

DIALECTIC AND POPULAR CULTURE: ON MICHAÏL BACHTIN'S "MODEL OF CULTURE"

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More and more often we see attempts not to develop or reflect on Bachtin's ideas, but to adopt them mechanically in fields where special analyses need to be made of how they might be applied [...] Bachtin's complex, not always obvious, thoughts have been [...] simplified and domesticated, thereby taking on a scientific-ornamental character.

Thus Jurij Lotman and Boris Uspenskij on the applicability of Bachtin's model of popular culture, in a note that has much to tell us about the dangers that critical ideas run when they are received more as modes for general use than in their own specificity. The two scholars are referring to the situation in Soviet medieval cultural studies,¹ but it cannot be denied that their words apply in other areas more familiar to us, and for this reason perhaps more resistant to observations of this sort. The reception of Bachtin's work in Italy has, we know, followed a peculiar pattern, if not one unique in the West (it was with *Rabelais* that his fame burst upon our quarter of the globe);² this has resulted in our reading him in a somewhat unbalanced way, initially with a preponderant emphasis on Bachtin as "culturologist" and with a later shift of interest to the literary theoretician, a shift marked by an intensification of publishing activity in this area.³ Another result of this critical history has been a frequent failure to weld the two sides of Bachtin's work together into an overall view of his ideas, which is indispensable if we are to grasp his importance and his intentions: above all, our reception of Bachtin has had a negative consequence that seems peculiar to the Italian cultural situation, that of fixing in the cultural memory the "carnival" image of Bachtin; having once and for all defined him thus we have once again impeded – almost by

automatic reflex – that very restoration of the “true” Bachtin it had been hoped to achieve.

I believe that a critical revision of our vulgarized Bachtin is an essential precondition of any such restoration. This is the intention of the attempt which follows to reconstruct the “cultural model”; in connection with which I should point out that – like all correctly constructed models – its essential function is to bring out the main lines of the object it represents, making no claim to establish a general theory (of which at most certain elements are suggested).⁴

I

1. In Bachtin’s work the question of popular culture involves two fundamental points: 1) the definition of this cultural level; 2) its collocation in the general cultural and socio-cultural panorama, in particular – as the original title of his volume on Rabelais suggests – in relation to the world of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. We must then begin by considering the first point, and in particular the way in which it is dealt with by the image underlying the all-embracing term “carnival culture”.⁵

Such a culture is generally defined by identifying its characteristic features, some of which have taken on a strong semic character in critical discourse, becoming key terms (or rather, perhaps, *skeleton-key* terms), whose mere mention becomes a substitute for discussion. Such features are often vaguely attributed to two levels which Bachtin distinctly separates by the terms “carnival” and “carnivalizing, carnivalized”, that is, at the anthropological-cultural level of the celebration and at that of the texts produced, or, rather, influenced, by it. Be that as it may, among the most prominent “carnival” features are:

- the specular, inverted character of carnival life in relation to non-carnival life: carnival life is a life removed from its *normal* tracks, and to a certain extent a “counter life”, a “world upside down” (“monde à l’envers”);

- the abolition, during the Carnival, of the “laws, prohibitions and limitations that define the rule and order of non-carnival life”: that is, the fundamentally egalitarian character of the Carnival, which implies “a new mode of relations between men, in contrast with the all-powerful hierarchic-social relations of non-carnival life”;

- the *mésalliances* taking place between elements kept isolated and apart by the non-carnival idea of life: “the Carnival draws together, unites, joins and combines sacred and profane, sublime and low, grand and mean, wise and foolish, and so on”;

– the theme of profanation: “the sacrileges of the Carnival, the whole carnival system of lowering and secularizing, carnival obscenities, [...] carnival parodies of sacred texts and maxims, and so on”.

The passages I have just quoted, as well as the list structure, have all been taken – as the reader will easily recognize – from a text which I regard as particularly important for the reconstruction of the author's general line regarding the problem we are here concerned with: chapter IV of his book on Dostoevskij, translated into Italian (as into the other principal Western languages) from the second Russian edition of 1963 (*Problemy poëtiki Dostoevskogo*), which was a radical reworking of *Problemy tvorčestva Dostoevskogo* of 1929.⁶ In this second version, there appears at the beginning of the chapter in question a recapitulative excursus on the “serio-comic genres” (pp. 139-159 of the Italian edition), on the “problem of the carnival and the carnivalization of literature” (pp. 159-172) and on the specific relation linking these two areas (pp. 172-179), an excursus that forms a prelude to the analysis of these elements in the work of Dostoevskij. These pages undoubtedly have a systematic character in comparison with the general foundations of Bakhtin's “theory” of the carnival (the inverted commas are unavoidable): they are to be seen – also for reasons of chronology – as a sort of authorial testimony, summarising the broader, more scattered material of the book on Rabelais. That this is how chapter IV of *Dostoevskij* should be seen will be made clear below: but first we should add some more elements to the catalogue of carnival features.

In general it is indeed to the book on Rabelais that one refers when speaking of the carnival in the Bakhtinian sense: the catalogue already drawn up (inversion, egalitarianism, *mésalliances*, profanation) should then be accompanied, not to say preceded, by other perhaps more current notions. They may even be inferred from the contents page:

- ‘The Language of the Marketplace’ (ch. 2);
- ‘The Banquet’ (and the general conviviality-food theme) (ch. 4);
- the “grotesque body” (ch. 5);
- the “material bodily lower” (and the whole scatological area) (ch. 6).

This Bakhtin-digest (ready, alas, to be put to all sorts of uses), lacks only “carnival laughter”, a concept rich in implications that go beyond the specifically Bakhtinian; the list could, also, be fuller and more detailed, but I think it represents the essence of the carnival phenomenon, as it is normally received and applied at a certain critical level. All the features listed are realized, as Bakhtin emphasizes, on the “concretely-sensuous, ritual-pageant”⁷ level, that is to say in actual festivity (which is the concern of anthropology). On the other hand, their presence in texts – isolated or in various combinations – is generally taken as a sure indication of the “carnivalized” character of such texts, that is to say their relation to a cultural level defined as “popular”.

2. There is certainly some truth in this first approximation to a definition of popular culture on the basis of Bakhtinian categories. In literary analysis the features indicated are, in general, convincing symptoms (to a greater or lesser degree: this opens up a new line of discussion, which will however be made unnecessary by later considerations) of some form of contact between texts and the cultural level in question. But there is an evident degree of haziness involved in such an attempt at definition on the basis of separate features: for it is clear that the presence in a text of "grotesque body" themes, or a marked leaning towards the "material bodily lower", or a structure crowded with signs of "inversion" are always important and sometimes necessary elements, but never sufficient ones to enable us to define the text as carnivalized, tout court, in the precise sense of the term: for us firmly to establish its rootedness in the particular cultural experience to which such features refer us. The casual combination of certain features rather than others is still less sufficient as a basis for describing the influence exerted on the text by the "popular" impulse, the degree of power with which its energies act and interact upon it.

In the last analysis the situation is one of those in which it is necessary to distinguish, among the sum of features identified, between the phenomenal and the essential, if the model is not to remain permanently in a state of absolute vagueness. Many ambiguities regarding the Bakhtinian carnival (and many unjustified criticisms of its central notions)⁸ spring from this sort of imprecision; it is, then, no accident that in the present reception of Bachtin's ideas a second level should be present, tending to *organize* the carnival categories, subsuming them under a general heading that will orientate and grade all the others. Although there are no explicit theoretical formulations in this regard,⁹ there should be no doubt as to the pre-eminence accorded in this process to the first of the features listed above, the "life upside down", *monde à l'envers* character of the carnival, which expands to the point that it becomes superordinate, covering all the other features.¹⁰ In practice this generally remains implicit in the particular way the culture of the carnival is assumed to be situated within the overall culture: in a binary relation with its opposite pole, official, non-carnival culture, which is reflected back to front in the culture of the carnival. This whole results, then, in an isomorphic and specular dichotomic model:

In the Middle Ages popular culture, made marginal, created for itself an anti-model which is a mirror-image of that accepted by the dominant culture, because it overturns the topological arrangement of oppositions, favouring the low above the high, the body above the spirit, folly above wisdom...¹¹

This reading of Bachtin's ideas seems particularly common in Italy (I shall try below to identify some of its sources). But it also has its authoritative defenders elsewhere: for instance, Aaron Gurevich, in the introduction to his volume translated into Italian as *Le categorie della cultura medievale*, observes:

[...] the tendency to a paradoxical reversal of accepted ideas on the established order of things, on high and low, sacred and profane – characteristic, according to Bachtin, of the Carnival – is revealed to be an essential feature of the medieval world-picture.¹²

The fact is that Bachtin's texts permit this reading; but they do so, in my view, while involving the problem of "inversion" in more complex and perhaps less obvious structures (to echo the terms of the quotation with which we began), not representing it as the one and only (or almost) "main constant" of the Carnival. The choice of this last approach is far from coincidental, revealing epistemological affinities that require a moment of attention.

3. The first, evident link is that maintained between the dichotomic reading of Bachtin's ideas and structuralist thinking, whose fundamental binary conceptualizations have, as is well known, been gradually extended from the linguistic field where they originated to that of the humanities in general. In the case we are concerned with, too, there appears to be a tendency to define the object on the basis of a system of relations, identifying it through the sum of the features that are disposed in simple oppositive pairs within such a system.¹³ Given the wide currency of such procedures, further references may seem superfluous: but we must mention explicit references to structuralism by qualified commentators on Bachtin. Thus for instance Vjačeslav V. Ivanov – in an essay from which emerges a far more highly articulated critical vision than might be suspected from the quotation that follows – suggests that "the book [on Rabelais] could have been given the title *High and Low*, in the spirit of those oppositions (of a more concrete character) whose names have provided the titles for the various volumes of Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques*". In his view, indeed,

one of the main characteristics of Bakhtin's book on carnival culture, whose fundamental orientation is undeniably structural, is the fact that this book is built up on the analysis of certain fundamental binary oppositions, in particular the high-low opposition, considered simultaneously on different levels – social, hierarchic, spatial, material.¹⁴

Taking a similar point of view, D'Arco Silvio Avalle, annotating Bakhtin in connection with the "theory of the renewal of the idea of time in the novel" (but his reflections have a more general relevance), insists on the specific nature of such a theory, "founded mainly on a series of oppositions" (he here makes a reference to the essay by Ivanov that has just been cited), actually bringing the oppositive pairs under consideration (epic vs. novel; high vs. low, etc.) back within the "Humboldtian categories of *ergon* and *energeia*".¹⁵

Separate consideration – for obvious motives of cultural history – should also be given to the relations between Bakhtin's "dichotomic" interpretation and certain basic ideas held by Russian cultural semiotics, which have also been imported and developed further in Italy. I refer, obviously, to the ideas of the so-called Tartu school on the construction of cultural schemata, and in particular to Lotman's IN vs. EX, his well-known and extremely effective visualization of the model in which a particular culture expresses its own idea of itself in opposition to a foreign or specular "anti-culture". But, as has been remarked in this connection,¹⁶ we should keep the level of the "model-in-itself" (us/culture vs. them/anti-culture) distinct from that of metacultural critical discourse, the level to which, in my opinion, Bakhtin's reasoning belongs. The tendency to subject the cultural panorama to a specular dichotomy should not be transferred inadvertently from one dimension to another, or there will be a risk that the schematization that prevails in a certain historic-cultural situation will be too immediately superimposed on the comprehensive dialectic of cultural levels in this same situation.

4. The tendency to reduce the supporting lines of the Bakhtinian edifice to principles of an eminently binary type has also received an impetus (following a complicated course that cannot here be followed in detail) from another quarter of the humanities. There is an obvious congruence between such a reading of the carnival model with the thesis developed by cultural historians and/or sociologists concerning the interaction of cultural levels in a given social context; in particular, obviously, the relation between the "official" level and the "popular". Under the impetus also of fundamental advances made by the ethno-anthropological disciplines (one thinks for instance of the importance taken on by the theme of acculturation when transferred to within "advanced" societies),¹⁷ there has in fact been an attempt to remedy the insufficiency of the traditional theories of "cultural descent", which predict only the "vulgarization" of official culture (Robert Redfield's "great tradition") in a movement towards the low levels of the "little tradition" that belonged to the common people,¹⁸ by hypothesizing various types of reciprocity, or cultural circularity. As long ago as 1966,

Georges Duby spoke, albeit circumscriptively, of a "communication à double sens" between the cultural levels of the Middle Ages:

Reception and imitation, on the part of lower social strata, of models and attitudes provided by the élites, and, reciprocally, the adoption by those same élites of some values derived from the less elevated levels.¹⁹

It is true that other scholars, like Peter Burke, tend on the whole to reconfirm the "descendent" theories; in a critical formulation of Redfield's model, Burke indeed emphasizes that

there were two cultural traditions in early modern Europe, but they did not correspond symmetrically to the two main social groups, the élite and the common people. The élite participated in the little tradition, but the common people did not participate in the great tradition.²⁰

But in general, the fusing of the "bad conscience of colonialism" towards non-European cultures with the "bad conscience of class oppression" towards the oppressed classes of "civilized" society – Carlo Ginzburg's formulation is both suggestive and accurate²¹ – has introduced the *petitio principii* for equal dignity to be accorded to the cultures previously summarily defined as superior and inferior. That this *petitio*, with which "we have, at any rate verbally, got beyond [...] the position of seeing in the ideas, beliefs, world-views held by subordinate classes nothing more than an un-systematic heap of fragments of the ideas, beliefs and world-views elaborated by the dominant classes, perhaps hundreds of years earlier" (to cite Ginzburg again), has been accompanied by proportionate results in the field of concrete research, is a matter that lies outside our present considerations (it seems however that historians are more alert to the new line than are literary scholars). On the other hand, it should be stressed that theories of cultural circularity too are reformulable (and sometimes reformulated) in terms of a dichotomic model, merely redoubled (dominant culture vs. subordinate culture; subordinate culture vs. dominant culture), which lies next door to that of the theories of specularity and inversion discussed above. For it is a small step from the observation that there exist in a socio-cultural structure (at least) two autonomous but interactive levels of culture, and the suggestion that their reciprocity should be interpreted as that of a pair of wholes that mutually define each other and are set in opposition, essentially, by the "positive vs. negative" label they respectively attach to the elements in them that correspond.

There can however be no doubt that the peculiar aspects of the Italian theoretical context also played their part in bringing about the vulgarized

reading of Bachtin's theories: the presence of prominent individuals and schools, both in the structuralist area, with particular reference to literary semiotics, as in that of "nuove storie", the new historiography, imposed in practice a privileged reception of those aspects of Bakhtinian theory most in accord with the fundamental epistemological lines of these respective tendencies: first and foremost, I repeat, those linked with a binary and specular view of the dynamics of culture.

II

1. It is this model that has just been outlined, which defines Bachtin as a "culturologist", that I wish to bring into discussion. It is a model which, for all the authority of those who more or less explicitly resort to it, I consider far from satisfactory, even from the strictly philological point of view. For this discussion I shall once again avail myself of Bachtin's own presentation of the theory of Carnival contained in chapter IV of *Dostoevskij*.

Here, after having listed the characteristic features of the Carnival, Bachtin continues without interruption to the analysis of "carnival actions", remembering how the most central and most widespread of these, the burlesque crowning and subsequent de-crowning of the king of the Carnival, is founded on

the very core of the carnivalistic attitude to the world – *the pathos of vicissitudes and changes, of death and renewal*. Carnival is the festival of all-destroying and all-renewing time. The basic meaning of carnival can be expressed in this way. (*Dostoevskij*, 102)

From this "fundamental idea" derives an important consequence: the "ambivalent character, one and double", of the carnival ritual of coronation-discoronation, and, as we shall soon see, of all the main aspects of the Carnival itself. As may be inferred without possibility of error from Bachtin's reasoning, the true dominant (or superordinate, in the sense already suggested) category of the Carnival is ambivalence: under it are "subsumed" (in the Marxist sense of the term) the other features that Bachtin takes into account, and which criticism has gradually received, and sometimes found significant in themselves. Bachtin never tires of repeating it, either in the elaborate and extended forms of *Rabelais* or the compact synthesis we are here concerned with, a synthesis within whose reduced dimensions occurs a dramatic piling up of the idea and the terms connected with it:

Crowning and discrowning is a two-in-one, ambivalent ritual, expressing the inevitability and simultaneously the creativity, of change and renewal, the *jolly relativity* of every system and order, every

authority and every (hierarchical) position. The idea of immanent discrowning is contained already in the crowning: it is ambivalent from the very beginning. [...] In the ritual of coronation all the elements of the ceremony itself, the symbols of authority, [...] the clothes, [...] become ambivalent [...], their symbolic significance becomes bi-levelled. [...] All carnivalistic symbols are of this nature: they always include within themselves the perspective of negation (death) or its opposite. (*Dostoevskij*, 102-103)

And below:

We must again stress the ambivalent nature of carnival images [...] The image of *fire* is profoundly ambivalent in carnival. This is fire that simultaneously destroys and renews the world [...]. Carnival *laughter* is itself profoundly ambivalent [...]. In the act of carnival laughter death and rebirth, negation (ridicule) and affirmation (joyful laughter) are combined [...] We shall touch on yet another question – the carnivalistic nature of *parody* [...]. Parody is the creation of a *double which discrowns its counterpart*; it is that same “inside-out world”. Parody is then ambivalent. (*Dostoevskij*, 104-105)

I insist: *only in so far as they are ambivalent* do the actions, symbols and images examined in this context characterize the culture of the carnival, expressing its “notion of the universal world”:

All the images of carnival are single and double at the same time; they unite in themselves the twin poles of change and crisis. (*Dostoevskij*, 104)

The unity of opposites, and not their polarization is then in Bakhtin's view the specific sign of the culture of the Carnival; he repeatedly stresses this fundamental point, setting the carnival world of ambivalence in opposition to the “monovalent” non-carnival world:

In the ritual of coronation all the elements of the ceremony itself, the symbols of authority [...] become ambivalent [...] (as actual symbols of authority, in the non-carnival world, they are single-levelled, absolute, weighty, and monolithically serious). [...] we repeat, crowning and discrowning are inseparable, they are two-in-one, and they transmute into one another; if they are absolutely divided, their carnival significance is completely lost [...]. If the carnival ambivalence faded from the images of discrowning, then those images were turned into a purely negative exposé of a moral or social-political nature, they became single-levelled, lost their artistic character. (*Dostoevskij*, 102-103)

I could go on quoting, from *Rabelais* too,²² but I think that the essential line of Bachtin's thinking has now been made clear: the enumeration of the features of the carnival culture – their character of ambivalence – the contrast between the culture of ambivalence and “affirmative” culture/cultures.

The auctorial testimony provided by *Dostoevskij* seems to me decisive, and its consequences for Bachtin's cultural model considerable. It corrects the “vulgate” described above in at least two main aspects, that of the essence of popular culture and that of cultural dynamics as a whole.

Above all, it is evident – on the basis of the theoretical reconstruction that has taken place – that it is no longer possible to present popular culture as the “reverse” of dominant culture; so the implicit idea that the first merely derives from the second also collapses.²³ If popular culture cannot be defined within the structure of polarization to which it is happily referred, its specific and autonomous character must be established: but this character will take on more substantial outlines than appears from the *petitio principii* at which the pro-popular historiography discussed above sometimes comes to a halt, or from – *mutatis mutandis* – well-known statements of position on folklore as “an autonomous form of creation”.²⁴ For Bachtin, the autonomy of popular culture with regard to other cultural levels (in particular those that are dominant) is founded in its dialectic capacity to grasp and represent the movement of reality, understood as a becoming of opposites:

Carnival (and we repeat that we use this word in its broadest sense) did liberate human consciousness from the power of the official idea of the world, permitting man to look at reality in a new way: without fear, without piety, in a way that was wholly critical, but, at the same time, positive and not nihilistic, since it disclosed the material principle of the world, change and becoming, the invincible power and eternal triumph of the new, the immortality of the people. (*Rabelais*, 274)

Or again, in connection with the ambivalence of expressions like the Roman Carnival's “sia ammazzato” (“get yourself killed”):

Beyond the formal contrast of meanings and tones presented by this expression, beyond the subjective play of oppositions, there stands the objective ambivalence of being, the *objective* coincidence of contrasting elements which is perceived at a certain level, though not at all clearly, by those who take part in the carnival. (*Rabelais*, 272)

The appearance of expressions like “the material principle of the world, change and becoming”, “the *objective* ambivalence of being”, “the objective coincidence of contrasting elements” at essential moments of Bachtin's argument (too essential to consider the possibility that they were planted

deliberately for the eyes of the rulers), says much about the claim that Bachtin stands entirely outside Marxist thinking. This is not the place to go into such an essential point: it must suffice to indicate – as has in any case been done by others²⁵ – the intimate link between these statements of position by Bachtin and the political-philosophical debate on the dialectic, very much alive in the Soviet Union and in Marxist thinking of the 1920s (and later).

2. The suggested model has a still greater impact as regards the second of the problems mentioned above: the overall dynamic of "high" and "low" cultural levels. When the model is accepted, the relation between the levels is no longer explicable either in terms of theories of reversal and circularity, that is to say as *specular symmetry* (model vs. anti-model): on the contrary, it assumed a specifically *asymmetrical* form. This is an inevitable consequence of making the category of ambivalence the main axis of popular culture, which Bachtin sees as opposed, by reason of this very structure, to the culture based on monologism, unilaterality, the separation of opposites, and so on.

With such terms as symmetry, asymmetry and asymmetrical relation we touch on concepts that have recently again come to the fore in scientific discussion, in fields not always directly pertaining to the questions we are concerned with (and with meanings that are sometimes discordant). For example, their connection with Lotman's latest studies on the correspondence between cerebral and cultural structures, with their shared mechanisms of "asymmetrical" creativity, would repay investigation.²⁶ The centrality of the notion of asymmetry in the thinking of the Chilean scholar Ignacio Matte Blanco is equally familiar, although here there is a considerable distance from Bachtin's approach (while on the other hand certain aspects of the carnival culture have powerful implications for Matte Blanco's reformulation of the "logic of the unconscious").²⁷ From the specifically epistemological point of view, finally, the opposition symmetrical dichotomy/asymmetrical dichotomy can be linked with the opposition between ideology and dialecticity laid down by *kritische Theorie*: as has recently been remarked in connection with the theory of the novel, "ideological discourse [...] starts from *dichotomy*, from *absolute dualism* and tries to suppress dialectic ambivalence"; further: "at the same time, it eliminates paradox and irony" (this last remark will be taken up again below).²⁸

In still more general terms, however, the notion of asymmetrical relations put forward here on the basis of Bachtin's ideas, as a model of the relations between popular culture and official culture, brings us back once again to the discussion of dialectics mentioned above. For with this notion we touch on a point central to the distinction between truly and falsely dialectic thinking: as Giovanni Bottirolì well observes – in a summary of the argument one of whose main reference points is Alain Badiou's *Théorie de la*

*contradiction*²⁹ – it is “plurality, differences of quality and the exchange-traffic between contradictions [that] make it impossible to confuse dialectic division with the dualistic and dichotomic forms of tradition”. As a result, on the political-ideological level, “the specific (distorting) possibility of Marxism consists in a symmetrical and homogeneous vision of the relation between opposites” (a vision from which descends the typically revisionist interpretation of the idea of revolution as a pure substitution of élites, with all the consequences that implies). As far as cultural dialectics are concerned, then, these considerations apply: a truly dialectic conception obliges us to understand the model of cultural relations as an intrinsically orientated model; or – to employ again a terminology loaned from philosophical-political discussion – to investigate the “main side” of the contradiction between the levels of culture, its “dominant term”.³⁰ There is no doubt that in Bakhtin’s view of things, the dominant term in the contradiction between popular and official culture³¹ consists in the capacity possessed only by the former of providing, by virtue of its intrinsically dialectic character, instruments adequate to the dialectic character of what exists. Popular culture is really “a powerful weapon for the artistic conquest of reality”:

Popular-festive images became a powerful means of grasping reality; they [...] did not reflect the naturalistic, fleeting, meaningless and scattered aspects of reality but the very process of its becoming, its meaning and direction. (*Rabelais*, 211-212)

It is an affirmation which – together with other similar ones – induces us to reconsider the significance of certain attempts to accommodate Bakhtinian pathos with the “non-scientific” (and certainly “anti-Marxist”) tradition of Russian populism. Love for the people need not necessarily involve a pre-logical regression; for Bakhtin, on the contrary, the root of dialectical thinking was to be sought in the “phenomena of popular-comic culture”.³²

3. The idea of cultural relations as asymmetrical (in the sense indicated) is distributed among various levels of Bakhtin’s work. The last quotation implies a very precise idea of the dynamics of culture: from the wealth, the complexity, the amplitude of the expressions of popular culture to the impoverishment of official ones, polarized and monologized. “Subtraction of ambivalence” ends in the loss of cognitive and expressive value, and is at the root of the “degeneration” of many cultural phenomena in the course of historical evolution: once removed from their original context, they take on rigidified and mutilated forms: the forms of “monovalence”. Let us by way of recapitulation consider the following passage from *Rabelais* on scatology and the ways it is expressed in the festival:

All such gesticulations and verbal images are part of the carnival as a whole, infused with one single logic of imagery. This is the drama of laughter presenting at the same time the death of the old and the birth of the new world. Each image is subject to the meaning of the whole; each reflects a single concept of a contradictory world of becoming, even though the image may be separately presented. Through its participation in the whole, each of these images is deeply *ambivalent*. [...] But these images [...] become coarse and cynical if they are seen from the point of view of another ideology. If the positive and negative poles of becoming (death-birth) are torn apart and opposed to each other in various diffuse images, they lose their *direct* relation to the whole and are deprived of their ambivalence. They then retain the merely negative aspect, and that which they represent [...] acquires a trivial and strictly unilateral meaning. (*Rabelais*, 162 ff.)

As we have seen, Bachtin advances similar considerations also in connection with other aspects of the festival culture: the carnival laugh, which can be reduced to the unilateralness of the purely derisory attitude; parody, liable to be transformed into monologic satire or mere negative denunciation. Even Bachtin's idea of the system of literary genres – which, particularly in *Dostoevskij*, is penetrated through and through by the distinction between polyphony and monologism – can (apart from particular aspects that are open to criticism)³³ be understood within a framework of asymmetrical opposition: in his historical survey of content (in chapter IV, quoted several times above), Bachtin contrasts the genres, or rather metagenres, of late antiquity not in terms of the over-obvious opposition between “comic” and “serious” (deduced from the official “self-model” of normative rhetoric) but in terms of the dynamic opposition between “serio-comic” (“a denomination that already has a carnival ambivalence”, *Dostoevskij*, 172) and “serious”. So once again the contradiction moves between unequal poles, one of which includes the other.

Further development of this discussion could, obviously, lead directly to consideration of Bachtin's theorizations concerning the dialogic character of the literary act. This question has received adequate treatment from several scholars,³⁴ in the wake of the increased interest in Bachtin as literary theorist rather than historian that was mentioned in the opening pages of the present essay; it would be redundant to dwell on it here. It should instead be emphasized that the suggestion of an asymmetrical model of the cultural dynamic represents a truly Copernican revolution carried out by Bachtin, also as regards certain ideas that have been hinted at on the relations between “high” and “low”. For with his reading of Carnival and carnivalization Bachtin in fact overturns the view by which the contents and forms of “high” culture gradually “come down in the world” and become “low”; on the contrary, it is the contents and forms of popular culture – the culture of

ambivalence – which “degenerate” (Bachtin’s own term, as we have seen), turning into the monologism of official *Weltanschauungen*.

Certain criticisms that have been directed at Bachtin’s culturological ideas need to be discussed anew in this light. The models that can be induced from his work have been accused of making an over-rigid division between a popular cultural world which is represented as too unilaterally “comic” and an official cultural world (above all, that of the medieval Church), which is unilaterally “serious”.³⁵ As we have seen, the situation is more complex: in the first place, the problem of the dialectic between cultural contents, on which Bachtin chiefly concentrates, must not be confused with the problem – obviously related, but not because it is identical, or even homologous – of the relations between the various social forces that “produce” and/or “distribute” and/or “consume” such contents. The incontrovertible fact that in certain historical conditions (e.g. in the late Middle Ages, to which the critics like to refer), between bearers of “high” culture (like intellectuals “organically” within the Church) and bearers of “low” culture (like the more or less “extra-official” clergy) there runs a split which allows some of them to be active in both sectors at once, not only provides in the end support for the asymmetrical model, but leaves intact Bachtin’s main body of reasoning; a main body which, I repeat, is very far from rigid dichotomization, founded as it is in dialectic.

III

1. The foregoing considerations manifest, I think, a distinct simplification and abstraction of an author very much opposed to excessively “modelizing” procedures (we know Bachtin’s criticism of the tendency, shown by monologizing philosophies – including the “monologic dialectic” of the Hegelian type³⁶ – “to extract ideas and abstract judgements” out of the live reality of dialogue).³⁷ But it was pointed out at the outset that the reconstructing of Bachtin’s cultural model serves an essentially instrumental function (besides corresponding better, in my view, to the author’s “philology”, reconstructing more correctly the sense of his texts): the ambivalence-model can provide a higher “yield” than the dichotomic-symmetrical model to which it is a critical response. I shall outline here some of the operative consequences that follow its adoption in the specific field of literature, referring to medieval material for the twofold reason of the high rate of “cultural hybridism” in the Middle Ages (making it an eminently “dialectic” cultural place) and of the massive presence of the phenomena of “carnivalization” during the taking-shape of literatures called, not by chance, “demotic”. In this I shall continue to refer to the two areas involved by the model (the “internal” dimension, i.e. the essence of popular culture, and the “external”, i.e. the relations between this

and other levels of culture), putting forward a double set of considerations, which are obviously interdependent.

2. There is, as we know, a category of medieval texts (demotic and non-demotic) which critics of all tendencies recognize as having, more than others, the "popular" quality: for example, speaking broadly, the texts of the Renard tradition, most *fabliaux* (whose case is in reality more controversial, as is shown by the long and as yet unconcluded discussion of the limits of the genre and of its social referents), or the "Marcolfian" texts, linked with the Italian tradition of *Bertoldo*.³⁸ It is above all on material of this type that critical analysis employing Bakhtinian categories and concepts has by preference exercised itself, and still does. The results have certainly suggested new viewpoints and, in any case, a revival of interest in the material in question. A more discriminating assessment of the possible contribution of Bakhtin – as suggested above – could however integrate the new approach with readings at least complementary to those provided so far.

For it is clear that the identification of the "different" and "reversed" terms of this literature, with respect to official literature (for instance the obvious emphasis on materiality that pervades it, the preponderance of scatological, sexual, and in general bodily themes), features generally linked with the idea of cultural inversion, should be accompanied by greater attention towards the dialectal aspects of the text. This is the logical consequence of the fact, which has already been emphasized, that the autonomy of "popular" texts is based more on their capacity to represent (and represent themselves) in "structures of ambivalence" than in structures of polarization in comparison with "cultured" texts.

The term "structures of ambivalence" is here a substitute – quite provisional – for that general theoretical framework which, always within the operative limits I have spoken of, would be extremely useful in untangling the complex problem of the cultural relations underlying texts. Without claiming to be systematic, I shall confine myself to indicating some of these structures, which have all in general been quite well studied, though not, indeed, in an overall perspective:

- the deliberately dialogic construction of the text, which – through its actants – makes possible the copresence of opposites and reproduces their movement (the classic case is the above-mentioned *Dialogus Salomonis et Marcolphi*);³⁹

- the category of parody: as theory has more than once suggested, parody is by its nature a figure of ambivalence, founded in the indispensable copresence of two textual levels – the parodier and the parodied – placed in opposition within a single structure;

- the forms of paradox, including the literature of the absurd and nonsense, well represented in the Middle Ages.⁴⁰ In connection with paradox,

the reader will recall Bachtin's comment in *Rabelais*, where he remarks (à propos of the definition of the grotesque put forward by Pinsky) that "coming close to what is distant, relating what is mutually exclusive, violating habitual notions, the grotesque in art is similar to the paradox in logic".⁴¹

I have discussed structures of this type elsewhere, in an analysis of the Cockaigne theme, in which to the current idea of Cockaigne as an "upside-down" variant of the Golden Age I oppose that of a Cockaigne as paradoxical reproduction of the real economy (goods without production; money without value; distribution without market, etc.). The text chosen for inspection (the *fabliau de Coquaigne*) functions, then, only if understood as a structure of ambivalence embracing two poles (actual reality *in absentia*, the explicitly described Cockaigne); when such structuring is less present, the Cockaigne theme "degenerates" precisely into a simple reactionary-gastronomic dimension.⁴²

3. Besides the "internal" perspective of which I have here given some examples, general reflections on Bachtin's model also have consequences, as has been mentioned, on a second level. Simple dichotomizing theories tend rigidly to separate texts that cling to the official cultural model from those that cling to the anti-model: so a corpus of "different" texts is established (I have just cited some of them), perhaps too hastily shutting out the problem of the relation between official culture and popular culture and that of how it is reflected in the texts.⁴³ But the contribution of popular literature to the total cultural production is obviously not exhausted by the separate sector of "popular" texts: the matter must then be considered in a dynamic light, following with greater attention the traces of "carnivalization" in the whole body of texts, including those normally located in the other *hortus conclusus*, which, not by chance, is better cultivated (and is, for some, the only one that offers really "literary" produce).

The problem may appear solved by the idea, already mentioned, of cultural circularity, in which the various levels mutually influence each other. But it is only on the basis of the model of ambivalence that this rather aseptic and indiscriminating idea (which thus lends itself so well to general positions, behind which lies concealed that same elitist notion of culture which circularity sets out to correct)⁴⁴ becomes more urgent and, if one wishes, more evaluative. Bachtin's suggestions on the "loss of ambivalence" in the passage between cultural levels suggest a principle of orientation of the relation between popular and official culture, along a line which I have elsewhere defined as the line of cultural "monologization".⁴⁵

We find here, in simplified terms, a phenomenon comparable to what Jacques Le Goff, in his studies of the dialectic between folk-culture and clerical culture in the late Middle Ages, calls "denaturing":⁴⁶ the ambivalent substance of popular culture is denatured when single elements of it – more

or less in isolation or more or less centrally – are taken over by cultured texts. (As we have seen, Bakhtin applies to this process the comparable term of "degeneration"). The dialectic character of popular features, which implies a capacity to be subversive, challenging, antihierarchic and so on, is neutralized when they are placed in the service of affirmative ideological messages which the texts of official culture transmit as being dominant. Perhaps the best known example of this reductive mechanism is that provided by many texts of the literature of hagiography, in some of which typically popular features can still be traced faintly: the Old French *Alexis*, for example, is structured according to a "carnivalized" development: the protagonist, from a socially elevated point of departure goes through a (self)-discrowning (by choosing to become a beggar), only to end up – and here monologization is at work – in the religious-edifying absoluteness of his being crowned as a saint, an object of veneration and an unattainable ideal, with which the story ends, any further putting in perspective being broken off.

The weight and the function of popular cultural elements in official texts obviously varies greatly. Besides, since we are considering a dynamic dimension, we should not forget *officialized* texts, given that a non-official text or collection of texts can in turn be transferred *in toto* (as cultural semiotics of Lotman's type teaches us) to the opposite camp, precisely by virtue of the transformational mechanisms that have been indicated. In any case it would be useful to try to define the typologies, also in connection with the distinction previously drawn between surface and essential features of popular culture (obviously, the former will more easily than the latter lend themselves to being given new functions, even though there are some examples of "monologized" logic of ambivalence).⁴⁷

4. To wish to draw general conclusions at this stage would be premature. It is, however, clear that the application of the model "ambivalence/monologization" seems to provide interesting results in all cases in which a cultural situation and its textual expressions reveal – for the most varied reasons and in the most varied gradations – a particularly high degree of "hybridization" (as I believe can be felt in the examples I have given). But perhaps the usefulness of such categorial grids does not stop here:⁴⁸ if it is true that behind all works, even the most "closed" and "sublime", can always be sensed a dynamic constitutive process, which shapes them out of the most heterogeneous materials (time after time affirmed, denied, reduced, enlarged, redoubled, refracted, made metaphorical, encoded, explicated, etc.); if it is true that works are underlaid by a *multiple* creative web, which relives, to some degree, in the completed work; then every analytic approach that works towards recovering the *whole* sense of this creativity, towards stripping away *every* layer deposited in the work, towards identifying all the voices that have gone to its making, has its justification and its usefulness.

NOTES

- ¹ Ju.M. Lotman and B.A. Uspenskij (Italian translation), 'Nuovi aspetti nello studio della cultura dell'antica Rus'' (1977), in *La cultura nella tradizione russa del XIX e XX secolo*, ed. D.S. Avalle, *Strumenti critici*, 42-43, October 1980, pp. 349-371; note 5, p. 369.
- ² The first of Bachtin's works to be translated into Italian (and which appeared at the same time in Japan), *Problemy poëtiki Dostoevskogo* (1963), published in Italy as *Dostoevskij. Politica e stilistica* (Torino 1968), was received primarily as a work of specialist interest; *Rabelais*, in contrast (*Tvorčestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaja kul'tura srednevekov'ja i Renessansa* (1965), very soon reached a wider readership, from the moment of the French translation of 1970 (and also in the English translation of 1968), that is to say well before the tardy Italian translation (*L'opera di Rabelais e la cultura popolare. Riso, carnevale e festa nella tradizione medievale e rinascimentale*, Torino 1979). – In the text I shall cite the two works as *Dostoevskij* and *Rabelais*. [Translator's note: except where otherwise stated, the page numbers relate to the English-language translations; in the case of *Dostoevskij* (Ann Arbor 1973) one or two small changes have been made in the interest of style, and one discrepancy between the Italian and the English translations has been noted; in the case of *Rabelais* there are substantial differences between the Italian and the English versions; and since the author (i.e. Nicolò Pasero) refers to phrases present in the former and not in the latter, I have made an English version of the Italian, while retaining page references to the equivalent passages in the English edition (Bloomington, Indiana 1984).]
- ³ In particular with the translation of *Voprosy literatury i éstetiki* (1975), *Estetica e romanzo*, Torino 1979 (English translation: *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin, Texas 1981). The Italian editions of *Marxismo e filosofia del linguaggio* ([1929] Bari 1976), *Freudismo* ([1927] Bari 1977) and *Il metodo formale nella scienza della letteratura* ([1928] Bari 1977), have on the other hand not received adequate attention for themselves, discussion having been concerned above all with the problem of the extent to which they should be attributed to Bachtin (the original editions having of course been published under the names of V.N. Vološinov for the first two, P.N. Medvedev for the third). In this connection see N. Marcialis, (English Translation) 'Bachtin and his Circle' in the present issue ('Bachtin e la sua cerchia', in *Il linguaggio, il corpo, la festa. Per un ripensamento della tematica di Michail Bachtin* [Metamorfosi, 7, 1983], pp. 104-129; with bibliography).

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[...] effective scientific models are "speculative instruments" [...] Yet they succeed in wedding disparate arguments by means of a particular operation of transfer of the *implications* of relatively well organized cognitive fields. [...] The use of a particular model may amount to nothing more than the forced and artificial description of

an area already sufficiently familiar. But it may also help us to bring out that which would otherwise be neglected, to lay relative emphasis on the details – in short, to *see new connections*.

(Max Black, 'Modelli e archetipi' (1958), in *Modelli archetipi metafore*, Parma 1983, pp. 67-95; italics, as in all subsequent quotations, in the original)

- 5 As is well known, such expressions as "carnival culture", "festive culture" and "popular culture" are for Bachtin absolutely synonymous on the conceptual level. This synonymy has helped to bring about distorted interpretations of Bachtin's ideas (above all the general failure to distinguish between "phenomenal" and "essential" cultural features, which is dealt with below).
- 6 I am not aware of exhaustive comparative analyses of the two editions. For recent confirmation that ch. IV of *Dostoevskij* recapitulates *Rabelais* see T. Todorov, 'L'humain et l'interhumain (Mikhail Bakhtine)', in *Critique de la critique*, Paris 1984, pp. 83-84.
- 7 *Dostoevskij*, p. 101:

These carnivalistic categories are *not abstract thoughts* on equality and freedom, on the interrelatedness of all things, or on the unity of opposites, etc. No, they are concretely-sensuous, ritual-pageant "thoughts", experienced and played out in life itself, which have taken shape and survived over a period of millennia in the broadest masses of the European peoples.

For a discussion of this passage, cf. my essay 'Dialettica figurata. Implicazioni marxiste del "Rabelais" di Michail Bachtin', in *L'Immagine riflessa*, VII, 1984, 1-2 (*Saggi su Bachtin*), pp. 417-436.

- 8 Cf., e.g., P. Clemente, 'L'idea del Carnevale', in *Il linguaggio, il corpo, la festa*, cit., pp. 11-35, where, among a series of valuable remarks on Bachtin, Frazer, Caro Baroja and Van Gennep, Bachtin's categories are subjected to a reading that is directly historical-anthropological, and which, in my opinion, takes too little account of the peculiar conceptual character that distinguishes Bachtin's model from the "positive" analyses of the other authors taken into consideration: a style that demands, precisely, a structurally complex reading of his carnival features. Comparable methodological precautions should be taken in comparing Bachtin's ideas to works such as Burke's manual cited below (note 22) or J. Heers' recent historical investigation, *Fêtes des fous et Carnavals*, Paris 1983.
- 9 At any rate, there are none, as far as I know, that have been produced in Italy. Elsewhere the problem of the "structure" of the Bakhtinian carnival has more often been approached as it requires, that is to say also in the light of a possible theoretical model: cf., e.g., A. Belleau's recent study, translated into Italian as 'E vivo il carnevalesco?', in *L'Immagine riflessa (Saggi su Bachtin)*, cit., pp. 117-126.

- 10 As, using a semiotic terminology, Stefan Zolkiewski (in the course of a more fully articulated discussion of Bachtin), summarises: "Taken as a whole, the results of analysis show that the carnival sign-system serves to provide the model of a 'world upside down'" (S. Zolkiewski, 'La cultura letteraria. Semiotica e letteraturologia' [1980], in *Sigma*, 1/1982, ed. C. Prevignano, pp. 1-150; I quote from p. 31; cf. also p. 133).
- 11 Cesare Segre ('Testi, cultura e tipologia', in *L'ombra d'Argo*, I, 1983, 1-2, pp. 57-75; on p. 74), recapitulating the ideas expressed by Maria Corti in her studies of medieval cultural models.
- 12 A.J. Gurevich, *Le categorie della cultura medievale* (1972), Torino 1983; Introduction, p. 11 (where he also refers to the "medieval world of constant inversion").
- 13 At this point we shall confine ourselves to recalling the definition of the "optimal code" in Jakobson-Halle (1956): "a system of distinctive features based on a relation of reciprocal implication between the terms of every binary opposition" (translated from ch. VI of R. Jakobson, *Essais de linguistique générale*, Paris 1963, p. 145; Italian translation: Milano 1966).
- 14 V.V. Ivanov, 'Significato delle idee di M.M. Bachtin sul segno, l'atto di parola e il dialogo per la semiotica contemporanea' (1973), in *Michail Bachtin, Semiotica, teoria della letteratura e marxismo*, ed. A. Ponzio, Bari 1977, pp. 67-104 (p. 97).
- 15 D.S. Avalle, 'Il problema della cultura nella filologia e linguistica russe del XIX e XX secolo', in *La cultura nella tradizione russa*, cit., pp. 515-556 (p. 542).
- 16 By S. Zolkiewski, 'Des principes de classement des textes de culture', in *Semiotica*, VII, 1973, 1, pp. 1-17. Cf. in this connection M. Bonafin, (English translation) 'Typology of Culture and Carnival' in the present issue ('Tipologia della cultura e Carnevale. Nota sui modelli di Bachtin e Lotman', in *L'Immagine riflessa [Saggi su Bachtin]*, cit., pp. 381-396).
- 17 Cf. in this connection N. Wachtel, 'L'acculturazione' (1974), in *Fare storia*, ed. J. Le Goff and P. Nora, Torino 1981, pp. 93-116 (especially on p. 114, on acculturation as a "generalized" theory, applicable also to cultural dialectic in medieval and modern Europe).
- 18 Redfield's model is expounded and discussed by P. Burke, *Cultura popolare nell'Europa moderna* (1978), Milano 1980, pp. 26ff.
- 19 G. Duby, 'La vulgarisation des modèles culturels dans la société féodale', in *Niveaux de culture et groupes sociaux. Actes du colloque réuni du 7 au 9 mai 1966 à l'Ecole normale supérieure*, Paris-La Haye 1967, pp. 33-50, p. 36.
- 20 P. Burke, *op. cit.*, p. 31. Notwithstanding certain later adjustments on the interaction of cultural levels (e.g. on pp. 59ff.), this remains the author's essential view of the matter.
- 21 C. Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e i vermi. Il cosmo di un mugnaio del '500*, Torino 1976, p. XII (in the 'Prefazione', pp. XI-XXXI, which in my view still provides an excellent clarification of the problems associated with the cultural dynamics of Europe).

- 22 E.g. *Rabelais*, Introduction, pp. 16, 21, 26-27, 29, 30; ch. I, p. 135 and p. 155 (ambivalence and carnival laughter); p. 164 (ambivalence and scatological images); p. 178 (ambivalence and low material-bodily); p. 180 (ambivalence and marketplace language); etc. Other passages are quoted below, referring to the ambivalence-monologism opposition. [Translator's note: the page numbers given in this note refer to the Italian edition.]
- 23 As I have already remarked, it is only by assuming in critical (metacultural) discourse the basic mechanism of the self-descriptive schema "us/culture vs. them/non-culture" that one can go on arguing in these terms. But what we find here is, precisely, an ambiguity regarding the observer's relative "point of view".
- 24 I refer, obviously, to P. Bogatyrev-R. Jakobson, 'Folklore as an Autonomous Form of Creation' (1929), in Italian translation in *Strumenti critici*, I, 1967, pp. 223-238. It should however be emphasized (also to serve a discussion, which would here be out of place, on the cultural roots of some of Bachtin's ideas) that it is the study of folklore that has provided the assurance of the "fundamentally ambiguous, equivocal character of folklore, a belief in forces that are good and evil at once, the employment of a double-edged cultural 'ouillage'" (J. Le Goff, [Italian translation] 'Cultura clericale e tradizioni folkloriche nella civiltà merovingia' (1968), in *Tempo della Chiesa e tempo del mercante*, Torino 1977, pp. 193-207; on p. 202). See also the comments of L. Lazzerini, 'Arlecchino, le mosche, le streghe e le origini del teatro popolare', in *Studi Mediolatini e Volgari*, XXV, 1977, pp. 93-155; on p. 145ff.
- 25 See S. Tagliagambe, 'Il realismo grottesco', in *Alfabeta*, 14, June 1980, pp. 4-5.
- 26 J.M. Lotman, *La semiosfera, l'asimmetria e il dialogo nelle strutture pensanti*, ed. S. Salvemini, Venezia 1985, esp. pp. 91-111.
- 27 I. Matte Blanco, *L'inconscio come insieme infiniti. Saggio sulla bi-logica* (1975), ed. P. Bria, Torino 1981; for the "logic of the unconscious" see also the editor's introduction (pp. XXIII-XXV), where he makes reference to an unpublished work of Matte Blanco's of 1980.
- 28 Author's translation from P.V. Zima, *Der gleichgültige Held. Textsoziologische Untersuchungen zu Sartre, Moravia und Camus*, Stuttgart 1983, pp. 24-25.
- 29 A. Badiou, *Théorie de la contradiction*, Paris 1976, esp. pp. 70ff.; G. Bottioli, *La contraddizione e la differenza. Il materialismo dialettico e la semiotica di Julia Kristeva*, Torino 1980, pp. 19-21.
- 30 My reference here is, obviously, to Mao Tse Tung's *On Contradiction* (1937), in particular to chapter IV: 'Main Contradiction and Main Aspect of Contradiction'.
- 31 "Official culture" is, in general, synonymous with "dominant culture". The resulting play on words would in itself be enough to express Bachtin's turning upside-down of the prevailing view of the relations between cultural levels.
- 32 In the light of this, assertions such as these that follow, from *Rabelais*, need to be interpreted and developed:

I shall here refer to the phenomena of popular artistic imagery which have up to the present been neither understood nor investigated: spontaneous dialectic phenomena. Up to the present, attention has been paid only to phenomena that expressed formal-logical relations or which in any case belonged within the context of such relations: phenomena situated on a flat surface, as it were, one-dimensional and with a single tone, representing the static nature of the object and knowing nothing of becoming or ambivalence. In the phenomena of popular-comic culture on the other hand, we find, above all, dialectics in figurative form. (*Rabelais*, p. 452, n. 1)

Cf. my article 'Dialettica figurata. Implicazioni marxiste del Rabelais di Michail Bachtin'.

- 33 See C. Segre, *Teatro e romanzo*, Torino 1984, pp. 61-84 (chapter V: 'Quello che Bachtin non ha detto. Le origini medievali del romanzo'; English translation: 'What Bachtin Did Not Say: The Medieval Origins of the Novel', in the present issue).
- 34 With particular clarity by J. Lehmann, 'Ambivalenza e dialogismo. Sulla teoria del discorso in Michail Bachtin', in *L'Immagine riflessa (Saggi su Bachtin)*, cit., pp. 257-284; but see also T. Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtine, le principe dialogique*, Paris 1981, esp. chapters 4 and 5.
- 35 Such criticism, very widespread, has been advanced in Italy by Pietro Camporesi and Francesco Bruni: see, e.g., Pietro Camporesi, 'Cultura popolare e cultura d'élite fra Medioevo ed età moderna', in *Storia d'Italia, Annali*, 4 (*Intellettuali e potere*), Torino 1981, pp. 81-157 (on p. 101); and Francesco Bruni's essay 'Modelli in contrasto e modelli settoriali nella cultura medievale (A proposito di *Modelli e antiodelli nella cultura medievale* di Maria Corti, con una critica della categoria del carnevalesco)', in *Strumenti critici*, XIV, 1980, pp. 1-59, esp. pp. 40ff.
- 36 See the remarks made in this connection by T. Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtine*, cit., pp. 160ff. and V. Strada, 'Dialogo con Bachtin', in *Intersezioni*, I, 1981, p. 123; in English translation 'Dialogue with Bachtin' in the present issue.
- 37 M. Bachtin, (Italian translation) 'Dagli appunti del 1970-71' ('From the Notebooks of 1970-71'), in *Intersezioni*, I, 1981, pp. 125-147:

Dialogue and dialectic. Voices (the division of voices) and intonations (personalist-emotive) are removed from dialogue; ideas and abstract judgements are extracted from living discourse; all is pressed into a single abstract consciousness, and in this way dialectic is arrived at. (p. 139)

- 38 Essential references: P. Camporesi, *La maschera di Bertoldo*, Torino 1976; and G.C. Croce, *Le sottilissime astuzie di Bertoldo. Le piacevoli e ridicolose semplicità di Bertoldino. Col 'Dialogus Salomonis et Marcolphi' e il suo primo*

volgarizzamento a stampa, introduction, commentary and restoration of the text by P. Camporesi, Torino 1978.

³⁹ See note 38.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Rabelais*, pp. 465-469 (Italian translation), on the *coq-à-l'âne*. For a general orientation on this type of text, see P. Bec, *La lyrique française au Moyen Age (XII-XIII s.)*, Vol. I, *Etudes*, Paris 1977, pp. 158-183 (with bibliography).

⁴¹ *Rabelais*, p. 39 (Italian translation). (One could refer here again to the "logic of the unconscious", already hinted at in note 27.)

⁴² Cf. 'Il paradosso eversivo. Note in margine al "fabliau de Coquaigne"' ('The Subversive Paradox. Marginal Note to the "Fabliau de Coquaigne"'), in *Lectures*, 11, 1982, pp. 177-199.

⁴³ This is somewhat the risk run by works – for the rest useful and interesting – such as the recent Provençal anthology edited by P. Bec, *Burlesque et obscénité chez les troubadours. Le contre-texte au Moyen-Age*, Paris 1984 (for the symptomatic notion of "contre-texte" see the editor's introduction, esp. on p. 13: "Le contre-texte est, donc, par définition, un texte minoritaire et marginalisé, une sorte d'infra-littérature [underground]").

⁴⁴ I should like to make it clear that I do not wish to diminish the innovative importance of the idea of cultural circularity, but it seems to me that its applications – especially in the field of literature – have fallen well short of the methodological clarity shown by, e.g., Ginzburg, in the works cited.

⁴⁵ Cf. Pasero, 'Niveaux de culture dans les chansons de geste (Rapport introductif)', in *Essor et fortune de la chanson de geste dans l'Europe et l'Orient latin. Actes du IXe Congrès International de la "Société Rencesvals pour l'Etude des Epopées Romanes"* (Padoue-Venise 1982), Modena 1984, pp. 3-25 (also for examples of what follows, the reader is referred to this essay).

⁴⁶ J. Le Goff, 'Cultura clericale e tradizioni folkloriche' (*cit.* in note 24), pp. 201ff.

⁴⁷ As occurs, for instance, in the 'Charroi de Nîmes' (a 12th century *chanson de geste*), in which the epic conflict between the king of France and his vassal William of Orange (provoked by the refusal to concede a fief) is resolved by applying a typically "ambiguous" procedure: the king grants William the "land of Spain", his in name but not in fact, since it is occupied by the Saracens: in this way, as the caption to an illustration of the text puts it, "le rois [...] dona a Guillaume ce qu'il n'avoit que donner". "Popular" logic is in this way used to solve a conflict that endangers the unitary ideology of the epic world: so it is "monologized" (I refer the reader again to my essay 'Niveaux de culture', *cit.*, pp. 18-19).

⁴⁸ It is hardly necessary to point out that the reverse movement (i.e. from "monologism" to "ambivalence") can be applied to explain the genesis of parodic texts, which "cast into ambivalence" the monologic structure of the parodied text.