

Verbal Shape in the Poetry of Villon and Marot

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Generally speaking, lyrics written in the early years of the printing press cannot be read in editions other than their own. A visual aesthetic informing the poetic texture of François Villon and Clément marot is essential to an understanding of their work: *Le Grant Testament* of 1489 in gothic font and the physical shape of the *épitaphes* and *rondeaux* of the *Adolescence clémentine* use in a differential manner the absence of volume on the page's two-dimensional surface to elaborate a human drama of three dimensions. Thus their dialogue between voice and space or discourse and figure is always an open one, showing in its punctuation the areas of mediation and desire that generate great lyric poetry.

It is an ironic heritage that forces the late twentieth-century reader to discover the most lyrical range of word and figure in the earliest years of the printing press. Poets and editors who shaped the incunabulum's page were no doubt at a crossroads between aural and visual traditions that later—after the success of the printed book and the impact of the Reformation—would, apart from a few anomalies, disappear until the nineteenth century. Thus the demise of visual poetry is particularly striking in France where the later Middle Ages, after their supposed entombment during the Age of Reason and Enlightenment, are resurrected in the plastic verse of Hugo, Baudelaire, and Mallarmé.¹ Two gifted poets, François Villon and Clément Marot, are such participants of this heritage that their lyrics cannot be disengaged from either the visual shape printers gave to their words or the shape of the fixed poetic forms which contain them. Their poetry is an economy of visual and verbal writing in which the interaction of typeface and voice, each of reciprocal measure, draws the spatial perimeters around drama of Christian and monetary salvation. Concomitantly, the shift from gothic to roman font in the thirty-four years separating the first printed editions of Villon's *Le Grant Testament*

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et codicille (Paris: Pierre Levet, 1489) and Marot's *Adolescence clémentine* (Paris: Galiot du Pré, 1533) indicates the beginning of a tremendous shift in principles of reading and writing, and whose impact would not be fully comprehended until the end of the French Renaissance.

Prior to analysis of Villon's and Marot's lyrics, two points require elucidation. The first concerns the early printed book's influence upon the visual nature of reading until as late as 1595. Early French converts to Gutenberg like Jean du Pré, Johann Heynlin, Pierre Levet, and Jean Trepperel had to make their books resemble wherever possible a finely cut and delicately designed book of hours, and to give a new commodity an old sense of value. Very ironically, the first texts in France were set in a rounded, roman type that apparently did not have the visual appeal of a manuscript in gothic script. Thus the seemingly primitive *lettre bâtarde* replaced the classical font and became a popular visual form until at least 1530. "It developed into a beautiful letter, principally, if not always, used for printing of French. It was in type of this family that what is believed to be the first book in French printed in Paris, *viz.*, *Chronicques de France*, was produced by Pasquier Bonhomme about 1486."² We know that with Geoffroy Tory's *Champ fleury* of 1529, almost synchronic with Marot's early lyrics, the regressive Renaissance of the printed letter is finally corrected. Tory's book—an abecedarium, a manual for the drawing of roman characters and a treatise on every letter as a mirror of the world's physical body—was paradoxically to erase and to preserve the visual aspects of the gothic page in literary texts of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

Like his predecessors, Tory literally saw and felt the printed surface as he deciphered it, and even embodies in his theory and practice what would have an almost terminal expression in Montaigne's *Essays*, themselves a logical poetics of visual and verbal isomorphism that had been the habit of writing in the past century. "Plutarch," Montaigne said coyly, "says that he saw the Latin language through things: here, the same: meaning enlightens and produces words; no longer wind, but flesh and bone."³ In fact, the essayist's remarks on the visceral quality of

any worthwhile style only echoes what had been exploited by the early printers who had to rival the illuminated manuscript: shape and sense, text and illustration, interlace and phrase had to function harmoniously and economically if the printed book were to sell copy.

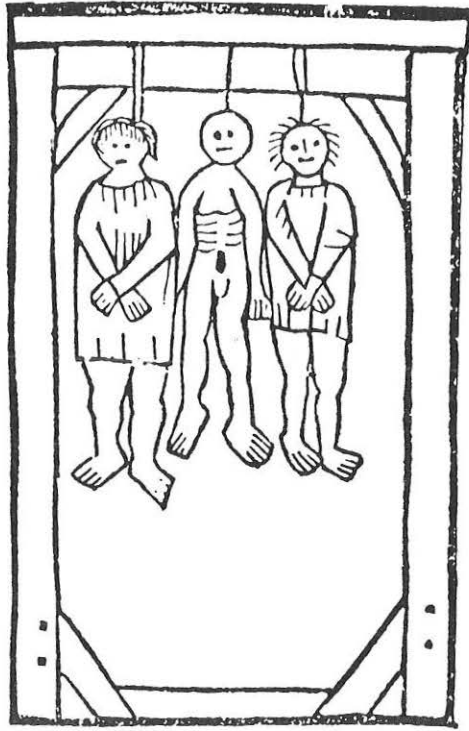
The second point raises a question requiring much longer study. The *lettre bâtarde*, so popular among the first Parisian printers, often has a function identical with the poems it conveys (see Fig. 1). Field and background are so indistinguishable, intervals so reduced and spelling so varied that, at least with Villon, words run over and into one another. No single reading can ever be established: words disperse and then agglomerate into groups of meaning according to the reader's sense of aural and visual distinction. Since each generation can punctuate a text following its own patterns of perception, it comes as no surprise that Marot, writing in the age of roman type, would feel bewildered in front of Villon's gothic characters. Possibly for this reason Pierre Guiraud felt it necessary in his study of Villon's slang to reproduce the *Jargon et Jobelin* in the original printed text. Words and sounds elide and accumulate so profusely that each ballad becomes a global anagram dedicated to one of six criminal professions.⁴ The critic uses this principle of sign and field to extrapolate three superimposed codes hidden within the jargon. The first is composed of tricksters' slang derived from common parlance and leads to a sub-code of cardplayers' tricks and trumps; below these is hidden a practical manual of pederasty for use of prisoners before their conviction and execution. In the same spirit David Kuhn reproduced portions of the *Grant Testament et petit* from the Longnon-Foulet edition in italics and without punctuation, thus bringing his reader as close as possible to the text of 1489. "A prosaic punctuation," he remarked, "tends fatally to reduce the syntactic fluidity of the text upon which an author of the period counted for his most beautiful effects."⁵ It is generally supposed that Villon was dead before the printing press arrived in France, but his legends and lines were conserved in manuscripts before reappearing in the similar style of the *lettre bâtarde* in 1489. When Marot, son of the well-known *Grand Rhétoriqueur* Jean Marot and member of the Basochian society, *Les Enfants sans soucy*, published



Le rondeau que feist
ledit Villon quant
il fut iugie

Je suis francois dont ce me poise
Ne de paris empies pontoise
Qui dune corde dune toise
Saura mon col que mon cul poise

Figure 1A. Villon refusing the gallows and leaving his *rondeau* and *epitaphe* in the first printed edition: Pierre Levet's *Le Grant testament villon|et le petit. Son codicille. Le iargon et les balades* (Paris, 1489).



Epitaphe dudit vilson
 freres humains qui apres no^r vies
 Napez les cucurs contre no^r endurcis
 Car se pitie de no^r pouurez auez
 Dieu en aura plustost de vous mercis
 Vous nous hoies cy ataches cinq sif
 Quât de la char q trop auôs nourrie
 Ellest pieca deuouree et pourtie
 et no^r les os deuens cédies a pouldie
 De nostre mal personne ne sen tie
 Mais puez dieu que tous nous vucil
 le absouldie

LE QUATRAIN

QUE FIT VILLON QUAND IL FUT JUGÉ A MOURIR

J E suis François, dont ce me poise,
Né de Paris emprès Pontoise,
Et d'une corde d'une toise,
Saura mon col que mon cul poise.



L'ÉPITAPHE

EN FORME DE BALLADE QUE FIT VILLON
POUR LUI ET SES COMPAGNONS
S'ATTENDANT A ÊTRE PENDU AVEC EUX

F RÈRES humains qui après nous vivez,
N'ayez les cœurs contre nous endurcis,
Car, si pitié de nous pauvres avez,
Dieu en aura plus tôt de vous mercis.
Vous nous voyez ci attachés cinq, six :
Quand de la chair, que trop avons nourrie,
Elle est piéçà dévorée et pourrie,
Et nous, les os, devenons cendre et poudre.
De notre mal personne ne s'en rie,
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous veuille absoudre!

Figure 1B. The modern counterpart following Galiot du Pré's edition of 1533, the first using roman typeface.

in 1533 what was considered the first critical edition of Villon's works (Paris: Galiot du Pré), he both preserved and destroyed the legacy of his master; the roman type and frequent punctuation molded the text into the form it assumes in most modern editions. But in his own early lyrics—his adolescence—Marot ironically elaborated forms resembling those in Villon's poetry. His process of destruction on one level and his continuation on another—in his use of the *építaphe*, *rondeau*, and *építre*—will be the major problem of our comparative study.

Below a woodcut of a personage whom we recognize as Villon, and to the left of a framed illustration of three bodies hanging from a gallows in Pierre Levet's illustrated first edition of the *Testament* (Fig. 1), is a quatrain entitled *Le rondeau que feist ledict Villon quant il fut iugie*, perhaps the most succinct example of a text to be seen:

I am Frances and this hangs heavy
Born in Paris not far from Levet
Now from a rope of about a levy
My neck'll know my ass is heavy⁶

Built concentrically so as to depart from a wide geographical area of France connoted by the name *Francois*, the poem moves to a *Paris* ironically near its own suburb on *Ponthoise*, then to the rope around the voice's neck in the last line. The literal weight in the ditty is balanced by the verbs at both ends that hold the nouns within, a mode of expression that leads to intimation of death in the length of the rope measured between the fourth line's first, future verb *saura* and its last, present verb *poise*, a word pulling the rope around the poet's throat and tending to elongate the distance between the neck and buttocks.

Circles of constriction operate complexly in a synthesis of graphics, rhetoric, and music in the famous *Ballade de la Grosse Margot* whose title probably refers to an ensign above a Parisian tavern. One of the more salacious poems of the later Middle Ages, its three stanzas of ten lines and its envoy of seven lines, each with refrain of *en ce bordeau ou tenons nostre estat* ("In this haven/bordello/port where we keep our state/court/order"), obeys the rules of narration and metrics to the letter. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of vertical and horizontal readings draws a theatrical space for the Christian drama of redemption.⁷ The first stanza describes, in his own words, the narrator/pimp's public duties; the second, more intimate, tells of his conjugal strife; and the third explains how, in a topsy-turvy world, healthy flatulence brings order and love back to their lives. The envoy, like the ring of the refrain, answers the rhetorical question asked in the first two lines:

If I love and squeeze the belle with joy
Must you think me a villain or fool?

By progression from left to right, top to bottom, and exterior to interior volumes—first the bordello, then the bedroom, the mattress, and finally the entwined bodies—the opening question has a hypothetical answer in the envoy. From a generalized ethical problem established in the opening lines, the ballad becomes a spatial drama with progressively smaller fields of action constricting the protagonist's physical and moral perspective. Though its fixed form would apparently represent a hermetic system with its own logic, internal development, and resolution, an open-ended spatial play overdetermines the poem, producing total equivocation through the crisscrossing of spatial and rhetorical systems. The voyage from outside to inside resembles the movement of dolls in a medieval theatre of boistrous cruelty; most of the rhymes are richly masculine, and every tonic syllable ends abruptly on a plosive *t*. Like the choppy *h* set in counterpoint to the musical *r* of the ballad from François to his ungrateful Marthe (v. 942-969), the *t* could be construed to stop each line on a prosaic or dissonant visual note and to punctuate the fixed form's flowing melody. But here as elsewhere in the poem, the palpable surface of the printed characters in *gothique bâtard*—where word and image are conjoined—tends to open the closed system. Words pushed together must be read according to shifting patterns of field and background, forcing the eye and ear to scan the text quite differently from one reading to the next, a process often generating contradictory or equivocal interpretations from a kernal form of several compressed words. On a printed page of 1489 the *t* would be the most visible letter except for the obvious acrostic in the envoy of the collective name Villon(e), the French (*François*) villain of the city (*ville*). Such vertical codings must have been evident to readers of illuminated manuscripts, since an opposition of left and right sides is seen with the proper name on one side while the *t* represents the other perimeter. The poet's voice is therefore progressively removed from the poem's system as it unfolds—scratched, as it were—as no more than a signature in juxtaposition to the poetic surface from which it is paradoxically excluded.

A grid forming the poem's cardinal points could be drawn according to poles of question and answer, statement and counter-

statement, or proposition and rebuttal that the rhetorical tradition had embodied throughout the Middle Ages. With Villon it is always charted or mapped on the poem's surface in the most effective pieces: the poem Marot entitled the *Ballade des dames du temps jadis*, the debate between Villon's body and heart, or even the ballad thought to be dedicated to the poet's mother, the *Priere pour nostre dame*. The recurrent structure is underscored in the *Ballade de la Grosse Margot* by the re-appearance of the verb *aymer* (v. 1) which moves from first-person singular to its collective plural (v. 35) in the envoy. Likewise, the nominative *vil* associated with *sot* returns in the first three lines of the acrostic. And the infinitive *tenir* surfaces in the same first-person plural in each refrain, but only in the ballad's final three lines does the spatial coding of words assault the reader with revelation of global turpitude and filth:

Wind. hail. freeze. I've got my toast
 I am filth: filth I boast
 Lo what's better: each blackens most
 Let one be another: it's cat and mouse
 O Lewd we love: lewde soots us
 Now we flee honor, honor flees us
 Ere our heaven be home and house⁸

Very clearly the poem is to be read through a series of musical and spatial oppositions which the envoy's decasyllables synthesize so crisply. Each line is broken into equal pairs of affective and alliterative units and can be visualized as walls or cloisters delineating outside and inside, cold and warm (*vente, gresle, gelle, and pain cuit*), masculine and feminine or passive and active (*paillard and paillarde*), question and answer (*lequel vaut mieux . . .*); excrement as subject and complement (*ordure amons . . .*); and finally, as the binary contrast of honor and action akin to the repulsion of like poles of a magnet in *Nous deffuyons onneur: il nous deffuit*. Spatial and rhythmic pairings establish the poem's equivocal moral geography. The reader can only navigate a forever mediated, zigzag course that is paradoxically no more than that of (however tautological) what it is: reading from left to right and top to bottom.



Villon

Se iayme et fers la belle de bon hait
 Men deues vous tenir a vil ne sot
 Elle a en soy des biens a son'ouhait
 Pour elle seings le bloucler et passot
 Quant viennent gens ie cours et hap
 pe vng pot
 Au vi mē fuis sās demener grāt bruit
 ie leur tendz eaue paī frōmage a fruit
 Silz iouēt bley:ic leurs diz q̄ bien stat
 Retournez cy quāt vo'seres en tuit
 En ce bourdeau ou tendōs nostre estat



La grosse margot

Mais adonc il ya grant dehait
 Quāt sās argēt se'va coucher margot
 Deoir ne la puis mō cuer mort la hait
 Sa robe pient/chaperon et surcot
 Si luy iure quil tiendia pour lescot
 Par les coustes:si se pient lantecrist
 L'ie et iure par la mort iesucrist
 Que nō fera:lors iēpongne vng esclat
 Dessus sō nez luy en fais vng escript
 En ce bordeau ou tenons nostre estat

Figure 2. Villon and Margot crowning their ballad in Levet's text.

Puis paiz se fait: et me lache vng gros
Pet
Pl⁹ enflambe qu'on venimeux escarbot
Riant ma siet le poing sur le sommet
Gogo me dit et me fait le iambot
to⁹ deuy en s'ble dormōs cōe vng sabot
Et au reueil quāt le ventre luy bruit
Mōte sur moy quel ne gaste son fruit
soubz elle geins pl⁹ qu'auz me fait plat
De paillarder tout elle me destruit
En ce bordeau ou tenons nostre estat

Vête, gresse, gelle: iay mon pain cuit
Je suis paillard: la paillard me suit
Ordure auons: ordure nous aruit
Lun vault l'autre cest a mauchat mau
rat
No⁹ deffuions hōneur: et il no⁹ deffuit
En ce bordeau ou tenons nostre estat

Item a marion sydolle
Et a la grant ichanne de bretagne
Donne tenir publicque escolle
On l'escolier le maistre enseigne
Lieu nest ou ce marche ne tiengne
Si non en la grille de meun
De quoy ie dis sy de l'enseigne
Puis que louuage est si comun

Item aussi a noe le iolys

Autre chose ie ne luy donne
fois plain point dosiers freiz cueilliz
En mon iardin ie la bon donne
L'harite est et belle aumosne
Ame ne doit estre marry
Vnze vings coups luy en ordonne
Par les mains de maistre henty

Item ne scay qua l'ostel dieu
Donner nauy pouures hospitaulx
Bourdes nont icy temps ne lieu
Car pouures gens ont asses maulx
Chascun leur enuoie leurs os
Les mendians ont eu mon oye
Au fort ilz en auront les os
A pouures gens menu monnoye

Item ie donne a mon barbier
Qui se nomme colin galerne
Pres voisin d'angelot serbier
Vng gros glasson, prins ou: en marne
Et fin qu'on aise se puerne
De lestomac le tiengne pres
Se liuet ainsi se gouuerne
Trop naura chault leste d'aptes

Item rien aux enfans trouues
Mais les perduz fait que console
f.i

The surprising equivalence of visual and verbal space could be too easily explained away by reference to the impact of the printed book which tends to ossify and sclerose the art of memory. Recollection depends on a spatial logic somewhat akin to the volume of a theatre, and the contradictions the book introduces would give to occasional poetry this privileged physicality absent from either the oral or the scriptural molds, but would be a brief and charmed amalgam of the two, a moment which would last until signifiers would no longer be the reflection or substance of the signified or, perhaps, when noblemen after the time of Montaigne would no longer serve elegant dinners of mutton, mackerel, mallard, mushroom, and morils for purpose of heralding the letter M.⁹ However speculative, the word was—if not the thing—at least a finer reflection of it. The economy of such cogent language would appear today to have been marvelously utopian or at best of honest coinage. At that time the equivalence of words either to salvation, to the body, or to money may never have been so evident. Marot, as keen reader of Villon, may have been one of the last medieval poets working toward so fluid an isomorphism, and his fixed forms and circumstantial pieces reflect the sense of physical language so absent in discourse of the next century.

With his epitaphs Marot begins where Villon ended. On first sight hardly as concentric as the circular structure of the ballad for Fat Margot, the epitaph for Frère Jean Levesque synthesizes imagined space and the rectangular symmetry of two quatrains framed around a perfectly built ditty:

*Cy gist, repose et dort léans
Le feu Evésque d'Orléans:
J'entends l'Evésque en son surnom,
Et frère Jehan en propre nom.
Qui mourut l'an cinq cens et vingt,
De la vérolle qui luy vint.
Or affin que saintes et anges
Ne prennent ces boutons estranges,
Prions Dieu, qu'au frère frappart
Il donne quelque chambre à part.¹⁰*

Here lies, rests and sleeps within
The regretted Bishop of Orleans:
I mean Bishop in his surname
And Brother John in proper name,
Who died in the year fifteen twenty
With syphilis of which he had aplenty.
Then, so that saints and angels
Won't catch these ruddy pimples,
Let us pray God, for the brother knocker
That he be placed in another locker.

Translated into modern English, the lines become an ironically innocuous poem less worthy of inscription on a granite surface than of inclusion in a book beneath the tongue-in-cheek title-epitaph of Clément Marot's *Adolescence clémentine* unearthing the facile and childish graffiti of boyhood.

The poem's tensions develop from differential oppositions of words and space. The sequence of flat rhymes in punctuation marks after the tonic units in a schema of *aa, bb, cc*, and so on, delineates the triple layering of volume. In lines one and two the oblong area is set below the point of the words' emission in the onlooker's imaginary theatre, then continued in the third and fourth lines' play on the titles appropriate to the tombstone. After a transition from surnames to proper names in the fifth and sixth lines, the central spatial segment, a since famous cliché, forms the median layer in words of a triple-decked tomb sculpture, the ironic counterpart of a conventionally planned monument.¹¹ The couplets below deal inversely with an identical unit of heavenly space above, suggested so economically by the poet's imprecation that the reader pray to God that a separate place be reserved for syphilitics: in devotion, hands folded and eyes cast upwards, the reader's knees remain on earth, leaving within the field of view no more than the facts recounted in the central section, those of the date and cause of death. Vertical ordering generates, of course, the modification in meaning from the space of *Ci-gist*—heightened only through the progression from left to right and top to bottom—to the fictive room *à part*. And identical, too, with the rapport between rhetoric and superficies are the inverted values given to proper and common behavior in direct proportion with a rectangle at a depth of six feet allotted to a clerical figure at his Christian interment.

On the text's margins there remains another economy and mode of exchange in satire. The poem's rhetoric suggests an evangelical view and masks its critical force through sometimes equivocal rhymes close to those of the *Grands Rhétoriciens (dort léans and d'Orléans; frappart and -re à part)*. Indebtedness to the masters went so far as commissioned lines for their own graves, a sort of occasion for occasions that the epitaph to Guillaume Crétin reveals. After describing the austere simplicity of the tombstone above such a royal poet, Marot exclaims that

C'est de Cretin, Cretin, qui tant sçavoit.
Regarder donc si ce tombeau avoit
De ce Cretin les faits laborieux,
Comme il devoit estre bien glorieux
Veu qu'il prend gloire au pauvre corps tout mort
Lequel par tout vermine mine et mort:
O dur tombeau, de ce que en keuvres,
Contente toy, avoir n'en peux les Oevvres,
Chose eternelle en mort iamais ne tombe:
Et qui ne meurt n'a que faire de tombe.

It's Cretin's, Cretin who knew so much,
 Look and see if the grave did have such,
 The facts of this Cretin so laborious
 As he shall always be so glorious,
 Seeing that it takes glory on the poor
 body so dead
 Where everywhere does insect infect his
 bed.
 Oh hard tomb, of what you must cover,
 Be happy not to have his works and their
 cover,
 Eternal thing into death will never fall
 And the dead know well what shall be
 fall.

The heritage of the epitaph combines spirit and word. Repetition of Cretin, an ignoble name—this (*ce*) Cretin—three times negates the negation of the name, ascribing to it a positive and eternal glory. The apprentice's imitation of the *Rhétoriqueur's* metrics tends to erase the presence of the circumstantial poet and ennobles, through simple imitation of daring combinations, the athletic verse of the master Crétin. *Vermine* and *mine*, *mort* and *mord*, *tombeau* (and the implied *tombe beau*), *tombe* (n.), and *tombe* (v.) are so equivocal that the poetic architecture rivals that of the master-masons who work with seemingly far more resistant granite and marble. Not by chance Marot places this inscription at the crypt or bottom layer of his complete works, in the final chapters entitled *épitaphes* and *cimetière*.¹²

The exchange of compliments or mock-reverent glances with a past master tells us why poetry of the time brings verbal and visual signs together so efficiently, for words—since they embody the objects they describe—are for the poet or valet the equivalent of money. The *rondeau*, a very popular form in the fifteenth century, has the same reciprocity of sound and surface so evident in the epitaph. Marot wrote among the finest specimens of the genre, and he reputedly abandoned them after 1527, at which time a much easier and freer flowing form, the sonnet, was about to appear in France. “To do *rondeaux*, you have to do them round,” remarked Pierre Fabri in his manual of second rhetoric in 1521,¹³

a statement repeated twenty-six years later in Thomas Sebillet's *Art poétique françois*. "The *rondeau* is thus named by its form. For as with the circle, after having run about (*discouru*) the whole circumference, we always return to the first point from which the discourse had begun its path."¹⁴ Less a container for superficial ideas than a rigorous model requiring exacting and meticulous choice of themes and words, the *rondeau's* circular "discourse" was a perfect vehicle for expression of difference, repetition, mutation, and metamorphosis of sense where words turn, unfold, and invert themselves from the opening clause to the almost symmetrical refrain at the third and fourth stanzas' conclusions. One piece balances or, as Montaigne would say, *contrerolles* (both controls and examines from multiple vantage points) itself as it is read. Thus the *rondeau's* shape becomes a perfect medium of exchange in the form of the coin and the balance, two icons of cyclic behavior, of give-and-take, of weighing, asking, thanking, soliciting, bargaining, praising, and of begging. In the majority of Marot's sixty-four examples, signs and their image-fields have the unalloyed ring of money. Words are emitted as if they were coins falling from an open pouch and striking a stone counter with the clink of pewter or copper.

The system of expression brings the spoken and written language to its basal and most efficiently unabashed status. A bad poet, Marot sings, who fumbles "*Raison, mesure, texte, et glose*"¹⁵ ought to be put to pasture. Combination of rhetoric, music, and the poem's page—this *texte et glose*—valorizes the written word and constitutes a poor man's currency. His slyest use of surface can be seen in the second rondel of the *Adolescence clémentine* in which enumerations of loudly ringing words are in counterpoint to the softly whispered *rentrement*, "*un bien petit*." Keynote are the sound of the words and the resulting, but monetarily worthless, circumference of a poem drawing not a coin but an IOU. Series of richly rhymed and tonically positioned nouns and imperatives—*taille, baille, vaille*, and *chaille*—lead to the last enunciation, *cliquaille*, a graphic and sonorous synonym of silver, and whose echo is the final payment, always deferred but ultimately overdue in the refrain of still another clause to come:

A un Créancier

Un bien petit de pres me venez prendre
Pour vous payer: et si devez entendre
Que je n'euz onc Angloys de vostre taille:
Car à tous coups vous criez: Baille, Baille,
Et n'ay de quoy contre vous me deffendre.

Sur moy ne fault telle rigueur estendre,
Car de pecune un peu ma bourse est tendre:
Et toutes fois j'en ay, vaille que vaille,

Un bien petit.

Mais à vous veoir—ou lon me puisse pendre!
Il semble advis qu'on ne vous vueille rendre
Ce qu'on vous doit: beau Sire, ne vous chaille!
Quand je seray plus garny de cliquaille,
Vous en aurez: mais il vous fault attendre

Un bien petit.

To a Creditor

A little nearer you come to me and my
hand

In order that I pay: but you must
understand

That I never had a farthing of the size
you say

For the amount you cry and hark, Pay,
Pay!

I never have credit on which to stand.

Against me your wrath you mustn't
disband,

For my purse has here and there but a
threadbare strand:

But I always will have, yea or nay,

A little.

But in seeing you—be I hanged by a
flaxen band—

It seems so strange that we just can't hand

Over what we owe: gentle master, come
what may,

When I'll have in my pocket a good
week's pay,

You'll have yours: meanwhile on your
faith you must stand

A little

The trickster's job is to transform worthless words into false money, and once completed, the poem fools the imaginary reader-as-creditor with its hollow song. Like Panurge's tale of the tramp who pays the restaurateur with the clink of his money in exchange for the aroma of a roast (*Tiers livre*, chapter xxxvii), the equivalence of sound to pieces of food or metal portrays the poem's image-sign as counterfeit banknote or illusory ticket permitting passage across barriers similar to those erected along the margins of Villon's ballads. Written with attention to salvation, the lines become the space of physical passage that will eventually fill an empty stomach.

The thirty-second *rondeau* tells of the poet's detention at the gates of Reims. The poem associates its own margins with the

city's shape and the poet's own body. Each rhyme is almost perfectly equivocal, as meanings can be inverted in the same fashion within the lines as in the refrain. Yet the real refrain, once again in opposition to the poem's buckle, *Au despartir*, is the word *refrains* in the sixth line. Repetitions are literal blows (from the Old French, *fraindre*, to strike or hit) on behalf of a belligerent host, but only with the opportune arrival of François Premier on September 19, 1521, en route from Troyes to Saint-Thierry, does the narrator hope for *grains* (line eleven, unleavened coins of sorts) that will resuscitate the poet's mangy nag and fill his own hungry mouth.¹⁶ A *rondeau* may pay the passage from one barrier to another, but the last sound, *Au despartir*, wafts back to the fellow knaves who are held up and still detained at the city's portals:

Au Roy

Au despartir de la ville de Reins
Faulte d'argent me rend foible de reins,
Roy des François, voire de telle sorte
Que ne sçay pas comme d'icy je sorte,
Car mon cheval tient mieulx que par les creins.
Puis l'hoste est rude, et plein de gros refrains:
Je y laisseray mors, bossettes, et frains,
Ce m'a il dict—ou le Diable l'emporte—
Au despartir.
Si vous supply, Prince, que j'ayme, et crains,
Faictes miracles avecques aucuns grains.
Resuscitez ceste personne morte:
Ou autrement demourray à la porte
Avec plusieurs qui sont à ce contrainctz
Au despartir.

To the King

In leaving one day the city of Reins,
 Need-of-money weakens me with kidney
 pain,
 King of Frances, indeed of such higher
 grist,
 I don't know how long here I must desist:
 My horse is a bonebag and a stringy
 mane,
 And the host is rough, with many nasty
 refrains:
 "I'll leave you with bites, bruises,
 bloodstains!"
 That he told me—lest the Devil insist—
 In leaving.
 I beg of you Prince, to whom my love
 and fear pertain,
 Do a miracle by sprinkling on us a sack of
 grain,
 Resuscitate this poet dead from disdain,
 Otherwise I'll stay at the entry, all the
 same,
 With those like me who strain and strain
 In leaving.

Nowhere is the verbal topos of circularity drawn so cogently or so graphically. Form and content are one, both being empty within the circle they trace. Here the void is the unfilled stomach and the roundabout manner of address that beckons to cross its own circumference. The rondel both illustrates and opens a system of economic exchange at its most immediate level, the poem being a diagram with its acuitous locations of need at the extremities.

The words, when enunciated, are no longer the property of the craftsman who glossed and measured them. In fact, the sounds belonged to no one and were perhaps—whether at Reims, on a tombstone, or within a Parisian bordello—image-signs arbitrarily linked to the objects they signify. Property would therefore not equal propriety at the level of the poem. Concomitantly, space and economy become isomorphic forms on the surface of the sixteenth-century's printed page. In reconstructing rhetorical habits of the declining Middle Ages, one critic has noted, "It is savory to remark that the art of speech is originally linked to a claim for property—as if language, as an object of a transformation, a basis for a practice, determined itself not at all from a subtle ideological mediation . . . but from the barest sociality (*socialité*) affirmed in its fundamental brutality, that of earthly possession: we begin—in our world—to reflect on language in order to protect our goods."¹⁷ The substitution of sounds for things—that is to say, of poems for women or food with Villon and Marot—effectuates a transfer or translation of equivalent quantities of desire whose economics in the physical presence of lines to be seen and read are, though blatantly non-utopian, highly poetic. The reader's displacement into the world of circumstantial exchange leaves one gaping hole in the reader's sensibility: the rondel's circularity emphasized in the last clause will always open the closed system with the reminder that the whole work cannot ring true, for the poem would otherwise never exist. In this light Villon's ballads and Marot's occasional rhymes become microscopic novels whose rhetoric is a field of continually mediated desire for momentary illusion of harmony between the forms of language and the objects they signify.

This aspect of occasional poetry could invert the scale of values that as students of literature we have been told to respect. In the

seventeenth century's pantheon La Fontaine holds a niche not far from Racine, but nonetheless numerous literary studies note how brilliantly the author of the *Fables* drew from Marot's forms.¹⁸ Rather than illustrating the continuity of a poetic tradition, the history of verse from Marot to La Fontaine proves that the image-sign and status of the word as money necessarily disappear. The famous *Epistre à son amy Lyon*, composed by Marot in 1526 but only published in 1534, uses the same verbal shape seen in the rondels. Borrowing from Aesop's fable of the lion and rat, Marot thanks his friend Lyon Jamet for his help in having him removed from the Châtelet prison in Paris after trial and conviction for transgression of abstinence during Lent. The discourse in the letter of thanks conveys the very isomorphism of image and sign. Lion and rat, two mammals at opposite ends of the great chain-of-being's hierarchy, are brought together through the equivalent weight of their words and deeds, which an English translation can only approximate. The lion, who had done himself honor in saving the rat, now finds himself caught in a trap. He sees the rodent arrive,

*Mais despita chatz, chates, et chatons,
Et prisa fort ratz, rates, et ratons,
Dont il avoit trouvé temps favorable
Pour secourir le lyon secourable;
Auquel a dit: 'Tays-toy, lyon lié,
Par moy sera maintenant deslié:
Tu le vaulx bien, car le cueur joly as.
Bien y parut, quand tu me deslias.
Secouru m'as fort lyonusement,
Ors secouru seras rateusement.'* (11. 36-45)

But he scorned toms, kitties, and cats,
And truly loved all rodents, pests, and
rats;
Now time favored the little thing
To save the savable animal king,
To whom he said, "Be quiet, lion-tied,
By me you'll surely and safely be untied.
You're worth it, for in your worthy heart
I did confide
And all came true when my claws you
untied.
You saved me most lionfully,
And you'll be saved rather ratfully."

Good actions are musical exchanges of equally weighed and repeated words that in a purer or higher mimetic context would be unacceptable: the pairing-off of *chatz, chates, and chatons* with *ratz, rates, and ratons*, the exchange of mock-heroic adverbs *lyonusement* and *rateusement*, the daring repetitions of *secourir* and

its variants four times in seven decasyllabic lines, or the inversions of *lier-des-lier* are the literal pans of a poetic balance, and the distance between the high and low totems is counterpoised by words and deeds of identical measure. Yet as an epistle the poem is still only one term of a greater rhetorical exchange that briefly displaces in its discourse the writer's need to stay alive, for the tale in the fable becomes microcosmic of greater patterns of communication. We must remember that the fabulous lion always refers equivocally to Marot's very real friend Lyon Jamet and reminds him of urgent times of need. In using Marot's version over one hundred years later, La Fontaine was to rewrite Aesop's tale, but he would never permit the word as visual sign of money or measure of exchange to exist as a poem.

If the signifier and signified of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries are of the same substance and weight, and if they are given such equivalence through a rhetoric of bodily economy and boundary dictated by circumstance and occasion, then, what critics have decried as stultified forms, decrepitude, or sterile versification in poetry of the same period must be reconsidered for the attempt to correlate visual sign and field of meaning. In their deceptively open-ended scenographic systems, the words become a surface of religious and monetary salvation. The poem assumes the form of a theatre, a church, or a piece of metal on which the displacement of need and desire takes place. In that space there occurs the inter-discursive flow between an area schematized and the voice or body in relation to it; between compliments and the food swapped for them: only in the physical shape of its language does the early printed book convey the reverie of such lucid communication. Today, in an age when words—still largely dominated by an aesthetic of representation—tend toward transparency, we often forget that the most moving poems are always those either inscribed upon or drawn by the poet's body. When used as an area of mediation on which music is both seen and heard, the poem's verbal shape actually heightens and enhances the lyric tone. And if Villon and Marot are to be remembered as lyric poets, their lyricism—in part an acuitous balance of visual and aural measure—must be appreciated for its differential economy of bodily needs and desire.

1. See David W. Seaman, "The Development of Visual Poetry in France," *Visible Language*, VI (Winter 1972), 19-44. Also appropriate is Michel Foucault's well-known distinction in *Les Mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966) between an epistemological configuration of resemblance and reciprocity of the later Middle Ages and representation or analogy of the seventeenth century.
2. Daniel Updike, *Printing Types, Their History, Forms and Use*. 2nd ed., vol. I (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 86-87.
3. *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard-Pléiade, 1962), *Essais*, III, v, p. 851. We have elsewhere examined visual aspects of Montaigne's writing in "The Page's Hidden Dimension: Surface and Emblem in Montaigne's *Essais*," *Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, VII (Spring 1974), 13-26.
4. From a study of the several thousand variants in the twenty printed editions from 1489 to 1533, Guiraud remarks, "We can conclude that the editors (at least the earliest) had the key for the first reading but without realizing the existence of two other versions underneath. It is the first reading that they try to emendate," *Le Jargon de Villon ou le gai savoir de la coquille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), p. 23. Guiraud touches on a problem studied by Meyer Schapiro in "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs," *Semiotica*, I, 3 (1969), 228.
5. *La Poétique de François Villon* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1967), p. 39.
6. This an all subsequent translations are ours. We feel that the reader, faced with two versions of the same text, cannot but find by means of comparative difference and obvious lack in the English renderings how blatantly physical are the metrics of Villon and Marot.
7. As Seaman had noted, "Complex acrostics not only were devotional for the poet, but could also stimulate meditation; the reader follows the letters like the beads of a rosary, finding satisfaction in the resolution of the poetry and the acrostic, while the visual design of the acrostic turns the text into an icon" (p. 27).
8. Here we encounter a textual contradiction of the type Pierre Guiraud had uncovered. Levet omits line three and places line five of the envoy in its place, destroying the perfect anagram found in the manuscripts. We must remember that such a popular poem was known by heart, and its printed resemblance to the ideal may have been close enough for any reader, the acrostic constituting a mnemonic device (Seaman, p. 22). But VIOL would inflect VILLON with a slightly different meaning, give the poet a shade of sexual deviation, quite appropriate to Margot's context. For this reason we use both versions of the manuscript and first printed edition.
9. "Des Noms" (*Essais*, I, xlvi), p. 266.
10. *L'Adolescence clémentine*, éd. V.-L. Saulnier (Paris: Armand Colin, 1958), p. 113. All reference to poems by Marot will be made to this text which differs little from the first printed edition. The topic of the Bishop of Orléans could also be a reminder of Thibaut d'Aussigny, who presumably tortured Villon. At the same time, as Guiraud notes, *Orléans* is a signature for *horle héants*, to shout against the spiteful enemy, *Le Testament de Villon ou le gai savoir de la Basoche* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 131.
11. Such, for example, the monument for Marguerite of Austria partially designed by the poet-architect and friend of Marot's father, Jean Lemaire de Belges, in Paul Frankl, *Gothic Architecture* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1962), plate 171.

12. Such is the ordering in the posthumous *Oeuvres de Clement Marot, de Cahors en Quercy, valet de chambre du Roy*. A Lyon, Pour Iean Gauthier, 1597, pp. 566-67 (University of Minnesota Special Collections Z842 M347).
13. *Le Grand et Vrai Art de pleine rhétorique* (Rouen, 1521), reprinted in 1890 (Rouen: Imprimerie Espérance Cagniard), vol. II, p. 63.
14. *Art Poétique françoys*, éd. Félix Gaiffe (Paris: Hachette, 1910), p. 119.
15. "A ung poete ignorant," rondel VII: "Qu'on meine aux champs ce coquardeau,/
Lequel gaste (quand il compose) Raison, mesure, texte et glose,/
Soit en ballade, ou en rondeau. . . ." (Take to pasture this nincompoop at a loss,/
Who spoils whatever he handles,/
Reason, measure, text, and gloss/
Either in ballads or rondels. . . .)
16. See biographical notes in C. A. Mayer, Clément Marot, *Oeuvres diverses* (London: Athlone Press, 1966), p. 101.
17. Roland Barthes, "L'Ancienne Rhétorique," *Communications*, no. 16 (1970), pp. 190-91.
18. Odette de Mourgues, *La Fontaine: 'Fables'* (London: Arnold, 1967), p. 7.