PART V.

ABELALIS' PLACE IN THE HISTORY OF EDUCATION.
An estimate of Francois Rabelais as an Educator:

There is a great variety of opinion as to what is Rabelais' main contribution to the art and science of education. Some see in his work the most complete embodiment of the spirit of the French Renaissance; this point of view needs qualification, however, as Rabelais keeps in full the life and energy but not the cult for beauty which characterized that movement. Others note the importance of his advanced views as a doctor and advocate of the joy of life, of bodily fitness and robust humour; hence his place as a precursor of gymnastic training. While some stress his originality in language study, including the vernacular, others point out the objective nature of his system, which gives training in observation of the most varied natural phenomena. Some critics stress Rabelais' belief in the excellence and dignity of human nature, contrasting favourably with the prevailing medieval ecclesiastical education - clerical monopoly and a pre-occupation with other worldly objectives.

In his great thoughts on education, Rabelais starts from the needs of the human beings of his time and proceeds to the needs of all time. Generally his contemporaries are only the pretext for lessons intended for the whole human race. He seized upon general truths and, by spreading them through his written works, secularised them. What is more important, he arrived at these truths by the use of reason as opposed to medieval philosophy and theology, which had confused them under one heading, the truth according to faith.

To his contemporaries Rabelais was known firstly, as a skilful physician and a profound scholar; secondly as one who possessed in the encyclopedic manner of the early Renaissance most of the branches of learning of his time. He enlarged the bounds of knowledge especially in medicine and botany. He was the
esteemed friend of the leading figures of his day whether men of letters, men of affairs, scholars, diplomats, churchmen or statesmen. We find him often referred to as "clear Doctor".

To take Rabelais as seriously as does Résumé, for instance, who proves him a worthy pendant with a single aim in writing his romance, that of developing his system of education, is as great a mistake as to look upon him entirely as a great humanitarian or as a mere buffoon. It is true that Rabelais does treat of important questions—education, ethics, justice, law, religion, and that he is serious up to the point of avoiding persecution. But, with whatever seriousness of purpose Rabelais sets out to satirise some abuse, he is eventually carried away by some foolery or extravaganza. While recognising his seriousness as reformer and educator, or his sincerity as a satirist, we must bear in mind that he lives by his creative literary genius together with his mastery of language.

We have discussed Rabelais's pedagogy from various points of view and have seen how certain of his principles coincide with those of some writers of the Italian and French Renaissance. It has also been noted how Rabelais retains more than he realises of scholastic education. There remain three important principles which are not found in the contemporary treatises on pedagogy or which are insufficiently developed therein. It is on these three points that must be based Rabelais's claim to an original contribution to education, for they arise from his own temperament. There is, first, the introduction of hygiene into Gargantua's education. It is not claimed that Rabelais invented these precepts of hygiene; his originality consists in their thorough application. Rabelais, the doctor, regulates the hours of work and sleep, the nature and duration of exercise, he supervises the meals, bodily functions, the transition from old to new type of education, the rub-down and the changes of clothing after games.
Secondly, he unites physical, intellectual and moral education, though the humanists, as a whole, were not deeply interested in physical culture; however great attention they devoted to the intellect. As soon as Bude started serious study, he abandoned his games through lack of time. Erasmus protested against the asceticism of the College de Montaigu and certainly admired fine physique but was preoccupied in his struggle against routine and ignorance. In Gargantua’s education the body takes an even more important place than the mind.

Rabelais’ third contribution to pedagogy is his desire to associate education with life, to take concrete reality, the objects and incidents of daily life as matter for instruction. What Gargantua learns from books is less important than what he learns outside the six hours of book study proper, from his observation of nature and men. It is by object lessons that he is encouraged to turn to the scientific knowledge awaiting discovery in the classics. This is the birth of Anschauung which was fully recognised and developed by Pestalozzi towards the close of the 18th century. There are other respects in which Rabelais heralds modern developments in education. He gives Gargantua tasks which involve the use of his hands as well as his head; he sends his pupil to observe the working of various trades thus foreshadowing our modern technical education; his pupil learns to handle a boat with and against the stream, spread the sail, climb the rigging and adjust the compass – a remarkable vision for the 16th century and one which was only realised with the inauguration of nautical schools in comparatively recent times.

Most critics are agreed in classing Rabelais as a humanistic-realist in that he bases the aim and purpose of education on the realities of contemporary life rather than the beauties of Greek and Roman literature; he is also a realist by his habit of
scientific enquiry. S.S. Laurie, agrees that Rabelais "certainly inculcates the study of languages; but this is not for the sake of languages, but merely because in no other way could the treasures of literature be reached. He urges also the study of science, and commends personal contact with nature. In general he sees the importance of instruction through the senses and advocates a wide range of realistic study. — He keeps in view a good useful and becoming life as the practical end of all education." Yet Laurie adds that it seems absurd to call Rabelais a "realist" because he holds these views and prefers to call him a "humanist". The latter opinion however, seems to be based on the letter to Pantagruel and pays insufficient regard to Gargantua's education. We have concluded earlier that Rabelais strongly emphasises the scientific and factual aspect of study, concentrating on the substance at the expense of form. He is one of the earliest writers on education who would teach about things through observation of those very things.

Though Rabelais is a humanistic-realistic from one point of view he is a precursor of the naturalistic education which culminated in the work of Rousseau. He belongs to the naturalists in his opposition to bookishness in education; he would no doubt have objected to the later tendencies of humanism almost as much as he revolted against the practices of scholasticism.

Paul Monroe, sums up Rabelais' varied contribution to pedagogy and his importance in the history of education: "Rabelais led the way out of ancient superstition into modern science. More than this, he taught in it that the study of Nature, observation of her laws, imitation of her methods must be at the root of every true system of education. He showed that the Nature spirit is the true spirit of good teaching. Ever since his day civilised mankind has been trying to learn this lesson of his and to apply it to schools. For three centuries the leaders in education, under his
direct inspiration, have been slowly and painfully transforming the false pedagogy of the cloister into the true pedagogy of out-of-doors. Writers and teachers, schools and universities, have been engaged in a halting and irregular struggle to transfer education from a metaphysical to a physical basis, to lead it away from the habit of deductive speculation into one of inductive research. This transfer Rabelais made boldly and at once. He did not, of course, elaborate the educational ideal of today, but he plainly marked out the lines upon which that ideal is framed. He taught truth and simplicity, he ridiculed hypocrisy and formalism, he denounced the worship of words, he demanded the study of things, he showed the beauty of intellectual health, of moral discipline of real piety. Best of all, he emasculated the supreme principle of Nature, which is ordered freedom.  

We have noted that Rabelais and his contemporaries produced hardly any external difference in the work of schools, their influence affecting chiefly the writings of later educationalists. Even at the beginning of the present century, when the theory of education has developed so far beyond that of Rabelais, the practices in the schools reveal many shortcomings and a striking disregard for sound principles in both curriculum and hygiene.

The curriculum was strictly classical, the grammatical niceties of Greek and Latin being the chief aim, together with French, studied as a dead language, and some mathematics. Each day began with early chapel then breakfast, followed by lessons or preparation of the whole morning. On certain days afternoon school left time only for a short game for which boys did not change and so they had afterwards to sit through a lesson in a sodden shirt. The many games were both monotonous and

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1 Paul Munroe — The educational ideal: an outline of its growth in modern times. P. 262.
compulsory; no opportunity was given for multitudes in the country, hence there was little contact with the outside world. The morning bath was unknown, few pupils could have a bath after games; the rest had to be content with one bath a week.

On Sunday there was no school but it was far from being a day of rest with morning chapel, divinity to learn, afternoon chapel with sermon, and in the evening a final service conducted by the Housemaster. There were minute regulations about clothes which had no regard for health; originality in clothing and in thought was discouraged.  

From the above it may be seen that what Rabelais recommended had not been adopted in practice some 350 years later, however such theorists agreed with his principles. In Gargantua's education there is no mention of special regulations for Sundays or Saint days; the masses and church services are deliberately omitted from his second education.

If Rabelais in the Elysian Fields could be heard discussing modern trend in education he might have certain suggestions to offer; he would certainly be highly indignant about the round shoulders and pale faces to be seen in many class rooms of schools or universities. His advice might well be: "The desire to provide boys and girls with more precise and more varied knowledge is laudable. Yet since 1534 there has been so great a widening of the boundaries of knowledge that what was possible in my time is no longer feasible; it is attempting too much. The way to lighten the curriculum is not to remove any particular subject but to make the initial stages easy, reducing knowledge to its elements. By this humble yet practical start subjects

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are easily correlated; combine your physics and chemistry into a general science course for at least a year. By arousing children's curiosity and encouraging them to observe the common forms of life in garden, field and pond, lay the foundation for nature study; start with the simple phenomena of biology and later proceed to more specialised work in botany and zoology, but decide for yourself at what stage you should introduce these terms. Let a boy study two living languages and compare them. Because he will not go very far in one that is no reason for giving it up; let him aim at a thorough mastery of the one but let him be content with a mere reading knowledge of the other.

Above all do not allow the pendulum to swing between physical and intellectual education; keep both in mind constantly. Recreate the body as much as possible in the open air; avoid a gymnasium in fine weather, just as you would avoid teaching botany and astronomy from books. Let your teaching of morality be simple and direct with no dogmatic spirit.

Remember that a complete education must neglect no possibility of developing all the energies of youth, leaving no single faculty undeveloped. It must reconcile and harmonise body and mind, things and books, games and study, the sciences and the arts, action and thought, the practical and the artistic. Boys and girls must be trained not for cloistered seclusion but for life; therefore bring them into contact with the outside world to rouse their curiosity and let them see that what can be gleaned from books is only a minute part of what is.

In our endeavour to discover the influence exerted by Rabelais on the theory of education, we found that it is less easy to trace the precise effect of his work on other writers on education than to indicate
the subsequent history of his pedagogical theories. Nevertheless, there seems to be no doubt that Rabelais had an important influence, direct or indirect, on Montaigne, Locke and Rousseau, possibly also Milton and Fenelon.

Rabelais was in advance of his time in that, while retaining the humanistic element in education, he allotted an important part to other elements – the scientific subjects which were to play such a large part in the fashioning of a new world of reality and thought in the following centuries. Trained in pure scholarship Gargantua would have run the risk of a lack of direct vision or the inability to enjoy life at first hand. In spite of obvious defects his education covers a remarkable range, combining the foundation provided by books and ordered thinking with a wealth of experience and observation of life. We feel that he will be a capable ruler as well as a man of learning and culture, thanks to his training which is devised to produce flexibility of outlook. Nothing of fundamental importance is omitted from his education; the use he makes of it all will depend upon his natural ability. He will at least possess the courage to express an unpopular opinion if he feels it is important.

Happy is the pupil brought up according to these principles, whose piety is a spontaneous welling-up of the heart and not a movement of the lips; whose studies have been made real as far as is possible by the presence of the very things he is studying; whose instruction is not the piling up of knowledge in an over-worked mind but the free and spontaneous expansion of mind aspiring of its own accord to perpetual progress.

It is difficult to decide if Rabelais' ideas are capable of stimulating further thought or if they are played out. In any case his work is inspired with
a creative force, and must remain an object of interest to the student of education as a concise, manly and healthy contribution to the theory of education. To the practical teacher who must reflect from time to time on the wisdom of his teaching and take stock of his aims and methods, Rabelais is still worth consulting.