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Bakhtin's Carnival as a Gnostic Chronotope

1. In an interesting article entitled *Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture*, Renate Lachmann wrote:

In laughter there occurs a „**second revelation**“ a „**second truth**“ is proclaimed to the world. [...] The truth of the second revelation is the truth of the relativity of the truth, the truth of crisis and change, the truth of ambivalence. [...] This is the crux of Bakhtin's approach: he formulates a myth of ambivalence that denies the „end“ by sublimating death in and through laughter. Thus by ridiculing death and finiteness, **folk culture, which is the bearer of this revelation**, embodies the refusal to acknowledge the authority of those official institutions which, by taking death and the end into their calculations, seek to exert and extend their hegemony. [...] The concepts of materialism and of ambivalence, which are constitutive for Bakhtin's argumentation, help clarify his **utopian ideas** and lend new contours to his approach. Bakhtin openly defines folk culture and the culture of laughter as materialistic. His concept of materialism, which one at first might tend to associate with Marxism, turns out upon closer observation to be based on an opposition to spiritualism. Bakhtin — who formulates this point very insistently numerous times throughout the book — is concerned with a positive reevaluation of the material and the corporeal. He resists the emphasis placed on the purely spiritual and takes a decided stance regarding the **irreconcilable contradiction between hyle and pneuma** that has always marked the history of Western philosophy and religion. Bakhtin's answer to **the traditional revulsion towards the material and the corporeal**, which is expressed in particular in gnosticism but also in medieval asceticism and mysticism, is to propound a celebration of matter and the body that seeks to suspend the dualism of

mind and matter and that travesties the „victory“ of the mystical and the ascetic over the body. **Bakhtin's promise of salvation** lies not, as **gnosticism** teaches, in the spirit being freed from its bodily shell and seeking salvation through individual stages of purification, but rather in **the grotesque body as the hyperbolization and hypertrophization of corporeality.** *'The material components of the universe disclose in the human body their true nature and highest potentialities; they become creative, constructive, are called to conquer cosmos, to organize cosmic matter. They acquire a historic character.'*¹ Bakhtin's concept of materialism, however, has yet another side to it: because matter „embodies“ cultural memory [...], it becomes **the guarantee for the continued existence of culture.** The material and corporeal are namely the manifest as such, what is really „real“: what matters for Bakhtin is matter. According to Bakhtin, soteriological teachings and ascetic practices rejecting the body cannot be utopian because they are oriented toward the „end“ of manifest materiality and reality. (Lachmann 1988—89: 124—126)

I begin with this long quotation for two reasons. First, it explains very clearly some specific features of Bakhtinian Carnival. It is not a matter of simple laughter; on the contrary, a) it is a **new truth**, an authentic **revelation** that argues against the traditional Aristotelian view of the coexistence of soul and body in the man, and b) **promises a salvation through the hyperbolization and hypertrophization of corporeality.** As Renate Lachmann points out, Bakhtin's Carnival is a sort of **new creation** based on **regain- ing the true nature of matter**, a nature that was unknown before his discovery. In another page of the same article, Renate Lachmann highlights some other features of Bakhtin's Carnival: c) it marks the **deletion of the boundaries** between „I“ and „we“ in the grotesque body of the carnival (Нарушение всех границ между телом и миром, Bakhtin 2008: 349) and d) **permits participants to reach an „earthly collective immortality“** (коллективное историческое бессмертие, Bakhtin 2008: 322). As a matter of fact, the grotesque body, which consists of „excrescences

¹ Та материя, из которой состоит вся вселенная, в человеческом теле раскрывает свою подлинную природу и все свои высшие возможности: в человеческом теле материя становится творческой, созидательной, призванной победить весь космос, организовать всю космическую материю, в человеке материя приобретает исторический характер (Bakhtin 2008: 372).

(sprouts, buds) and orifices,” presents „another, newly conceived body” (Lachmann 1988—89: 148. See also Mann 2007: 659—660).

The second reason for this quotation lies in the connection — or, better, in the non-connection — with Gnosticism. Lachmann mentions Gnosticism only to conclude that Bakhtin’s Carnival has no relation with Gnostic tradition, just because she takes into account only the Gnostic movement of Late Antiquity and omits the modern metamorphoses of Gnosis (Samek Lodovici 1991)². Now, whoever is familiar with Gnostic studies — I refer to Baur, Hans Jonas, Eric Voegelin, Karl Prümm, Augusto Del Noce, Vittorio Mathieu, Emanuele Samek Lodovici, Luciano Pellicani, just to mention some of the primary scholars — knows how Gnosis was able to assume expressions far different from the original form (“Gnosticism”), where in fact the spirit tries to remove its corporal chains and to reach salvation by means of purificatory steps.

According to Voegelin, the main characteristics of Gnostic movements are the following six: 1. The Gnostic is dissatisfied with his situation. 2. He believes that this situation can be attributed to the fact that the world is intrinsically poorly organized. 3. He believes that salvation from the evil of the world is possible. 4. He believes that the order of being can be changed in an historical process by which this corrupted world becomes a good one. 5. He believes that such a salvational change lies in the realm of human action and that it is possible through man’s own effort. 6. He invents a formula for self and world salvation. (Voegelin 1968: 86—88).

Briefly, world, history and man are the results of an inherent disorder, of an ontological evil, and Gnosticism’s recipe (gnosis — knowledge) for salvation consists in rejecting Christian eschaton and replacing it with a this-worldly „paradise.”

² Strangely enough, in the materials, notes and summaries prepared by Bakhtin for his *Rabelais*, recently published by the Institut Mirovoj Literaturny im. Gor’kogo, there is a reference to W. Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis*, Göttingen 1907, which is entirely devoted to the the Gnostic movement of Late Antiquity (cf. Bakhtin 2008: 817).

2. From this perspective, Gnosis is no longer limited to the opposition body/matter, but comprehends several contemporary cultural and political phenomena. Both Voegelin and Pellicani, for example, explained Marxism as one of the expressions of modern Gnosis: they identified the Gnostic features of the young Marx's Promethean longing for a complete re-creation of the world, his rejection of human limitation, the soteriological dimension of his diagnosis-therapy, the palingenetic rationale of the abolition of private property necessary to regain the Great Universal Harmony, the Gnostic *Pleroma*.

If political Gnostic movements are mostly oriented to the recovery of finitude by means of revolutionary activism, „existential“ Gnostic movements aim at the recovery of lost fullness, of *Pleroma*, through forms of the deconstruction of the individual identity through eroticism, drugs etc. Samek Lodovici (1991: 155–156), for example, refers to the „program“ inherent in Georges Bataille's eroticism.

The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives. Stripping naked is the decisive action. Nakedness offers a contrast to self-possession, to discontinuous existence, in other words. It is a state of communication revealing a quest for a possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self. Bodies open out to a state of continuity through secret channels that give us a feeling of obscenity.

Here, clearly, the substantial deficiency of an individual — the *programming error*, the limit — consists in his self contained character, in self-possession, in his discontinuous existence and, finally, in his „self.“ Erotic nakedness is man's possibility of Redemption: a transformation of the world, put into effect only by human means, without divine Grace.

Let us come back to Bakhtin's Carnival, and let us come back with this very quotation, in which Renate Lachmann references Bakhtin's Carnival. According to Bakhtinian semiotics — she explains (Lachmann 1988–1989: 151) —, the peak of *dialogical* exchange between body and world, between the I and We, between identity and alterity, is an ecstasy, an ecstasy, however, that does

not refer to the soul leaving the body (which would mean the end of all exchange) but rather the egression of the body's inside into the outside world, that spilling out into the world that is captured in the phrase „to laugh your guts out“. The same movement is expressed by Bataille's concept of *mise a nu*:

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In other words, it is ecstasy as exotopy (*vne-nakhodimost'*), as eccentricity of the „I.“ The significant reference to the passage from Bataille — which Samek Lodovici quotes as an example of modern Gnosis and Lachmann quotes as something comparable to the ecstasy of Bakhtin's Carnival — is a sort of *sui generis* demonstration. I would only add that what Bakhtin refers to as Carnival we could properly call a *Gnostic chronotope*. Furthermore, we could identify in the people-subject-of-the-Carnival the *prophet* required by the Gnostic recipe to put into effect the re-birth of the world. By losing his own personal and social identity through masquerade and role exchange, by taking the part of the grotesque body, the protagonist of Bakhtin's Carnival redeems his limited and restricted life. He redeems himself from that *fall from grace*, which gave life to the world of *institutional sadness*. Thanks to the loss of boundaries between „I“ and „We“ in the grotesque body of Carnival, he conquers *earthly immortality*.

3. Like many other scholars, Renate Lachmann saw in Bakhtin's Carnival a variant of the *eternal return*. If in the Carnival the official culture comes close to the regenerative power of popular culture, nevertheless the latter does not permanently affect the former. The reason is that only popular culture belongs to cyclical time, only popular culture gives birth to the Carnival chronotope, which re-enacts myth.

In this perspective, there is a radical opposition between the official culture, linear and teleological, and the popular culture

where „carnival appears as the return of the ‘Golden Age,’ and as the vision of a future world of emancipated laughter that no longer knows ‘cosmic fear’: in other words, a classical utopia motif of paradise lost and regained, of the Promised Land. [...] The principle of laughter — Lachmann argues — guarantees the regeneration of the species-body, the accumulation of cultural experience as a collective memory that manifests itself cyclically in the concrete forms of carnival rituals as an anti-eschatological promise of redemption. The carnival culture has no telos“ (Lachmann 1988—1989: 134—135).

Consequently, there are two main interpretations of this topic: Bakhtin’s Carnival can be considered either as a Gnostic chronotope, or as a re-enactment (in Eliade’s understanding) of the myth of the eternal return. Personally, I prefer the first interpretation, especially for its conception of time (see Filoramo 1993: 33).

According to the myth of eternal return, the world fell into a cycle of time from the initial stage of perfection, power and „sanctity,” and only the rite, cyclically re-enacted, permitted the recovery of that lost condition through immersion in the so-called *illud tempus*.

Certainly, this periodic immersion in power was not related to a *programming error*, and certainly in the religions described by Eliade in *The Myth of the Eternal Return* nobody was immune to decay. Consequently, no new Prometheus could project and carry out a diagnosis-therapy of re-creation of the world.

The Gnostic is already within the Judeo-Christian conception of linear time: he diagnoses human and worldly frailty as an ontological break, and promises he will fulfill Paradise on this earth. On one hand, he condemns *time* as it is decaying like everything else on the earth. On the other hand, with a typical turnaround, he thinks that salvation takes effect in this very *time* and through this *time*. It is „Paradise on earth”, a Christian Paradise shifted from the afterlife to the present life, from the eternity of God to human time. This is why Gnostic perspective can be also considered an expression of realized eschatology.

Now, what is the problem with Bakhtin’s Carnival? In my opinion, everything confirms the latter interpretation. It is not by

chance that Renate Lachmann explicitly refers to „an anti-eschatological promise of redemption.“ „Anti-eschatological,“ in this sense, is a perfect definition of „Gnosticism“. This also explains one of the reasons of Bakhtin’s success in Western countries: Gnostic Carnival, in fact, attracted and fascinated the Western intelligentsia because of a sort of Gnostic empathy. The Western intelligentsia — as Samek Lodovici correctly pointed out — cultivated the Gnostic attitude of going beyond the confines of the self, the attitude of exotopy through drugs or through eroticism, as we read in Bataille, through the abolition of the „I“ in a commune. An intelligentsia of this sort cannot but be sympathetic to a carnivalesque Gnosis.

This explanation must not be misunderstood. Personally, I consider Bakhtin’s Carnival a great cultural acquisition. However, we must take into account that in great part it presents a utopia, not real facts. We must take into consideration that this utopia has Gnostic roots. This very combination — Gnosis and Utopia — decreed Bakhtin’s success, since the Western intelligentsia was indeed full of Gnostic and Utopian ideas in both its versions, revolutionary and ludic.

One of the characteristics that makes for such a particular reading of Bakhtin and his *Rabelais* consists in the emotion it provokes in the reader — a common experience for every teacher who has presented Bakhtin’s Carnival to a class. In my opinion, this emotion is not caused by its status as a „fruitful intellectually provocative work“ (Gurevich 1997: 58), but rather by the fact that there is in it a certain, moving element of truth. It is the emotion of Utopia as „the dream of the West, longing for Paradise lost and attempting to reach a Promised Land“ (Servier 2002: 8). As Jean Servier clearly demonstrated in his beautiful works, this dream of Paradise, this longing for a mythical „Golden Age,“ gives birth to Gnostic Utopias, which people try to recreate here in this world.

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