

THE COMIC AND THE SERIOUS
IN RELIGIOUS LITERATURE
OF THE MIDDLE AGES

A history of the comic has not yet been written. According to historians, the comic had very different, and sometimes even opposite causes, in relation to different ages and cultures. What provoked laughter in one civilization could be taken quite seriously in another. The comic has always had a particular function and its nature, its internal composition, has not been immutable. It could be kept within the limits of a single sphere that was assigned to it in particular (the comic, as opposed to the tragic), but it could also be elevated to a conceptual vision of the world, and in this case, it embraced much more universal domains of human history. Nevertheless, nothing has been written on the history of the comic throughout all ages and encompassing all peoples.¹ Serious studies concerning the place it occupies in the history of civilizations are, however, of great interest.

¹ Cf. Lucien Febvre's remarks on this subject in *Combats pour l'Histoire*, Paris, 1953, p. 236.

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Of the most important authors on this subject we would like to single out O. Freidenberg and M. Bakhtine. In 1925 O. Freidenberg wrote a short study on "The Origin of Parody",² in which she showed with the aid of many supporting documents, the link between parody and the sacred in ancient, classic and medieval civilizations. According to her, the comic and the tragic, the profane and the sacred, the ridiculous and the sublime are but two aspects, almost necessarily complementary, of a single conception of the world. God and the ass playing the role of God, the Mass and dionysic liturgy, the chief of state and the clown that the monkey represents seated on the throne, the triumph of the ridiculous, the parody of justice, etc., illustrate a conception of the world that presupposes a comic double for everything that is serious. This comic duality is part of the very make-up of the sacred and as the author concludes, "...the association of parody and the divine can be found in the most ancient religious conceptions." The stronger is religious feeling and the more lively it is, the more easily can it be made ridiculous; moreover, it draws new elements into parody itself. "Parody is not the make-believe that we conceive of today. Neither does it hide, as we may have thought, a lack of content. Rather, it indicates a strengthening of content bringing to light the nature of the gods: it does not make fun of them, but of us, and it does this so well that nowadays it is taken for comedy, for an imitation or for satire." This way of looking at the question is radically opposed to conceptions of the world that are often very flat and "tending toward atheism."

In another work, *The Poetics of Subject and Genre* (Leningrad, 1936), O. Freidenberg returns to the problem of the meaning of laughter in the popular consciousness as it was depicted in the literature of ancient times, and describes the link between the alternation of laughter and tears in ancient religious rites. "Like laughter, tears are not a simply biological phenomenon, but are expression of a conception of the world of semantic origin." Employing mythological sources and folklore, she shows that in ancient literature realism corresponds to the

² This study was first published almost a half century later, in *Troudy po znakovym sistemam*, VI ("Study on systems of symbols," VI), Tartu, 1973, p. 490-497.

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vulgar and the comic, and in this context she uses the expression "vulgar realism." She also points out that in the Middle Ages "an intimate mixture of the elevated with the vulgar, of passions and of farces" took place. The short realist scenes that interrupted serious action in the mysteries, morals, and miracles put into the foreground fools, charlatans, clever servants, and devils who argued or fought with one another."

The "duality" between sacred and comic, their combination and their traditional fusion are therefore an important trait of civilization, from primitive times to antiquity and in the Middle Ages. One may challenge the affirmation that the origin of the duality between sacred and comic can be traced to the most ancient and pre-logical periods of civilizations, but one cannot deny that an interesting problem has been raised.³

In his already classic monograph, *François Rabelais' Works and Popular Culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Moscow, 1965), M. Bakhtine takes up the same idea but in a somewhat different way. He accords a fundamental significance to the role of laughter and the grotesque in medieval civilization. According to him, our current conception of the comic is very different from what it was at that time; and the place it occupies in modern literature and art seems, in comparison, to be quite poor and limited. "Grotesque realism" of the Middle Ages in fact transforms the terrifying into the comical and conquers fear by means of laughter. Thus, a mixture between the grotesque and the elevated is not in question but rather we can observe the breakdown of all boundaries and opposites—the boundary between our body and the world, negative and positive, serious and comic. The high approaching the base, the reversal and mutation of these two opposites, the joyous upsetting of reality makes up the basis of the concept of the "corporeal grotesque." M. Bakhtine finds sources of the grotesque in folklore of the most diverse art forms of that period's civilization: painting, literature, mysteries, carnival. "Influenced by a carnivalesque conception of existence, the grotesque frees the world from all that is terrifying, making it altogether reassuring, and thus extremely joyful and luminous."

³ So as not to go beyond the framework of the European Middle Ages, we shall limit ourselves to citing some observations on the link between the comic and the demonic in Scandinavian "sagas" Cf. E. Mélétynsky: *The "Edda" and the Original Forms of the Epic*, Moscow, 1968, p. 202 and ff.

Another historian, L. Pinski, also brings to light the ambivalence and paradoxical nature of the medieval sense of the grotesque: "by bringing closer together what is normally separated, by uniting opposites, by violating ordinary notions, the grotesque in art is similar to the paradox in logic."⁴

M. Bakhtine attempts to contrast the comic that originated in popular culture with the "official" culture of the Church in which, according to him, laughter and gaiety are frowned upon. Saint John Chrysostome himself said: "Christ never laughed." The apostles and Church Fathers condemned frivolous merry-making and impious joking. During the Middle Ages the Church agreed with this point of view, and only in the 12th century its position underwent a change, and it began to show a certain tolerance for gaiety, on condition that the latter was "moderated."⁵

It was during this period that parody and satire, that could only be found sporadically in previous times, make their appearance in medieval Latin literature.⁶ Let us not forget that there was a break between the general principles that ecclesiastical authorities never stopped declaiming, and the praxis that was far from always following these principles.

However, we must not be satisfied with popular, carnivalesque comic sources furnished from the production of non-official culture. It may be interesting also to search for them in the official literature of the period. From this point of view we shall endeavor

⁴ L. Pinski, *Realism during the Renaissance*, Moscow, 1961, p. 120.

⁵ F. Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, 8th edition, Bern and Munich, 1973, p. 422. Curtius brings to our attention the mixture between serious and comic and the fragility of their boundaries, as one of literature's characteristic traits from the end of Antiquity to the Middle Ages. Humorous elements can be found, often quite unexpectedly, in scenes from the lives of saints, even in those farthest from the comical. One must then deduce that the audience of the time expected authors to introduce comic elements into these descriptions. Curtius quotes numerous convincing examples of the method consisting in "telling the truth while laughing" in Medieval literature, and he emphasizes the point that this question has received little attention and that it merits further study. Curtius limits himself mainly to noting the fact that joking and seriousness are mixed, without searching deeper into the nature of the phenomenon. He certainly feels that this stylistic norm in Medieval literature can be sufficiently explained by the succession of Greek and Roman traditions, contrary to classical canons of ancient aesthetics, that made a strict distinction between the elevated and the vulgar style.

⁶ Lehmann, *Die Parodie im Mittelalter*, 2nd edition, Stuttgart, 1963.

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to examine the monuments of Latin literature that we owe to ecclesiastics: the lives of saints, legends about the other world, sermons, religious precepts and other works generally associated, by researchers, with the "serious" genre that characterizes official doctrine.

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The synthesis of the serious and the tragic on the one hand, and of the tendency toward the most extreme forms of humiliation on the other hand, was already germinating in Christian doctrine, itself built upon the concept of an incarnated god uniting in his person manifestations of the divine and the human. The idea of a god born in a stable and delivered from an infamous execution, after having undergone the atrocious anguish of death, as well as "God's abandon;" the accent put on his crucified body, a bloody and mutilated symbol of supreme beauty, on the cult of resignation and physical suffering, poverty, the renunciation of worldly joys, that impregnates the Christian religion, and on the discovery of moral strength and physical weakness—this whole context of "humiliation," transcendent on principle, is associated in Christianity with the no less striking paradox of the incompatibility between faith and reason. The opposition between the body and the spirit, between the terrestrial and celestial worlds, in Christianity was expressed in the Medieval aesthetic, and in particular in the grotesque, that was widely used both in the plastic arts and in literature.⁷

While reading examples of edifying literature today, one is continually struck by a kind of paradox, or contradiction, between the general theme that is set forth and its concrete realization. The religious author, concerned with the state of health of his reader's souls, relates different stories which he hopes will help him to lead them onto the path of truth. His whole narrative is subordinated to this pious task. Demonstration of the importance of the holy communion and of baptism, the necessity to resist sinful temptations, denunciation of the devil's schemes and glorification of the saints, astonishment before divine

⁷ We must remember that the role of the grotesque in European art after ancient times was described in a clear and pertinent way by Victor Hugo. In particular, we feel that his comments on the universal influence of the grotesque, that penetrated into all spheres of Medieval life, including the customs, are very incisive. (Cf. Victor Hugo, preface to *Cromwell*).

grace, appeals for contrition and penitence, demonstration of the superiority of humility and modesty over pride, a peek into the other world, showing its punishments and rewards; these are, in general, the edifying themes of the short narratives in which ecclesiastical writer's works of the 6th century (Gregory the Great, Gregory of Tours) and of the 13th century (Césaire de Heisterbach, Jacques de Voragine) abound. However this elevated and pure mission must be carried out in a world in which evil spirits' activities predominate, and in which men give in to impulses that are the most part grossly material, egoistical and base. For this reason the sacred and the common, the elevated and the base find themselves in close contact in the edifying narrative, therefore provoking a reaction in today's reader that is probably very different from the one provoked in the Medieval listener for whom it had obviously been conceived.

The "strangeness" of these narratives is due to the fact that they only provoke laughter or astonishment in us, and under no condition can they put us in a serious frame of mind. That Renaissance tales ridiculing the ignorance and vices of the clergy or ordinary people's superstitions make us laugh is not surprising, since this is their aim; at the dawn of the new epoch civilization parted with the past in peels of laughter. However the Medieval religious narrative sprung from a very different environment: its intention was not to ridicule or to denounce any thing, its aim was constructive, not destructive. We must attempt to reconstruct the cultural context in which this kind of narrative was born, and in which it enjoyed a fairly long life. First of all, we must take a closer look at the nature of its comic, "not serious," element.

We can immediately point out that it is difficult to find even one example of the purely comic or to find a writing exclusively intended to entertain the reader. For the most part, the episodes that make us smile in religious works of the time envisage different, more elevated didactic aims. This is why we can ask ourselves whether what today appears grotesque or comical, was intended as such at that time. For example, the discussions on the nature of God's body, like those related by Gregory of Tours,⁸ provoke in the contemporary reader an impression of

⁸ *Vitae patrum*, XIII, 3; *Historie Francorum*, I, 48.

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the grotesque that is reinforced by the fact that the author himself does not seem to be aware of the comic side of the situation he depicts in such a serious and pious way. In any case, even if certain situations showed traces of the comic or of parody at the time, they undoubtedly had also another impact, of a much more serious nature, and possibly more fundamental.

An important place is reserved for the devil in the popular sense of the grotesque. The devilry in Medieval mysteries, the visions of beyond the tomb, and fables represent the devil as "the ambivalent and joyous bringer of profane ideas, of the sacred turned upside down; he is the image of the inferior element, material and corporeal, etc. Nothing about him is terrifying or strange."⁹

In our sources the evil spirit is given considerable attention, leading us to examine M. Bakhtine's thesis on the basis of this material. Césaire de Heisterbach's *Dialogues sur les Miracles* are particularly rich in descriptions of the devil's schemes. This is understandable since the devil became "fashionable" beginning in the 11th century, even if previous Christian literature also made reference to him. In Medieval thought, the devil acquires traits that he didn't possess before: he becomes a powerful lord who endeavors to subject weak and hesitant souls and to force them to worship him. "Swear me a loyalty oath," is the devil's condition, in exchange for his promise to give his help and all kinds of wealth to man.¹⁰ Although the authors affirm that the Prince of Shadows does not equal God in might, in accordance with the "latent Manicheism" so particular to this epoch, the devil and his numerous servants become, in their works, a considerable power that trips up men at each step. He is the incarnation of treason and perfidy—sins of particular significance in the conception of the feudal world.

Man finds himself at a fork in the road. One way leads to the happiness of the ever-after and to the soul's well-being, but requires the renunciation of worldly temptations; the other

⁹ M. Bakhtine, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

¹⁰ This is the proposal the devil makes to the bell-ringer whom he threatened, in case of refusal, to abandon forever on top of the tower on which he had thrown him. (Césaire de Heisterbach. *Dialogus Miraculorum*, V, 56).

leads to sin, that inevitably brings weak souls to perdition. Man is free to choose between these paths. Christian theology challenged and condemned the theory by which the state of sin and the state of grace did not depend upon the individual will, and were imposed from the outside. Nevertheless it seems that these beliefs were widely spread among the people, to a great extent educated to believe that a destiny governs the world and men, than to believe in the idea of *liberum arbitrium*, which was a strange and abstract notion for them. "Ordinary" religious consciousness of the time did not limit itself to affirming the existence of a dichotomy between sin and holiness in their general appearance. Man is not simply put before a choice: he is the object of incessant attacks on the part of the enemy. Like a fortress in a hostile country, he is in a state of permanent siege. The forces of evil untiringly search for the slightest fault to conquer its ramparts. Every man has two angels: a good one to protect him, and an evil one, to test him.

Demonology constitutes an important part of Medieval theology. The devil's image is constantly present before the spirit, it awakens its interest, and unceasingly engenders new accounts about his misdeeds. The evil spirit is not banished in hell, but is constantly surrounding man. In a sense, demons were the virus of the Middle Ages, and all sinful land was infected with them. Except under specific conditions, the evil spirit does not generally appear to the unaccustomed eye. Not everyone is gifted with the ability to see and recognize him, in the form in which he may choose to appear. For this reason some people believed that demons did not exist, since they did not have proof of the contrary.

Césaire de Heisterbach reports that a certain matron, come to church "dressed like a peacock," did not see the multitude of little devils that were seated upon the train of her sumptuous gown: black as Ethiopians, they laughed and clapped their hands with joy, squirming like fish caught in a net, since the lady's unseemly dress was no other than a fishnet, an invention of the devil (*D.M.*, V, 7). Blinded by their vanity, men do not see the demons who hungrily crowd around them like flies, but this unfortunate scene is clearly visible before the eyes of the just. Today such scenes are amusing, and they surely amused Césaire de Heisterbach's contemporaries who enjoyed seeing the evil

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spirit's image debased, and sinners ridiculed. However, these scenes also had much more profound implications, that were clearly perceived by the people of the time, and that were not the least comical for them. The above-mentioned episode had to have a tragicomic effect on the reader. We must never lose sight of the terrifying side of Medieval comic demonology.

The evil spirit is extremely active, sly and malicious. Demons let nothing get in their way in their efforts to take possession of a soul. If one asked the demon of a possessed person whether he wanted to renounce his misdeeds and go to heaven, he would answer without hesitation: if he had the choice between seducing even one soul and sending it to hell, and going to heaven himself, he would choose the former. "What is so surprising about that?" he adds. "My perfidy is such that I am not in a position to desire anything good" (*D.M.*, V, 9).

Just as hell represents the antithesis of heaven, fallen angels are the opposite of heavenly angels: they are the inverse of angels. The antagonism between forces of good and forces of evil presupposes that the latter can be derided and shown up in a carnivalesque way. Even though there is no evil that demons do not try to bring upon men, religious authors are far from always depicting them in sombre tones. The Medieval devil does not lack ambiguity, nor does he lack a kind of attraction. Elements of the popular sense of the grotesque clearly appear in his descriptions. The ambivalent nature of the depiction of demons can be found in all of Medieval literature starting with Gregory the Great. In his imagination the evil spirit is utterly terrifying; it takes the form of malicious and revolting beings, horrible dragons that bind a man with their tails and gulp down his head, or thrust their heads into the sinner's throat and suck out his soul, etc. Demons are identical in narratives of other Medieval authors.

In his true form, as a spirit, the devil cannot be perceived by human eyes. Just as the supreme happiness of the elect is to be given an intuitive vision of God, the worst torture for the damned is to come across the devil in the other world. He and his servants show themselves to humans under any form. They have been seen to assume the form of men and women of great beauty, of priests, pigs, cats, dogs, reptiles: their aptitude for metamorphosis is limitless! However, demons who have assumed

human form cannot be seen from the back: they do not have a back and always retreat backing up (*D.M.*, III, 6).

In Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*, some stories about demons are not without their comic side. We can mention, among many others, the one about a nun who one day acquired an irresistible desire for salad and she ate a leaf, without remembering to cross herself first; the devil immediately took possession of her. The abbot Equitius was called, and began to pray for her recovery. When the abbot came to the vegetable garden where the possessed was in convulsions, the little devil began to whine "as if to justify himself": "What have I done wrong? I was sitting on a leaf of salad; she came along and ate me." The enraged abbot ordered him to leave the unfortunate woman, and the demon immediately retired. (*S. Gregorii Dial.*, 14).

Although he is always anxious to do bad deeds or make new slaves, the Evil One nevertheless fears saints, and flees from them. The evil spirit, chased out of the body of a possessed person by Saint Fortuné, wanders in the evening through the streets of the town sobbing: "Oh holy man, bishop Fortuné! What has he done? He chased the pilgrim from his refuge. I am looking for shelter, and I can find none in this town" (*Dial.*, I, 10). Evil spirits have feelings of fear mixed with respect for saints, and the demons themselves recognize the power of heavenly forces. In a story by Gregory of Tours, the demon who was in possession of the Emperor Leon's daughter refused to leave her until his wish was satisfied: "I will not leave here unless the Archdeacon of Lyon comes here. Under no circumstances will I leave this place unless he himself chases me out" (*De Gloria Confessorum*, 63). Some evil spirits who had slithered into human forms prostrated themselves before Saint Rusticula begging her "by the cross and nails that crucified the Lord" not to force them to leave "their homes" (*Vita rusticulae*, 13). One can surely see a carnivalesque exhibition of religious spirit in this pious blasphemy.

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The representative of the comic element, generally assumed by the clown in literature, is assumed by the simple in spirit in the religious sermon, the pious dialogue or the story of a saint's life;

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where the clown is clearly out of place. A place of honor is reserved in monuments to "holy simplicity," pleasing to God and even surpassing erudite wisdom. The 6th part of Césaire de Heisterbach's *Dialogues sur les Miracles* even bears the title "De Simplicitate." In this work we can find stories about the extreme naïveté of monks. Some of these stories are strongly tainted with humorous elements. The Lord loves the simple in spirit and encourages them. A monk, still half asleep, was in such a hurry to get to church in time for the evening prayer that he did not find the door and jumped through the window, but he didn't smash onto the ground because he was caught by angels who gently placed him down (*D.M.*, VI, 9).

The Lord even puts up with the familiarity and crudity of the simple of spirit who are dear to him. One of them, in the prey of temptations, began to cry out during the prayer: "Lord, if you don't deliver me from these temptations I will complain to your mother." Christ immediately freed him from the temptations (*D.M.*, VI, 30). The following account represents a case of extreme confidence and ingenuity, immediately rewarded by God. Overcome by a sermon on the sin of concubinage and the terrible punishments awaiting the guilty in Gehenna, a woman who lived with a priest asked the preacher: "What is the destiny of priests' concubines?" He jokingly answered: "Nothing can save them, unless they enter a lighted oven." She took his words literally and taking advantage of a moment when she was alone, she climbed into the oven used to bake bread. While she burned, people in the neighborhood of the house saw a dove as white as snow fly out of the chimney. Nevertheless, since she had committed suicide, her remains were buried in a field and not in the cemetery. But the Lord judged otherwise. She had taken her life out of obedience, and not out of evil intent, and this is why at night candles lit her tomb (*D.M.*, VI, 35).

At the same time as he shows how simplicity pleases God, Césaire de Heisterbach sets forth his ideas on knowledge and man's intellectual ability, their origin and the extent to which they are inherent or are bestowed from above. God is the master of knowledge; he endows it in a miraculous way, and takes it away in the same manner. Among the numerous stories he recounts on this subject, we can take for example the one

about a priest who had completely lost his knowledge—that was considerable—after a hemorrhage: it was as if his knowledge had drained out of him along with his blood. After that, he no longer recognized Latin letters and was no longer able to understand or speak words in Latin. However, wrote Césaire, insanity was not at fault, since the man had retained intact his other faculties. The explanation could be found in God's will, and by God's will his knowledge returned to him a year later (*D.M.*, X, 4).

Morality and the physical, acquired or hereditary abilities, culture and nature are all mixed together, indistinguishable, in this system of thought; they are phenomena of the same sort, and are therefore interchangeable, sometimes in a carnivalesque way. Also in the most remote periods of the Middle Ages knowledge was considered to be a gift of God.¹¹ At the same time, the evil spirit also knew Latin. A young woman that a demon was ardently pursuing, demanded that he recite the *Pater Noster*; he obeyed and said the prayer crudely and leaving pieces out, but not from ignorance. The evil spirit said laughing: "that is how you laics should say your prayers." He also knew the symbol of faith, but deformed it saying: "*Credo Deum Patrem omnipotentum*," instead of "*Credo in unum Deum*," since, as Césaire de Heisterbach explains, the devil believes in the existence of God and in the truth of His words, but he does not believe in Him in the sense that he does not love Him (*D.M.*, III, 6). The carnivalesque parody of the prayer is in this case shown in the demon's words.

In addition, it seems that ignorance was not considered a serious fault, even in the case of a priest. The ignorance of certain priests was truly astonishing, but this was not held against them. Verinbold, the Canon of Cologne, was so ignorant that he did not know how to count; he only knew how to distinguish objects by forming pairs from unpaired ones. He thus counted hams hanging in his kitchen: "Here is a ham and

¹¹ We can call to mind the miraculous gift of knowledge of the history of the Bible given to the illiterate Caedmon (*Bedae Hist. Ecc.*, IV, 24). The Latin preface to the Saxon translation of the story of Christ's passion describes the case of an ignorant Saxon who received from heaven the gift of composing verses: "qui prius agricola, mox et fuit ille poeta," *Heliand*, Tübingen, 1965, p. 3).

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his partner; here is another ham and his partner," etc. His servants took advantage of his ignorance and robbed him, but he found out only if one ham disappeared at a time. Hearing this story, a student wondered whether Verinbold was more of an idiot than a naive person, but the master dismissed this idea: God had blessed his naïveté (*D.M.*, VI, 7).

It would nevertheless be false to conclude from these stories that no importance was attached to learning. Like the other authors, Césaire de Heisterbach does not miss a chance to include erudition (in the field of religious literature) and knowledge of Latin, among the qualities of certain priests. The inability to express oneself in Latin was considered a fault, except in the rare cases that we mentioned above. All during the Middle Ages, the learned were contrasted with the ignorant. In a society in which science retained for the most part a holy nature, since books were rare and deemed of great value, the erudite inevitably formed an elite, separate from the profane. Further confirmation can be found in the examples justifying the ignorance of simpletons, that show they are God's beloved.

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Religious authors felt that real-life examples were the most effective means for the education of their flock. Legends about saints, Church lessons, and sermons are full of spirited anecdotes taken from the lives of the just.

However saints in Medieval Latin literature often behave in a quite original manner. Christian pardon is far from an obligation for them. Thus we find numerous episodes in which angry saints resort to violent means to make believers who have strayed from the right path or who lack respect for their patrons, listen to reason. The saintly patrons of churches and monasteries do not hesitate to leave their celestial heights to deal out terrible punishments to those who have attempted to steal the treasures in their charge. Some saints are ready to mix in earthly arguments and disputes in order to defend the interests of the Church, that are consecrated to them. In these cases religious authors are clearly applying their own customs and behavior to the saints and martyrs in whose name they govern the populace.

The Virgin and Jesus Christ himself in some cases conduct themselves in a not much less aggressive manner. Because a certain matron had dared to consider an ancient portrait of the Virgin and Child as "old rubbish," the Holy Virgin condemned her to remain poor forever. Stripped of all her wealth by her own son, she became a beggar (*D.M.*, VII, 44). Neither does Christ tolerate offenses to the Virgin Mary; he gives proof of a lack of seemly restraint and lays hands on the guilty one. During a dispute between two players, one of them began to blaspheme against the name of God and of His Mother; suddenly a voice was heard: "I could have withstood a personal offense, but I will not tolerate an offense to my mother's honor." And the sinner was immediately wounded and died (*D.M.*, VII, 43). Anecdotes of this kind are innumerable.

A Lord-Judge who, at the Last Judgement rewards each according to his merits or punishes him for his sins, is a grandiose figure who lives up to the image one generally has of supreme justice that rules the world. However a God who hands out slaps and shows you the right path by means of punches, produces a strange impression. Most of all, one is struck by the contradiction between contemplative immobility and solemn calm befitting inhabitants of the heavens who live in eternity, and the agitation of these same personages in the narratives describing their doubtful exploits. How can squabbles, battles and assassinations be reconciled with the doctrine of pardon, humility and love for one's neighbor? Nevertheless, it seems that the excesses that troubled and terrified people of the time, did not seem incompatible with their idea of the Christian God and of holiness. In general, in Medieval Christianity and particularly in its popular version, we observe a certain return from the principles of the New Testament to those of the Old Testament: the unsatisfied or angry God mixes freely in the affairs of his people and makes them obey by means of blows or catastrophe falling on their heads. Christ's religion, that was more spiritualized, was less accessible to the masses.

We feel that battle scenes, assassinations, etc., indicate the same kind of phenomenon as the tendency to interpret the world beyond the tomb in the image of this world, to people it with souls that look like and can be mistaken for living beings, and to consider that it follows the same course of time as this world.

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Even the saints and Christ, who enter into disputes and avenge themselves of insults, as in the narratives mentioned above, obey a *logic of this world* and they act as men would act in analogous situations, as the people for whom these narratives were intended and who appreciated them would act. Here we are confronted with an unconscious lowering of the great and the sacred to the level of the small and the worldly. We feel that convincing proof of the level of religious consciousness at the time can be found in the inspiration to pious and saintly sentiments by means of slaps, blows and, in general, the bodily punishment of the disobedient on the part of the inhabitants of the heavens. Apparently the clergy did not consider the most effective method to be that of directly influencing people's ways of thinking and mental structure, but to try to modify their interior universe with the help of an exterior action, using the most primitive means, such as blows and threats of retaliation (in this world or in the other). However, recourse to physically sensible "arguments," that should have corresponded perfectly to people's general conceptions at that time, does not only indicate the level of consciousness of the flock; but it also allows us to deduce something of the orientation of the clergy itself.

The level of religious spirit is not the only question to be examined. The great spirituality of representatives of the sacred principles combined with their "laicism" and their "down-to-earth" spirit, that comes very close to blasphemy and farce, make up a constant trait of Medieval consciousness. This leads us to believe that these are not just gratuitous deviations from the orthodox, nor are they a simple vulgarization of elevated ideas due to the spiritual condition of a people wallowing in ignorance, obstinately retaining pagan traditions and predisposed to a naturalist interpretation of Christian doctrine. Rather, we are faced with an organic trait of religious consciousness, in which the sacred and sublime are perceived as associated with the "vile" and the comic. The Holy Virgin administering slaps, a saint giving out punches, Christ distributing blows or striking down a rebel lose nothing of their holiness in the eyes of the faithful. The exploits of heavenly beings inspired a holy terror and served to increase their adoration.

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Didactic literature during the Middle Ages abounds in stories similar to the ones mentioned above. A large number of them are amusing, not lacking in humor or even in spicy joking. From this point of view they surpass tales of the Renaissance period. However, these tales are completely laical, both in tone and content, while those written by ecclesiastical authors invariably are of an edifying nature. Jokes and amusing incidents are only a curtain through which constantly pierces the intention to edify the reader and turn him from the path of sin. The author is willing to distract his audience, but distraction cannot be an end in itself—it is only a means. This means was often made use of, since the audience that read and listened to the narrative was much more susceptible to education by means of examples than to abstract reasoning. Priests often complained about the inattention of their parishioners during the religious service, who let themselves be distracted, and did not listen to the words of the prayer that they didn't understand, and who were in a hurry to leave God's house. In order to capture the listener's attention and to know how to make him assimilate religious truths, the sermon had to have several qualities: to be amusing, concrete and simple, inventive, and lastly—though not the least importantly—it had to be brief. Inevitably, a certain vulgarization resulted, both in the sense of popularization and in an extreme simplification. While the great religious author knew how to retain a certain measure of reserve in his recourse to vulgarization, the common preacher, who had neither his learning nor his talent, could easily surpass the limit—undoubtedly without even realizing it—between the orthodox and superstition. We can assume that such writers as Césaire d'Arles or Gregory the Great were able to elevate religious feeling in their listeners to a more or less acceptable level, while a monk or an ordinary priest had to stay within reach of their parishioners in order to be understood. Césaire de Heisterbach was clearly a man of superior level, but this does not prevent us from coming across quite primitive ideas in his writings.

The monk's reclusive life among other ascetics, in a tête-à-tête with God, spent in prayers and meditation on images of the eternal peace of the heavenly world, presents a striking contrast

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to secular life full of diversity and movement, eventful and sinful; and, in his role of spiritual guide, the monk could not escape contact with it. The *Dialogues sur les Miracles* shows that Césaire de Heisterbach knew both worlds. The characters in his stories are not only monks and clergy, saints and demons, but also merchants, artisans, foreigners, kings, women and children, heretics and crusaders, representatives of all classes and all social levels of Germany, France and Italy of the time. If one wanted to influence the masses of laics, one had, to a certain extent, to take part in their interests, penetrate into their ideas and speak their language. This adaptation was made easier by the fact that the priests themselves, in general, were not on a level so very much higher than their flock. What distinguished them was their consecration, some learning, their way of life—but not their conception of the world. Religious authors did not lack the “realism” of the common people, that did not make a distinction between spiritual and material, that transformed abstractions into concrete images and modeled the other world in the image of this one.

The short stories of the kind we analysed above are collected under the title *miracula*. The *miraculum* is an unusual phenomenon, a violation of the normal course of events, and for this reason the miracle provokes astonishment and lively interest, but it is generally not doubted. In the space of a moment the two worlds are united; the miracle takes place here on earth, but is caused by forces from above. “We name a miracle what is contrary to the normal, habitual course of events, and for this reason we admire it. But the miracle does not contradict supreme reason” (*D.M.*, X, 1). In some sense it is an invasion into everyday life of substances coming from the other world. Thanks to the miracle, eternity shows itself during the human lifetime. It is precisely because the miracle overcomes the barrier between the two worlds and discovers the links between them, that it is convincing and authentic to the highest degree. In some sense it “explains” the divine world in its entirety, shows “all of it in one instant” in the “compartments” that oppose each other in ordinary life.

In theology, terrestrial life and heavenly life are the antithesis of one another. On the contrary, in popular literature devoted to miracles they are extremely near each other, they are continually

in contact and communicate with each other by all sorts of means. It is possible to visit the other world, and it is equally possible to come across it down here: sleep becomes death, but death itself may only be a dream. The two worlds were so near in men's consciousness that some people continued their typically earthly rivalry in the other world. Such was the case of the two peasants whose families had always been obstinate rivals: they died at the same time and, according to God's will, found themselves in the same tomb where they continued to fight, kicking and scratching each other until they were finally transferred to separate coffins (*D.M.*, XI, 56).

The saint belonged to two worlds at a time, to the extent that he was already a "citizen" of heaven. Christ suddenly gets down from the altar, or gets back onto the cross, or appears in a physical form during the communion. Like his mother and the apostles, he can visit the living at any time, bring them consolation and promises of happiness in the other world, or else reprimand them and even strike them down or take their life. The inhabitants of hell, the demons, devils and Satan himself work actively among men, ensnare them at each step, sometimes literally grinding them underfoot, and are always ready to send to hell a soul who has forgotten himself. Demons can take possession of a man without particular difficulty, on the occasion of the slightest misstep on his part, and can manipulate him according to their pleasure, they can indulge in excesses, maintain pleasant relations with his friends, prophesize, and argue with priests. Demons can even render men disinterested services.

The two worlds are so mixed up, in spite of their polarization, that it is difficult to distinguish between the laws that govern them. Not only man's moral health, but also his physical health depends on forces from the other world. If it was believed that immoral acts were committed under the influence of the devil, and that most illnesses were also caused by the devil, then a saint was the best healer, and the best medicines were the sacraments and not the remedies that doctors recommended. It was easy to explain natural phenomena by the intervention of these opposing forces: harvests and good weather were sent by God and catastrophes and accidents were due either to God's wrath or to the devil's manipulations. The "synthetic" view of the world that united this world with the other impregnated not

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only stories, epics and comedies, but also religious narratives relating miracles, saints' victories over evil spirits, and visions of the other world.

Such a conception of the world does not dispel the opposition between the earthly and the heavenly worlds, the antagonism between the forces of good and those of evil, but one is inconceivable without the other; thought can only represent them *together*, in endless interaction and struggle. It is this reconciliation and mixture of the "high" and the "low" that engenders tragi-comic situations. Medieval man's imagination erased the boundary between possible and impossible, between beautiful and ugly, between serious and comic. Or, more precisely, these boundaries are continually erased only to be reconstituted again, to be finally rejected or challenged. It is in this *perpetual movement going from opposition to fusion and from fusion to opposition* that we find the core of "grotesque thought."

Saints whose joy in paradise is multiplied by the contemplation of sinners suffering in hell, even if some of their relatives are among them (Honorius Augustodunensis, *Elucidarium*, III, 20, 21); faithful servants of the Lord who, by the sword, send both heretics and catholics to the other world, believing that the All-Powerful will separate the good grain from the bad; the pearls into which the leper's illness is transformed, after having been licked by a holy man of God (*D.M.*, VIII, 32); the demon who, fearing he will be sent to Gehenna, doesn't dare violate his promise to a bishop, while the latter doesn't hesitate to deceive him; the fanatical followers of a saint who try to take his life in order to get his precious relics (Petri Damiani, *Vita s. Romualdi*, 13); the demon sincerely attached to a knight whom he serves faithfully, to the extent of wanting to donate a clock to the church; the wild birds and beasts that carry out saints' orders: these episodes, of the many that didactic Latin literature of the Middle Ages abounds in, lead us to ask ourselves whether this is not the grotesque, ambivalent and paradoxical, that associated in the most strange ways things and phenomena diametrically opposite, material and spiritual, elevated and base, that puts beyond common sense all established notions of good and evil, of tragic and comic, that reverses them and then puts them back in place. The grotesque can cause joy, but does not inhibit fear; rather, it unites them in a kind of contradictory

feeling that includes holy trembling and joyous laughter among its inseparable elements. We feel that the Medieval sense of the grotesque is not opposite the sacred and does not deter us from it; maybe it represents, on the contrary, one of the forms that disguises an *approach to the sacred*. It *profanes* and *affirms* the sacred at the same time. As the couplet quoted by Karsavine proclaims: *Ego et ventrum meum purgabo at Deum laudabo*.¹² Doesn't this amusing verse epitomize the essence of the Medieval sense of the grotesque?

In modern literature, the grotesque is a conscious creative process; it is a caricature or a satire that deliberately deforms the normal structure of the phenomenon being examined, *creating a particular kind* of fantastic world. The grotesque constitutes a departure from the normal conception of things, and its aim is to bring out more profoundly and accurately life's contradictions. The creator of the grotesque, like his reader or spectator, is well aware of its conventional and ludicrous nature.

The grotesque during the Middle Ages was not an artistic process, and was not the result of any subtle intentions on the part of the author. In this context we do not intend to deal with satire or parody, that as we know, already existed during that period and often consisted in a conscious game with the sacred. Rather, we intend to deal with aspects of "grotesque thought" to be found in edifying literature, in other words "serious" literature, in the lives of saints, legends concerning visions, lessons and treatises of common theology in which any satirical intentions or parody were excluded.

A fundamental trait of the Medieval conception of the world can be found in the comical element. It was as essential to man's attitude towards reality as was his attraction to the elevated and the sacred. The Medieval grotesque is always ambivalent at the start: it is an attempt to comprehend the world in its dual aspects: sacred and laic, sublime and material, serious and comical. M. Bakhtine demonstrated its great importance in laic culture of the Middle Ages, in carnival and in farce. We feel that it played a very important part in all of Medieval civilization, embracing all levels, from carnival, the lowest, to official religious spirituality. Although we do not intend to systemati-

¹² L. Karsavine, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

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cally bring them together and still less to mix up aspects that maintain certain particular characteristics, we nevertheless feel entitled to affirm that they have many points in common.

The difference in interpretation of the Medieval grotesque between Bakhtine and this author stems principally from the documents used. Bakhtine mainly studied the civilization of the "autumn" of the Middle Ages, and Rabelais' novel is his principal document. His analysis describes the comic during this period and offers a retrospective that allows us to appreciate more ancient phenomena. The carnivalesque element, that he evokes so well, can be mainly localized in the town of the late Middle Ages. We have, on the other hand, made use of works of Latin literature of the high and classic Middle Ages. They were mainly created in monasteries and episcopal residences; they are addressed to the clergy and its flock, the latter being largely made up of peasants. These differences may only be due to the time periods involved.

To summarize the different interpretations of the comic element of the Middle Ages, we may say that according to Bakhtine, the popular grotesque debases the serious, putting laughter in its stead; the comic element is in opposition to the official sense of the sacred as an *exterior* and foreign element, that is nothing more than background scenery.¹³ Such an attitude could scarcely predominate in a civilization grown out of the expansion of the Medieval religious spirit, that embraced both official and non-official spheres of the culture—not so autonomous until the end of the Middle Ages. Such an attitude towards the sacred and the serious could only be encountered at the decline of this period. In our opinion, the documents mentioned above lead to the conclusion that in the preceding period the inferior element was not conceived of in itself, but only *in the context of the serious*, giving the latter a new dimension. The specific relationship between the serious and comic elements, the *unexpected* aspect of their combination—in the interpretation of "holy simplicity" and the "natural," ordinary mira-

¹³ Bakhtine imagines a Medieval world oscillating between two universes: parallel to official serious culture that incarnates "terrifying and terrified thought," there is, "on the other hand," popular, carnivalesque culture, making up "a second universe and a second life," in which men in the Middle Ages participated.

cle—constitute the original source of the Medieval grotesque. In this system of thought, the sacred is not challenged by the comical; on the contrary it is reinforced by the comic element that is its double and its companion, its permanent echo.¹⁴

¹⁴ The question of ulterior transformation of the didactic genre in Medieval Latin literature surpasses the limits of our study. As Huizinga demonstrates, the relationship and even the mixture between the sacred and the ordinary were even more intense during the low Middle Ages. Nevertheless this evolution no longer resulted in a spiritualization of life, but in the elimination of traditional forms from the religious context. Thus, the disappearance of the distance between the serious and the comic brought about the profanation of the former, the “constant degradation of the infinite in the finite,” and the substitution of faith by superstition (J. Huizinga, *Herbst des Mittelalters*, 10th edition, Stuttgart, 1969, p. 214 and ff.).