Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich XXIII 2
PL ISSN 0084-4446

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THE GROTESQUE: ARCHEOLOGY OF AN ANTI-CODE

> Il n'y a pas d'énoncé qui n'en suppose d'autres, il n'y en a pas un qui n'ait autour de soi un champ de coexistence, des effets de série et de succession, une distribution de fonctions et de rôles.
> (Michel Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir*)

In both its aesthetic and vernacular senses, the grotesque stands at the crossroads between the canonic and the anarchic. It does not submit to norms and therefore escapes formal classificability; it is even a reaction to the normative although it may insert itself in networks of normative standards; it is the prototype of a carnivalesque art, and it draws essentially upon the inversion of official values even though it may often serve them.

The grotesque is an anti-code, not only because it escapes systematization, but especially because it never attains a statutory position. This is what distinguishes it succinctly from the monsters of canonic art such as the angel, the unicorn, the dragon, the basilisk and so forth. These fulfil an institutionally intelligible function beacuse they indicate canonic values and convey monovalent explanations and models. The grotesque, on the other hand, possesses a fundamentally proliferative character.

The object of this article is to explore these assumptions and to demonstrate in this connection that the category "grotesque" is in fact not in the form.

1. THE PROBLEM: AN OVERLOOKED PRESUPPOSITION

What conventional aesthetic theory and colloquial usage came to typify as "grotesque" generally referred to 1) an anti-mimetic art in which empirical impossibilities akin to those classical *adynata*[1] are strung together to produce an "uncanny" effect, and 2) forms of the monstrous that are ideologically *trivialized* and treated in a very different spirit from subli-

[1] See E. R. Curtius' discussion of the term in connection with the topos of the *mundus inversus* in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, New York – Evanston 1953, p. 95 – 98.

mated forms of the monstrous such as wonderful or magical animals. The semantic development of the word "grotesque" is particularly indicative of this discrimination.

Characteristically until the 19th century and positivistically ever since, aesthetic theory has either concentrated on the first point and ignored the second, or else dissertated from a perspective which was itself ideological without yet being aware of its own presuppositions. The tendency has been, especially since the 18th century, either to treat "grotesque" idealistically as foil to *nobler* art forms which stuck to the canons of the *sublime* and *beautiful*, to use a hackneyed Burkean phrase, and thus to discuss what it was not rather than what it was; or else to describe it through the etymological development of the term "grotesque" and hence to ignore whatever *grotesque* art was produced before the actual word "grotesque" came into use in current language; or again to diagnose it solely from the psychological perspective and include it indiscriminately within the general manifestations of the "uncanny" (*Unheimlich*); or yet to deal but with the finished product and to treat it merely as form.

Consequently, such fundamental questions as the susceptible discrimination in ancient Greek art between Apollonian forms of the monstrous emphasizing the rational principle of hierarchic order, and Dionysiac ones reversing it by suspending authority through the festive and ecstatic, as in Euripides' *The Bacchae*; or again, in the Middle Ages, the difference between the courtly treatment of such monsters as those allegorical birds of the medieval bird debate convention as, say, in *The Parlement of Foules*, and the trivialized anti-courtly treatment of the monsters of ape-lore in Gothic drolleries; such questions remain inresolved. Which categories of the monstrous have aesthetic theory and colloquial usage subsumed under "grotesque" and why?

Although the general agreement has been to use "grotesque" with "monstrous" since both display the same taxonomic characteristics, yet the levels of identification have been dramatically streamlined. The angel, for instance, though formally a monster—winged man— is not always ideologically apprehended as "grotesque." It will become clearer as we go along that the history of what is perceived as "grotesque" is a stock example of a form which becomes epistemologically intelligible and commonly stereotyped, by its presuppositions rather than by its outward shape. Concordantly, "grotesque" denotes a specific attitude which has been set within a vertical system of values.

We know that originally the word "grotesque" was simply derived from Italian *grotta* (cave) and by extension *grottesca* and *grottesco*, to designate the intricate wall decorations found in the chambers or "grotts" of the Roman buildings excavated around 1500, especially in the Domus Aurea of Nero, and in which human, animal and floral elements were

fancifully combined.[2] We also know that the earliest record of the word occurs in a "contract for certain fantastic designs which Pinturicchio was to paint at Sienna."[3] Here, "grotesque" is seen merely as a style of fanciful decoration. However, this immoderate interlacing of shapes, this jumbled interbreeding of forms, this art that defied the very laws of statics, became gradually associated in colloquial usage with objectionable absurdity, with displeasing and ridiculous distortion of nature, with unsual ugliness, ludicrous strangeness, terrible incongruity, wild and fantastic fearfulness.[4] And so, the term became established in its trivialized connotation. Yet, the form itself and the various attitudes towards it are much older than the use and diffusion of the actual word, and they may very well have conditioned its semantic contents.

The aesthetic trivializing of what was eventually called "grotesque" came to be identified in art criticism as the "Vitruvian view." Conceiving of the universe as a perfect geometric form, Vitruvius attacked in *De architectura* a non-official barbarian art in these terms:

> All these motifs taken from reality are now rejected by an unreasonable fashion. For our contemporary artists decorate the walls with monstrous forms rather than reproducing clear images of the familiar world. Instead of columns they paint fluted stems with oddly shaped leaves and volutes, and instead of pediments arabesques, the same with candelabra and painted edicules, on the pediments of which grow dainty flowers unrolling out of roots and topped, without rhyme or reason by figurines. The little stems, finally, support half-figures crowned by human or animal heads. Such things, however, never existed, do not now exist, and shall never come into being. For how can the stem of a flower support a roof, or a candelabrum pedimental sculpture? How can a tender shoot carry a human figure, and how can bastard forms composed of flowers and human bodies grow out of roots and tendrils?[5]

The accusing finger points to the lack of reason, to the absence of order and rules. Adherence to codes, assertion of what is unchanging, rational control: the directives are given from above. The mingling of heterogeneous elements in unfamiliar novelty, the telescoping of high and low, far and near, the figurative annihilation of space, this restless kinesis which did not conform to conventional order, was indeed seen as subversive from the authoritarian point of view. During the classical period this form never became dominant and was relegated to certain "low" non-classical areas, such as plastic comic art, as in the Kerch terracottas, comic masks, humorous vase decorations, figurines of the

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[2] F. K. Barasch, *The Grotesque: a Study in Meanings*, The Hague–Paris 1971, p. 16; A. Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature*, Oxford 1965, p. 1; W. Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, Gloucester, Mass., 1968, p. 19.

[3] Barasch, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

[4] Clayborough, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

[5] Quoted in Kayser, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

demons of fertility, popular statuettes such as those of the little monster Tersitus.[6]

Later in the Middle Ages (about 1125), Bernard de Clairvaux, the austere founder of the Cistercian monastic order, disapproved of some cloister decorations in these terms: "what profit is there in that ridiculous monstrosity, a marvellous kind of deformed beauty and beautiful deformity?"[7] Bernard de Clairvaux is here referring not to sublimated monsters such as the unicorn symbolizing Christ, or the phoenix symbolizing Resurrection, or again the basilisk standing for death, but to monsters conceived in a very different spirit far from awesome: a spirit of the ridiculous. It is the introduction of realism or of comedy into religious art that Bernard de Clairvaux objects to.

Non-conformity and ridiculousness were the two trivializing criteria retained to denote "grotesque." In his *Essais* (1580) Montaigne perceived it in these terms:

> Considerant la conduite de la besongne d'un peintre que j'ay, il m'a pris envie de l'ensuivre il choisit le plus noble endroit et milieu de chaque paroy pour y loger un tableau elabouré de toute sa suffisance; et le vuide tout au tour, il le remplit de crotesques, qui sont peintures fantasques n'ayant grace qu'en la variété et estrangeté. Que sont-ce icy aussi à la vérité, que crotesques et corps monstrueux, rappiecez de divers membres, sans certaine figure, n'ayants ordre, suite ny proportion que fortuite?[8]

Already Cotgrave's *A Dictionnairie of the French and English Tongues* (London 1611) described grotesques as

> Pictures wherein (as please the Painter) all kinds of odde things are represented without anie peculiar sence, or meaning, but only to feed the eye.[9]

By the end of the 17th century and especially with the advent of Neo-Classicism, "grotesque" both as a colloquial and an aesthetic term became normalized in its pejorative connotation.

Dryden viewed it with moral smugness, placing it among the lower subjects of art:

> There is yet a lower sort of poetry and painting which is out of nature; for a farce is that in poetry, which grotesque is in picture. The persons and action of a farce are all unnatural and the manners false, that is, inconsisting with the characters of mankind [...] Laughter is indeed the propriety of a man, but just enough to distinguish him from his elder brother with four legs. 'Tis a kind of bastard pleasure too, taken in at the eyes of the vulgar gazers, and at the ear of the beastly audience. Church-painters use it to divert the honest countryman

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[6] See M. Bakhtin's comment on the matter in *Rabelais and His World*, Cambridge, Mass., 1968, p. 30–31.

[7] Quoted in W. Farnham, *The Shakespearean Grotesque, Its Genesis and Transformations*, London 1971, p. 1–3.

[8] Quoted in Clayborough, *op. cit.*, p. 3–4.

[9] *L.c.*

> at public prayers, and keep his eyes open at a heavy sermon [...] The better sort go thither too, but in despair of sense and just images of Nature, which are adequate pleasures of the mind.[10]

In a letter written on 10 October 1718 to Lady Rich, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu tells her: "These grotesque daubers give me a still higher esteem of [...] natural charms." "You have employed yourself more in Grotesque figures than in Beauties," deplored Steele in the *Tatler* (1709). "All the designs I have chanced to meet of the temptations of St. Anthony were rather a sort of odd, wild grotesques, than anything capable of producing a serious passion," sneered Burke in 1756.[11]

In the 18th century, Frances Barasch reports, the

> polite readers of contemporary journals were cautioned against grotesque behavior of all sorts. Participation in masquerades, like attendance at opera, was especially proscribed: "Would any parent wish his child to frequent an entertainment which consists of a large number of persons of both sexes in masks and antick dresses, where the principal conversation consists in abusive raillery and obscene discourse convey'd in whispers with [...] music and dancing to assist the designs of young fellows in their amours [...] The king has shown a noble contempt for *Italian* operas by discouraging them as much as he can" ("On Masquerades", reprinted from *The Craftsman* in "Gentleman's Magazine" XVII, January 1747).[12]

Even if in the 18th century, and in spite of a prevailing prudishness, the taste for the *grotesque* succeeded in becoming the "reigning Taste of the Age" and in flourishing in mitigated form in caricature, it was allowed such licence out of fastidious mannerism, as in a fad where involvement is parapersonal and aiming at effect rather than experience. The form of adoption remained highly rationalized: *grotesque* was but a pet craze. In this connection, one instantly senses the flirtatious dilettantism of the title of William Horsley's essays published in the "Daily Gazetteer" in 1748: *The Fool: Being a Collection of Essays and Epistles, Moral, Political, Humorous and Entertaining.*[13] Of course, the collection was a bantering one on the history and character of the Fool, a traditionally "grotesque" character. The lavish use of the *grotesque* was rooted in an attitude of facetious teasing in middle- and upper-class ideology. It was allowed to exist liberally, but as a diverting mental escapade in an ocean of official stiff-necked rationalism. It was justified by its value as foil to endorse this rationalism: it was *Entertaining*, but not without being also *Moral*; it was *Humorous*, but also prudently *Political*. Tergiversating between heart-whole licence and hidebound censorship, between tolerant humanensess and doctrine-feeding, this literature of cautious secular tonality drew its values from a pattern of double-faced moralizing.

[10] J. Dryden, *Essays* II, 132–33. Quoted in Barasch, *op. cit.*, p. 125.
[11] Quoted in Clayborough, *op. cit.*, p. 6, 10, 5.
[12] Barasch, *op. cit.*, p. 98.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 99.

Much 18th- and 19th-century critical approach to the grotesque is coloured by the trivializing bias. Even Victor Hugo, the Romantic writing in an age of revolt, presented this time an argument of *excuse* on behalf of the grotesque, considering it as a necessary foil without which the sublime and the beautiful remain imperfect:

> On a besoin de se reposer de tout, même du beau. Il semble [...] que le grotesque soit un temps d'arrêt, un terme de comparaison, un point de départ d'où l'on s'élève vers le beau avec une perception plus fraîche et plus excitée.

The "beautiful" then is the aesthetic norm from which the grotesque is a deviation. Walter Bagehot reiterates the same view on his *Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning: or Pure, Ornate and Grotesque Art in English Poetry*:

> An exceptional monstrosity of horrid ugliness cannot be made pleasing, except it be made to suggest – to recall – the perfection, the beauty, from which it is a deviation.

The semantic shift from a simple name-tog for an unconventional style of decoration to a word laden with valve-judgments, and namely with hostility towards the unconformable character of such an art, is revealing about the socio-ethical system which endorsed and routinized such an interpretation. It is that the grotesque is a promiscuous art which mingles incongruously beyond conventional canons. In its pure form, it denies the qualitatively hierarchical and taxonomic. It could hence be exploited as a viable means for subversive socio-aesthetic designs. Significantly in the Romantic period, at a time of social ferment and bubbling innovation, nonconformists and rebels could see in the grotesque a possibility for "artistic freedom and the overthrow of cramping conventions." In his reaction against the hyper-rationalized industrialization of the 19th century, Ruskin tried to recuperate the form on its positive level. In his distinction between the "true" and the "false or ignoble" grotesque (*The Stones of Venice*, 1851–3, XLV) he attacked the "workman of the ignoble grotesque" for he "can feel and understand nothing, and mocks at all things with the laughter of the idiot and the cretin" (*ibid.*, XXXIX). The "true" grotesque on the other hand is a pleasing distortion of nature, inspired by a sense of playful emotion:

> It is not as the creating, but as the *seeing* man, that we are here contemplating the master of the true grotesques. It is because the dreadfulness of the universe around him weighs upon his heart, that his work is wild; and therefore through the whole of it we shall find the evidence of deep insight into nature. His beasts and birds, however monstrous, will have profound relations with the true. He may be an ignorant man, and little acquainted with the laws of nature; he is certainly a busy man, and has not much time to watch nature; but he never saw a serpent cross his path, not a bird flit across the sky, nor a lizard bask upon a stone, without learning so much of the sublimity and inner nature of each as will not suffer him henceforth to conceive them coldly. He may

not be able to carve plumes or scales well; but his creatures will bite and fly, for all that. The ignoble workman is the very reverse of this. He never felt, never looked at nature.[14]

In the 20th century the tendency has been to explain the grotesque through the semantic development of the word or to use it indiscriminately with the monstrous. We find this method developed in the quoted studies of Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, of Arthur Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature*, and of Frances Barasch, *The Grotesque: a Study in Meanings*. A major taxonomic analysis of monster forms in general was undertaken a few years ago in France by Gilbert Lascault. His impressive *Le Monstre dans l'art occidental* attempts to classify all anti-mimetic forms of the "m" (monster) genera. However, when he tried to draw up a list of the different types of monsters in art, he discovered by his interminable yet far from exhausted table of monster items, that one could not impose without reservations a Cartesian classification on a form which powerfully disaffirmed all Cartesian streamlining. The monster simply ignores formal repetition:

> Par sa définition même, le forme monstrueuse échappe en effet aux autres modes de détermination rationnelle, habituellement utilisés. Ecart par rapport à la nature, refus d'être l'imitation d'une réalité naturelle préalable, elle ne peut ni être comparée à cette réalité, ni être classée en fonction d'un ordre des images parallèles à l'ordre des réalités imitées (portraits, natures mortes, paysages). Distincte de l'être verbal, de la contradiction ouverte définie par Spinoza, elle ne peut être l'objet d'une étude purement logique qui en dénoncerait les caractères contradictoires. Opposée au monstre naturel, elle échappe aux critères d'une classification *tératologique*. Distincte du monstre moral, du Mal incarné, elle est diversement valorisée et ne saurait, en elle-même, recevoir une signification non ambigue grâce au jugement éthique d'un sujet libre.[15]

While emphasizing the limitations of the Cartesian method, Lascault equally realized that the actual aesthetic production of a monster did imply a rationality which could therefore be submitted to a formal classification. This method should then be utilized only as an instrument of clarification: it allows us to organize an apparently anarchic field. Only with these reservations in mind can we start cataloguing. And Lascault has 64 items on his list of which the most familiar ones are: humanized animals, bestialized humans, bestialized plants, animated inanimate, monsters by transformation of size, monsters with overdeveloped, underdeveloped or multiplied limbs.[16]

Undoubtedly a taxonomic analysis is important. Yet, in such a dynamic art as the *monstrous*, taxonomy reckons but with surface effects and takes epiphenomena for causes: the distinction between one form and another is merely depicted; it remains, however, to be explained.

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[14] Above quotations after Clayborough, *op. cit.*, p. 45, 44, 13, 14.

[15] G. Lascault, *Le Monstre dans l'art occidental*, Paris 1973, p. 115–116.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 115–175.

2. SOME AXIOMS OF IDENTIFICATION

The first observation that I propose to make towards an identification of the grotesque, is that there are no fixed and constant axioms except in a very general sense that apply to the grotesque as distinct from the monstrous, but that they become dramatically distinguishable relatively to the culture in which they have a function, the culture which gives them their relevance, distinctiveness and operativeness. An angel, to take my previous example, was not conceived as "grotesque" by people in the Middle Ages, but may, anachronistically be seen and represented as such by a Dadaist. Tribal magic and totemic teratology are sacred to the savage mind but they may appear trivial to a mechanical engineer. So, form and ideological presupposition cannot be dissociated in a definition of the grotesque.

The ideologico-formal system of the grotesque in contrast with that of wonderful monstrosity as, say, in the Holy Ghost image or in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* is founded on 3 inseparable axioms of identification:

1. A sense of *being there*, a corporeality. The grotesque dramatizes brute physicalness. From Saturnalias through gargoyles, chimères, Rabelais' Gargantua and Pantagruel, Swift's Yahoos, to Jarry's Ubu and Kafka's Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*, the material principle of the body is potently emphasized. Hence, a character like Shakespeare's Falstaff, though not specifically an *adynaton*, an empirical impossibility, may yet be rated as grotesque. For we are told, his is

> a "monstrous body" in the tradition of grotesque animal and man-animal figures [...] in him the beast is not by any means all beneath the girdle. It penetrates so far into what is above the girdle that it helps to make him the sensual man, the natural man *par excellence*. [His bovineness gives him] a lively understanding of his own grotesqueness as man and beast together and of its relation to a general human grotesqueness with reaches of high and low even greater than his own.[17]

2. A sense of *degradation*, the naturalistic desecration of what is apprehended as rational or sublime. In *The Shakespearean Grotesque* Willard Farnham refers, for instance, to a Gothic drollery which turns a knight on a horse into a comic simian figure burlesquing "the close and apparent indecent likeness to man."[18]

3. A sense of the *ridiculous* whereby monstrosity is shown and perceived not only as monstrous, but above all as ridiculously monstrous, that is to say conducive to laughter or to contempt or to diffidence or to all, as with Bernard de Clairvaux who objected to a *trivialized* type of monstrosity (*ridicula monstruositas*) in grotesque cloister decorations.[19]

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[17] Farnham, *op. cit.*, p. 50, 55, 68.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 13.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 1–3.

Yet essentially the grotesque, like the monstrous in general, is an anti-mimetic structuring dynamic which breaks the familiar code of nature, which interprets and transforms it in order to produce an aesthetically estranged and ideologically revealing new code: fish may now grow feet and genitals, frogs may paddle with pendant breasts, apes may become learned scholars. The monster has created its own code by an act of uncoding. The outcome is a multiplicity of combinations: animal-plant, man-beast, man-bigger-than-man (giants), man-small-as-thumb (Lilliputians), bleeding stones, severed living limbs, metamorphoses, telescoped creatures with legs growing out of head or mouth in belly, talking beasts, ravenous plants; one can go on *ad infinitum*, nor is it possible to set up an exhaustive classification of this ever inventive and highly dynamic art.

What is specifically significant in a study of the grotesque (though this need not apply merely to this art) is not, strictly speaking, an image with certain components which identify it as "grotesque"—ape-mandrake, snake-toad, man-bull, multi-headed monster, phallus on back, foot growing out of ear—but the ideological process which selects and joins an ape to a mandrake, a snake to a toad, a man to a bull, many heads to the same body, a phallus to a back, a foot to an ear. And this act of uncoding familiar reality (or natural) codes in order to build new ones, cannot be said to represent one single ideology, but rather expresses itself in a global context of mediated ideologies containing the very movement of history with its continuity and ruptures, traditions, archaic models and new models.

In this manner we can speak of a number of grotesque variants belonging to the same *breed* and expressing the same ideological tendencies, such as gargoyles, grylles and chimères. Or we may trace the development of the same grotesque image, as that of the congenial giant, say Rabelais' Grandgousier, Gargamelle, Gargantua, Pantagruel, converted a few centuries later into the frightening giant, say Swift's ambivalently rationalized giants of Book II of *Gulliver's Travels*, before whom the tiny Gulliver can now experience only terror and estrangement. We may investigate the influence of scientific paradigms in the making of a grotesque as in H. G. Wells' adaptation of Social Darwinism to science fiction in *The Time Machine* or in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. We may also observe a systematic and militant creation of grotesque anti-codes as in the movement of Dadaism.

The questions one should ask about the grotesque in general are not only the how of the form, but also the what and why. What is for example the ideological dynamic involved in the creation of an anamorphosis, that forceful ejection of forms outside themselves to produce an optical illusion which disappears to restore the initial coded order when seen from a specific angle? Why is the code unhinged here only to be scrupulously conserved? Furthermore, from the sociological perspective,

what is the connection between this art and the technical use of the mirror?[20] Furthermore yet, what types of anamorphoses belong to the wonderful, and what are the types that belong to the grotesque? We can thus scan the literature in which the grotesque appears and proceed with our critical questionnaire. What is the intention of the author of *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* when in his accounts of voyages to strange lands he invents monsters (things "deformed against kind both of man or of beast or of anything else") with no heads and with their eyes in their shoulders, or men with ears hanging down to their knees, or other with huge lips to cover their face with, or folk with horses' feet, or in the Valley Perilous serpents with crests upon their heads, with their throat open from which they always drop venom, and why do grotesques suddenly disappear when the author starts describing the religious cities of Jerusalem, Galilee and Nazareth?[21] What is the ideological significance of Edmund Spencer's investment of anti-social forces in the Blatant Beast in the *Faerie Queene*, and why does he confront it in battle with Sir Calidore, a Knight of Courtesy (with emphasis on "courtesy")? What are the values that the author is championing in this arrangement? What is the function of the (grotesque) dance of pygmies in Ben Jonson's *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue*? What is this ideological perspective which makes our playwright place this antimasque just before the elegant dances of the gentry at the end of the masque? Why is there a need to contrast the grotesque *low* (literally: pygmies) with the polished *high*? Why does Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* make the beast (the horses of Houyhnhnmland) rational and congenial, and man (the Yahoos: versions of the Noble Savage turned vicious) irrational and monstrously repulsive?

What are the ideological presuppositions in such *Verneinung*, such malaise? The grotesque, as I pointed out earlier, breaks the code by introducing in it intensities that disorganize paradigmatic contiguities. But here, the artist at the same time negates (*verneint*) his connection with this structural disruption. We recall Freud's explanation of this phenomenon in *Der Wizt* where he analyzes the type of malaise involved in the telling of the obscene joke: the narrator laughs at his own verbal obscenity, thereby negates it and by the same token clears himself from violating the laws of propriety. There is in other words a return of the repressed without, however, a recognition of it: the narrator tells the joke in spite of its obscenity—in fact, *because* of its obscenity—but then he reintegrates himself into the repressed order by negating this very obscenity. So, on one hand the code is disrupted and on the other it is frauduslously restored.

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[20] See J. Baltrusaitis, *Anamorphoses ou magie artificielle des effets merveilleux*, Paris 1969.

[21] I am referring to the Cotton Manuscript version. Quotation p. 32.

In the production of a grotesque this self-conscious process may have many faces. Its structural aspects may be summed up as follows:

1. A grotesque can be *subversive* when it overthrows the foundations of a normatively repressive order to bring forth a code that positively affirms its own grotesqueness. Charles Fourier, the 19th-century French utopian, provides us with an interesting illustration. Attacking the reductionist *laissez-faire* of bourgeois rationalism in France, he invented a perfected utopian society based on an intensified eudemonism and harmony, in which perfected utopian man would possess a sixth sense called "archibras": a mutation in the shape of a tail ending with an eye heightening his naturalistic pleasure of the world.[22] The grotesque here overthrows the repressive (in Fourier: destructive) social code and proceeds with critical transcendence through the looking-glass. That lucky tail becomes the utopian grotesque principle which auspiciously *degrades* man from a harmful social rationalism to affirm his undaunted materialism.

2. A grotesque can be *invertive* when it simply transposes the code by turning it upsidedown as, for instance, in the topos of the *mundus inversus*. Ernst Robert Curtius provides us with some examples. In the *Carmina Burana* "cattle talk; the ox is harnessed behind the cart; capital and pedestal are interchanged; an ignorant fool becomes prior." In John of Hanville's *Architrenius* the Hill of Presumption is the scene of the world upsidedown: the turtle flies, the hare threatens the lion. In Chrétien de Troyes, the dog flees from the hare, the fish hunts the beaver, the lamb the wolf: "Si vont les choses à envers." And famous, of course, is Théophile de Viau's poem on this conception of chaos, expressed with surrealistic force:

> Ce ruisseau remonte en sa source;
> Un boeuf gravit sur un clocher;
> Le sang coule de ce rocher;
> Un aspic s'accouple d'une ourse;
> Sur le haut d'une vieille tour
> Un serpent deschire un vautour;
> Le feu brusle dedans la glace;
> Le soleil est devenu noir;
> Je voy la lune qui va cheoir;
> Cet arbre est sorty de sa place.[23]

3. A grotesque can also be *interruptive* when it neither subverts nor inverts, but merely upsets the code without breaking it. Here, there is only a circulation of the grotesque inside the code. In Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* for instance, or in Jean Genet's *Le Balcon*, *Les Nègres* and *Les Paravents*, the grotesque is powerfully inflated to call down execration

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[22] Ch. Fourier, *L'Archibras*. Reprinted from "La Phalange" (August 1848) in "La Brèche, action surréaliste" 7, December 1964, p. 69–70.

[23] Curtius, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

on the code without however succeeding in annihilating it. Actually in *The Metamorphosis* it is the grotesque, the anti-code, which is finally destroyed, and in Jean Genet there is no effective change: the grotesque was but a ceremony; the end remains closed. This grotesque is of the order of blasphemy: it curses God while still recognizing his existence.

3. THE TWO FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE GROTESQUE

Distinguished from those forms of the monstrous from which brute materiality has been expurgated, yet itself belonging to the monstrous, the grotesque, as I have argued, has been patently coloured by specific ideological attitudes which have given it its identity. From this perspective its general theoretical aspects can be made intelligible by just a few basic axioms. Broadly speaking, we find but two ideologico-formal patterns in grotesques: one in which *adynata* — empirical impossibilities — exist in conflict, one form challenging the other, and another in which there is no conflict and where *adynata* endorse each other. The ostensibly incomplete character of this art, the unstable movement of one form into the other in a constant state of becoming are founded on two principles of *continuity* and *discontinuity*.

The category of *continuity* refers to an ideology motivated by relations of integration, polyvalence, interchangeability and in which material elements are conceived in terms of inclusion and extension. The category of *discontinuity* refers to an ideology motivated by relations of fragmentation, specialization, vertical projection and in which material elements are conceived in terms of exclusion and reduction. There are broadly speaking but two types of grotesque: a) a *grotesque of continuity* which positively integrates rational and sub-rational, and b) a *grotesque of discontinuity* which mingles material elements only to stress their disconnectedness: spiritual separated from material, mind from body, man from beast, high from low, noble from trivial, sky from earth, intellectual from sensual.

In his remarkable study of the Rabelaisian grotesque, Mikhail Bakhtin underlined the principle of degradation contained in that art: "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity."[24] The *grotesque of continuity* positivizes or glorifies this degradation; the *grotesque of discontinuity* ambivalently negates this degradation. Significantly, the *grotesque of discontinuity* finds expression in sharply rationalized forms of discourse in which relations are seen in terms of computed space and selective discrimination: higher — lower, farther — nearer, better — — worse. The *grotesque of continuity* articulates itself in encyclopaedic forms of discourse in which relations are treated in terms of intensity and universality: bigger — smaller, wider — narrower, more — less.

[24] Bakhtin, *op. cit.*, p. 19 — 20.

We can in this connection speak of a sublimated grotesque (discontinuity) and of a materialistic one (continuity). On the level of the implied world view in such forms, we may call the first Apollonian and the second Dionysiac, though by its very nature the grotesque is Dionysiac. On one hand, there is a consciousness of order and discrimination; on the other hand, the receptive wholeness of being. In the first one security and centrifugal preservation; in the other centripetal licence and collective celebration. In its attempt to recapture the wholeness of material being beyond particular types of social fragmentation, the Dionysiac grotesque may be said to be utopian, that is to say, transcending ideology while dialectizing it. Conversely, and by its very nature, the Apollonian grotesque endeavours to conserve ideology: here the dialectic remains concentric. Rational selectiveness and discontinuity prevent any harmonious integration of socially opposed forces in the grotesque form. This produces an effect of negative valorization through satire, exacerbation or rejection as in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, to use our old example, where the human never comes to terms with the bestial, even though the human is inextricably linked with the bestial. In the Dionysiac grotesque monstrous elements are mutually endorsing in positive valorization, through a comic and open-ended vision as in Rabelais' *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*.

Surely the most characteristic illustrations of the two ideological attitudes are strikingly exhibited in the grotesque treatment of the humanoid beast. In the animal image is invested a significant amount of libidinal and ideological economy. For complex cultural reasons which have to be analyzed individually, the identification of the animal with the subhuman has commonly been taken for granted. Time and again the image has been used to stigmatize the subrational in favour of the rational and to show the inferiority of the first to the second. The tendency has been to expurgate the animal principle. In Christian ideology, for instance, man's allegedly middle state below the angels and above the brutes, places him in a strategic position which is ethically and intellectually demanding. The moral didacticism of the medieval Church was concerned with providing man

> with illustrations warning him of what he would become if, instead of elevating his soul, he submitted to the base desires of the body. Since the Aristotelian view that the inner characteristics were exemplified by the outward physical form was widely held, the animal, both by virtue of its position in the Chain of Being and its appearance, served as a most appropriate metaphor for human corruption. Roger Bacon quoted the passage from Boethius in full when he was considering the seven deadly sins, and the *Ancrene riwle*, the first English work to portray the sins as animals, referred to the lion of pride, the serpent of envy, the unicorn of wrath, the bear of sloth, the fox of covetousness, the swine of greediness and the scorpion of luxury.[25]

[25] B. Rowland, *Blind Beasts: Chaucer's Animal World*, The Kent State University Press, 1971, p. 19.

Because of its resemblance to man, because it is imperatively biological, because it can become a threat to rational order, because it can also be used to subvert this rational order, the animal is perfectly suited to the grotesque. Characteristic of this view is the history of ape lore. The tradition survives in our popular literature in the Abominable Snowman, King Kong and the Planet of the Apes. Because of the animal's glaring position as a threatening counterpart to man, it was easy to see it as a deformed image of man in a state of degeneracy. Nor was it surprising, notably in the 12th and 13th centuries at a time of growing humanism, to find much interest in the *mind* of the ape. The burning question was: is he as rational as man? In *De animalibus* Albertus Magnus accepted *ratio* as the supreme test for distinguishing man from the brutes. The ape was declared *naturae degenerantis homo* and intimately associated in the official Christian view of transcendental redemption with the sin of *superbia*, the desire to be like God, and with the Fall of Man, both of which are concepts of degree of high and low.

In *Apes and Apelore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* H. W. Janson reports a pertinent allegorical fable about the ape entitled "against the proud ones who want to be like God," from the *Speculum sapientiae sancti Cirilli*, a collection of animal stories dating from the 14th century:

> An ape sees a sailor climbing a mast and tries to do the same against the advice of the raven. He becomes dizzy, falls, and injures his neck so that he can never again raise his eyes toward heaven. Then he seats himself on the king's throne and is reproached for his presumption by the fox, but pays no attention for the warning until he is thrown off and badly mauled by dogs. The fox accuses him of being the only animal that refuses to accept the common fate of being subject to Adam, and of trying to be like man. The ape admits his ambition and justifies it with the claim that he resembles man more than any other animal, but the fox replies that this similarity is perverted, that the ape is the ugliest of all beasts and that his pride makes him *turpior Deoque dissimilior*. He advises the ape to submit to man's will, because in return man will feed him and cover his "shameful parts" with a garment.[26]

The fable articulates a condescending *Weltanschauung*: one must not try to be superior to what one is. This rule is reinforced by the repeated violent maiming of the transgressor. He is an impostor who oversteps his bounds; he must therefore be penalized and made to accept his subservience with due modesty and submission. The emphasis here is on rank and on a vertical arrangement of relations, consolidated by a coercive ideology. To make a clean sweep of the subject's presumption in violating an undue position in an established hierarchical order, the libidinal pulsations are effectively kept under control: the "shameful parts" must be hidden. Implicitly, the conservation of a hierarchical *status quo* requires

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[26] H. W. Janson, *Apes and Apelore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, London 1952, p. 110.

integral abnegation from the lower ranks. *Discontinuity* here operates on all levels.

As a related point of comparison, let us mention the pastoral. We can say that in attitude and form the pastoral stands in diametrical opposition to the grotesque. For, if the grotesque is the dynamic materialization of the social, the pastoral is its entropic idealization through sublimation of the animal by avoidance and omission: there are no wolves, no foxes, no apes, no vultures, no imperatively present animal principle either in its positive or negative form. The pastoral utilizes above all idealized ungulates, images of the double domestication of domestic tendencies and of the intellectualization of sensual impulses. This mode ambivalently ennobles the popular classes—shepherds in fact behave like nobles—and replaces carnal appetite by spiritual *appetition*, a strongly subdued craving.

A comparable process of abstraction takes place in magical animals. The phoenix, the centaur, the unicorn, Pegasus, the siren, the sphinx, the griffin and like prodigies are an attempt to recuperate the animal, but within the realm of the rational. These beast images are reintegrated subliminally and above all guiltlessly into the imagination because they are unreal. Characteristically, magical animals can never be used for satiric purposes for they are not commensurate with man and consequently cannot affect him socio-ethically. The levels of identification are totally removed: there can be neither *continuity* nor *discontinuity* between one principle and another.

The grotesque of continuity operates on fundamentally different principles. Probably one of its most representative examples is to be found in Rabelais. The Rabelaisian grotesque is maximized by interconnected levels of carnivalesque exuberance, an orgasmic type of linguistic debauchery, and the triumphant celebration of the earthiness and universality of life. Following an aesthetic process that can be described paradoxically as *anti-mimetic naturalism*, this grotesque seeks no power over nature, in other words no separation from nature, but rather it draws power in, with and through nature. Anti-mimesis and naturalism in Rabelais are mutually endorsing, as they reinforce the utopian character of his work. Anti-mimesis means the rejection through grotesque degradation of the official "serious" culture, and of the spiritual symbolism of the medieval Church. Naturalism means the recuperation of a more authentic reality, that of folk culture and humour, and the positive materialism of the human body. The Rabelaisian grotesque is by this token affirmative and open-ended.

But this art is itself embedded in a rich folk tradition of carnivalesque humour and popular festive forms, as Mikhail Bakhtin has ingeniously demonstrated. Among the popular ceremonies of extreme licence which influenced Rabelais, were the Feast of Fools and the Feast of the Ass

which came down from the Roman Saturnalias and which existed in the ritual of the Church from the 11th century to the Reformation. They "taught in symbol that the superiority of the rich would not last forever. There would be some day of compensation when the clergy and laity would be equal."[27] This was expressed through riotous and obscene songs and dances, and through irreverent masquerades in honour of a temporarily elected pope or archbishop of fools. A general atmosphere of carnivalesque impiety prevailed over a crowd of people disguised in grotesque attire, playing games of dice and eating sausages on the high altar of the cathedral while shoe leather was burned for incense. Defecation played an important role in the ritual of the Feast of Fools. "During the solemn service sung by a bishop-elect, excrement was used instead of incense. After the service the clergy rode in carts loaded with dung; they drove through the streets tossing it at the crowd."[28] The Feast of the Ass illustrating the flight to Egypt, was another of many occasions of folk carousing. There an ass was watered and fed and then taken to the nave where the congregation, in a state of gay inebriation, danced around the beast and imitated its braying. These ceremonies were exempt form any form of contempt or emotional distancing. The people were wholly integrated in the dynamic movement of the world around them, as the sublime and frozen in religion became naturalistic and human.

Likewise, a wide-eyed earthiness dominated the popular grotesque of early Gothic architecture. The image that comes to our mind is that of gargoyles, those water-spouts in the shape of effigies of monsters, holding supposedly live animals in their mouth such as a suckling pig, a fox or a hare. According to Emile Mâle, these gargoyles which were also the main attraction in medieval processions, contained no symbolism whatsoever and represented no particular ethical values.[29] In other words, meaning here is subordinated to form; what is seen is more important than what is conveyed. In the same period, forms of the magical could be spontaneously materialized: during medieval processions, for instance, dragons, large enough to house several men, were paraded through the streets. The relation with the animal could be seen as familiar and intimate. In fact in the popular medieval tradition animals were often treated as human beings. One knows about those trials where animals were put on the rack to confess their sins: "Officers of the law considered themselves able to read the confession in the cries and groans of the beast."[30]

The animal remains the material principle in which man recognizes his subrational desecration and his attachment to the body. With plants

[27] L. B. Bridaham, *Gargoyles, Chimères and the Grotesque in French Gothic Sculpture*, New York 1930, p. XI.

[28] Bakhtin, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

[29] Mentioned in Bridaham, *op. cit.*, p. XIV.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. X, XII.

the distance is too big: a plant cannot be seen as an obvious continuum of man for it does not communicate, nor walk, nor fornicate, nor eat and even if it does it shows no appetite; it possesses no *being there*. In Grandville, who developed the man-plant *bizarrerie*, the discussion between a potato and an asparagus for example is merely childish and contains no subversive force whatsoever. Unless plants develop a certain corporeality, say they become ravenous or concupiscent, they can only be seen as a minor or secondary transformation of the grotesque. And here, the mandrake may offer much opportunity for its treatment as grotesque precisely because of its physical resemblance to man.

On the other hand machines can be conceived as grotesque because of their activity and energy which, although non-organic, recall and above all exceed human organic activity and energy. But machines do not only exceed human power, they especially do so arbitrarily and inflexibly, unhampered by socio-ethical laws. In the 19th century at a time of accelerated industrialization, we see the emergence of a mechanical grotesque. Didier de Chousy's *Ignis* (1883) provides a peculiar example of it. A passage in the book tells of how the once industrious and obedient sewing machines of an assembly line suddenly turn to viper-like demons spitting venom, joined in a silent carnivorousness, with the drunken females of the "species" snarling obscenities. The picture is preposterous.[31] It is above all grotesque because it is bestialized. As a contrast to Chousy's wild machines we can point at Isaac Asimov's sublimated robots, tied to the three "Laws of Robotics" whereby they are made incapable of revolting or harming man.[32] This idealism of course places them in a different category from that of grotesques.

4. NEGATIVE AFFIRMATION: THE SATIRIC CONNECTION

The grotesque of discontinuity is teleologically satiric; the grotesque of continuity may be said to transcend satire. Though formally the grotesque of discontinuity affirms its own *being there*, ideologically it negates it. This negative affirmation drew generic value from satire, nor is the connection purely fortuitous.

Satire necessarily arises out of contempt towards an object of scorn, and makes a disapproving comment *on* the world: such is its nature. Its historical development however expressed essentially different tendencies. How does for instance the medieval satirist compare with the Elizabethan, the Elizabethan with the neo-classical, the latter with the Romantic and so forth? In his analysis of this evolution Alvin Kernan

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[31] Quoted in P. Versins, *Encyclopédie de l'utopie, des voyages extraordinaires et de la science fiction*, Lausanne 1972, p. 170.

[32] I. Asimov, *The Rest of the Robots*, London 1964, p. 69.

pointed at the "mask of the Plowman" (Piers) of the English medieval satirist: the assumed idealized mask of the pious, honest and humble countryman. This universalized figure of the "plain man with plain morals addressing plain people in plain terms on plain matters," emerged as the moral prototype adopted by the satirist in a world of increasing social conflict and discontent at the corruption of the old order. Then, the satirist did not satirize in his own name, but in that of an ideal. The mask of the Plowman was therefore a screen which concealed his personality. So that if the satirist removed himself from the world by satirizing, he reintegrated himself on the other hand by identifying with this prototype. His distancing was thereby neither too conspicuous nor too assertive. The medieval satirist in fact evaded his own personality by dissolving it into the whole: his comment was at once a comment *on* the world and *in* the world. This integration was possible because the medieval satirist found in his communal and traditional society, ideological points of reference like the Plowman ideal which gave him an official mandate.

The Piers Plowman figure acquiring in the course of time many names was retained as a type. "Colin Blowbol, Cock Lorel, Roderick Mors, Colin Clout, Jack Napes, and Jack Upland are all satiric personae who, as their plain, country names suggest, are proliferations of the Piers type," writes Kernan.[33] Yet, after the Middle Ages the relation of satirist to satire and indeed to his world became problematic, for he now functioned in a context of independent socio-economic relations with an individualized system of interpretation of the world. Kernan's remark that in Elizabethan times the satirist developed a *satyr* personality which spoke in *his* name is revealing about the new type of ideology which became articulate.[34] Two points must retain our attention: the development of a *personality* as such and the association with *satyrs*.

Personality meant that satire become a self-conscious art. The association with *satyrs*, thought of by the Elizabethans as coarse and goatish creatures, meant that satire was allowed an uncensored freedom of expression while exonerating the satirist himself for using "crude" language. The *satyr* figure stood both as pretext and justification. At the same time the choice of that figure itself meant the adoption of a definitely more aggressive approach. This ideological structure was reinforced by the Elizabethans' own attitude towards it. Satire was placed within a disparaging hierarchy and considered as an inferior form of discourse. It was thought that it dealt exclusively with the foolishness of man, that the subject matter was therefore base and necessarily required a base style. On the other hand, since satire was associated with a wanton creature

[33] A. Kernan, *The Cankered Muse: Satire of the English Renaissance*, New Haven 1959, p. 42–43.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 140.

with a tail, half-man, half-goat, it was thought that "harsh meters, coarse language, and frank descriptions of the most unattractive kinds of vice" were the befitting idiom for such creatures.[35] And the satirist felt he had to apologize for his crudeness. So did Spenser:

> No Muses aide me needes here too to call:
> Base is the style, and matter mean withall.
> (*Mother Hubberd's Tale*, l. 43–44)

Self-conscious embarrassment, heightened hostility, increasing detachment from the object of satire: such were the tensions of the new individualized attitude. The attack was thus effected not through a figure of the Piers type which stood as an ideal social model, but through an ambivalent persona, half-beast half-man, which was utilized as an excuse. The medieval satirist spoke through the Piers mask for the Piers ideal, univocally; the Elizabethan satirist spoke through the satyr impersonation against the satyr values, equivocally. The relation of the satirist to his art had become problematic. Though he was uneasy about the "baseness" of satire, he yet was obliged to use such a medium. He learned that he could not be innocent and that he had to express himself through vice against vice. In this manner his expression could only be *grotesque*.

Self-consciousness and grotesqueness in satire reached of course their apex with the misanthrope satirists: the Thersites, Timon and Gulliver figures. The misanthrope is by definition outside the world. He is the solitary world-hater who in his scabrous unsociability has lost all ideological points of reference. He has no situation or mandate, for he defends values that should be in society but that do not exist anymore: his only alternative is scowling rejection.

5. A PROVISIONAL CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to establish merely an archaeology of the grotesque. It consisted in demonstrating that, as a basic assumption, it is not possible to conceive of a meaningful theory of the grotesque without a theory of ideology(ies). The categories employed to define the subject must by no means be taken arbitrarily, but rather generally, for they refer to a multitude of forms which should themselves be considered within changing historical contexts. At this stage, these points must remain working hypotheses which only a detailed analysis of various works of the grotesque can confirm. Hence the task of the critic must be to investigate the interconnections between the evolution of this art and other genres, forms and *topoi* of anti-mimesis such as arabesques, anamorphoses, metamorphoses, bizarreries, the utopia of the Land of

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 58.

Cockaigne, the *fatrasie* and the *fatras*, the *galimatias*, aberrations, the *mundus inversus*, the *sermons joyeux*, bestiaries, the fantastic, various types of parody, caricature and science fiction teratology.

In a global perspective however, this introduction to the grotesque should lead to the fundamental problem of critical theory: that of the dynamic interaction between empirical world and aesthetic expression and interpretation, that of art and literature as products and extensions of organized, controlled, selected, distributed and changing systems of social discourse.

GROTESKA
PREHISTORIA PRZECIWKODU

STRESZCZENIE

Kategorii groteski nie można określać po prostu jako sprawy formy. Jako zjawisko natury estetycznej kształtuje się ona na płaszczyźnie zmieszania z elementami nacechowanymi „monstrualnie" (zresztą bardzo często jest produktem zmieszania różnych składników). Groteski nie można opisać inaczej niż poprzez ukazanie związków z systemem określonych wartości ideowych.

Historyczne ujęcie idei groteski wskazuje na nią jako na wyraźną degradację natury, na odwrócenie walorów normalnie estetycznie akceptowanych oraz na inwazję elementów cieleśnie trywialnych. Groteska jawi się jako dynamiczna struktura „antymimetyczna", przy czym dekodowanie konwencji mimetycznych zasadza się na wyraźnej krytyce norm obowiązujących w naturze i w społeczeństwie, podobnie jak na odrzuceniu zasad funkcjonujących w sztukach kanonicznych (klasycznych).

Opierając się na dużym zespole przykładów historycznych wywodzących się z dawnej tradycji średniowiecznej (Rabelais'go, co dowodnie wykazał Michaił Bachtin), z Jonathana Swifta, Charlesa Fouriera, a wreszcie Franza Kafki i Jeana Geneta, praca obecna proponuje wyróżnienie dwóch kategorii groteski. Są one wyznaczone przez ich funkcje ideowe, podobnie jak poprzez pewne cechy immanentne. A oto owe dwie kategorie groteski:

a) groteska kontynuacji (ciągłości) zasadzająca się na dynamice „karnawalizacji" integrującej substancję racjonalną i irracjonalną,

b) groteska antykontynuacji, która polega na degradacji tego, co bywało akceptowane, na atakowaniu uznawanych wartości.

Groteska kontynuacji ma w sobie coś z założeń dionizyjskich oraz niektórych form utopii libertyńskich. Natomiast groteska antykontynuacji odgrywa poważną rolę w satyrze; rola ta polega na waloryzacji składników trywialnych i animalnych z równoczesnym ich zaprzeczeniem (*Verneinung*).

Rozprawa prowadzi do wniosku, że groteska jest równocześnie formą uznania dla ideologii (idei), jest także historią wyobrażeń społecznych; teoria ta uchyla również pogląd sprowadzający groteskę wyłącznie do zabiegów formalnych.

Przełożył *Jan Trzynadlowski*