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RABELAIS ON LANGUAGE BY SIGNS.

THE origin of language was no new subject when it was taken up by the Schoolmen, using the text of Genesis ii, 19, 20: 'And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto the man to see what he would call them: and whatsoever the man called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And the man gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field.' The general attitude towards this question may be seen in the notes of Nicolaus De Lyra (1270—1340), the Jew who became a Franciscan or a Dominican, and in 1320 finished his commentary on the Bible, which was in use till the Reformation. His commentary runs as follows: Gen. ii, 19 '*ut videret quid vocaret ea. diligenter considerando naturas eorum; quarum primus homo habuit perfectam notitiam....Deus formavit hominem perfectum, non solum quantum ad corpus...sed etiam quantum ad animum in scientia ad quam potuit naturaliter attingere, ut statim posset docere.*'

Gen. ii, 20 '*Omne enim quod vocavit Adam etc. secundum veritatem; ex qua prius habuit notitiam de proprietatibus naturalibus viventium: quia nomina bene imposita a proprietatibus rerum imponuntur.*'

The naming of objects by one man is alluded to by Plato (*Tim.* 78 E) ὁ τὰς ἐπωνυμίας θέμενος. Cicero says (*Tusc. D.* i, § 62): 'Aut qui primus, quod summae sapientiae Pythagorae visum est, omnibus rebus imposuit nomina.' Bacon (*Interpr. of Nature*, c. 1) writes: 'Behold, it was not that pure light of natural knowledge whereby man in paradise was able to give unto every living creature a name according to his propriety, which gave occasion to the fall.' Cf. also Cope on Aristotle's *Rhet.* i, 1. § 8.

Thus we see that the original perfect man was credited with the knowledge of the properties of every thing and the nomenclature which designated it. With the deterioration of humanity, or with

the confusion of tongues at Babel, this knowledge was lost or became imperfect, while we find in Homer three or four objects bearing two names, one a god-given name, which denotes some essential inherent quality, as is maintained by Plato in the *Cratylus* (391 D) ὅτι οἱ γε θεοὶ αὐτὰ καλοῦσι πρὸς ὁρθότητα ἅπερ ἐστὶ φύσει ὀνόματα. Thus the god-given name of the bird χαλκίς (*Il.* xx, 291) is its real name, while κύμινδις is some fanciful human appellation. Rabelais burlesques this in iv, N. prol. Jupiter, in a 'consistory' of the Gods, speaks of 'Africa; so do mortals call that town on the Mediterranean, which we call Aphrodisium.' Thus arose the controversy of ὀνόματα φύσει ἢ θέσει, Plato inclining to the one in his *Cratylus* and Aristotle maintaining the theory θέσει οὐ φύσει. Other writers ranged themselves on one or the other side. Hippocrates, *De Arte* § 2, declares that 'forms are natural, words are made by custom.' Gellius (x, 4) quotes Nigidius: 'multa argumenta dicit cur videri possint verba esse naturalia quam arbitraria.' Sir T. Browne (*Pseud. Epid.* vi, 1) says 'Speech is by instruction, not by instinct.'

But, though the *Cratylus* is mentioned by Rabelais in iv, 37 and an allusion to one of Plato's etymologies οἶνος, ὅτι οἶεσθαι νοῦν ἔχειν ποιεῖ (*Crat.* 406 c) is found in v, 46, and perhaps δαίμονες = δαήμονες (*Crat.* 396 b) is aimed at in *Pant.* 18 ('y a il homme tant sçavant que sont les diables?' this is, however, a commonplace in the chivalric romances, e.g. Merlin i, 3), it is in iii, 19 that the Platonic doctrine is combated: 'It is a mistake to say that we have language by nature; languages exist by arbitrary institutions and agreements of the nations. Vocables (as the dialecticians say) have signification, not naturally but arbitrarily.'

Rabelais, who knew his Herodotus, naturally quotes the entertaining experiment of Psammetichus, King of Egypt, who determined that Phrygian was the oldest language from the word *Bekos* ('bread' in Phrygian), which was the first word uttered by two children who had been carefully secluded so as not to hear speech of any kind. This is cleverly versified by Claudian in *Eutrop.* II, 251:

Dat cuncta vetustas
principium Phrygibus; nec rex Aegyptius ultra
restitit, humani postquam puer uberis expers
in Phrygiam primum laxavit murmura vocem.

Rabelais perhaps inclined to Ionic as the oldest language, when he puts it in the mouth of the old Macrobius (iv, 25); possibly as the language of Hippocrates and Herodotus, or following Pliny vii, 210:

'Gentium consensus tacitus primus omnium conspiravit ut Ionum litteris uterentur.' The 'Etruscan letters' which he finds in *Garg.* 1 he probably looked upon as Lydian, and so connected with Ionic.

The method of divination styled 'Onomatomancy,' scoffed at by Panurge in iii, 25, crops up again later in iv, 37, when the *Cratylus* is mentioned on the subject of bestowing names of good omen on the captains in command against the Chitterlings. The practice is supported by instances from Roman imperial history, and the doctrine is derived from Cicero *De Divin.* i, § 103, which is backed by Herod. ix, 91 and Liv. v, 65. From Pliny xxviii, 33 is derived also the Pythagorean discovery that names of an odd number of syllables indicate perfections or defects on the right side of the human body, while those of an even number of syllables concern the left side. This probably comes direct from Pliny, though it is to be found in Agrippa *Occ. Phil.* ii, 20 under the title *Arithmomantia*, and in the *De Van. Scient.* c. 15 (*De Sorte Pythagorica*). These last treatises were much employed by Rabelais. At the end of this episode 'Mardigras,' in the shape of a sow, is declared to be the tutelary god of the Chitterlings; for they are extracted from swine; while at the encounter in iv, 41, in trying to pronounce the word, Gymnast says *Gradimars* (= fat tithe-collectors), a terrible insult to the Chitterlings. *Di-mars* is the form at Toulouse of *Mar-di*, so that in reality Gradimars is only a dialectic variety of Mardigras. It is pointed out in Macrobius on Verg. *Aen.* ii, 351 ('*Excessere omnes adytis arisque relictis | Di quibus imperium hoc steterat*') that the tutelary gods of Troy had deserted that city on being summoned forth by their proper names (*Sat.* iii, 9). For this reason also the Romans scrupulously concealed the real name of their city. Philostratus (*Vit. Apoll.* iv, 16) relates how Apollonius restored a dead girl to life by calling upon her by her proper name.

Rabelais again scoffs at this 'science' in v, 18 when he represents Henri Cotiral, a double of Her Trippa, styling a cabbage, which he held up to view, *lunaria major*, no doubt on account of the similarity of its leaves to the fronds of the *lunaria minor*, or *botrychium lunaria* (Moonwort), the strange fern dear to Alchymists, mentioned in Chaucer, *C. T.*, G. 800 (ed. Skeat). This little plant, with the seeds on one stalk and its crescent-shaped fronds on the other, was considered of mystic potency. In Du Bartas (*La Semaine*, 3rd Day, l. 604) it is credited with the powers of a magnet, so as to draw the nails out of horses' shoes. Similarly many plants obtained names from medical botanists by reason of the likeness of their leaves to organs in the human body,

for which they were therefore believed to provide remedies. Allusions to this may be found in Sir T. Browne, *Pseud. Epid.* ii, 6. 5, Corn. Agrippa, *Occ. Phil.* i, 23 and *Hudibras* iii, 1. 329:

Seek out for plants with signatures
And quack of universal cures.

Vitruvius (II, 1, § 1) has a theory derived perhaps from Lucretius (v, 1039—1105) that men living in a primitive state were brought together by forest fires that had been kindled by boughs of trees when rubbed together by the wind. When the fire had subsided they appreciated the warmth and, gathering round it, made signs and sounds to one another, which being constantly repeated became recognized and understood. This he suggests was the origin of language. Some of them began to make covered dwellings of boughs and leaves, others to dig caves under mountains, while others, in imitation of the nests and constructions of swallows, wattled together sticks and plastered them with mud, making places in which they could find shelter. This was the beginning of architecture.

The episode of the argumentation of Thaumast and Panurge by signs (*Pant.* 19), the signs exhibited by Nazdecabre (iii, 20), and Pantagruel's interpretation (iii, 45, 46) put upon the words and gestures of Triboulet the fool, are all part of the same investigation, namely, the origin of language and the primitive communication of thoughts by signs and otherwise. The signs made by Panurge to Thaumast are mostly coarse symbols of derision used in mockery, and intended to bring into contempt the keeping of acts at the Sorbonne, while the signs made by Nazdecabre are in some cases the actual symbols employed in antiquity to indicate numbers and the meanings expressed by numbers. A fairly complete list of such notation or 'supputation' (cf. Ovid, *Pont.* ii, 3. 18, *sollicitis supputat articulis*) is given in a short treatise mentioned by Rabelais in *Pant.* 18, *Baeda De Numeris et Signis*. The actual title is *De Computo vel Loquela Digitorum*, and it forms chap. 1 of the *De Temporum Ratione* of the 'venerable Bede,' or calculations to find the Church festivals during the year.

Eighteen positions of the fingers of the left hand expressed the 9 units and the 9 tens; the same on the right the 9 hundreds and the 9 thousands (cf. Mayor, *Juv.* x, 249, *dextra jam computat annos*): 10,000 and higher numbers were expressed by moving the hands to various parts of the bodies. This is a summary of the system set forth in detail by Baeda. The numbers also had different meanings attached to

them, as is shewn in Martianus Capella, when the goddess Arithmetic salutes Jupiter with the number 717 (Mayor). The number of 'the beast' will readily occur.

In Froben's edition of the Epistle of Jerome against Jovinianus Erasmus gives Scholia: 'Nec desunt qui ferant extare Baedae libellum in quo hujusmodi numerandi ratio tradatur: verum eum non potuimus nancisci.' Scholia in *Epist. I adv. Jovin.* In an appendix to *Epist. II adv. Jovin.* Erasmus says that a friend, Ludovicus Berus of Basel (cf. *Epist. Erasm.* No. 488 vol. II, ed. Allen), had lent him this book. He then proceeds to give a summary of Baeda's system. This note had probably been seen by Rabelais, who, I think, is indebted to the *Epist. adv. Jov.* for some other points. In iii, 30 the first sign made by Nazdecabre is correctly interpreted: Baeda puts it: 'Cum dicis triginta, unguis indicis et pollicis blando conjunges amplexu' and he also says that this number has reference 'ad nuptias.'

The second sign of Nazdecabre, by which he is said to indicate the Quinary number, is the ordinary natural one of holding up the five fingers of the left hand. Baeda's symbol for this is raising the medical finger of the left hand. The right hand with the thumb extended and placed above the al Katim, that is the five lowest lumbar vertebrae (i.e. the loins), indicates 900,000. The thumb of the right hand placed between the joints of the middle and medical fingers indicates 200. The raising of the index and the little fingers is not so easily made out, but the passing of the right thumb up the chest to the neck seems to indicate 200, 300, 400 thousand progressively. Beyond this Baeda's system gives no clear explanation. It seems probable, however, that Rabelais did not trouble to make out these intricate signs, excepting for purposes of ridicule.

Quintilian who gives careful directions for the use of the fingers to emphasise the effects of rhetoric (*Inst. Or.* xi, 3, 92 sqq.) also remarks in lib. i, 'si digitorum solum incerto aut indecoro gestu a computatione dissentit'; probably referring to some Rabelaisian employment of gesticulation.

Another illustration but a more general one of 'the universal language of gesture and countenance,' as Gibbon calls it (c. 59), is given in iii, 20 by a story from Lucian (*De Salt.* c. 64): An Eastern potentate who ruled over nations of many languages begged from Nero as a present a player of farces, who was a master of gesticulation. By means of this man, he said, he would be able to speak to any of his different peoples without any other interpreter. In his *Jupiter*

Tragœdus, 7, Lucian represents Hermes as wishing to address an assembly of strange gods by signs; he was not linguist enough to speak intelligibly to Scythians, etc. The powers of gesticulation among modern Neapolitans are notorious.

It is not quite clear what Panurge means when he tells Pantagruel in this chapter that it is paradoxical to say that no man ever spoke who had not heard speech. The generalization alluded to is probably that of Pliny (x, 69, § 88) 'nec sunt naturaliter surdi ut non iidem sint et muti.' This seems to be contradicted in one of the *Problemata* (No. 138 in Politian's translation) of Alexander of Aphrodisias, a book referred to by Rabelais more than once: 'Quidam vero medicorum dicunt unam esse nervorum conjugationem quae ad linguam quaeque ad aures pertineat: quo fit ut affectuum quoque consensus iis accidat: qui autem ex accidenti sunt muti surdi omnino non sunt; localis enim oritur nervorum passio.' A story is then told from the lawyer Bartolus in a gloss on ff. XLV, l. 1, § 17, to the effect that an Italian who had become deaf by accident, could still understand whatever was said in Italian, merely by observing the movement of the speaker's lips. This is not uncommon nowadays and is known as 'lip-language.' Possibly Rabelais had also in mind the temporary dumbness of Zacharias in Luc. i, 20 and 64, to which he refers in *Garg.* 7.

W. F. SMITH.

GENEVA.