James Helgeson, author of a monograph on Maurice Scève and a translation of Du Bellay, has now produced a study on the problem of truth and language in the Renaissance. Invoking the topos of speech as the mirror of the mind, the title announces a very ambitious scope of inquiry. Helgeson has divided his work into two parts, each consisting of three chapters, preceded by an Introduction and followed by a Conclusion. The author generously invites us to skip part of the Introduction (p. 24), and the same invitation can safely be extended to the whole preamble, which rehearses various definitions of the self. It is quite a relief when he finally settles down to discuss Renaissance texts, such as Montaigne’s essay ‘De l’exercitation’ (11, 6), from which he cleverly elicits the interplay of first- and third-person perspectives as well as the dual role of the narrator, as both observer and observed, in his account of a nearly fatal fall from his horse in a skirmish of the Wars of Religion. Helgeson’s citation of 11, 6 reminds us of the very peculiar character of self-expression in the Essais: when the rider regains consciousness after his fall, the narrator quotes a verse from Ovid’s Tristia, ‘Ut tandem sensus convaluere mei’ (When at length my lost senses again returned). The possessive form mei refers to both Ovid and Montaigne, or to both the fallen rider and the exiled poet. We can see the same peculiarity in ‘De la vanité’ (11, 9), where Montaigne insists on his self-sufficiency with a quotation from Terence: ‘In me omnis spes est mihi’ [I put all my hope in myself]. In whom does he put his faith, in himself or in the Roman playwright? This ambivalence supports Helgeson’s segregation of the first person from the self. Subsequent chapters on the topos of the friend as another self and on the polemical writings of Erasmus are very well done and yield a good harvest of insights. The ‘lying mirror’ reappears in the dispute between Erasmus and Edward Lee, who accuses Erasmus of having one thing on his mind and another in his mouth (p. 153). This phrase not only cleverly returns the accusation of insincerity, as Helgeson shows, but also alludes to The Praise of Folly, where Mona says of the wise men that they hide one thing in their mind and feign another in their speech, which, as others have noted, echoes the sophist Hippias in Plato’s dialogue Hippias minor. Perhaps Lee means to insinuate that Erasmus is a sophist, which is an accusation that resonates deeply in Renaissance humanism. The longest chapter of the book, on meaning and interpretation in Rabelais, revisits the debate over plurality and transparency that the editor of the Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France naïvely considered closed in 1986. The last chapter struggles against the thesis of the impersonality of lyric poetry, preferring instead the notion of poetic action. The Conclusion recapitulates the argument while seeking to conciliate all opposing views. Such diplomacy can be wearisome, but the author’s keen eye for textual detail redeems the book’s flaws.

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