MASKS AND MIRRORS:
PROBLEMS OF REPRESENTATION IN FRENCH RENAISSANCE LITERATURE

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Abstract

Renaissance writers often seem to place human existence in a ludic context, that of the *theatrum mundi*. As they expose the folly of believing the illusions of the *theatrum mundi*, the writers also must confront the paradoxes into which they enter by attempting to intimate truth through the *mise-en-abîme* of literary representation.

Chapter One posits the theater as a paradigm for the dynamics of representation because the theater constantly exposes itself by emphasizing the provisional and arbitrary nature of its illusions. The inability of the creative illusions of art or language to attain the absolutes towards which they strive is examined through ancient and modern contexts.

Chapter Two compares the poetic endeavors of Marguerite de Navarre and Pierre de Ronsard. Ronsard seeks to create a poetic *persona* that becomes substantial through his poetry. His poems figure the desire to be the divinely annointed descendent of Homer and Virgil. They enact his desire to transform himself, like Jupiter, as a means of working his will. Thus his poetry figures the desire for the capacity to satisfy desire.

Marguerite's poetry and theater give form to her yearning for incorporation with the Divine Totality. Prerequisite to that reunion is the annihilation of self and the stilling of its voice. Marguerite's poetic voice is a figuration of the desire for silence; it constantly points beyond its own utterances to the silence by which it is succeeded and absorbed. The *Chansons spirituelles* are examined in Chapter Two. Chapter Three contains readings of Marguerite's *Théâtre profane* and the poem "L'Umbre."

Rabelais mocks the desire for absolutes as a craving that can only be satisfied through delusion. Seekers of certainty, absolute knowledge or power are ridiculed.

Rabelais emphasizes the process and growth of becoming rather than the vain attempt to arrest and contain the truth and vitality that informs existence.

The final chapter examines Montaigne's project of self-portrayal through a reading of "Des boyteux." The human desire for perfection, Montaigne seems to say, can only proceed through recognition of our incapacity to seize perfection. Desire mirrors our deformity as it fuels our quest .

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Chapter 1

The Theatrical Paradigm and "*l'autre monde*"

"La poésie est ce qu'il y a de plus réel. C'est ce qui n'est complètement vrai que dans un autre monde."[1] Thus poetry, as characterized by Baudelaire, crystalizes a paradox that can be found at the heart of human perception and representation. The paradox, proteiform as it is, may be summed up as follows: There is nothing more "real" than that which must transcend phenomenal "reality" to attain fullness and closure. And so, obversely, anything which purports to be "real" and complete in the world which we perceive, must of necessity be fraud or illusion, since such closure is unattainable in the fragmentary world of human perception.

This dilemma has many faces; many writers have explored and evoked it in many ways, a variety of which we shall examine in this study. However, it is in the theater that the paradoxes of perception and representation are physically delineated and their mechanisms enacted. The theater is a consciously provisional representation of its own provisional status as representation; it illuminates the truth of its own insufficiency through the illusion of completion. For Baudelaire poetry is "real" because it recognizes that it is not truly itself until it transcends what it seems to be. It would then seem to follow that poetry's perceivable "truths" must be of a provisional nature, as

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[1] Baudelaire's quote is taken from a fragmentary note, "Puisque Réalisme il y a", published in *l'Art romantique*. See *Curiosités esthétiques; l'Art romantique et autres oeuvres critiques*, ed. Henri LeMaître (Paris:Garnier, 1962), 825.

representations of a transcendant meaning and being "*dans un autre monde*". As such, poetry also represents its own provisional status as representation in this world. Both poetry and theater present illusions that expose the illusion of "reality" in this world by mirroring its function of representative image. This reflection, by adding its image to that of the world it reflects, opens before us a hall of mirrors, suggesting to us that that world, too, is the image of another. And so the conscious "illusions" of theater and poetry invite us to recognize the world in which they exist as a series of reflected images of an elusive truth and being, beyond immediate attainment, adumbrating and duplicating the promise of realization and fulfillment. This quality, inherent in the written word and physically manifested in the theater, will be a source of reference and inquiry throughout this study.

The fact that the theater has long been a source of metaphors for a multitude of perceptions and situations in life and literature has been amply documented[2]. The seemingly ubiquitous evocation of this metaphor as well as its diverse applications raise many questions about the nature of the theater and its relation to other forms of representation and other literary genres. The question arises as to whether the theater, rather than being the source of our notions of the nature of representation, does not in fact

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[2]Lynda G. Christian's *Theatrum Mundi: The History of an Idea* traces the literary lineage and evolution of the world as theater metaphor, examining its varied applications and interpretations in western thought from Heraclitus through the Renaissance. Frances Yates' *Art of Memory* studies the appropriation of the theatrical *locus* as an organizing principle for the psyche in its perception and comprehension of the phenomenal world from ancient times to the 17th Century. Marianne Hobson's article "Du *theatrum mundi* au *theatrum mentis*" explores the transformation of the concept of the psychic spectator from the Middle Ages through the Enlightenment.

serve as a paradigm of these concepts. As a paradigm or model the theater represents the dynamics of representation, thus opening a *mise-en-abîme* to the self-reflexive nature of representation. According to C.S. Peirce,

> The meaning of a representation can be nothing but a representation. In fact, it is nothing but the representation itself conceived as stripped of irrelevent clothing. But this clothing can never be completely stripped off; it is only changed for something more diaphanous. So there is an infinite regression here[3].

The infinite regression, as we shall see, seems to be an inevitable corollary of representational endeavor. The infinite regression arises from, and mirrors, the search for, and impossibility of, a closure that would culminate in the coincidence of that which is represented with the dynamics and means of its representation. But representation is itself an evocation of the absence of what it purports to represent. The act of representation thus consists of contradictory movements: one which strives for identification with the object of representation, and another that simultaneously asserts autonomy from and non-coincidence with the phenomenon represented. Because of this, representation can be seen as a provisional operation; its mimetic function is limited by its autonomy while its autonomous existence cannot be separated from its mimetic purpose.

The theater reflects this provisional quality common to representation; in fact, it exploits it. Nothing is more "theatrical" than the flaunting of theatrical devices, than the celebration of the artificiality of the theater and the arbitrariness of its conventions. The

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[3]*Collected Papers* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1960) I, 117.

theater's conventions are "arbitrary" in that they do not seem to be the result of some natural force or unyielding necessity. They are arbitrary in the way that language is arbitrary, in that they manifest a limited number of an infinite number of endlessly changing possibilities to form a system that can reflect both aspects of itself and the world in which it exists[4] .

The conventions of a representational system, such as language or the theater, pretend to render perceptible and comprehensible the world beyond those conventions by reference to that world. Yet the representational system is contained within the world it represents rather than vice versa. Thus the representational system relies on its conventions to establish the illusion that it, an infinitesimal component of existence, is capable of containing and transmitting the whole of existence. Illusion in the theater is based on this premise - that a recognizable and perceptible world can be contained within the limited theatrical *locus*. One might suggest that this action mirrors the very act of perception, in that the representation to one's self of a boundless phenomenal world requires provisional circumscription of the aspects of that world which are to be perceived. This perception, that the perceived phenomenon is separable from its ontological matrix, could be considered an illusion born of psychic "conventions" which provide a system for the noetic apprehension of the phenomenal world.

The paradoxes that accompany an infinite regression towards an unattainable origin and completeness are inseparable from the theater. In this study the notion of the theater

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[4]The theater's voluntary and intrinsic exposure of its own arbitrary nature has much in common with Paul Valéry's idea that a primary function of a work of art or literature is to evoke the myriad possiblities not chosen or realized in the execution of the *oeuvre*.

as paradigm or model of the dynamics of representation will serve as an illustration and reference as we examine literary texts from the French Renaissance, that seem to struggle with questions about their own nature, status, origin and teleology. The world as theater is a popular metaphor during the Renaissance, and is consistent with new perspectives that emphasize relativity over absolutes. The discovery of new worlds and patterns of perception proved subversive to the acceptance of closed systems that had heretofore explained, in absolute terms, everything from language to man's physical and spiritual position in the cosmos. It is the theater's insistence on the arbitrary and illusory nature of systems and closure, its positing of any absolute as "elsewhere", that lends such resonance to the metaphor of the world as stage during a time of inquiry and uncertainty.

Among writers of the Renaissance, there seems to be great consciousness both of the insufficiency and the power of the written word. Language is still based on the paradigm of the Word, an absolute, but is recognized as an imperfect representation of the Word, susceptible to abuse and limited in capacity. In this work, we will examine the paradoxes posed by a "theatrical" perspective of the human condition and language. By theatrical, we mean a consciousness of the arbitrary and provisional character of the means of representation. We will explore the manner in which these dilemmas present themselves to writers such as Pierre de Ronsard, Marguerite de Navarre, François Rabelais, and Michel de Montaigne. We will examine and compare the strategies that these writers employ in confronting the infinite regression of illusion that seems to confront any attempt at the figuration or interpretation of substance and truth.

In the theater, a primary paradox, and one which leads inevitably to a *mise-en-abîme*, is that of theatrical illusion. The nature of illusion in the theater is complex and often contradictory. The staged "illusion" is more pretense and complicity than illusion. The pretense that an actor is the character he plays, that the theater has effected a transformation of time, place, and identity, is not taken literally by anyone - be it spectator, actor, or director. In a play, imagination is channeled by the conventions of the theater to produce a series of "false" transformations in which everything feigns to be something else. These false, or provisional, transformations are mirrored by the spectator's own "transformation" to a state of passive observance and feigned credulity. The spectator mirrors the actor's pretense of a transformed identity in his own pretended credulity. The spectator "makes believe" that he believes in the theater's transformations and takes part in the illusion that he is illuded[5].

The roles assumed by author and reader in the privileged locus of the text offer an obvious parallel to the theater's conventions of transformation. However, the relationship of the writer to language also reflects an analogous situation. Language is the material by which the entire fabric of a literary work is created. The stage, actors, decor, and masks are all constructed of language. The persona of the author is also fabricated from language, as is any claim to a meaning or an authority beyond the figurations of language. The writer may play out the illusion in full consciousness of its

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[5]Octave Mannoni's *Clef pour l'imaginaire, ou l'autre scène*, in discussing the theatrical aspects and analogues of human psychology and perception, also examines the "roles" of spectator and actor in the theater, if not quite in the same manner as I have here.

provisional theatrical character, reflecting, through the mechanics of the theater of language, the mechanics of the theater of human perception and existence. There is also the temptation, however, to seduce and be seduced by the simulacrum of language, which itself represents the desire for autonomous meaning and being. Language, as a representation of an insatiable and unrealizable desire, lends itself to the fabrication of successive veils of illusion. Linguistic illusion often attempts to mask language's various insufficiencies, by, for example, representing language as capable of figuring and capturing the elusive object of its desire to possess and supplant what it merely represents. The author, as a creation of language and creator of texts, is implicated in the *mise-en-abîme*. He cannot remove the authorial mask, for he is nothing but a mask, existing only within and of language; nor can he make the mask substantial, conferring upon it the authority and autonomy that it plays at possessing.

Pierre de Ronsard claims for the poet authority through, of and beyond language[6]. The hierophantic functions he claims for the poet imply divine authority and inspiration. The divine authority claimed for the Bible transcends any individual, but the divine furor attributed to the pagan poets of antiquity creates a line of poets who are divinely inspired human beings, unique bearers of truth to mankind. Poetry, as a mirror, reflects the desire for an absolute grounding of human language and identity in a transcendant authority. Poetry, as a mask, permits the poet to figure verbally the desire to express and satisfy the

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[6]See David Quint's *Origin and Originality in the Renaissance* for a brilliant reading of the search for authority as an obsession of Renaissance writers. Chapter One provides an insightful reading of Ronsard's quest for self-creation as expressed in "Ode à Michel de l'Hospital" (see especially pages 24-31.)

desire for an absolute grounding of language and identity in a transcendant authority. Ronsard employs language to create poetry that reflects and figures his desire to be, in the guise of Pierre de Ronsard, the Poet, descendant of Homer and father of French poetry. Ronsard's poetry figures the satisfaction of his desire for the (divine) capacity to satisfy desire: by making the word flesh, or (as when he uses Jupiter as a model) through willful metamorphosis and transformation.

Metamorphosis and transformation may be enacted, as in Ronsard's poetry, as agents of the satisfaction of desire. However, for writers such as Marguerite de Navarre and Michel de Montaigne, metamorphosis and transformation are inevitable aspects of the unseizable nature of existence. The protean nature of both self and the language by which one attempts to figure and seize self frustrate Marguerite's attempt to discard the mask of individual identity in search of true being in God's totality. A similar problem plagues Montaigne's effort to portray himself in a text supposed to be consubstantial to its author. The text he creates may represent, but cannot be consubstantial with the self he did not create and cannot seize. However Montaigne's text does succeed in representing the passage of the self in its contemplation of a protean essence that animates both the author and text, but that remains beyond the grasp of either.

In the theater the illusion of metamorphosis (of the actors and stage) and the illusion of belief in the metamorphoses are established and maintained by theatrical conventions. And, once again, these conventions of theatrical representation echo the paradox that we perceive at the heart of representation: while they are obviously provisional in nature, limited by space, time, and mutual agreement between the

participants, the conventions also seem to encompass phenomena external to the domain contained within their own provisional boundaries. In the same way, language evokes and seems to give substance to what exists independently of language and beyond language. Within the theater of language we witness the figuration of the desire to surpass the verbal incapacity to know or recreate the world in our own image. Montaigne's awareness of this tendency leads him to criticize human vanity and presumption, while Rabelais parodies and mocks the actor in the *theatrum mundi* who becomes dupe of the illusions that are devised to give form to his empty urgencies.

In order to define more clearly the nature of, and trace the implications of what we have designated as the theatrical paradoxes of representation, it might be useful to borrow a couple of terms employed by Octave Mannoni in his book *Clefs pour l'imaginaire ou l'autre scène.* Mannoni makes a distinction between two kinds of spectator, one whom he characterizes as a *consommateur*, and another whom he calls a *connaisseur* (162). The *consommateur* perceives and appreciates the play completely within the theatrical conventions, while the *connaisseur* perceives and appreciates the play as a phenomenon contained within the phenomenal world. To illustrate his idea Mannoni cites the example of a technician who attends a play, but whose attention as a spectator is completely focused on the means by which the theatrical illusion is produced, rather than the course of events occurring within the conventions of the illusion. The *connaisseur* does not play his role as spectator; that is, he does not pretend to believe in the illusions of the stage. For him, the conventions of the theater merely provide a pretext for the technical activity that interests him in the world outside the actual

theatrical representation. It is only in refusing the temporary primacy of the theatrical illusion and the conventions that maintain it that the *connaisseur* can perceive the theatrical representation in a context beyond that stipulated by the conventions. In both a theatrical and literary context, the *connaisseur* could be seen as performing a critical function, as he mediates between the illusory closure of the theater's conventions and its context in the world beyond those conventions.

The *consommateur* on the other hand plays along with the conventions and as such participates in the play rather than remaining exterior to it. As we have noted, no one within the theatrical conventions is deceived by them; everyone plays at belief. As Mannoni explains:

> Si les acteurs ne peuvent pas se proposer de créer une illusion, au sens propre de ce mot, ils agissent (jouent) à l'intérieur de leurs conventions comme si l'essentiel était bien, par les déguisements, les masques, les truquages, de produire cette illusion (163).

Everything in the theater is (at least) a step removed from what it purports to portray or enact. Just as the actors pretend to try to create an illusion, the spectator pretends to believe them on both levels. Without these continuing levels of pretense, there is no theater. The writers we will examine are extremely conscious of this dynamic and inevitably, if sometimes unwillingly, find the truest coherence of their work in acceptance of the theatrical model of representation, which renounces possession as it figures the desire to possess.

> L'expression "croire aux masques" n'aurait aucun sens si cela voulait dire que nous croyons aux masques comme à quelque chose de réel. Par exemple, que nous prendrions les masques pour de vrais visages. Il en résulterait en effet qu'il n'y aurait plus d'effet de masque du tout. Le masque ne se donne pas pour autre qu'il n'est, mais il a le pouvoir d'évoquer les images de la fantaisie. Un masque de loup ne nous fait pas peur à la façon du loup, mais à la façon de l'image du loup que nous avons en nous (165).

To believe that a mask is a real face nullifies the entire effect which the mask aims to produce, that is, the evocation of an image in the psyche of the beholder. The blatant artificiality and fragmentary nature of the mask appeal to the desire for a completeness and reality that are beyond the mask's finite substantiality. In the same way, a participant in the theatrical illusion, who is duped by the illusion, would negate the desired effect of the theater, which is to reveal the non-coincidence of image and substance, of seeming and being. Nevertheless, Mannoni posits the psychic necessity for the spectator to believe that somebody is taken in by the illusions.

> Tout semble machiné pour la [l'illusion] produire mais chez quelqu'un d'autre, comme si nous étions de mèche avec les acteurs (164).

And who would this someone be? Mannoni sees this imaginary dupe portrayed in plays that contain further scenes of illusion mirroring their own (for example, Corneille's *l'Illusion comique*), and in the stock characters of the credulous naif, or the gullible yokel.

Montaigne will call him "le badin de la farce".[7] As we shall see in Chapter Four, much of Rabelais' humor resides in his mockery of those who, like Thaumaste, Picrochole, or Panurge in the *Tiers Livre* and *Quart Livre*, who are dupes of the illusions created by the theater of their own desire for completion. There is never any question but that the reader can clearly perceive the groundlessness of the illusions which these characters so eagerly embrace.

> On voit combien nous serions loin d'une illusion qui serait la présentation d'un faux réel. Puisque cette illusion, c'est certain, n'est au théâtre jamais la nôtre, [...] (166).

But why should we need to presume that someone is duped by the *illusion comique*? One might trace this need to the instability inherent in and revealed by the series of illusions unfolded and debunked by the theater. The actors are not who they seem to be. Neither are they impostors, attempting to persuade the spectator that they are the characters they play. As we have noted, they play their role as if they were attempting to deceive the audience. Likewise, the spectator merely makes believe that he believes in the conventions of the theater and the illusions it presents. Thus the theatrical illusion itself is only the illusion of an illusion. For the infinite regression and its vertiginous instability to be arrested there must be an element within the structure that is ignorant of the conventions (and thus the limitations) of the structure. The dupe who cannot distinguish the insubstantiality of what he considers to be real, who accepts the arbitrary rules of convention as absolute verities, is an object of ridicule. But he also

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[7]III,9,980.

seems to be a bastion of stability (however false) in a system of perception in which everything, upon being identified, sheds its mask to reveal yet another layer of illusion and deferral of identity. All other stability within the conventions of the theater, including the character of those conventions, relies on the provisional identities provided by the conventions - identities that by their very nature are not to be believed. If the theater evokes in us our image of the world, much as the mask of a wolf evokes our image of a wolf, an understanding of the *mise-en-abîme* mirrored by the theater may prove extraordinarily destabilizing to any conventional interpretations of that world that claim absolute status. Applied to other human constructs and systems an understanding of the nature of the theater subverts the conventions necessary to the coherence and integrity of the constructs by revealing that all human systems are as arbitrary and insubstantial as those of the theater. The result of this recognition is often a profound anxiety. As David Quint, Terence Cave, Robert Cottrell, and others have pointed out, the literature of the Renaissance is very much a product of this recognition and its anxiety. While Marguerite, Rabelais, and Montaigne all expose and deride the dupes of presumption and *cuyder*, who believe in the illusions of the *theatrum mundi*, they are also extremely conscious of the fact that it is only through the theatrical illusion of language and literature that they play out, or represent the truth about humanity's delusions and illudedness.

The poetry of Pierre de Ronsard is full of performances. Some, like "Ode à Michel de l'Hospital", create a cosmological and geneological supporting role for the mask of the persona of the poet, which enacts the desire for an "absolute" status as the

culminating point of the line of the ancient, divinely inspired poets, and source for any "true" poets who might follow. Immortality is the absolute desired and figured in many of Ronsard's poetic performances. In sonnet 20 of the *Amours de Cassandre* (Pléiade I, 10-11), which we shall examine in the next chapter, Ronsard poetically represents the desire, like that of Narcissus, to project, perceive and seek union with his own image on the face of the world. He also expresses the desire to be like Jupiter, possessing the power to satisfy desire. These scenes are placed in a stylistic theater - the sonnet - where, on another level, the poet simultaneously plays out his desire for an identity modeled after, but surpassing, that of his "predecessors", especially Petrarch. However, Ronsard also enacts his recognition of the insufficiency of desire and imagination to reify the protean mutations of temporal existence, or to transform the relative to an absolute.

In "Discours ou Dialogue entre les Muses deslogées et Ronsard" (Pléiade I, 817-21[8]), the aged, disillusioned poet whose voice, unheard, is borne away by the wind, confronts the Muses whose "dance he followed". They now appear ragged, dirty, famished, and in exile. However, they still retain their native grace and beauty, and Ronsard runs to them to ask who they might be. The Muses cite their divine lineage and glorious past as inspiration to man's honor and glory and as a link between heaven and earth ("Et tousjours dans le Ciel avoir l'ame attachée" [p.818]). An astonished and fearful Ronsard rebukes his former mistresses:

Et me repens d'avoir vostre danse suivie,

[8]The Pléiade edition does not indicate line numbers for Ronsard's poems. Therefore, I will indicate page rather than line numbers in citing his verse.

Usant à vos mestiers le meilleur de ma vie" (819).

Gone is "L'abondance et le bien," the plenitude promised by the Muses. Ronsard now sees them, like himself, abandoned and ill-nourished, fed and feeding "seulement de fumées/ Et d'un titre venteux, antiquaire et moysi" (819). The virtue that he once attributed to them, and by which he was seduced, he now sees as nothing but wind. Together, Ronsard and the Muses have produced nothing of substance, only a spectacle of the desire for creative power.

Ce n'est qu'une parade, un honneur contrefaict,

Riche en fantaisie, et non pas en effet (819).

The Muses attack the poet's ingratitude; after all, they have made him famous, spreading his name over the earth. They threaten the retribution of the gods; however, considering their present state of impotence, there is little sense of imminent menace from that quarter. They ask Ronsard to help them find a home in France. Ronsard, citing the King's power and majesty and his own impotence and insignificance, can offer them nothing but words; he bids them Adieu.

The poem is structured as a dialogue, with the verses spoken by the Muses and Ronsard marked by their names. The performance of Ronsard's disillusionment with the Muses emphasizes the insubstantiality, the illusory and transitory quality of the poetic endeavor that was supposed, in its "fureurs" to link man to the heavens and its divinities. The impotence of the poet is evident at the beginning of the poem, as he watches the flight of a group of cranes towards distant lands; the poet can only envy their freedom and power, while the words that express his yearning dissolve as they are expelled.

Ronsard is powerless to express his desire and impotence except by means of a poem. By dramatizing the desire and impotence of poetry within the poem, Ronsard has already emphasized the insubstantiality of his verbal theater, and has characterized the poem as empty words destined to be lost in the wind. And so "Discours..." is a poem reflecting on the hollow promises of the empty letter. As a reflection and enactment of poetic creation, the poem implies that the web of illusion spun by poetry cannot be unraveled or traced to a substantial and authoritative source. The poetic illusion can only be exposed as such through the *mise-en-scène* of the creation and duplication of illusion. The poetic performance becomes an expression of self-awareness, as identities are now revealed to be mere roles, and the once hierophantic poet makes no claims to any status or function for his art beyond the ludic.

The poetic works of Marguerite de Navarre could also be interpreted as performance[9]. Marguerite's performance is not an attempt to reify a mask and solidify her identity on the stage of the *theatrum mundi.* It is rather a staging of her desire to discard the mask of human identity which, she believes, separates her from and blinds her to the totality of God. Her desire for the Word can only be represented by means of the word. Human language, as an expression of her yearning for the *Tout-Verbe*, must expose the illusions of the *theatrum mundi*, as well as its own deficient character. The word, while expressing desire for the Word, is a representation. As representation, it implies the absence of that which it represents. Marguerite yearns for the silence that will

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[9]In *The Grammar of Silence: A Reading of the Poetry of Marguerite de Navarre*, Robert Cottrell refers to Marguerite's texts as "performances," (137).

permit the Word to be manifested rather than represented. However, her poetry, as an expression of that yearning, could be seen as an obstacle to that silence. Conscious of the paradox, Marguerite writes,

> A l'escriture veritable
>
> Defaudroit la force à ma main.
>
> Le taire me seroit louable,
>
> S'il ne m'estoit tant inhumain[10].

The silencing of imperfect, fallen human language can no more satisfy her yearning for perfection and reunion in the Divine Totality, than the utterance of the word can satisfy her yearning for the Word. Marguerite's poetry, we shall see, is a theater, not only of language, but of silence. As Robert Cottrell says of Marguerite's poetic endeavor,

> What she actually does, [...], is make her desire for absence present to the reader by embodying it in texts. We are thus dealing with ironic texts, that is to say, with texts that say what they mean through language that does not mean what it says (*The Grammar of Silence*, 199-200).

In both her poetry and her plays Marguerite expresses her desire that the voice of self be quieted with a *mise-en-scène* that figures the stilling of the voice. This expression is accomplished, of course, through language and the endless mutterings of an insistent self urging itself to silence. Marguerite's consciousness of the paradox leads to poetic

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[10] These lines are taken from the "Pensées de la Royne de Navarre estant dens sa litiere durant la maladie du Roy", which is the first poem of the *Chansons spirituelles*, pages 84-90 of *Les Marguerites de la Marguerite des Princesses*, ed. Félix Frank, (Geneva: Slatkine), 1970.

strategies of great power and ingenuity that almost always reveal and confront the paradox that fuels and frustrates her poetic purpose.

The books of François Rabelais also present a theater of masks and illusions. Rabelais employs a variety of narrators and actors to perform a parody of the *theatrum mundi*. Rabelais' carnivalesque spectacle not only unmasks the pretensions of the world's illusions, but also reckons with their fecundity and generative powers. We have noted Rabelais' mockery of those who cannot separate themselves from illusion because it is a figuration of their desires. Rabelais presents desire to us as contributing to the proliferation of illusion. The dupes of illusion in Rabelais' books are generally blinded by their desire for completion and closure. Thaumaste seeks the ultimate knowledge, Panurge seeks the primacy of self, the Papimanes seek a divine authority on earth, just to mention a few of Rabelais' dupes. Rabelais' evocation and exposure of desire as a generative force of the human comedy seems itself curiously devoid of desire. The central Rabelaisian metaphor of thirst is a form of desire, but a desire that does not seek the illusion of satisfaction. Thirst awakens us to, and urges us to comply with natural necessity. To drink is to water and nourish the body. Thirst may be slaked, but not abolished. One does not drink to put an end to desire, but to answer a need. As one drinks, one is aware that one will thirst again, and that to thrist and to drink are part of a process and not a resolution. Rabelais' interpretation of the Pauline injunction to thirst to be perfect seems to accept the process of moving towards perfection, without a need to circumscribe that perfection within the boundaries of self or psyche. In the tradition

of Paul and Erasmus, which inspires Rabelais, the perfection for which we strive is *Caritas*, or Love.

Love is the paradigm which desire seeks to appropriate, but Love, as constancy and perfection, is unrealizable in a world of mutation and desire. Desire, as a figuration of the absence of Love, is an inversion of Love. In Rabelais' comedy the inversions of Charity and desire fuel human activity. One might see such a pairing in the fecund partnership of the charitable Pantagruel and the philautistic Panurge. Charity, with its abnegation of the primacy of self and self's desire for completion, implies submission to process. The motifs of the voyage and the quest in the *Tiers Livre* and the *Quart Livre* stress the process of seeking a truth that is everywhere evident but nowhere graspable. Submission to process implies acceptance of the infinite deferral of closure and definition. Charity accepts process because Charity submits to the totality of Love. Love's immanence incorporates and informs process. To thirst and to drink in the Rabelaisian context, is to nourish oneself in the unseizable immanence of Love and perfection.

If Love is immanent, then desire is protean. Desire, through a continual chain of metamorphoses, strives to imitate and appropriate, or at least approximate, Love's ominipresence and infinite range of manifestations. Love informs its manifestations, desire shapes its representations. If Love is manifestation, desire is representation. Love is the Spirit; desire is the letter, trapped in an infinite regression as it tries to capture, express, realize and incarnate the spirit of *agape* in an imaginary vessel or behind a mask. Rabelais invites us to drink of the "tonneau inexpuisible" of immanent Love and berates

those who seek definition behind a "larve bustuaire" [11]. In Rabelais' world, the lust for perfection, bereft of Love, generates the farce of insatiable desire seeking to figure its own satisfaction. The thirst for perfection that is informed by *Caritas*, and which looks beyond the constraining mask of selfish desire, is a rich, joyful, fecund, and self-renewing process.

The *Essais* of Michel de Montaigne form a theater for the representation of the process of self-perception. Perception, as François Rigolot has suggested, noting the link between the words *viser* and *visage*, is a kind of formation; looking at something forces it into a form, if only in one's psyche[12]. By contemplating the world, Montaigne re-forms it in his own image - a "branloire perenne"[13]. By contemplating himself in a book, Montaigne forms from himself a self that is "consubstantiel à son autheur"[14] -the author who is portrayed and contained within the locus of the book.

> Me peignant pour autruy, je me suis peint en moy de couleurs plus nettes que n'estoyent les miennes premieres. Je n'ay pas plus faict mon livre que mon livre m'a faict [...] (II, 18, 648c).

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[11]See the final pages of the Prologue to the *Tiers Livre*. In Pierre Jourda's edition of the *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Garnier, 1962) see vol.1, 402-3.

[12]See *Les Métamorphoses de Montaigne*, (Paris: Presses universitaires, 1988), 163-4.

[13] Gérard Defaux, in his reading of "Des cannibales", suggests that Montaigne "devours" the phenomenon that he contemplates, for example the cannibals, in order to speak of, or represent, himself (*Parole, présence et écriture*, 173). All reading and all interpretation, says Defaux, "n'est au fond que traduction, que réduction de l'autre au même" (175).

[14] *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. M. Rat (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), II,18,648c.

Montaigne has painted himself, and through this act of representation implies his own absence in the literary portrait. The portrait is a seizable representation of an ungraspable self. In painting himself "pour autruy", he has made a version of himself that is "other". The image in a mirror is not the face that it portrays, but a duplicate limited to a specific locus. Montaigne's text is also a mask that hides the self and represents it in a fixity that it cannot know. Montaigne's painting of himself could be interpreted, not only as representation in a verbal portrait, but as covering himself with the paint of words to form a mask of self, whose colors and features are fixed, and thus "plus nettes que n'estoyent les miennes premieres". As he makes his book, his book makes Montaigne - the main character of the book. This character cannot be consubstantial with the self it represents. Montaigne, seeking "l'essence mesme de la verité, qui est uniforme et constante" (II,12, 535), encounters instead,

> une discontinuité infiniment rapide, où chaque instant inaugure un nouveau moi qui supplante le moi précédant (Jean Starobinski, *Montaigne en mouvement*, 108).

Form and stability, like finitude and closure, are illusions formed by art and presumption, Montaigne discovers. He accepts existence as a dynamic process rather than a static object. He portrays "non l'estre, mais le passage" (III,2,). The masks he wears are means of representing the ineluctable flux of existence.

> Je donne à mon ame tantost un visage, tantost un autre, selon le costé où je la couche. Si je parle diversement de moy, c'est que je me regarde diversement (II,1, 319b).

In "De la Vanité" Montaigne cites Petronius on the theatrum mundi, "*Mundus universus exercet histrioniam.*" Montaigne repeatedly, in his essays, denounces the dupes of illusion and presumption. Yet, having attempted and failed to escape illusion in his yearning to perceive and understand himself and the world, Montaigne argues for a theater of experience conscious of its arbitrary and provisional status as a means of figuring that which exceeds perception.

> Il faut jouer deuement nostre rolle, mais comme rolle d'un personnage emprunté. Du masque et de l'apparence il n'en faut pas faire une essence réelle, ny de l'estranger le propre (III, 9, 989b).

Montaigne, like the other writers to be discussed here, recognizes the inevitability of illusion in the open-ended process of seeking truth. He, like the others, seeks to come to terms with the paradoxes that frustrate human desire by consciously enacting the dynamics of those very paradoxes in the provisional conventions of language and the circumscribed locus of the text.

The theatrical paradigm's insistance on the necessity of masks and the inevitability of illusion for the representation of reality is itself a reflection of humanity's endless search for ontological definition by means of unseizable metaphysical and epistemological "truths" and certainties. Before proceeding with more detailed examinations of the works of these writers from the Renaissance, I would like to place what I have called the theatrical paradigm in the context of philosophical traditions pertinent to both the sixteenth century writer and the twentieth century reader.

* * *

Le plus réel and *l'autre monde*

If the theater is, as we have argued, a paradigm or model for the nature and mechanisms of representation, then the dynamics and paradoxes that it reflects ought to be discernable not only in artistic representation, such as literature, but in the manner in which we perceive and present to ourselves the world and our situation in it. Baudelaire's characterization of poetry as more "real" than the phenomenal world in which it cannot be realized implies that true "reality" transcends the illusion of reality. The simulated penetration of this *maya* manifests a desire to transcend illusion as it enacts the impossibility of fulfilling that desire, since the representation of that desire is produced by illusion. The unaccomplishable quest, to trace through the reflections of that desire in an attempt to find its originary character is one that we shall encounter in diverse forms and means in all of our subsequent chapters. A concept central to this enterprise is our insistance that the true mimetic function of the theater, and by extension, literature, consists of reflecting the infinite regression of illusion that is set in motion by the paradoxes we have identified as being central to perception and representation. Clearly, this notion draws on an ancient and extensive tradition in which the phenomenal world, as perceived by man, is considered to fall far short of absolute reality[15].

Octave Mannoni suggests that "Les écrivains ont généralement besoin de théories personnelles, [...], pour se masquer, dirait-on, la réalité de ce qu'ils font" (106). Thus,

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[15]Once again, Lynda G. Christian's informative outline of the concept of the world as a stage presents the wide array of interpretations and implications drawn from the metaphor according to the various philosophical and religious applications it has received.

in the proliferation of the hall of mirrors that is our existence, not only truth is masked, but also the desire to mask or perceive the truth. "Le désir s'affuble toujours de faux noms," writes Mannoni (106). And so Dante employs the name Beatrice to figure his desire, while Proust writes about his desire to write about desire. Speaking of Dante, Mannoni observes that:

> [...] chez lui le désir d'écrire a besoin du soutien d'un autre désir dont il ne connaît, dont nous ne connaissons pas la véritable économie, mais dont il sait, dont nous savons de quel (faux) nom le désigner: ce nom, c'est Béatrice. Montaigne en fait autant à l'égard de la Boétie. Enfin on trouverait partout, inscrits en grandes lettres, ou cachés, ou déguisés, de ces noms - qui ne sont forcément des noms de personnes - qui servent à désigner un désir qui n'a pas de vrai nom (106).

And in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Mannoni continues, the true object of Marcel's desire "c'est de retrouver le désir qui n'avait pas d'objet; qui, comme il dit 'ne conduisait à rien'" (107).

All of this leads to nothing, one might say, but an endless deferral, not only of the satisfaction of desire, but even of the identification of the object of desire. Instead we find a chain of metamorphoses figuring desire and its objects.

We have noted that in the authors and works to be explored in this study, there is a recognition of the infinite deferral of definition, that origin and *telos* are represented as unattainable figures of a desire for completion and coherence. The Christian tradition, as enunciated by Augustine, posits the plenitude of the Divine Totality as original,

immanent, and ultimate grounding for all of existence. From this perspective human illusion and presumption (sin and Original Sin) block access to and apprehension of God's immanent Reality. Faith and Grace provide a means of penetrating illusion and holding firm to a transcendant reality. This tradition informs much of 16th-Century epistemology and is refined and further developed by humanists like Erasmus. It is certainly central to the perspectives of Marguerite de Navarre and, to a certain extent, Rabelais. However, there is also an aspect of Renaissance humanism that seeks a secular and rational exploration of the limits of human understanding. This attitude, which, though often criticized by Montaigne, is evident in his work, gains force and dominates thinking in ensuing centuries. As 20th-Century readers, it is interesting for us to compare the perspectives of the *theatrum mundi* that influenced Renaissance writers with those that have informed our own thinking. At this point I would like to refer to some of the insights of Friedrich Nietzsche concerning the nature of representation and human illusion and illudedness as a basis for comparison with the Augustinian tradition. I hope to show that, while Nietzsche posits a void where Augustine posits plenitude, both thinkers place human existence and perception in vortexes of paradox that resist resolution.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche's observations and interpretations of the nature of human perception and representation of reality coalesce with Nietzsche's theories of the origin and nature of artistic creation. He posits two poles of artistic creation: the Apollonian and the Dionysian. The Dionysian wisdom that has been suppressed is

described by Nietzsche as a recognition of the insubstantiality of human existence[16] that nevertheless manifests an overpowering primal life-urge. This apparent contradiction implies that life, empty, inconsequential, and unworthy of desire though it may be, is nonetheless the focus of longing and desire. The Dionysian desire to embrace an existence apparently devoid of substance results in empty arms that clasp only air or oneself, recalling the failure of Orpheus to recapture the phantom object of his consuming desire. In such a situation illusion, as a representation of an insatiable desire, becomes necessary in order to provide that desire with a perceivable object. This illusion begets myth and its representation in poetry and, eventually tragedy. As an illusion, myth

> teaches by analogy with its own nature, that the whole phenomenal world is only the created, artificial symbol of a generating truth behind it[17].

Thus the illusion of myth, and its expressions in tragedy and poetry, reflect, through their own characteristics, the truth that truth can only be completely true "*dans un autre monde*". This world, like the theater, like Baudelaire's definition of poetry, is a provisional reality, and for it to function properly we must remain aware that it is less than absolute.

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[16] Nietzsche refers to the answer given by the satyr Silenus to Midas' inquiry as to what was the best or most desirable thing for man:

> "Oh, wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you is - to die soon" (*The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Vintage, 1967] 3,42).

[17] Benjamin Bennett, "Nietzsche's Idea of Myth: *The Birth of Tragedy* from the Spirit of 18th Century Aesthetics, *PMLA* (May 1979), 423. My reading of Nietzsche here is greatly indebted to Bennett's article.

We recall that, according to Nietzsche, myth and illusion are born of necessity, as a means of avoiding a confrontation with the terrible truth revealed by Silenus. We have previously noted the destabilizing effect that is a result of consciousness of the arbitrary conventions of illusion in the theater and the infinite regression it implies. Nietzsche finds the penetration of the illusions in which we live even more dangerous, for the truth to be found behind them destroys the will to live (*Birth of Tragedy*, 7, 60). Myth and illusion are necessary as a means of insulating us from the truth that can only sicken us through a consciousness of the absurdity of our existence. Artistic illusion, conscious of its status as illusion, grows out of myth and consciousness of the function of myth:

> for if we were not always at least dimly conscious of the horrible truth, we would have no incentive to renew constantly that creative act by which we maintain the mythical image. Hence also myth's inexorable historical tendency toward greater consciousness of itself as art (Bennett, 426).

The artistic illusions evolving from myth are animated by the paradoxical situation in which in order to better perform their function of veiling and distracting from the truth, the illusions must not only remain somewhat conscious of the truth that they obscure, but must draw from it and reflect it as well. It is this paradox that leads to the developement of tragedy and what Nietzsche terms its "suicide":

> [...] tragedy is art intensified to the point where it must display and affirm precisely that truth which it is the nature of art, from primitive myth on, to conceal (Bennett, 426).

Thus tragedy perishes in the revelation and awareness of its own function and character by mirroring its origins in myth as a representation of an untenable truth. For Nietzsche illusion is not only necessary, but inevitable, and he sees the demise of tragedy as being succeeded by a new illusion, lacking in self-awareness, that he designates the "Socratic illusion" (*Birth of Tragedy*, 12, 82). Nietzsche sees Socrates as instituting a naive belief in the ultimate triumph of reason as a means of attaining perfect knowledge, an attitude that has continued through modern times in the guise of science. For Nietzsche the basic error of the Socratic illusion is, as Bennett puts it, "the notion that all existence is ultimately knowable" (427). This assumption, again, to quote Bennett, "thus has the character of primitive myth: it is an illusion not cognizant of its illusoriness" (427). But once again, the fragile nature of primitive myth and belief leads inevitably to an evolution from the unselfconscious scientific illusion to a conscious art, aware of its illusory nature.[18] So the scientific illusion born of Socratism, too, through the development of this awareness, becomes an "artistic" illusion.

In describing the source, nature, and evolution of illusion, Nietzsche identifies two creative impulses: the Dionysian and the Apollonian. We have spoken of the primal Dionysian life-urge in the face of an intuition of the debilitating truth revealed by Silenus. The Apollonian impulse develops along with the necessity of illusion and its artistic (i.e. increasingly self-conscious) evolution. However, the distinction between the two impulses does not permit their separation and complete definition, for Nietzsche sees them as

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[18] Bennett maintains that Nietzsche's aim in *The Birth of Tragedy* is to contribute to the development of the Socratic myth, exposed by Kant and Schopenhauer, into a conscious artistic illusion (430-32).

complementary rather than contrary. Once more we encounter, in the mechanisms that explain, govern, or represent illusion, the inescapability of duality and paradox. The duality that binds and opposes the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of the creative impulse follows patterns of transformation and infinite regression that we have noted as characteristic of the phenomenon of representation.

The Dionysian wisdom or knowledge of truth is ungraspable. The truth that the Dionysian perceives, according to Nietzsche, negates existence. To perceive and accept that truth would be to cease to exist. The only possible reaction to an intuition of that unacceptable truth is to struggle against it. Only the Apollonian struggle against truth through the creation of illusion can manifest an awareness of the truth. All culture is illusion, be it "the Socratic love of knowledge and the delusion of being able thereby to heal the eternal wound of existence", "art's seductive veil of beauty", or "the metaphysical comfort that beneath the whirl of phenomena eternal life flows on indestructibly" (*Birth of Tragedy*, 18, 109-10). We have noted that the Socratic illusion eventually becomes conscious of its own insufficiencies and takes on the character of artistic illusion. Similarly, the consciousness of the illusoriness of man's created existence that seeks metaphysical consolation through that consciousness is also trapped in illusion. Nietszche refers to the "tragic culture" (*Birth of Tragedy*, 18, 110) of the Buddhists or Brahmins. For such a tragic culture a representation of the truth that negates existence becomes the comforting illusion that permits existence. There can be no "reconciliation with truth", for such a reconciliation implies freedom from illusion[19]. The truth cannot be

[19]See Bennett, 428.

encountered or perceived unless it wears a mask, and in that case it is the mask that is perceived, not the truth. We remember Mannoni's observation that believing that a mask is the being it figures destroys the whole effect of masks, that the purpose of the mask is to evoke the images of reality contained within ourselves. The artistic illusion born of the Apollonian impulse seems to operate in a similar way. Its fundamental impulse is to obscure the truth, while endlessly evoking it as the source of its own creative activity. The artistic illusion reflects our confrontations with truth[20] as it shields us from it through its own creative energy. Because this creative activity reflects and is made necessary by confrontations with truth, it also reflects something true about the nature of its relationship to the truth it obscures. Thus the artistic illusion may reveal the truth about its own illusory nature, and one might trace the generation of one illusion from another in an infinite regression. But the originary truth behind the entire Apollonian dynamic would seem to be unreachable in this way. And while the Apollonian illusion might seem to seek or approach the truth, by revealing that our world is one of illusion, it nevertheless remains true to its original function of making existence possible through the creation of the illusion that permits the constant creation of illusion as a bulwark against the void beyond that illusion.

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[20] Bennett explains the direct proportionality of the two:
"To the extent that we confront the truth as truth (Dionysianly) we must also be in the process of creating and of illuding ourselves (Apollonianly) with a world in which human life is possible; otherwise we simply could not exist. And conversely, the brilliance and beauty - the obvious artificiality or 'createdness' - of the world in which we live (which means the illusion by which we live) are a direct measure of the extent to which we need illusion, that is the extent to which we confront the truth as truth" (429).

From such a perspective Baudelaire's *monde plus réel* would seem to be even less accessible than we had thought. The accomplishment and realization of poetry in that other world would seem to imply the annihilation of poetry in a manner similar to the suicide of tragedy. We are speaking, then, of an annihilation that reaffirms the function of poetry (and all literature) through a revelation of its dual nature and longings, as an Apollonian agent of illusion and as a Dionysian seeker of truth.

The production of illusion, the transformations and metamorphoses of illusion as it strives to justify and transcend itself seem to grow from a void at the center of existence[21]. This void can be seen as the abyss indicated by Silenus. It might also be seen as the impossibility of approaching or identifying a substantiality that it is beyond our power to attain. If, as Nietzsche maintains, there is no existence beyond illusion, with both science and faith founded in primitive myth and developing into artistic illusions, then no perception or representation of any truth can be taken as anything but illusion. If the whole phenomenal world is illusion, we cannot detach ourselves from that world of illusion in order to perceive or present any knowledge that would transcend the world of illusion. Even the supposed knowledge that the world is nothing but illusion must necessarily proceed from a state of illudedness.

Thus, no rational or systematic interpretation of the paradoxes or the series of reflected illusions that comprise perceived existence can pretend to explain or deconstruct

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[21] One cannot help but note here the similarity of this image to those evoked and developed by Terence Cave in his book, *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.) We will refer to Cave's book in subsequent chapters dealing with Rabelais and Montaigne.

those paradoxes and illusions without negating the premises for its own validity. The concept that we are referring to as "theatricality" begins with recognition of the paradox that "truth" can only be represented through illusion (which is to say, that truth is beyond figuration and all representation is illusion.) This awareness of the illusory nature of representation is manifested in an act of representation that consciously confronts and reveals the very paradox that negates and transcends its provisional goal (that of representing a comprehensible "truth".) What we call theatricality finds its paradigm in the theater, but is central to what Nietzsche calls the "artistic illusion", for it mirrors and plays with the illusions of the ceaseless creative energy by which man creates and perceives existence. The transience, temporality, and specific locus of represention in the theater emphasize the provisional nature of perspective and so remind us of the impossibility of stepping outside the illusory world to perceive its source and true nature. But all artistic illusion reflects a consciousness of the generating power of the paradox of its own dual nature as veiling and mirroring, fearing and longing for truth. Artistic illusion reveals what lies beyond the grasp of conceptual or systematic thought because art, like its theatrical paradigm, thrives on the paradox of illusion, while systems and concepts are neutralized or nullified by paradox. Artistic illusion recognizes the impossibility of knowledge as it reflects a longing for it, and in this way does seem to provide a valid intimation of our nature and situation.

In the Christian tradition, for which Augustine is arguably the most influential spokesman, the truth is equally ungraspable, equally shrouded in man-made illusion, but it is clearly identified with God: the ultimate Good, to be supremely desired. For

Augustine human existence does have a purpose, and that purpose is the apprehension of God. The nobility of the human spirit, for Augustine, rests not upon its capacity to forge illusion, but its capacity to recognize it, including the illusion of self.

> The spirit, when it contemplates the highest wisdom- which, since it is changeless, cannot be the same thing as the spirit- apprehends even its own changeableness and in a sense penetrates into its own mind. [...] Yet the spirit is even nobler when it forgets itself in its love of the immutable God; [...] If, however, it takes the opposite road and is satisfied with itself, seeking to imitate God in a perverse way, so that it wills to delight in its own power - if the spirit takes this road, the more it desires to be greater, the less it becomes.[22]

According to Augustine, man's artistic illusions do not augment his being, but rather diminish it; man's creative enterprise in fashioning a world after his own image (or the images within himself) do not protect him from an unbearable truth, but rather blind him to the most desirable of truths. While Nietzsche posits the source of creation as a void rendered infinitely fecund by apprehension, the ever more complex refractions of illusion that are generated and multiply from this source seem to spiral on endlessly, with no fixed *telos* except the mechanism of self-renewal. Augustine, on the other hand, proposes both an ultimate source and an ultimate end, that happen to be identical. The definition of an etiology and teleology that mirror one another might seem to banish the

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[22] *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Anna S. Benjamin and L.H. Hackstaff (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts, 1964), III, 25, 261-3.

paradoxical mechanisms that illustrate the impossibility of perception free of illusion. However Augustine is rigorously conscious of the difficulty of escaping illusion. As he points out, the very means by which he attempts to represent the truth, i.e. the medium of language, illustrates the dilemma.

Augustine, as a writer, manipulates the illusions of language. Augustine, as a man of God, attempts to penetrate and deconstruct illusion in his quest to know God. The literary representations of his quest mirror the contradictions of Augustine's endeavor to transcend illusion with the aid of illusion (language) and to represent the true grounding of that effort through the distortions and inventions of language. Augustine not only confronts the contradictions but seems to embody them. In writing his *Confessions* Augustine contemplates the self he has been, not for the pleasure of self-contemplation, not to supplant the worthier contemplation of God, but as a means of tracing a pathway through illusion to God. Again, contemplation and representation of the illusion of who he was, is employed by Augustine as a tool in his effort to transcend illusion. Augustine represents his illusions and enlightenment through the medium of language, which he also recognizes as a provisional illusion.

> There are two reasons why things written are not understood: they are obscured either by unknown or by ambiguous signs[23].

Language is a system of ambiguous signs that obscures the truth, even when it seeks to represent that truth, for the truth is itself an unknown sign.

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[23]*On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Library of the Liberal Arts, 1958),III, 10, 15.

Augustine expresses his anxiety with the problem of attempting to point towards truth through the illusion of language. In the name of Charity, he prays that he may

> sacrifice to you [God] the service of my thought and of my tongue, and I beg you to give me what I may offer to you. [...] From all rashness and all lying *circumcise my lips* both within and without[24]. Let your scriptures be my chaste delight. Let me neither be deceived in them nor deceive others by them (*Confessions*, III, 2, p. 258).

The desired circumcision represents the desire that the lips and heart be stripped of the outer language of illusion and to be delivered of lies of subjective consciousness. In a world in which the quest for absolute truth must be undertaken by means of provisional illusion, Augustine appreciates the necessity for a self-aware participation in the conventions of the illusions in the name of a transcending *telos*. The masks of illusion must be reinvested with the Spirit, in order to evoke the Spirit. Poets, as theologians of the City of Man, are dupes of the illusions that they create and in which they live; however these illusions are visible to the spectator in the City of God (*City of God*, XVIII,iv,621). In the *Confessions*, Augustine describes his youthful love of poetry and rhetoric (II-V) as a kind of lust that obscured the Word of God. Yet, he also perceived a truth in the structure, meter, and proportions of poetry that implied an analogous and transcendant perfection and order towards which poetry, at its best, points[25].

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[24]Eugene Vance, in his book *Mervellous Signals: Signs and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages*, says that Augustine's striking metaphor seems to "describe his hermeneutical objectives" (6).

[25]See Vance, *Mervelous Signals*, 17.

The masks of the world created by man's will and imagination can neither fully figure nor completely obscure the truth beyond that world. The carnal metaphor, reinvested with the Spirit, seems a worthy vessel of truth to Augustine. The self-absorbed lust of poetry and rhetoric is a caricature of the desire for the Word, whose perfection is mirrored in the structure and proportions of a degraded art. Poetry, seduced by its own illusions, is incapable of perceiving or figuring the object of its true desire, while it unconsciously continues to reflect "through analogy" an aspect of the beauty and perfection of the Word. According to Augustine the figments and fantasms we create are inferior to the power to create them and therefore should not usurp the esteem due that creative power (*Confessions*, VII, 17, p.154). Man's creations can neither summon nor obscure God; they are illusions of convention that signify, consciously or not, the immanence and inenarrability of the truth.

From an Augustinian point of view one might say that the *mise-en-abîme* of illusion is not an infinite regression, since a beginning and an end point of illusion can be identified and a divine truth arrests the regression. Nevertheless, the character of the identification resides in belief, which, Nietzsche would say, is nothing but myth, or illusion, and unaware illusion at that. Augustine's faith in finitude of illusion still cannot provide him with the certitude that he is not illuded. His prayers in Book XI of the *Confessions* reflect the insecurity born of the fact that he has recognized in his past that while he was illuded he could not know he was illuded. The very nature of illudedness precludes such an awareness. Only from a point beyond that illusion can one, as a spectator, be aware of the illudedness of another, even if that other be oneself at another

point in time. Only God, outside of the *theatrum mundi*, is capable of lucidity, and Augustine prays that God, through His Love and Grace, may confer upon man moments of lucidity that permit him to recognize and expose the illusions born of incapacity and desire.

> Lord, have pity on me and give ear to my desire. [...] See, my God, from what my desire springs! *The wicked have told me of delights, but not such as Thy law, O Lord.* That is the reason for my desire. See, Father, look well at it, see and approve, and I pray that [...] I may find grace before you so that the inner secrets of your words may be laid open to me when I knock (XI, 2, p.259).

Augustine prays to the object of his desire that he may truly come to know what he so assiduously seeks. At the same time he recognizes that desire does not preclude illusion, but rather tends to generate it from the absence of a perceivable object[26]. The problem is that the means of conveyance of truth and the reflections of truth are not truth. Christianity recognizes and, at least abstractly, solves the problem in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus, the *Logos*, reflects God the Father while remaining consubstantial with Him. As the Word made Flesh, Christ is both the Word and the Truth it conveys, Signifier and Signified; he is the creative means and principle made incarnate. Yet it is only by faith that one can define The Word as the object of desire behind the illusions that mere men cannot escape. And faith can be seen as yet another myth or illusion

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[26]As Mannoni points out, the expression of "le désir impossible, c'est bien une forme extrême de la métaphore" (112).

protecting man from the truth he does not want to know. The desire to penetrate illusion, represented here by Augustine, in order to attain metaphysical truth, cannot dispense of illusion as a means of undertaking that quest or representing the object of that desire. How can one know to what extent the object of desire is illusory?

On the other hand, the supposition that illusion is necessary in order to shield us from an unbearable metaphysical truth, is no more substantially grounded than any other human invention. Here the object of desire is to coexist with a debilitating truth by making believe that we are unaware of it, while it is our very intimation of that truth that supposedly generates the illusion that obscures the unwelcome verity. But once again, it is impossible to perceive whether or not we need fear the truth since we cannot perceive that truth, but only our representation of that truth, which is necessarily illusion. In both cases the paradox leads to an infinite regression of representations of illusion.

There does not seem to be a satisfactory solution, in any rational or systematic sense, to the desire to escape illusion. On the other hand, this dilemma is endlessly enacted in the theater and poetry. The mechanisms of the theater represent over and over again the mechanisms of representation. The illusion, through conventions, of illusion in art, reflects a consciousness of the apparent inescapability of illusion in the search for grounding or closure. Such grounding or closure must be posited "*dans un autre monde*". This other world may be yearned for or feared, depending on how it is figured, but it seems to be inconceivably "*plus réel*". In the chapters that follow we shall explore various versions of that unattainable world and the paradoxes that circumscribe its undefinable frontiers.

Chapter 2

The Unseizable Self and the Web of Desire

Baudelaire, we remember, maintained that there is nothing more real than poetry, since poetry is not completely true except in another world. We have noted that poetry, in this world, is composed of language and desire, a desire that mirrors the desire inherent in language. This desire for voice and presence[1] is played out in a simulacrum of voice and presence that betrays the absence of the trueness for which it yearns.

"The word is a presence made of absence," according to Lacan (*Ecrits*, trans. Sheridan, 65). But what is the quality of the absence masked by the linguistic presence? Is it, as Augustine maintains, the Word, whose absence is evoked, and whose completeness is desired but not attained by the linguistic or poetic word? Or is absence itself the totality and reality that subtends the verbal mask? Thus might language be construed as the Apollonian creative impulse whose very fecundity attests to, as it obscures, the Dionysian intuition of the void upon which it is projected. These suppositions imply two very different roles for poetry (and language) in its realization "dans un autre monde". The first implies the realization of language's referential function (which, according to the Christian view, is realized in the Incarnation), while the second

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[1]See Suzanne Gearhart's The Open Boundary of History and Fiction: A Critical Approach to the French Enlightenment (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984), 254, and her discussion of the debate between Derrida and DeMan over Rousseau's theory of the origin of language.

assumes the annihilation of the linguistic ruses of presence, voice, being, and referentiality. The assumption that the referential nature of language mirrors an ultimate Referent, or *Signifié*, implies that the linguistic mask is capable of transcending its inherent insubstantiality and artifice in order to bear witness to a Truth and Trueness beyond its grasp. The Pauline formulation of this notion is the investment of the letter by the Spirit[2].

The letter that, according to Paul, kills, is the creative impulse ignorant of its origins, the mask(ed) maker blind to the absence of being that his mask betrays. For Augustine, the origin of human language is in the Fall, hence the insufficiency of its nature, grounded as it is in fallen Nature, severed from the Divine Totality. The plenitude that is mimicked by language has been lost. The letter, miming the wholeness for which it yearns, acts out its desire. Investment by the Spirit, made possible by the Redemption, that is, the Incarnation of the Word, provides language with a teleology that mirrors and inverts its etiology; as such, language may point the way to the True Being that preceded it and that exists beyond it. Thus language reflects, through its own emptiness, the existence of a plenitude that is absent in its own illusory "presence". Such an interpretation implies that the absent plenitude to which language refers can only be realized, or its presence perceived, in the absence of language. If the word is a simulated presence acted out in the absence of the Word, so is the Word a true presence that can

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[2]In II Corinthians,3:5-6, Paul says:

> our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life.

only be perceived in the silencing of the mimetic word that represents and obscures it[3]. The writer who accepts this interpretation of language and who expresses her desire for the totality of the Word by means of the word is trapped in a paradox that seems to suspend infinitely the satisfaction of that desire. The apprehension of the Word depends on the silencing of human language, but each utterance of longing defers that silence. In this chapter we will examine how the poetry of Marguerite de Navarre reflects her confrontation with the paradoxes of language and desire enunciated through the Augustinian tradition.

If we return to the assumption, that an absolute absence, rather than an absolute Totality is behind the theater of human language and creativity, we find a secular analogue to the Christian notion that the letter must be invested with the Spirit in order to live. Nietzsche, we will recall, insists that the Apollonian illusion must be nourished by a veiled awareness of the awful truth it obscures; without such an intimation, artistic (and linguistic) creation would lose its urgency and necessity, its sense of purpose, if you will. Apollonian creativity, nourished by the consciousness of its origin in the void, cannot but continually refer to that origin, becoming ever more self-conscious of, and thus reflecting, the very truth it exists to conceal (See Bennett, 426). The original purpose of artistic creation (in which we include language) is to obscure absence by its own presence. This primary purpose is succeeded by the desire to substantiate that presence and confer upon it a Truth and trueness of being beyond an artistic simulacrum of being.

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[3]In Book IX, Chapter 10 of the Confessions, Augustine evokes the stilling of "the tumult of the flesh" and the voices of man and all creation as a prerequisite to apprehension of the Word.

This enterprise inevitably leads to a self-conscious exploration of the intuition of the "awful truth", the suppression of which engenders and nourishes human creativity. And so, in what Nietzsche calls tragedy's "suicide", human artifice, striving for truth, inevitably reveals the truth it would conceal, which in turn reveals the falsity of art's pretensions to "true" presence or being. As a result, man scrutinizes the masks he has constructed to contain and attest to his being, fantasizing an apotheosis from *paraître* to *être*[4] - the investiture of a trueness of being that is beyond human capacity to confer. And as he scrutinizes his fabrication, man realizes that the mask is never more true than when it proclaims itself mask - not "real"- and yet the same mask is never more satisfying than when it serves as the screen upon which man projects his fantasies that the mask lives and is therefore true. In this chapter we will explore how, in his poetry, Pierre de Ronsard creates for himself the role that he directs and performs in a theater of auto-creation.

The contradictions inherent in the nature of human constructs and their apparent functions, are, in their very unresolvability, generative forces for endless activity on both sides of the argument we have delineated concerning the ultimate referentiality of language. Augustine can interpret the human word as an imperfect mirror that partially reflects (and distorts) the Word[5].

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[4]See Jacques Lacan's Séminaires, Séminaire XX, page 44, where he compares paraître (seeming) with para - être (beside being).

[5] See Marcia L. Colish's The Mirror of Language: A Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge (New Haven: Yale UP, 1968) especially pages 45-67.

In this referential role words refer to things, and, along with things, the Totality whence all things come. And so, according to Robert Cottrell (*The Grammar of Silence: A Reading of Marguerite de Navarre's Poetry*), "Augustine scripturalizes the whole of creation," (15) identifying the world as a book to be read (*liber mundi*) and, in doing so, blurring the distinction between word and thing, since both may signify God (Cottrell 10-19). But the very things, linguistic and natural, that signify God, simultaneously bear witness, by their presence, to His absence, and must be silenced before the Word may be heard (*Confessions*,IX,10). The linguistic mirror man has constructed to complement nature in bearing witness to God offers only a reflection (and an imperfect one at that). Gazing at the mirror is not perceiving God. For God to be perceived we must tear ourselves from the mirror and seal our eyes, we must cease to signify and interpret God and, along with all of Creation, seal our lips. Nevertheless, language may be used as a tool, says Augustine, to point beyond itself, beyond the world of things. In this way Augustine makes a distinction between literal and figurative language - the letter, and the letter invested with the Spirit. Both are masquerades, but behind the figurative mask is plenitude, while the literal mask is hollow. In his treatise *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine cautions against adherence to the signifier rather than the signified

> If it is a carnal slavery to adhere to a usefully instituted sign instead of to the thing it was designed to signify, how much is it a worse slavery to embrace signs instituted for spiritually useless things instead of the things themselves? Even if you transfer your affections from these signs to what

> they signify, you still, nevertheless, do not lack a servile and carnal burden and veil (III, 7, 11).

This warning works on two levels, for any thing signified by verbal signs is itself, in Augustine's view, a sign pointing to God[6]. Thus the referentiality of language and all signs must always be kept in mind in order to avoid the "carnal slavery" of an idolatrous devotion to an empty letter. Nevertheless, even consciousness of the ultimately referential function of all signs cannot reduce man's dependence on signs, "a servile and carnal burden and veil". And so Augustine makes a distinction between enjoyment and use, that is, that the natural world as well as the creations of man are not to be enjoyed in themselves or for their own sake (for as such they are only dead letters), but rather used as a means of loving, or "enjoying" God:

> Therefore, among all these things only those are to be enjoyed which we have described as being eternal and immutable; others are to be used so that we may be able to enjoy those (*On Christian Doctrine*, I, 22, 20).
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> ...
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> Not everything which is to be used is to be loved, but only those things which [...] by a certain association pertain to God [...] (I, 23, 22).

The reliance on signs, says Augustine, began with the Fall, for before they sinned Adam and Eve did not use signs. Instead their communication with God was effected by illumination of their minds. Man's fallen state is mirrored by the fragmented and

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[6]In the *Confessions*, Augustine says of "everything which exists only to pass away", [...] if one can hear them, these all say: We did not make ourselves. He made us that abideth forever [...] (IX, 10, p. 202).

temporal character of his language. The possibility of the reconstitution of man's fragmentary nature is manifested in the Incarnation, the unity of Signifier and Signified. Christ gives man the capacity to speak to God by being both man and God. Christ is the only signifier that is not inferior to that which he signifies[7]. Grace, made possible by Christ's Incarnation, can illuminate, leading towards a reconstitution of fragmented man to the Wholeness of God's Being. But because fallen man has lost the faculty of being paradigmatically illuminated, as are the angels, he is still reliant on the syntagmatic hall of mirrors of referential signs[8]. The humanly fabricated word supplants the Word, its ultimate point of origin and reference. Man's creation obscures and seems to displace God's immanence. Throughout the *Confessions* Augustine expresses his anxiety over the unresolvable dilemma that he confronts in employing words to evoke and reach the Word. We recall his prayer "From all rashness and all lying *circumcise my lips*, both within and without" (*Confessions*, XI,2) as he writes his book. In chapter one we noted that the metaphor of circumcision expresses the "desire that the lips and heart be stripped of the outer language of illusion and (...) be delivered from lies of subjective consciousness." The subjective consciousness is as integral to the *Confessions* as are the words of which it is composed. Augustine traces the transformation of his own "self" from legacy of the

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[7]See Vance, *Mervelous Signals*, 190-1.

[8]Augustine notes that,

> [...] a multitude of innumerable signs by means of which men express their thoughts is made up of words. And I could express the meaning of all signs of the type here touched upon in words, but I would not be able at all to make the meanings of words clear by these signs (*On Christian Doctrine*, II, 3, 36).

Fall to signifier of the desire to know and be one with God. Just as perception of the Word requires the silencing of words and all signs refering to It, the knowledge of, and reincorporation with the Divine Totality desired by the Augustine's literary "self", cannot be effected while the self exists. The existence of the self testifies to its severance from the Totality it desires, just as the presence of the word implies the absence of the Word to which it refers. The self is an expression of desire, and the condition of desire is a statement that what is desired is absent or lacking. Throughout the *Confessions* Augustine is absent from the self he describes. As Vance points out, when a narrative "I" writes about "I", the "I" recounted is effectively transformed from the first to the third person (*Mervelous Signals*, 1). The "I" recounted by Augustine is another; *"Je" est un autre.*

Augustine ends his book with an exegesis and contemplation of the Scriptural account of Creation given in Genesis. The end of the self is played out in an attempt to lose the self in a comprehension of and incorporation into the Wholeness that preceded the self. But that timeless Wholeness becomes perceptibly manifest only through a temporal account of Creation. Augustine contemplates man's verbal reflection of Creation. He cannot contemplate Creation, only its signs in the fallen natural world, or in the opaque distorting mirrors of language and self. Unable to rid himself of self and thus reach the plenitude beyond the self, Augustine plays out the ripening of a literary self to an apotheosis of self-effacement in contemplation and prayer. Thus the desire for existence beyond time and language is expressed in the temporal language of narrative culminating in the atemporal language of prayer in Book XIII.

John Freccero says that:

> For Saint Augustine, consciousness begins in desire. To discover the self is to discover it as in some sense lacking, absent to itself, and desire is the soul's reaching out to fill the void (35).

Furthermore, Freccero points out that, for Augustine, desire is also the beginning of language, from which it is inseparable, as both reach out towards the satisfaction and intelligibility of the Word. Language, then, reflects desire, which represents the absence of that which it desires: completion, perfection, intelligibility. For Augustine, behind the endless chain of representations that attempt to figure desire there is an endpoint. It is the *Logos* that ultimately informs all language and is the ultimate object of all desire.

However, should the infinite regression of representation truly have no grounding, should the posited *Logos* merely be another exquisite figuration of unsatisfiable desire, the *mise-en-abîme* of infinitely fecund and ultimately empty signs recalls Nietzsche's description of the Apollonian creative impulse grounded in Dionysian intuition and despair. In this case, the ultimate referent might be said to be the void. If the ultimate reference is the lack of referentiality outside of the conventions established to obscure that inanition, then the Augustinian dichotomy of figurative versus literal language is irrelevant; all language works on the same level, that of illusion and arbitrary conventions[9]. There is no "informed" letter, such as Scripture is for Augustine.

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[9]As Paul DeMan puts it: "If all language is about language, then the paradigmatic linguistic model is that of an entity that confronts itself" (*Allegories of Reading*, 153.) According to DeMan any distinction between figurative and literal language is delusion, as are the boundaries between history and literature and literature and criticism. In DeMan's view, no text escapes from the theater of language and its *mise-en-abîme*. See chapter 7 on "Metaphor" in *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979).

Augustine's scripturalization of nature assumes, as we have seen, that both nature and language have an ultimate referent. Augustine sees language and nature as masquerades, but to uncover them is to reveal their insufficiency without God, their status as creations of God, and signs pointing towards the Word that they reflect, evoke, and desire, but with which they can never coincide. On the other hand, if language has no referent outside of itself, then God, or the Word, too, could be seen as a creation of language. Whether language points to the intelligibility of the Word, or the absence of meaning, we recognize that language can never be identical with its constructs. Its very presence denotes the absence it would transcend, as well as the desire to bridge that gulf. And as the act of representation precludes veritable identity with that which is represented, the state of desire implies the deferment of the satisfaction of its craving.

Augustine evokes the silence that is prerequisite for an apprehension of the Word, but he does so linguistically, thus, it might seem, further distancing that silence. Augustine tries to resolve the paradox with his distinction between figurative and literal language, between the empty enjoyment and the productive use of language. However, it could be countered that all use of language is enjoyment of language. One might compare Augustine's use of language to evoke the silence that language obscures with Pascal's attempted use of reason to rationalize the Faith that he himself places beyond reason[10].

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[10]Augustine prefigured, in some ways, Pascal's effort in his attempt to lend a classical, rational coherence to the fragmentary abstractions of Scripture (see Auerbach's Mimesis, 73-4).

Language that "refers to the absence of meaning," and for which "Nothingness is the single 'referent'," presents a similar paradox. Such language is referential, for it refers to the absence behind its presence; on the other hand, if it refers to nothing, it must be non-referential. Language whose ultimate referent is the void rather than a grounding presence and plenitude, nevertheless presents itself as a presence and functions as an evocation of plenitude - of a world made of correlative presences. Is language then, nothing but a mask[11]? If we recall Octave Mannoni's characterization of the wolf mask that signifies that it is not a wolf, we might find a similar function in the linguistic mask that proclaims "I am not presence, but absence." Nevertheless, any attempt to unmask the feigned plenitude of language and reveal that absence leads only to another series of masks ready to be removed.

How is one to interpret this *mise-en-abîme*? In which sense do we trace it, to the abyss of nothingness? How? Instead of the void, we find a swarming *copia* of presences, an infinite regression of reference and meaning in which no referent or meaning, even that of absence, is absolute, or even what it purports to be. Demasking leads, not to the void, but to the confrontation of yet another mask. The multiplicity of masks and their arbitrary identities suggest that they are hiding something; nothingness? absence of identity? Yet, the fact that there is always another mask implies that nothingness and the absence of identity are unattainable. One might almost be tempted to posit something other than the void as the source of reference, if not exactly the referent - a Proteus

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[11] Paul DeMan says that literature is a mode of language that consciously signifies its own rhetorical and unreliable nature (DeMan, *The Rhetoric of Blindness*,136-7). Also see Suzanne Gearhart, 237.

implicit behind the transformations and guises - an ungraspable presence. Such a conclusion would bring us full circle to an Augustinian view and its unresolvable paradoxes. And so it seems to go, *ad infinitum*, since neither of the beginnings or end points (i.e. absolutes of Plenitude or Absence) proposed for the linguistic presence that denies its own ontological autonomy is attainable or perceptible. The infinite reflection of distorted and ungraspable beginnings and ends floods the interim with presences that proclaim both plenitude and absence. The protean chain of transformation resists identification as new identities are endlessly engendered and disappear.

There is no resolution to the debate, since for both sides paradox is inescapable; a theater of presence proclaims its own negation. The word that points towards the plenitude of the Word distances the silence that is prerequisite to apprehension of the Word. On the other hand, the word whose sole referent is nothingness, or the absence of referentiality, obscures that void in an endlessly proliferating *réseau* of reference to its own illusory meaning. All of this shall be pertinent to our discussion of the poetic enterprises of Marguerite de Navarre and Pierre de Ronsard. Both poets confront and expose these paradoxes as they struggle to figure the desire for contrary, but equally inaccessible versions of closure.

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Poetic Persona and the Masks of Self

The works of both Marguerite and Ronsard are profoundly informed by questions of etiology and teleology, both of poetry and of the poetic self. Each encounters the

paradoxes that frustrate the search for beginnings and endings. Each expresses the yearning for an absolute identity through poetic performances that expose the failings of the provisional identities of mortal existence. The motivations and sources for the works of Marguerite and Ronsard seem quite different, but the fact that the paradoxes that impede and impel their pursuits tend to mirror one another suggests that they share a fundamental passion for the problems of presence and absence that we have identified with the theatrical paradigm.

The reader of poetry soon becomes aware that there are two major sources of inspiration for poets of the French Renaissance: Christianity and classical antiquity. A closer examination of this dichotomy reveals profound differences in attitudes towards the purpose and the meaning, as well as the execution of literary activity and production. David Quint, in his book *Origin and Originality*, describes the tension between what he calls allegorical and historicist conceptions of literature during the Renaissance. Quint traces the undermining of the allegorical tradition by a new awareness of the poet's historical relationship with his classical predecessors. Quint also describes the anxiety evoked by the subversion of allegorical authority and the effort on the part of Renaissance literary artists and critics to reinvest an empty letter with "new" sources and origins.

For texts grounded in Christianity, as Augustine has told us, the letter exists only to serve one function: to bear witness to the divine truth of the Word. Secular texts, concerned with their own creative and historical uniqueness, tend to seek authorization for their own originality in the texts and writers of antiquity. The poems of Marguerite

de Navarre could be taken as a collective example of the Christian allegorical tradition.

> Si vous lisez ceste oeuvre toute entiere,
> Arrestez vous, sans plus, à la matiere,
> En excusant la rhythme et le langage
> Voyant que c'est d'une femme l'ouvrage,
> Qui n'a en soy science, ne sçavoir,
> Fors un desir, que chacun puisse voir
> Que fait le don de Dieu le Createur [...] (I,[12]) [my

emphasis].

In "Au lecteur", the prefatory poem to *Les Marguerites*, the poet directs the reader of her work to concern himself with the "*matière*", and not the letter, ("*la rhythme et le language*") of the text (Frank,I,13). Marguerite makes clear that her work, which she characterizes in the last lines of the poem as "rien", is merely an expression of the search for divine grace, "le don de Foy". She undertakes this expression equipped with nothing but the desire for God, which is itself a gift of God's grace.

That grace is figured in another manner in one of the many *Chansons* that bear the title "Autre chanson" and which ends each stanza with the refrain "Hé, laissez la dormir!" (Frank, vol.3, 118-9). In this poem, Marguerite presents the image of her soul, filled and sated with the grace of God, asleep to the world. Each stanza of the poem

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[12]References to Marguerite's poetry, unless otherwise specified, will be to the 1547 edition of *Les Marguerites de La Marguerite des Princesses*, ed. Félix Frank, 4 vols. (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1970).

banishes another aspect of worldly existence that would disturb the blissful soul, awakening it to the false light of illusion.

Puis que Dieu par pure grace
M'a tiré à soy,
Et qu'en tous en toute place
Luy tout seul je voy,
Je suis remply de plaisir,
Veu que mon ame est s'amye,
Qu'il a d'Amour endormie:
Hé, laissez la dormir! Hé, laissez la dormir!

The speaker of the poem, filled ("remply") with pleasure, sees her soul asleep in God's love. She claims to see only Him (l.4). However, in each subsequent stanza, her dismissal of another worldly intruder implies that she cannot altogether banish the world.

Allez dehors, Scrupule
Et piquant Remord,
[...]
Mon ame ha en Dieu fiance:
Hé, laissez la dormir! Hé laissez la dormir!

God as "fiance" implies "trust, credit, [...], assurance, confidence" [13]. Its close resemblance to "fiancé" recalls Marguerite's frequent evocation of Jesus a mystic bridegroom. Both words imply a promise. The promise is that the soul, asleep to the din of the words of the world, will awaken to the sweet plenitude of the Word. The soul's slumber also implies that the soul, by shutting out the "criart Monde" (stanza 4), enacts the silence posited by Augustine as necessary for the apprehension of the Word. Faith banishes Reason, which can teach no real truth or give nor real solace.

Las! cessez, Raison humaine,
De la travailler;
Car povoir n'ha vostre peine
De me reveiller.
Tout vostre sens à loisir
Ne me peult plus rien apprendre,
Qui me fait vray repos prendre:
Hé! laissez la dormir! Hé! laissez la dormir! (stanza 3)

The noisy world, attempting to corrupt the soul ("de rendre mon ame immunde"), sings Siren songs offering false promises of no substance. But the soul, full of the pleasure of the Word, rejects these illusions:

Or taisez vous, criart Monde,

[13] Randle Cotgrave, *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues*, (Columbia: U. of South Carolina Press, 1968), reproduction of 1611 edition.

Qui tousjours taschez

De rendre mon ame immunde;

Car vous la faschez:

Ne luy offrez à choisir

Plaisir, honneur ny richesse;

Pleine elle est d'autre liesse:

Hé! laissez la dormir! Hé! laissez la dormir! (stanza 4)

Just as earthly language must be muted for the Word to be heard, earthly love - desire - must be banished for Divine Love, which is the satisfaction, and thus annihilation of desire, to be manifested. In the fifth stanza Marguerite tells Cupid ("Petit Dieu", a little and inferior god) that his "rolle" is finished, the spectacle of human desire is over. She tells him to turn and contemplate the face of the True God that, through Faith, her soul embraces. Before the overwhelming reality of True Love, the theatrical pretenses of erotic love are stripped to reveal their insubstantiality ("rien n'avez au coeur"):

Petit Dieu, qui par tout vole,

Te disant vainqueur,

Finez cy vostre rolle;

Rien n'avez au coeur

Qui la find de son desir

Tourne à contempler la face,

Que par Foy mon ame embrasse.

Hé! laissez la dormir! Hé, laissez la dormir!

The final stanza states that the soul will sleep through storms and war, full of joy, "soubs la divine tente" in a "Repose seure et contente". But the final refrain, with its insistent appeal to allow the soul to sleep, also betrays the insecurity of the soul's supposed slumber. We cannot fail to note that the speaker seems awake while standing watch over the repose of the soul. There is a dichotomy in the speaker; the voice that hears and sees the worldly voices and apparitions and tells them to be gone is separate from the soul whose slumber she describes and protects. While the speaker confronts the tempting illusions of the world, the soul finds plenitude and joy ("plaisir", "liesse"). Yet the implied finality and security of the soul which reaches the endpoint of desire by embracing, through Faith, the Divine Totality, seems in doubt. The speaker endlessly voices her fear that the soul may wake, implying that the soul is not immune to the lure of illusion. The repose of the soul rests in the grace that allows it the Faith to believe in the promise of ultimate satisfaction. Thus the satisfaction represented is really several steps removed from realization. The final stanza's use of the future tense ("Elle dormira", "Se resjouyra"), also implies deferral. The voice's anxious narrative of the soul's silence and satisfaction is in fact a representation of that silence and satisfaction. The voice is the absence of silence, since silence would require the absence of the voice. Were the soul sure, there would be no need of the voice's vigilance against the world's menacing illusions. The soul's apotheosis rests on faith, the belief in an ultimate endpoint of desire, and its manifestations, including self and language. In fact, the poem is itself the voicing of a desire for the end of desire. It is a performance that requires the proliferation of the illusions of self (voice and soul) and language to play out the annihilation of voice and

language. This is the paradox at the heart of Marguerite's poetry, informing it with a poignancy that transcends her adherence to any orthodoxy or heresy. Any creed, secular or religious, can be seen addressing the desire to figure the satisfaction of desire. The formation of a poetical ideology, under the banner of the Pléiade, we would suggest, merely confronts the same problem from another angle.

The works of the Pléiade poets, especially those of Pierre de Ronsard, can be seen as representative of the historicist "new wave" that puts a premium on the originality of the text and, thus, the valorisation of the poet. As David Quint points out, by the end of the Renaissance Ronsard's side has won out: originality is the most important criteria for judging the merit of a literary text. One may well ask if this result was inevitable and if it is irreversible. Quint suggests that Rabelais - a contemporary of Marguerite and predecessor by a generation of Ronsard - is the Renaissance writer best able to reconcile the allegorical tradition of the text as a vessel of transcendant truth with the assertion of his own individual authorial voice (x, 31). For all its extravagance, there is at the heart of Rabelais' work a profound lucidity - that of a participating spectator of the human pageant: fascinated, amused, even contributing in his own good-humored way, but never allowing himself to be completely taken in by the spectacle. Both Marguerite and Ronsard, however, claim a kind of madness as the inspiration for their works. For Marguerite the madness is a Christian folly akin to that described by St. Paul (I Corinth., 3:18) - folly in the eyes of a world blind to its misery without God. The madness

claimed by Ronsard is a divinely inspired poetic furor, similar to those which animate lovers, prophets, and priests.

In *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus portrays Folly, or madness, as the misplacing of authority in theatrical masks, costumes and scenarios of human fabrication. Men lend authority to their own illusions, then are unable to discern whether there is any truth behind the masks they have created. Erasmus' Folly claims the *theatrum mundi* of human existence as her domain (*Folly*,104). But as Lynda Christian points out Folly is herself double - *Môria*: the Pauline folly conscious of its own paradoxical nature - that is wisdom that fools call folly because it recognizes the folly of fools, and *Stultitia*: the "natural" folly of the world, duped by the illusions of which it is made ("The Metamorphoses of Erasmus' 'Folly'"). And so Folly both engenders and deconstructs the *theatrum mundi* by exposing the flimsiness of the costumes and illusions in which men play out their roles. Folly notes that the less self-conscious an actor is, that is, the less aware he is of his situation of being an actor, the more convincing he is in playing his role (that of the deluded spectator?). If he is convinced of the truth of the illusion, why should anyone else doubt? But contrasting roles often present contrary illusions. Thus one madman sits in an empty theater, "laughing and clapping and enjoying himself because he believed marvellous plays were being acted on the stage, when in fact there was nothing at all," (*Folly*, 121), while another "tries to take the masks off the actors when they're playing a scene on the stage and show their true natural faces to the audience" (104). And so "One madman laughs at another, and each provides entertainment for the other" (122).

Erasmus' view of madness might be fruitfully evoked in examining the self-proclaimed furor and folly of Ronsard and Marguerite, respectively. Marguerite, then, might be compared with the "maniac" (*Folly*,104) who would strip away all the masks, especially her own, while still on the human stage. Her aim, in this endeavor, is to dispose of the illusory folly of this world and become one with the true, that is God: "Ce qui n'est Rien estre fait Tout en un", as she writes in the *Chanson* that begins "Par faux cuyder..." (Frank, 116-7). Ronsard, on the other hand, seeking legitimacy for the authorial role he plays, might be seen as trying to construct a substantial and autonomous authority for the masks and costumes he wears - those of poet, annointed of the gods, descendant of the great poets of antiquity, and precursor of those to come. Quint cites Ronsard's "Ode à Michel de l'Hospital" as an example of the poet's imaginative establishment of his own literary genesis (*Origin and Originality*, 24-31). Ronsard's prefaces, his self-justifications and literary rules and theories, as well as those of other Pléiade poets such as Du Bellay, could be seen as structures created to prop up the mantle that they, in their identities as poets, claim for themselves. These structures are as necessary to the creation and presentation of the poetic persona as is the outer costume they support.

Both Marguerite and Ronsard seek, throughout their poetic activity, an "*autre monde*" that is "*plus réel*", where what they write will be "*complètement vrai*". The desire for such a teleology inevitably turns us back to genesis. Suppose, with an eye to Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, one were to recast the myth of the origins of the human comedy from its source in the Fall from Grace through Original Sin. Adam and Eve first covered themselves, the Bible tells us, to conceal the nakedness that they perceived upon

tasting of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. We might then imagine that nakedness as an absolute nakedness, akin to the recognition of Silenus's horrible Truth: the recognition of the absence of the Whole of which they had been a part leads to their first "human" act - that of covering themselves. They clothed themselves, then, in their moment of self-knowledge, not to conceal naked flesh, but to cover and give shape to their nothingness - for they saw that they were now nothing without God, a finite nothingness separated from the Divine Totality (Marguerite's *Tout*). The encompassing substance of a costume would seem to define and give shape to the nothingness perceptible in a human heart bereft of grace. A proliferation, through human imagination and self-indulgence, of Dionysian frenzy and Apollonian invention, of masks and costumes could then lead to an ever richer complexity and diversity of roles for men to play at being.

From such a perspective, Marguerite could be seen as trying to strip away the worldly masks and costumes in an attempt to regain the *Rien* that, through the Redemption, can again become *Tout*, where God chooses to invest it with His Grace. But even as Marguerite gives us a poignant itinerary of the vestments she discards, the question remains for those without her faith: how can one discard all that makes one's being perceptible without disappearing into silence and the void? Marguerite's situation reminds us of Augustine, who reveals the emptiness of words with words, who evokes the Silence in which God becomes perceptible with a voice that is incompatible with that Silence. In his *Confessions*, Augustine, as we have noted, moves from the syntagmatic

journey of the self that he was to the paradigmatic modes of meditation and prayer[14]. Nevertheless, he effects this derogation of self with a (one supposes) unintentional and apparently inevitable proliferation of selves. For the "I" whose story is told has spawned an "I" who perceives that first "I" as "another". This perception (in what could be seen as an unintentional mirroring of Augustine's own explanation of the refractory relationship of the Trinity) in turn engenders yet another "I", a director, who employs the perceiving "I" to bear witness to the perceived "I" in a *mise-en-scène* of the genesis of the third, unnamed "I". Once again we encounter a theatrical paradox: the enactment of the reduction of one self begets a proliferation of others, revelation of one masquerade begets new, more complex *mises-en-scène*. We saw this happen in the poem "Hé! laissez la dormir!". The self that would close its eyes to the world is now doubled, represented by both the conscious voice that describes and the blissful soul that the voice describes and protects. Marguerite, in the *Heptaméron*, takes advantage of the generation of voices and persona through the representation of representation. The spiraling proliferation of narrative voices in that novel seems to fragment and pulverize[15] the authorial mask, of which each narrative voice is then a shard or mote. However, in her poetry Marguerite relies on the poetic mask which proclaims itself mask and artifice, to expose the mask of self that claims to <u>be</u> what it represents. But her desire to be rid of all masks is both

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[14] The terms "paradigmatic" and "syntagmatic" are commonplaces in Saussurian based linguistics. In using these terms to comment upon the structural strategies of Marguerite's poetry I am following the example of Robert Cottrell in <u>The Grammar of Silence</u>.

[15]See Cottrell, 39, for a discussion of the doctrinal basis of Marguerite's theme of the pulverisation of self as a prerequisite to reabsortion in the *Tout* that is Christ.

expressed and frustrated by the poetic mask that gives voice to that desire. The paradox can only be deactivated if the removal of the poetic mask reveals, not another mask, but Faith, that through the Incarnation, binds the provisional self to the as yet unattainable totality for which it yearns. However, one bereft of Grace and the Faith it makes possible, might ask whether it is not likely that Faith, too, is but a mask - a mask that claims not to be a mask, thereby reflecting the mask of the self it has displaced.

On the other hand, Ronsard, conscious and appreciative of the ingenuity and human resourcefulness that have animated other roles and costumes, wishes to add his own gifts and contributions to the dazzling web of Apollonian illusion. However, we remember that there is, in Apollonian creativity, an inherited and intuited instinct on the part of the artist to cover his nothingness in order to be. This anxiety leads him to invest his fragile human fabrication with the most cogent and convincing foundations possible to hold back the void in the absence of a transcendant Divine Authority. From Marguerite's (or Augustine's) point of view, then, Ronsard would seem to be guilty of the sin of idolatry in his efforts to invest palpable human constructs with the power to replace the mysterious and intangible reality of the *Dieu caché.*

Marguerite's distrust of the vanity and illusion of human constructs is profound. Her evangelical Christianity emphasizes an intimate and directly spiritual worship of God, as opposed to trusting too completely in the man-made structures of the Church and its hierarchy. For Marguerite the only lucidity available to humanity is that of the "*âme pécheresse*" and recognition of one's misery without God. This recognition leads the Christian to seek God's grace by bending her will towards God. In this way she might

hope to be ready to accept God's grace should it be offered. Opposed to such lucidity, in Marguerite's view, is the *Cuyder*:

> Par faux Cuyder j'ay bien été déceu,
>
> Lequel m'a fait ignorer mon vray Estre,
>
> Voire mon Rien sy très-fort mescoignoistre,
>
> Que tard me suis de son mal apperceu.
>
> (*Chansons spirituelles*, Frank,III,116-7, stanza 1).

Le cuyder, Georges Dottin tells us, is "aveuglement et manifestation insidieuse de l'orgueil" (*Chansons spirituelles*, xx-xxi). *Le cuyder* makes self-knowledge impossible. And self-knowledge, for Marguerite, is the recognition that, beneath the pretense and illusion of the world and its frippery, one is nothing, "moins que pouldre et cendre" (Frank, 117, stanza 6).

> En nous faisant cognoistre nostre Rien
>
> Et vostre Tout par grâce et par puissance,
>
> Nous renonçant avons la jouyssance
>
> De vous, Seigneur, et seul bon et seul bien; (117-8, stanza 7).

The *cuyder* leads us to believe that we possess knowledge, but on the contrary, says Marguerite, we are nothing and remain ignorant even of that fact. Still, we persist in wanting to believe that we are something without God. For Marguerite, then, such knowledge as is claimed by *cuyder* is really "*mescoignoistre*" (l.3). Only God's love and

grace can lead to the faith which allows a true self-knowledge of one's nothingness - "*cognoissance*" (l.15) and "*coignoistre*" (l.25).

Theologically, Marguerite's point is clear. But, as Dottin mentions, "Marguerite s'est toujours défendue d'être théologienne" (xviii). Marguerite's poetry is not didactic, but attestive. One cannot be didactic without presuming to know something. Marguerite's poetry, on the other hand, merely claims to bear witness to the experience of a soul in search of reunion with God. The poem is the voice which relates the experience - "*la matière*". Neither the identity nor the structure of the poetic voice is important, for the voice belongs to the soul which is nothing until it can rejoin the *Tout.* Thus the structure and identity of the voice are merely provisional, if not arbitrary. A persona is necessary to give voice to the experience of Faith, but the function served by the persona is akin to that of the letter that is only of value as a vessel for the Spirit. Marguerite uses signs - the letter - to construct a voice which can testify to its own hollowness. At the same time, the voice seeks to strip itself of all which masks that hollowness, for recognition of its nothingness is the soul's prerequisite to the possible annihilation of its finite non-existence and incorporation into infinite totality. Marguerite's use of signs, then, is referential. The end of the poem, the discontinuity of the signs, the stilling of the poetic voice, are like a theatrical allegory for the discarding of the human mask and persona and the quelling of the human voice that are necessary to reunion with God in His heard Silence.

For Marguerite writing, like all language and human endeavor, is meaning deferred. In her poetry the true meaning comes only at the end of the poem, with silence.

The poem, then, is a staging, like that of life, and the end of each poem, the silencing of the voice, enacts the ultimate (and ultimately desired) event, the permanent stilling of Marguerite's own voice, implying, through her faith, her reunion with God outside the theatrics of the verbal and phenomenal universes. Meanwhile, during the breach of silence, the manifestation of the voice which bears witness to the experience of the yearning for the silence of the *Tout*, Marguerite is dealing with the referential signs of the letter. Marguerite's search for silence through language makes use of the letter while illuminating her attitude towards it.

In the Augustinian tradition, the letter is meant to be a vessel for the Word. Marguerite aims to employ the letter as a means of returning to the divine source of meaning. The seeming arbitrariness of the letter as it exists and is manipulated by individuals and history does not trouble her, for that arbitrariness is a function of the sign's human staging. Marguerite's use of *contrafacta* exemplifies her attitude towards the letter. Her manipulation of the letter can transform a bawdy song by taking its rhyme scheme and melody as the structural foundation for a hymn of praise to God, or a condemnation of *cuyder*. In this way Marguerite seeks to reinvest the letter with the Spirit.

When Scève recasts Petrarch or Marot revises Aesop, when Ronsard reinvents Pindar and Horace, their imitations call upon the structural inventions and manipulations of the letter employed by classical predecessors as authorisation for their own original creations. When Marguerite recasts a *chanson grivoise* as a *chanson spirituelle* it is not the authority, but the relativity and arbitrariness of the letter which is accentuated. Both

carnal love and divine love can be found within the husks of human beings and their constructs. With God's grace *Agape* replaces *Eros*, lodging itself within the same structure that lately served to articulate such lofty sentiments as "*Hau Margot, liève la cuisse*: (Dottin, xi). If the divine meaning within the man-made structure can transcend that structure, the poet can designate her literary monument, like her worldly mask, "*un rien*" and await the moment when that nothingness manifests itself and the "*rien*" ripens to true non-being, its disappearance revealing the *Tout* that it carried within. Thus Marguerite's imitation is an imitation, not of the letter, but of the transcendence of the letter and is effected through renunciation of both life and letter. This renunciation becomes possible and necessary once life and letter have fulfilled their function of turning the soul towards God.

Marguerite's renunciation is quite theatrically conveyed in her adaptation of the popular song "Avez poinct veu la Peronnelle?"[16] Dottin remarks upon how well the song's story line and imagery lend themselves to Marguerite's adaptation (xvi). One might also note Marguerite's considerable expansion of the song (from 14 lines to 164). By means of the expanded letter, the narrator of the poem relates the experience of renunciation and exile. We see here an exercise in imitation, not of the letter, but of the spirit, a poetical imitation of the lives of Jesus, John the Baptist, and Saint Anthony. The letter of the poem is not imitated, but appropriated; it is not reconstructed, but reinvested.

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[16]For the original song see Gaston Paris, *Chansons du XVe siècle* (Paris: Société des anciens textes français, 1875) 41-2. Gaston Paris notes the extraordinary popularity of the original song which lasted well into the seventeenth century. I am citing Marguerite's version from Dottin's edition of the *Chansons spirituelles*. In Dottin the "Peronelle" is Chanson #34.

The poem's many paradoxical constatations, especially in the final stanzas, further accentuate the limitation of a letter that portrays truth as contradiction. The final lines of the poem explain the reversal of the letter, and all human imperfection, through Divine Love:

> La desconfortée conforte,
>
> Et luy rend plaisans ses ennuys;
>
> Voire resucite la morte,
>
> Tourne en glorieux jours les nuis (lines 149-52).
>
> [...]
>
> Or est la malheureuse, heureuse,
>
> Et son malheur, faict très heureux,
>
> Puisqu'elle est parfaicte amoureuse
>
> De son trespas faict amoureulx (161-4) [my emphasis].

The contradictions of comforting discomfort, pleasant troubles, the dead revived, nights become day, the happiness of the unhappy question the capacity of language and logic to contain or express the transcendant reality of which the poet sings.

The story of the Peronnelle is told in the third person, although the intimate expression of the experience related in Marguerite's poem suggests that the narrative voice is describing itself in disguise[17]. One might suggest that the voice is trying to

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[17]Or, one might say, the narrative voice describes itself in yet another disguise, once again de-emphasizing the authority of that voice and the persona it reflects, or rather, emphasizing the arbitrary and provisional (i.e. theatrical) character of the poetic voice and persona.

further distance itself from the persona it evokes in order to further valorise the experience to which it bears witness[18]. The distance allows the voice to reach beyond the letter's dichotomy, which renders truth as paradox, to describe the "*âme heureuse*" behind the "*malheureuse*" mask perceived by the world which the Peronnelle has renounced. The persona of the poet, then, has not only been de-emphasized, but disassembled. A disembodied narrative voice bears witness to the stripping of the worldly masks and raiment in which, we sense, it was once arrayed. The Peronnelle has found refuge, not "en la plaine/ De propre delectation," but rather "sur la montaigne/ De toutte tribulation" (5-8). By choosing this place she has effectively renounced both speech and writing as a means of figuring or satisfying desire:

> Le plaisir du fol et du saige,
> C'est de trouver à qui parler:
> Mais li n'a en ce lieu sauvaige,
> A qui se puisse declarer (49-52).
>
> [...]
>
> Là ne croist papier, encre ou plume,
> Pour escripre ce qu'elle veult,
> Ny livre, livret ny volume;
> Toutesfois elle ne s'en deult (68-72) [my emphasis].

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[18]For another point of view see Ehsan Ahmed, "Regenerating Feminine Poetic Identity: Marguerite de Navarre's Song of the *Peronelle*," *Romanic Review, 78, 2 (March 1987): 165-76.*

Nevertheless the voice, though separated from her, remains to convey the experience of that separation as it attempts to penetrate behind the masks to the void which permits reincorporation with the *Tout.* Marguerite has succeeded in investing the letter with the longing for the spirit; she has played out a masque of that desire; the Peronnelle's sanctuary of silence is acted out in the silence that succeeds the poem. But when the poetic play is over, the desire remains to take on yet other figurations to give form to its unsatisfaction. There is only Faith, claiming "I am not a mask", to arrest the infinite regression that accompanies the stripping of masks.

In examining Pierre de Ronsard's view of the poetic persona, and of the letter and its authority, we move from a Christian frame of reference to a classical one. If we were to look at the *topos* of the letter versus the Word through the story of Plato's Cave, we could see Marguerite as sincerely believing in, and yearning for, a life beyond the cave in which she is imprisoned. Erasmus' Folly evokes the shadows of the cave to support her claim that illusion suffices to make men happy. David Quint comments on Folly's assertion:

> According to Folly, these objects are transformed by the human mind into signs from which it constructs a system of cultural meaning. The prisoners of the cave are the willing prisoners of their culture, a culture that answers and flatters their desires (11)[19].

[19]Erasmus offers a version of the Apollonian artistic illusion that posits misapprehension of the originary plenitude rather than the perception of the void as the source of human culture and creativity. This is an Augustinian perspective that condemns

If we are contrasting those who wish to escape from the cave with those who wish to embellish life within it, then Marguerite certainly belongs with the former party, and Ronsard with the latter.[20] In perceiving the "realities" of the cave - the letter - as shadows, Marguerite invests these signs with a transcendent origin and meaning beyond the phenomenon of their perceptibility. At the same time, this investment precludes any absolute quality or identity that might be ascribed to the sign itself. The shadows are effects, not causes; they are manifestations of, and witnesses to, a more substantial reality outside the cave. Manipulating or disguising these effects and manifestations cannot change the quality of their primal cause.

On the other hand, utilization of the letter as the foundation for a new construct invests the sign, not with a transcendent origin beyond itself, but with its own originary function. The shadows, then, are seen not as creations, but as means, and even sources of creation. The "Ode à Michel de l'Hospital" serves Ronsard as a stage for the invention his own poetic genealogy and pedigree. In the poem, Ronsard uses classical allusions to construct a poetic genesis of literary history whose culmination is a triumphant return of the Muses to sixteenth-century France. Quint says that while Ronsard claims to "reinherit the inspired prophetic mantle of the Greek bards," the claim "rests on little more than a return to Greek poetic models" such as the form of Pindaric odes and Hesiod's account

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the idolatry of man preferring his own tangible, but empty, creations to the plenitude of the divine reality beyond his immediate grasp.

[20]Marguerite's long poem *Les prisons* adresses this very subject, with the narrator-protagonist *l'Amy* recounting his imprisonment in and escapes from a series of prisons (*eros*, philautia, the seduction of society and culture) in which he had closed himself off from the Divine Totality.

of creation (28). And so Ronsard, trying to invest the letter, seems unable to do more than manipulate it. Quint sees in Ronsard "the divided aspirations of a poet who desires both to ground his verse in an authorized source and to establish his own individuality as a literary creator: to be a source for other poets" (30). These dual aspirations lead in two directions: into the past and towards the future, both of which the poet seeks to construct in a present he controls. The past must be rechanelled towards a specific present constructed around the poet. The future will flow from the poet. But for all the imagery of sources and rivers employed in the attempt to legitimize poets and their works, mechanical metaphors seem more apt in describing the Pléiade poets and their constructs.

Du Bellay, in his *Deffense et illustration de la langue françoise*, evokes the mechanism of the alimentary canal with his linguaphagic images of poets devouring their predecessors and digesting them, "les convertissant en sang et nourriture" (I, xii). The Pléiade goal, as stated by Du Bellay, of a "plus haut et meilleur style" of poetry might be seen from an Augustinian perspective as the building of a kind of aesthetic Tower of Babel - a presumptuous human edifice doomed to failure since it can never approach the coherence of the Word it aspires to rival, attain, or supplant. Even while it lasts, the tower is nothing more than another illusion projecting a non-existent human capacity to reach perfection. The desire for a humanly grounded absolute originary truth results in the creation of a panoply of masks, each claiming to justify the other, in a *mise-en-scène* that seeks to abolish its own limitations and "give solidity to smoke"[21].

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[21]I am referring to Montaigne's quotation of Persius: *"dare pondus idonea fumo"*, in the essay "Des Boyteux", which we will examine in chapter 5.

The authority that Ronsard seeks through his invented lineage, as described in the "Ode à Michel de l'Hospital", elicits a fundamental question: what is his conception of the Muses and classical divinities in whom he grounds his creative authority? If they are merely learned figures of speech, then what lies behind the rhetorical mask? The allusions are obviously more theatrical than substantial. For Renaissance poets, classical myths are evocations, not absolutes; the personnages of the myths are references and not beings. Ronsard does not worship the Greek pantheon except as a creation and amplification of humanity. When Marguerite sings to her God, she believes in Him as the immanent originary and culminating point of the universe. For Ronsard, the evocation of Jupiter is merely a well-tried and respected device useful to the creation of a poetic work and a character in the theatrical enactment of the poet's self-creation. We might recall the Augustinian tradition that places God as the ultimate end of all desire as well as of all signification. For Ronsard, an invented god is the means, and not the end of signification, a figurant in the expression of desire, rather than the unique possibility of its satisfaction.

In sonnet XX of his *Amours de Cassandre* (1552), I, 10-11)[22], Ronsard's poetic persona imagines himself as the source of and solution to desire.

Je voudroy bien richement jaunissant
En pluye d'or goute à goute descendre
Dans le giron de ma belle Cassandre,

[22]References to Ronsard's poetry will be to the Pléiade edition of the *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Gustave Cohen, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1950).

Lors qu'en ses yeux le somne va glissant.

Puis je voudroy en toreau blanchissant

Me transformer pour sur mon dos la prendre,

Quand en avril par l'herbe la plus tendre

Elle va, fleur, mille fleurs ravissant.

Je voudroy bien pour alleger ma peine,

Estre un Narcisse et elle une fontaine,

Pour m'y plonger une nuict à séjour

Et si voudroy que ceste nuict encore

Fust eternelle, et que jamais l'Aurore

Pour m'esveiller ne rallumast le jour.

The speaker states his wishes repeatedly: "Je vouldroy..."(1), "Je vouldroy..." (5), "Je vouldroy..." (9), "Et vouldroy..." (12). Thomas Greene says of the sonnet: "Perhaps of all Ronsard's poems, this provides us with an allegory of his profoundest poetic will" (210). And what is that will? All but one of the desires expressed in the sonnet allude to miraculous transformations effected by Jupiter in order to satisfy his sexual longings. But Ronsard's desire seems to go beyond erotic satisfaction to the desire for a divine capacity to appease desire. His real "vouldroy", it seems, is to be a Jupiter, a god, and the preeminent god at that. The sonority of the word "je" suggests Jupiter to the ear, as the mythological allusions evoke the god intellectually.

The other "vouldroy" is "Estre un Narcisse, et elle un fontaine/ Pour m'y plonger une nuict à séjour" (10-11). In other words, the narrator's love for his own image, as

reflected by another, would lead him to congress with the other as an image of himself. His love, then, is neither *eros* nor *Agape*, but *philautia*, the self-love claimed as sister by Erasmus' Folly. The power and privilege of the narrative persona is here at the opposite pole from the voice that seeks its own extinction as it describes the Peronelle's arduous path towards non-being. Ronsard's "Je" dons the masks of gods and then peers into its mirror - the eyes of another (his creation - the "Je" *qui est autre*) to appreciate his performance through those imaginary organs of perception.

Obviously, Ronsard has not reinvested the letter with a transcendant authority. No historical continuity with Greek, Roman or Italian predecessors has replaced the absence of an allegorical Christian truth. In Ronsard's poetry the letter serves neither the classical tradition nor transcendant human love, but rather is subservient to the poetic persona which it serves to construct.

In the poem "Elegie à son livre" (*Le Second Livre des Amours* [I,111-5], Ronsard's poetic persona sends off his "son", a literary creation, with orders to defend the integrity of its "father's" literary reputation. In the process the poet takes the liberty of rewriting his forbearers Homer and Petrarch (lines 41-56, 106-128). He renounces the Pindaric humor that previously "Enfloit empoulément ma bouche magnifique" (172) in favor of "un beau stille bas", like that employed by a new set of ancestors, Tibullus, Ovid, and Catullus, in their erotic poems (174-76). Love and desire should be expressed simply, says Ronsard:

> Le fils de Venus hait ces ostentations:
>
> Il suffist qu'on luy chante au vray ses passions

Sans enflure ne fard, d'un mignard et doux stile,

Coulant d'un petit bruit, comme une eau qui distile (177-80).

It seems ironic that, in order to arrive at the conclusion that love and desire should be stripped of embellishment or pretense, Ronsard has begun this poem with the pretense of creating a literary progeny to defend his reputation, and, in the process, has addressed, critiqued and reinterpreted his literary forbearers. The expression of love and desire, as we have seen, is always a theatrical enterprise, since they can only be represented, not grasped, and escape any attempts at definition. The figuration of love and desire as "la simple Venus , et [...] son fils Amour" (182), is itself rhetorical "fard" and "enflure". Ronsard ends the poem with the imaginative fulfillment of his wish to be a great tragic poet:

S'il advient quelque jour que d'une voix hardie

J'anime l'eschafaut par une tragedie

Sentencieuse et grave, alors je feray voir

Combien peuvent les nerfs de mon petit sçavoir (183-6).

The poem serves as a stage for the presentation of Ronsard the poet who animates the stage. But, he continues, having established his mastery of the profound and complex, he would dismiss the tragic muse when writing about love:

Mais ores que d'Amour les passions je pousse,

Humble, je veux user d'une Muse plus douce (191-2).

The poet, as *metteur-en-scène*, presents himself as fulfilling his desire to equal or exceed the great poetic predecessors he has evoked. He figures his mastery of the tragic mode: "Et feray resonner d'un haut et grave son, / Pour avoir part au bouc, la tragique tançon" (189-90)). But he also presents himself as capable of laying aside the mask of tragic poet, in order to sing simply of love, thus mastering the lyric mode. The obvious contradiction is evident in this poem itself, which, while dazzling in its inventiveness and virtuosity, belies in its very construction the satisfaction that it presents in the final couplet:

> Car je suis satisfait, si elle prend à gré
> Ce labeur que je voüe à ses pieds consacré.

Even the satisfaction portrayed seems to have two faces. One is the amorous, if not erotic, fulfillment simulated through the poem itself: My beloved accepts my poem as a representation of my love; this communication leads to our mutual comprehension and fulfillment in love. The other is the poet's satisfaction at having proved his mastery and control of the lyric mode, as well as the tragic. Behind both aspects is the myth of imaginative staging of the fulfillment of desire. In this staging, the poet, as *metteur-en-scène*, offers a spectacle of self-creation and self-fulfillment, in presenting us the poet whose ambitions are fulfilled, and the lover whose desires are satisfied. The emphasis on the poet is reinforced, not only by the fact that the poem is dominated by a discussion of poetics, rather than love or the beloved, but also in the last line. The beloved is a kind of altar before which the gift of the poem is offered. The poet choses this altar over that of "un brave regent". The altar seems chosen almost as the setting which best becomes

the offering, rather than vice versa. We note that in the final line, it is "ce labeur" that is "consacré" rather than the "pieds" before which it is placed. This is, however, totally consistent with the title of the poem, "Elégie à son livre", which presents a poet singing to his literary reflection, which is also a song of his own making.

Sonnet IX of the *Amours de Marie* (I, 123) focuses on the word *aimer* and its manipulation. "Marie, qui voudroit vostre beau nom tourner,/ Il trouveroit Aimer: aimez-moi donc, Marie" (1-2). The manipulation of the letter serves to reconstruct Marie as someone who will fulfill the poet's desire: "Faites cela vers moi dont vostre nom vous prie" (3). The "je", which seemed ubiquitous in Sonnet XX of the *Amours de Cassandre* ("Je vouldroy richement jaunissant..."), does not appear in this poem until the last line. The subject "je", who would act as a god in sonnet XX, here would become an object - the object of Marie's love. Nowhere does the poet say that he loves Marie, only that he would be loved by her. Neither as subject "je" in sonnet XX to Cassandre or as object "moi" in sonnet IX to Marie, are the poet's wishes realized. Both poems remain statements of unfulfilled desires, yet the narrative structures of the poems, moving from one image of fulfilled desire to another, imaginatively realizes their satisfaction. At the end of sonnet XX the poet would banish the dawn to perpetuate his nocturnal enjoyment of his own image in another[23]. In sonnet IX, when the "je" appears (twice) in the final line to proclaim how it loves and always will, the verb aimer has no object.

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[23]In the Greek myth Jupiter prolonged the night so that he wouldn't be recognized by Alcmena. In Ronsard's version it could very well be that the poet as Narcissus fears recognizing that the self-image he embraced in another has disappeared, leaving only the other, *un autre*.

Rien n'est doux sans Venus et sans son fils : à l'heure

Que je n'aimeray plus, puissé-je trespasser!

Ronsard, accoutering the letter with desire, has made the word intransitive.

We notice that Venus and her son, erotic love and desire, are again present at the spectacle of self-reflection. Desire is the absence of fulfillment that sets the process of art - the weaving of illusion - in process. However, the illusions born of desire are also the only means of figuring the satisfaction of the desire for the end of desire. The masks of Cupid and Venus cover the void and, by playing out the illusion of satisfaction and completion, make life bearable.[24] Without them, says the poet, I would just as soon die ("trespasser"); certainly, without them his persona of poet would perish for lack of a mirror in which to figure and contemplate his creation of himself.

The object of desire figured in Ronsard's poetry seems to be auto-creation - the construction of a monumental poetic persona by means of appropriated signs. Since signs, as we have seen, reflect, in endless referentiality, either an ultimate plenitude or an ultimate absence, the construction of an autonomous reality between the ultimate referents of All or Nothingness is obliged to arrest the endless transformations of signs. The sign is reified by denying its ultimate significance; it points neither to God nor the void, says the poet, but to my presence: this mask not only signifies my presence, but it does so endlessly, and thus becomes my presence. This imaginative inversion of the inherent

[24]In chapter 5 we will discuss Montaigne's use of Venus in the essay "Des Boyteux" as a metaphor for unattainable perfection.

function of signs corresponds closely with Judeo-Christian notions of idolatry[25]. But idolatry, as John Freccero notes, is "the essence of poetic autonomy" (40). We have returned, then, to the fundamental opposition of Ronsard's and Marguerite's poetic endeavors: the search for an autonomous poetic persona versus the attempt to escape from the illusory autonomy of self.

It might, at this point, be useful to review this dialectic with an eye towards the two different sources of inspiration and authority claimed by the poets. Eric Auerbach's comparison of the Homeric and Biblical texts (*Mimesis*, ch.1) might prove helpful to our understanding of Marguerite, who takes Scripture as a model, and Ronsard, who traces his poetic lineage to Homer (See "L'Ode à Michel de l'Hospital"). The Homeric text, Auerbach notes, tries to leave no gaps or lacunae; all doubt is filled in with the proliferation of artistic illusion. The gods are described and precisely placed. Limits in time and space are clearly defined. In Scripture, however, one never knows where or who God is. He can not even be named. Where is Abraham when he speaks to God? God remains a disembodied voice with no precise *locus*. The Bible claims the entire universe as its stage; nothing escapes its theater of operation. Everything that happens in the world "can only be conceived as an element in its sequence" (Auerbach, 16), for the syntagmatic sequences related in the Bible are only fragments of a paradigmatic Reality beyond sequence. Scriptural accounts are incomplete, devoid of Homeric detail,

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[25]See Freccero's The Fig Tree and the Laurel (37) where he cites Yehezkel Kaufmann's Religion of Israel trans. M. Greenberg (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1960).

but full of mysteries and abstractions. God remains unfixed in form or content. The motives of the Greek gods, grand or venal, are explained; nowhere does the Bible explain, for example, why God tempts Abraham.

"The Bible seeks to overcome our reality," says Auerbach (15), because it claims to point to a greater reality. Hence its "urgent" claim to absolute truth and its insistence on absolute authority and primacy (14). Scripture does not seek to flatter or entertain but to subject (14). The Bible claims to be the letter invested with the Spirit, the sign pointing towards truth as it reveals the illusions that obscure the true plenitude whence it springs and to which it refers.

On the other hand, Auerbach remarks, it does not matter if Homer is a liar. "His reality is powerful enough in itself; it ensnares us, weaving its web around us, and that suffices him. And this 'real' world into which we are lured, exists for itself, contains nothing but itself" (13). This version of the Apollonian artistic illusion, then, refers to nothing - except itself, woven around the absence of an external source or referent. Apollonian creativity seeks to construct a reality devoid of chinks through which a dishearteningly empty space might be perceived. Its teleology is its own creative production and, while it cannot completely forget that its source springs from the void, the artistic illusion is obliged to create a more aggreable and consistent etiology that mirrors its teleology (i.e., its own creative production). This is the "necessity", or desire, that informs much of Ronsard's poetry and theoretical writings.

The Bible, on the other hand, seeks to point out and enlarge the space behind the chinks, claiming that the space devoid of human fabrications is not empty but full, not

to be dreaded but desired. Marguerite, with the Bible as her model, claims that the human construct of reality is not freedom, but a prison. The confidence that scriptural truth is grounded in the absolute authority of the Word lends a formidable coherence to the Augustinian perspective presented by Marguerite and Erasmus. The lucidity of their view of the farcical human tragedy seems to make the persona of Ronsard into a self-deceiving actor who believes himself *auctor*, and who plays the role with great persuasiveness in the most attractive of (self-fabricated) costumes. The wearing of costumes and masks is absurd and self-defeating if one believes that stripping the mask from the nothingness beneath the human personnage is necessary to the ultimate ascendancy and reintegration of the isolated empty self with the wholeness of God. But, as David Quint says in commenting on *Praise of Folly*,

> If only death lies beyond the human play, it is no wonder that Folly advises her audiences to keep their delusions, and to accept the counterfeit meaning as better than no meaning at all (16).

Or, as Auerbach says, so what if Homer is a liar? With Homer as a model, Ronsard revives the Apollonian artistic illusion and weaves brilliant and intricate verbal veils that both reflect and obscure the void. Inherent to the genius of Homer and Ronsard is the fact that they are never dupes of their own illusions. The anxiety born of their understanding and intuition inspires the weaving of ever more intricate tapestries with which to cover the hollow frames of existence.

Even Marguerite cannot be sure that her folly in the eyes of the world is not folly pure and simple until she has shed the eyes with which she sees the world and the voice

with which she addresses it. The theatrical representation of this divestment in poems like "Avez poinct vu la Peronnelle?" imaginatively brings her to the brink of the lucidity she seeks, much the same as Ronsard's *mise-en-scène* of Jupiter's successes imaginatively fulfills his erotic and poetic desires. The difference is Marguerite's faith, which unmasks all human desires as shadows of one true and worthy desire and reduces all human folly and self-deception to one great choice. Only faith stills the doubts and fears as to what lies beneath the last mask of corporality; only faith can figure the amplitude and nature of the silence that will be when the voice has finally and irrevocably ceased. But should faith be nothing but the reification of desire (the desire not to be nothing), then it, too, is a mask - a mask that allows Marguerite to imagine that the last mask and veil have disappeared, and to invent or accept a scenario for that ineluctable event. In that case, Marguerite's poetically expressed desire to reduce her self to *rien* or nothing in order to be absorbed in the *Tout*, would actually be predicated upon the desire not to be nothing.

In his poem "Pour la fin d'une comédie" [1564] (II, 472-3), Ronsard describes the world much as Erasmus has in *Praise of Folly*:

> Le monde est le theatre, et les hommes acteurs,
> La Fortune, qui est maistresse de la scène
> Apreste les habits de la vie humaine
> Les Cieux et les Destins en sont les spectateurs (3-6).

The poet speaks of the folly and vanity of human pursuits and of how the roles are played:

> Ce-pendant le souci de sa lime nous ronge,

Qui fait que nostre vie est seulement un songe,

Et que tous nos desseins se finissent en rien (17-19).

And so Ronsard admits, along with Marguerite, Erasmus and Augustine that we are, along with all we design and create, au fond, nothing. But even if we are nothing au fond, we have not yet arrived, nor can we while we live arrive, except on the autre scène of the imaginaire[26], at that foundation and terminal point of being.

Tandis que nous aurons des muscles et des veines

Et du sang, nous aurons des passions humaines;

Car jamais autrement les hommes n'ont vescu (34-6).

Yes, we are nothing, admits Ronsard, but until that nothingness chooses to reveal its true character, we are muscles and veins and blood and passions. We are an empty letter seeking authority, legitimacy, origin, and meaning. And because, as letter, we are subject to the arbitrariness and finitude of history and historicity, it is difficult not to doubt the validity and immutability that we like to claim for the letter. Marguerite seeks to bring the letter back to its divine source. What if there is no divine source? In that case Marguerite's anti-theater of stripping away life's masks becomes a theater of the absurd, a *Waiting for Godot* in which she is a self-created character, unconscious of that self-creation, trapped by her own hope and fear-inspired illusions, deluded by a mask called Faith that claims not to be a mask. From such a perspective the games and posturings of a Ronsard in an empty theater seem neither more nor less mad than those

[26]I have borrowed the terms from the title of Mannoni's book.

of a Marguerite. "Ce n'est que vent, fumée, une onde qui suit l'onde" ("Pour la fin d'une comédie",38).

Human creativity is smoke and mirrors after all, Ronsard seems to admit. The aspiration towards plenitude by sheer creative energy engenders the mask of self and is, in turn, reflected by the self's desire for a wholeness of completion and autonomy. The self continues to "create" itself as an alternative to accepting its role as signifier of absence. It must do so in spite of the fact that its every invention joins the referential chain that points in both directions to nothing, with no possibility of ever repleting absence or exhausting the void. The self created by Ronsard's poetic endeavor yearns to <u>be</u> and to be "<u>true</u>" in the provisional theater of poetry, where that desire is played out. But the truth of ultimate emptiness (or plenitude) can only be realized "*dans un autre monde*", devoid of referentiality. From the point of view we have ascribed to Nietzsche and DeMan, that other world is the void in which the referential function of artistic and linguistic illusion finds its true referent and only possible closure.

In Marguerite's case, the self's yearning to be "true", is combined with the recognition that the poetry of the desire for wholeness and true being can only be realized in another world where the self's referential function is consummated in the self's annihilation and absorption in the *Tout.* Marguerite, too, it might be said, has created the very self she seeks to dismantle in order to satisfy the desire to <u>absolutely</u> and <u>truly be</u> that engendered self she seeks to discard to that same end. This endless cycle of reciprocal mirrorings invites comparison with Lacan's concept of the "Mirror-stage".

According to Lacan, when an infant sees his reflection in a mirror, "the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power" (*Ecrits*, 94-5; *Séminaires*, 2). For example, the child who has not yet learned to stand might picture herself upright. This illusion is accompanied by great "jubilation". As Jane Gallop explains, the child

> [...] thus finds in the mirror image "already there," a mastery that she will actually learn only later. The jubilation, the enthusiasm, is tied to the temporal dialectic by which she appears already to be what she will only later become (*Reading Lacan*, 78).

The imaginative anticipation of the maturation of a self not yet realized is analogous to the imaginative theater played out in the mirror of the text. Ronsard imagines himself possessed of the autonomy of Jupiter, with the divine power to satiate and put an end to desire. Marguerite's vision of the ripening of the self is the falling away of the husk and incorporation with the *Tout.* In both cases, the self reflected in the textual mirror is an illusion born of imagination and desire, like that of the child, that figures the self as it would be. The jubilation, in all three cases, might be seen as a narcissistic love of the image of the self realized in the "mirror-stage".[27]

If the self is incorporated in a jubilant moment of imaginative power and unity, the question arises as to what preceded this pivotal point. According to Gallop, it is generally assumed that the mirror stage is preceded by the "*corps morcelé*", "[...] a Lacanian term for a violently nontotalized body image, an image psychoanalysis finds

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[27]Once again we find a parallel to the Augustinian concept of the Trinity, with the Son reflecting the existence of the Father and the Spirit expressing or "embodying" the joy that accompanies that recognition.

accompanied by anxiety" (79). It would seem, then, that a fragmentary (non)being would precede, and be annihilated by the illusion of self. However, as Gallop remarks:

> The mirror stage would seem to come after "the body in bits and pieces" [corps morcelé] and organize them into a unified image. But actually, that violently unorganized image only comes after the mirror stage so as to represent what came before. What appears to precede the mirror stage is simply a projection or a reflection. There is nothing on the other side of the mirror (80).

The contradiction, then, is that an imaginary unity of self projects, not only its unity in a state it has not yet attained (and never will attain), but, at the same time, projects the illusion to "represent what came before." The mirror image engenders both self and the image of an anterior dismembered self. Gallop calls the decisive moment of the mirror stage one "of self- delusion, of captivation by an illusory image. Both future and past are thus rooted in an illusion" (81). Or, one might say, origin and *telos*. The end, too, is illusion, for the maturation anticipated in the original illusion of self conflicts with the "natural maturation" that follows. This natural maturation

> proves that the self was not mature before, and since the self was founded upon an assumption of maturity, the discovery that maturity was prematurely assumed is the discovery that the self is built on hollow ground. Since the entire past and present is dependant upon an already anticipated maturity - that is, a projected ideal one - any "natural maturation" (however closely it might resemble the anticipated ideal one)

> must be defended against, for it threatens to expose the fact that the self is an illusion done with mirrors (Gallop, 83).

The mirror stage brings us back to Nietzsche's birth and "suicide" of tragedy; indeed, Gallop calls the mirror stage "high tragedy" (85). The jubilation of the creation of self can only lead to the reinvention of the self's origins and a suppression of its natural destiny in a futile attempt to allay the anxiety that recognizes the falseness and inadequacy of the self. Gallop likens the child's passage through the mirror stage as a "paradise lost" (85) and likens the process of the birth of the self to the creation and expulsion from Eden of Adam and Eve. The first humans are created in Paradise, but only assume the human condition upon leaving. There are, then, two births, the "natural" birth, an expulsion from *néant* to *être*, and an "historical" birth, from *être* to what Cottrell (borrowing Lacanian terminology) might call *paraître* or *par être* - a knowledge of self that recognizes what the self is not. The poetic mirror reflects the moment of jubilation and tragic joy it helps engender with its illusion of unity and autonomy. However, the anxiety that accompanies the artistic illusion is also inevitable in the self-creation described in the mirror stage:

> This illusion of unity, in which a human being is always looking forward to self-mastery, entails a constant danger of sliding back again into the chaos from which he started; it hangs over the abyss of a dizzy Ascent in which one can perhaps see the very essence of Anxiety" (Jacques Lacan. "Some Reflections on the Ego," *International Journal of Psycho-analysis* 35 [1953], 15).

If this aspect of the mirror stage seems pertinent to Ronsard's invention of a poetic persona, Marguerite is also brought to mind. One analogy to the mirror stage would be to interpret Marguerite's vision of the dismembered self as an invention produced to precede a jubilant Unity (the ultimate maturation of the soul-self) that is itself an illusion that actually precedes the mirage of anterior fragmentation it has fabricated, and so on, in an endless cycle of mirrored mirages of presence in absence. On the other hand, Christian tradition, as we have seen, posits an originary and penultimate unity - teleological and etiological boundaries that are identical. It is on such a mirror stage that Marguerite perceives the fiction and drama of a fragmentary self that would imagine for itself, in joyful desperation, an illusory wholeness that could only be true *dans un autre monde*.

Chapter 3

Shadow and Reflection

In Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* we saw two madmen: one who sat in an empty theater projecting his own fantasies upon the empty stage; another who would climb upon the stage, interrupting a performance, to strip away masks and costumes, exposing the actors and destroying the illusion of the characters' presence and palpability. In chapter two we compared Marguerite's poetic purpose to that of the demasker, and her "madness" to Paul's Christian folly that is only folly in the eyes of the world that sees nothing beyond the context of its own delusions. Marguerite, as we have seen, yearns to lose the masks of self, and to be freed from the *theatrum mundi* in order to find true being and life in the plenitude beyond the empty human stage. Nevertheless, the very expression of this desire, in her writing, depends on a verbal and poetic mise-en-scène that reflects the mechanisms and strategies of the *theatrum mundi* from which she would escape. The poet's attempts to realize and represent the object of her desire encounter, and reflect, the paradoxes we have identified with the theatrical paradigm. In this chapter we shall see how Marguerite's plays and poetry assume the character of a textual theater in order to figure the desire for an escape from the theatrical illusions of self and the world.

In her *théâtre profane*, Marguerite creates a *mise-en-scène* in which every character wears an ontological mask. The characters of *La Mondainne*, *La*

Supersticieuse, and *La Sage* in *La Comédie du Mont de Marsan* can be seen as allegorical figures. According to Paul DeMan:

> Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference ("The Rhetoric of Temporality", *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. C.S. Singleton [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1969] 191).

The characters in Marguerite's texts, as allegorical figures, are like actors in the theater who, by the very conventions of the theater, proclaim their non-coincidence with the identity they represent. Allegory might be compared with Mannoni's wolf mask that proclaims "I am not a wolf". The drama played out textually in Marguerite's *théâtre profane* is a theater within the play itself, that reflects the *theatrum mundi* outside of the play. The allegorical figures within the text proclaim that they are masks, and that no one should be duped by mistaking their feigned reality for the reality they are meant to evoke. The provisional character of this theater, accentuated by its allegorical components, is meant to mirror that of the outside world, implicating it, too, in a *mise-en-abîme* of representation and non-coincidence with reality.

The allegorical figures in *La Comédie du Mont de Marsan*, for example, are rigid masks that represent worldly, superstitious, and rational identities. A similar rigidity is found in the character of the Inquisiteur in the play *L'Inquisiteur*. The

allegorical masks proclaim their theatrical function as representation (which, we have seen, implies absence of the object of representation) rather than presence. But, at the same time, the characters allegorically figured by the masks lack awareness that the world is made of masks that, by denying their representative function and pretending to be an absolute presence, delude rather than enlighten. And so, a mask that proclaims its theatrical function (allegory), represents a mask that does not (the self encoded in flesh, fetishism, or reason). In each play, a character wearing the mask of divine folly plays out a role similar to that of the madman in *Praise of Folly,* whose actions we compared with Marguerite's poetic strategy: the *Bergère*, also called the *Ravie*, in *La Comédie du Mont de Marsan*, and the children in *L'Inquisiteur*, enact the unwelcomed stripping of masks on the stage of a *theatrum mundi* unwilling to recognize its own representative, referential, and allegorical function. The children tell the Inquisitor to

> Laisser Adam et son cuyder,
>
> Sa peau n'est pleine que de vent.
>
> Hors de sa peau vous fault vuyder,
>
> Lors de tout bien serez sçavant (lines 468-72)[1].

Adam has covered his nakedness - or nothingness, as we suggested in chapter two - with the presumptuousness of self. Adam's *cuyder* is a web of illusions that covers his nothingness and creates a self that presumes an independent and

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[1]References to *L'Inquisiteur* and *La Comédie du Mont de Marsan* are from *Théâtre profane*, ed. V.L. Saulnier (Geneva: Droz, 1960.)

autonomous being outside of the divine totality. The children explain to the Inquisitor that,

> Qui regarde soy, ou son euvre,
> Comme fist le Pharisien,
> Sa nudité si fort descoeuvre
> Qu'il se veoit plus villain qu'un chien (456-8).

To reject worldly wisdom, as the Inquisitor eventually does, is to strip away the mask of self, revealing the naked nothingness of man without God, thereby opening the way to reunion with God and true being through Grace. The Inquisitor abandons his fabricated "identity" of a wise man: "Je veulx estre enfant, non plus saige," he announces (l.478). He no longer apes Adam's desperate and ignorant (ignorance that presumes itself knowledge - *cuyder*) attempt to <u>be</u> through the fabrication of a false existence. The *Varlet*, who has guided the Inquisitor's journey away from self and presumption, tells his master,

> Mais oyez <u>le divin langaige</u>
> Que chacun de ces enfans tient (476-7) [my emphasis].

It is in lending his ear to this transcendant language of song filled with Spirit that the Inquisitor decides that he, too, would prefer to be a child and "non plus saige" (477). Touched by Grace, the Inquisitor and the *Varlet* sing the praises of God, imitating the joyful "divin langaige" of the children.

> Je saulte, je dance,
> Et n'ay cognoissance

De ce que j'estoye (497-9).

He is infused with a Christian joy[2] that accompanies God's Grace. It is Grace, a Divine power, that has permitted the Inquisitor to recognize that the wisdom and pomp of the world are shams, and that only God and his Love are real[3].

In *L'Inquisiteur*, we find a textual *mise-en-scène* of an apotheosis and salvation that leads, not to a conclusion, but to a higher level of desire. The Inquisitor succeeds in shedding the empty husks of *cuyder* and self. Touched by a palpable Grace, he recognizes that he is and knows nothing. One of the children asks him:

Ne serez vous poinct desdaigné

D'apprandre par nous à parler? (650-1).

The Inquisitor desires to learn the language of the spirit that transcends the letter.

Non, mais j'estime à grant honneur,

Enfantz et euvres, de vous suyvre:

Puis qu'ainsi plaist au grant seigneur,

Je veulx en innocence vivre (652-5).

He follows the children, who lead him to their "maison de paix" (657), where "Unyon et Charrité" rule. The play ends with an invitation to partake of the "pain de vye et

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[2] One cannot help but think of Lacan's characterization of the moment of self realization, of the recognition of an apparent coherence and unity of the self, as being accompanied by "jubilation". This perception of wholeness, and of a maturity and power not yet attained, is immediately accompanied by the invention of an anterior dismemberment. Both wholeness and disarticulation are illusions, one jubilant and the other anxious (*Ecrits*, vol.1, "Le Stade du miroir", 89-97).

[3]See Cottrell, 136.

vérité" (663), which can, evidently, only be consumed in the silence that succeeds the end of the text. The Inquisitor's hymns of praise to God reflect his recognition of the emptiness of the letter and his yearning for the Spirit, but the "divin langaige", like a life of innocence, can be figured only in silence.

In *La Comédie du Mont de Marsan, La Sage* employs rational discourse to correct the delusions of *La Superstitieuse* and *La Mondainne*. But this discourse reflects a faith in the power of logic, reason, and language that seems to attribute an absolute value to these tools. However, in the Christian (and Marguerite's) view, man is saved only by God's Grace and Love. The Sage is, to return to Mannoni's terms, a *connaisseuse* of the *theatrum mundi* that deludes the worldly and superstitious: "Du corps pour son masque se sert/ vostre ame,..." (288-9). But she seems oblivious to her own enthrallment to a variety of what Nietzsche would call the "Socratic illusion", that is, the illusion of the sufficiency of reason and language, an illusion that denies the provisional and arbitrary nature of these human constructs. For this reason, the Sage is blind to the truth of the *Ravie*'s condition and utterances. The Sage, with worldly eyes, cannot perceive the *Ravie*'s wisdom, that of the primacy of God's Love; instead she sees only folly and madness in the shepherdess' irrational joy. The *Ravie* sings, and she demolishes the illusions of a rationally recognizable "reality" and of an independently coherent and meaningful language. "L'un est dict vestu, qui est nud," says the *Ravie* (966). Humanity, wrapping its nothingness in the shroud of *cuyder*, like Adam, assumes itself clothed and defined. But in fact, one is naked unless enfolded in the love of God. The *Ravie* does not speak, she sings. Song, natural and

spontaneous, seems to transcend the inadequacies of language; song is also the medium of the children in *L'Inquisiteur*[4]. The *Ravie*'s words, full of contradictions and paradoxes, thwart the presumptions of reason.

Et le caillou sy fort et dur,
on le dict mol;
Et le saige on nomme fol
Et qui est Pierre on nomme Pol.
Ainsy chacun
Parle son langaige commun (969-74).

The *Ravie*, knowing only the reality of God's Love, forgets names, apparel, body and accoutrements; her very insouciance effects their unmasking. The spirit overwhelms the pretenses of the letter. To expose reason, intelligence, and language as illusion is folly in the eyes of the world that relies on those illusions to hold back the void. But this folly is wisdom to one who believes that the void is really the ungraspable Totality of God.

Puis, quant tu m'auras abatue,
me feras vivre.
Pour toy veulx estre folle et yvre
Sans jamais en estre delivre (999-1002).

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[4]See Louis E. Auld, "Music as Dramatic Device in the Secular Theatre of Marguerite de Navarre" *Renaissance Drama*, 7 (1976) 192-217. Robert Cottrell says that in Marguerite's poetry "music symbolizes the language of a truth that cannot be contained in words" (134-5).

What the wise of the world fear, the Christian fool desires. The object of that desire is beyond figuration. But the expression of desire is a figuration of desire in search of an attainable object; it can never be more than a representation that reinforces the absence of that which is desired. We remember that Mannoni characterized literature as the figuration of the desire to figure desire, that is to give shape, substance, expression to that which is wanting. The *Ravie*'s one desire is to love God, to be united with her divine "Amy". The accomplishment of this desire can only be realized once human beings are stripped of all figurations - such as self and language - that separate them from incorporation with the *Tout* that is beyond figuration. And so the *Ravie* demolishes language, reason, and self. Her desire is to disfigure desire, to free desire for the All from the clutter of the particular that has accrued around it. The desire for which the *Ravie* yearns is the lack of desire that is found only in the plenitude of God. Show me someone who does not lack [and therefore desire] something, the *Supersticieuse* challenges the *Ravie* (796-7). "Ha! qui l'a tient la bouche close," responds the *Ravie* (798). The lack of desire cannot be figured, and its plenitude and satisfaction are reflected in silence - the absence of verbal figuration.

The *Ravie*, in passionate words, expresses her desire to be annihilated - to lose the mask and illusion of self - and to be consumed in the love of God, her divine origin and end. Yet, so ardent is her desire and its expression, that the allegorical mask of the character seems to turn to flesh. Thus the character representing the desire to transcend the human condition and its masks is a much more convincingly

human mask than the frozen attitudes of the *Sage*, the *Mondainne*, or the *Superstitieuse*.

At the end of the *Ravie*'s prayer to be consumed by divine Love, there is, says Saulnier, a long pause, and "la Grâce descend" (p.323, note on line 1011). The *Ravie* communicates this event in her final four lines:

> Tu l'as faict et je t'en mercie.
> Voila l'estat de la bergère
> Qui suivant d'amour la banniere
> D'autre chose ne se soucye (1012-15).

Her prayer has been answered, her desire appeased. Consumed by the Word, she now drops the mask of language and fades into the longed for "heard Silence".

The *Ravie* has revealed the falsity of the *theatrum mundi* and reached union with God. But without the theater of language to represent it, the Silence of Plenitude is indistinguishable from the silence of the void. Moveover, the character of the *Ravie* is itself merely a mask - a poetic figuring of the desire for desire to be freed of its figuration in order to be satisfied, and thereby annihilated. The *Ravie*, who has unmasked the world, is nevertheless a mask herself - a mask that cries out "I am not a mask - I merely wear one." She begs to be delivered from her mask and theatrically enacts that ultimate liberation. Because the *Ravie* is only a mask, or character in a play, the dropping of her mask of self leaves nothing. She, like her utterances, is merely another reflection of the endless reticulation of the desire for an absolute being in a divine totality. As a figment of desire, the *Ravie* cannot claim divine origin - her

origin is in the human desire she reflects and whose satisfaction she, in the theater of language and imagination, mimes (or invents). Her silence represents the Silence of Plenitude, but cannot, itself, escape the silence of the void.

Were *La Comédie du Mont de Marsan* to be staged, an actress would perform the role of the *Ravie*. Within the text itself, as well, the role of the character of the *Ravie* is to carry out a performance. She performs the role of madman in the theater, stopping the show, stripping the masks from the *theatrum mundi*, and then she strips herself. The *Ravie* performs a figuration of the desire for Oneness with God through the disfiguration of all inferior desires. She then performs the accomplishment and satisfaction of that desire through a figuration of the end of figuration. Each level of performance in a *mise-en-abîme* of performed figurations reveals a continuum of desire and the absence of the object of desire. Artistic creation attempts to give desire a face, but succeeds only in fabricating a mask. The object of desire, because it ultimately is God, like God, cannot be figured or named. As words point to the Word that they obscure, masks give provisional form to the desire they dissimulate. The *Ravie*'s performance of stripping masks is an attempt to make palpable the desire for the absence of masks and the presence of what they represent and desire. However, this performance, too, relies on the masks of language, text, and persona. In this way the text defers the silence that it proclaims, as it points towards the Word while distancing its apprehension.

The multiple layers of performance in the urge to figure textually a desire for the end of figuration and desire are not limited to Marguerite's plays. Rather, they

permeate her *oeuvre*. Because her writing figures the desire for an absolute annihilation of desire and its figurations, it is trapped in paradox. Paradox, says Rosalie Colie, relies on relativity and is critical of absolute and fixed conventions. Yet, paradoxically, paradoxes often seem designed "to assert some fundamental and absolute truth" (*Paradoxica Epidemica*, 10). Marguerite employs paradox to expose the relativity of the *theatrum mundi* and the limits and arbitrariness of its conventions. She refutes the delusion that the provisional stage of human fabrication is real in order to assert the fundamental and absolute truth that she finds in Christ's Love. However the fact that she is part of the world and relies on such relative tools as language to expose the farce and point towards the truth put the poet in a position where she is trapped by the very illusion she would escape. Her every means of dismantling that illusion exist within the illusion with her. Marguerite employs paradox to demolish the world's pretensions to absolute status, but, in turn, her aspirations for a divine absolute lead to similar paradoxes.

"[...]Paradoxes," writes Colie, "are profoundly self-critical: [...] they comment on their own method and technique" (7). "Paradox deals with itself as subject and as object, and in this respect, too, may be seen as both tautological and paradoxical"(7). Paradox generates and is generated from self-referential activities. If Marguerite's poems and plays seem to be "performances", as Robert Cottrell says (137), it is because the theatrical paradigm, with its acknowledgement of the arbitrariness of its conventions and the provisional status of its existence, is a response to the ineluctable ensnarement in the webs of paradox that trap every pursuit of absolute truth.

Performance is mirrored on every level at which paradox is encountered. Writers who reach across boundaries, who reflect the *mise-en-abîme* of self-reference, who seek the absolute by means of the relative produce works rich in paradox. Because paradox is insoluble, texts that generate or are generated by paradox take recourse in what we have called theatricality in order to expose the relativity of their means, while evoking, or figuring, the absolute to which they aspire "*dans un autre monde*" - another world that is not subject to the vicissitudes of that relativity. Theater and literature proclaim their own relativity, exposing and exploiting the provisional and arbitrary nature of their own conventions. At the same time, they point beyond their own relative existence to an absolute paradigm, implying that it is the dynamic of the absolute paradigm which informs their own relative structures. It is in this way, the Spirit is supposed to inform the letter of Scripture. Or, from another perspective, in this manner Silenus' truth is glimpsed behind the weaving and rending of the tragic veil. Be it All or Nothing, the absolute invoked is ungraspable and unperceivable both in the relative, provisional *theatrum mundi*, and in its literary and histrionic refractions. At the same time, the tendency of the relative to aspire to the status of absolute reflects the desire, blind to its own delusions, for an absolute being. The theatrical paradigm permits an exploration of the absolute by means of the relative, creating a fictive absolute as a figuration of the desire for the absolute. This ludic construct permits a controlled illusion (aware of its illusoriness) of lucidity before the reticular *mise-en-abîme*.

Marguerite's performances, as we have seen, tend to reflect the theatricality of man's self-perception in the world in order to unmask the empty husk of man without God and to demystify the sham of the *theatrum mundi*. Her characters, then, wear the specular masks of those who believe that their masks are their identities: the women who cannot understand the truth behind the folly of the *Ravie*, in *La Comédie du Mont de Marsan*, the Inquisiteur, Adam, and all who are victims of *cuyder*. These masks are exposed as such by the madness of a *Ravie*, or of children, while the letter of language is overturned by the song of spirit. In the *Chansons spirituelles* we find the spectacle of the hollow vessel of the letter cleansed and replenished with the spirit in the once bawdy *contrafacta* that henceforth sing of divine Love. The Inquisitor, in the play of that name, asks the *Varlet* where he has learned the Scripture that he quotes. The servant's answer contrasts and reconciles the hollow letter of human learning with the plenitude of the Spirit:

> Vous m'en avez faict la lecture,
>
> Et Dieu m'en a donné l'esprit (380-1).

Marguerite's *oeuvre* is a theater revealing the comedy of human folly and the tragedy of the void behind man's illusions bereft of God. Marguerite's texts, like Nietzsche's version of Greek tragedy, play out the unmasking of what art is meant to conceal, that is man's nothingness. But in so doing, Marguerite also reveals that the exposure of the void is not the end, but rather a (provisional) beginning, for in recognizing his nothingness man prepares for his reunion with his Creator. Marguerite's poetic theater presents the paradox that man's nothingness is not the end,

but the beginning, that it leads not to the void, but to the All. Marguerite presents the paradox that the nothingness that man so dreads, that is his greatest fear, is the only path to ineffable and absolute Joy. The void seems empty only to one not informed with Love. Love opens man's eyes to the plenitude of the absence of self. Rather than fearing the engulfment of the self as the end of existence, the Christian (that is, one who shares Marguerite's and Briçonnet's brand of Christianity) anticipates the shedding of self as the end of a separation from true Being. Subjective projections of "reality" upon the void offer an ontology and cosmology that consist of subjectivity or its absence. If the self's projections are taken as the reality of existence, then the absence of those projections implies nothingness. But if the soul is informed with Love, then it perceives the plenitude of what seems to be a void, i.e., the loss of self. The dropping of the masks of self is the end of a temporal spectacle and projection, and a return to eternal life. Marguerite theatrically exposes the folly of the *theatrum mundi* in order to remind the actors that their roles are nothing, an empty letter, unless invested with *caritas*. Man, dupe to his own mask of self, separates himself from the totality of God's creation in order to attain subjective perspective. Thus, he views the world as "other", an object separate from himself. Upon this separate object he projects his self and its creations, both of which are illusions. The "separate" world perceived by man is no longer God's Creation, but man's, because man has replaced *agape* with *philautia*. The world created and perceived by man is a philautic parody of the world as an expression of God's Love. The nothingness behind the stage he has made, and upon which he performs, haunts man when he

realizes that he must eventually leave the stage. His fear grows as he realizes that he has invented no sequel to the theater of self. He sees self, its creation and its self-love (an unconscious parody of the Trinity) as doomed to be engulfed in what seems a void, because it is characterized by the absence of self and its theater. Unable to appreciate Creation as the wholeness and plenitude in which he yearns to be reabsorbed, man sees only the abyss of the loss of self. Marguerite's poetic theater seeks to turn this fear to joy, this apparent end to the beginning of true being by evoking and enacting the transcendance that results from God's grace, the gift of Love.

We have also seen, however, that Marguerite's *mises-en-scène* cannot help but play out their own desire and inability to escape the masks of language and identity that are indispensable to their representation. Marguerite's poetry is a theater and, at the same time, a performance of its aspirations to transcend theatricality and attain sacramental status, that is truly to become what it enacts. The Eucharist, to a believer, is not a representation of the Incarnation; it <u>is</u> the Incarnation, freed from temporal constraints, manifesting its immanence and ubiquity. The transubstantiation is not theater, for that would imply the absence of that which is represented, in this case, Jesus Christ and his Love. The sacramental <u>is</u> what it enacts; it is consubstantial with its figuration.

Marguerite's poetic theater, figuring the desire to escape the theaters of the world, self, language and text, seeks to enact the deconstruction of the theatrical conventions that separate the absence inherent to mimetic representation from the

transcendance and immanence of sacrament. Temporality is one of Marguerite's prime targets. Robert Cottrell repeatedly examines the subversion of narrative and its implied temporality in Marguerite's texts. We have seen that, according to Cottrell, a characteristic of Marguerite's poetry is the replacement of a linear syntagmatic structure with one that is paradigmatic (see especially 73-5; 101; 120; 155; 279-83). The syntagmatic structure has a beginning and an end and traces the progression between the two points. Linearity and temporal progression reinforce the illusory autonomy of the particular outside of the Whole. The paradigmatic structures fashioned by Marguerite, however, mirror her desire for a wholeness beyond time, without beginning or end, where origin and *telos* are One. The paradigmatic structure is a means of combatting the anxiety born of the paradoxes that haunt Marguerite's poetic enterprise.

Marguerite's poem "L'Umbre", which follows the long poem "La Coche" in *Les Marguerites...* (Frank, 268-9), is, once again, a performance of the desire to figure a desire beyond figuration. The poem, in Marguerite's usual fashion, is the utterance of a first person narrator, to whom we will refer as Marguerite, in the same way that we refer to the narrator of Augustine's *Confessions* - and the person whose life he recounts -as Augustine. The narrator, or Marguerite, repeatedly expresses her desire to lose her selfhood and identity in order to be enfolded in the *Tout*:

> O que ce m'est grand plaisir de rien estre,
>
> Et qu'estre toute à mon amy et maistre! (56-7).

Once again, the paradox of Christian folly is invoked; Marguerite, like the *Ravie*, is seen as mad ("*divertie*" [1.60]) by those who, like the madman in the theater, imagine the void created by the self to be real.

> Bien folz sont ceux qui me tiennent perdue,
> Quand de mon Rien en tous biens suis fondue;
> Et si je suis de leurs yeux divertie,
> Pour en mon Tout toute estre convertie,
> Ce m'est plaisir d'estre Rien estimée
> D'eux, en estant en mon Tout transformée (58-63).

The word "*divertie*" mirrors the paradox in meaning both "withdrawn", "kept", or even "driven from" the sight of the world, as well as mentally "diverted, turned, altered" (Cotgrave, *Dictionarie...*), with the latter definitions again double, signifying both the negative judgement of the world before a deviation from its arbitrary conventions, and the recognition and joy of an altered state of consciousness and being beyond the world's empty understanding.

The Pauline paradox of Christian folly permeates the poem. Nothingness in the eyes of the world is the Totality for which Marguerite yearns. If the world sees nothing in the plenitude of the *Tout*, then it is blind. And if the world sees plenitude in the nothingness of its empty theater, then it hallucinates upon the void of its blindness. The only reality for Marguerite is that of "*Amour*". "*Amour*" is the first word of the poem. Robert Cottrell has noted the significance of the letter "O" at the beginning of *Les Marguerites*:

> Inscribed in time, Marguerite's texts strive to attain the perfect adequation that is signified by the capital letter O at the beginning of the *Marguerites*. They move back toward their beginning, searching for the silence that reigned before the Word was reflected in time by language (*Grammar of Silence*, 103).

In "L'Umbre", the large letter "A" that begins both the poem and the word "*Amour*" suggests that Love is the Beginning, the Alpha of all. Language is merely an empty letter, meaningless outside of the context of the true reality of Love, which informs all the universe, including the letter of the poem.

> Amour en qui vertu est toute enclose,
> Par qui se fait et conduit toute chose,
> Et à qui rend tout coeur obeissance,
> Contre lequel povoir est impuissance,
> Qui tout mesure et tout prise, et tout nombre,
> Me fait parler, moy qui ne suis qu'une Umbre (1-6)
> (my emphasis).

Marguerite's "Oraison à nostre Seigneur Jesus Christ" ends with the words, "le parler j'abandonne". In "Umbre", Love ("*Amour*"), bids the poet speak ("me fait parler"), animating and informing the shadowy nothingness of human language and the poetic voice of yearning. The values, language, and perceptions of the world are empty masks outside of *Amour*; what the world believes to be and calls power is really "*impuissance*", or impotence. The only true power is *Amour*, whence all power

springs. But the world, seduced and enthralled by its illusions, confuses appearance and reality. Man, impotent without God, believes himself powerful by virtue of his capacity to fabricate illusion, which in fact is merely evidence of both his impotence and his refusal to acknowledge that impotence. The sexual inference of the word "*impuissance*" or "impotence" is also pertinent, for Marguerite contrasts erotic love with "*Amour sans sentement*" (10), that is without sensuality.

Like the *Ravie*, Marguerite, as *Umbre*, sings of her "*amy*" in language that mimes the erotic. We find here, as in the *contrafacta* of the "*Chansons spirituelles*", an investment of the carnal letter with the transcendant Spirit that gives meaning to the masquerade of flesh. Marguerite, once again, exposes the masquerade and warns lovers to seek the plenitude of Love rather than the empty husk of desire. Her "amy tant digne d'estre aymé" is consubstantial with *Amour* throughout the poem. The lover is Love; he has no existence or identity outside of the union and unity of Love. It is to this same condition that Marguerite, a shadow of such a lover, aspires.

> Hors d'avec luy ne puis voir ny parler,
> Ne riens penser, fors sans cesse d'aller,
> Et sans propos poursuyvre à retourner
> Au lieu heureux oú je veux sejourner:
> Car en luy seul je retrouve ma vie,
> Qui hors de luy par ennuy m'est ravie (89-94).

She advises lovers ("O vrays amans" [113]) not to confuse desire ("peine vous meistes/ De parvenir au bien qui est promis" [114-5]) with Love that is

"immortel"(119). The "parfaitz amys" addressed in "L'Umbre" are warned not to become prisoners of desire which merely mirrors eternal love; it is the same lesson learned by *Amy* in the long poem "Les Prisons".

Throughout "Les Prisons" desire masquerades as love in a seductive chain of metamorphoses, from erotic love, to the esthetic appreciation of the *theatrum mundi* and its inventive structures, to a bibliophilia and *libido sciendi* that, in its faith in the letter and its rational manipulation, resembles Nietzche's "Socratic illusion". Desire figures Love as the object of desire. At the same time desire manifests its own inadequacy as a means of figuring Love, for Love is plenitude, and desire figures Love in the absence of that plenitude. Desire, which is *rien*, mirrors Love, which is *Tout.* The protean chain of desire's figurations mimes the temporal perspective of Love's immanence. Humankind, incapabable of a paradigmatic apprehension of Love's omnipresence, syntagmatically interprets ubiquity as an endless metamorphosis, as the Spirit informs an infinite chain of letters. As such, every perceptible manifestation of Love must be illusion, in that no single manifestation <u>is</u> Love, but merely an aspect of Creation giving voice to Love which is beyond voice. In "L'Umbre", Marguerite enjoins the worldly lovers:

> Jugez jamais n'avoir veu Amour tel
> Que cestuy cy que voyez immortel,
> Puisqu'immortel en est le fondement.
> Jugez aussi et jurez hardiment
> Que digne il est, et merite à toujours

D'avoir l'honneur sur tous autres Amours.

Laissez moy là toutes histoires, fables,

Lesquelles sont feintes ou veritables:

Quoy que ce soit, confessez n'avoir leu

En livre aucun, ne en ce monde veu

Amour qui soit semblable à cestuy cy,

Ne que louer on peult d'estre sans sy (117-29).

Marguerite dismisses the masks of desire that figure Love in the particular and in time. Such attachments theatrically enact in time the mystic *unio* with God that is outside of time. As Robert Cottrell points out in his analysis of "Les Prisons", the fictions of desire are exposed by time, which inexorably gnaws away at the mortal masks with immortal pretensions (260-1). The figurations of desire are all servants of self, which is the principal obstacle to the apprehension and realization of *Amour*. Worldly desire, rather than submitting to the Totality of Love, seeks to conquer Love under the banner of self. The attempted conquest of Love through the flesh is as absurd and impotent as the presumptive attainment of heaven by way of a Tower of mud and bricks[5]. One thinks of a would-be conqueror of Love like Don Giovanni who distances himself from Love as he piles up statistics of desire conquered, or rather desires conquered. The list of his master's conquests, temporal and syntagmatic, read by Leporello in Mozart's opera, only accentuates the unattainability

[5]In "Les Prisons", the successive prisons, constructed by the self, which separate *Amy* from God, are figured as Towers.

of the paradigmatic completeness of infinite and eternal Love by means of mechanics and arithmetic[6].

Even "*vrays amys*", or true lovers, are urged to seek beyond the satisfaction of desire in unity with each other, to the immortal Love that "*en est le fondement.*" Lovers such as Dante's Paolo and Francesca figure the object of desire in one another and wish to join not with eternity, but with each other for eternity[7]. Thus they are condemned to exist only for each other, only with each other, floating endlessly, desiring endlessly, as they mirror one another's desires in the absence of the rest of existence, that is the absence of God, who is truly Love. Throughout Marguerite's *oeuvre*, the ultimate prison that keeps one from God, the ultimate obstacle to the annihilation of desire and incorporation with the all-encompassing Lover who is Love, is the self. The Augustinian concept of God as the ultimate object of all desire leads to a paradox that hinges on the self: All desire is the desire for the annihilation of desire (i.e. union with God). Desire, as a figuration of the self and its yearning to be, is impossible without the self, for the self <u>is</u> the manifestation of separation from God, who is the object of desire. And so desire, as an expression of self, expresses the desire for the annihilation of the self whence it springs and which it figures. The only exit from the circle comes from the gift of God's grace and the Incarnation which

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[6] A version of this phenomenon is described by Albert Camus in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, especially the sections "Le Don Juanisme", "La comédie", and "La conquête" (152-64).

[7] *Inferno*, trans. John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford UP, 1979), Canto 5, pp.77-79.

endow man with *caritas*. Charity is antithetical to selfish desire, Paul tells us (I Corinthians, 13). In "L'Umbre", Marguerite figures the abnegation of self in love.

> Que mon Rien est par son Tout honoré,
>
> Et son Tout est par mon Rien adoré.
>
> Je consens donc à mon infirmité,
>
> Et à mon rien et mon humilité (107-10).

Caritas is submission to Love. *Caritas* sacrifices self to Love as the only way to pulverize the vessels of desire in which man imprisons himself. Charity exposes the illusory love that springs from the self and its *philautia*, or self-love. *Caritas*, as a celebration of Love's immanence, is antithetical to the particularities of self and its desires. *Caritas*, the shade of François I tells Marguerite in the poem, "La Navire" undoes and deforms ("*defait et deforme*") the mask of self(l.88)[8].

The fictions of desire and the self are once again unmasked in Marguerite's poetry, but once again the link between desire and language[9] places Marguerite's endeavor in a vortex of paradox. Marguerite has exposed the void behind desire's syntagmatic figuration of Love's plenitude, but she has been obliged to rely on language do so. Language, too, is a syntagmatic construct that, in Marguerite's work, is employed to express the desire for the paradigmatic *Tout*; it is a deferral of the encompassing Silence, the desire for which it represents. We have seen that

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[8]See Cottrell (203-19) for an exceptionally edifying reading of "La Navire".

[9]Augustine, remember, posits the absence of, and longing for God as the source of both desire and language. See John Frecerro's "The Olive and the Fig Tree".

Marguerite is keenly aware of this contradiction and we have noted some of the strategies she devises to surmount it. There is the recourse to song, such as that of the *Ravie* in *La Comédie du Mont de Marsan*, or the children who confront the Inquisitor in *L'Inquisiteur*. But the songs are nevertheless represented textually. Another strategy is the renunciation of language within a poem, implying that the true meaning of the poem comes at its termination, in the stilling of the poetic voice. Cottrell, points out Marguerite's iconic strategy, that is, the attempt to circumvent the syntagmatic flow of narrative with an atemporal structure that resembles that of the Christian's paradigmatic reality (*Grammar of Silence*, 118-20). We find several of these strategies employed in "L'Umbre". The entire poem is a song of self-abnegation, or, rather, sings of the longing to be cleansed of self and united with God. The writer denounces "*toutes histoires, fables*" be they "*feintes ou veritables*" (124-5), and places books in the same category as earthly love in its incapacity to represent the Love inherent in the Word (125-7):

> [...] confessez n'avoir leu
>
> En livre aucun, ne en ce monde veu
>
> Amour qui soit semblable à cestuy cy (126-8).

Cottrell points out that "*histoires*" and "*fables*" "necessarily unfold diachronically" (240, note 49), but all books rely on the linear unfolding of language in the form of a fixed text. The structure of the poem aims to subvert the syntagmatic matrix of language; there is no narrative line; everything is described as actuality and

in a non-specific and all-inclusive present. "*Amour*", as we have noted, is the *alpha*, and it is also the All that "encloses" and informs everything in a boundless presence:

> "[...] en qui vertu est toute enclose,
>
> Par qui se fait et conduit toute chose,
>
> [...]
>
> Qui tout mesure et tout prise, et tout nombre (1-5) [my emphasis].

Amour, we have seen, is consubstantial with the *amy*; union with the *amy* is incorporation into the totality of Love, which is not only the beginning, the *alpha*, but also the *omega* outside of time. This paradigm is represented in the closing lines of the poem and especially the final word:

> Comme de moy Umbre tresinutile,
>
> Et qui puys tout par cest amour gentile
>
> De mon amy, duquel pour fin je dis
>
> Que l'union c'est mon vray Paradis (130-3) [my emphasis].

The "*fin*", or ending of the poem is the union with the Divine Love, *Amour-amy* with which the poem commences. The final word, "*Paradis*", completes the paradigm in two ways. First, the longed for paradise at the end of time and language is one and the same as the *Amour* that is *Tout*, beyond temporal or verbal figuration. Secondly, mankind was created from Paradise in the plenitude of God's Love; Paradise is not only the desired destination, it is the lost origin. The placement of the word "*Paradis*" at the end of the poem emphasizes the mirroring etiology and teleology of humanity outside of its temporal errancy.

at the end of the poem emphasizes the mirroring etiology and teleology of humanity outside of its temporal errancy.

Cottrell writes that "Anaphora appears in Marguerite's text when language loses its referential fixity, when narrative, [...], ceases to be an adequate mode of exposition" (72). He also notes that anaphora "focuses the readers attention on a presence that is perpetually duplicated" (80). There are but two instances of anaphora in "L'Umbre"; the first comes at the beginning of the poem, immediately following Marguerite's first identification as "*une Umbre*"(6) and justifies her speech as induced by "*Amour*":

> Pour ceste fois, ce qui m'est permis faire,
>
> Pour au desir de celuy satisfaire (7-8).

Marguerite repeatedly justifies her presence throughout the poem as "*L'Umbre*" (6, 19, 53, 74, 129, 130), and her presence as *L'Umbre* is that of an absence of self or substance; the *Umbre* is merely a physical evidence of the divine presence. Marguerite's characterization of herself as a shadow of the immanence of *Amour* and the Word is what Cottrell might term an "iconic" representation of her desire for union with God and His Love. The text has no referential fixity except as a shadow of the Word; the self has no referential fixity except as a shadow of God, who is Love. Thus Marguerite's desire, and the self that is both the source and frustration of that desire, is figured as a shadow, an absence that figures the presence of the object of

desire[10]. The shadow, which is absence of light, mirrors the movements of the Beloved, who is Light. The Beloved, Love, Light, *Logos*, is everything beyond the shadow. Nevertheless, a shadow, unlike a mirror or reflection, is physically linked to the Beloved. He cannot walk away from His shadow as he can from a mirror; the shadow will mime his movements. *L'Umbre*, if not consubstantial with her *amy*, nevertheless exists only as a function of God or Love, and is devoid of all figuration but that of His presence.

> Je ne suis rien, [...]
>
> Car je n'ay corps, ny os, ny nerfz, ny veine,
>
> Voix ne propos, et je suis chose vaine (65-7).

The shadow successfully figures the self as nothing without God, and as a nothing that is inseparable from God (89-105). Marguerite rejoices at the loss of self, and the shadow which figures that lack of self also simulates or mimes incorporation with the *Tout* of *Amour-amy*.

> S'il me fait signe ou des mains, ou des doigts,
>
> Et moy à luy, ou si la main me tend,
>
> En mesme instant la mienne aussi s'estend,
>
> Et quand il tend ses bras pour m'embrasser,
>
> Et moy les miens sans m'en pouvoir lasser....
>
> Tant suis à luy qu'où il va je l'ensuis (39-44).

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[10]This bears comparison to the Apollonian illusion, which is a figuration of presence that bears witness to the absence it would obscure.

Here, another example of anaphora ("Et".."Et") focuses our attention, as Cottrell says, "on a presence that is perpetually duplicated."

The dark mirroring of the shadow's tenebrous mimesis implies God's presence even in the manifestation of His Absence. That Absence, the vestige of self, flees God's approach and embrace:

"Mais quand il vient à moy, tousjours le fuis" (45). But God's generous and loving embrace of His own image in nothingness accomplishes the shadow's annihilation and seems to bring about the union it desires.

> Sinon que lors que contre un mur m'aculle
> Pour me baiser, car lors ne me reculle,
> S'il approchoit tout du long de mon corps,
> Je ne sçay plus que je deviens alors,
> Là je me perds : ô qu'heureuse est la perte
> Par laquelle est telle aise recouverte!
> Et ne suis riens par ceste charité,
> Qui met en un l'umbre et la verité (46-53).

However, the shadow does not become one with God. Unlike the textual figuration of the descent of Grace upon the *Ravie*, at the end of *La Comédie du Mont de Marsan*, which is followed by silence, the poetic figuration of the incorporation of *L'Umbre* with *Amy* occurs in the middle of the text and is followed by more linguistic figuration of the desired state of bliss. The *Umbre* cannot continue to be *l'Umbre* that bears witness as darkness (absence of light) and be one with God at the same time.

And so the text reminds us that the *Umbre* that cannot be one with God, but seems to come so close, is not in fact God's shadow, but a textual figuration of the desire to be God's shadow. The text, like the shadow it portrays, is mimetic without effect, and represents an impotence that darkly mirrors the yearning to be joined with Omnipotence. The poem "L'Umbre", unlike the shadow figured therein, is not a shade that moves with God, but an icon fixed in words, an icon of absence. The apparently ambulant *Umbre* is revealed to be a static verbal silhouette, a mask reduced by one dimension acting out the desire to be freed from dimensions. The absence of dimension that the world interprets as nothing is also the source and endpoint of the Infinite, beyond dimension. As the shadow points out, "riens à tout ne scauroit ressembler" (105).

In the "Oraison de l'âme fidèle, à son Dieu", Marguerite notes the mutability of man seeking to be: "L'homme souvent se mire et change tant" (*Marguerites*, 88). Man mirrors his own fantasies and the desire whence they spring in an imitation of what is perceptible. Identity is defined by perception; in *La Comédie du Mont de Marsan*, for example, we see the characters identified by the aspects of the world that they perceive as predominant: the *Superstitieuse* is an idolater who worships perceptible relics instead of the God beyond perception; likewise, the *Mondainne* worships the flesh, and the *Sage*, at the pinnacle of the perceptible, worships Reason. But the world of the perceptible, Adam's legacy, is "fange et fiens" ("Oraison", 78). Throughout Marguerite's *oeuvre* mud, dung, and slime are the substance in which man molds his malleable "reality" and the protean self that it reflects. Instead of the plastic

mutability of the perceptible, Marguerite seeks a "mutation/ De nous en Toy" ("Oraison",86). Rather than molding the perceptible in the shape of her desire, Marguerite seeks a mimesis of what is beyond sense. Cottrell notes that *oraison* "may be read as a homonym of *hors raison*," beyond reason. *L'Umbre* claims "Amour sans sentement" (10), Love that does not rely on sensory stimulation. Old Adam, condemned, in his exile from God, to figure his nothingness in "fange et fiens", is allowed, through the Incarnation, to become *Umbre*, linked to God by *caritas*. The apparent mutability of the shadow is the result of the manifold manifestations of Love, which is *Tout*, rather than the endless and fruitless attempt to figure desire.

In "Miroir de l'âme pécheresse", Marguerite plays the various roles of mother, wife, sister, and lover to Jesus (pp. 31-38) in an attempt to figure the all-encompassing nature of Divine Love. However, in the world of the Spirit, desire disappears. Marguerite's poems remain an expression of the desire for the annihilation of desire. Even the genius that reduces the figuration of desire to its bare minimum, a shadow, a silhouette, must figure the union of nothing with plenitude in the plastic medium of language.

In chapter one we examined, as a point of comparison, Nietzsche's view that the silence of the infinite so appalls man that he must obscure it with his own creations and his own image. In Marguerite's view, the infinite only becomes a void when it is parceled and obscured by human imagination, in a vain and presumptuous attempt (*cuyder*) to fill or remake the void of man's separation from the infinite. Marguerite believes she will find God in the silence and apparent nothingness that

spurs others to imaginative (and verbal) activity. She expresses this belief in imaginative and verbal activity. Caught in this paradox, she seeks a *parole humaine* that is consistent with, and absorbable by the Silence, and not a barrier against it. The *umbre* is the visual analogue for such a silence. But both Marguerite's shadow that represents the absence of self, and her human word that evokes the Silence that precedes apprehension of the Word, are masks that figure the self's desire, even should that desire seek the absence of both desire and self. "L'Umbre" is a poem that stresses the primacy of Love over desire. Yet, at the same time, it is the figuration of the desire for Love, and desire, as we have seen, implies the absence of that which is sought.

The image of the *umbre* could be seen as Marguerite's version of the "Mirror Stage". In Lacan's Mirror stage, we remember, the child, upon seeing its image reflected in a mirror, forms a notion of self[11]. This self is (imaginatively) perceived as possessing a maturity and power that it has not yet, and will never attain. However, the perceived unity of self inspires jubilation. This joy is followed by the anxious invention of a "pre-" self to give credence to the notion of a completed self. The precursor to the illusion of a mature self is the dismembered self. Marguerite, as *umbre*, perceives an imaginary maturity and power in the lack of self (darkness, empty shadow) formed in the image, or shape of God, who is the totality (ultimate power and maturity) for which she yearns. She expresses her jubilation repeatedly throughout the

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[11]See Lacan's *Ecrits*, vol.1, 89-97.

poem. The dismembered self that supposedly precedes the maturity and power of union with God is the chain of identities the self assumes in the absence of God. The mirror stage implies that self-delusion, or at least illusion, is the inevitable response to the insatiable desire for existential definition. This would seem applicable even should that definition be the negation of the illusion of self and assimilation in a totality of Being.

Human verbal activity is a mask that covers the silence whence it springs, be that silence the dreaded void, or the plenitude beyond the empty letter. Literature, as a representation of verbal activity, also reflects the fundamental impossibility of a definition of existence or identity through this activity. At the same time, it manifests the impossibility of ending the masquerade and the chain of metamorphoses born of subjectivity and its utterance. For the Christian, Christ is the solution to the paradox of the figuration of desire that defers the satisfaction of desire. Christ, as the Word made flesh, is the Lover of mankind who is Love and yet joins with man's flesh. Christ removes the tensions of the tragic human condition by revealing the void as plenitude, death as life. The *deus ex machina* of Christian faith provides the only possible escape, for Marguerite's poetry, from the paradoxes of which it is woven.

Let us recall for a moment Mannoni's concept of the deluded spectator. He is the stock figure who, always distinct from the initiated and complicitous spectators, is unaware that what he takes for reality is staged. He is the object of amusement and ridicule to those of us who, aware of the staging, are accomplices in the theatrical conventions whose arbitrariness and artificiality are invisible to the dupe. We find his

blindness to the ludic to be ludicrous. Marguerite sees all of mankind as the deluded spectator-actor in the *theatrum mundi*. Rather than laughing at man, however, she, like the madman in *Praise of Folly*, seeks to free him of his delusions so that he may perceive the greater reality of his existence. But, confined, herself, to the terrestrial stage, Marguerite is obliged to employ her own *mises-en-scène* and to fabricate her own textual masks in order to unmask those enthralled to a theater that they take for reality. Nevertheless, Marguerite's very awareness of the apparent impossibility of escape from the theatrical *mise-en-abîme* is a source of great anxiety. As she plays out the theater of escape from the *theatrum mundi*, her awareness of her own theatrical devices leads to an ever more sophisticated and self-aware theater that enacts the negation of its own structures. Marguerite's texts aim to create a self-conscious theater whose primary function is the revelation of the illusions of the *theatrum mundi* to her deluded brethren, and which consumes itself as it performs that function. Marguerite, like her readers, is trapped in the theater of the world by locus, temporality and a self that manifests her inescapable role as a being separated from and longing for true being beyond the human stage, the "*Je suys qui suys*,"[12] that only God can claim. Through her poetry and drama Marguerite theatrically annnihilates the limits that emprison her in a theater of exile. It is beyond her power to destroy the theater of the world, or language, or time, or self, and so she is obliged to act out her desire by means of a theater that seems to escape its own theatricality by that most theatrical of devices, the *deus ex machina*.

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[12] *Les Prisons*, III,520.

While the term *deus ex machina* usually signifies a god issuing from within the machinery of the theater, Marguerite's version is, as one might expect, double in nature. On the one hand, as part of the performance of the poem, the descent of Grace upon the Ravie in *La Comédie du Mont de Marsan*, the Inquisitor in *L'Inquisiteur*, *Amy* in "Les Prisons", or the realization of *unio* with God in "L'Umbre" are effected only within the structure of the text and, as such, proceed from its internal machinery as *dei ex machina.*[13] But, just as the syntagmatic temporality of narrative and language is masked in Marguerite's poetry by an "iconographical" textual representation of the paradigm of a timeless eternity where beginning and end are one, the god within the machine is merely an "icon" of the *Deus extra machinam*, the God beyond the machinery of the *theatrum mundi*, whose Love is desired and evoked in the figuration of that desire. Obviously, the credibility of the *Deus extra machinam* as a solution to the theatrical *mise en abîme* is problematic; the fact that it relies on Faith, which is also within the "machine" while claiming authority from beyond it, leaves Marguerite's poetic strategies inbedded in paradox. One is asked to accept the assumption that those with Faith are initiated spectators, *connaisseurs* of the *theatrum mundi* and that those without Faith are dupes of their own illusions - that is to say

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[13]Cottrell, in his reading of "La Navire", sees the rising of the sun that puts an end to the conversation between Marguerite and her dead brother François, as a *deus ex machina* that resolves the contradictions of the text (218). Throughout the poem, Marguerite speaks of her love for her absent brother, while his shade reproves her attachment to his departed person as "faux amour, qui le mal nomme bien/ Et le bien mal" (lines 94-5). François, freed of body and self, reminds her that *caritas* is the only true love. Marguerite, still trapped in human form (where desire seems inescapable) agrees "Je crois, mais..."(l. 705).

fools. The defense of Faith is the Pauline defense that folly in the eyes of the mad, deluded world is true wisdom. However, to one without Faith, grace, and the faith it permits, comprise a *deus ex machina* that appears to resolve the desire for an ultimate grounding of the theater of desire. The *Deus extra machinam* then is seen as a theatrical device of the self, such as those employed in the Mirror stage. Faith, then, seems to impose an illusory closure to the infinite regression of man's representation to himself of himself and the world he perceives. Faith could be seen as yet another figuration of an ungraspable *autre monde.*

Once more we confront the paradox of the figuration of desire. The better part of Marguerite's *oeuvre* could be seen as testimony to the struggle against the illusions of self. God, as the ultimate object of desire, is both beginning and end of the seemingly infinite regression of desire and its figurations. The immanence of God, and the Faith in that immanence that originates beyond the limitations of the theaters of self and the world, are, for Marguerite, the assurance that there is Light beyond the shadows cast on the cave wall. A shadow that seeks annihilation in the Light rather than the amusement of delusion within the caverns of *theatrum mundi*, Marguerite's madness is of a higher order. But her poetry of Love can only be realized in that world of Light beyond the cave.[14] Within the cave, in the shadows, Charity undoes

[14]See Plato's *Republic*, Book 7, 513a-517b, where man is described as prisoner in a cave, perceiving the world only by shadows cast upon the wall. Man, fettered, can see nothing but shadows. Should he be released, however, and turn to the fire that burns within the cave, or leave the cave and crawl to the light without, his eyes, accustomed to the darkness, would be overwhelmed by the dazzling lucency, and he would see nothing of the reality before him.

and deforms the figurations of desire and self by enlightening us to the fact that they are merely umbrous illusions. However, that Light from beyond remains imperceptible, except through the medium of representation; the Light is represented in the cave by the shadows that proclaim its absence. For the prisoner within the cave love remains the obscure figuration of the desire for a Love beyond desire and self.

Chapter 4

The Larval Stage

In his letter to Martin Dorp, defending *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus writes:

> When I want to play the fool I assume the character of Folly, and just as in Plato Socrates masks his face in order to sing the praises of love, I too have played my comedy in character.[1]

Folly, then, is a mask, or *larva*[2], through which Erasmus performs his "comedy". In his book, *Montaigne, Rabelais, Marot, l'écriture comme présence*, Gérard Defaux delineates the Renaissance notion, enunciated by many commentators, including Erasmus himself, that the written word serves to mirror the spirit of man, that *oratio* reflects *ratio*. Folly, then, as a creature composed of language, serves her creator as both mask and mirror.

The doubleness or duplicity of Folly's character is a critical commonplace. *Môria-Stultitia*, foolish and wise[3], purveyor of lies in the guise of truth, purveyor of

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[1] "Letter to Martin Dorp", following *Praise of Folly* in the Penguin edition (218-9).

[2] See Terence Cave, *The Cornucopian Text* (166). Erasmus uses both *persona* and *larva* to convey the notion of "mask".

[3] Lynda G. Christian distinguishes between *Môria* and *Stultitia* in her article "The Metamorphoses of Erasmus' *Folly*", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 32 (1971) 289-94. *Môria* is the paradoxical Christian folly - wisdom that is folly in the eyes of the world because it recognizes the folly of the world. *Stultitia* is what Ms. Christian terms "pagan" or "natural" folly - the Folly in love with the illusions she creates and sustains.

truth in the guise of lies, whose performance is enacted in *serio ludere*: all these aspects of Folly's duality have been noted and commented upon. Such oppositions seem inexhaustably fecund in the generation of further paradoxes and dichotomies.[4] The duality mirror-mask is no exception. As a mask, Folly conceals her author; as a mirror, she reflects his understanding. Defaux traces the notion of *logos* as a living reflection of the spirit of its author to the paradigm of Christ, as *Logos*, who is a reflection of the Father that is consubstantial with the Father (15-26). However, in the textual *mise-en-scène* of *Praise of Folly*, the linguistic mirror reflects a linguistic mask rather than a spiritual entity. Folly's contortions and transformations endlessly reflect and unmask the "wisdom" of the world. She is mask and mirror, not only of her author and of the world as he perceives it, but also for the world that she addresses and to which she is presented in print. Through Folly, Erasmus enacts the ludic layers of representation in language, and the world that (as representation) it creates. Folly's sophism and *philautia* provide the masks by which the world projects its illusions, while Folly, as refraction of the authorial *logos*, strips and mocks those self-same masks.

Since she is both speaker and subject of her encomium, Folly's oration perversely mirrors her *ratio*, which is itself nothing more than an authorial mask. Folly as mask, praises the masks and illusions of the world. Folly as mirror praises images. But in reflecting the layers of illusion of the *theatrum mundi*, Folly

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[4] See especially Terence Cave, *The Cornucopian Text* (3-34; 157-67) and Rosalie Colie, *Paradoxica Epidemica* (3-43).

deconstructs the stage and the spectacle, revealing the hollowness behind its apparent plenitude.

We have noted that Erasmus refers to Folly as a mask, *larva*. But *larva* can also be translated as "ghost" or "goblin" - a lesser spirit.[5] Folly, as *larva*, is both the means of concealment, mask, and that which is concealed - the "ghost" that animates the ludic machine. As such, she is a fallen parody of the Christian concept of *Logos* as reflection, manifestation, and incarnation of the Spirit. Yet, as reflection of her author's understanding of this phenomenon, she reveals her own ruses and the emptiness they veil. Terence Cave, commenting on the "reflexive, dialogic and open-ended" quality of Renaissance texts notes that,

> Written in the shadow of an impossible ideal, they proliferate in order to question themselves and lay bare their own mechanisms (182).

Such texts represent the *copia* of existence "as a centrifugal movement, a constantly renewed erasure of their origins" (182).

The proliferation and mutations that mark the extravagant *copia* of the *theatrum mundi* and its self-representations, the apparent plenitude that masks the void behind the illusions, can also be seen as reflecting, and deforming, the generative and transformational powers attributed to the paradigm of the divine *Logos*. Gérard Defaux cites Jacques Lefèvre d'Etaples' notion of man as a mirror image of God, deformed by *cuyder* and disobedience. Man has "«deffiguré» cette image, détruit la similitude qui l'unissait à son créateur" (Defaux 15). The protean transformations of

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[5] Leverett, *A New and Copious Lexicon of the Latin Language.*

Folly and her minions are the warped reflections of the ultimate transformation, that of the Word, "la «mutation» tant espérée" (Defaux, 15). Through the mediation of Christ, the *Logos*, the Word made flesh, Defaux points out, writers such as Erasmus and Lefèvre hoped to return man to a mirror of the divine image. This ultimate mutation would be the end of man's own mutability, the final hour evoked by Gargantua in his letter to Pantagruel:

> [...] alors cesseront toutes generations et corruptions, et seront les elemens hors de leurs transmutations continues, veu que la paix tant desirée sera consumée et parfaicte, et que toutes choses seront reduites à leur fin et periode (*Pantagruel*, 257).

Writers such as Erasmus, Rabelais are aware of the protean transformations of the letter as "deviant (deviating from its origin in reality)" [Cave xviii]. Their texts also reflect and expose the letter's "devious (concealing its duplicity...)" [Cave xviii] tendencies. Writers aware of the absence and deferment of plenitude implicit in the protean distortions of linguistic and representational *copia* might struggle with the

paradoxes that confront their quest to perceive and represent truth through language. The texts of Rabelais and Erasmus, however, show us that the writer need not necessarily fear the collapse of the empty linguistic and fictional structures wherein an author enacts the quest for truth. Both *Praise of Folly* and Rabelais' novels evoke laughter, rather than fear.[6] The *larvae* of the linguistic and textual creations of writers like Erasmus and Rabelais comically expose the emptiness of their extravagant masks and inferior spirits, not to expose a void, but to reflect the opacity that obscures the reflection of true plenitude.

Larva, we have noted, can either be a mask or a "spectre, ghost, phantom, walking spirit, hobgoblin, goblin, noxious spirit" (Leverett). The mask that no longer reflects the Spirit with its representational letter, but instead valorizes its own hollow structure becomes an inversion of the Spirit, an empty and noxious phantom. Leverett also cites Petronius' use of the word *larva* to mean "an automaton, a puppet".

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[6] M. Bakhtin extensively discusses the role of laughter in the folk tradition in *Rabelais and His World.* Carnival laughter, such as that evoked by Rabelais and Erasmus, according to Bakhtin, destroys fear through its depiction of the world's "gay relativity" (11). As such, it is not only "mocking and deriding" (12), but also "gay and triumphant" (11). Carnival laughter is all inclusive, for he who laughs is not only spectator of, but participant in the droll spectacle of *theatrum mundi.* Because of its scope, laughter in the Renaissance, Bakhtin asserts, is not negative but generative and regenerative. Such laughter is closely linked to the grotesque, which, celebrating the incompleteness of life, constantly "outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits" (26). "The grotesque image," Bakhtin writes, " reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming" (24). This regenerative function of laughter assumes a vital force that can and will transcend the collapse of the world's pretensions to presence and completion. Rabelais' work is, in Bakhtin's opinion, "the most fearless book in world literature" because it destroys fear "at its very origin" (39) by emphasizing the inexhaustibility of the world's generative energy.

Erasmus' Folly, is like an automaton or puppet that claims to be living and autonomous. The letter devoid of the Spirit is, for Erasmus, an illusion of reality. Humanity devoid of the Spirit is but a puppet: an exterior semblance of humanity that is animated by cupidity and madness. One might also note the related adjective *larvatus*, meaning "mad, distracted". Rabelais and Erasmus present as masks and puppets the mad, empty, wooden structures of human claims of autonomy from a transcendent reality.

The Renaissance writer, seeking to reconstitute the written word as reflection of the Word, cannot avoid the use of masks in his or her quest[7]. But the masquerade must mirror and expose the empty farce that humankind plays out in its desire for presence and plenitude. The venial spirits of humanity's self-love, fear, or desire create a false *copia*. Fear of the void behind the masks justifies the reign of the mad puppet, Folly. A human being, in its larval stage is an immature worm, a mask.[8] It is both a lesser spirit and the automaton animated by that spirit or "goblin". It finds

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[7] See chapters 2 and 3, supra, which explore the struggles of Marguerite de Navarre and Pierre de Ronsard as paradigms of this dilemma.

[8] Larva derives its English meaning from the insubstantial and immature nature of both a ghost and a mask. The *Oxford English Dictionary* shows that the original English meaning of "a disembodied spirit; a ghost, hobgoblin, spectre" came to be applied figuratively to describe the immature stages of animals, especially insects, when transformation or metamorphosis is involved in the attainment of the adult form. The *O.E.D.* further explains, preceding its citations of the word:

> In the first quot. the word is used in a general sense = 'mask', 'guise': the technical restricted use is due to Linnaeus. In the larva the perfect form, or *imago*, of the insect is unrecognizable (p. 1573).

Our use of the term "larva", will follow this precedent, and evoke the insubstantiality (ghost), provisionality (mask), as well as the immaturity implied by the entomological usage.

itself in/on a mirror stage (in both senses of the word). It is the ghost in a machine of its own invention, in which it imagines itself metamorphosed to an illusory maturity and plenitude. The only possible true meaning to be gleaned from the "insigne fable et tragicque comedie"[9] of the *larva larvata*[10] and *larva larvosa*[11] is the revelation of the emptiness of the *copia* generated by human desire and fear; for when one ceases to mirror the *Logos*, one mirrors its absence. Opposed to the empty plenitude of desire and fear is the true generative principle and *copia* of God's Love, or *caritas*, perceptible to man through the Incarnation. The Incarnation is not the end of human mutability and distortion; however, it permits man to banish the goblins of fear and desire and to reflect through his masks their investment with Love.

Nowhere is this freedom from fear and desire more energetically enacted than in the work of Rabelais. Rabelais' novels, in their multi-dimensional scope, reflect the masks by means of which the texts reflect and enact the "mommeries" of the world and language. The dizzying multiplicity of the novels' refractions powerfully and disarmingly evokes, mimes, mocks and unravels the *copia* of the world, all the while

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[9] In the "Prologue" to the *Tiers Livre*, Rabelais, in a passage full of ironies conveyed by dazzling inversions and contorsions of words, their meanings and etymologies, speaks of his shame,

> plus que mediocre estre veu spectateur ocieux de tant de vaillans, divers et chevalereux personnaiges, qui en veue et spectacle de toute Europe jouent ceste insigne faible et tragicque comedie (398).

[10] *Larvatus*, as we have mentioned, means "distracted, mad, out of one's wits, *as it were* frightened by ghosts" (Leverett). Thus, the *larva larvatus* would be the mask, worm, or ghost, who is mad, distracted, frightened (or all three) by phantoms.

[11] *Larvosa* means "frightening" (Leverett). Thus *larva larvosa* would imply the mask, ghost, or worm that frightens, or is frightening.

presenting an alternative mirror image, perceptible, beckoning, though still just beyond reach, of an existence informed with *caritas*.

In the Prologue to the *Tiers Livre*, the author verbally transforms his text into a "*tonneau*", or wine-barrel, from which he invites his reader to drink his fill, for it will never be empty.

> Ainsi demeurera le tonneau inexpuisible. Il a source vive et vene perpetuelle. Tel estoit le brevaige contenu dedans la couppe de Tantalus representé par figure entre les saiges Brachmanes (402).

Tantalus, of course, is condemned to thirst endlessly, only to have the water he craves trickle away every time he brings it to his parched lips; he is the figure itself of satisfaction seemingly within reach, but infinitely deferred. One finds similar figures of plenitude beyond reach throughout Rabelais' *oeuvre*. If we return to Gargantua's letter to Pantagruel we will recall his evocation of an ultimate perfection, beyond mutability. However, with the endless transformations of human existence he expresses his wishes for his son's perfection which he has already placed out of reach by recognizing its deferral beyond the mutations of temporal existence.

> mais ainsi te y ay je secouru comme si je n'eusse aultre thesor en ce monde que de te veoir une foys en ma vie absolu et parfaict, tant en vertu, honesteté et preudhommie, comme en tout sçavoir liberal et honeste, et tel te laisser après ma mort comme un mirouoir representant la personne de moy ton pere, et sinon tant excellent et tel de faict comme je te souhaite, certes bien tel en desir (258) [my emphasis].

Gargantua notes the goal and its unattainability. In previous chapters we have seen that the desire for and unattainability of an absolute goal has been the source of frustration for poets like Marguerite and Ronsard. In Rabelais' text, however, the exposition of desire and the acceptance of a seemingly infinite deferral of its satisfaction, seem themselves devoid of desire and therefore free of frustration. Rabelais conveys an optimism that rarely flags[12], and which is attributable to his faith, born of Love ("*foy formée de charité*" [*Pantagruel*, 262]), that the deferral of the infinite is finite. The fact that the finite world attempts to reach infinity through a Babelian piling up of the finite is, for Rabelais, essentially comical.[13] Hence his endless lists, the Borgesian library of Saint-Victor which proliferates endlessly and absurdly; hence Panurge's ridiculous and demeaning quests for absolutes that are pursued for the most venial of reasons in the most meaningless ways. Rabelais' presentation of these "tragicque comedies" does more than unmask the goblins of desire and fear behind these spectacles; it reinvests human energy with a tangible source and attainable *telos*, that of charity. Thus, when Gargantua expresses his desire to his son that "*rien ne te soit incogneu*", or that he become "*un abysme de science*"

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[12] Two notable exceptions are Gargantua's sigh after reading the "Enigme en prophetie" (*Gargantua,* ch. 58, 209), and Pantagruel's melancholy after passing the ship bound for the "*concile de Chesil*" (*Quart Livre*, 93). Gargantua's sigh is followed by Frère Jean's ludic interpretation of the enigma as describing a tennis match, while Pantagruel abandons his unhappy contemplation to engage the storm that threatens his fleet.

[13] For a stimulating discussion of Rabelais' "historical optimism" and his rewriting of the "biblical myths" of Enoch, Job and Babel, see chapter 6 of David Quint's *Origin and Originality....*

(*Pantagruel*, 261), he is not proposing a Renaissance version of Nietzsche's "Socratic illusion". The very word "*abysme*" implies recognition of the boundlessness of knowledge. Yet neither Gargantua nor Pantagruel give evidence of a frustrated *libido sciendi*. Gargantua warns his son, in the very same letter, against "*science sans conscience*" (261-2), suggesting a *science* that must inform and be consubstantial with science, a knowing that is "*foy formée de charité*" (262). The fact that Gargantua's wishes for perfection are sent "*De Utopie*" (262), or "no place", also place them beyond the larval desires of a deluded *theatrum mundi*.

Throughout Rabelais' novels one encounters comical reflections of man's desire for knowledge or completion. Devoid of "*conscience*", man's pretensions to intellectual or spiritual fullness are mere farce and masquerade. The endless lists, as we have mentioned, Panurge's superstitious rituals and empty prayers in the *Quart Livre*, the plans of Picrochole's captains for world conquest (*Gargantua*, ch. 33) all reflect the mentality of Babel: a blend of *cuyder*, *philautia*, desire for completion, and fear of the unknown situation of man subject to fate. When Hippothadée answers Panurge's question, "Seray je poinct coqu?" (*Tiers Livre*, ch. 30) with "Nenny dea,[...], si Dieu plaist" (530), Panurge is furious that his fate should be subject to the "conseil privé de Dieu, en la chambre de ses menuz plaisirs!". The totality of a Universe whose completion is far beyond his grasp and to which he is subservient is an inversion of his desire for a universe that exists only to present and complete Panurge's *être*. His protest:

> Où me renvoyez vous, bonnes gens? Aux conditionales les quelles en dialecticque reçoivent toutes contradictions et impossibilitez" (530),

reflects Panurge's sophistication in sophism and rhetoric, here turned back upon himself. Yet, at the same time, his complaint also reflects a truth of which he is unaware, but that can be seen as one of the foundations of both Christian faith and the optimism of humanists such as Erasmus and Rabelais: all contradictions and impossibilities are received by and contained in an ultimately coherent totality. The incompletion of the world that Panurge perceives as frustrating and threatening "conditionales", is, for the good Pantagruelist, the perceptible dynamics of a transcendent, but all-inclusive absolute perceived only "*per speculum in enigmate*".

Thaumaste, like Panurge, seeks a truth free of "conditionales". He affirms to Pantagruel that, unlike the sophists, he seeks not "contradiction et debat", but "verité" (*Pantagruel*, ch. 18).

> Seigneur, aultre chose ne me ameine sinon bon desir de apprendre et sçavoir ce dont j'ay doubté toute ma vie, et n'ay trouvé ny livre ny homme qui me ayt contenté en la resolution des doubtes que j'ay proposé (318).

Thaumaste proposes that the discussion be conducted

> par signes seulement, sans parler, car les matieres sont tant ardues que les parolles humaines ne seroyent suffisantes à les expliquer à mon plaisir (314).

Thaumaste, then, through his encounter with Pantagruel, hopes to satisfy his desire for a knowledge that will resolve all question, content all curiosity, and banish all doubt. His visit to Pantagruel is his version of a voyage to La Dive Bouteille, and this quest, too, is full of ironies. To assuage his thirst for knowledge and certitude, Thaumaste consults Pantagruel, the daemon of thirst, contact with whom leaves one "tout alteré". Pantagruel offers not satisfaction, but thirst; he offers not an end to the "transmutations continues" of a protean world that defies the human desire to identify and thereby possess it, but rather "alteration", which implies mutation as well as thirst.[14] Pantagruel agrees to Thaumaste's proposed "disputation":

> nous confererons de tes doubtes ensemble, et en chercherons la resolution jusques au fond du puis inexpuisable auquel disoit Heraclite estre la verité cachée (315) [my emphasis].

The "puis inexpuisable" of knowledge wherein truth is concealed ("*cachée*") recalls Gargantua's desire that his son become "un abysme de science" (*Pantagruel*,261), as well as the textual "tonneau inexpuisible" evoked in the prologue to the *Tiers Livre*. The end-point of total knowledge beyond the vicissitudes of an unfinished world remains "cachée" "au fond du puis inexpuisable". Pantagruel, in accepting Thaumaste's proposal, promises no resolution of the Englishman's doubts, but rather a quest ("nous chercherons") towards a hidden endpoint ("la verité").

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[14] Cotgrave gives these meanings: "to alter, change, varie, turn from what it was," as well as those pertaining to thirst. Huguet (*Dictionnaire de la langue française du 16e siècle*) gives these definitions: "modifier...; émouvoir, affecter, troubler." The reflexive *s'alterer*, according to Huguet, is defined as "se transformer, se changer."

Knowledge of truth, then, remains an unattainable *telos*, the quest for which is infinite and unending, for the abyss is, by its very definition, bottomless. Yet the bottomless pit, or "abysme" in which the truth is hidden is also a well, a source of water, reminiscent of Folly's pauline fountain. Pantagruel, who inspires unquenchable thirst, is to become an abyss of knowledge, that is, one whose life testifies to the value of the quest and to the necessity of thirst. For the thirst and quests inspired and accompanied by Pantagruel (those of the *Tiers Livre* and *Quart Livre*) do not serve to trace or figure the phantoms of desire. Rather, they manifest the principle of plenitude that informs, however tantalizingly, human existence.

Truth is unreachable, yet it is hidden in a source of inexhaustable plenitude. The necessity of the paradox becomes obvious when one inverts it: if truth is attainable, then the well must be exhaustable. Such an inversion reflects the sterility of the human desire for completion, versus the plenitude of an unceasingly generative world, nourished by divine sources, complete as no finite completion could be. Therefore, man's thirst, paradoxically, becomes a celebration of the world's fullness, rather than a sign of its emptiness. The plenitude of *caritas*, the Divine Love which underlies and nourishes the world, is infinite. If, in the view of the Christian humanist, humanity is like Tantalus (evoked, as we mentioned, in the Prologue to the *Tiers Livre*), then the Incarnation has allowed the water for which he yearns to reach his lips. He will continue to thirst for it endlessly, but he is also free to drink of it eternally, and he can rejoice that the Source will never run dry.

In the theater of Folly, however, men prefer to seek an end to thirst. Spiritual thirst gives way to desire for satiation. Thaumaste wished to discuss his doubts with Pantagruel, but instead he has confronted Panurge, whom he considers to be Pantagruel's disciple. Panurge, we will contend, is more like a distorting or inverting reflection of Pantagruel and his philosophy than a true disciple. In *Pantagruel*, Panurge, it could be argued, is a Folly-like mirror of all he encounters. Panurge, the seeker of certitude, servant of desire encounters Thaumaste, whose *libido sciendi* leads him to seek an end to all doubts. Thaumaste, doubting the capacity of words to convey the truth he hopes to possess from his debate, wishes to argue in signs. Panurge, a consummate linguist, able both to conceal what words mean (as in his initial encounter with Pantagruel [*Pantagruel*, ch. 9]), and to reveal what they don't mean[15] expertly exploits Thaumaste's yearning for digestible significance. Desire for a purity of communication that transcends the grossness of words and is a worthy vehicle for the truth he covets, leads Thaumaste to a ludicrous exposition in which he farts, pisses vinegar, and forces those in attendance to hold their noses, for "il se conchioit d'angustie" (322). At the end of the debate, Thaumaste praises Panurge and

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[15] In chapter 19 of *Pantagruel* Panurge justifies stealing from the "bassains des pardons":

> car les pardonnaires me le donnent quand ilz me disent, en presentant les reliques à baiser : *Centuplum accipies*, que pour un denier j'en prene cent... (309).

Thus Panurge's use of the letter of the word of the pardonners (*Centuplum accipies*) against them is a reflection of the pardonners own appropriation of the letter to deform the spirit when they cite Scripture (Matthew, XIX, 29) in selling their wares: the dry (and probably inauthentic) bones that attempt to reify, in the name of greed, the sanctity and charity of a saint.

Pantagruel, believing that he has satisfied his desire to learn. Yet his thirst is greater than ever. Describing Thaumaste's post-game drinking bout with Pantagruel and his company, Alcofribas explains their copious swilling:

> Il n'y eut celluy qui ne beust vingt cinq ou trente et sçavez comment? *Sicut terra sine aqua*, car il faisoit chault; et dadvantaige, se estoyent alterez (326).

While profane appropriation of Scripture is frequently employed as a comic device in Rabelais' books,[16] the reference to the psalm (143,6) in this context may not be totally gratuitous. For the thirst of he, desperate and fearful, who wanders over a dry and barren land devoid of water, is not the same as that of the Pantagruelist whose thirst is a joy, not a curse, as he drinks freely and without fear from an eternal source. Because the water of life springs eternal and endless, the insatiable thirst of one who drinks there is not a cause for frustration or anxiety, but rather an invitation to be nourished. However, the anxiety of a Thaumaste or Panurge (in the Third and

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[16] In chapter 2 we discussed Marguerite's use of contrafacta, that is, the appropriation of profane, often coarse or vulgar, popular songs which she reconstitutes as hymns of praise and love for God. She thereby invests an empty letter with the plenitude of the divine Spirit. Rabelais, one might say, employs a similar, but double-hinged inversion of this strategy. His apparently blasphemous appropriation of Scripture for comical use in a profane context is often shocking (thirsty drunkards at the tripe picnic preceding Gargantua's birth, for example, cry "Sitio" - "I thirst" - the last words of crucified Christ.) Upon further reflection, however, one realizes that such passages hold a mirror to the linguistic mask by which the Spirit is conveyed. The dependency on language as an insufficient tool for the conveyance of divine truth is, as we have seen, the basis of much anxiety. For Rabelais, however, it is not threatening, but comical. This dynamic folds back upon itself in situations, like that discussed in footnote 5, in which Panurge mirrors the bankruptcy of the letter covered with a false mask of spirit, covering the caritas of the divine word, not only with a liguistic mask, but also with one of cupidity and philautia.

Fourth Books) interprets thirst as the sign of a barren land. Thaumaste, after the debate, believes he has attained his Dive Bouteille which will satisfy his lust to possess truth. And so he will describe his debate with Panurge "et signification des signes desquelz ils userent en disputant" (a significance that Thaumaste obviously "discovers" in the manner of Frère Lubin) in a great book "auquel il declaire tout sans rien laisser" (326). He will attempt to write all, leaving nothing out, and represent in words what was never spoken, an illusory completeness that is nothing but a mocking image of his unsatisfied and unsatisfiable desire.

The search for universal completion by human accretion is both parodied and explored throughout Rabelais' work. An example of parody can be found in young Gargantua's quest for the perfect "torche-cul" (*Gargantua*, ch. 13). Young Gargantua describes exhaustively to his father the "longue et curieuse experience" by which he has "inventé un moyen de me torcher le cul, le plus seigneurial, le plus excellent, le plus expedient que jamais feut veu" (55). He has wiped himself with objects, likely and unlikely, the list of which covers over three pages. The object of such an extensive experiment is to exhaust the realm of possibility, to assure oneself that there is no possibility that has escaped one's grasp in the attempt to banish doubt. In this case, the precocity of the young Gargantua, the good-humored benevolence of Grandgousier, and the extravagant absurdity of the goal of the quest mirror and expose man's Babelian pretensions with a carnivalesque guffaw. In the middle of his "exposé", Gargantua and his father get side-tracked in scatological rhyming. Grandgousier wants to get back to Gargantua's experiment:

- Retournons (dist Grandgousier) à nostre propos.

- Quel? (dist Gargantua) chier?

- Non (dist Grandgousier), mais torcher le cul (55). At this point, Gargantua employs logic to prove that one cannot approach the problem of "torcher le cul" without first dealing with that of "chier" (56).[17] Having logically linked his search for completion through accretion to excretion, Gargantua continues with his list of objects excluded, by his experiment, from the possibility of being the perfect implement of anal application. He is so convinced of the absolute truth of his conclusion - that a downy gosling is the supreme "torche-cul" - that he asserts his belief (seconded by the great systematizer, Duns Scotus) that the "heroes et semi dieux qui sont par les Champs Elysiens" also wipe their butts with "un oyzon" (59).

Gargantua's parody of the quest for the absolute can be seen as a precocious but puerile imitation of the world around him. He is but a child, and one expects that when he becomes a man he will, true to his Pauline motto, put aside such childish ways. Panurge's search, which forms the core of the *Tiers Livre*, is more earnest, though not less comical. However, while Gargantua's ingenuousness directs our laughter in the episode of the "torche-cul" of the gods, in the *Tiers Livre* Panurge the disingenuous, as dupe of his own selfishness and anxiety, is the butt of our laughter.

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[17] Of course, in so doing, Gargantua reveals the gaping hole adjacent to "perfection": everything is interconnected, and thus incomplete. No particular aspect of existence can be "perfected" or attain perfection independently of the whole of existence. The quest for perfection, then, following the chain of particulars, mirrors the protean aspect of the unfinished perceptible world, full of "transmutations continues".

One should not infer from these passages that Rabelais wishes to mock man's thirst for perfection. The exhortation to thirst to be perfect comes from Paul (Philippians). Rabelais does not belittle the spiritual thirst for perfection that invests the world while transcending the world. Rabelais reveals the incoherency of a desire to reach perfection and coherence through the accumulation of the finite (masks, empty letters, cast off forms of a protean dynamic are but some of the metaphors we have encountered and employed), or the systematic eradication of possibility, rather than through an appreciation of the Spirit. That is not to say that a spiritual quest brings one to the threshold of the hour, evoked by Gargantua, when "la paix tant desirée sera consumée et parfaicte, et que toutes choses seront reduites à leur fin et periode" (*Pantagruel*, ch. 8, 257). Rabelais does not encounter the same dilemma as Marguerite.[18] The more man drinks at the divine font, the greater his thirst. The thirst for the Spirit, however, nourishes one with *caritas*, unlike the venial desires that distort love with cupidity and fear. One nourished by the Spirit grows endlessly towards the ultimate metamorphosis. Bursting skin after skin as he grows, man cannot, as larva, be that towards which he is growing, when all things will have reached "leur fin et periode" (257). The penultimate chapters of both *Gargantua* and the *Tiers Livre* both recount the imaginary attainment of human perfection. In the absence of human

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[18] Rabelais dedicates the Tiers Livre to Marguerite, inviting the

> Esprit abstraict, ravy, et ecstatic,
> Qui frequentant les cieulx, ton origine,

to return to earth to "ça bas veoir une tierce partie/ Des faictz joyeux du bon Pantagruel" (TL, 391).

perfectability, though, both episodes are obliged to recycle their serious inquiries with jokes and laughter.

Theleme, the name of the abbey founded by Gargantua for Frère Jean after the Picrocholine War, signifies "will". For Pierre Jourda, and many other readers, "L'abbaye de Thélème sera celle de la libre volonté" (*Gargantua*, 189, note 1). Per Nykrog, on the other hand, links the abbey's famous motto, "Fay ce que vouldras" (Do what you will), to "fiat voluntas tuas" (Thy will be done). The fact that the two are not identical, that the individual and Divine, or Universal Will are not one, confirms that Theleme cannot be a locus of earthly perfection. If anything, Theleme corroborates the Rabelaisian insistence that "earthly perfection" is an oxymoron, a theater of *môria* and
delusion.

Theleme is situated in the middle of Grandgousier's kingdom of Utopie, that is to say, no place. There is a temporal shift in the description of the abbey. At the end of the war, the abbey is yet to be built. The narrative describing its organization continues, normally enough, in the past tense (imperfect).[19] As the narrative continues, however, the abbey seems to fade farther and farther into the past until, with the discovery of the "*Enigme en prophetie*" "qui fut trouvé aux fondements de l'abbaye" (ch. 52, 205), Theleme has become, in Richard Helgerson's words, "an

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[19] François Rigolot, in *Les Languages de Rabelais*, notes that, "Les verbes sont soit au futur (style indirect), soit au conditionnel et au subjonctif (style indirect)" (81). Also see André Tournon, "L'Abbé de Thélème," 201-2 on the change in verb tenses in this passage.

object of archaeological excavation"[20]. Drifting between a future and past that never attain presence, established in a locus infinitely deferred, the abbey's temporal and spatial situations are equally ambiguous and dreamlike. There are no walls at Theleme; no circumscriptions, temporal or spatial, that could impede the freedom of will of its inhabitants.

We return here to the nature of the will implied in the motto, "Fay ce que vouldras". For the individual will is a circumscription, a separation, ever since Eden, from the Divine Will. The individual will could be seen as analogous to the individual languages spawned at Babel, and the Divine Will as analogous to the single originary tongue spoken by all before that presumptuous expression of human will.[21] The thirst to be perfect, to be one with God and His Will, is barbarized by the individual will and becomes selfish desire. Hence, at Babel, men seek to overthrow the heavens by force of their own will, rather than by identification with the Divine Will. The thirst to be perfect gives way to the desire for circumscription that will assure the eternal presence of the self and a universe that will reflect, if not satisfy, its desire for absolute being.

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[20] See Richard Helgerson, "Inventing Noplace; or the Power of Negative Thinking" in *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, 111. See also Kaiser's Praisers of Folly (105), and Cave, Cornucopian Text, 180, note 17.

[21] As such, Babel finds its reversed mirror image in Pentecost, when the Spirit inspired the Apostles, who spoke a common language, to speak in a various foreign tongues. However, filled with the Spirit, the Apostles still understand one another, even as they converse in the strange tongues of those to whom they will bring the Gospel - the letter as vessel of the Spirit.

The first thing one sees at Theleme, after entering the door, is a magnificent fountain of alabaster:

> au dessus les troys Graces, avecques cornes d'abondance, et gettoient l'eau par les mamelles, bouche, aureilles, yeulx, et aultres ouvertures du corps (Ch. 55, 198).

The three Graces evidently represent abundance, as water gushes from a cornucopia, as well as their breasts, eyes, ears, mouth, and other orifices. Thus they seem to encourage one to drink of an overflowing plenitude that never runs dry. Yet the fountain is only a representation of true abundance, the Graces only a sculpture, and the water that bursts from their chanelled forms neither flows eternally nor conveys eternal life. The description resembles that of a monument from antiquity. The main point, however, is that the fountain, and its abundance, are artificial, like so much of Theleme. In each chamber of the abbey,

> estoit un miroir de christallin, enchassé en or fin, au tour garny de perles, et estoit de telle grandeur qu'il pouvoit veritablement representer toute la personne (199).

The mirrors represent the wholeness of the individual, an image of completeness, just as the abbey represents an imaginary common weal and common will that appear to be one and the same.[22]

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[22] See especially chapters 56 and 57, which describe the universal acceptance, in Theleme, of one another's suggestions on courses of action in any situation, be it how to dress, the choice of passtimes, etc.

The word "*arbitre*", even when linked with the adjective "*franc*", seems redolent of *arbitraire* (arbitrary) in this chapter. For it is by mere chance - or the result of Divine Will - that one should be well-born or well-bred enough to join the elect of Theleme. The door, that adjoins no walls, to the *locus amoenis* free of all circumscription, bears an inscription. It is an inscription of prescription that bars its door to the greater part of those who people the world and Rabelais' books, including the "verollez", to whom *Gargantua* is dedicated.[23] This policy of exclusion recalls Richard Helgerson's reminder that man seeking what he perceives as "perfection", through the destruction of what he perceives as "imperfection" (as in the "perfect bomb", the "perfect" or "final solution", for example), must eventually destroy everything. For human perceptions of perfection are arbitrary and constantly shifting. Pantagruel, we should note, is enormously tolerant of Panurge's glaring imperfections throughout Rabelais' books.

In Theleme, perfection seems to be the end of desire; desire seems subsumed in the freed will, *arbitre franchi*, or the will freed from the constraints of self. The negations, inversions and exclusions of Theleme present a silent, dreamlike image. Indeed, François Rigolot calls Theleme a silent place, noting that the chapters describing the abbey contain no dialogue, and that the speaking characters one has encountered throughout the book are here absent (*Les Languages de Rabelais*, 94-5). This silent vision of earthly wholeness follows, it should be remembered, the

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[23] "Beuveurs tres illustres, et vous, Verolez tres precieux, - car à vous, non à aultres, sont dediez mes escriptz, ... (*Gargantua*, "Prologe de l'auteur", 5).

Picrocholine War. That conflict pitted Gargantua, whose motto is the famous description of *caritas*, "La charité ne cherche pas son propre avantage" (I Corinthians, 13; *Gargantua*, ch.8, 38), against Picrochole and his captain, Toucquedillon, whose motto is "oignez villain, il vous poindra; poignez villain, il vous oindra" (ch. 32, 123). Gargantua has triumphed in the name of *caritas*, but only through force of arms. The desire for completion, that is the universality of will(s), represented in the Abbaye de Theleme, is, ultimately, the desire for an end to desire, for desire only exists within the walls of self. Love, *caritas*, is the end of desire: "Love seeks not after its own." But desire cannot be obliterated in this world; it must be reinvested as a thirst for the quest to be perfect, a quest invested with love. *Caritas* is a love that matures and ripens from within throughout the seemingly endless metamorphosis of forms that it animates. *Caritas* negates, and is distorted by, the unappeasable lust for satiety through possession and accumulation. But *caritas* in the humanist's view is meant to inform man's actions, not put an end to them. The world invested with the Spirit and Love is not the means to an end, but means as a reflection of its end. The world, for Rabelais, is process, and therefore cannot be complete until it is no longer the world.

Gargantua's emblem of the "androgyne" (ch.8, 38), is another image of human completion. Yet it is a completion that, especially as described by Alcofribas, seems monstruous:

> un corps humain ayant deux testes, l'une virée vers l'autre, quatre bras, quatre piedz et deux culz".

Such a creature would seem monstrous to this world, akin to the wretch(es) described by Montaigne in "D'un enfant monstrueux" (II,30). Yet both the desire for completion, and its monstrous failure are recycled, if you will, by the injunctions to charity and to laughter. The description of the "androgyne" ends with the rhypological humor of imagining mankind as possessed of "deux culz" "à son commencement mystic" - an inversion of the metaphysical yearning for union and closure in a divine origin reflected from a world of fragments and process. The entire image is encompassed by Paul's description of *caritas* as antithetical to selfish desire. The episode of Theleme concludes with an "Enigme en prophetie", whose sobering implications of the world's apocalyptic completion are defused and reintegrated into what one might call the Bakhtinian cycles of continuity and regeneration, by fellowship, jokes and laughter.

The enigma is found "aux fondemens de l'abbaye" (ch. 57, 205), which can suggest that it was found in the ruins of the abbey, or that it was part of the foundation upon which the abbey was built, or both.[24] The enigma is addressed to "Pauvres humains qui bon heur attendez" - poor human being who wait for, or expect happiness - (the bliss of the final hour evoked in Gargantua's letter?). The enigma foretells the emergence of a kind of man, unhappy with rest and tranquillity, who will bring strife to the world:

{...} en ce lieu où nous sommes

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[24] One might also surmise that the abbey is built upon the ruins of a previous structure, those ruins serving as the foundation for the new structure of Theleme.

Il sortira une maniere d'hommes

Las du repoz et faschez du sejour

Qui franchement iront, et de plein jour,

Subourner gens de toutes qualitez

A different et partialitez (ch. 58, 206).

The poem continues with a delineation of the conflicts to follow. The opposition with Theleme's unanimity of will, complétion, silence, and tranquillity, could not be more stark; yet the prophecy specifies, "en ce lieu où nous sommes", the place where we are, Theleme. Theleme is founded upon the discord that will (or has already) apparently put an end to its "repoz" and "sejour". The conflicting wills of selfish men, which the Thelemites wished to subsume in charitable unanimity, subvert all order, including the docile concord of Theleme:

Car ilz diront que chascun à son tour

Doibt aller hault et puis faire retour,

Et sur ce poinct aura tant de meslées,

Tant de discordz, venues et allées, (206).

The young and brave, as opposed to those described in Theleme, will die in the flower of youth, pricked by their youthful fire and desire:

Lors se verra maint homme de valeur,

Par l'esguillon de jeunesse et chaleur

Et croire trop ce fervent appetit,

Mourir en fleur et vivre bien petit (206).

Folly will reign, as men without faith will have the same authority as "gens de verité;

Car tous syvront la creance et estude

De l'ignorante et sotte multitude, (207).

The descriptions of the folly, violence, and selfish willfullness of men continue, and are too lengthy to be cited here. They are followed by elemental cataclysms, and

Lors sera près le temps bon et propice

De mettre fin à ce long exercice:

flood and fire bring all to final term (208). All, at this final hour (which recalls that evoked in Gargantua's letter) will receive their just desserts

[...]de tous biens et de manne celeste,

et d'abondant par recompense honeste

Enrichi soient; les aultres en la fin

Soient denuez (208).

The concluding lines attribute every fate to the fact that

Un chascun ayt son sort predestiné,

Tel feut l'accord. O qu'est à reverer

Cil qui en fin pourra perseverer! (208).

Theleme has been superceded and erased by the folly, violence, and selfishness that preceded it. One might say that Theleme, seeking to transcend and put an end to human activity bereft of the Spirit, is founded upon the fallen world in an echo of the notion of *felix culpa* - the "happy fall" that permits the Incarnation. But Theleme is a product of men, and it is beyond the power of man, for good or for ill, to bring the

world to completion. The cyclical nature of existence is evoked in the enigma, as well as the paradoxes enfolded, but never resolved, by the perpetual inversions of "ce long exercice". Gargantua sighs deeply after reading the poem. One supposes that he and his companions have just laid the foundation of the abbey, or are inspecting the newly completed edifice. Yet, in this very beginning there is an inescapable finality, reinforced by the emphasis on predestination in the poem's last lines. Gargantua's mood seems more suitable to a sifting through the ruins of a razed Theleme than to the inauguration of the community of concord and freedom. His only solace seems to come from the fact that "Dieu, par son cher Filz, nous a prefix". As it is written in the conclusion of the Enigma, happy is he who can persevere.

Frère Jean asks Gargantua how he interprets the enigma. As divine truth, Gargantua answers. The reader of Rabelais, as we have seen, should be on his guard when confronted with texts claiming divine authority. Rabelais' narrators, to say nothing of his characters, tend to proclaim most vociferously the verity of the most comically extravagant claims. In this case, again, comedy defuses the earnest claim of having swallowed the world whole, digested and incorporated it. For Frère Jean gives his interpretation of the enigma, that it is "une description du jeu de paulme soubz obscures paroles" (209). The monk's statement, which explodes the pretenses of arcane interpretations of a tragic human existence, nonetheless suggests multiple significations itself.

First of all, Frère Jean's statement makes us laugh. And that laughter dissipates the fear and gloom that had accrued around the apparently inevitable

tragedies foretold by the prophecy. The prophecy, we seem to have forgotten, is an enigma. We readers, always so avid to capture the truth, now laugh with relief at the possibility that a "truth" we believed to possess, but the possession of which was grim, is not true after all. We are reminded that it is "rire", or laughter, that is "le propre de l'homme", not possession of truth.[25] In fact, what seems to be a comically naive suggestion, is in fact true. The poem, by Mellin de Saint-Gelais (whose style the monk has recognized), does in fact describe a tennis game.[26] We find it curious and comical that a dire account of the ways and end of the world could be confused with a tennis game. The confusion reinforces the notion of life as a ludic enterprise, a game, a theater: a temporal and spatial fixity (as opposed to the timeless and placeless Theleme) formed and animated and endlessly transformed by the energy of life (as opposed to Theleme's sedately unchanging mask of completion). The ludic locus is bounded by temporal, spatial, and arbitrarily conventional limits (as opposed to the absence of walls at Theleme). The stage and the playing field are places of agonistic struggle (as opposed to the Thelemic unanimity of will), but the significance of what takes place in the ludic locus, because of its circumscription, is limited. The multiplicity of endpoints, through the continuous repetition of ludic activity devalorizes the absolute quality of any circumscribed *telos*, and the consequences are enfolded in process which implicitly recognizes that a true end has no end. The

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[25] See Cave, *Cornucopian Text*, 163.

[26] See Jourda, ed. *Gargantua* (209, note 3), and Screech, ed. *Gargantua*, 306-14, notes.

Tiers Livre, too, concludes with an enigmatic prophecy of mankind's future, followed by a joke. The unstable peace of Theleme is destroyed by the restlessness of men. At the end of the *Tiers Livre* this restlessness is harnessed by the plant pantagruelion, after Pantagruel, inventor of "un certain usaige" of the plant, which is to make rope from it (ch. 51, 609). Theleme was an expression of the desire for the union of the individual will in the universal will. Pantagruelion is both the product and the agent of union and composition. Pantagruelion is derived from the hemp plant, a plant that, unlike most plants, is either male or female. Plants of both sexes, both flowering and non-flowering, are necessary for the plant to regenerate. The fibers of the plant, twisted together, fused and bound, serve to make rope. The preparation of the rope is compared to the

> passe temps des trois soeurs Parces, de l'esbatement nocturne de la noble Circé et de la longue excuse de Penelope envers ses muguetz amoureux, pendant l'absence de son mary Ulyxes (ch. 50, 606).

The *Parques*, or Fates, spin, measure and cut, determining the substance and limits of each individual existence. Circe, in the darkness of night, fabricates illusion, while Penelope unravels in the night what she has woven during the day, endlessly deferring a *telos* that she dreads. If pantagruelion is born of these activities, its varied usages reflect, in turn, its own multivalent genesis. The life of the "larron" reaches its terminus at the end of a rope. The rope closes the criminal's passages of nourishment and expression ("les conduitz par les quelz sortent les bons mots et entrent les bons morseaulx"). The hanged man complains that Pantagruel has him by the throat (610),

as if Pantagruel were his executioner. But the confusion of the inventor with his invention is the result of speaking "par figure synecdochique", that is taking a part for the whole. Pantagruelion is an agent of man's energy; man chooses its function. Those who find the point where "Atropos leurs couppoit le filet de vie" (610), are altered by their own actions, rather than by the thirst inspired by "le noble Pantagruel".

Pantagruelion, itself a composite and product of fused particulars, in turn serves to bind, link, connect and transform the world in everyday life, even lowering the dead into their graves (611-2). "Icelle herbe moyenante, les substances invisibles visiblement sont arrestées, prinses detenues et comme en prison mises" (612). The plant allows people to discover nature's properties and exploit them according to their own inventions. In this way humankind has explored the world (613). The continuously expanding realm of man's exploration and invention has threatened the gods and they express their alarm and their impotence:

> «Pantagruel nous a mis en pensement nouveau et tedieux, plus que oncques ne feirent les Aloides, par l'usaige et vertus de son herbe. Il sera brief marié, de sa femme aura enfans. A ceste destinée ne povons nous contrevenir, car elle est passée par les mains et fuseaulx des soeurs fatales, filles de Necessité. Par ses enfans (peut estre) sera inventée herbe de semblable energie, moyennant laquelle pourront les humains visiter les sources des gresles, les bondes des pluyes et l'officine des fouldres, pourront envahir les regions de la Lune, entrer le territoire des signes celestes et là prendre logis, les uns à l'aigle d'or,

> les aultres au Mouton, les aultres à la couronne, les aultres à la Herpe, les aultres au Lion d'argent, sasseoir à table avec nous, et nos déesses prendre à femmes, qui sont les seulz moyens d'estre déifiez (613-4).

The implication that by harnessing their energy and inventiveness, human beings will scale the heavens contrasts with the destructive energy described in the "Enigme en prophetie", at the same time that it recalls the audacity of Babel. Yet this is an "informed" audacity, an exercise in which the means are powerless without a pantagrueline investment. The heavens attained by humankind are those of its own invention, of the gods of mythology. These gods are powerless before the dictates of fate, to which they, too, are subject. Man, married to the daughters of his own inventions, the gods, does not challenge his submission to the Universal Will; man reaching the heavens, mingling with the gods of his own invention, turns the constellations into taverns. However, if humanity's attainment of its own highest imaginative powers is mirrored and masked in the guise of gods, then the fears of the gods, as well as the fate they foretell, are also human inventions, and therefore suspect. And why not, since the whole sequence emphasizes its own fanciful composition by humorously transforming the constellations into public houses? Here, as in Gargantua's letter to Pantagruel, the enterprise of harnessing human energy in a positive manner, of investing *science* with *conscience*, is encouraged. And, once again, the ultimate goal of the endeavor terminates in a paradox that suggests that the *telos* is unattainable in any systematic manner. If humankind's "deification" to the level of the Olympian gods is the realization of its highest faculties (which humans

have conferred upon their divine creations), then humanity reaches the heavens from within itself. Likewise, the wisdom encouraged by Gargantua, would engage his son, not in a Thaumastian search for an endpoint of knowledge, but rather implies that truth itself is a process, and that external engagement must be invested with internal growth. The concept of *caritas* is a paradigm of the rabelaisian *telos*. *Caritas*, as the investment by the Holy Spirit, places the divine within human beings, rather than beyond them. Human expansion, to be productive, must seek to realize the force within the individual that transcends the limits of self. Attempts to attain the absolute by conquest of the exterior world, while the interior remains a void, are ridiculous and doomed to failure, and Rabelais often makes such endeavors the butt of his jokes. The worthwhile engagement of human energy in the physical world is, as the pantagruelion episode suggests, a process of linking and binding, carried out, infinitely, by an agent of linking and binding, itself a product of composition and fusion.

We began this chapter with a quote from Erasmus, comparing his use of Folly as a mask to Socrates' use of a mask in order to sing the praises of love. Socrates, the silenus, is himself one of the figures to whom Alcofribas, another mask, compares his text.[27] Socrates' inner beauty is covered by an ugly and ridiculous covering - a grotesque *persona* taken as real by a foolish world oblivious to the truth behind Socrates' exterior. Socrates, himself, dons yet another mask in order to sing of love.

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[27] See the Prologue to *Gargantua*, 5-6, and the *Adages* of Erasmus, *Sileni Alcibiadis*, III, 2, 1.

Erasmus, likewise, uses Folly as a mask-mirror to reveal to the world its folly and open its eyes to the divine "folly" of *caritas*, or Love. Rabelais adopts and invents a plethora of masks in which he plays out the fool and sings of the plenitude of Love and the endless thirst inspired by the empty mask of its mirror image, desire.

Alcofribas, we have noted, serves as a narrative mask in Rabelais' first two books. He enters his narrative frequently in the first person, as Rabelais will do in the Third and Fourth Books. In *Pantagruel*, Alcofribas not only enters the text, but the textual creation of Pantagruel, when he enters the giant's mouth and finds there yet another world.[28] The *mise-en-abîme* he finds within Pantagruel is not just an "abysme de science", but of existence. The implication is that every world contains another, and is contained within another. This also implies that every individual contains a world, as well as being contained within one. This notion is mirrored in a textual context, where the same infinite regression applies to stories and narrators. The rabelaisian text is a verbal theater that reveals the ridiculous aspect of the desire for an absolute straining to be satisfied through accumulation or valorisation of the fragmentary. Desire is itself a manifestation of man's fragmentation, as opposed to the wholeness of *caritas*. *Caritas* seeks not its own, but rather that which transcends self and bonds the fragment of self to the universal. Rabelais' texts evoke the plenitude of the universal by their own fecundity, but they also constantly reveal their own incompleteness. This very emphasis of this incompleteness, however, suggests

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[28] See Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis*, "The World in Pantagruel's Mouth", for an insightful discussion of Rabelais' resistance to closure by means of inversion and renewal.

functions of inversion and paradox. Paradox, in the Rabelaisian text, is rarely frustrating, but more often instructive and regenerative.[29]

Rabelais employs his textual creations as a mask while he exposes the folly of the world and inspires a thirst for the plenitude of *caritas*. His narrative masks often mirror the folly of the world. In *Gargantua*, Alcofribas, who enjoins his readers to penetrate the surface of appearances, constantly protests that he is telling the truth when the outward appearance of his statements are the most outlandish. One, among many examples, is his scholarly citation of ancient texts which attest to long gestations. Alcofribas cites these texts in order to corroborate the "veracity" of his claim that Gargantua's own gestation lasted eleven months.

> Moiennans lesquelles loys, les femmes vefves peuvent franchement jouer du serrecropiere à tous enviz et toutes restes, deux moys après le trespas de leurs mariz.Je vous prie par grace, vous aultres mes bons avrlans, si d'icelles en trouvez que vaillent le desbraguetter, montez dessus et me les amenez (ch. 3, 20).

The conclusion of his argument, that widows may freely copulate for up to two months after the death of their husbands without fear of bearing an illegitimate child, and the subsequent ribaldry of "bring 'em to me!", reinforce the comic nature of the claim to authority and truth. Rabelais, through his narrators and characters, is constantly weaving ruses that he then exposes, like a Penelope deferring the *telos* that

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[29] See Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (11-32), and Colie (34-8; 43-71.)

others would force. As such, the text composed of ruses that reveal themselves, serves as a ludic paradigm and mirror for a world composed of ruses that would make dupes of us all.

Alcofribas adds yet another reflection to the hall of mirrors in his discussion of the meaning of Gargantua's livery (ch. 9-10). In chapter nine, Alcofribas tells the reader that Gargantua's colors were white and blue,

> et par icelles vouloir son pere qu'on entendist que ce luy estoit une joye celeste; car le blanc luy signifioit joye, plaisir, delices et resjouissance, et le bleu choses celestes (40).

He vociferously defends this interpretation of the significance of the two colors, against the common notion that white indicates faith, while blue signifies firmness and loyalty. He berates the credulity of those who draw and sustain their belief from the authority of a book, *Le Blason des couleurs*. "Qui vous meut? Qui vous poinct?", Alcofribas confronts the reader. He cannot decide which is greater, the book's stupidity, or its outrageous presumptuousness.

> son oultrecuidance, qui sans raison, sans cause et sans apparence, a ausé prescripre de son autorité privée quelles choses seroient denotées par les couleurs, ce que est l'usance des tyrans qui voulent leur arbitre tenir lieu de raison, non des saiges et sçavans qui par raisons manifestes contentent les lecteurs;

> sa besterie, qui a existimé que, sans aultres demonstrations et argumens valables, le monde reigleroit ses devises par ses impositions badaudes (40-1).

This is the same Alcofribas who ironically insisted on the veracity of his account of Gargantua's improbable birth by acknowledging the doubts of his readers:

> Je me doubte que ne croyez asseurement ceste estrange nativité. Si ne le croyez, je ne m'en soucie, mais un homme de bien, un homme de bon sens, croit tousjours ce qu'on luy dict et qu'il trouve par escript (ch. 6, 31).[30]

In this last quotation, Alcofribas parodies the same kind of tyrannical claim to authority by the written word as that which he criticizes in chapter 9. But in chapter 10, Alcofribas presents his case for the primacy of his interpretation of the symbolic value of the colors blue and white. He supports his case with citations from ancient philosophers and historians, just as he did in defending the veracity of his patently absurd description of the genesis of Gargantua. Why should we believe Alcofribas

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[30] Alcofribas' irony continues with even more twists in the first edition version, subsequently cut:

> Ne dict pas Solomon Proverviorum 14: «Innocens credit omni verbo, etc.», et Sainct Paül prime Corinthio. 13 : «Charitas omnia credit». Pourquoy ne le croyriez vous? Pour ce (dictes vous) qu'il n'y a nulle apparence. Je vous dictz que pour ceste seule cause vous le debvez croyre en foy parfaicte. Car les Sorbonnistes disent que foy est argument des choses de nulle apparence (Jourda's note 4, p. 31).

Through the distorting mirror of human deception of self and others, the passage reflects the foundations of faith and textual authority. The comic subversion of Alcofribas' own authority compares itself with the mysterious and more profound authority of Scripture, justifying that comparison by citing the Sorbonne's misappropriation of faith to justify its arbitrary will.

now, when it was clear that we were not to believe his claims to textual truth and authority in the previous episode? He seems in earnest now, it is true, while the grin on his face was all too evident before. But the verbal masks of man are not fixed "masques figés", but protean, as Folly has shown us.

In defense of his contention that white signifies joy, Alcofribas makes a reference to Erasmus' *Folly*.

> Car par la clarté sont tous humains esjouiz, comme vous avez le dict d'une vieille femme que n'avoit dens en gueulle, encores disoit elle : *Bona lux* (45).

The reference is to Folly's description of the aged and decrepit, bereft of most of life's accessories, who insist that life is good and grotesquely attempt to look and live like adolescents (*Folly*, 31, 109). Folly recounts the anecdote ironically. Is Alcofribas' apparently serious citation of an ironic passage as proof for his argument meant to reveal the more subtle (in comparison to the birth of Gargantua, for example) irony and subversion inherent in, and revealed by his harangue? Perhaps Alcofribas' grinning mask in his broader parodies conceals yet a subtler aspect of his function as *larva*. The grinning mask proclaims, "I am a mask, do not take me at face value." Because we understand this, we laugh when Alcofribas insists on being taken at face value. However, in his harangue on the significance of colors, the grin disappears. Rabelais' use of his narrative *larva* here is the unmasking of the mask that insists it is not a mask. For the outrage of Alcofribas before the arbitrary and fatuous claims to authority of the authors of *Le Blason des couleurs* in chapter 9, becomes Alcofribas'

own claim to authority in chapter 10. Granted, Alcofribas seems much cleverer than his opponents, but, as Panurge has shown us, cleverness does not further one's claim to truth. Alcofribas, in his earnest defense of his will, plays the part of one duped by his own will, who would do violence to his perception of the universal will in an effort to have it reflect his own.

Alcofribas' argument is undermined, not only by the reference to *Folly*, but also by his own sophistic reasoning and syllogisms, that compare sets of opposites, "good" and "evil", "black" and "white", and "joy" and "sorrow". The result is a classic illustration of the arbitrary manipulation of reason in the form of syllogism (43). Alcofribas summarily dismisses all exceptions to his insistence that white universally symbolizes "joye" and black "dueil" (44). Those nations not conforming to what he terms "*jus gentium*, droict universel, valables par toutes contrées" (44) have (or had) "l'ame de travers".[31] The examples from antiquity are often patently ridiculous:

> Lisez les histoires antiques, tant Grecques que Romaines. Vous trouverez que la ville de Albe (premier patron de Rome) feut et construicte et appellée á l'invention d'une truye blanche (45).

The evocation of the white sow, after taking recourse to rhetoric, scripture, philosophy and history, not only alerts us that Alcofribas is reaching the point of overkill, but also brings back to us the absurdity of the whole argument. Alcofribas'

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[31] The appeal to a "droict universel" and a "droict naturel" (44), recall, for us, Rousseau's desperate search for an ultimate authority in nature for his own perceptions.

point seemed well taken when he derided the arbitrary imposition of significance by force of the written word alone. However, in chapter 10, Alcofribas offers the reader a "better", or at least more baroque, version of the same impulse he has derided. The juridical conclusion to the argument (47) is generally, in Rabelais' book, an unraveling of whatever authority the speaker claims.[32] And, indeed, after this conclusion, which proclaims that all that has preceded is a mask, Alcofribas drops his oratorical pretense - "Icy doncques calleray mes voilles". Having performed for us the ridiculous attempt to prove his authority and truth, he reinforces the arbitrary nature of the will to prove such a point. For behind the veil he has dropped he reveals the persistant desire that his will prevail. He, like Thaumaste, will put all in a book,

> et diray en un mot que le bleu signifie certainement le ciel et choses celestes, par mesmes symboles que le blanc signifioit joye et plaisir (47).

Like Thaumaste, Alcofribas is a seeker ("Abstracteur de Quinte Essence", the title-page tells us). Like the authors of *Le Blason des couleurs*, Alcofribas will insist "tyrannically" upon the unique validity of his interpretation. Unlike them, however, Alcofribas plays out his absurdities as a mask-mirror that reflects and exposes the folly of the world while it reflects and conceals its author's perception and consciousness of

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[32] See especially ch. 18-9, and the harangue of Janotus. Ponocrates, when he sees Janotus and his entourage, "pensoit que feussent quelque masques hors de sens" and refers to their presence as "mommerie" (71). Janotus' juridically and sophistically inept harangue leads Gargantua and his companions to weep with laughter (ch. 19).

that folly. In the *Tiers Livre* and the *Quart Livre*, Rabelais abandons Alcofribas as a narrative mask. Nevertheless, the prologues to both works continue to establish the concealing and reflective aspects of the text. In comparing Rabelais' narrators and prologues as masks, we might compare them, not only with Erasmus' use of Folly, but also with some of the conceptions of masks and ludic function that we have encountered.

A mask, according to Bakhtin, represents, but it also hides, dissimulates and deceives (39-40). Both Folly and Alcofribas hide their authors while representing, in a specular manner, his "soul". We remember Mannoni's observation that the mask's deception is not that it claims to be what it represents; quite the contrary. The wolf mask proclaims that it is a mask and not the "wolf" it represents. Neither Alcofribas, nor Folly, claim to be consubstantial with their author,[33] but play endlessly with their provisional status. Nevertheless, the nature of the mask is duplicitous; it is both a real object in the world and an image of an absent "reality". Folly, in choosing herself as the subject of her oration, endlessly reflects her own duplicitous nature. Alcofribas, though not the subject of his narration, nevertheless reveals his essentially duplicitous nature through his comic claims to truth and in instances such as the episode of the significance of the colors blue and white.

Bakhtin links the mask with the processes of transformation and metamorphosis. The ludic function of the mask belies an empty interior, violating

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[33] We will see, in chapter 5, that Montaigne's goal is to make of his literary mask a textual analogy of the *Logos*. He yearns to make his reflections live and coincide with their authorial source, so that *ratio* is incarnate in the *oratio* of his book.

natural boundaries of being and suggesting an inexhaustible life-force (Bakhtin, 39-40). Johann Huizinga, speaking of the games men invent, notes that, "the very fact that play has a meaning implies a non-materialistic quality in the nature of the thing itself" (*Homo Ludens*, 1). He also notes the ludic functions of both life and literature. He quotes Plato's *Laws* (vii, 803): "Life must be lived as play" (18-9). Huizinga also describes *poeisis* as a play function:

> All antique poetry is at one and the same time ritual, entertainment, artistry, riddle-making, doctrine, persuasion, sorcery, soothsaying, prophecy and competition (19).

Rabelais' prose conforms to this description of ancient poetry because of its extra-ordinary self-consciousness of its dual function of mask and mirror.

We have discussed Gerard Defaux' examination of the specular character of the word in relation to the spirit of its author. We have also seen that, while Erasmus does indeed seek to create a text as mirror of the mind and soul, he also employs the text as larva, mask or puppet. The idea of text as a mirror of its author, we remember, is analogous to the Christian tradition that posits the *Logos* as a reflection and image that is consubstantial with the complete Being of the Father. The idea of text as mask or puppet also can be seen as embodying a divine analogy. Before God, writes Martin Luther, human existence "is nothing but dissimulation, masquerade, and

mummery." Luther also calls the world God's carnival.[34] Humankind serves, then, as *larva* for God, a mirror-mask behind which the Divinity can "play the fool" in the *theatrum mundi*. Humankind, as mask or puppet, plays out, embodies, yet conceals and distorts through an endless metamorphosis, the divine plenitude that is the source of its energy. Rabelais' books reflect these concepts in a dizzying *mise-en-abîme* of inversion and reflection. However, there is, it seems, a key to what one might call Rabelais' specular theatricality, and it can be found in St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, 13, from which young Gargantua's motto is taken. This is not to propose I Corinthians as a Rosetta Stone for the interpretation of Rabelais, but merely as a textual precedent and paradigm, with which Rabelais was very familiar, for the paradoxes that form and dominate the Rabelaisian texts.

In First Corinthians 13, Paul insists on the emptiness of human achievement devoid of love, and the enduring and transcendent plenitude that love reflects. Human speech, even should it attain the language of angels, is empty without Love (1). Knowledge, and even faith, are empty without Love (2-3). The generosity of Love (evoked by Gargantua's emblem) overcomes the blind predations of self (4-7). The imperfections and finitude of human capacity are noted without frustration or chagrin. The means will make way for the end, which has invested the finite means with the eternal and made the process of earthly life possible and meaningful (8-11). The comparison of human imperfection with the perceptions and ways of a child implies a

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[34] *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Press, 1957) vol.23, p. 123.

process of maturation that is both natural and delightful in its finitude. The process of maturation that leads to plenitude would be impossible without the plenitude that informs it and towards which it is growing. Paul's version of the mirror stage, then, posits an immature or larval being that imagines itself whole, mature and powerful. However, the ontological "child" contemplates and creates an image that is not the self, as in the Lacanian model which we have evoked in our discussion of Marguerite's poetry. In the Pauline mirror of Christian charity, one contemplates and creates an image of what is beyond self yet which forms and animates that self.[35] The larva imagines existence beyond the chrysalis, not as the metamorphosis of a worm, but as a progressive manifestation of the plenitude that is both origin and end of the process of development. With Love as *telos* and origin, the human "child" need not invent his dismemberment,[36] as does the child in the Lacanian model. The image the Pauline child reflects and attempts to contemplate does not pretend to the absolute

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[35] In the Prologue to the *Tiers Livre* the invitation to drink from the "tonneau inexpuisible" begins:

> Sus à ce vin, compaings! Enfans, beuvez à pleins guodetz (401) [my emphasis].

[36] In I Corinthians 12, Paul, as an analogy for the unity of the church, speaks of the unity of the body through the multiplicity of its members:

> For just as the body is one and has many member, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and all were made to drink of one Spirit (12-3).

Thus, the dispersion of Babel is countered by the unity of the Spirit. If Babel can be seen as a myth analogous to the dismemberment posited by the child as he imagines an unattained maturity, it is nonetheless secondary to an anterior original completeness. That original wholeness is reconstituted through its reflections of the Word made Flesh and the Spirit, which are consubstantial with that originary unity.

definition desired by self. Dimly, the child reflects and attempts to comprehend the *Logos* of his Author. He does not fear that he is born of a chaos which he must arrange in conformity with his own image. Chaos reflects the self's fear of failure in its desire to figure the world in its own image. The maturation of the Divine Love within a person will free her or him from the distortion of specular mediation, and knowledge - a reflection - will give way to understanding and comprehension. And so, if we may reread Paul through the Lacanian mirror, man invested with divine Love seeks not himself as he peers into an obscure glass. He need not engage in the theatrics of self-creation and self-justification. The maturation of the Spirit within humankind is a childhood, and a person's temporal transformations are sequential manifestations of completion and wholeness beyond time.

Opposed to Paul's vision is the world of Folly, in love with its own empty images. When Paul speaks of "understanding fully" he implies that comprehension succeeds the "mirror stage" of human finitude, where it is reflected but dimly. There is a sense to be gleaned from the enigmatic mirror of the *theatrum mundi*, but that sense is beyond the power of humanity to convey, absorb or embody. It is perceptible only through Divine Grace.[37] Nevertheless, the minions of Folly, bereft of the Spirit that transcends and informs image, senselessly continue to mime the frozen grimace of a dead letter.

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[37] We remember Marguerite's textual enactment of the moment of Grace in *La Comédie du Mont de Marsan* and *L'Inquisiteur*, that were discussed in Chapter 3.

In the prologue to the *Quart Livre*, the reader is enjoined to seize life: "saisissez vous du vif, saisissez vous de vie, c'est santé" (14). Life, we may assume, is not the image of life, but the substance of life, not the grotesquely painted exterior, but the substantific and nourishing marrow of life. Life and health is life invested with the spirit and love. Life, then, is not an end in itself, but a nurturing and maturation of the spirit. Nor can it be cast off by those impatient to reach the "goal" of plenitude beyond life. "Mediocrité", or moderation, is health, and it is illustrated by the story of Couillatris.

Couillatris, a wood-cutter, loses his "coignée", or axe-head, into the river. The axe-head being his sole means of making his modest living, Couillatris raises his voice to heaven. Jupiter, to put an end to the bereaved man's cries, tells Mercury to offer the wood-cutter three axe-heads: one of gold, one of silver, and his own. Couillatris, content to recover the tool, or means of his livelihood, chooses his own axe-head. Had he, through greed, chosen the gold or silver, he would have been beheaded. Because he has chosen "mediocrité", he is rewarded with all three axe-heads and becomes a wealthy man, envied by all those who covet wealth. Hearing Couillatris' story, they all buy axe-heads, throw them in the river, and cry to heaven for restitution. When Mercury presents them with the three axe-heads and asks which is theirs, Couillatris' greedy countrymen choose the gold or silver and are decapitated.

We see that Couillatris seeks only the means (les moyens) of living - a tool by which to ply his trade. He does not seek wealth as a goal or as his due, and so he is

content with life as a process. He, of course, gains all. The others miss the point. They wish for wealth as a goal, and they wish to attain the goal and by-pass the process. They are Folly's minions who valorise the outward manifestation - wealth. They remain ignorant and insouciant of the meaning and worth of the toil that wealth should measure rather than supplant. Their ignorance of the sense and value of wealth and work is reflected in their foolish and ridiculous activities. We see nobles selling their swords - the tools of their trade - to buy axe-heads to toss in the river. Instead of finding plenitude in process, as has Couillatris, they, seeking a false plenitude, throw the means away in order to claim the "goal", and instead find nothingness and death.

The Prologue to the *Tiers Livre* begins with a question to reader: "veistez vous oncques Diogenes, le philosophe cynic?" (393).

> S'il avoit quelques imperfections, aussi avez vous, aussi avons nous. Rien n'est, sinon Dieu, parfaict (394).

Diogenes, imperfect as he is, is employed by Rabelais as a mask, behind which he can "play the fool", while commenting on the character and purpose of his narrative enterprise.[38] Rabelais recounts the story of the Corinthians preparing for a siege by Philip of Macedonia. The description of the frenzied activity is long and exhaustive.

> Diogenes, les voyant en telle ferveur mesnaige remuer et n'estant pas

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[38] In Rabelais, Michael Screech says:

> Yet the real scholarly Dr. Rabelais still does not talk to the reader directly, he continues to wear a mask as certainly in the prologue to his third Chronicle as he did in the two earlier ones (ch. 6, 216).

> les magistratz employé à chose aulcune faire, contempla par quelques jours leur contenence, sans mot dire. Puys, comme excité d'esprit Martial, ceignit son palle en escharpe, recoursa ses manches jusques es coubtes, se troussa en cuilleur de pommes, bailla à un sien compaignon vieulx sa bezasse, ses livres et opistographes, feit hors la ville tirant vers le Cranie (qui est une colline et promontoire lez Corinthe) une belle esplanade, y roulla le tonneau fictil, qui pour maison luy estoit contre les injures du ciel...(396) [my emphasis].

The intense activity of Diogenes is described in the rest of the sentence which continues with almost seventy verbs. The physical contortions of Diogenes and his "tonneau fictil", or ceramic barrel, are mirrored by the text's verbal contortions,[39] at the same time that they (the physical contortions) are meant to reflect the harried activities of the Corinthians in preparing for war. The preparations for war are exhaustively described in a manner reminiscent of Gargantua's quest for the perfect "torche-cul"; no stone should be left unturned by the Corinthians in the effort to control their own fate. The fact that the Corinthians were conquered by Philip is not

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[39] Thomas Greene describes Rabelais' concept of language as "malleable", which recalls the clay of which both man and Diogenes' "tonneau fictil" are made. Greene's characterization of this Rabelais' treatment of language is reminiscent of Rabelais' description of Diogenes' treatment of his barrel in his imitation of the Corinthians. The word, for Rabelais, says Greene,

> [...] is a plaything of demonic gaiety, to be destroyed and refashioned with effervescent zest. Rabelais is incessantly assaulting and belaboring his language, twisting it out of shape, mincing it, sending it up in smoke (17).

even mentioned by Rabelais, but his readers would have known this. Implicit in the story is the notion that destiny is more powerful than human efforts to circumvent it; this proves to be a major theme in the *Tiers Livre* as Panurge seeks to avoid having his fate relegated to the "menuz plaisirs" of a God beyond his control.[40] When Diogenes is asked why he is engaged in his seemingly mad barrel-rolling he responds that,

> il en ceste façon son tonneau tempestoit pour, entre ce peuple tant fervent et occupé, n'estre veu seul cessateur et ocieux (397).

Diogenes' apparent folly of rolling continuously down the hill, mimes and mirrors the folly of the Corinthians. Rabelais cites the example of Diogenes, in turn, to mirror his own textual folly. For he,like Diogenes, could be seen ("estre veu") as

> spectateur ocieux de tant vaillans disers et chevalereux personnaiges, qui en veue et spectacle de toute Europe jouent ceste insigne fable et tragicque comedie, [...].
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> [...]

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[40] This theme recurs throughout Rabelais' books. One notable example is the story of the death of Aeschylus (Quart Livre, XVII, 89-90). We saw the powerlessness of the Olympian gods before the fates (*Tiers Livre*, ch. 51, 614). The dilemma of the gods confronted by fate is seen again in the prologue to the *Quart Livre* with the story of the dog that catches everything it chases in pursuit of the fox that cannot be caught.

> Le chien, par son destin fatal doibvoit prendre le renard; le renard, par son destin ne dobvoit estre prins (18).

The only recourse of the gods is to turn both to stone (19), endlessly deferring the resolution of the paradox and the confrontation of contradictory destinies.

> Prins ce choys et election, ay pensé ne faire exercice inutile et importun, si je remuois mon tonneau Diogenic qui seul m'est resté du naufragé faict par le passé on far de Mal'encontre (398).

In offering his third and promising a fourth book "de sentences Pantagruelicques", Rabelais explicitly links his enterprise to that of Diogenes. Of the "sentences Pantagruelicques" he tells the reader, "par moy licite vous sera les appeler Diogenicques" (400). Just as Diogenes mimes and mirrors the senseless activity of the Corinthians, Rabelais verbally evokes Diogenes as a means of reflecting the mad activity of the world. We encounter Corinthians who have not yet known (the ancients), or have not yet accepted (16th Century Europe) the Spirit of which Paul speaks, and who thirst for the false certitude of the illusory completeness of power and self rather than the eternal process of God and His Love. To accept the uncertainties of life as an ongoing process takes courage, but courage also is linked to the Spirit of *caritas*, for fear, as Panurge shows us in the Third and Fourth Books, is a product of self-love. Rabelais proposes a mode of living that he calls "Pantagruelisme",

> moienant laquelle jamais en maulvaise partie ne prendront choses quelconques ilz coingnoistront sourdre de bon, franc et loyal couraige (*Tiers Livre*, Prologue, 401).

When Rabelais, in the Prologue, returns to his barrel ("à mon tonneau je retourne" [401]), the sense is double. For the narration of the *Tiers Livre* will be a Diogenic rolling and tumbling of a textual "tonneau" that is both "fictil" and "fictif",

imitating the "tragicque comedie" of Panurge's philautic quest for certitude. But the exterior reflection of the world's folly will also reflect the source which springs from the interior, investing the project with love[41]. For the "tonneau" is not just a ludic property, but also a wine barrel from which the narrator invites his readers to drink. We have noted that the evocation of Tantalus implies a continual thirst rather than satisfaction, and that this thirst is beyond fear, for one may drink forever from the "tonneau inexpuisible" (402).

> Si quelque foys vous semble estre expuysé jusques à la lie, non pourtant sera il a sec. Bon espoir y gist au fond, comme en la bouteille de Pandora : non desespoir, comme on bussart des Danaides (402).

To drink of the Spirit in this world is not to abandon or escape this world. Theleme could not escape the energy and conflicting wills of men. But the hope of the pantagruelist is that the harnessing of human energies, and investment with the Spirit can lead humanity beyond itself. Gargantua, at the birth of his son Pantagruel, Janus-faced, turns now a grieving visage on his dead wife, now a laughing face to his new-born son. At the very moment when it seems that all is lost and empty, the hope of the future, by which he will live[42] and his race will reach the stars, comes into the world. And so, at the end of the Prologue to the *Tiers Livre*, the invitation to drink is

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[41] See Bakhtin on Rabelais' comedy versus later satire in the introduction and first chapter of Rabelais and His World.

[42] Pantagruel will be for Gargantua,

> après ma mort come un mirouoir representant la personne de moy ton père (Pant., 8, 258)

to "Tout Beuveur de bien, tout Goutteux de bien, alterez", to "Gens de bien, Beuveurs de la prime cuvée, et Goutteux de franc alleu" (402). Such drinkers drink generously and are generously welcomed. However, those who seek after themselves, who "ne sont de bien, ains de mal" (403) are chased off. And why not? They come not to drink of the Spirit, but to feed their desires. "Ce n'est icy leur gibbier" (403), the author asserts. For these rapacious fools, who would "compisser mon tonneau", the "tonneau inexpuisible" is transformed once again to a Diogenic function.

> Voyez cy le baston que Diogenes par testament ordonna estre près luy posé après sa mort pour chasser et esrener ce larves bustuaires et mastins cerbericques (403) [my emphasis].

Those who live in the world of folly, are masks, but death masks (*larves bustuaires*) and voracious three-headed dogs (*mastins cerbericques*). Erasmus' Folly reflects humankind's unconscious madness while urging it finally to the Divine Folly evoked by Paul. Folly is herself, as we saw earlier, the *larva*, or mask, of her author's *ratio*. Likewise, Rabelais' Diogenic barrel reflects and accuses human folly, while inviting all to drink of the Spirit. Rabelais' textual barrel, his "tonneau fictif", also masks and mirrors the mind that animates it. Opposed to these larval manifestations of plenitude and largesse is the hellish hunger of man who, bereft of the Spirit, is both a beast of his own myth-making, and a mask whose only function is to faithfully mime the absence of life and spirit behind its own fixed form. The Rabelaisian mask is a larva that reflects the universal dynamics of potential, growth, and continual transformation

perceived by its author. Rabelais, as narrator of the Prologue, attacks those who would defile the "tonneau" of charity (itself a reflection and manifestation of the Spirit), calling them "*larves bustuaires*" and" *mastins cerbericques*". Bestial men, such as these, seek an end to the thirst for perfection, preferring the rapacious desires of a self-aggrandizing self. Since the self can never be identical with perfection, which transcends the individual, the desire for the "satisfying" illusion of a "complete" self is a dilution and pollution of the perfection intimated by *caritas*. As masks of death, these larvae cannot reflect the charity of the invitation to thirst and and to drink in the endlessly regenerative and deferred plenitude of the Spirit. Instead, they mirror the image of an absolute death, while fattening themselves on the illusion of its closure and the lie of its permanence.

Chapter 5

Desire and Deformity in Montaigne's "Des boyteux"

Part I

"Il y a deux ou trois ans qu'on acoursit l'an de dix jours en France" (III,11,1002b).[1] At the beginning of his essay "Des boyteux", Montaigne notes the adoption of the Gregorian calendar and the amputation of several days from the calendar year the change entailed. The operation was seen as momentous: "ce fut proprement remuer le ciel et la terre à la fois" (1002b). But since the calendar, indeed time itself, is a product of human reason and perception, the loss of several days from the year really has changed nothing. Farmers continue to sow, reap and sell their products at the appropriate time. The days removed from the year are not missed because they never were a part of nature. The year, a human invention, is shaped by reason, "un instrument libre et vague" (1003b), and man's perception of natural phenomena. As the calendar year revealed the miscalculations and misperceptions of its formation, the superfluous days took on the aspect of a deformity. The growing appendage of the unaccounted for days marred the symmetry of the rational representation of the earth's cyclical orbit. For Montaigne, the importance attached to the affair, and its ultimate lack of significance, is an indictment of the human desire to seize and fix the universal flux of the "branloire perenne" and define it in a human context. Since the universal exceeds human capacity

[1]All references to Montaigne's *Essais* indicate book, chapter, and pagination in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. A. Thibaudet and M. Rat. Paris: Gallimard, 1962.

to grasp or even perceive it ("[b]Tant il y a d'incertitude par tout, tant nostre apercevance est grossiere, [c] obscure et obtuse" [1003]), our pretensions to knowledge and mastery are nothing but illusion, born of, and sustained by pride and presumption. Men are enamoured of the "explanations" that they invent to describe nature and its phenomena; they are more interested in reflecting upon their own fabrications (and contemplating there their own reflections) than in seeking elusive truths.

> Je vois ordinairement que les hommes, aux faicts qu'on leur propose, s'amusent plus volontiers à en cercher la raison qu'à en cercher la verité: Ils laissent là les choses, et s'amusent à traiter les causes. [c] Plaisans causeurs. La cognoissance des causes appartient seulement à celuy qui a la conduite des choses, non à nous qui n'en avons que la souffrance, et qui en avons l'usage parfaictement plein, selon nostre nature, sans en penetrer l'origine et l'essence (1003).

Man, says Montaigne, is incapable of seizing the knowledge he desires as to the true nature of existence. Human pretensions to mastery of nature, through intellectual possession, are vain. "A l'infériorité, subjection et apprentissage appartient le jouyr, l'accepter" (1003c). But man prefers to imagine that an intimate knowledge (and control) of nature can be his. He seeks knowledge (and control), not only of the causes of things, but also of the consequences. Thus, a Janus-faced humanity pursues the past and the future, hoping thereby to banish uncertainty. Like Panurge, we are loathe to submit to the "menuz plaisirs" of God.[2] And like Panurge, who creates a world of apparent

[2]See ch. 4, pp.9-10 *supra.*

plenitude upon empty words in his encomium to debts, humanity is capable, through language, of inventing and analyzing imaginary worlds wherein it is master. The word-play of "causes"/"causeurs" implies that the assumed knowledge of the "causes" of natural phenomena is nothing but a linguistic illusion. Through language man plays out the possession of the knowledge he desires but which lies beyond his grasp. Through language man constructs a world in which he is master and not subject.

> Nostre discours est capable d'estoffer cent autres mondes et d'en trouver les principes et la contexture. Il ne luy faut ny matiere, ny baze; laissez le courre: Il bastit aussi bien sur le vuide que sur le plain, et de l'inanité que de matiere, *dare pondus idonea fumo* (1004[b]).

To try and expose the illusion, to reveal that the smoke has no weight, leaves one open to accusations of stupidity and ignorance, says Montaigne. The world does not suffer lightly contradictions to the *mise-en-scène* of its desire. We remember the madman in *Praise of Folly*, who pulls the masks from the actors upon the stage, or the reactions of Panurge, in the *Tiers Livre*, to those who interpret signs to describe his future marriage other than as he would wish it to be. Montaigne, with a quote from Cicero, concedes that it is not easy to judge what is true and what is false, what is real and what is unreal.[3] The difficulty of distinguishing between the similar faces of truth and falsehood is compounded by the pleasure humans take "à nous embrouiller en la vanité, comme conforme à nostre estre" (1004b).

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[3]"*Ita finitima sunt falsa veris, ut in praecipitem locum non debeat se sapiens committere*"(1004c).

The themes introduced by Montaigne in the first pages of this essay are central, not only to "Des boyteux", but to the whole "espineuse entreprinse" of the *Essais*. The book, is meant not only to depict, or represent, its author, but to be consubstantial with him (II,18,648c).[4] It is to be a monument to his late friend, Etienne de La Boétie, and a prosthetic device with which the author compensates for the loss of half of the "self" that he and his friend together formed (I,28).[5] Yet Montaigne is acutely aware of the difficulty of his project(s). He recognizes the protean quality of self that resists definition.[6] He resigns himself to painting "le passage" and not "l'estre" (III,2,782b).

> C'est une espineuse entreprinse, et plus qu'il ne semble, de suyvre une alleure si vagabonde que celle de nostre esprit; de penetrer les profondeurs opaques de ses replis internes; de choisir et arrester tant de menus airs de ses agitations (II,6,358c).

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[4]See Richard L. Regosins' "Figures of the Self: Montaigne's Rhetoric of Portraiture," for a stimulating discussion on Montaigne's use of the metaphor of painting in confronting the problems of self-representation. Regosin says, "As Montaigne uses the metaphor to unite himself and his text, this *co*-incidence also announces itself as double and difference" (66). Also see chapter 8 of Regosin's *The Matter of My Book: Montaigne's* Essais *as the Book of the Self.*

[5]Michel Butor writes: "Le livre que Montaigne veut faire, [...], doit être entre autres choses un monument à La Boétie, son *tombeau*" (*Essais sur les* Essais, 33).

[6]See François Rigolot's *Les Métamorphoses de Montaigne* for an extensive and rich discussion of Montaigne's awareness of the protean quality of the self he would portray, and the strategies he adopts to confront the problem. Jean Starobinski's *Montaigne en Mouvement* and Gérard Defaux's *Marot, Rabelais, Montaigne: l'écriture comme présence* (introduction and chapter three) also provide insightful examinations of this and other aspects of Montaigne's "entreprinse".

The desire to grasp and seize the self, to arrest its endless permutations, can no more be satisfied than can the desire of humankind to seize and possess the truth of the phenomenal world.

> Nous n'avons aucune communication à l'estre, par ce que toute humaine nature est tousjours au milieu entre le naistre et le mourir, ne baillant de soy qu'une obscure apparence et ombre, et une incertaine et debile opinion (II,12,586a).

Just as humanity's construction of worlds upon the void, by means of language, represents the desire to be master rather than subject, Montaigne's book is a verbal figuration of the desire for self-possession. He adopts the Oracle of Delphi's "commandement paradoxe" to "know thyself" (III,9, 979b).[7] Yet the self he would know is beyond embrace. The self-knowledge developed by Montaigne through the course of his essays is the realization that, though no one in the world knows his subject as well as he, still, he knows nothing. The oracle of Delphi emphasizes man's vacuity and vanity (the citation ends the chapter "De la vanité"), and notes his limitless desire:

> «Sauf toy, ô homme, disoit ce Dieu, chaque chose s'estudie la premiere et a, selon son besoin des limites à ses travaux et desirs. Il n'en est une seule si vuide et necessiteuse que toy, qui embrasse l'univers; tu es le

[7]See Defaux, *Marot, Rabelais, Montaigne: l'écritur comme présence*, 180.

> scrutateur sans connoissance, le magistrat sans jurisdiction et, après tout, le badin[8]de la farce» (III,9,980) [my emphasis].

Montaigne's continued pursuit of an unrealizable and unseizable self is a reverberation of the "humaine condition".

> Il ne faut pas trouver estrange si gens desesperez de la prise n'ont pas laissé de avoir plaisir á la chasse (II,12,490a).

Endless desire and eternal pursuit are implicit in the central image of "Des boyteux", which gives the chapter its name; it comes from the Italian proverb that says that one cannot know the perfection of Venus unless one has slept with a cripple.[9] I would suggest that implicit in the metaphor is the notion that man cannot aspire to knowledge of perfection without first knowing profoundly his own imperfection. Furthermore, the coupling with imperfection or deformity seems to be an inevitable stage in the quest for perfection, the "parfaicte douceur" of the divine Venus. Finally, man's desire to be coupled with the perfect sweetness of divinity can only be expressed or represented in, and as, a deformation of the divine paradigm that is desired. Attempting to clutch the perfect beauty of Venus, one grasps the misshapen form of the cripple. The self that Montaigne cannot embrace is like Venus, an abstraction. The book that he writes in pursuit of that self, portrays the cripple in whose arms we may imagine Venus's perfect sweetness. While the self is engaged in a process of endless transformation, any

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[8]See Mary McKinley, "Vanity's Bull," p. 206 for an examination of the implications of the word "badin".

[9]"[...] on dict en Italie, en commun proverbe, que celuy-là ne cognoit pas Venus en sa parfaicte douceur qui n'a couché avec la boiteuse" (1011b).

portrait of the self, be it in paint or in words, is fixed. Montaigne, attempting to paint himself, must bind or fix himself in language.[10] The passage that he would describe becomes a series of prints or tracks that, in their fixity, bear witness to the absence of the self as they bear witness to its passage.[11]

"Or je me pare sans cesse, car je me descris sans cesse," Montaigne writes (II,6,358c).[12] Montaigne, ever conscious of the endless process and transformations of existence, realizes that he cannot seize himself, either for himself, or for his reader. He wishes to give an idea of the constant mutation of self and self-perception. The best he can do is to present examples and a verbal representation of what is ungraspable. Yet this, too, proves inadequate.

> Toutes choses se tiennent par quelque similitude, tout exemple cloche, et la relation qui se tire de l'experience est tousjours defaillante et imparfaicte; on joinct toutesfois les comparaisons par quelque coin (III,13,1047b).

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[10]Regosin writes: "In his effort to overcome these consequences of language's mercurial elusiveness, of its unstable forms and ambivalent meanings, Montaigne metaphorizes writing as portraiture to impute to it stability, fixity and the accessibility of a model whose "reality" is acceded to by a penetrating reading of physionomic signs" ("Figures of the Self: Montaigne's Rhetoric of Portraiture," 68).

[11]In "De la vanité", Montaigne says: Ce que je ne puis exprimer, je le montre au doigt: *Verum animo satis, haec vestigia parva sagaci/Sunt, per quae possis cognoscere cetera tute.* [But if you have a penetrating mind,/These little tracks will serve the rest to find.] (III,9,961b).

[12]On the same page Montaigne speaks of ancient precedents for his enterprise: "[...] deux ou trois anciens qui ayent battu ce chemin [...]. Nul depuis ne s'est jetté sur leur trace" (my emphasis). Montaigne's language ("chemin", "trace") suggests the image of a trail blazed, tracks left in testimony to passage.

Examples, the flesh of his book, limp and resemblances are imperfect, often joined together unnaturally. The paradigms of experience and self cannot be seized, but are represented, "realized", as something "defaillante" and "imparfaicte". The book, lame, pieced together, "un enfant monstrueux", like the Siamese twins in the chapter of that title (II,30), becomes a figuration of desire for the unattainable- the desire for a stable identity and completeness of being. Knowledge of the perfection of existence is deferred while we embrace, gaining intimate knowledge of, the imperfections of self and its representations.

In the essay "D'un enfant monstrueux" (II,30), we encounter extraordinary deformity that is ultimately attributed not to the freakish phenomena described, but to the finite quality of human perception. Nevertheless, the physical deformities presented in the essay provide vivid images ("crotesques"[13]) that seem to incarnate the intellectual and spiritual incapacities that inspire and frustrate the *Essais.* Montaigne describes a monstrous child who is displayed by his wretched parents for profit. The child is in fact both one child and two, being siamese twins. One part of the child, smaller and headless, is repeatedly referred to by Montaigne as "l'imparfaict", while the other part, which "se soustenoit sur ses pieds, marchoit et gasouiloit à peu près comme les autres de mesme aage" is called "l'autre" (690a). The designation of one child as the "imperfect one" would seem to imply the perfection of the other. Yet the very presence of "l'imparfaict" renders such a thought absurd. Not only is the perfection of "l'autre" excluded by the

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[13]In I,28 ("De l'amitié"), Montaigne describes the fantastic designs that frame an unfinished painting as "crotesques et corps monstrueux, rappiecez de divers membres..." (181a).

existence of his sibling, but even the simplest of his movements is hindered. Yet the fact that the walking, babbling child is the "other" relegates him to secondary status behind the primacy of his imperfect, headless brother.

> ils estoient joints face à face, et comme si un plus petit enfant en vouloit accoler un plus grandelet (690a).

It seems curious that, with only one head, the brothers should find themselves face to face. The image of the broken-armed, headless appendage, grasping and embracing his "brother" is a desolate parody of the androgynous unity of primordial love in a fallen world. It could also serve as an image of man, "l'imparfaict", embracing the crippled "autre" as if he were joined with a transcendant and transforming Venus.

Montaigne continues the essay with the description of a shepherd from Medoc who was born bereft of genitals. Nevertheless "il est barbu, a desir, et recherche l'attouchement des femmes" (691b). The plight of humankind trapped between desire and insufficiency in pursuit of truth, knowledge and love seems grotesquely incarnated by this poor wretch. As in the case of the siamese twins, the implications of the shepherd's misery are reciprocal. For deformity not only thwarts desire, but is itself rendered all the more grotesque by the very presence of desire. One might say that desire is itself deformity. In that case the shepherd of Medoc, in his incapacity to couple, while desiring to do so, constitutes, and is constituted of, the coupling of deformities, like the deformed "autre" and his brother "l'imparfaict".

The end of the essay addresses the deformity of perception by presumption and vanity, themselves forms of desire, which magnify human incapacity and render it monstrous.

> Ce que nous appelons monstres ne le sont pas à Dieu, qui voit en l'immensité de son ouvrage l'infinité des formes qu'il y a comprinses; et est à croire que cette figure qui nous estonne, se rapporte et tient à quelque autre figure de mesme genre inconnu à l'homme. De sa toute sagesse il ne part rien que bon et commun et reglé; mais nous n'en voyons pas l'asortiment et la relation (691c).

Monstrosity, says Montaigne, is the projection of presumption upon the empty space of our ignorance. We put the face of Venus, which is beyond our comprehension, on the form of a cripple calling it goddess. But we also name cripple, monstrosity, deformity, that which is part of a greater perfection because that perfection escapes our grasp. The cripple reflects the lameness of our own understanding, according to Montaigne and not a flaw or incapacity on the part of God or Nature.

We have hearkened back to Marguerite de Navarre in suggesting that desire is, in itself, deformity, for the presence of desire implies the absence of the perfection of true presence. The perfection and true presence sought by Marguerite is God, the totality of being, the *Tout* with which she desires union. The perfection of union with God banishes desire and deformity, replacing them with wholeness and understanding. But since that union and comprehension have not yet been realized, they can only be desired. The union beyond human grasp cannot be represented, only the desire for it may be figured. Thus,

instead of depicting the perfection we seek, in voicing our yearning for it we reveal and magnify the infirmity and deformity of our amputation from perfection, in the same way that the shepherd's incapacity seems all the more poignant and pitiful as he manifests an insatiable lust. Montaigne, throughout his *Essais*, insists upon his own deformity. In "Sur des vers de Virgile" (III,5), he relates his own libidinous frustrations and portrays himself as a kind of sexual cripple.[14] Elsewhere Montaigne characterizes his self-portrayal:

> Les autres forment l'homme; je le recite et en represente un particulier bien mal formé.. (III,2,782b).

He notes that he edits the accidental errors in his text "mais les imperfections qui sont en moy ordinaires et constantes, ce seroit trahison de les oster" (III,5,853b). In "Des boyteux" Montaigne says:

> Je n'ay veu monstre et miracle au monde plus exprès que moy-mesme. On s'apprivoise à toute estrangeté par l'usage et le temps; mais le plus je me hante et me connais, plus ma difformité m'estonne, moins j'entens en moy (1006b).

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[14]"Pour ce peu qu'il m'en faut à cette heure, *ad unum/ Mollis opus,* je ne voudrois importuner une personne que j'ay à reverer et craindre: *Fuge suspicari,/ Cujus heu denum trepidavit aetas,/ Claudere lustrum.*

"Nature se devoit contenter d'avoir rendu cet aage miserable, sans le rendre encore ridicule" (865b). This passage is just one of many in the essay that emphasize Montaigne's feeling of incapacity. Montaigne explains the frankness of his explicit self-descriptions by asserting that "Chacune de mes pieces me faict esgalement moy que toute autre" (866c).

If Montaigne discerns more deformity in himself than in others, it is only because of the nature of his quest for self-discovery; he examines himself more thoroughly than he examines others. Yet what he discovers in himself becomes a paradigm for all: "chaque homme porte la forme entiere de l'humaine condition" (782b). One might say that each man carries the deformity of the human condition: an "imparfaict" clinging to an "autre", in an irremedial yearning for wholeness and self. In the essay titled "Nos affections s'emportent au dela de nous", Montaigne notes that "Nous ne sommes jamais chez nous, nous sommes tousjours au delà" (I,3,18b). Our desire, reaching beyond the insufficiency of self towards completeness and perfection presumes that by embracing and possessing what is exterior we may find what is lacking within. However, since we are incapable of seizing what is perfect, we can only, through imagination and presumption, attempt to transform the imperfect to perfection. The very fact that something can be seized by our desire implies that it is imperfect. In the essay "Nous ne goustons rien de pur", Montaigne says that:

> La foiblesse de nostre condition fait que les choses, en leur simplicité et pureté naturelle, ne puissent pas tomber en nostre usage. Les elemens que nous jouyssons sont alterez, et les metaux de mesme; et l'or, il le faut empirer par quelque autre matiere pour l'accommoder à nostre service (II,20,655a).

Reminding us that the imperfection of what we touch is merely a reflection of our own condition, Montaigne describes man: "L'homme, en tout et par tout, n'est que rapiessement et bigarrure" (656b). We piece ourselves together with objects of our desire,

with what we are not; thus we construct our patchwork selves with our yearning for what is good and beautiful. But,

> Comme si nous avions l'attouchement infect, nous corrompons par nostre maniement les choses qui d'elles mesmes sont belles et bonnes" (I,30,195a).

Our corruption is not only inherent, but contagious. It seems that even should we be capable of seizing Venus in her perfect sweetness and beauty, her voluptuous limbs would wither in the avidity of our grasp. She, rather than transporting us, through bliss, to perfection, would become a misshapen "imparfaict", fused to our breast, hanging round our neck, sharing our base and basic functions.

The figuration of Venus in erotic desire is a favorite subject of Montaigne's observations. The double nature of Venus herself, sometimes Love and sometimes *Eros*, echoes throughout the essay, "Sur des vers de Virgile" (III,5), which begins with the promise of titillation and ends with a plea for love. Sexual desire in human beings is unlike the procreative urge of animals, Montaigne notes.

> Ce n'est pas une passion simplement corporelle [...]. Ell vit encore après la satiété; et ne luy peut on prescrire ny satisfaction constante ny fin: elle va tousjours outre sa possession (III,5, 864b).

Sexual desire and the sex act are bestial in their corporality, but uniquely human in their insufficiency. "Certes, c'est une marque non seulement de nostre corruption originelle, mais aussi de nostre vanité et deformité" (856b). What is more, this quenchless desire, manifested as "l'action honteuse, et honteuses les parties qui y servent" (856b), is not

only the inaccessible goal, but also the source of our existence. "Nous estimons à vice nostre estre" (857c). Our being is born of the same insatiable desire by which it seeks, in vain, completion and definition.

Venus is nothing, Montaigne states, but "le plaisir à descharger ses vases comme le plaisir que nature nous donne à descharger d'autres parties" (855b). This is the biological fact around which we construct a goddess of perfect beauty and sweetness. Venus exists the way the year exists - the natural character of the phenomenon remains fundamentally unaltered by our perceptions, fabrications and fabulations. Yet, just as the reappraisal of man's perception of the natural cycle of the year caused great uproar, so the discharge of fluids becomes, in the human mind, venerial love:

> [..] un feu temeraire et volage, ondoyant et divers, feu de fiebre, subject à accez et remises, et qui ne nous tient qu'à un coing (I,28,184a).

These comments on the character of Venus and venerial love are from the essays "Sur des vers de Vergile" and "De l'amitié". In these essays Montaigne compares erotic desire to poetry and to friendship. In "Sur des vers de Vergile", Montaigne compares the physical reality of *eros* with Virgil's poetic description of love. Montaigne lauds the poetry for its ability to evoke the essence of *eros* while artfully draping Venus with a verbal veil. Since Venus herself is inaccessible, it is proper that she be formed of words, the substance and meanings of which are also endlessly deferred. The Venus we grasp is always a cripple; likewise, the words by which we create the world and ourselves are freakish splicings of *verba* and *res*. The word "n'est pas une partie de la chose ny de la substance", but rather "une pièce étrangère joincte à la chose, et hors d'elle" (II,16,601a).

Once again, we encounter fusion reminiscent of the "enfant monstrueux" (II,30). Montaigne praises the poetry of Virgil and Lucretius for its vigor and virility, and his characterization of their verses is remarkably carnal (850-1). Montaigne also claims that "le sens esclaire et produict les parolles" of these poets (851b). "Elles signifient plus qu'elles ne disent" (851c). In signifying more than they say, these words are animated by the same desire that animates the Venus they evoke. Thus Venus, creation and representation of insatiable desire is vividly figured by language, that is also the creation and representation of insatiable desire.

> Elle represente je ne sçay quel air plus amoureux que l'amour mesme. Venus n'est pas si belle toute nue, et vive, et haletante, comme elle est icy chez Virgile (826b).

Venus, veiled in language that itself pulsates with desire, is more desirable than a Venus alive and breathing, whose nakedness reveals "une boiteuse". For we cannot know Venus, only "la boiteuse". Made up with words, she plays the role of Venus as we play at the satisfaction of desire. The mechanism is described in the title of an early essay: "Comme l'ame descharge ses passions sur des objects faux, quand les vrays luy defaillent" (I,4).

Any discussion of love, desire, loss and compensation in Montaigne inevitably leads to a consideration of his relationship with Etienne de La Boétie. Overwhelmed by the absence of his friend, whom he describes as part of himself, Montaigne tries to fill the void with words, both his own, and those of the departed La Boétie. In the essay "De l'amitié" (I, 28), Montaigne remarks upon the fact that nature does not assure the resemblance of blood relatives (183-4). Montaigne says that he and La Boétie were

spiritual kin, attaining the union of love and self that cannot be captured in flesh. Their "parfaicte amitié" is pure, untainted by other interests (184a).[15] Whereas venereal love is feverish and fiery, true friendship is characterized by

> [...] une chaleur generale et universelle, temperée au demeurant et égale, une chaleur consistante et rassize, toute douceur et polissure, qui n'a rien d'aspre et de poignant (184a).

The union of friendship, unlike that of Venus, is a privileged consistency in a world of flux. As a manifestation of pure essence in a world in which nothing is pure, friendship achieves the union that venerial love only enacts:

> c'est je ne sçay quelle quinte essence de tout ce meslange, qui ayant saisi toute ma volonté, l'amena se plonger et se perdre dans la sienne; qui a, ayant saisi toute sa volonté, l'amena se plonger et se perdre en la mienne, d'une faim, d'une concurrence pareille (187c) [my emphasis].

The pure essence of the great muddle of the world is desire. The wills of the two friends ("la volonté") mirror one another reciprocally. Friendship, according to Montaigne, "est jouye à mesure qu'elle est désirée" (184a). There is no "jouissance" that sates or banishes desire. "Jouissance" is not deferred or frustrated by unabated desire; it is not squandered on a lame substitute, reduced to a mere physical discharge of vesicles. The "jouissance" of friendship accepts the quality of pure desire; each half of the union accepts and reflects the will and desire of the other for union and completion

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[15]Richard Regosin writes that Montaigne, seeking an "absolute", "...ascribes qualities of abstract perfection to his friendship with La Boétie so that the ideal is rendered real in their union" (*The Matter of My Book: Montaigne's* Essais *as the Book of the Self*, 13).

as one self. Erotic love, on the other hand, says Montaigne, "ce n'est qu'un desir forcené après ce qui nous fuit" (184a), and then he quotes Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*:

> Come sugue la lepre il cacciatore
>
> Al freddo, al caldo, alla montagna, al lito;
>
> Ne piu l'estima poi che presa vede,
>
> Et sol dietro a chi fugge affretta il piede (X, 5).
>
> (Just as a huntsman will pursue a hare
>
> O'er hill and dale in weather cold or fair;
>
> The captured hare is worthless in his sight;
>
> He only hastens after things in flight)
>
> [Frame, 137].[16]

Likewise, in venereal love, desire is not sated by possession. The lover sought is Venus; the lover possessed is a cripple. With possession "La jouyssance le perd, comme ayant la fin corporelle et subjecte à sacieté" (184a). Friendship, however, being spiritual, "est jouye à mesure qu'elle est désirée". Thus, as unabated desire, it is constantly enjoyed (184a).[17]

Montaigne notes that at their first meeting he and La Boétie were "tous deux hommes faicts" (187c). "Hommes faicts" implies completion, but both men found that

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[16]This, and all subsequent English translations, are from Donald Frame's The Complete Works of Montaigne. The page number after the translation refers to the page on which that translation may be found in Frame's text.

[17]See Constance Jordan's article "Montaigne's 'Chasse de coignoissance': Language and Play in the *Essais*," especially 265-6.

the completion of maturity was illusory; completion was yet to come in their friendship, in the reciprocity of desire to know and be known.

> Nos ames ont charrié si uniement ensemble, elles se sont considerées d'une si ardante affection, et de pareille affection descouvertes jusques au fin fond des entrailles l'une à l'autre, que non seulement je connoissoy la sienne comme la mienne, mais je me fusse certainement plus volontiers fié à luy de moy qu'à moy (188c).

In perfect friendship one can tell a secret to the friend, "sans parjure", because the friend is "celuy qui n'est pas autre: c'est moy" (190c). As Montaigne remarks, "C'est un assez grand miracle de se doubler" (190c). In "Des boyteux", as we shall see, Montaigne systematically dismantles examples of what are taken to be miracles as deformation of perception. The reader may well ask, was the perfection of friendship realized by the two friends, or, is the miracle "de se doubler" figured in the absence of that longed-for unity with an absent other? Montaigne cites Aristotle's definition of friendship as "un'ame en deux corps" (189c). While the image reflects both doubleness and unity, it can also evoke the deformity of the siamese twin(s) that form an"enfant monstrueux" and the mutual and irremedial confrontation of the headless, or lifeless "imparfaict" with an ambulant "autre".

In "De l'amitié", Montaigne contrasts true friendship's miraculous union of two in one to the "superficielle accointance" that, through the monstrosity of presumption, blends incompletes into a misshapen travesty of completion (191c). Instead of expecting completion, or perfection, in all things (or anything), Montaigne advises us to appreciate

the particularities that suit various situations and enterprises. For example, at table he seeks the pleasant, not the prudent, while in bed he prefers "la beauté avant la bonté" (191c). Montaigne fears that his evocation of perfection in his friendship with La Boétie can be understood only by those

> [...] qui eussent essayé ce que je dis. Mais, sçachant combien c'est chose eslongnée du commun usage qu'une telle amitié, et combien elle est rare, je ne m'attens pas d'en trouver aucun bon juge (191c).

Even the examples of antiquity pale before Montaigne's experience of friendship. He cites Horace: *Nil ego contulerim jucundo sanus amico*, which Maurice Rat translates as "Rien pour un esprit sain n'égale un tendre ami" (1479, note p.192, 2). But the soul deprived of its friend is ill.

> Depuis le jour que je le perdy, [...], je ne fay que trainer languissant;et les plaisirs mesmes qui s'offrent à moy, au lieu de me consoler, me redoublent le regret de sa perte.
>
> ...
>
> J'estois desjà si fait et accoustumé à estre deuxiesme par tout, qu'il me semble n'estre plus qu'à demy (192a).

Montaigne cites Menander crediting happiness to anyone "qui avoit peu rencontrer seulement l'ombre d'un amy" (192a). It seems curious, after Montaigne's strenuous and detailed characterizations of the rare qualities of his true and perfect friendship, that meeting the mere shadow of a friend should prove sufficient to happiness. One is also struck by the recurrence of the past participle "fait", which described both Montaigne and

La Boétie before they met, and now describes him during their friendship. Just as the presumption of completion before their friendship is revealed by the plenitude of their union, is it not possible that the completeness of that union is also less than absolute? The separation resulting from La Boétie's death leaves Montaigne incomplete again, but conscious now of his incompletion.

The quotations from Horace at the end of the essay bring to mind the essay's opening paragraphs and another quote from Horace. The essay opens with Montaigne's description of a painter's method and the notion he takes to imitate it.[18]

> Il choisit le plus bel endroit et milieu de chaque paroy, pour y loger un tableau élabouré de toute sa suffisance; et, le vuide tout au tour, il le remplit de crotesques, qui sont peintures fantasques, n'ayant grâce qu'en la varieté et estrangeté (181a).

Montaigne compares his essays to the painter's grotesques:

> Que sont-ce icy aussi, à la verité, que crotesques et corps monstrueux, rappiecez de divers membres, sans certaine figure, n'ayants ordre, suite ny proportion que fortuite? (181a) [my emphasis].

While the painter fills the void around a painting with his "crotesques", Montaigne surrounds and frames the void with his deformities and monstrosities. He quotes Horace, "*Desinit in piscem mulier formosa superne*" ("A lovely woman tapers off into a fish" [Frame, 135]) as an example of monstrous fusion. In the void framed by the grotesques of Montaigne's essays, La Boétie's tract *La Servitude volontaire*, "depuis rebaptisé le

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[18]See ch. 16, "Un encadrement «maniériste»", in Butor's *Essais sur les* Essais.

Contre Un" (182a) is to be placed. However, at the end of the essay, "De l'amitié", Montaigne does not insert his friend's text because of the use and misuse of the treatise in the political and religious struggles of the time. The text has already been used to misrepresent La Boétie and Montaigne prefers to represent the civic responsibility of his friend in not presenting the now inflammatory and corrupted work. He proposes instead to place in the middle of his *Essais*, preceded by twenty-eight, and followed by twenty-eight essays, twenty-nine sonnets by La Boétie.[19] However, these, too, were finally excised because they had apparently been published elsewhere (Rat, 1480, note p.194, 4). And so, chapter twenty-nine, the center of Book One, contains nothing but an introductory letter and the addendum, "Ces vers se voient ailleurs" (194c). The space at the center of the "crotesques" remains "le vuide".[20]

Montaigne, at the end of the essay, describes his life outside of his four years of friendship as "exempte d'affliction et pleine de tranquillité d'esprit" (192a). However, this life was nothing but an illusion of plenitude and completion. Since the loss of his friend Montaigne sees that the rest of his life is nothing, "ce n'est que fumée, ce n'est qu'une nuit obscure et ennuyeuse" (192a). Is it the knowledge of perfection in his unity with La Boétie that has opened Montaigne's eyes to the imperfection of the years before they were joined? If so, the recognition of imperfection as a result of the knowledge of perfection is an inversion of the central metaphor of "Des boyteux". Instead of lying with a cripple as a means of knowing Venus, one must lie with Venus to see the cripple for

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[19]See Butor, 72-79.

[20]See Regosin, *The Matter of My Book...*, 19-20.

what she is. After his passionate descriptions of the perfect "amitié" Montaigne describes his present self as a fragment, existing only "à demy"(192a). In another quote from Horace, Montaigne implicitly refers to his own situation: "I the remaining part, less dear than he..." (Frame, 143). In the beginning of the essay the monstrosity of Montaigne's essays was ascribed to the combination of dissimilar elements with no order or proportion. At the end of the essay he describes the monstrosity of the amputated self, of the separation of integral parts, the violence of incompletion.[21]

Yet, was not their union like that of Horace's example of the woman and the fish, combining, in Montaigne's view, La Boétie's virtue and his own faults? "[...] il me surpassoit d'une distance infinie en toute autre suffisance et vertu" (192a). One cannot help but note that the description of his friendship with La Boétie is now a part of the "crotesques" that surrounds an empty space. The space prepared for prose, for sonnets, for his friend, remains a void. The painter that Montaigne watched filled the void around a portrait with grotesques. Is the void at the center of the *Essais* the absence of La Boétie, of friendship, of completion, of self? Is the "miracle" of perfect friendship - plenitude, the endless enjoyment of desire in its process - a verbal figuration of desire built on "le vuide" or "sur le plain", "*dare pondus idonea fumo*" (Suited to give solidity to smoke [Frame, 785])?[22] The absence at the center of the essays is that of a friend

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[21]To return to the image of the "enfant monstrueux", the only thing more pitiful than the unhappy fusion of the headless body of the "imparfaict" to the "other", would be the sight of the "imparfaict" truncated from his brother. Such an autonomy would seem even more monstrous than their misshapen unity.

[22]Once again, Lacan's notion of the "mirror stage" is applicable. Instead of an illusory, unattained wholeness which engenders a myth of previous dismemberement, we

who, Montaigne claims, was identical with himself, each self doubling and reflecting the other in their fusion. Desire for completion was reflected reciprocally from one self to the other. The fusion of two into one, within the dynamics of desire, now seems a brief embrace of illusory completeness, itself born of desire. Instead of plenitude there is emptiness; instead of friendship there is loneliness; instead of two as one, there is a void surrounded by the invalidated movement of the amputated "other". This invalid, seeking to embrace its self in an absent other, is the unseizable self of Montaigne.[23]

If Montaigne's attempt to grasp his self, by fusing it with La Boetie or with his book, reminds us of the embrace of the two parts of the "enfant monstrueux", we ought also to recall Montaigne's interpretation of that, and other, deformities. In faulting human perception rather than God or Nature, he implied that the child's monstrosity could not be perceived as an absolute form of being, but rather as the realization of one particular aspect in an endless train of transformation and possibility. Existence, in its infinite variety and process, dons many masks, none of which are absolute. Likewise, Montaigne, in his portrayal and enactment of self, represents himself by means of a variety of masks and metamorphoses constructed of words, which are themselves protean masks that wear masks.[24]

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see here the illusion of an anterior completion and subsequent dismemberment.

[23]Regosin writes: "Rather than La Boétie's discernible face, the portrait represents Montaigne as grotesque and monstrous bodies, pieced together of diverse members" ("Figures of the Self: ...",76).

[24]Jean Starobinski, noting the difficulty of representing being by language, asks whether the *moi* that is sought is "intimement présent" or "indéfiniment absent". According to Starobinski, "L'essai selon Montaigne est tour à tour (ou simultanément) une révélation instantanée du moi, et une poursuite qui ne peut s'achever" (89).

The grotesques of the painter are meant to frame the centered picture. Montaigne's grotesques, too, are subordinate to the void they frame, which inspired them, and which threatens to absorb them. The absence at the center may be the truest representation of being. It is the place where masks fall and words fail.[25] La Boétie could not possibly be figured there in any manner; certainly not in words. Instead, both friend and friendship are absorbed into the surrounding grotesques, digested by the self that would reflect his presence in the "identical" other. Deprived of consubstantiality with his friend, Montaigne seeks it with his book.[26]

> Icy, nous allons conformément et tout d'un trein, mon livre et moy. Ailleurs, on peut recommander et accuser l'ouvrage à part de l'ouvrier; icy, non : qui touche l'un, touche l'autre (III,2).

Montaigne has previously made the same claim for his friendship with La Boétie. If Montaigne cannot be separated from his book, then they go as one, like siamese twins, a live half and a dead half, the image of the friendship the book represents.[27] Absorbed

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[25]According to Regosin, "Montaigne compensates for the missing subject by inserting himself in the center, but in doing so, it disappears, for to be periphery and center at once is to be everywhere and nowhere. The portrait of *De l'amitié* appears to evoke a project of self-depiction destined to undermine its own ends," ("Figures...," 76).

[26]In "Figures of the Self:..." Regosin notes that "[Montaigne's] claim of consubstantiality gives equal status to both model and image, subject and object, indeed makes each generate the other" (68).

[27]François Rigolot notes the desire of "le moi observant et le moi observé" to abolish "leur division pour se representer en toute plénitude («plainement») et en toute transparence («conformément»), [Les Métamorphoses de Montaigne, 181].

Rigolot also asserts that "Toute l'originalité du mimétisme des Essais consistera donc, si l'on croit leur auteur, à ne pas déformer le déformé mais à le transformer en choisissant une forme d'écriture unique, qui accueille la contradiction pour ne pas contredire la vérité" (183).

into the text of the *Essais*, friend and friendship join the continuity and mutability of experience.[28] Experience, as Montaigne emphasizes in his final chapter "De l'Experience", is the "passage" which winds and twists towards "estre", tracing the limits of nothingness.

Gérard Defaux (*Marot, Rabelais, Montaigne: l'écriture comme présence*) sees in Montaigne's book a replacement for La Boétie, a mirror that is consubstantial with him, in which he finds presence and discovers himself (201). Defaux describe's Montaigne's attitude towards his supposed consubstantiality with friend and book in terms similar to the way we have described Nietzsche's Apollonian Illusion. (Nietzsche describes Apollonian Illusion, we remember, as the creative and inventive fabric of art and life that, by shielding us from the truth of the void that grounds existence, permits us to live.)

> La logique, ici, perd son temps. [...] Le désir règne, et la croyance. La vérité que proclame Montaigne n'est pas en l'occurrence la vérité qu'elle est. Elle est au contraire la vérité à laquelle il s'accroche, celle qu'il s'est inventée parce qu'elle lui permet de continuer à vivre, et de se retrouver (202).

If the book approaches "consubstantiality" with its author it is in its permutations, which mirror "un sujet merveilleusement vain, divers et ondoyant" (I,1,13a) and its "informe visage" (I,26,144a) in the vivid mutability of a living language.

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[28]François Rigolot speaks of Montaigne's "poétique de la mutation des formes" (Les Métamophoses de Montaigne, 185).

> Me peignant pour autruy, je me suis peint en moy de couleurs plus nettes que n'estoyent les miennes premieres. Je n'ay pas plus faict mon livre que mon livre m'a faict, livre consubstantiel à son autheur, d'une occupation propre, membre de ma vie; non d'une occupation et fine tierce et estrangere comme tous autres livres (II,28,648c).

Montaigne, the author, has been created by his book. Once again, we encounter the past participle "faict". Montaigne and La Boétie were both "tout faicts" when they met, only to find that each was in fact incomplete before his union with the other. Montaigne, since the death of his friend is nothing but half of himself, a self which, in the unity of their friendship, seemed "desjà si fait". Both images of completion were belied by subsequent transformations in the development of friendship and the loss of the friend. Now we see the past participle "faict" implying the reciprocal formation, if not completion, of the author and his book. Again, the language in which the two form one another is of the same nature.

In "De la vanité" Montaigne says that if he were to write a book to last he would have written it in "un language plus ferme" (960-1b), i.e. Latin. A dead language would have been appropriate for a monument, but a living language is most suitable to trace out the author's metamorphoses, as the language, too, grows, transforms, ingests and digests classical antecedents and day to day life. Modern French changes constantly, Montaigne notes, yet we always presume that it is now "faict" or "parfaict".

> Il escoule tous les jours de nos mains et depuis que je vis s'est alteré de moitié. Nous disons qu'il est à cette heure parfaict. Autant en dict du sien chaque siecle (961c).

In the same essay Montaigne compares his verbal self-representation with a gentleman "qui ne communiquoit sa vie que par les operations de sa ventre" (922b). The gentleman would display in his house a week's worth of his excrements: "c'estoit son estude, ses discours; tout autre propos luy puoit." Montaigne then describes his own words as "des excremens d'un vieil esprit" (923b). Language, as excrement, is merely the waste product and evidence of the nourishment of experience. Nourishment, like experience, is process and passage that sustains being. Both are incorporated and partially assimilated by a being to which they are nevertheless alien.[29] Only what is not assimilated is released as evidence, tracing the passage and process. To call oneself consubstantial with one's offal is not logical. If you are what you eat, it is the part that is absorbed, not the excreted material that is assimilated. Words and excrement cannot be more than witness to, or, as in the case of the "Gentil-homme", a representation of the process of living. Weary, Montaigne asks,

> Et quand seray-je à bout de representer une continuelle agitation et mutation de mes pensées, en quelque matiere qu'elles tombent [...]? (III,9,923b).

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[29]Gérard Defaux notes Montaigne's cannibalism of "des cannibales" in the essay of that name, as well as of the Stoics and La Boétie in order to represent himself (*Marot, Rabelais, Montaigne: l'écriture comme présence*, 173).

Montaigne's book cannot be complete, nor can the self it represents be complete before death. The self can be completed neither by verbal representation, nor in the reflection of the desire for mutual completion in friendship with an other.[30] Neither fecal matter nor verbal "matiere" constitute a man or his ideas. However, language is not only a by-product of experience, but is also a generative member of illusion. Like another generative member, it is inobedient and tyrannical. In trying to figure or measure himself through experience, Montaigne employs language as evidence of process and passage. The world is devoured by the self and spun out anew from language. But language, like self, resists definition. In trying to trace out the evershifting lines of self in order to "know" it, Montaigne creates, not a portrait, but a labyrinthine road-map. The situation is remarkably similar to the human attempt to portray nature, including human nature, in order to "know" it, that Montaigne describes repeatedly in the *Essais*. In seeking to describe or portray our nature through language, says Montaigne, we have come to the point where in our portrait we leave

> chez nous aucune trace apparente de la nature. Et en ont fait les hommes comme les parfumiers de l'huile: Ils l'ont sophistiquée de tant d'argumentations et de discours appellez du dehors, qu'elle en est devenue variable et particuliere à chacun, et a perdu son propre visage, constant et universel, [...] (III,12,1026-7b) [my emphasis].

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[30]As Terence Cave says:

> The production of the word-self, continually growing in size and potency, coincides with the progressive elimination of the real or natural self - in short with a movement towards death (*The Cornucopian Text*, 298).

We tend to make a portrait of nothing, surrounded and obscured by the proliferating swirl of grotesques that endlessly spew and spin the desire not to be nothing, to be something other than nothing. Montaigne often exhorts humanity to clear away the illusions of culture and ego in order to perceive "le vray visage des choses" (I,23,115a). What is the true face of things, of nature, of humanity, of the individual, beneath the masks and illusions by which we represent them? Montaigne, at one point, implies that the "degré zéro" of "estre" is attainable:

> Ce masque arraché, rapportant les choses à la vérité et à la raison, [l'homme] sentira son jugement comme tout bouleversé et remis pourtant en bien plus seur estat (I,23,116a).

The removal of man's illusions would be traumatic, Montaigne seems to say, but to rest upon truth and reason would accord a veritable and stable being. The effort to attain such a being could be compared to Montaigne's effort to portray himself in his book. Montaigne is not unaware of the paradoxes that frustrate his enterprise. He renounces artifice, in order to paint himself as truly and nakedly as he can. But as more than one commentator has pointed out, painting (like writing) is an art and cannot avoid recourse to artifice.[31] The depiction of self depends on masks, both for the individual and for humanity as a whole. As Gérard Defaux says, "Pour Montaigne déjà, [...], l'esprit humain ne voit et ne comprend vraiment que ce qui lui ressemble" (*Marot, Rabelais, Montaigne* ..., 169). The dynamics of life, a current without perceptible form or graspable substance, must be contained, or, that failing, represented by a countenance made of and

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[31]See Starobinski, 46-7, and Defaux (*Marot, Rabelais, Montaigne:* ..., 145-94).

in man's image. Defaux notes the transformation of the *Essais* from the fixity of a portrait in the first and second books "vers la continuité construite de l'auto-biographie ou du roman" (184), in the Third Book. In *Les Métamorphoses de Montaigne*, François Rigolot describes the necessity of masks to represent the endless train of mutation of self, and of the ludic function of the *Essais* as the playing out of self (181-222). The inescapable paradox for Montaigne is that what is seizable is dead (a portrait)[32] or deformed (a cripple), and what is living and genuine evades our grasp. And so while Montaigne advocates stripping the masks from the world's illusions in order not to be dupes of illusion, and to recognize a mask as a mask, he also recognizes the inescapable necessity of masks in order to represent what has no single perceptible face.[33]

We remember that Marguerite wished to strip the masks of the world's and the self's illusions in order to find pure self in God with the absence of self in silence. For Montaigne, the desire for plenitude and stability of self would also be satisfied in silence - a silence that would affirm that the last word has been uttered in the definition of a stable being. But since all is a "branloire perenne", no stable finished self is attainable or perceptible. Montaigne's idea of writing a monument for and portrait of his dead friend (and, by extension for and of himself, since he describes the two as one) must be abandoned. The original concept, in its desired finality and closure, resembles a death

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[32] See Defaux, *Marot,...*, 186, and especially note 9 on page 186, for a discussion of Montaigne's "peinture morte et muette" (II, 37) and its relation to Seneca and Erasmus' *imago res mortua est* (a portrait is a dead thing).

[33]See Rigolot's *Les Métamorphoses de Montaigne* 150-1, for a generous sampling of citations from the *Essais* describing man's multiple visages.

mask, the *larve bustuaire* decried by Rabelais. Yet, as Montaigne writes, the indistinct face beneath the flour and plaster of words continues to twitch and grimace, frown and grin, cracking and dislocating the molded features before they can set. The living self cannot be contained. La Boétie, the dead and silent half, is absent, and cannot be contained in his (friend's) monument. Nevertheless, Montaigne attempts to encase his (and his friend's) utterances and actions, including his stoically perfect death, in a verbal cenotaph. But the living half of this *androgyne*, where death and life replace male and female, will not be still. Like the restless men who will destroy Thélème in an eruption of inexorable process, monsters and chimeras must burst forth from the otiosity of the living. The enigma to be deciphered by Montaigne is the identity of the unbridled and unbranded soul. As Frère Jean transforms apocalypse to exercise by interpreting Mellin de Saint-Gelais' enigma as a game of tennis, so Montaigne's earnest quest to contain, unmask, portray or <u>be</u> himself is saved by his recognition of the ultimately ludic character of his "sotte entreprise". Within such a context, Montaigne finds that there is no ultimate mask to be removed, nor an ultimate self to be discovered, unmasked, or portrayed. Behind every mask is the unquenchable and unsilenceable urge to speak oneself. "Je veux représenter le progrez de mes humeurs, et qu'on voye chaque piece en sa naissance" (II,37,737a). The Heraclitian self, bubbling from a hidden source, flows, ever-changing, its process uncapturable as a <u>thing</u>. "Et ne traicte à point nommé de rien que rien, ny aucune science que celle de l'inscience" (III,12,1034b). Democritus laughs and Heraclitus weeps before the tragic farce of endless desire. Together the two make Janus, "rien que

rien", a point of endlessly moving fixity, looking back at the past and towards the future of their own invention from a masked and protean present.

Defaux says that the *Essais* are not, as Butor says, a "tombeau" for La Boétie, but rather "le lieu où, Montaigne temoignant, La Boétie survit dans l'écriture" (215). As such, Montaigne's words create a *locus*, a *scène*, for a testimony of love and the dynamics of life and experience to be staged. A stage insists upon the ludic character of the masks and characters that pass upon it.[34] Throughout the *Essais* we are spectators of the masks that men fashion to figure the multiple visages of unquenchable desire.[35] While we are still obliged to rely on imagination in order to perceive (an illusory) perfection, we are not obliged to consolidate or petrify our fabulations with presumption. Masks are required to lend a comprehensible face and form to that which transcends face and form. We probably could not recognize or appreciate Venus were she to set herself before us "toute nue". We do perceive the beauty of her lineaments, though, beneath the verbal veil of Virgil, just as we grasp, for an instant, her sweetness, in the misshapen but familiar flesh of *la boiteuse.*

It is true that "Nous ne goustons rien de pur", but if we are obliged to disfigure and deform perfection and nature in order to commune, in any way, with what is beyond our grasp, the ultimate forum, especially for the pyrrhonian, is in the theater. There all

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[34]See Constance Jordan's article "Montaigne's 'Chasse de cognoissance': Language and Play in the *Essais*". Jordan writes: "In play, I think, Montaigne finds his alternative to despair" (272).

[35]See Starobinski, 87-113.

is played out as a game, behind masks, representing perfection, that, by their very existence and presence on the stage, proclaim "I am not perfection, but deformity that portrays perfection". Montaigne presents, examines, and critiques the masks and mechanics of the *theatrum mundi* throughout the book. But the book itself is a stage for the *mise-en-scène* of self, and the spectator-critic of the spectacle of the world, becomes the actor-critic who plays out the desire to be and portray a self, while endlessly appraising and commenting upon his own performance. As he balances keen perception and endemic aporia, Montaigne's famous "Que sçay-je" leads never to silence but to a "scrutateur sans connaissance" (III, 9, 980b) connaissant, and a "badin de la farce" who consciously and conscientiously plays his role.[36]

> Il faut jouer deuement nostre rolle, mais comme rolle d'un personnage emprunté. Du masque et de l'apparence il n'en faut pas faire une essence réelle, ny de l'estranger le propre (III,10,989b).

Even as he criticizes the presumption and loquacity of the "plaisans causeurs" at the beginning of "Des boyteux" (1003c), Montaigne recognizes that he resembles them. In portraying them, he, too, is a "causeur", speaking and, as he speaks, spinning, from the excretions of language and experience, an image of himself that claims to mirror its source and fundamental structure.

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[36]Jean Starobinski notes Montaigne's "[...]réconciliation avec l'inévitable apparence du monde, reconnaissance de la nécessité d'un recours à la forme esthétique, donc à l'artifice et au fard, pour accéder à l'identité personnelle" (110). Also see Constance Jordan on the ludic aspects of Montaigne's enterprise. "In play, I think, Montaigne finds his alternative to despair" (272).

> Je m'estalle entier: c'est un *skeletos* où, d'une veuë, les veines, les muscles, les tendons paroissent, chaque piece en son siege. L'effect de la toux en produisoit une partie; l'effect de la palleur ou battement de coeur, un autre, et doubteusement.
>
> Ce ne sont mes gestes que j'escris, c'est moy, c'est mon essence (II,6,359c).

The character of the author is presented both structurally and essentially; we trace his presence and his being mechanically as evidence of the source, or cause.[37] Yet, the verbal mask of the lineaments of essence can never cease proclaiming, I am not a man, but words. We hear the man, whom we cannot grasp, from behind the mask when he proclaims, "Mon mestier et mon art, c'est vivre" (359c). We understand that the mask cannot live, but merely bear witness to the passage of life.

The tension between the *causeur* and critic, of the madman who unmasks the world and the madman who traces the spectacle of self and existence upon the empty stage of words, pervades the *Essais*. In "Des boyteux", (the body of which will be examined in part two of this chapter), the desire for resolution, for an end to the tension of imagination and doubt, of desire and incapacity, is figured in all its frustration.

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[37]Regosin, in "Figures of the Self:...," writes that "[...] SKELETOS is also a corpse which by its etymology is dried up, withered like a mummy; thus it parallels Montaigne's characterization of "cette peinture morte et muete" in *De la ressemblance des enfans au peres* [...]. The image of SKELETOS captures the paradoxical nature of the *essais*: just as the body must leave its life before its inner workings can be revealed, just as it must become a facsimile before its structure can be known, so the essayist must be re-placed in/by the lifeless image which is his textual portrait before he can accede to form and knowledge" (73).

However, the essay seems to find a kind of resolution of these paradoxes by placing them in a ludic context. We are incapable of satisfying our desire for an absolute, and must substitute the infirm for the perfect and the mask for the real. This fact allows the possibility that the deformity we embrace, like the deformity we embody, is also merely a mask that makes us perceptible to ourselves.

Part II

In "Des boyteux", Montaigne, relates a series of "miracles" and "merveilles" ("J'ay veu la naissance de plusieurs miracles de mon temps" [1004b]), in order to maintain that in most instances "il faudroit dire: «Il n'en est rien»". Miracles are born of misperception and desire and nurtured by invention.[38]

> La vérité et le mensonge ont leurs visages conformes, le port, le goust et les alleures pareilles; nous les regardons de mesme oeil. Je trouve que nous ne sommes pas seulement lâches à nous defendre de la piperie, mais que nous cerchons et convions à nous y enferrer. Nous aymons à nous embrouiller en la vanité, comme conforme à nostre estre (1004b).

When the marvellous mask of an event threatens to fall in the telling, revealing the commonplace, we tend to chink the spaces that are least persuasive with our own inventions ("calfeutrant cet endroict de quelque piece fauce"). Rumors, says Montaigne,

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[38]See Maryanne Cline Horowitz, "Montaigne's Doubts on the Miraculous and the Demonic in Cases of His Own Day" (81-91).

are the acceptance of appearance without care for its substance, and are bred for the sole pleasure of engaging in their generation (1005). Rumor grows more powerful as it progresses. Montaigne's characterization of rumor as "erreur" implies not only its false nature, but also its erratic course. The progression leads to the irony that the last person exposed to the rumor is more convinced of its veracity than the first. "C'est un progrez naturel" (1005b), Montaigne notes, but one must assume that he is speaking of human nature, our nature that attempts to refine itself until it is free from nature, in order to cast the world and ourselves in the image of our own desires. Yet our denaturizations often mimic natural models, and the "progrez naturel" of rumors could be likened to that of a hurricane. It is a creation that takes on life as it passes from tongue to ear to tongue to ear, like the winds of a hurricane that suck and spew water into the vortex that swirls around its hollow core. In "De l'Expérience" Montaigne says:

> Mais quoy, nous sommes partout vent. Et le vent encore, plus sagement que nous, s'ayme à bruire, à s'agiter, et se contente en ses propres offices [...] (III,13,1087c).

Montaigne presents the paradox that, in the effort to convince others of our beliefs "[on] ne crainct poinct d'adjouster son invention". In other words, we do not hesitate to deform our beliefs in an effort to make them accessible to others. Montaigne admits that he himself tends towards amplification in argument ("grossis et enfle mon subject" (1005b), perhaps in an attempt to bridge the defects in the other's understanding. However, should one demand the naked truth ("la verité nue et crue") he does his best

to provide it. Thus, the mask of deliberate artifice yields to the more obdurate husk of incapacity, as one struggles to convey ungraspable truth.

Montaigne notes that people often try to bolster their arguments by sheer force of numbers; that is, by citing numerous corroborating testimonies.

> Il y a du malheur d'en estre là que la meilleure touche de la verité ce soit la multitude des croians, en une presse où les fols surpassent de tant les sages en nombre (1105b).

Ironically, Montaigne calls on Cicero and Augustine to support his stance criticizing the appeal to "l'authorité du nombre et ancienneté des tesmoignages" (1005b):

> *«Quasi veró quidquam sit tam valdè, quàm nil sapere vulgare.»* ("As if anything were so common as lack of sense! [Cicero]") *«Sanitatis patrocinium est, insanientium turba»* ("A fine evidence of sanity is the multitude of the insane! [Augustine]") (1005c; Frame 786).

As Hugo Friedrich (ch.4) has pointed out, Montaigne habitually places *exempla* in opposition to one another to contradict one another, which negates their weight as authoritative advocates of any one fixed position. Jean Starobinski says of Montaigne's treatment of *exempla*:

> L'exemple n'est plus un terme fixe, qui s'élève et luit par-delà les vicissitudes du monde corruptible. Il est un élément de ce monde désordonné, un instant de son branle, une figure du flux universel (32).

Montaigne, with these citations, mirrors the masks of those who seek to persuade by "l'authorité du nombre et ancienneté des tesmoignages" as he maintains that he would no

more believe one hundred authorities than one, "et ne juge pas les opinions par les ans" (1006b). It is the content of the quotations, rather than their age or quantity, that makes them worth quoting. They remind us of the predominance of madness in the affairs and opinions of mankind in a manner similar to Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*. We remember the link between *Stultitia* and *cuyder*, as well as the pleasure humanity takes in the spectacle of self-deception. Montaigne wears the mask of *Moria* in revealing that the age and number of examples or supporting opinions are merely mask and makeup, irrelevant to the substance of opinion. Nevertheless, although words and masks may obscure and hide emptiness and deformity, they are also the only means we have of portraying and conveying what we perceive as truth, beyond vanity and desire.[39] And so Montaigne avails himself of the portrayals of human folly produced by ancient and illustrious predecessors.

Montaigne then recounts the anecdote of a gouty prince (another "boyteux"), who, because of his affliction "avoit perdu un beau naturel et une allegre composition" (1106b). He sought, through the intercession of a miracle-working priest, to recover his youthful nature and overcome his painful deformity. From sheer desire for health and wholeness he forced himself to submit to a painful ride on horseback to see the reknowned priest who was unable to cure him. Montaigne again notes the imperfection of human perception and the generation of fantasms and chimeras to mask that incapacity.

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[39]In her article "Vanity's Bull: Montaigne's Itineraries in III,ix," Mary McKinley writes: "In humanist discourse, language, incapable of transcending the human condition, became a metaphor for it. [...] language in its imperfections both mirrors and shapes life" (207).

> Nostre veuë represente ainsi souvent de loing des images estranges, qui s'esvanouissent en s'approchant (1006b).

The images we see in the distance are born of desire and they fade and disappear as we draw near to seize them. The true marvel is the frivolous origin and development of our hallucinations of truth. As we attempt to solidify and realize our chimeras, the verities that surround us escape notice.

> C'est merveille, de combien vains commencemens et frivoles causes naissent ordinairement si fameuses impressions. Cela mesmes en empesche l'information. Car, pendant qu'on cherche des causes et des foins fortes et poisantes et dignes d'un si grand nom, on pert les vrayes; elles eschapent de nostre veuë par leur petitesse (1006c).

Again Montaigne emphasizes the miracles of living, which surround us, and which we ignore or despise because we perceive them syntagmatically rather than paradigmatically, that is, in a temporal and linear series rather than as a timeless whole. As we saw at the end of "D'un enfant monstrueux", the only true deformity in the world is that of our perception. We prefer miracles of our own invention, miracles that defy nature, rather than the miracles of nature. Perhaps it is because humanity prefers to see itself as a miraculous exception to nature, rather than as a miracle of nature. In "De l'expérience", Montaigne repeatedly emphasizes the beauty and wonder of our part in nature, and the presumption and folly of our efforts to surpass nature.

> Nostre grand et glorieux chef d'oeuvre, c'est vivre à propos. Toutes autres choses, regner, thesauriser, bastir, n'en sont qu'appendicules et adminicules pour le plus (III,13,1088c).

The *chef d'oeuvre*, the centerpiece of our existence, is our life. But we, seeing nothing there, concentrate on the grotesques that surround it. For all the prosthetic inventions we devise to distance us from nature, we cannot escape our place in nature, or its place in us.

> [b]Nous cherchons d'autres conditions, pour n'entendre l'usage des nostres, et sortons hors de nous pour ne sçavoir quel il y fait. [c]Si, avons nous beau monter sur des eschasses, car sur des eschasses encores faut-il marcher de nos jambes. Et au plus eslevé throne du monde, si ne sommes assis que sus nostre cul (1096).

Our separation from nature is not transcendence, but farce and monstrosity. Montaigne, who has previously declared that he has seen "la naissance de plusieurs miracles de mon temps" (III, 11, 1004b), now reveals more fully the irony of that statement as he confesses,

> Jusques à cette heure, tous ce miracles et evenemens estranges se cachent devant moy. Je n'ay veu monstre et miracle au monde plus exprès que moy-mesme. On s'apprivoise à toute estrangeté par le temps; mais plus je me hante et me connois, plus ma difformité m'estonne, moins je m'entens en moy (1006b).

Again we witness the tension between the wish to unmask the folly and presumption of the world, which ignores its essence to flatter itself with illusions, and the desire to find a path to that essence and a means to contain it. Montaigne's revelation of the madness and deformity of the world is convincing in its rationality. But the search for the essential is beyond the capacity of reason. Reason itself is exposed as a cripple in the attempt to grasp the naked self. One can kick away stilts and topple a throne, but the "jambes" and "cul", the lineaments of self, seem as difficult to grasp as those of Venus. The question arises: if Montaigne is astounded at his own deformity, what is the model of perfection from which he deviates? The nothingness of the completed self, like that of La Boétie, neatly concluded with a perfectly stoic death? If so, Montaigne's endless mutations are the grotesques woven around the unachievable fixity of being. Montaigne's "deformity" is really lack of form. It is neither the false fixity of human presumption, nor the unattainable stability beyond the human condition. It is not the cold and empty completion of death. It is the "perpetuelle mutation" of living, of experience.

In "Des boyteux", Montaigne recounts examples of supposed miracles and marvels that he exposes as attributable to ignorance, gullibility, hope or desire. It is mere chance ("accidens") that determine which "miracles" are accepted and which are exposed as hoaxes. He recounts the story of a young man in a neighboring village, who

> s'estoit joué à contrefaire une nuict en sa maison la voix d'un esprit, sans penser à autre finesse qu'à jouyr d'un badinage présent (1006-7b).

The playful farce drew great attention and excitement. The young fellow was having such fun that, with two accomplices, "pour estendre sa farce à plus de ressorts" he hid under the church altar, speaking as spirits in the night.

> De paroles qui tendoient à la conversion du monde et menace du jour du jugement (car ce sont subjects soubs authorité et reverence desquels l'imposture se tapit plus aiséement), ils vindrent à quelques visions et mouvements si niais et si ridicules qu'à peine y a-il rien si grossier au jeu des petits enfans (1007b).

The youths imitate the imprecations of the the clergy within the same locus of the church. In doing so, their farce mirrors (and exposes) the masks of authority and reverence that shield "l'imposture" that is accepted daily. Fortune led the youths to be caught and put in prison where they will suffer "la peine de la sottise commune". They will suffer from the common stupidity for having exposed the common stupidity. But had it been otherwise, "qui sçait jusques où se fut accreu ce battelage" (1007b). Montaigne implies that the world is constructed and filled, "estoffé", carved and stuffed with such "battelages" that fortune chooses not to expose, or that man chooses not to see. The world's folly and abuse is often engendered by our reluctance or fear of professing our ignorance. Instead of, like the Romans, prefacing statements with qualifiers such as "il me semble" or other expressions of doubt and relativity, we rashly wrap our statements in mantels of infallibility. The illusions of presumption and *cuyder* guide our actions rather than recognition of our ignorance and incapacity. Unwilling to accept our

deformity, we compound it with masks that are meant, not to portray the perfection to which we aspire, but rather to counterfeit it.

Montaigne prefers to teach children inquiry, which implies an acceptance of ignorance. Responses, too, should be "enquesteuse, non resolutive" (1007b). Questioning is seeking and open-ended. Admission of ignorance is not a celebration of deformity or incapacity, but an acceptance of process and incompletion. The imposition of illusory resolution merely seals ignorance behind a mask of false and presumptive knowledge that, by duping he who wears it, cripples his progress towards understanding. "Qui veut guerir de l'ignorance, il faut la confesser" (1007b).

Montaigne interjects the statement "Iris est fille de Thaumatis" (1007-8c). The messenger of the gods (Iris, the rainbow), is the daughter of wonder (Thaumatis). That God speaks to man through Creation is an Augustinian commonplace. Man receives this communication through his appreciation of what extends beyond his grasp (wonder). However, often, in frustration or anxiety from his inability to complete this understanding, man closes himself off from this communication. Rather than appreciate and wonder at this communication (and wonder is an incitement to inquiry, i.e. quest, i.e. process and development), man rejects it for *cuyder*, and its pretensions to knowledge and control. We remember Montaigne's statement in the beginning of the essay that man's lot is not possession of creation, but rather enjoyment, appreciation, and acceptance ("le jouyr, l'accepter" 1003c]). Man deprives himself of this capacity; he deforms himself by blinding himself through presumption.

> [b]Voire dea, il y a quelque ignorance forte et genereuse qui ne doit rien en honneur et en courage à la science, [c]ignorance pour laquelle concevoir il n'y a pas moins de science que pour concevoir la science (1008).

Philosophy, born in wonder, nurtured through inquiry, results in the Socratic profession of ignorance.[40] Philosophy is the conscious ignorance that exceeds knowledge in its recognition of the incompleteness of knowledge and the unattainability of complete knowledge. The philosopher embraces knowledge as "une boiteuse", recognizing that she is not the Venus he desires. Knowledge, if presumed complete, is in fact ignorance of the incomplete nature and situation of that knowledge. Ignorance, as self-recognition, becomes knowledge of one's situation and nature. The fact that ignorance and knowledge, like truth and falsehood, have similar faces leads to the possibility of mistaken identities. This motif is continued with the story of "deux hommes qui se presentoient l'un pour l'autre", and described by Montaigne as "un accident estrange" (1008b).

In Corras' version of the story of Martin Guerre[41], which Montaigne read as a youth, the judge hearing the case attributed the misperceptions cultivated by the impostor to magic because of their character "merveilleuse et excedant de si loing nostre

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[40]While, for Montaigne, Socrates exemplifies the recognition of the limits of reason, he will, for Nietzsche, be the source of the illusion of reason. However, Nietzsche's Socrates sets up the paradox of reason tracing its own insufficiency, a model that lends Socrates a physiognomy similar to that of the author of the *Essais*.

[41]See Natalie Zeman Davis' book *The Return of Martin Guerre* for a modern examination of this case. In chapter 12 she discusses Montaigne's evocation of the case in "Des boyteux."

connoissance" (1008b). As such, the facts of the case obviously exceeded the knowledge ("connoissance") of the judge, who nevertheless sentenced the impostor to be hanged. Rather than attributing his ignorance to the limits of his own knowledge, the judge presumed that any knowledge that surpassed his own must be magic. Once again we encounter the refusal to seek truth and the desire to seal the apertures that threaten to expose the fallibility of a system that sustains itself on the myth of its own infallibility. Montaigne proposes, rather, that in difficult cases, the court admit its ignorance: "«La court n'y entend rien»" and tell the litigants to return in one hundred years, as the Areopagites were wont to do in such a case (1008b). Montaigne holds the recognition of ignorance in this case as an example of wisdom.

Montaigne tells us that the witches in his neighborhood are in mortal danger whenever some new author "vient donner corps à leurs songes" (1008b). It seems that, for Montaigne, witches are witches only in their imaginations. Montaigne implies that to be a witch is to cast one's identity according to "songes" of a specifically witch-like nature. Others, by giving credence to these fantasies and constructing for them, in words, an effect that reaches beyond the power of the witch herself, bind their own, and the world's, illusions to the personal chimeras of the witch. This denaturizing "progrez naturel" resembles that of rumor which, as it "progresses", oscillates from private error to public error to private error, *ad infinitum.* Belief in the fiction of words which calls truth the fictions of the sorceress' mind constructs a public persona for the "songes" of the witch, presenting them as "real" before the *theatrum mundi.* This "reality" is a marvel so frightening that it must be burned at the stake.

Deformity again pervades perception. First there is the deformation within the witch's mind; Montaigne presents them as mentally ill. There is the deformation of reason and understanding that gives substance to the smoke of the witch's delusion. And it is a deformation of the word to grant authority to "nouvels autheurs" as if their words were comparable to "la divine parolle" and the miracles of which it is both author and witness. Throughout the essay Montaigne has presented wonders, marvels and miracles that are nothing but lies, distortions, hoaxes, presumption, and ignorance masked as knowledge and truth. Montaigne now mentions the miracles related in the Bible as "certains et irrefragables" (1008b). But he mentions them only to say that it is presumptuous to compare the Biblical miracles to modern phenomena. The mysteries of the Bible are beyond our understanding; they are matters of faith. "Dieu en doit estre creu" (1008b). Again, we confront a double mouvement. How can one who is himself astonished by what he narrates give an authoritative account, analysis, or judgement of the phenomena he relates? The situation recalls that of the judge who, understanding nothing of the case, calls it magic and condemns Martin Guerre to be hanged.

> A tuer les gens, il faut une clarté lumineuse et nette; et est notre vie trop réele et essentielle pour garantir ces accidens supernaturels et fantastiques (1009b).

But while scepticism would seem in order, we also remember that wonder is the pathway of communication between man and the divine. Montaigne weaves around the evasive poles of faith and doubt. We diminish the wonder of the reality of life by obscuring it with distortions and superstition. We do so because we prefer wonder that

can be seized and grasped - like a cripple. We prefer to find "causes", which can also mean culprits, rather than to seek truth. Culprits can be executed and the menacing chink in the armor of "understanding" plugged with the corpse.

Man, says Montaigne, is to be believed about what is human; beyond that is God's domain (1009b). However, God privileges certain men to relate his truth and others, through grace and faith, to believe them. But Montaigne is not about to enter into a discussion on grace, faith and free will. He merely notes that man cheapens his commerce with God by presuming to tread with authority in the realm of the supernatural. Humanity should pay more attention to the natural. For example, it is more natural to believe that men lie or are deceived than to believe the wonders that they recount.

> Combien plus naturel que nostre entendement soit emporté de sa place par la volubilité de nostre esprit detraqué, que cela, qu'un de nous soit envolé sur un balay, au long du tuiau de sa cheminée, en chair et en os, par un esprit estrangier" Ne cherchons pas des illusions du dehors et inconneuës, nous qui sommes perpetuellement agitez d'illusions domestiques et nostres (1009b).

From scepticism of human reason we proceed to the scepticism of human irrationality. Both are attempts to find causes, and to constrain the world within the realm of human imagination. Magic is less boggling or perturbing than the impossibility of total comprehension. Human deformity can be explained away as magic, as beyond nature. Montaigne tells us of a prince who, to shake Montaigne's scepticism, brought him to see a group of prisoners supposed to be witches. There he saw

> [...] une vieille entre les autres, vrayment bien sorciere en laideur et deformité (1010b).

But behind the mask of her physical deformity was mental illness.

> [b]En fin et en conscience, je leur eusse plustost ordonné de l'ellebore que de la cicue, [c] *«Captisque res magis mentibus, quàm consceleratis similis visa»* (1010). ["It seemed to be a matter rather of madness than of crime" {Livy} (Frame 790)].

Montaigne notes once more that presumption leads to knots of conjectures. He says that he does not attempt to disentangle them, but prefers to cut through them as Alexander cut through the Gordian knot. How? By means of "les preuves et raisons qui se fondent sur l'experience et sur le faict" (1010b). However, fact and experience are diverse, indefinite and subject to various interpretations. We find ourselves, once more, before a familiar problem: that of the impossibility of establishing any stable truth by seeking its causes or describing its face. Montaigne again counsels acceptance of the limitations of human understanding and comprehension.

> Après tout, cest mettre ses conjectures à bien haut pris que d'en faire cuire un homme tout vif (1010b).

Montaigne notes examples, such as Prestantius' story of his father[42], who dreamed he was a mare and actually served as a pack-horse to some soldiers, of those who dream materially. "Et ce qu'il fantasioit, il l'estoit" (1010c). The idea reminds us of the problematic of Montaigne's enterprise in producing the *Essais*. Is his book a

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[42]See Augustine's *City of God.* XVIII, xiii).

fantasy of what and who he is? Or a dream of self that seeks corporality? Still speaking of men passing judgement on marvels that surpass human understanding, Montaigne opines:

> Si les sorciers songent ainsi materiellement, si les songes peuvent ainsi par fois incorporer en effects, encore ne croy-je pas que nostre volonté en fust tenue à la justice (1010c).

In this essay we have encountered rumor-mongers who attempt to compel truth to assume the shape which they lend it, and enlist cohorts to persuade others by sheer force of numbers that the falsehood they propagate is truth. They seek, through force, to make real what they have willed to believe. We have seen hoaxers who willfully duped others, finding amusement in the spectacle of the gullibility of others, and exploiting the desire of ignorance to believe in marvels. For this, and thus exposing the ignorance and desire of much accepted belief, they bear the vengeance of the world's ignorance and stupidity. We have encountered witches who believed that they were witches, perhaps willed to be witches. Yet their magic was confined to the imagination - their own, and those that "substantiated" (literally giving substance to) their fantasies and words. And finally, we have seen dreamers who, with no apparent conscious control or willful desire, realized the fantasies of their dreams. If we accepts Freud's notion that dreams serve as vehicles of desire, then we find in all of these examples that desire is the motivating force for the creation of and belief in the deformations known as "miracles". In the example of the dreamer who is consubstantial with his figuration in a dream we find a certain resemblance to the relation between Montaigne and his book.

At many junctures in the *Essais* we find Montaigne seeking the certainty of identity, seeking to recapture the dead, seeking to convince others that his book is one with himself and that he speaks truly. He copiously cites authors of antiquity as witnesses for all variety of opinions. He creates, captures and controls fantasies and chimeras with words, and wanders endlessly, tracing an image of self through the production of a book. Yet, here, in "Des boyteux", he warns the reader not to take too seriously his "resveries", since he can offer no certainty to replace toppled idols.

> Car en ce que je dy, je ne pleuvis autre certitude, sinon que c'est ce que lors j'en avoy en ma pensée, pensée tumultuaire et vacillante (1010c).

Montaigne claims to speak about everything only as conversation, and of nothing as opinion. As such, he splits the double meaning of "plaisans causeurs"[43], retaining only the aspect of pleasant conversationalist and rejecting the face of pretender to knowledge. He adopts a new *jeu de mots* that, instead of finding two meanings in one word ("causes"/"causeur"), contrasts the similar form of two words with different meanings ("devis"/ "advis").

> C'est par maniere de devis que je parle de tout, et de rien par maniere d'advis (1010-1c).

Everything is conversation, that is, words without import or anchor, and nothing is opinion. Later, Montaigne, will tell us, that every medal has its reverse (1012b). If

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[43]We remember this *jeu de mots* from the beginning of the essay, when Montaigne criticized the presumption of the tendency of people to seek causes for phenomena rather than truth. "Ils laissent là les choses, et s'amusent à traiter les causes. [c]Plaisans causeurs" (1003).

nothing is opinion, the implication of the entire essay is that the reverse is also true: opinion is nothing - nothing but fantasy sustained by force of will and desire (i.e. presumption). Opinion is the cripple one desperately seizes in the absence of absolute certainty. Montaigne again points to the paradox of the knowledge of ignorance in maintaining that he does not presume to know enough to transmit truth to others, and he quotes Cicero to this effect.

> *«Nec me pudet, ut istos, fateri nescrire quod nesciam»* (1011c). ("Nor am I ashamed, as those men are, to admit that I do not know what I do not know" [Frame, 790]).

Montaigne denies presuming to influence opinions. He claims that he merely tries to show various aspects of an issue

> [...] pour esclarcir vostre jugement, non pour l'obliger; Dieu tient vos courages et vous fournira de chois (1011b).

Montaigne does not deny that he has plenty of opinions and no lack of vehemence, but he insists that he does not trust them.

> Quoy? si les plus vrayes ne sont pas toujours les plus commodes à l'homme, tant il est de sauvage composition (1011b).

Man is of a wild composition. He is not tame, not predictable, not stable. His composition is like that of the grotesques, fantastic wanderings that fills the boundaries around an empty space; or it is like Horace's figure of the beautiful woman attached to a fish's tail.

Montaigne's introduction of the Italian proverb concerning Venus and "la boiteuse" mirrors the "sauvage composition" of humanity. In "A propos ou hors de propos, il n'importe..." we see the coupling of opposites, reflecting the "pensée tumultuaire et vacillante" (1010c) of one man who reflects the human condition. The expression introduces a proverb that, as centerpiece of the essay, evokes the desire of humans to couple with perfection, and the ability of humans to couple with deformity. Both the proverb and the introduction reflect the character of the grotesque, as the grotesque is described by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World.*

> The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming (24).

The ambivalence of the expression, "A propos ou hors de propos, il n'importe", is consistent with the content of the essay, if not of Montaigne's whole book, and thus follows a logical progression. While the most obvious interpretation of his introduction to the proverb would seem to be, "I'm not sure if what I am about to tell you is pertinent to what we have been discussing," we remember that throughout the essay Montaigne has repeatedly opined that men's opinions are not trustworthy guides to truth. "A propos" to this opinion, Montaigne seems to imply that what he is about to say is also untrustworthy. Or, if what he is about to tell us is "hors de propos", we could infer, paradoxically, that the opinion is trustworthy - in the same way that his other opinions are trustworthy, because they are conscious of their arbitrary nature. This interpretation is supported by the disclaimer, "il n'importe". It doesn't matter whether what I'm saying is true or not, Montaigne seems to say. I am speaking for the sake of conversation, not conversion; "par

maniere de devis" and not "par maniere d'advis". Certainly, Montaigne does not go out of his way to defend the veracity or authority of the proverb around which his essay is formed. Chance, "ou quelque particulier accident" has put this saying "en la bouche du peuple" (1011b). Again, Montaigne seems to be saying, this may or may not be true. Chance and fortune are not to be taken as absolute authorities. We have already seen what credence should be given, according to Montaigne, Cicero, and Augustine, to the mass acceptance of or popular adherence to any opinion or belief.[44] The paradoxical subversion of any authority behind the proverb continues with the appeal to the antiquity of the opinion: "il y a longtemps" that this proverb was placed in the mouth of the people (1011b). We remember Montaigne's derision of the appeal to the "l'authorité du nombre et ancienneté des tesmoignages" as measures of the veracity of an opinion or belief (1005b).

The proverb itself, as we have noted, reflects the wild composition and grotesque nature of humanity. Once more, we recall Bakhtin. Grotesque images, he says,

> [...] remain ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of "classic" aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed (25).

The grotesque implies incompletion, but also a transgression of limits (Bakhtin, 26). The Roman figures, discovered during the Renaissance in an excavation of Titus' bath, from

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[44]In "Des cannibales" Montaigne denounces the self-satisfied misperceptions of arbitrary but commonly held beliefs that cast themselves as "perfect et accomply usage de toutes choses". But, says Montaigne, the paradigm of popular belief is that which "nous avons alterez par nostre artifice et detournez de l'ordre commun" (I,31, 203a).

which Bakhtin traces the origin of the term "grotesque", were not static representation of reality, and implied that absence of finished forms or a stable world (31-2).

Throughout the essay, Montaigne has insisted upon the open-ended nature of existence before the eyes of humankind. He has derided the human presumption to completion, as manifested in the absolute quality of belief or opinion, as ridiculous and monstrous. Our true deformity, he seems to say, lies not in our incompleteness, but in our preposterous presumption to satisfy our desire for completeness by sheer force of will. The proverb he cites implies that man cannot know perfection without first knowing, profoundly, his own imperfection. The coupling with imperfection and deformity seems to be obligatory in the quest for perfection, the "parfaicte douceur" of Venus. Montaigne's formulation of the proverb does not assure union with Venus as a result of union with a cripple; it merely states that knowledge of Venus is beyond he who has not known "la boiteuse". It does not necessarily follow that knowledge of the "boiteuse" results in the attainment Venus; in fact, everything else we have seen in the essay would seem to suggest the contrary. Thus, the proverb apparently leads us to another paradox: Knowledge of Venus is beyond the man who does not know deformity, but it would be absurd to believe that knowledge of deformity should bring about knowledge of perfection. Human desire to be coupled with the sweet completion of divinity can only be expressed or manifested or "realized" in, and as, a deformation of the divine paradigm. As Montaigne shows us throughout the *Essais*, in the very substance of the *Essais*, it certainly does not follow that mere expression of desire should result in the satisfaction of desire.

Montaigne tells us that the proverb is supposed to be applicable to both men and women: "et se dict des masles comme des femelles." The equality and reciprocality of the situation of men and women in their relation to deformity and desire recalls Aristophanes' description, in Plato's *Symposium*, of the androgynous origin of humanity. The division of that unified being resulted in the irremedial mutilation and insatiable desire of the separated parts. We remember that the figure of the "androgyne", as a symbol of completion through love, serves as the emblem of the young Gargantua (ch.13). In Montaigne's context, however, we see only the aftermath of the split and the desire for unification. Man and woman in the world are truncated; they are amputees of a primordial unity that is no longer attainable. The desire to attain completion drives human actions. Humans, as "mutilés d'amour", must seek restitution and reconstitution through commerce with their own severed members. The quest for Venus, then, is inevitably the coitus of two "boyteux", who, instead of reconstituting androgynous unity, fuse "l'imparfaict" with "l'autre".

Montaigne, having cited the proverb and having cast doubts upon its veracity and pertinence to his essay, enters into conjecture as to why "le boiteux le faict le mieux" (1011b). Montaigne cites "la philosophie ancienne" (again we note the irony of the "ancienneté des tesmoignages"):

> elle dict que, les jambes et cuisses des boiteuses ne recevant, à cause de leur imperfection, l'aliment qui leur est deu, il en advient que les parties genitales, qui sont au dessus, sont plus plaines, plus nourries et vigoureuses (1011b).

The image of disproportionate size and vigor of certain members evokes Alcofribas' description of Pantagruel's ancestors in Rabelais' book. There we encounter an antique genealogy that mocks the appeal to ancient authority as a means of convincing the reader of the "truth" of the narrator's story, while actually subverting all claims to absolute truth.[45] Here we see Montaigne citing ancient philosophy after having defined philosophy as ignorance and having discredited claims to truth based on the antiquity of an opinion. We also note that Pantagruel's deformed ancestors, the medlar-eaters, were victims a "fall", since the medlars that caused their deformity had grown in the blood of Abel. Like the fragments of androgynous human completion, their deformity accentuates humanity's fall from a primordial reflection of perfection. Yet, it is the continual coupling and generation of the deformed medlar eaters, through a process informed by desire, that produces the hero whose son will lead man to wed and bed godesses.

Montaigne, sticking to his "propos", which is either/both the sexuality of cripples, and/or conjecture, offers other possible rationales for the supposed sexual prowess of cripples. We ought to note here the generation of a network of uncertainty, traced from the juxtaposition of several equally dubious opinions. One uncertain opinion - that cripples are sexually superior - is the result of "La fortune, ou quelque particulier accident". This notion, in turn, spawns a host of other conjectures, equally uncertain and unprovable, which bear, not upon the truth of the opinion that cripples "le faict le mieux",

[45] See Chapter 5 of this dissertation for a discussion of Alcofribas' strategy for revealing the arbitrary authority of his own declarations.

but upon the causes of this conjecture. This is the very tendency that Montaigne has noted and criticized in the opening pages of the essay.

The other explanations and possibilities for the cripple's alleged sexual preeminence that are cited by Montaigne concern movement, or the lack of it, on the part of the handicapped. Once again, he cites ancient authority, the Greeks, who, in an analogous enigma, described weavers as lascivious because of their sedentary work (1011-2b). Montaigne notes the opinion that the inactivity of a cripple's withered limbs "dissipe moins leurs forces et en viennent plus entiers aux jeux de Venus" (1011b). There is an obvious irony in the word "entiers" in describing the marred and malformed playing Venus. Moreover, Montaigne himself has already stated the contrary notion that, rather that crediting immobility for sexual superiority,

> J'eusse dict que le mouvement detraqué de la boiteuse apportast quelque nouveau plaisir à la besogne [...] (1011b).

Montaigne, conscious that all this conjecture is a kind of "mouvement detraqué" that illustrates his original point about the vanity and presumptuousness of seeking causes rather than truth, asks again, "Dequoy ne pouvons nous raisonner à ce pris là?" (1012b). Yet, the conversationalist, diluting every opinion with yet another, mirrors the "plaisans causeurs" in proposing the possibility that the passions of weavers are inflamed, not by inaction, but rather that

> ce tremoussement que leur ouvrage leur donne, ainsin assises, les esveilles et sollicite, comme faict les dames le crolement et tremblement de leurs coches (1012b).

The web of conjecture surrounding propositions of dubious merit continues to be spun, almost in spite of the author. Montaigne, conscious of the dilemma, asks if these examples do not prove his original point:

> [...] que nos raisons anticipent souvent l'effect, et ont l'estendue de leur jurisdiction si infinie, qu'elles jugent et s'exercent en l'inanité mesme et au non estre? (1012b).

We judge and reason and surmise beyond the limits of judgement and reason. If our reason is exercised even in inanity and non-being, how do we judge the line between inanity and wisdom, between being and non-being? Montaigne speaks of the "flexibilité de nostre invention à forger des raisons à toute sorte de songes" [my emphasis], and notes the tendency of our imaginations "à recevoir des impressions de la fauceté par bien frivoles apparences" (1012b). "Forger", of course, carries the ambivalent meaning of "Fabricating", implying either "forming" or "counterfeiting". As for the vulnerability of the imagination to receive and ensconce appearance as truth, Montaigne cites his own experience to prove his point. He once had commerce with a cripple and

> par la seule authorité de l'usage ancien et publique de ce mot, je me suis [...] faict à croire avoir reçeu plus de plaisir [...] (1012b).

We remember that, at the beginning of the essay, Montaigne has mocked the society that imagined that by changing the calendar, "ce fut proprement remuer le ciel et la terre à la fois" (1002b). Here, in his tryst with the lame, Montaigne mimicks that presumption, citing authorities that he has already discredited ("l'usage ancien et publique") as

convincing his imagination that, during his coitus with a cripple, heaven and earth had moved.

Montaigne provides us with contrary explanations for other dubious facts, citing the completely contradictory explanations of Tasso and Suetonius as to whether equestrian exercise thickens or thins the legs of the rider. Our understanding is "soupple et erratique", "bon a tous pieds" (1012b). Like Panurge in the *Tiers Livre*, who can twist the words of each of the oracles and experts he consults to a counterfeit conformity with the image of conjugal bliss that he wishes to realize, we not only give solidity to smoke, but lend it features in the image of our desire. We have noted the spreading network of uncertainty through conjecture over the sources, rather than the veracity, of dubious propositions. Montaigne explains that our understanding "est double et divers et les matieres doubles et diverses"(1012b). We create "estoffe" out of nothing in a geometric progression, combining the grotesque combinations of imagination and perception with the protean mutability of being.

Each time that Montaigne cites an ancient source in this essay, he sends us into a *mise-en-abîme*, since he has already cast doubt upon the utility and authority of such claims to truth. In citing such a source he is presenting us with words uttered through a mask. He has told us not to be taken in by the mask. Because it seems old and venerable is no reason to believe it utters only truth. The mask is a vehicle for the words which are themselves a vehicle for the transmission of an idea imperfectly conceived, and imperfectly imparted. While claims to the authority of corroborating testimony generally are a means of sealing an argument against contrary opinions, and thus a movement

towards closure, the effect and intention of Montaigne's citations are the proliferation of uncertainties, and imply the impossibility of closure. As such they contribute to the overall effect of the open-endedness of the grotesque, as described by Bakhtin. Bakhtin, we have seen, describes the grotesque as denying stability and closure, but representing, rather,

> [...] the inner movement of being itself [...] expressed in the passing of one form into another, in the ever incompleted character of being (32).

Later in "Des boyteux," Montaigne introduces another Italian proverb: *«Ogni medaglio ha il suo riverso»* (1012b), which again implies the unattainability of certainty or closure. Since it is an Italian proverb, we cannot but think of the previously cited Italian proverb concerning Venus and cripples. We remember that that proverb had been placed in the mouth of the people by chance or accident. Should we assume a similar origin for this proverb? The legitimacy of citation has by now been placed completely in doubt by Montaigne. On the other hand, the content of the proverb is entirely consistent with what Montaigne has been discussing. It tells us that every medal or coin has two sides, that a contrary face or opinion can be found for any appearance or belief. Thus, both the contestation and its presentation place us in a matrix of doubt, antithetical to certainty or closure.

Montaigne cites yet another source from antiquity, quoting and interpreting Clitomachus in the opinion that Carneades had surpassed the labors of Hercules in having stripped from man "l'opinion et la temerité de juger" (1012b). However, being human, in fact, our model, at the moment, of the "humaine condition", Montaigne cannot help but

conjecture as to the origin and cause of the concept of Carneades and enlist yet another ancient example to support his view:

> Cette fantasie de Carneades, si vigoureuse, nasquit à mon advis anciemment de l'impudence de ceux qui font profession de sçavoir, et de leur outrecuidance desmesurée (1012-3b) [my emphasis].

Again we encounter fantasy, vigourous and energetic, born of the desire to know, expressed as the illusion that one does indeed know what he desires to know. This "outrecuidance desmesurée" is a deformity, a grotesque caricature joining human capacity with the chimeras of desire and imagination, fusing the solidity of human existence to the void of what it is not. Montaigne recounts an anecdote about Aesop to illustrate his point. Aesop is being sold along with two other slaves who, to increase their value, claim exaggerated powers, "monts et merveilles, qu'il sçavoit et cecy et cela" (1013b). Aesop, when asked what he can do replies "«Rien,[...], car ceux cy ont tout preoccupé: ils sçavent tout»" (1013b). Montaigne employs the story to conclude his essay with the observation that extravagant claims of human capacity on oneside have merely spawned "par despit et par emulation" the extreme opposite opinion that man is capable of nothing. Montaigne cites these extreme opinions that man can know all and that man can know nothing to support his conclusion that man is immoderate in all things ("par tout"). The conclusion, characteristically, mirrors the immoderate characteristic it attributes to man in claiming its universal validity. Montaigne ends the essay by noting that man, in his immoderate way,

> n'a point d'arrest que celuy de la necessité, et impuissance d'aller outre (1013b).

Throughout the essay human deformity has been portrayed as presumption and desire. Man sodders onto himself that which is not his, making him a Siamese twin of substance and nothingness. Like the shepherd from Medoc, bereft of genitals but possessed of desire (II,30,691b), humanity exercises its judgement where it is impotent. Yet, when reason could be efficacious in dispelling the smoke of superstition, it seems to whither before our desire for "merveilles". This essay on cripples and deformity, which paradoxically, might be one of Montaigne's most symmetrical and structurally perfect, ends with the conjunction of "necessité" and "impuissance". The "impuissance d'aller outre" evokes the inability to transcend certain limits. To return to the central metaphor of the essay, the erotic enjoyment of a cripple may be prerequisite to knowledge of Venus, but it most certainly does not effectuate or guarantee that transcendance. An epistemological parallel for the erotic metaphor of the proverb might imply that human reason, "estropiée" though it is, must be embraced before divine lucidity may be approached. Yet, the enjoyment of the handicapped human faculty cannot in itself lead to the desired omniscience. The yearned for union with divine sapience can only be simulated by means of a prosthetic device - the imagination.

The transformation of cripples to goddesses and human understanding to divine sapience is ultimately a ludic and theatrical enterprise. If humanity is conscious of this fact, it plays its roles in a continual process of mutation and transformation, tracing the vivid "crotesques" of experience around the void of all that is not his own. "Il n'y a point

de fin en nos inquisitions; nostre fin est en l'autre monde" (III,13,1045c). Within that context man creates and discovers himself and the world as a game, as an enactment of possibility and potential, until he reaches the limits of necessity or impotence - the limits of his own capacity. However, if he is unconscious of the game, and takes his grotesques as the centerpiece, replacing the void of what he is not with fantasies of what he would be, man is foolish and mad. He has gone from enjoying the cripple as he seeks Venus, to clinging to the cripple, insisting that she is Venus. It seems that heaven and earth have moved. Meanwhile Venus, like the natural year, remains untouched and unaffected.

Conclusion

We began this study with Baudelaire's paradoxical statement that poetry is the most real of phenomena, because it is only completely true "in another world." The most real of phenomena, says Baudelaire, is incomplete and only reaches completion beyond the phenomenal world. This implies that any semblance of completion in the phenomenal world must be illusory. Poetry is comprised of language, which is by its very nature incomplete. Language, as representation, serves an intermediary function, evoking an image of an absent referent. Representation, we have noted, implies the absence of that which is represented while evoking or miming its presence. This conception of representation led us to what we called the theatrical paradigm. We suggested that the theater, as the most self-conscious of representative systems, could be employed as a paradigm for the dynamics of representation. We called the theater self-conscious because it manifests its provisional status; time, place, and identity are clearly circumscribed, defined and labeled as illusory. Theatrical presence clearly proclaims the absence of "reality" in what is represented through its artifice. This idea led us to recall Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* and its concepts of the origin and purpose of artistic and representational activity.

Nietzsche asserts that the function of artistic illusion is to conceal the absence of meaning that underlies human existence, thereby providing the illusion of meaning that renders life bearable. He also maintains that tragedy is the apogee of artistic endeavor because it reveals the very truth that art is meant to obscure: that of the void behind its

own imaginative veil. We noted the paradoxical implications of this interpretation as well as Nietzsche's insistence that while truth may be intimated, it cannot be seized or defined. While the importance of these ideas to our concepts of representation and literary activity are evident, they also could be seen as bringing into focus epistemological and ontological problems that have captivated writers and thinkers since ancient times.

Before reading the authors from the French Renaissance whose works are examined in this study, we compared our observations on the nature of representation with the Augustinian tradition that informs, in one way or another, the works and attitudes of the Renaissance. Augustine, too, posits reality beyond the phenomenological world, in the Divine Totality of God. Augustine also places this truth and reality beyond the grasp of humanity, but claims that it can become accessible through the grace of God. Augustine presents the paradox of human language as a means of pointing towards the Truth that is beyond language. Augustine posits Truth in a "heard silence" that is the stilling of the particular voices of creation and their incorporation into a totality of eternal being. Language, in Christian tradition, is no more than a vague reflection of the Divine *Logos*. Human language, the word, must come to silence before the totality of the Word can be apprehended.

The ideas and authors that we have discussed in our introductory pages prepared us for a critical point of view that precludes closure, certainty or absolutes in this world. While Nietzsche places the void as origin and endpoint of human cultural activity, Augustine places the Divine Totality as origin and *telos* of human existence. Both,

however place beginnings and endings beyond our grasp; both characterize the "truths" invented by human cultural activity as self-justifying illusions.

French Renaissance literature is a product of the Christian tradition that defers ultimate meaning and closure to the divine plenitude of another world. It is also the product of a fascination with the intellectual freedom, energy and creativity of classical antiquity. This study of the literary quests of Pierre de Ronsard, Marguerite de Navarre, François Rabelais and Michel de Montaigne is indebted to the observations of David Quint and Terence Cave concerning the intellectual and literary problems that arise from this blending and confrontation of traditions and sources. Quint's book, *Origin and Originality: Versions of the Source,* examines the anxiety of Renaissance writers in search of an authoritative grounding for their works in literary antecedents while trying to make a place for their own original production and authorial personae. Cave's work, especially *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance,* explores the paradoxes implicit in the quest for a plenitude richly evoked, but infinitely deferred by the empty masks of language and desire.

In these stimulating discussions one encounters the fascination with the quest for an absolute: an absolute beginning, an absolute resolution; absolute plenitude or absolute absence. From more than one perspective, the search for absolutes could be said to motivate creative activity. But the absolute eludes our grasp and its unattainability demands ever more elaborate strategies in an attempt to represent the unattainable. The representation of an absolute presents a paradox. Beyond attainment by the particular and finite, it is also beyond representation and reproduction by what is less than absolute.

Rather than reproducing an unattainable absolute, literary representation becomes the figuration of the desire to define and seize an absolute. But since the absolute is beyond comprehension, what is really represented is, as Octave Mannoni says, the desire to figure the object of desire.

Various texts and authors reveal various degrees of consciousness of the infinite regression into which they have entered in attempting to represent a desire for that which is beyond fulfillment or even figuration. Consciousness of this dilemma is part of what we have termed the theatrical paradigm, because it leads the writer to adopt strategies that are most clearly formulized in the theater. Such strategies reveal the artificiality of their means. They manifest their own provisional status as representation while exploiting this self-awareness to evoke and express a yearning for what is beyond representation. One might say that the incapacity of literature to satisfy or even define the desire that motivates it is part of the truth that literature reveals. Literature then becomes a ludic enterprise, mirroring the endless quest, endless yearning, and eternal process of the search for an absolute grounding for existence.

Quint and Cave are not the first to point out that Renaissance thought was focused simultaneously on both the power and the insufficiency of the written word. Recently, Gérard Defaux's book *Marot, Rabelais, Montaigne: l'écriture comme présence* has greatly enriched the discussion with illuminating readings of seminal Renaissance writers such as Erasmus and Jacques Lefèvre d'Etaples. Defaux's readings of these influential thinkers and writers provide a detailed and provocative picture of prevailing attitudes towards language and the desire for an *oratio* capable of mirroring authorial

ratio. Our study has profited from these and other works, using them as a point of reference in our exploration of the dilemmas confronted and strategies pursued by Ronsard, Marguerite, Rabelais and Montaigne. It is their creation of literary masks that comment upon themselves as *personae* and figurations of desire that has formed the body of this discussion.

In Ronsard's poetry we encountered the quest to construct and certify an authoritative authorial *persona*. We saw Ronsard's poetry as mask and mirror behind which and before which the poet creates and animates a self. That self is the poet who is capable of figuring, and figuratively satisfying, the object of desire. In Ronsard's case that desire is for the capacity to satisfy and banish desire. We noted Ronsard's elevation of the poet to a hierophantic status that approaches divine authority. The poet simulates that coveted authority as his verse represents the satisfaction of the desire to transform Marie into his own words, himself into a protean Jupiter or (as in the "Ode à Michel de l'Hospital) the direct descendant of Homer, the divinely ordained Poet. But we also saw, in poems such as "Pour la fin d'une comédie" and "Discours ou dialogue entre les Muses deslogées et Ronsard", the poetic figuration of the dismantling of the poetic mask. In these works, poetry is portrayed as incapable of directing the *theatrum mundi* or reifying its illusions.

The notion of *theatrum mundi*, an important metaphor in the Renaissance, firmly places human ludic constructs in a relative and mimetic position. Human creation provides us with a ludic locus wherein we distribute roles, don masks, control the action, witness beginnings and endings and the absorption of the particular by the whole. The

dupe in our creations is never ourselves. But the very certainty simulated by our own constructs reminds us of their relative and provisional character as particles of a reality beyond the theater of the world. In that theater beyond our control and comprehension we fear that it is we who are, in Montaigne's words, "le badin de la farce." Ronsard admits that his poetry is illusion. He complains to the Muses that they have deluded him by presenting poetry as something real, complete and substantial. But he also submits that as long as we are human, we have no other recourse but to play along with the illusions within our grasp since lucidity is beyond our capacity. Poetry then becomes the stage upon which we enact the illusory fulfillment of our desire for transcendence. Yet it is, at the same time, the mirror of our incapacity. Such a characterization reminds us of Montaigne's cripple in "Des boyteux." Poetry, as such, is a cripple that, seized in this world, seems to make the heavens and earth move as, clutching her to our breast, we simulate possession of Venus. We close our eyes to her infirmity and imperfection because she responds to and reciprocates our desire for perfection. When we open our eyes we encounter our own imperfection mirrored in that of the lame partner with whom we are joined.

Our reading of Marguerite de Navarre's poetry and theater owes much to Robert Cottrell's brilliant book, *The Grammar of Silence*. Marguerite's texts deconstruct the illusions of the world in an effort to be rid of illusion. Among the illusions that obscure the reality of God, according to Marguerite, are those of self and language. Self and language are masks that figure desire as capable of being satisfied by something less than the Divine Totality of God's Love. The deconstruction of the world's masks and illusions

in Marguerite's poetry is motivated by the desire for incorporation with the plenitude of God, who is "*Tout*". Marguerite's *oeuvre* figures the desire for the annihilation of the self which separates her from God. Marguerite sees the self's autonomy as an exile from the Divine Totality for which she yearns. Silence is the prerequisite to reincorporation with the absolute beginning and end in God. Marguerite's texts express the desire for the voice of self to be quieted with a *mise-en-scène* that figures the stilling of the voice. Paradoxically, this stilling of the voice is represented through language as the endless mutterings of an insistent self urging itself to silence. Her poetry enacts the reduction to nothingness as a figuration of the desire to be whole. We have seen that Marguerite's consciousness of this paradox leads to poetic strategies of great power and ingenuity that almost always reveal the paradox which fuels and frustrates her poetic purpose. In her *Chansons spirituelles*, Marguerite points to a process that accepts the constraints of the masks which bind her to self and society by reinvesting the masks with *caritas*. The popular and profane songs that Marguerite adopts and adapts to express her yearning for God are transformed into vessels of transcendent love. Marguerite's reworking of the *contrafacta* implies that the desire for a divine absolute need not demand the immediate annihilation of the world. Invested with charity, the masks of the *theatrum mundi* can serve to illustrate and celebrate the process of the soul in search of its fulfillment in God.

Rabelais' novels celebrate the richness of the *theatrum mundi*, while ridiculing those duped by its illusions. Rabelais shows us that the world as a vehicle of process invested with charity is astounding in its fecundity and resilience. On the other hand, the impotent illusions of *philautia*, enacted within the sterile confines of the self, are the stuff

of farce. We have commented upon Rabelais' mockery of the quests for absolutes in characters such as Thaumaste and Panurge. We remember the young Gargantua's parodic search for the ultimate "torche-cul" and we remember the letter that Gargantua writes to Pantagruel. In that letter Gargantua urges his son to become an "abysme de science". The abyss of science has no endpoint, and "science" without "conscience" is an illusory knowledge that merely flatters the *libido sciendi*. The voyages and quests of the Rabelaisian heros provide no certain answers and the silent world of Thélème explodes in the joke of an enigmatic poem about a tennis match. The narrators of Rabelais' novels exhort us to thirst, echoing Paul's injunction to thirst to be perfect. Thirst invested with *caritas*, with the desire to love what is perfect in that which is not, encourages us to drink and nourish ourselves. To drink of the fountain of charity is not an attempt to sate and put an end to thirst, but to accept thirst as an incentive to nourishment in a continual process of growth and regeneration. Rabelais mocks the self-deception that is necessary to believe that satiety is possible, or even desirable, and his laughter deconstructs and demystifies the masks of self-delusion.

Montaigne's desire to portray himself reflects what Gérard Defaux calls "le vieux rêve" of mimesis. That dream is for language to present a true mirror image

> [...] non seulement de peindre les choses telles qu'elles sont, de «représenter» et de rendre fidèlement présent le réel, mais encore de pouvoir sans dommage se substituer à lui.[1]

[1] *Marot, Rabelais, Montaigne: l'écriture comme présence*, 153.

Montaigne's figurative fusing of himself to his deceased friend La Boétie, and then to the book that replaces La Boétie, leads us to two images drawn from the *Essais*. Insistence upon the completion of these unions and the consubstantiality of their components evokes the image of the *enfant monstrueux* described in the essay of that name. We remember that wretched child as a siamese twin described by Montaigne as the fusion of the babbling "imparfaict" and the headless "autre" (II,30,690-91). Montaigne's recognition of the protean character of self, as unseizable and undefinable as truth or any other absolute in a world of endless flux and permutations, reminds us of the portrait painter that Montaigne describes in the opening of "De l'amitié". Montaigne's book, like the life it mirrors and enriches, traces the labyrinthine passage of life in a "grotesque" that frames the empty space left for definition. As we borrow Montaigne's word "crotesque", we recall Bakhtin's characterization of the grotesque as reflecting

> [...] a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming.[2]

In our reading of "Des boyteux" we explored Montaigne's criticism of the human presumption to definition and comprehension of oneself and the world. Such presumption reveals and accentuates our true deformity, says Montaigne. We must embrace the cripple before we can know perfection; recognition of our own deformity (i.e. incompletion) makes it less likely that we will persist in our role as dupe, as the "scrutateur sans connoissance" and the "badin de la farce" described at the end of "De la vanité" (III,9,980). But while coupled with the cripple we should not believe that we

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[2] *Rabelais and His World*, 24.

have possessed the perfection of Venus. Desire for Venus leads to congress with the cripple as a means of representing our desire and its objective. But Venus is attainable only in another world of perfection, completion and comprehension that is beyond our grasp. The cripple, like poetry, is obviously incomplete in this world and therefore "plus réel" than any simulated perfection. She reminds us of reality: that what we grasp is not what we want and that what we desire is beyond our grasp. Consciousness of this fact frees us from servitude to illusion. Something beyond urges us on, be it love or charity, courage or an intangible aspect of what we call humanity. Montaigne, too, reminds us of this in his final essay, "De l'experience":

> [c] Nul esprit genereux ne s'arreste en soy: il pretend tousjours et va outre ses forces; il a des eslans au delà de ses effects; s'il ne s'avance et ne se presse et ne s'accule et ne se choque, il n'est vif qu'à demy; [b] ses poursuites sont sans terme, et sans forme; son aliment c'est [c] admiration, chasse, [b] ambiguité (III,13,1045).

Life is process, nourished by wonder, pursuit and uncertainty. If life is thus, it seems that any representation of that experience ought to attempt to mirror that elusiveness, while straining to capture its vitality.

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Because this study is a verbal representation of one perspective for exploring problems of representation it, too, is subject to paradoxes and frustrations such as those it describes. It makes no pretense to any absolute status as an optic for the interpretation

of texts or the problems of representation. The metaphor of theatricality has been central to our discussion because it undermines absolutes by presenting our definitions and characterizations with the arbitrary and provisional qualities proper to ludic enterprise. Yet the ludic reading of the texts we have chosen for this study leads me to consider whether it might not profitably be extended to other texts and authors beyond the Renaissance.

Corneille's *L'Illusion comique*, with its own *mise-en-abîme* of representational levels and the constant shifting of roles would provide an interesting subject of comparative study. Other baroque works, such as Théophile de Viau's "La Solitude", with its ambivalent rhetoric, shifting voices and rich intertextual kinship with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, seem richly self-conscious of their means of expression. Diderot's fascination with the *mise-en-abîme* leads to paradox and confrontation with systems of representation. In a work such as *Jacques le fataliste*, for example, we encounter an infinite regression of narrative levels while the ambiguous and even subversive appeal to the ultimate authority and referent is Jacques' fatalistic "It is written." Since Jacques himself is written in a book that often seems to be an exercise in arbitrary authorial authority, that ineffectual grounding leads straight back to the *mise-en-abîme*.

Nineteenth century writers such as Baudelaire and Nietzsche have been repeatedly evoked in this study to support our critical stance, and Baudelaire's poetry, especially his emphasis on the voyage and the unrealizable quest for an unattainable *au-delà*, could also be discussed in this context. I should also confess here that as I read through these works

be discussed in this context. I should also confess here that as I read through these works from the Renaissance, the many voices and masks of Kierkegaard seemed nearby, especially in discussions of paradox, yearning, and faith.

The works and thought of Paul Valéry were basic to the formulation of the perspectives I have applied to the readings in this study. The theme of process and mutation, so subtly yet profoundly evoked in poems like "La Jeune Parque" and "Le Cimetière marin", permeate Valéry's *oeuvre*. While examining Ronsard's sonnets, more than once I thought of Valéry's Narcisse. While the Narcissus of Ovidian tradition is ignorant of the fact that it is his own image and not another that he loves, Valéry's Narcisse despairs because he is conscious that everything he sees is masked and obscured by his own reflected image.

The works of Samuel Beckett seem to reduce all expression and presence to ludic situations that are unbearable and inescapable. In Beckett's world the ludic is the only level. *En attendant Godot* could be seen as the ultimate tragedy in the Nietzschean sense, as it endlessly reveals the emptiness of the games of which it is constructed. L'Innommable, in the novel of that name, is stripped of everything as it strives towards silence and non-being, but like Marguerite it is incapable of quelling its own endless mutterings. Hamm, Winnie, Krapp, and Malone are just a few of Beckett's characters who must create themselves and rearrange their masks through endless narratives or scribblings that stave off inevitable annihilation. Beckett's characters could be seen as

the skeletons of a body born under the Pléiade, nourished and then dissected in the intervening centuries.

If there is any conclusion to be made at the end of a study such as this, it is merely that the applicability of the ludic metaphor to human experience subverts the insistent pretensions of absolutes or closed systems. A ludic perspective permits acceptance of process and mutability as ludic activity generates and deconstructs meaning and purpose in a seemingly endless cycle whose ultimate definition and resolution can only be posited elsewhere. "Il n'y point de fin en nos inquisitions," Montaigne writes in his last essay (III,13,1045b); "nostre fin est en l'autre monde." A ludic perspective defuses frustration by emphasizing process rather than finality. It encourages humanity to play the role of the larva in metamorphosis and ridicules the desperate desire to define and conserve the infinite behind the *masque figé* of a *larve bustuaire.*

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