

Reading Signs of Mystery in Flaubert's "Hérodiad"

Leonard Marsh
Le Moyne College
Syracuse, New York

Abstract

Flaubert's "Hérodiad" from Trois Contes is marked by an aura of secrecy, confinement, and mystery. While many readers have endeavored to explain the text's images and spatial significance, the relationship between these various formal attributes and the Christological content of the text has not been thoroughly treated. In this paper I show how the word is valorized in the text as a sign and how, along with the images of circle and space, it forms a nexus of signs with Christological import that illuminate the "paroles mystérieuses," the "grande nouvelle" and the "réponse si longtemps espérée" announced in the text.

Even a cursory reading of Flaubert's "Hérodiad" reveals an aura of secrecy, confinement, and mystery. The voice of the sometimes seen prophet John the Baptist (Iaokanann in the text), imprisoned in a dungeon deep in Herod Antipas's palace, weighs heavily as a political threat to Herod, the Tetrarch, and his wife Hérodiad. Indeed, the physical and temporal space of the narrative, limited to one palace and one day, along with mysterious entrances and exits, unexplained auguries and descriptors of doom, and an underlying fear of an unseen ascetic prisoner, all contribute to an atmosphere of secrecy and the unknown.

"Hérodiad" is perhaps the least treated of Flaubert's *Trois Contes* since any interpretation or analytical reading seems to be co-opted by the "authorized" story recounted in the gospel accounts of the New Testament. Many readers of "Hérodiad" have, however, endeavored to look into the mystery enshrouding the form of the tale. Victor Provenzano has convincingly illuminated the hidden geometry of the text and its relationship to the

text's cosmological references. Most readers have commented on the tale's tight telescoping of time and space in its own tripartite structure. The preponderance of circular images and confined spiral movement has been noted by many readers, including Raymonde Debray-Genette (49), John R. O'Connor (822), Provenzano (769) and Michael Issacharoff (35). However, the relationship between these various formal attributes and the Christological content of the text has not been thoroughly treated.

It is true that the content of "Hérodiad" is postulated on the absolute centrality and omnipresence of John's voice in the text, as Provenzano has indicated (767, 780), and that whatever action there is in the text hinges on John's voice (Issacharoff 36). But it is also true that John's words exist, both in Flaubert's tale and in the Scriptures, not only for themselves alone as a threat to Herod and Hérodiad, but also to point to another Word, the *Logos*, the Word of God incarnate in the person of the Messiah. It is my purpose to show how the word is valorized in the text as a sign and how, along with the images of circle, space and the banquet, it forms a nexus of signs with Christological import.

Word

The twice-reported words of John announce him as the precursor of the Messiah: "Pour qu'il grandisse, il faut que je diminue" ("For him to increase, I must decrease.") (188).¹ It is in this apothegm that the Christological content of the tale consists, for it is the only quote of the prophet based on scriptural authority (John 3:30). As such, it occupies a privileged place and an unusual treatment in the text. The scripturally documented words, rather than being reported directly by the narrative voice as one would expect, are words reported to Herod as the Samaritan Mannaëi heard them said by John. They occur near the beginning of the text where the very identity of the mysteriously named Iakobanann is revealed as "le même que les Latins appellent saint Jean-Baptiste" ("the very one the Latins call Saint John the Baptist") (188). Thus, just as the name of John the Baptist is twice removed from the reader, so are his words. The words occur within the context of an observed puzzling visit of two men to the prisoner's dungeon. These men had exchanged "paroles mystérieuses" ("mysterious words") (188) with the prisoner and then left for Upper Galilee "en annonçant qu'ils apporteraient une grande nouvelle" ("announcing that they would bring important news") (188). The interlocutors, their words and their news are all left shrouded in mystery, unidentified and imprecise. This apothegm, again reported as said by John, is

repeated after John's death at the end of the text, at dawn, one whole day after the cycle of events leading to John's decapitation has been completed. At that time the two unidentified men return with the still unspecified "réponse si longtemps espérée" ("long awaited answer") (199). They confide this "answer" to the Essene Phanuel who, after being told that the decapitated prophet John has descended among the dead to "annoncer le Christ" ("announce Christ") (199), now understands the words: "Pour qu'il croisse, il faut que je diminue" ("For him to increase, I must decrease.") (199). But the text withholds from the reader an explanation of the import of the words, just as it curiously changes the verb "increase" from *grandir* to *croître*. The three men proceed with John's head on their way to Galilee. A pattern of repetition has been established:

Beginning of text

Two unidentified men

"en annonçant qu'ils apporteraient une grande nouvelle" ("announcing that they would bring important news")

Movement toward Galilee

"Pour qu'il grandisse, il faut que je diminue." ("For him to increase, I must decrease.")

End of text

Two unidentified men

"réponse si longtemps espérée" ("long awaited answer")
 "annoncer le Christ"
 ("announce the coming of Christ")

Movement toward Galilee

"Pour qu'il croisse, il faut que je diminue." ("For him to increase, I must decrease.")

In each instance there is movement toward Galilee away from the confinement of the Tetrarch's palace, and this represents the beginning of a new order, a new time, a new day (literally and figuratively), the reality of the awaited news announced by the feared words of the prophet. The news, namely the beginning of Jesus's public life as Messiah, remains secret in the text. It is known to the reader only metatextually, for the story is already known as told in the gospels. When Jesus has begun to increase by going public in his mission, it is time for John to diminish, and indeed he has, for his voice is silenced and his body is reduced to his head. A sense of finality has been achieved in John's death; yet it points to a new beginning. A circle has been closed; yet another path begins. But the news of this new path remains as cryptic at the

end of the text as it was at the beginning. An exploration of how the text moves within the confinement of its own space can illuminate the meaning of the “paroles mystérieuses” (“mysterious words”), the significance of the “grande nouvelle” (“important news”) and the importance of the “réponse si longtemps espérée” (“long awaited answer”). This movement is at once vertical and horizontal, circular and linear, and is implied in the properties of the word as sign and in the signs of the circle and the labyrinth.

Word as Sign

Vertical movement is immediately established by John’s position of imprisonment in a dungeon deep within Herod’s palace. John’s power is limited to his voice, his word. The first hint of the existence of this prisoner is neither a description of him nor of his activity but rather the effect of his voice: “Tout à coup, une voix lointaine, comme échappée des profondeurs de la terre, fit pâlir le Tétrarque” (“Suddenly, a far away voice, as if emerging from the depths of the earth, made the Tetrarch go pale.”) (188). The first time John’s voice is directly heard from him in the text, it is described as “un grand soupir, poussé d’une voix caverneuse” (“a great sigh, coming from a cavernous voice”) and then “[l]a voix s’éleva” (“the voice rose”) (193). It is clear then that Flaubert characterizes this voice as one that rises or increases from below to a “spatial paroxysm,” as one reader has termed it (Hubert 250), only to descend to its ultimate decrease in death. As each of the gospel accounts proclaims, John is not the awaited Messiah but is the one who heralds the Messiah.² This is why the stylized upward and then downward movement of John’s voice is the exact opposite of the movement of Jesus the *Logos*, which traces the path of a parabola. The Word incarnate of the Father first descends to earth to become human and then ascends in glory after his resurrection from the dead. This parabolic movement of descent followed by ascent is a property of the theological symbolism of the word of God as efficacious.³ John’s words, on the other hand, rise to a high point first in Flaubert’s text: “La voix grossissait, se développait, roulait avec des déchirements de tonnerre ...” (“The voice grew in strength, swelled and rolled around with the clarity of a ripping thunder”) (194). The prophet’s words are sustained there in his diatribe against the Pharisees, the Saducees and Hérodias and then descend into the silence of his dungeon. As “parabola” (Gk. *parabole*, comparison), Jesus is identified with the Father as the *Logos*, the *parole* of the Father, but John, in a reverse parabolic movement, is not identified as the word of the Messiah but rather as his herald.⁴

Circle

The interplay of opposite movement finds its expression in yet another image of God, that of the circle. The well known metaphor of God as an intellectual circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere has been variously attributed across the centuries.⁵ The intellectual circle with its simultaneously expanding and contracting properties becomes a sign in the text for the increase of the Messiah and the decrease of his prophet. Much of the aura of secrecy in “Hérodiad” is contained within the tour of the dark, circular palace that Herod gives to the Roman Proconsul Vitellius, and this tour itself is characterized by the same opposing movements as the intellectual circle. It quickly becomes clear that the Tetrarch is hesitant to conduct the tour and that the Proconsul, on the other hand, is anxious to find the “trésor d’Hérode” (“Herod’s treasure”) (193) suspected to be located therein. The movement around and within the palace is significant since it is the only space that the narrative occupies and, as such, it represents the totality of the text. The cavernous descent terminating at the dungeon of the prisoner John is preceded by a description in the text of the social and public context of Herod’s birthday celebration at the palace. This is the point in the text where Herod’s people are hoisting baskets of exotic foods for the birthday feast. On this event some slaves “descendirent sur le sentier, d’autres le montaient; ils refluèrent; deux courants se croisaient dans cette masse d’hommes qui oscillaient, comprimée par l’enceinte des murs” (“went down the path, others went up, rushing into each other; two groups kept crossing each other in this mass of men swaying back and forth while being contained within the enclosure of the palace walls”) (192). Like the conception of God as an intellectual circle with its shrinking circumference and expanding center, this description in the text is marked by simultaneous movement in opposite directions within the circular palace.

Circle and Labyrinth

When Vitellius takes a closer look at the palace, he demands to see the “chambres souterraines de la forteresse” (“underground chambers of the fortress”) (192). The descent begins and passes vertically eight numbered chambers. On the birthday of the Tetrarch, this movement in the text from the external circular “enceinte des murs” (“enclosure of the walls”) passing down by eight chambers through various diversions to the internal central point of John’s dungeon embeds the labyrinth as a sign in the text. Many classical labyrinths, with seven circuits and one goal, are constructed

of 272 stones, each representing a day in the human gestation period, and as such are seen by many as a birthing instrument (*Mid-Atlantic Geomancy*). In addition, some consider the labyrinth as a secret path to a chamber in which a second birth takes place (de Freitas 413). In this sense John's dungeon is the place where he is reborn to new life after he is beheaded and announces a new order marked by the Messiah. This labyrinthine tour is the text's way of mysticising the narrative with a convoluted path within a circle representing simultaneously the Tetrarch's birth at its outer rim, the "enceinte des murs" ("enclosure of the walls") and the prophet's death and spiritual rebirth at its center, his dungeon.

The labyrinth is so named (Gk. *labrys*, double axe) because of the many images of the double axe found at the Minoan palace of Knossos, origin of the mythical labyrinth in which Theseus killed the Minotaur hidden in its center (de Freitas 413). An axe does mark the center of the text's labyrinth, at the point where John's dungeon is opened for Vitellius to see. One of the Proconsul's lictors took up an axe to open the lid of the dungeon but Mannaeï "crut, en voyant une hache, qu'on allait décapiter Iaokanann ..." ("on seeing an axe, believed they were going to decapitate Iaokanann") (193). The jailer stayed the lictor's hand and pried open the dungeon's circular lid himself.

Labyrinths on the floors of European cathedrals represented for the faithful a vicarious means to make a pilgrimage to a holy place and for this reason such a labyrinth was frequently called "La Lieue de Jérusalem" (de Freitas 414). The path along this "Jerusalem mile" terminated in a sacred center such as the center of Judaism, the temple of Jerusalem, which does figure in Flaubert's text as "une montagne lumineuse, quelque chose de surhumain, écrasant tout de son opulence et de son orgueil" ("a luminous mountain, something superhuman, dominating everything with its opulence and pride") (188). The temple is a luminous mountain while John is imprisoned in the dark depths of Herod's palace. The temple's superhuman attributes and majestic richness contrast with John described as "[u]n être humain ... couché par terre sous de longs cheveux se confondant avec les poils de bête qui garnissaient son dos" ("a human being lying on the ground, his long hair meshing with the animal fur that covered his back") (193). This Jerusalem center is in marked contrast to the center of the labyrinthine descent to John's dungeon precisely because John prophesies a new Jerusalem, a different and renewed order. Yet, while John is diminished in comparison to the Jerusalem temple, his voice and name expand, like the intellectual circle, from the center to the circumference of the for-

tress: “Hérodiad l’entendit à l’autre bout du palais. ... On avait reconnu Iaokanann. Son nom circulait” (“Herodias heard him at the other end of the palace. They had recognized Iaokanann. His name circulated.”) (193).

Perhaps the most disquieting circle in the text is the circle that is known before the narrative begins. The head of John is the icon of a story that belongs to the corpus of oral and written tradition in western religious culture due to its appearance in each of the synoptic gospel accounts. It is the head, this “sphere,” that receives unusual attention in the text. From its arrival in the banquet hall to its circulation among the guests, it is personified in the sense that it moves with its own power: “La tête entra ...,” “Elle arriva à la table des prêtres” (“The head entered,” “It arrived at the table of the priests.”) (198). Intermittently passed around among the guests, the head is variously treated with indifference, curiosity, and horror. The act of decapitation has been prepared since the beginning of the text. Hubert has noted that the decapitation of John is foreshadowed by such words as “tailladant” (“slashing”) and “cette couronne de pierres, suspendue au-dessus de l’abîme” (“this crown of stones, suspended above the abyss”) in the initial description of the landscape and palace (248). In addition, one must not fail to mention the “créneaux sur le bord” (“crenels on the edge”) (187) of the fortress walls, also found in the beginning of the text. These crenels, indentations or notches alternating with the merlons on the top of the walls, serve as a type of aperture through which heads and defensive projectiles are extended in battle. The reader, assuming a distant long view *on* the fortress in a reversal of Herod’s long view *from* the fortress, then perceives the circular castle as a crown of stones encircling the head of John and hanging over an abyss, the textual anticipation of John’s decapitation. Indeed, these crenels have even been transformed into other practical devices at the point in the text where several of Herod’s people, “penchés sur les créneaux” (“leaning out over the crenels”) (192), were hoisting baskets of exotic victuals to provide for the birthday feast. In this way the crown-fortress that symbolically encircles the head of John in the beginning of the text is associated with the feast at the end of the text where the head is passed around on a plate, as if one of the excessive delicacies to be consumed.

Space

The aura of mystery and secrecy that pervades the text is amplified by the fact that, despite the stasis of a single narrative space, the text does

present the physical movement of characters, but with a suddenness that suggests the paranormal. In a very real way the text must be read in the same way that the stars are read in the text, that is to say that the text must be read from its own natural signs. From the very beginning one of the signs is that of covered and closed space, and it is within this confined space that the characters appear, circulate and disappear. In itself this space is a metaphor for the yet to be discovered and disclosed message both of Phanuel, the Essene, and John, the prophet. Even before the introduction of the Tetrarch, the palace is described as a palace “couvert d’une terrasse que fermait une balustrade” (“covered with a terrace enclosed by a balustrade”) and where “des mâts étaient disposés pour tendre un vélarium” (“poles had been erected to hold up an awning”) (187). The Tetrarch Herod, as pivotal character, is the first character introduced. After presenting the palace and its environs via the *imparfait* of description, the narrative voice inserts the entrance of Herod via the first *passé simple* in the text accompanied by its temporal context: “Un matin, avant le jour, le Tétrarque Hérode-Antipas vint s’y accouder, et regarda” (“One morning, before daybreak, the Tetrarch Herod-Antipas leaned over the wall and looked.”) (188). There ensues a description of the palace’s environs but even there the atmosphere is covered, heavy and dark, ready to be uncovered and illuminate something monumental:

Les montagnes, immédiatement sous lui, commençaient à découvrir leurs crêtes, pendant que leur masse, jusqu’au fond des abîmes, étaient encore dans l’ombre. Un brouillard flottait, il se déchira, et les contours de la mer Morte apparurent. L’aube, qui se levait derrière Machaerous, épanchait une rougeur. Elle illumina bientôt les sables de la grève ...

The mountains immediately below him were beginning to show their tops, while their bases right down to the abyss were still in the shade. A fog hovered, it broke, and the contours of the Dead Sea appeared. Dawn, which rose behind Machaerous, spread its light. It soon lit up the sands of the shore.” (188).

Each of the remaining main characters appears from behind, from within or from under this heavy, dark cover that is expected to lift.

With the Tetrarch styled as a disquieted ruler, the very next character’s presence is made known only by a voice that breaks the quiet. This is the voice of John, a voice that is neither heard nor quoted in the text at this point

but rather made known by its sudden, disquieting effect on the Tetrarch. Then, the first appearance of Hérodias surprises the Tetrarch with its suddenness: “Quelqu’un l’avait touché. Il se retourna. Hérodias était devant lui” (“Someone had touched him. He turned around. Herodias was before him.”) (189). Her last appearance is no less sudden: “Les panneaux de la tribune d’or se déployèrent tout à coup; et à la splendeur des cierges, entre ses esclaves et des festons d’anémone, Hérodias apparut” (“The pannels of the golden platform opened up, and suddenly amidst her slaves bearing tapers and flowered garlands, Herodias appeared.”) (197). The first time Salomé is seen, it is not directly but from afar and through the eyes of Herod. Distracted from his conversation with his wife Hérodias, Herod notices an unidentified young girl on the balcony of a neighboring house unpacking a traveling basket and admiring her belongings. Styled as a sleek Roman column, the girl captivates the Tetrarch who inquires of her identity, only to receive a cold response from Hérodias. Salomé’s second appearance is so oblique that the text presents it as the Tetrarch’s brief glimpse of an unidentified person’s body part coming from beneath: “Sous une portière en face, un bras nu s’avança ...” (“A bare arm slipped out from under a curtained door.”) (195). The text presents her third entrance by an impersonal narration of the noise that heralds it and its effect on the guests at the feast. By then she has already entered the hall: “... il arriva au fond de la salle un bourdonnement. Une jeune fille venait d’entrer” (“A buzzing was heard at the end of the hall. A young girl had just entered.”) (197). In this way the mysterious appearance of the characters and their indirect presentation into the text heighten the sense of mystery and suspend the resolution of uncovering and disclosing the message of Phanuel and the news heralded by the prophet John. This mystery surrounds no other character more than Phanuel himself.

Phanuel was a member of the Essenes, an ascetic sect that represented the presence of the beyond-this-world in the world itself. The text of “Hérodias” itself describes these singularly unusual individuals: “On respectait ces hommes pauvres, indomptables par les supplices, vêtus de lin, et qui lisaient l’avenir dans les étoiles” (“These poor men clothed in linen, who were unaffected by sufferings and could read the future in the stars, were respected by everyone.”) (190). The very name of the sect most likely signifies seer, the silent and the mysterious (Smith). Everything in Phanuel’s demeanor and bearing indicates the mysterious and the unknown, the dark and the shade. His first appearance is made from behind: “... au fond de la terrasse, à gauche, un Essénien parut, en robe blanche, nu-pieds,

l'air stoïque" ("At the far end of the terrace, on the left, a stoic looking, barefoot Essene appeared in a white tunic.") (189). On seeing him, Hérodiad demands that he be killed, but they both withdraw silently walking backwards, each exiting by a different staircase. At his second appearance "*Phanuel surgit à l'angle d'un couloir*" ("Phanuel materialized suddenly in the corner of a corridor.") and comes with an "*attitude inspirée*" ("inspired attitude") to relay to Herod an unspecified message, "*une chose considérable*" ("something of considerable importance") (190). As day falls, they both proceed into darkness, an "*appartement obscur*" ("an obscure apartment") characterized by walls "*peintes d'une couleur grenat, presque noire*" ("painted garnet, almost black") and containing "*un lit d'ébène*" ("an ebony bed") (190). The third time Phanuel is presented, he is noticed talking with Herod "*dans un créneau*" ("in a crenel") (194). Another appearance at the birthday banquet is marked by "*la vapeur des haleines avec les fumées des candélabres [qui] faisait un brouillard dans l'air*" ("the steam of breath with the smoke of candelabras [which] fogged the air") (197). From within this atmosphere the Essene makes a silent entrance: "*Phanuel passa le long des murs*" ("Phanuel slipped along the walls.") (197). The point is that each time Phanuel, meaning in Hebrew the "face of God" (Smith), appears, he does so from a hidden, almost secret position. At his third appearance, he announces, still shrouded in mystery, that he has a "*chose considérable*" ("something of considerable importance") (190), which announcement had been interrupted by the arrival of Vitellius. Having read the stars, he concludes that "*un homme considérable*" ("an important man") (194) will die that very night in that very locality, which leads Herod to wonder who that might be and to suspect that it might be himself. It is clear then that Phanuel's function is that of messenger. Just as John is not the Messiah whom he heralds, Phanuel is not the imprisoned John whom he represents. What John cannot do physically because he is imprisoned, Phanuel accomplishes, namely to announce that John has a message to be heeded. And just as John is neither God nor the prophet Elijah resurrected, neither is Phanuel. Instead, Phanuel represents onomastically God's face, for in the biblical sense God is who is and God's face is but a representation once removed from his essence. Thus, John and Phanuel both occupy the role of mediator, a role which is literalized in the text in an almost imperceptible character who deals with the most important medium in the text, words, for words both literally make up the text and iconize its message. This character is Vitellius's interpreter.

Banquet

On his very introduction into the text, Vitellius “s’appuyait sur le bras de son interprète” (“leaned on the arm of his interpreter”) (191). Textually the two are inseparable. Named Phinéés, the interpreter is more of a function than a character, serving as a mediator to connect Vitellius as an outsider with the inside of Herod’s closed world. The full function of the interpreter as sign of the word is assumed during the discussion that takes place during Herod’s birthday banquet. The discussion has the semiotic marks of both a Roman tribunal and a philosophical symposium, the former in that it takes place in a hall which has “trois nefs, comme une basilique” (“three naves, like a basilica”) (195) and the latter in that it takes place during a banquet.⁶ The Roman basilica was the local courthouse and the epitome of legal activity, testimonies, questioning, declamations, all marked with the skillful use of the word. At Herod’s birthday banquet one such testimony was made when, at the mention of “[u]n certain Jésus,” “... un homme se leva” (“a certain Jesus,” “... a man stood up”) (195) and testified to Jesus as worker of miracles. This Jacob recounts that after beseeching Jesus to cure his sick daughter, he returned home as instructed to find her cured at the very hour he had approached the healer. What is important in this testimony is that the text indicates that the daughter was healed “quand le gnomon du palais marquait la troisième heure” (“when the gnomon of the palace indicated the third hour of the day”) (196). This detail is nowhere present in the gospel accounts⁷ and embeds a marker in the text, and that marker is the gnomon, the indicator embedded on a sundial which casts a shadow to tell the hour. The gnomon stands out in that it is itself the Greek word for interpreter and has been used in the text as a synecdoche for sundial. As an interpreter then, Phinéés, Vitellius’s mediator of the word, is part of the sign of the gnomon. He is less important than the message he mediates, just as the sundial does not bring attention to itself but rather marks Jesus’s miraculous healing. In like manner, John is the gnomon that mediates, announces and indicates the new order to be established by the Messiah.

Herod’s birthday banquet has been momentarily turned into a trial with “les femmes dans les tribunes” (“women in the stands”) and with courtroom verbal activity highlighted in such terms as “interpellant” (“posing questions”), “objectèrent” (“objected”), “sommaient” (“summoned”), “Justifie” (“Justify”), “prit la parole,” (“took the floor”), “argument” (“argument”), “pérorait” (“held forth”), “comme un juge posa des questions” (“as a judge poses questions”), “enquête” (“inquiry”) and “déclama” (“de-

claimed”) (196). On trial is not so much John for himself but rather John as predecessor of the Messiah, as claimant in the eyes of the Jews to be the resurrected prophet Elijah who would precede the Messiah. The trial comes to a close with the definitive word spoken in Latin and left untranslated since it is declaimed, as the text states, “pour le Proconsul” (“for the Proconsul”) (196). At issue in the discussion is whether the prophet Elijah can be considered as resurrected and embodied in the person of John and, if not, whether John can be called the herald of the Messiah. To debunk this proposition one Jonathas quotes in Latin the Roman philosopher and poet Lucretius who argues that the body can neither grow nor last after death: “Nec crescit, nec post mortem durare videtur” (“It neither grows nor seems to last after death.”) (47; v. 338). Out of context Jonathas’s quote speaks only of the body, but in the context of Lucretius’s argument the quote refers to the inextricable union of body and soul, neither of which survives death (47-48; vv. 323-349). Thus, this citation discounts a key tenet of Judeo-Christian belief, namely the existence of an afterlife for the soul. The narrative voice presents this belief of Jonathas not as a direct quote from him but via the *discours indirect libre*, Flaubert’s hallmark free indirect discourse, whereby the narrative slips imperceptibly from objective description into the mind of a character: “Jonathas ... s’efforçait de rire comme un bouffon. Rien de plus sot que la prétention à la vie éternelle ...” (“Jonathas forced himself to laugh like a buffoon. What could be more stupid than to aspire to eternal life!”) (196). In addition, Jonathas’s quote ironically supports John’s stated desire not to grow himself but rather to decrease while the Messiah increases, and the words of Lucretius also provide a mirror for the repetition of the apothegmatic words of John at the end of the text. The Latin verb “crescit” generates the change from the verb *grandir* at the beginning of the text to its etymological relative *croître* at the end of the text.

With the quasi trial ended and the philosophical arguments proffered on weighty issues, the text immediately segues into a comedic representation of a body that literally does grow due to its massive consumption of food. The gorging of Vitellius’s son Aulus provides the comedic relief from the serious philosophical discussion and also provides an introduction to the philosophical symposium as banquet. In his sensual appetite and cultivation of the earthly pleasures of life, Aulus represents a diametric opposition to John. In this way he iconizes the secular vs. religious dichotomy in the text as does the very banquet hall in which he and Herod indulge themselves. The banquet hall was compared in the text to a secular

Roman courthouse basilica and it is on this architectural model that Romanesque church basilicas were built. The text also styles the banquet hall as a church. Like a Roman basilica, it has naves and then is referred to as a "vaisseau" ("vessel") (195) in much the same way that the church Jesus was to found is traditionally compared to a bark, a small vessel, a *navis*.⁸ In addition, the Pharisees in the banquet hall shuddered at the sight of sprinkling a certain mixture "réservée aux usages de Temple" ("reserved for use in the Temple") (195). Here it is that the sacred and the profane are beginning to mingle on the textual level, thus providing a space where the climactic beheading becomes both a political expedience for Herod and a spiritual fulfillment for the Jews.

In contrast to the mysterious appearances of Phanuel and the other Essenes, the head of John enters the hall with the full expectation of all the attendees, who lavish on it their curious and occasionally horrified attention. Passed around on a plate, the head of the ascetic mocks the lavish meal in progress and also echoes the gnomon on the sundial disk. As such, the head becomes the announcement, the indicator, the interpreter of the message that has never been pronounced, and it becomes the mediator between the old order and the new represented by Jesus's public life, the beginning of which one is left to suppose is the "réponse si longtemps espérée" ("long awaited response"). This is why the two unnamed Essenes reappear, suddenly and mysteriously again, in the brief epilogue to the text, a coda that serves in a very real way as an envoi to the text, as it summarizes the mission of John and sends the Essenes on their way (envoi < Lat. *in via*) to Galilee with the precious head. Phanuel, now understanding the meaning of John's prophetic decrease to permit Jesus's increase, goes along with the other two Essenes carrying the head alternately, thus iconizing in gesture the simultaneous increase and decrease, for the head alone, which should be light, is too heavy to bear. Such incongruity underscores the power of John's voice, for, as Debray-Genette has noted, the prophet is diminished to his head but increases in his prophetic message (50).

Ironically, the message, the "réponse si longtemps espérée" ("long awaited response") that is the focus of John's prophecy is never announced in Flaubert's tale. The reader is simply told in the epilogue that it was confided to Phanuel, "qui en eut un ravissement" ("who was raptured by it") (199). Like everything in the text, the message remains mysterious since the reader knows of it only obliquely through Phanuel's reaction to it. The epilogue provides the locus whereby the text in all its mystery, con-

stantly closed by limits of time and space, cover and circle (mystery <Gk. *muein*, to be closed), begins to open itself on a lateral path to Galilee and thus to escape the confinement that is Herod's palace and John's dungeon.

Notes

¹ All translations from "Hérodiad" are mine.

² Matt. 3:11, Mark 1:7, Luke 3:15-16, John 1:19-27. Interestingly, Flaubert does not have John make explicit that he is not the Messiah but rather the Messiah's herald, as does each of the New Testament accounts.

³ This parabolic movement of Jesus the Word is the fulfillment of the role of the word of God as efficacious as prophesied in the Old Testament: "My word is like the snow and the rain that come down from the sky to water the earth. They make the crops grow and provide seed for planting and food to eat. So also will be the word that I speak – it will not fail to do what I plan for it; it will do everything I send it to do" (Isa. 55:10-11).

⁴ Indeed, the French *parole* (word) and *parabole* (parabola and parable) are both derived ultimately from the Greek *para+ballein* (to throw next to, compare).

⁵ Rabelais sees this spherical image as a figure of God and attributes it to the Greek mystic philosopher Hermes Trismegistus, teacher of Pythagoras: "... ceste infinie et intellectuelle sphaere, le centre de laquelle est en chascun lieu de l'univers, la circonference point (c'est Dieu selon la doctrine de Hermes Trismegistus)" ("this infinite and intellectual circle, whose center is in every place in the universe and whose circumference nowhere. It is God according to the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus.") (*Tiers Livre* 13). Pascal describes the all encompassing power of God in the universe as "une sphère infinie dont le centre est partout, la circonférence nulle part" ("an infinite circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere") (*Pensées* 185) (translations mine).

⁶ The word "symposium" itself comes from the Greek *sympinein* meaning "to drink together."

⁷ In fact, each of the two gospel accounts containing this anecdote (Matt. 8:5-13, Luke 7:1-10) refers to a centurion who begs Jesus to cure his servant, not his daughter. It is interesting that the Lucan account never even has the centurion meeting Jesus personally, but rather the request is relayed through the mediation of a messenger.

⁸ Almost certainly due to the profession of the apostles as fishermen, the church has been represented in literature and iconography as a bark with Peter at the helm. Cf. "Pensa oramai qual fu colui che degno / collega fu a mantener la barca / di Pietro in alto mar per dritto segno" ("Think now of how worthy a man he was, / This companion to keep the bark / of Peter on a straight course on the high seas.") (Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia: Paradiso*, canto XI, 117-19) (translation mine).

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