

# Rabelais and the Grotesque

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Rabelais and the Grotesque in a Threefold Perspective - A Comparative Study of Three Critical Approaches to Rabelais - by Erich Auerbach, Mikhail M. Bakhtin and Leo Spitzer

M. Bakhtin's major study of a great Humanist poses questions that concern many great issues in literature and history and their interrelationships. in honour of the late Dr. Frantisek Galan, a noted scholar at the universities of Toronto under Northrop Frye and UT at Austin

Texts Discussed:

Leo Spitzer:

"Die Wortbildung als stilistisches Mittel exemplifiziert an Rabelais" ("Word Formation as a stylistic Device exemplified by (the Works of) Rabelais") (Article, 1910).

Erich Auerbach:

"The World in Pantagruel's Mouth", from Chapter 11 in *Mimesis* (Original Monograph in German, Bern 1946). English translation by Willard Trask, Princeton 1953

Mikhail M. Bakhtin:

Rabelais and His World ( Russian title: *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable*), Moscow 1965. English translation by Helena Iswolsky. "The Rabelaisian Chronotope" in *The Dialogic Imagination / Four essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, edited by Michael Holquist and translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin 1981. " The Folkloric Bases of the Rabelaisian Chronotope" in *The Dialogic Imagination*.

A comparison of the respective critical approaches adopted by Erich Auerbach, Mikhail Bakhtin and Leo Spitzer towards the works of Rabelais is fraught with certain difficulties. These partly result from the complex nature of these works themselves and partly in divergences of outlook and critical philosophies. While it is true, as Michael Holquist points out, (1) that all three scholars belong to the same tradition grounded in German historicism, their literary philosophies are in no way reducible to a readily discernable pattern or model. What common denominator unites Spitzer's linguistically based mode of investigating literary styles, Auerbach's comprehensive historical, essentially post-Hegelian, analysis of literary developments and Bakhtin's universal theory of literature with its recognition of historical progress subject to spontaneous "pre-class" infusions of that "carnavalesque" spirit which bursts into literary tradition from time to time, thus freeing it from hierarchically imposed conventions and imbuing it with fresh vigour?

Auerbach, Bakhtin and Spitzer all took a great interest in Rabelais, but not necessarily for the same reasons, as differences in the scope and emphases of their studies on his works will show. The many pages which Bakhtin devoted to Rabelais pose a marked contrast to the relatively sparse discussions of Rabelais by the other scholars. However, in only a few pages in *Mimesis* Auerbach succinctly appraises the central importance of Rabelais in the development of European literature.

This study will focus on a particular aspect of Rabelaisian art affording opportunities to compare and contrast the scholars' theoretical and philosophical approaches to Rabelais in particular and to literature in general. The aspect in question concerns the nature of the "grotesque" as manifested in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.

We note a considerable lapse of time separating the original publication of the sources quoted above and their appearance as material translated into English. The studies by Leo Spitzer and Mikhail Bakhtin originated as dissertations. Spitzer's minute analysis of Rabelais' invention of new words and the thorough-going precision with which this scholar classified numerous textual details led to an immediate recognition of the high quality of his research and scholarship. Bakhtin, on the other hand, had to wait over twenty years before seeing his work on Rabelais in print. He wrote his dissertation, on which his later monograph on Rabelais is based, in the forties, at about the same time that Auerbach was writing *Mimesis* during his years of exile in Istanbul. Bakhtin's dissertation caused a furore within Soviet academic circles and was not at first accepted by his doctoral committee. Thus he suffered the fate of many who have dared to wander from the beaten track of conventional methodology.

What made the works of Rabelais so interesting to the three scholars whose findings and opinions we are considering? All three were specialists in French studies and could hardly ignore such a centrally important writer as Rabelais. Secondly, Rabelais was a Humanist par excellence, and one who greatly influenced the course of European culture at a time of fundamental change when the medieval world was being superseded by modernity. Spitzer, Auerbach and Bakhtin were all heirs of the same Humanism that Rabelais had done so much to initiate. Furthermore, all three adhered to a school of thought that took great interest in periods of fundamental transition, being exponents of the historicist tradition based on the works of Vico, Herder and Kant. It is, however, when we consider the extent of the scholars' interest in Rabelais and his works that differences between them emerge both in their approach to these works and to the wider question of the relationship between literature and history or the wide world beyond literature.

As Geoffrey Green points out in the concluding chapter of his monograph *Literary Criticism and the Structure* / Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer (2), differing analyses of literary history inevitably lead to different assessments of particular literary works. Geoffrey Green notes that Auerbach and Spitzer found in Dante and Cervantes respectively those who achieved an exemplary harmony of art and life - or whatever might be thought to supply the context in which art is couched. According to Bakhtin, Rabelais demonstrates the interrelationship between literature and history in a special, even unique, way. Certainly, Spitzer and Auerbach evinced a greater reserve in their overall assessment of Rabelais' central role in the development of European literature. Spitzer saw it as his task to demonstrate the validity of his postulates of language theory, for which the works of Rabelais provided illuminating examples without thereby posing the main subject of interest, hence the inclusion of the words "exemplified by Rabelais" in his study. Rabelais' inventiveness in creating new words gave Spitzer a free rein in the exercise of his historical linguistic method of analysis without involving him in a discussion of pagan elements in the content of *Gargantua et*

Pantagruel, a distasteful task for Spitzer and Auerbach, steeped as they were in the monotheistic tradition. This is not to say that Spitzer's formalism itself hindered a discussion of ideology and subject matter. For his part, Auerbach, writing in the eleventh chapter of *Mimesis*, paid homage to Rabelais as a great poet and to the "high style" of his work. (3) However against such an affirmation one has to balance a less sanguine appraisal of Rabelais in the same chapter: "the riches of his [Rabelais] style are not without their limitations. The grotesque frame in itself excludes deep feeling and high tragedy." (4)

We note from this citation that the term "grotesque" connotes something of limited worth while with Bakhtin it designates the very essence of Rabelais' exuberant creativity and driving power. Spitzer and Bakhtin, in contrast to Auerbach, assiduously define the term "grotesque" before applying it to a study of Rabelais' works. However, even Auerbach in his own way highlights the term if only by making repeated use of it in the 11th chapter of *Mimesis*.

Despite the claim to "objectivity" and quasi-scientific precision so often made by some literary critics, every school of literary criticism is predicated on some stated or, more likely not explicitly stated, speculative ideology, whether or not the proponents of a particular school admit to this. One might even argue that much literary criticism is "pious theology", to parry a much cited jibe against the Romantics. The underlying assumptions in the criticism of Spitzer and Auerbach are steeped in biblicism and, in Spitzer's case, the mysticism of the gematria, which is not to say that they are any the worse for that. In the case of Bakhtin, any indebtedness to religious thought is not so readily apparent, though not necessarily entirely absent. The Russian scholar had to defend his essentially unorthodox approach to literary phenomena in the age of Stalinist censorship. His ingenious way of recognizing both the spontaneity of art as well as its setting within a historical frame transcends any ideological rift between pre-Marxist religious traditions and the Marxist premise that history reveals the unfolding of universal verities. At the same time, Bakhtin held that something of a timeless nature, which he termed "the carnivalesque", might at times break into the plane of contemporary literature and thus imbue it with new vitality. As this principle was deemed to be "pre-classical" and anti-hierarchical, Bakhtin opened himself to the charge of heresy, as indeed might anyone who then valued literature and its inherent values for their own sake beyond their social usefulness. After all, even Trotsky accused the Russian Formalists of being adherents of Saint John for placing great importance on the meaning and value of "the word".

So far we have considered Bakhtin as the odd man out. In one respect, however, the studies in Rabelais undertaken by Spitzer and Bakhtin reveal a close affinity not shared by Auerbach's discussion of Rabelais in *Mimesis*. Perhaps we too often consider treatises and similar studies with little reference to the circumstances under which they were written. Auerbach wrote *Mimesis* in Istanbul when an exile from Nazi persecution. The work represents the distillation of his mature thoughts and reflections on literature. The studies of Rabelais by Spitzer and Bakhtin, on the other hand, are rooted in work done to complete a doctoral dissertation. Dissertations, as we know, are usually written by young men and women who are expected to produce impeccable and authoritative results based on a sound and unimpeachably logical theory. In reality, the student is often engaged in a process of self-discovery, a wandering search for the coherence that will hopefully underpin the completed dissertation. Certainly, Spitzer's mysticism evolved throughout his life, and there is little obvious evidence of its influence on his dissertation on Rabelais, written in his early twenties while he was still unsure as to whether the study of Romance philology was the right course for him. However, the dissertation evinces Spitzer's keen interest in the analysis of word structures, a factor which points forward to his later formulations on word theory supporting his belief in the word as a window to divine truth.

As Bakhtin differs from Spitzer and Auerbach in the emphasis he places on Rabelais' centrality in literary history and in his particular understanding of the meaning of the term "grotesque", similarities and differences between Bakhtin's positions on these issues and those of Spitzer and Auerbach deserve close inspection.

In his study of Rabelais, Bakhtin at no point concerns himself with Spitzer's "Die Wortbildung als stilistisches Mittel exemplifiziert an Rabelais", at least not explicitly. Bakhtin does concern himself, however, with a work which the German scientist G. Schneegans published in 1894 under the title of *Geschichte der Satyre* (5) "History of Satyr", the same work which Spitzer took as a foundation for his own ideas concerning the relationship of word formation and comic

situations. Bakhtin first finds an occasion to discuss Schneegans's work in the introduction of Rabelais and his World in the course of reviewing the history of the term "grotesque" and the manner in which it had been applied through centuries of literary criticism. According to Bakhtin, Schneegans had fallen prey to a serious misconception concerning the true nature of "the grotesque" but in this the German scientist was seen to be merely typical of a trend that had been established long before by the Romantics. (6), Bakhtin understood "the grotesque" as something intimately related to the human body and its functions. Accordingly, the application of a value judgment associating the term "high" with nobility and worth and "low" with the base and sordid had no validity beyond that of a social convention foisted onto the literary world by a hierarchically structured society. The common people remained in contact with a timeless and classless tradition of popular-festive forms, folk humour and the language of the market place (Billingsgate). Far from being subject to any negative evaluation, "the low" was associated in the popular tradition with the life-sustaining and regenerative functions of the bowels and the reproductive organs.

In Bakhtin's estimation, Rabelais infused folkloric and carnivalesque energies into the mainstream of Renaissance literature. The influence of this tradition had remained alive ever since but in the course of time the literary world had lost sight of the popular origins of the grotesque, one reason for this development lying in the fact that the Romantics and others had associated the grotesque with notions about the isolation of the private consciousness and the individual's rebellion against the forces of social oppression. The grotesque increasingly tended to appear to be either a vehicle of social criticism in the form of satire or an expression of black despair resulting from what Bakhtin termed a "bifurcation" in the Romantics' apprehension of historical time. Thus Bakhtin discerns in Schneegans's analysis of the grotesque a false representation of what the term should truthfully convey. His criticism therefore implicitly challenges the assumptions on which Spitzer based his arguments when analysing Rabelais's word formations.

In particular Bakhtin takes exception to Schneegans's "and hence Spitzer's" premise that the grotesque is the product of "exaggeration" (7) and represents therefore the clumsiest and least sophisticated of the three categories of the comic which Schneegans had laid down as: "the clownish" ("das Possenhafte"); the "burlesque" and its subcategory "parody" and "travesty", both considered to be dual aspects of the grotesque. (8)

While Schneegans assumes that manifestations of the monstrous and gigantic at first aroused feelings of displeasure, which were then dispelled by mirth and the element of satire generated by a mixture of mirth and displeasure, Bakhtin interprets the fundamental significance of Pantagruel's gigantic size, the very source of all that is grotesque in Gargantua and Pantagruel, in the light of the preclass chronotope and the positive association of death as a necessary aspect of an all-transcending process of life.

Bakhtin draws particular attention to the first chapter of Pantagruel, in which the origin of all giants, Pantagruel included, is explained in the light of legends interpreting the shedding of Abel's blood in terms of a source of fertility able to produce superabundant and even abnormal growth. (9)

Bakhtin differs from Schneegans on the question of laughter and its causes. Laughter constitutes in his view a primary bodily function. It celebrates life in its original communal aspect and the bodily functions that belong to it, particularly eating, defecation, copulation, flatulence (Chaucerian farting) and death. In the opinion of Schneegans, Spitzer and even Freud, laughter originates in a certain part of the brain endowed with the function of defending the psyche against the negative effects of unexpected, incongruous and apparently illogical occurrences that the reason cannot assimilate or integrate.

Even if one accepts Bakhtin's criticisms of Schneegans's basic assumptions, do they necessarily undermine Spitzer's

scholastic achievement in this case? Probably not, if we allow that Schneegans's tripartite model for explaining the nature of the comical provides Spitzer with a useful working hypothesis, namely the premise that certain words that are capable of implying and epitomising comic situations or actions. Spitzer goes so far as to argue that even prefixes and suffixes carry comical implications in the process of creating the newly invented words that abound in Rabelais's works. Not only this. These implications, once translated into the language of bodily actions, sort themselves into three subdivisions of the comic, namely into the categories of "parody", "travesty" and "grotesque". For Spitzer, at least, the matrix threefold mode of classification "worked", however firm or questionable its original justification.

It was noted earlier that Auerbach, after seeming to voice reservations about Rabelais's literary credentials in the eleventh chapter of *Mimesis*, ends by singing the praises of Rabelais's "high" style. It is to this question that the concluding section of this paper is addressed. A reading of the eighth chapter of *Mimesis* may throw light on this question, for it focuses attention on Dante and on what Auerbach considers to be the Italian poet's key role in ushering in the third great epoch of western literature after the demise of antiquity and the middle ages when the authority of the Church was supreme. The religious-ideological divide separating Auerbach and Spitzer on the one side from Bakhtin on the other may not prove to be as daunting as it first appears. Auerbach argues that Dante's *Comedy* marks a decisive turning point in history in both effecting and reflecting an inversion of the relationship between the "Christian-figural" and its "fulfilment" in the hereafter according to the tenets of traditional Christian theology. (10) Before Dante, this argument runs, the figural, by which one should understand human life as it exists on the physical and temporal plane, though real enough in itself, had been seen in religious philosophy and literature until Dante's time as a domain foreshadowing the eternal truths that were believed to await full revelation in the hereafter. Dante's vision of the hereafter is imbued with an extraordinary intensity of a kind that enables the reader to grasp the quintessential character of the dead seen not as ghostly spirits but as those who have fully played out their lives on earth. Death does not destroy but preserves the perfectly defined and integral soul of the once living. Thus, in a sense those who have entered the world beyond, even including the damned in Hell such as Farinata Calalcante, appear to be more essentially themselves than they had been on earth. Dante's visions of the hereafter effectively reversed the earlier subordination of the figural to the eternal substance by allowing a projected vision of the hereafter to serve as a vehicle of criticism, at times biting, of things that happen on this side of veil between time and eternity. In Auerbach's words: "The image of Man eclipses the vision of God," (11) In less flamboyant terms perhaps, Auerbach also states: "Dante's work made man's Christian-figural being a reality, and destroyed it in the very process of realizing it." (12) It follows then that both Dante and Rabelais in their different ways abolished the hierarchy upheld in medieval philosophy, at least to the extent this affected the literary realm. While Dante abolished the old-world view by his faithful adherence to it, Rabelais did so, as both Auerbach and Bakhtin were aware, by supplanting what Auerbach termed "medieval creatural realism" with a new perception of reality which expressed "the vitalistic-dynamic triumph of the physical body and its functions." (13)

Finally, let us consider the relationship of the grotesque and the sublime in the light of what I suggest poses the unity underlying the approaches to Rabelais we have been considering in this paper. According to the conventional usage of the term "grotesque" and "sublime" the words appear to be locked in an irreconcilable antithesis. For Spitzer the Rabelaisian "monster formation" (14) came under the heading of "grotesque" and there is no reason to question the validity of this linkage. For Auerbach the term "monstrous" applies even to Dante's sublime epics. The *Comedia* enfolds both sublime and grotesque elements, but it is not the "grotesque" as defined according to some conventional measure that is "monstrous". By the standards of antiquity or according to the aesthetics of Goethe, even the comedy of Dante might appear monstrous. What seems to be shocking in this case is not the conspicuous presence of some essentially "grotesque" object but the mixture of elements that had hitherto been thought of as separate. The same principle applies to a morally guided perception of the sublime: "themes which cannot possibly be considered sublime in the antique sense turn out to be just that by virtue of his (Dante's) way of moulding and ordering them." (15) Thus for Auerbach the sublime and the grotesque exist not as intrinsic fixtures but as mutually dependent halves of a greater whole within a relationship comparable to that of subject and object, or of mind and (literary) matter. According to the findings of Spitzer's analysis of Rabelais's word formations, the mind, when confronted with the unfamiliar, i.e. the grotesque, instigates the bodily reaction of laughter, having sensed a unity underlying or transcending the seemingly incongruous, without at the same time being able to provide a rational explanation for why it has done so. In the case of each scholar, the sublime and the grotesque become facets of the same truth at that point in their respective systems where unity is perceived, be it in the realm of body, mind or spirit.

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1. Holquist, Michael. "Introduction" xvii in Bakhtin, Mikhail M., *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin, 1981.
2. Green, Geoffrey, *Literary Criticism and the Structure of History*Â Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer, Lincoln (Nebraska), 1982.
3. Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis*. Translated from the German by Willard Trask, New York, 1957. P. 249
4. *Ibidem*, p. 247.
5. Schneegans, G. *Geschichte der Grotesken Satyre*, Berlin, 1894.
6. Bakhtin, Mikhail M., *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolky, Cambridge, Mass., 1965. P. 39.
7. Spitzer, Leo. "Die Wortbildung als stilisches Mittel exemplifiziert an Rabelais". In *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie*. No. XXIX, Halle, 1910. P. 31.
8. *Ibid.*, P. 27.
9. *Rabelais and His World*, p. 325
10. *Mimesis*, p. 170
11. *Ibid.*, p. 176
12. *Ibid.*, p. 176
13. *Mimesis*, p. 242
14. "Die Wortbildung als stilisches Mittel." p. 105.
15. *Mimesis*, p. 161.