

# Are You 'Gargantuesque'?



*The education of Gargantua. Illustrations  
by Gustave Doré.*

An Introduction  
To the Universe of  
François Rabelais

by François Calentier

**Just as the thinkers of the Renaissance could not have accomplished their revolutions in the domains of science, the plastic arts, and the art of government, without reliving the spirit of the discoveries of the ancient Greeks and of Christ's ministry, so today, in order to secure a future of progress for coming generations, we need to rekindle the generous zest of language of François Rabelais, and the quality of spirit he brought to it.**

**T**he works of Rabelais are the unique means of breaking with the logic of deductive Cartesian/Newtonian\* thinking that reigns supreme in France, as well as in other countries, by replacing it with the power of creative beauty as expressed in metaphor. Rabelais conceived of, and invented, a rich and harmonious language, as a means of recruiting both the educated, and the uneducated, social strata.

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\* The reader should be informed that the disease of Aristotelian deductive logic which spawned the cult of Newtonianism and British Empiricism in England, also permeated French culture under the devastating influence of René Descartes.—Trans.

The Renaissance stimulated a great educational movement, encouraged in France by Louis XI, the father of the first modern nation-state established according to the plans of such great thinkers as Dante Alighieri and Nicolaus of Cusa. Under Louis XI, France considerably increased its economic prosperity, thanks to his revolutionary improvements in the modernization of agriculture and national industries. The invention and use of the printing press, promoted by Louis XI, gave a great number of people access to essential writings, particularly the Greek Classics.

This educational ferment is exemplified by the letter that the giant Gargantua wrote to his son Pantagruel<sup>1</sup>:

Now every method of teaching has been restored, and the study of languages has been revived: of Greek, without which it is disgraceful for a man to call himself a scholar, and of Hebrew, Chaldean, and Latin. The accurate and elegant art of printing, which is now in use, was invented in my time, by divine inspiration; as, by contrast, artillery was created by diabolical suggestion. The whole world is full of learned men, of very erudite tutors, and of most extensive libraries, and it is my opinion that neither in the time of Plato, of Cicero, nor of Papinian were there such facilities for study as one finds today. No one, in future, will risk appearing in public or in any company, who is not well polished in Minerva's workshop. I find robbers, hangmen, freebooters, and grooms nowadays more learned than the doctors and preachers were in my time. Why, women and girls also aspire to the glory and reach out for the celestial manna of sound learning. . . .

Of the liberal arts, geometry, arithmetic, and music, I gave you some smattering when you were still small, at the age of five or six. Go and learn the rest, also the rules of astronomy. But leave divinatory astrology and Lully's art alone, I beg of you, for they are frauds and vanities. . . .

At some hours of the day also, begin to examine the Holy Scriptures. First the New Testament and the Epistles of the Apostles in Greek; and then the Old Testament, in Hebrew. In short, let me find you a veritable abyss of knowledge. For, later, when you have grown into a man, you will have to leave this quiet and repose of study, to learn chivalry and warfare, to defend my house, and to help our friends in every emergency against the attacks of evildoers. . . .

But because, according to the wise Solomon, wisdom enters not into the malicious heart, and knowledge without conscience is but the ruin of the soul, it benefits you to serve, love, and fear God, to put all your thoughts and hopes in Him, and by faith grounded in charity to be so conjoined with Him that you may never be severed from him by sin. Be suspicious of the world's deceits and set not your heart on vanity; for life is transitory, but the word of God remains eternal. Be helpful to all your neighbors, and love them as yourself. Respect your tutors, avoid the company of those whom you would not care to resemble, and do not omit to make use

of those graces which God has bestowed on you. Then, when you see that you have acquired all the knowledge to be gained in those parts, return to me, so that I may see you and give you my blessings before I die. [Book II, Chapter 8]\*

In this program, astrology is banned, and the knowledge of languages, and the fostering of general erudition, are clearly encouraged. This is the idea of education that Rabelais attempted to apply to himself. This is how the biographer Colletet refers to him: "It is unbelievable to see with what ferocity of spirit he tackled the study of sciences and of the Greek and Latin languages, and to what degree he succeeded." And later on: "Thus, by the strength of his mind, and through hard work, he rose to the level of polymath few men have achieved; since it was clear that he was a very learned humanist, a very profound philosopher, theologian, mathematician, geometer, astronomer, even an artist and a poet all in one." Rabelais was even an actor in his leisure.

Gargantua's letter, however, also includes a warning: positive science is not sufficient. Highway robbers can also become erudite. So, one must fear God, and practice science only by His Light, which enlightens human consciousness. The reader sees that, for Gargantua, the purpose of education is to engage the person in legitimate actions applied to the real world—including just wars, if that were necessary.

## The Historic Lineage

Rabelais, a monk who became a poet and a doctor, was affiliated with the "evangelical current," which returned to biblical writings in order to rid them of medieval commentaries, and to read them in the original language as much as possible; but without dividing the Church, and also, without having to obey the strict rules of such and such a brotherhood. This so-called evangelical current was also inspired by the achievements and the thinkers of the European Renaissance. For example, the works of the master of Rotterdam, Desiderius Erasmus, had been so fundamental for his own thinking, that on Nov. 30, 1532, Rabelais wrote a beautiful letter to him, in which he declared that he considered himself to be Erasmus's son.

In the following study, we shall concentrate on the first two books published by Rabelais, *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua*, in which Rabelais tells us about the genealogies of these two giants, starting with their marvelous births, their childhoods, their escapades, and the many

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\* Extracts reprinted from *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. by J.M. Cohen (New York: Penguin Books, 1955), by permission of the publisher.

events through which are presented Rabelais' conception of the education of peoples and of kings, as well as the cultural, political, and religious conflicts of his time, which so completely overlapped one another, that the issues of philosophical and educational choices were not at all academic questions.

Rabelais was one of those rare thinkers, who demonstrates not only that there exists an unbridgeable gap between the respective philosophies of Aristotle and of Plato, but that this is the most profound question of all. We shall see how these two schools are irreconcilable, and what kind of warfare they engaged in at that time.

Why did Rabelais choose to have his heroes be giants? Of course, he preferred giants to dwarfs, because he was thinking big, and was not very happy with littleness. Rabelais was among those who discovered America, and wanted to people it. Rabelais transformed Pantagruel, whose folkloric origin was as an imp, a sea and salt genie who afflicted his victims with insatiable thirst, into a giant, who retained the faculty of generating a thirst for water—and for wine, of course—but it was for knowledge, and for a Renaissance, that he developed his greatest thirst.

Was it enough to be a giant? No. In the popular chivalric romances of the time, Gargantua was already known as a giant. Rabelais adopted that tradition, while completely transforming its content; for the folk tales were riddled with elements that Rabelais wanted to eliminate from the world of literature: astrology, magic, courtly love, and mystical chivalric cycles which exalted cruelty and penance.

## Neither 'Obscurantism,' Nor 'Heresy,' But Renaissance

In 1532, Rabelais published *Pantagruel* in Lyon, under the pseudonym of Alcofribas Nasier, and it became a great success. In his Prologue, he warned that he told only the truth, "Quod vidimus testamur" ("We testify to what we have seen") (John 3:11). Indeed, what can be more true than a metaphor?

In the Prologue, Rabelais mocks certain Church authorities, while at the same time carefully distancing himself from the Lutherans, by indicating that he expected criticism from them. As soon as *Pantagruel* appeared in published form, the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the Sorbonne University in Paris, feeling threatened by the evangelical movement, censured it. Meanwhile, John Calvin, the head of the French Protestant Church in Geneva, Switzerland, condemned it as well. This was the same Calvin who inspired the French Huguenot movement, whose existence was the precondition for the religious wars that later ravaged France from 1562 to 1598.

Before getting into Rabelais' chronicles, it is necessary to cite a few historical and biographical events, as follows.

After the death of Pope Julius II, and the election of Leon X, in 1513, on the one hand, and the accession of Francis I to the throne of France, in 1515, on the other, a Concordat between Church and State was signed in 1516, according to which the King gave to the Pope, the parishes of France, which had been previously taken from him, in exchange for which, the King would obtain the nomination of benefices that were previously attached to the Colleges and to the chapters of the church canons. By virtue of this Concordat, Francis I, who at that time was favorable to the humanist current, nominated Geoffroy d'Estissac as priest and bishop, a humanist protector of scholars who then became a friend of Rabelais.

In 1520, Rabelais was a monk at the Franciscan monastery of the Cordeliers de Fontenay-le-Comte (in Vendee), where his father had sent him, but where he was unable to satisfy his thirst for knowledge. In 1523, Erasmus published his commentaries on the Greek version of the Epistles. The Sorbonne tried to prevent the introduction of Greek studies, and Rabelais' superiors confiscated all of his Greek books (which were returned to him only in 1524). However, Rabelais requested permission to leave the austere rule of the Franciscan order, and was granted permission to transfer to the order of Saint Benedict, where he took the solemn vows at the Abbey of Maillezais in Poitou, and where, according to his biographer Colletet, he remained for many years devouring secular as well as religious works. It was in this circumstance that he became friends with Geoffroy d'Estissac.

In 1528-1530, Rabelais began his medical studies in Paris, leaving the Benedictine order to become a secular priest,<sup>2</sup> because the monastic rule forbade him from healing by operating on the body, notably "by fire or by the sword." By September 1530, Rabelais was enrolled in the Medical University of Montpellier. Three months later, he received his Baccalaureate, which means that he had acquired everything that he needed to know beforehand. On Nov. 1, 1532, Rabelais was nominated doctor at the Hotel-Dieu of Lyon. He had a calling for healing human beings, and he is known to have invented a mechanical device for healing broken legs. If Rabelais was often censured or condemned, to the point of having to modify his writings in later editions, or was even forced into exile, he also received the protection and the support of many persons, among them, Cardinal Jean du Bellay who traveled with him to Rome in 1533-34. In 1535-36, Cardinal du Bellay was commissioned by the Pope to win the English King, Henry VIII, back to the Church, and thus prevent the break with Rome.

During the great "Battle of the Dispondes," Episte-

*Rabelais identified with the viewpoint of the great Renaissance educator Desiderius Erasmus (of Rotterdam), writing Erasmus that he considered himself to be his son. Far right: François Rabelais. Right: Desiderius Erasmus.*



The Granger Collection



mon, the companion of Pantagruel, got his head chopped off and, before Pantagruel sewed it back on, he had the opportunity, having been that close to dying, to go down to Hell, where he was made to realize that a lot of great people of this world became little people in the other. By describing a rich tapestry, in which many world-historical personalities are recognizable, Rabelais gives us a good idea of which camp he chose to be associated with. Many hierarchies are turned upside down: Those who accumulated unwarranted riches and honors in this world, are found humbled in the next, whereas the poor and the persecuted of this earth, have abundance, having become the governors of the other. Let me give you a few examples:

I saw Patelin, Rhadamanthus's treasurer, bargaining for the little pies that Pope Julius was hawking. "How much a dozen?" he asked him. "Threepence," said the Pope. "No," said Patelin. "Three blows of the cudgel. Give them here, you rogue. Give them here, and go and fetch some more." And the poor Pope went off weeping, and when he came to his master the pieman, he told him that he had been robbed of his pies. Then the pieman whipped him with an eel-skin, so soundly that his skin would have been worth nothing to make bagpipes with. [Book II, Chapter 30]

When one realizes that the ancients had placed Rhadamanthus among the judges in Hell, because of his prudence and his equanimity; and that Pope Julius II, who had allied with Louis XII in the League of Cambrai against Venice, the pseudo-Renaissance center of merchants and financier manipulators, committed treason against the League by allying with Venice after 1509, and

forming with her the Holy Alliance against Louis XII; and that the Venetian objective was to stop the dynamic of the Renaissance, and to destroy its achievements, including the creation of France as the first modern nation-state; one can then understand why this Pope finds himself in the next world reduced to the condition of a seller of little meat pies.

Or, we have:

I saw master François Villon asking Xerxes: "How much a pot of mustard?" "A penny," said Xerxes. To which the said Villon replied: "The quartan fever seize you, wretch! Five times the quantity is only half a farthing. You're overcharging us for victuals down here, aren't you?" Then he pissed into his tub, as mustard-makers do in Paris. [Book II, Chapter 30]

Villon was the famous French poet who used his poetry as a weapon to fight for the cause of Louis XI.

As for Lancelot of the Lake (the hero of the mystical, chivalric cycle of Brittany, written by Chretien de Troy, which includes also Perceval and the Quest for the Holy Grail), he was found in the underworld as "a dead horse skinner." The attack here is against feudalistic chivalry, which promoted a pseudo-Christianity based on predestination and impregnated with pagan mysticism.

*Gargantua* was probably published in Lyon, in 1535. Compared to the preceding book, a larger place is given to more "serious" issues, especially the question of education. While reasserting the idea that "it is better to write about laughter than about tears, since laughter is the characteristic of man," Rabelais clearly shows, from the very beginning, in his Prologue, that the work was peda-

gogical, by suggesting that the reader grasp his stories as metaphors, and to understand their meanings beyond a literal reading—something that can only lead to error:

Most noble boozers, and you my very esteemed and poxy friends—for to you and you alone are my writings dedicated—when Alcibiades, in that dialogue of Plato’s entitled *The Symposium*, praises his master Socrates, beyond all doubt the prince of philosophers, he compares him, amongst other things, to a Silenus. Now a Silenus, in ancient days, was a little box, of the kind we see today in apothecaries’ shops, painted on the outside with such gay, comical figures as harpies, satyrs, bridled geese, horned hares, saddled ducks, flying goats, stags in harness, and other devices of that sort, light heartedly invented for the purpose of mirth, as was Silenus himself, the master of good old Bacchus. But inside these boxes were kept rare jewels and fine drugs, such as balm, ambergris, cardamom, musk, civet, mineral essences, and other precious things.

Just such an object, according to Plato, was Socrates. For to view him from the outside and judge by his external appearance, no one would have given a shred of an onion for him, so ugly was his body and so absurd his appearance, with his pointed nose, his bovine expression, and his idiotic face. Moreover his manners were plain and his clothes boorish; he was blessed with little wealth, was unlucky in his wives, and unfit for any public office. What is more, he was always laughing, always drinking glass for glass with everybody, always playing the fool, and always concealing his divine wisdom. But had you opened the box, you would have found inside a heavenly and priceless drug: a superhuman understanding, miraculous virtue, invincible courage, unrivalled sobriety, unflinching contentment, perfect confidence, and an incredible contempt for all those things men so watch for, pursue, work for, sail after, and struggle for.

Now what do you think is the purpose of this preamble, of this preliminary flourish? Is it that you, my good disciples and other leisured fools, in reading the pleasant titles of certain books of our invention, such as *Gargantua*, *Pantagruel*, *Toss-Pint*, *On the Dignity of Codpieces*, *Of Peas and Bacon*, *Cum Commento*, may not too easily conclude that they treat of nothing but mockery, fooling, and pleasant fictions; seeing that their outward signs—their titles, that is—are commonly greeted, without further investigation, with smiles and derision. It is wrong, however, to set such small store by the works of men. For, as you yourself say, the clothes does not make the man; some wear a monkish cloak who are the very reverse of monkish inside, and some sport a Spanish cape who are far from Spanish in their courage. That is the reason why you must open this book, and carefully weigh up its contents. You will discover then that the drug within is far more valuable than the box promised; that is to say, that the subjects here treated are not so foolish as the title on the cover suggested.

But even suppose that in the literal meanings you find jolly enough nonsense, in perfect keeping with the title, you

must still not be deterred, as by the Siren’s song, but must interpret in a more sublime sense what you may possibly have thought, at first, was uttered in mere light-heartedness. Have you ever picked a lock to steal a bottle? Good for you! Call to mind your expression at the time. Or did you ever see a dog—which is, as Plato says, in the second book of his *Republic*, the most philosophical creature in the world—discover a marrow bone? If ever you did, you will have noticed how devotedly he eyes it, how carefully he guards it, how fervently he holds it, how circumspectly he begins to gnaw it, how lovingly he breaks it, and how diligently he licks it. What induces him to do all this? What hope is there in his labor? What benefit does he expect? Nothing more than a little marrow. It is true that this little is more delicious than great quantities of any other meat; for, as Galen says in his third Book, *On the Natural Faculties*, and in his eleventh, *On the Parts of the Body and their Functions*, marrow is the perfect food concocted by Nature. [Book I, Author’s Prologue]

It is through such analogies and the metaphor of the “substantific marrow,” and not through explanations, that Rabelais urges you, dear reader, one more time, to understand his writings as metaphors, emphatically inspired by the Socratic method of Plato’s dialogues.

## How To Educate a Giant?

At his birth, Gargantua was given a medal on which was inscribed in Greek the statement from Saint Paul: “Love [*agapē*] is never selfish.” (I Cor 13:5)

One day, Grandgousier, the father of our hero, discovered that his son had “a mind which participated in divinity,” and decided to have him “fully indoctrinated in Aristotle, the most estimated of all Greek philosophers.” Aristotle was the key to the education that Gargantua was to undertake, under the authority of the “great sophist doctor.” In that system, Gargantua had to learn by heart, forward and backward (!) all sorts of indigestible things, such as treatises on mythology, ethics, scholastics, grammar, semantics, rhetoric, and other scholarly manuals and commentaries which were in fact used at the time, and which the humanists mocked for their purely formal content. There was also the *Dormi secure* (*Sleep Without Worries*), which was a recipe book of sermons prepared for preachers who wanted to avoid any intellectual effort.

All of this, presented by Rabelais as the old educational system that was in practice before the advent of printing, Gargantua had to endure during two extended phases, one of thirteen years, six months, and two weeks, and the other for sixteen years and two months. His first teacher died of chicken-pox, after which he was taught by an old codger.



*A learned council prepares to teach the philosophy of Aristotle.*

However, one bright morning, Grandgousier realized that this education was not very profitable to his son, and that, on the contrary, he was going crazy, getting stupid, and turning into a dreamer and a dotard. He inquired among other authorities, who told him that he would be better off not getting any instruction, rather than to have such books and such tutors. Then they made the decision to compare the judgmental capacity of Gargantua against that of “one of those young present-day students, who had only two years of studies.” It was at that time that a young page named Eudemon, who was barely twelve years of age, was introduced to them. He was “so well curled, so well dressed, so well brushed, and so courtly in his behavior, that he was more like some little angel than a human being.”

This is what happened:

The idea pleased Grandgousier, and he commanded the page to state a proposition. Then, after demanding permission of the said Viceroy, his master, with his cap in his hand, with an open countenance and ruddy lips, and with assurance in his eyes and his gaze fixed in youthful modesty on Gargantua, Eudemon rose to his feet and began to praise and extol him, first for his virtues and fine manners, secondly for his learning, thirdly for his nobility, fourthly for his physical beauty, and in the fifth place charmingly exhorted him to show his father every reverent attention for being at such pains to have him well taught. Lastly he begged Gargantua in his kindness to employ him as the least of his servants. For he desired no other gift from heaven at that present time save that he should have the good fortune to please Gargantua by doing him some welcome service. This speech was delivered by him with such fitting gestures, with such a clear enuncia-

tion, and so eloquent a voice, in such ornate language and such good Latin, that he seemed more like a Gracchus, a Cicero, or an Emilius of the olden times than a youth of this age. But Gargantua could keep no better countenance than to burst out bellowing like a cow. He hid his face in his cap, and it was no more possible to draw a word from him than a fart from a dead donkey. [Book I, Chapter 15]

After that catastrophe with the Aristotelians, an angry Grandgousier resolved to send all of Gargantua’s tutors to the devil, and decided to look for better ones. He assigned the education of Gargantua to Ponocrates (meaning, in Greek, the worker), the teacher of Eudemon.

His new tutor was horrified to hear what Gargantua had to do under his former teachers. Thus, we learn that in this old system, Gargantua used to eat enormously and would drink almost non-stop. He would sleep a lot, would get up late (9:00 a.m.), would not wash, would play dice, cards, chess, and other out of door games, etc. He wasted a lot of his time, and studied very little. He attended many masses, recited many Pater Nosters, and in the evening, he would sometimes go out, and visit with the girls of the neighborhood. Rabelais’ long and varied descriptions of the many ways in which Gargantua would waste his time indicate only one thing: boredom.

To start with, Ponocrates asked that Doctor Theodore put Gargantua on a healthier regime<sup>3</sup>:

Therefore, to make a better beginning of his task, he entreated a learned physician of that time, Master Theodore by name, to consider if it would be possible to set Gargantua on a better road. Theodore purged the youth in due form with black hellebore, and with this drug cured his brain of its corrupt and perverse habits. By this means also Ponocrates made him forget all that he had learned from his old tutors, as Timotheus did for his pupils who had been trained under other musicians. The better to do this, Ponocrates introduced him into the society of the learned men of the region, in emulation of whom his wit increased, as did his desire to change his form of study and to show his worth; and after that the tutor subjected his pupil to such a discipline that he did not waste an hour of the day, but spent his entire time on literature and sound learning. [Book I, Chapter 23]

With Ponocrates, Gargantua had to get up very early (4:00 a.m.), and listen to passages of the Holy Scriptures that were well read and well pronounced (not mumbled nor psalmodized), during which he would wash up.

Then, he took lessons by applying practical examples about the lives of men, Ponocrates being constantly at his disposal in case he needed some help on difficult points. Then, he would play sports with his comrades, at leisure, stopping when he wanted to. They all had frugal breakfasts in order to remain light for the rest of the day. They ate while listening to readings, then chatted about food and their virtues, and went about learning everything pertinent that doctors throughout history had to say about them. After that, they sang beautiful songs, had classes in arithmetic, in geometry, in astronomy, and in music. Gargantua learned how to write and was initiated to the art of calligraphy, learning how to trace and form ancient letters and Roman characters. Then, he was initiated in the art of chivalry by the young gymnast squire, an art which required great dexterity. He would do acrobatics, go hunting, play ball, and swim in deep water. He would do many other feats of valor, and then, in the evening, he would go with his companions to study trees and plants; they would chat and eat as much as they wanted. During a copious dinner, they would continue to study, as much as they could, then for the rest of the evening, they would continue to discuss instructive and scholarly topics. After that, they would give thanks, would sing beautiful songs, amusing themselves, and then go to bed. Sometimes they would go out and pay visits to scientific circles or to people who had traveled in foreign countries. In the late evening, before turning in, they would go to their lodgings and observe the night sky, where they would identify comets, if there were any, the figures of the constellations, their location, and the different aspects of opposition and conjunction of the planets.

When the weather turned to rain, in the evening, they would saw wood, build fires, or truss wheat in the barn. Then they would study painting and sculpture, play at knuckle-bones, while re-reading ancient authors. They went on tours, visiting metal manufactures, armament foundries, jewelers, coiners, weavers, clockmakers, printers, organ makers, dyers, etc. They would learn everything by observing the creative processes involved in each trade. And,

They went also to hear public lectures, the solemn statements, repetition, declamations, and pleading of the noble advocates, and the harangues of the Gospel-preachers. Gargantua walked through the halls and places appointed for fencing, and there practiced against the masters with all weapons, conclusively proving to them that he knew as much as they did, or more. Also, instead of herborizing, they visited the druggist's shop, the herbalist, and the apothecaries, and carefully examined the fruit, root, leaves, gums, seeds, and foreign ointments, also the way in which they were adulterated. They went to see the jugglers, con-

jurers, and sellers of quack remedies, and noted their antics, their tricks, their somersaults, and their smooth words . . . when they got home they ate more soberly than on other days, of more desiccative and extenuating dishes, as a method of correcting the humid inclemency of the air, communicated to the body by necessary proximity, and so that they might receive no harm from not having taken their regular exercise.

In this way, Gargantua was tutored, and he kept to this course from day to day, profiting as you understand a young man can at his age, if he is sensible and takes such exercise continuously: a course of things which, though it seems difficult at first, became so sweet, easy, and pleasant as it went on that it was more like a king's recreation than a student's plan of study. [Book I, Chapters 23-24]

Should one interpret, dear reader, this last remark of Rabelais' to mean that Rabelais meant this program of Ponocrates to be exclusively for the education of kings, or was he thinking that every schoolboy should have the education of a king?

## The Political Fight

In March 1530, King Francis I made a contribution to the cause of humanism. In fact, the historian Belleforest writes: "King Francis I, being a lover of humanities, and of their professors, established at the University of Paris, once fallen from its glory, and into which an unintelligible obscurantism had been introduced, established in Paris twelve Public readers in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, in Mathematics, Philosophy, the Oratorical Art, and Medicine, calling upon them to educate the youth, not only from France but, from all over Christendom." In the beginning, this institution was more modest than stated by Belleforest, however, the royal readers had to avoid the "ignorant Sorbonne," as they were denigrated by it. Even the King was hated by the hostile Sorbonne.

Five years later, in the period of the publication of *Gargantua*, times had changed, and the reform had expanded; religious differences were more pronounced, and repression was getting worse. Nonetheless, Francis I was still tolerant. But, in reaction to the retrograde conservatism of the Sorbonne, a lot of people became sympathetic to reform, without being hostile to the doctrines of the Church, and were suspected by the Sorbonne of siding with the Protestants. Some people went to Italy, in exile, where Pope Paul III was still tolerant and pardoned many of those "suspected of Lutheranism."

On the night of October 17-18, 1534, the affair of the Placards erupted: throughout the crossroads of France and in Paris, even at the door of the King's bedroom, placards were hung denouncing the Catholic mass, and accusing its

priests of being idol-worshippers. Their author, Antoine Marcourt, a French pastor at Neufchatel, was attacking, simultaneously, both the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, and the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation. This provocation, which could only serve the interests of Venice, launched—and this was the aim of it—a wave of religious and political repression. Francis I was forced to publicly confess his Catholic faith, and felt himself obliged to launch persecutions. Sixteen heretics were burned at the stake in Paris from November 10 to 24. Numerous Protestants had to go into exile, among them Calvin himself, and it was very difficult to reestablish order. At the beginning of 1535, Noel Beda, a theologian from the Sorbonne, sought to embarrass Francis by accusing his sister, Marguerite, of heresy. The King's sister, a learned poetess who sympathized with the reformists, had to go into hiding in Ferrare. On February 28, however, Noel Beda was forced to publicly recant the charges.

It is in this context of confrontation, that the two educational systems examined by Rabelais have to be situated. And, it is with these political realities in mind, that we must now pay a visit to the Abbey of Theleme.

## The Abbey of Theleme

Imitating Erasmus, as well as relying on his own personal experience, Rabelais lampooned monks who were ignorant, fat, lazy, dirty, and reactionary, and went after those formalists who saw heretics everywhere, mocking their victims; who timidly hid in the monasteries, or fled from the enemy; monks to whom he gave such affectionate descriptions as bigots, hypocrites, cockroaches, etc. In the story of the Picrocoline Wars, however, Rabelais set the stage for a remarkable monk, a model monk, who resisted bravely against his opponents and defended his abbey, a monk who went by the name of Brother John of the Entemmeures. In order to thank Brother John for his heroic behavior, Gargantua gave him permission to build an abbey of his choice, and according to his own plan. This was the Abbey of Theleme.

In that abbey, contrary to every other abbey described by Rabelais, the monks were not forced to “eat shit,” that is, to eat the sins of everybody else. Nor would they generally waste their time either. The abbey was not built to welcome as members those who were rejected elsewhere because they were too stupid. Not at all. Furthermore, as long as they were pure, women were welcome. It was not necessary for people to be chaste. People could come and get married. Rich people could come, too, and everyone lived in total freedom, without closed walls. The buildings were modern and magnificent, and were open to the outside world.

However, not everyone was welcome, as was indicated by the inscription over the entrance door:

Here enter not vile bigots, hypocrites,  
Externally devoted Apes, base snites,  
Puft up, wry-necked beasts, worse than the Huns,  
Or Ostroguts, forerunners of baboons:  
Curst snakes, dissembled varlots, seeming Sancts,  
Slipshod caffards, beggars pretending wants,  
Fat chuffcats, smell-feast knockers, doltish gulls,  
Out-strouting cluster-fists, contentious bulls,  
Fomenters of divisions and debates,  
Elsewhere, not here, make sale of your deceits.

Your filthy trumperies  
Stuff't with pernicious lies,  
(Not worth a bubble)  
Would do but trouble,  
Our earthly Paradise,  
Your filthy trumperies.

Here enter not Attorneys, Barristers,  
Nor bridle champing law-Practitioners:  
Clerks, Commissaries, Scribes nor Pharisees,  
Willful disturbers of the People's ease:  
Judges, destroyers, with an unjust breath,  
Oh honest men, like dogs, ev'n unto death.  
Your salary is at the gibbet-foot:  
Go drink there; for we do not here fly out  
On those excessive courses, which may draw  
A waiting on your courts by suits of law.

Law-suits, debates and wrangling  
Hence are exil'd, and jangling.  
Here we are very  
Frolic and merry.  
And free from all entangling,  
Lawsuits, debates and wrangling.

Here enter not base pinching Usurers,  
Pelf-lickers, everlasting gatherers.  
Gold-graspers, coin grippers, gulpers of mists:  
Niggish deformed sots, who, though your chest  
Vast sums of money should to you afford,  
Would ne'ertheless add more unto that board,  
And yet not be content, you clunchfist dastards,  
Insatiable fiends, and Pluto's bastards,  
Greedy devourers, chichie sneakbill rogues,  
Hell-mastiffs gnaw your bones, you rav'nous dogs.

You beastly looking fellows,  
Reason doth plainly tell us,  
That we should not,  
To you allot.  
Room here, but at the Gallows,  
You beastly looking fellows.

Here enter not fond makers of demures  
In love adventures, peevish, jealous cures,



Sad pensive dotards, raisers of garboyles,  
Hags, goblins, ghosts, firebrand of household broils,  
Nor drunkards, liars, cowards, cheaters, clowns,  
Thieves, cannibals, faces, o'rcast with frowns,  
Nor lazy slugs, envious, covetous:  
Nor blockish, cruel, nor too credulous.  
Here mangy, pockie folks shall have no place,  
No ugly lusk, nor persons of disgrace.

Grace, honor, praise, delight,  
Here sojourn day and night.  
Sound bodies lin'd  
With a good mind,  
Do here pursue with might  
Grace, honour, praise, delight.

Here enter you, and welcome from our hearts,  
All noble sparks, endow'd with gallant parts.  
This is the glorious place, which bravely shall  
Afford wherewith to entertain you all.  
Were you a thousand, here you shall not want  
For anything; for what you'll ask we'll grant.  
Stay here, you lively, jovial, handsome, brisk,  
Gay, witty, frolic, cheerful, merry, frisk,  
Spruce, jocund, courteous, furtherers of trades,  
And in a word, all worthy gentle blades.

Blades of heroic breasts  
Shall taste here of feasts,  
Both privily  
And civilly  
Of the celestial guests,  
Blades of heroic breasts.

Here enter you, pure, honest, faithful, true,  
Expounders of the Scriptures old and new.  
Whose glosses do not blind our reason, but  
Make it to see the clearer, and who shut  
Its passages from hatred, avarice,  
Pride, factions, cov'nants, and all sort of vice.  
Come, settle here a charitable faith,  
Which neighbourly affection nourisheth.  
And whose light chaseth all corrupters hence,  
Of the blest Word, from the aforesaid sense.

The Holy Sacred Word  
May it always afford  
T'us all in common  
Both man and woman  
A sp'ritual shield and sword,  
The Holy Sacred Word.

Here enter you all Ladies of high birth,  
Delicious, stately, charming, full of mirth,  
Ingenious, lovely, miniard, proper, fair,  
Magnetic, graceful, splendid, pleasant, rare,  
Obliging, springhtly, virtuous, young, solacious,  
Kind, neat, quick, feat, bright, compt, ripe, choice,  
dear, precious.  
Alluring, courtly, comely, fine, compleat,  
Wise, personable, ravishing and sweet.

Come joyes enjoy, the Lord celestial  
Hath giv'n enough, wherewith to please us all.

Gold give us, God forgive us,  
And from all woes relieve us.  
That we the treasure  
May reap of pleasure.  
And shun what e'er is grievous,  
Gold give us, God forgive us.<sup>4</sup>

Hypocrites of all sorts, legal beagles, formalists, theological police in Sorbonne uniforms, usurers, worshippers of poverty and of burning faggots, razor manipulators, jealous husbands, and pockified blades—so many poor souls of whom Rabelais never lost hope of being able to cure their terrible diseases—yet, all of these frightful characters, were prohibited from entering into the abbey. On the other hand, those who were sanctified by the Holy Word, a metaphor taken from Saint Paul, were all welcome. The reader will note also that the poem ends on a fine-spirited pun, giving thanks to the generous givers who made possible the construction of the abbey, and whose sins have been forgiven for making possible such generous and revolutionary thinking.

This inscription is, indeed, a beautiful and joyful poem which should be read aloud, and tastefully appreciated for its musical and rhythmic qualities.

Steeped in all of the classical and in many modern languages, also with his profound sense of poetry, which he translated both into prose as well as verse, and drawing from the fountain-head of Villon, deriving from his poetry its strength, its eagerness, its deadly efficiency and musicality, the daring François Rabelais was able to elevate the French language to a level of expressiveness, of richness and beauty, which has never been surpassed by anyone to this day. And such a quality remains, still today, a standard and reference point which should inspire us to rekindle in our own present language the spirit of certain virtues that have been lost, and especially the idea of a language which reflects the cognitive powers of human creativity. By retracing the steps made by Rabelais, and by following the process of “learning to walk by walking,” we attempt to establish a continuity with the philosopher and political humanist Lyndon LaRouche, as a challenge to our own time.

The last chapter of *Gargantua* is crucial. Etymologically speaking, Theleme means “the will of God.” So, the people living in Theleme, had all received a good education, somewhat similar to that of Gargantua under the care of Ponocrates. This education was based on the principle of respecting “the will of God”; that is, to re-live the great discoveries of the past, including scientific progress in the physical sciences, the arts, and economy, all for the purpose of replicating them in future generations. In oth-



*View of the quiet pleasures enjoyed by the inhabitants of the Abbey of Theleme.*

er words, the purpose was not to reflect one's allegiance to a given faith, or to express thanks for some grace received, or to acquire some benefit through obedience to some fixed rule. All the inhabitants of Theleme well understood that the best that they could do in the world, was to act according to "their own free will"; that is, to obey "the will of God."

Let us look at this paradox more closely:

All their life was spent not in laws, statutes or rules, but according to their own free will and pleasure. They rose out of their beds, when they thought good: they did eat, drink, labour, sleep, when they had a mind to do it, and were disposed for it. None did awake them, none did offer to constrain them to eat, drink, nor to do anything; for so had Gargantua established it. In all their rule, and strictest tie of their order, there was but one clause to be observed,

*DO WHAT THOU WILT.*

Because men that are free, well-born, well bred, and conversant in honest companies, have naturally an instinct and spur that prompteth them unto virtuous action, and withdraws them from vice, which is called honour. Those same men, when by base subjection and constraint they are brought under and kept down, turn aside from that noble

disposition, by which they formerly were inclined to virtue, to shake off and brake that bond of servitude, wherein they are so tyrannously enslaved; for it is agreeable with the nature of man to long after things forbidden, and to desire what is denied us.

By this liberty they entered into a very laudable emulation, to do all of them what they saw what pleased one; if any of the gallants or Ladies should say, "Let us drink," they would all drink: if anyone of them said, "Let us play," they all played; if one said, "Let us go a-walking into the fields," they went all; if it were to go a-hawking or a-hunting, the Ladies mounted upon dainty well-paced nags, seated in a stately palfrey saddle, carried on their lovely fists, miniardly begloved every one of them, either a sparhawk, or a Laneret, or a Marlin, and the young gallants carried the other kinds of Hawks.

So nobly were they taught, that there was neither he nor she amongst them, but could read, write, sing, play upon several musical instruments, speak five or six several languages, and compose in all very quaintly, both in Verse and Prose: never were seen so valiant Knights, so noble and worthy, so dexterous and skillful both on foot and a horseback, more brisk and lively, more nimble and quick, or better handling all manner of weapons than were there.

Never were seen Ladies so proper and handsome, so miniard and dainty, less froward, or more ready with their hand, and with their needle, in every honest and free action belonging to that sex, than were there; for this reason, when the time came, that any man of the said Abbey, either at the request of his parents, or for some other cause, had a mind to go out of it, he carried along with him one of the Ladies, namely her whom he had before that chosen for his Mistress, and were married together: and if they had formerly in Theleme lived in good devotion and amity, they did continue therein and increase it to a greater height in their state of matrimony: and did entertain that mutual love till the very last day of their life, in no less vigour and frequency, than at the very day of their wedding. Here must not I forget to set down unto you a riddle, which was found under the ground, as they were laying the foundation of the Abbey, ingraven in a copper plate, and it was thus as followeth.

[Navarre Edition, Book I, Chapter 57]

Rabelais shows that, in this Abbey, there exists no opposition between individual free will and belonging to a community of human beings, or to an institution, so long as everyone is inclined to respond to the necessity of the will of God. Saint Augustine had already elaborated the possibility of a perfect harmony between human desire and the will of God. What is very beautiful, and at the same time quite shocking, is that Rabelais is putting forward the paradox of an absolute idea applied to a concrete living situation. The ideal and its realization come together, which is the supreme objective of humanism—

but which necessarily disturbs the minds of those who get stuck in some sort of “pragmatic realism,” influenced by one or another form of the Aristotelian mediocrity that has corrupted our own times as well. On the other hand, this Abbey is not an end in and of itself; it is the place where humanists can go to complete their education, in order to create an ideal elite, better than that of the monasteries and of the universities of the period. By showing how one can live without monastic rules, Rabelais does not imply that all rules and regulations should be thrown out, but only indicates that the human mind cannot develop without solving paradoxes, such as that of freedom and necessity.

Finally, Rabelais includes in his description of Theleme, a poetic riddle, of which, it is said, he wrote only the first two and the last ten lines. The rest was written by Mellin de Saint Gelais, a poet close to Francis I, whom Rabelais had the opportunity to work with in various circumstances. This poem circulated in pirate editions among humanist circles, but was not published by its author until 1574. Why? Was the content of the poem a forbidden subject? What was the meaning of the word “Prophetic”? Clearly, Rabelais was not talking about some prophecy, or “predestinational” hypothesis, of the sort which he, himself, had refuted in the Almanac of 1535.<sup>5</sup>

Let us see if we can solve the riddle:

### Riddle in the Form of a Prophecy

Poor mortals, who wait for a happy day,  
 Cheer up your hearts, and hear what I shall say:  
 If it be lawful firmly to believe,  
 That the celestial bodies can us give  
 Wisdom to judge of things that are not yet:  
 Or if from Heav'n such wisdom we may get,  
 As may with confidence make us discourse  
 Of years to come, their destiny and course;  
 I to my hearers give to understand,  
 That this next Winter, though it be at hand,  
 Yea and before, there shall appear a race  
 Of men, who loth to sit still in one place  
 Shall boldly go before all people's eyes,  
 Suborning men of divers qualities,  
 To draw them unto covenants and sides,  
 In such a manner, that whate'er betides,  
 They'll move you, if you give them ear (no doubt)  
 With both your friends and kindred to fall out,  
 They'll make a vassal to gain-stand his lord,  
 And children their own Parents, in a Word,  
 All reverence shall then be banished:  
 No true respect to other shall be had:  
 They'll say that every man should have his turn,  
 Both in his going forth, and his return;  
 And thereupon there shall arise such woes,

Such jarrings, and confused tos and fros,  
 That never were in history such coiles  
 Set down as yet, such tumults and garboyles.  
 Then shall you many gallant men see by  
 Valour stirr'd up, and youthful fervency,  
 Who trusting too much in their hopeful time,  
 Live but a while, and perish in their prime.  
 Neither shall any who this course shall run,  
 Leave off the race which he hath once begun,  
 Till they the heavens with noise by their contention  
 Have fill'd, and with their steps the earth's dimension.  
 Then those shall have no less authority,  
 That have no faith, than those that will not lie:  
 For all shall be governed by a rude,  
 Base, ignorant, and foolish multitude:  
 The veriest lowest of all shall be their Judge,  
 O horrible, and dangerous deluge!  
 Deluge I call it, and that for good reason,  
 For this shall be omitted in no season;  
 Nor shall the earth of this foul stir be free,  
 Till suddenly you in great store shall see  
 The waters issue out, with those streams the  
 Most moderate of all shall moist'ned be,  
 And justly too; because they did not spare  
 The flocks of beasts that innocentest are,  
 But did their sinews, and their bowels take,  
 Not to the gods a sacrifice to make,  
 But usually to serve themselves for sport:  
 And now consider, I do you exhort,  
 In such commotions so continual,  
 What rest can take the globe terrestrial?  
 Most happy then are they, that can it hold,  
 And use it carefully as precious gold,  
 By keeping it in Gaol, whence it shall have  
 No help but him, who being to it gave.  
 And to increase his mournful accident,  
 The Sun, before it set in th'occident:  
 Shall cease to dart upon it any light,  
 So that at once its favor shall be gone,  
 And liberty with it be left alone.  
 And yet, before it comes to ruin thus,  
 Its quaking shall be as impetuous  
 As Aetna's was, when Titan's sons lay under,  
 And yield, when lost, a fearful sound like thunder.  
 In a rime did not more quietly move,  
 When Typhoeus did the vast huge hills remove,  
 And for despite into the sea them threw.  
 Thus shall it then be lost by ways not few,  
 And changed suddenly, when those that have it  
 To other men that after come shall leave it.  
 Then shall it be high time to cease from this  
 So long, so great, so tedious exercise;  
 For the great waters told you now by me,  
 Will make each think where his retreat shall be;  
 And yet before that they be clean disperst,  
 You may behold in th'aire, where naught was erst,

The burning heat of a great flame to rise,  
 Lick up the water, and the enterprise.  
 It resteth after those things to declare,  
 That those shall sit content, who chosen are,  
 With all good things, and with celestial man,  
 And richly recompensed every man:  
 The others at the last all stripp't shall be,  
 That after this great work all men may see  
 How each shall have his due, this is their lot:  
 O he is worthy-praise that shrinketh not.

[Navarre Edition, Book I, Chapter 58]

What is this globe that the riddle is talking about? Is it the planet Earth, or a mere tennis ball? What are the conflicts and debates all about, those of a sport tournament, or of religious conflicts of the period, which were turning into an apocalyptic conflagration? Are we talking about referees, or of court judges? And furthermore, why did Rabelais add ten more lines at the end? Is he referencing the “elect” whom God has chosen as his representatives, or is he talking about the winners of a match? Let us see what Gargantua and his friend Brother John think:

No sooner was this enigmatic monument read over, that Gargantua, fetching a very deep sigh, said unto those that stood by: “It is not only, I perceive, that People called to the Gospel, and convinced with the certainty of Evangelical truths, are persecuted; but happy is that man who shall not be scandalized, but shall always continue to the end, in aiming at that mark, which God by his dear son hath set before us, without being distracted or diverted by his carnal affections and depraved nature.”

The Monk then said: “What do you think in your conscience is meant and signified by this riddle?” “What,” said Gargantua, “the progress and carrying on of the divine truth.” “By Saint Goderan,” said the Monk, “that is not my exposition; it is the style of the Prophet Merlin<sup>6</sup>: make upon it as many grave allegories and glosses as you will, and dote upon it you and the rest of the world as long as you please: for my part, I can conceive no other meaning in it, but a description of a set at tennis in dark and obscure terms. The suborners of men are the Makers of Matches, which are

commonly friends. After the two chases are made, he that was in the upper end of the tennis court goeth out, and the other cometh in. They believe the first, that saith the ball was over or under the line. The waters are the heats that the players take till they sweat again. The cords of the rackets are made of the guts of sheep or goats. The Globe terrestrial is the tennis-ball. After playing, when the game is done, they refresh themselves before a clear fire, and change their shirts: and very willingly they make all good cheer, but most merrily those that have gained: And so, farewell.” [Navarre edition, Book I, Chapter 58]

Interestingly enough, Gargantua defends the “evangelical” interpretation, but without entering into a nominalist quarrel. Once again, he glorifies those who remained truthful to natural law, to the will of God, and to the task that God has given us, even under the most terrible and difficult of circumstances, as stated in the Bible. Here the word “predestined”<sup>\*</sup> is not lost in the irony, because it simply means that the judgement of each will be according to the actions or inactions of each; and accordingly, they will be punished or rewarded, and life will go on. As for the monk, he prefers quite a different hypothesis. And what about you, dear reader: *What is your hypothesis?*

Thus, at the very end of this *Gargantua*, which Rabelais has conceived in the image of Socrates, as in the Silenes of old, whose mere appearance did not reveal the true jewels hidden inside, your choice of interpretation, dear reader, as well as your interpretation of the other chronicles of Gargantua and Pantagruel, may decide the fate of future humanity: Are we moving rapidly toward a new period of obscurantism, a New Dark Age, or will we find within us the mental and spiritual dispositions, and the necessary will, to create, right now, a new Renaissance, as was done a few centuries ago, by some illustrious giants?

—translated from the French by Pierre Beaudry

\* Translated by the expression “This is their lot,” in the penultimate line of the Riddle.—Trans.

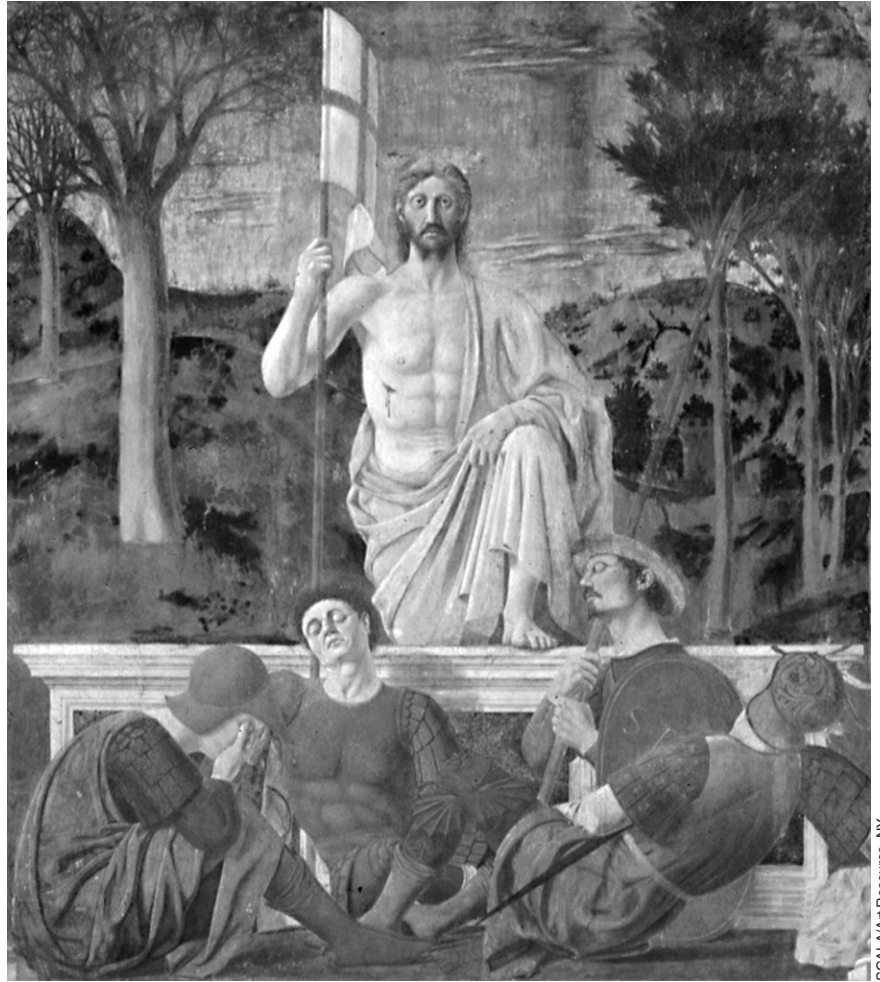
1. The translator has used the English translation by J.M. Cohen, François Rabelais, *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel* (New York: Penguin Books, 1955). I have chosen this modernized version of the Sixteenth-century French, because it is more accessible to the verbal action of the spoken language of today, while remaining close enough to the meaning of the old Rabelaisian text.  
 2. A priest living independently of a monastic order.—Ed.  
 3. This passage appears in the first printed edition, but was cut from subsequent ones.  
 4. *The Works of Mr. Francis Rabelais, Volume I*, Privately Printed for the Navarre Society Limited (London: 1653). The translator has chosen a few selected pieces, especially the poetry sections, from this older English edition, because the modern Penguin Edition

was clearly inferior in those locations. For the reader who is a Rabelaisophile, we have somewhat altered some of the strains of the old Seventeenth-century English and brought it closer to the modern reader.

5. This issue of prophecy *vs.* predestination has been precisely identified by Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., in recent writings referencing the Vatican statement on the Third Letter of Fatima, where the Fatima prophecy is presented as an urgent warning to Christians to *change* that sinful behavior whose consequences appear today as the great cultural crisis of the late Twentieth century. See, i.e., Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., “Jesus Christ and Civilization,” this issue, p. 26.—Trans.  
 6. The court poet Mellin de Saint Gellais was commonly known as “Merlin.”—Ed.

The central institutional feature of the Golden Renaissance, is that it has been the greatest political revolution in the known existence of mankind, the introduction of the principle of the modern European form of sovereign nation-state.

When considered as a model political revolution, this Renaissance is the third great revolutionary development in the entire history of globally extended European civilization. For the first time in all presently known human existence, the entirety of the population of a nation was raised from the status of virtual human cattle,



Piero della Francesca, "The Resurrection of Christ" (1455-1465).

I think my earlier reports have prepared you to be confronted now with what will be, for many, the most important, and also most shocking fact which most people, including most among my usual readers, have yet to face.

As I have repeatedly warned of late, events have already reached the point which I had warned would have arrived, *unless* certain prescribed changes were instituted. Despite my repeated warnings, of the need to reverse the policies which have created this risk, the refusal of governments and others to heed my warnings has now already brought the U.S.A. into the final phase of an already onrushing, global financial collapse. Worse, that onrushing, global financial collapse, threatens now to plunge global civilization into a *threatened* new dark age for all humanity.

In earlier reports, I had emphasized those more obvious, immediate issues which must be addressed, if even a temporary recovery of civilization is to occur. Now, presume, for a