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Festa!

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Festa!

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II

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Grotesque images and carnival culture in the tradition of Ovid

Bogdana Paskaleva

Introduction

François Rabelais' second book, dedicated to "the most horrific life of the great Gargantua" (1534) opens with an author's prologue. Beside the function of addressing the readers and obtaining their benevolence, this prologue could also be read as a hermeneutic tool, providing an interpretative mechanism that is already carnivalesque in its nature. Rabelais proposes to his readers to avoid taking what they are about to encounter in his book at face value. The readers are invited to understand the book as a twofold entity – it has an outer and an inner side, a surface and a meaningful depth. The reader is thus encouraged to penetrate the mere surface in search for the hidden treasures of an inner meaning. This hermeneutic attitude is nothing new to the epoch, it has been already widely promoted by Dante as the theory of the four levels of meaning (*Conv.* II. 1; *Epist.* XIII. 20-22), which leads back to the early-Christian Patristic tradition (De Lubac 1959). However, Rabelais sets an entirely new tone to this old hermeneutic attitude – the text of the book being presented as a "Silène":

[...] Alcibiades, ou dialogue de Platon, intitulé *le Banquet*, louant son précepteur Socrates, sans controverse prince des philosophes, entre aultres parolles le dict estre semblable ès Silènes. Silènes estoient jadis petites boites, telle que voyons de présent ès bouticques des apothecaires, pintes au-dessus de figures joyeuses et frivoles, comme de harpies, satyres, oysons bridez, lièvres cornuz, canes bastées, boucqs volans, cerz limonniers et aultres telles peintures contrefaites à plaisir pour exciter le monde à rire (quel fut Silène, maistre du bon Bacchus); mais au dedans l'on réservoir les fines drogues comme baulme, ambre gris, amomon, musc, zivette, pierrieres et aultres choses précieuses. Tel disoit estre Socrates, parce que, le voyans au dehors et l'estimans par l'extérieure apparence, n'en eussiez donné un coupeau d'oignon, tant laid il estoit de corps et ridicule en son maintien, le nez pointu, le regard d'un taureau, le visaige d'un fol, simple en meurs, rustiq en vestimens, pauvre de fortune, infortuné en femmes, inepte à tous offices de la république, tousjours riant, tousjours beuvant d'autant à un chascun, tousjours se guabelant, tousjours dissimulant son divin sçavoir; mais, ouvrans ceste boite, eussiez au dedans trouvé une céleste et impréciable drogue : entendement plus que humain, vertus merveilleuse, courage invincible, sobresse non pareille, contentement certain, assurance parfaicte, désprisement incroyable de tout ce pourquoy les humains tant veigent, courent, travaillent, navigent et bataillent. (éd. Demerson)

In one of Plato's dialogues, entitled *The Banquet*, Alcibiades, praising his teacher Socrates as the prince of philosophers beyond any doubt, compares him, among other things, to the Sileni. Back then, Sileni were called the little boxes, such as those we see in the pharmacy stores, that

have on the outside funny and frivolous figures like harpies, satires, bridled geese, horned rabbits, ducks with packsaddles, flying goats, coachmen deer, and other such pictures, designed at fancy to make people laugh (such as Silenus, the teacher of good Bacchus, was). But inside, fine herbs were stored, such as balsam, grey amber, amomum, musk, civet ointment, gemstones and other precious objects. And such, he said, was Socrates: because seeing him on the outside and judging by his outer appearance, one wouldn't give a nickel for him, that ugly his body was, and that ridiculous his bearing: his nose – so big, his eyes – like bull's eyes, his face – resembling the face of a fool; simple in his manners, rude in his garments, lacking any money, having no luck among women, inept for any state service, yet always laughing, always drinking to everybody's health, always joking, always dissimulating his divine wisdom. But if you would open that box, inside you will find a heavenly and priceless herb: an over-human understanding, wonderful virtue, invincible courage, incomparable sobriety, incontestable serenity, perfect assurance, unbelievable readiness to forsake all that men so much strive for, run to, work for, sail to and fight for. (Author's translation)

This complex image should be read, in the first place, within the framework of the Renaissance reception of Plato, as a web of hieroglyphs and complicated intertextual references. This has been done in a compelling manner by Romain Menini his comprehensive monograph "Rabelais et l'intertexte platonicien" (2009). The author explains the different textual elements of this passage as referring to moments of the Platonic tradition and interprets their allegorical meaning in respect of the new functions they acquire within the Rabelaisian context. In Menini's interpretation, the image of the Silenus refers mainly to the tradition of a *literary-philosophical feast*, namely – *the banquet* (symposium), – that has its beginnings in Plato's same-title dialogue (Menini 2009, 133-154).

However, we can expand Menini's argument on the philosophical meaning of the banquet by claiming that not only the Platonic symposium is at stake here, but also another, less elitist and rather medieval festive form – the carnival that enters through the strange and funny, grotesque images on the outer side of the apothecary boxes. The very comparison of a book with such a box already introduces the moment of carnivalesque travesty, a higher meaning disguised in the costume of a silly looking figure. How are we then supposed to explain the relation of the grotesque mask to the face of wisdom? Why does wisdom need to mask itself as a fool?

Approaches to the theory of the grotesque

This interpretation of the cited paragraph brings us right away to what Mikhail Bakhtin would call in his 1965 book "The Work of François Rabelais and the Popular Culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance" (translated in English as "François Rabelais and His World"), *the culture of the carnival*. According to Bakhtin, carnival culture was a substantial part of folk and popular culture during the Middle Ages and had the function to perform a perpetual subversion of and against the official ecclesiastic and state culture. Thus, the complex phenomenon of carnival festivities was the territory of genuine expression of the people's spirit and of its resistance against oppressive elite cultural forms. Bakhtin describes a vast number of heterogenous phenomena, all pertaining to carnival culture: laughter, transvestite



Agostino Veneziano (Agostino dei Musi), *Ornamental panel*, after Raphael or Giovanni da Udine, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

practices, practices of temporal hierarchical reversal, etc. Among literary genres, Bakhtin recognizes the origins of carnivalesque literature in the Hellenistic tradition of the Menippean satire, all types of parody, dramatic improvisation, commedia dell'arte, curses, oaths, and others.

One of the central aspects of carnival culture is the grotesque. With respect to the representational style of Rabelais, Bakhtin coins the somewhat paradoxical notion of “grotesque realism” (Bakhtin [1965] 1984, 24 et passim). Since the problem of the grotesque is key to the understanding of both popular carnival culture, and its literary form within Rabelais’ novel, Bakhtin dedicates a whole chapter to the phenomenon of the grotesque and its history (chapter five “The Grotesque Image of the Body and Its Sources”, Bakhtin [1965] 1984, 303-367), but the actual philosophical account of it is rendered in the last couple of sections of the Introduction (Bakhtin [1965] 1984, 30-53). It is, however, worth noting that the first study that postulates Rabelais’ work as a paragon of the grotesque in literature is “Geschichte der grotesken Satire” by Heinrich Schneegans (1894, 1-10; 56-58 et passim). Not only is his monograph the first to define the grotesque literature through Rabelais, but to collect a vast material about the Medieval, Renaissance, and Mannerist uses of the grotesque, and to perform a detailed analysis on Rabelais verbal style alongside his imagery (Schneegans 1894, 248-270).

While following Schneegans' thesis on Rabelais' book as a paradigm of grotesque literature, Bakhtin presents the historical data on the grotesque in the way they were first organized and analyzed by Wolfgang Kayser in his groundbreaking study "Das Groteske: seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung" (Kayser [1957] 1963). Although using these already existing materials, Bakhtin is critical toward both authors' conclusions on the nature of the esthetic category of the grotesque. He provides a completely original idea that could be defined as both Hegelian-Marxist, and Romantic in its nature. The grotesque is to be perceived, Bakhtin insists, as the visual and literary representation of a whole cultural complex, that of carnival festive culture. Thus, the grotesque takes over the characteristics of the carnival, and first of all, its propensity toward *becoming* at the expense of *being*. For Bakhtin, priority is to be given to process, transformation, becoming – an already Hegelian move. At the same time, a typological opposition (the one between becoming and being) is represented as a historical one and thus, Western cultural history is rendered in terms of rivalry and alternation between two esthetic tendencies: the classical and the grotesque (anti-classical). The grotesque incarnates the idea of becoming and fluidity, as well as the possibility of logical ambivalence (comprising negative and affirmative aspects together), while the classical is promoting fixed and immobilized being, and logical unambiguity.

Because of his interest in grotesque ambivalence, Bakhtin estimates Schneegans' and Kayser's interpretations of the grotesque as one-sided in their emphasizing of the negative. In fact, in the closing chapter of his book, Kayser offers three definitions of the grotesque, all of them accentuating the negative: it is "the estranged world", "a play with the absurd", and finally "an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world" (Kayser [1957] 1963, 184-188). To Bakhtin, these definitions are suitable to clarify Modernist and, to some extent, Romantic grotesque, but completely incapable of giving account for the whole phenomenon of the grotesque, and especially, of the grotesque as it appeared in popular culture, Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance (Bakhtin [1965] 1984, 48).[1]

Since the grotesque embodies the spirit of the carnival understood as a living actualization of the trans-individual and collective existence of the people, Bakhtin actively searches to prove its ambivalence, insisting that the grotesque should provoke carnival laughter which is at once destructive and re-constructive. However, one might ask if this concept of the grotesque is really able to encompass all related phenomena, and how is Classical Antiquity presented in this respect.

As Kayser before him, Bakhtin identifies the emergence of the notion of the grotesque in Italy, at the end of the 15th century, when the remains of important ancient buildings were discovered in Rome (the Baths of Titus, later proved to be the remains of Nero's Domus Aurea, Zamperini 2019, 57-61; Zamperini 2021). The up until then unknown decorative images in these dungeons were designated as "cave paintings" (*pittura grottesca*) (Kayser [1957] 1963, 19-20; Bakhtin [1965] 1984, 31-32). It is interesting to note that the first publication of "Gargantua" (ca. 1534) coincides with Rabelais' first stay in Rome in February-April 1534, where

he researched the topography of the city (see Rabelais 1973: 25, 35). However, regardless of the visual legacy of Ancient Rome, medieval grotesques are present in Europe and are very common in the field of manuscript illustrations and miniatures. The “frivolous pictures” that decorate the Silenus-boxes, as Rabelais describes them, recall rather this medieval tradition than the newly discovered ornamental style of Imperial Rome. So, in his reading of the problem of the grotesque, Bakhtin emphasizes precisely the effect of destructive-creative laughter that these images are supposed to provoke – “contrefaictes à plaisir pour exciter le monde à rire” as Rabelais puts it.

In this respect, albeit overly positive, Bakhtin’s definition of the grotesque appears to be more far-reaching than Kayser’s, since it puts an accent on the grotesque’s *ambivalence* and *hybridity*:

Гротескный образ характеризует явление в состоянии его изменения, незавершенной еще метаморфозы, в стадии смерти и рождения, роста и становления. Отношение к времени, к становлению – необходимая конститутивная (определяющая) черта гротескного образа. Другая, связанная с этим необходимая черта его – амбивалентность: в нем в той или иной форме даны (или намечены) оба полюса изменения – и старое и новое, и умирающее и рождающееся, и начало и конец метаморфозы (Bakhtin [1965] 1990, 31; italics of the author).

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 (Bakhtin [1965] 1984, 24).

We can call this notion of the grotesque *dialectical*. In this sense, the grotesque is a “dialectical image”. I am referring here to Walter Benjamin’s concept from the “Passagen-Werk” (N 7 a, 1; N 9, 7). A dialectical image represents the extremes in the transforming state of the same phenomenon: “Die Vor- und Nachgeschichte eines historischen Tatbestands erscheint kraft seiner dialektischen Darstellung an ihm selbst” (N 7 a, 1, ed. Tiedemann) (“The before- and after-history of a historical fact appears, thanks to its dialectical representation, in itself”, Author’s translation). In this sense, the grotesque is *an explication of time*, or more precisely, as Benjamin would express it, following Hegel and Lukács, of the *truth* of a phenomenon, which is exactly time understood as historical time: “Das dialektische Bild ist ein aufblitzendes. So, als ein im Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit aufblitzendes Bild, ist das Gewesene festzuhalten” (“The dialectical image is a flashing one. Thus, as an image that flashes in the ‘now’ of recognizability, the ‘once before’ could be grasped”, Author’s translation). In Bakhtin’s interpretation, the explicit relation to time is designated as the common feature of both the grotesque and the carnival as representative forms:

Празднество всегда имеет существенное отношение к времени. В основе его всегда лежит определенная и конкретная концепция природного (космического), биологического и исторического времени. При этом празднества на всех этапах своего исторического развития были связаны с кризисными, переломными моментами в жизни природы, общества и

человека. Моменты смерти и возрождения, смены и обновления всегда были ведущими в праздничном мироощущении. Именно эти моменты – в конкретных формах определенных праздников – и создавали специфическую праздничность праздника. (Bakhtin [1965] 1990, 14; italics of the author)

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. (Bakhtin [1965] 1984, 9)

And also:

Лежащее в основе этих форм отношение к времени, ощущение и осознание его, на протяжении процесса развития этих форм, длившегося тысячелетия, конечно, существенно эволюционирует, изменяется. (Bakhtin [1965] 1990, 31-32)

The relation to time, its perception and experience, which is at the basis of these [grotesque] forms was bound to change during their development over thousands of years. (Bakhtin [1965] 1984, 24)

Bakhtin doesn't apply the term 'dialectical' to his interpretation of the phenomena of the grotesque and the feast of carnival, but his work was deeply indebted to Lukács' dialectical Marxism, as Galin Tihanov demonstrates in his monograph "The Master and the Slave", dedicated to the relation between these two philosophers (Tihanov 2000). Judging the esthetical problem of the grotesque from point of view of time in its dialectical perception, we might advance the hypothesis that the common trait of all grotesque phenomena is not their relation to the satiric and the comical, to "what shouldn't be" ("das Nichtseinsollende", in Schneegans' reading), nor to distortion and the uncanny (as in Kayser's interpretation), nor the idea of "total freedom of fancy" (in early sources grotesques were designated as "artistic dreams", *picturae somnium* in Daniele Barbaro's phrasing of 1567; see Chastel [1988] 1997, 54; 85), but precisely to *the expression of time in an image*, and moreover, as a dialectical interpretation of time.

To the ever-transforming grotesque images, the "classical form" is opposed. This is the form in its state of acme, the frozen perfect form, which neither lacks anything nor has anything in excess (see Chapter 5, Bakhtin [1965] 1984, 320). Its main problem hides in the fact that its link to time has been cut off – classical (as well as classicist) esthetics raises the pretense to be "timeless", ideal, pertaining to an eternal sphere beyond any history. In this respect, classical forms, unlike grotesque ones, cannot convey the key message of history, namely that "everything can be otherwise":

Во всех этих явлениях – [...] – карнавално-гротескная форма несет сходные функции: [...] позволяет взглянуть на мир по-новому, почувствовать относительность всего существующего и возможность совершенно иного миропорядка. (Bakhtin [1965] 1990, 42).

In all these phenomena [...] – the carnival-grotesque form has similar functions: [...] it offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists and the possibility of completely different world order. (Author's translation).

It is curious, that in a monograph on the esthetics of the grotesque from 1991 Elisheva Rosen reaches similar conclusions about the supposed 'nature' of the grotesque, although basing them on completely different presuppositions. To Rosen, the grotesque poses an epistemological question regarding the collision of the old and the new in the field of knowledge (Rosen 1991, 153-163). Thus, the grotesque as an esthetic category, functions as a means of promoting the new, of combating the old forms not only in arts and literature, but also the forms of knowledge in general. If we re-formulate Rosen's conclusions, we might say that the esthetics of the grotesque is the agency that challenges the existing (social, epistemological, cultural, etc.) order.

The Ancient 'canvas' of early modern grotesques

We can notice the difference between the classical (ancient) and the grotesque (medieval, folk) in the attitude of classicist authors to the work of Rabelais. Here is what La Bruyère states in his "Characters" (appeared for the first time in 1687):

Rabelais surtout est incompréhensible: son livre est une énigme, quoi qu'on veuille dire, inexplicable; c'est une chimère, c'est le visage d'une belle femme avec des pieds et une queue de serpent, ou de quelque autre bête plus difforme; c'est un monstrueux assemblage d'une morale fine et ingénieuse, et d'une sale corruption. Où il est mauvais il passe bien loin au delà du pire, c'est le charme de la canaille; où il est bon il va jusques à l'exquis et à l'excellent, il peut être le mets des plus délicats. (*Les Caractères*, I 43(V), ed. Adam)

Rabelais is above all incomprehensible: his book, whatever one would say, is an inexplicable riddle. It is a chimera, the face of a beautiful woman with the feet or the tail of a serpent, or of some other most disgusting beast. It is a monstrous combination of fine and ingenious morals with abominable corruption. Where he is bad, he goes far beyond the worst – that is the allure of the scoundrel. Where he is good, he reaches to the exquisite and the excellent, he could be the most distinguished dish. (Author's translation)

From the point of view of La Bruyère's classicist esthetics, Rabelais is incomprehensible precisely because of the hybridity and instability of the form. The comparison of his book to a beautiful woman with a serpent's or fish's tail is an apparent reference to Horace's "Poetic Art" (*Hor. Ars poet.* 3-5), where the same image appears as an example of a ridiculous combination that the good poet should avoid. Thus, La Bruyère demonstrates the intolerance of the classicist artistic taste towards the grotesque. For if it is not a "form that interprets itself", as in Hegel's notion of the classic ("das sich selbst Deutende", "Lectures on Aesthetics", Vol. I, Part II), then who will interpret it? It becomes incomprehensible. It is evident that for La Bruyère this difficulty is above all an obstacle to moral evaluation, to reading the equivocal ethical message of the grotesque.

That hybridity was one of the grotesque's central features, was noticed by André Chastel in his 1988 study "La Grottesque", the most systematic account on the historical development of the grotesque in visual arts, especially with respect to the two earliest centuries after the discovery of the images in the Roman dungeons. The French art historian formulates two principles that govern the visual appearance of the grotesque: suspension of space (absence of gravity) and hybridity of forms (Chastel [1988] 1997, 22). In the 15th and 16th centuries, obeying these trends meant going against the current of the re-invented linear perspective and the artistic ideal of Antiquity. Paradoxically, it was precisely Antiquity (Roman architectural and painting monuments) that fueled the anti-classic tendency in visual arts, to the same extent as it promoted the pro-classic one. In this respect, Chastel reconnects the Renaissance visual grotesque to the tradition of the medieval art (Chastel [1988] 1997, 45-49, Baltrušaitis [1991] 2022).

Therefore, if we raise the ideas of *time and transformation*, and of *heterogeneity* as the central traits of the grotesque images, where does laughter appear? What might this dialectical grotesque look like? For Bakhtin, of course, the main example are Rabelais' grotesque images, where carnival as a point of crisis of time (if we extend this idea to an extreme, we might even suggest that Bakhtin's carnival should coincide with revolution) is introduced exactly through the grotesque. Beside hybridity and fluidity of form, in Rabelaisian grotesques the element of laughter, so central for Bakhtin's interpretation of the meaning of the carnival, is also clearly visible. Thus, for Bakhtin, the folk grotesque preforms a double task – it resists against the dominance of the classical form, but also against the seriousness of the form in official culture by introducing the gesture of laughter. However, taking all examples into account, we would notice that apart from the tradition of the medieval, folk grotesque, dominated by laughter, there is also the "high" or "neo-classical" grotesque of the 16th and 17th century in the countless re-interpretations of the images from Domus aurea, ornamental grotesques, executed in a neo-classical style. Is it possible these two trends to be integrated in one common esthetic tradition?

Dante and the grotesques of Ovid

In the epoch of August, Horace's classic esthetics are counterbalanced by Ovid's interest in hybrid and unfinished, unstable and fluid images that challenge the permanence of the one fixed contour and could be referred to as a form of grotesque imagery in Bakhtinian sense (Segal 1998, 11-12; 32-39). During the Middle Ages, both Horace and Ovid were considered central for the development of Latin-language poetry, both appear – along with Lucan and Virgil – in Dante's "Inferno" as members of the community of the "noble pagans" (*Inferno* IV)[2].

In the Middle Ages, especially the 12th to 14th centuries, Ovid's "Metamorphoses" were very popular, and their author highly praised as poet, moral teacher, natural philosopher, in one word – as a multifaceted scholar. One of Dante's early commentators, Guido da Pisa, even called the "Metamorphoses" *paganorum biblia*, the "Bible of the Gentiles" (Guthmüller 1986: 3-4). This attitude encouraged various and manifold processes of reception of Ovid during the

Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Here, we are going to focus on one particular instance, the echoes of Ovid in Dante's "Divine Comedy". The choice of this example is led by the special position Dante occupies in the early-modern poetic tradition: on the threshold between medieval and modern, Dante serves as a focal point of both cultural tendencies and could help us clarify the complex relation between divergent and opposing cultural-historical processes.

Ovid's imagery appears in several passages of the "Divine Comedy", the most representative being cantos XXIV and XXV, and to a certain extent canto XIII, where the second section of Hell's Seventh circle is presented, the one allotted to those who committed suicide^[3]. However, canto XIII refers rather to the story of Polydorus as it is told in Virgil's "Aeneid" (*Verg. Aen.* III 24-57) than to the version of Ovid (*Met.* XIII 429-575), so we will focus on canto XXV, the seventh subdivision of Hell's Eighth circle, "Malebolge", a place assigned to the punishment of thieves. This sub-circle is named "Cacus" after the monstrous giant Cacus who stole Hercules' cattle (*Verg. Aen.* VIII 190-275). Here, as usual in Dante, historical and mythological characters are brought together: Vanni Fucci of Pistoia appears as the first thief (in 1293, he stole the treasure of Capella S. Iacopo in Pistoia), and a little later Cacus himself, represented as a centaur wrapped around by snakes. In the mythological tradition, Cacus was not a centaur, but rather a fire-breathing giant, a strong savage (such, for example, presents him Virgil in the "Aeneid"). Therefore, Dante's decision to picture him as a centaur is particularly interesting, since the rest of the centaurs are punished as perpetrators of violence in the Seventh circle.

The whole sequence of episodes that play out in the seventh section of the Malebolge is marked by the style of Ovid and his "Metamorphoses": bitten by one of the infernal snakes, Vanni Fucci burns to ashes and is instantly reborn to continue his suffering. This scene develops as a parodic version of the story of the bird Phoenix as told in Book 15 of Ovid's "Metamorphoses" (*Ov. Met.* XV 391-407, cfr. *Inferno*, XXIV 100-111). Next, Cacus appears, transformed into the hybrid creature centaur (*Inferno*, XXV 17), although there can be no doubt in Dante's profound knowledge of the "Aeneid", so he cannot possibly be unaware of Virgil's representation of the original Cacus.

However, the most interesting scene, which comes closest to the Ovidian imagery, concerns several Florentine noblemen that Dante meets in this circle. They are identified by the critics as Agnello dei Brunelleschi, Buoso degli Abati (or dei Donati) and Puccio dei Galigai. Later, they are joined by Cianfa Donati and Francesco Cavalcanti. The punishments of these characters are represented in two subsequent episodes. In the first, a six-legged dragon (it turns out to be Cianfa Donati) is absorbed into the body of Agnello Brunelleschi, and the two form a new indefinable being; in the second, Francesco Cavalcanti, in the form of a snake, stings Buoso, wherefrom a double metamorphosis ensues, and while the former is gradually transformed back into a man, the latter turns into a snake. Puccio remains as the only unchanged witness of the scene.

Let us introduce some excerpts from these two scenes to illustrate the nature of the infernal metamorphoses, the double metamorphosis of Francesco Cavalcanti and Buoso degli Abati:

Com'io tenea levate in lor le ciglia,
e un serpente con sei piè si lancia
dinanzi a l'uno, e tutto a lui s'appiglia.

Co' piè di mezzo li avvinse la pancia
e con li anterior le braccia prese;
poi li addentò e l'una e l'altra guancia;

ii diretani a le cosce distese,
e miseli la coda tra 'mbedue
e dietro per le ren sù la ritese.

Ellera abbarbicata mai non fue
ad alber sì, come l'orribil fiera
per l'altrui membra avviticchiò le sue.

Poi s'appiccar, come di calda cera
fossero stati, e mischiar lor colore,
né l'un né l'altro già pareva quel ch'era:

come procede innanzi da l'ardore,
per lo papiro suso, un color bruno
che non è nero ancora e 'l bianco more.

Li altri due 'l riguardavano, e ciascuno
gridava: "Omè, Agnel, come ti muti!
Vedi che già non se' né due né uno".

Già eran li due capi un divenuti,
quando n'apparver due figure miste
in una faccia, ov'eran due perduti.

Fersi le braccia due di quattro liste;
le cosce con le gambe e 'l ventre e 'l casso
divenner membra che non fuor mai viste.

Ogne primaio aspetto ivi era casso:
due e nessun l'immagine perversa
parea [...].
(*Inferno*, XXV 49-78)

Insieme si rispuosero a tai norme,
che 'l serpente la coda in forca fesse,
e 'l feruto ristinse insieme l'orme.

Le gambe con le cosce seco stesse
s'appiccar sì, che 'n poco la giuntura

non facea segno alcun che si paresse.

Togliea la coda fessa la figura
che si perdeva là, e la sua pelle
si facea molle, e quella di là dura.

Io vidi intrar le braccia per l'ascelle,
e i due piè de la fiera, ch'eran corti,
tanto allungar quanto accorciavan quelle.

Poscia li piè di rietro, insieme attorti,
diventarono lo membro che l'uom cela,
e 'l misero del suo n'avea due porti.

Mentre che 'l fummo l'uno e l'altro vela
di color novo, e genera 'l pel suso
per l'una parte e da l'altra il dipela,

l'un si levò e l'altro cadde giuso,
non torcendo però le lucerne empie,
sotto le quai ciascun cambiava muso.

Quel ch'era dritto, il trasse ver' le tempie,
e di troppa materia ch'in là venne
uscir li orecchi de le gote scempie;

ciò che non corse in dietro e si ritenne
di quel soverchio, fé naso a la faccia
e le labbra ingrossò quanto convenne.

Quel che giacèa, il muso innanzi caccia,
e li orecchi ritira per la testa
come face le corna la lumaccia;

e la lingua, ch'avèa unita e presta
prima a parlar, si fende, e la forcuta
ne l'altro si richiude; e 'l fummo resta.

(Inferno, XXV 103-135)

These passages can give us an idea of the essence of the artistic imagery that Dante constructs to represent the appearance of infernal suffering. In this respect, the grotesque emerges as a combination of the ancient artistic model (Ovid) with the medieval sensitivity to the ridiculous and the repulsive. The sufferings of the Florentines, who are constantly turning into snakes and back into people, are enveloped in the repugnant atmosphere of the hybrid, unnatural image represented by the grotesque, and yet, the canvas of this grotesque refers

to the Classical Antiquity. This becomes evident thanks to Dante's comment on the second scene:

Taccia Lucano omai là dov'e' tocca
del misero Sabello e di Nasidio,
e attenda a udir quel ch'or si scocca.

Taccia di Cadmo e d'Aretusa Ovidio,
ché se quello in serpente e quella in fonte
converte poetando, io non lo 'nvidio;

ché due nature mai a fronte a fronte
non trasmutò sì ch'amendue le forme
a cambiar lor matera fosser pronte.
(*Inferno*, XXV, 94-102)

This statement demonstrates Dante's typical lack of modesty – in fact, according to Bodo Guthmüller, he is stating here his intention to defeat the ancients on their own ground (Guthmüller 1986: 13-14). A double metamorphosis such as the one Dante pictures was not described by either Ovid or Lucan, therefore Dante surpasses them both in poetic mastery^[4]. What is, however, clearly visible on the level of imagery here, is the fact that Dante preserves the representation of the event of metamorphosis characteristic of Ovid's poem – dynamization, in which the transformation of one being into another is presented precisely as a process consisting of separate phases of transition from one form to another. Most often it is a transition from human to animal or from human to some other natural object, but examples of the opposite exist as well. What Ovid achieves in metamorphic imagery has been interpreted by Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux as the first of its kind in ancient literature. Against the background of the metamorphosis in the Greek sources, in which there is a momentary replacement of one stable image with another (one form disappears and suddenly, another is present), Ovid manages to imagine the very process of transition (Frontisi-Ducroux 2009, 14-15). And we must add that this is precisely where the grotesque image arises – at the moment when the form is simultaneously no longer the old one (e. g. human), but not yet the new one (e. g. snake). It is both at the same time, the poles in the dialectical logic of the grotesque.

In fact, in her monograph "L'homme-cerf et la femme-araignée" Frontisi-Ducroux (2003) focuses her research precisely on the Greek metamorphosis in the manner it appears not only and not so much in textual sources, but on Ancient Greek pottery. The conclusion of her research is that metamorphosis is represented on ceramic vessels usually as a hybrid image, as some intermediate being between man and animal or man and object. We might consider here the difference between the visual and the verbal medium – while the verbal is able to integrate temporal dimension in its representation, the visual could only rely on one simultaneous state of affairs (a feature that has been noticed already in Lessing's "Laokoon").^[5]

The relation between grotesque and metamorphosis has been noticed and interpreted in a highly interesting manner, by Pirro Ligorio, a Renaissance architect and the author of a book on Roman antiquities (*"Delle antichità di Roma"*, 1553). In a period, similar to the one that Rabelais spent in Rome, Ligorio observed and studied the ancient remains, and developed a theory on the meaning of the grotesques. In three private letters, he laid out his understanding of the grotesque images in the tradition of the allegorical and hieroglyphic reading. The grotesques were to Ligorio a visual allegorical expression of morals and a hidden natural philosophy. Metamorphosis played a central role in this hermeneutics of secret signs, since Ligorio compared the grotesque to the mythical Proteus, a deity of changing forms (Chastel [1988] 1997, 57; Volpi 2016, 83; Acciarino 2016, 127-128). Thus, grotesque, mythical metamorphosis and "hidden meaning" (the Silenus strategy) come together in one figure.

The question would be to distinguish metamorphosis from the grotesque. In the terms of Kayser, the grotesque would then be such a hybrid or metamorphic image that conveys the ideas of estrangement and the uncanny. But since we prioritized Bakhtin's dialectical interpretation, we would suggest another path of reasoning, coming back to the conceptual Introduction to *"Rabelais and His World"*. Following the organization of the material on the theory of the grotesque in Kayser, Bakhtin points out that the two central theorists of the Romantic grotesque were Friedrich Schlegel and Jean Paul. However, in his effort to underscore the one-sidedness of the Romantic use of grotesque forms and bring back the question of laughter as one of the central carnival festive practices, Bakhtin is inclined to neglect even those aspects of Schlegel's and Jean Paul's theory that could actually serve as corroboration of his own thesis on the dialectical nature of the grotesque. The case of Schlegel is particularly interesting – Bakhtin only mentions him briefly and refers to his *"Gespräch über die Poesie"* (1800), but not to the earlier *"Athenaeums-Fragmente"* (1798). In this earlier publication, Schlegel clearly undertakes an actual dialectical interpretation of the grotesque, which precedes Hegel's opposition between a classic and a non-classic esthetic form by two decades. In the several fragments, addressing the grotesque in different contexts (75, 125, 305, 389, 396, 424), the grotesque is coherently presented as "a contrast between form and matter" (*"Kontrast der Form und des Stoffs"*, Fr. 75); as inclined toward "delightful displacements of form and matter" (*"wunderbare Versetzungen von Form und Materie"*, Fr. 305); and as "every purely arbitrary or completely accidental connection of form and matter" (*"jede rein willkürliche oder rein zufällige Verknüpfung von Form und Materie"*, Fr. 146).

Thus, Schlegel defines the grotesque in terms of a relation between form and matter, and moreover, as a contrast, distortion, and unmotivated (arbitrary) connection of these two components. Bakhtin does not introduce this definition in his monograph, although it would fit very well to his approach to the notion couple grotesque vs. classical form. If the classical, as Hegel would later stipulate, is to be described as harmonious and necessary connection of form and matter (*"Lectures on Aesthetics"*, Vol. I, Part II), then its opposite term would be precisely the grotesque, a distorted relation between form and matter, that produces all the heterogenous phenomena of disbalance, such as estrangement, horror, laughter, ambivalence, polarization,

etc. It would be a figure of a non-sublated dialectical tension, and in the end, such is Bakhtin's vision of the phenomenon of the grotesque.

If we combine the two traits – the relation to time, and the distortion of the form-matter connection – then the grotesque would present itself as *an esthetic phenomenon of an out-of-balance form that introduces the dimension of time*. We can now turn back to the grotesque metamorphosis of Cianfa Donati and Agnello Brunelleschi, where “all traits of the previous looks were erased: the perverted image resembled both the two and none” *Ogne primo aspetto ivi era casso:/ due e nessun l'immagine perversa/ pareva*) (*Inferno*, XXV 76-78). The adjective “perversa” for the noun “immagine” is supposed to refer here to the transformation that has taken place, to the appearance of the creature after the metamorphosis, however preserving a negative moral connotation (see commentary of A. M. Chiavacci Leonardi ad loc., v. 77). Extending this line of reasoning, we might add that “perverted” or even “perverse” in this figure reflects precisely the esthetic (or even ontological) parameters of the grotesque image: it per-verts the relation of form and matter and resists to unequivocal interpretation – it is neither the form of a man, nor that of serpent, albeit both. It looks literally like no one or nothing (“nessun... pareva”, “membra che non fuor mai viste”, v. 75).

The narrative development of the two scenes in the seventh section of the Malebolge progresses similarly to what Ovid has created as a method of dynamic representation of metamorphosis: the gradual change renders all stages of continuous transition perceptible. At the same time, it is disharmony and confusion that dominates the scene: “Omè, Agnel, come ti muti!/ Vedi che già non se' né due né uno” (v. 68-69) (“Alas, Agnello, how you change! >See, you are neither two, nor one anymore.”).

What regards the definition of the grotesque that was constructed above, we shall cite once again the those verses that almost challenge the authority of the ancients: “[Ovidio] due nature mai a fronte/ non trasmutò sì ch'amendue le forme/ a cambiar lor materia fosser pronte” (v. 100-102): “Ovid never transformed two natures facing each other, so that both forms would be able to change [or probably “switch”] their matter”. In the first place, the metamorphosis process is perceived here as a question of form and matter (*forma – materia*), and moreover, the description doesn't represent transmutation as a changing of form, but rather as *forms changing their matter*. This is quite curious, since such a problem could be discerned already in first lines of Ovid's “Metamorphoses”: “In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas/ corpora” (*Met.* I 1-2) (“My spirit incites me to speak of forms changed in new bodies”). The problem is generally that according to this formulation metamorphosis is supposed to be a process of a form acquiring a new body, and not a body that receives as new form (Fantham 2004, 4-5). It appears that in the verses on non-envying Ovid, Dante understands this opening claim as a true definition of metamorphosis – to describe a metamorphosis would then mean to present a stable form obtaining a new body, and not vice versa. On this background, Dante's pride is the fact that he manages to imagine a double metamorphosis: two forms, an animal and a human one, facing each other and switching matters. The logical consequence of such a

formulation would be that the forms remained the same, while matters were exchanged, and thus, each form finds itself attached to an inappropriate matter.

If we go back to Friedrich Schlegel's definition of the grotesque (displacement of form and matter), re-interpreted in the light of Bakhtin's dialectical and carnivalesque image, we might conclude that here, in the episode of *Inferno's* XXVth canto, this complex scenario became fulfilled. Moreover, from a cultural-historical perspective, the medieval thematic of religious and moral poetry is integrated into the Ancient, classical imagery, thus producing the unique picture of infernal punishment as a grotesque.

Conclusion

At this point, let us come back to the opening passage from Rabelais' prologue to "Gargantua" and reconsider it in the light of our re-structured definition of the grotesque in order to interpret anew the image of the Silenus as an instruction for reading. What is the relationship between the grotesque mask and the hidden meaning? In the first place, Rabelais' Silenus-book legitimates the connection of grotesque approach and classic (in this case Platonic) sources. Second, Rabelais hermeneutic program, based on the Patristic belief that a text has an outside and an inside, easily allows the application of Bakhtin's dialectic approach. In these terms, it should be inferred that Rabelais' book is grotesque not only on the surface, but in its very mechanism, as far as its contents are (or at least, the author claims them to be) in contrast to the form. This would double the grotesque effect and ironically subvert the message. On the other hand, the introduction of the element of time-flow and instability enables the dynamization of the meaning production of Rabelais' book in general. In other words, meaning never stops transforming in the ambivalent interconnection between form and contents. The temporal index of the grotesque form thus refers to historical time as well – it discloses the intertwining of the historical past (Antiquity) and historical present (Modernity), the exchange between classic and anti-classic elements.

Note

[1] For a detailed analysis on the relation between Kayser's and Bakhtin's interpretation of the grotesque, and their complementary contribution to the esthetic thought on the grotesque, see Rosen 1991, 111-140.

[2] The fifth major poet, Statius will appear only later, in the Purgatory, since Dante suggests that he has converted to Christianity and is going to be saved (Purgatorio XXI).

[3] For a more comprehensive study on Dante's allusions to Ovid in the entire corpus of the "Commedia", see the study of D. Clay ([1999] 2014). An interactive collation of all cross-references between Dante and Ovid is available at the website of the Digital Dante Project: <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/>.

[4] An alternative interpretation of the episode, that takes into account the relation between divine punishment and bodily form in the theological and moral logic of the "Commedia" is given by W. Ginsberg (1991).

[5] Of course, we are not including here all forms of technically producible moving images.

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English abstract

The text aims at developing a new definition of the grotesque as an esthetic category on the basis of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the expression of carnival culture in grotesque images that prioritizes the process of becoming over the state of being. This new definition understands the grotesque as a "dialectical image" (W. Benjamin), that is an image that discloses time as dimension. The analysis focuses on Renaissance grotesques in Dante's "Inferno" and Rabelais' "Gargantua" and collocates them to Ovid's stylistic inventions in the representation of the mythical metamorphoses in order to disclose the intricate relationship between popular medieval tradition of grotesque images and early modern re-interpretation of Classical Antiquity. This relationship creates the historical-temporal aspect of their message.

keywords | Grotesque; Metamorphosis; Image; Time.



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a cura di Anna Ghiraldini, Christian Toson e Chiara Velicogna

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Damiano Acciarino, Giuseppe Allegri, Danae Antonakou, Gaia Aprea, Barbara Baert, Kosme de Barañano, Giuseppe Barbieri, Silvia Burini, Maddalena Bassani, Anna Beltrametti, Guglielmo Bilancioni, Barbara Biscotti, Elisa Bizzotto, Renato Bocchi, Giampiero Borgia, Federico Boschetti, Maria Stella Bottai, Guglielmo Bottin, Lorenzo Braccesi, Giacomo Calandra di Roccolino, Michele Giovanni Caja, Alberto Camerotto, Alessandro Canevari, Franco Cardini, Alberto Giorgio Cassani, Concetta Cataldo, Monica Centanni, Mario Cesarano, Gioachino Chiarini, Claudia Cieri Via, Victoria Cirlot, Giorgiomaria Cornelio, Massimo Crispi, Silvia De Laude, Federico Della Puppa, Fernanda De Maio, Gabriella De Marco, Christian Di Domenico, Massimo Donà, Alessandro Fambrini, Ernesto L. Francalanci, Dorothee Gelhard, Anna Ghiraldini, Laura Giovannelli, Roberto Indovina, Vincenzo Latina, Delphine Lauritzen, Frederick Lauritzen, Fabrizio Lollini, Angelo Maggi, Giancarlo Magnano San Lio, Alessandra Magni, Michela Maguolo, Roberto Masiero, Arturo Mazzearella, Patrizia Montini Zimolo, Lucia Nadin, Peppe Nanni, Elena Nonveiller, Giuseppe Palazzolo, Enrico Palma, Bogdana Paskaleva, Filippo Perfetti, Margherita Piccichè, Susanna Piscicella, Alessandro Poggio, Ludovico Rebaudo, Stefania Rimini, Antonella Sbrilli, Alessando Scafi, Marco Scotti, Massimo Stella, Oliver Taplin, Gabriella Tassinari, Gregorio Tenti, Stefano Tomassini, Giulia Torello-Hill, Christian Toson, Francesco Trentini, Flavia Vaccher, Gabriele Vacis, Herman, Van Bergeijk, Chiara Velicogna, Silvia Veroli, Piermario Vescovo, Alessandro Zaccuri, Paolo Zanenga, Flavia Zelli

e, nella sezione “Che festa sarebbe senza di voi?”: Sergio Bertelli, Giuseppe Cengiarotti, Paolo Morachiello, Sergio Polano, Lionello Puppi, Mario Torelli, Martin Warnke