

The Carnavalesque (Bakhtin)

Bakhtin defines the *carnavalesque*¹ as a subversive stream of “unofficial literature” that has led a parallel existence with the “official” genres since Antiquity. The carnivalesque has its ‘modern’ eruption in the works of the 16th Century physician and Franciscan cleric, François Rabelais. According to Bakhtin, who cites the French historian Michelet, the satire of Rabelais has its sources in *popular culture*: in ancient provincial sayings, popular jokes, popular wisdom, uttered by fools and jesters. Rabelais’ works, which for Bakhtin exemplify the carnivalesque genre, are a watershed of the “folk humor” and the “popular culture of the market place” which Bakhtin sees as the counterpart to the “serious” and “official” church and feudal culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Bakhtin divides the popular culture of folk humor into three categories. First, he cites ritual forms, performed during carnival times as public spectacles. Then come the literary comic works, including parody, in Latin and in the vernacular, in oral and written form. The third category of carnival is comprised of various types of ‘familiar’ public speech genres such as curses, swear-words, sacrilegious expressions and scurrilous invocations. The first and the third category figured prominently in medieval popular culture, which was punctuated by folk fests, such as the *festi stultorum* (festival of fools), *vendange* (grape harvest), as well as the more sacrilegious tradition of *risus paschalis* (Easter carnival laughter).

In the works of Rabelais, the carnivalesque acquires a pronounced *bodily* dimension. The materialistic and bodily aspects of Rabelais’ satires are said to be connected, in the first instance, with the rise of a bourgeois culture during the Renaissance. While Bakhtin accepts this assumption, he also adds that the “grotesque realism” of representations of the body and its functions – eating, drinking, discharging excrement, and sexual practices – has its origins in popular culture. With the “people” as the principal carriers of this “grotesque realism” which we might call “excremental culture,” the body becomes, according to Bakhtin, a site of *excess*. As a representation of excess, the bodily does not point to the isolated ego of a bourgeois individual, to “economic” man, but to the “collective, generic body” of the people who are a force of social renewal and collective growth.²

When Bakhtin speaks of Rabelais’ works in terms of their ‘origins’ in ‘popular culture’, he does not equate ‘popular’ with the postmodern concept of ‘mass’ culture. To Bakhtin, the concept of ‘popular culture’ or ‘folk culture’, or the ‘culture of the people’ is opposed to the ‘official’ culture of the medieval court circles and the medieval church. For Bakhtin, ‘popular culture’ is a culture not grounded in a unifying ideology. Going back to the *saturnalias* of Antiquity, ‘popular culture’ reflects a ‘popular’ world perception that is *open-ended*. ‘Popular culture’ in this definition is the antinomy of everything that is “completed,” everything that aspires to “the eternal” and the “immutable” in form.

‘Popular culture’ in Bakhtin’s understanding of the works of Rabelais, as well as his predecessors (Dante, Boccaccio) and successors (Cervantes, Shakespeare), has the attribute of *authenticity*. The concept of ‘popular culture’ refers, in Bakhtin’s

¹ See M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

² Compare M. Bakhtin, *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul'tura srednevekov'ia i renessansa*. [The Work of François Rabelais and the popular culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance]. Moskva: “Khudozhetsvennaia literatura”, 1965, pg. 6-7 ; 23-4.

understanding of it, not to the class of people who read³ or produce the works thus classified, but to its 'roots' in an authentic national cultural discourse that is intimately connected with the spontaneous cultural rituals and popular carnival spectacles of which the 'common people' are the ideal carriers. 'Popular culture' in the sense of an authentic, *irreducible national discourse*, thus comes down to *a national language of many voices and many registers, which includes the 'lowest' registers of the spoken vernacular and the language of folk sub-cultures*. In Bakhtin's opinion, Rabelais's works are characterized by a "non-literariness" that flies in the face of all the official norms of "literariness" that determine the canons of High Literature from the end of the 16th century to the present. In grater measure than Shakespeare or Cervantes, whose works transcend the narrow confines of Classical aesthetics of the 17th century, Rabelais defies all notions of a canon, of 'closure' of any kind.⁴

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³ In his introduction to the Morley Universal Library edition of Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Henry Morley wrote of the cultivated readership of Rabelais' times being able to decode literary allusions to Thomas More: "Not without inspiration from Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, published in 1516, which Rabelais had read and of which he incorporates some touches in his romance – Gargantua becomes King of Utopia – Rabelais found a way of his own along which every earnest and cultivated Frenchman of his time could follow, knowing well whither it led..." *Life of Gargantua and the Heroic Deeds of Pantagruel. From the French of Rabelais*. Translated by Sir Thomas Urquhart. With an Introduction by Henry Morley. London: George Routledge and Sons, 1883, p. 9.

⁴ M. Bakhtin, *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul'tura srednevekov'ia i renessansa. [The Work of François Rabelais and the popular culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance]*. Moskva: « Khudozhetsvennaia literature », 1965, p. 4. The translations and paraphrasing of Bakhtin's text are mine.