

The Carnavalesque and Contemporary Narrative: Popular Culture and the Erotic

LINDA HUTCHEON,
McMaster University.

The revalorizing of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin today does not appear to be based on his particular insights into particular author's works. Instead it is the general suggestiveness and even the incompleteness of Bakhtin's theories that have attracted critical attention. It has been suggested, for instance, that contemporary narrative illustrates even more clearly than does Dostoevsky's fiction the polyphony and dialogism that Bakhtin so prized.¹ Perhaps we can go one step further and argue that fictional narrative forms today are, in fact, a very extreme and self-conscious version of the novel as defined by Bakhtin. And this is true even within the limitations of Bakhtin's very selective notion of the genre² as parodic, self-reflexive, and non-monologic.

Metafiction, one of the predominant forms taken by the novel today, is decidedly characterized by ironic intertextuality or parody: we at once think of the works of John Fowles or John Barth and their overt historical evolution from prior literary forms. Bakhtin had argued: "La prose romanesque europeenne nait et s'elabore dans un processus de traduction libre (transformatrice) des ceuvres d'autrui."³ He also felt that the novel was unique as a genre in its ability to internalize or constitute a self-criticism of its own form." The novel he valued so highly for its "auto-critique du discours,"⁵ *Don Quijote*, is the direct forbear of the contemporary metafictional investigations into the relation of discourse to reality. Furthermore today's autorepresentational novels are even more overtly and functionally polyphonic in structure and style than Dostoevsky's work ever was. Although, for many complicated reasons, Bakhtin never chose to

¹ Pierrette MALCUZYNSKI, "La Fiction neobaroque aux Ameriques: 1960-1970," unpublished dissertation. McGill University, 1981.

² The most trenchant critique of Bakhtin so far on this point has been that of George STEINER, "At the Carnival of Language," *TLS*, 17 July 1981, p. 800.

³ *Esthetique et theorie du roman*, trans. Daria OLIVIER (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), p. 193.

⁴ *Esthetique*, p. 444.

⁵ *Esthetique*, p. 224. See too Robert ALTER, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-conscious Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

consider more modern fiction, his personal, restricted range of reference need not hamper the rest of us, for the work of many contemporary novelists reinforces rather than contradicts his arguments. As David Hayman has argued, we must work to concretize and specify Bakhtiri's suggestions and methods.⁶

Lyotard has called our contemporary postindustrial, developed West a "postmodern" world, one which appears to be suffering from a lack of faith in systems which require extrinsic validation." All of our art forms - not only fiction - seem obsessed with "autocritique," distrusting external criticism enough to choose to internalize their first critical commentary as a way of short-circuiting the normal critical relationship. They overtly query the separation of art and reality, drawing the reader/viewer/listener into and through the looking-glass of their aesthetic identity. Modern metafiction exists on this self-conscious borderline between literature and life, making little formal distinction between the co-creating reader and the author. Were we to substitute spectator and actor for these two agents we would find ourselves with Bakhtin's definition, not of the novel (especially not of the modern novel), but of the mediaeval and renaissance carnival.⁸ This second, joyous, inverted world, he claimed, existed in opposition to official, serious, ecclesiastical culture, just as modern metafiction contests the novelistic illusion of the realist dogma and attempts to subvert a critical authoritarianism. The ambivalence and incompleteness of contemporary novels recall the similar qualities of the carnival and of the Romantic grotesque, as defined by Bakhtin. In a novel like Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, the social and literary inversions are typically carnivalesque: the religion of the spirit gives way to the religion of the flesh, complete with its own saints (sexy movie stars) and sacred texts (pornography and sex manuals). The official church discourse - specifically that of prayer and of the Jesuit chronicles - is paradoxically inverted in form and content. There is a specific and wholesale transfer from the elevated, spiritual, ideal plane to the material and bodily reality of life.

Bakhtin, however, devalued this more modern usage of parody: "in modern times the functions of parody are narrow and unproductive. Parody has grown sickly, its place in modern literature is insignificant. We live, write and speak today in a world of free and democratized language: the complex and multi-leveled hierarchy of discourses, forms, images, styles that used to permeate the entire system of official language and linguistic consciousness was swept away by the linguistic revolution of the Renaissance."⁹ But surely our cultural forms today have become even

⁶ - Au-dela de Bakhtine," *Poetique*, 13 (1973), p. 76.

⁷ Jean-Francois LYOTARD, *La Condition postmoderne : rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Minuit, 1979), p. 7.

⁸ The discussion here is drawn primarily from Bakhtin's introduction to *Rabrlais and His World*, trans. Helene ISWOLSKY (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968).

⁹ "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse;" in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael HOLQUIST, trans. Caryl EMERSON and Michael HOLQUIST (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 71.

more parodic and self-reflecting than ever. Perhaps, *pace* the (understandably, safely) Marxist, utopian Bakhtin, we do not live or write today in a linguistic context that *is* free and democratic. Certainly the radical Italian poets and novelists of the early sixties, whose rallying cry was *asetnanticita*, led an attack against what they saw as the linguistic reification caused by bourgeois neocapitalism.¹⁰ If our language today is democratized, it would only be in the sense that it has been bureaucratized. But then the battle would still be one against an official language - meaningless babble (Babel).

Yet, despite the limitations of Bakhtin's view of modern, post-Renaissance literature in general, many of his observations on the early carnival are surprisingly appropriate and illuminating with regard to the contemporary aesthetic and social situation; and there are, perhaps, historical reasons for this ready adaptability. Contemporary metafiction exists - as does the carnival - on the boundary between art and life, denying frames and footlights, making, as we have seen, little or no formal distinction between actor and spectator, that is, between writer and reader. Its form and content both also operate to subvert formalistic, logical, authoritarian structures. The ambivalent incompleteness of contemporary fiction also suggests, perhaps, that the mediaeval and modern worlds may not be as fundamentally different as we might like to think. The carnivalesque inversions of norms could well share with subversive metafictional challenges to novelistic conventions a common source: feelings of insecurity in the face of both nature and the social order. Fear is the emotion that contributes most to the power and seriousness of official culture, according to Bakhtin. Today we live in fear of the consequences of what our forefathers unironically called "progress" - urbanization, technology, and so on. Demonic machines and the ephemerality of the plastic are obsessions of more than our literature today.

Bakhtin suggested that one response to this fear was the creation of "popular-festive" forms which allowed temporary respite, in the shape of temporally restricted, legalized transgressions of social and literary norms. Today we call this folk culture "pop." However, there is one extremely significant difference between modern pop culture and the mediaeval folk forms described by Bakhtin. It has been argued that Bakhtin overvalued the positive elements of the carnival as a reaction against the prevailing discredit of popular cultural forms. Though he talks of ambivalence, his focus is always on the positive, ultimately to the detriment of the complexity of the popular forms.¹¹ We have not yet witnessed what Bakhtin, in his optimistic enthusiasm, predicted: "the victory of all the people's material abundance, freedom, equality, brotherhood. The victory of the future is ensured by the people's immortality. The birth of the new, of the greater and the better, is as indispensable and as inevitable as the death of the

¹⁰ See, for example, the collections, *Il romanzo sperimentale* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1966) and *Gruppo 63* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1964).

¹¹ David HAYMAN, "Au-dela de Bakhtine," pp. 77,81,82,84.

old."¹² Our contemporary pop culture, for all its admitted vitality, still appears to represent, instead, our increased alienation. Poets such as Leonard Cohen deliberately become pop singers in an attempt to reach the people, but even then, ironic pessimism replaces Bakhtin's optimistic utopianism. His positive valuation of ambivalence and incompleteness often becomes negativized today and these change into anarchy and confusion.

In fact, all of Bakhtin's positive readings - of birth and death cycles, of the community of the people, of the inverted order - somehow do not quite ring true to today's pop culture. Instead we find an inverted but demonic world of folly, pain and confusion, one that Northrop Frye has labelled as "ironic." Frye's definition of this particular mode of literature parallels Bakhtin's own, but the valorization is more negative or, some would say, more realistic. In Frye's words: "it is all very well to eat, drink, and be merry, but one cannot always put off dying until tomorrow."¹³ Bakhtin's ideal community of the people, according to Frye's ironic vision, becomes a society "held together by a kind of molecular tension of ego, a loyalty to the group or the leader which diminishes the individual."¹⁴

Nevertheless, we appear to be at an "ideological watershed," to use Robert Scholes' term,¹⁵ one comparable to that at the end of the middle ages and at the start of the renaissance. But that confidence in human modes of knowing, understanding, controlling, even surviving seems to be lacking today. Along with this has disappeared our ability to establish with any sureness hierarchies of values, either aesthetic or social. The elitism on both of these levels that characterized literary modernism - its respect for form and craft, and also for both reason and psychological "truth" - has been challenged by what we now call postmodernist literature. The conservative value of control has given way to what some feel to be anarchy and randomness.¹⁶ Certainly one of the most manifest forms of contestation of modernist elitism and academicism has been the attempt on the part of recent fiction to destroy the Arnoldian, nineteenth-century separation between high and low culture, restoring to literature "an awareness of the sexual-, racial-, and class-content (and function) of all art."¹⁷ The social and intellectual gap between author and reader is closed or at least lessened by a novel which overtly acknowledges that it only exists insofar as (and while) it is read. Typical of this new kind of high/low self-reflexive

¹² *Rabelais*, p. 256.

¹³ *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1970), p. 235. Interestingly enough, Frye's corpus is almost identical to Bakhtin's: especially *Rabelais*, Menippean satire, and other encyclopedic forms.

¹⁴ *Anatomy*, p. 147.

¹⁵ "On Realism and Genre," *Novel*, 2 (Spring 1969), p. 269.

¹⁶ For extended treatment of this difference, see Gerhard Hoffmann, Alfred Hornung, Rudiger Kunow, "'Modern,' 'Postmodern' and 'Contemporary' as Criteria for the Analysis of Twentieth-Century Literature," *Amerikastudien*, 22 (1977), pp. 19-46.

¹⁷ Manfred PUTZ, "The Struggle of the Postmodern," *Kritikon Litterarum*, 2 (1973), p.233.

fiction is the work of Tom Robbins: there are two epigraphs to his *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, one from William Blake and one from Roy Rogers. If all the arts are part of the same culture today, it is because the popular arts have become internalized, incorporated into the serious forms, democratizing the class-inspired hierarchies of an earlier time.¹⁸ This is, in a sense, a variation of Bakhtinian carnivalesque formal inversion and triumph of "the people." In Susan Sontag's words, for the new (post 1960s) sensibility, "the beauty of a machine or of the solution to a mathematical problem, of a painting by Jasper Johns, of a film by Jean-Luc Godard, and of the personalities and music of the Beatles is equally accessible."¹⁹

The novel today has been the art form that has most obviously turned to pop art for this democratization and potential revitalization. This is not surprising since the novel itself was one of the first middle-class or popular forms of literature. Like Bakhtin's "popular-festive" folk forms, the pop art used in contemporary fiction is subversive of elitist, high-brow concepts of literature: we find comic books, Hollywood movies, popular songs, pornography, and so on being used in novels. However, these transgressions of literary and social norms remain legalized by the authority of the genre's elastic conventions, just as pop art is made popular, not by the youth who buy it as much as by the authorities that manipulate their consumption - the New York publishers and marketing experts who both precensor and peddle, the multinational record companies, and even the commercial radio stations.²⁰

The novel that incorporates high and low art forms is another variant of what Bakhtin valued in fiction, the dialogic or polyphonic. For instance, Tom Robbins inverts the literary and social conventions of the popular Western genre to give us the Rubber Rose Ranch - "the largest all-girl ranch in the West" - a citified New York Indian, and a very un-chaste and un-manly concept of (*cowgirl*) love as lesbian sexual play. Similarly the celibate cowboy and his horse relationship that is at the core of the heroic Western is subverted, in Robert Kroetsch's parody in *The Stud-horse Man*, by Hazard Lepage's obsession with fertility. Margaret Atwood's incorporation, in *Lady Oracle*, of the structures and conventions of both the "costume" gothic or popular romance, and modern, hermetic, serious verse, works in much the same way as does Bakhtinian parody in its motivation and form, its authorized subversion of social and literary

¹⁸ On this relation of class to art forms, see Raymond WILLIAMS *Culture and Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1960), pp. 124-37, and more generally, Richard HOGGART, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957). See too Stuart HALL and Paddy WHANNEL, *The Popular Arts* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 39, especially.

¹⁹ "One Culture and the New Sensibility," in her *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell, 1967), p. 304.

²⁰ My polemic here is against Leslie Fiedler's sixties-intellectual's recuperation of pop art as a subversive product of youth's hostility to order in "Cross the Border - Close that Gap: Post-Modernism," in Marcus CUNLIFFE, ed., *American Literature since 1900* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1975), pp. 359-62 in particular.

norms. The same is true of Hubert Aquin's use of the structure of the popular spy story in *Prochain episode*.

Yet critics have felt profound uneasiness in dealing with pop forms: Clement Greenberg was typical in his response, dismissing it as "kitsch." Bakhtin's revalorizing of folk forms, however, provides us with a somewhat more productive critical context, one which is sorely needed, for today we are faced with self-reflexive forms of fiction which internalize the structures of more popular art forms as a way of activating in the reader both a self-consciousness about the literariness and fictiveness of what he or she is reading and also a subsequent acknowledgement of the value of such creative and ordering aesthetic processes.²¹

Among the most widely used forms of popular literature are detective stories²² (Borges, Robbe-Grillet, Nabokov) and fantasy or science-fiction (Calvino, Carpentier, Borges). These are highly conventionalized forms which become actualized or structuralized models within meta-fictional works, models which act as narrative clichés that signal to the reader the presence of textual autorepresentation. Another form that acts as a model is that of pornography, a popular art that makes critics even more uneasy than ever; but it is precisely this erotic form that Bakhtin's insights on the carnival illuminate best.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin focussed on the significance of the "material bodily lower stratum" in Rabelais's work: its obsessions with bodily apertures (and thus with the processes of eating, drinking, defecating, and urinating) and with sexual organs. Much contemporary fiction - and not just metafiction using a pornographic model - would seem to share these obsessions. Subversion often takes the form of so-called perversion in these works. When a contemporary novelist seeks to shock, he has to turn to anal and oral sex. This reflects, of course, our slightly more liberal attitudes to genital sex today, but it also recalls the carnivalesque obsession with bodily openings. But, as argued earlier, the positive evaluation of Bakhtin becomes itself inverted today; or at the very least, it becomes ironized. The scatology, blasphemy, and obscenity of word and deed in Rabelais were not, Bakhtin argued, merely abusive; they were representations of irrepressible vitality and freedom. And they were ambivalent, as Bakhtin insisted but then conveniently ignored, placing his full emphasis on the positive: any stress on bodily function signified both a protest against official decorous culture and a triumph of life over death. What contemporary novelists have done is restore the negative pole of Bakhtin's ambivalence, while retaining the positive, though on another level of textual realization, as we shall soon see. Images of physical sterility tend to dominate today: miscarriages, abortions, onanism, homosexuality.

²¹ See Linda HUTCHEON, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980).

²² See also Michael HOLQUIST'S fine study, "Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Post-War Fiction," *New Literary History*, 3, 1 (Autumn 1971), pp. 135-56.

What Severo Sarduy called the "natural bodily dialogue" is denied.²³ But, there is a positive pole that makes the erotic a truly ambivalent model: if reproduction ceases to be the aim of sex, pleasure takes over... especially the displaced "plaisir du texte" of the reader.

There are other positive forms of this model, however, besides this hermeneutic one. The synthetic image of the hermaphrodite, for instance, as a basic binary system, as an ultimate ambivalent manifestation, occurs frequently: Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckenridge* and *Myron*, or Brigid Brophy's *In Transit*. The obsession with fertility in Kroetsch's *The Studhorse Man* is also ambivalent. The women, *Martha* and *Marie*, are both linked to the perfect fertile *mare* that Hazard Lepage seeks. The double French pun on both *mère* (the male narrator's name is Demeter) and *mer* (the stud's name is Poseidon) recalls ambivalent mythic tales of death and rebirth. In the end the great stud's sperm is ironically but symbolically used to artificially inseminate mares for economic profit: pregnant mares' urine (P.M.U.) is used in the manufacture of birth control pills.

Much self-reflexive fiction using a strictly pornographic model, however, does tend to suggest the more negative pole of the ambivalence which Bakhtin detected in verbal and narrative sexuality and scatology. Perhaps this is because of the very existence today of PORN, that is, of a conventionalized popular erotic model, for pornography is clearly an exploitive mode, as feminists have made us aware. But contemporary meta-fictionists tend to displace this aggression, or rather to make it ambivalent: seduction and aggression are ambivalent inversions of each other, and symbolic of other levels of subversion.

A good illustration of this ambivalence is to be found in the work of a writer who has received much revived critical interest lately: William Burroughs.²⁴ In such novels as *Naked Lunch*, *The Soft Machine*, *Nova Express*, and most recently, *Cities of the Red Night*, Burroughs's attack on language, narrative form, and on social, sexual, psychic, and political structures is embodied in a novelistic world that is carnivalesque in its inversions of those contested norms. *Naked Lunch* presents the "second world" of the carnival exiles, here the junkie and the homosexual; it is a world where death and sickness are the norms. Rabelais's joyous descriptions of bodily functions take on a decidedly negative cast here as lymph glands "swell and burst in suppurating fissures, drain for days, months, years, a purulent stringy discharge."²⁵ Sickness and homosexuality both

²³ "El barroco y el neobarroco," in César Fernández Moreno, ed., *América latina en su literatura*, 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1974), p. 181.

²⁴ Proof of his new status is perhaps his inclusion by Henry Blake in "Le Post-modernisme américain", in *Tel Quel*, 71-73 (1977), pp. 174-76: "Les textes de Burroughs ne représentent pas les expériences d'un drogue, les profondeurs d'un sujet précis. C'est déjà ce collage discours-dreck, aux yeux des post-modernes, la civilisation du discours" (p. 176).

²⁵ *Naked Lunch* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 53. Other quotations will be from this edition and page numbers will appear in parentheses in the text.

are linked, not only to drug addiction, but also metaphorically to political and economic power structures. The Bakhtinian connection of sex, birth, and death reappears but in a rather Sadian vision that Burroughs called a satire against capital punishment as obscene, barbaric, and disgusting (p. xlv): here a woman and two men enact a hanging, complete with cannibalism, necrophilia, and self-immolation, in what we discover later to be a stage "blue movie" (pp. 88-103). Similarly Bakhtin's notion of the ideal continuity between nature and body, the stress on process and transformation (to the point of a certain lack of physical distinctions) becomes negatized. His positive description of grotesque ornaments that express "the inner movement of being itself... the passing of one form into the other, in the ever incompleting character of being"²⁶ is reminiscent in an ironic way of Burroughs's "Complete All American De-anxietized Man" who is presented to the Meeting of the International Conference of Technological Psychiatry: "The Man wriggles.... His flesh turns to viscid, transparent jelly that drifts away in green mist, unveiling a monster black centipede" (p. 104). Burroughs also describes a drugged state in similar terms: "I feel myself turning into a Negress, the black color silently invading my flesh" (p. 109). Leonard Cohen described a similar process and final image in *Beautiful Losers*, when all characters merge into two main figures, a female Isis and a male victim/hero, complete with colour transformations (red to white, and white to black) and what can only be called ontological changes (human to movie projected against the sky).

Cohen, like Burroughs, also links life and death, but unlike Bakhtin, it is through negative images of torture and sex: exhausted after bizarre, mechanical sex, F. and Edith are bathed by a Hitler figure with a bar of human soap. In *Naked Lunch*, there is a guard in "a uniform of human skin, black buck jacket with carious yellow teeth buttons, an elastic pull-over shirt in burnished Indian copper, adolescent-nordic-sun-tan slacks, sandals from calloused foot soles of young Malayan farmer" (p. 57). Similarly, in both novels, scatology and pornography are linked to power and perversion. Burroughs's narrator addresses his "Gentle reader" to describe a spectacle whose ugliness "buggers description": "Who can shit on a fallen adversary who, dying, eats the shit and screams with joy?" (pp. 39-40). Instead of being vital and life- (or at least pleasure-) producing, sex is mechanical and unsatisfying: Burroughs's "Automat Handy Man" and Cohen's D.V., or Danish Vibrator.

Despite this more ironic, even negative, treatment of Bakhtinian ideas, Burroughs himself makes frequent mention of the carnival-like quality of some of his scenes. A man can actually work in a carnival in *Naked Lunch* when he manages to teach his asshole how to talk ("The human body is scandalously inefficient. Instead of a mouth and an anus to get out of order why not have one all-purpose hole to eat *and* eliminate?" [po 131]). At another point a "Carny" pitchman asks us to "Step right up, Marqueses and Marks.... The one and only legit *Son of Man* will cure a young

²⁶ Rabelais, p. 32.

boy's clap with one hand - by contact alone, folks - create marijuana with the other, whilst walking on water and squirting wine out his ass" (p. 113). The obsession with the oral and the anal and the mockery of religion both recall Bakhtin's mediaeval carnival.

These same ingredients are not unique to Burroughs. Andy Warhol's *a* shares the orifice-orientation, so to speak.?? But it is Norman Mailer's early work that comes to mind first, perhaps, both because of its Burroughs-like anti-authoritarianism and its mixing of scatology, murder, rape, incest, and anal intercourse. After killing his wife, Steve Rojack, the hero of *All American Dream*, buggers her German maid: "There was a high private pleasure in plugging a Nazi, there was something clean despite all."²⁸ Rojack is obsessed with his physicality: „I was so far into the fevers of fatigue that the bourbon resolved a majestic route down through my chest, the congestions of my lungs, the maze of my belly, those peppered links in my gut" (p. 94). But there is little of the joy and celebration of Rabelais here.

Although Rojack's TV show is called, as this novel could be, "a carnival of bad taste which violates the canons of dignity" (p. 167), the inversion in Mailer's world, while subversive, is not really ambivalent. Rojack's aim in life is to father a child, yet his women always end up dead or belonging to others. After his wife's death, he wants to assert life, yet chooses anal intercourse. He then fantasizes a trio of sex with his father-in-law and the maid: "three of us to pinch and tear and squat and lick, swill and grovel on that Lucchese bed, fuck until our eyes were out, bury the ghost of Deborah by gorging on her corpse" (p. 254).

There are more ambivalent versions of the modern carnivalesque, but even they are not without this negative emphasis. Amanda, the heroine of Tom Robbins's *Another Roadside Attraction*, believes in birth, copulation and death: her husband chants: "Rhythm. Birth, growth, death. Rhythm. Creation, evolution, extinction. Extinction is part of the natural rhythm of the universe,"²⁹ But Amanda's unborn foetus is prematurely expelled and she herself almost dies. Robbins too is interested in carnival forms. In this novel it is the Indo-Tibetan Circus run by Nearly Normal Jimmy. In *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, he even offers a new etymology for the word carnival to replace what he offers as the original - *carne levare* - which he regards as "Poppycok, Balderdash. And flapdoodle. In other words, bullshit."³⁰ He offers instead an origin Bakhtin would have approved, claiming that, since the carnival was a Catholic

²⁷ (New York: Grove Press, 1968), p. 21: "Would you like to be RIMMED? Oh, I, I don't mind it, yknow, it's as nice as anything else, but certain days I guess my asshole must have a special flavour."

²⁸ (New York: Dial Press, 1965), p. 44. Other quotations will be from this edition and page numbers will appear in parentheses in the text.

²⁹ (New York: Ballantine, 1971), p. 83.

³⁰ (New York: Bantam, 1976), p. 309. Other quotations will be from this edition and page numbers will appear in parentheses in the text.

adaptation of "an ancient pagan whoopededoo, the Festival of Dionysus," the root was *carrus navalis*, Dionysus's processional cart of the sea: "The pagan festivals were deeply entrenched in the hearts and minds of the people, and they weren't inclined to give them up... , So the church shrewdly compromised. It permitted carnival, but conspired to give it Christian significance" (pp. 310-11). Like Bakhtin, Mailer, an Burroughs, Robbins uses the carnival as a metaphor for recognized and legitimized freedom, existing within, though against, the accepted norms. And all three novelists, along with many others, use the conventions of pornography, a literary mode founded on a subversion of ethical and social norms. In all of their works, however, Bakhtin's overly positive view of ambivalence is balanced by an equal if opposite negative emphasis. As in pornography, there is no creation of new life; but also as in pornography, there *is* excitement, titillation, seduction - but on a different level, on the level of the reader.

In other words, the creative and exuberant impulse of the carnival that Bakhtin stressed is not denied - except on the surface, that is, in the texts' plots. Rather, it is merely displaced. The characters of *Beautiful Losers* may all be orphans, addicted to anal or oral sex or masturbation, but the reader is left in an interesting, compromising position, left to resolve "all the polarities, things and their images," including the narrative tensions between that new erotic triangle - the text, the author, and the reader. The sterility in the *product* is countered by the fertility of the *process*. Similarly, inspired by certain paintings of Magritte, Robbe-Grillet produced a pornographic response entitled *La Belle Captive* and offered both to the reader: "Ainsi le lecteur-spectateur est-il convié à prendre part (createur à son tour d'un itinéraire) à cette circulation du sens parmi les organisations mouvantes de la phrase qui donne à voir et du tableau qui raconte." 31 In his earlier novels, *Le Voyeur* and *Les Gommès*, Robbe-Grillet tantalized his reader with erotic, not to say pornographic, suggestiveness (*fillette/ficelles, corps/cordelettes, violette/iolette*), while claiming that "le mouvement de l'écriture y est plus important que celui des passions et des crimes." 32

As an allegory of the process of reading *all* texts, the *Je lit/lit* play in Helene Cixous's *Tombe* makes clear the essentially erotic relationship operative when author and reader meet on the sheets of the text, giving thereby a new erotic meaning to Dante's "Galeotto fu il libro." The mutual involvement and active participation of both parties is analogous to that of sex. As Roland Barthes has taught us, there are texts which seek to tantalize and seduce the reader, while seeking nevertheless to escape this desired possession. If the sex in the plots of these novels is sterile and unproductive, the metaphoric sexual relation of author and reader is not: the creativity and vitality of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque change locus but do not disappear. For instance, the linguistic foreplay

31 (Lausanne, Paris: Bibliotheque des arts, 1975), back cover.

32 *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Minuit, 1963), p. 32.

of Nabokov's *Ada* teases and even satisfies the reader. Ada's anagrammes (insect/scient/incest) act as important thematic clues to the reader. *Flavita*, Ada's version of the Russian Scrabble, *alfavit*, is a prelude to sexual dallying. The secret code in which Ada and Van write their love letters has to be learned by the voyeuristic reader too, if he wants to read Van's text. Nabokov's novel recalls John Barth's assertion: "Of course form can be passionate; language itself can be passionate."³³

In Barth's own *Chimera*, the genie/author who appears to Scheherazade makes overt the link between sex and the acts of writing and reading as active, mutual processes. Nabokov had explored this conjunction in an even more subtle way in his *Lolita*,³⁴ where Humbert Humbert learns that he can only possess Lolita imaginatively, in an erotic narrative shared with a life-giving reader. He cries out to us: "do not skip these essential pages! Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me." Similarly, in Halo Calvinos *Le citta invisibili*, Marco Polo describes to the Kublai Khan the diverse cities of his empire, each identified with a seductive female name. These cities are creations of both the teller and his listener, and by extension, of Calvina and his reader, taking their meaning and existence in the imagination - where seduction best operates. This localization of the erotic impulse is even clearer in William Gass's novel, *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*. Here the loneliness of the writer is compared to that of the heroine during sex: to break the solitude, sexual fantasies are required. In other words, fictional worlds are invented. Like any literary creation, the heroine is really only "a string of noises": "These words are all I am.... Not even the Dane is more than that."³⁵ In this novel, as in Robert Coover's *Pricksongs and Descants*, sex is clearly a metaphor for the union of the acts of writing and reading, the processes that enact the more positive pole of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque ambivalence. One character in Coover's collection refers to the title as "death-cunt-and-prick songs."

If modern metafiction denounces passivity, it is not beyond involving the reader by force. Sex is as much a mode of control and possession as is the act of writing, a lesson John Fowles taught us in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Manipulation of and even aggression against the reader are not uncommon. For instance, Gass traps the reader in a footnote: "Now that I've got you alone down here, you bastard, don't think I'm letting you get away easily." In writing *Trou de memoire*, Hubert Aquin admitted that he sought a "dance of seduction" with his reader: "j'adrnets que j'essaie d'etreindre le lecteur litteralement dans *Trou de memoire*, au de le violer merne, à la limite, et de l'agresser pour ensuite le

³³ "Hawkes and Barth Talk about Fiction," *New York Times Book Review*; 1 April 1978, p. 32.

³⁴ Nabokov denied that this was a pornographic novel either in design or intent. See his "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," published in *Lolita* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1955), p. 315.

³⁵ (New York: Knopf, 1968), unpaginated.

relacher et le reprendre indéfiniment. Malgré tout, c'est une opération dirigée vers le lecteur étant donné que c'est lui qui crée le livre."³⁶ In that novel, the character, Rachel Ruskin, acts as the reader's surrogate. Her willing rape - enjoyed but blocked from her memory - leads to pregnancy; life and creativity are asserted but Rachel only learns of the traumatic act of creative consummation through the process of reading the text we too have been reading.

In this novel, as in much *Canadian* metafiction, at least, the seduction and aggression, both of process and of textual product, take on political implications. The impotent hero of Aquiri's novel needs to rape and murder: "Mon comportement sexuel est l'image d'un comportement national frappé d'impuissance: plus ça va, plus je sens bien que je veux violer."³⁷ He then points out that this is a mirror image of the specific political situation of Quebec. In Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, the Canadian Indian girl, Edith, is raped by the pens and fingers of the impotent Frenchmen of her village in a quarry owned by American interests. This broader ideological context reveals even more clearly the carnivalesque quality of the transgressions of social norms that the pornography model permits in metafiction.

Far from being a manifestation of anti-art, or a destructive response to technological society, the use of popular forms like pornography represents a serious challenging of cultural hierarchies. In a world in which most of us are condemned to be techno-peasants, we, like the equally repressed mediaeval peasants, seek to understand at least our own creations: hence, the self-reflexivity of metafiction. We also want to revel in these creations when they subvert the accepted norms - both aesthetic and social. The energy and vitality of popular art forms are not so much coopted as valorized in a recontextualization that offers a positive response to the tendency to trivialize and thereby dismiss today's "popular-festive forms." If, on the level of plot and theme, there is little of the regenerative power of the erotic that Bakhtin elevated to a vital positive pole of ambivalence, the erotic in today's metafiction at least offers pleasure and perhaps even titillation. It is, however, on the level of the living process of reading and writing that the carnivalesque reproductive energy is still to be found. This is why there are no footlights or frames. This is how metafiction exists, like the carnival, on the borderline between art and life.

³⁶ "Aquin par Aquin," *Le Québec littéraire*, 2 (1976), p. 134.

³⁷ *Trou de mémoire* (Montreal: Cercle du livre de France, 1968), p. 112.

³⁸ Cf. Ihab HASSAN, "POSTmodernISM: A Paracritical Bibliography," *New Literary History*, 3, 1 (1971), 5-30.

