The Politics and Poetics of Transgression

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For Annie and Jenny

denied at the level of political organization and social being whilst it is instrumentally constitutive of the shared imaginary repertoires of the dominant culture. This is evidenced by the history of the representation of 'low' entertainment and the carnivalesque, to which we now turn.

FROM CARNIVAL TO TRANSGRESSION

> The new historian, the genealogist, will know what to make of this masquerade. He will not be too serious to enjoy it; on the contrary, he will push the masquerade to its limits and prepare the great carnival of time where masks are constantly reappearing. Genealogy is history in the form of a concerted carnival.
>
> (Foucault 1977: 160–1)

> In the world of carnival the awareness of the people's immortality is combined with the realisation that established authority and truth are relative.
>
> (Bakhtin 1968: 10)

There is now a large and increasing body of writing which sees carnival not simply as a ritual feature of European culture but as a *mode of understanding*, a positivity, a cultural analytic. How is it that a festive ritual now virtually eliminated from most of the popular culture of Europe has gained such prominence as an epistemological category? Is there a connection between the fact of its elimination as a physical practice and its self-conscious emergence in the artistic and academic discourses of our time? For both Michel Foucault in the passage cited above and for Mikhail Bakhtin in his seminal study *Rabelais and his World*, the Nietzscheian study of history leads to the ideal of carnival. Everywhere in literary and cultural studies today we see carnival emerging as a model, as an ideal and as an analytic category in a way that, at first sight, seems puzzling.

Undoubtedly it was the translation of Mikhail Bakhtin's monumental study of Rabelais and the carnivalesque which initially catalysed the interest of Western scholars (albeit slowly – the book was only translated into English in 1968) around the notion of carnival, marking it out as a site of special interest for the analysis of literature and symbolic practices. Since the 1970s there has been an

increasing number of literary and historical studies devoted to the topic. In 1978 Krystyna Pomorska could write with every justification that 'Mikhail Bakhtin is today one of the most popular, if not the most popular, figures in the domain of humanistic studies' (Pomorska 1978: 379). More recently Tony Bennett averred that Bakhtin's study of Rabelais should hold an exemplary place in materialist cultural criticism (Bennett 1979: 90–2). This is surely correct: *Rabelais and his World* is ostensibly a scholarly study of Rabelais's popular sources in carnivalesque folk-culture which shows how indebted Rabelais is to the popular, non-literary, 'low' folk humour of the French Renaissance. His intention in the study was self-consciously iconoclastic.

> 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.
>
> (Bakhtin 1968: 3)

Naturally this reading of Rabelais has not gone unchallenged by conventionally learned scholars (Screech 1979: 1–14, 479; also 1984: 11–13, but in this latter article, 'Homage to Rabelais', Screech is much closer in spirit to Bakhtin than in the earlier book). But although Bakhtin is deeply concerned to elucidate the sources of Rabelais's work, the main importance of his study is its broad development of the 'carnivalesque' into a potent, populist, critical inversion of *all* official words and hierarchies in a way that has implications far beyond the specific realm of Rabelais studies. Carnival, for Bakhtin, is both a populist utopian vision of the world seen from below and a festive critique, through the inversion of hierarchy, of the 'high' culture:

> As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order; it marks 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 complete.
>
> (Bakhtin 1968: 109)

Carnival in its widest, most general sense embraced ritual spectacles such as fairs, popular feasts and wakes, processions and competitions (Burke 1978: 178–204), comic shows, mummery and dancing, open-air amusement with costumes and masks, giants, dwarfs, monsters, trained animals and so forth; it included comic verbal compositions (oral and written) such as parodies, travesties and vulgar farce; and it included various genres of 'Billingsgate', by which Bakhtin designated curses, oaths, slang, humour, popular tricks and jokes, scatalogical forms, in fact all the 'low' and 'dirty' sorts of folk humour. Carnival is presented by Bakhtin as a world of topsy-turvy, of heteroglot exuberance, of ceaseless overrunning and excess where all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled.

If there is a principle to this hotch-potch it resides in the spirit of carnivalesque laughter itself, to which Bakhtin ascribes great importance:

> Let us say a few initial words about the complex nature of carnivalesque 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 the carnival.
>
> (Bakhtin 1968: 11–12)

Carnival laughter, then, has a vulgar, 'earthy' quality to it. With its oaths and profanities, its abusive language and its mocking words it was profoundly ambivalent. Whilst it humiliated and mortified it also revived and renewed. For Bakhtin ritual defilements went along with reinvigoration such that 'it was precisely this ambivalent abuse which determined the genre of speech in carnival intercourse' (Bakhtin 1968: 16). The 'coarse' and familiar speech of the fair and the marketplace provided a complex vital repertoire of speech patterns excluded from official discourse which could be used for parody, subversive humour and inversion. 'Laughter degrades and materialises' (Bakhtin 1968: 20). Fundamental to the corporeal, collective nature of carnival laughter is what Bakhtin terms 'grotesque realism'. Grotesque realism uses the material body–flesh

conceptualized as corpulent excess – to represent cosmic, social, topographical and linguistic elements of the world. Thus already in Bakhtin there is the germinal notion of *transcodings* and *displacements* effected between the high/low image of the physical body and other social domains. Grotesque realism images the human body as multiple, bulging, over- or under-sized, protuberant and incomplete. The openings and orifices of this carnival body are emphasized, not its closure and finish. It is an image of impure corporeal bulk with its orifices (mouth, flared nostrils, anus) yawning wide and its lower regions (belly, legs, feet, buttocks and genitals) given priority over its upper regions (head, 'spirit', reason).

Bakhtin is self-consciously utopian and lyrical about carnival and grotesque realism. '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, egoistic, "economic man", but to the collective ancestral body of all the people' (Bakhtin 1968: 19). To complete the image of grotesque realism one must add that it is always in process, it is always *becoming*, it is a mobile and hybrid creature, disproportionate, exorbitant, outgrowing all limits, obscenely decentred and off-balance, a figural and symbolic resource for parodic exaggeration and inversion. All these grotesque qualities have a positive force in Bakhtin. It was only after the Renaissance, according to Bakhtin, that the principles of grotesque realism were subjected to a monologic reading. Stigmatized as the vulgar practices of a superstitious and crude populace, the carnivalesque was prettified, incorporated into commercial or civic display or regarded as a purely negative phenomenon. Bakhtin's optimistic populism is at its most insistent (and problematic) in those passages where he emphasizes the positivity of the grotesque bodily element.

The grotesque body was traditionally presented, Bakhtin argues,

> 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 the severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earthy and 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 individualised. 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.
>
> (Bakhtin 1968: 19)

It is difficult to disentangle the generous but willed idealism from the descriptively accurate in passages like these. Bakhtin constantly shifts between prescriptive and descriptive categories in his work. In this passage the cosmic populism, which seems to us rather wishful and finally unusable as an analytic tool, assorts with an acute perception about the historically variable nature of the body-image. In this latter respect recent thinking has largely confirmed Bakhtin's insistence on the relation between body-image, social context and collective identity. 'The whole concept of body-image boundaries has implicit in it the idea of the structuring of one's relations with others' (Fisher and Cleveland 1958: 206), and in the 1972 edition of the *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* Fisher writes:

> The investigation of body-image phenomena has become a vigorous enterprise . . . Speaking broadly, one may say there is an emphatic need to ascertain the principal axes underlying the organization of the body image. . . There is also a need to examine the relationships between body attitudes and socialization modes in different cultures. There is evidence in the anthropological literature that body attitudes may differ radically in relation to cultural context.
>
> (Fisher 1972: 116)

It is a major premise of Bakhtin's work that this is so. Moreover, body-images 'speak' social relations and values with particular force.

In Bakhtin's schema grotesque realism in pre-capitalist Europe fulfilled three functions at once: it provided an image-ideal of and for popular community as an heterogeneous and boundless totality; it provided an imaginary repertoire of festive and comic elements which stood over against the serious and oppressive languages of the official culture; and it provided a thoroughly materialist metaphysics whereby the grotesque 'bodied forth' the cosmos, the social formation and language itself. Even linguistic rules are played up by what Bakhtin calls a *grammatica jocosa* whereby grammatical order is transgressed to reveal erotic and obscene or merely materially satis-

fying counter-meaning. Punning is one of the forms taken by the *grammatica jocosa*, and recently it has been argued, in Bakhtinian style, that the pun

> violates and so unveils the structure of prevailing (pre-vailing) convention; and it provokes laughter. Samuel Beckett's punning pronouncement 'In the beginning was the Pun' sets pun against official Word and at the same time, as puns often do, sets free a chain of other puns. So, too, carnival sets itself up in a punning relationship with official culture and enables a plural, unfixed, comic view of the world.
>
> (Arthur 1982: 1)

Arthur is one of the many contemporary critics who has been profoundly influenced by Bakhtin's work, and even from the cursory outline which we have provided here it is possible to see some of the suggestive force of his project. Certainly the enthusiastic adoption of the 'carnivalesque' as formulated by Bakhtin has resulted in articles and monographs on specific works, authors and periods far removed from Rabelais and the Renaissance. Film critic Robert Stamm writes:

> The notion of the carnivalesque, as elaborated by literary theorists like Mikhail Bakhtin and social anthropologists like Roberto da Matta is a potentially indispensable instrument for the analysis not only of literary and filmic texts but also of cultural politics in general.
>
> (Stamm 1982: 47)

However it is striking that the most successful of these attempts to apply Bakhtin *tout court* focus upon cultures which still have a strong repertoire of carnivalesque practices, such as Latin America, or upon literatures produced in a colonial or neo-colonial context where the political difference between the dominant and subordinate culture is particularly charged. Régine Robin's study of Soviet Yiddish literature (Robin 1983) is of this sort and gains some of its strength from the extent to which Bakhtin's own work was already, in its original form, a cryptic anti-Stalinist allegory. *Rabelais and his World* pits against that 'official, formalistic and logical authoritarianism whose unspoken name is Stalinism the explosive politics of the body, the erotic, the licentious and semiotic' (Eagleton 1981: 144). Robin's work on Soviet Yiddish nicely applies Bakhtin's use of the polyphonic 'multi-voicedness' of Yiddish (arguably in itself

already a 'carnivalesque' language), the language of the oppressed Jewish minority. The rightness of this is underwritten by Bakhtin's indirect championing of the humorous resistance of the 'folk' through the darkest period of Stalinist terror.

For similar reasons Bakhtin has been used almost unchanged and unchallenged to provide readings of Latin American culture (Stamm 1982; Vilar de Kerkhoff 1983; Hill 1972; Malcuzynski 1983) and of minority culture in Canada (Godard 1983; Thurston 1983). Eisenstein may well have drawn upon Bakhtin's ideas in the final scenes of his film *Que viva México* in which macabre mockery of the Catholic ministers is effected through the use of carnival effigies (Ivanov 1976). Todorov's recent work on the colonization of the Americas (Todorov 1985) owes much to his recent critical interest in Bakhtin (Todorov 1984), and for some years now the appropriateness of Bakhtin to a study of James Joyce has been recognized. Joyce's 'carnivalization' of 'The King's English', his interest in and use of grotesque realism (Parrinder 1984: 16; Lodge 1982), suggested to Pomorska in the early 1960s that *Finnegans Wake* was the exemplary carnivalesque modernist work and recently Sidney Monas (1983) has gone some way to substantiating this view. In 1976 Ivanov wrote:

> One cannot help seeing the profound likeness between novelistic regularities discovered by Bakhtin and the structure of such twentieth century works as Joyce's *Ulysses* whose period of creation coincided with Bakhtin's youth: the intertwining and dialogic opposition of different speech genres; their conflict within the novel; the parodic and travestied features of the genre of the novel – all qualities which are at their fullest in *Ulysses* whose very structure is parodic, a travesty of the structure of Homer's *Odyssey*.
>
> (Ivanov 1976: 27)

The poetry of Shelley (Sales 1983), the plays of Samuel Beckett (Van Buuren 1983) and the writing of Jean-Claude Germain (Short 1983) have all been examined in recent criticism within a Bakhtinian frame and with a straightforward and unproblematical enthusiasm for his conceptual schema.

Others, however, have been more critical. Whilst almost every reader of Bakhtin admires his comprehensive and engaged gener-

osity, his combination of festive populism and deep learning, and whilst few would deny the immediate appeal and the vitality of the notion of carnival, various writers have been sceptical of Bakhtin's overall project.

Terry Eagleton thinks that the weakness of Bakhtin's positive embrace of carnival is transparent:

> Indeed carnival is so vivaciously celebrated that the necessary political criticism is almost too obvious to make. Carnival, after all, is a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art. As Shakespeare's Olivia remarks, there is no slander in an allowed fool.
>
> (Eagleton 1981: 148)

Most politically thoughtful commentators wonder, like Eagleton, whether the 'licensed release' of carnival is not simply a form of social control of the low by the high and therefore serves the interests of that very official culture which it apparently opposes. The classic formulation of this is in Max Gluckman's now somewhat dated *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa* (1963) and *Custom and Conflict* (1965), in which he asserted that while these 'rites of reversal obviously include a protest against the established order . . . they are intended to preserve and strengthen the established order' (Gluckman 1965: 109). Roger Sales amplifies both on this process of containment and its ambivalence:

> There were two reasons why the fizzy, dizzy carnival spirit did not necessarily undermine authority. First of all, it was licensed or sanctioned by the authorities themselves. They removed the stopper to stop the bottle being smashed altogether. The release of emotions and grievances made them easier to police in the long term. Second, although the world might appear to be turned upside down during the carnival season, the fact that Kings and Queens were chosen and crowned actually reaffirmed the *status quo*. Carnival was, however, Janus-faced. Falstaff is both the merry old mimic of Eastcheap and the old corruptible who tries to undermine the authority, or rule, of the Lord Chief Justice. The carnival spirit, in early-nineteenth century England as well as in sixteenth century France, could therefore be a vehicle for social protest and the method for disciplining that protest.
>
> (Sales 1983: 169)

As Georges Balandier puts it succinctly in *Political Anthropology*: 'The supreme ruse of power is to allow itself to be contested *ritually* in order to consolidate itself more effectively.'

It actually makes little sense to fight out the issue of whether or not carnivals are *intrinsically* radical or conservative, for to do so automatically involves the false essentializing of carnivalesque transgression (White 1982: 60). The most that can be said in the abstract is that for long periods carnival may be a stable and cyclical ritual with no noticeable politically transformative effects but that, given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act as *catalyst* and *site of actual and symbolic struggle*.[1]

It is in fact striking how frequently violent social clashes apparently 'coincided' with carnival. Le Roy Ladurie's *Carnival in Romans* (1981) has popularized one such incident when the 1580 festival at Romans in eastern France was turned into armed conflict and massacre. Other social historians have documented similar occurrences (Davis 1975; Burke 1978; Thompson 1972). However to call it a 'coincidence' of social revolt and carnival is deeply misleading, for as Peter Burke has pointed out, it was only in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – and then only in certain areas – that one can reasonably talk of popular politics *dissociated* from the carnivalesque at all. John Brewer has described English politics in the eighteenth century as 'essentially a calendrical market', by which he designates a deliberate commingling of holiday and political events (in this case organized by the Hanoverians for conservative motives):

> Far too little attention had [sic] been paid to the emergence during the eighteenth century of a Hanoverian political calendar, designed to inculcate loyal values in the populace, and to emphasize and encourage the growth of a national political consensus. Nearly every English market town celebrated the dates which were considered the important political landmarks of the nation. They can be found in most almanacs of the period, barely distinguishable from the time-honoured dates of May Day, Plough Monday, Twelfth Night, Shrove Tuesday and the like... In the early eighteenth century, these dates, together with the occasion of the Pretender's birthday, were occasions of conflict. The year of the Jacobite Rebellion, 1715, was especially contentious, with Hanoverian Mug House clubs fighting it out in the streets with

> Jacobite apprentices and artisans. On October 30, frequenters of a Jacobite alehouse on Ludgate Hill were beaten up by members of the Loyal Society who were celebrating the birthday of the Prince of Wales, the future George II. A Jacobite attempt to burn William III in effigy on November 4 was thwarted by the same Whig clubmen who the next day tried to cremate effigies of the Pretender and his supporters. On 17 November further clashes ensued and two Jacobites were shot dead.
>
> (Brewer *et al.* 1983: 247)

Again this should act as a warning against the current tendency to essentialize carnival *and* politics. On the one hand carnival was a specific calendrical ritual: carnival proper, for instance, occurred around February each year, ineluctably followed by Lenten fasting and abstinence bound tightly to laws, structures and institutions which had briefly been denied during its reign. On the other hand carnival also refers to a mobile set of symbolic practices, images and discourses which were employed throughout social revolts and conflicts before the nineteenth century.

Recent work in the social history of carnival reveals its political dimensions to be more complex than either Bakhtin or his detractors might suspect. Bob Scribner has shown convincingly the importance of popular carnival practices in German Reformation struggles against Catholicism, particularly in the propagandistic application of ritual defilement to the Papacy; Martine Boiteux has shown the lengths to which the ecclesiastical powers were prepared to go in Rome in 1634 in order to 'upstage' the regular, popular carnival with a patrician counter-festival designed, says Boiteux, to 'repress, control and mutilate' the carnival of the common people. Whilst Simon Schama emphasizes the 'benign license' of Dutch seventeenth-century carnival and its avoidance of Calvinist bourgeois strictures, David Kunzle has emphasized the directly political use of Dutch carnival forms in the War of the Netherlands (Scribner 1978; Boiteux 1977; Schama 1979; Kunzle 1978).

In recent social histories of England there has been a considerable debate over the interrelationship between popular culture and class conflict (Yeo and Yeo 1981; Bushaway 1982; Walvin 1978; Cunningham 1980; Thompson 1972; Malcolmson 1973; Stedman Jones 1983). Most of these studies unearth evidence of a long battle (with occasional truces) waged by the State, ecclesiastical and bourgeois

authorities against popular custom. It is a battle that goes back well beyond the Renaissance but which, from the Renaissance on, produced local festivities as sites of resistance to the extension of power by the propertied and the State. Bushaway remarks:

> Custom and ceremony became a battleground in the struggle between the labouring poor and the increasingly wealthy landowners and proprietors over the defence of popular rights and the protection of a normative view of the structure of the community held by the labouring poor.
>
> (Bushaway 1982: 21–2)

This seems an altogether more accurate way of conceiving the relationship. Carnivals, fairs, popular games and festivals were very swiftly 'politicized' by the very attempts made on the part of local authorities to eliminate them. The dialectic of antagonism frequently *turned* rituals into resistance at the moment of intervention by the higher powers, even when no overt oppositional element had been present before. All these issues in their historical complexity are discussed at greater length in the chapters which follow. In introducing them here we are only underscoring the banal but often ignored truth that the politics of carnival cannot be resolved outside of a close historical examination of particular conjunctures: there is no a priori revolutionary vector to carnival and transgression.

In his research on the carnivalesque Bakhtin had substantially anticipated by some thirty years main lines of development in symbolic anthropology. In his exploration of the *relational* nature of festivity, its structural inversion of, and ambivalent dependence upon, 'official culture', Bakhtin set out a model of culture in which a high/low binarism had a fundamental place. Bakhtin's use of carnival centres the concept upon its 'doubleness . . . there is no unofficial expression without a prior official one or its possibility. Hence, in Bakhtin's analysis of carnival, the official and unofficial are locked together' (Wilson 1983: 320). Symbolic polarities of high and low, official and popular, grotesque and classical are mutually constructed and deformed in carnival. Two of the best general synopses of Bakhtin's work correctly perceive this to be the most significant aspect of *Rabelais and his World*. Ivanov (1976) links Bakhtin's discovery of the importance of binary oppositions with the work of Lévi-Strauss:

> the books by Bakhtin and Lévi-Strauss have much in common in their treatment of the functioning of oppositions in the ritual or the carnival which can be traced back historically to ritual performance. For Lévi-Strauss the chief purpose of the ritual and the myth is the discovery of an intermediate link between the members of a binary opposition: a process known as *mediation*. The structural analysis of the ambivalence inherent in the 'marketplace word' and its corresponding imagery led Bakhtin to the conclusion (made independently from and prior to structural mythology) that the 'carnival image strives to embrace and unite in itself both terminal points of the process of becoming or both members of the antithesis: birth–death, youth–age, top–bottom, face–lower bodily stratum, praise–abuse' [Bakhtin 1968: 238]. From this standpoint, Bakhtin scrutinized various forms of inverted relations between top and bottom 'a reversal of the hierarchy of top and bottom' [Bakhtin 1968: 81] which takes place during carnival.
>
> (Ivanov 1976: 35)

The convergence of Bakhtin's thinking and that of current symbolic anthropology is highly significant. Where Ivanov points to the kinship Bakhtin shares with Lévi-Strauss and Edmund Leach (particularly Leach's essay on carnival, 'Time and false noses', 1961), Masao Yamaguchi suggests that Bakhtin's work significantly parallels that of Victor Turner, Barbara Babcock and Mary Douglas in their shared interest in cultural negations and symbolic inversions (Yamaguchi 1983). We may note, for instance, the similarity of Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque high/low inversion to the concepts developed in *The Reversible World*, a collection of essays on anthropology and literature edited by Barbara Babcock. Although apparently unaware of Bakhtin's study she assembles a range of writing on 'symbolic inversion and cultural negation' which puts carnival into a much wider perspective. She writes:

> 'Symbolic inversion' may be broadly defined as any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, social and political.
>
> (Babcock 1978: 14)

This is what we refer to in this book as 'transgression' (though there is another, more complex use of the term which arises in connection with extremist practices of modern art and philosophy; these designate not just the infraction of binary structures, but movement into an absolutely negative space *beyond the structure of significance itself*). For the moment it is enough to suggest that, in our view, the current widespread adoption of the idea of carnival as an *analytic* category can only be fruitful if it is displaced into the broader concept of symbolic inversion and transgression.

This is not to deny the usefulness of the carnivalesque as a sort of 'modelling', at once utopian and counter-hegemonic, whereby it is viewed, in Roberto da Matta's words, as a *privileged locus* of inversion. In his attempt to go beyond Bakhtin's nostalgic and over-optimistic view of carnival, Matta acknowledges the degree to which festivity is licensed release, but he also praises its deep modelling of a different, pleasurable and communal ideal 'of the people', even if that ideal cannot immediately be acted upon. Victor Turner has similarly argued with respect to role reversal that carnival is 'a moment when those being moved in accordance to a cultural script were liberated from normative demands, where they were . . . betwixt and between successive lodgements in jural political systems'. Carnival in this view has been defended as having a persistent *demystifying* potential (Jones 1983; Arthur 1982; Stamm 1982; Davis 1975). Even Terry Eagleton wants to salvage Bakhtin's carnivalesque by seeing it as a utopian modelling yoked to a glimpse through the ideological constructs of dominance, a 'kind of fiction', a

> temporary retextualizing of the social formation that exposes its 'fictive' foundations.
>
> (Eagleton 1981: 149)

In this perspective the carnivalesque becomes a resource of actions, images and roles which may be invoked both to model and legitimate desire and to 'degrade all that is spiritual and abstract'. 'The cheerful vulgarity of the powerless is used as a weapon against the pretence and hypocrisy of the powerful' (Stamm 1982: 47). In a most engaging description of this utopian/critical role of carnival Stamm continues:

> On the positive side, carnival suggests the joyful affirmation of becoming. It is ecstatic collectivity, the superseding of the individuating principle in what Nietzsche called 'the glowing life of Dionysian revellers' . . . On the negative, critical side, the carnivalesque suggests a demystificatory instrument for everything in the social formation which renders such collectivity difficult of access: class hierarchy, political manipulation, sexual repression, dogmatism and paranoia. Carnival in this sense implies an attitude of creative disrespect, a radical opposition to the illegitimately powerful, to the morose and monological.
>
> (Stamm 1982: 55)

Refreshingly iconoclastic, this nevertheless resolves none of the problems raised so far concerning the politics of carnival: its nostalgia; its uncritical populism (carnival often violently abuses and demonizes *weaker*, not stronger, social groups – women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who 'don't belong' – in a process of *displaced abjection*); its failure to do away with the official dominant culture, its licensed complicity.

In fact those writers and critics who remain purely within the celebratory terms of Bakhtin's formulation are unable to resolve these key dilemmas. It is only by completely shifting the grounds of the debate, by transforming the 'problematic' of carnival, that these issues can be solved. It is precisely such an intervention in the current surge of Bakhtin-inspired studies which we have attempted in this book. The remainder of our introduction endeavours to sketch out a kind of political and aesthetic analysis building upon the work of Bakhtin but attempting to avoid the limitations here identified in his work. We have chosen therefore to consider carnival as one instance of a generalized economy of transgression and of the recoding of high/low relations across the whole social structure. The symbolic categories of grotesque realism which Bakhtin located can be rediscovered as a governing dynamic of the body, the household, the city, the nation-state – indeed a vast range of interconnected domains.

Marcel Détienne puts a similar notion most persuasively in *Dionysos Slain*:

> A system of thought . . . is founded on a series of acts of partition whose ambiguity, here as elsewhere, is to open up the terrain of their possible transgression at the very moment when they mark off a limit. To discover the complete horizon of a society's

symbolic values, it is also necessary to map out its transgressions, its deviants

(Détienne 1979: ix)

By tracking the 'grotesque body' and the 'low-Other' through different symbolic domains of bourgeois society since the Renaissance we can attain an unusual perspective upon its inner dynamics, the inner complicity of disgust and desire which fuels its crises of value. For the classificatory body of a culture is always double, always structured in relation to its negation, its inverse. 'All symbolic inversions define a culture's lineaments at the same time as they question the usefulness and the absoluteness of its ordering' (Babcock 1978: 29). Indeed by attending to the low and the marginal we vindicate, on the terrain of European literary and cultural history, the more general anthropological assertion that the process of symbolic inversion,

> far from being a residual category of experience, is its very opposite. What is socially peripheral is often symbolically central, and if we ignore or minimize inversion and other forms of cultural negation, we often fail to understand the dynamics of symbolic processes generally.
>
> (Babcock 1978: 32)

This is a scrupulously accurate and indispensable formulation. The carnival, the circus, the gypsy, the lumpenproletariat, play a symbolic role in bourgeois culture out of all proportion to their actual social importance. The dominant features of the psycho-symbolic domain cannot be mapped one-to-one onto the social formation. Thus 'work', for example, which occupied such a central place in individual and collective life, is notoriously 'underrepresented' in artistic forms (Barrell 1980) but this should not be ascribed to some wilful act of ideological avoidance. Although work is 'actually central' in the production and reproduction of the whole social ensemble there is no reason, beyond an irrationally vulgar Marxist one, to suppose that capitalism should be totally different from other societies in locating its most powerful *symbolic* repertoires at borders, margins and edges, rather than at the accepted centres, of the social body. Thus a writer such as Arnold Bennett, committed to a realist and sympathetically accurate account of commercial working life in the industrial Midlands, reaches out to the circus, the Burslem

Wakes, a hot-air balloon ascent and a public execution for significant climaxes in the dramatic narrative of *The Old Wives' Tale*. The complex of utilitarianism, industry and calculating parsimony which were fundamental to the English bourgeoisie by the nineteenth century drew its imaginative sustenance from precisely those groups, practices and activities which it was earnestly and relentlessly working to marginalize and destroy. In chapters 3, 4 and 5, we explore the contradictory constructions of bourgeois desire to which this led in the nineteenth century – a construction of subjectivity through totally ambivalent internalizations of the city slum, the domestic servant and the carnivalesque.

At various points throughout this book we have turned to Bakhtin's vocabulary of 'classical' and 'grotesque' in our exploration of high/low symbolism. In Bakhtin the 'classical body' denotes the inherent *form* of the high official culture and suggests that the shape and plasticity of the human body is indissociable from the shape and plasticity of discursive material and social norm in a collectivity. 'No absolute borderline can be drawn between body and meaning in the sphere of culture' (Ivanov 1976: 3). Because he is at pains to hold onto the mediating role played by the body in cultural designation, Bakhtin is undeniably ambiguous in his use of the terms 'classical body' and 'grotesque body', yet the imprecision seems not unjustifiable. Clearly, as often as they are able, 'high' languages attempt to legitimate their authority by appealing to values inherent in the classical body. Bakhtin was struck by the compelling difference between the human body as represented in popular festivity and the body as represented in classical statuary in the Renaissance. He noticed how the two forms of iconography 'embodied' utterly contrary registers of being. To begin with, the classical statue was always mounted on a plinth which meant that it was elevated, static and monumental. In the one simple fact of the plinth or pedestal the classical body signalled a whole different somatic conception from that of the grotesque body which was usually multiple (Bosch, Bruegel), teeming, always already part of a throng. By contrast, the classical statue is the radiant centre of a transcendant individualism, 'put on a pedestal', raised above the viewer and the commonality and anticipating passive admiration from below. We *gaze up* at the figure and wonder. We are placed by it as spectators to an instant–frozen yet apparently universal – of epic or tragic time. The presence of the

statue is a problematic presence in that it immediately retroflects us to the heroic past, it is a *memento classici* for which we are the eternal latecomers, and for whom meditative imitation is the appropriate contrition. The classical statue has no openings or orifices whereas grotesque costume and masks emphasize the gaping mouth, the protuberant belly and buttocks, the feet and the genitals. In this way the grotesque body stands in opposition to the bourgeois individualist conception of the body, which finds *its* image and legitimation in the classical. The grotesque body is emphasized as a mobile, split, multiple self, a subject of pleasure in processes of exchange; and it is never closed off from either its social or ecosystemic context. The classical body on the other hand keeps its distance. In a sense it is disembodied, for it appears indifferent to a body which is 'beautiful', but which is taken for granted.

Vasari's codification of Vitruvian categories, the famous list of *regola*, *ordine*, *misura*, *disegno* and *maniera* is an interesting example of some of the governing principles of the classical body. Taking formal values from a purified mythologized canon of Ancient Greek and Roman authors – the 'classic' with which this introduction began – the classical body was far more than an aesthetic standard or model. It structured, from the inside as it were, the characteristically 'high' discourses of philosophy, statecraft, theology and law, as well as literature, as they emerged from the Renaissance. In the classical discursive body were encoded those regulated systems which were closed, homogeneous, monumental, centred and symmetrical. It began to make 'parsimony' of explanation and 'economy' of utterance the measure of rationality, thus institutionalizing Lenten rule as a normative epistemological standard. Gradually these protocols of the classical body came to mark out the identity of progressive rationalism itself. These are the terms of Foucault's 'regimen' and Weber's 'rationalization', the strong forms of functional purity which, certainly by the eighteenth century in England, led to the great age of 'institutionalizing' – asylums, hospitals, schools, barracks, prisons, insurance and finance houses – which, as Foucault has suggested, embody and assure the maintenance of classical bourgeois reason. Furthermore Foucault's concentration upon the contained outsiders-who-make-the-insiders-insiders (the mad, the criminal, the sick, the unruly, the sexually transgressive) reveals just how far these outsiders are constructed by

the dominant culture in terms of the grotesque body. The 'grotesque' here designates the marginal, the low and the outside from the perspective of a classical body situated as high, inside and central by virtue of its very exclusions.

The grotesque body, as Bakhtin makes clear, has *its* discursive norms too: impurity (both in the sense of dirt and mixed categories), heterogeneity, masking, protuberant distension, disproportion, exorbitancy, clamour, decentred or eccentric arrangements, a focus upon gaps, orifices and symbolic filth (what Mary Douglas calls 'matter out of place'), physical needs and pleasures of the 'lower bodily stratum', materiality and parody. The opposition between classical and grotesque in this sense is invoked as automatically and unconsciously by Charcot in his description of the female hysteric as it is by the police spokesperson in a description of pickets or Auberon Waugh in his description of the women encamped at Greenham Common ('smelling of fish paste and bad oysters'). The grotesque physical body is invoked both defensively and offensively because it is not simply a powerful image but fundamentally constitutive of the categorical sets through which we live and make sense of the world.

The encampment of women protesters positioned on common land outside the entrance to the Cruise Missile Base near Newbury focuses many of these issues, and so powerfully, that it provides an exemplary instance. Malise Ruthven writes:

> all the women arouse a degree of hostility far in excess of any inconvenience they may cause to soldiers, policemen or residents living near the base. Shopkeepers and publicans refuse to serve them; hooligans unexpectedly join forces with the establishment and actualize the verbal insults by smearing the benders [home-made tents] with excrement and pig's blood . . . This spontaneous and voluntary association of females, without formal leadership or hierarchy, seems to threaten the soldiers, the local gentry, the bourgeoisie of Newbury and even its hooligans far more than the missiles, although the latter would be a prime target in the event of nuclear war.
>
> (Ruthven 1984: 1048)

'What is socially peripheral may be symbolically central'. The women at Greenham Common in their precarious and vulnerable condition by the roadside entrance to a vast military installation, 'On the perimeter' as Caroline Blackwood describes it, occupy a very

powerful *symbolic* domain *despite and because of* their actual social marginalization. They constitute what Edmund Leach calls an 'intermediate and taboo-loaded category' and their association with excrement and pig's blood by a hostile local populace strongly attests to the fear and loathing which they have excited. They were accused, amongst other things, of having smeared the local town of Newbury with excrement. On one occasion, some soldiers as they were leaving the Base in a military coach ritually bared their backsides to the women 'in a gesture that had clearly been rehearsed with parade-ground precision' (Ruthven 1984: 1048). So many of the themes of this book intersect here, where transgressions of gender, territorial boundaries, sexual preference, family and group norms are transcoded into the 'grotesque body' terms of excrement, pigs and arses. We would argue that this is ascribable neither to a residual superstitious primitivism on the part of the good people of Newbury nor to trivial or accidental alignments. The women of Greenham Common are drawing (in some cases self-consciously) upon historical and political resources of mythopoetic transgression and conjuring from their antagonists not dissimilar reservoirs of material symbolism. They outrage the military establishment and the politicians by flagrantly maintaining their 'low' hovels at the very door of the mighty military estate; they outrage the local ratepayers (RAGE – Ratepayers Against Greenham Encampment) by transgressing the neat boundaries of private and public property as the Levellers and the Diggers did before them, occupying common land in the name of the people. They outrage local youths by breaking the norms of women's dependence upon men and by their independant sexual stance and are visited, in consequence, with a 'charivari' – a scapegoating carnivalesque ritual, usually carried out by young men against those whom they feel have broken the customs of courtship and sexual duty in the locality (Le Goff and Schmitt 1981; Desplatt 1982): charivari was a rowdy form of crowd behaviour often used against 'unruly women', and here it is an overt reminder of patriarchal dominance.

The women live 'on the wire', 'on the perimeter', neither fully outside nor fully inside, and they have triggered powerful associative chains which connect the international issue of nuclear missiles with pigs' blood and excremental vandalism: the cosmic with the local, the topographic with the sexual. Arguably a special (in every sense)

and privileged case, the Greenham Common women nevertheless reveal how the grotesque body may become a primary, highly-charged intersection and mediation of social and political forces, a sort of intensifier and displacer in the making of identity. The exorbitant contrast between the closed, monumental, classical body of the multi-million dollar American Military Complex and the open, muddy, exposed huddle of higgledy-piggledy polythene tents is a scandal to hegemonic dignity which it can scarcely sustain. It is indeed wonderful that so little can make so great a difference.

This book aims to give a number of exploratory testings from early modern and modern Europe (particularly England), by mapping domains of transgression where place, body, group identity and subjectivity interconnect. Points of antagonism, overlap and intersection between the high and the low, the classical and its 'Other', provide some of the richest and most powerful symbolic dissonances in the culture. In mapping some of these spaces we illuminate the discursive sites where social classification and psychological processes are generated as conflictual complexes. It is precisely here where ideology and fantasy conjoin. The topography of realms which, *by virtue* of exclusions at the geographical, class, or somatic level, traces lines of desire and phobic contours which are produced and reproduced through one another. There is a secular magic to these displacements, and its law is the law of exclusion.

Thus the logic of identity-formation involves distinctive associations and switching between location, class and the body, and these are not imposed *upon* subject-identity from the outside, they are the core terms of an exchange network, an economy of signs, in which individuals, writers and authors are sometimes but perplexed agencies. A fundamental rule seems to be that what is excluded at the overt level of identity-formation is productive of new objects of desire. As new classificatory sets emerge with new forms of production and new social relations, so the carnivalesque and transgressive anti-structure of the emergent classical body will also change, marking out new sites of symbolic and metaphorical intensity in the ideological field. In class society where social conflict is always present these sites do not necessarily coincide with the 'objective' conflict boundaries of antagonistic classes but will nevertheless function to the advantage of one social group rather than another. In Chapter 3 for example we note how certain middle-class

fantasies about the lumpenproletariat in the nineteenth century effaced the centrality of issues around the proletariat. On the other hand transgressive symbolic domains and the fetishism which attaches to them are never merely diversionary. There is no simple fit between the imaginary repertoire of transgressive desire and economic and political contradictions in the social formation, and yet the two are always deeply connected.

It is perhaps worth recapitulating the points we have made so far. By focusing upon the 'taboo-laden' overlap between high and low discourse which produces the grotesque, we have tried to effect a transposition of the Bakhtinian conception of the carnivalesque into a framework which makes it analytically powerful in the study of ideological repertoires and cultural practices. If we treat the carnivalesque as an instance of a wider phenomenon of transgression we move beyond Bakhtin's troublesome *folkloric* approach to a political anthropology of *binary extremism* in class society. This transposition not only moves us beyond the rather unproductive debate over whether carnivals are politically progressive or conservative, it reveals that the underlying structural features of carnival operate far beyond the strict confines of popular festivity and are intrinsic to the dialectics of social classification as such. The 'carnivalesque' mediates between a classical/classificatory body and its negations, its Others, what it excludes to create its identity as such. In this process discourses about the body have a privileged role, for transcodings between different levels and sectors of social and psychic reality are effected through the intensifying grid of the body. It is no accident, then, that transgressions and the attempt to control them obsessively return to somatic symbols, for these are ultimate elements of social classification itself.

NOTE

1 Kateryna Arthur: 'The question I shall be addressing throughout my exploration of carnivalesque activity is: how can carnival be simultaneously revolutionary and law-abiding?' (Arthur 1982: 4). Terry Eagleton: 'Carnival laughter is incorporating as well as liberating, the lifting of inhibitions politically enervating as well as disruptive. Indeed from one viewpoint carnival may figure as a prime example of that mutual complicity of law and liberation, power and desire, that has become the dominant theme of contemporary post-marxist pessimism.' (Eagleton 1981: 149).

I

The Fair, the Pig, Authorship

How does one 'think' a marketplace? At once a bounded enclosure and a site of open commerce, it is both the imagined centre of an urban community and its structural interconnection with the network of goods, commodities, markets, sites of commerce and places of production which sustain it. A marketplace is the epitome of local identity (often indeed it is what defined a place as more significant than surrounding communities) and the unsettling of that identity by the trade and traffic of goods from elsewhere. At the market centre of the polis we discover a commingling of categories usually kept separate and opposed: centre and periphery, inside and outside, stranger and local, commerce and festivity, high and low. In the marketplace pure and simple categories of thought find themselves perplexed and one-sided. Only hybrid notions are appropriate to such a hybrid place.

It sometimes seems that the commonplace is what is most radically unthinkable. The market square – that epitome of the 'common place' – so definite and comforting in its phenomenological presence at the heart of the community, is only ever an *intersection*, a crossing of ways. If it exists at all it is as a conjuncture of distribution entirely dependent upon remote processes of production and consumption, networks of communication, lines of economic force. As much a process of commercial convergence as an open space, the marketplace gives the illusion of independent identity, of being a self-sustaining totality, and this illusion is one of separateness and