

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, PhD

‘To be on the skids’; ‘Epitaph for Francois Rabelais’ Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585)

The western mind in the making. Our theme in this critical anthology. Do we feel new bruises of self-awareness, as we jolt, say, from the mystical transports of Ficino’s Neoplatonic world view, with its blend of earthy medical lore and transcendent, indeed astral, life of the spirit, to the raw meat of (certain of) Ronsard’s poems. (Raw meat? This Ronsard we now chew off a couple of bites of, is at times supremely lyrical—deep in the natural wonder of the County of Vendome—at others, musical and innovative, with his bringing to perfection of the 12 syllable Alexandrine line—all these resources he can bring to the chemistry of roughness, which meets him, as in the past they met the sensibilities of Francois Villon, 1431-1463, who brought a strange beauty to rest on the raw texture of fifteenth century French poetry. The passage of centuries, ultimately drowned in the slippage of temporal eras, highlights here the gear grinding as well as the oil slick passage of one century into another.

As a visage encountering the new of the first modern century, Ronsard brings with him the kind of traditional education and high-level social entry that would mark Montaigne’s career, a decade later. Like Montaigne, Ronsard was born into the provincial nobility, thoroughly trained in both. He was swept up young into royal service, first as a court page, then as a member of the diplomatic corps, accompanying Princess Margaret on a royal wedding journey to Scotland, then, upon return to France, and in the course of travel to a conference in Alsace, Ronsard fell victim to a serious deafness, which was to color the rest of his life and to redirect his energies—he now appeared headed toward a significant post at court—*toward humane study and literature*. It will have been at this point that his blend of erudition and experience kicked in to firm up his appropriate career. He joined with a few fellow poets, who represented the cutting edge of French language in this early modern moment. The members of this eventually illustrious group—*La Pleiade*, honoring a group of six poets from ancient Alexandria, and signaling a desire to write in the stylistic wake of antiquity. It is no surprise that in Ronsard’s first published volume, *Odes* (1550), Horace shone as the master star of the work. Carefully hewn, intricately earthy language was to be part of Ronsard’s path in language.

The following twenty eight liner, ‘To be on the skids’ —two sonnets back to back-- works the traditional effects of the sonnet, interlacing rhymed with unrhymed line endings, fine tuning the inner distances established by rhyming pairs and rhyming quatrains, opening and then closing one prominent pathway of meaning after another. The dexterity of thought aligns with the trim music, though of course we must recognize that we are reading this poem in a (splendid) English translation, which is employed to make the discussion available to an English language reader.

ESTRE INDIGENT. (‘To be on the skids’)

*To be undaunted and dissolve in fear,
To wish to die, and dance upon a string,
And, all being ventured, to have nothing clear;
To bow in servile homage, with the brand
Upon one's face, the heavy loss in hand
To plot unceasingly some trick or dodge
Whereby one's brave designs shall not endure,
Are the effects which in my spirit lodge
Hope that is doubtful, torment that is sure.
To be in want and one's last pittance wring,
To laugh by feigning and suppress the tear,
To hate the true, to love the fictive thing,*

*To possess all and find in nothing cheer;
To be set free and to one's shackles cling,*

(Author note: the heady intercrossing of fictive hope with willed delight in bondage, of 'hating the true,' while 'loving the fictive,' spins the lines with the deft energy of a poet miming the utter down and outness of a brilliant sensibility—who is invented by the author. The persona generated by this antic (or is it crazed?) persona, the author's emissary within the poem, predates, but anticipates, the paradoxical personae of John Berryman's *Love Songs* (1969) or of the narrator of Hart Crane's *Bridge* (1930) or perhaps even of William Blake's presence to the daily in his *Songs of Experience* (1794), all of these works sites at which the creator's mind interacts unpredictably with the self-aware languages of hysteria, sharp perception, sudden insight. We we can imagine parts of the poetic sensibility; we can imagine this sensibility increasingly visible by the time, say, of the era of John Donne (1572-1631) and the Metaphysicals, not to mention the work inside the Romantic movement, when the whole soul of the poet (as in Wordsworth's *Prelude*) is invested in its identity with the natural scene (with which it interacts copiously and instructively.

*These sonnets in the Pierian solitude
I made, when Frenchmen under armour sweat,
And the whole people rushed infuriate,
Being guided by Bellona, dripping blood;
When vice instead of Law, when murder, crude
Impudence, the low skill to imitate
Glaucus and Proteus to control the State
Were marks of pride: the Theban tale renewed.
In such a vicious time, to cheat my thought,
I put these quite unuseful complaints together:
Mars, even as Love, is happy for our tears.
One war is cruel, mine is nobly fought;
Mine could be ended by two skirmishers,
A hundred thousand could not end the other.*

(Author note: the stamp of the classical glistens on most serious poetry of the early modern period. We recall that Ronsard began early to write a *Franciade*, a France-centered epic, modelled on Virgil's *Aeneid*, and celebrating the triumphs of his native land, replete with references to ancient literary texts. The sense of self, in all its openness to the kaleidoscope of dicta the poetry-rich past exudes—the team of the Muses, the death struggles in ancient myth—grows rich, complex, and compelling, like the dexterous self of Ronsard's brilliant play on indigence.)

Ronsard is rarely so pungent with wit as in the poem on indigence, where he is working out the hyper-subtle intricacies of his search for identity, for the comfort of something to call himself. In the following poem he comes at us with one foot in the Middle Ages, realistic and thick, the other in the world of wit he occupies in his indigence poem. Yet, for all its seeming readiness, for the conflict with his fantasy-foe, Rabelais, for the hardy combat with his brilliant but rough tongued predecessor, there is a basic play and bitter high humor, in this epitaph, which derives from an age intimate with death, and willing to figure-skate over the surface of dark fact.

Epitaph for Francois Rabelais

*If anything can sprout
From a dead man rotted out.
And if further generation
Arises from stagnation,
A grapevine will surely take birth
From the belly and the girth
Of good Rabelais, who contrived
Always to drink while alive.*

*In one suck down the hatch
 His gullet could dispatch,
 With two shakes and a burp,
 More milk than a pig can slurp,
 More rivers than Iris can nuzzle,
 More waves than a beach can guzzle.
 Not even the dawn sun, blinking,
 Has seen him when he's not drinking,
 And night, however late,
 Has seen him in no other state
 Because 24/7, no break.
 François had a thirst to slake.
 But when the summer came on.
 Sweltering, dusk to dawn,
 He'd roll up his sleeves until,
 His arms half-bare, he would spill
 Flat on the floor in the dirt
 With the rushes and jugs, inert.
 Supine in the grease, he would hollow
 A hole in the ground, where he'd wallow
 In wine like a frog in mud,
 Then drunkenly warble a flood
 Of praise to good Bacchus - a story of
 triumph and glory:
 How he'd put down a Theban plot;
 How his father was much too hot
 For his mother, and grabbed her ass
 But burned her alive, alas
 He sang the club and steed
 Of Gargantua, and the seed
 Of Panurge; the quondam reign
 Of the gullible Papimane
 And his customs, codes and lore;
 Of Jean des Entommeures
 And all Epistemon's battles.
 But Death does not drink, he rattles,
 And he hauled François from here
 To the underground frontier,
 Where he's forced by Death to drink
 From rivers that run like ink
 All you who pass his grave,
 Be you nobleman or knave,
 Hang cups on this, his shrine
 To vessels and sparkling wine;
 Hang sausages and ham:
 For if he still has sensation,
 His soul prefers potation
 To lilies as a gift,
 And wine gives a better lift.*

Like the poem on indigence, this early modern poetry flirts with being tongue in cheek. (Scholars debate the character of the poem: is Ronsard expressing his admiration or his contempt toward Rabelais?) Do we feel, in either of the two poems in question, here, that the poet is reaching ahead of himself, into a self-awareness not characteristic of the pre-modern literary figure? Do we feel we are dealing, here, with a lack of some presence to self which will mark what later, even already in Donne, we will identify. The answer is, of course, that we are counterposing shadows, inventing a pre modern and a modern

perspective, in the interests of our overall exploration. There are few registers of literary modernity for which we cannot find parallels in western European literature as old as Chaucer, Boccaccio, or Petrarch. (Whether we can step carefully and lightly even from late antiquity, up the modernizing ladder, to the Renaissance and farther, is substance for the broadest perspectives we can undertake; though this long climb might well prove fruitful and make us rethink the kind of lip we find dividing the Middle Ages from early modernity.)

Study guide

Ronsard was raised into an aristocratic home, given the best of educations, and passed formative years of his youth in the diplomatic corps. But it was not until after he had lost his hearing, as a consequence of an infection, that he began to bring his world-experience back into writing, heading, as he did, the poetry circle that called themselves *La Pléiade*. Within that framework Ronsard became a full time poet. Becoming aware of himself as a writer was his stance toward becoming 'aware of his self,' surely one version of 'writerly self-awareness,' a trait conspicuous among many of the leaders of artistic movements, in the modern period. Do you think there were self-aware groups of poets in western culture prior to the Renaissance? How about the poets of the *Carmina Burana*?

Ronsard's poem, 'To be indigent,' 'To be on the skids,' as I put it, is the max in the adroit nimbleness of a search for identity. The dance of words mirrors the dance of mind as it defines and then unravels itself. Are we en route here to the role of the poem, in 'modern literature,' as the foremost carrier of the weight of literary self-awareness? Are we on the cusp of the discovery of the poet as working through his multiple identities, and giving words full freedom to direct their user's thought? Is Ronsard, looking like a 'modern poet'?

What kind of confraternity does Ronsard pretend to establish with Rabelais? Does the jocular humane tone of this poem take us back in spirit to the long premodern tradition of the drinking song or the Villonesque joking tone. Are you reminded of the teasing boisterous tone of the *Carmina Burana*? Do you identify such a tone in 'modern poetry?' Edward Lear? G.K.Chesterton?

Ronsard created many deeply human, full throated poems, celebrating love and women's beauty. One of the most celebrated is his *Sonnet pour Helene*, which opens:

Quand vous serez bien vieille
Le soir, a la chandelle...

One day when you ere old,
In the evening, by the candlelight...

And carries on to remind the lady that she will remember Ronsard, and that they were intimates, and he was renowned...and time had eaten them up. Take a long look at the treatment of Beatrice and Francesco in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. How did Dante handle a tender love affair—of his own creation? Was he torn by compassion? No way.