts the people of Paris de demeurer en la foy de leurs ancêtres. The leitmotif of the tract is that ‘quelque religion que vous ayez nouvellement semée’ inevitably brings
about a disastrous 'changement d'estats' (Rem. 10v°). The historian from Comminges goes out to buttress his argument with examples from the past: '... m'en feront foy toutes les histoires anciennes, and la misere mesme de ce temps [my emphasis] que jamais faux service ne fut annoncé ... que le monde n'ayt veu un ne sçay quel bouleversement de son intégrité (Rem. 2v°). Belleforest realized that in 1567 the 'nouvelle doctrine' already was several years and two wars removed from the definite assertion of Calvinism in 1560. Therefore he says that he had an encounter with the revolutionary ferment of the movement 'il y a plus de cinq ans' (Rem. 17r°), i.e. about the time Ronsard began to fight with his pen.

Both Ronsard and Belleforest consider Arianism and Manicheism, heresies of the third century, as the antecedents of the present threat to the Church. About a thousand years later, the Albigenses did their subversive work. To Ronsard they seemed crazed, to Belleforest pestiferous. When we come to 'la tierce, et generale heresie, la plus pernicieuse et seditieuse de toutes' (Rem. 10v°), the sowers of evil were Wyclif and Hus. Ronsard had put these reformers at the leaden breast of the allegorical monster 'Opinion' (Rem. vv. 265-266), already introduced in the Discours des Miseres as 'peste du genre humain' (v.134). Opinion, the feathered monster with a hundred tongues becomes Belleforest's 'idre d'heresie,' disfigured by 'des serpenteaux nez' (Rem. 12v°), a 'monstre a plusieurs testes' (Rem. 4v°) which emerges in the countryside and terribly scares anybody within sight. In Ronsard's prosopopeia the serpentine mother breathes her soul into Luther, 'Et son venin mortel luy crache en la poitrine' (Rem. v. 320), where we easily recognize Belleforest's vituperation of the earlier heretics: 'Arrius, et ses complices [ont] vomy le venin de leur pestifere poitrine' (Rem. 4v°).

In the wake of Luther, 'le pere du Mensonge,' 'le Prince de division' (Rem. 12v°) comes a whole flock of reformers, headed by Calvin, 'nombre infiny d'autres qui ont semé ceste yvroie' (Rem. 11r°), 'the vicious grain called Ray,' as Cotgrave translates, which turns up in Ronsard, via St. Matthew, in verse 445 of the Responces aux Injures, 'Je voy bien que l'yraye estouffe le bon blé.' Last on Ronsard's and Belleforest's virtually identical lists comes the reformer who is closest to them in time and importance, Théodore de Bèze. But in this instance the immediacy of Ronsard's experience, as reflected in the moving verses of the Continuation, has at least not been imitated by Belleforest.

However, where the Huguenots and their kind are concerned, we find a wealth of 'épithètes significatifs.' The 'Evangile armée' of Ronsard (Cont. v.119) becomes an 'Evangile ... planté par armes' (Rem. 12v°), Evangile being feminine for Ronsard and masculine for Belleforest. The 'beaux Predicans' in verse 169 of the Continuation re-appear as 'beaux Docteurs' (Rem. 8r°); the 'mignots' and their 'mignotises' occur on both sides, and their 'cousps effeminnés' (Rem. v. 800) are unmistakably the 'actes effeminez' charged by Belleforest (Rem. 4v°). The 'galans' and 'paillardes' are taken to task by both writers although 'paillardise' occurs much more frequently in Belleforest, it being the key word in his protracted attack on Luther's attitude towards marriage and divorce: (a discussion entirely lacking in Ronsard who really touches upon none of the controversial issues). A further checking of the verbal arsenal reveals close replicas of Ronsard's 'escollier debauché,' the 'fardés langages,' and the bewitching 'miel empoisonné' or 'doux breuvage.' The vandalism and family strife charged to the Huguenots are etched by both pens in acid, as is the call for extirpation, although this surely was a common request among pamphleteers in general. In order to achieve victory, not only weapons but also
wiles will have to be used and both advocates of force recommend 'les ruses d'un Ulysse' (Rem. 8v6). For Ronsard, foreign intervention is not the solution whereas Belleforest, at the time he wrote, considered outside help a matter of urgency in order to match the power of the Huguenots and their increasing enlistment of foreign assistance.

Ronsard's final, relentless call to arms in the Remonstrance, with its baroque tonality, and similar imprecations by the poet are handled by the emulator in his own effective though necessarily much less poetic way, 'Vivez heureux en l'anéantissement des heresies, chastiment des obstinez, et reconnaissance de vostre Dieu.' These lines would seem to belong to Belleforest's own Remonstrance; instead, they come from the other, more benignly titled pamphlet, Discours des Presages et des miracles advenez en la personne du Roy, et parmy la France, dès le commencement de son regne. In two pamphlets that seem to have been written consecutively, if not simultaneously, we expect a similar intonation. In fact, despite the very different title, we can see quite early in the Presages, on the verso of leaf four, that the attitude towards the enemy is by no means mitigated: 'Quel plus grand essay de la constance du Roy en la solidité de la pure doctrine sçauroit on imaginer, que de le voir parmy les Docteurs sathaniques disputans et voimissant les blasphèmes apris en l'escole de Calvin, sans que pour cela il aye gousté de leur viande,' a passage which also shows an affinity with lines 70-78 of the 'Epistre au Lecteur' in prose that ushers in the Response aux Injures.

I have already pointed out that Belleforest found grist for his Remonstrance in one line of the entreaty which Ronsard addressed to de Bèze, 'Ne presche plus en France une Evangile armée' (Cont. v.119). It took some finessing to put the next verse, 'Un Christ epistollé tout noircy de fumée' into the other pamphlet, where we find Ronsard's powerful image transformed into an emblem of vilified Truth, 'enfumée de poudre et de salpêtre' (Presages, 20v), while 'armez et epistolez' is reserved, a few lines below, for the conspirators at Amboise. In other instances we shall have to look far beyond the 'retable satirique' of Ronsard. For example, we can follow Belleforest's antithetical composite 'douce-pernicieuse liqueur' (Presages, 28v), the Lutheran potion, all the way back to Ronsard's 'douce inhumaine' in the sonnet of the nightmare, in the Amours of 1552, 'Espovanté je cherche une fontaine,' where the appeal 'Amy sauve moy du danger' and the reference to 'un larron estranger' and his murderous intent made the applicability of the political situation all too easy. Of course Belleforest's predilection for compound words can lead us back even farther, to Chapter VI of the second Book of the Deffence.

Ronsard's belief in prodigies and prognostications is well known. We read in Albert-Marie Schmidt's La Poésie scientifique en France au XVIe siècle: 'Aussi Ronsard, à mesure qu'il prend de l'âge, accorde-t-il une attention toujours plus maniaque aux signes augu-raux.' In the Discours Ronsard chides all those who stubbornly cast aside the authority of the ancient prophets and omens such as 'songes menaçants' and 'hideuses comettes' which clearly forecast 'que l'an soixante et deux/Rendroit de tous costés les Francais malheureux' (vv.97-98). Since Belleforest puts 'présages' on his masthead, he is bound to make his attitude clear. Portents are called 'assurez' (10v) and they must not be regarded with superstition (26v). 'Souvienne toy que les presages envoyez de Dieu te doivent servir d'advertisement veritable - where veritable should be stressed - du courroux de Dieu' (15v). Among these dependable portents Belleforest counts new stars, abnormal meteorological phenomena, fires, visions of various kinds, and yet, strange to say, he feels uneasy about the qualifications of comets and eclipses.

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The basis for divination in Ronsard's *Discours* and in the *Presages* of Belleforest is the ancient interpretation of weather-signs. In one passage, comprising verses 43 to 50, Ronsard beseeches Catherine to take more resolute control of the storm-tossed boat that is France, otherwise a 'piteux naufrage' must be expected. The imagery supplied by hail and high water is rather conventional and the references to 'la gresle et la pluye, et la fureur des cieux' which have irritated 'la mer de vens seditieux' are too general to alert us to any then recent weather conditions. Sixty verses later we pass from the general to the particular:

*Le Ciel qui a pleuré tout le long de l'année,*  
*Et Seine qui courait d'une vague éfrenée,*  
*Et bestail et pasteurs largement ravissoit,*  
*De son malheur futur Paris avertissait,*  
*Et semboit que les eaux en leur rage profonde*  
*Voulussent renoyer une autre fois le monde.*  
*Cela nous predisoit que la terre, et les cieux*  
*Menaçoient nostre chef d'un mal prodigieux.*

(vv.107-114)

As Laumonier has pointed out, the ominous message carried by the flood waters concerned the days between March 16 and 25 of 1562 when an armed confrontation between Protestants and Catholics inside Paris threatened to get out of hand.  

Belleforest, the historian, mentions a 'grand débord de Seine' during the reign of Chilperic I in the sixth century as a preamble to the flood witnessed by Ronsard: 'Mais quoy peuple François n'as tu pas veu le semblable l'an 1562 que Seine se deborda si extremement que en plusieurs rues de Paris on n'y pouvoit passer que par des bateaux: de quoy te fust signification ce desbord et inondation, que la guerre esmue pour fait de religion ...' (15v°-16r°). The threat to the King's safety which, Ronsard felt, was inherent in the extraordinary behaviour of the elements, was expressed by Belleforest in the following manner: 'Quel plus grand signe et argument voulez vous de cecy [that God has consistently protected Charles] que ceux du Ciel, et des saisons et des Elementz advertissants le Roy de se tenir sur ses gardes?' (8v°). Here we could comment, once again, with Ronsard in his *Remonstrance*,  

'De tel arbre tel fruit' (v.641) or with Belleforest in his, 'L'on coignoit tousjours l'arbre à son fruit' (9r°).

There is another curious reference to the year 1562 in the *Presages*. The author tells us of a long celestial battle over beleaguered Jerusalem, 'à savoir de chevaucheurs garnis de lances dressés [sic] par esles' (10v°), a story related by Pope Gregory the Great. Belleforest's belief was intense enough to make him see a similar encounter over Paris 'par un fort long espace de temps' (11r°). He hastens to sustain his vision '[qui] n'estoit point illusion telle que celle des Necromanciers'; rather, it was a trustworthy message from above.

Belleforest's concern in 1567 with events or pseudo-events of 1562 is indeed ominous. To what extent the epigone adopted and also rejected the thought of the master in a broader sense is a complex problem, one aspect of which I have discussed elsewhere. I hope to have shown here that Ronsard's poetry did not only reappear as poetry and that Belleforest indulged in a further extension of the canon of imitation during the Renaissance. But it surely would be an exaggeration to say that this historian's tribute to Ronsard's poetry adds another magnitude to the brightest star of the Pléiade.

*State University of New York at Buffalo*
Notes

1 On Speroni and the Délite, see The 'Délite' of Maurice Scève, ed. I. D. McFarlane (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 27; 482-490.

2 Alexandre Cioranescu, Bibliographie de la littérature française du seizième siècle (Paris, 1959), entries 3383-3435 and the bibliography attached by Saulnier to his article on Belleforest in Dictionnaire ..., ed. G. Grente (Paris, 1951), pp. 94-95.


4 Dix Ans d'études historiques, 5ème éd. (Paris, 1846), where section XI contains the article on Belleforest, pp. 339-43.


6 (Paris [1912]), pp. 140-142; 175-183.

7 The University of Missouri Studies, Vol. XXII, No. 1 (Columbia, Mo., 1948).


9 Raymond, L'Influence, II, 11.

10 La Cosmographie universelle de tout le Monde. Auteur en partie Munster, mais beaucoup plus augmentée ornée et enrichie, par François de Belle-Forest, Comingeois ..., 2 vols. (Paris, 1575), I, fol. 322v° ('Du Pays, et Princes de Vendosme').


12 Randle Cotgrave, A French and English Dictionary ... (London, 1673). Quoted from the rather late edition in my possession.

13 'Evangile a été longtemps fém., il l'est encore au XVIIe s.' O. Bloch and W. von Wartburg, Dictionnaire étyymologique de la langue française, 4e éd. (Paris, 1964).

14 Huguet lists only the older paillardie (cf. Godefroy, Lexique de l'ancien français), for which he gives three examples. Belleforest's paillardise is not the only contribution that this author could have made to the Dictionnaire de la langue française du seizième siècle, even within the narrow framework of the two pamphlets under discussion here. Among words found in the pamphlets but not in Huguet we could add the following: les requerans; mille vaines interpretations; le gazouillis (dated by Block and v. W. as 'XVIe s.'). souillure and abomination; le frain aux dens; Senat de Paris; des basteleurs masqués; ces difformateurs d'estats; des hommes qui se laissent embeguiner; ces desseneurs de reformation; grattent leur roigne de trop près.


17 The story is taken up again, in slightly elaborated form, on 27v° of the Presages. It is not surprising that Gregory I's preoccupation with miracles, superstitions, priestly practices, and mythological reflections upon angels and demons had great appeal for Belleforest.