Rereading Rabelais' Sacred Noise¹

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Dans l'épisode des paroles degelées, les marins du navire Thalamège arrivent dans une zone où des mots gelés fondent et éclatent lorsqu'ils sont touchés. Les chercheurs ont tenté plusieurs hypothèses d'interprétation de cet épisode, néanmoins, il semble qu'il y ait toujours un aspect dont on ne rend pas compte. Cet article propose que la richesse de signification rabelaisienne est mieux mise en lumière lorsque l'analyse de cet épisode tient compte à la fois de l'herméneutique de l'Écriture, de la satire ménipéenne, et de l'approche philologique.

In his "Prologue de l'auteur" to *Le Quart Livre*, Rabelais states his relationship to Scripture: "ie revere," he says, "la sacrosainte *parole* de bonnes nouvelles, c'est l'Évangile."² ["(I revere the) sacrosanct word of good news (...), that's the Gospel"].³ By privileging "*parole*" early in *Le Quart Livre* as a possible translation for the original Johannine *logos*, Rabelais prepares the terrain for his enigmatic use of the vernacular later in the text. In the "*parolles degelées*" episode, Pantagruel, Panurge, and other sailors aboard the Thalamège find themselves surrounded by stalactite-like structures that melt, bleed, and burst, releasing sounds and morsels of history in the process. In "Pantagruelian" fashion, the shipmates proffer various explanations regarding the provenance of the audible oddities, and, as they do so, implicitly explore the interstices where scriptural hermeneutics meets philology (*philo-logos*) and satire in Renaissance France. I propose to do two things in my reading of the melting words episode.⁴ First: to establish the rich hermeneutic tapestry implicit in Rabelais' use of the "*parolles*" as a translation of the Johannine *logos*. Second: to explore the implications of Rabelais' satirical encounter with holy words in the "*parolles degelées*" episode.⁵

“Parolle” enters the nascent French language in the Middle Ages, a probable derivative of the vulgar Latin *paraula* meaning “noise, news, or fame,” but also a parable, yielding the French word “parabole” as well.⁶ In Renaissance France, Lefèvre d’Etaples’ 1523 *Nouveau Testament* offers “parolle” as a translation of the Greek *logos*, participating therefore in debates, which had precedents in many patristic sources.⁷ Lefèvre d’Etaples’ translation thus implies the progression from the Greek “original” to its Vulgate and vernacular successors, which Rabelais pursues in his fourth book. To situate Rabelais’ espousal of *parolle*, it is thus necessary to place Lefèvre d’Etaples’ translation along the continuum in which it is implicit.⁸

En arche ein ho logos, kai ho logos ein pros ton theon, kai theos en ho logos. outos ein en arche pros ton theon. panta di auton eleneto, kai choris auton eleneto oude en.⁹

In principio erat Verbum et Verbum erat apud Deum et Deus erat Verbum hoc erat in principio apud Deum omnia per ipsum facta sunt et sine ipso factum est nihil quod factum est.¹⁰

Au commencement estoit la parolle, et la parolle estoit avec dieu. Icele estoit au commencement avec dieu. Toutes choses ont este faictes par elle: sans icelle rien n’a este fait qui ait este fait.¹¹

Logos means more than a word. It suggests “all kinds of oral communication,” which generally include saying, declaring, expressing, meaning, and commanding, to name a few.¹² In patristic sources, *logos* might refer to “rationality,” “reckoning,” “the trinity of the Godhead,” or to “man’s communion with God.”¹³ The *logos* of the New Testament, which yields *parolle* for Lefèvre d’Etaples and, later, for Rabelais, implies Christ: the underlying discourse that subtends, enables, and infuses the discursive functioning of things by embodying itself as man. *Logos* alludes to the genesis of speech in the Biblical context, to man as speech, and to the flesh as a means through which the divine becomes apparent in the quotidian exchanges of *logoi*, of many words. Lefèvre d’Etaples’ *parolle* is noteworthy not only because it displaces the Vulgate *verbum* as a translation of the *logos*, but because it also doubles its worth in the vernacular by suggesting *parabole*: the parable, which is the deployment of figurative language, through which the Christological speaks in enigmatic terms.

In the beginning, therefore, was the *logos*.¹⁴ *Logos*’ rich history, whose multiple resonances are omnipresent in recent critical theory, owes a debt to Heraclitean philosophy for which the *logos* represents the cosmos, to the Stoics for whom it is the universe and everything in it, and the wise would do well to live by it, to Origen for whom the *logos* is wisdom that accompanies,

anticipates, and attaches itself to the discursive act, and to Augustine who finds an eternal Christ in the *logos* that “already always is, and does not require birth.”¹⁵ In this suggestive movement between one *word* and another, one meaning and another, each hinting at the other’s history, and dependent upon it for its own articulation and displacement, Michel Jeanneret’s contention is apropos:

Incapables d’accéder à la butée qui en arrêterait le mouvement, les signes [à la Renaissance] se renvoient les uns aux autres, dans un glissement sans fin où tel mot fait allusion à tel autre et telle chose en implique une autre, aucun énoncé ni aucun objet ne saisissant jamais la vérité ultime, mais des bribes et des reflets qui doivent être complétés, et ainsi de suite. Pris dans un tissu de relations multiples et témoins d’une réalité infiniment complexe, les signes, par ailleurs, sont polysémiques ; leurs significations, plurielles, approximatives et incertaines, défient la totalisation.¹⁶

[Incapable of reaching the abutment that would arrest their movement, (Renaissance) signs refer to each other, in an endless sliding in which one word alludes to another and one thing implies another. No utterance, no one thing grasps ultimate truth. There are only fragments and reflections, which must be completed, and so on. Caught in a web, moreover, of multiple resonances, and witnesses to an infinitely complex reality, Renaissance signs are polysemous. Their meanings, which are plural, vague and uncertain, defy attempts to account for them all (“la totalisation”).]¹⁷

From his prologue to *Le Quart Livre*, where he speaks of “la sacrosainte *parole* de bonnes nouvelles, c’est l’Evangile,” Rabelais is invested in what Jeanneret refers to as “une réalité infiniment complexe” in which copious signs issue from textual interpretation, and from Scripture as text.¹⁸ “Infiniment” is pivotal here since it evokes a vast terrain in which words (“*parolles*”) suggest and recall other words and signs *ad infinitum*. As philosophers, the Skeptics were aware of the potential difficulty involved in exploring something *ad infinitum*. While exploring something *ad infinitum* helped situate a philosophical position’s depth across time, it demonstrated how impossible it was to do so adequately, for perfect situation of a position, idea, or word demanded some delving into its history. The further into the history of an idea one dove, the more impossible it became to excavate the totality of a body of knowledge due to the sheer depth and ancestry of an idea, which induced a suspension of judgment regarding Truth. Such a quest for absolute knowledge becomes utopian in some sense, as it presumes that what one subject discovers in his quest for Truth, the meaning that accounts for all meaning (“la totalisation”), can account for and explain what countless others experience alternatively. Everything becomes relative: relative to the time of its inscription, to the philosopher, to his beliefs, and to everything that might participate in the inscription of what the philosopher assumes to be truth.¹⁹

Part of a text's sacredness ("sacrosainte parole"), therefore, might be due to its evocativeness, to what Jeanneret refers to as a perpetual "sliding" ("glissement") or *enfolding* and *unfolding* of the interpretative possibilities of one word, as it reflects and hints at the same possibilities in other words and yet retains something enigmatic and uncertain of its own. *Parolle*, for example, is the *logos* in Middle French and yet it is not. Only when considered in relation to the many other words (*parolles-verbs-logoi*) that are linked to it does it exist richly and in the fullness of its own meaning, of its own difference, invalidating the utopian impulse that would seek to arrest one meaning, one point in a word's history. Rabelais enjoys the vernacular *parole* so much in his fourth volume that *parolles* and its variants appear more in *Le Quart Livre* than in any other of Rabelais' books.²⁰

In chapters 55 and 56 of *Le Quart Livre*, the "parolles dégelées" episode, the Johannine metaphor is implicitly reviewed as Pantagruel and his companions find themselves amidst melting words ("parolles") that drop from above. Pantagruel conjectures what the origin of the *parolles* might be, and, as he does so, *Le Quart Livre* explores the humanist's relationship with original classical and biblical sources and invites its reader to evaluate the complex and interdependent relationships entertained by both.

Mais entendons. J'ay leu qu'un Philosophe nommé Petron estoit en ceste opinion que fussent plusieurs mondes soy touchans les vns les autres en figure triangulaire aequilaterale, en la pate & centre desquelz disoit estre le manoir de Verité, et la habiter des parolles, les Idees, les Exemplaires & protraictz de toutes choses passées & futures: autour d'icelles estre le Siecle. Et en certaines années par longs interualles, part d'icelles tomber sur les humains comme catarrhes et comme tomba la rousée sur la toizon de Gedeon: part là rester réservée pour l'advenir, iusques à la consommation du Siecle. (135)

[But let's listen. I've read that a philosopher named Petron was of the opinion that there were several worlds touching one another in the form of an equilateral triangle, at the base and center of which he says were the abode of Truth and the habitat of Words, Ideas, the exemplars and images of all things past and future, and all around these was the Age. And in certain years, at long intervals, part of these fell upon humans like catarrhs, and as the dew fell upon Gideon's fleece; part of them remain reserved for the future, until the consummation of the Age.] (557)

An obscure and unknown writer, Petron, known to us only through Plutarch, becomes equally capable of positing a cosmology worth pursuing as the sailors try to understand what is happening. Petron's cosmology provides a Platonic sphere in which Truth, *parolles*, Ideas and copies (Exemplaires) cohabit. Since Rabelais, as Screech notes, is the only author to translate Plutarch's original *logoi* as *parolles*, Rabelais addresses the plurality that inheres in the

original *logos* but which is now bestowed upon, or dispersed in, the vernacular *parole*: it becomes the *parolles* (plural), and, quite possibly, the many subjects that use words.²¹ As Timothy Hampton notes, the construction of a national identity through the use of French as the official language, instituted by Francis I's royal edict in 1539, occurred as a culture of Latinity gave way to the murmurings of a nascent sense of the French self.²² This "birth" of a French self suggests the importance of *parolles*, words, but more than words: speech acts in the vernacular that displace the original *logos* and *verbum*, and create a French identity whose language is its own even if still dependent upon its classical predecessors.²³ As Rabelais addresses alternative *logoi* in his text, he offers possible alternatives for the generation of meaning in the cosmos and in the French identity, even if those meanings might contend with the Biblical prescription, which depends upon Christ and his ability to embody Truth, speech, past prophecy, and the future divinity of the human race he has come to save. Classical, vernacular, and biblical originals coexist in the Rabelaisian cosmology and it is in the play between them that the Rabelaisian text occurs.

In Plutarch, however, Petron, whom Rabelais cites, is but a small part of an extended discussion exploring the diminished importance of the sacred oracles. The widely traveled Spartan, Cleombotrus, states that he has learnt that there are 183 worlds "arranged in a triangle, sixty on each side, with three fixed at the angles: each lightly made contact with the next as they revolved; and the area within the triangle was the common hearth of the universe, and was called the Plain of Truth." In the Plain of Truth "principles, forms, and exemplars of things past and present" exist and are available to humans every ten thousand years.²⁴ Petron of Himera is said to be the author of the theory, which is discredited by Cleombotrus's interlocutor, Demetrius—as Plato himself made similar arguments if only to abandon them. Petron is brought into some relief in the Rabelaisian text, where the author uses him to subordinate the Biblical cosmological provision to the Petronic oracular *exemplum*, just as Rabelais simultaneously culls the Petronic example from its oracular setting and places it within a Christian context, associating it with Gideon.²⁵ This is no doubt a possible "Christianisation" of the Petronic narrative, but also an exploration of the classical or pagan potential of the Scriptural text, showing Rabelais' investment in a plural hermeneutics that envisions the many possibilities inherent in the act of textual reading.²⁶

Such potential, it should be noted, relies on the etymological value of words as well. The scriptural pun (in the vernacular) *parolles/parabole* is linked, as we saw, to the medieval Latin *paraula*: noise, news, or fame. Rabelais presses his words for their maximum potential yet that potential

in no way arrests the signifying ability of the word; instead it expands it, and in the process generates an abundance from which the writer might draw. In the evaluation of the words' signifying ability Rabelais adds depth to the Scriptural and classical texts he draws from—insofar as he implies vernacular rereadings of both. Rabelais creates a third text, his own, which he enriches by situating it along a continuum issuing from the *logos*, where his own reading seems to stop.²⁷ In *parolles*, therefore, its genitor *paraula* still equivocates in noisy fashion, as Rabelais shows when his travelers hear bestial noises aboard the ship.

Le pillot feist responce: « Seigneur, de rien ne vous effrayez. Icy est le confin de la mer glaciale, sus laquelle feut au commencement de l'hyuer dernier passé grosse et felonnie bataille, entre les Arismapiens et les Nephelibates. Lors gelerent en l'air les parolles et cris des homes et femmes, les chaplis des masses, les hutys des harnoys, des bardes, les hannissemens des cheuaux, & tout aultre effroy de combat. A ceste heure la rigueur de l'hyver passée, advenente la serenité et temperie du bon temps, elles fondent et sont ouyes ». (136)

[The skipper made answer: "Lord, don't be afraid of anything! Here is the edge of the glacial (Arctic) Sea, on which, at the beginning of last winter, there was a great and fierce battle between the Arismapians and the Nephelibates. Then in the air froze the words and cries of the men and women, the clashing of maces, the banging of armor for the men and the horses, the neighing of the horses, and every other tumult of combat. Right now, with the rigor of the winter past, and the serenity of the good weather coming on, they are melting and are heard."] (558)

It is not surprising that Rabelais deploys *parolles* here to evoke the "*parolles et cris des homes et femmes*," possibly suggesting, as Frame argues, both Pliny and Herodotus who mention the Nephelibates either as one-eyed beings or as "those who travel on the clouds."²⁸ A more apposite reading would be Saulnier's, which Frame comments upon peripherally, suggesting that the two factions represent Lutherans and Papists, each of whom engages in discursive wars to advance their bloody hermeneutic engagement with Scripture.²⁹ To be sure, the word *parolles*, as Huguet notes in the *Dictionnaire*, also referred to the Reformists whose relationship with the holy *parole* might be of particular interest to Rabelais since Reformists, for their part, claimed to possess the truth. Etienne Pasquier, Huguet notes, refers to the "prisonniers pour la parole," signalling the Reformists and their imprisonment for their relationship with the Word of God.³⁰ As words melt aboard the Thalamège, they surrender their *paraula*, their noise, which is a concatenation of male, female, animal, and seasonal sounds arrested in a moment of great violence. Speech, in the Rabelaisian text, becomes a perilous fusion of competing possibilities, each of which attaches itself to a word and provides it with history.

The word's difference from other words, its animosity, becomes apparent at the moment of its bloody engagement with its opposite. The Nephelibates and Arismapiens become vehicles for the exposition of *parole's* etymological ability, which includes cries and, paradoxically, the "news" and the "fame" that accompany the clashes between opposing hermeneutic camps, be they Protestant or Catholic. As Saulnier states in *Rabelais: Rabelais dans son enquête*,

Les paroles gelées... Comment ne pas repenser au sens tout particulier de ce mot, vers l'époque où nous sommes. Les ministres de "la Parolle," ne nomme-t-on pas ainsi les prédicateurs de Calvin? Rabelais n'est pas calviniste: mais c'est, lui aussi, un évangéliste, à sa manière: un novateur.³¹

[The melting words... How can we not recall the specific meaning of this word (*parole*) in the Renaissance? Are Calvin's preachers not referred to as ministers of the Word (*Parole*)? While Rabelais is not a Calvinist, he is an evangelical humanist too, in his own way, an innovator.]³²

Rabelais' status as a "novateur" is due to the implications of defrosting speech. Such melting might mean that the Church has long issued the Word-as-*verbum* and has authorized interpretations of the *logos* for so long, but now (suggests Rabelais) anyone can and should have access to it in the original languages and in the bastards, simply by approaching it, breaking off chunks of it, having "Pantagrueliste" fun with it. Speech yields to the presence of a sentient body, and it melts, becoming fugitive. When it melts, it runs. In running it signifies in new ways, and increases its suggestiveness.

Rabelais himself hasn't had enough fun playing with the *logos-parolle*. As a Menippean writer like Erasmus and More, inspired by Lucian and invested in the uses of Cynic and Skeptic thought, Rabelais unearths the exorbitance of the totalitarian impetus through satirical means.³³ As Mikhail Bakhtin argues, Menippean authors relish "scandalous scenes of eccentric behaviour, incongruous speech performances, i.e. all violations of the generally accepted, ordinary course of events and of the established norms of behaviour and etiquette, including the verbal."³⁴ Such breeches of the conventional are powerful means through which the Menippean author can articulate a personal and "carnavalesque" vision of a world in which authority errs but denies its ability to do so.³⁵ Satire provides a playful yet effective remedy, prescribed at the moment of the satirist's textual rendering of the other's claim to absolute truth. The cure is inherent in language itself. The more the truth depends on words for its articulation, the more it evokes other words whose signifying ability it cannot control. Thus, when Rabelais introduces another word, *mot*, as a substitute for the *logos-verbum-parolle* in the

parolles degelees episode, he not only plays with the *parolle*, but he also rebuffs any attempt to arrest or curtail his scriptural hermeneutics based on philology, on classical satire, and on subjective access to the original texts in a manner suitable to him. Take, for example, Pantagruel's engagement with the stalactite-like structures they break from the air. In his engagement we find a dislodging of *parolles* as a vernacular translation of the *logos*, and *mot* appears—to say the same thing, differently. It is in this sense that Heraclitus's beautiful remark offers its pertinence to the present discussion. “We step and do not into the same rivers. We are and are not.” *Mot* means a word, as does *parolle*, but a different kind of word.³⁶ *Mot* insinuates itself in Rabelais' signifying chain, and offers a certain tincture and depth to our understanding of the Johannine inscription in the vernacular.

Ce non obstant il (Pantagruel) en iecta sus le tillac trois ou quatre poignées. Et y veids des parolles bien picquantes, des parolles sanglantes, les quelles le pillot nous disoit quelques fois retourner on lieu duquel estoient proferées, mais c'estoit la gorge coupée, des parolles horribles, & autres assez mal plaisantes à veior. Les quelles ensemblement fondues, ouysmes, hin, hin, hin, hin, his, ticque, torche, lorgne, brededin, brededac, fr, fr, fr, fr, bou, bou, bou, bou, bou, bou, bou, bou, traccc, trac, trr, trr, trr, trr, trrr, trrrr, on, on, on, on, ououououon, goth, magoth, & ne sçay quelz aultres motz barbares, & disoyt que c'estoient vocables du hourt et hannisement des chevaux à l'heure qu'on choque. (136)

[This notwithstanding, he tossed three or four handfuls onto the deck. And among them I saw some words that stung, some that drew blood (which the captain said sometimes returned to the spot they were sent from, but it was with their throats cut), some horrific words, and others rather unpleasing to see. When these were melted together we heard: “Hin, hin, hin, hisse, tick, tock, tack, brededin, brededac, fr, fr, fr, fr, bou, bou, bou, bou, bou, bou, bou, bou, traccc, trr, trr, trrrr, on, on, on, ouououououououou, goth, magoth, and I know not what other barbarous words; he said that these were vocables from the crashing and from the neighing of the horses at the time of the clash.] (559)

We shouldn't forget that Rabelais mentions Moses earlier in the episode.³⁷ Moses broke the tablets of the Law (the *logos*) when he found his people worshipping the Golden Calf. Here, Pantagruel, as Duval argues, alludes not only to the Old Covenant, but also to Pantagruel's prophetic status, for he breaks the words off and attempts new interpretations of them before an audience of travelers who do not know how to interpret these “signes.”³⁸ The signs are words, which like *parables-paraboles-parolles* evoke an hermeneutic richness only apparent when interpretation, satire, etymology—maybe even philosophy—collide. Take, for example, the *parolles sanglantes*, which draw blood, or which are issued from blood, and which return to the place of their genesis with slit throats, *la gorge coupée*. While such *parolles* sug-

gest the violence in the use of the word, they also suggest Christ and his blood, which inheres in the *logos*, and presumes therefore that all speech or conversation in the vernacular assumes the presence of Christ, his terrifically bloody demise, and his unbloody resurrection.³⁹ It also alludes to the stakes involved in speaking in Renaissance France and to Rabelais' own contentious relationship with his powerful detractors. Rabelais adopts satire to engage with the difficulty of speaking, but it is not any satire, it is Menippean satire, which favours a fusion of Cynicism and Skepticism to achieve its ends. While Cynicism explores the uses of the body as a philosophical statement, Skepticism inheres in the body of a philosophical statement and evacuates it from within. Words, *parolles*, are within language, its members. In their constitution they bear—if we take the body seriously—the fundamental genesis and dissolution of speech, of speech as a “body of speech.” In their melting, their disintegration, and eventual degradation, Rabelais' *parolles* suggest the possible resurrection of speech and its eventual reawakening, its “renaissance,” to a new hermeneutics at a different point in its time. What will matter at that point is not so much the veracity of the interpretation of the *parolles* as its hermeneutic viability, its capacity to explain and convince and then cede to other equally persuasive possibilities or cohabit with them—truth and persuasion not always being the same thing.

We also see in the foregoing citation references to the *Cratylus* which, among other things, explores how words are formed when certain letters and sounds are compounded, and how etymology can(not) help in arriving at Truth. But what is notable here, precisely for its suggestive etymological underpinnings to which the evangelical humanist has been sensitive, is the use of the word *mot* at the end of the citation (“motz barbares”). While *parolles* refers to noise, *mot*, first used in the tenth century to refer to the Passion of Christ—in a negative sense: “ne soner mot,” meaning “ne rien dire”—derives from the Vulgar Latin *mottum*, a possible mutation of *muttum*, a grunt.⁴⁰ Rabelais, the former monk, puts etymological punning to startling effect as different grunts are explored on the deck of the Thalamège, and all as possible renditions of the *logos*.

Such barbarous grunts are reminiscent of the communication between animals: Cynics, in fact, whose name, etymologically, recalls dogs and their barking.⁴¹ Rabelais mocks the canine language he hears, and he laughs at his own Cynicism in the process. The satirist laughs at himself for, in order to satirize, he must reproduce what he dislikes, and as he reproduces he introduces the barbaric language into his text, which becomes a part of it.⁴² *Logos-parolle-mot* is now the incarnation of a primal cry, which is still Christ and the Word of God, as *mot* itself meant both in Renaissance France. Huguet

notes that it also referred to *Le Verbe*.⁴³ We come full circle. The last word in the signifying chain, although somewhat depleted, rejoins the original meaning it was meant to displace.

Because it is primal and violent, *logos-parolle-mot* is also sexual as it relates to the body and its various “scandalous” (to use Bakhtin’s word) uses, expanding even more the hermeneutical possibilities inherent in the Rabelaisian engagement with the Johannine text.

Puys nous ouysmez d’autres grosses, & rendoient son en degelant, les unes comme de tabours, & fifres, les aultres comme de clérons & de trompettes. Croyez que nous y eusmes du pasetemps beaucoup. Je vouloys quelques motz de gueule mettre en reserve dedans de l’huile, comme l’on garde la neige & la glace, & entre du feurre bien nect. Mais Pantagruel ne le voulut: disant estre folle faire reserve de ce dont jamais l’on n’a faulte & que tous jours on a en main, comme sont motz de gueule entre tous bons et joyeux Pantagruelistes. (137–137b)

[Then we heard some other, coarse ones, and in unfreezing they made a noise, some as of drums and fifes, some as of bugles and trumpets. Believe me, we had lots of good fun. I wanted to put a few lusty jests in reserve in oil, as you keep snow and ice. But Pantagruel wouldn’t have it, saying that it was folly to keep a reserve of what you never lack and always have in hand, as are lusty jests among all good joyous Pantagruelists.] (559)

The coarse words (“d’aultres grosses”) the sailors hear are potentially sexual grunts or noises (“grosses”; “gueule”) which, no longer frigid, “rendoient son en degelant.”⁴⁴ Added to the suggestive figurations are phallic military instruments which produce highly pitched tones, particularly the trumpet and the fife, and which the sailors enjoy to no end. The playful nature of their encounter with the phallic instruments, in the context of the all-male camaraderie of travel on the sea, is a particularly telling instance of a homosocial environment. Why, it should be asked, do the “Pantagruelists” have lots of fun with each other aboard the *Thalamège*? Scholars argue that the reason (and meaning) may be lost to us as are many of the references to which Rabelais alludes.⁴⁵ The easiest answer to the question is no doubt the most audible (and visible) one in the text: because “tous bons et joyeux Pantagruelistes” love and enjoy “des motz de gueule.” But, if that is so, then why is Frère Jean so incensed when Panurge takes him at his *motz*? Scholars say that he is taken literally—at his word—which he does not wish to be.⁴⁶ While this is true, as *Le Quart Livre* militates against any literal reading, it is still striking that scholars have chosen, themselves, to read the episode literally. What might this camaraderie achieve? And how in relation to a discussion of the *logos-parolle-mot*? None of the scholarly readings seem to explain

the bawdiness of Frere Jean's response. If a *parolle* is only a *parolle* and *mot* a *mot*, then why does the monk take Panurge so seriously and why is he so moved by him? What might a "scandalous" reading find in all this?

Là Panurge fascha quelque peu frere Jan, & le feist entrer en resverie, car il le vous print au mot sus l'instant qu'il ne s'en doubtoit mie, & frere Jan menassa de l'en faire repentir, en pareille mode que se repentit G. Jousseaulme vendent à son mot le drap au noble Pathelin, & advenent qu'il feust marié le prendre aux cornes, comme un veau puy qu'il avoit prins au mot comme un homme. (246)

[Here Panurge angered Frère Jean quite a bit, until he was beside himself, for he took him at his word at the moment when he least expected it, and Frère Jean threatened to make him sorry for it the way G. Jousseaulme was sorry he sold the cloth on his word to the noble Pathelin, and, if it had turned out that Panurge got married, to take him by the horns like a calf, since Panurge had taken him at his word like a man.] (559)

Some scholars say they do not know.⁴⁷ If the sailors are all men, if they are talking about the grunts they hear and see, if they enjoy them and wish to preserve them in an oily lubricant ("dedans l'huile"), if they have these *motz* in hand ("que tous jours on a en main"), and if Pantagruel takes Frère Jean at his *mot* like a man ("comme un homme"), if—, then *mot* refers to the male body that inhabits the original *logos*, here interpreted for the sailors through the words of the prophet, Pantagruel. The men are playing with each other's bodies (the *logos-parolle-mot* become flesh), and that part of the body—represented by the trumpet and the fife—which makes a sound, supposedly as it liquefies ("rendoient son en degelant"). Indeed, *mot* refers to that part of the male body that embodies and produces other *logoi-verba-parolles-motz* as a result of its conversation with other bodies, here all male. In this sense, men, who threaten to emasculate each other by treating each other like a "veau," build Rabelaisian discourse and the possibility of its multiplication by contact with other men.⁴⁸ This reading accounts for the sailors' immense joy and the time they spend with each other's *motz* ("Croyez que nous y eusmes du passetemps beaucoup"). And it explains Frere Jean's anger. The *mot* has become violent, virile, and vocal.

Since Cynic thought influences Rabelais, such "Pantagruelist" behavior might recall the explicit nature of Diogenes' actions in the agora or those of Crates and Hipparchia, here alluded to—and possibly imitated—by Frère Jean and Panurge. When hands heat the projectiles, the projectiles melt and make sounds that are provocative and suggestive, sometimes bursting and making the sounds of exploding chestnuts. Panurge and Frère Jean are moved, so excited in fact by the suggestiveness of the entire episode that one thus grabs the other at the *logos*, holding the vernacular "*mot*" the other

extends. An incensed Frère Jean, “entrer en resverie” responds, threatening to cuckold Panurge (“le prendre aux cornes”). Cuckolding is important here. It suggests the sexually charged atmosphere aboard the Thalamège and the need for vocal and bodily release. “Motz,” like “parolles” or *logos*, represents an entire structure, or one of its parts.⁴⁹

Le Quart Livre mocks those who would take the word literally. Rabelais states that he reveres (“ie revere”) the Gospel and yet his engagement with it seems irreverent. Might irreverence be the height of reverence, like imitation the height of flattery? Rabelais not only tests the “truth” (Bakhtin), but also shows how it lies in so many semantic *loci-logoi*, and how the possibility of truth is inherent in the body, which itself touches other bodies and so on *ad infinitum*. We should note that the friar is taken at his *mot*. To take anyone else’s *mot* might detract, it seems, from its association with the Church. Given the episode’s Johannine origins, it might be useful to ask other questions of Rabelais’ engagement with the hermeneutic possibilities in *Le Quart Livre*. By providing *mot* as an interpretation of the *logos*, is Rabelais suggesting a Christological grunt in the Bible? More broadly, does the “parolles degelees” episode imply that speech is always an initial grunt, dismembered words aware of the possibility of their own mortality, but only able to surmount and realize it when they become flesh, flesh that converses, touches, enjoys? If the beginning of speech implies a possible grunt, is the grunt divine since it can be messianic and prophetic? And what of women? Where are they in the genesis of Rabelaisian sacred speech? Does their exclusion from the Thalamège indicate that their speech signifies differently and in non-“Pantrugrueliste” ways? Or, alternately, is Rabelais suggesting that all (non-masculine) speech is derivative, an attempt to espouse and re-join the rhetorical complexity of the *logos*? Whatever the answer, it seems to matter more how much “Pantagruelist” fun the quest for meaning should provoke in all who pursue it. Finding meaning implies finding ways *to* and *of* meaning. Those ways and their implications are always plural, competing, and ultimately their issue is unresolved.

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Notes

1. I presented a version of this paper at the RSA Conference, San Francisco in March 2006. I would like to thank the University Research Council at the University of Hawai’i for summer funding that allowed me to do further research for this paper at the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Kroch Library, Cornell University. I am particularly grateful to Professor William J. Kennedy, whose generous guidance has helped refine many of my ideas.

2. Emphasis mine. I have retained Rabelais' Middle French orthography and grammar. All citations in French are excerpted from Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre* (facsimile) (Geneva: P. Cailler, 1953); henceforward, page numbers will appear in parentheses in the main text.
3. Donald M. Frame's *The Complete Works of François Rabelais*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). The present extract is from page 425. Henceforward, when Rabelais is cited in English, the page number from Frame's edition will appear in parentheses in the main text.
4. My own debt to other readers of the episode is reflected throughout my reading.
5. My reading therefore explores Rabelais' evangelical humanism. Evangelical humanists were invested in reforming "Church practices by emphasizing the study and the practice of the *Evangile*, or Gospel books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Initially indistinguishable from the Protestant Reformation, the evangelical movement distinguished itself by its confidence in human nature when inspired by faith and charity. Evangelical doctrine is most closely linked with the teachings of Saint Paul. The writings of Rabelais, Erasmus, Thomas More, Lefèvre d'Étaples, Marguerite de Navarre, and Clément Marot reveal an evangelical sensibility." Elizabeth Chesney Zegura, ed., *The Rabelais Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004) p. 72. See also M. A. Screech, *L'Évangélisme de Rabelais: Aspects de la satire religieuse au XVI^e siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 1959); M. A. Screech, *Aspects of Rabelais's Christian Comedy* (London: Lewis, 1967); Edwin Duval, *The Design of Rabelais's Pantagruel* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991).
6. *Paraula* is a possible contraction of *parabla*, from the ecclesiastical Latin *parabola*: a parable. Albert Dauzat, ed., *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue française* (Paris: Larousse, 1938), p. 534. Albert Dauzat, Jean Dubois, and Henri Mitterand, ed., *Nouveau dictionnaire étymologique et historique* (Paris: Larousse, 1964), p. 536.
7. I am also indebted to Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle's "grammar" of Erasmus's engagement with the complexity of the biblical *logos* and its patristic sources. Erasmus preferred "sermo" as a translation of *logos* both because it represented a more suitable translation of *logos* than did the Vulgate *verbum*, and because of its gender and sound. *Erasmus on Language and Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977). Calvin espoused Erasmus's reading: "But admit they [the Latinists] followed something which seemed to be true, yet can they not deny but that *sermo* is more convenient. Whereby it appeareth what barbarous tyranny those pelting Divines did use, who did so molest *Erasmus* because he changed but one worde into that which was better." *A harmonie vpon the the three Euangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke: with the commentarie of M. Iohn Caluine: faithfully translated out of Latine into English, by E.P. Whereunto is also added a commentarie vpon the Euangelist S. Iohn, by the same authour* (London: Thomas Dawson, impensis Geor. Bishop, 1584), p. 443.
8. English: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made." Marc Z. Brettler, Michael D. Coogan, Carol A. Newsom, and Pheme Perkins, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, Vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 1286. What is startling in the English rendition of the Greek is the choice of "Word" as a translation for *logos*. This would suggest that the English "Word" derives from its Latin

equivalent *verbum* and in the process forfeits the depth and multiple meanings embedded in the Greek original.

9. A modern literal translation, as will shortly become clear, also translates *logos* as *verbum*. O'Rourke notes that *verbum* is only a word and would have to be pluralized to represent the *logos* adequately:

The noun *verbum* signifies a word or a brief saying, such as a proverb or maxim; it is also frequently used to designate a definite part of speech, the verb *rhema*. Its restricted application, therefore, does not satisfy the denotation of *logos* as speech rather than word. In order to approximate the meaning of *logos*, Erasmus explains, the noun *verbum* must be pluralized, as in the expressions *verba facere* and *multis verbis mecum egit*. (O'Rourke, p. 8)

The literal translation of the Johannine inscription reads as follows: "In the beginning was the word, and the word was toward the God, and God was the word. This was in the beginning toward the God. All through him became, and without him became not one thing." Paul R. McReynolds, ed., *Word Study Greek English New Testament: A Literal, Interlinear Word Study of the Greek New Testament, United Bible Societies' Third Corrected Edition with New Revised Standard Version, New Testament and Word Study Concordance* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1998), p. 326.

10. B. Fischer, I. Gribmont, H. F. D. Sparks, and W. Thieleeds, *Biblia Sacra Vulgata* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), p. 1658.
11. Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, *Le Nouveau Testament, Facsimile de la première édition de Simon Colines 1523*, ed. M. A. Screech (East Ardsley: S. R. Publishers, 1970). The use of "parole" as a translation of *logos* seems to have been subsequently fluid even for Lefèvre. Guy Bedouelle implies that it is not uncommon for Lefèvre to conflate terms that Erasmus and other humanists sought to clarify. "La Loi, le précepte, la Parole, ces mots du Psaume CXVIII qui désignent le Verbe de Dieu, sont des synonymes. Pour parler de l'Écriture Sainte, Lefèvre emploie le mot *verbum Dei*, parfois même le mot *sermo* mais pour la définir adéquatement (*recte*), il utilise plus précisément le terme *loquela*." *Lefèvre d'Étaples et l'intelligence des Écritures* (Geneva: Droz, 1976), p. 146. Bedouelle, however, does not explore whether Lefèvre's choice of *parole/verbe* applies throughout his reading of the Bible or only to the Psalms, which were neither written in the same language as the Gospels, nor by the same authors. What is important here is Rabelais' engagement with the gospels as an evangelical humanist, and therefore the espousal of *parole* as a translation of *logos*. Lefèvre's preference for *loquela* implies the vast semantic terrain, the very copiousness, of any word in the Renaissance. Renaissance versions of the Vulgate in the vernacular, *La Sainte Bible: en françois, tradlatée selon la pure et entière traduction de Saint Hierome, derechief conferée et entièrement revisitée selon les plus anciens et plus corrects exemplaires* (Antwerp: A. de la Haye, 1541), p. 37, and *La Bible qui est toute la Sainte écriture contenant le vieil et le nouveau Testament, autrement la vieille et la nouvelle Alliance* (Geneva: F. Perrin, 1567), p. 119, deploy "parolles" for *logos*, the first *paroles*, the second *parolles*, respectively.
12. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, eds. *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 1034.
13. G. W. H. Lampe, ed., *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 807–11.

14. For an extensive discussion of possible meanings of the term "beginning" see Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1989–1993), pp. 52–56. In discussing the "beginning," I am also thinking of D. A. Carson's observation in his book, *The Gospel According to John*: "The Greek word behind 'beginning', *arche*, often bears the meaning 'origin' (cf. BAGD), and there may be echoes of that here, for the Word who already was 'in the beginning' is soon shown to be God's agent of creation (vv. 3–4), what we might call the 'originator' of *all* things." Emphasis mine. (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), pp. 113–15.
15. "Because he is *in* the Word, and is the Word, Christ does not need a material birth. He already always is, and does not require birth, as the Arians argue, in order to be." *Sermons III/4 (94A-147A) on the New Testament. The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1992), p. 213. See also Saint John Chrysostom on Christ as the Word become flesh: *Commentary on Saint John The Apostle and Evangelist, Homilies 1–47*, trans. Sister Thomas Aquinas Goggin (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1957), pp. 45–47.
16. Michel Jeanneret, *Le Défi des Signes: Rabelais et la crise de l'interprétation à la Renaissance* (Orléans: Paradigme, 1994), p. 92.
17. Translation mine.
18. Emphasis mine. Such copiousness, as Terence Cave argues, is linked to the "duplicity of discourse"; a linguistic "difficulty," if you will, in which speech cannot be placed with any certainty because it so evocative. See Cave, *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979), p. 160.
19. See Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. R. G. Bury (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), and Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
20. J. E. G. Dixon, and John L. Dawson, *Concordance des œuvres de François Rabelais* (Geneva: Droz, 1992), p. 621.
21. "Nothing in classical Greek thought justifies placing 'words' within the seat of truth. And nobody except Rabelais (as far as I can tell) had ever taken Petron's *logoi* to be words. But classical Greek texts look different when read with the meanings of Biblical Greek uppermost in mind." M.A. Screech, *Rabelais* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979) pp. 427–428.
22. See Timothy Hampton, *Literature and Nation in the Sixteenth Century: Inventing Renaissance France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); William J. Kennedy, *The Site of Petrarchism: Early Modern National Sentiment in Italy, France, and England* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).
23. One of the dilemmas humanists faced was the negotiation of vernacular equivalents for their classical predecessors. Du Bellay, in *Deffence et Illustration de la Langue Françoise*, ed. Jean-Charles Monferran (Geneva: Droz, 2001), seems particularly aware of the dependence of the vernacular on its classical predecessors. He enjoins his compatriots to plunder the classical languages and in so doing enrich the vernacular.
24. "Oracles in Decline," in *Plutarch: Selected Essays and Dialogues*, trans. Donald Russell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 31–33 (422 B-E).

25. Montaigne does this famously later in the century. Hassan Melehy observes that it is the culling/cutting and pasting of different source materials that enriches the Montaignian text and adds to its appeal. *Writing Cogito: Montaigne, Descartes, and the Institution of the Modern Subject* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997).
26. Screech, *Rabelais*, p. 422.
27. Max Gauna's rejection of any reference to Scripture in the Rabelaisian text is therefore unfounded. Gauna argues against Screech's observation that *parole* is used by Rabelais to "translate Plutarch's *logoi*." Gauna seems quite adamant that "there is no suggestion anywhere in the Rabelaisian text that Petron's *parolles* refer in particular to revealed Scripture." Gauna, *The Rabelaisian Mythologies* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), p. 244.
28. Frame, pp. 899–900.
29. V. L. Saulnier, *Rabelais: Rabelais dans son enquête. La Sagesse de Gargantua; Le dessein de Rabelais* (Paris: Editions Sedes Réunies, 1983).
30. "Le roy... a fait minuter une abolition generale, par laquelle ont esté les prisons ouvertes à tous ceux qui estoient prisonniers pour la parole. C'est le terme dont nous usons au lieu de dire la religion." Edmond Huguet, *Dictionnaire de la langue française du seizieme siecle*, vol. 5 (Paris: Champion, 1925–1973) p. 641.
31. Saulnier, p. 119
32. Translation mine.
33. Screech's *Rabelais* draws attention to Rabelais' admiration for Lucian, to his translation of Lucian's work into Latin, and to the fact that: "men such as these [who] translated Lucian, edited him, imitated him, were influenced by him, really ought to have scotched the belief that to admire and imitate Lucian's *A True History*, the *Dialogues of the Gods* or the *Dialogues of the Dead*, was to have moved half-way down the road to atheism!" (p. 8). In Christopher Robinson's *Lucian and His Influence in Europe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), pp. 133–38, Rabelais' rewriting of Lucian's *A True History* is of utmost interest. Robinson is interested in drawing comparisons between the Lucianic *corpus* and those of his debtors. Duval's *The Design of Rabelais's Pantagruel* mentions Lucian's Menippean satire peripherally as part of a broader discussion regarding *Pantagruel* and Scripture. For W. Scott Blanchard, in *Scholar's Bedlam: Menippean Satire in the Renaissance* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1995), pp. 77–108, the adaptation of *menippea* in the sixteenth century and the infusion of Skeptic and Cynic philosophies allowed Rabelais to disclose his "penchant for paradox," particularly in the *Tiers Livre*. The *Quart Livre* goes unmentioned. Following Robinson's lead, David Marsh's *Lucian and the Latins: Humor and Humanism in the Early Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), pp. 176–207, draws comparisons between Lucian's paradoxical encomia, and Rabelais' praise of debt in *Le Tiers Livre*. Marsh compares the fantastic voyages in Lucian's *A True History* to those in *Le Quart* and *Quint* livres. Marsh's work on Rabelais, unfortunately, does not go beyond comparison. Also of interest: J. Bompaigne, *Lucien Ecrivain: Imitation et création* (Paris: Boccard, 1958); C.-A. Mayer, *Lucien de Samosate et la Renaissance Française* (Geneva: Editions Slatkine, 1984); Eugene P. Kirk, *Menippean Satire: An Annotated Catalogue of Texts and Criticism* (New York: Garland, 1980); H. K. Riikonen, *Menippean Satire as a Literary*

34. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 96.
35. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984).
36. "The word *paroles* in the title also means 'word,' but usually the spoken word, whereas a *mot* may be either spoken or written." Frame, p. 899.
37. -Par Dieu, dist Panurge, ie l'en croy. Mais en pourrions nous veoir quelqu'une. Me soubuient avoir leu
 que, l'orée de la montaigne en laquelle Moses receut la loy des Iuifz, le peuple
 voyoit les voix sensiblement.
 -Tenez tenez (dist Pantagruel) voyez en cy qui encores ne sont degelées (136)
 [“By God,” said Panurge, “I do believe he’s right! But might we see one of them?
 I remember reading that by the edhe of the mountain on which Moses received the
 law of the Jews, the people could literally see weather coming on, they are melting
 and are heard.”
 “Look, look!” said Pantagruel, “here are some that are not yet unfrozen.”] (558).
38. Duval, p. 6.
39. For Origen, the mouth of the Word (the Son of God) is like a sword: the symbol of battle and of victory. “Above all,” says Origen, “since he came not to cast peace on the earth, that is on the things which are corporeal and perceived by the senses, but a sword, and since he cuts through, if I may speak in this way, the harmful friendship of soul and body, that the soul, by devoting herself to the spirit which fights against the flesh, might be made a friend of God, he had his mouth as a sword, or as a sharp sword as the word of the prophet has it.” *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, p. 79. It’s unsurprising, given Origen’s reading, that some scholars have also read this episode as a reference to the wars of religion.
40. Dauzat, *Dictionnaire étymologique*, p. 487. Alain Rey, ed., *Le Grand Robert de la langue française* (Paris: Le Robert, 2001), p. 712.
41. See Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, “Cynicism,” in *Greek Thought: A Guide to Classical Knowledge*, ed., Jacques Brunschwig and Geoffrey E.R. Lloyd, trans. Catherine Porter et al. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000) pp. 843–858; “Religion and the Early Cynics,” *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and its Legacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). pp. 47–81.
42. The “barbaric” nature and origin of the “motz” should not be underestimated, however. Barbarism is sometimes a site of sacredness: Saint John Chrysostom argues that
 The “barbarian” and “illiterate” [Saint John] utters such words as no man on earth has
 ever known, and not merely speaks them, but also convinces by them—though if the
 former alone were true it would still be a great marvel. But if, actually, in addition, he
 furnishes another proof greater than this, that his words are God-inspired, in the fact
 that all his hearers through all time believe, who will not marvel at the power dwelling

within him? And this is so, because that is the greatest proof, as I have said, that he does not draw up his teaching from his own resources.

This “barbarian,” then, by the writing of his Gospel has taken possession of the whole world. With his body he has gained control of middle Asia, where of old all those of Greek persuasion used to teach philosophy, and there he is fearful to the demons; shining in the midst of his enemies, dispersing their darkness, and destroying the stronghold of the demons. And by his soul he has withdrawn to that place which was suited to one who has done such things. (Chrysostom, p. 16)

43. Huguet, vol. 5, p. 344.
44. Screech’s *Rabelais*, for example, translates this as “gullet words,” while Frame’s translation of *Le Quart Livre* sees them as “lusty words.”
45. Screech, *Rabelais*, p. 1.
46. See works by Screech (*Rabelais*) and Gauna.
47. “I still find it unclear what remark by Panurge has given offense to Frère Jean.” Frame, p. 900.
48. I am reminded here of Amy Staples’s essay “Primal Scenes/Primal Screens: The Homosocial Economy of Dirty Jokes,” *High Anxiety: Masculinity in Crisis in Early Modern France*, ed. Kathleen P. Long (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2002). Staples examines a “systematic blindness concerning questions of misogyny and gender on the part of Rabelais’ male readers.” (37) I can’t help but wonder to what extent the homosocial reading of Rabelais, observed by Staples, is in part generated by the text itself; and, while not excusing the wide-ranging implications of such “blind” readings, we may want to take a more robust look at Rabelais’ rhetoric and its implications for male/masculine speech both within and outside the text than is possible here.
49. See Saint Augustine: “That Word, that God, is *not* less in his parts than in his totality.” p. 211.