

A "Grotesque" Reply to Y. Yamada and B. Boehrer*

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Pondering a reply to Yamada's and Boehrer's illuminating remarks on my article, I have been stuck between answering by merely clarifying some points of my argument or by accounting for its criticism on the basis both of my larger PhD thesis and of the ensuing chain of re-thinking, self-criticising (what Boehrer much too approvingly, or ironically, renames "self-distinction" in keeping with the Jonsonian-Eliotian image) and much scattering out of brains which has taken place in the meantime. What has come out of this is a reply directed not only to Yamada and Boehrer, but also to some of the questions yet unexpressed in my article.

I will begin with reformulating some points perhaps not fully cleared up there. Boehrer puts his finger on what is probably a methodological problem: whereas I had initially promised to reject "reference-spotting," thus calling for a consideration of Jonson as primarily a crafty playwright, later on in the article I fell back on the same habit, and continually so (Boehrer 241-43). But instead of deprecating what I was just about to do in the course of my article, I was questioning the long-lived abuse of Jonson's legendary erudition as a polemical means of deflecting his theatrical craftsmanship into trite, pedantic translation. Surely, reference-spotting is not a bad idea, as long as it helps us appreciate the transformation of carnivalesque motifs into drama. This leads me to a second methodological point. I find it difficult to dissociate the idea of "self-distinction" from a probably unwanted pejorative sense. Nor do I think that Jonson's practice was limited to an ante-literam Bloomian relish for

*Reference: Yumiko Yamada, "Deeper into the Bakhtinian Labyrinth: A Response to Rocco Coronato, 'Carnival Vindicated to Himself?'" *Connotations* 7.2 (1997/98): 220-39; Bruce Boehrer, "Carnivalizing Jonson: A Reply to Rocco Coronato," *Connotations* 7.2 (1997/98): 240-45.

patricide and a quest for originality. Rather, it is precisely in the light of his usage of the sources that Jonson makes the case for a revision of Bakhtin's carnival. Is this richness just a priggish display of erudition, which can easily produce the misdemeanour of reference-spotting, or is it a unique intertextual potential for gaining partial access, so to speak, to the workshop of the playwright? If the age of Jonson represents a turning point in the history of carnival, an assumption that can be shared without being a Bakhtinian believer in overturning, its salience can best be appreciated by approaching the literary texts via some detours—and here come the sources.

These are, however, only minor points. The real problem concerns the sense and usage of the terms "carnavalesque" and "grotesque." While thoroughly sharing Yamada's argument on Bakhtin's de-classicising "castration" of Rabelais, I am at odds with its purpose. It is not simply that I find it hard to reconcile the creation of Rabelais as a "guardian angel of the communist populace" (220) with Bakhtin's notorious problems with Stalinism and, most importantly, with his inherently anti-materialist, religious drive which has been consistently brought to the fore in recent criticism:¹ this problem of consistency should be left to the believers in carnival as a manifesto for liberating the masses. Also, it might well be that while denying Communism any formal value in his system, Bakhtin was somehow bound to fuel his poetics of carnival with a heightened perception of communality as the first mover of society and literature. But if I understand Yamada's argument correctly, its aim is not only that Jonson and Rabelais were quite alike and that the latter was not *that* popular as Bakhtin would have had it, but also to sketch out the reconstruction of "the value system advocated by Jonson and Rabelais" and secure "a more positive view" of the three works by Jonson I considered in my article (223). This moral interpretation, although deeply ingrained in Jonson's classical make-up, does not seem to be so very widely apart from Bakhtin. Anti-Bakhtinianism, for what this or any other label is worth, may end up by revamping the same intrusion of the moral sphere into literature that lies at the core of Bakhtin's exalted vision of carnival as a folkloric belief in the subterranean value system of the mythical popular comic culture. Truly, Jonson and Rabelais prefaced their works under the

aegis of *prodesse et delectare* (who didn't?): the problem is how much we can extract from this conventional framework in the light of the self-contradicting results of their works. To put it bluntly, one has to decide between the conventional moralism of Renaissance literature and its expression. One of the merits of Bakhtin's devastating theory of carnival is a beneficial sort of indifference to moral intentions and an invitation to go beneath the surface of classicism. Indeed, literature reduced to "instruction" would be a rather desolate area.

At the end of this reply, I still have to set the record straight on the meanings of both terms, words and distinctions that lie at the basis of carnival and the 'anti/pro Bakhtin' question. And there is still another objection of Boehrer's that prompts me to qualify my argument. Boehrer notes that, while I "espouse a dominant commitment to moving beyond simplified binary oppositions" (244), in the end I let them swarm through my paper, for instance "through the old tension between literary history and theatrical performance." In this case, it is not enough to say that I was again criticizing the *abuse* of oppositions, like popular/classic, by which Jonson was ultimately labelled "elitarian." The point made by Boehrer is central to any appreciation of the carnivalesque and the grotesque: are these terms necessarily based on opposition, as Bakhtin implied with his theory of inversion and the clashing of cultures? I can couple this objection with another one coming from Yamada, this time about my being still entrapped into a "Bakhtinian spell" (220). Then, what are we to do with Bakhtin's terms? Perhaps Bakhtin practiced a devilish trick and forced even his detractors somehow to share his destructive assumptions: this would make it hard to resist the idea that even the humanist appreciation of Jonson and Rabelais is shot through with an apologetic desire to defend the classics, as if they needed it—by the same token it might be asked: was Plautus a classical or an obscene author? Was humanism devoid of any compromising with what might perhaps be called the more mundane materialism of the mannerist or grotesque tradition, or are we anachronistically interpreting Renaissance texts according to neoclassicist standards? Or, more generally, what came first, the carnivalesque or the grotesque? If there is such a thing as a uniformly grotesque culture, is there any point in calling authors either learned or popular?

To try and answer some of these questions: Bakhtin's most original idea was to give carnival a superior status, which was vested with grotesque realism. Now, despite the difficulties attending the development of the term, the grotesque offers that blend of popular and learned themes, mixtures of materialist and spiritualist elements, Carnival and Lent, so characteristic of the counter-culture I am interested in exploring. Instead of stopping short with criticizing an antithetical interpretation it might be possible to go a step further and envisage another kind of culture, unveiled by the rites of carnival, in an inverted order with respect to Bakhtin's theory. Inversion is inseparable from the grotesque—but the inversion of thought here is *expressive* in so far as it reproduces the disseminated culture of contrast by means of that iconic excess that Bakhtin read as the universally carnivalesque oppositional culture. In this sense, I think that we may salvage the most precious part of Bakhtin's theory, the idea of getting us into connection with the relatively undiscovered domain of the grotesque, without implying that its aim was a ritual regeneration or even liberation. I know that in this vision of Bakhtin as a sort of Internet server, I risk the same pitfall of positing a cosmic culture that universalizes both its opponents and admirers. But the grotesque unveiled through the usage of carnivalesque sources can at least be placed in textual strategies of adaptation, rather than in a flamboyant poetics or philosophy.

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NOTE

¹See for instance Charles Lock, "Carnival and Incarnation: Bakhtin and Orthodox Theology," *Literature and Theology* 5 (March 1991): 68-82; for a general reassessment of Bakhtin's influence, see Caryl Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997) and the excellent review article by Joseph Frank, "Lunacharsky Was Impressed," *The London Review of Books* (19 February 1998): 18-20.