

PRE-PUBLICATION DRAFT

Apocalypse and Literature in the Sixteenth Century: The Case of Rabelais and the Frozen Words¹

Apocalyptic discourses enjoyed an increased currency in the period of the Reformation.² History was generally thought to have reached its final stage, a belief that could be grounded in the four monarchies of Daniel or the triadic prophecy of Elias, the two schemes of periodization that dominated sixteenth-century historical thought.³ The upheavals of the Reformation were so significant that it seemed they must belong to the events of the final phase of history. There was great interest in prophetic readings of biblical texts such as Revelation and Daniel and medieval prophets including Joachim of Fiore.⁴ At the same time, the Renaissance brought renewed vigour to the notion of specifically poetic prophecy, the idea that literary writers were divinely inspired and their utterances prophetic.⁵ I believe that it would be fruitful to analyse fully these contexts together, investigating the relationships between apocalypse, prophecy, and literature.⁶ How did the concern with apocalypse shape conceptions of poetic prophecy or fiction? How were fictions or poems employed to imagine the end of the world or to approach revelation? And what relationships existed between 'literary' and 'non-literary' prophecy? This essay stems from a book project which explores these questions.

Frank Kermode famously argued that *modern* literature fictionalised the apocalyptic paradigm, setting it in balance with a modern view of time in order to explore a 'sense of an ending'. Kermode also opposed 'complex' modern concepts of

¹ I am grateful for the helpful responses to my presentation of this work at New York University's Maison Française and at the Barnard College conference on 'Charting the Future and the Unknown'.

² On France, see in particular Denis Crouzet, *Les Guerriers de Dieu: la violence au temps des troubles de religion (vers 1525-vers 1610)* (Champ Vallon: Seyssel, 1990). For a relatively recent overview of the state of scholarship on Reformation apocalypticism in general, see Robin Bruce Barnes, 'Varieties of Apocalyptic Experience in Reformation Europe', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 33 (2002), 261-74.

³ Robin Bruce Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1988), 100-40; Anthony Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 2 vols, ii, 346-56.

⁴ Irena Dorota Backus, *Reformation Readings of the Apocalypse: Geneva, Zurich, and Wittenberg* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969); Marjorie Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future* (London: S.P.C.K, 1976).

⁵ Teresa Chevrolet, *L'Idée de fable: théories de la fiction poétique à la Renaissance* (Geneva: Droz, 2007), 49-134 and *passim*; Jean Lecointe, *L'Idéal et la différence: la perception de la personnalité littéraire à la Renaissance* (Geneva: Droz, 1993), 217-374. On the notion of *prose* which is inspired and 'poetic', see Jean Lecointe, 'Naissance d'une prose inspirée: néo-platonisme et "prose poétique" à la renaissance', *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et renaissance*, 51 (1989), 13-57.

⁶ On literature and poetic prophecy in particular, see my 'Prophecy and Literature', *Insights*, 4 (2011), <<http://www.dur.ac.uk/ias/insights/volume4/>> accessed 3 March 2012.

time to the 'naively predictive' apocalyptic ones of earlier ages.⁷ However, while it was almost universally believed in the sixteenth century that time was a finite structure, and that the present moment was situated towards the end of it, 'naively predictive' views were not dominant, and models of apocalyptic time were varied, complex, and mysterious. So it might be unsurprising if in fact the literature of early modern apocalyptic cultures also explored apocalypse, as much or more than that of modernity does. Furthermore, pre-modern European cultures were very aware of the etymology of apocalypse — from the Greek noun meaning an 'uncovering' or 'disclosure'.⁸ After all, their understanding of apocalypse was shaped by the Book of Revelation. So their fiction might deal with revelation as much as with the 'sense of an ending'. Indeed, while Kermode showed that literary forms function well to investigate the end and the structure of time, because they have their own endings and their own structures,⁹ texts which we call 'literary' also tend to be interested in their own representational practices and, in the Renaissance, even to conceive of them as prophecy. Thus sixteenth-century literary texts might explore revelation and prophecy as much as time and, in so doing, reflect on not only apocalypse but also literature (or 'poetry').¹⁰ Therefore, my project asks how both time and revelation are presented in literary texts featuring apocalypse, as well as how such literary texts think about their own modes of 'revelation' and about the role therein of the writing subject or 'prophet'.

This essay focuses on the fictions of François Rabelais. Apocalypse and prophecy have been analysed in Rabelais before. Dennis Costa in particular has shown that Rabelais's evocations of apocalypse highlight the hermeneutic complexities associated with it.¹¹ Gérard Defaux explored Rabelais's status as a prophet in the Old Testament

⁷ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁸ 'Apocalypse, n.', *OED Online*, <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/9229?redirectedFrom=apocalypse>> accessed 20 December 2012.

⁹ Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*.

¹⁰ The Renaissance defined 'poetry' in a number of ways, and versification was only one of a number of considerations. Furthermore, in the absence of an overarching category of 'literature' like our own, notions of 'poetry' undoubtedly served to conceptualise the status and nature of prose texts which we would describe as 'literary'. Thus Rabelais, the focus of this essay, was described by some contemporaries or near-contemporaries as a 'poet', although in at least some cases this seems to reflect the small amount of verse he wrote. In addition, French near-contemporaries of Rabelais, such as Héloïse de Crenne, François Habert, and Louis Le Caron, identified their own prose as poetic. See C. A. Mayer and C. M. Douglas, 'Rabelais poète', *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et renaissance*, 24 (1962), 42-46; Jean Plattard, 'Rabelais réputé poète par quelques écrivains de son temps', *Revue des études rabelaisiennes*, 10 (1912), 291-304; Lecointe, 'Naissance'.

¹¹ Dennis Costa, *Irenic Apocalypse: Some Uses of Apocalyptic in Dante, Petrarch and Rabelais* (Saratoga, CA: Anma Libri, 1981), 107-38. See also André Tournon, '«Ce Temps De Passe-Passe...» (Le Millénium selon Rabelais)', in Jean-Raymond Fanlo and André Tournon, eds, *Formes du millénarisme en Europe à l'aube des temps modernes* (Paris: Champion, 2001), 455-68. On Rabelais's borrowings from the Book of Revelation, see Thierry Victoria, *Un livre de feu dans un siècle de fer: les lectures de l'Apocalypse dans la littérature française de la Renaissance* (Leuven and Walpole, MA: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2009), 240-45 and 311-30.

sense, that is, as one who fulminates against moral and ecclesiastical wrongs.¹² David Quint has suggested that Rabelais means us to understand his text as prophecy in a Pauline exegetical sense, that is, as a form of inspired interpretation, which, in Rabelais's case, can in turn be interpreted.¹³ It is well known that Rabelais engages topoi of poetic prophecy to discuss his own writing.¹⁴ However, it seems to me crucial to investigate further how analysing Rabelais from the angle of apocalypse and prophecy can help to answer the perennial questions in Rabelais studies of hermeneutics and epistemology, and to assess the senses in which Rabelais's text might be understood to be prophetic or inspired.

Since the relationship between apocalypse and hermeneutics constitutes my starting point, my analysis is dependent on passages which both evoke apocalypse and also deal with interpreting or reading. In this essay, I will investigate just one such passage, namely the famous frozen words episode found in chapters 55-56 of the *Quart Livre*.¹⁵ My focus on apocalypse will enable me to provide a fresh reading of this episode. At the same time, my analysis of the episode will point to what is at stake in a number of Rabelais's evocations of apocalypse, namely an exploration of revelation such as it is in the here and now of history. I will argue that the notion of embodiment is central to this, as is the associated question of the relationship between letter and spirit.

Rabelais's central characters are on a sea voyage to seek the oracle of the 'Dive Bouteille' ('Divine Bottle') when the hero Pantagruel hears voices 'parlans en l'air'.¹⁶ In the first half of the episode, Pantagruel sifts through his bank of erudition for information which might assist the search for an explanation. Pantagruel recasts Petron's idea explained in Plutarch's *On the Decline of Oracles*, suggesting that the Words and Ideas of all things, past and future, are contained in a 'Manor of Truth', some remaining there until the end of the world but others descending onto humanity within historical time. Pantagruel also claims that the words of Homer (the archetypal prophetic poet) were described by Aristotle as 'voltigeantes, volantes, moventes, et par consequent animées' (668). Meanwhile, Plato's teachings were said to be like frozen words because they are understood not immediately but gradually, over the course of a lifetime. Perhaps, Pantagruel says, this could be the place where such words melt, or

¹² Gérard Defaux, *Rabelais Agonistes: du rieur au prophète. Etudes sur 'Pantagruel', 'Gargantua', 'Le Quart Livre'* (Geneva: Droz, 1997).

¹³ David Quint, *Origin and Originality in Renaissance Literature: Versions of the Source* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 167-206.

¹⁴ This has been studied in particular in the prologue to *Gargantua*. See Edwin M. Duval, 'Interpretation and the "Doctrine Absconce" of Rabelais's Prologue to *Gargantua*', *Etudes rabelaisiennes*, 18 (1985), 1-17.

¹⁵ For a related reading of the prologue to *Pantagruel*, see my essay "'I speak like John about the Apocalypse": Rabelais, Prophecy, and Fiction', *Literature and Theology*, 26 (2012), 417-38. The essay also includes a version of the argument about the frozen words which is presented here.

¹⁶ Rabelais, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Mireille Huchon (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 667. All citations will be from this edition.

they might find here the severed but ever-lamenting head of Orpheus, inspired poet and supposed author of the Orphic hymns.

Mais entendons. J'ay leu qu'un Philosophe nommé Petron estoit en ceste opinion que feussent plusieurs mondes soy touchans les uns les aultres en figure triangulaire æquilaterale, en la pate et centre des quelz disoit estre le manoir de Verité, et là habiter les Parolles, les Idées, les Exemplaires et protraictz de toutes choses passées, et futures : au tour d'icelles estre le Siecle. Et en certaines années par longs intervalles, part d'icelles tomber sus les humains comme catarrhes, et comme tomba la rousée sus la toizon de Gedeon : part là rester reservée pour l'advenir, jusques à la consommation du Siecle. Me souvient aussi que Aristoteles maintient les parolles de Homere estre voltigeantes, volantes, moventes, et par consequent animees. D'avantaige Antiphanes disoit la doctrine de Platon es parolles estre semblable lesquelles en quelque contrée on temps du fort hyver lors que sont proferées, gelent et glassent à la froydeur de l'air, et ne sont ouyes. Semblablement ce que Platon enseignoyt es jeunes enfans, à peine estre d'iceulx entendu, lors que estoient vieux devenus. Ores seroit à philosopher et rechercher si forte fortune icy seroit l'endroit, on quel telles paroles degelent. Nous serions bien esbahiz si c'estoient les teste et lyre de Orpheus. Car après que les femmes Threisses eurent Orpheus mis en pieces, elles jecterent sa teste et sa lyre dedans le fleuve Hebrus. Icelles par ce fleuve descendirent en la mer Pontiq jusques en l'isle de Lesbos, tous jours ensemble sus mer naigeantes. Et de la teste continuellement sortoyt un chant lugubre, comme lamentant la mort de Orpheus : la lyre à l'impulsion des vents mouvens les chordes accorderoit harmonieusement avecques le chant. Regardons si les voirons cy autour. (668-9)

In response, at the outset of the second half of the episode, the ship's pilot explains that the sounds are from a battle which took place at the beginning of the previous winter: they froze and now are melting, which is why Pantagruel can hear them. Indeed the sounds will include gunfire and throats being cut (669-71).

There is, as critics have observed, a distinction to be made between Pantagruel's reflections concerning the sounds and the pilot's explanation of them. While Pantagruel, like the pilot, does suggest that words might be melting, it is not, for example, the case that the words whose origin the pilot is explaining fall from the Manor of Truth. Some critics emphasise this contrast strongly, perceiving an absolute opposition between Pantagruel's thoughts and the pilot's information. Furthermore, some critics have grounded this in a perceived opposition between letter and spirit, noting that, as Michel Jeanneret showed,¹⁷ the relationship between letter and spirit is at stake in surrounding episodes too. In particular, Gérard Defaux argued that Pantagruel's reflections neglect the fact that 'the spirit presupposes the letter'.¹⁸ Defaux saw in the episode not only an opposition between letter and spirit but also related oppositions between violence and revelation, and between the words of battle and the words of Homer.¹⁹ I agree with

¹⁷ 'Les Paroles dégelées (Rabelais, « Quart Livre », 48-65)', in Michel Jeanneret, *Le Défi des signes: Rabelais et la crise de l'interprétation à la Renaissance* (Orleans: Paradigme, 1994), 113-129, first published in *Littérature* 17 (1975), 14-30.

¹⁸ Defaux, *Rabelais Agonistes*, 535. Michel Jeanneret also aligns Pantagruel with one half of the opposition between letter and spirit, but in a contrasting way ('Les Paroles Dégelées').

¹⁹ 'Pantagruel [...] évoque Orphée, Homère et Platon [...] quand il s'agit de guerre, de bataille et de massacre. Il pense Inspiration et Révélation, et il n'est question que de violence, de souffrance et de bruit. Il dit l'émouvante légèreté des paroles d'Homère, pour se trouver aussitôt après confronté à des paroles lamentablement matérialisées et déchues' (Defaux, *Rabelais Agonistes*, 529).

Defaux that the episode invites us to think about these pairs of terms. However, I will argue that the relationships between spirit and letter, revelation and violence, and Homeric words and bloody words should not be thought of as absolute oppositions. A fresh approach to these pairs enables us, I think, to incorporate Pantagruel's musings into a reading of the episode which says something about 'revelation' such as it is in the here and now of history.

Pantagruel's first thought is that words or Ideas from the Manor of Truth might 'tomber sus les humains comme catarrhes, et comme tomba la rousée sus la toizon de Gedeon'. The standard interpretation of the dew on Gideon's fleece was that the fleece represented the elect and the dew the divine teachings which they received. Such a reading neglects the importance of the dew's physical movement, in favour of assigning meanings to objects. By contrast, Pantagruel's discussion, while utilising the notion that the dew is like revelation, re-emphasises movement through the reference to dripping catarrh. For some readers, the reference to catarrh simply pokes gentle fun at Pantagruel and at his hopes for enlightenment, since the potentially revolting nature of catarrh seems to undercut any notion of revelation. Nevertheless, Pantagruel's subsequent musings do not contain similarly revolting elements. They do, however, continue the practice of emphasising physical movement.

After evoking dripping from the Manor of Truth, Pantagruel thinks of the winged nature of Homeric words and describes this latter aspect using not one but several adjectives of movement. For Pantagruel, Homeric words are 'voltigeantes, volantes, moventes, et par consequent animees'. This relatively lengthy evocation of the flight of the words suggests that this is not simply a passing metaphor for inspiration, but rather an actual flight through the air. Since Homeric words are not only 'voltigeantes' but also 'par consequent animees', the reader might imagine them as like literal birds, perhaps like those from whom, within Homer's *Iliad*, the future was read. It as if Rabelais were 're-animating' the Homeric 'winged' words which de-literalised the bird omens within Homer's poetry.²⁰ Next, Pantagruel brings out the physicality inherent in Antiphanes' analogy for Plato's teaching, which resembles freezing and melting because his words are understood only in later life. The episode will later literalise this analogy, since it turns out that what Pantagruel has heard are indeed sounds melting. However, Pantagruel's own musings foreshadow this literalisation, since, after discussing Plato's words, he suggests that this might be the place where 'such words' melt, so that there is some confusion between Plato's words which, for Antiphanes, metaphorically melt, and the words which literally melt. Finally, Pantagruel remembers the severing of Orpheus's head and describes the head being thrown into the river and floating downriver emitting song.

Thus, at no point does Pantagruel imagine the voices he can hear as if they were disembodied. On the contrary, his evocations of various forms of revelation or prophecy or enlightenment insist upon the physical. Where an account of revelation might have

²⁰ Rebecca Bushnell suggests that Polydamas, who interprets the bird omen of eagle and snake within the *Iliad*, resembles the Homeric poet-prophet himself (for example analogy is central to both modes of 'prophecy'). *Prophesying Tragedy: Sign and Voice in Sophocles' Theban Plays* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 32.

implied voices which were somehow pure spirit, Pantagruel's use of the language of movement ensures that we imagine them as physical, flying through the air 'voltigeantes' like stars or birds, or dripping onto our heads like cosmic 'catarrh'. It is as if Pantagruel were keen to ensure that his various Greek accounts of enlightenment partake of the coupling of Word and Flesh which is inherent to Christianity. Moreover, a number of Pantagruel's reflections bring to mind modes of prophetic discourse which are dependent not merely on the embodied but even on violence. Homeric epic may be prophetic but it constitutes for the most part bloody words of battle, and the continued existence of Orphic verse which Pantagruel hypothesises would be dependent on the violent severing of Orpheus's head.

Therefore, within Pantagruel's reflections there is no strong opposition between violence and revelation, letter and spirit, physical words and Homeric words. In fact, Pantagruel imagines a revelation which operates through language, the letter and violence. He brings into dialogue with ideas of revelation/ prophecy/ enlightenment an emphasis on physical movement and violent bodies. Thus bodily materiality is fascinating not only because it engenders a carnivalesque reversal of usual hierarchies, as Bakhtin argued,²¹ but also insofar as it is intertwined with truth-seeking. 'Revelation', such as Pantagruel imagines it, appears to be dependent on the body, not only in the sense that bodily and truth-seeking activities co-exist, as at the Platonic banquet, but also in that revelation might be embodied.²²

Moreover, while the actual words encountered are indebted to a battle which played no role in Pantagruel's musings, they do in some ways recall his discussion. For a start, they turn out to be frozen words which are melting, a possibility that Pantagruel had suggested, and, like the words which spring from a severed head, they are associated with violence. The second half of the episode provides a much darker vision of the voices, since there are sounds of violence, and, as we shall see, words suggestive of apocalypse. Nonetheless, the physicality of the battle and the frozen word-objects seems to me to contrast with Pantagruel's musings less absolutely than some critics have suggested. Furthermore, if physicality and violence are already present in the first half of the episode, I would argue that the notion of revelation returns in its second half, thanks to the words suggestive of apocalypse, namely 'goth' and 'magoth':

Les quelles ensemblement fondues ouysmes, hin, hin, hin, hin, his, ticque, torche, lorgne, brededin, brededac, frr, frrr, frrr, bou, bou, bou, bou, bou, bou, bou, bou, bou, tracc, trac, trr, trr, trr, trrr, trrrrr. On, on, on, on, ououououon: goth, magoth, et ne sçay quelz aultres motz barbares, et disoyt que c'estoient vocables de hourt et hannissement des chevaux à l'heure qu'on chocque.

(670)

The words 'goth' and 'magoth' stand out not only because they come at the very end of the list but also because the other items in the list constitute the sounds of blows

²¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, transl. by Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1968).

²² C.f. Michel Jeanneret, especially on metaphors of reading as eating, in *Des mets et des mots: banquets et propos de table à la Renaissance* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1987), transl. by Jeremy Whiteley and Emma Hughes as *A Feast of Words: Banquets and Table Talk in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

being exchanged or the grunts and snarls of combat.²³ Gog and Magog could serve simply as generalised terms for northern barbarians but they are also combattants who wage war under Satan in the Book of Revelation²⁴ and, as Florence Weinberg pointed out,²⁵ the words 'goth' and 'magoth' would surely have made Rabelais's readers think of this biblical episode. Quite apart from the omnipresence of apocalyptic discourse in the first half of the sixteenth century, 'goth' and 'magoth' appear here involved in a battle. In addition, the episode takes place at the 'confin de la mer glaciale' (669), recalling the fact that Gog and Magog were usually expected to come from the north. I would argue that this echo of the Book of Revelation is important because Pantagruel has already raised the question of revelation earlier in the episode.

Can we say more about the hermeneutic of the revelation suggested? It may be partly indebted to medicine: the body plays an important role in this passage, and one of the potentially revelatory signs with which Rabelais's characters are faced is catarrh, precisely a medical sign or 'symptom' transposed into the cosmic realm. According to Denis Crouzet, for Nostradamus, Rabelais's contemporary and fellow doctor, the interpretative method of medicine was central to prophecy, to the sort of 'revelation' possible in the here and now.²⁶ While for Rabelais time is less central to any parallel with medicine than it was for Nostradamus,²⁷ such a parallel may be in play here too. The evocation of the Book of Revelation – through the words 'goth' and 'magoth' – also indicates the mode of 'revelation' which might be at stake. In particular, it suggests that it would be not only about reading bodies but also about the interplay between the body and that to which it might point. The final biblical book represents revelation in the form of enigmatic visions of violence and physical actions: eating and drinking and blowing and smiting and throwing and fighting and casting down. The letter offers no transparent access to the spirit here, and these actions are given no clear interpretation. In short, 'goth' and 'magoth' call to mind not a revelation which would be beyond the letter and beyond violence but rather one which operates through both of them.

If, as I have argued, 'goth' and 'magoth' constitute not only threats of violence but also tantalising hints of revelation, this bolsters André Tournon's intuition that,

²³ In other words, to use the terms of Aristotelian philosophy, 'goth' and 'magoth' are the only items in the list which signify *ad placitum* (Defaux, *Rabelais Agonistes*, 526-27). 'ticque, torche, lorgne' is given in Cotgrave's 1611 French-English dictionary as 'voices or words, whereby, as by our thwicke, thwacke, etc, a beating, or cuffing with the fists, etc, is expressed.

²⁴ Rev. 20:7-9: 'et cum consummati fuerint mille anni solvetur Satanas de carcere suo et exhibit et seducet gentes quae sunt super quattuor angulos terrae Gog et Magog et congregabit eos in proelium quorum numerus est sicut harena maris et ascenderunt super latitudinem terrae et circumierunt castra sanctorum et civitatem dilectam et descendit ignis a Deo de caelo et devoravit eos' ['And when the thousand yeeres are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison, and shall goe out to deceive the nations which are in the foure quarters of the earth, Gog & Magog, to gather them together to battell: the number of whom is as the sand of the sea. And they went up on the breadth of the earth, and compassed the campe of the Saints about, and the beloved citie: and fire came downe from God out of heaven, and devoured them', 1611 King James Version].

²⁵ Florence Weinberg, *The Wine and the Will* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1975), 41-2.

²⁶ Denis Crouzet, *Nostradamus: une médecine des âmes à la Renaissance* (Paris: Payot, 2011), 19-21.

²⁷ According to Crouzet, Nostradamus understood the future by examining past and present just as a doctor would anticipate the future of a human body by observing past and present symptoms (*ibid.*).

while the frozen words do not descend from the Manor of Truth, the episode leaves open the possibility of seeking truth in the world.²⁸ Yet, it remains unclear how truth-seeking would occur: with the exception of ‘goth’ and ‘magoth’ the battle sounds are simply sounds. As Jan Miernowski pointed out, Pantagruel refers to voices ‘in the air’, recalling Paul’s description in Corinthians of speaking in tongues which, Paul said, was not useful to the church unless they could be interpreted.²⁹ And the sounds remain ‘languaige Barbare’ or ‘motz barbares’ (670), recalling Paul’s suggestion that if utterances are not understood, then their speaker will appear to us a ‘barbarus’, a foreigner.³⁰ At the same time, Paul also states that one should pray for the ability to interpret the sounds, and that ‘nihil sine voce est’,³¹ given in most sixteenth-century vernacular translations as ‘nothing is without meaning’.³² However, the friends are faced simply with violent sounds and the words ‘goth’ and ‘magoth’; and, even more than in the Book of Revelation, it is unclear what to understand by them.

Furthermore, an evocation of Exodus highlights the absence of a readable revelation in the episode. Panurge would like to see the frozen words like the Jews ‘saw’ the words of the Law.³³ As Gérard Defaux argued, this reference to Exodus — an important intertext throughout the *Quart Livre* — highlights similarities and differences between the two texts. Defaux pointed out that Rabelais’s characters, like the Israelites, are confronted by a strange prodigy involving voices but, he argued, in the case of Rabelais, this is within a universe full of violence rather than one in which God’s voice can be heard.³⁴ It seems to me that the contrast highlights the question of not simply whether revelation is possible but rather, more specifically, the degree to which a sensorially available revelation can be read or understood, the degree to which the letter points beyond itself to an enigmatic spirit. The episode evokes two biblical texts — Revelation and Exodus — which imply different notions of revelation. Both depict a revelation which was available to the senses but in Exodus that which is revealed is a *Law* which can be understood according to the *letter*, whereas the New Testament

²⁸ André Tournon, ‘De l’Interprétation des «mots de gueule»: note sur les chapitres LV-LVI du Quart Livre du Pantagruel’, in *Hommage à François Meyer* (Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l’Université de Provence, 1983), 145-53. André Tournon, *“En sens agile”: les acrobaties de l’esprit selon Rabelais* (Paris: Champion, 1995), 9-13.

²⁹ Jan Miernowski, ‘Literature and Metaphysics: Rabelais and the Poetics of Misunderstanding’, *Etudes rabelaisiennes*, 35 (1998), 131-51.

³⁰ ‘Si ergo nesciero virtutem vocis ero ei cui loquor barbarus et qui loquitur mihi barbarus’ (1 Cor. 14:11). C.f. Marie-Luce Demonet’s reading of ‘languaige Barbare’ in the episode as participating in a revalorisation of vernacular (or ‘barbarous’) languages, in *Les voix du signe: nature et origine du langage à la Renaissance (1480-1580)* (Paris: Champion, 1992), 376-84.

³¹ 1 Cor. 14:5, 10-13.

³² James Helgeson, “‘Words in the Air”: Thaumaste, Nazdecabre, and the Question of Perspicuous Signs’, in R. Leushuis and Z. Zalloua, eds, *Esprit Généreux, Esprit Pantagruelique: Essays by His Students in Honor of François Rigolot* (Geneva: Droz, 2008), 177-96 (p. 189).

³³ ‘Par Dieu, dist Panurge, je l’en croy. Mais en pourrions nous veoir quelque’une ? Me soubvient avoir leu que l’orée de la montaigne en laquelle Moses receut la loy des Juifz le peuple voyoit les voix sensiblement’ (670). Panurge is thinking of Exodus XX, 18, ‘cunctus autem populus videbat voces’. ‘Videbat’ is usually taken to indicate hearing rather than sight.

³⁴ Defaux, *Rabelais Agonistes*, 530-31.

apocalyptic version of revelation is a much more mysterious one, which clearly points *beyond* the visible to the unknown, beyond the letter to an enigmatic spirit. Panurge's wish to see a revelation just as the Israelites 'saw' the words of the Law strikes me as one more example among many in Rabelais's fiction of Panurge engaging in what Renaissance evangelists would call 'Judaicizing' practices, that is, ones which prioritise the letter at the expense of the spirit.³⁵ His request emphasises that the Law in Exodus was available to the senses — he states that the Israelites 'voyoit les voix sensiblement' (670). However, the Law given in Exodus was, for the Israelites, readable according to the letter. By contrast, while the Book of Revelation also involves the seeing (by John) of something physical, it is without a doubt the most enigmatic book of the Bible. Similarly, the frozen words will be almost impossible to understand. Their hint of revelation is slight, contained only in the words 'goth' and 'magoth' and in the senses in which they recall revelation as discussed by Pantagruel.

So, how might we respond to the frozen words? What the Rabelaisian friends do is creatively exchange them. Pantagruel casts fistfuls of frozen words onto the deck, then the friends play with them, melting them so they can be heard, and throwing and catching them. They also play with words in the more usual sense of engaging in wordplay (670-671). A number of suggestions have been made about what is central to this wordplay. Nicolas Le Cadet stresses the transfigurative power of wordplay, which transforms sounds of battle into discussion of love and lawyers.³⁶ André Tournon highlights interpretations of words which can, within a generous interpretative community, run counter to their usual meanings.³⁷ David Quint emphasises the importance of temporal process, since the words and sounds need to melt before they are heard.³⁸ For my part, I would like to suggest that one crucial aspect of the various modes of playing with words in the episode is their movement, in a number of senses, between the figurative and the literal. This is a development of my broader argument about the undermining of potential oppositions between spirit and letter or revelation and violence.

The responses to the frozen words depend upon moving between letter and spirit in creative ways. Most obviously, 'playing' with words becomes literal, as the frozen words are physical objects which can be thrown and caught. At the same time, Pantagruel moves creatively between the literal and the figurative, taking figuratively Panurge's requests to be given or sold words. And this play with letter and spirit crosses both halves of the episode. As we have seen, when Pantagruel re-imagined various accounts of revelation in embodied ways, he did so by moving from the figurative to the literal, for example by imagining that Homeric words were literally winged, or Platonic words literally frozen. Then, in the second half of the episode, faced with the nearest

³⁵ It also recalls Rabelais's suggestion in the 1532 prologue to *Pantagruel* that poetic prophecy would be 'not speaking like the Jews', that is, not speaking solely according to the letter. See Banks, "'I speak like John about the Apocalypse'", 421-25

³⁶ Nicolas Le Cadet, *L'Évangélisme fictionnel: les 'livres' rabelaisiens, le 'Cymbalum Mundi', 'L'Heptaméron' (1532-1552)* (Paris: Éditions Classiques Garnier, 2010), 178-89.

³⁷ Tournon, 'De l'Interprétation' and Tournon, *En Sens Agile*, 9-13.

³⁸ Quint, *Origin and Originality*, 186-8.

thing the friends have to revelation — some sounds including ‘goth’ and ‘magoth’ — Pantagruel again responds by playing with the boundaries between literal and figurative, letter and spirit. Furthermore, if Pantagruel imagined that revelation might be embodied, responses to the sounds also involve the characters using their bodies: words are thrown and caught and exchanged and melted. So, while the prospects for revelation in the second half of the episode seem slim — and only two words from the Book of Revelation are included — both halves of the episode suggest that the only form of revelation available in the here and now stems from bodies and the physical and violence, which can be responded to in a way which also involves bodies as well as words, and movement between letter and spirit. Revelation — in the fragmentary and puzzling form in which it may be encountered — appears dependent on the body, and on a creative movement between body and words, and between letter and spirit.

Finally, while the frozen words episode suggests an attitude in the face of potential revelation, it might also be read as a reflection on how to read fiction or ‘poetic prophecy’. Like other Rabelaisian scenes which constitute a *mise-en-scène* of interpretation, the frozen words episode can be seen to reflect upon hermeneutic issues pertinent to Rabelais’s own fiction. Furthermore, I have argued elsewhere that, in the 1532 *Pantagruel* prologue, embodied revelation is central to the poetic prophecy to which Rabelais’s narrator lays claim and which he imagines to resemble ‘speaking like John of the apocalypse’.³⁹ In addition, the play with words in the frozen words episode is described as a ‘passetemps’ (670), an echo across the distance of Rabelais’s four books of the description of writing and reading fiction in the conclusion to *Pantagruel*, where Rabelais described his favoured readers as those who read his fictions ‘pour passetemps joyeux’ or to ‘passer temps joyusement’, just as he wrote them ‘passant temps’.⁴⁰ Thus the reflection on letter and spirit, and body and revelation, seems relevant not only to revelation and truth-seeking in general but also, more specifically, to fiction.

In conclusion, I have argued that in Rabelais’s famous frozen words episode apocalyptic vocabulary points to the intertwining of revelation with violence and the body. I have suggested that the episode is deeply concerned with the relationships between revelation and the body, and between spirit and letter, yet these are not absolute oppositions. Instead, revelation is dependent on the body not simply in that the two might co-exist, as at the Platonic banquet, but rather in that revelation, such as it exists, is embodied. Pantagruel imagines a revelation which operates through the body, the letter, and violence. The episode then asks how we can respond to possible revelation, and suggests doing so in ways which engage the body and which move creatively

³⁹ Banks, “‘I speak like John’”.

⁴⁰ ‘Sy pour *passetemps joyeux* les lisez, comme *passant temps* les escripvoyz, vous et moy sommes plus dignes de pardon q’un grand tas de Sarrabovites, Cagotz, Escargotz, Hypocrites, Caffars, Frapars, Botineurs et aultres telles sectes de gens [...] Quant est de leur estude, elle est toute consummée à la lecture de livres Pantagruelicques : non tant pour *passer temps joyusement*, que pour nuyre à quelcun meschantement (336-337, my italics).

between letter and spirit. Furthermore, this has implications for literature, which in the sixteenth century could be conceived of as 'prophecy', and even — as in Rabelais's 1532 prologue to *Pantagruel* — as apocalyptic prophecy: readers (and writers) of fiction resemble the Rabelaisian friends who play with words which hint at revelation. Thus the hermeneutic questions raised by Rabelais's evocation of apocalypse revolve around the kind of revelation which we might hope for within history, and the roles to be played within it by the body, the letter, and violence.