Rabelais and His World

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[7] See H. Reich, *Der Mimus, ein literarentwicklungsgeschichtlicher Versuch*, Berlin, 1903, pp. 507–598. Reich interpreted the hag figurines superficially in the naturalistic spirit.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[9] A colloquial Russian expression for strong and coarse abuse. (Translator's note.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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