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## INFANTILE REGRESSION, VIOLATING TABOOS AND THE GROTESQUE

### Prologue

The term *grotesque*, like so many terms in aesthetics and literary theory (*romanticism, irony, tragedy, novel*) refers to a fuzzy category, to a wide range of partially overlapping, and, by the same token, partially incompatible notions. It is used to refer to works in which conflicting emotional tendencies occur together, such as the laughable and what is incompatible with it; and to works which display the blurring of the categories human, animal and plant; and to the conspicuous flouting of taboos associated with the excretions, orifices and protrusions of the human body. Philip Thomson speaks of emotional disorientation in relation to the grotesque. Such a multiplicity of uses is a clear indication that the works preceded the term, and that authors and artists did not create their works with the rules of the grotesque in mind. One cannot define the grotesque with reference to necessary and sufficient conditions. In this state of affairs it is most convenient to apply Wittgenstein's (1968) notion of "open concept" (refined by Rosch and Mervis). The paradigmatic instances of the grotesque can be defined according to the principles of "family resemblance" and "contrastive set"; the latter phrase suggesting what displays maximum contrast to neighboring concepts (cf. Mervis, 1980). Regarding further instances, one must decide whether they are sufficiently similar to these paradigmatic instances, or to other instances that have already been recognized as grotesque by virtue of their resemblance to the paradigmatic cases, and so forth. The boundaries (as between "hills" and "mountains") can only be drawn in an arbitrary fashion. With every new instance, the critic must make a de-

cision whether it sufficiently resembles instances that have already been recognized as grotesque so as to include it in the concept "grotesque", or to close the concept, and open for it a new concept (e.g., "macabre", "black humor"). Elsewhere I discuss these issues at great length (Tsur, 2008: 315-322, 423-449; 2003: 263-285). In the present paper I will further elaborate on one of these issues: the flouting of taboos and the preoccupation with the excretions, orifices and protrusions of the human body.

I begin by highlighting two aspects of the Freudian conception of pleasure: pleasure may arise from the saving of mental energy, and through renewal of contact with certain aspects of infantile life or "archaic logic". This conception underlies Ernst Kris' contributions to the psychology of the comic, including Kris and Gombrich's "The Principles of Caricature". The scribbling style of caricature is related to the infant's inarticulate movements of limbs when learning to master motor skills and, I would add, to the newborn baby's ability to identify schematic faces. Likewise, plays on words and nonsense talk renew the contact with the babbling period when the infant learns to master the speech sounds. In both instances Kris and Gombrich also point out that there is saving of mental energy when the same outlines or clusters of speech sounds convey two kinds of semantic information at the same time. The grotesque makes use of all these pleasures: some may be directly perceived as pleasures, and some may contribute to the comic component of the grotesque. In this paper I consider two additional aspects of the infantile world related to the grotesque: viewing the female body from the infant's point of view, and uninhibited preoccupation with pulpy food, excretions, and the openings and protrusions of the human body. The protrusions of the adult body look much bigger to the infant (*relative to himself*) than to the adult. Among these protrusions, the female breast has a special status.

### Infantile Regression

A classic paper by Sándor Ferenczi, one of the founding fathers of psychoanalysis, sheds light on the preoccupation with excretion and the openings of the human body. His article explores the tendency to refer to gold (or money, its earthly representative) as "dirty" or "filthy". There are, of course, the usual rationalizations, for instance, that people will play "dirty" tricks to acquire gold or money as well as "Who knows how much (physical) filth is on it when it changes hands?". Such an attitude

probably also involves pleasure in the oxymoron that presents the "purest" metal as filthy.

Ferenczi's paper presents the issue in a developmental perspective that may, at the same time, illuminate also the regression from the achievements of that development. According to Ferenczi, infants take pleasure in occupying themselves with their own stools. They play with it, eat it, smear themselves with it, and enjoy it. Early socialization forbids such pleasures, and compels the infant to regard his stool (and other excrements like vomit) as disgusting. A permissible substitute for the pleasure derived from his excrements is to play and smear himself with mud (or chocolate), which preserve the texture and color of the excretions, but not the odor. Subsequently, the infant is forced to keep away from mud which also "sullies" him but still is allowed to play in the sand, which is mud minus water. But sand too soils one's clothes, and the infant must give up its friability and play with solid objects:

After stones comes the turn of artificial products, and with these the detachment of the interest from the earth is complete. Glass marbles, buttons, fruit pips, are eagerly collected - this time no longer only for the sake of their intrinsic value, but as measures of value, so to speak as primitive coins, converting the previous barter exchange of children into an enthusiastic money exchange. The character of capitalism, however, not purely practical and utilitarian, but libidinous and irrational, is betrayed in this stage also: the child decidedly enjoys the collecting in itself. It only needs one more step for the identification of faeces with gold to be complete. (Ferenczi, 1956: 275)

As a matter of fact, Ferenczi presents money in a paradoxical, or ambivalent, perspective. On the one hand, he quotes Freud (Ferenczi, 1956: 270): "Wherever the archaic way of thinking has prevailed or still prevails, in the old civilisations, in myths, fairy-tales, superstition, in unconscious thinking, in dreams, and in neuroses, money has been brought into the closest connection with filth". On the other hand, Ferenczi quotes the Latin proverb *Pecunia non olet?* (Money has no smell; p. 276). This contradiction can be resolved in light of the ontogenesis of the symbolism of money and gold, as they are seen in psychoanalysis. These two evaluations correspond to the two extremes of one socialization process, beginning with the infant's pleasure in his preoccupation with his feces, and ending with taking pleasure in the purest metal-gold. Consequently, the sentence "Money has no smell" becomes ambiguous: on the one

hand, it means that if you are rich enough and have a high standard of living, nobody asks about the "stinky" ways you acquired your wealth. However Ferenczi quotes the proverb as a summary to the following argument: "Pleasure in the intestinal contents becomes enjoyment of money, which, however, after what has been said is seen to be nothing other than odourless, dehydrated filth that has been made to shine" (Ferenczi, 276).

Some writers on the grotesque have claimed that "the grotesque is essentially physical, referring always to the body and bodily excesses and celebrating these in an uninhibited, outrageous but essentially joyous fashion" (Thomson, 1972: 56). "Our laughter at some kinds of the grotesque and the opposite response - disgust, horror, etc. mixed with it, are both reactions to the physically cruel, abnormal or obscene" (ibid., 8). In the grotesque there is a kind of "delight in seeing taboos flouted". My previous discussion presents this conception in a new light. As indicated above, one of the sources of pleasure, according to Freudian theory, is the regression to infantile life; in this case, to a state preceding the enforcement of taboos concerning excretions and the female body, especially the "enormous" female breasts. This is probably what Thomson meant by "the grotesque is essentially physical, referring always to the body and bodily excesses and celebrating these in an uninhibited, outrageous but essentially joyous fashion". But this is only part of the story. Regression to the infant's view of the world is pleasurable but at the same time is shocking, owing to the flouting of taboos involved. This is, in the present case, the source of the conflicting emotional tendencies that elicit the sense of confusion and emotional disorientation characteristic of the grotesque.

According to Kris and Gombrich, the regression to infantile pleasures may involve comic pleasure. In order to explore the nature of this kind of comic pleasure, and to explore the difference between it and experiencing the grotesque, I propose to examine three "Graf Bobby" jokes (Graf [Count] Bobby is an aristocratic hero of the Austro-Hungarian joke folklore).

**First joke:** Graf Bobby wants to stand on a chair to change an electric light bulb. His wife tells him to put a piece of newspaper on the chair first. But he answers "No need, I can reach the bulb without it".

**Second joke:** Graf Bobby is trying on shoes at a shoe store. He says the shoe is too tight. The shopkeeper suggests "Try pulling out the tongue". Graf Bobby sticks out his tongue and says "It's still too tight".

Third joke: Graf Bobby and Graf Rudy are taking a walk in the forest. Graf Bobby needs to go to the bathroom. Graf Rudy suggests going behind a nearby bush. But Graf Bobby has no toilet paper with him. "So, use a one dollar bill instead". Graf Bobby comes back smeared all over. "What happened?" "I only had 99 cents".

"The archetypal victim of irony is man", says Muecke (1970: 38), seen "as trapped and submerged in time and matter, blind, contingent, limited, and unfree - and confidently unaware that this is his predicament".

Graf Bobby is trapped in his concrete thinking, which he tends to deploy automatically in improper circumstances. Consequently, the audience tends to take an attitude of superiority, relative freedom, and amusement toward him. This sense of superiority and relative freedom make the listener feel shielded from the dangers of the Graf's concrete, automatic thinking; this, in turn, allows the listener to be amused. From a cognitive point of view, these jokes also make it possible to defamiliarize fluent cognitive processes which *we* deploy fairly automatically. Every concrete object is a bundle of features, but we are inclined to focus our attention on one feature, the one required for the upcoming action. The newspaper has black letters printed on it whose purpose is to convey information; but quite frequently we use newspaper to wrap things, or as covers to protect things from getting dirty. My grandfather, however, when he said "The walls of today's houses are made of newspaper", did not mean any of these properties, but rather its thinness and instability. The Graf's wife asks Bobby to cover the chair to protect it from dirt. The Graf's response makes us aware of several issues. The first is that the newspaper has, beyond the aforementioned properties, "thickness" too, not only "thinness" (that is, some distance between its opposite surfaces). The second is that we leave huge gaps in our discourse. Hence the listener must fill in these gaps automatically; we need to be wary of such automatic responses and there are perhaps rules for efficient communication in creating and filling these gaps. This de-automation of responses makes us aware of our adaptation mechanisms, and sharpens, by way of laughter, our adaptation to reality. The comic experience involves a sudden shift of mental sets, from one set of possibilities to another. A similar pattern can be found in the one-dollar-bill, which has at least three properties: its nominal value and exchange rate; the material it is made of (paper); and color (which colloquially authorized the euphemism of "greenback"). The bank clerk is interested in its first feature; Graf Rudy (and the audience of the joke) focuses on the material of which the bill is made (with some faint awareness that its

nominal value is low). Graf Bobby forces us to shift mental sets, revivifying our awareness of the complexity of the object. With respect to its nominal value, the difference between one dollar and ninety-nine cents is only one cent; from the point of view of bowel movements, it makes all the difference. The second joke about the shoe's tongue, defamiliarizes the process of the filling of gaps, relating words to their contexts and choosing the relevant meaning of a polysemic word. This too forces a shift in mental sets, and is perceived as comic.

The second and third jokes, however, provide additional elements, which are not present in the first joke—at least, not so explicitly; namely, regression to processes characteristic of infantile life. The second joke returns us to preoccupations with the set of speech sounds and the meanings attached to them. In the present case, we are dealing with the polysemic word “tongue” which refers to two different objects; the only relationship between them, (as in caricature) is their similar contours. The Graf's error draws attention to the fact that both meanings are conveyed by the same string of speech sounds. Moreover, sticking his tongue out distorts the pronunciation of the consonants in the sentence “It's still too tight”. Focusing on the different meanings attached to one phonological string and the distortion of pronunciation brings us closer to the infant's process of acquiring the phonological system. The third joke renews the process of smearing oneself with one's stool, and also links feces and coins. Nevertheless, most people would regard this joke as amusing rather than grotesque, probably because of the sense of superiority and relative freedom of the listener. He feels that he is not trapped in Graf Bobby's foolish concrete thinking, and that “this cannot happen” to him. As we will see, the case is different with the toothless beggar in Khanokh Levin's *Job's Sufferings* who, if he is not to starve to death, must eat the vomit of the “middle class” beggars. At this scene the spectator cannot look with an attitude of superiority; he is compelled to look at the beggar with compassion and empathy, to the extent of seeing him as a symbolic representative of his *condition humaine*?. The listener may respond to these jokes from a position of freedom, amusement and superiority; being superior to Graf Bobby in his intellectual faculties, he may feel above such failures. By contrast, the spectator has an advantage over the beggar who is forced to feed on his colleague's vomit only because he has money enough to buy food and implant teeth to chew it. These advantages are material, temporary and transitory. The sense of superiority can turn to empathy, and the sense of comic veers toward emotional disorientation.

## Semiotics of the Human Body

Bakhtin's study of the grotesque can help clarify the foregoing psychoanalytic view. He places his discussion in a historical and semiotic, non-Freudian, perspective. In the sixteenth century, he says, a major change in the bodily canon took place in Western art, which was intimately related to the rise of individualism.

The new bodily canon, in all its historic variations and different genres, presents an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual. That which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off (when a body transgresses its limits and a new one begins) is eliminated, hidden, or moderated. All orifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is the individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable façade. The opaque surface and the body's "valleys" acquire an essential meaning as the border of a closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies and with the world (1968: 320).



*Figure 1.*

Cover design for Khanokh Levin's plays; woodcut: Jan Lenica; design Yael Schwartz

No isolated quotation can do justice to Bakhtin's magnificent study. This paragraph is also indicative of its opposite, the old bodily canon. Only in the old canon was the grotesque possible, because "Of all the features of the human face, the nose and mouth play the most important part in the grotesque image of the body [...] The grotesque is interested only in protruding eyes [...] It is looking for that which protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out beyond the body's confines" (316). [...] The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss (317). The mouth gaping with laughter is replaced in the new canon by the Madonna smiling with closed lips. As to their relative importance, "next to the bowels and the genital organs is the mouth, through which enters the world to be swallowed up. And next is the anus. All these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome [...] Eating, drinking, defecation and other forms of elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body—all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world" (317). Accordingly, the grotesque quality of Baudelaire's "Une charogne", for instance, is derived not only from a response to the disgusting and what is incompatible with it—beauty, love, and sexual desire—but also by the blatant violation of the confines between the disintegrating body and the outer world.

### Bodily Excesses: The Breasts of the Giantess

Let us consider a poem that has grotesque elements, in the sense that it refers to the body and bodily excesses and celebrates these "in an uninhibited, outrageous fashion". Moreover, it focuses on the enormous protrusions from the female body and suggests regression to infantile pleasures that preceded early socialization. In Baudelaire's sonnet "The Giantess" (*La Géante*), the speaker imagines himself living with a young giantess like a sensuous cat rubbing himself on a queen's legs. The *set* reads:

Parcourir à loisir ses magnifiques formes;  
 Ramper sur le versant de ses genoux énormes,  
 Et parfois en été quand les soleils malsains,



Lasse, la font s'étendre à travers la campagne,  
Dormir nonchalamment à l'ombre de ses seins,  
Comme un hameau paisible au pied d'une montagne.

(To explore leisurely her magnificent form; / To crawl upon the slopes of her enormous knees, / And sometimes in summer, when the unhealthy sun // Makes her stretch out, weary, across the countryside, / To sleep nonchalantly in the shade of her breasts, / Like a peaceful hamlet below a mountainside. - Trans. William Aggeler).

The fantasy about an age of giants whom nature created in its primeval verve changes the proportions between the speaker and the young woman. Expressions like "the slopes of her enormous knees", "Like a peaceful hamlet below a mountainside", "stretch out, weary, across the countryside" confer geographic dimensions to the girl. The late Iván Fónagy<sup>2</sup> observed (personal communication) that the resulting proportions—"creeping on the slopes of her knees" and sleeping "in the shade of her breasts / Like a peaceful hamlet below a mountainside"—are an experience known to every person in the distant past: we are dealing with the infant's view of the world. This description focuses on the enormous protrusions from the female body. The topographic imagery generates a sense of bodily excesses. At the same time, the simile "like a voluptuous cat at the feet of a queen" hints at a sense of sexual sensuality in the infantile experience which, too, may be regarded as the flouting of taboos. Fónagy mentioned the phrase "in the shade of her breasts, / Like a peaceful hamlet below a mountainside" only to emphasize the relevance of a Freudian analysis of certain poetic descriptions; in my view, he was also suggesting that it falls somewhere within the open concept of the "grotesque".

### Villon and the Fat Margot

The ballade "Villon et la grosse Margot" contains an unusual concentration of blunt flouting of taboos, celebrating bodily excesses and the obscene, as if it were explicitly meant to illustrate Bakhtin's distinctions. Such blunt flouting earned the ballade a great deal of popularity in the twentieth century. The topic of the poem, the love of a whore for her pimp, and the pimp's outspoken devotion to his duties provide an excellent example of the flouting of taboos. I quote only the first and third stanzas:

Se j'ayme et sers la belle de bon hait,  
 M'en devez vous tenir ne vil ne sot?  
 Elle a en soy des biens a fin souhait.  
 Pour son amour sains bouclier et passot;  
 Quant viennent gens, je cours et happe ung pot,  
 Au vin m'en fuis, sans demener grant bruit;  
 Je leur tens eaue, frommage, pain et fruit.  
 S'ilz paient bien, je leur dis: "Bene stat;  
 Retournez cy, quant vous serez en ruit,  
*En ce bordeau ou tenons nostre estat!"*

What if I love and serve the beautiful girl, / Ought you to take me for  
 a vile guy or a fool? / She holds fine and desirable goods. / For her love I take  
 up arms and helmet; / When men come, I run to fetch a chamber pot, /  
 I run for wine, without making much noise; / I bring them water, cheese,  
 bread and fruit. / If they pay well, I say "It stands firm; / Come back to us  
 when you are in heat, / *In this brothel where we keep our residence!"*

[...]

Puis paix se fait, et me fait ung gros pet,  
 Plus enflée qu'ung vlimeux escharbot.  
 Riant, m'assiet son poing sur mon sommet,  
 Gogo me dit, et me fiert le jambot.  
 Tous deux yvres, dormons comme ung sabot.  
 Et, au resveil, quant le ventre luy bruit,  
 Monte sur moy, que ne gaste son fruit.  
 Soubz elle geins, plus qu'un aiz me fait plat;  
 De paillarder tout elle me destruit,  
*En ce bordeau ou tenons nostre estat.*

Then we make peace, and she blows me a great fart, / swollen like  
 a venomous beetle. / Laughing, she taps my pate with her fist, / Gogo she  
 calls me, and tickles my thigh. / Both of us, drunk, sleep like logs. / On wa-  
 king, while her stomach makes a noise, / She mounts on me, to save her  
 fruit. / I groan under her, she flattens me more than a piece of plank: / She  
 ruins me with her bawdiness, / *In this brothel where we keep our re-  
 sidence.*

In the third stanza the bodily excesses are celebrated. Fat Margot,  
 burning with desire, mounts her lover who groans under her, and flattens  
 him like a piece of wood. The unrestrained activity of her bowels is

manifest in “she blows me a great fart” and “her stomach makes a noise”. And in the first stanza, the pimp-lover’s eagerness to provide for the clients’ needs, running to get them food or the chamber pot, suggests uninhibited but essentially joyous celebration of these acts in the outrageous fashion of the physically cruel, abnormal or obscene; so does his farewell to the clients “It stands firm; / Come back to us when you are in heat”. The predicate in the refrain, *we keep our residence* implies “living at a certain place” with connotations of high, respectable social status. Such connotations have an ironic relationship to *brothel*.

One could argue against this interpretation that in the culture of pimps and prostitutes all this involves no flouting of taboos, it fits perfectly into their system of values. Villon, however, was not only a pimp, robber and murderer, but a pimp, robber and murderer with a Master of Arts degree from the Sorbonne. He did not address his poetry to the underworld alone, but to the general public. This is clearly suggested throughout his *Great Testament*, where time and again he expresses remorse for having strayed from the “decent” set of values. But, above all, in the poem itself Villon takes measures to ensure that the outrageous elements of the poem are not sterilized. The poem’s world is not an unambiguous part of the world of pimps and prostitutes: The first four lines of the ballade conjure up the manners of courtly love; the speaker running to fetch a chamber pot for the clients comes as a surprise, unexpectedly, as outrageously as possible.

### Orifices and Excretions: Job’s Sufferings

One possible source of the grotesque is thus the pleasure derived from regression to certain kinds of experience experienced prior to the infant’s early socialization. One conspicuous facet is preoccupation with bowel movements, the chewing of food in the mouth, the excretions of the body, and its various openings, from the mouth to the anus. Elsewhere (Tsur 2003: Chapter 10) I have pointed out this principle in its full splendor in Hieronymus Bosch’s (?1450 - 1516) painting *Tree-man and buildings burning in Hell* from the *Garden of Earthly Delight* (triptych, right wing). Still elsewhere (Tsur, 2008: Chapter 17) I discuss the great eleventh-century Hebrew poet Ibn Gabirol’s poems that express his “grotesque illness”, taking pleasure in his wounds and pus. Such preoccupations are prevalent in literature of the grotesque kind, especially in the twentieth century. The Hebrew playwright Khanokh Levin’s absurd drama, for instance, abounds in excretions and human ori-

lices. Here I examine at some length two episodes (out of many), from *Job's Sufferings* by Khanokh Levin. The play begins at the end of a feast Job prepared for his guests.

Banquet in Job's house. End of the night. The guests lying around, stuffed, exhausted. Leftovers heaped on the tables.

**Job** What is a satiated man?

A satiated man is like a finished man, lost,  
 What can he hope for anymore?  
 Everything is blocked, completed,  
 Prostrate, sluggish, hardly breathing.  
 Feels that life weighs, indeed, heavily on the heart,  
 One cannot imagine more terrible despair;  
 From such a darkness the horizon can only brighten.

Job philosophizes here on the nature of satiated man in terms of bodily excesses, and presents his spiritual horizons and the understanding of his fate through the prism of bowel movements. Words that refer to the physical state of the body are frequently used as metaphors for a spiritual-psychological state. "Hunger" does not only mean "an empty stomach, lack of food" but also "strong desire, craving". Likewise "satiety" does not only mean "the state of being fed beyond capacity", but also "the revulsion or disgust caused by overindulgence or excess". For Job, the state of physical satiety is the realization of a metaphor, as it were—it is not merely the satisfaction of physical needs, but also the absence of desire, of craving, i.e., being sick of, in fact "fed up" with, the world. Consequently, a satiated man is "blocked" which actually means its opposite: "emptiness".

At this stage one may regard his words as mere ironic depreciation of human spirituality. What follows, however, throws the feast and its leftovers into a totally different perspective when the servant announces to his master that "the beggars request to approach the table". Job utters a pious blessing: "Blessed art thou, God, who nourishest all". This blessing suggests some form of cruel irony. What is said in a pious tone implies sarcastic defiance of God, poignant criticism of the outrageous social injustice prevailing in the world. It is not clear whether it is Job's irony, or whether Job was "perfect and upright, and one that feared God", and the irony is the implied author's. I suspect the latter. The details of the beggars' meal are grotesque to the extreme:

**Beggar** Only cracked and chewed bones  
Do you think this is the end of the meal? Wrong!  
There is no bone, cracked and chewed as it may be,  
That doesn't contain something more.  
[...] and you will be surprised  
How much fat and moisture there is yet.  
True, part of the moisture is  
Your spittle.  
But, precisely, sucking a bone  
That was in a sated person's mouth-  
Is not merely the bone, but also the pedigree (p. 58).

In seventeenth-century French salons, the domain of obscene words also contained such "vulgar" terms as marriage, to eat and to sleep according to the Dictionary of Abbé de Somaize ([1660] 1856) (quoted by Fónagy, 2001: 268). According to twentieth-century manners, talking about eating becomes "vulgar" only when instead of the general word "eat" people go into specific details about the processes taking place in their mouths. Children are taught to eat with their mouths closed, and not to chew audibly. Sucking bones in public, for instance, is strictly forbidden according to the decorum of table manners. In "polite" society, the rituals of eating are emphasized; attention is directed towards table manners and away from the processing of food in the mouth. The excerpt above violates all the prohibitions related to table manners, by placing crude emphasis on the cracking and sucking of bones. "Sucking" takes us back to the infant's feeding; the cracking of bones and its wetting with saliva follows Ferenczi's developmental process in reverse: the solid bone is cracked and pulverized, and then wet until it becomes a pulpy mass. The wet saliva draws attention to another excretion of the body that is prohibited in polite conversation.

Finally, the outrageous social gap is not presented as a "class struggle" for instance, between the hungry and the sated, but rather as self-deprecation of the lower class, grateful identification with the sated ruling class. This absurd state of affairs is translated into a concrete image of "sucking a bone / That was in a sated person's mouth- / Is not merely a bone, but also the pedigree". The manifest pleasure in chewing food that already has been in another person's mouth associates the pleasurable and the disgusting, a combination that may arouse emotional disorientation. Again, it is not clear whether it is the speaker's or the implied author's sarcasm; again, I would pick the latter possibility.

In such a case, the beggar is the very embodiment of the *condition humaine*?: we are looking down from a position of relative freedom and superiority at a person trapped in his lowest physical needs, unaware how lowly his condition is. He is thus a metaphor for us all, because we are prisoners of our base physical needs, and unaware of our condition. His situation is similar to ours, only much more extreme. Thus we become ironic observers and the victims of irony at the same time. In this case, we the onlookers, the observers, are but one, relatively high, link in the chain of beggars presented in this scene. The grotesque in *Job's Suffering*, and in many similar works, leads us to contemplate Man's fate and his place in the universe from a position of emotional disorientation.

It would seem that nothing could go lower than this low ebb. Superlatives cannot make us feel the possible dire distress of the human predicament. Their expressiveness erodes too fast and are easily perceived as "empty words". One of the inherent means in literature to efficiently evoke extreme qualities is graded comparison: this is so; this is more so; this is even more so. Khanokh Levin creates a pattern of repetition in which each upcoming situation reflects a lower level of existence than its predecessor. We are up against a parade of statuses: "beggars", then "beggars of beggars" and finally "beggarly beggars of beggars", who eagerly rush on the "second tooth" and "third tooth" bones. Here the grotesque goes beyond satire or grotesque defiance. The same is true of Job's pious blessing, "Blessed art thou, God, who nourishest all" repeated before every wave of beggars. The jumps to ever lower levels of the hierarchy of beggars are suggestive of the basest situations that the *condition humaine* may reach. This is not achieved by one sweeping superlative, but by descending from the lowest possible condition to an even lower one. The appearance of waves of beggars one after the other involves schematic repetition; and every new wave demonstrates the same thing: each time it would appear that we have reached a condition beyond which there can be no lower one; and lo, each time there *is* a lower condition. This is not merely an aggravation manifest in the *number* of times the bones are chewed, but also in the resulting state of the food in the mouth. In a sense, the food goes through a process of "increasing grotesqueness" in the mouth.

**Second Beggar** Second-tooth bones, leftovers  
 Of leftovers. No matter,  
 What was sucked twice, what sated twice,

Will not disappoint for the third time either.  
True, there is no marrow, no moisture,  
But, on the other hand, the bone is already damp,  
Soft and crumbling, pulpy indeed,  
Ready to eat (p. 59).

The bone that is "already damp, / Soft and crumbling, pulpy indeed", summarizes the reversal of the process discussed by Ferenczi, that is, from a solid object to a thick and viscous pulpy mass that is very disgusting, very much like feces. The pulpy state of the bones in the mouth is related to base physiological processes underlying the grotesque. "Polite" eating focuses on the initial stages and the end result of eating: having one's fill; but it is mandatory to attend away from the intervening stages. Infantile pleasure focuses precisely on the "forbidden" pulpy state. But now, after the two waves of beggars comes the last beggar:

**Beggarly Beggar** Empty. There is not even a bone.  
But even if there were,  
How would I crack it? I have no teeth.

Here we have reached a condition in which it is impossible to subsist. How, in spite of all, does survive a person in such a helpless state?

The basis for my nourishment is that sometimes  
One of the middle-class beggars  
Swallows his bone too hastily,  
A bone sticks in his throat and he throws up.  
The vomit I can eat without chewing,  
And also easily digest what is  
Already half-digested.  
And if I'm lucky, I find in the vomit  
A piece of what used to be a potato or beetroot  
(p. 60).

Here another kind of bodily excretion is added, perhaps the most disgusting kind: vomit. The conflicting emotional tendency derives from the blessing the toothless beggar finds in the vomit which too, after all, is nutritious organic matter-nutritious, and even already half-digested. The nineteenth-century Hebrew novelist Mendele Mocher Sforim achie-

ved a grotesque-satiric effect in his *Book of Beggars* by a "scientific" classification of the kinds of beggars, and regarding beggarhood as a vocation; Khanokh Levin's message is incomparably harder. Mendele achieves his satiric effect by endless enumeration of kinds of beggars. In Levin's play, by contrast, it is not the wide variety of beggars of more or less equal standing that creates the desired effect, but the plunge from one level of the beggar hierarchy to ever lower ones, to the lowest reaches in a universe in which "God is dead", and even if he is alive, his existence makes little difference. This scene celebrates bowel movements, excretions of the body and by-products of digestion in an uninhibited, outrageous fashion. But all this comes with what is incompatible with it: compassion.

The other episode I will discuss is the scene of Job's impalement.

- Officer** [angry, points at Job]  
 Will you spike him on the stake at last!!  
 [the soldiers spread apart Job's legs and bring the pole closer]
- Sergeant** Have you found the anus? Yes, in the middle, right.  
 The entrance to the ass, as it is said,  
 Even a blind man in a moonless night will find.
- Soldier** One can't miss the smell.
- Sergeant** And now insert it, thrust, yes, like that.
- Job** Ouch, my buttocks! my buttocks! O my God!  
 My buttocks! my buttocks! God, my buttocks!
- Officer** All the being of this man  
 Is now concentrated in his buttocks.  
 All the family ties, the instincts,  
 The feelings, the beliefs and ideas,  
 Are blended for him in an amorphous mush,  
 In a heavy fog, through which, like the light of a lighthouse,  
 The terrible pain in the ass flickers.  
 When the pale moves up into the bowels,  
 Like the fog, the pain in the ass dissipates too,  
 Making room for new centers of experience (p. 92-93).

The act of impalement provides an opportunity to concentrate on the anus, the smell, the bowels; and the suspension of boundaries between inside and outside: by thrusting the outer world via the anus into the bowels—briefly, all that Bakhtin considers as basically grotesque. At the



same time, these actions elicit a feeling of horror in the observer; or alternatively, a feeling of amusement and superiority, if he is able to impose sufficient psychic distance. According to Thomson, the grotesque emerges when the power of amusement and horror are balanced. The officer's "philosophical" attitude is yet another stance that is incompatible with the horror felt at the sight of thrusting the pole into Job.

We live in an infinite universe. But we are hemmed in a narrow space that is determined by our sensory and intellectual faculties. But not only, since we are also confined by our pains and distresses. The more painful our needs, the stronger our need to ignore what is beyond them. The officer points out this truth in relation to Job's impalement; the distress in his buttocks and later in his bowels is so great that his entire world is restricted to it. The observer may feel the horror by empathy and compassion, but also make an effort to establish some psychic distance. If he succeeds, he may achieve a state in which the horrible and the ridiculous co-occur.

In several of my writings (e.g. Tsur, 2008: 295-312; 2003: 55-86) I conceive of Man as a prisoner hemmed in by his narrow world. There I refer to Gordon D. Kaufman who suggested that people use "God-talk", that is, language in which such terms as *God*, or *the gods, angels, demons, the other world*, and so on occur "within the context of man's sense of limitation, finitude, guilt, and sin, on the one hand, and his question about the meaning or value or significance of himself, his life, and his world, on the other" (Kaufman, 1972: 46).

In this respect the idea of God functions as a *limiting concept*, that is, a concept that does not primarily have content in its own right drawn directly out of a specific experience, but refers to that which we do not know but which is the ultimate limit of all our experiences. [...] It must be observed that we [...] are also involved in a certain duality here, between what is in fact concretely experienced, and the limit(s) of all experience and knowledge (ibid., 47-48).

I put forward the argument that a wide range of literary styles deploy strategies to cope with this "hemmed-in" state of Man. Romantic and metaphysical poetry attempt to transcend the ultimate limit. One important feature of the *absurd*, by contrast, is the sense of human limitation "heightened, to any degree heightened", in a world in which "God is dead"; and, therefore, any attempt to transcend this world is utterly futile. In the beggars' scene and the impalement scene, human limited-

ness is heightened to almost unprecedented extremes. The grotesque in absurd drama in general, and in *Job's Sufferings* in particular, forces us to contemplate Man's fate and his place in the universe from a standpoint of emotional disorientation.

In the context of *Job's Sufferings* another brief comment seems pertinent, regarding "God-talk". In an absurd play, the word "God" need not occur to suggest a sense of Man's absolute limitedness in a Godless universe. But in this play God is the center of interest. With every wave of beggars Job utters the blessing "Blessed art thou, God, who nourishest all", and is eventually impaled precisely because he refuses to declare that God does not exist. But in Job's phrase "Ouch, my buttocks! my buttocks! O my God!" the word "God" has a completely different status. In his lecture "Brain and Language", Roman Jakobson (1980) pointed out that language and speech are typically related to the left hemisphere of the brain. There are, however, such verbal elements as interjections and exclamations, which permeate speech yet share the character of what one may call immediate signals. These "stand outside the general syntactic patterning of language, and they are neither words nor sentences. [...] semantically they are reduced to stereotyped affective expressions" (Jakobson, 1980: 23), and are typically related to the right hemisphere. In this context, Jakobson quotes an 1874 article by John Hughlings Jackson: "the communist orator did not really make a blunder when he began his oration 'Thank God I'm an atheist', for the expression *Thank God* is used by careless, vulgar people simply as an interjection" (ibid). This transformation of the word "God" suggests a fundamental change in Job's metaphysical world: from the metaphysical being "which we do not know but which is the ultimate limit of all our experiences", God becomes an emotive expression, an interjection, a mere scream.

### Epilogue

We have followed Ferenczi's deliberations regarding "the ontogenesis of the symbolism of money and gold", "the transformation of anal-erotic interest into interest in money" (Ferenczi, 1956: 270). According to Ferenczi, the infant goes through a complex process. At the beginning he takes pleasure in his feces, which is a thick, wet, viscous mass, with a certain characteristic smell. Over the course of his early socialization he is taught that it is disgusting, and that such pleasures are forbidden. In this process he is forced to be content with a series of substitutes from which the characteristics of filth disappear one after the

other: smell, wetness, crumbliness until, eventually, the adult remains with an interest in such solid, shiny, pure objects as silver, gold and gems, that "have no smell". In these objects, the pleasure principle and the reality principle meet at last, providing gratification of the senses and utility. As we have seen, certain varieties of the grotesque originate from the return of the arts to infantile pleasures by way of flouting a wide range of taboos. The combination of infantile pleasures and the shock caused by the violation of taboos generate the emotional disorientation characteristic of the grotesque.

The usefulness of theoretical models is seen, among other things, by their ability to account for phenomena which they were not, initially, meant to explain. Ferenczi proposed his developmental model to account for the psychological relatedness of gold and filth; I, by contrast, used it to account for the grotesque effectiveness of the return to preoccupations with chewed food, excretions and orifices of the human body.

Ferenczi claimed that even in the early stages of development there occurs a "return of the repressed" (*ibid.*, 273). It would appear that the grotesque is a more mature and more sophisticated, publicly acceptable, mode of the "return of the repressed". What is more, he argues that not only the grotesque, but the interest in rare odors, and even the interest in aesthetic pleasure has its roots in repressed anal-erotism. From this point of view, the difference is, perhaps, that in the case of the grotesque repression is incomplete.

Even the interest for the specific odour of excrement does not cease at once, but is only displaced on to other odours that in any way resemble this. [...] A special sublimation path of anal-erotism branches off from the smell of gas, asphalt, and turpentine: the fondness for substances with an agreeable odour, for perfumes, by means of which the development of a reaction-formation representation through the opposite is concluded. People with whom this kind of sublimation occurs often develop in other respects as well into aesthetes, and there can be no question that aesthetics in general has its principal root in repressed anal-erotism.

The meeting of values and gratification of the senses is further elaborated by Gombrich:

For what else is gold but the glittering, sunlike metal that never ages or fades? Or what else are jewels but gaily sparkling stones which do

not break? There was a time [...] when riches, economic wealth, could thus feast the eye, when the miser could enjoy the sparkle of his hoard, instead of having to admire balance sheets. The fact that wealth can no longer be seen, that it no longer provides direct visual gratifications, belongs with the many dissociations of value from immediate experience, which is the price we pay for our complex civilization.

Gombrich quotes evidence that, in certain circumstances, the glittering ornaments of gold and jewels on a shrine in a church could arouse mystic-ecstatic excitement in a believer. That is, in the appropriate circumstances, the glittering of gold and jewels could act as visual metaphors for the Kingdom of Light. In other words, the complex context makes it possible to realize the potential inherent in those treasures as a metaphor for spiritual values.



*Figure 2*

Rétaud, St Trojan, corbels from apse: two figures with legs pulled up to display their bottoms, one also pulling mouth open in a grimace (Kanaan-Kedar, 1995: 18).

Ferenczi, by contrast, as we have seen, relates the glittering gold and jewels, as well as aesthetic pleasure, to sublimation of anal aggression. Presumably, these are two sides of the same coin. Indeed, we need not dig very deep to discover anal aggression (with grotesque ingredients) even behind the saints depicted in the churches as, for instance, in the churches of twelfth-century France. Consider Figure 2, from Nurith Kenaan-Kedar's illuminating book (Kenaan-Kedar, 1995). Marginal sculptures like these were not displayed on the walls of taverns, but on the upper margins of church walls. Such marginal sculptures violate not only various kinds of taboos, but also the ideals of beauty. Moreover, these reliefs appeared over paintings and sculptures frequently set with gems and gold, that were intended to arouse religious awe. According to Ervin Panofski (quoted by Gombrich) gold and jewels may serve as visual metaphors for the Kingdom of Light but according to Ferenczi, at the same time, also serve as facet behind which, literally, anal aggression can hide.

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## INFANTYLNA REGRESJA. POGWAŁCENIE TABU I GROTESKA

### Streszczenie

Groteskowość podobnie do rodzaju i wielu innych estetycznych kategorii jest tym, co Wittgenstein nazywał „otwartymi pojęciami”, które zawierają w sobie cały szereg jakości, niektóre nachodzą na siebie, inne zaś nie dają się ze sobą pogodzić. Ten artykuł bada pewną podkategorię groteski zawierającą takie własności, jak infantylna regresja i pogwałcenie tabu z perspektywy Freudowskiej i Bachtinowskiej. Artykuł omawia sonet Baudelaire'a „Olbrzymka”, balladę Villona „Ballada o grubej Małgosi”, oraz dramat absurdu Khanokha Levina „Job's Sufferings”. Artykuł stara się odpowiedzieć na pytanie, dlaczego pewien typ poezji poszukuje estetycznej przyjemności w ekscesach cielesności, w otwieraniu ludzkiego ciała i w jego ekskrementach. Autor odpowiada na to pytanie przywołując klasyczne opracowania Freuda, Sándora Ferenczego, Bachtina i Gombricha, starając się oryginalnie rozwiązać ten problem.