François Rabelais by Primo Levi

Translator's Note

In his "Premessa" to *L'altrui mestiere*, published by Einaudi in 1985, Primo Levi offers an assessment of his poetics, writing that he is, "troppo chimico, e chimico per troppo tempo, per sentirmi un autentico uomo di lettere; troppo distratto dal paesaggio, variopinto, tragico e strano, per sentirmi chimico in ogni fibra" (Levi, *L'altrui mestiere* 585). Many of the essays in this collection were written for La Stampa over the course of Levi's career, described by the author as "il frutto di questo mio più che decenale vagabondaggio di dilettante curioso" (Levi, *L'altrui mestiere* 585).

I have selected for translation excerpts from the short essay "François Rabelais" for this collection. In choosing this work for this collection, my aim was not to provide a necessary retranslation of Levi's essay into English, but rather to showcase Levi's affinity for Rabelais, and to accentuate the great, if somewhat surprising, influence Rabelais had on Levi's own worldview and writing. In 2016, Nancy Harrowitz explored this connection in depth, writing on the Rabelaisian influence in Levi's collection science fiction stories *Storie naturali*. Harrowitz argues "one of the themes that he develops in this fiction is the relation between modern science and the Holocaust," expressed through "a discourse of monstrosity as a method of exploring and reading scientific epistemology and its relation to scientific ethics and politics" (Harrowitz 67). This discourse, she observes, is framed by Levi's choice of a particular passage from Rabelais which serves as Levi's epigraph for the text and is the source of the title of the collection. Harrowitz's reading of the collection is provocative, and, in translating anew this essay, I wonder to what extent Rabelais lent Levi and other twentieth-century writers, writing under totalitarianism and through moments of crisis and loss, a language to help critique, laugh, and mourn.

As I translated this work, I refrained from reading Raymond Rosenthal's translation (which I believe is the only other extant English translation) of *Other People's Trades* from 1989 until I was nearly done. Comparing our versions was quite fun: I felt I was in a dialogue with him, free to learn from, consult, and debate his choices. Levi, for instance, writes towards the end of the first paragraph that *Gargantua and Pantagruel* contains "sottilità aristoteliche da cui si diparte una risata gigante, altre sottoscritte e avallate" (Levi, *L'altrui mestiere* 599). Rosenthal's solution to this

peculiar *altre* was to include the conjunction "while," a clarifying choice to which I am indebted, as I translated Levi's comma splice. Also of note is Levi's comparison of Rabelais to a "*bosin*," a word with which I was entirely unfamiliar, and evidently (by my research) refers to a popular satirical poetic practice originating in Lombardy. Levi writes: "è vivo in ogni sua parola uno stato d'animo diverso… anche del *bosin*, dell'estemporaneo da fiera." Rosenthal translated the clause following "bosin" as "the extemporaneous barker at a country fair" (Levi, *Other People's Trades* 122). I entirely understand the instinct, when translating a text about Rabelais, to select the word "barker," though I am unable to confirm if the Lombard *bosin* correlates to the Rabelaisian barker. In my view Levi's choice of that word in this instance was meant to relate the Lombard tradition to Rabelais's project; "bosin" and "estemporaneo" should stand as independent, but connected, thoughts. My decision to translate this passage as "and even the *bosin* and the impromptu speech of the marketplace" was an attempt to communicate this point. Lastly, Levi's use of the verb "*tace*" in reference to Rabelais's attitudes on human suffering proved challenging. I cannot think of an equivalent English verb to express the act of being silent. *Tacere* suggests an active silence. My translation of this passage to "his silence" intends to convey a similar degree of activity through ownership.

I was extremely fortunate, in my time at Haverford College, to study Italian literature at Bryn Mawr College, a decision and privilege which enabled me to reimagine my conceptions of the world, language, and the possibilities of academic work, and to translate works of Italian literature in a course at Swarthmore College through the Tri-College consortium. As such, now as a PhD student, I am an academic grandchild of Nicolas Patruno, a man who I was fortunate to meet during my studies and whose warmth, humor, passion, and love for life (like Rabelais himself) made it evident to me that the studies of my second language were indeed a discipline from which I can endlessly learn; informed by these experiences, this work is an expression of my gratitude. I am also extremely grateful to Roberta Ricci and Chiara Benetollo for their invitation, support, and generosity as I worked on this translation.

François Rabelais

There are some books which become dear to us only when we can properly explain why. In these cases, by amply widening the scope of our investigation, we likely would uncover their hidden resonances, their richness with insights into the inconspicuous sides of our nature. And then, of course, there are some books which we carry with us over the years, for our whole lives, the reason why being clear, accessible, and simple to put to words. Among these, reverentially and lovingly, I dare name *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, the colossal, singular work of Rabelais, *mon maître*. The peculiar path of this book is well-known. It was born from the love of life and worldly idleness of Rabelais, a monk, physician, philologist, traveler, and humanist. Over nearly twenty years and with absolutely no design, it grew and proliferated to over a thousand pages, accumulating with utter and fantastical liberty inventions evermore astounding, partly an emphatically farcical popular epic, partly steeped in the vigorous and vigilant moral sensibilities of a great Renaissance spirit. On any given page we encounter ribaldries, clever, lewd, or foolish, audaciously paired with quotations (real and unreal, and almost all of them drawn from memory) from Latin, Greek, Arabic, or Hebrew texts; paired with dignified, poetic oratorical performances; or paired with Aristotelian nuances, which at times swell into thumping laughter, and at times are signed and approved in good faith by a man of a pure life.

Considering that this fundamentally incongruous text, which teems with linguistic intricacies, includes vitriolic critiques and blatant satires against the Roman Curia, it is easy to understand both how *Gargantua and Pantagruel* could find a small audience in any age and why it is often a target to be banned or sliced apart and remade, opportunistically, into children's literature. Nevertheless, only do I need to open it to feel how it is a book for today — really, a book for all times, immortal and speaking a language which will always be understood.

The book is unburdened by the fundamental themes of the human comedy. Indeed, in vain would the great classical sources of poetic inspiration — love, death, religious experience, our precarious destinies — be sought within it. Instead, in Rabelais there is no self-seclusion, no second guessing, and no inward searching. There is a distinct, fanciful, and flamboyant expression of the soul alive in every word he writes, in its essence befitting an innovator or a creator (but not a utopian), an inventor of things great

and small, and even the *bosin*[1] and the impromptu speech of the marketplace. Crucially, and intentionally, the book is a revival, as it is known to have a lost ancestor: the *Chroniques du grand Géant Gargantua*, a chapbook originating from peasant fairs, which has long since vanished from the record.

It must be said that the two giants of Rabelais's genealogy are not simply colossuses of flesh nor just prodigious eaters and drinkers. The two of them, paradoxically, are the legitimate heirs of the giants who warred against Zeus. They are the heirs of Nimrod and Goliath. They are at once noble princes and joyful philosophers. In his hearty breath and hearty laugh, Pantagruel contains the hopes of our times: an industrious and fecund humankind, which shrugs its shoulders at fear and walks resolutely towards a peaceful and prosperous path, towards the golden age described by the Romans. Neither past nor distantly future, it is near at hand, so long as the strong of the earth never abandon the way of reason, steadfastly preserving it from enemies both near and afar.

This is not some placid hope; it is a robust certainty. If you desire the world, it is enough to make it yours. Enough are education, justice, science, art, law, and the examples of the ancients. God exists, but only in heaven. Man is free and not predestined, he is *faber sui*, and he can and must triumph over the divine gift of the earth. It is because of this that the world is beautiful and full of joy, not tomorrow but today, because the glorious delights of goodness and consciousness are open to everyone. The delights of the body — the sumptuous banquet table, the "theologian's" libations, and the indefatigable Venus — are too a divine gift. To love humans is to love what they are, body and soul, *tripes et boyaux*.

The only character in the book of human proportions and who never strays into symbol nor allegory is Panurge, an extraordinary upside-down hero, a restless and curious condensation of humanity who, so much more than Pantagruel, Rabelais seems to see as himself. He represents the very complexities and contradictions of modern man happily embraced. Panurge, a swindler, pirate, *clerc*, alternately the trickster and the gull, full of courage "except when in danger," hungry, poor, and destitute, who enters the novel begging for bread in every language living and dead, is us, the Human. He is not an exemplar, and is he not "perfection," but he is humanity, living for each question, sin, pleasure, and thought.

[…]

Why does Rabelais speak to us now? We certainly do not resemble him. He is rich with virtues which are missing from the sorrowful, captive, and weary man of today. He speaks to us as a model. He speaks to us with his happily curious spirit, with his good-natured skepticism, with his faith in tomorrow and his faith in man, and lastly with his style, which is so incompatible with rules and genre. Perhaps we could trace from Rabelais and his Abbey of Thélème the notion of "writing how you please," which has flourished from Sterne to Joyce to now, abandoning customs and precepts to follow the thread of fantasy as it snakes from need to spontaneous need, different and surprising at every turn like a carnival procession. Rabelais speaks to us because we can sense in this boundless painter of earthly delights a forceful and enduring acknowledgement, enriched by countless experiences, that the whole of life is not contained in this book. Indeed, it would be difficult to find a single melancholic passage across the whole of his work, and yet Rabelais understands human suffering. However, as the good doctor writes, his silence is not acceptance; he wants to cure it instead:

> Mieulx est di ris que de larmes escrire
> Pour ce que rire est le propre de l'homme.

PETER KURTZ THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

NOTES

[1] Levi appears to be referencing the singers of *bosinada*, a form of popular satirical poetry originating from Lombardy which dates back at least to the seventeenth century. See the introduction for more information on my approach to translating this passage. Scholarly references to *bosinada* can be found in Camerani, "Notizie" (1932) and in Bignami, "Alcune businade dialettali bresciane" (1971).

WORKS CITED

Bignami, Giovanni, "Alcune businade dialettali bresciane." *Lares*, vol. 37, no. 3/4, July-December 1971, Leo S. Olschki, pp. 247-51.

Camerani, Sergio, "Notizie." *La Bibliofilía*, vol. 34, no. 5, May 1932, Leo S. Olschki, pp. 193-99

Harrowitz, Nancy. "Primo Levi's Writerly Identity: From Science to Storytelling." *Primo Levi and the Identity of a Survivor.* U of Toronto P, 2016, pp. 67.

Levi, Primo. "François Rabelais." *Other People's Trades*, 2nd ed., translated by Raymond Rosenthal, Michael Joseph Ltd, 1989, pp. 121-25.

---. *L'altrui mestiere. Opere,* vol. 3, Einaudi, 1990, pp. 583-829.