

## Are Jonson and Rabelais Elegant or Grotesque? A Response to Rocco Coronato\*

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Reflecting on Rocco Coronato's "Grotesque" reply to B. Boehrer and me, I noticed that despite our agreement on the post-Bakhtinian prejudice against Jonson and "Bakhtin's de-classicising 'castration' of Rabelais," the gulf between us is wider than had been expected. Since my critical remarks against the Russian authority from the view point of classicism<sup>1</sup> seem to have provoked him to make de facto profession of his faith in Bakhtianism, I hold it my responsibility to make my anti-Bakhtinian standpoint clearer, by answering some of the new questions raised there, including whether Plautus was a classical or an obscene author (370). Coronato argues that if I insist that in his use of the terms "grotesque" and "carnavalesque,"<sup>2</sup> he is under a "Bakhtinian spell" I am left behind in a "desolate area" of "the conventional moralism of Renaissance literature" (370). My moral-hunting or value-seeking attitude, he says, is nothing more than "revamping the same intrusion of the moral sphere into literature," which senselessly obscures "the self-contradicting results" of the Renaissance moralism (369-70). What Coronato proposes, instead, is to "salvage the most precious part [do not the words 'salvage' and 'precious' connote value-seeking orientation as well?] of Bakhtin's theory," as a sort of web server, who provides end users with "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," to be used as "textual strategies of adaptation" which is alienated from "a flamboyant poetics or philosophy" (371).

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\*Reference: Rocco Coronato, "A 'Grotesque' Reply to Y. Yamada and B. Boehrer," *Connotations* 7.3 (1997/98): 368-71.

Amazed as I am at the high-tech evolution of literary criticism, I cannot but still wonder if it might lead in time to the "castration" of Bakhtin to process his "most precious part" into an electronic version, say, of Samuel Beckett's *L'Innommable*. I understand that Bakhtin's chief concern is "poetics," as is indelibly inscribed in the title of his *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* (1929; revised 1963), which contains the germ of his argument on carnival later developed into *Rabelais and His World* (1965), and that his charismatic effect owes largely to his "philosophy" of "carnavalesque" rite, which promises ecstatic communion with primal unity between "cosmic life and the life of the human body" in the hope of eternal rebirth. In my attempt to "rescue" Rabelais and his supporter Jonson from [post-]Bakhtinian prejudice, I was unable to think of any better way than to match a "classical" counterpart against his "poetics or philosophy." It is equally difficult, in the first place, to deal with Rabelais, who, like any other physician of the day, took primary pride in being a scholar, without mentioning philosophy, distinctively that of Aristotle, which did form the core of the teaching at Padua, Bologna and his Montpellier.

Nor do I think that "the conventional moralism of Renaissance literature" always incurs "self-contradicting results." Indeed we have had enough of futile controversies over the moral code in the *Poetics* or the *Ars poetica* for centuries past, yet Renaissance "moralists" knew better than to reduce literature to insipid "instruction." Frequently they had a definite purpose to be no more "moralistic" in the strict sense of the word than, for instance, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is "ethical," or his *Metaphysics* "metaphysical." If we are to take issue on this point, it is Bakhtin, rather than Renaissance "moralists" including Jonson and Rabelais, who carries the problem of "self-contradiction"; in this respect his "relatively undiscovered domain of the grotesque" may be well worth our research. What seems most clearly to reveal his oxymoronic frame of mind is the very concept of "grotesque realism," which, I suspect, has been originated from his "inherently anti-materialist religious drive" suggested by Coronato (369). As far as Jonson and Rabelais were concerned, they could not have brought themselves to believe that whatever is real, materialistic and existent in nature should be "grotesque," which predominantly imported distortion or unnatural combinations (*OED*), apart from its original meaning.<sup>3</sup>

My last argument remained in the stage of opposing the idea that those who engage in medical science—or have some knowledge in the field—could find any parts of the body or any bodily functions “grotesque.” This time I will make a step forward to postulate that Rabelais would have considered—and most probably Jonson as well—Bakhtin’s catalogue of bodily matters (save “dismemberment” and “swallowing up by another body”) “beautiful,” and that the epithet “elegant” ought to be substituted for “grotesque” in describing the selfsame physiological images from the viewpoint, again, of classicism. Bakhtin may prove, in the process, to be far more “moralistic” in his domain of the unconscious than Jonson and Rabelais.

Let us begin with Rabelais’s verses to the readers prefixed to *Gargantua*, in which he proclaims himself innocent of causing depravity among them:

Good Friends, my Readers, who peruse this Book,  
Be not offended, whil’st on it you look:  
Denude your selves of all deprav’d affection,  
For it containes no badnesse, nor infection:  
’Tis true that it brings forth to you no birth  
Of any value, but in point of mirth;  
Thinking therefore how sorrow might your minde  
Consume, I could no apter subject finde;  
One inch of joy surmounts of grief a span;  
Because to laugh is proper to the man. (1-10)<sup>4</sup>

Far from inviting his readers to share “deprav’d affection” (a Bakhtinian equivalent of “grotesque” feeling), he is warning them against it as a breeder of mind-consuming sorrow. What he prescribes for it is joyful laughter, on the ground that man has an innate power of healing himself of depression, by being the only animal that laughs.

It is noteworthy that in pointing out “to laugh is proper to the man,” Rabelais is citing Aristotle’s *Parts of Animals*, which deals with comparative anatomy.<sup>5</sup> Along with Aristotle’s other treatises on animals which constitute the fundamental tenets of his philosophy, this book had given a decisive influence upon the Galenic system of physiology, and was required of medical students of those days. As is clearly reflected in his definition of man as “an animal that walks on two feet” (*Topics* 1.7), the

virtue of Aristotle's biology consists in his attempt to seek constitutional and functional analogies between man and other animals, rather than to differentiate the former as the lord of creation.

In the *Parts of Animals* Aristotle declares that he will treat all animals alike including man, "without omitting, to the best of our ability, any member of the kingdom, however ignoble," and warns us not to "recoil with childish aversion from the examination of the humbler animals," for that ultimately amounts to self-hatred:

If any person thinks the examination of the rest of the animal kingdom an unworthy task, he must hold in like disesteem the study of man. For one can not look at the primordia of the human frame—blood, flesh, bones, vessels, and the like—without much repugnance. (1.5)

"The primordia of the human frame" here includes Bakhtin's catalogue of the "grotesque," e.g. "the genital organs, the anus and buttocks, the belly, the mouth and nose" and "dismembered parts." The best way to overcome our "childish aversion" or preconceived "repugnance" to their seemingly "grotesque" appearance, which can cause what Rabelais called "deprav'd affection," according to Aristotle, is to "have eyes to discern the reasons that determined their formation"—to understand that the shape, size and position of each organ of the animal body, after all, indicates its purpose and function in the whole system.

Once we succeed in tracing "links of causation," Aristotle guarantees in the same chapter that those things which had "no graces to charm the sense" come to "give immense pleasure":

. . . so we should venture on the study of every kind of animal without distaste; for each and all will reveal to us something natural and something beautiful. Absence of haphazard and conduciveness of everything to an end are to be found in Nature's works in the highest degree, and the resultant end of her generations and combinations is a form of the beautiful.

Hereby we may assume that Aristotle's homological attitude in dealing with man and the lower animals equally and alike as living creatures is closely related to his concept of imitation in the *Poetics*, the ultimate guide for those engaged in literature:

Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and dead bodies. The cause of this again is, that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general; whose capacity, however, of learning is more limited. Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, "Ah, that is he." (ch.4)

Here we may realise that it is this kind of "positive realism" that gives birth to comedy:

Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation of characters of a lower type—not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive. (ch.5)

As soon as we have convinced ourselves that things seeming "ugly" at first sight—whether they are parts of animals, or deeds or characters of men—do have their own *raison d'être* or functional indispensability they cease to be "painful or destructive" to our eyes, and fill us with relaxation and laughter, which "belong to the class of pleasant things" (*Rhetoric* 1.11). If man has a privilege denied the rest of the animals, it is, as Rabelais highlights in his preface to *Gargantua*, his being able to laugh.

While Aristotle encourages us to find natural beauty by keeping our eyes to "their composition, and the totality of the form, independently of which they have no existence" (*Parts of Animals* 1.5), Bakhtin shows a marked tendency to "dismember" the whole system and pay attention to "the parts," whose "ugly" or "grotesque" forms alone simply engender a certain degree of "repugnance" in the mind of the observer. This, I suspect, is the primary cause that makes Bakhtin's interpretation of Rabelais smack more strongly of tragedy than of comedy. It may be helpful to remember that he was strongly influenced by Nietzsche, as well as by Freud and Marx. Bakhtin's strong concern about sporadic violence in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, such as "bloodshed, dismemberment, burning, death, beatings, blows, curses, and abuses," which he avows to be "steeped in 'merry time,' time which kills and gives birth," as well as "the laughing chorus of the marketplace" to celebrate their immortality as a mass,<sup>6</sup> faithfully reflects Nietzsche's "image of the larger, eternal drama of

Dionysus," which is enacted "on this macrocosmic stage," "where the god dies and is reborn, cyclically and forever, and where ecstatic unity will always, by turns, conflict and find a balance with an Apollonian dream image of solitary selfhood."<sup>7</sup> Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, after all, may be regarded as a comical version of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872).

Nietzsche's alliance of Dionysus with tragic character is based on "a recognition that whatever exists is of a piece, and that individuation is the root of all evil; a conception of art as the sanguine hope that the spell of individuation may yet be broken, as an augury of eventual re-integration."<sup>8</sup> The early Nietzsche's—and Bakhtin's—antipathy towards "the Apollonian *principium individuationis*" and desire to shatter it<sup>9</sup> is quite contrary to the Aristotelian or Rabelaisian spirit of comedy, which roots in the strong belief in the state of individuation as the "true" form of living:

In generation both the individual and the class are operative, but the individual is the more so of the two, for this is the only true existence. And the offspring is indeed produced of a certain quality, but also as an individual, and this latter is the true existence. (*Generation of Animals* 4.3)

In addition to Bakhtin's hatred of individuation under Nietzschean or Marxist inspiration, Freud seems to have contributed to his tendency to see bodily matters as "grotesque," by instilling a certain sense of guiltiness about the image of regeneration. There seems to be good reason to suppose that the Freudian theory of discussing all human activities from the viewpoint of sexual libido is largely responsible for Bakhtin's seeing physiological phenomena not as natural but as "scandalous" and "eccentric." First used in *Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, these two notions, which savor strongly of Aristotle's "aversion" and "repugnance," are to be crystallised into his "grotesque realism" in *Rabelais and His World*. Freud's self-reproaching struggle with libido also runs counter to the Aristotelian principle of self-preservation that "the production of another like itself" is "the goal towards which all things strive," and "for the sake of which they do whatsoever their nature renders possible" (*On the Soul* 2:4).

It has been pointed out that in the *Poetics* Aristotle frankly admits that the origin of comedy is in the phallic procession and dance, without the

least indication of censure, and that nowhere in his extant works does he object to the Aristophanic comedy,<sup>10</sup> which contains "grotesque" elements no less than the books of Rabelais, who was considered to be a direct descendant of the Greek poet.<sup>11</sup> Still more remarkable is that the Old Comedy including that of Aristophanes was sometimes regarded as "elegant" by posterity, just as "the primordia of the human frame," which may cause "repugnance," had been esteemed as "beautiful" by Aristotle.

Let us take Quintilian's comment as an example:

The old comedy is almost the only form of poetry which preserves intact the true grace of Attic diction, while it is characterised by the most eloquent freedom of speech, and shows especial power in the denunciation of vice; but it reveals great force in other departments as well. For its style is at once lofty, elegant, graceful . . . .<sup>12</sup>

We can see how the writer embraces the characteristics of the Old Comedy as a whole, including its "indecency" ['in other departments']. Nor did Cicero show any hesitation in praising it as "the representative of liberty and refined style of wit," and Aristophanes as "the wittiest poet of the Old Comedy" (*De legibus*, 2.15.37).<sup>13</sup>

Jonson also held a similar attitude towards Plautus, who, according to Cicero, was the Latin representative of the type of liberal humour affected by the Old Comedy.<sup>14</sup> In the *Discoveries*, Jonson introduces the opinion of M. Varro, who pronounced Plautus "the *Prince of Letters*, and *Elegancie*, in the *Roman Language*," approving this by granting Varro the epithet "the most Learned" (2551-54); he furthermore regrets Horace's harsh opinion of Plautus as a degenerate writer (2600-24).<sup>15</sup> As for Aristophanes, Jonson was thinking of becoming a satirist of his type early in his career, and several of his works reflect Aristophanic influence, retaining no less obscenities, indecencies and personal abuse.<sup>16</sup> Although in the *Discoveries* Jonson translated Heinsius' critical remarks concerning "obscene" and "aggressive elements in the Old Comedy," deepdown he seems to have shared the view, with Varro, Cicero, Quintilian and others, that both comic writers possessed enough "*Elegancie*" to vindicate themselves from the charge of indecency and licentiousness.

Precisely the same is observed in Whibley's defence of Rabelais. He points out that Rabelais "does not leave his impropriety half covered" but "always drags away the veil with a strong hand," lest it should "prompt his reader to a filthy curiosity"; by staying within "the high domain of intellect," Rabelais has succeeded in transforming many a passage containing "impropriety" and "bawdry" into "a mere burlesque of what is called 'sexuality,' without being obscene [or "grotesque"]".<sup>17</sup> This reminds us of Aristotle's words that the intellectual perception of the "links of causation" reveals every thing in nature to be "something natural and something beautiful." To this we may add the "masterful lucidity" of Rabelais's style; based on the popular language of France haunted by memories of the classics, it never ceases to impress us with its "elegance."<sup>18</sup>

Whether it refers to tasteful correctness, or harmonious simplicity in the choice of words, or ingenuous simplicity, convenience, and effectiveness in scientific processes, with the skill of careful and correct choice (*OED*), what is described as "elegant" by Varro and Quintilian—and as "beautiful" by Aristotle—seems to require full emotional maturity, the intellectual ability to grow out of "childish aversion," which enables us to see reality as it is and cope with it without losing our intellectual composure. Hence Aristotle allows only persons of mature age to worship "those Gods at whose festivals the law permits even ribaldry," while he prohibits youngsters from being spectators of *iambi* or of comedy until they are of age (*Politics* 7.17). We do recognise this sense of maturity inherited in Rabelais's "Pantagruelism"—"to live in peace, joy, health, making yourselves alwayes merry" (*The Second Book* ch.34) after the manner of his hero:

... he (=Pantagruel) was the best, little, great Good-man that ever girded a Sword to his Side; he took all things in good part, and interpreted every Action to the best Sense: He never vexed nor disquieted himself with the least pretence of Dislike to any thing; because he knew that he must have most grosly abandoned the Divine Mansion of Reason, if he had permitted his Mind to be never so little grieved, afflicted or altered at any occasion whatsoever. (*The Third Book* ch.2)



Thus Bakhtin's self-contradicting notion of "grotesque realism," which is "inherently anti-materialist," accounts a great deal for his failure to enjoy Rabelais's robust yet innocent mirth. Bakhtin's way of thinking betrays the typical symptoms of the syndrome called *horror victorianorum* by David Stove: appearing as a part of the religious reaction of the nineteenth century against the Enlightenment of the preceding century, it is characterised by the tendency to escape the burden of social responsibility as adults and of accumulated scientific knowledge (19-25), and is shared by Marxists and Freudians, whose thought is virtually "modern idealism."<sup>19</sup> Nor is Nietzsche's image of Dionysian dismemberment dissimilar to Marxism and Freudianism, in furthering the ongoing modern diminishment of the individual by portraying the self largely as a construct and consequence of impersonal systems.

Truly Bakhtin's "grotesque" may be effective in studying modern, pathologically hypersensitive writers like Dostoyevsky, yet it is an idea quite foreign to those blessed with "strong stomachs and strong heads,"<sup>20</sup> such as Jonson and Rabelais, who, as "champion[s] of sane and active life,"<sup>21</sup> most valued "health" of mind and body.<sup>22</sup> And if they are to be called "moralists" at all, their *ethos* or *mores* had first and foremost the meaning to observe and accept the way that things are, which, I believe, forms an important part of the "elegant" classicality they strove to hand down to posterity.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Yumiko Yamada, "Deeper into the Bakhtinian Labyrinth: A Response to Rocco Coronato's 'Carnival Vindicated to Himself?'" *Connotations* 7.2 (1997/98): 220-39.

<sup>2</sup>See Coronato, "Carnival Vindicated to Himself?: Reappraising 'Bakhtinized' Ben Jonson," *Connotations* 6.2 (1996/97): 180-202.

<sup>3</sup>Jonson uses the word to indicate something unnatural and monstrous by quoting Vitruvius's *De architectura* and Horace's *Ars poetica* in the *Discoveries* 1565-71. Citations of Jonson's works refer to *Ben Jonson*, eds. C.H. Herford, Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1925-52).

<sup>4</sup>English quotations from Rabelais are taken from *Rabelais: Gargantua and Pantagruel*, ed. Charles Whibley, trans. Thomas Urquhart and Peter le Motteux, 3 vols. (1653-94; New York: AMS, 1967).

<sup>5</sup>*Parts of Animals* 3.10. Citations of Aristotle's works refer to *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984), except for those of the *Poetics*, which refer to *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art with a Critical Text and Translation of the Poetics*, ed. and trans. S. H. Butcher (1895; London: Macmillan, 1923).

<sup>6</sup>Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolski (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984) 211, 407.

<sup>7</sup>William Storm, *After Dionysus: A Theory of the Tragic* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998) 23.

<sup>8</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956) 66-67, cited in Storm 23.

<sup>9</sup>Nietzsche 50, 52, cited in Storm 22.

<sup>10</sup>Lane Cooper, *An Aristotelian Theory of Comedy* (1922; rpt. New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1969) 20-21.

<sup>11</sup>By Joachim du Bellay: see Whibley xvli.

<sup>12</sup>*Institutio oratoria* 10.1.65-66, first pointed out by Cooper (92). The quotation is taken from *Quintilian*, trans. and ed. H. E. Butcher, 4 vols. (1922; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1979).

<sup>13</sup>First pointed out by Cooper (91). The quotation is taken from *Cicero*, trans. and ed. C. W. Keyes, vol. 16 (1928; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1988).

<sup>14</sup>G. C. Fiske, "The Plain Style in the Scipionic Circle," *Classical Studies in Honor of Charles Forster Smith* (Madison, Wis., 1919) 77, 79, 85-86, quoted in Cooper 97.

<sup>15</sup>See Horace, *Epistles* 2.1.168 ff. and the *Ars poetica* 270-74.

<sup>16</sup>See Coburn Gum, *The Aristophanic Comedies of Ben Jonson* (Mouton: The Hague, 1969) 46-66; Gum explains, however, the obscenity and indecency of Aristophanes and Jonson only in terms of foils to their almost oppressive satire.

<sup>17</sup>Whibley lv-lvi.

<sup>18</sup>Whibley lxviii. He also points out that the real difficulty of Rabelais's book lies in the vocabulary, that the syntax is never tenebrous, and that when it sometimes falls into darkness and obscurity, he deliberately intends to befog us.

<sup>19</sup>David Stove, *The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Follies* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) vii-viii, 19-25.

<sup>20</sup>See Henry Silvette, *The Doctor on the Stage: Medicine and Medical Men in Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. Francelia Butler (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1967) 233.

<sup>21</sup>Whibley lxiii (referring to Rabelais).

<sup>22</sup>See Rabelais's Preface to the Reader, *The Fourth Book*.