

*Rabelais and His World*

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*Rabelais and His World*

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Of all great writers of world literature, Rabelais is the least popular, the least understood and appreciated.

And yet, of all the great creators of European literature Rabelais occupies one of the first places. Belinski called Rabelais a genius, the sixteenth-century Voltaire, and his novel one of the best of times past. Because of his literary power and historical importance, Western literary critics and writers place him immediately after Shakespeare or even next to him. The French Romanticists, especially Chateaubriand and Hugo, included him among the greatest "geniuses of humanity" of all times and na-

tions. He was and is still considered not only a great writer in the usual sense of the word but also a sage and prophet. Here is a typical opinion expressed by the historian Michelet:

Rabelais collected wisdom from the popular elemental forces of the ancient Provençal idioms, sayings, proverbs, school farces, from the mouth of fools and clowns. But refracted by this foolery, the genius of the age and its prophetic power are revealed in all their majesty. If he does not discover, he foresees, he promises, he directs. Under each tiny leaf of this forest of dreams, the fruit which the future will harvest lies hidden. This entire book is a golden bough.<sup>1</sup>

All such judgments and appreciations are, of course, relative. We do not intend to answer the question whether Rabelais can be placed next to Shakespeare or whether he is superior or inferior to Cervantes. But his place in history among the creators of modern European writing, such as Dante, Boccaccio, Shakespeare, and Cervantes, is not subject to doubt. Rabelais not only determined the fate of French literature and of the French literary tongue, but influenced the fate of world literature as well (probably no less than Cervantes). There is also no doubt that he is the most democratic among these initiators of new literatures. He is more closely and essentially linked to popular sources and, moreover, to specific ones. (Michelet enumerates them with considerable accuracy.) These sources determined the entire system of his images and his artistic outlook on the world.

It is precisely this specific and radical popular character of Rabelais' images which explains their exceptional saturation with the future so correctly stressed by Michelet in the appreciation quoted. It also explains Rabelais' "nonliterary" nature, that is the nonconformity of his images to the literary norms and canons predominating in the sixteenth century and still prevailing in our times, whatever the changes undergone by their contents. Rabelais' nonconformity was carried to a much greater extent

<sup>1</sup> Jules Michelet. *Histoire de France*, Vol. 10, p. 355. Paris, L. Hachette, 1852-1867. The golden bough was plucked by Aeneas at the bidding of the Cumaean sibyl. It was the passkey to the underworld.

than that of Shakespeare or Cervantes, who merely disobeyed the narrow classical canons. Rabelais' images have a certain undestroyable nonofficial nature. No dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook. This accounts for Rabelais' peculiar isolation in the successive centuries. He cannot be approached along the wide beaten roads followed by bourgeois Europe's literary creation and ideology during the four hundred years separating him from us.

Although during these four hundred years there have been many enthusiastic admirers of Rabelais, we can find nowhere a fully expressed understanding of him. The Romantics who discovered him, as they discovered Shakespeare and Cervantes, were incapable of revealing his essence and did not go beyond enraptured surprise. Many were repulsed and still are repulsed by him. The vast majority, however, simply do not understand him. In fact, many of his images remain an enigma.

This enigma can be solved only by means of a deep study of Rabelais' popular sources. If he appears so isolated, so unlike any other representative of "great literature" of these last four centuries of history, we should reflect that this period of literary development may in turn seem unusual when viewed against the background of folk tradition. Rabelais' images are completely at home within the thousand-year-old development of popular culture.

Rabelais is the most difficult classical author of world literature. To be understood he requires an essential reconstruction of our entire artistic and ideological perception, the renunciation of many deeply rooted demands of literary taste, and the revision of many concepts. Above all, he requires an exploration in depth of a sphere as yet little and superficially studied, the tradition of folk humor.

Rabelais is difficult. But his work, correctly understood, casts a retrospective light on this thousand-year-old development of the



folk culture of humor, which has found in his works its greatest literary expression. Rabelais' illuminative role in this respect is of the greatest importance. His novel must serve as a key to the immense treasury of folk humor which as yet has been scarcely understood or analyzed. But first of all it is necessary to take possession of this key.

The aim of the present introduction is to pose the problem presented by the culture of folk humor in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and to offer a description of its original traits.

Laughter and its forms represent, as we have said, the least scrutinized sphere of the people's creation. The narrow concept of popular character and of folklore was born in the pre-Romantic period and was basically completed by von Herder and the Romantics. There was no room in this concept for the peculiar culture of the marketplace and of folk laughter with all its wealth of manifestations. Nor did the generations that succeeded each other in that marketplace become the object of historic, literary, or folkloristic scrutiny as the study of early cultures continued. The element of laughter was accorded the least place of all in the vast literature devoted to myth, to folk lyrics, and to epics. Even more unfortunate was the fact that the peculiar nature of the people's laughter was completely distorted; entirely alien notions and concepts of humor, formed within the framework of bourgeois modern culture and aesthetics, were applied to this interpretation. We may therefore say without exaggeration that the profound originality expressed by the culture of folk humor in the past has remained unexplored until now.

And yet, the scope and the importance of this culture were immense in the Renaissance and the Middle Ages. A boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture. In spite of their variety, folk festivities of the carnival type, the comic rites and cults, the clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers, the vast and manifold literature of parody—all these forms have one style in common: they belong to one culture of folk carnival humor.

The manifestations of this folk culture can be divided into three distinct forms.

1. *Ritual spectacles*: carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace.
2. *Comic verbal compositions*: parodies both oral and written, in Latin and in the vernacular.
3. *Various genres of billingsgate*: curses, oaths, popular blazons.

These three forms of folk humor, reflecting in spite of their variety a single humorous aspect of the world, are closely linked and interwoven in many ways.

Let us begin by describing each of these forms.

Carnival festivities and the comic spectacles and ritual connected with them had an important place in the life of medieval man. Besides carnivals proper, with their long and complex pageants and processions, there was the "feast of fools" (*festa stultorum*) and the "feast of the ass"; there was a special free "Easter laughter" (*risus paschalis*), consecrated by tradition. Moreover, nearly every Church feast had its comic folk aspect, which was also traditionally recognized. Such, for instance, were the parish feasts, usually marked by fairs and varied open-air amusements, with the participation of giants, dwarfs, monsters, and trained animals. A carnival atmosphere reigned on days when mysteries and *soties* were produced. This atmosphere also pervaded such agricultural feasts as the harvesting of grapes (*vendange*) which was celebrated also in the city. Civil and social ceremonies and rituals took on a comic aspect as clowns and fools, constant participants in these festivals, mimicked serious rituals such as the tribute rendered to the victors at tournaments, the transfer of feudal rights, or the initiation of a knight. Minor occasions were also marked by comic protocol, as for instance the election of a king and queen to preside at a banquet "for laughter's sake" (*roi pour rire*).

All these forms of protocol and ritual based on laughter and consecrated by tradition existed in all the countries of medieval Europe; they were sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials. They

offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less, in which they lived during a given time of the year. If we fail to take into consideration this two-world condition, neither medieval cultural consciousness nor the culture of the Renaissance can be understood. To ignore or to underestimate the laughing people of the Middle Ages also distorts the picture of European culture's historic development.

This double aspect of the world and of human life existed even at the earliest stages of cultural development. In the folklore of primitive peoples, coupled with the cults which were serious in tone and organization were other, comic cults which laughed and scoffed at the deity ("ritual laughter"); coupled with serious myths were comic and abusive ones; coupled with heroes were their parodies and doublets. These comic rituals and myths have attracted the attention of folklorists.<sup>2</sup>

But at the early stages of preclass and prepolitical social order it seems that the serious and the comic aspects of the world and of the deity were equally sacred, equally "official." This similarity was preserved in rituals of a later period of history. For instance, in the early period of the Roman state the ceremonial of the triumphal procession included on almost equal terms the glorifying and the deriding of the victor. The funeral ritual was also composed of lamenting (glorifying) and deriding the deceased. But in the definitely consolidated state and class structure such an equality of the two aspects became impossible. All the comic forms were transferred, some earlier and others later, to a nonofficial level. There they acquired a new meaning, were deepened and rendered more complex, until they became the expression of folk consciousness, of folk culture. Such were the carnival festivities of the ancient world, especially the Roman Saturnalias, and such were

<sup>2</sup> See an interesting analysis of comic doublets in *Proiskhozhdenie geroicheskogo eposa* "Origin of Heroic Epics" by E. M. Meletinskii, Moscow, 1963, pp. 55-58. The book also contains a bibliography.

medieval carnivals. They were, of course, far removed from the primitive community's ritual laughter.

What are the peculiar traits of the comic rituals and spectacles of the Middle Ages? Of course, these are not religious rituals like, for instance, the Christian liturgy to which they are linked by distant genetic ties. The basis of laughter which gives form to carnival rituals frees them completely from all religious and ecclesiastic dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety. They are also completely deprived of the character of magic and prayer; they do not command nor do they ask for anything. Even more, certain carnival forms parody the Church's cult. All these forms are systematically placed outside the Church and religiosity. They belong to an entirely different sphere.

Because of their obvious sensuous character and their strong element of play, carnival images closely resemble certain artistic forms, namely the spectacle. In turn, medieval spectacles often tended toward carnival folk culture, the culture of the marketplace, and to a certain extent became one of its components. But the basic carnival nucleus of this culture is by no means a purely artistic form nor a spectacle and does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play.

In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants. It was most clearly expressed and experienced in the Roman Saturnalias, perceived as a true and full, though temporary, return of Saturn's

golden age upon earth. The tradition of the Saturnalia remained unbroken and alive in the medieval carnival, which expressed this universal renewal and was vividly felt as an escape from the usual official way of life.

Clowns and fools, which often figure in Rabelais' novel, are characteristic of the medieval culture of humor. They were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season. Like Triboulet<sup>3</sup> at the time of Francis I, they were not actors playing their parts on a stage, as did the comic actors of a later period, impersonating Harlequin, Hanswurst, etc., but remained fools and clowns always and wherever they made their appearance. As such they represented a certain form of life, which was real and ideal at the same time. They stood on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar mid-zone as it were; they were neither eccentrics nor dolts, neither were they comic actors.

Thus carnival is the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter. It is a festive life. Festivity is a peculiar quality of all comic rituals and spectacles of the Middle Ages.

All these forms of carnival were also linked externally to the feasts of the Church. (One carnival did not coincide with any commemoration of sacred history or of a saint but marked the last days before Lent, and for this reason was called *Mardi gras* or *carême-prenant* in France and *Fastnacht* in Germany.) Even more significant is the genetic link of these carnivals with ancient pagan festivities, agrarian in nature, which included the comic element in their rituals.

The feast (every feast) is an important primary form of human culture. It cannot be explained merely by the practical conditions of the community's work, and it would be even more superficial to attribute it to the physiological demand for periodic rest. The feast had always an essential, meaningful philosophical content. No rest period or breathing spell can be rendered festive per se;

<sup>3</sup> Fevrial, or Le Feurial, was the court fool of Francis I and of Louis XII. He appears repeatedly in Rabelais under the name of Triboulet. (Translator's note.)

something must be added from the spiritual and ideological dimension. They must be sanctioned not by the world of practical conditions but by the highest aims of human existence, that is, by the world of ideals. Without this sanction there can be no festivity.

The feast is always essentially related to time, either to the recurrence of an event in the natural (cosmic) cycle, or to biological or historic timeliness. Moreover, through all the stages of historic development feasts were linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man. Moments of death and revival, of change and renewal always led to a festive perception of the world. These moments, expressed in concrete form, created the peculiar character of the feasts.

In the framework of class and feudal political structure this specific character could be realized without distortion only in the carnival and in similar marketplace festivals. They were the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance.

On the other hand, the official feasts of the Middle Ages, whether ecclesiastic, feudal, or sponsored by the state, did not lead the people out of the existing world order and created no second life. On the contrary, they sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it. The link with time became formal; changes and moments of crisis were relegated to the past. Actually, the official feast looked back at the past and used the past to consecrate the present. Unlike the earlier and purer feast, the official feast asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions. It was the triumph of a truth already established, the predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and indisputable. This is why the tone of the official feast was monolithically serious and why the element of laughter was alien to it. The true nature of human festivity was betrayed and distorted. But this true festive character was indestructible; it had to be tolerated and even legalized outside the official sphere and had to be turned over to the popular sphere of the marketplace.

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.

The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling, rank, and merits and to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age. The hierarchical background and the extreme corporative and caste divisions of the medieval social order were exceptionally strong. Therefore such free, familiar contacts were deeply felt and formed an essential element of the carnival spirit. People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. The utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind.

This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life. This led to the creation of special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times. A special carnivalesque, marketplace style of expression was formed which we find abundantly represented in Rabelais' novel.

During the century-long development of the medieval carnival, prepared by thousands of years of ancient comic ritual, including the primitive Saturnalias, a special idiom of forms and symbols was evolved—an extremely rich idiom that expressed the unique yet complex carnival experience of the people. This experience,

opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretense at immutability, sought a dynamic expression; it demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms. All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities. We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the "inside out" (*à l'envers*), of the "turnabout," of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings. A second life, a second world of folk culture is thus constructed; it is to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a "world inside out." We must stress, however, that the carnival is far distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times. Folk humor denies, but it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture.

Our introduction has merely touched upon the exceptionally rich and original idiom of carnival forms and symbols. The principal aim of the present work is to understand this half-forgotten idiom, in so many ways obscure to us. For it is precisely this idiom which was used by Rabelais, and without it we would fail to understand Rabelais' system of images. This carnival imagery was also used, although differently and to a different degree, by Erasmus, Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Guevara, and Quevedo, by the German "literature of fools" (*Narren-literatur*), and by Hans Sachs, Fischart, Grimmelshausen, and others. Without an understanding of it, therefore, a full appreciation of Renaissance and grotesque literature is impossible. Not only belles lettres but the utopias of the Renaissance and its conception of the universe itself were deeply penetrated by the carnival spirit and often adopted its forms and symbols.

Let us say a few initial words about the complex nature of carnival laughter. It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated "comic" event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant,



and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival.

Let us enlarge upon the second important trait of the people's festive laughter: that it is also directed at those who laugh. The people do not exclude themselves from the wholeness of the world. They, too, are incomplete, they also die and are revived and renewed. This is one of the essential differences of the people's festive laughter from the pure satire of modern times. The satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, he is opposed to it. The wholeness of the world's comic aspect is destroyed, and that which appears comic becomes a private reaction. The people's ambivalent laughter, on the other hand, expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it.

Let us here stress the special philosophical and utopian character of festive laughter and its orientation toward the highest spheres. The most ancient rituals of mocking at the deity have here survived, acquiring a new essential meaning. All that was purely cultic and limited has faded away, but the all-human, universal, and utopian element has been retained.

The greatest writer to complete the cycle of the people's carnival laughter and bring it into world literature was Rabelais. His work will permit us to enter into the complex and deep nature of this phenomenon.

The problem of folk humor must be correctly posed. Current literature concerning this subject presents merely gross modernizations. The present-day analysis of laughter explains it either as purely negative satire (and Rabelais is described as a pure satirist), or else as gay, fanciful, recreational drollery deprived of philosophic content. The important point made previously, that folk humor is ambivalent, is usually ignored.

We shall now turn to the second form of the culture of folk humor in the Middle Ages: the comic verbal compositions, in Latin or in the vernacular.

This, of course, is not folklore proper although some of these compositions in the vernacular could be placed in that category.

But comic literature was infused with the carnival spirit and made wide use of carnival forms and images. It developed in the disguise of legalized carnival licentiousness and in most cases was systematically linked with such celebrations.<sup>4</sup> Its laughter was both ambivalent and festive. It was the entire recreational literature of the Middle Ages.

Celebrations of a carnival type represented a considerable part of the life of medieval men, even in the time given over to them. Large medieval cities devoted an average of three months a year to these festivities. The influence of the carnival spirit was irresistible: it made a man renounce his official state as monk, cleric, scholar, and perceive the world in its laughing aspect. Not only schoolmen and minor clerics but hierarchs and learned theologians indulged in gay recreation as relaxation from pious seriousness. "Monkish pranks" (*Joca monacorum*) was the title of one of the most popular medieval comic pieces. Confined to their cells, monks produced parodies or semiparodies of learned treatises and other droll Latin compositions.

The comic literature of the Middle Ages developed throughout a thousand years or even more, since its origin goes back to Christian antiquity. During this long life it underwent, of course, considerable transformation, the Latin compositions being altered least. A variety of genres and styles were elaborated. But in spite of all these variations this literature remained more or less the expression of the popular carnival spirit, using the latter's forms and symbols.

The Latin parody or semiparody was widespread. The number of manuscripts belonging to this category is immense. The entire official ideology and ritual are here shown in their comic aspect. Laughter penetrates the highest forms of religious cult and thought.

One of the oldest and most popular examples of this literature, "Cyprian's supper" (*coena Cypriani*) offers a peculiar festive and carnivalesque travesty of the entire Scriptures. This work was con-

<sup>4</sup> A similar situation existed in ancient Rome where comic literature reflected the licentiousness of the Saturnalias, to which it was closely linked.

secrated by the tradition of "Paschal laughter" (*risus paschalis*); the faraway echoes of the Roman Saturnalia can be heard in it. Another ancient parody is the "Grammatical Virgil Maro" (*Vergilius Maro Grammaticus*), a semiparodical learned treatise on Latin grammar which is at the same time a parody of the scholarly wisdom and of the scientific methods of the early Middle Ages. Both works, composed at the very borderline between the antique world and the Middle Ages, inaugurated this humorous genre and had a decisive influence on its later forms. Their vogue lasted almost up to the Renaissance.

In the further development of humorous Latin literature, parodical doublets of every ecclesiastical cult and teaching were created—the so-called *parodia sacra*, "sacred parody," one of the most peculiar and least understood manifestations of medieval literature. There is a considerable number of parodical liturgies ("The Liturgy of the Drunkards," "The Liturgy of the Gamblers"), parodies of Gospel readings, of the most sacred prayers (the Lord's Prayer, the Ave Maria), of litanies, hymns, psalms, and even Gospel sayings. There were parodies of wills ("The Pig's Will," "The Will of the Ass"), parodies of epitaphs, council decrees, etc. The scope of this literature is almost limitless. All of it was consecrated by tradition and, to a certain extent, tolerated by the Church. It was created and preserved under the auspices of the "Paschal laughter," or of the "Christmas laughter"; it was in part directly linked, as in the parodies of liturgies and prayers, with the "feast of fools" and may have been performed during this celebration.

There were other parodies in Latin: parodies of debates, dialogues, chronicles, and so forth. All these forms demanded from their authors a certain degree of learning, sometimes at a high level. All of them brought the echoes of carnival laughter within the walls of monasteries, universities, and schools.

Medieval Latin humor found its final and complete expression at the highest level of the Renaissance in Erasmus' "In Praise of Folly," one of the greatest creations of carnival laughter in world literature, and in von Hutten's "Letters of Obscure People."

No less rich and even more varied is medieval humorous litera-

ture composed in the vernacular. Here, too, we find forms similar to the *parodia sacra*: parodies of prayers, of sermons (the *sermons joyeux* in France), of Christmas carols, and legends of the saints. But the prevailing forms are the secular parody and travesty, which present the droll aspect of the feudal system and of feudal heroics. The medieval epic parodies are animal, jesting, roguish, foolish; they deal with heroic deeds, epic heroes (the comic Roland), and knightly tales ("The Mule without a Bridle," "Aucassin and Nicolette"). There are various genres of mock rhetoric: carnivalesque debates, comic dialogues, and *euloges*. Carnivalesque humor is also reflected in the *fabliaux* and in the peculiar comic lyrics of vagrant scholars.

All these genres are linked to carnivalesque forms and symbols more closely than the Latin parodies. But it is the medieval comic theater which is most intimately related to carnival. The first medieval comic play that has been preserved, *The Play in the Bower* by Adam de la Halle, is a remarkable example of a purely carnivalesque vision and conception of the world. De la Halle's play contains in embryonic form many aspects of Rabelais' own world. The miracle and morality plays acquired to a certain extent a carnivalesque nature. Laughter penetrated the mystery plays; the diableries which are part of these performances have an obvious carnivalesque character, as do also the *soties* produced during the late Middle Ages.

We have here described only a few better known manifestations of humorous literature, which will suffice for the posing of our problem. As we advance in our analysis of Rabelais' work we shall examine in detail these genres, as well as many less known examples of medieval humorous writings.

Let us now look at the third form of the culture of folk humor: certain specific manifestations and genres of medieval and Renaissance familiar speech in the marketplace.

We have already said that during carnival there is a temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life. We added that

an ideal and at the same time real type of communication, impossible in ordinary life, is established.

A new type of communication always creates new forms of speech or a new meaning given to the old forms. For instance, when two persons establish friendly relations, the form of their verbal intercourse also changes abruptly; they address each other informally, abusive words are used affectionately, and mutual mockery is permitted. (In formal intercourse only a third person can be mocked.) The two friends may pat each other on the shoulder and even on the belly (a typical carnivalesque gesture). Verbal etiquette and discipline are relaxed and indecent words and expressions may be used. But obviously such familiar intercourse in our days is far from the free familiar communication of the people in carnival time. It lacks the essentials: the all-human character, the festivity, utopian meaning, and philosophical depth. Let us point out that elements of the old ritual of fraternization were preserved in the carnival and were given a deeper meaning. Some of these elements have entered modern life but have entirely lost their primitive connotation.

The new type of carnival familiarity was reflected in a series of speech patterns. Let us examine some of them.

It is characteristic for the familiar speech of the marketplace to use abusive language, insulting words or expressions, some of them quite lengthy and complex. The abuse is grammatically and semantically isolated from context and is regarded as a complete unit, something like a proverb. This is why we can speak of abusive language as of a special genre of billingsgate. Abusive expressions are not homogeneous in origin; they had various functions in primitive communication and had in most cases the character of magic and incantations. But we are especially interested in the language which mocks and insults the deity and which was part of the ancient comic cults. These abuses were ambivalent: while humiliating and mortifying they at the same time revived and renewed. It was precisely this ambivalent abuse which determined the genre of speech in carnival intercourse. But its meaning underwent essential transformation; it lost its magic and its specific prac-

tical direction and acquired an intrinsic, universal character and depth. In this new form abuse contributed to the creation of the free carnival atmosphere, to the second, droll aspect of the world.

Profanities and oaths (*jurons*) are in many ways similar to abusive language. They too invaded billingsgate speech. Profanities must also be considered a special genre with the same attributes as abuse—isolation from context and intrinsic character. Profanities and oaths were not initially related to laughter, but they were excluded from the sphere of official speech because they broke its norms; they were therefore transferred to the familiar sphere of the marketplace. Here in the carnival atmosphere they acquired the nature of laughter and became ambivalent.

The fate of other patterns of speech, for instance of various indecent expressions, was similar to that of the genres previously discussed. The familiar language of the marketplace became a reservoir in which various speech patterns excluded from official intercourse could freely accumulate. In spite of their genetic differences, all these genres were filled with the carnival spirit, transformed their primitive verbal functions, acquired a general tone of laughter, and became, as it were, so many sparks of the carnival bonfire which renews the world.

We shall later discuss the peculiar verbal forms of the marketplace. Let us here merely stress in conclusion that all these genres and patterns of speech exercised a powerful influence on Rabelais' literary style.

Such are the three basic forms of the culture of folk humor as expressed in the Middle Ages. All the influences we have analyzed have been known to scholars and have been studied by them, especially humorous literature in the vernacular. But these influences have been examined separately, completely severed from their maternal womb—from the carnival, ritual, and spectacle. This means that the studies have been pursued outside the unity of folk culture, the problem of which was not posed. This is why, dealing with the variety and heterogeneous character of these phenomena, the scholars did not see the one deeply original humor-

ous aspect of the world, presented in isolated fragments. The influences were interpreted in the light of cultural, aesthetic, and literary norms of modern times; they were measured not within their own dimensions but according to measurements completely alien to them. They were modernized, which means that they were subject to a false evaluation. The peculiarity of comic imagery, which is one in spite of its variety and is inherent to medieval folk culture and generally foreign to modern times (especially to the nineteenth century), was also not understood. We must now undertake the characterization of this comic imagery.

It is usually pointed out that in Rabelais' work the material bodily principle, that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life, plays a predominant role. Images of the body are offered, moreover, in an extremely exaggerated form. Rabelais was proclaimed by Victor Hugo the greatest poet of the "flesh" and "belly," while others accused him of "gross physiologism," of "biologism," or "naturalism." Similar traits were also found to a lesser degree in other representatives of Renaissance literature, in Boccaccio, Shakespeare, and Cervantes, and were interpreted as a "rehabilitation of the flesh" characteristic of the Renaissance in reaction against the ascetic Middle Ages. Sometimes they were seen as a typical manifestation of the Renaissance bourgeois character, that is, of its material interest in "economic man."

All these and similar explanations are nothing but interpretations according to the narrow and modified meaning which modern ideology, especially that of the nineteenth century, attributed to "materiality" and to the "body."

Actually, the images of the material bodily principle in the work of Rabelais (and of the other writers of the Renaissance) are the heritage, only somewhat modified by the Renaissance, of the culture of folk humor. They are the heritage of that peculiar type of imagery and, more broadly speaking, of that peculiar aesthetic concept which is characteristic of this folk culture and which differs sharply from the aesthetic concept of the following ages. We shall call it conditionally the concept of grotesque realism.

The material bodily principle in grotesque realism is offered in its all-popular festive and utopian aspect. The cosmic, social, and bodily elements are given here as an indivisible whole. And this whole is gay and gracious.

In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body. We repeat: the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable.

This exaggeration has a positive, assertive character. The leading themes of these images of bodily life are fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance. Manifestations of this life refer not to the isolated biological individual, not to the private, egotistic "economic man," but to the collective ancestral body of all the people. Abundance and the all-people's element also determine the gay and festive character of all images of bodily life; they do not reflect the drabness of everyday existence. The material bodily principle is a triumphant, festive principle, it is a "banquet for all the world."<sup>5</sup> This character is preserved to a considerable degree in Renaissance literature, and most fully, of course, in Rabelais.

The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in

<sup>5</sup> A popular Russian expression in old tales and epics to describe a great banquet, usually the happy ending of the story. (Translator's note.)



their indissoluble unity. Thus "Cyprian's supper" and many other Latin parodies of the Middle Ages are nothing but a selection of all the degrading, earthy details taken from the Bible, the Gospels, and other sacred texts. In the comic dialogues of Solomon with Morolf which were popular in the Middle Ages, Solomon's sententious pronouncements are contrasted to the flippant and debasing dictums of the clown Morolf, who brings the conversation down to a strongly emphasized bodily level of food, drink, digestion, and sexual life.<sup>6</sup> One of the main attributes of the medieval clown was precisely the transfer of every high ceremonial gesture or ritual to the material sphere; such was the clown's role during tournaments, the knight's initiation, and so forth. It is in this tradition of grotesque realism that we find the source of the scenes in which Don Quixote degrades chivalry and ceremonial.

In the learned scholastic milieu of the Middle Ages lighthearted grammatical parody was popular. The tradition went back to the previously mentioned "Grammatical Virgil Maro," was maintained throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance and has survived in oral form in religious schools, colleges, and seminaries of Western Europe. This flippant grammar contains a transposed version of all grammatical categories brought down to the bodily level, especially to the erotic sphere.

Not only parody in its narrow sense but all the other forms of grotesque realism degrade, bring down to earth, turn their subject into flesh. This is the peculiar trait of this genre which differentiates it from all the forms of medieval high art and literature. The people's laughter which characterized all the forms of grotesque realism from immemorial times was linked with the bodily lower stratum. Laughter degrades and materializes.

What is the character of this process of degradation? We shall here answer this question briefly. Rabelais' work will permit us further to define, broaden, and deepen our analysis in the following chapters.

<sup>6</sup> These dialogues of Solomon and Morolf are similar in their earthiness to many dialogues of Don Quixote and Sancho.

Degradation and debasement of the higher do not have a formal and relative character in grotesque realism. "Upward" and "downward" have here an absolute and strictly topographical meaning. "Downward" is earth, "upward" is heaven. Earth is an element that devours, swallows up (the grave, the womb) and at the same time an element of birth, of renascence (the maternal breasts). Such is the meaning of "upward" and "downward" in their cosmic aspect, while in their purely bodily aspect, which is not clearly distinct from the cosmic, the upper part is the face or the head and the lower part is the genital organs, the belly, and the buttocks. These absolute topographical connotations are used by grotesque realism, including medieval parody. Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place. Grotesque realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving.

This is the reason why medieval parody is unique, quite unlike the purely formalist literary parody of modern times, which has a solely negative character and is deprived of regenerating ambivalence. This genre and all the other modern forms of degradation could not, of course, preserve their former immensely important meaning.

Degradation, whether parodical or of some other type, is characteristic of Renaissance literature, which in that sense perpetuated the best tradition of the culture of folk humor (fully and deeply expressed by Rabelais). But even at this point the material bodily

principle was subject to a certain alteration and narrowing. Its universal and festive character was somewhat weakened. True, this process was still at its initial stage as can be observed, for instance, in Don Quixote.

The fundamental trend of Cervantes' parodies is a "coming down to earth," a contact with the reproductive and generating power of the earth and of the body. This is a continuation of the grotesque tradition. But at the same time the material bodily principle has already been reduced. It is undergoing a peculiar crisis of splitting; Cervantes' images of bodily life have begun to lead a double existence.

Sancho's fat belly (*panza*), his appetite and thirst still convey a powerful carnivalesque spirit. His love of abundance and wealth have not, as yet, a basically private, egotistic and alienating character. Sancho is the direct heir of the antique potbellied demons which decorate the famous Corinthian vases. In Cervantes' images of food and drink there is still the spirit of popular banquets. Sancho's materialism, his potbelly, appetite, his abundant defecation, are on the absolute lower level of grotesque realism of the gay bodily grave (belly, bowels, earth) which has been dug for Don Quixote's abstract and deadened idealism. One could say that the knight of the sad countenance must die in order to be reborn a better and a greater man. This is a bodily and popular corrective to individual idealistic and spiritual pretense. Moreover, it is the popular corrective of laughter applied to the narrow-minded seriousness of the spiritual pretense (the absolute lower stratum is always laughing); it is a regenerating and laughing death. Sancho's role in relation to Don Quixote can be compared to the role of medieval parodies versus high ideology and cult, to the role of the clown versus serious ceremonial, to *charnage* versus *carême*. The gay principle of regeneration can also be seen, to a lesser extent, in the windmills (giants), inns (castles), flocks of rams and sheep (armies of knights), innkeepers (lords of the castle), prostitutes (noble ladies), and so forth. All these images form a typical grotesque carnival, which turns a kitchen and banquet into a battle, kitchen utensils and shaving bowls into arms and helmets, and

wine into blood. Such is the first, carnival aspect of the material bodily images of *Don Quixote*. But it is precisely this aspect which creates the grand style of Cervantes' realism, his universal nature, and his deep popular utopianism.

A second aspect appears, under Cervantes' pen, as bodies and objects begin to acquire a private, individual nature; they are rendered petty and homely and become immovable parts of private life, the goal of egotistic lust and possession. This is no longer the positive, regenerating and renewing lower stratum, but a blunt and deathly obstacle to ideal aspirations. In the private sphere of isolated individuals the images of the bodily lower stratum preserve the element of negation while losing almost entirely their positive regenerating force. Their link with life and with the cosmos is broken, they are narrowed down to naturalistic erotic images. In *Don Quixote*, however, this process is only in its initial stage.

This second aspect of the material bodily image mingles with the first to form a complex and contradictory combination. Precisely in this double, tense, and contradictory life lies the power and the realism of these images. Such is the peculiar drama of the material bodily principle in Renaissance literature—the drama that leads to the breaking away of the body from the single procreating earth, the breaking away from the collective, growing, and continually renewed body of the people with which it had been linked in folk culture. But this process had not yet been fully completed for the artistic and ideological consciousness of the Renaissance. The bodily lower stratum of grotesque realism still fulfilled its unifying, degrading, uncrowning, and simultaneously regenerating functions. However divided, atomized, individualized were the "private" bodies, Renaissance realism did not cut off the umbilical cord which tied them to the fruitful womb of earth. Bodies could not be considered for themselves; they represented a material bodily whole and therefore transgressed the limits of their isolation. The private and the universal were still blended in a contradictory unity. The carnival spirit still reigned in the depths of Renaissance literature.

The complex nature of Renaissance realism has not as yet been sufficiently disclosed. Two types of imagery reflecting the conception of the world here meet at crossroads; one of them ascends to the folk culture of humor, while the other is the bourgeois conception of the completed atomized being. The conflict of these two contradictory trends in the interpretation of the bodily principle is typical of Renaissance realism. The ever-growing, inexhaustible, ever-laughing principle which uncrowns and renews is combined with its opposite: the petty, inert "material principle" of class society.

To ignore grotesque realism prevents us from understanding correctly not only its development during the Renaissance but also a series of important phenomena belonging to its later manifestations. The entire field of realistic literature of the last three centuries is strewn with the fragments of grotesque realism, which at times are not mere remnants of the past but manifest a renewed vitality. In most cases these are grotesque images which have either weakened or entirely lost their positive pole, their link with the universal and one world. To understand the meaning of these fragments of half dead forms is possible only if we retain the background of grotesque realism.

The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming. The relation to time is one determining trait of the grotesque image. The other indispensable trait is ambivalence. For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis.

The relation to time, its perception and experience, which is at the basis of these forms was bound to change during their development over thousands of years. At the early stage of the archaic grotesque, time is given as two parallel (actually simultaneous) phases of development, the initial and the terminal, winter and spring, death and birth. These primitive images move within the biocos-

mic circle of cyclic changes, the phases of nature's and man's reproductive life. The components of these images are the changing seasons: sowing, conception, growth, death. The concept which was contained implicitly in these ancient images was that of cyclical time, of natural and biological life. But grotesque images did not, of course, remain at that primitive level of development. The sense of time and of change was broadened and deepened, drawing into its cycle social and historic phenomena. The cyclical character is superseded by the sense of historic time. The grotesque images with their relation to changing time and their ambivalence become the means for the artistic and ideological expression of a mighty awareness of history and of historic change which appeared during the Renaissance.

But even at this stage of their development, especially in Rabelais, the grotesque images preserve their peculiar nature, entirely different from ready-made, completed being. They remain ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of "classic" aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed. The new historic sense that penetrates them gives these images a new meaning but keeps intact their traditional contents: copulation, pregnancy, birth, growth, old age, disintegration, dismemberment. All these in their direct material aspect are the main element in the system of grotesque images. They are contrary to the classic images of the finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development.

In the famous Kerch terracotta collection we find figurines of senile pregnant hags. Moreover, the old hags are laughing.<sup>7</sup> This is a typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh

<sup>7</sup> See H. Reich, *Der Mimus, ein literarentwicklungsgeschichtlicher Versuch*, Berlin, 1903, pp. 507-598. Reich interpreted the hag figurines superficially in the naturalistic spirit.

of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its twofold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. And such is precisely the grotesque concept of the body.

Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body, the link in the chain of genetic development, or more correctly speaking, two links shown at the point where they enter into each other. This especially strikes the eye in archaic grotesque.

One of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body is to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born. This is the pregnant and begetting body, or at least a body ready for conception and fertilization, the stress being laid on the phallus or the genital organs. From one body a new body always emerges in some form or other.

In contrast to modern canons, the age of the body is most frequently represented in immediate proximity to birth or death, to infancy or old age, to the womb or the grave, to the bosom that gives life or swallows it up. But at their extreme limit the two bodies unite to form one. The individual is shown at the stage when it is recast into a new mold. It is dying and as yet unfinished; the body stands on the threshold of the grave and the crib. No longer is there one body, nor are there as yet two. Two heartbeats are heard; one is the mother's, which is slowed down.

The unfinished and open body (dying, bringing forth and being

born) is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects. It is cosmic, it represents the entire material bodily world in all its elements. It is an incarnation of this world at the absolute lower stratum, as the swallowing up and generating principle, as the bodily grave and bosom, as a field which has been sown and in which new shoots are preparing to sprout.

Such are the rough outlines of this concept of the body. In Rabelais' novel this concept has been most fully and masterfully expressed, whereas in other works of Renaissance literature it was watered down. It is represented in painting by Hieronymus Bosch and the elder Breughel; some of its elements can be found in the frescoes and bas-reliefs which adorned the cathedrals and even village churches of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>8</sup>

This image of the body acquired a considerable and substantial development in the popular, festive, and spectacle forms of the Middle Ages: in the feast of the fool, in charivari and carnival, in the popular side show of Corpus Christi, in the diableries of the mystery plays, the *soties*, and farces.

In the literary sphere the entire medieval parody is based on the grotesque concept of the body. It is this concept that also forms the body images in the immense mass of legends and literary works connected with the "Indian Wonders," as well as with the Western miracles of the Celtic sea. It also forms the body images of ghostly visions and of the legends of giants. We also discover some of these elements in animal epics, *fabliaux*, and *Schwänke*.

Finally the grotesque concept of the body forms the basis of abuses, oaths, and curses. The importance of abusive language is essential to the understanding of the literature of the grotesque. Abuse exercises a direct influence on the language and the images of this literature and is closely related to all other forms of "degradation" and "down to earth" in grotesque and Renaissance

<sup>8</sup> Emile Mâle offers considerable and valuable material concerning the grotesque themes in medieval art in his extensive book: *L'Art Religieux du XIIème siècle, du XIIIème et de la fin du Moyen Age en France*. Vol. 1, 1902, Vol. 2, 1908, Vol. 3, 1922.



literature. Modern indecent abuse and cursing have retained dead and purely negative remnants of the grotesque concept of the body. Our "three-storied" oaths<sup>9</sup> or other unprintable expressions degrade the object according to the grotesque method; they send it down to the absolute bodily lower stratum, to the zone of the genital organs, the bodily grave, in order to be destroyed. But almost nothing has remained of the ambivalent meaning whereby they would also be revived; only the bare cynicism and insult have survived. Thus these expressions are completely isolated in the system of meaning and values of modern languages and in the modern picture of the world; they are fragments of an alien language in which certain things could be said in the past but which at present conveys nothing but senseless abuse.

However it would be absurd and hypocritical to deny the attraction which these expressions still exercise even when they are without erotic connotation. A vague memory of past carnival liberties and carnival truth still slumbers in these modern forms of abuse. The problem of their irrepressible linguistic vitality has as yet not been seriously posed. In the age of Rabelais abuses and curses still retained their full meaning in the popular language from which his novel sprang, and above all they retained their positive, regenerating pole. They were closely related to all the forms of degradation inherited from grotesque realism; they belonged to the popular-festive travesties of carnival, to the images of the diableries, of the underworld, of the *soties*. This is why abusive language played an important part in Rabelais' novel.

The concept of the body in grotesque realism as discussed in this introduction is of course in flagrant contradiction with the literary and artistic canon of antiquity,<sup>10</sup> which formed the basis of Renais-

<sup>9</sup> A colloquial Russian expression for strong and coarse abuse. (Translator's note.)

<sup>10</sup> But not of all antiquity. In the ancient Doric comedy, in "satyric" drama, in Sicilian comic forms, in the works of Aristophanes, in mimes and *Atellanae* we find similar grotesque conceptions; we also find them in Hippocrates, Galen, Pliny, in the symposia, in Athenaeus, Macrobius, Plutarch, and other writings of nonclassical antiquity.

sance aesthetics and was connected to the further development of art. The Renaissance saw the body in quite a different light than the Middle Ages, in a different aspect of its life, and a different relation to the exterior nonbodily world. As conceived by these canons, the body was first of all a strictly completed, finished product. Furthermore, it was isolated, alone, fenced off from all other bodies. All signs of its unfinished character, of its growth and proliferation were eliminated; its protuberances and offshoots were removed, its convexities (signs of new sprouts and buds) smoothed out, its apertures closed. The ever unfinished nature of the body was hidden, kept secret; conception, pregnancy, childbirth, death throes, were almost never shown. The age represented was as far removed from the mother's womb as from the grave, the age most distant from either threshold of individual life. The accent was placed on the completed, self-sufficient individuality of the given body. Corporal acts were shown only when the borderlines dividing the body from the outside world were sharply defined. The inner processes of absorbing and ejecting were not revealed. The individual body was presented apart from its relation to the ancestral body of the people.

Such were the fundamental tendencies of the classic canons. It is quite obvious that from the point of view of these canons the body of grotesque realism was hideous and formless. It did not fit the framework of the "aesthetics of the beautiful" as conceived by the Renaissance.

In this introduction as in the following chapters of our work (especially in Chapter 5), while contrasting the grotesque and the classic canon we will not assert the superiority of the one over the other. We will merely establish their basic differences. But the grotesque concept will, of course, be foremost in our study, since it determined the images of the culture of folk humor and of Rabelais. The classic canon is clear to us, artistically speaking; to a certain degree we still live according to it. But we have ceased long ago to understand the grotesque canon, or else we grasp it only in its distorted form. The role of historians and theorists of literature and art is to reconstruct this canon in its true sense. It should not

be interpreted according to the norms of modern times; nor should it be seen as deviation from present-day concepts. The grotesque canon must be appraised according to its own measurements.

Here we must offer more clarification. We understand the word canon not in the narrow sense of a specific group of consciously established rules, norms, and proportions in the representation of the human body. (It is still possible to speak of the classic canon in such a narrow sense at certain phases of its development.) The grotesque image never had such a canon. It is noncanonical by its very nature. We here use the word canon in the wider sense of a manner of representing the human body and bodily life. In the art and literature of past ages we observe two such manners, which we will conditionally call grotesque and classic. We have defined these two canons in their pure, one might say extreme, form. But in history's living reality these canons were never fixed and immutable. Moreover, usually the two canons experience various forms of interaction: struggle, mutual influence, crossing, and fusion. This is especially true during the Renaissance. Even in Rabelais, who was the purest and the most consistent representative of the grotesque concept of the body, we find some classic elements, especially in the episode of Gargantua's education by Ponocrates and the Thélème episode. But for the sake of our research the fundamental differences between the two canons are important. We shall center our attention on these differences.

The specific type of imagery inherent to the culture of folk humor in all its forms and manifestations has been defined by us conditionally as grotesque realism. We shall now have to defend the choice of our terminology.

Let us first examine the term grotesque, giving its history as related to the development of the grotesque itself and of its theory.

Grotesque imagery (that is, the method of construction of its images) is an extremely ancient type; we find it in the mythology and in the archaic art of all peoples, among them, of course, the Greeks and Romans of the preclassic period. During the classic period the grotesque did not die but was expelled from the sphere of official

art to live and develop in certain "low" nonclassic areas: plastic comic art, mostly on a small scale, as the previously mentioned Kerch terracottas, comic masks, Sileni, figurines of the demons of fertility, and the popular statuettes of the little monster Tersitus. Humorous vase decorations present the images of grotesque "doublets" (the comic Heracles and Odysseus), scenes from comedies, and symbols of fertility. Finally, in the wider range of humorous literature, related in one form or the other to festivals of carnival type, we have the "satyric" drama, the ancient Attic comedy, the mimes, and others. During the period of late antiquity grotesque imagery attained its flowering and renewal; it embraced nearly all areas of art and literature. Under the influence of the art of Eastern peoples a new kind of grotesque was formed, but aesthetic and artistic thought developed along the lines of classic tradition; therefore, grotesque imagery was not given a consistent definition nor was its meaning recognized in theory.

During its three stages of development—archaic, classic, and late—the essential element of realism was gradually shaped. It would be incorrect to see in grotesque merely "gross naturalism," as has sometimes been done. But this antique imagery is outside the scope of our work.<sup>11</sup> In the following chapters we shall discuss only the manifestations of antique grotesque which influenced Rabelais' novel.

The flowering of grotesque realism is a system of images created by the medieval culture of folk humor, and its summit is the literature of the Renaissance. At that time the term grotesque first appears on the scene but in a narrow sense occasioned by the finding at the end of the fifteenth century of a certain type of Roman ornament, previously unknown. These ornaments were brought to light during the excavation of Titus' baths and were called *grot-*

<sup>11</sup> Interesting material and valuable observations concerning antique and to some extent medieval and Renaissance grotesque are contained in A. Dieterich: "Pulcinella. Pompeian Mural Paintings and Roman Satyric Drama," Leipzig, 1897. (*Pulcinella. Pompeyanische Wandbilder und Romische Satyrspiele.*) The author, however, does not use the word "grotesque." In many respects Dieterich's book is not outdated.

*tesca* from the Italian word *grotta*. Somewhat later similar ornaments were discovered in other areas of Italy.

What is the character of these ornaments? They impressed the connoisseurs by the extremely fanciful, free, and playful treatment of plant, animal, and human forms. These forms seemed to be interwoven as if giving birth to each other. The borderlines that divide the kingdoms of nature in the usual picture of the world were boldly infringed. Neither was there the usual static presentation of reality. There was no longer the movement of finished forms, vegetable or animal, in a finished and stable world; instead the inner movement of being itself was expressed in the passing of one form into the other, in the ever incompleting character of being. This ornamental interplay revealed an extreme lightness and freedom of artistic fantasy, a gay, almost laughing, libertinage. The gay tone of the new ornament was grasped and brilliantly rendered by Raphael and his pupils in their grotesque decoration of the Vatican loggias.<sup>12</sup>

Such is the fundamental trait of the Roman ornament to which the term grotesque was first applied, a new word for an apparently new manifestation. The initial meaning of the term was in the beginning extremely narrow, describing the rediscovered form of Roman ornament. But in reality this form was but a fragment of the immense world of grotesque imagery which existed throughout all the stages of antiquity and continued to exist in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The fragment reflected the characteristic features of this immense world, and thus a further productive

<sup>12</sup> Let us here quote another, excellent definition of the grotesque by L. E. Pinsky; "In the grotesque, life passes through all the degrees, from the lowest, inert and primitive, to the highest, most mobile and spiritualized; this garland of various forms bears witness to their oneness, brings together that which is removed, combines elements which exclude each other, contradicts all current conceptions. Grotesque in art is related to the paradox in logic. At first glance, the grotesque is merely witty and amusing, but it contains great potentialities." (See L. E. Pinsky, *Realism Epochy Vozrozhedenya*, ("Realism of the Renaissance") Goslitizdat, Moscow, 1961, pp. 119-120.

life was ensured for the new term, with gradual extension to the almost immeasurable sphere of grotesque imagery.

But this extension of the term took place very slowly and without a clear theoretical interpretation of the peculiar character and the oneness of the grotesque world. The first attempt at theoretical analysis, or more correctly speaking at description and appraisal of this genre, was made by Vasari; relying on the opinion of Vitruvius, the Roman architect and art expert in the time of Augustus, Vasari pronounced a negative judgment. Vitruvius, whom Vasari quotes approvingly, condemned the new "barbarian" fashion of covering walls with monsters instead of the "bright reflection of the world of objects." In other words, Vitruvius condemned the grotesque from the classic standpoint as a gross violation of natural forms and proportions. Vasari expressed a similar point of view which prevailed for a long time. Only in the second part of the eighteenth century did a deeper and broader understanding of the grotesque make its appearance.

During the domination of the classical canon in all the areas of art and literature of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the grotesque related to the culture of folk humor was excluded from great literature; it descended to the low comic level or was subject to the epithet "gross naturalism," as we have seen. During this period (actually starting in the seventeenth century) we observe a process of gradual narrowing down of the ritual, spectacle, and carnival forms of folk culture, which became small and trivial. On the one hand the state encroached upon festive life and turned it into a parade; on the other hand these festivities were brought into the home and became part of the family's private life. The privileges which were formerly allowed the marketplace were more and more restricted. The carnival spirit with its freedom, its utopian character oriented toward the future, was gradually transformed into a mere holiday mood. The feast ceased almost entirely to be the people's second life, their temporary renaissance and renewal. We have stressed the word almost because the popular-festive carnival principle is indestructible. Though narrowed and

weakened, it still continues to fertilize various areas of life and culture.

A special aspect of this process seems important. The literature of these later centuries was not directly subject to the popular-festive culture and remained almost impervious to its influence. The carnival spirit and grotesque imagery continued to live and was transmitted as a now purely literary tradition, especially as a tradition of the Renaissance.

Having lost its living tie with folk culture and having become a literary genre, the grotesque underwent certain changes. There was a formalization of carnival-grotesque images, which permitted them to be used in many different ways and for various purposes. This formalization was not only exterior; the contents of the carnival-grotesque element, its artistic, heuristic, and unifying forces were preserved in all essential manifestations during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: in the *commedia dell'arte* (which kept a close link with its carnival origin), in Molière's comedies (related to the *commedia dell'arte*), in the comic novel and travesty of the seventeenth century, in the tales of Voltaire and Diderot (*Les bijoux indiscrets*, *Jacques le fataliste*), in the work of Swift, and a few others. In all these writings, in spite of their differences in character and tendency, the carnival-grotesque form exercises the same function: to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things.

But a clear and precise theoretical understanding of the oneness of these manifestations known as the grotesque, as well as their artistic specificity, developed slowly. The term itself was often replaced by the words arabesque (mostly applied to ornament) and burlesque (literature). Due to the prevailing classic point of view in aesthetics, theoretical interpretation was as yet not possible.

In the second half of the eighteenth century an essential change took place in literature, as well as in the field of aesthetic thought. A literary controversy broke out in Germany around the character of Harlequin, a constant participant in all dramatic performances of that time, even the serious ones. Gottsched and the other classicists demanded this character's expulsion from "the serious and respectable stage" and succeeded for a while. Lessing himself took part in the controversy in Harlequin's defense. Beyond the narrow scope of this dispute there was a wider problem of principle: could manifestations such as the grotesque, which did not respond to the demands of the sublime, be considered art? This problem was discussed in a short essay published in 1761 by Justus Möser, entitled "Harlequin, or the Defense of the Grotesque-Comic" (*Harlekin, oder die Verteidigung des Grotesk-Komischen*). This defense was placed in Harlequin's own mouth. Möser stressed that this grotesque character was a part of a peculiar world or microcosm to which Colombine, the Captain, the Doctor, and other characters also belong—the world of the *commedia dell'arte*. It constitutes a whole; it has its own legitimate order, its own criterion of perfection which does not obey the aesthetics of the beautiful and the sublime. But at the same time Möser considers this world as opposed to the "low" spectacle of the marketplace; he thus narrows the very concept of the grotesque. He further explores certain distinct traits of this peculiar world: he calls it "chimerical," that is, combining heterogeneous elements, and points out that it violates natural proportions, thus presenting elements of caricature and parody. Finally, Möser stresses the principle of humor in the grotesque and traces the origin of laughter to the human soul's need of joy and gaiety. Such is the first and rather limited defense of the grotesque genre.

In 1788 a "History of the Comic Grotesque"<sup>13</sup> was published.

<sup>13</sup> Flögel's book was reprinted in 1862 in a somewhat revised and broadened form by Fr. W. Ebeling, *Flögel's Geschichte des Grotesk-Komischen, Leipzig*, 1862. This revised edition had five printings. In the text that follows we take all quotations from Ebeling's first edition. A new edition, revised by Max Brauer, was published in 1914.



The author, Carl Friedrich Flögel, also wrote a history of comic literature and a "History of Court Jesters." Discussing grotesque, Flögel does not define or limit the grotesque concept either from the historic or from the systematic point of view. He attributes to this genre all that which deviates from the usual aesthetic forms and which sharply emphasizes the exaggeration of the material bodily element. A considerable part of Flögel's book is devoted to the medieval grotesque. He studies the forms of medieval folk festivals (the "feast of fools," the "feast of the ass," the comic side shows of Corpus Christi celebrations), the buffoon literary societies of the late Middle Ages ("Queen Basoche," "Carefree Lads"), *soties*, farces, Shrovetide games, and various types of popular comic performances. Generally speaking, Flögel's survey is somewhat limited; he does not examine the purely literary manifestations of grotesque—for instance, the medieval Latin parody. The lack of a systematic historic point of view has caused a somewhat haphazard choice of material and superficial understanding of the grotesque. Actually, there is no true understanding; the author merely collects his examples as curiosities. Nevertheless, Flögel's book has retained its interest because of the material it presents.

Both Möser and Flögel are aware only of the grotesque comic form based on the humorous principle, and this principle is conceived by them as gay and joyful. Such was also the material analyzed in their works: the *commedia dell'arte* by Möser and medieval grotesque by Flögel.

At precisely the time when Möser and Flögel published their works, oriented toward already-covered ground, the grotesque was entering a new phase of development. Pre-Romanticism and Romanticism witnessed a revival of the grotesque genre but with a radically transformed meaning. It became the expression of subjective, individualistic world outlook very different from the carnival folk concept of previous ages, although still containing some carnival elements. The first important example of the new subjective grotesque was Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, a peculiar

transposition of Rabelais' and Cervantes' world concept into the subjective language of the new age. Another variety of the new grotesque was the Gothic or black novel. In Germany this subjective form had perhaps the most powerful and original development: the *Sturm und Drang* dramatics and early Romanticism (Lenz, Klingler, the young Tieck), the novels of Hippel and Jean Paul, and finally the works of Hoffmann, who strongly influenced the development of the new grotesque in the next period of world literature. Friedrich Schlegel and Jean Paul became its theorists.

Romantic grotesque was an important manifestation of world literature. To a certain degree it was a reaction against the elements of classicism which characterized the self-importance of the Enlightenment. It was a reaction against the cold rationalism, against official, formalistic, and logical authoritarianism; it was a rejection of that which is finished and completed, of the didactic and utilitarian spirit of the Enlighteners with their narrow and artificial optimism. In rejecting this spirit the Romantic grotesque relied first of all on the tradition of the Renaissance, especially on the rediscovered Shakespeare and Cervantes. It was in their light that the medieval grotesque was also interpreted. An important influence was exercised in this field by Sterne, who in a certain sense is even considered the founder of the new genre. As to the direct influence of folk spectacles and carnival forms, which were still alive though degenerate, it was apparently not considerable. The purely literary tradition was predominant. We should however point out the influence of the folk theater, especially the puppet show and the performances given at fairs.

Unlike the medieval and Renaissance grotesque, which was directly related to folk culture and thus belonged to all the people, the Romantic genre acquired a private "chamber" character. It became, as it were, an individual carnival, marked by a vivid sense of isolation. The carnival spirit was transposed into a subjective, idealistic philosophy. It ceased to be the concrete (one might say bodily) experience of the one, inexhaustible being, as it was in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

However, the most important transformation of Romantic gro-

tesque was that of the principle of laughter. This element of course remained, since no grotesque, even the most timid, is conceivable in the atmosphere of absolute seriousness. But laughter was cut down to cold humor, irony, sarcasm. It ceased to be a joyful and triumphant hilarity. Its positive regenerating power was reduced to a minimum.

We find a characteristic discussion of laughter in one of the most remarkable works of Romantic grotesque, "The Night Watches" of Bonaventura (the pen name of an unknown author, perhaps Wetzel).<sup>14</sup> These are the tales and thoughts of a night watchman. The narrator describes as follows the meaning of laughter: "Is there upon earth a more potent means than laughter to resist the mockeries of the world and of fate? The most powerful enemy experiences terror at the sight of this satirical mask, and misfortune itself retreats before me, if I dare laugh at it. What else indeed except laughter does this earth deserve, may the devil take it! together with its sensitive companion, the moon."

These lines proclaim the philosophy and universal character of laughter, the characteristic trait of every expression of the grotesque. They praise its liberating power, but there is no hint of its power of regeneration. Laughter loses its gay and joyful tone.

Speaking through the medium of his narrator, the night watchman, the author offers a curious explanation of laughter and of its mythical origin. Laughter was sent to earth by the devil, but it appeared to men under the mask of joy, and so they readily accepted it. Then laughter cast away its mask and looked at man and at the world with the eyes of angry satire.

The transformation of the principle of laughter which permeates the grotesque, that is the loss of its regenerating power, leads to a series of other essential differences between Romantic grotesque and medieval and Renaissance grotesque. These differences appear most distinctly in relation to terror. The world of Romantic grotesque is to a certain extent a terrifying world, alien to man.

<sup>14</sup> *Nachtwachen*, 1804. (see R. Steinert's *Nachtwachen des Bonaventura*, Leipzig, 1917.)

All that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognized by all suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious and hostile. Our own world becomes an alien world. Something frightening is revealed in that which was habitual and secure. Such are the tendencies of Romantic grotesque in its extreme expression. If a reconciliation with the world occurs, it takes place in a subjective, lyric, or even mystic sphere. On the other hand, the medieval and Renaissance folk culture was familiar with the element of terror only as represented by comic monsters, who were defeated by laughter. Terror was turned into something gay and comic. Folk culture brought the world close to man, gave it a bodily form, and established a link through the body and bodily life, in contrast to the abstract and spiritual mastery sought by Romanticism. Images of bodily life, such as eating, drinking, copulation, defecation, almost entirely lost their regenerating power and were turned into "vulgaries."

The images of Romantic grotesque usually express fear of the world and seek to inspire their reader with this fear. On the contrary, the images of folk culture are absolutely fearless and communicate this fearlessness to all. This is also true of Renaissance literature. The high point of this spirit is reached in Rabelais' novel; here fear is destroyed at its very origin and everything is turned into gaiety. It is the most fearless book in world literature.

Other specific traits are linked with the disappearance of laughter's regenerating power in Romantic grotesque. For instance, the theme of madness is inherent to all grotesque forms, because madness makes men look at the world with different eyes, not dimmed by "normal," that is by commonplace ideas and judgments. In folk grotesque, madness is a gay parody of official reason, of the narrow seriousness of official "truth." It is a "festive" madness. In Romantic grotesque, on the other hand, madness acquires a somber, tragic aspect of individual isolation.

Even more important is the theme of the mask, the most complex theme of folk culture. The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to

oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles. Of course it would be impossible to exhaust the intricate multiform symbolism of the mask. Let us point out that such manifestations as parodies, caricatures, grimaces, eccentric postures, and comic gestures are per se derived from the mask. It reveals the essence of the grotesque.<sup>15</sup>

In its Romantic form the mask is torn away from the oneness of the folk carnival concept. It is stripped of its original richness and acquires other meanings alien to its primitive nature; now the mask hides something, keeps a secret, deceives. Such a meaning would not be possible as long as the mask functioned within folk culture's organic whole. The Romantic mask loses almost entirely its regenerating and renewing element and acquires a somber hue. A terrible vacuum, a nothingness lurks behind it. (This theme is strikingly presented in Bonaventura's "Night Watches".) But an inexhaustible and many-colored life can always be descried behind the mask of folk grotesque.

However, the Romantic mask still retains something of its popular carnival nature. Even in modern life it is enveloped in a peculiar atmosphere and is seen as a particle of some other world. The mask never becomes just an object among other objects.

The theme of the marionette plays an important part in Romanticism. This theme is of course also found in folk culture, but in romanticism the accent is placed on the puppet as the victim of alien inhuman force, which rules over men by turning them into marionettes. This image is completely unknown in folk culture. Moreover, only in Romanticism do we find the peculiar grotesque theme of the tragic doll.

The Romantic treatment of the devil is also completely different from that of popular grotesque. In the diableries of the medi-

<sup>15</sup> We have in mind the mask and its meaning at the time of the people's festive culture of antiquity and the Middle Ages, and are not concerned with its ancient cultic meaning.

eval mysteries, in the parodical legends and the *fabliaux* the devil is the gay ambivalent figure expressing the unofficial point of view, the material bodily stratum. There is nothing terrifying or alien in him. In Rabelais' description of Epistemon's ghostly vision the devils are excellent and jovial fellows. At times the devils and hell itself appear as comic monsters, whereas the Romanticists present the devil as terrifying, melancholy, and tragic, and infernal laughter as somber and sarcastic.

We must point out that in Romantic grotesque ambivalence offers a sharp, static contrast. Thus the storyteller of the "Night Watches" is the son of the devil, while his mother is a canonized saint. The night watchman himself laughs in church and weeps in the bordello. Thus the ancient popular derision of divinity and medieval humor become in the early nineteenth century the sardonic laughter in church of a lonely eccentric.

Let us finally stress another peculiarity of Romantic grotesque. It is in most cases nocturnal (Bonaventura's "Night Watches," "Hoffman's "Night Tales"). Darkness, not light, is typical of this genre. On the contrary, light characterizes folk grotesque. It is a festival of spring, of sunrise, of morning.<sup>16</sup>

Friedrich Schlegel mentions the grotesque in his "Discourse on Poetry" (*Gespräch über die Poesie*, 1800) without giving any clear terminological definition. He usually calls it "arabesque" and considers it "the most ancient form of human fantasy" and the "natural form of poetry." He finds the grotesque in Shakespeare and Cervantes, in Sterne and Jean Paul. He sees its essence in the fantastic combination of heterogeneous elements of reality, in the breaking up of the established world order, in the free fancy of its images and in the "alternate succession of enthusiasm and irony."

Jean Paul defines the Romantic grotesque even more sharply in his "Introduction to Aesthetics," (*Vorschule der Ästhetik*). He does not use the term grotesque and he conceives it as "destructive humor." Jean Paul interprets it quite broadly, not limiting it to

<sup>16</sup> More precisely, folk grotesque reflects the very moment when light replaces darkness, night-morning, winter-spring.

literature and art but including in this category the "feast of fools" and the "feast of the ass," that is, the comic rituals and pageants of the Middle Ages. Among the literary manifestations of grotesque in the Renaissance, Jean Paul quite often refers to Rabelais and Shakespeare. He mentions in particular the "deriding of the entire world" (*Weltverlachung*) in Shakespeare, meaning the "melancholy clowns" and Hamlet.

Jean Paul understands perfectly well the universal character of laughter. "Destructive humor" is not directed against isolated negative aspects of reality but against all reality, against the finite world as a whole. All that is finite is *per se* destroyed by humor. Jean Paul stresses the radicalism of humor. Through it, the entire world is turned into something alien, something terrifying and unjustified. The ground slips from under our feet, and we are dizzy because we find nothing stable around us. Jean Paul sees a similar universalism and radicalism of destruction of all moral and social stability in the comic ritual and spectacles of the Middle Ages.

He does not separate the grotesque from laughter. He understands that without the principle of laughter this genre would be impossible. But his theory concerns itself only with a reduced form of laughter, a cold humor deprived of positive regenerating power. Jean Paul emphasizes the melancholy character of destructive laughter, saying that the greatest humorist of all would be the devil (of course, in the Romantic meaning of this word).

Jean Paul is attracted by the manifestations of medieval and Renaissance grotesque, and especially by Rabelais and Shakespeare. However, he merely offers the theory of the Romantic; through this prism alone can he observe the past stages of development. He "romanticizes" these stages (mostly through Sterne's interpretation).

The positive element of the grotesque, its last word, is conceived by Jean Paul (as it is by Schlegel) as outside the laughter principle, as an escape from all that is finite and destroyed by humor, as a transfer to the spiritual sphere.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Jean Paul himself used many images typical of the Romantic gro-

In the early 1820's, there was also a revival of grotesque imagery in French Romanticism. We find an interesting presentation of the problem, and one typical of the French Romantic spirit, by Victor Hugo, first in his preface to *Cromwell* and then in his book on Shakespeare.

Hugo gives a broad interpretation of grotesque imagery. He finds it in preclassical antiquity (the hydra, the harpies, the cyclopes, and other archaic images); he further places in this category all postantique literature, starting with medieval forms. "The grotesque," says Victor Hugo, "is everywhere: on one hand, it creates the formless and the terrifying, on the other hand the comic, the buffoon-like." The essential aspect of this form is the monstrous; the aesthetics of the grotesque are to a certain extent the aesthetics of the monstrous. But at the same time Hugo reduces the intrinsic value of the grotesque by declaring that it is a means of contrasting the sublime. The two complete each other, and their unity, most fully achieved in Shakespeare, produces the truly beautiful, which classicism could not attain.

In his book on Shakespeare Hugo gives his most interesting analysis of this imagery and of the comic and material bodily principle, in particular. We shall discuss this work later, for Hugo also expresses in it his appreciation of Rabelais.

Interest in the grotesque and in its early phases of development was shared by other French Romanticists who conceived it as a national tradition. In 1853 Théophile Gautier published an anthology entitled *Les Grotesques*. He collected for this anthology a number of French authors, interpreting the grotesque rather broadly; we find Villon and certain libertine poets of the seventeenth century (Théophile Viau, Saint-Amant, Scarron, Cyrano de Bergerac, and even Scudéry).

Such is the Romantic phase in the development of the grotesque. Two positive elements must be stressed in conclusion:

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tesque, especially in his "Dreams" and "Visions" (see the P. Bentz edition of works belonging to this genre: *Jean Paul, Träume und Visionen*, Munich, 1954). This edition offers many striking examples of nocturnal and ghostly grotesque.



first, the Romanticists searched for popular roots; second, they never attributed to the grotesque a purely satirical function.

Our analysis of this Romantic phase is, of course, far from complete. Moreover it bears a rather one-sided and even polemical character, since all we are looking for here is the difference between the Romantic aspect of the grotesque and the imagery of the culture of folk humor. But Romanticism made its own important discovery—that of the interior subjective man with his depth, complexity, and inexhaustible resources.

This *interior infinite* of the individual was unknown to the medieval and the Renaissance grotesque; the discovery made by the Romanticists was made possible by their use of the grotesque method and of its power to liberate from dogmatism, completeness, and limitation. The *interior infinite* could not have been found in the closed and finished world, with its distinct fixed boundaries dividing all phenomena and values. Suffice it to compare the rationalized and exhaustive analysis of interior experience by classicism and the images of inner life offered by Sterne and the Romanticists. Here the artistic and heuristic force of the grotesque method is clearly shown. But this aspect is outside the scope of our work.

Let us say a few words on the concept of the grotesque of Hegel and Fischer.

Hegel is concerned only with archaic grotesque, which he defines as the expression of the preclassic and prephilosophic condition of the spirit. Relying mostly on archaic Indian forms, Hegel defines grotesque by three traits: the fusion of different natural spheres, immeasurable and exaggerated dimensions, and the multiplication of different members and organs of the human body (hands, feet, and eyes of Indian gods). Hegel completely ignores the role of the comic in the structure of the grotesque and indeed examines grotesque quite independently of the comic.

E. K. Fischer differs from Hegel. He sees the burlesque, the comic as the essence and the driving force of this genre: "The grotesque . . . is the comic in the form of the miraculous, it is the mythological comic." Fischer's definition has a certain profundity.

It must be added that in the further development of philosophical aesthetics up to our times the grotesque has not been duly understood and evaluated; there was no room for it in the system of aesthetics.

After the decline of Romanticism, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the interest in the grotesque was considerably reduced both in literature and in literary thought and studies. If mentioned at all, it is either listed among the vulgar comic genres or interpreted as a peculiar form of satire, directed against isolated, purely negative objects. Because of such interpretation the deep and universal nature of grotesque images was completely obscured.

The most extensive work devoted to the subject was published in 1894 by the German scientist G. Schneegans, entitled "The History of Grotesque Satire" (*Geschichte der Grotesken Satyre*). This book is largely devoted to Rabelais whom Schneegans considers the greatest representative of this genre. The author also gives a brief description of similar medieval types of imagery. He is the most consistent interpreter of the purely satirical grotesque. In his mind the latter is always negative, it is the exaggeration of the abnormal, an exaggeration that is incredible and therefore becomes fantastic. Through the medium of exaggeration of the abnormal a moral and social blow is dealt to the aberration. Such is the gist of Schneegans' analysis.

Schneegans fails completely to see the positive hyperbolism of the material bodily principle of the Middle Ages and of Rabelais. He fails to grasp the positive regenerating power of laughter. He sees merely the negative, rhetorical satire of the nineteenth century, a laughter that does not laugh. This is the extreme expression of the modernization of laughter in literary analysis. Neither does Schneegans see the universal character of these images. His shortsightedness is typical of the literary approach of the second part of the nineteenth century and of the first decades of the twentieth century. Even in our days the purely satirical interpretation of the grotesque, and of Rabelais' work in particular, is far from outmoded.

Since Schneegans founded his work mostly on Rabelais, we shall return to a further discussion of his book (Chapter Five).

A new and powerful revival of the grotesque took place in the twentieth century, although the word revival is not exactly suited to the most recent forms.

The latest development of this genre is considerably complex and contradictory. Generally speaking, two main lines of development can be traced. The first line is the modernist form (Alfred Jarry), connected in various degrees with the Romantic tradition and evolved under the influence of existentialism. The second line is the realist grotesque (Thomas Mann, Bertold Brecht, Pablo Neruda, and others). It is related to the tradition of realism and folk culture and reflects at times the direct influence of carnival forms, as in the work of Neruda.

The analysis of these developments does not enter our picture. We shall merely discuss the most recent theory of the grotesque according to modernist trends. We have in mind the work of the distinguished German literary critic Wolfgang Kayser: "The Grotesque in Painting and Poetry."<sup>18</sup>

Kayser's book is the first and at the present writing the only serious work on the theory of the grotesque. It contains many valuable observations and subtle analysis. But it offers the theory of the Romantic and modernist forms only, or, more strictly speaking, of exclusively modernist forms, since the author sees the Romantic age through the prism of his own time and therefore offers a somewhat distorted interpretation. Kayser's theory cannot be applied to the thousand-year-long development of the pre-Romantic era: that is, the archaic and antique grotesque (for instance, the satyric drama or the comedy of Attica) and the medieval and Renaissance grotesque, linked to the culture of folk humor. In his book Kayser does not even discuss these manifestations. Instead he bases his deductions and generalizations on the

<sup>18</sup> W. Kayser, *Das Grotesk in Malerei und Dichtung*, 1957. This book was reprinted posthumously in *Rowohlt's deutsche Enzyklopädie* series, 1961.

analysis of Romantic and modernist forms, and it is the latter which, as we have said, determines his concepts. The true nature of the grotesque, which cannot be separated from the culture of folk humor and the carnival spirit, remains unexplained. In the Romantic form this link is loosened and reduced; it has to a certain extent acquired a new meaning. But even at that stage all the basic elements, which have a clearly carnival origin, retain a certain memory of that mighty whole to which they belonged in the distant past. This memory is awakened in the best works of Romantic grotesque—most forcefully in Sterne and Hoffmann, although each expressed it differently. These works are more powerful, deep, and joyful than the objectively philosophical idea which they express. Kayser is unaware of this reawakened tradition nor is he looking for it. The modernist grotesque that inspires his own concept has almost entirely lost its past memories. It formalizes the heritage of carnival themes and symbols.

What are, according to Kayser, the basic characteristics of grotesque imagery?

Kayser's definitions first of all strike us by the gloomy, terrifying tone of the grotesque world that alone the author sees. In reality gloom is completely alien to the entire development of this world up to the romantic period. We have already shown that the medieval and Renaissance grotesque, filled with the spirit of carnival, liberates the world from all that is dark and terrifying; it takes away all fears and is therefore completely gay and bright. All that was frightening in ordinary life is turned into amusing or ludicrous monstrosities.

Fear is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter. (We shall find an excellent elaboration of this theme in Rabelais' novel, especially in the Malbrough theme). Complete liberty is possible only in the completely fearless world.

For Kayser the essential trait of grotesque is "something hostile, alien, and inhuman" (*das Unheimliche, das Verfremdete und Unmenschliche*).

He particularly stresses the element of alienation: "The gro-

tesque is the alienated world." Kayser explains this definition by drawing a comparison to the world of the fairy tale. The fairy tale world can be defined as strange and unusual, but it is not a world that has *become* alienated. In the grotesque, on the contrary, all that was for us familiar and friendly suddenly becomes hostile. It is our own world that undergoes this change.

Kayser's definition can be applied only to certain manifestations of modernist form of the grotesque; it is no longer completely adequate for the Romantic period and entirely inapplicable to the preceding stage of development.

Actually the grotesque, including the Romantic form, discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life. It leads men out of the confines of the apparent (false) unity, of the indisputable and stable. Born of folk humor, it always represents in one form or another, through these or other means, the return of Saturn's golden age to earth—the living possibility of its return. The Romantic grotesque does this too, but in its own subjective form. The existing world suddenly becomes alien (to use Kayser's terminology) precisely because there is the potentiality of a friendly world, of the golden age, of carnival truth. Man returns unto himself. The world is destroyed so that it may be regenerated and renewed. While dying it gives birth. The relative nature of all that exists is always gay; it is the joy of change, even if in Romanticism gaiety and joy are reduced to their minimum.

Let us stress once more that the utopian element, the "golden age," was disclosed in the pre-Romantic period not for the sake of abstract thought or of inner experience; it is lived by the whole man, in thought and body. This bodily participation in the potentiality of another world, the bodily awareness of another world has an immense importance for the grotesque.

In Kayser's concept there is no room for the material bodily principle with its inexhaustible wealth and perpetual renewal. Neither do we find in his theory any notion of time, of change and crisis, that is, of all that happens to the sun, to the earth, to man, to human society, of all that true grotesque actually lives by.

Another of Kayser's definitions is characteristic of the modernist interpretation: "the grotesque is a form expressing the *id*."

The *id* is understood by the author not so much in the Freudian as in the existentialist sense of this word. *Id* is an alien, inhuman power, governing the world, men, their life and behavior. Kayser reduces many of the basic grotesque themes to the realization of this power, for instance the puppet theme. He also reduces to this power the theme of madness. According to the author we are always aware of something alien in the madman, as if some inhuman spirit of irony had entered his soul. We have already said that the theme of madness is used in the grotesque in quite a different manner—to escape the false "truth of this world" in order to look at the world with eyes free from this "truth."

Kayser himself often speaks of the freedom of fantasy characteristic of the grotesque. But how is such freedom possible in relation to a world ruled by the alien power of the *id*? Here lies the contradiction of Kayser's concept.

Actually the grotesque liberates man from all the forms of inhuman necessity that direct the prevailing concept of the world. This concept is uncrowned by the grotesque and reduced to the relative and the limited. Necessity, in every concept which prevails at any time, is always one-piece, serious, unconditional, and indisputable. But historically the idea of necessity is relative and variable. The principle of laughter and the carnival spirit on which grotesque is based destroys this limited seriousness and all pretense of an extratemporal meaning and unconditional value of necessity. It frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities. For this reason great changes, even in the field of science, are always preceded by a certain carnival consciousness that prepares the way.

In the grotesque world the *id* is uncrowned and transformed into a "funny monster." When entering this new dimension, even if it is Romantic, we always experience a peculiar gay freedom of thought and imagination.

Let us examine two more points of Kayser's theory.

Summing up his analysis, he asserts that "the grotesque ex-

presses not the fear of death but the fear of life." This assertion, expressed in the spirit of existentialism, presents first an opposition of life to death. Such an opposition is completely contrary to the system of grotesque imagery, in which death is not a negation of life seen as the great body of all the people but part of life as a whole—its indispensable component, the condition of its constant renewal and rejuvenation. Death is here always related to birth; the grave is related to the earth's life-giving womb. Birth-death, death-birth, such are the components of life itself as in the famous words of the Spirit of the Earth in Goethe's *Faust*.<sup>19</sup> Death is included in life, and together with birth determines its eternal movement. Even the struggle of life and death in the individual body is conceived by grotesque imagery as the struggle of the old life stubbornly resisting the new life about to be born, as the crisis of change.

Leonardo da Vinci said: "When man awaits the new spring, the new year, with joyful impatience, he does not suspect that he is eagerly awaiting his own death." Although da Vinci's aphorism is not expressed in grotesque form, it is based on the carnival spirit.

Thus, in the system of grotesque imagery death and renewal are inseparable in life as a whole, and life as a whole can inspire fear least of all.

It must be recalled that the image of death in medieval and Renaissance grotesque (and in painting, also, as in Holbein's or

<sup>19</sup> Geburt und Grab,  
Ein ewiges meer  
Ein wechselnd Weben,  
Ein glühend Leben.

Here we see no opposition between life and death, there is a confrontation of life and the grave, both linked to the devouring womb of the earth and of the body. Both enter as indispensable elements into the living whole of ever changing and renewed life. This is also characteristic of Goethe's concept of the universe. The world in which life and death are opposed and the world in which birth and the grave confront each other are completely different. The latter is the world of folk culture and of Goethe as well.

Dürer's "dance of death") is a more or less funny monstrosity. In the ages that followed, especially in the nineteenth century, the public at large almost completely forgot the principle of laughter presented in macabre images. They were interpreted in an unrelieved, serious aspect and became flat and distorted. The bourgeois nineteenth century respected only satirical laughter, which was actually not laughter but rhetoric. (No wonder it was compared to a whip or scourge.) Merely amusing, meaningless, and harmless laughter was also tolerated, but the serious had to remain serious, that is, dull and monotonous.

The theme of death as renewal, the combination of death and birth, and the pictures of gay death play an important part in the system of grotesque imagery in Rabelais' novel. We shall submit them to a detailed analysis in later parts of our book.

The last point of Kayser's theory to be discussed is his treatment of grotesque laughter. He formulates it as follows: "Laughter combined with bitterness which takes the grotesque form acquires the traits of mockery and cynicism, and finally becomes satanic."

We see that Kayser interprets laughter in the spirit of Bonaventura's night watchman and of Jean Paul's theory of "destructive humor," that is, in the spirit of Romanticism. The gay, liberating and regenerating element of laughter, which is precisely the creative element, is completely absent. However, Kayser is aware of the complexity of this problem and abstains from offering an arbitrary solution.<sup>20</sup>

As we have said, the grotesque became the prevailing form of various modernist movements whose theoretical basis can be found in Kayser's concept. With a few reservations this theory may clarify certain aspects of the Romantic grotesque. But it cannot be extended to the other periods of this imagery's development.

The problem of the grotesque and of its aesthetic nature can be correctly posed and solved only in relation to medieval folk culture and Renaissance literature. The depth, variety, and power

<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.* ftn. 18, p. 139.



of separate grotesque themes can be understood only within the unity of folk and carnival spirit. If examined outside of this unity, they become one-sided, flat, and stripped of their rich content.

The correctness of the term grotesque as applied to the imagery of medieval folk culture and of the Renaissance which is linked to it can raise no doubts whatever. But how can our term grotesque realism be justified?

We can offer only a preliminary answer to this question here.

The characteristic traits which mark the sharp difference of medieval and Renaissance grotesque from the Romantic and modernist types, are first of all its materialistic concept of being, most adequately defined as realistic. A further concrete analysis of grotesque images will confirm this proposition.

Renaissance grotesque imagery, directly related to folk carnival culture, as we find it in Rabelais, Cervantes, and Shakespeare, influenced the entire realistic literature of the following centuries. Realism of grand style, in Stendhal, Balzac, Hugo, and Dickens, for instance, was always linked directly or indirectly with the Renaissance tradition. Breaking away from this tradition diminished the scope of realism and transformed it into naturalist empiricism.

Even in the seventeenth century some forms of the grotesque began to degenerate into static "character" presentation and narrow "genrism." This degeneration was linked with the specific limitations of the bourgeois world outlook. The last thing one can say of the real grotesque is that it is static; on the contrary it seeks to grasp in its imagery the very act of becoming and growth, the eternal incomplete unfinished nature of being. Its images present simultaneously the two poles of becoming: that which is receding and dying, and that which is being born; they show two bodies in one, the budding and the division of the living cell. At the summit of grotesque and folklore realism, as in the death of one-cell organisms, no dead body remains. (That is, when the single cell divides into two other organisms, it dies in a sense but also reproduces; there is no departure from life into death.) Old

age is pregnant, death is gestation, all that is limited, narrowly characterized, and completed is thrust into the lower stratum of the body for recasting and a new birth.

On the other hand, in the process of degeneration and disintegration the positive pole of grotesque realism (the second link of becoming) drops out and is replaced by moral sententiousness and abstract concepts. What remains is nothing but a corpse, old age deprived of pregnancy, equal to itself alone; it is alienated and torn away from the whole in which it had been linked to that other, younger link in the chain of growth and development. The result is a broken grotesque figure, the demon of fertility with phallus cut off and belly crushed. Hence all these sterile images representing "character," all these professional lawyers, merchants, matchmakers, old men and women, all these masks offered by degenerate, petty realism. These types also existed in grotesque realism, but they were not expected to build the picture of life as a whole; they were but the dying part of the life which gave birth. The fact is that the new concept of realism has a different way of drawing the boundaries between bodies and objects. It cuts the double body in two and separates the objects of grotesque and folklore realism that were merged within the body. The new concept seeks to complete each individual outside the link with the ultimate whole—the whole that has lost the old image and has as yet not found the new one. The notion of time has also been transformed.

The literature known as "realism of manners" was already presenting, together with authentic carnival themes, the images of a static grotesque entirely removed from the main flux of time and from the flux of becoming. This is a form either frozen in its duality or split in two. Certain scholars (for instance, Régnier) are inclined to define this genre as the first step of realism. In reality these are but the lifeless and at times meaningless fragments of the mighty and deep stream of grotesque realism.

The manifestations of medieval folk culture as well as grotesque realism have been exhaustively studied, but they were re-

garded only from the point of view of the historical and literary methods prevailing in the nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth century. These studies were concerned not only with literary works but with specific phenomena such as the "feasts of fools" (F. Bourquelot, Dreves, P. Villetard), the "Paschal laughter" (J. Schmidt, S. Reinach), the "sacred parody" (F. Novati, E. Ilvonen, P. Lehmann), and others which are outside the sphere of art and literature. The antique culture of humor was also examined (A. Dieterich, H. Reich, F. Cornford). Folklorists performed a considerable task in the study of the origin and character of various themes and symbols pertaining to the culture of folk humor. (It is sufficient to recall Frazer's monumental work *The Golden Bough*.) Generally speaking, the number of scholarly works devoted to this subject is almost unlimited.<sup>21</sup> As we pursue the present study we shall refer to the specialized works which deal with this matter.

But all this enormous bulk of literature, with only a few exceptions, is devoid of theoretical pathos. It does not seek to make any broad and firmly established generalizations. The almost immeasurable, carefully selected, and scrupulously analyzed material is neither unified nor properly understood. That which we have called the one world of folk culture of humor appears in these works as a collection of curiosities, not to be included, in spite of its wide scope, in a serious history of European culture and literature. This accumulation of curiosities and indecencies remains outside the circle of creative problems. With such an approach the mighty impact of folk humor on belles lettres and on the very images created by human thought remains almost unexplored.

We shall briefly discuss only two works that pose the theoretical

<sup>21</sup> Among Soviet works, O. Freidenberg's book: "Poetics of Subject and Genre" (*Poetica Sujeta i Zhanra*), Goslitizdat, 1936, is very valuable. This work contains an immense body of folklore material directly related to folk culture of humor, especially the antique specimens. But this material is mainly interpreted in the spirit of prelogical thought. The problem of culture of folk humor is not posed.

problem and do so in such a way as to touch upon the two aspects of the culture of folk humor.

In 1903, H. Reich published his voluminous work entitled "The Mime," a work devoted to the historical study of literary development (see footnote 7). The object of Reich's research is essentially the antique and medieval forms of the culture of humor. The author offers an immense, most interesting, and valuable body of material. He correctly shows the unity of the tradition of humor, developed throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages. He grasps the essential, many-centuries-old link of laughter with the images of the body's lower stratum. All this permits Reich to make a correct and practical approach to the problem.

And yet, he does not state his problem *per se*. Two restrictions seem to have prevented him from doing so.

First, Reich attempts to reduce the entire history of the culture of humor to the history of the mime, that is, to a single genre. True, it is a characteristic one, especially for the later period of antiquity. In Reich's mind, the mime is the center and even the almost unique representative of this tradition. The author goes on to reduce all medieval festive forms and comic literature to the influence of the antique world. He pursues his research beyond the sphere of European culture, which causes him to give forced interpretations and to ignore all that does not fit the mime's Procrustean bed. We must add that Reich himself does not always cope with his concept. His abundant material overflows and carries him beyond the narrow limits reserved for the mime.

Second, Reich modernizes and diminishes the value of laughter as well as of the material bodily principle that is closely linked to it. His conception of laughter's positive elements, of their liberating and regenerating power has a muffled tone, even though he is perfectly acquainted with the antique philosophy of laughter. Neither are laughter's universal character and its philosophical and utopian nature properly understood and evaluated. But the narrowest aspect of his theory is his presentation of the material bodily principle. Reich sees it through the prism of the abstract,

differentiating thought of modern times and therefore offers an almost naturalistic interpretation.

Such are the two points which in our mind weaken Reich's theory. However, he has made a considerable contribution to the correct approach to the problem relative to the culture of folk humor. It is to be regretted that his work, containing so much new material and so bold and original, did not exercise in his time the influence it deserved.

The second work that remains to be examined is a small volume published by Konrad Burdach, entitled "Reformation, Renaissance, Humanism."<sup>22</sup> This book also studies the problem of folk culture, but from a different angle. Burdach makes no mention whatever of laughter or of the material bodily principle. His only protagonist is the "idea-image" of "regeneration," "renewal," and "reformation."

Burdach seeks to prove that this idea-image of regeneration in its many variations, although born from the most ancient mythological thought of the Eastern peoples and of antiquity, continued to live and develop during the Middle Ages. It was also preserved in the cult of the Church, (in the liturgy and in baptism, for instance) but remained there in a state of dogmatic petrification. From the time of the religious revival of the twelfth century (Joachim of Floris, Francis of Assisi, and the *Spirituals*) the idea-image was revived; it penetrated wide popular circles, acquired the hue of purely human emotions, and awakened the poetic and artistic imagination. It expressed the growing thirst for regeneration and renewal in the purely earthly sphere.

Burdach retraces the slow and gradual process of secularization that took place in Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and in the ideas and activity of Rienzo.

He correctly surmises that such a historic phenomenon as the Renaissance could not arise merely as a result of the scientific search or of the intellectual efforts of individuals. He writes:

<sup>22</sup> Konrad Burdach, *Reformation, Renaissance, Humanismus*, Berlin, 1918.

Humanism and Renaissance are not the product of knowledge. They do not arise because scholars discover the lost monuments of antique literature and art, and strive to bring them back to life. Humanism and the Renaissance were born from the passionate and boundless expectation and striving of an aging epoch; its soul, shattered to its very depths was thirsting for a new youth.

Burdach is of course completely right in refusing to trace and explain the Renaissance merely through scholarly and bookish sources, through an individual ideological search and "intellectual effort." He is right in stating that the Renaissance was prepared by the Middle Ages, and especially by the twelfth century. And finally, he correctly points out that the word *renaissance* did not mean a revival of the ancient arts and sciences. It was an immensely important and significant word, rooted in the very depths of the ritualistic, ideological, and visual imagery of mankind. However, Burdach did not see and did not grasp the main sphere of being of the Renaissance idea-image, the medieval culture of folk humor. The striving toward renewal and a new birth, "the thirst for a new youth" pervaded the carnival spirit of the Middle Ages and found a multiform expression in concrete sensual elements of folk culture, both in ritual and spectacle. This was the second, festive life of the Middle Ages.

Many figures described by Burdach as preparing the Renaissance reflected the influence of the culture of folk humor and were the forerunners of the new epoch. Such were, for instance, Joachim of Floris, and especially Francis of Assisi and the movement he initiated. Francis called himself and his companions "God's jugglers" (*ioculatores Domini*). Francis' peculiar world outlook, his "spiritual joy" (*laetitia spiritualis*), his blessing of the material bodily principle, and its typically Franciscan degradations and profanation can be defined, with some exaggeration, as a carnivalized Catholicism. Carnival elements were also strong in Rienzo's entire activity. All these movements, which according to Burdach prepared the Renaissance, expressed the liberating and renewing principle of laughter, even though at times in an ex-

tremely reduced form. But the author completely ignores this principle. All he is aware of is the serious tone.

Nevertheless, in his attempt to attain a more correct understanding of the relation of the Renaissance to the Middle Ages Burdach contributed to the posing of the problem of the culture of folk humor.

So our problem is posed. However, the immediate object of our study is not the culture of folk humor but the work of Rabelais. The sphere of folk humor is boundless and, as we have said, presents a great variety of manifestations. As far as this culture is concerned, our problem is purely theoretical: to show the oneness and meaning of folk humor, its general ideological, philosophical, and aesthetic essence. The problem can be solved best of all with the help of concrete material in which folk tradition is collected, concentrated, and artistically rendered at its highest level; this is to be found in Rabelais' work. To help us penetrate the very depth of this matter, Rabelais is unique. In his creative world the inner oneness of all the heterogeneous elements emerges with extraordinary clarity. His work is an encyclopedia of folk culture.

However, while using Rabelais' work for the understanding of this culture, we do not wish to transform him merely into a means for attaining a goal outside the sphere of his writings. On the contrary, we are convinced that only thanks to this method of research can we discover the true Rabelais, to show, as it were, Rabelais within Rabelais. Up to now he has been merely modernized: he has been read through the eyes of the new age, and mostly through the eyes of the nineteenth century which were the most shortsighted in this respect. Only that part of his work was read which was the least important for him and for his contemporaries and which, objectively speaking, was the least essential. Rabelais' exceptional charm, which we all feel, remains unexplained to date. To explain it, it is first of all necessary to understand his peculiar language, that is, the language of the culture of folk humor.