

**UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON**

**Ph.D. in COMPARATIVE LITERATURE**

Italian and German Departments

**BAKHTINIAN THEORY AND MODERNIST THEATRE?  
CARNIVAL AND DIALOGISM IN SHAW'S *ARMS AND  
THE MAN*, JARRY'S *UBU ROI*, AND PIRANDELLO'S *SEI  
PERSONAGGI IN CERCA D'AUTORE* AND *ENRICO IV***

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis sets itself the double task of analysing the chosen dramatic texts through Bakhtin's theories of carnival and dialogism, while at the same time debating these categories, exploring their validity, and testing their possible applications to the interpretation of modernist dramatic texts.

The main body of the thesis will follow a critical path through Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, Pirandello's *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, and Pirandello's *Enrico IV*, highlighting the process of the debunking of conventions and ideology operated by the various texts. Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, the most traditional and least controversial in relation to Bakhtin's categories of interpretation, shows how they can be applied in a relatively straightforward and unproblematic way; the subsequent analysis of *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* starts to suggest some problems and flaws within the Bakhtinian conceptual framework; then, in the chapter on *Ubu Roi*, it will be argued that Bakhtin's theories of carnivalesque subversion become problematic when taken to such an extreme as this play seems to do. Finally, the analysis of *Enrico IV* attempts to show how the categories of carnival and dialogism can be observed utterly disrupting any convention or certainty about life and the self, and how therefore they have a tragic potential, to which Bakhtin himself remained blind.

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# Introduction

The present analysis will discuss a series of modern dramatic pieces, positing their connection through some underlying motifs which can be fruitfully illuminated by a Bakhtinian description, starting with *Arms and the Man* by George Bernard Shaw, on to Luigi Pirandello's *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, and terminating with Pirandello's *Enrico IV*.

My choice of the above authors relies on the fact that, although coming from different political positions (Shaw being a socialist, Jarry an anarchist, Pirandello right-wing), they all participate in the Modernist discourse, and seem to me to share in Bakhtin's concerns, which he translates into the concepts of carnival and dialogism as a means of resisting any form of ideological rigidity, including established cultural conventions and social habits, that threaten to fossilize the mind and deprive it of freedom, flexibility of thought and expression, and possibility of innovation. This point of view seems to translate successfully in the chosen plays, although in different ways – in the form of parodic exaggeration, shocking grotesque, dramatic debate or poignant pathos – and it establishes a cultural and ideological link between them when considered from a Bakhtinian perspective; this hypothesis is introduced in the first two sections here below, and will then be illustrated in the textual analysis.

The sequence of the plays is intended to discuss and expose these issues in a gradual increase in “seriousness”, from a more light-hearted or ambiguous tone in *Arms and the Man* and *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* to a more disturbing or tragic perspective in *Ubu Roi* and *Enrico IV*; which also progressively reveals problematic aspects within the Bakhtinian theorization. This itinerary will therefore also constitute a practical testing of Bakhtin's conceptual framework, of which a first assessment will be

given in a theoretical appraisal below; the textual analysis will then investigate the extent to which those categories work in the reading of modernist dramatic texts, and of their contextual implications. The scope of this thesis does not allow to deal with the aspect of performance, both for reasons of space, and choice of main focus on the textual level.

## 1. The authors and Modernism

Shaw, Pirandello and Jarry can all be regarded as taking part, each in his own way, in the phenomenon of Modernism, thus forming a strong connection with each other; this appears both from an overview of their respective attitudes to their cultural milieus, and from a brief analysis of some salient aspects of Modernism as perceived by general critical opinion, also in relation to the Bakhtinian themes, such as the artistic foregrounding of artifice, and the cultural crisis of values and norms, of the sense of self, reality and time.

Many critics regard Shaw as the first English modern dramatist, indeed the precursor of Modernism, which I believe justifies his inclusion in this series of authors. Berst describes drama before Shaw as stagnant “melodrama, farces, burlesques, and extravaganzas”, even if modernized in décor, machinery, and sometimes in subject (domestic realism or social plays, with Robertson, Gilbert, Jones, Pinero); altogether a drama that “succeeded by observing Victorian propriety [...] a bulwark of morals, constancy, and ideals – a solid *status quo* – [that] provided comfort, reliability, safety, sanction. And, naturally, theatre catering to such sensations or offering an escape from insecurities was *right*, sensible, satisfying”.<sup>1</sup> Dukore stresses the ground-breaking

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<sup>1</sup> Charles A. Berst, “New Theatres for Old”, in Christopher Innes (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to George Bernard Shaw*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 55-75, p. 59.

novelty of Shaw's first plays, claiming that they were "the first significant drama in the English language in at least a century, it was the first genuinely modern drama in our language";<sup>2</sup> and Innes thinks that "it was Shaw who set the terms within which modernism has been discussed in England [...] what became the hallmarks of the modern in subsequent British drama, and largely remain so today, are the characteristic qualities of Shaw's work".<sup>3</sup> Nathan perhaps goes too far in calling him "a Futurist in every way", given his repulsion for common "trends", but she plausibly claims that he anticipated Sartre, was a radical feminist and, "like all his heroic characters, *dared*";<sup>4</sup> and indeed early twentieth-century anthologies and critical studies of drama perceptively "included Shaw as one of the noteworthy writers for the modern stage".<sup>5</sup> The *Cambridge Companion to Modernism* defines modernist drama as an "infusion of a modernist spirit into standard theatrical form" which had been begun by Shaw, who in his apparently naturalistic plays "uses the intellectual qualities of inversion and paradox to an extent that undermines their apparent rationalism".<sup>6</sup> This operation would be carried on by such writers as Pirandello, whose texts "si dichiarano metalinguistici – si rivolgono ai problemi del linguaggio teatrale oltre che a quelli del linguaggio in

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<sup>2</sup> B. F. Dukore, "The 1992 Conference: Shaw and the Last Hundred Years", in B. F. Dukore (ed.), *1992: Shaw and the Last Hundred Years*, University Park (Penn.): The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994, pp. 3-5, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Innes, "The Shaw Factor", in B. F. Dukore (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 95-103, p. 98. Innes also refers British success of Brecht's drama to Shaw's "preparatory" work: "The rationalism of Brecht's approach, with its demystifying of the stage, its anti-illusionistic theatricality, and its thematic emphasis on the linkage of character and social context, was not new in Britain. Shaw had already begun to introduce such elements as far back as the early 1890s" – *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>4</sup> Rhoda Nathan, "From Shaw to Beckett: the Road to Absurdity", *The Independent Shavian*, 1998, 36: 3-10, p. 3, her emphasis.

<sup>5</sup> K. E. Kelly, "Imprinting the Stage: Shaw and the Publishing Trade, 1883-1903", in C. Innes (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 25-54, p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Levenson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 147.



generale. Questo processo decostruttivo fa svanire l'illusione di una mimesi naturalista e distrugge l'integrità del testo drammatico coerente".<sup>7</sup>

There appears to be in fact a strong link between Shaw and Pirandello: they were partially contemporaries, and knew and appreciated each other's work; Pirandello had in his library a copy of Shaw's *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant* which he filled with notes and comments on the margins;<sup>8</sup> and he reviewed *Saint Joan* at the New York première. Shaw said that he ranked "Pirandello as first rate among playwrights, and have never come across a play *so original* as *Six Characters*",<sup>9</sup> and it was only thanks to his support that the Stage Society included in its 1922 season the play which had been banned from public performance. The two authors have often been compared during their time in various critical reviews,<sup>10</sup> although in some opinions they differ widely: Tilgher for example remarked on Pirandello's interest in the "realizzazione scenica di un processo tutto interiore di stati d'animo, la qual cosa Shaw non si è mai sognato di fare"<sup>11</sup>. Fergusson and Park as well claim that Shaw is "inferior" to Pirandello because he would lack the latter's "seriousness of the artist", and the Shavian "farce-of-rationalizing" would be below "the much deeper, more consistent and more objective

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<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Stone, "La firma di Pirandello: i saggi e la semiotica", in P. D. Giovannelli (ed.), *Pirandello saggista*, Palermo: Palumbo, 1982, pp. 144-165, p. 145.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Alfredo Barbina, *La biblioteca di Luigi Pirandello*, Roma: Bulzoni, 1980.

<sup>9</sup> G. B. Shaw, Letter to Frederick May, assigned to 8<sup>th</sup> August 1950, in *Collected Letters, 1926-1950*, ed. by Dan H. Laurence, London: Max Reinhardt, 1988, p. 873, his emphasis.

<sup>10</sup> Marco Praga spoke of Pirandello as "questo Shaw italiano": review to *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, as quoted in L. Pirandello, *Sei Personaggi in cerca d'autore*, critical edition by Guido Davico Bonino, Torino: Einaudi, 1993, p. 243. Silvio D'Amico criticized the "parentele fra Pirandello e Shaw" established by some critics on the grounds of an "asserita cerebralità": review in *Idea Nazionale*, 11 October 1921. *ibid.*, p. 249. John Palmer writes extensively on a parallel between Shaw and Pirandello, in his "M. Luigi Pirandello and the Enigma of Personality", *Studies in the Contemporary Theatre*, London: Martin Secker, 1927. pp. 45-64.

<sup>11</sup> Adriano Tilgher, review in *Il Tempo*, 11 May 1921, as quoted in L. Pirandello, *Sei Personaggi in cerca d'autore*, critical edition by G. Davico Bonino, cit., p. 210.

theatrical forms of Pirandello".<sup>12</sup> Shaw's dramatic work is indeed mostly comedy, and he may even lack "a tragic vision" owing to a supposed "failure to penetrate his own existential rebellion",<sup>13</sup> but his criticism of conventions and ideological mystifications is nonetheless just as serious and deep as Pirandello's plays which have a more tragic tone. Caputi seems to hit the mark when he observes that "if Shaw was repelled by the frivolity of living with fictions, others were persuaded of the desperate need to live with them. [...] If Shaw saw the mind as the darling object of creation, others saw it as a frail, uncertain faculty capable of little more than self-deception",<sup>14</sup> a remark that clearly applies to Pirandello's vision.

Both authors were sceptical towards conventions and "-isms", Shaw being concerned with stripping Victorian smug dogmatism, ideals, myths and self-delusions, rebelling "against the pompous solemnity, the 'high seriousness' of that era",<sup>15</sup> and asking the audience "to look critically at their own received attitudes and socially conditioned assumptions".<sup>16</sup> According to Davis, "[p]laying around the edges of

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<sup>12</sup> See Francis Fergusson, "Action as Theatrical: *Six Characters in Search of an Author*", in Glauco Cambon (ed.), *Pirandello. A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs (N. J.): Prentice Hall, 1967, pp. 35-42, p. 35; Bruce R. Park, "A Mote in the Critic's Eye: Bernard Shaw and Comedy", in R. J. Kaufmann (ed.), *G. B. Shaw. A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs (N.J.): Prentice Hall, 1965, pp. 42-56. See also Walter Starkie's *Luigi Pirandello*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965, ch. vi: "Pirandello and Bernard Shaw", pp. 243-264.

<sup>13</sup> R. Brustein, "Bernard Shaw: the Face behind the Mask", in R. J. Kaufmann (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 100-118, p. 104. He also writes that "Pirandello's philosophy [...] is quite different from Shaw's, since it is pessimistic in the extreme, and based on the conviction that the problems of life are insoluble. Because of this conviction, Pirandello sees no possibility of salvation through social or community life.": R. Brustein, "Pirandello's Drama of Revolt" in G. Cambon (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 103-133, p. 105.

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Caputi, *Pirandello and the Crisis of Modern Consciousness*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Julian B. Kaye, *Bernard Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Tradition*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955, p. 101.

<sup>16</sup> C. Innes, "The Shaw Factor", *cit.*, p. 98. See also R. J. Kaufmann (ed.), *op. cit.*, especially R. J. Kaufmann, "Introduction", R. M. Ohmann, "Born to Set It Right: the Roots of Shaw's Style". and B. R.

monolithic binaries is one of Shaw's trademarked strategies [...]. As an ironist, Shaw consistently draws out our assumptions [...] teases out unexpected complications from the logical follow-through of those assumptions, then displays the fallacy of the universe being as simple and stable as we might ever assume";<sup>17</sup> a position against "the so-called 'bourgeois morality'" that Pirandello also emphasized.<sup>18</sup> Pirandello was "like Shaw, deeply suspicious of traditional values and violently hostile to traditional structures",<sup>19</sup> on his part declaring that his drama would consist in "una certa lente Pirandello, a detta dei maligni diabolica, che fa veder doppio e triplo, e di sghimbescio, e insomma il mondo sottosopra";<sup>20</sup> and that he "trained" his audience "ad aspettarsene da me d'ogni colore. Gli sono andato sempre con le dita negli occhi... Tutta la mia opera è stata sempre così, e sarà così: una sfida alle sue opinioni e soprattutto alla sua quietà morale [...] o immorale".<sup>21</sup> One critic commented that Shaw "laughs at everything, himself included";<sup>22</sup> and Pirandello's carnivalizations are always also self-directed, in their undermining anti-dogmatism.

Both Shaw and Pirandello aimed, on the other hand, at a substantial control over

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Park, "A Mote in the Critic's Eye: Bernard Shaw and Comedy".

<sup>17</sup> Tracy C. Davis, "Shaw's interstices of empire: decolonizing at home and abroad", in Innes C. (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 218-239, p. 218.

<sup>18</sup> L. Pirandello, notice to *Saint Joan* in the *New York Times*, 13 January 1924, 7; quoted in T. F. Evans (ed.), *Shaw. The Critical Heritage*, London, Henley and Boston: Routledge & Kegan, 1976, pp. 279-284, p. 280.

<sup>19</sup> A. Caputi, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> L. Pirandello, "Teatro nuovo e teatro vecchio", in *Saggi, poesie e scritti vari*, Milano: Mondadori, 1965, pp. 225-243, p. 230.

<sup>21</sup> Letter to Virgilio Talli, May 1917, quoted in *Maschere nude*, ed. by A. D'Amico, Milano: Mondadori "I Meridiani", 1986, vol. 1, pp. 423-424. In this respect, Claudio Vicentini links together the three authors of this analysis precisely for their attempt at shaking the public's awareness, instead of trying to obtain the audience's approval, by means of their "unpleasant" works, though obviously using different methodologies: "Umorismo and Plays Unpleasant". *Pirandello Studies*, 2002, 22: 7-20, pp. 7-10.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Knight, unsigned review in *Athenaeum*, 28 May 1898, 3683, 703, quoted in T. F. Evans (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 81-82, p. 81.

the interpretation and performance of the text, as the prefaces and the sometimes narrative detailing in the stage-directions make apparent, in this way showing an awareness of the potential multiplicity of meaning of their own dramatic discourses, and at the same time effecting, more or less deliberately, a certain “polyphony” of genres. Bertolini recalls Shaw’s “many skirmishes with actors over who shall have authority in the performing of a play, the author or the actor-manager”;<sup>23</sup> and Niccodemi recalls Pirandello’s frantic co-operation during its preparation: “si alza, cerca, spiega, rettifica. Incerto ed esitante in principio, si accalora subito, ridiventa subito efficace. Prende di petto l’attore in difetto e spiega, spiega con un torrente di parole”.<sup>24</sup> His habitual presence at the rehearsals and his extremely demanding and detailed stage directions express his own preoccupation with maintaining an authorial check over the performance; he repeatedly claimed the superiority and inviolability of the dramatic text, and often complained about the distortions operated by the staging process.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Bertolini comments that the term “stage directions” is “totally inadequate to Shaw’s narrative links between the dialogues, his indications of tone, facial expressions, bodily postures and movements, his descriptions of settings [...] his comments upon and analyses of his characters”, which derived from the author’s conception of his plays as primarily “living in the text”, and from his effort to make their reading “more like the

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<sup>23</sup> J. A. Bertolini, *The Playwriting Self of Bernard Shaw*, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Dario Niccodemi, “L’autore alla prova”, from the autobiography *Tempo passato* (1929), as quoted in L. Pirandello, *Sei Personaggi in cerca d’autore*, cit., p. 192.

<sup>25</sup> “Pirandello era contro il ‘teatro del regista’ che era una delle formule del teatro sperimentale in Europa”: M. Valentini, *Shakespeare e Pirandello*, Roma: Bulzoni, 1990, p. 60. See also L. Pirandello, “Illustratori, attori e traduttori”, in *Saggi, poesie e scritti vari*, cit., pp. 209-224, especially pp. 215- 216, and the later “Discorso al Convegno ‘Volta’ sul teatro drammatico”, *ibid.*, pp. 1002-1008, especially p. 1007.

reading of novels”.<sup>26</sup> Kelly considers Shaw’s Prefaces and stage directions as “inserted for the benefit of the reader” like “glosses to the printed text, giving them the appearance and the ‘value’ of novels”;<sup>27</sup> the same applies to the narrative nature of Pirandello’s stage directions and of the plays altogether, which could be regarded as “closet plays” for their “readability”. In both writers’ works a blurring of boundaries occurs between the genre of the dramatically developed word and the narrative genre, and between the stage direction and authorial critical commentary on the action.

Next to Shaw and Pirandello, Jarry appears as one of a kind, a seemingly unrelated, more eccentric figure, with no material connection or contact with them; on the surface he does not share in some of the aspects that have been highlighted here about the other two, especially when considering him from the perspective of his more prolific work in symbolic poetry and narrative. But, as much as Shaw and, later, Pirandello, he has consistently been identified as one of the major influences in the development of modern theatre, specifically of French Avant-Garde and the Theatre of the Absurd.<sup>28</sup> There is also a strong link between his dramatic work and Bakhtin’s ideas, which could also suggest an influence on the formation of the latter, given Bakhtin’s knowledge and appreciation of French Symbolism and Avant-Garde; this has not been proved, and Bakhtin’s work was quite clearly generated out of the study of Rabelais and Dostoevsky; however, the strong role played by Rabelais’s works in Jarry’s literary education can perhaps be plausibly regarded as an explanation of the common ground

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<sup>26</sup> J. A. Bertolini, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> K. E. Kelly, *cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>28</sup> On modernist drama and the Absurd, I also consulted Martin Esslin, *Brief Chronicles. Essays on Modern Theatre*, London: Temple Smith, 1970; M. Esslin, *The Field of Drama. How the Signs of Drama Create Meaning on Stage and Screen*, London & New York: Methuen, 1987; M. Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1962; Peter Szondi, *Theory of the Modern Drama*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987.

between the two.

Bakhtin also explicitly names Jarry as an exponent of the twentieth-century revival of the grotesque,<sup>29</sup> and *Ubu Roi* is indeed a great example of some of the major carnivalesque elements; however, little critical attention has been given to this kind of study. One of the main analogies with Bakhtin's thought is Jarry's non-conformist attitude, both in his life and in his works, towards any kind of imposed convention, either social and ideological: anecdotes abound about his freakish public behaviour and style of dress,<sup>30</sup> and this extends to his ideas on art, culture and politics, as most critics agree. For Lennon, "[o]n all sides, the old order – political, social, and artistic – of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was visibly and audibly disintegrating; change was in the wind. This tempestuous intellectual climate was perfect for Jarry, to whom idealism had always been a ridiculously bourgeois concept and whose far-reaching intellectual idiosyncrasy caused him to be highly suspicious of formalized ideologies";<sup>31</sup> and this refusal of an imposed official discourse certainly appears close to Bakhtin's position. Although Jarry did not have to face the pervasive pressure of a Stalinist regime, but rather the growth of nationalism in the Third Republic; and even if he devises his own philosophical system, "pataphysics", this is far from being a rigid, monolithic discourse. Jannarone explains it as "a personal strategy of interpreting and creating a world that rejects existing paradigms", whereby "there are only two crimes of perception one can commit: the first, to insist upon the supremacy of any one version of the truth; and the second, to accept a pre-existing theory as one's own".<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 46.

<sup>30</sup> See the major biographical studies, like Arnaud's, Beaumont's, Béhar's, and Stillman's.

<sup>31</sup> Nigey Lennon, *Alfred Jarry. The Man with the Axe*, San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1990, p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> Kimberly Jannarone, "Puppetry and 'Pataphysics: Populism and the Ubu Cycle", *New Theatre Quarterly*, 2001, 17 (3-67): 239-253, p. 240.

Moreover, the experimentation with words that *Ubu Roi* displays is carried further in Jarry's later works, where he develops a kind of suggestive, highly ambiguous and "multi-voiced" language that seems to welcome the foundations of Bakhtin's "heteroglossia" as a verbal universe, where univocal meaning is only a temporary illumination within a web of potentially infinite significance, susceptible of individual variations. Beaumont seems to share this view when he observes that in "Linteau", the preface to the collection of poems *Les Minutes de Sable Mémorial* (an extremely ambiguous title in itself), Jarry calls for "a cult of deliberate ambiguity or 'polysemy'", implying that "the work of literature does not merely allow of a number of vague possibilities of interpretation, but that each word of a text opens up a different line of signification".<sup>33</sup>

As with Shaw and Pirandello, critical opinion on Jarry's importance within the history of modern drama is unanimous; Béhar links him with "le théâtre surréaliste, le théâtre de l'absurde, le théâtre tragique contemporain",<sup>34</sup> and specific studies have demonstrated the relation between his dramatic work and the Theatre of the Absurd and Arnaud's Theatre of Cruelty.<sup>35</sup> According to Benedikt, *Ubu Roi* was "a miraculous event. With no immediate literary antecedents, he created a genre of drama in which many of the most advanced poets and dramatists [...] have worked";<sup>36</sup> similarly, for Lennon, *Ubu Roi* "created an entirely new category of drama – that of absurdism. On that evening in 1896 the Theater of the Absurd was born, ushering in a whole new age

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<sup>33</sup> Keith Beaumont, *Alfred Jarry. A Critical and Biographical Study*, Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1984, p. 68.

<sup>34</sup> Henri Béhar, *Jarry. Le monstre et la marionette*, Paris: Larousse, 1973, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. for example in Bibliography, works by Béhar (especially 1980, ch. ix), Benedikt, Grossman (1967), La Belle, Perry, Shattuck, Stillman (1983, ch. vi), White (1980).

<sup>36</sup> Benedikt M, "Introduction" to Benedikt M. & Wellwarth G. E. (eds. & transl.). *Modern French Plays. An Anthology from Jarry to Ionesco*, London: Faber & Faber, 1964, p. ix.

of philosophical irrationality”.<sup>37</sup> Again, for Beaumont

the parallels between Jarry and later playwrights are to be found less in the field of philosophical vision than in that of their conception of the theatre. [...] his work in the theatre set out to revolutionize that genre in respect of its language, of its forms of expression, and of the underlying purpose and function of the theatre itself. [...] a theatre based on the principles of deliberate stylization and simplification, and on the adoption of purely ‘schematic’ modes of representation. [...] a theatre which will be concerned with a portrayal of ‘situations’ and ‘types’, or more exactly archetypes, and with the expression of the universal and the eternal rather than with the purely historically limited social issues and themes.<sup>38</sup>

This foregrounding of the formal, artificial aspects in art, which indeed strongly features in the works of all three writers, is in fact recognized by critical opinion as one element of the complex phenomenon of Modernism: Bradbury and McFarlane see in it “a quality of abstraction and highly conscious artifice, taking us behind the familiar reality, breaking away from familiar functions of language and conventions of form”,<sup>39</sup> and Schleifer regards modernist discourse as making “time both a theme and a discursive or representational problem”.<sup>40</sup> This also seems to tally with Bakhtin’s view of the de-familiarizing function of carnival in the prominence given to the mask, in its stress on the artificiality of roles and conventions (such as literary principles, moral norms or time) which are mockingly emphasised and overturned.

The breaking away from cultural categories and inherited trends, which have been shown to characterize the three authors, are obviously also part of the larger Modernist experience, which “would seem to be the point at which [...] myth, structure

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<sup>37</sup> N. Lennon, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>38</sup> Keith Beaumont, *Jarry. Ubu Roi*, London: Grant and Cutler, 1987, pp. 87-89.

<sup>39</sup> Malcom Bradbury and James McFarlane (eds.), *Modernism 1890-1930*, Penguin Books: Harmondsworth & New York, 1976, p. 24.

<sup>40</sup> Ronald Schleifer, *Modernism and Time. The Logic of Abundance in Literature, Science, and Culture, 1880-1930*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 68.



and organization in a traditional sense collapse, and not only for a formal reason. The crisis is a crisis of culture”.<sup>41</sup> The role played by such thinkers and scientists as Marx, Bergson, Frazer, Nietzsche, Freud, Darwin, Einstein – who variously affected the formation of our authors – has been widely recognized as fundamental in fostering a rupture with a whole cultural system perceived as authoritarian and obsolete, while important historical and social events<sup>42</sup> contributed to this in-depth transformation and to an “overwhelming sense of change and of the breakdown of traditional patterns of experience and value [...] during the years surrounding the turn of the twentieth century.”<sup>43</sup> Some of the most defining features of Modernism are in fact a deep sense of crisis and instability, consequent to the questioning of former “universal” norms and categories (“the repudiation of a filing system”, as McFarlane tersely describes it<sup>44</sup>), and investing the whole range of human experience, from the perception of the self and the other, to the apprehension and description of reality, “truth” and time. As Nicholls observes, “the authentically modern subject thus seems to slip the social moorings of the rational bourgeois self [...] This new form of subjectivity is accompanied by a rejection of art’s traditional role as an arbiter of moral truths”, as well as by a rebellion against the bourgeois mimetic principle:<sup>45</sup> these aspects are clearly expressed in the works analysed here, and also implicated in Bakhtin’s concepts of dialogism and

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<sup>41</sup> M. Bradbury & J. McFarlane, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>42</sup> John Fletcher and J. McFarlane effectively sum up as “the Dano-Prussian and Franco-Prussian wars, the Paris Commune, the growing power of Germany, the unification of Italy, the spread of industrialization, the proliferation of capitalism, the emergence of the European political left-wing, the growth of communications, the changing standard of morals, the new preoccupations with the ways of the unconscious mind”: “Modernist Drama: Origins and Patterns”, in M. Bradbury & J. McFarlane, *op. cit.*, pp. 497-513, p. 500.

<sup>43</sup> R. Schleifer, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>44</sup> “The Mind of Modernism”, in M. Bradbury & J. McFarlane, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-93, p. 92.

<sup>45</sup> Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms. A Literary Guide*, London: MacMillan, 1995, pp. 8, 13-15.

carnivalized polyphonic literature, which undermine inherited canons of uniformity and stability, and monological discourses claiming univocal truth.

If a “tortured disunity was the tragic condition of the modern poet”.<sup>46</sup> this entailed a problematization of the sense of subjectivity and its relationship with otherness, including the issue of the Double. The multiplicity of the subject is in fact variously debated within the four plays, and indeed sustained in the Bakhtinian principle of the ever-changing nature of experience, language and the human self; however, changeability and instability are with Bakhtin welcomed rather than suffered, as is generally the case with Modernist discourse: here a “sense of personal difference, coupled with that of speaking ‘a special language’, now complicated the Romantic concept of uniqueness by locating the trauma of division and separation within subjectivity [...] This inward turn set language at odds with normal discourse, pressuring it to articulate an ever more intense self-consciousness”.<sup>47</sup>

Another aspect of Modernism which is relevant to the present analysis is the problem of time, no longer accepted as the rational concept inherited from Enlightenment culture, “an autonomous, homogeneous flow in a single direction [which] separates people from the past absolutely, without confrontation or collision”:<sup>48</sup> it is rather experienced as repetition, randomness and absence of logical development, a subversion of traditional categories that once again is echoed in Bakhtin’s idea of carnival and its reversal of a rational time sequence, but which sometimes attains a tragic dimension, as it does in some of the plays, leading – along with the disorienting sense of discontinuous subjectivity – to “the collapse of ontological continuity”.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>48</sup> R. Schleifer, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>49</sup> William Everdell, *The First Moderns*, quoted *ibid.* p. 10.

This strongly affects the theatrical field, which perhaps more directly than any other literary form confronts the issues of conventions, “reality” of representation and artifice, time, and the relationship of the self to the other; the element of meta-theatre appears as intensely as it did in Renaissance times, as well as the problematization of the boundaries of genres, fictionality and theatrical space. These aspects are involved in all the plays analysed, and constantly debated by their authors;<sup>50</sup> furthermore, they establish a link with Bakhtin’s discourse, as will appear more clearly from the analysis of his theory, and as is suggested by Fletcher and McFarlane’s description of modernist drama, almost echoing the Bakhtinian view of carnival and the grotesque: “Modernism’s response [...] was] to transfer things to the realm of aesthetics, where the real was placed against the illusory, the mask set beside the face, the stage opposed to the auditorium, and where, above all, the smile was juxtaposed with the tear to produce that characteristically Modernist phenomenon, the grimace of tragicomedy.”<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, considering the fundamental common ground shared by Shaw, Jarry and Pirandello as discussed above, and their relatedness to the Modernist experience, it seems to me plausible and interesting to bring together some of their works in a comparative study, relying also on their proximity to Bakhtin’s ideas – as will be briefly suggested in the next sections – and indeed using them to re-describe those dramas through a coherent path. This will also throw some light on the relatedness of the

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<sup>50</sup> Fletcher and McFarlane evoke them in their description of the dual spirit of the Modernist dramatist: “To see with a clear vision, to define the problems, to break free of conventions, to proclaim in their own often very idiosyncratic way the truth, however unexpected or unpalatable [...] Demonstrative, declarative, expressive, often ironical, occasionally absurdist, the line embraces the late-naturalistic drama of Germany, the work of Shaw in England, the early absurdist in France [...] Complementing them, and orientated more towards things structural and technical and linguistic, are those dramatists for whom the intimate, the oblique, the implied, the elusive, the subdued, the symbolic are of the essence”: cit., p. 503.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp. 505-506.

Bakhtinian frame to some principles of Modernism,<sup>52</sup> and therefore on its suitability for the analysis of Modernist works.

## 2. The texts

*Arms and the Man* is very often dismissed as youthful and simple satire on the Romantic idealization of war and of the soldier as Byronic hero, and so forth; *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* is mostly read as enacting the labours of authorial creation or, as with *Enrico IV*, the by-now-old adage of “life as a stage”; *Ubu Roi* has been viewed as a grotesque farce, and occasionally charged with various symbolic overtones. These aspects can be a good testing ground for the Bakhtinian categories of carnival and dialogism, investigating how these plays stage a heteroglossia of conflicting discourses out of which no definite “truth” emerges, but where the interplay itself is the core of the action and of the text, where carnivalistic parody and inversion are the means to challenge imposed, “monoglot” ideologies and roles, and where the subject itself as a unifying point in the web of discourses is questioned.

Bentley remarks that Shaw, like Pirandello and Brecht would later do, had already started “attacking a theatre that was itself untheatrical”,<sup>53</sup> by which he means the naturalistic drama that refused to acknowledge its “theatrical” devices and fictional nature, the established dramatic canon that aimed at portraying a bourgeois complacent and self-assured perception of “truthful” reality. Niccodemi remembers Pirandello’s dramatic approach as “un vivo e animato compendio generale di tutte le eccezioni

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<sup>52</sup> In this respect, see also R. Schleifer, *op. cit.*, where he devotes a whole chapter to Bakhtin’s theory: “The Global Aesthetics of Genre: Mikhail Bakhtin and the Borders of Modernity”, pp. 208-232.

<sup>53</sup> Eric Bentley, *The Pirandello Commentaries*, Evanston (Ill.): Northwestern University Press, 1986, p. 97.

contro tutte le regole”;<sup>54</sup> and the same critical opinion is generally sustained about Jarry’s dramatic exploits.

Therefore, the Bakhtinian ideas of carnival and dialogism will be traced in *Arms and the Man* and *Sei personaggi* as the more or less comic subversion of common dramatic conventions such as the concepts of the noble/tragic hero and heroine, the opposition actor/real person, literary precedent, expectations of plot, conclusion and clear-cut definitions; the foregrounding of fiction and illusion, in both dramatic and psychological terms; the challenging, by means of linguistic “refractions”, of political and social discourses (war, as support to the solidity of the state, and the consistency of its individuals); and firmly established ideas of truth. All this leads to a critical moment of utter ambiguity and disruption of subjectivity, a sort of hovering on the brink from which *Arms and the Man* and *Sei Personaggi* branch off in separate ways, one choosing the comic situation of a happy compromise, the other heading towards the more problematic one of a constant vertigo of multiple voices and self-roles.

*Ubu Roi* and *Enrico IV*, on the other hand, will be observed as they show both the enactment and the collapse of carnival, taking the comic or ambiguous effects of the subversion of norms, reversal of principles, the grotesque, and dialogic identity to their far from comic extremes; in this way they question Bakhtin’s totally positive view of the categories of carnival and dialogic confrontation, and projecting their negative, indeed devastating potential in the two king-figures, on the level of power in the case of *Ubu Roi*, and on the level of identity in *Enrico IV*.

### **3. The Bakhtinian approach**

Bakhtin’s work on language, literature, and culture at large aroused great critical

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<sup>54</sup> D. Niccodemi, cit., p. 193.

enthusiasm, when it was rediscovered and translated in the 1960s; his ideas have proved particularly interesting and challenging for the reading of literary works, triggering a host of critical reflection, especially in the analysis of novels. Nowadays, I believe, the concepts of carnival, dialogism and otherness can still be useful and fruitful as an approach to literary production and its interaction with the surrounding cultural, social and historical environment, although they will be here considered in a critical perspective.

Around 1929 Bakhtin wrote that “every literary work is internally and immanently sociological. Within it living social forces intersect; each element of its form is permeated with living social evaluations”.<sup>55</sup> In fact, Bakhtin’s ideas appear to be a productive combination of the modern interest in the specific “fabric” of the text in itself (as opposed to the “old criticism” projection of a preconceived author’s personality or “spirit of the age” onto the reading of the work), and the necessary rooting of the text within its present or preceding context, discourses and linguistic constructs (which from Post-Structuralism onwards, through Foucault to New Historicism, etc., has been a major preoccupation of critical practice). This approach also moderates the abstractness of a search for the “infinite interplay of signifiers” typical of a Post-Structuralist approach.

What also characterizes Bakhtin’s theory altogether, and which I believe is fundamentally quite consistent with the ideas he propounds, is its nature of “openness”, in the sense of not aiming at a systematic, definitive and therefore rigid arrangement of concepts which normally constitutes a proper “theory”. He himself preferred to term his

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<sup>55</sup> Fragment from the 1929 edition *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art*, in Appendix I to M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. ed. and transl. by C. Emerson, p. 276.

approach as “philosophical anthropology” rather than “theory”;<sup>56</sup> as Michael Holquist observes, “‘theory’ is a term that must be invoked with great caution in a Bakhtinian context, for Bakhtin’s work is [...] militantly opposed to most conceptions of – precisely – theory”.<sup>57</sup> Clark and Holquist describe Bakhtin in their biography as “a man who gave chief importance to being ‘unfinalized’ and ‘becoming’”;<sup>58</sup> and he himself in some late sketchy notes admits to “a certain *internal* open-endedness of many of my ideas” that mainly affects “expression and exposition”, to his “love for variations and for a diversity of terms for a single phenomenon”, a “multiplicity of focuses”.<sup>59</sup> The latter phrase connecting this flexibility of approach with his own concept of heteroglossia, in the refusal to say the “final word”. This is also the reason why Bakhtin’s work allows a fruitful adoption of his ideas with a critical perspective, without thereby causing the collapse or invalidation of a whole “system” as a rigid set of ideas.

I will therefore run through the main categories of carnival, dialogism and otherness, their relation to ideology at large and to the contemporary Stalinist context specifically, also assessing their main limitations of over-positivity, generalization, and unnecessary restriction to the genre of the novel. The testing of those categories against the chosen dramatic works will follow in the respective chapters.

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<sup>56</sup> See Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, Cambridge (Mass.) and London: Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 3.

<sup>57</sup> Michael Holquist, Introduction to M. M. Bakhtin, in *Art and Answerability. Early philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. by M. Holquist and V. Liapunov, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990, p. xx.

<sup>58</sup> K. Clark and M. Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, cit., p. 2.

<sup>59</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “From Notes Made in 1970-71”, in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. by C. Emerson and M. Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986, pp. 132-158, p. 155.

## ❖ Carnival

Bakhtin's concept of carnival – mainly expounded in his books on Rabelais and Dostoevsky – is a wide-ranging “sum total of all diverse festivities, rituals and forms of a carnival type”, with its roots in folk culture opposed to official ritual; a primordial, ritualistic form, a “syncretic pageantry” with a symbolic sensuous language of its own, but which, he also claims, has a possible transposition in the language of literature, where it creates “a language of artistic images that has something in common with its concretely sensuous nature”.<sup>60</sup> One of the advantages of this concept is, as Dentith observes, that “it gives a name [...] to a range of otherwise dispersed activities and cultural forms which can now be seen to have real and historical connections”.<sup>61</sup> The “spirit” of carnival then consists in the celebration of sensual life, laughter, and freedom from socially imposed positions and taboos, a counter-current to officialdom that carries along with it the parody, “lowering” and reversal of official roles and rituals (for example through mock-crownings), of rationality and seriousness, and of established conventions and definitions, thus propounding, in Bakhtin's thinking, the “realization that established authority and truth are relative”.<sup>62</sup> It is an ambivalent laughter because it is also self-addressed, with no distinction between who laughs and who is laughed at; it revels in the use of masks and role-playing, and creates unexpected “mésalliances”, whereby things that were “distanced from one another by a non-carnivalistic hierarchical worldview are drawn into carnivalistic contacts and combinations”.<sup>63</sup> Finally, it celebrates the grotesque with its imagery of lowliness and degradation, filth, ugliness, hybridisation, deformation and exaggeration, and the realism and sensuality of

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<sup>60</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, cit., p. 122.

<sup>61</sup> Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 70.

<sup>62</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 256.

<sup>63</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, cit., p. 123.



the “material bodily principle”.

Altogether, carnival is characterized by elements that promote change and freedom, and emphasize the relativity of categories in the cultural framework: if “the official feast asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions”, on the other hand

carnival celebrated the temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order [...]. All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal [...], the peculiar logic of the “inside out” [...] of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings.<sup>64</sup>

Carnival then bears a strong potential for social disruption, even if within specific time-boundaries: it is “the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter. It is a festive life” which “is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of coercive socio-economic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity”.<sup>65</sup> Thus it acts as a sort of safety-valve for social tensions, but at the same time the absolute validity of the ideological “system” is questioned, and the possibility of alternative truths and organizations is put forward: for Gardiner it reveals “the arbitrariness [...] of a whole range of institutional arrangements and social roles right down to our conceptions of history, of individuality and sexuality, and even of time itself. It demonstrates that other, less rigid and hierarchical social relations are possible and indeed desirable”.<sup>66</sup> As Stallybrass and White also observe, “given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, [carnival] may often act as a *catalyst* and *site of actual*

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<sup>64</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., pp. 9-11.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 255.

<sup>66</sup> Michael Gardiner, *The Dialogics of Critique*, London, New York: Routledge, 1992. p. 94.

and symbolic struggle”.<sup>67</sup>

### ❖ Dialogism

Sharing with carnival this idea of a multiplicity of perspectives and alternatives is another major component of Bakhtin’s approach, the concept of “dialogism”, developed throughout his life in several essays<sup>68</sup> and in the work on Dostoevsky. Bakhtin posits a linguistic “theory” whereby the attribution of meaning and the consequent formation of discourse is governed by “heteroglossia”, understood as a dynamic stratification of possible meanings of a single word or utterance, both on a diachronic and a synchronic level. An object, in the widest sense, is semantically charged and indeed “saturated” with multiple referentiality, acquired in time by repeated definitions and consequent modifications and connotations, and also resulting from the contemporary context. The object, in the act of being defined by a word, is like an intersection and catalytic point for contrasting forces which are defined as “centripetal” and “centrifugal”,<sup>69</sup> that represent different perspectives on the world, and therefore different judgements and attributions of significance. Bakhtin compares this process to the refraction caused in a ray of light by a prism-like object or a mist, whereby the single ray (the “intentionality”, i.e. the single meaning intended by the word) is broken down into multiple rays (other alternative meanings):

no living word relates to its object in a *singular* way: [...] any concrete utterance finds the object at which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist – or, on the contrary, by the “light” of alien

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<sup>67</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1986, p. 14, their italics.

<sup>68</sup> Mainly collected in M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by M. Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998; and in M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, cit.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. M. M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, cit., pp. 270-273.

words that have already been spoken about it. It is entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgements and accents. The word, directed towards its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment [...] the living and unrepeatable play of colors and light on the facets of the image that it constructs can be explained as the spectral dispersion of the ray-word [...] in the social atmosphere of the word, the atmosphere that surrounds the object.<sup>70</sup>

The dynamic relation or confrontation that results from the multiple viewpoints being evoked or implied or disputed is precisely “a dialogic interaction” that constitutes the basic nature of language and utterance, that is dialogism itself. This in turn defines two different modes of discourse, according to whether this multiple referentiality or “multivoicedness” is accepted and upheld, or rejected in the effort to impose a univocal, “monoglot” meaning: in the first instance, a heteroglot, truly dialogic discourse is created which lets the different voices resound as in a polyphonic piece – “polyphony” is an alternative term to heteroglossia and the fundamental characteristic that Bakhtin finds in Dostoevsky’s narrative fiction. In the second instance a rigid “monological”, “authoritative” discourse arises, that is characterized by the “direct”, “serious”, “straightforward” word that does not accept ambiguity and the consequent multiplicity of points of view: it is the typical mode, according to Bakhtin, of official discourse, of “authoritative” religious, political and social ideologies, that will not admit of questioning and alternatives to themselves.<sup>71</sup> “Monologism is the conceptual glue which holds together the complex mosaic of religious, political, psychological, and

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<sup>70</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”, cit., pp. 276-277.

<sup>71</sup> Tony Crowley distinguishes three different ways in which Bakhtin uses the terms “monologism” and “dialogism”. “First, to refer to the historical forces which are in conflict in discourse: dialogical versus monological forces. Second, to the effects brought about by the conflict: monological or dialogical forms of discourse. Third, to the nature of the conflict itself: given that the forces are always in conflict, the form which dominates at any one time has to engage in constant dialogical re-negotiation with the other in order to retain its position”: “Bakhtin and the History of Language”, in Ken Hirschkop and David Shepperd (eds.), *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed., Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001, pp. 177-200, p. 179.

aesthetic attitudes [...]. Dialogism is Bakhtin's attempt to think his way out of such an all-pervasive monologism";<sup>72</sup> in this respect, the phenomenon of carnival and its components can be regarded as a manifestation of, or an openness to, the wider instance of the dialogic. Hirschkop however sees monologism, "rather than as some inexplicable perversion of the dialogical [...] as a strategy of response toward another discourse, albeit a strategy which aims to 'ignore' or 'marginalize' the opposite discourse". thus including "questions of cultural oppression and power".<sup>73</sup>

Dialogism also typically informs the novel, which Bakhtin regards as the only literary genre that does not arise out of a poetic canon, as a rigid system of prescriptive rules, but develops in a continuous dialogue with the irrepressible multiplicity and open-endedness of reality, welcoming all that the other genres exclude in terms of content and of conscious multivoicedness,<sup>74</sup> and counteracting their conventions. This is considered by Bakhtin as so peculiar to the novel, that he comes to define as "novelized" discourse or "novelness", in a rather generalized way, any form of utterance or literary language that adopts this mode: "whatever form of expression within a given literary system reveals the limits of that system as inadequate, imposed, or arbitrary [...]. Because the fundamental features of any culture are inscribed in its texts, not only in its literary texts but in its legal and religious ones as well, 'novelness' can work to undermine the official or high culture of any society".<sup>75</sup> This limitation to the novelistic field will be

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<sup>72</sup> K. Clark and M. Holquist, *op. cit.*, p. 348.

<sup>73</sup> Ken Hirschkop, "A Response to the Forum on Mikhail Bakhtin", in Gary Saul Morson (ed.), *Bakhtin. Essays and Dialogues on His Work*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 73-79, p. 75.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. for example M. M. Bakhtin, "Epic and the Novel", in *The Dialogic Imagination*, *cit.*, pp. 3-40.

<sup>75</sup> K. Clark and M. Holquist, *op. cit.*, pp. 276-277. Another critical term used to this purpose is

discussed below.

### ❖ Otherness

A further element in Bakhtin's work, related to his concept of language as a dialogic act, which still sounds very up-to-date nowadays, is his reflection on the nature of the self, which he regards as inextricably bound with the social and cultural context, to the point that, as De Man comments, the whole "reality principle coincides with the principle of otherness".<sup>76</sup> Following the idea of signification and discourse as socially and historically stratified processes, the utterance always results in a dialogue, never in a single isolated act, a response to previous utterances that also expects and requires a further response: a situation that Bakhtin calls "addressivity",<sup>77</sup> and summed up by Holquist as the "awareness of the otherness of language in general and the otherness of given dialogic partners in particular [...] constantly to turn a general system of language to the needs of specific experiences".<sup>78</sup> It is therefore always a social event, as Holquist puts it, an act of "co-authorship", "an utterance is always an answer";<sup>79</sup> consequently, the definition of one's consciousness, as a process of ideological construction, also develops through a dialogic interaction with otherness:

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"prosaics", "the increasingly popular term for Bakhtin's theory of the novel and of communication acts generally": Donald Wesling, "Rhythmic Cognition in the Reader: Correcting Bakhtin's Wrong Turn, in Alastair Renfrew (ed.), *Exploiting Bakhtin*, Strathclyde: University of Strathclyde Print Unit, 1997, pp. 39-55, p. 42.

<sup>76</sup> Paul De Man, "Dialogue and Dialogism", in his *The Resistance to Theory*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, pp. 106-114, p. 110.

<sup>77</sup> See M. M. Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres", in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, cit., pp. 60-102, p. 95.

<sup>78</sup> M. Holquist, "Answering as Authoring: Mikhail Bakhtin's Trans-Linguistics", in G. S. Morson (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 59-71, p. 63.

<sup>79</sup> M. Holquist, *Dialogism. Bakhtin and His World*, cit., pp. 13; 60.

I realize myself initially through others: from them I receive words, forms and tonalities for the formation of my initial idea of myself [...], a person's consciousness awakens wrapped up in another's consciousness [...]. I live in a world of others' words. And my entire life is an orientation in this world, a reaction to others' words [...] beginning with my assimilation of them (in the process of initial mastery of speech) and ending with assimilation of the wealth of human culture [...which has] immense and essential significance [...] for the personality, for the human *I*.<sup>80</sup>

For Bakhtin the identity of the self defines itself in relation to the social to such an extent that “[t]he *I* hides in the other and in others, it wants to be only an other for others, to enter completely into the world of others as an other, and to cast from itself the burden of being the only *I* (*I-for-myself*) in the world”.<sup>81</sup> Holquist sees Bakhtin's dialogism as “part of a major tendency in European thought to reconceptualize epistemology the better to accord with the new versions of mind [...] It is an attempt to frame a theory of knowledge for an age when relativity dominates [...] when *non-coincidence* of one kind or another – of sign to its referent, of the subject to itself – raises troubling new questions about the very existence of mind”.<sup>82</sup> Therefore consciousness *is* otherness, the self is eminently dialogic, relational, and this concept is opposed to what Bakhtin pinpoints as the “idealistic” image of man: “the ‘idea of man’ as such is always monistic. It always strives to overcome the dualism of the *I* and the *other*, even if in doing so it advances one of these categories as fundamental”.<sup>83</sup> It is also a constructive alternative to the Freudian theory of the self being formed through a repressive relation towards the social, where personality results from a series of compromises with outward official norms of behaviour and personal relations that constrict the individual into more or less pathological psychic processes; for Freud

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<sup>80</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “From Notes Made in 1970-71”, cit., pp. 138; 143, his italics.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 147, his italics.

<sup>82</sup> M. Holquist, *Dialogism. Bakhtin and His World*, cit., p. 17, his italics.

<sup>83</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity”, in *Art and Answerability*, cit., pp. 4-256, p. 58, his italics.

therefore the social acquires an almost totally negative role of coercion of the natural self:

In Freud, the movement is from the infant's complete ego, through increasing repression, to the socialized self of adults who can delay ego gratification. In Bakhtin, on the contrary, the movement is from a nonself through the acquisition of different 'languages', to a self that is the sum of its discursive practices [...] In Freud, self is suppressed in the service of the social; in Bakhtin, self is precisely a function of the social.<sup>84</sup>

If, as Clark and Holquist observe, the issue of difference dominates the whole of modern thinking, what marks Bakhtin's originality is "his concentration on the possibility of encompassing differences in a simultaneity. He conceives of the old problem of identity along the lines not of 'the same as' but of 'simultaneous with'",<sup>85</sup> as a "self in otherness" that welcomes ambiguity and diversity as an irreducible aspect of life. This tone of positivity, however, comes to a clash with some forms of modern sensibility, where the composite and fragmented nature of the self is perceived as negative, as is for example the case with Pirandello.

#### ❖ **Ideological subversion**

Bakhtin's concepts of carnival, heteroglossia, dialogism and otherness come together in expressing alternative and multiple visions, the acceptance of ambiguity and incompleteness, the possibility of change; this is deeply disturbing to any "established" system of thought, that is to a particular ideology or discourse that is imposed as the "truth", the only acceptable interpretation of reality, and which relies on this general acceptance to be perpetuated, and to legitimize in turn the social or cultural group that upholds it. Bakhtin sums up what he considers

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<sup>84</sup> K. Clark and M. Holquist, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

those two basic elements upon which any ideology is built: *the separate thought*, and a unified world of objects giving rise to a *system* of thoughts. In the usual ideological approach, there exist separate thoughts, assertions, propositions that can by themselves be true or untrue, depending on their relationship to the subject [... They] are united in a systemic unity of a referential order. In this systemic unity [...] one thought is bound up with another on referential grounds. A thought gravitates toward system as toward an ultimate whole.<sup>86</sup>

This definition concisely explains his view that not only is there an arbitrary connection between the word and the object, a fact which is generally recognized as constituting any form of language; but the question of whether an utterance or a definition be true or not is secondary and relative. Furthermore, what is arbitrary is the connection of certain thoughts into a whole, and the single element derives its significance from belonging to this whole, it implies the other parts, and for this reason depends on the stability of the system. This, because of this “togetherness”, this “gravitation” of the parts – which Bakhtin also defines as the “centripetal force”<sup>87</sup> – creates the impression of absolute, all-encompassing stability, that is, the “ultimate” truth. Therefore, any thought that does not belong to this self-sufficient unity, or that insinuates a referentiality outside this system, or interrupts the network of relationships between the parts, will create ambiguity, instability, and is bound to be rejected from the system itself for the sake of its own internal balance and continuation.

Ideology and language for Bakhtin are deeply connected: precisely, ideology coincides with a “unitary language”, a fixed selection within the universe of possible discourses, one “monoglossia” out of heteroglossia, the “authoritative” discourse. Therefore it is a “posited”, “ideologically saturated” and “crystallized” linguistic system that expresses a world view and tends to its own unification – as opposed to the “decentralizing” forces deriving from the stratification of other different systems – and

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<sup>86</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, cit., p. 93.

<sup>87</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”, cit., pp. 270-271.



“in vital connection with the processes of socio-political and cultural centralization”.<sup>88</sup> This monoglossia is elsewhere defined as the “one-sided seriousness” of discourse, and Bakhtin emphasizes its connection with the ruling class in creating the “official discourse”: in the seventeenth century, for example, when “[r]ationalism and classicism clearly reflect the fundamental traits of the new official culture” which “was also authoritarian and serious”, “[n]ew prevailing concepts were established which [...] the new ruling class inevitably presented as eternal truths”. This official discourse tended therefore “towards the stability and completion of being, toward one single meaning, one single tone of seriousness”, and was always historically “based on fear and coercion – a seriousness which [...] tended to underwrite the static, unshakeable hierarchy; it conceded no exchange of roles”.<sup>89</sup> Again, a closed circle of self-imposed and self-supported discourse that endorses the status quo, where “a dual tone of speech is, generally speaking, impossible: hard, well-established lines are drawn between all the phenomena (and these phenomena are torn away from the contradictory world of becoming, of the whole)”;<sup>90</sup> a discourse that will not allow to be penetrated, for example, by parody which introduces the “corrective of laughter, of a critique on the one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word, the corrective of reality that is always richer [...] and most importantly *too contradictory and heteroglot*”.<sup>91</sup>

In this respect, the socio-political considerations of Michel Foucault on the concept of discursive practices significantly bear on Bakhtin’s referential relation to the objects, as various ways of attributing meaning to the empirical world;<sup>92</sup> and Foucault’s

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>89</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit, pp. 101, 268.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 433.

<sup>91</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse”, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, cit., pp. 41-83, p. 55, his emphasis.

<sup>92</sup> Michael Gardiner also comments on the analogy between Bakhtin’s “speech genres” and

thoughts on the structuring of social categories, institutions, and truth in connection to those discourses come close to Bakhtin's self-contained systems of thoughts; which also emphasizes the modernity inherent in Bakhtin's thinking. For Foucault, "the notion of ideology [...] always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth. Now I believe that the problem [...consists in] how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false".<sup>93</sup> He also regards these practices in a struggle for predominance, and the dominating one establishing its own world-view in very concrete terms of power, therefore connected to the ruling social group, which he sees as a "political, economic, institutional regime"<sup>94</sup> not only coercive (for example in the establishing and definition of categories like "madness" and "sanity", and the consequent reclusion and silencing of the socially repulsed "insane"<sup>95</sup>) but also productive of knowledge, behaviour, further discourse, altogether aiming at its own perpetuation. As Hindness comments,

Foucault conceives of power in terms of a 'structure of actions' bearing on the actions of those who are free. It follows from this, in his view, that power relationships will often be unstable and reversible [...]. Domination refers to conditions under which the subordinated have relatively little room for manoeuvre. Government lies between domination and those relationships of power which are reversible; it is the conduct of conduct, aiming to affect the actions of individuals by working on their conduct – that is, on the ways in which they regulate their own behaviour.<sup>96</sup>

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Foucault's "orders of discourse": see *The Dialogics of Critique*, cit., pp. 81-82. See also Peter I. Barta *et al.* (eds.), *Carnivalizing Difference. Bakhtin and the Other*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, pp. 5-6.

<sup>93</sup> Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power", from *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon, New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980, p. 118.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>95</sup> See his *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London: Routledge, 1997.

<sup>96</sup> Barry Hindness, *Discourses of Power: from Hobbes to Foucault*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, p. 97.

The Bakhtinian concepts of carnival, dialogism, and otherness represent an approach to culture and to the social, political, historical milieu, that clearly situate his thought, with its emphasis on “plurality and variety”. in contrast to its own contemporary context of growing Stalinist ideology in the late 1920s and early 1930s. with its “increasing homogenization of cultural and political life”.<sup>97</sup> The subversive potential of his writings is quite apparent, as Clark and Holquist emphasize: “in a time of increasing regimentation, Bakhtin wrote of freedom. In a time of authoritarianism, dogmatism, and official heroes, he wrote of masses as ebullient, variegated, and irreverent. At a time when literature was composed of mandated canons, he wrote of smashing all norms”.<sup>98</sup> The gradual imposition of the Soviet regime, with its centralized dictatorial control mechanisms and its censorship of political thought, the press, cultural expression and its enforcement of allegiance to the party, are obviously implied in Bakhtin’s description of monological official discourse and its dogmatic assertion of univocal truth and point of view, rejecting the possibility of other, contrasting perspectives and voices. The tracing of these in the phenomenon of carnival and in the safely remote work of Rabelais can be regarded as an attempt to avoid open controversy and censure, which would have resulted in serious consequences for Bakhtin (Clark and Holquist see most of his works as “manifestos disguised as academic inquiries”<sup>99</sup>). Also symptomatic of this situation is the fact that the book on Dostoevsky, first published in 1929, aroused strong critical reactions and received positive comments, but then immediately disappeared altogether from the scholarly scene, in coincidence with the strengthening of Soviet politicization and Bakhtin’s arrest, until its “rediscovery” in the early 1960s.

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<sup>97</sup> M. Holquist, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>98</sup> K. Clark and M. Holquist, *op. cit.*, p. 312.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

## ❖ Some flaws in the system

This inherent political opposition leads to some dogmatism in Bakhtin's ideas as well, and his view of carnival on the whole suffers from a somewhat generalizing tendency, in being too comprehensive and too positively connoted. Stallybrass and White regard the Rabelais book as "a cryptic anti-Stalinist allegory",<sup>100</sup> and Gardiner, Clark and Holquist agree in considering Bakhtin's interest in the folk culture of carnival and in dialogism as an "allegorical attack on the mentality of 'barracks-communism' and rule by bureaucratic fiat that characterized Stalin's statocracy".<sup>101</sup> But, as these critics point out, the relationship is more complicated, in that for example the Stalinist propaganda made use of some carnivalesque techniques to ridicule opponents, and largely drew on the concept of "folk" to support the political and cultural "revolution" against the bourgeoisie. If "this appeal to popular values and styles promoted a prettified, sanitized image of the 'people' as paragons of noble virtue",<sup>102</sup> Bakhtin's own projection of the people constitutes a kind of utopian vision, being no less idealized "as an untamable, rebellious, and regenerative force that will destroy the status quo [...] the folk are held to be instinctively anti-absolutist, pro-universalist, and anti-war".<sup>103</sup> It is a uniformly positive image that fails to take into account the necessary differentiations and conflicting interests within the social body itself, while being too assured of its "revolutionary" aspirations; and it is an image that remains on an abstract level, not coming to grips with the reality of social and political forces, and with how the "folk" or carnival element can actually effect this liberation of consciousness in real life terms. Dentith remarks that "it is hard to accede to a version of carnival which

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<sup>100</sup> P. Stallybrass and A. White, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>101</sup> M. Gardiner, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>103</sup> K. Clark and M. Holquist, *op. cit.*, pp. 310-311.

stresses its capacity to invert hierarchies and undermine boundaries, without at the same time recalling that many carnival and carnival-like degradations clearly functioned to reinforce communal and hierarchical norms”,<sup>104</sup> drawing attention for example to some late Renaissance popular violent rituals aimed at the ridiculing and final killing of political or religious heretics or opponents. Sales makes a similar observation when claiming “the fizzy, dizzy carnival spirit did not necessarily undermine authority. First of all, it was licensed or sanctioned by the authorities themselves [...]. The release of emotions and grievances made them easier to police in the long run. Second, [...] the fact that Kings and Queens were chosen and crowned actually reaffirmed the *status quo*”.<sup>105</sup> However, Bakhtin’s carnival cannot be taken as an attempt to propound a valid political or social theory or manifesto, which was not probably his intention; but rather as the expression of a drive inherent to culture, towards non-uniformity and a richer experience of reality within a given social context, and towards maintaining a healthy, free relationship to political and ideological structuring. As Stallybrass and White most lucidly see it,

If we treat the carnivalesque as an instance of a wider phenomenon of transgression we move beyond Bakhtin’s troublesome *folkloric* approach to a political anthropology of *binary* extremism in class society. This transposition not only moves us beyond the rather unproductive debate over whether carnivals are politically progressive or conservative, it reveals that the underlying structural features of carnival operate far beyond the strict confines of popular festivity and are intrinsic to the dialectics of social classification as such. The ‘carnavalesque’ mediates between a classical/classificatory body and its negations, its Others, what it excludes to create its identity as such.<sup>106</sup>

The Rabelais book is especially considered as pervaded by a “cosmic populism”,

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<sup>104</sup> S. Dentith, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>105</sup> Roger Sales, *English Literature in History 1780-1830: Pastoral and Politics*, London: Hutchinson, 1983, p. 169.

<sup>106</sup> P. Stallybrass and A. White. *op. cit.*, p. 26, their italics.

a generally “poetic, optimistic and breathlessly exaggerated” tone, a black-and-white discrimination; in it, the idea of “unfinalizability” is happily upheld as “the only supreme value”, whereby “everything completed, fixed, or defined is declared to be dogmatic and repressive; only the destruction of all extant or conceivable norms has value”<sup>107</sup> – although the revised book on Dostoevsky somehow moderates the concept, describing carnival “not as a pure force of antinomian destruction, but as a clearing away of dogma *so that* new creation can take place”.<sup>108</sup> A generalized positive connotation for example characterizes the carnivalesque element of reversal and overturning, due to its potential for liberation from political hierarchy which, however, can also have dire, tragic consequences, as for instance in the issue of uncrowning. Shakespeare’s *Richard II* and *King Lear* are obvious literary examples of how the loss of the crown and rationality, the divesting of royal power, and the assumption of the role of “mad”, “fool” or mock-king has far from comic, but rather shattering effects both on the person who is being “uncrowned”, and on the stability of the social context; which goes well beyond the boundaries of a carnivalistic parenthesis – this aspect will be especially illustrated in the analysis of *Ubu Roi*. Kristeva also sees carnival as potentially serious and even tragic: “[t]he laughter of the carnival is not simply parodic; it is no more comic than tragic; it is both at once, one might say that it is *serious*”.<sup>109</sup> Thus, carnival categories can still be employed for the reading of literary works, but taking into account that their “liberating”, positive and comic connotations may well be at odds with the overall mood of the work in question and not fit within the boundaries of given “genres”, while establishing a meaningful dissonance.

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>108</sup> Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin. Creation of a Prosaics*, Stanford (Ca.): Stanford University Press, 1990, pp. 90, 92, 95 (their italics).

<sup>109</sup> Julia Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue and the Novel”, in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*. Oxford (UK) and Cambridge (Mass.): Blackwell, 1986, p. 50.

The concept of otherness also bears an unconditional positivity: as Morson and Emerson observe, Bakhtin projects the “other” as “benignly active, always at work to define us in ways we can live with and profit from [...]. The self, awaiting a response, is presumed resilient or vigorous enough to incorporate, or counter, any definition the other might thrust upon it. Bakhtin presumes no absolute conflict between an organism and its surroundings”,<sup>110</sup> whereas the confrontation with and assimilation of diversity can also have devastating consequences on the individual, as is for example hinted in *Sei personaggi* and emerges more clearly in the reading of *Enrico IV*. The principle of dialogism can have similar effects if taken to its extreme potential: Bakhtin’s totally positive view of the multiplicity of perspective, the changeability of experience and subjectivity can in fact have utterly negative and destructive consequences for the individual, as is again exposed in *Enrico IV*.

Another limitation in Bakhtin’s approach is that he developed his idea of dialogism and “heteroglossia” within the literary field as pertaining mainly to the novel; but undoubtedly “multi-voicedness” can also be traced in poetic and dramatic works, while some novels appear consistently “monological”. In passing remarks, Bakhtin only recognized some degree of polyphony and some carnivalesque elements in Shakespeare’s works: in the tragedies he rather contradictorily finds an “ambivalent and universal laughter [that] does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it”,<sup>111</sup> and the principle of bodily materialism and of “crownings and uncrownings [...] organizes the serious elements also”, with the effect of a “fearless, sober (yet not cynical) realism and absence of dogmatism”,<sup>112</sup> containing “the entire world” in a way that “has never

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<sup>110</sup> G. S. Morson and C. Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin. Creation of a Prosaics*, cit., p. 470.

<sup>111</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 122.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

again returned to European drama”.<sup>113</sup> On the one hand, it is not clear how the carnivalesque can “complete” or “organize” the serious elements without somehow undermining them at the same time, or without creating a truly dialogic dramatic work, which Bakhtin does not seem altogether willing to grant. On the other hand, if he concedes the possibility of co-existing seriousness and laughter to a comprehensive, polyphonic and undogmatic result in a Shakespearean work, then there is no reason why it should not be possible in other dramatists’ works too.

Bakhtin does admit that “[c]ontemporary realistic social drama may, of course, be heteroglot and multi-languaged”,<sup>114</sup> but generally he regards drama as well as poetry as codified genres, therefore rigid, monologic discourses, not open to the carnivalesque, to ambivalence and multivoicedness. Specifically, he thinks that the “concept of a dramatic action, as that which resolves all dialogic oppositions, is purely monologic”:<sup>115</sup> however, this very definition of drama is rather restrictive, and there are numerous examples among the most highly-rated drama – Pirandello’s, for instance – that refrain from solving all conflicts, but rather carry out an ambiguous ending or leave some points open to further debate. Bakhtin claims that drama cannot be genuinely polyphonic, as it “may be multi-leveled, but it cannot contain *multiple worlds*”<sup>116</sup> (which is again in contrast with what he regards as possible in Shakespeare’s evocation of an “entire world”), but only one voice, that of the hero which clearly points to classical theatre as the target for this kind of criticism. Notwithstanding the presence of different characters on the stage, the dramatic piece would be in its essence always the expression of a single authorial worldview: which does not explain why it should be

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<sup>113</sup> From a 1970 review, quoted in “Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences”, in M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, cit., pp. 159-172, p. 171, note 11.

<sup>114</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”, cit., p. 405, n. 62.

<sup>115</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, cit., p. 17.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.



different in the novel, or why only the novel is capable of incorporating a variety of discourses, consciousnesses and points of view, being itself written by a single author. The theatre can and does give voice to conflicts, indeed does not exist without these and diversity, and consequently contrasting discourses and points of view, not necessarily made to coincide in the end: as Pirandello thinks, if the author “ha creato veramente caratteri, se ha messo su la scena uomini e non manichini, ciascuno di essi avrà un particolar modo d’esprimersi, per cui [...] un lavoro drammatico dovrebbe risultare come scritto da tanti e non dal suo autore”.<sup>117</sup>

The positing of this limit shows a definite flaw in Bakhtin’s theory; Knowles tries to explain it by arguing that possibly “Bakhtin’s ideas on drama are in part formed in reaction to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century elevation of Greek tragedy by German aesthetics to a monolith of official culture”,<sup>118</sup> which is also contemporary with the re-discovery and cult of Shakespeare in Germany. Todorov observes that the concept of heteroglossia, analogous to that of intertextuality, has a wider, a-temporal scope, which is hardly compatible with the historicity of genre; he further comments that

Il semble que le concept de roman soit si essentiel à Bakhtine qu’il échappe à sa propre rationalité, et que l’emploi du terme relève d’un attachement avant tout affectif, qui ne se soucie pas des raisons qui le fondent. En sorte qu’une question s’impose: le roman, au sens bakhtinien du terme, est-il vraiment un genre?<sup>119</sup>

Bakhtin’s idea of the novel seems in fact to be much wider than the conventional understanding of the generic form, as his definition of “novelness” itself shows;

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<sup>117</sup> L. Pirandello, “L’azione parlata”, in *Saggi, poesie e scritti vari*, cit., pp. 981-984, p. 983.

<sup>118</sup> Ronald Knowles, *Shakespeare and Carnival. After Bakhtin*, Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1998, p. 9.

<sup>119</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtine. Le principe dialogique. Suivi de Écrits du Cercle de Bakhtine*, Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1981, p. 132.

therefore, there is no reason why a dialogic practice in discourse cannot be found in other genres. Lodge talks of the possibility of some poetry as “novelized discourse”.<sup>120</sup> and a definitely “polyphonic” style pervades a poem like Eliot’s *The Waste Land*; Bakhtin himself quotes some poems by Pushkin as displaying a dialogic kind of verse,<sup>121</sup> and some successful Bakhtinian criticism has already been carried out both on poetry and on drama, especially on Shakespeare.<sup>122</sup> On the other hand, Bakhtin himself, when tracing the origins of carnivalesque and dialogic literary practice, refers not only to narrative pieces, but to pageants, Roman comic rituals, the Greek satyr play, the parodic plays of Southern Italy, Saturnalia, mimes, etc.,<sup>123</sup> and to verse travesties and parodies. All of these are more or less overtly carried on in the following centuries and let the ambivalent, polyphonic, subverting voice resound; all this amounting to sufficient internal contradiction to Bakhtin’s confinement of these features to the novel exclusively.

Therefore, I intend to try to renew the scope of this theoretical approach – as has already been done with some Shakespearean and other theatrical works – questioning

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<sup>120</sup> David Lodge, *After Bakhtin. Essays on Fiction and Criticism*, London and New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 96.

<sup>121</sup> See his “Discourse in the Novel”, cit., and *Toward A Philosophy of the Act*, ed. by M Holquist and V. Liapunov, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993.

<sup>122</sup> See for example P. I. Barta *et al.* (eds.), *op. cit.*, which also has a useful concise bibliography on the subject in pp. 8-10; the contributions by R. Watson and D. Wesling in A. Renfrew (ed.), *Exploiting Bakhtin*, cit.; or that by G. Pechey in K. Hirschkop and D. Shepperd (eds.), *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, cit.; Michael D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theatre: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England*, New York and London: Routledge, 1989; and the recent collection of essays by Ronald Knowles, *Shakespeare and Carnival. After Bakhtin*, cit., or Cathleen McLoughlin. *Shakespeare, Rabelais, and the Comical-Historical*, New York: Peter Lang, 2000. Stallybrass and White note that other critics have studied Shelley’s poetry, Beckett’s drama and Germain’s writings, although, as they remark, “with a straightforward and unproblematical enthusiasm for his conceptual schema”: *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>123</sup> See for example M. M. Bakhtin, “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse”, cit.

Bakhtin's limitation of it to the novel, as well as testing the validity of the categories of carnival and dialogism in four dramatic pieces that appear to lend themselves significantly to this kind of reading. To my knowledge, no criticism has been attempted from a Bakhtinian point of view, on Shaw's dramatic work; and only a few critics consider Pirandello's drama from the perspective of the carnival motif with specific reference to Bakhtin's theorization.

Donati, for example, interprets Pirandello's poetics of "umorismo" in terms of a dialogic principle, and briefly reads the major plays through the Bakhtinian frame;<sup>124</sup> Druker, on the other hand, does not agree with comparing "umorismo" to a Bakhtinian dialogic art, owing to the latter's positive quality, as opposed to Pirandello's sense of crisis:<sup>125</sup> however, this seems to be a difference in their conclusions – as will be argued mainly in the last chapter of this thesis – and not in their starting points, which do bear some connections. Gioanola in fact, referring to Bakhtin's theory, again establishes a comparison between carnival – mainly focusing on menippean texts – and Pirandello's "umorismo", tracing some common motifs such as a certain composite and disjointed character of these texts, the closeness to folkloristic and dialectal elements, the function of unmasking, the themes of opposites, reversals and doubles, the distancing gaze, the crowning and uncrowning motifs, and the detachment from the uniform figure of the epic-tragic hero.<sup>126</sup> Bazzoni also observes the recurrence of the carnival motif, with brief reference to the Bakhtinian formulation, in an overview of Pirandello's plays, where she remarks that

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<sup>124</sup> Corrado Donati, *Il Sogno e la Ragione. Saggi Pirandelliani*, Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1993.

<sup>125</sup> Jonathan Druker, "Self-Estrangement and the Poetics of Self-Representation in Pirandello's *L' Umorismo*", *South Atlantic Review*, 1998, 63 (1): 56-71. pp. 59-60.

<sup>126</sup> E. Gioanola, *Pirandello, la follia*, Milano: Jaca Books, 1997, pp. 23-25.

[c]arnival, which may function as an escape system from the pressures of hostile society, becomes [...] an irrepressible force which breaks out of its prescribed limits and runs amok until it is rebridled, leaving confusion, inversion, disjunction, displacement, and even death in its passage. [...] The temporary madness of carnival receives a grotesquely distorted reflection in this play as its intended freedom becomes permanent imprisonment<sup>127</sup>.

She also similarly sees the common ground between the carnivalesque and Pirandello's work in "the mix of comic and tragic elements, the series of maskings and unmaskings, the doubles, the self-conscious performance, the enactment of a trial, the juxtaposition of 'truths', and in the manipulation of characters and audience."<sup>128</sup>

Pirandello's work at large has also received some attention with regards to a Bakhtinian interpretation: Borsellino for example, discussing the writer's concept of "umorismo", sees "quel processo di abbassamento parodistico e insieme patetico dei propri conflitti" as bordering on Bakhtin's polyphony,<sup>129</sup> and regards the anecdote of the *digestio post mortem* as very similar to the Bakhtinian grotesque-carnavalesque imagery: "come il topos del 're nudo', una delle occasioni privilegiate di scomposizione e dissacrazione delle liturgie ufficiali".<sup>130</sup>

Vannini on the other hand traces a parallel between Pirandello's and Bakhtin's ideas on authorship (as expressed in the book on Dostoevsky), for their similar contribution to the deconstruction of the monologic author, without going so far as to suppress it altogether, but "suggesting a model of dialogical authorship"<sup>131</sup> that does not dominate the characters' voices but lets them express their otherness; for Pirandello, as much as for Bakhtin – Vannini observes – "creativity is based on recognition and

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<sup>127</sup> Jana Bazzoni O'Keefe, "The Carnival Motif in Pirandello's Drama", *Modern Drama*, 1987, 30: 414-425, pp. 418-419.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 419

<sup>129</sup> Nino Borsellino, *Ritratto e immagini di Pirandello*, Bari: Laterza, 1993, p. 39.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 159-160.

<sup>131</sup> Simona Vannini, "Pirandello, Bakhtin and Barthes: Towards the Death and Resurrection of the Author", *Pirandello Studies*, 2004, 24: 26-44: p. 27.

respect of the identity of the other on the part of the authorial self. In other words, writing consists of an attempt by the author to embrace the external world while being aware of its otherness.”<sup>132</sup> Ann Caesar had also expressed this perspective, having remarked that “Pirandello’s own description of creativity is one which not only recognizes, but is indeed posited on the alterity, or otherness, of the world and its inhabitants. [...] Pirandello describes a process that is very similar in its conception to Bakhtin’s exploration of multiplicity in human perception [...] As a theory of creativity, polyphony is remarkably similar to Pirandello’s own representation of the artistic process.”<sup>133</sup>

As regards Jarry, Perry is one of the few to see Bakhtinian carnivalesque aspects in the figure of Ubu,<sup>134</sup> while major monographs like Behar’s only vaguely hint at these without explicitly connecting them with Bakhtin’s work. Therefore, I think that there is scope for a new and fruitful critical reading of these authors’ works.

This will, I believe, also add a further dimension to the interpretation of some discourses as plain “satire” or traditional “parody”: whereas the latter’s “assumption is imperial” and “stresses difference and through the inscription of that difference in a literary or artistic tradition masters it”,<sup>135</sup> the Bakhtinian concept of the comic and of dialogic, ambivalent, polyphonic, carnivalesque discourse seems to be less dogmatic,

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>133</sup> Ann Hallamore Caesar, *Characters and Authors in Luigi Pirandello*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998, p. 17. She also observes that the two writers even resort to the same kind of imagery – “the language of visual perception” – when describing the problem of subjectivity in relation to otherness, whereby the sense of self is necessarily completed by the other’s “surplus of vision” (p. 76).

<sup>134</sup> Curtis Perry, “Vaulting Ambitions and Killing Machines: Shakespeare, Jarry, Ionesco, and the Senecan Absurd”, in Donald Hedrick & Bryan Reynolds (eds.), *Shakespeare Without Class: Misappropriations of Cultural Capital*, New York: Palgrave, 2000, pp. 85-106, pp. 87-88.

<sup>135</sup> V. Crapanzano, “The Postmodern Crisis. Discourse, Parody, Memory”, in A. Mandelker (ed.), *Bakhtin in Contexts. Across the Disciplines*, Evanston (Ill.): Northwestern University Press, 1995, pp. 137-150, p. 138.

more significant and productive of debate, in that it admits both the criticizing and the criticized voice, rather than simply upholding a condemnation or mockery of the object of the satire, which rather seems always to come from a fixed point of view of what is right or wrong. The carnivalesque builds a dialogic confrontation of voices that leaves questioning open, and disputes rather than solves the issue of a single, valid discourse or truth; and this also seems to be eminently valid for drama itself, as the chosen pieces will show.

I agree with Ann Jefferson that carnival also questions representation and offers an alternative based on “participation”, whereby “classical representation can be transformed into one which implies an involvement with representation, its objects and its recipients”.<sup>136</sup> With Morson and Emerson, the Bakhtinian “dialogic sense of truth manifests unfinalizability by existing on the ‘threshold’ [...] of several interacting consciousnesses, a ‘plurality’ of ‘unmerged voices’ [...] their separateness is essential to the dialogue. Even when they agree, as they may, they do so from different perspectives and different senses of the world”<sup>137</sup> – this is after all the basis for the potentially unending significance and critical understanding of a literary text. What will hopefully emerge from the analysis of the carnivalesque, identity and dialogism in the chosen texts, is also that they, in their laughing criticisms and subversions, ambiguities and multivoicedness, imply and project certain defined concepts of ideology that they expose and question as official, dominant discourses. In this view, every chapter will start with a reference to the contemporary reception of the text, as an introduction and pinpointing to the surrounding cultural system of values and norms, and the prescribed ideologies that these plays target.

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<sup>136</sup> Ann Jefferson, “Body matters: Self and Other in Bakhtin, Sartre and Barthes”, in K. Hirschkop and D. Shepperd (eds.), *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, cit., pp. 201-228, p. 214.

<sup>137</sup> G. S. Morson and C. Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin. Creation of a Prosaics*, cit., pp. 236-237.

# 1. *Arms and the Man*

## 1. Impact of the play

*Arms and the Man* had its première in Florence Farr's season at the Avenue Theatre, in London, on 21 April 1894, and its reception was marked by great success. applauded by a celebrity-packed audience among whom were William Archer, Henry Arthur Jones, George Moore, Oscar Wilde, William Butler Yeats, and fellow-Fabians with Sidney Webb. However, according to Shaw, this success was based on a total misunderstanding of the play, as he was to recall in his preface to Archer's collection of theatre articles, so much so that, if it had not been

for the pleasure given by the acting, and for the happy circumstance that there was sufficient fun in the purely comic aspect of the piece to enable it to filch a certain vogue as a novel sort of extravaganza, its failure would have been as evident to the public as it was to me when I bowed my acknowledgements before the curtain to a salvo of entirely mistaken congratulations on my imaginary success as a conventionally cynical and paradoxical castigator of "the seamy side of human nature".<sup>1</sup>

This suggests that the subversive potential of the play was contained within "acceptable" limits with regards to common conventions, and that the carnivalesque elements that will be highlighted below do not imply a total undermining of norms and shared beliefs, but rather seem to be aimed at a temporary, "rational" debate.

The Preface to the 1898 edition of *Plays Pleasant* can be considered as mediating ground between the text and contemporary criticism, offering helpful hints as to what context *Arms and the Man* was interacting with. In it, Shaw expresses the conviction that "[p]ublic and private life become daily more theatrical: the modern

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<sup>1</sup> G. B. Shaw, Preface to W. Archer, *The Theatrical "World" of 1894*, London: Walter Scott Ltd., 1895, pp. xi-xxx, p. xxvii.

Kaiser, Dictator, President or Prime Minister is nothing if not an effective actor [...]. No frontier can be marked between drama and history or religion, or between acting and conduct”<sup>2</sup> (p.xi); a statement that finds realization in the play’s game of taking up, maintaining or discarding roles, also clearly pointing at positions of power as carrying out a performance, which again implies a gap between an apparently fixed, given role and its representation; and this debate constitutes a strong link with the other plays selected in this analysis.

Further in his Preface, Shaw also observes that

the real issue between my critic [Moy Thomas] and myself [...] was, whether the political and religious idealism which had inspired Gladstone to call for the rescue of these Balkan principalities from the despotism of the Turk, and converted miserably enslaved provinces into hopeful and gallant little States, will survive the general onslaught on idealism which is implicit, and indeed explicit, in *Arms and the Man* (p.xvi).

Some contemporary criticism was in fact very alert in sensing this direct relationship with the current situation in England: in his notice in *World*, Archer declared not to believe the effect of Bulgarian local colour given by the costumes and scenery and some elements in the dialogue, and rejects other critics’ interpretation of the play as a satiric piece on Bulgaria. Instead, he quite positively asserted that the “satire is directed against humanity in general, and English humanity in particular [...] Saranoff and Bluntschli and Raina and Louka have their prototypes, or rather their antitypes, not in the Balkan Principalities, but in that romantic valley which nestles between the cloud-clapped summits of Hampstead and Sydenham”.<sup>3</sup> He also pointed out what can be defined as

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<sup>2</sup> The text used is the Standard Edition of Shaw’s *Plays Pleasant*, London: Constable & Co., 1931, reprinted 1957. All quotations from the text will be given with act and page numbers in brackets; the odd contractions like “theyre”, “isnt” or “youll” are such in the text itself.

<sup>3</sup> William Archer, initialled notice in *World*, 25 April 1894, 1034, 22; quoted from T. F. Evans (ed.). *op. cit.*, pp. 61-65, p. 62.



carnavalesque reversals (“he makes his characters turn their moral garments inside out and go about with the linings displayed, flaunting the seams and raw edges”). grotesque lowerings to “the seamy side of the human mind”, overturning of serious, official discourses (“he has set himself to knock the stuffing, so to speak, out of war; to contrast a romantic girl’s ideals of battle and its heroic raptures”, “mowing down military ideals with volleys of chocolate-creams”); the fictionality of the characters’ roles and the relativity of each version (“Bluntschli’s picture is not the whole truth any more than Raina”<sup>4</sup>).

The main critical canon was obviously still that of “reality”, as the reference to London shows: Archer was annoyed by the playwright’s apparent “intention” to portray “life as it really is” which turns out to have the opposite effect of total “unreality”, with the characters having a “crude and contorted psychology” that has “nothing of human nature except its pettinesses”.<sup>5</sup> In his Preface, Shaw as well refers to criticisms of unreality aimed at the figure of Bluntschli, and counteracts comments of “fantastically improbable and cynically unnatural” with some military authorities<sup>6</sup> and “unromantic facts” that were perceived by his audience as “a denial of the existence of courage, patriotism, faith, hope, and charity” (p.xv). The play in fact, like all Shaw’s early ones, “launched a polemic against contemporary social organization but also against the cynical practices and unreal actions of contemporary theatre [...] Shaw’s claim to address reality, to show things as they really are, in the 1890s plays, is made through the introduction and subversion of familiar devices and plot-lines and the conventional

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<sup>4</sup> W. Archer, initialled notice, in T. F. Evans, *op. cit.*, pp. 63- 64.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 62, 64.

<sup>6</sup> He was very solicitous about getting first-hand information from Admiral Serebryekov, a commander on the Bulgarian side, and working local colour into the text: see Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw*, London: Vintage, 1998, pp. 170-171.

morality they presupposed”,<sup>7</sup> resulting in an “anti-Scribean” reversal of the well-made play.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, the critics were disoriented by a play that, in a truly modernist way, called many institutions and general beliefs into question, deliberately flouting conventions and welcoming an ambiguity of vision: an unsigned notice to the première in the *Star* found the play “[e]normously amusing, if slightly perplexing. Not fitting exactly into any ready-made category”, combining surface lightness and wit with “little less than a profoundly serious criticism of life”.<sup>9</sup> Yeats’s own reaction was of “admiration and hatred”, and, as he would later remember, “[t]he whole pit and gallery, except certain members of the Fabian Society, started to laugh at the author and then, discovering that they themselves were being laughed at, sat there not converted [...] but dumbfounded, while the rest of the house cheered and laughed”.<sup>10</sup> A challenge to contemporary ideologies was quite dramatically expressed also by Walkley in his notice in the *Speaker*: “Mr. Shaw’s position is that these current ideals are not valid”, and the play is a “spectacle of a number of people trying to apply the current ideals only to find in the end that they won’t work”, because “bad, [...] obsolete, cramping”.<sup>11</sup>

The choice of the Bulgarian setting conveyed the image of a minority perceived as exotic, barbaric and a bit ridiculous;<sup>12</sup> Shaw himself commented on the Bulgarians in

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<sup>7</sup> Jean Chothia, *English Drama of the Early Modern Period. 1890-1940*, London & New York: Longman, 1996, p. 154.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Bentley, “The Making of a Dramatist (1892- 1903)”, in R. J. Kaufmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-75, p. 62.

<sup>9</sup> Unsigned notice in *Star*, 23 April 1894, 1928, i; quoted from T. F. Evans, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>10</sup> William Butler Yeats, unreferenced quotation in M. Holroyd, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

<sup>11</sup> A. B. Walkley, initialled notice in *Speaker*, 28 April 1894, vol. IX, 226, 471; quoted from T. F. Evans *op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel A. Weiss confirms this perception also by observing that a 1929 production of the play in Prague underwent a modification to an Albanian setting: “Shaw, *Arms and the Man*, and the

1885-86 as “just beginning to work out their own redemption from barbarism [...] they were very ignorant heroes, with boundless courage and patriotic enthusiasm but with so little military skill. And their attempts at Western civilization were much the same as their attempts at war – instructive, romantic, ignorant”.<sup>13</sup> Thus, even the setting seems to imply, as will be argued later, that this romantic and patriotic idealism is perceived as provincial and obsolete.

As to these various “ideals” which constitute a great part of Raina’s, Sergius’s, and Catherine’s vocabulary, Shaw highlights their mystifying nature and the real issues behind them:

idealism, which is only a flattering name for romance in politics and morals, is as obnoxious to me as romance in ethics or religion. In spite of a Liberal Revolution or two, I can no longer be satisfied with fictitious morals and fictitious good conduct, shedding fictitious glory on robbery, starvation, disease, crime, drink, war, cruelty, cupidity, and all the other commonplaces of civilization which drive men to the theatre to make foolish pretences that such things are progress, science, morals, religion, patriotism, imperial supremacy, national greatness and all the other names the newspapers call them. (p.xvi)

These above are precisely the discourses that are mocked and debunked in the comedy, shown in their “fictitious” nature by the deliberate and ostentatious impersonation of roles, therefore also calling into question the established system that supports them. This carnivalesque function of the play coincides with some critical opinion: Carpenter for example sees Shaw’s early drama as “marked by its consistent adherence to the aim of destroying ideals”, thus carrying out “an assault on social,

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Bulgarians”, in Stanley Weintraub and Fred D. Crawford (eds.), *Shaw. The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies*, University Park: Penn State University Press, 1990, pp. 27-44.

<sup>13</sup> G. B. Shaw, “A Dramatic Realist to His Critics”, originally appeared in *The New Review*, xi, July 1894, reprinted in *Shaw on Theatre*, ed. by E. J. West, London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1960, pp. 18-41, p. 23.

moral, and philosophic ‘sentimentalities’”;<sup>14</sup> and this would have a destructive drive on the contemporary idea of a drama “designed primarily to give the audience pleasure [...that] should uphold, defend, and at best enhance society’s revered ideals. Above all, they were not to be subjected to indignities – much less genuinely shaken. What Shaw regarded as silly [...] were generally considered the very foundation-stones of society, the removal of which would cause anarchy”.<sup>15</sup>

The text will be observed here from the Bakhtinian perspective of the carnivalesque overturning of accepted conventions, assumptions, values and hierarchies, which seem to translate well in the play’s mockery of the characters’ pretensions to heroic literary tradition and Romantic ideas about love, military heroism and patriotism. This will consequently bring to light a coherent pattern, questioning the respective discourses and accepted distinctions of gender, power, and identity, emphasizing games of role-play, contradictions and personal ambiguities, and interacting with the dominant imperialistic ideology, in a way that seems largely consistent with Bakhtin’s theory of carnival’s debunking function.

## 2. Epic and romance

*Arms and the Man* can be considered as a parodic take on inherited and contemporary epic and romantic literary conventions, as established patterns that would be upheld as universally valid and truthful in the representation of reality. In Bakhtin’s terms, carnivalized literature, “[p]arodying is the creation of a parodic double”,<sup>16</sup> and

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<sup>14</sup> Charles A. Carpenter, *Bernard Shaw and the Art of Destroying Ideals. The Early Plays*, Madison, Milwaukee and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> C. A. Carpenter, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, cit., p. 127.

historically it has mainly addressed the “serious” – and official – genres like epic and tragedy (cf. travesties like Scarron’s *Virgile travesti*, or the satyr play at the end of a Greek tragic trilogy); tracing literary parody to its Latin origins, Bakhtin sees it as a practice whereby the “entire official ideology and ritual are here shown in their comic aspect. Laughter penetrates the highest forms of religious cult and thought”.<sup>17</sup> it is “directed at the whole world, at history, at all societies, at ideology. It [is] the world’s second truth” playing “with all that is most sacred and important from the point of view of official ideology”.<sup>18</sup> Parody itself is a kind of “double-voiced word” in which an utterance introduces “a semantic intention that is directly opposed to the original one”:<sup>19</sup> therefore, it is an utterance which is “designed to be interpreted as the expression of two speakers [...]. The audience of a double-voiced word is therefore meant to hear both a version of the original utterance as the embodiment of its speaker’s point of view [...] *and* the second speaker’s evaluation of that utterance from a different point of view”; in this conflict of voices, one is supposed to have “higher semantic authority” and the audience “knows for sure with whom it is expected to agree”.<sup>20</sup> Morson also remarks that parody historicizes, revealing “the relation of the text to the compromising and conditionalizing context of the utterance [...] parody is most readily invited by an utterance that claims transhistorical authority [...] and in so doing, it exposes the conditions that engendered claims of unconditionality”:<sup>21</sup> which seems to be precisely the point with this play. Rose also traces and summarizes the evolution of concepts of parody, from the ancient “comic imitation and transformation of an epic verse work” to

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<sup>17</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, cit., p. 84.

<sup>19</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, cit., p. 193.

<sup>20</sup> Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson (eds.), *Rethinking Bakhtin. Extensions and Challenges*, Evanston (Ill.): Northwestern University Press, 1989, pp. 65, 67.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78. For a wider discussion of parody, see *ibid.*, Part One/A, pp. 62-103.

more modern usages that also “reflect in comic or ironic fashion on the possibilities and limits of fiction from within a fictional frame”.<sup>22</sup>

Without totally reaching this meta-dramatic extreme (which will be exposed more radically in Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* and in Pirandello’s works), *Arms and the Man* in its very title sets a parodic tone, in the Bakhtinian sense of comic questioning and debunking, towards “high” literary tradition by echoing the first words of Virgil’s *Aeneid* as translated by John Dryden,<sup>23</sup> and in the sub-title “An Anti-Romantic Comedy”, immediately indicating the dual target of the celebration of the soldier-hero by the epic tradition, and the Romantic literary stock-properties. The well-known first line of Dryden’s version, as well as Virgil’s original, give the word “Arms” a weight that indicates the importance of the role of war in conjunction to and in definition of the concept of “Man”; in fact, the mission of this particular man is to fight his way to the foundation of a new civilization, born from the courage, strength and virtue of a *miles gloriosus*, whose very last action in the poem is the soldierly one of raising his arm to kill the enemy. The poem “sings”, celebrates these heroic “labours” and the final accomplishment of the hero’s fate, with the re-creation of a new Troy in the town of Rome, the re-establishment of the royal dynasty, and the restoration of the divinities. All this well-known heroic matter would certainly be evoked by the famous first line of the poem, and all the more so as being in Dryden’s version which became extremely popular, praised by Johnson and Pope as the highest achievement of the English poetic language in translation; therefore the title of the play creates a set of expectations and literary reverberations that will be promptly disappointed, predominantly in the first act.

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<sup>22</sup> Margaret A. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-Modern*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 280-281.

<sup>23</sup> For a closer study of the connections between the two works, see Calvin T. Higgs, Jr., “Shaw’s Use of Vergil’s *Aeneid* in *Arms and the Man*”, *Shaw Review*, 1976, 19: 2-16.

The play, set during the war between Bulgarians and Serbs, starts by staging a soldier, Bluntschli, who indeed appears largely as a carnivalesque reversal of the traditional *miles gloriosus*, and who, at the beginning at least, cuts a poor figure, counterpoints every feature of his literary antecedents, and parodies their solemn conclusions. The appearance in the dark, which builds up a suspenseful tension, a sort of gothic “villain” threatening the damsel, un-dramatically unveils a “man” of an overall “hopelessly prosaic” and “undistinguished” appearance (I, p.8), “in a deplorable plight”, his military uniform in disgracefully “torn ruins”: a sharp anticlimax to the exceptional “Man” of the title. Incidentally, he remains nameless throughout the whole first act, and when he is finally named as the rather cacophonous Bluntschli, it is largely to the disgrace of his role, “blunt” being a far from flattering attribute for the traditional bearer of a sword; even the “soldierlike carriage” is bound to collapse within a few lines from his appearance and revealed as fake (“drops the manner he has been assuming to intimidate Raina” – p.10). His desire not to get killed “if [he] can help it” stands in marked contrast to the canonical heroic attitude of defiance of suffering and death; and the stunning – to Raina – affirmation that all soldiers are afraid to die reinforces the lowering of the soldier status to the level of common men. Shaw himself remarked, on the responses to this play, that “nothing could convey a more sickening sense of abandoned pusillanimity [...] than the ignoble spectacle of a soldier dodging a bullet”:<sup>24</sup> which shows his awareness of having offended the widely accepted image of the brave soldier. His following move is again an unheroic relinquishing of his revolver, substituted by the much more humble and “un-chivalrous” cloak (p.9), an action that virtually undoes the title: the hopelessly lower-case “man” drops his “arms”, the weapon being in the epic literary tradition the hero’s inseparable companion and

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<sup>24</sup> G. B. Shaw, “A Dramatic Realist to His Critics”, cit., p. 26.

defining feature.<sup>25</sup> Finally, Bluntschli lets his fear show in degrading terms (“I’m as nervous as a mouse” – p.14), he is indecorously pulled and pushed by Raina, he is on the point of crying and even disgracefully falls asleep at the close of the scene, after receiving from Raina the extremely un-heroic epithet of “chocolate cream soldier”.<sup>26</sup> The whole gives the carnivalesque effect of a grotesque lowering of the image of the ideal soldier to a more material reality, an aspect that is further supported by Bluntschli’s craving for food, another carnivalesque element that brings him down from the ethereal literary figure to a very corporeal level.

The other “hero” of the play, the brave officer Sergius and Raina’s betrothed, at first stands out as the opposite of the miserable Bluntschli, the veritable *miles gloriosus* who is reported by Raina’s mother Catherine to be the main agent in the Bulgarian victory at the battle of Slivnitsa, “the hero of the hour, the idol of the regiment” (I, p.4), defying the commanders and acting on the spur of his own courage, eyes flashing, fearlessly brandishing his sword and successfully leading a cavalry charge. However, Raina expresses her fear that “all his heroic qualities and his soldiership might not prove mere imagination when he went into a real battle” (p.5), and what in Catherine’s words is fearlessness, in Bluntschli’s other side of the story is reduced to mere youthful rashness, and Sergius’s heroic action gets reversed as the most unprofessional and

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<sup>25</sup> See for example the Arthurian legends like *The Sword in the Stone*, where the sword is the very means for the identification of Arthur as the worthiest to become the soldier-king, and it even has its own proper name, Excalibur; or similarly the Roland cycle where every knight’s sword has a name (Roland’s Durendal, Charlemagne’s Joyeuse, Baligant’s Précieuse), and Roland exhausts his last energies in trying to break his, so that it doesn’t fall into undeserving hands; or again Aeneas’s getting his arms made by the god Vulcan to prepare him to the great war to win the Italian territory.

<sup>26</sup> “When she taunts him as being only a ‘chocolate cream soldier’, Raina defines a new term for a soldier, one who is more interested in his own survival than in heroism”: Anne K. Kaler, “Conventions of Chocolate as Weapons of War and Peace in Shaw’s *Arms and the Man*, Straus’s *The Chocolate Soldier* and in the MGM Film Version, *The Chocolate Soldier*”, in Alex Szogyi (ed.), *Chocolate. Food of the Gods*, Westport (Conn.) & London: Greenwood Press, 1997, pp. 47-58, p. 48.



ignorant act in the war, equal to suicide, and calling for court-martialling. Furthermore, the supposed hero gets caricatured as grotesquely “shouting his war-cry and charging like Don Quixote at the windmills” (I, p.15 – not a random comparison, given the latter character’s own delusional engrossment in epic literature and romance), clownishly “flourishing like a drum major”, only exciting the adversaries’ laughter, and being successful by sheer mistake while “thinking he’d done the cleverest thing ever known”. In the ironic stage direction describing his first appearance on stage, he pointedly comes across as the caricatured quintessence of the Byronic hero, and is even explicitly associated to Childe Harold; and surely, the mock epic of *Don Juan* must have appeared as a rather obvious precedent to this ambivalent sort of heroism: as Kelsall comments on Don Juan in the siege of Ismail (Canto VII), “[b]ecause he has the ‘generous’ breeding of the old gentry of Spain, he shows the heroic characteristics expected of his class. He is brave in battle and chivalrous to women”, but in the battle the “patrician hero is no more than an elegantly decorated cork borne along helplessly in the tide of events [...] The man who destroys Ismail is the vulgar Suvarov, an effective professional soldier.”<sup>27</sup> Finally Sergius, quite un-heroically by his own admission, survives, failing to rise up to the best epic tradition reaching back to the glorious voluntary Trojan deaths.

Epic tradition is not the only target of the text: a more extensive parody is carried out towards the “Romantic” literary canon hinted at in the sub-title, and partly bound up with the heroic canon (a fusion of the two had already been consecrated by medieval romances, like Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*). If Shaw himself declared his “view of romance as the great heresy to be swept off from art and life” (Preface, p.xiii),

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<sup>27</sup> Malcom Kelsall, *Byron’s Politics*, Sussex: The Harvester Press, and New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1987, p. 164.

the play is a very deliberate counterpointing and ridiculing of what can be generally subsumed under the definition of Romantic ideals, a whole (mis)representation of life which is “brought down” and exposed as mystifying, illusory, and deceitful, mainly through the characters of Raina and Sergius.

The first germ of doubt is instilled at the very beginning by the romantic heroine herself, Raina who, after the news of the victorious battle, seems surprised that their “ideas were real after all” (I, p.5), and whose following dialogue is a continued semantic variation on “imagination”, “ideas”, “heroic ideals”, “dreams”, “disillusion”. as opposed to “real life”. This initial doubt seems to be dispelled, and her beloved heroic officer Sergius is reported to appear “just as splendid and noble as he looks”, but this is only the first of a series of reversals in terms of what seems to be real. What puts these (Romantic) ideals in a ridiculous light is the fact that Raina and Sergius, and Catherine as well, do not possess them innately, or absorb them from within a whole culture, but, with a *reductio ad absurdum*, “because we are so fond of reading Byron and Pushkin, and because we were so delighted with the opera that season” (p.5); that is, a reduced second-hand set of “ideals”, derived from identification with a few literary examples of poetry and melodrama<sup>28</sup> (the year on the stage is 1885, a period when such melodramatic and sentimentalising operas as Bellini’s and Donizetti’s, besides Verdi’s and Wagner’s, were still the rage all over Europe<sup>29</sup>). The presence of “paper backed novels” in the initial stage direction, significantly next to Sergius’s portrait, leads to

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<sup>28</sup> For Martin Meisel, Shaw uses “direct operatic allusion, because of the arch-romantic associations of opera, as part of his attack on romantic sentiment [...] opera is put on a level with Byron and Pushkin as a source of romantic ideals”: *Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Theater*, Westport (Conn.): Greenwood Press, 1976, p. 46.

<sup>29</sup> Gerald Abraham (ed.), *The New Oxford History of Music. Romanticism (1830-1890)*, vol. ix, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, Parts III, V, VI. M. Baroni *et al.*, *Storia della musica*, Torino: Einaudi, 1988, chapters ix, x.

Raina “abandoning herself to fiction” (p.7) after the news of Sergius’s victory and the contemplation of “blessed reality”, and culminates in Bluntschli’s ironic depiction of Sergius fighting “like an operatic tenor” (I, p.15), thus repeatedly keeping Romantic literature and opera in sight as the all-encompassing, and therefore at the same time ridiculed, dated source of values and life-pattern for the two lovers.<sup>30</sup>

Raina’s posing as Romantic heroine is part of the picture: she is first seen on the balcony in the moonlight, and the initial stage direction describes her in what appears as an ironically simplified compendium of the canon, “intensely conscious of the romantic beauty of the night, and of the fact that her own youth and beauty are part of it” (I, p.3), a rather pointedly comical and sceptical rendering of romantic self-consciousness. Her behaviour is a constant display of “powerful feelings”: she is either “ecstatically” lost in her reveries, or she moves about and expresses herself “eagerly”, “rapturously”, with extreme “enthusiasm”; the account of Sergius’s victory sends her into exclamatory raptures, and the confrontation with the shabby Swiss soldier gives her the opportunity to show the full range of her passionate ideals and noble sentiments, together with a most appropriate heroic and haughty contempt towards danger and her opponent (an attitude incidentally paralleled by Catherine in Act II, where she expects heroism from her husband, and not the shameful striking of a peace treaty). The posing reaches a pitch of artificiality when, at the news of Sergius’s arrival in the house, she makes a melodramatic entrance, suddenly and effectively appearing at the top of the stairs,

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<sup>30</sup> On this intermingling of life and poetry, Walter Scott had significantly commented on Byron’s own personal image as being indistinguishable from his poetic persona, writing “that the poet had ‘Childe Harolded himself, and outlawed himself, into too great a resemblance with the pictures of his imagination’, suggesting that the public saw Byron’s writing as having *written him*, the poetry anticipating and dictating the life of the poet”: see Frances Wilson (ed.), *Byromania. Portraits of the artist in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Culture*, London: MacMillan, and New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999, p. 10.

announcing herself in the third person, making “a charming picture” and “posing regally”, a perfect moment that is disturbed by her father’s somewhat detached response to the whole scene, “Pretty, isn’t it? She always appears at the right moment”, and finally anticlimaxes at her mother’s comment that “she listens for it. It is an abominable habit” (II, p.29); a hint of the customary artificiality of Raina’s behaviour which is finally exposed by Bluntschli’s dismissive remark: “When you strike that noble attitude and speak in that thrilling voice, I admire you; but I find it impossible to believe a single word you say” (III, p.50). Raina then cannot but physically “step down” from her pedestal (she physically drops down sitting next to him and speaking with “babyish familiarity”) and flatly admit to having always deliberately acted this part, thus effecting a strong “uncrowning” of her initial “sublime” image.

The Romantic heroine of course has her male counterpart in Sergius, the brave major (rather than a plain soldier) who is first seen through his fetish-like photograph, which Raina embraces and kisses adoringly, as an “extremely handsome” man of “lofty bearing and magnetic glance” (I, p.3), the traditional fascinating hero who, when he first comes on stage (the conventional epic moment of the homecoming), is explicitly connected to the Byronic canon by a stage direction which lumps in a series of conventional manly attributes (“tall, romantically handsome”, “hardihood” and “high spirit”, “susceptible imagination”, “untamed”, “jealously observant eye”, “pugnacious”, “assertive chin” – II, p.27), and winds up with another compendium of Romantic attitudinising explicitly described as “Byronism”. The parodic tone implied in this wholesale reduction is only an extra hint for the sole benefit of the reader, but it is further displayed in Sergius’s solemn behaviour on stage, the “conscious dignity” that accompanies each of his movements, the emphatic tone of his speeches, his grave considerations on the grim reality of war in contrast to his noble aspirations, the insistent folding of his arms that should signify his resoluteness of character in the face

of adversity; the whole being mockingly summed up by Bluntschli as “these heroics of yours”. The picture is complete when he meets his betrothed Raina, with his adoring and chivalrous attitude towards her, in compliance with the canon of romance (“I have gone through the war like a knight in a tournament with his lady looking down on him” – II, p.32) and very appropriately leading to an exchange of reciprocally worshipping appellatives (“My hero! My king!” – “My queen!” [...] “My lady and my saint!” – “My lord and my...”), the meeting being temporarily concluded by a regular emotional “parting of the lovers” full of kisses and of “the loftiest exaltation”, only to break down into Sergius’s confession to the maid Louka that this Romantic “higher love” is indeed a “very fatiguing thing to keep up for any length of time” (p.33).

This admission of the artificiality of romantic discourse, and the negotiation between the heroic and the non-heroic, then, appear as more than just a caricature – which would not entail a total rejection of such conventions – and more than simple parody as the unambiguous statement of an “opposing point of view”, but rather as a more complex and ambivalent carnivalization, where accepted images and codes of behaviour are comically debunked in their assumption of universal solidity and veracity, and not resolved in another, equally rigid alternative, but rather subverted to proclaim a liberation from stale conventionality; and this seems to invest all the other aspects of the play.

### **3. War and nationality**

Another convention to be overturned is the idea of war which, in the commonplace simplification of Romantic idealising discourse debunked by this play, appears as the heroic fight, made of individual acts of valour, for national independence and glory. Sergius’s *alter ego* Byron himself, like other writers of the period, took active part in the struggles for national independence that were troubling Europe at the

time, being a member of the Carbonari in Italy and supplying them with material help and advice, and then joining in the Greek struggle against the Turks; these activities gained him fame as a “proper” hero in partial opposition to some of his mock-heroic poetic creations. Contemporary melodrama as well, repeatedly mentioned in the play, stages war as the hero’s supreme mission, and also celebrates it as a choral achievement that grants freedom, collective dignity and pride:<sup>31</sup> Raina praises Verdi’s *Ernani*, for example, and 1871 had seen the début of the heroic *grand-opéra Aida*; Verdi’s works bore a close connection to the Italian patriotic movement of Risorgimento, with their librettos appearing as “appeals to liberty, and exhortation against tyranny”;<sup>32</sup> and the rise of nationalism in music was most visible in German opera, culminating with Wagner’s major works between the 1840s and 1880s.<sup>33</sup> Meisel supports this idea, observing that *Arms and the Man*’s point of departure was “particularly Military Melodrama. The conventions of heroism in melodrama (Shaw inveighed against their catastrophic potential twenty years before the World War) presented an idyllic picture of war in which all wounds were chest-high and the brave acquired the fair”.<sup>34</sup>

Catherine’s enthusiastic account of the cavalry charge is in this line: she tells of the lion-hearted officer defying his commanders and bravely heading towards the guns followed by the “gallant splendid Bulgarians with their swords and eyes flashing, thundering down like an avalanche and scattering the wretched Serbs and their dandified Austrian officers like chaff” (I, p.4); although she at the same time wishes,

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<sup>31</sup> Even in countries that had not been producing it before, opera “played a leading part in the growth of musical nationalism, as the use of characteristic national subjects, often from patriotic motives, stimulated composers to seek an equally characteristic national expression in their music”: Donald J. Grout, *A Short History of Opera*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, p. 529. See also Stanley Sadie (ed.), *History of Opera*, London: MacMillan, 1989, Part III.

<sup>32</sup> D. J. Grout, *op. cit.*, p. 420; and in general Part IV.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, Part IV, ch. 22, and Part V.

<sup>34</sup> M. Meisel, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

quite incoherently, that her people “were not so cruel” (p.9) in their victory, thus already implying a flip-side to that ideal image. Hers is a reported epic depiction of irresistible strength and glorious military action that blatantly clashes with Bluntschli’s eyewitness version and is brought down to a pathetic “slinging of peas against a window pane”, with the soldiers pitifully pulling at their horses in order not to be the first to get killed, since “they know that theyre mere projectiles, and that it’s no use trying to fight” (I, p.15), in a complete reversal of the supposed onslaught for the sake of the country. Another side-thrust at the supposedly rigid and organized discipline of the military image is offered by the fact that the Bulgarians only win because the Serb opponents end up with the wrong ammunition, with the effect of further ridicule; and a complete reversal of the canon of military strategy<sup>35</sup> is accomplished by Sergius’s own desolate admission that he “won the battle the wrong way” instead of “losing it the right way”, and that he did not get promoted because he neither got his regiment “routed on the most correct principles of scientific warfare”, nor got himself “killed strictly according to military etiquette” (II, p.28). Ironically, since he started out as the indomitable hero, he ends up expressing the same commonsensical wisdom as the down-to-earth Bluntschli as regards war: he gives out the disillusioned aphorism that war “is the coward’s art of attacking mercilessly when you are strong, and keeping out of harm’s way when you are weak” (II, p.29). Ironically, Kelsall writes on Byron’s own experience of the war that

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<sup>35</sup> Contemporary military strategists, like Jomini (*Traité des grandes opérations militaires; Précis de l’art de la guerre*) and Clausewitz (*On War*), recommended the economy of forces brought to bear on single ascertained weak points in the adversary’s deployment, the simultaneity and unity of attack among the parts of the army, the importance of strategic defence and prudent action rather than the attack at all costs, strict discipline and subordination. See for example E. M. Earle, *Makers of Modern Strategy*, New York: Atheneum, 1966, chapters 4 and 5.

For the nineteenth-century liberal and nationalist, Byron, by the splendour of his personal sacrifice, had given the sincerest testimony to the libertarian sentiments so often uttered in his verse [... but he] did not have the practical experience [...] The battlefields of Europe are littered with the bodies of those who believed that generous birth qualifies the rich to lead armies. But Byron never came under fire, and the Carbonari were snuffed out by professional soldiers in a twinkling [...] Byron's political education, therefore, is not in revolution, but in disenchantment. It is a process of learning the hard way.<sup>36</sup>

To Sergius it is a steep fall from the heights of military skill and glory that compares to Bluntschli upholding the prudence of the old and experienced soldier avoiding rash suicide, and disgracefully loading his revolver with chocolate instead of bullets – a fact that reduces him to the status of a schoolboy in Raina's eyes, and is both a mockery of the importance of weapons and the healthy expression of the “material bodily principle”, the “grotesque realism”<sup>37</sup> of the “low” instinct for food and survival which goes undeclared in the lofty discourse of glorious war. This, after all, is, in Sergius's words, only a “dream of patriots and heroes! A fraud [...]. A hollow sham, like love” (III, p.60), and suddenly Bluntschli, with his earthly slyness and resourcefulness in avoiding bloodshed and death, a sort of carnivalesque Ulysses, and his straight, “blunt” talking (another implication of his name), eventually appears more of a soldier in practical terms than the erratic Sergius.

The mockery of the patriotic spirit of war entails the discourse of national pride supported by some of the characters: Catherine is the first to burst out in patriotic praise of the battle of Slivnitza which shows the valour and honour of the “gallant splendid Bulgarians” as opposed to the “wretched Serbs” and the “dandified Austrian officers”(I, p.4), a confrontation which once again supports the image of the distinguished and virile

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<sup>36</sup> M. Kelsall, *Byron's Politics*, cit., pp. 1-2, 117.

<sup>37</sup> “The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract: it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body”: M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 19.



strength of the epic hero, but which is somehow soon blurred by the fact that the Austrians become in Catherine's words a few moments later "just as clever as the Russians". Then she appeals to Raina's "Bulgarian blood" as a spur to her devotion to Sergius, patriotic sentiment being apparently the perfect coronation to this idyllic love. On her part, in her meeting with Bluntschli, Raina sets out proclaiming her own devotion to the national cause, pestering him with political reprimands: "you are one of the Austrians who set the Serbs on to rob us of our national liberty, and who officer their army for them. We hate them!" (I, p.12); but this patriotic rant is immediately deflated by Bluntschli revealing that he comes from the eminently neutral state of Switzerland, and that he is a professional soldier, therefore himself totally uninvolved in the nationalistic drive of the war. This also puts in a ridiculous light the previous excited hunt for the hated Serb, and the lack of condemnation of the mercenary soldier implicit in Bluntschli's ultimately positive figure also seems to undermine the patriotic propaganda for war; this proud Serbs-Bulgarians opposition is finally un-patriotically played down by the prosaic striking of the peace and the actual cooperation of the two armies, whereas for the nationalistic Catherine it should have culminated in a pugnacious annexation of Serbia.

The counterpointing of Raina and Bluntschli constantly carries out a pattern of inflation and deflation of patriotic impetus mingled with family honour: from her solemnly declaring that he is her enemy and at her mercy, to her offering to check the balcony for him to escape safely, thus immediately downplaying her national pride; from her boasting of her dynasty, the "Petkoffs", as the most important in the country (Catherine doubles her at this, self-importantly claiming their "almost historical" position which turns out to be a modest "twenty years" – p.69) to his silly and degrading misunderstanding ("A pet what?" – I, p.18) and the mockery implied in his unsuccessful attempt at pretending to be impressed. The same reaction follows Raina's proud stating

that her father holds “the highest command of any Bulgarian” (he in fact will turn out to be a quite “insignificant, unpolished”, “unambitious” man – p.24), that their house has actually got a flight of stairs, and even a library, “the only one in Bulgaria” (a thing even her father Petkoff cannot refrain from flaunting, and which turns out to be just “a single fixed shelf” – III, p.44), and that they are civilized people since they “go to Bucharest every year for the opera season” and “wash their hands nearly every day” (I, pp.19-20).

This show-off of “European” refinements is also in itself a carnivalesque aspect, since it is rather a grotesque aping of fashionable manners than genuine finesse (the decoration of the house also is “half rich Bulgarian, half cheap Viennese” – p.3), and one that is supposed to enhance the national status but quite inconsistently looks up to a foreign model, Austria, and that being in fact the country’s very enemy.<sup>38</sup> Even the Bulgarians’ fight for the nation, Petkoff confesses, would not have been possible without the foreigners teaching them, to the inglorious extent that “there’d have been no war without them!” (II, p.30).

#### **4. Roles of gender and power**

This carnivalesque subversion of current ideology through parody also touches on the definition of male and female positions in society, and on issues of power, both fairly debated topics at the time. Well into the Victorian period when the play is set, and performed in London (therefore having England as its immediate context), the dominant late nineteenth-century view of woman, famously emblemized in Patmore’s poem

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<sup>38</sup> There is no space in this thesis to expand on this wide subject, but I will briefly remark that this issue of a nation “aping” its very enemy, and the mixture of national pride and failed patriotic assertiveness may also have struck a sympathetic chord in the topical debate on the relationship between England and Ireland, the latter being alluded to in the provincial and backward status of Bulgaria, succumbing under borrowed or cramping ideals.

“The Angel of the House” (1854-62),<sup>39</sup> was as the admiring spectator of man’s courage, passively waiting at home for the return of the man, remaining virtuous and making sure the house is a comfortable nest providing family cosiness and safety. Oxford divinity professor John Burgon had preached in 1884 that “[h]ome is clearly Woman’s intended place [...]. And it is in the sweet sanctities of domestic life, – in home duties – in whatever belongs to and makes the happiness of *Home*, that Woman is taught by the SPIRIT to find scope for her activity”.<sup>40</sup> As Burstyn observes, “[m]en were prepared to be chivalrous to women when they had no rights of their own and no remedies against men’s mistreatment. Men, it was argued, had to protect women because of their essential physical weakness. And yet women had the strength of a pure conscience. Unlike men, they did not have to compromise their ideals each day by turning them into reality”.<sup>41</sup> On the English throne as well, was a woman who in the early stages of her reign had represented to her contemporaries the quintessence of wifely devotion to the husband: in “her reliance on Albert, [...] presented herself through a scrim of domestic virtues emphasizing home, hearth, and heart”, and whose “ascension to the throne in 1837 confirmed the emergence of a new ethic of restraint, probity, and decency”.<sup>42</sup>

However, Queen Victoria was also a powerful and resolute ruler, a paradox that bewildered contemporary responses to her public image; and her period was also

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<sup>39</sup> The four-part poem was an immense success and “sold a quarter of a million copies before Patmore’s death in 1896”: Vanessa D. Dickerson (ed.), *Keeping the Victorian House. A Collection of Essays*, New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1995, p. xiv.

<sup>40</sup> John W. Burgon, *To Educate Young Women Like Young Men, – A Thing Inexpedient and Immodest. A Sermon*, Oxford: 1884, p. 17, his italics and emphasis.

<sup>41</sup> Joan N. Burstyn, *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood*, Totowa (N.J.): Barnes & Noble Books, 1980, p. 31.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody’s Angels. Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995, pp. 63-64.

witnessing the development of the feminist movement,<sup>43</sup> especially in England where such essays as Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* and John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* had earlier appeared, and the first women's discussion clubs and associations had begun to spread, where Shaw himself, sympathetic towards the issue of the independent woman, was invited as a speaker:<sup>44</sup> women, it seemed, were beginning to wish to step over into men's spheres like higher education, the professions, the franchise.

This gradual questioning of Victorian values at the end of the nineteenth century seems to be enacted in *Arms and the Man* with its carnivalesque reversal of the traditionally accepted opposition male/female, in the three couples Raina-Bluntschli, Louka-Sergius, and Catherine-Petkoff. Raina, the main female character, appears to conform to her traditional – and Romantic – role, waiting for and dreaming about her heroic lover, rejoicing in his victory, reverently adoring his image, and preparing herself to welcome him back home with due affection and devotion. But all this lovely and reassuring – though emphatic – picture is turned upside down by the arrival of Bluntschli, which, if it is the occasion for a display of Raina's best romantic qualities, also lets out, despite herself, her other antithetic features. She confronts him with a brave attitude that, if part of the heroic canon, reveals her as more manly than him, and makes her take the initiative in the action, hiding him behind a curtain, shushing him and skilfully acting the innocent in a way that does not quite conform with the conventional idea of the virtuous woman; on his part, the supposed "man" soon loses his virile manner and turns peevish, fearful, tearful and weak. As her opinion of him

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<sup>43</sup> See Philippa Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England. Private Roles and Public Commitment*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990; and her *Victorian Feminism. 1850-1900*, Gainesville (FL): University Press of Florida, 1994.

<sup>44</sup> See for example S. Peters, "Shaw's life: a feminist in spite of himself", in C. Innes (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 3–24.

sinks lower and lower, she gradually discards her conventionally feminine attitude of “damsel in distress” and starts behaving in a patronizing manner that puts her in an unusual position of superiority towards a man: “though I am only a woman, I think I am at heart as brave as you” (I, p.13), she consciously says. Although this notion is derived from a misconceived idea of war and heroism, she nonetheless displays her womanly strength, does not faint away in a display of feminine delicacy, comforts the man who is about to cry, pulls him vigorously about the room, and wants to behave in a “soldierly” way by trying to “save” him, in what appears as a complete exchange of places between the man and the woman.

Another woman, the maid Louka, in her turn upholds her womanly right to decisions and independence. Her foil and eventual better half is the brave Sergius, whom she quite skilfully manages from beginning to end. She at first behaves prudishly according to the contemporary canons of female morality, but then cleverly uses her femininity to vindicate her dignity with respect to Sergius: she wants to be kissed on her arm where he has exerted his manly strength and ends up having a bracelet; she resists the mature servant Nicola’s advice on appropriate behaviour and his attempts at moulding her character, and wants to choose her own way; and she fights for her love against her rival Raina without the conventional false modesty and reserve around women’s feelings (“My love was at stake. I am not ashamed” – III, p.63). She is not subdued by Sergius’s self-importance and supposed heroism, but rather calls it into question and deflates it (“Men never seem to grow up: they all have schoolboy’s ideas. You dont know what true courage is” – III, p.56); she is the *ante litteram* feminist who refuses his male-chauvinistic courtship (Sergius: “you belong to me” – Louka: “What does that mean? An insult?” – III, p.58), and wants to have him on her own terms, that is conserving her dignity and womanly pride and power – which she will manage, since the never-apologizing/never-compromising Sergius will eventually capitulate and ask

for her forgiveness.

Louka's attitude is also indicative of what can be read as another carnivalesque reversal of conventional roles in the play, those connected with the possession of power.<sup>45</sup> Contemporary books and pamphlets on etiquette and housekeeping emphasized the absolute need for "an attitude of obedience and subservience" in servants, who were "required to acknowledge and 'perform' their inferior status";<sup>46</sup> Louka flouts these rules in a way that goes beyond the traditional comic figure of the insolent servant, who usually manipulates situations but does not fundamentally challenge the *status quo*. She is seen from the outset as a "proud", "defiant" and "insolent" girl who dares to push it to the limit, especially with Raina; the opening of Act II puts her defiance in quite a prominent position, smoking and immediately asserting her self-awareness: "I do defy her. I will defy her. What do I care for her?" (p.22). Though she seems to acknowledge that she is "only Miss Raina's maid", she actually feels that she is "worth six of her" (pp.34-35), and she keeps on throwing her position in Sergius's face only to vindicate her sense of her own personal dignity despite it. She values her own worth and will not condescend to humiliate herself just because that is the behaviour expected of a servant; to Nicola, who patronizingly recommends this latter attitude implying acceptance of the established class-structure, she scornfully replies in a crescendo of "You have no spirit", "You have the soul of a servant", "You'll never put the soul of a servant into me" (pp.23-24). In fact, she refuses

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<sup>45</sup> In carnival "what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it": M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, cit., p. 123.

<sup>46</sup> E. Langland, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

to “know her own place”, breaks the dress code<sup>47</sup> by wearing “a broad gilt bracelet” (p.52), daringly fantasizes with Sergius on her being the Empress of Russia and choosing her man regardless of status (p.57). Unlike the typical insolent servant in the comic tradition, her subversive attitude and role in the play have a less harmless and simplistic, but rather deeper value, as in the end she will materially upset the social hierarchy and etiquette by winning the aristocratic young man, who significantly stoops to her in the final scene.

Even the other servant, Nicola, for all his common sense recommendations about “knowing one’s place”, has aspirations beyond his position: he wants to enter the middle class by opening a shop, thus defying the water-tight social distinctions; but he chooses to do so by means of a covert manipulation of such an established structure: he exploits his position to gain an advantage over his employers, his not revealing all their secrets being the way to win their rewarding gratitude and finally break free from their supremacy.

The other two couples, Raina and Bluntschli, and Catherine and Petkoff, in addition to the duality man/woman, also enact the closely connected one of power in terms of civilian vs soldier, and wife vs husband. As already shown above, Raina and Bluntschli virtually exchange places: his pathetic attempts at soldierly behaviour (“If they find me, I promise you a fight: a devil of a fight” – p.10; “I must do something” – p.17) are immediately frustrated, both by his lack of strength and warlike spirit, and by Raina’s martial behaviour and reproaches to him; she mocks the soldier, and becomes herself the military person he is too tired to be, somehow breaking into the military hierarchy in what is for the period a remarkable inversion of positions of power.

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<sup>47</sup> “*Dress as becomes your station [...] dressing clean and neat, but in a style very inferior to that of your mistress*”: H. G. Watkins, *Friendly Hints to Female Servants*, his italics; as quoted in E. Langland, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-39.

Women had in fact always been admitted to travel in the train behind the battalions, but their only role was the subordinate one of nursing and cooking, and only in extreme situations had there been episodes of women actually taking up arms;<sup>48</sup> in the mid-Victorian period “domestic and welfare ideology” had rendered the army more efficient as well as “more male. Some of the women who had previously moved in and out of the military environment now found themselves permanently excluded [...]. The mid-Victorian period saw a narrowing down [...] to a concentration on their sexual and family services”;<sup>49</sup> and the difficulties of getting permission to marry were just another proof of the inherited idea of supremacy of the role of soldier on the woman.

In opposition to this conventional situation – which was being questioned at the time by the emerging feminists – Raina’s mother Catherine, who also refuses the passive feminine role, virtually becomes the husband and the soldier. She welcomes Petkoff back home from the war with a devoted stooping to kiss him, in a way reminiscent of a dame bowing in front of her lord (“My queen was crouching at my side, / By love unsceptred and brought low”<sup>50</sup>), but the picture is once again destroyed by her immediately springing energetically up at the disgraceful news of the peace, while her husband turns submissive. She too behaves patronizingly towards him, dismissing his attempts at advice, directs him here and there and even wants to take part with him in arranging the regiments; she silences him, takes up a bet against him, and mocks him and his perceptions by producing the coat that he was sure was not in the house; her superiority over him climaxes when he quite self-consciously asks her to

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<sup>48</sup> See for example Byron Farwell, *Queen Victoria’s Little Wars*, Ware (Herts.): Wordsworth Editions, 1999, pp. 79-81.

<sup>49</sup> Myna Trustram, *Women of the Regiment. Marriage and the Victorian Army*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> Coventry Patmore, *The Angel of the House*, ed. by Ian Anstruther, London: Haggerston Press with Boston College, 1998, 1:181.



come along to give orders to the messengers, since “theyll be far more frightened of you than of me” (III, p.47). She clearly reverses the traditional pattern of wifely subordination, and is both the lady and the lord of the house, deliberately making use of her strength, and having the control of her own life and her husband’s as well.

All this confusing *bouleversement* of social and gender hierarchies also seems to mirror what is a contiguous aspect of the carnivalesque, the creation of “*a new mode of interrelationship between individuals*” characterized by “*eccentricity*” and a “free and familiar attitude”, a series of *mésalliances* whereby “[a]ll things [...] distanced from one another by a noncarnivalistic hierarchical worldview are drawn into carnivalistic contacts and combinations [...] the lofty with the low [...] the wise with the stupid”.<sup>51</sup> The strong Catherine has married and dominates the submissive and unplausibly-Major Petkoff; the proud and straight-talking servant Louka is united with the peevish, double-dealing aristocratic Sergius, while the professed romantic, refined, noble Bulgarian young woman, Raina, winds up with the frank, plain, middle-class Swiss “chocolate cream soldier”.

## 5. Role-playing

Carnival celebrates the freedom from fixed roles, “the renewal of clothes and of the social image” through masks and disguises,<sup>52</sup> and it “does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators [...] and everyone participates”.<sup>53</sup> Purinton reads a similar kind of critique of social roles in some romantic plays by Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley:

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<sup>51</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, cit., p. 123, his italics.

<sup>52</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., pp. 81, 39; see also *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, cit., p. 130.

<sup>53</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 7.

The theatrical character of social hierarchies [...] and political institutions [...] were themes in the political polemics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The fictive constitution of 'roles' – sexual, familial, political – was an explicit *topos* in political rhetoric. When the period's discursive practices are removed from the status of 'background' and are understood as the determining presences which they were at the time, it appears with great clarity that some of the romantic dramas are symbolic figurations of such roles, and portrayals of their fictive constitution.<sup>54</sup>

These pièces were not much acclaimed by their contemporaries, the dramatic medium perhaps not being very suitable, as has been often argued, to Romantic poetics; but they nonetheless show the perception of a theatricality of social life that will increasingly come to the fore in dramatic production, a side that undoubtedly *Arms and the Man* sets out to display with what is inherent in the concept of carnival, the conscious taking-up of roles and masks. What characterizes this "game" played by all the characters, is that this happens with an on-and-off pattern, thus stressing even more the deliberate posing and ultimate insincerity of the supposedly Romantic figures; this also reverberates on the actual dramatic situation, implying the fundamentally fictive nature of the people on stage and calling into doubt the "sincerity" or ultimate truth of the scene in progress: a mild suggestion that will be brought more openly to the fore in Pirandello's plays.

As already stated, that of the Romantic, virtuous and refined heroine is an attitude deliberately acted out by Raina, quite successfully until Bluntschli's arrival: she keeps it up in front of her parents, the officer, and Sergius, she thinks she does in front of Louka and for a short time with Bluntschli, who is the first one to unmask her. With him, she starts hesitating, in the first act, between her usual lofty behaviour and a more familiar tone which breaks in every now and then, and is physically stressed in the stage directions by her sudden and repeated "drawing herself up" or rising, and by her less

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<sup>54</sup> Marjean D. Purinton, *Romantic Ideology Unmasked. The Mentally Constructed Tyrannies in Dramas of William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and Joanna Baillie*, Newark: University of Delaware Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1994, p. 12.

ceremonious “handling” of the soldier. Another signal of her role-play is when she momentarily exchanges it for another one, the coquette, typical of drawing-room comedy: “putting on her most genteel social manner”, she civilly invites him to sit down, and “walks with studied elegance to the ottoman” (I, p.12) which is immediately thwarted by her jumping up shrieking. The first act witnesses this progressive relenting of the “lofty” mask, to the point that she drops it altogether and virtually eliminates the distance when she comforts him maternally patting his head, and lets him sleep on her bed.

She is back into her role throughout the second act, with her theatrically skilful entrance, and when she plays the dutiful daughter and devoted fiancée with her father and Sergius; but this time her shocked reaction to Sergius’s “coarse story” of worthless women giving shelter to an enemy, which is actually about herself, is patently feigned: confronted with the reality of her behaviour, she retreats back in her adopted disguise. She is almost given away by Louka’s unimpressed comment that “she’s a liar; and her fine airs are a cheat” (II, p.35), is seen romantically lost in “picturesque revery” but suddenly comes wide awake when her practical interests in the shape of an Arab horse are being discussed (III, p.46). She is further shown “in performance” with comedy-of-manners and farce feats, improvising an explanation to her unwitting exclamation “The chocolate cream soldier!” (II, p.41) in front of her father, and when she and Bluntschli deftly manage to extract the picture from Petkoff’s coat pocket behind his back (III, p.64); the whole in order to keep up the role of the virtuous woman in her father’s eyes. If Catherine is seen playing along with Raina to this purpose (Raina immediately relaxes her manner as soon as Sergius leaves the two women alone – II, p.37), and Louka is not deceived by her acting, Bluntschli soon sees through her, although he only reveals it at the beginning of Act III, when her would-be virtuous claim that she cannot deceive Sergius and wants “to be quite perfect” with him (p.48) rings with an

unintended false note and shows her calculated posing. She then finally throws the mask with him (“How did you find me out?” – p.50), but still puts it back with Sergius and Petkoff, who will be the very last ones to discover the disguise in the last moments of vertiginous whirl of unmasking and revelations.

Raina’s engrossment with her own role is such that she cannot see through the same game in Sergius; indeed, they force each other into a vicious circle, to carry on their respective disguises just because of their chosen role. His own acting is somehow hinted at in Blutschli’s description of him during the battle: “[h]e did it like an operatic tenor” (I, p.15), where the comparison with opera evokes the idea of performance – and rather an emphatic one too. This also ties in with West’s comment on Sergius’s “predecessor” Byron, that his “idea of himself” which “enthralled Europe [...] under the heading of Byronism”, consisted of his “peculiar gifts of spectatorship, cliché-combining, and chameleonic impersonation”, and in his “need for emphasis – the need to be vivid and spectacular in his own eyes”.<sup>55</sup> Unlike Raina, he does not try to keep up his main role of perfect lover and soldier all the time, but drops it as soon as she turns her back to him; he admits being happy to be relieved of its weight with Louka, although with her he picks up another mask, that of the seducer, the gallant, only to relapse into the dignified man when she refuses to play along and calls Raina’s bluff: after taking the liberty of flirting with her, he frigidly exclaims “you will please remember that a gentleman does not discuss the conduct of the lady he is engaged to with her maid” (II, p.34); and their dialogue goes on as a back and forth, on his part, between these two “masks”. Like Raina, he is blinded by his own acting and does not perceive hers until well into the third act (“she! whose worst thoughts are higher than

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<sup>55</sup> Paul West (ed). *Byron. A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs (N.J.): Prentice Hall, 1963, pp. 2-3.

your best ones, is capable of trifling with another man behind my back?” – p.57), when he needs to be told to his face by Louka and is quite ready to give up her fiancée, but he is willing to play the heroic virtuous lover again a few moments later, when he challenges Bluntschli to a duel because he is his “rival” in Raina’s love in the chosen role-play. He finally admits that their “romance is shattered. Life’s a farce” (p.61); but even at the end, after he gives up his loftiness and apologizes to Louka, but still stooping “in his grandest manner” (p.67), his “heroics” come usefully back in defending himself from claims on his pledge to Raina, with his fourth solemn folding of his arms, an action that each time (III, pp.56,60,66,67) signals the most thorough assumption of his appointed role.

Petkoff too unexpectedly finds himself “playing” the army Major because of his social position and the ongoing war; Catherine performs the dutiful wife while actually managing her husband; and, as observed above, the servant Nicola as well is deliberately acting himself: he speaks of “knowing one’s place” which implies accepting the role given by society and playing along with it for what it is worth, he gives Louka director-like pieces of advice on how to behave; and we see him twice successfully taking the cue from Catherine and Raina in covering up their manoeuvres in front of Petkoff, appearing a worthy performer of an improvised farce.

This sample of dramatic stock-action is not the only one in the play: Raina’s suddenly playing the drawing-room comedy *femme charmante* has already been touched upon, together with her improvising explanations for her blunders; other moments of conventional comedy such as we would find in Molière’s, Goldoni’s, or Restoration plays, are Raina’s initial hiding of Bluntschli from the officer behind a curtain (I), Catherine scheming ways in and out of the room for Bluntschli to prevent him from meeting her husband (II); Louka being caught red-handed while eavesdropping on the young people (III); Raina and Bluntschli’s contrivances to retrieve

the picture from Petkoff's coat while helping him into it; and the final sudden revelation of the secrets to the unsuspecting senior man of the house.

All these practices of role-play and routine comedy are a strong demonstration of the play enacting its own carnival, a sense of constant performance that never leaves the scene, that exaggerates and mimics dramatic conventions and therefore cannot but reflect on itself meta-dramatically. Sergius's exclamation that "Life's a farce" also applies to the ongoing play, with its patent adoption of romantic and farcical dramatic modes, thus stressing its own status of performance in the carnivalesque sense of "knowing no footlights", including itself as a whole in the "role-play", generating a laughter that is self-addressed and "also directed at those who laugh";<sup>56</sup> and this lack of fictional boundaries cannot but reverberate outside itself, extending the concept of acting to what is supposed to be outside it, the audience, suggesting how everyone wears masks and acts out roles in their daily social intercourse. This aspect will acquire a more problematic dimension in Pirandello's plays, as will be later discussed, whereas here it retains a hold on reality, in the sense that there is indeed a final discovery of a "true" identity of the characters: carnival has run its course and everyone ultimately achieves an established and more or less genuine role.

Incidentally, the opposite seemed to be true of Oscar Wilde's contemporary drama, and a comparison would be interesting in this respect, but owing to the limited space of this thesis, I will just remark that what is in Shaw a game intended to unmask social and political pretensions in the name of a more "realistic" outlook on life and politics, and what will be the tragic essence of life for Pirandello, seems to be in Wilde the happy and carefree welcoming of a permanent masquerade, reverting the idea of hypocrisy back to its original Greek meaning of "acting", and the completely a-moral

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<sup>56</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit, p. 12.

celebration of the carnivalesque nature of identity and social interrelations as masks constantly and happily at play. *The Importance of Being Earnest* for example cursorily hints at this discrepancy between social behaviour and a supposed moral code, but pointedly by-passes the discussion of such issues, jovially playing with artificiality and deceptions that come to constitute the only reality. As Vivian breezily summarizes in “The Decay of Lying”, “[i]n point of fact what is interesting about people in good society [...] is the mask that each one of them wears, not the reality that lies behind that mask”;<sup>57</sup> thus appearing to take the idea of Bakhtinian carnival to its positive but wholly shallow extreme of light-hearted group role-play, without any real indictment or undermining of the current social or political ideology or of any established value.

## **6. Reversals and contradictions**

The carnivalesque idea of relativity and becoming as opposed to the static rigidity of accepted truths is also a part of the play, in terms of the multiple reversals of opinions, definitions, ideas of truth, “versions of the story”, and personal images that are carried out in the text. After establishing a more or less definite character or concept, mainly in the first act, the second and especially the third enact repeated turn-about that leave the characters, and along with them the reader or spectator, temporarily disoriented as to the question of “what is really true”. This process is similarly employed in Pirandello’s *Sei personaggi* where, however, the alternating versions of the “truth” will find no final resolution, but only implement a more radical sense of ambiguity and impossibility of definition.

The most glaringly obvious example here is Bluntschli who appears on the scene

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<sup>57</sup> Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying”, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, London and Glasgow: Collins, 1990, pp. 970-992, p. 975.

as a soldier, only to overturn the image his outfit proclaims, together with the attached ideals: he makes his entrance in the first act as a regular villain but soon becomes soft in Raina's hands; he is dressed as a soldier but does not really like fighting and is not involved with the cause for which he fights; he is thought to be a Serb and turns out to be a Swiss, and his threatening revolver is discovered to contain chocolate. Again, he reveals that army life is really about trying to preserve, not sacrifice, one's own life, undoing all romantic ideals about heroism; finally, he stands out against the evoked image of Sergius as the down-to-earth, commonsensical man who does not meddle with romance. But this is just the first step: interestingly, it is in relation to his opponent Sergius who despises him, that Bluntschli's unsuspected "soldierly" and "heroic" sides come to light, in that Sergius is the one to acknowledge and articulate them most of the time. The first partial reversal of the image of Bluntschli offered in the first act of a simple, weak man only trying to survive, is provided by Sergius who calls him "that bagman of a captain" (II, p.29) who cunningly overreached the Bulgarians in the exchange of prisoners, therefore showing an unexpected commercial shrewdness and entrepreneurship. This not only contrasts with his image of plain, straightforward but altogether pathetic, helpless man, but also surprisingly makes Sergius proclaim him "a soldier: every inch a soldier", "a consummate soldier", and a "bourgeois" to boot (p.30). The businesslike soldier later turns up himself to testify to this new image, behaves like a gentleman and renders himself immediately "invaluable" to Petkoff in settling army matters efficiently, and shows himself to be the resolute military commander threatening messengers with having "the skin taken off their backs" (III, p.47). He even reaches a pitch of cynicism when he makes nothing of Raina's "despair" at having told a lie, contemptuously equates the feeling of gratitude to hate, ruthlessly unmasks her pretensions to thorough sincerity of behaviour, and appears to her to have "a low shopkeeping mind" (III, p.52), at the farthest end from the gentleman he was described



a few moments earlier. He seems to be again the unconcerned practical soldier when he deals with Sergius calling the duel on and off, with the result of being labelled “a machine” (p.61), but then unexpectedly unveils a background and nature that completely overturns his preceding images and definitions: “a vagabond, a man who has spoiled all his chances in life through an incurably romantic disposition”. who has defied parents’ expectations, has behaved irrationally during the war and after, hopelessly pining after the supposedly too young Raina (p.68); surprisingly, the very quintessence of the romance he has up to this point derided and dismissed. This revelation turns him into “a romantic idiot” resigned to unrequited love, and in Sergius’s eyes even his well-established “sagacity is a fraud” (p.69): he appears totally lost to his image of at least shrewd soldier, when he finally makes another about-face, shows determination and competitive spirit in fighting up for Raina’s hand with a detailing of his assets of gargantuan proportions, and is finally “re-crowned” by Sergius’s exclamation, significantly recalling the title, “What a man! Is he a man!” (p.71).

The reversal of personal image in the other characters is partly implied in what has been said above about their role-acting: Raina, the noble, virtuous, patriotic heroine who is then unexpectedly moved into saving an enemy, is revealed to be quite a scheming person, shrewdly playing on everybody’s belief in her innocence, but turns out to be childishly innocent after all, when she sulks and succumbs to her “chocolate cream soldier” (III, p.71). Catherine and Petkoff, for all their pretensions to distinguished aristocracy and their “almost historical” position, finally decide that all this does not matter, when Bluntschli’s display of riches overturns all their objections to connecting with the until then despised bourgeoisie.

Sergius who is portrayed as the heroic knight and the romantic and devoted lover at the beginning, is soon subject to doubt together with the ideals he represents, but his

reported behaviour reinstates him in Raina's mind to the position of "real" hero; when he appears, however, he turns out to be a disillusioned and dejected officer and a smooth double-dealer flirting with a maid, but then again reveals to be quite earnest in his love for Louka. From being the dupe of romantic abstract sentiments and ideals, he switches to more sensuous, down-to-earth feelings, and even to trite worldly wisdom ("The world is not such an innocent place as we used to think" – III, p.65); and he even ends up showing more "sense" than the commonsensical Bluntschli in understanding Raina and the present situation.

Characters are one part of a general pattern of reversals and contradictions of what has been told or believed or done before, that is predominant in the third act. The first occurrence is in the double account of the cavalry charge, told in turn by Catherine and Bluntschli: two stories that contrast in every point, the brave hero being reversed into a pathetic Don Quixote, the avalanche of gallant Bulgarians into a handful of peas, the splendid action into a suicide attempt, immediately setting the tone of contradiction and differing versions of reality. The story of Bluntschli's sheltering in the Petkoff's house is also graphically summed up and funnily turned around in Sergius's words, to become "quite a romance", with the addition of moral scruples and propriety of behaviour ("She very modestly entertained him for half an hour or so, and then called in her mother lest her conduct should appear unmaidenly" – II, p.30) which, while worthy of the best Richardson, is an ironic misrepresentation of the previous scene. Petkoff's coat is the source for yet more carnivalesque caperings (Petkoff being the main victim): it is brought in to Bluntschli under Catherine's orders but has to go back because of her about-face; then it is not in its usual place, "in the blue closet", when Petkoff looks for it, but suddenly is (apparently) brought out from there by Nicola. It contained Raina's dedicated portrait which turns out not to be there at all, and which is the occasion for a

series of misconceptions and undeceivings on Petkoff's part, when he exultantly "finds out" that Sergius is the "chocolate cream soldier", only to be contradicted and told that Bluntschli is; this in turn leads back to the initial story of the fugitive, but with the substantial – and to Petkoff astounding – change of cast, from an anonymous young lady to his unsuspected daughter, which totally upsets his ideas about her.

Contradictions and refutations also characterize single utterances and tit-for-tat verbal exchanges: Sergius declares that "in the charge [he] found that [he] was brave" and immediately undermines his own words by exclaiming that "the courage to rage and kill is cheap" (III, p.56); his "discovery" that "Life's a farce" and that Bluntschli is a machine is countered by the latter's claim that "life isn't a farce, but something quite sensible and serious" (III, p.61). Bluntschli's assertion that Raina is not guilty of granting him "favours" and does not even know *if* he is married leads to her own declaration that she did not know *that* he was married, a misunderstanding that opens the way to a comical series of denials and reversals of previous words and convictions:

BLUNTSCHLI. [...] I'm not married.

RAINA. [...] You said you were.

BLUNTSCHLI. I did not. I positively did not. I never was married in my life.

PETKOFF. [...] Raina: will you kindly inform me, if I am not asking too much, which of these gentlemen you are engaged to?

RAINA. To neither of them. This young lady [...] is the object of Major Saranoff's affections at present.

PETKOFF. Louka! Are you mad, Sergius? Why, this girl's engaged to Nicola.

NICOLA. I beg your pardon, sir. There is a mistake. Louka is not engaged to me.

PETKOFF. Not engaged to you, you scoundrel! Why, you had twenty-five levas from me on the day of your betrothal; and she had that gilt bracelet from Miss Raina.

NICOLA. We gave it out so, sir. (III, p.66)

Of course the bracelet comes from Sergius, and is only the last example of the constant overturning and upsetting of conceptions, opinions, ideas about oneself, the others and reality, that the comedy enacts in a carnivalesque game of "which is which?"

that constantly delays the resolution or answer, that by its internal development keeps everything in a suspended position of contradiction or inversion; thus it appears as an actual example of dramatic heteroglossia, where every utterance is just as “contested, contestable and contesting” as the typically “polemical and apologetic” orientation that Bakhtin finds only in novelistic discourse. This game, however, does come to an end in the final scene, where everything and everybody take their own place, and a certain solidity of truth is achieved with regards to the various versions of the story. The play’s use of commonplace dramatic habits (entrances and exits, props, mistaken identities) is carried out in a less “cosy”, rather defamiliarizing way, foregrounding and parodying those stale conventions: the carnivalesque subversion of literary and social commonplace notions and values has therefore been allowed plenty of action, but it is contained within a non-destructive boundary, exposing their mystifying nature; it appears as a sort of moderate anticipation of future more radical developments in the theatre, of which authors like Jarry and Pirandello will be an example.

## **7. The carnival of identity**

The game of contradictions and role-playing in its turn calls into question the whole issue of “true” identity, continuously mystified mainly by Bluntschli, Sergius, Raina and Louka: this process is analogous to the implications of the carnivalesque concepts of the mask and acting, although here it eventually comes to an end, as the identities of the characters are ultimately established in a fairly unambiguous way, unlike the puzzling concept of selfhood projected by the later *Enrico IV*.

With his carnivalizing of the role of soldier and of the whole epic tradition and ethics, Bluntschli’s character carries out an undermining process towards the image of man propounded by such official discourses, which also affects the idea of the integrity of personality. Bakhtin considers that such epic hero

in the high distanced genres is an individual of the absolute past and of the distanced image. As such he is a fully finished and complete being. This has been accomplished on a lofty heroic level, but what is complete is also something hopelessly ready-made; he is all there, from beginning to end he coincides with himself [...] his appearance and his actions all lie on a single plane. His view of himself coincides completely with others' views of him.<sup>58</sup>

The epic-heroic character is in fact characterized by a series of constant, fixed traits and attributes, in close connection with the stability of ideals and values that the hero upholds and represents; this “tendency toward the stability and completion of being”<sup>59</sup> as Bakhtin sees it, that characterizes such an official discourse as the epic tradition, is completely upset by Bluntschli's irreverent mocking of the heroic canons of behaviour, of his own role of soldier and of the ethics of war. The image of the upright soldier who constantly stands by the values of honour, decorum, sacrifice, courage, noble sentiments, incorruptible and unswerving in his one-dimensional mission to serve and protect national welfare and his beloved, is shattered, besides his cynical comments, by his intermittently adopting that attitude, and by the fact that he exposes that image as changeable, totally arbitrary and as unstable as a mask. He does not offer a consistent picture of himself, but an ambiguous mixture of heroism and cowardice, of unscrupulous cynicism and romantic affection, nobility and mediocrity, a non-coincident, multiple personality that does not tally with, and indeed questions the possibility of any epic or official notion of coherent, uniform identity. Bluntschli's dramatic character performs what Bakhtin saw as a peculiarly novelistic operation:

The destruction of epic distance and the transferral of the image of an individual from the distanced plane to the zone of contact with the inconclusive events of the present [...] result in a radical re-structuring of the image of the individual in the novel [...]. A dynamic authenticity was introduced into the image of man, dynamics of inconsistency and tension between various factors of this image; man ceased to coincide with himself, and consequently men ceased to be

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<sup>58</sup> M. M. Bakhtin. “Epic and the Novel”, cit., p. 34.

<sup>59</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 101.

exhausted entirely by the plots that contain them.<sup>60</sup>

Sergius's character represents the play's second great criticism of the conventional idea of the individual's single identity. Raina's doubts on his person at the beginning of the play ("I doubted him: I wondered whether all his heroic qualities and his soldiership might not prove mere imagination" – I, p.5) already set the tone for what will be a rather more radical questioning of identity by his own admission, besides the constant role-playing in which he is engaged. Act II sees him enter as the conventional epic hero and lover, obeying all the canons of decorous and gallant behaviour; but as soon as the characters that (apparently) uphold the traditional morality are off the stage, he not only steps down from that role into that of a mischievous seducer, but he also comically admits to a multiple personality: "Sergius, the hero of Slivnitza [...] Sergius, the apostle of the higher love [...] the half dozen Sergiuses who keep popping in and out of this handsome figure of mine" (II, p.33). He even gives a short Hamlet-like monologue that mockingly enacts the dilemma of a very unofficial and carnivalesque multiplicity: "Which of the six men is the real man? that's the question that torments me. One of them is a hero, another a buffoon, another a humbug, another perhaps a bit of a blackguard [...] And one, at least, is a coward" (II, p.34). With this comic plurality of identity and the deliberate assumption of different roles, Sergius, like Bluntschli, functions as novelistic picaresque hero who for Bakhtin negates the "rhetorical approach to the unity of a human personality":

he is not implicated in any norm, requirement, ideal; he is not all of one piece and is not consistent, if measured against the rhetorical unities of personality that were available. A human being is, as it were, emancipated here from all the entanglements of such conventional unities, he is neither defined nor comprehended by them; in fact, he can even laugh at them [...]. A sharp gap now opens between a man and the external position he occupies – his rank, his public worth,

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<sup>60</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, "Epic and the Novel", cit., p. 35.

his social class. All the high positions and symbols, spiritual as well as profane, with which men adorn themselves with such importance and hypocritical falsity are transformed into masks in the presence of the rogue, into costumes for a masquerade, into buffoonery.<sup>61</sup>

Raina, in her turn, candidly embodies both this hypocritical behaviour and the conscious wearing of masks, ambiguously standing between the official morality and acceptance of the idea of coherent individuality on the one hand (she believes it of Sergius, of her father, and of the military-heroic canon they represent), and on the other hand roguishly and happily welcoming an irreconcilable duplicity of personality and behaviour (in herself and in her mother); which cannot but mock the very ideals she invokes, of integrity and uniformity of passions and personality. Louka as well shows an elusive personality that constantly fails to comply with other people's projections and understanding of her own self and feelings, and even Catherine's and Petkoff's playing with their roles adds to this sense of instability.

Altogether the characters operate a modernist debunking of the reassuring image of the coherent, stable, and truthful individuality strongly implied in the "monological" ideals of heroism and romantic love, and of social life at large: Bluntschli, Sergius, Raina and Louka are mostly revealed as unpredictably changeable and ambiguous personalities that upset expectations and assumptions about them, and happily celebrate multiplicity and flexibility. The soldier, the lover, the hero and the heroine in them are exposed not as believable and univocal identities, but as nothing more than an arbitrary and fictional imposition of personal roles and masks for political and social convenience, that have no definite connection with a supposed "real" nature of the characters. Everyone is expected to be and behave at one with their single recognized role in a uniform and coherent way, a role which is supposed to coincide with their intimate self, and which does not leave doubts as to the ultimate integrity and reliability

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<sup>61</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel", cit., pp. 407-408.

of their identity; but the carnivalesque instability and ambiguity of identity that are given free rein in the play – although only temporarily because they find a resolution in the ending – nonetheless contribute to the undermining of a whole ideological system that is perceived as upholding categories such as identity as fixed and unquestionably true. This moderate questioning of the solidity of subjectivity will then be carried further to a radical extreme in later modernist drama like Pirandello's.

### **8. The subversion of imperialistic ideology**

In *Arms and the Man* the disrupting drive of the action, intermittently perceived at the time of its performance, seems to target background ideologies of identity, relationships between men and women (including the Romantic world-view, Victorian bourgeois morality and patriarchy); of heroism and nationalism, and, consequently, of war and power. All these norms and ideals, as will be argued below, are persistently mocked and subverted by the action and the characters, and, in being shown as discourses perceived as mystifying and artificially established, they refer back to some dominating social entities that can impose and uphold them, and consequently to issues of power lying behind them. Inasmuch as emanating from a source of power, these discourses have the status of ideologies, which are criticized and subverted by the action of the play; this carnivalizing operation will attain a more radical dimension in Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, as will be argued later on, whereas here the criticism does not do away with social values in their entirety, but rather strives to ground them in a more realistic, less idealistic view, as is consistent with Shaw's own belief in a feasible and more rational political order.

The text projects and criticizes a social picture where women are expected to be devotedly attached to their husbands or fiancés, virtuous, sincere and of elevated sentiments, adoringly passionate about the men's ideals and engagement with the world,



although remaining submissively relegated in the household to be ready to offer a warm and cosy welcome to the returning heroes; canons of prudery, purity and moral uprightness apply to them, as well as a belief in their physical weakness and inferiority to men. Men, in their turn, share the noble and intense sentiments and virtues, patronizingly return women's affections, and are expected to behave in a vigorous and heroic way. In this respect, romantic heroism permeates the ideology of war with ideas of noble and chivalrous action, together with a sense of national belonging and pride, coating the harsh and very material reality of military conflict with the abstract gloss of epic glory and patriotic honour. Codes of behaviour also affect the inferior classes, namely servants, who have to conform to ideas of faithful service and blind obedience.

Heroic and nationalistic cant are also shown as propelling agents in the waging of and consensus about war, which is an essential element in the maintenance of state power both at home and abroad, as was for the imperialistic policy of Victorian Britain. The historian Earle stresses how the major political and war strategists have always insisted on this key-value of war for the stability of the ruling authority: Machiavelli for example "had observed the decisive role of military power in politics, and [...] that the existence and greatness of a state were assured only if military power received its appropriate place in the political order".<sup>62</sup> The liberal opinion of the late 1770s French *philosophes* circles relied on the concept of citizenship to maintain that "as a safeguard against tyranny, the citizens of a country must be trained to arms";<sup>63</sup> in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the military officer and strategist Clausewitz had declared that "[w]ar is nothing else than the continuation of state policy by different means".<sup>64</sup> Earle also describes Britain in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as the only victorious one among the mercantilist states,

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<sup>62</sup> E. M. Earle, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

a “protectionist, autarchic, expansionistic, and militaristic”<sup>65</sup> system where war was inherent, a status recognized even by the later political thinkers Smith, Hamilton and List.

The heroic canon is also strictly bound up with military leadership, which in its turn is a perquisite of the aristocratic class, and helps to justify their domination and power. Earle again traces the development of armies from bands of mercenaries to citizen armies between 1740 and 1815, with the nobility constantly forming the “élite corps of the cavalry and [...] officers for the infantry”,<sup>66</sup> the bourgeoisie providing the technical and administrative services and know-how, and the increasing attention given to training, discipline, and physical care; the whole with the purpose to create an efficient and cohesive “tool” in the hands of the ruling power, where hierarchy mirrored the political establishment and the norms of behaviour were set by the aristocratic officers and their traditional codes of honour.<sup>67</sup>

Although some critics envisage a conventional imperialistic attitude in Shaw’s works,<sup>68</sup> these are generally considered as “asserting again and again the folly and wickedness of glorifying human vindictiveness by romantic codes of honor and institutionalizing it in systems of jurisprudence”.<sup>69</sup> Shaw himself, in his later essay *Everybody’s Political What’s What* (1944), gave a picture of the average social man, “Mr. Everybody”, that stresses the pervasiveness of such ideals in his largely bourgeois society, although half a century later, and in the context of World War II: “[h]is mind,

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27; but see the whole of chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>67</sup> See B. Farwell, *op. cit.*, p. xviii, 90.

<sup>68</sup> See for example Ellen J. Gainor, “Bernard Shaw and the Drama of Imperialism”, in Sue-Ellen Case and Janelle Reinelt (eds.), *The Performance of Power. Theatrical Discourse and Politics*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991, pp. 56-74.

<sup>69</sup> J. B. Kaye, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

when it is capable of ranging beyond his personal, family, and business affairs, is full of the romance of war and chivalry, and his imagination with hero worship of his favourite platform orator or of famous military and naval commanders who have slaughtered the greatest number of foreigners".<sup>70</sup> He also remarked on the relevance of infusing and maintaining those discourses in connection to political power: "ambitious conquerors and dictators who have to instil royalist idolatry and romantic hero-worship, all use both ignorance and education as underpinnings for general faith in themselves as rulers".<sup>71</sup>

In this respect, the carnivalization of the soldier and of the ethics of war in *Arms and the Man*, as described in earlier sections, has the same modernist, subversive value towards the political establishment of late Victorian England as the concept of carnival itself in Bakhtin's Stalinist Russia: the British Empire at its peak of expansion and world domination was rooted in war as a means to achieve and maintain power.<sup>72</sup> Farwell for example charts the constant state of warfare during Victoria's reign, the stream of minor wars not even known at home, not to mention the major ones, driven by the desire to impose and celebrate British civilization and superiority,<sup>73</sup> with the propaganda effect of consolidating existing rule and ideology. Queen Victoria herself frequently expressed the importance she attributed to her troops,<sup>74</sup> their welfare and

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<sup>70</sup> G. B. Shaw, *Everybody's Political What's What*, London: Constable and Co., 1944, p. 41.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>72</sup> "In Queen Victoria's reign it was the Army which played the key role in building and preserving the Empire": B. Farwell, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. 1, especially pp. 1-3.

<sup>74</sup> In a letter to the Secretary for War, Lord Panmure, in 1857, for example, she said "It will be good policy to oblige the East Indian Company to keep permanently a larger portion of the Royal Army in India than heretofore. The Empire has nearly doubled itself within the last twenty years, and the Queen's troops have been kept at the old establishment. They are the body on whom the maintenance of the Empire depends": quoted in B. Farwell, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

successes, as her frequent addresses to “her” army testified,<sup>75</sup> alongside the institution of the Victoria Cross, and the interest she took in even little episodes of valour (an officer remembered the end of a campaign being marked by “one of those gracious messages with which Her Majesty the Queen never fails to acknowledge the gallantry of her Army”<sup>76</sup>).

When Bluntschli appears as a good soldier, on the other hand, it is not for those idealized heroic qualities, but in his commonsensical shrewdness, practicality, and an almost cynical instinct for survival; instead, the failed, caricature soldiers embodied partially in Bluntschli, in Sergius and Petkoff represent a strong criticism of the contemporary dominating political system, based on ideologies of militarism and heroism which are exposed as illusory discourses, a farce, a pretext for commercial and territorial exchanges, a mystification and ratification of the government’s imperialistic policy. This position is remarkably similar, despite the difference in political agendas and dramatic tone, to the one emerging from the reading of Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*, in terms of the exposure of the cynical lack of scruples and inhumanity involved in the wielding of power.

The organization of the army also mirrored that of the family of the time: the officer’s wife “was perfectly placed to fulfil the domestic ideology’s conception of the ideal lady. The regiment itself was modelled on the aristocratic family with its retinue of subordinate families and servants. This aristocratic model lay at the heart of the domestic ideology’s view of ideal family life. The goal of the officer’s wife was to model the benevolent lady of the aristocracy who took an interest in the welfare of her

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, see for example pp. 134, 309.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309.

husband's retainers".<sup>77</sup> This, together with the image of passive womanhood and of romantic relationships, points to a patriarchal matrix in the social structure, with the traditional dominance of the male, aimed at the preservation of the rights of male primogeniture, and therefore of the unity and solidity of the landed families, who in their turn owned the political power. The "suffragette" Florence Fenwick Miller deplored in 1890 that

under exclusively man-made laws women have been reduced to the most abject condition of legal slavery [...]. In property, in work, in person, in the affection which they bore for their children, in reputation, in their claims to right themselves before the law when wronged [...] a course of unchecked man-making of the laws reduced women to the most enslaved and the most helpless position [...] under the arbitrary domination of another's will, and dependent for decent treatment exclusively on the goodness of heart of the individual master.<sup>78</sup>

Women's magazines by the mid-1800s had been less and less devoted to political discussions, preferring the more neutral and edifying subjects of "moral tales, poetry, and advice on etiquette [...] fashion news",<sup>79</sup> alongside the increase in the output of etiquette books that described the accepted social behaviour, driven by the "desire to stabilize the system along predictable lines" and thereby aiming at "the consolidation of a social group".<sup>80</sup> Female sexuality was viewed as exclusively passive, in parallel with the political position, while legislation on women's sexual behaviour grew increasingly prescriptive in the Victorian period, thus maintaining double standards of morality<sup>81</sup> corresponding to the political sphere.

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<sup>77</sup> M. Trustram, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

<sup>78</sup> Florence Fenwick Miller, *On the Programme of the Women's Franchise League. An Address Delivered at the National Liberal Club* (1890), quoted in P. Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England*, *cit.*, p. 103.

<sup>79</sup> J. N. Burstyn, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>80</sup> E. Langland, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>81</sup> See P. Levine, *Victorian Feminism*, *cit.*, ch. 6.

A change to this system, like the one advocated by the burgeoning feminist discourse, was regarded with horror, as a dangerous and destabilizing revolution: a feminist article signed B. T. appeared in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1874 which portrayed a mirror-image world on Venus that carnivalized England's male-oriented institutions and their reluctance to admit women: on that planet, "though the present sovereign happens to be a king, all political business, electoral and parliamentary, is allotted to women", and an attempt to extend suffrage to men, "[t]he notion of admitting young cornets, cricketers and fops [...] to a share in the legislation, the prospect of Parliamentary benches recruited from the racecourse, the hunting-field, and the billiard-room, was a picture that proved too much for the gravity of the Commons".<sup>82</sup>

A similar destabilizing picture, if on a lesser scale, is presented in *Arms and the Man*, where the main heroine Raina carnivalizes and demolishes the socially imposed ideology of womanhood by turning the double standards to her advantage, playing on the conventional role of fragile, devoted, idealistic, romantic woman that conquered Sergius's affection, while at the same time being capable of typically "masculine" initiative and action when trying to preserve that image or to win Bluntschli, thus taking over the recognized position of power. The same does her mother Catherine, as she takes over the role of commanding officer with regard to her husband the Major, marshalling him and the rest of the household, and significantly putting down her embroidery to go and frighten the messengers into quickly despatching their orders. Women in this play appear therefore very far from acquiescing in the canon of submissiveness, fragility and purity upheld by the dominant ideology, and very strongly asserting their power against it.

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<sup>82</sup> B. T. [Bertha Thomas], "Latest Intelligence from the Planet Venus", *Fraser's Magazine* 90 o.s., 10 n.s. (December 1874), p. 763; as quoted in P. Levine, *Victorian Feminism*, cit., pp. 62-63.

The role of servants is also explicitly connected with social hierarchy and its maintenance, especially at higher levels, and this is another aspect that receives a blow in the carnivalesque misrule of the servants in *Arms and the Man*. Servants were an important part of the aristocratic and bourgeois households, but they were kept separate from family areas when they were not on duty; most importantly, they were “hired not just to do the enormous amount of housework, cooking, laundry, gardening, stablework and gamekeeping required to keep up a first-class establishment, but to confirm publicly the family’s social superiority with their submissive deference and obedience”.<sup>83</sup> They were thus invested with the highly symbolic value of displaying by their number the family’s rank and richness, and sanctioning by acquiescence the social status-quo, and the established relations of power. The attention given to servants’ behaviour and dress codes shows these as tools of patriarchy, justified in moralistic sermons and pamphlets, to draw a very distinct line between management and labour,<sup>84</sup> between the rulers and the ruled, which once again reiterated and enforced the established political organization and ideology. The behaviour of servants in *Arms and the Man* as described above represents a deliberate flouting of this kind of discourse: Louka fails to comply with the plain dress code pertaining to her position, has ambitions to rise above her station and fulfils them, as well as Nicola who wishes to start a bourgeois activity. These are not merely examples of comic irreverence to their masters within the play, but more importantly, together with the attack on male supremacy, “stings” aimed at the interconnected discourses of patriarchy and imperialism, and consequently at the whole ideological web that emanates from them, the political and social system that rigidly and constantly confirms, through each of its components, the validity of the whole.

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<sup>83</sup> Jessica Gerard, “The Chatelaine. Women of the Victorian Landed Classes and the Country House”, in V. D. Dickerson (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 175-206, p. 177.

<sup>84</sup> See E. Langland, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-39.

Although appearing at first sight as a funny and harmless romantic farce, *Arms and the Man* does in fact enact a modernist carnivalization of the aspects it portrays, romantic conventions and mystifications of reality, heroic canons and their function of propaganda for an imperialistic policy, established ideas about identity, genders and their roles that are propounded and naively accepted as realistic; it plays with their artificial nature in what comes across as more than mere caricature or satire, debunking and unmasking them all as pure constructions, fictional discourses intended as ways to control social and political truth and power. This is not achieved through an authoritative satirical voice, but by means of mock role-playing, reversals of canons, masquerading, foregrounding and undermining of conventions that seem to equal, in moderate terms, the function of carnival in the Bakhtinian description, as the however temporary liberation from an imposed and rigid order, be it literary, social or political. What Shaw seems to do here, is not to completely embrace a radical subversion, as Jarry and Pirandello will later do, but rather pragmatically to expose old-fashioned rules and frames of reference, in order to achieve an ideological awakening in the audience: Bluntschli's affirmation that "life isn't a farce, but something quite sensible and serious" seems to apply and rather sum up the scope of this play, in its taking up and going beyond the inherited conventions to uncover the framework behind them, in an attempt to state something relevant and truthful about the social and political systems at work in his time.



## 2. *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*

### 1. “Una strana commedia”

The first performance of the play on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1921 in Rome at Teatro Valle aroused very controversial reactions in the audience, this being significantly indicative of the kind of *bouleversement* operated by the text within a “canonical” context such as the Roman theatre establishment: Pirandello was dramatically greeted at the theatre exit by whistles, insults like “Manicomio!”, flinging of coins, and had to be escorted away by his friends.<sup>1</sup>

Tilgher recalled the appreciation of “una minoranza [...] un pubblico disorientato e perplesso, e, in fondo, voglioso assai di capire”, and hastily sums up the play as showing “una cosa saputa da secoli: che il teatro (cioè l’arte) non è la fotografia della vita reale, ma è riflessione sulla vita e quindi deformazione della vita”.<sup>2</sup> More enthusiastic and perceptive was Frateili’s opinion on a “tecnica assolutamente insolita, insofferente di qualunque legame tradizionale, che conduce l’azione del tutto fuori delle vie battute finora, in un’atmosfera non mai respirata”.<sup>3</sup> Martini and Mancuso agreed that the “story” itself was just a pretext for the enacting of another more subtle “dramma”, even though they singled it out simply as that of artistic creation;<sup>4</sup> and on the whole, the

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Orio Vergani, “L’ora dei *Sei personaggi*”, in *Corriere della Sera*, 15 December 1936, quoted in L. Pirandello, *Sei Personaggi in cerca d’autore*, critical edition by G. Davico Bonino, cit., pp. 200-201.

<sup>2</sup> A. Tilgher, cit., pp. 211, 212.

<sup>3</sup> Arnaldo Frateili, review to in *L’Idea Nazionale*, 11 May 1921, as quoted in L. Pirandello, *Sei Personaggi in cerca d’autore*, cit., p. 214.

<sup>4</sup> “in questo forte e strano lavoro di Luigi Pirandello il dramma, un dramma qualunque, era già fatto, o quasi, e l’autore se n’è servito come specchio di un altro, più vero e più profondo dramma, il suo proprio”: Umberto Mancuso, review in *Il Popolo di Roma*, 11th May 1921, as quoted in L. Pirandello, *Sei Personaggi in cerca d’autore*, cit., p. 226; “con una tecnica che vorremmo chiamare divisionistica, ha

critics were unanimous in acknowledging the absence of a coherent and identifiable “plot”.

Conversely, the play was triumphantly welcomed by both audience and critics in Milan at Teatro Manzoni on 27<sup>th</sup> September, after which general success followed, and it soon travelled abroad (firstly to London, at the Stage Society, on the suggestion of George Bernard Shaw): its innovative character, both in form and content, was generally stressed with appreciation, it was described as a “strana commedia ch’è, indubbiamente, un’opera d’arte di un’originalità rara”.<sup>5</sup> Simoni sensed the theme of the impossibility of a definitive artistic work (“l’angoscia dell’artista che [...] non compie il suo assunto; c’è l’impotenza sua a raggiungere la pienezza della forma”), and that of the multiplicity of identity (“la tragedia della reciproca incomprensione”).<sup>6</sup> Bontempelli, regarding the play as having “tentato cosa che era impossibile condurre a termine”, also rated it for its daring, as, in Italy, “lo sforzo più laborioso e più tenace e più originale che siasi fatto per innalzare una barriera invalicabile contro la invecchiata abitudine teatrale [...]. Teatro di distruzione, certo, ma di quelle distruzioni rivoluzionarie, che possono essere segni, prodromi e fondamenti di una ricostruzione”.<sup>7</sup> Levi most perceptively commented on a “*realtà fantastica del personaggio* [...] in antitesi colla *realtà di fatto dell’uomo* che lo rappresenta [...] la realtà fantastica tanto stravince che la realtà di fatto si perde, o almeno si smarrisce, dubita di sé stessa [...] di fronte alla nostra illusione di spettatori, siamo ora dunque [...] nella nostra stessa *vita*, in questa

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esteriorizzato sulla scena il dramma tumultuoso che ogni artista ha più volte sofferto”: Fausto Maria Martini, review in *La Tribuna*, 11th May 1921, *ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>5</sup> Marco Praga, review in *Illustrazione Italiana*, 4 October 1921; quoted from L. Pirandello, *Sei Personaggi in cerca d’autore*, cit., p. 244.

<sup>6</sup> Renato Simoni, review in *Corriere della Sera*, 28th September 1921, as quoted in L. Pirandello, *Sei Personaggi in cerca d’autore*, cit., p. 238.

<sup>7</sup> Massimo Bontempelli, review in *Industrie Italiane Illustrate*, 39-40, 7th October 1921, as quoted in L. Pirandello, *Sei Personaggi in cerca d’autore*, cit., pp. 246-247.

eterna rappresentazione la quale eternamente oscilla fra la commedia e la tragedia".<sup>8</sup>

The genesis of the work was quite elaborate, and is conventionally traced through a few stages of composition where the text is of a narrative form, being turned into a play in the last stages,<sup>9</sup> and then undergoing substantial revisions between the 1921 and the 1925 editions.<sup>10</sup> The tales all share the core idea of the characters visiting and even haunting the author to claim a plot and a role in a performance, which will form the "antecedent" to the play and the subject of the 1925 preface; the fragment is the nucleus of the Father's connection with Madama Pace's brothel, and of the family relationships between the six characters; finally, the four texts contain the common image of the characters coming to life quite independently of the writer's will and imagination, as if to defy his *authority*. This narrative origin of the play and the many reformulations, a process not infrequent in Pirandello's mode of work, will be shown to have thematic relevance in the present analysis, in particular in its very "failure" as an act of narration.

Taking the Bakhtinian categories as a frame of interpretation, *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* will be discussed in what appears as a carnivalesque subversion of conventional dramatic action, tragic characters, the tradition of Verismo and bourgeois

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<sup>8</sup> Eugenio Levi, review in *Il Convegno*, 10, 30th October 1921, as quoted in L. Pirandello, *Sei Personaggi in cerca d'autore*, cit., pp. 256-258, his italics.

<sup>9</sup> See for example Guido Davico Bonino's Preface to the above-cited critical edition; Corrado Donati, "Orchestrating the Incongruities; *Sei Personaggi in cerca d'autore*", in Julie Dashwood (ed.), *Luigi Pirandello. The Theatre of Paradox*, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1996, pp. 233-261; and E. Gioanola, *Pirandello, la follia*, cit., pp. 241-251.

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of the development between the first and the second version, see for example Olga Ragusa, "Six Characters, 1921-1925 and Beyond", in Gian Paolo Biasin and Nicolas J. Perella (eds.), *Pirandello 1986. Atti del Simposio Internazionale (Università di California, Berkeley, 13-15 Marzo 1986)*, Roma: Bulzoni, 1987, pp. 19-30.

morality; of established distinctions between life and stage, directors, actors and “real” people and the involved hierarchies and role-plays; in its grotesque elements and in its problematization of the possibility of telling or showing a story, and in its upsetting of the idea of a single, coherent and recognizable identity. All these aspects will therefore emerge as parts of a consistent pattern of questioning and liberation from norms and conventions that goes a long way towards undermining basic ideologies within the receiving culture, in both a modernist and a Bakhtinian sense.

## 2. Dramatic tradition

Arnaldo Frateili, recalling a private reading by Pirandello of *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* early in 1921, affirmed the writer's deliberate intention to “mandare all'aria tutte le norme estetiche e tecniche che avevano presieduto fin allora alla nascita dell'opera di teatro, disposto ad affrontare gli spettatori per afferrargli le idee abituali e rovesciargliele come un guanto”;<sup>11</sup> but this operation was being carried out by Pirandello through the foregrounding and consequent subversion of conventional dramatic habits, rather than by means of utter disruption that the Futurist theatre for example practised. Mariani seems close to Bakhtin's thought when he observes that

come il personaggio pirandelliano cerca di smascherare quei miti, così pure polemizza con le forme artistiche che li hanno presentati e celebrati, la commedia borghese soprattutto, delle cui forme e dei cui significati a volte s'investe il personaggio pirandelliano per denunciarne la vuotezza, la falsità, l'inconsistenza [...], indossandone le vesti e usandone il linguaggio per smascherarne la meccanicità, la convenzionalità, la dubbia familiarità.<sup>12</sup>

This section will in fact focus on the play's subversion of some traditional dramatic

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<sup>11</sup> A. Frateili, cit., p. 194.

<sup>12</sup> Umberto Mariani, *La Creazione del Vero. Il maggior teatro di Pirandello*, Firenze: Cadmo, 2001, pp. 14-15.

conventions, like straightforward, coherent and uninterrupted action, the writing process, the solemnity of tragic characters, and the issues and moral norms of contemporary bourgeois drama, in a way that closely resembles the carnivalesque overthrowing of conventions, indirectly aimed at the liberation from any superimposed ideology or moral system that emanates from them; a process that appears even more blatantly in Jarry's *Ubu Roi*.

The 1921 edition bears the subtitle "Commedia da fare", a phrase that will reappear in the 1925 version in the initial cast list ("I personaggi della commedia da fare"<sup>13</sup> – p.28), thus stating explicitly from the outset what runs throughout the play: the disregard for, and indeed the overturning of, the most customary dramatic requirement: that is, the performance of a finished product, and a well-defined story or subject. As Liebler suggests, "the design of *Six Characters* is, from the start, that of an incompleteness, a work perpetually in progress [...] what Pirandello uncovered was the unfinished, unfinishable, perpetually evolving [...] forms of the drama".<sup>14</sup> The audience is in fact confronted by the full view, on the one hand, of back-stage preparations for a performance and, on the other, by a far from finished piece: it is rather the actual making of a play, the creation of the primary text to be performed, which goes well beyond the "open text" of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. Furthermore, the set of the six characters with different solidity and depth on the scene (some featuring as mere

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<sup>13</sup> All quotations are from the edition *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore. Enrico IV*, Milano: Mondadori, 1989. Owing to the lack of division into acts and scenes, only the page numbers will be given in brackets; stage-directions are given in italics as in the text.

<sup>14</sup> Naomi C. Liebler, "The Pirandellian Dissolution: *Six Characters* in Suspension", in Mario Mignone (ed.), *Pirandello in America. Atti del Simposio Internazionale Università Statale di New York, Stony Brook, 30 ottobre – 1 novembre 1986*. Roma: Bulzoni, 1988, pp. 163-171, pp. 163-164. The author goes on relating this evolving quality to the precedent of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. Giovanni Calendoli establishes a parallel with the modern American model of the "work in progress": "La trilogia e le esperienze europee d'avanguardia", in E. Lauro (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 207-222.

apparitions) goes against the convention of dramatic protagonists being all at the same point of development, usually conveying the sense of balanced accomplishment.

All this finds a first expression in the initial stage direction as “*uno spettacolo non preparato*” (p.29) that even defies the habitual division of the dramatic text into scenes and acts – the note at the bottom of the introductory list of characters says “*La commedia non ha atti né scene*”, although a basic division in three parts still appears from the action. The play in fact opens with a stage-hand still hammering pieces of scenery around the stage and with the actors and director getting ready for the rehearsal of another play by Pirandello, featuring trivial exchanges between the director, his assistants, and the lead actress. There are similar scenes of “backstage work” in the second and third part, when the director and the stage-hands actually assemble the indoor and outdoor sets for the characters’ play; and the various technical mishaps, like the accidental dropping of the curtain or the blunders with lights and stage-props, also contribute to the overall effect of undoing the serious atmosphere and the fictional veil that usually surrounds a performance.

The unfinished quality of the play is enhanced by the abortive attempts even to begin this rehearsal, the director’s exhortations to start (“Su, su, cominciamo [...] Su, su, il secondo atto [...] Chi è di scena? [...] Cominci, cominci [...] Andiamo avanti [...] Attacchiamo!” – pp.32-36) being ludicrously interrupted several times, to his own exasperation, by a series of interjections and objections from the actors that climax in the intrusion of the six characters. The same pattern is repeated when the latter try to take over the stage: they are first of all rudely dismissed by the director (“E loro si levino! Sgombrino di qua!” – p.41), in an apparent replica of the authorial refusal to grant them a script; then, their own attempts at performing “their play” are continuously frustrated by interruptions from the director and the cast, alternatively mocking their ambitions to act and discuss the technical aspects of the performance. The director

repeatedly cuts in with comments on the characters' inadequacy with regards to dramatic action, based on his professional experience, such as "Ma tutto questo è racconto, signori miei!" (p.57); "Veniamo al fatto [...]. Queste son discussioni!" (p.60); "Ma no, aspetti! Qua bisogna rispettare le esigenze del teatro!" (p.82); "Non può stare che un personaggio venga, così, troppo avanti [...] Bisogna contener tutti in un quadro armonico e rappresentare quel che è rappresentabile!" (p.96). But he also repeats his exhortations to carry on the repeatedly abortive performance of the "commedia da fare": "Su, su! E' già disposta la scena? [...] Non perdiamo altro tempo! [...] Su su! La prima scena è della Signorina." (pp.76-77); "Avanti! avanti! L'entrata!" (p.89).

The actors in their turn keep on interrupting the six characters' play mainly with bursts of laughter or of shock, and with comments showing that they are not taking it "seriously", but seeing only its fictionality: "Oh, badiamo bene. Quelli là sono i nostri capelli!" (p.86), "Ah, io non sto mica a far la buffona qua per quella lì!" (p.93). Furthermore, the six characters as well (mainly the Father, the Stepdaughter and the Mother) break in on each other's act, even when they finally get to play out their own drama, and most of all disrupt the actors' distorted doubling of the scene between the Father and the Stepdaughter in the brothel with objections and laughs that undermine its self-containment; the Stepdaughter even lets out the whole plot of the "commedia da fare" and how it ends before it has started at all. Altogether, every single attempt at a play by the actors, the director, the characters and their different combinations ends in failure, taking the traditional fictionality and stability of the dramatic action, even in its partial sections, to a paroxysm of precariousness and subversion, and constantly counterpointing it with "reality".

The play also seems to enact a carnivalesque subversion in its mocking of the writing process, reversing the standard sequence author-text-performance and therefore

dethroning textual supremacy over the actors. Firstly, the play itself is about the problem of staging another play which is not even the one initially proposed, *Il giuoco delle parti*, a concrete script which is thus discarded in its priority on the stage, the text also being discussed and mocked for being abstruse and impracticable. The six characters constitute in themselves a defiance to the supremacy of the author, since they are on the stage against their author's will, without his supposedly fundamental contribution: the Father claims that "[q]uando un personaggio è nato, acquista subito una tale indipendenza anche dal suo stesso autore, che può [...] acquistare anche, a volte, un significato che l'autore non si sognò mai di dargli" (p.108). However, the situation goes well beyond an unpredictable "escape" of the intended meaning, reaching the extreme, surreal "independence" from the author that results in the characters being alive autonomously and arguing about their nature, supplanting the god-like authorial act of creation.

Then, the script of the "commedia da fare" is physically absent, a situation more extreme than that of the *commedia dell'arte* where a basic story-line is provided; therefore a backward creative and dramatic process is forced – again a carnivalesque reversal of the logical time-sequence<sup>15</sup> – from the characters alive on stage to the actors, and from the acting to the writing of the script. This only begins halfway through the hiccup-like performance, and is carried out by an eminently minor person, the prompter, which once again appears as a comic reduction of the role of the writer: the play seems bent on constantly throwing in the audience's face the issue of writing and authorship, which is never really allowed to be forgotten or simply absent, but rather problematized

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<sup>15</sup> "The kind of time peculiar to carnival is the release from time, a respite from the relatively closed and rigid historical patterns": K. Clark and M. Holquist, *op. cit.*, p. 302.



and questioned.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the authorial position is alternatively taken up by the Father, who also acts as off-stage narrating voice of his own drama (“Il dramma scoppia, signore, impreveduto e violento, al loro ritorno” – p.59), and by the director, who is first conferred the role by the characters (“Siamo qua in cerca d’un autore [...]. Tranne che non voglia esser lei” – pp.38-39; “lo trascriva, se mai, avendolo così davanti – in azione – scena per scena” – p.66) and then willingly takes it upon himself (“Eh... quasi quasi, mi tenta...” – p.66; “la scena tra lei e quella Madama Pace, che penserò poi io a scrivere” – p.89). Finally, the parody of artistic creation culminates in the conjuring trick of laying around the tools of the trade to attract Madama Pace, a mockery of the authorial shaping of a character, “questo prodigio di una realtà che nasce” (p.80), which is actually performed by another character on the stage.

Carnival as described by Bakhtin also typically targets “monological” seriousness, which is connected to moral rigidity and decorum: a kind of solemnity that pervades the world of tragedy, which is in fact debunked in this play. The entrance of the six characters, precluded by an almost ominous draught sweeping over the prompter, has – according to the long and detailed stage direction – the appearance of an ancient tragic piece: the sharp differentiation from the opposing group of actors, by means of positioning on the stage, dark clothing and spotlights; the solemn, tragic tone conveyed by the suggested use of masks, which freeze each character’s dominating mood in a

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<sup>16</sup> In this respect, see Jennifer Stone, “In Search of a Dead Author”, in M. Mignone (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 147-161: although I agree with the description of the text as a “battle of signatures” (p. 153), I cannot share the article’s conclusions of the play’s ultimate reinstatement of the author, whereby, in post-structuralist terms, “the play remains resolutely logocentric, anchored by a transcendental signifier in the shape of an author, Pirandello” (p. 154), precisely because, as Stone herself states, and as will be shown below, “Pirandello [or rather, the text] can no longer narrate: the act of narration is under siege, and all that Pirandello [or, the text] can relate is this narrative insecurity” (p. 150); and narration, as discourse, is a basic act of authoring, of giving formal (verbal and/or dramatic) shape to a “story”.

fixed expression (*“fissata ciascuna immutabilmente nell’espressione del proprio sentimento fondamentale, che è il rimorso per il Padre, la vendetta per la Figliastro, lo sdegno per il Figlio, il dolore per la Madre”* – p.37), in a way reminiscent of Greek drama or a medieval morality play. This is enhanced by the statue-like rigidity of the Mother (*“vestiario [...] con pieghe rigide e volume quasi statuario [...] mostrerà un viso [...] come di cera, e terrà sempre gli occhi bassi”*), who constantly strikes poses of maternal despair and utters imploring exclamations; and by the aloofness of the Son (*“irrigidito in un contenuto sdegno [...] e in un’accigliata indifferenza”* – p.38), who stands immovably aside from the main action.

The characters have come with the serious purpose of offering their “dramma doloroso”,<sup>17</sup> which according to Gioanola “addirittura ripropone il prototipo della tragedia classica” but instead results in “l’esempio più clamoroso, nella letteratura europea del primo Novecento, di carnevalizzazione della tragedia”:<sup>18</sup> they are seen as a joke by the laughing and incredulous actors and director (“Lor signori vogliono scherzare?” – p.39), and labelled as mad (“non abbiamo tempo da perdere coi pazzi!”). From the outset, then, the six characters’ tragic stature and dignified wish to perform are mockingly belittled, even to the point of rude jokes (“Vogliono vivere in noi!” – “Eh, per me volentieri, se mi toccasse quella lì!” – p.43), their first attempts at telling their drama being received with laughter or ironic condescension (“Non s’immagineranno mica di saper recitare loro! Fanno ridere...” – p.73), all of which contributes to bringing them down from their elevated pedestal to a lower, more “material” level. The Stepdaughter herself soon contributes to this undoing of the tragic atmosphere by improvising a comic cabaret piece of song and dance (*“Accennerà con malizia il*

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<sup>17</sup> Hereafter the six characters’ own play they have come to perform will be referred to as the “dramma”.

<sup>18</sup> E. Gioanola, *op. cit.*, pp. 217, 220.

*'prends garde à Tchou-Tchin-Tchou'*” – p.44), by her sudden bursting into grating, nervous laughs, alternating with mischievous, morbid allusions to the Father's relationship to her (“Eh, ma siamo stati proprio lì lì, sai!” – p.51; “Veniva a vedermi come crescevo” – p.56), extremely serious and solemn tones (“*cupa, fiera, facendosi avanti*. Appena morto mio padre...” – p.58), philosophical tirades on morals, and the mocking of the Father's supposedly tragic emotions by the adoption of an overcharged register (“la rappresentazione (*caricando*) dei suoi travagli spirituali [...] tutti i suoi ‘nobili’ rimorsi, tutti i suoi tormenti ‘moralì’” – pp.96-97) that has the multi-voiced, distancing effect of a “parodic stylization”, an “internally dialogized language”<sup>19</sup> in Bakhtinian terms.

The almost mystical atmosphere and solemn suspense created by the conjured-up appearance of Madama Pace is similarly shattered by her supremely grotesque, clownish look and her speaking in a comic mixture of Spanish and Italian, that once again introduces a multi-voicedness of register, excites the actors to roaring laughter, and throws a ridiculous light, as the Stepdaughter points out, on the supremely tragic situation of the young woman being forced to sell herself to the Father to make up for the Mother's bad work and useless sacrifice: “Sentirsi fare con un tal linguaggio certe proposte: effetto sicuro, perché par quasi una burla, signore!” (p.83). Furthermore, the scene between the Father and the Stepdaughter in the brothel is snobbishly simplified by the director and the cast (“Va trattata, naturalmente, con un po' di leggerezza” – “di spigliatezza, già” – “Ma sì, non ci vuol niente!” – pp.88-89), so that, despite the stage direction,<sup>20</sup> the actors' replica of it comes across as an involuntary grotesque parody that

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<sup>19</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”, cit., pp. 362-364.

<sup>20</sup> “*senza che abbia tuttavia, neppur minimamente, l'aria di una parodia; apparirà piuttosto come rimessa in bello*” – p. 90.

undermines the tragic scene just acted by the two characters:<sup>21</sup> the lead actor appears almost like an old satyr (“*con l’aria spigliata, sbarazzina d’un vecchietto galante*” – pp.89-90), the lead actress like a puppet even moving her head according to the director’s prompt, and the mechanical detailing of emotions brings everything to an absurd *mise-en-abîme* when even the director sets out to act the scene in his turn, multiplying the parodic effect. The whole thing arouses the Father’s objections and the Stepdaughter’s irrepressible laughter, turning the tragic situation into a “*pasticcetto romantico sentimentale*” (p.95) interspersed with typically carnivalesque clown and fool “numbers”, like Madama Pace’s look and behaviour, the Stepdaughter’s cabaret, her laughter and insistence on the Father’s pathos as “*buffo*” or “*buffissimo*”, and the actors’ ludicrous mimicry. Another intensely tragic moment, where the pathos seems to reach the climax of a Greek tragedy, is when the Mother bursts into the incestuous scene and stops the Father with a heart-rending cry (“No! Figlia, Figlia mia! [...] Bruto, bruto, è mia figlia! Non vedi che è mia figlia?” – p.100), but the tension of the action is once again interrupted by the Director’s detached and trivial exclamation “Benissimo; sì, benissimo! E allora, sipario, sipario!”, which breaks the illusion bringing us back to the level of a fictional representation caught “behind the scenes”, and even causes a burlesque ending with the comic mishap of the unwanted dropping of the curtain. Finally, the characters’ play, when it comes to an end, is rounded off by sarcastic laughter and the Director’s cynical summing up of the extraordinary event as a waste of time: “Ah! Non mi era mai capitata una cosa simile! Mi hanno fatto perdere una

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<sup>21</sup> Pirandello commented on the function of the contemporary *grotteschi*, which he called “*farse trascendentali*”. in words that seem perfectly to describe this situation as well: “una farsa che include nella medesima rappresentazione della tragedia la parodia e la caricatura di essa, ma non come elementi soprammessi, bensì come proiezione d’ombra del suo stesso corpo, goffe ombre d’ogni gesto tragico”: article in *L’Idea Nazionale*, 27.02.1920, as quoted in Gaspare Giudice, *Luigi Pirandello*, Torino: UTET, 1963, p. 327.

giornata!” – p.123.

The carnivalization of tragic characters and situations in *Sei personaggi* also targets the kind of highly sentimental melodrama and morality typical of contemporary bourgeois naturalistic and veristic drama, as is generally testified by critical opinion: Monti in fact observes that all of Pirandello's plays consist in “uno smontaggio critico, anche nelle forme della parodia, delle forme sceniche contemporanee per un bisogno intellettuale [...] di verificare la consistenza e la praticabilità teatrale delle poetiche sceniche del suo tempo”.<sup>22</sup> Cecchi and Sapegno also agree that “l'esperienza verista [...] avrebbe costituito il punto di partenza per la rivoluzione di Pirandello, il banco di prova, il materiale invecchiato ma solido delle sue distruzioni e del suo rinnovamento”.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Petronio regards Pirandello's drama as “negazione e antitesi di quello naturalista, anche quando i suoi schemi potevano parere gli stessi: storie contemporanee, vissute da personaggi della media e piccola borghesia, imperniate sui problemi della famiglia, ambientata naturalisticamente [...] Il personaggio ‘pirandelliano’ [...smaschera] il sistema di convinzioni e di pregiudizi nel quale gli altri si adagiano”.<sup>24</sup> All this seems to translate successfully in Bakhtinian terms of subversion of conventions.

The Italian Verismo and naturalistic, positivist theatre of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century – such as can be found in the works of Giovanni Verga,

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<sup>22</sup> Silvana Monti, “Il teatro verista e borghese nel secondo Ottocento”, in Stefano Milioto (ed.), *Pirandello e il teatro del suo tempo*, Agrigento: Centro Nazionale di Studi Pirandelliani, 1983. pp. 35-46, pp. 35-36.

<sup>23</sup> Emilio Cecchi and Natalino Sapegno (eds.), *Storia della letteratura italiana. Dall'Ottocento al Novecento*, Milano: Garzanti, 1988, p. 644.

<sup>24</sup> Giuseppe Petronio, *L'attività letteraria in Italia. Storia della Letteratura Italiana*, Firenze: Palumbo, 1991, pp. 862-863.

Giuseppe Giacosa, Marco Praga, Luigi Capuana, Federico De Roberto and Eduardo Scarpetta – aimed at objectivity and the almost scientific portrayal of stark reality (or at least at the impression of it), at the reproduction of real life situations and emotions without the distortions and selections operated by preceding romantic or classical dramatic conventions, and with an almost obsessive interest for the theme of the family:

si intese rappresentare ‘scientificamente’ la società e l’uomo quali essi sono, anche nei loro aspetti ritenuti meno nobili e meno ‘poetici’ [...] Sulla famiglia, come entità economica e affettiva, poggiava tutta la civiltà borghese del tempo: la famiglia vista come nucleo, una cellula sociale [...] fondata sul lavoro del padre, il “capofamiglia” al quale spetta provvedere la mantenimento di essa, che perciò deve avere la supremazia giuridica e morale; mentre la donna [...] è l’“angelo del focolare”, la custode dell’intimità domestica [...]. Da ciò l’indulgenza per l’adulterio dell’uomo [...] e invece la condanna dell’adulterio femminile, che può mettere in crisi la famiglia.<sup>25</sup>

Hence the stress on the conflicting registers of sexuality and shame, psychology, instinct and the dominant morality. But this kind of focus, in the long run, seemed nonetheless to lead to the formulaic and trite representation of highly charged sentimental pictures, of contorted human – especially family – relationships (as far as censorship would allow) and moral dilemmas in connection with bourgeois ideology. Muscetta in fact defines late nineteenth-century Italian drama as

strumento essenziale di affermazione e divulgazione della contemporanea ideologia sociale [...] nell’etica del lavoro e della costruzione, nel costume, nel modo di vita, nell’affermazione dell’etica familiare intesa come primo patrimonio del nucleo sociale [...]. Si tratta dunque di un teatro che si incarica di sostenere e divulgare i temi-miti ovvero l’ideologia della classe egemone: di una rappresentazione del presente, di situazioni e personaggi esemplari, volta più a sostenere tesi edificanti che a esplorare nuove possibilità tematiche e nuove soluzioni drammaturgiche. In questo senso, tale teatro si può anche definire realista, a condizione di intendere per realtà non il termine di un rapporto fra l’uomo e la totalità della sua esperienza del mondo ma, al contrario, la conferma di un’ipotesi del mondo preesistente a tale esperienza<sup>26</sup>;

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 691-692.

<sup>26</sup> Carlo Muscetta (ed.), *La Letteratura italiana. Storia e Testi*, Roma – Bari: Laterza, 1975. vol.

an idea of reality, then, which has the fixity and “givenness” of an ideological dogma. Monti similarly stresses the self-complacent, uncritical and bourgeois nature of this supposedly naturalistic drama:

Questo teatro della verità, che avrebbe dovuto segnare il trionfo dell’oggettività, la morte di ogni convenzione intesa come falsità sovrapposta alla vita vissuta, azione pura e semplice [...] diventa un teatro epico [...] per un pubblico accondiscendente [...] la pièce realista e borghese dell’Ottocento passa dalla convenzione mascherata di realtà all’esaltazione della convenzione come alternativa ad una realtà passivamente e moralisticamente accettata.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, Monti affirms, Pirandello “consacra [il teatro] come unico luogo dove sia ancora possibile parlare dell’uomo e del mondo, senza cadere nella illusione della verità oggettiva, conoscibile in una unica forma universale e necessaria”;<sup>28</sup> Pirandello himself, as much as he appreciated the art of Giovanni Verga, prime exponent of Verismo, decried the stale and mechanical pursuit of a “naturalistic” effect that would end up creating a separation between “form” and “content”, and an ultimately artificial art that would still uphold a set of conventions, however new.<sup>29</sup> Of course Pirandello was not alone in breaking through the fourth wall, being part of a wider European movement which in Italy included the experience of the *grotteschi*; but as Bassnett observes, what characterizes his work is “the way in which Pirandello

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VIII(1), *Il Secondo Ottocento. Lo stato unitario e l’età del positivismo*, p. 595.

<sup>27</sup> S. Monti, cit., pp. 39-40, 44.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>29</sup> “Ora la poetica del naturalismo voleva *imporre* all’arte questo valore obiettivo intenzionale, circospezioni e inibizioni; e conseguentemente, una tecnica meccanica, razionale, fondata sul metodo scientifico; una tecnica cioè che non fosse più il libero, spontaneo e immediato movimento della forma. Come questa era considerata dall’antica retorica, così la tecnica fu considerata dalla poetica del naturalismo: esteriore. E si ebbero così gli eccessi e le aberrazioni dell’oggettivismo, dopo il soggettivismo sfrenato del periodo romantico. Si vollero scontare tutte le esaltazioni troppo libere, scomposte e disordinate dei sentimenti e della volontà, con una schiavitù brutta agli oggetti della piatta realtà esteriore”: “Soggettivismo e oggettivismo nell’arte narrativa”, in *Saggi, poesie e scritti vari*, cit., pp.199-200.

moves beyond the use of the stage as a means to attack either bourgeois drama or popular highly rhetorical poetic drama of writers like D'Annunzio, to probe the whole nature of the convention of stage reality",<sup>30</sup> an implication that will be explored in the next section. This attack on dramatic habitual repertoire again seems to parallel the carnivalesque function of exposing the artificiality and non-absoluteness of generally accepted conventions or norms like those of naturalistic drama.

A first criticism of contemporary drama in *Sei personaggi* comes from the director himself right at the beginning: "Che vuole che le faccia io se dalla Francia non ci viene più una buona commedia" (p.35), implying that Italian works are not even considered worthy of attention, and the only author left is the controversial and incomprehensible Pirandello; the fictional "creation" of Madama Pace is a superior "prodigio" contrasted with a "verità volgare" (p.80), the truth which was the aim of Verismo; and the incestuous scene in the brothel appears like an insert from a bourgeois tragedy of the time, which is comically interrupted several times, exposed as a fiction and therefore undermined in its serious purpose as a naturalistic picture. Finally, the director's refusal to go as far as having the Father suggest to take off the Stepdaughter's dress, is exactly indicative of the bourgeois moral scruples that contaminate an intended objectivity of representation, turning it into what Monti defines above as the moralistic acceptance of conventions: "Benissimo! Per far saltare così tutto il teatro? [...] Ma che verità, mi faccia il piacere! Qua siamo a teatro! La verità, fino a un certo punto!" (p.95): a criticism levelled at the established morality and at what was considered "decent" to show, as opposed to truth.

The initial, interrupted rehearsal of *Il giuoco delle parti*, a play where already the

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<sup>30</sup> Susan Bassnett McGuire, *Luigi Pirandello*, London: Macmillan, 1983, p. 32.



“grotesque emphasizes and denounces the falsity of bourgeois life”.<sup>31</sup> is a preliminary foregrounding to the whole plot of the six characters’ “dramma doloroso” which runs along the lines of naturalistic drama: a bourgeois family in the grim reality of a loveless and broken marriage, female adultery and poisoned parent-children relationships, straightened circumstances leading to moral decay and incest, the trite confrontation of purity and sin (the Stepdaughter “con l’orrore del mio corpo contaminato, accanto a lei che mi stringeva forte forte coi suoi braccini amorosi ed innocenti” – p.110). It is a story that does not find a proper outlet on the stage, because it is continuously thwarted and mocked by the surrounding cast and by the characters themselves, especially the Stepdaughter.<sup>32</sup> She is cynically derisive of the Father’s “travagli spirituali” and pretensions to bourgeois morality, bursting into laughter when he admits always having “di queste maledette aspirazioni a una certa solida sanità morale” (p.55) that induce him to send the Son away from his mother to receive a “healthy” upbringing; she continuously insinuates the incestuous nature of the Father’s interest in herself since she was a child, when he very concernedly claims it as innocent, while the recurring Leitmotif of the Father buying a “cappellino” for her belies his pretensions to purity and acts as a metaphor for his sexually perverted instinct.<sup>33</sup> The Father’s attempt to “redeem” the family is for her “buffissimo” (p.61); and she counteracts his conventional

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<sup>31</sup> C. Donati, “Orchestrating the Incongruities”, cit., p. 251.

<sup>32</sup> Cornelia Van Der Voort remarks that “là dove finisce generalmente la commedia borghese, cioè con la scoperta dell’adulterio e la ricomposizione del nucleo primario, inizia la tragedia pirandelliana tutta incentrata sulla costruzione artificiosa di un nucleo nuovo, basato su un giuoco delle parti”: “Il guanto rovesciato. Giochi pirandelliani con le strutture famigliari del teatro borghese”, in S. Milioto (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 241-251. p. 244.

<sup>33</sup> In relation to the theme of incest and oedipal conflict, Gioanola gives a lucid assessment of the psychoanalytic readings done on this play, plausibly demonstrating the inapplicability of such a model: *op. cit.*, pp. 221-225; he rather claims that “la reciproca persecuzione è il vero legame che unisce [...] tutti i Personaggi [...]: la vera tragedia dei personaggi è quella di non poter arrivare alla tragedia, per impossibilità di ogni tipo di conflitto”: *ibid.*, p. 223.

blaming of the woman for the man's corruption with a tirade that carnivalizes the kind of moral cant and sophistications arising in naturalistic drama, and consequently the bourgeois morality lying behind it:

che schifo di tutte codeste complicazioni intellettuali, di tutta codesta filosofia che scopre la bestia e poi la vuol salvare, scusare [...] Perché quando si è costretti a “semplificarla” la vita – così, bestialmente – buttando via tutto l’ingombro “umano” d’ogni casta aspirazione, d’ogni puro sentimento, idealità, doveri, il pudore, la vergogna, niente fa più sdegno e nausea di certi rimorsi: lagrime di cocodrillo! (p.60)

Thus, she undermines an ideology that tries to suppress the level of physicality with the discourse of ideals and noble sentiments, bringing it down to what Bakhtin defines as the low materiality of the “bodily principle”; this moment also represents a very daring and theatrically unprecedented step taken by Pirandello in hinting at the sordid, socially repressed side of man in terms of paedophilia and incest, a reminder of the “bestiality” of man that is further explored and more strongly voiced in *Ubu Roi*.

### **3. The stage and real life**

Besides carnivalizing the conventions of bourgeois naturalistic drama, *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* also overturns the commonplace rationalistic division between the fictionality of the stage and the truth of life which such drama posits and sets out to represent faithfully, the clear-cut distinction between characters and real people (carnival is “without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators”<sup>34</sup>), and the idea itself of a supposed “reality” of life, in a way that is certainly reminiscent of some dramatic tradition like the typically Shakespearean concept of “the world as a stage”, but taking it to a paradoxical extreme, the upsetting claim that fiction is “more real” than life.

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<sup>34</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, cit., p. 122.

The self-referentiality of the initial scene is a first example of the flouting of the conventional fictional frame, the stage representing itself which undermines the rituality of performance, the halo of untouchable self-containment: the cast are about to rehearse *Il giuoco delle parti*, another play by Pirandello, which both hints at the “actual” situation of the audience watching *Sei personaggi* on stage, and breaks down the supposed screen between the fictional nature of the performance and the reality of the spectators, “lifting the curtain” as it were, by investing the stage with the same “reality” of an everyday rehearsal situation. This will be replicated at the beginning of the second part, when the ringing of the stage bells calling the cast on the scene doubles what the audience has presumably just experienced in being summoned from the foyer to their seats after the interval. The game is carried further with the mention of Pirandello himself and his difficult relationship with critics and audience (which again points at the present predicament outside the dramatic frame), and when the director, like a vicarious author, utters a self-reviewing commentary on the meaning of the play being rehearsed, as a pièce on the role-game of life<sup>35</sup> where people are shown to be characters representing themselves, “in un giuoco di parti assegnate, per cui lei che rappresenta la sua parte è volutamente il fantoccio di se stesso” (p.35 – Leone in the afore-mentioned play says: “Mi vedo e vi vedo giocare, e mi diverto”,<sup>36</sup> while at the same time he acts as the conscious puppeteer with the other characters). This also reverts back to the Director and the cast as being on a stage and as real people, and therefore also extends the idea of “playing a part” to the audience, in a puzzling, endless game of refractions between the present situation on and off the stage. The boundaries between stage and auditorium are

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<sup>35</sup> *Il giuoco delle parti* is usually quite freely translated as *The Rules of the Game*, whereas the proper rendering should be, in my opinion, something like *The Role-Play*, which would better bring out the original idea of life as an “acting of parts”.

<sup>36</sup> L. Pirandello, *Il giuoco delle parti*, in *Maschere Nude*, cit., p. 180.

also physically overcome by the Director's repeated to-ing and fro-ing between the two spaces to check the "effect" of the scene, thus acting himself alternatively as participant and spectator of his own "reality": "[s]iamo alla dissoluzione del teatro, della finzione del teatro, dello spazio teatrale come luogo di finzione [...] tutto diventa spettacolo, in una sorta di straniamento generale dalle parti che tutti hanno, nel teatro come nella società e nella vita".<sup>37</sup> The emphasis on the pretence, the reiterated acting, all contribute to foreground the artificiality and the limitations of the traditional theatre, conceived as a well-defined fictional space, which finds an echo in the Stepdaughter's explanation of the author's rejection "per avvilitamento o per sdegno del teatro, così come il pubblico solitamente lo vede e lo vuole" (p.109).

The theatrical dimension of life is once again highlighted in the characters' awareness of their dramatic potential ("Vedrà che scena da rappresentare! Superba!" – p.61; "Con un personaggio come me!" – p.65; "nati, come siamo, per la scena" – p.66), and in their critical perspective on their story as effectively made for the stage, a story which at the same time they claim as real and very alive in themselves ("Il dramma è in noi; siamo noi" – p.43). Again, the awareness of theatricality appears in their perception of themselves both as characters and living beings, which the Father and the Stepdaughter express in the explanation of their relationship with the reluctant author ("esser nato vivo dalla fantasia d'un autore che abbia poi voluto negargli la vita [...] personaggio lasciato così, vivo e senza vita" – p.108), and in the Son's refusal to perform ("non ho mai fatto scene, io [...] Non faccio nulla!" – p.119; "non mi presto! E interpreto così la volontà di chi non volle portarci sulla scena!" – p.120). The blurring of

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<sup>37</sup> Giorgio Barberi Squarotti, "La trilogia pirandelliana e il rinnovamento del teatro". in Enzo Lauro (ed.), *La trilogia di Pirandello. Atti del convegno internazionale sul teatro nel teatro pirandelliano (Agrigento 6-10 dicembre 1976)*, Agrigento: Centro Nazionale di Studi Pirandelliani, 1977. pp. 7-36, p. 33.

the boundaries between reality and fiction is forcefully articulated by the Stepdaughter in oxymoronic terms of “serious game”: “Siamo su un palcoscenico, cara! Che cos’è un palcoscenico? Ma, vedi? un luogo dove si giuoca a far sul serio. Ci si fa la commedia. E noi faremo ora la commedia. Sul serio, sai!” (p.116).

At this point, the initial sharp differentiation in the appearance of the characters as opposed to the actors seems intended to put the audience off track, to present a traditionally clear-cut categorization that, like others, is bound to be upset. The arrival of the six characters like an itinerant company during the rehearsals is not an instance of reality breaking into a momentary fiction, and neither is it the opposite, but the superimposition of different planes of fictionality, of acting and constant performance. The rather disorienting direct interaction of characters with the director and actors as if they were real too – which will be brought to a point of confused paroxysm in Pirandello’s later play *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* – begins here soon after the six characters reach the stage; their posing together as a perfect tragic picture leaves the actors surprised and delighted, as the stage direction details, “*come per uno spettacolo che sia stato loro offerto*” (p.41). The actors become spectators, will be later thrown off the centre-stage and start interrupting in their turn; and the “living” characters become actors, in the first reversal of roles that will continue to take place throughout the whole play, as the scenes are in turn performed by each group, this implicitly referring to real people (the actual audience) as a possible continuation of the “game”. The conventional distinctions are thus carnivalized and paradoxically overturned: the initial equalling of the role of the actor to a mad “game” (“che, se pazzia è, questa è pur l’unica ragione del loro mestiere... far parer vero quello che non è; senza bisogno, signore: per giuoco” – pp.39-40) falls back on the characters (“Che vuoi che siano! Pazzi o imbrogliani!” – p.68) at the end of the scene; and the director’s passionate defence of the actor’s

profession turns it around into an apparently contradictory definition: the noble one of “giving life” to “esseri vivi, più vivi di quelli che respirano e vestono panni! Meno reali forse; ma più veri!” (p.40). Martini commented with insight that “ciascuno di quei sei personaggi ha tale intensità di vita che essa trabocca dai limiti della realtà e ha diritto di nutrire di sé una creatura d’arte [...] lo spasimo di diventare finzione, di nascere all’eterno”.<sup>38</sup> Then, the really alive people, claims the Father, are the characters: “chi ha la ventura di nascere personaggio vivo, può ridersi anche della morte. Non muore più” (p.42); but at the same time, these characters have to act, to perform their story, in order to be alive, to fulfil their existence: “[v]ogliamo vivere, signore! [...] almeno per un momento, in loro” (p.43). By asserting that they know and represent the human condition of necessary acting in real life (“quel tanto che ciascuno recita nella parte che si è assegnata, o che gli altri gli hanno assegnato nella vita” – p.66), they imply that all human individuals are involved in this game of fictional roles and *have* to choose to perform them in order to be truly alive. They advocate that “sincerità” which Pirandello saw as ultimate self-consciousness and as a means to counteract self-deception: the recognition of the necessity “to live in fictions invented for oneself” and that “finally all structures are false, or at least arbitrary. To live like this is to live with absolute *sincerità* [...]. At such moments courage is indispensable, the courage to put one’s mask together as best one can”.<sup>39</sup> This theme, which emerges in this play but remains somehow contained within the realm of the theatre, as it is advocated by characters on a foregrounded stage, will be more deeply probed in *Enrico IV*, where it invests the concept of human personality and relationships in their entirety.

The whole idea of a “reality” of life is thus subverted, as is the traditional

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<sup>38</sup> F. M. Martini, cit., p. 221.

<sup>39</sup> A. Caputi, *op. cit.*, pp. 29, 61, 65.

dichotomy true/false, which since the beginning is the focus of the debate between the Father and the director: “Oh, signore, lei sa bene che la vita è piena d’infinite assurdità. le quali sfacciatamente non han neppure bisogno di parer verosimili; perché sono vere” (p.39): fiction is preferable to truth; the latter is equalled to absurdity, and the former, the life of the characters, is a reality “formata dalla stessa scena, e che ha più diritto di viver qui, che loro; perché assai più vera di loro” (p.80); it is not a game, not an illusion, but “si recita sul serio” (p.104). The paradox is then reached: not only is there no actual distinction between life on the stage and outside it, since they both partake of the dimension of theatricality and the playing of a part, in the same way as carnival “knows no footlights”, but in addition, the six characters are “alive” and “real” *because* they are contained in a play, therefore know no end, no death, whereas the actors are “fake” and pretend *because* they are contained in a “reality” which binds them to an end.

This also causes a subversion of the traditional time-sequence made of past-present-future: the nature of the character (and, potentially, of the real person) is that of an endless ritual repetition, an eternal present, “il momento eterno” (p.99) that fails to comply with human-made categorizations of “real” time: the Stepdaughter’s revelation of the ending early in the play is coherent with the characters’ world where past, present and future coincide, temporal terms do not mean anything because to them everything is present and relevant. What has already happened “avviene ora, avviene sempre! [...] sempre, sempre, per rinnovarmi sempre, vivo e presente, lo strazio che ho sofferto” (pp.98-99), the Mother’s children are “actually” dead or gone but nonetheless present (“Se ne stanno aggrappati a me [...] ma essi, per sè, non sono, non sono più!”): a ritual re-enactment of the moment that echoes the essence of the dramatic performance, a perpetual coming-back to life that overcomes the cycle of birth and death.

Thus, in a complete overturning of the conventional point of view, the dramatic life of a character is claimed to be “more real” than that of a living person, because it is

fixed, less changeable and therefore less illusory, insofar as less subjected to assumptions of solid truthfulness and sameness through time, than real life:

*Il Capocomico.* E dica per giunta che lei, con codesta commedia che viene a rappresentarmi qua, è più vero e reale di me!

*Il padre.* Ma questo senza dubbio, signore! [...La nostra realtà] Non cangia, non può cangiare, né essere altra, mai, perché già fissata – così – ‘questa’ – per sempre – (è terribile, signore!) realtà immutabile (p.107).

This carnivalesque undermining of distinctions reaches a peak at the end of the play, where again the initial debate between true and false is brought to a frantic point of confused shouts, where the arrival of the “light” leaves nothing but bewilderment:

*Il primo attore.* Ma che morto! Finzione! finzione! Non ci creda!

*Altri attori da destra.* Finzione! Realtà! realtà! E’ morto!

*Altri attori da sinistra.* No! Finzione! Finzione!

*Il padre (levandosi e gridando tra loro).* Ma che finzione! Realtà, realtà, signori! realtà! [...]

*Il capocomico (non potendone più).* Finzione! Realtà! Andate al diavolo tutti quanti! Luce! Luce! Luce!

*D’un tratto, tutto il palcoscenico e tutta la sala del teatro sfolgoreranno di vivissima luce [...] e tutti si guarderanno negli occhi, sospesi e smarriti.* (pp.122-123)

It is an invocation to light that “rappresenta l’esigenza del ritorno alla normalità teatrale, cioè alla rappresentazione e al luogo infinito e artificioso che le è proprio [...] scaccia lontano e fa sparire la rappresentazione della vita che vuol farsi arte”,<sup>40</sup> a need for clear-cut boundaries between the fictional and the real, of a reassuring limit to the illusion, that is however immediately frustrated by the startling reappearance of the characters’ shadows in the background stage light. This fundamental ambiguity forms the core of *Sei personaggi*, as will emerge further below: as Giudice asserts, “everything seems pointed toward a problematic end: no specific author’s intention holds a definitive line,

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<sup>40</sup> G. Barberi Squarotti, “La trilogia pirandelliana e il rinnovamento del teatro”, cit., p. 7.



and meanings rebound one after the other as in a game of mirrors”.<sup>41</sup>

#### 4. Role-play and hierarchy

Connected to the idea of life and performance is the carnivalesque element of role-play, which is of course a dominating theme in the play. Besides the obvious role-playing done by the actors in a dramatic piece, and by the characters as part of a text (although unwritten), the motif running through the play and characterizing most of Pirandello’s works is that of the acting game in which every human being is inevitably involved. The six characters, by coming onto the stage in the flesh, highlight this concept from the start: they constitute a hybrid between a textual (fictional) nature and a real one, and insofar as they are consciously determined to act out their part, they are more human than the real life actors (and people), in recognizing that the mask, the role, is not just superimposed, but inherent in human nature (“*Il padre*. [ho recitato] quel tanto che ciascuno recita nella parte che si è assegnata, o che gli altri gli hanno assegnato nella vita” – p.66). Because of this awareness, they can freely and voluntarily switch from the telling to the living of their story, from the direct experiencing of an emotion to the detached perception of its essentially illusory quality, being nonetheless conscious of the need to accomplish the performance, to stick to one’s role, this being the only possible way to live life consciously and truly. The Son, with his refusal to act, is no exception to this awareness, but just an example of the non-acceptance of the human condition, and he will eventually have to give in, given his inextricable bond to the story (“Dice che non c’entra, mentre è quasi lui il pernio dell’azione!” – p.65; “legato alla catena, indissolubilmente” – p.114). Indeed, his unwillingness to express

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<sup>41</sup> G. Giudice, “Ambiguity in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*”, in John Louis Di Gaetani (ed.), *A Companion to Pirandello Studies*, New York, Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1991, pp. 167-184, p. 177.

himself, which he claims cannot result in any action, is in itself already part of the dramatic situation, as the Father also stresses (“E non è una situazione anche questa? Questo tuo appartarti, così crudele” – p.64), and even the triggering factor to the tragic ending of the story which will eventually detain him as an active part of the final performance: “*Il Figlio resterà proteso verso la scaletta, ma, come legato da un potere occulto, non potrà scenderne*” (p.114).

The six characters’ awareness of performing a part means the voluntary taking up of masks and roles that reveals human life as a game, made up of changeable social images and positions that can be played around with, and indeed shifted from their usually recognized order, as is shown in the carnivalesque reversal of roles: the Director becomes an author, the actors become spectators, some people apparently coming from the outside audience supplant the actors, and the prompter turns out not to be a prompter at all, but a good short-hand writer (“Non saprò suggerire; ma la stenografia...” – p.71). This game of role-play, which was just a temporary game in *Arms and the Man*, is here propounded as the substance of life, and quite poignantly felt as a necessity, which already detaches it from the light-hearted dimension proposed by Bakhtin; as part of Pirandello’s constant poetics, it is a theme that will later be shown to attain a deeply tragic dimension in *Enrico IV*.

In a similar way to *Arms and the Man*, *Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore* also enacts the typically carnivalesque overturning of expected hierarchical roles, this time within the theatrical tradition (author – text – director – actors – characters), a fact that is already suggested by the title: in the same way as the process of writing is reversed from the action to the writing, and the supremacy of the text undermined, so the author is not at the origin of the work, but its ultimate goal, the point which the representation aims to find, and the characters defy and subvert authorial supremacy by the very act of

being alive and acting on stage without his consent or support. The hierarchical subversion can be seen as going even further, for Bentley: the characters' "search for an author can easily suggest a search for the Author of our being [...] God is meaning. God is authority and authorship. God is fatherhood. A poignant sense of the absence of all this burns through every page".<sup>42</sup> This could even be seen as conveying a critique of what Derrida calls the "theological" theatre, where "an author-creator [...] absent and from afar, is armed with a text and [...] lets representation represent him through [...] directors or actors, enslaved interpreters".<sup>43</sup> The characters have cut loose from this bondage, the author's importance is belittled by the Father ("Non ci vuol niente. Lo fanno tanti!" – p.66), and further dethroned by putting the director and the prompter in his place, although this is only a "mock-crowning", since their only task is that of "transcribing" an already existing text.

If the Director represents "la salvaguardia dell'Autore rispetto alle semplificazioni e agli arbitri dell'attore", on the grounds of a "capacità di decifrazione critico-interpretativa",<sup>44</sup> the play then proceeds to overthrow this new hierarchy as well: the director is the author's double and the first dethroning is reiterated; to his confused reaction at the unusual situation, the characters respond by gradually taking over the stage, and the rule too. The Father is the first to do it, when he rebukes the director for not keeping control of the stage: "Imponga un po' d'ordine, signore, e lasci che parli io" (p.52), already insinuating himself in the position of maintaining the discipline, and controlling the telling (and performance) of the story, in the same way as he had been the director of his personal drama in providing his wife with a new husband ("Lo pensò

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<sup>42</sup> E. Bentley, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>43</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, London: Routledge, 1978, p. 280.

<sup>44</sup> Roberto Alonge, "Pirandello, l'attore. il regista", in S. Milioto (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 145-162. pp. 149, 153.

invece lui, per loro – e lo fece!” – p.54). In the second part, it is the Stepdaughter who takes over, when the preparation for the scene in the brothel involves her in arguments with the director on how to manage the setting, and shows her actually dictating the terms and gradually ordering the others about in a way that replicates the director’s initial actions and words: “Non è possibile, non è possibile che la mamma stia qui!”; “Su, su, dunque, Madama.”; “Ma via, faccia entrare questo ‘vièchio señor’”; “Insomma, bisogna farla, questa scena! ... Su, avanti!”; “Lei se ne vada!”; “E lei faccia l’entrata! Non c’è bisogno che giri! Venga qua! Finga d’essere entrato! [...] E su! Metta fuori la voce!” (pp.84-85): which obviously rouses the director’s objections: “Oh guarda! Ma insomma, dirige lei o dirigo io?” (p.85). The Director further articulates this exchange of roles when he complains about the characters’ interruptions, significantly saying that it is “una maledizione provare davanti agli autori” (p.94), thus implying that they have effectively reversed the hierarchy and become the actual authors. The overthrowing will be complete in the third part, when they take total control of the stage, the Director submits to the Stepdaughter’s indications on how to perform the final scene of the Girl’s death, while the Son reacts to the Father’s imposition to perform and self-assumed directing role by knocking him off the stage. This subversion of the order of roles connected to an accepted hierarchy appears here as an instance of liberation along the lines of the carnivalesque drive as described by Bakhtin, but will be seen to spiral out of control, and break through the boundary of the purely comic, in the way it operates in Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*.

## **5. Mésalliances and the grotesque**

Critical interpretations of the grotesque have often highlighted its ambivalent nature, the absurdity and exaggeration “simultaneously laughable and horrifying or

disgusting”,<sup>45</sup> its union of the “playfully gay and carelessly fantastic” with the “ominous and sinister”, and the unsettling effect given by a play with “the secure level of reality” that “totally destroys the order and deprives us of our foothold”.<sup>46</sup> For Bakhtin, a function of “degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual. ideal. abstract”<sup>47</sup> is also inherent in the grotesque, which he sees as intimately connected with “the material bodily principle”, a down-to-earth materialism that has sometimes an exaggerated dimension, and a “deeply positive” character (however generalized). a distorted, ambivalent and debased imagery that “become[s] coarse and cynical if [...] seen from the point of view of another ideology”.<sup>48</sup>

In this respect, the period preceding the writing of *Sei personaggi* saw the flowering of some dramatic works named “grotteschi”, by authors such as Luigi Chiarelli, Luigi Antonelli, Rosso di San Secondo, and Massimo Bontempelli, which in fact aimed at “rendere impraticabile la drammaturgia borghese della famiglia e del lavoro mediante il gigantesco specchio deformante che davanti a questa drammaturgia veniva posto”, resulting in a “scomposizione grottesca dell’unicità del punto di vista [...]e] dell’uomo che non può più identificarsi coi valori sociali”.<sup>49</sup> In Twohill’s opinion,

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<sup>45</sup> Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque*, London: Methuen & Co., 1972, p. 3.

<sup>46</sup> Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1981, pp. 21, 30, 59. Kayser comes interestingly close to Bakhtin when he concludes that the grotesque is “an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world [...]”. The various forms of the grotesque are the most obvious and pronounced contradictions of any kind of rationalism and any systematic use of thought”: *ibid.*, p. 185, his emphasis. Bernard McElroy also shares this view of the grotesque as teasing the “rationalizations and compensations of everyday life” by its playing with the underlying monstrous, primitive, uncanny: *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*, Basingstoke and London: MacMillan, 1989, p. 18. Incidentally, Bakhtin devotes a few pages to Kayser’s discussion of the grotesque: see M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., pp. 46-52.

<sup>47</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., pp. 18-19. Here Bakhtin also traces the history of the concept of the grotesque throughout the centuries: cf. pp. 30-58.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150.

<sup>49</sup> C. Muscetta (ed.), *op. cit.*, vol. IX (1), *Il Novecento. Dal Decadentismo alla crisi dei modelli*,

Pirandello's play carries the drive of the grotesque even deeper, to

a figure of difference between the rationally ordered world [...] and the realm of the imaginary that points up the fictional qualities of self-construction. Therefore, in Pirandello, the grotesque is an inward aberration rather than an invasion of the perverse [...]. Yet, these plays do not feature entirely horrific characters; rather, they depict and explode distorted lives [...]. What is grotesque is that these lives reflect cultural norms in a mirror that distorts culture's falsely unified self-image.<sup>50</sup>

Twohill also observes that this sense of the grotesque is similar to Bakhtin's idea of carnival,<sup>51</sup> and indeed this concept seems to be aptly described by the Bakhtinian categories of carnival: in *Sei personaggi*, it seems to be contained within the level of ambiguity, but it also appears very clearly in *Ubu Roi*, as will be discussed in the next chapter, in a way that takes it to a very sinister and disturbing extent.

In relation to the bourgeois ideology of decorum and propriety, the appearance of Madama Pace, as already noticed, is a supremely grotesque moment, full of "low" and exaggerated features, from the material heaviness of the body ("*megea d'enorme grassezza*" – p.79) to the pathetically garish hair ("*pomposa parrucca di lana color carota... una rosa fiammante da un lato*") and outfit ("*vestita con goffa eleganza di seta rossa sgargiante, un ventaglio di piume [...] la sigaretta accesa*"). It is a really ambivalent apparition of ugliness and attempted beauty, of middle age trying to look youthful, a gawky effort at fashionable elegance that is strongly reminiscent of the old lady in Pirandello's essay on humour, "coi capelli ritinti [...] e poi goffamente imbellettata e parata d'abiti giovanili",<sup>52</sup> that excites a mixed reaction of laughter at her

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p. 453.

<sup>50</sup> Timothy P. Twohill, "Flimsy Masks and Tortured Souls: Luigi Pirandello and the Grotesque". in Michael J. Meyer (ed.), *Literature and the Grotesque*, Amsterdam – Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1995, pp. 85-97, pp. 85-86.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>52</sup> L. Pirandello, *L'umorismo*, Roma: Newton, 1993, p. 78.

ridiculous appearance and pity at the pathetic reality behind that mask. Here, however, the ambiguous reaction of the surrounding cast tends not to the “sentimento del contrario” which allows human understanding to go beyond the superficial perception of the comic, but rather to a mixture of attraction and repulsion, which is typical of the grotesque imagery that unites the beautiful and the ugly, elements of young and old, of life and death, like the “senile pregnant hags” referred to by Bakhtin.<sup>53</sup> While the Stepdaughter is humbly drawn to Madama Pace, the actors run off “*con un urlo di spavento*” (p.80) and protest violently, but then come back fascinated to watch and listen to her; she is the embodiment of luxuriousness and licentiousness that is both repugnant and attractive, and exposes, by her very presence, the hypocritical moral norms of the bourgeois society that uses and supports but hides her. Her self-important opening in a freakishly comic language again undermines the pathetic seriousness of the Stepdaughter’s “sacrifice” and excites roaring laughter in the cast, and her maxim of crude, down-to-earth common-sense (“viejito [señor...] ché se no te dà gusto, te porta prudencia!” – p.83) “brings down” bourgeois moral values and dignity, and, indirectly, the tragic sentiments underlying the Mother’s outraged reaction to her (“Strega! strega! assassina! la figlia mia!” – p.84). This in turn is the cause of another ambivalent moment, as the Mother’s desperate attack on Madama Pace leads to the latter’s grotesque scene where she furiously picks up the wig and pompously exits amid general laughter.

The Stepdaughter’s attitude as well is a grotesque, deeply ambivalent mixture of roguishness, passion, cynicism, tenderness, hysteria, laughter and sadness that alternate with startling but fascinating rapidity, and make her the most vital character on the stage, as opposed to the static “seriousness” of the others. She is another source of

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<sup>53</sup> See for example *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 25.

several grotesque moments, from the initial queer juxtaposition of the sad confession of being newly orphaned with the carefree cabaret-dance (which again seems to have a spell-like attraction on the cast), to her mischievous insistence on racy particulars like her infant underwear when the Father used to watch her “grow up” (“le mutandine più lunghe della gonna – piccina così” – p.56), and her nakedness during her encounter with the Father. In this scene she also undergoes a process of grotesque uncrowning and mock-crowning, in being divested of her mourning hat and dress, and being offered a new “crown” – the “cappellino” – a metaphor of the sexual exchange. She upholds an instance of reality in wanting to perform that scene in all its “coarseness” (“lei vuol risparmiargli l’orrore d’essersi un bel giorno trovata tra le braccia, dopo averla invitata a togliersi l’abito [...] quella bambina ch’egli si recava a vedere uscire dalla scuola” – p.97); and she seems to represent the Bakhtinian “material bodily principle” in her passionate assertion of the reality of the animal instincts of the human being, in contrast to the sophisticated hypocrisy and false morality of bourgeois ideology, thus bringing out the “beast” in the Father (“Perché quando si è costretti a ‘semplificarla’ la vita – così, bestialmente – buttando via tutto l’ingombro ‘umano’ d’ogni casta aspirazione, d’ogni puro sentimento, idealità, doveri, il pudore, la vergogna, niente fa più sdegno e nausea di certi rimorsi” – p.60). Her repeated shrill, sinister bursts of laughter in the middle of extremely serious situations give these a distorted, debased, tragic-comic effect: when the Father expresses his feelings and “moral” torments; when she alludes to his incestuous passion or tells of the scene in the brothel; when the actors solemnly replicate the characters’ parts (a scene that has itself a grotesque, caricature effect); when the Son desperately tries to leave the stage. Finally, her repeated laugh at the end confers a sinister ambivalence to the tragic moments of the children’s death and of the characters’ lingering on the stage, and distorts the effect of the surreal ending with an ambiguous grimace that seems to sum up the whole mood of the play, suspended half-



way between tragedy and comedy, between life and death, in a way that suggests the disturbing potential of the carnivalesque element of the grotesque – an aspect that will be further investigated in *Ubu Roi*.

This grotesque blending of opposites like the tragic and the comic, the ugly and the beautiful, the good and the bad, can be also traced in the play's carnivalistic *mésalliances*, that question the ideological system by the “free and spontaneous combination of formerly self-enclosed and fixed categories”,<sup>54</sup> and undermine the “hierarchical worldview” by the unification of “the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant”.<sup>55</sup>

The intended use of partial masks for the six characters (“*tagliate in modo che lascino liberi gli occhi, le narici e la bocca*” – p.36) and the extremely detailed description of their human features (for example the Father: “*un sorriso incerto e vano [...] occhi azzurri ovati, lucidissimi e arguti*” – p.37) in the stage-direction is a first example of this mingling of categories: their appearance forms a hybrid between the natural humanity of living beings and the rigid artificiality of statues, thus suggesting a more complex concept of “character”, not simply as a fictional creation, but as a living ambivalent entity that unites the supposedly opposite categories of fiction and reality, and physically illustrates the play's constant game on such boundaries (“*I Personaggi non dovranno infatti apparire come fantasmi, ma come realtà create [...] e dunque più reali e consistenti della volubile naturalità degli Attori*” – p.37). Quite interestingly, the static mask over the actor's face will be used in *Ubu Roi* as well, but the effect there is not to evoke grotesque ambiguity, but rather to de-humanize the character, simplifying

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<sup>54</sup> M. Gardiner, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>55</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, cit., p. 123.

it to the extreme of grotesque brutality, as is argued in the next chapter.

Madama Pace again represents another carnivalistic *mésalliance*, besides her grotesque appearance: this accounts for her comic, indeed hilarious effect on the stage. but she also generates contradictory responses in the others (the actors run off screaming with fear and then come close to observe her and finally applaud her sneeringly, the Stepdaughter looks up to her almost as a mentor, and the Mother attacks her with desperate fury) and her role in the story is extremely dire, as the by-no-means comic promoter of the Stepdaughter's degradation to a sordid life of prostitution. It is this unusual combination of clownish and grim elements that offers an almost Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, a different, carnivalized perspective on this repressed side of bourgeois society, debasing its pretensions to social morality and propriety represented in the Father's "moral scruples" and the Son's rejection of an adulterous mother and "bastard" siblings.

The Mother too is the embodiment of a *mésalliance*: her appearance of a woman oppressed by sorrow for her lost children and estranged son, her mask strewn with wax tears, her statuary dress, her grieving attitude and moves ("*ora si nasconderà il volto, ora metterà qualche gemito*" – p.86; "*con le braccia protese verso di lui*" – p.123), and the stage-direction itself link her explicitly with the Christian effigies of the *Mater dolorosa*. This is an almost blasphemous association, since this profane mother is very far from the Holy Virgin, indeed an adulterous woman who has left her husband and her eldest son who hates her, and has indirectly led to her daughter's corruption and her youngest children's death. She is in fact crushed by remorse and shame ("*atterrita e schiacciata da un peso intollerabile di vergogna e d'avvilimento*" – p.37), which also associate her with the Catholic discourse of sin and penance and the prescribed attitude of humility and passive expiation; this link of sacred and profane seems to amount to a further carnivalesque mockery of the social system of values that hypocritically

censures human instincts, imposes shame on and rejects this mother.

## 6. Telling the story

The possibility of narrating, of relating one's story, is another motif that runs through *Sei personaggi*, but it is an endlessly abortive one, in the same way as the performances both of the initial play and the characters' "commedia" are repeatedly interrupted; different narrations mingle together in a heteroglot, multi-voiced version of the original story, and this also reflects on the impossibility of the whole play itself of coming to a definitive statement or act, and indeed carnivalizes the whole idea of affirming a univocal truth, of saying something that is ultimately true.<sup>56</sup> Here, as will be shown below, the action is also deeply critical of the traditional dramatic discourse itself, in the same way as only the novel is purported by Bakhtin to do: "the *auto-criticism of discourse* is one of the primary distinguishing features of the novel as a genre. Discourse is criticized in its relationship to reality: its attempt to faithfully reflect reality, to manage reality and to transpose it (the utopian pretences of discourse), even to replace reality as a surrogate for it".<sup>57</sup>

The first attempt of the characters to tell their story takes place with the Father who, as soon as he steps on the stage trying to win the Director's interest, is immediately joined by the Stepdaughter who does the same in an alluring manner ("*facendosi avanti al Capocomico, sorridente, lusingatrice*" – p.42), whereupon the Father ousts her and regains control of the narrative; soon however the Stepdaughter catches the Director's attention again and manages to get across the whole plot herself.

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<sup>56</sup> Silvio D'Amico finds in this play another expression of the "straziato poeta del soggettivismo e della relatività: ossia di questo nostro sciagurato tempo che ha perduto la fede in una realtà, in una verità oggettiva [...] la verità consiste unicamente nella rappresentazione che noi ci facciamo": cit., p. 251.

<sup>57</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel", cit., p. 412.

This pattern is constantly repeated, the characters always criticizing, shushing or interrupting each other in order to tell the story in their own words (*“per non darle tempo di parlare”*, *“tentando d’intromettersi”*, *“scacciandola”* are some examples of frequent stage-directions – pp.58,65), to affirm their own truth<sup>58</sup> and to win the cast over to their side (expressions like *“non è vero”* and *“creda a me”* occur very often). The characters are very conscious of each other’s manipulation of the story (*“Il padre. Ma io non narro! voglio spiegargli. – La figliastra. Ah, bello, sì! A modo tuo!”* – p.52; *“Quello che è possibile sulla scena ve lo siete combinato insieme tutti e due. di là, grazie! Lo capisco bene! Egli vuol subito arrivare alla rappresentazione [...] dei suoi travagli spirituali; ma io voglio rappresentare il mio dramma! il mio!”* – p.96), and they always try to impose their definitions of each other (*“No, che pazza! E’ peggio!”* – p.45; *“indifferente, gelido lui [...] pieno di sprezzo per me”* – p.46; *“Non è una donna; è una madre!”* – p.48; *“Tu sei un cinico imbecille, e te l’ho detto cento volte!”* – p.50).

Each intervention is a mocking or criticizing comment and gives a different bias to the other’s preceding words, and this contradicting process involves not only the two main speaking persons, the Father and the Stepdaughter, but also the less verbally active Mother and Son, who in fact significantly intervene in the play only to deny another’s statement or to defend their own version – this is especially noticeable in the otherwise reluctant Son, who is drawn into the action precisely by his wish to dispute the Father’s interpretation of the facts (*“Sì, stiano a sentire che squarcio di filosofia, adesso! Parlerà loro del Dèmone dell’Esperimento.”* – p.50). He eventually takes his part in the acting by narrating the final scene, at the same time as it is performed by the others, like a voice-over speaker; but even this longed-for accomplishment of the telling and acting

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<sup>58</sup> Mancuso very appropriately describes them as if *“pervasi da un demone della verità”*: review in *Il Popolo di Roma*, cit., p. 228.

yields no final truth, it remains on a suspended tone, leaving the spectators wondering if it was all a fiction, expression of a “umanità che balbetta, e [...] vorrebbe essere umanità che si libera nella parola profonda e sicura”.<sup>59</sup>

Each version of the story constitutes its own discourse, intended as the expression of a different point of view, thus representing an instance of what Bakhtin calls “dialogism” in language, or “heteroglossia”: in his terms, an individual, “unitary language” is “posited [...] opposed to the realities of heteroglossia [...] crystallizing [...] working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization”.<sup>60</sup> The characters, with their interruptions and doublings, perceive and counteract this attempt at a monological truth, the imposition of a single version of the story, therefore together they create a multifaceted, heteroglot narrative on the stage; even the Stepdaughter’s concern with truth (“La verità! la verità, signore!” – p.96) and with a faithful representation of the “dramma” ends up being only aimed at capturing the Director’s curiosity, therefore another instance of narration, only one story among others. This effect of carnivalesque ambiguity and contradiction, which has been observed in *Arms and the Man* as a game with a final resolution, pervades here the whole play as a narrating act that puzzles rather than communicates, that confuses rather than represents a reality which remains ultimately un-definable and elusive, and, as signified by the Stepdaughter’s final harsh giggle, both tragic and laughable. It also seems to carry out dramatically what Pirandello describes in *L’umorismo* as the role of the humourist – which again builds a link between Pirandello’s and Bakhtin’s ideas – and can thus be regarded as his own “shade” of dialogism: the ambiguous carnivalesque effect recalls the mixed reaction of “lo sdegno, il dispetto, l’irrisione dell’umorista”.

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<sup>59</sup> R. Simoni, review in *Corriere della Sera*. cit., p. 238.

<sup>60</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”. cit., pp. 270-271.

whose discourse appears as the polyphony of a dialogic utterance: “[o]gni sentimento, ogni pensiero, ogni moto che sorga nell’umorista si sdoppia subito nel suo contrario: ogni sì in un no, che viene in fine ad assumere lo stesso valore del sì. Magari può fingere talvolta l’umorista di tenere soltanto da una parte: dentro intanto gli parla l’altro sentimento”.<sup>61</sup> This seems to amount again to the refusal to say the final word, and to a significant congruity with the Bakhtinian heteroglossia of point of view.<sup>62</sup>

The characters’ narrating impetus is apparently at odds with the dramatic form that contains it, as signified by the Stepdaughter’s and the Director’s protests (“Qui non si narra! qui non si narra!” – p.52; “Ma tutto questo è racconto, signori miei!” – p.57; “Veniamo al fatto [...] Queste son discussioni!” – p.60). However, it is actually itself action and constitutes a mingling of genres, an insertion of a narrative, novelistic discourse within a theatrical event that carnivalizes and transcends traditional categorizations and creates a truly heteroglot discourse even on the level of “form”: it is the Bakhtinian “novelization” of another genre, the creation of a “system of intersecting planes”<sup>63</sup> within a dramatic piece, which therefore can be described as polyphonic, despite Bakhtin’s claim that this quality only pertains to the novel.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *L’umorismo*, cit., p. 86.

<sup>62</sup> As S. Vannini remarks, “Pirandello recognizes the characters’ need to reveal their individuality through their speeches, and the relevance of their freedom to tell their own stories spontaneously, at the expense of the omniscient control of their author. In other words, he is aware of the characters’ dialogical importance [...] In *Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore*, Pirandello extends to the limit the idea of the author’s recognition of characters’ alterity.”: cit., pp. 32-34.

<sup>63</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse”, cit., p. 48.

<sup>64</sup> Donati observes that the play “is polyphonic in the sense that all the characters have their own mode of expression in artistic terms. But it is not dialogic as the different points of view do not so much interact as clash with each other without any possibility of mediation” in the play’s search for meaning (“Orchestrating the Incongruities”, cit., p. 239). Besides the fact that in Bakhtin’s writings there is no such distinction of domains between the two terms, and the juxtaposition of many consciousnesses is in

In this respect, the genesis of the work is also significant, from a series of tales of a narrative nature to a play, not in the sense that the formal development is not mature or complete, but that the narrative element also has a thematic value, being part of the play's discussion on the possibility to tell or show unequivocally. The tales themselves speak of the characters and of their possible future embodiment in a narrative piece, a meta-narrative act that only partly conveys the intended story, and ultimately refuses to accomplish the project. Then, the shift to a dramatic situation where the rejected characters come to tell their story can be considered as a further step in this direction, a staging which is a multiple *mise-en-abîme* of unconcluded narration, both on the part of the author and the characters, thus leading to a thematic open-endedness, a narrative "heteroglossia".

Donati, in analysing the play's evolution from the tales, thinks that the characters' drama "cannot be acted out on stage [...] it can be narrated, explained and commented on but not made into theatre", hence the author's refusal to write their play, and the critic's difficulty "to understand why [Pirandello] thought he could 'cavarne un bel dramma'".<sup>65</sup> However, this conclusion does not seem to take into account the fact that this authorial refusal is intradiegetic, enclosed inside the larger frame of the play *Sei personaggi*, and therefore cannot be regarded as identical with the writer Pirandello; and the drama does indeed get some sort of staging, by leaps and bounds: what it does not get, is the rationality and coherence of a traditional performance, the undisturbed and self-assured unfolding of the story. Furthermore, the supposed "un-stageability" and consequent narration appear to be intimately linked with the whole play's statement of

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fact said to create the polyphony of the "great dialogue" (see *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, cit., p. 40), the "clash" between the voices, as opposed to the "mediation", is in my opinion part of the statement illustrated by the play, of the ultimate impossibility to come to a mediated, common, and therefore definable "meaning".

<sup>65</sup> C. Donati, "Orchestrating the Incongruities", cit., pp. 240-241.

the impossibility of coming to a definitive “representation”, intended both as performance and as discourse on reality; the characters’ frantic insistence to “tell” can be taken as indicating the perpetual and inconclusive human effort to come to terms with, to explain and define an experience of life that is ungraspable in its constant, heteroglot mutability. In this sense, besides the fact that the dramatic form seems better suited to convey and reverberate the ongoing discourse of the theatrical dimension inherent in human life and the necessity of masks and role-play, I agree with Donati that this “state of conflict” between the characters’ different verbalizations coincides with what “made the dialogic formulation of the projected novel impossible in the first place”, that is the removal of the “‘theological’ word from the text”, the “organizing point of view”,<sup>66</sup> the “axiological” narrative act that explains monologically, that draws univocal conclusions. The irresolute conflict of voices conveys Pirandello’s groundbreaking dramatic novelty, that sets this work apart from the achievement of Shaw’s *Arms and the Man*, where the debate for the truth has a final resolution: “the play is always breaking down in disputes about the idea and the reality [...]. It is in these disputes that the Pirandellesque brilliance most closely resembles the Shavian brilliance [...]. But Pirandello, unlike Shaw, transcends his paradoxes by accepting them as final [...] as various versions of a final split in human nature”.<sup>67</sup> More radically than Shaw, as Giudice observes,

che la verità sia essa stessa ambigua e inafferrabile nelle radici, non molti ancora hanno detto, almeno in teatro, come Pirandello dice in quest’opera. L’ambiguità e l’equivoco rappresentano anche l’originalità e il senso contemporaneo dell’opera, il suo ritrovarsi, a pieno titolo, in una storia culturale che cerca di ripresentare l’uomo a se stesso, al di qua di tutti gli schemi e pregiudizi tradizionali, e quindi al di qua di un’ottimistica e troppo intelligibile autocoscienza.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., pp. 241-242.

<sup>67</sup> F. Fergusson, cit., p. 40.

<sup>68</sup> G. Giudice, *op. cit.*, p. 347.



## 7. Dialogic identities

The act of telling in this play is indeed strictly linked to the problem of identity: the characters' obsessive effort at verbalization of the story is explained by both Hodess and Bentley as an act of self-preservation, therefore equating the utterance of a definite and fully-expressed version of reality with the possibility of an analogously stable and final discourse on the speaking subject: referring to Laing's psychoanalytic approach. Hodess observes that *Sei personaggi*

yields an image of the characters as schizoid personalities whose *entire motivation* is the preservation of a self that is structured precariously around a single moment of existence. In their fierce determination to strip away everything but that one moment of recognition, the six characters dramatize the dissolution of the self, or personality [...]. In Laing's terms, the Father is talking to live, to avoid being killed. His self-justification is an act of self-preservation; he is fighting off the implosion of the outside world.<sup>69</sup>

Kennedy also justly remarks that what constitutes the script of the "dramma" the characters so desperately cling to, is nothing but "a few murmured speech fragments surrounded by silence... and two heart-rending screams", which comes to signify the dissolution of character: "[h]ence the tragi-comic contradiction of wanting to preserve each syllable of speech fragment intact, while insisting that the whole speech-sequence is untrue to the self";<sup>70</sup> the impossibility of both action and verbalization form therefore the substance of the play.

Verbalization, in Bakhtinian terms, is the creation of a discourse which is always ideologically biased, has the power of definition, but is also immersed in a dialogic arena of other discourses, of other words that may distort or conflict with it; therefore

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<sup>69</sup> Kenneth M Hodess, "In Search of the Divided Self: A Psychoanalytic Inquiry into the Drama of Pirandello", in M. Mignone (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 135-145, p. 138 (the work by Laing referred to is *The Divided Self*). Bentley expresses similar observations in *The Pirandello Commentaries*, cit., pp. 64-67.

<sup>70</sup> Andrew K. Kennedy, "Six Characters: Pirandello's Last Tape", *Modern Drama*, 1969, 12: 1-9, pp. 4, 7.

there can be no final, definitive word, but a changing multi-voicedness of discourse:

such use of another's words is extremely widespread, especially in dialogue, where one speaker very often literally repeats the statement of the other speaker, investing it with new value and accenting it in his own way [...]. Someone else's words introduced into our own speech inevitably assume a new (our own) interpretation and become subject to our evaluation of them; that is, they become double-voiced. [...] Our practical everyday speech is full of other people's words.<sup>71</sup>

Contact with others is not only limited, for Bakhtin, to the experience of a different discourse, but it goes as far as the experience of the self "through the eyes of" the other, by means of the other's images and words about oneself: "[t]he reflection of the self in the empirical other through whom one must pass in order to reach *I-for-myself* [...]. I realize myself initially through others: from them I receive words, forms, and tonalities for the formation of my initial idea of myself [...] a person's consciousness awakens wrapped in another's consciousness".<sup>72</sup> Confrontation with the other, and with the otherness of oneself in the perspective of others, has for Bakhtin a positive connotation of a richer, fuller experience of reality.

The dialogic instability of discourse, on the other hand, is not only inherent in the confrontation with the other's word, but also in the intimate mutability of the self, the subject itself has no final definition about it because it is in constant, dialogic evolution:

The form of my life-from-within is conditioned by my rightful folly or insanity of *not coinciding* – of not coinciding *in principle* – with me myself as a given [...].

My own word about myself is in principle incapable of being the last word, the word that consummates me. For me myself, my own word is an act that I perform, and my performed act is alive only in the unitary and unique event of being. Hence, no act performed by me is capable of consummating my own life, for it connects my life with the open infinitude of the event of

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<sup>71</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, cit., pp. 194-195.

<sup>72</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, "From Notes Made in 1970-71". cit., pp. 137-138, his italics.

being.<sup>73</sup>

This sense of the impossibility of a final word and the rigidity of the attempt at a verbal definition, especially in reference to the individual, is dramatically stressed in *Sei personaggi*; but here, unlike Bakhtin's principle, the dialogic multiplicity of the subject in the confrontation with the other acquires a less positive dimension, the unsettling sense of the dissolution of the unitary self. Donati rightly observes that "la poetica dell'umorismo [...] può essere definita essenzialmente in base ad un principio dialogico", but that unlike Bakhtin, "secondo la poetica dell'umorismo la pluralità dei punti di vista e dei modelli interpretativi del reale è all'origine di una visione conflittuale e negativa dei rapporti umani";<sup>74</sup> a vision of the self that is suggested here on the level of ambiguity, but that will be carried to a more deeply tragic extreme in *Enrico IV*.

The first time that this problem of the self is presented in *Sei personaggi* is precisely in connection with the issue of speaking, with the Father's intervention about the dialogic instability of "words" – which is very closely paraphrased in one of Enrico IV's speeches: "nelle parole ch'io dico metto il senso e il valore delle cose come sono dentro di me; mentre chi le ascolta, inevitabilmente le assume col senso e col valore che hanno per sè, del mondo com'egli l'ha dentro" (p.52). He stresses the heteroglot nature of discourse, the multi-voicedness of the word which is related to every individual's idiosyncrasy and experience of reality ("Abbiamo tutti dentro un mondo di cose; ciascuno un suo mondo di cose!" – p.52), and which cannot therefore result in a single meaning but in a multiplicity of significance, and sometimes in total diversity and irreconcilability ("Crediamo d'intenderci; non c'intendiamo mai!" – p.52; "Comincio

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<sup>73</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity", cit., p. 127 (his italics); p. 143.

<sup>74</sup> C. Donati, *Il sogno e la Ragione*, cit., pp. 82, 90.

già... non so, a sentir come false, con un altro suono, le mie stesse parole” – p.74), and in the impossibility of truly understanding others. Bakhtin described the perception of the other as a kind of authoring of their identity, of “creative understanding”, which has the positive value of an enrichment of perspective: here, on the contrary, the undermining of the unitary discourse and point of view has a disorienting, troubling sense.

The characters constantly protest that they do not recognize themselves in the actors’ replicas of them (“a noi pare un’altra cosa, che vorrebbe esser la stessa, e intanto non è!” – p.94): they in fact discover “that perfectly distinctive value-coefficient with which our life presents itself to the other – a coefficient which is completely different from the coefficient with which we experience our own life in ourselves”.<sup>75</sup> Hearing oneself described by another, or seeing another’s image of oneself, involves an inevitable difference (“davanti a uno specchio che, per di più, non contento d’agghiacciarci con l’immagine della nostra stessa espressione, ce la ridà come una smorfia irriconoscibile di noi stessi” – p.119) that has a shattering effect on the individual’s idea of oneself as a single and consistent entity: like the protagonist of Pirandello’s novel *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, the characters come to the troubling realization of the hundred different identities that a person can take up in the eyes of a hundred other people. At the same time, however, because every individual discourse tends to be a monologic version, the hundred images of oneself reflected by others assume the nature of a rigid and immovable definition that captures the self in one single instant, from one point of view, and freezes it into a univocal whole. “agganciati e sospesi, alla gogna, per un’intera esistenza, come se questa fosse assommata tutta in quell’atto” (p.62). Hence the tragic situation of the characters, rather than in their

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<sup>75</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity”. cit., pp. 15-16.

“dramma”, lies in this apprehension from the outside of their static image: “la visione le ha irrigidite [...] perchè tutti insieme *si vedono vivere* in quell’*attimo eterno*, in cui per loro si è trasformato l’*attimo fuggente* di questa nostra vita mortale”.<sup>76</sup>

This painful sense of asymmetry between the self and the others’ image of it seems at times to share borders with the Freudian distinction between the individualistic Id and the Super-Ego which has a social matrix. As the Father says, “ciascuno – fuori, davanti agli altri – è vestito di dignità: ma dentro di sè sa bene tutto ciò che nell’intimità con se stesso si passa, d’inconfessabile. Si cede, si cede alla tentazione; per rialzarcene subito dopo, magari, con una gran fretta di ricomporre intera e solida, come una pietra su una fossa, la nostra dignità, che nasconde e seppellisce ai nostri stessi occhi ogni segno e il ricordo stesso della vergogna” (p.59). The Father, in calling into question the hypocrisy of social decorum and convenience, also points to the hiatus between an intimate side of the individual and an image imposed or projected on him by the others in Freudian terms, and which involves him in a perpetual social fiction:

Pirandello identifica la ‘maschera’ in quel pregiudizio metafisico che è l’anima (l’io, la coscienza). Poiché l’assunzione di valori modelli comportamenti inidonei è spesso una forma di adattamento che la lotta per la vita impone in diversa misura a tutti gli uomini, la finzione assume un carattere necessitante fissato dalle stesse modalità d’interazione sociale come i rituali, le convenienze, ecc. All’essere autentico di ogni uomo si sovrappone quindi un’identità fittizia, rispondente alla forma delle relazioni sociali di cui è funzione: perciò il parere degli altri è una dimensione della coscienza che rende impossibile la distinzione fra l’essere originario e il Super-ego sociale.<sup>77</sup>

However, the Father also tries to reject the rigidity of this image, and to

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<sup>76</sup> E. Levi, cit., p. 258.

<sup>77</sup> M. Ermilli, “Vita, arte e società nei primi saggi di Pirandello (1893-1908)”, in P. D. Giovanelli (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 320-344, p. 333. The critic connects this notion with Nietzsche’s anticipation of the “scoperta della pluralità del soggetto” whereby man is the “risultato provvisorio di un sistema di forze in perpetuo contrasto”: *ibid.*, p. 326.

overcome the Freudian dialectic of the constant war between the original and the social self; in fact, there does not even seem to be an “authentic I” onto which the superimposition of the mask takes place: “ci accorgiamo [...] di non esser tutti in quell’atto, e che dunque una atroce ingiustizia sarebbe giudicarci da quello solo” (p.62): there is always motion and change, and a hundred different “I”s that rebel against the final categorizations of the social, not in the name of the Id, but rather for the sake of a multiplicity of the individual.

Then, according to the ambiguity that pertains to the six characters’ nature, the Father laments, as a “living” person, this fixity which is attributed to the individual by the other’s glance, claiming that everyone is “‘tanti’, secondo tutte le possibilità d’essere che sono in noi” (p.62). He and the other Personaggi, as characters, complain about the rigidity of the fictional univocal roles which entrap them, painfully longing for the opposite changeability and complexity of the “real” person: they are given masks, a typified attitude that tends to the inhumanity of the allegorical dimension, a “fictional reality” that “[n]on cangia, non può cangiare, né esser altra, mai, perchè fissata – così – ‘questa’ – per sempre – (è terribile, signore!) realtà immutabile”. as opposed to the living person’s reality that “può cangiare dall’oggi al domani” (p.107). Here drama itself, in the shape of the pre-set, finished work, is dramatically foregrounded and exposed as a fixed illusion, “in quanto finzione [...] un sistema regolato che si contrappone alla fluidità magmatica del vivere e alla imprevedibilità dell’esistenza, è l’essere di contro all’esistere, l’eterno che contraddice il transeunte”.<sup>78</sup> The characters want to “live”, therefore not to be set in one immutable, preordained role but experience the undefined, endless possibilities that life offers, the open-ended

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<sup>78</sup> Lucio Lugnani, “Teatro dello straniamento ed estraniamento dal teatro in *Questa sera si recita a soggetto*”, in E. Lauretta (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 53-114, pp. 53-54.

complexities of being, “For in order to live and act, I need to be unconsummated. I need to be open for myself [...] someone who does not coincide with his already existing makeup”;<sup>79</sup> but their tragic destiny is that they are stuck in one role, they can only act that one play, only their own part.

The multiplicity of a “living” person acquires then a positive connotation in the characters’ tension towards it; with a turn of the screw, however, it is also exposed as an extremely upsetting notion that undermines all certainties about human nature; the paradox of the character claiming to be “more real” than the real person because it is fixed in a very precise role, leads to the surreal situation of the Father pointedly asking the Director the terrible question “who are you?” (*“Lo guarderà negli occhi. Mi sa dire chi è lei? E rimarrà con l’indice appuntato su di lui”* – p.105). The threat of annihilation is thus reversed onto the real people, because “un personaggio ha veramente una vita sua, segnata di caratteri suoi, per cui è sempre ‘qualcuno’. Mentre un uomo [...] può non esser ‘nessuno’” (p.106). The changeable, dialogic nature of identity, which is reinforced by the confrontation with otherness, leads to a disorienting instability, to the troubling doubt about a “real” individuality, beyond the mere opposition fiction/reality to the more radical and insidious one of reality/reality: “quel che lei era una volta [...] con tutte le cose, dentro e intorno a lei, come allora le parevano – ed erano, erano realmente per lei! – Ebbene, signore; ripensando [...] a tutte quelle cose che ora non le ‘sembrano’ più come per lei ‘erano’ un tempo; non si sente mancare, non dico queste tavole di palcoscenico, ma il terreno, il terreno sotto i piedi [...]?” (p.106). It is an instability of identity that frightens, in the same way as the cast is frightened by the blurring of the boundary between fiction and reality, or as the actors are afraid of the

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<sup>79</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity”, cit., p. 13.

unpredictability of an improvised performance. It calls for a deliberate assumption of a well-defined part that will somehow restrain the continuous flow of personality, the conscious fiction of “a form, or mask; we must create a self, conscious always that it is a fiction, and only one of the many that may be operative in the life of an individual at any one time. To be fully cognizant of relativity is to live with this openness, to nourish it”.<sup>80</sup>

From this perspective, the intradiegetic authorial rejection of the Six Characters comes to signify not just the pathos of unachieved artistic creation, but the refusal to give definitive shape to this dialogic otherness; the Father guesses “perchè il nostro autore, che ci vide vivi così, non volle poi comporci per la scena [...] difficilmente potrà essere una rappresentazione di me, com’io realmente sono. Sarà piuttosto [...] com’egli [l’attore] interpreterà che io sia” (pp.75-76). It is a rejection that, notwithstanding and indeed by its very denial, points to the impossibility of writing the definitive word – a monological discourse – on what is felt as a mutable and heteroglot selfhood; it is a further staging of the changeability of the subject that goes along with that of the characters and of the cast, and is internally thematized and problematized in the play, rather than asserted. Bentley observes: “Which aspect of theatre is exhibited in this play? Not performance. Only rehearsal – *répétition*”,<sup>81</sup> but it is a *répétition* which is never identical to itself: the play does not offer a definite solution but the problematization of the issue, and chooses rather openendedness and ambiguity, “[testimoniando] una condizione dell’io diviso, che non si lascia ricomporre in unità neppure dall’arte, e ha bisogno per questo d’una nuova forma d’arte, aperta e non più

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<sup>80</sup> A. Caputi, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

<sup>81</sup> E. Bentley, *op. cit.*, p. 70, his italics.



chiusa, problematica e non più definitiva”.<sup>82</sup> What, however, starts to emerge in this play, as the suffering of the six characters constantly reminds us, is the fact that this refusal of monologic stability, the recognition of constant ambiguity and multiplicity, of the impossibility of a definitive act, word, or identity, is perceived by Pirandello, unlike Bakhtin, as far from positive and enriching, but rather as a painful experience, which will be brought to the point of utterly tragic despair in *Enrico IV*.

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<sup>82</sup> G. Nava, “Arte e scienza nella saggistica di Pirandello”, in P. D. Giovanelli (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 180-198, p. 193.

### 3. *Ubu Roi*

#### 1. Enter the savage god

“Merdre”. This, the scandalous first word of a play<sup>1</sup> that shocked the Parisian audience of the Théâtre de l’Œuvre into twenty minutes of cries and whistles on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1896, and that only made it to the end through continuous interruptions by vociferating critics and stunts by the leading actor Gémier to attract the attention of the audience. That word “was the signal for one of the greatest scandals which the French theatre had ever seen. [...] The theatrical bombshell which Jarry had thus exploded was to leave an imprint on the theatre, both in France and elsewhere, which can rarely if ever have been equalled by any other single play”;<sup>2</sup> the startled critical reception to *Ubu Roi* was in fact very intense and controversial, and therefore very relevant to the analysis of the play, as a sort of counterpoint to the kind of carnivalesque subversions operated by the text.

Levesque puts together the following description of the mood at the première, which was honoured by the presence of eminent critics, artists and writers, among whom were Zola, Victorien Sardou and Yeats:

La salle debout hurle. Les amis de Jarry invectivent les notabilités indignées. Devant le tumulte qui ne s’apaise pas, A Ferdinand Hérold, qui s’occupe de la lumière, éclaire et éteint alternativement la salle. Les spectateurs gesticulants et criants – toutes les célébrités de l’époque – sortent brusquement de l’ombre [...] Gémier, pour meubler ce «trou», improvise une gigue. [...]

Aussi Francisque Sarcey, le critique le plus sérieux et le plus écouté de l’époque, ne peut

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<sup>1</sup> The text used throughout is Jarry, *Ubu*, ed. by Noël Arnaud and Henri Bordillon (Collection Folio Classique), Paris: Gallimard, 1998. References to act, scene, and page numbers for the quotations will be given in brackets.

<sup>2</sup> K. Beaumont. *Jarry. Ubu Roi*, cit., p. 9.

supporter davantage, il arrache de son fauteuil sa massive silhouette et quitte le théâtre, au milieu de la pièce, tout à fait indigné.

Le chahut continue. On siffle. On applaudit. On rit. On ricane. On hurle. A chaque instant les acteurs, vraiment pleins de persévérance, devant cette tempête qui déferle et couvre leurs voix, doivent s'interrompre.<sup>3</sup>

The Théâtre de l'Œuvre managed by Lugné-Poe was not new to controversy: it had established itself in recent years at the new frontier of dramatic art, hosting avant-garde productions and provocatively modern authors such as Ibsen, Strindberg, Hauptmann, Maeterlinck.<sup>4</sup> “There are often duels after these performances”, a bewildered Yeats recalled being told, while he expressed his response to the unprecedented performance with the well-known remark: “After us the Savage God”.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, all contemporary sources agree in recording the première (which was also the last performance<sup>6</sup>) as one of the most outrageous performances witnessed by the Parisian stage, commenting on the “savagery” and freakishness of scenery, language, and overall “meaning”: its effect was of a complete and startling *bouleversement* of any established canon or set of expectations, in some ways reminiscent of a carnivalesque upside-down world.

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<sup>3</sup> Jacques-Henry Levesque, *Alfred Jarry*, Paris: Pierre Seghers, 1954, pp. 40, 43. For a more extensive account see for example Georges Rémond, “La bataille d’*Ubu Roi*”, quoted in *Ubu*, cit., pp. 433-437; H. Béhar, *Jarry. Le monstre et la marionette*, cit., pp. 97-103; and Noël Arnaud, *Alfred Jarry. D’Ubu Roi au Docteur Faustroll*, Paris: La Table Ronde, 1974, ch. 6.

<sup>4</sup> For a brief history of the Théâtre de l'Œuvre see Denis Bablet, *Esthétique générale du décor de théâtre de 1870 à 1914*, Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1965, pp. 156-167; and Dorothy Knowles, *La réaction idéaliste au théâtre depuis 1890*, Paris: Librairie E. Droz, 1934, pp. 172-208.

<sup>5</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, ed. by W. H. O'Donnell & D. N. Archibald, New York: Scribner, 1999, p. 266.

<sup>6</sup> It was in the tradition of the Théâtre de l'Œuvre that each dramatic piece should only have two performances, the dress rehearsal, to which friend-artists and sympathizers were mainly invited, and the première open to the general public. In the case of *Ubu Roi*, the *générale* had taken place on the 9<sup>th</sup>, and according to most sources, was, if not properly quiet, much less controversial.

The scenery was the first source of much bewilderment and surprise in the audience, after being faced by a childish-looking Jarry who introduced the play in an inaudible voice, then disappeared to reveal a weird backdrop that was to be the only stage-prop: as Arthur Symons witnessed, this “was painted to represent, by a child’s conventions, indoors and out of doors [...] at the back of the stage, you saw apple trees in bloom, under a blue sky, and against the sky a small closed window and a fireplace [...]. On the left was painted a bed, and at the foot of the bed a bare tree and snow falling. On the right there were palm trees... a door opened against the sky, and beside the door a skeleton dangled”.<sup>7</sup> On the same canvas, produced by several modernist painters (mainly from the Nabis group, like Bonnard, Ranson, Sérusier<sup>8</sup>) including Toulouse-Lautrec, others noticed the less-than-pleasing detail of a chamber-pot, “un palmier à boa, une fenêtre fleuronée de hiboux et chauves-souris [...], un soleil écarlate nimbant un éléphant”,<sup>9</sup> an unusual chimney-piece that flapped open to serve as stage-door; finally, the bewildering expedient of a gentleman in a long white beard and evening dress, tiptoeing on stage to hang placards designating the different locations of the scenes. The grotesque cardboard masks, the few synecdochic stage-props (a plaster

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<sup>7</sup> Arthur Symons, *Studies in Seven Arts*, New York & London: Garland Publishers Inc., 1984, p. 373. At the time, Symons was a critic for *The Savoy*, and supporting the introduction of French Symbolism to England.

<sup>8</sup> As Beaumont observes, “Jarry’s attraction to [contemporary] art, and to the ideas of the Nabis in particular, lay in its and their resolute hostility to all forms of realism and naturalism”: *Alfred Jarry: A Critical and Biographical Study*, cit., p. 46. The Nabis, as the artistic counterpart of poetic Symbolism, advocated a strong reaction against past tradition, schemes and formulas, in an effort to express the spiritual life and be suggestive of “moods” rather than merely representative. See also George L. Mauner, *The Nabis: Their History and Their Art, 1888-1896*, New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1978.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Vallier, notice in *La République Française*, 12 décembre 1896; quoted in Henri Robillot, “La presse d’*Ubu Roi*”. in *Cahiers du Collège de 'Pataphysique*, 22 Haha 79 (= 1951). 3-4: 73-88; p. 75. This article, being a very comprehensive collection of the *service de presse* in newspapers and reviews, will be the source for contemporary critical reception.

horse's head on stick for the horse, or a bear's head worn by an actor), and the actors' deliberately stylized, mechanical movements suggested to some a similarity with the traditional puppet theatre of the *Guignol*, without however being welcomed as a successful or convincing experiment, but rather as an insulting one: "autre chose est de faire parler des mannequins comme des hommes, autre chose est de faire parler des hommes comme des mannequins".<sup>10</sup> All this was generally emphasized at least as unusual and upsetting, if not as offending, and as a mockery of expectations of rational, realistic *décor*; only a progressive but almost isolated Romain Coolus, writing in fact for one of the contemporary avant-garde literary periodicals, remarked that "il s'agissait d'évoquer au lieu de les représenter directement, les divers lieux [...] une sorte de langage théâtral nouveau".<sup>11</sup>

Almost simultaneous with the visual shock was the auditive one produced by the opening word of the pièce<sup>12</sup> enriched by an aggressive "r", and generally by the language used throughout, which was the target of many incensed reactions. The influential Sarcey disdainfully called it a "fumisterie ordurière qui ne mérite que le silence du mépris";<sup>13</sup> Vallier saw only "grossièretés ignominieuses" and "truculence ordurière";<sup>14</sup> Léon Bloy referred to "la répugnance de la critique" towards "le charme de

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<sup>10</sup> "Criticus", review in *La Critique*, 20 décembre 1896, in H. Robillot, cit., p. 79.

<sup>11</sup> Romain Coolus (pseudonym for René Weil), review in *La Revue Blanche*, 1 janvier 1897, in H. Robillot, cit., pp. 74-75, p. 75.

<sup>12</sup> The secondary sources agree on the fact that this was the first time the word had been uttered on an official French stage, at least in such a prominent position. See for example J. H. Levesque, *op. cit.*, p. 39. Only a few months earlier, however, an analogous situation had taken place at a public reading of the poem 'L'Hiver' by the poet and anarchist journalist Jean Rictus, where the opening word was in fact "Merd": cf. Richard D. Sonn, *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin de Siècle France*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989, n. 43 p. 321.

<sup>13</sup> Francisque Sarcey, notice in *Le Temps*, 14 décembre 1896 ; in H. Robillot, cit., p. 75.

<sup>14</sup> R. Vallier, cit.

l'ordure";<sup>15</sup> and a "Criticus" blamed the "allusion grossière et scatologique contre laquelle le public a opposé la digue du bon sens".<sup>16</sup> Similarly *Paris* and *Le Petit Parisien* focused on the "grossièreté à haute dose",<sup>17</sup> "turpitudes" and "insanité scatophile",<sup>18</sup> and an anonymous "Pompier de Service" emphatically commented that "Le mot de Cambronne y fait une continuelle explosion [...]. Sortez ce vocable des cinq actes, il n'y a plus d'*Ubu Roi*".<sup>19</sup>

"Grossièreté" and "ordure" in fact formed the recurring terminology in all the critical responses to this most unwelcome play, which was also the stepping stone for the eminent contributor of *Le Figaro* Henry Fouquier to launch an attack against Henri Bauër of *L'Echo de Paris*: his well-known labelling of the soirée as a "Neuf-Thermidor littéraire" where "le public, le vrai public, a fait justice" against either a "fumisterie" or a supposed "art nouveau", was only indirectly addressed to the actual play, but rather directly aimed at Bauër's anti-conventional patronage of avant-garde literature, his "voulant tout renverser"<sup>20</sup> in defiance of the established theatre like the national Odéon. Bauër's almost isolated pro-Ubu campaign had in fact begun a few months back, at the time of publication of the pièce,<sup>21</sup> undoubtedly also as a means to advance the avant-garde/Symbolist/anarchic cause: he openly described *Ubu Roi* as a "pamphlet philosophico-politique à gueule effrontée, qui crache au visage des chimères de la tradition et des maîtres inventés selon les respects des peuples".<sup>22</sup> The pro-Symbolist

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<sup>15</sup> Notice in *Gil Blas*, 11 décembre 1896, in H. Robillot, cit., pp. 77-78, p. 77.

<sup>16</sup> "Criticus", cit.

<sup>17</sup> "C' de N", notice in *Paris*, 11 décembre 1896, in H. Robillot, cit., p. 78.

<sup>18</sup> Notice in *Le Petit Parisien*, 11 décembre 1896, ibid., pp. 78-79.

<sup>19</sup> Notice in *La Paix*, 11 décembre 1896, ibid., p. 76.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Fouquier, notice in *Le Figaro*, 11 décembre 1896, ibid., pp. 85-88, p. 86

<sup>21</sup> The text had already appeared twice that same year: in instalments through April and May in the periodical *Le Livre d'Art*, and published in June by the prestigious Editions du *Mercure de France*.

<sup>22</sup> Henri Bauër, notice in *L'Echo de Paris*, 12 décembre 1896, in H. Robillot, cit., p. 74.

*Mercur de France* praised along the same lines “cette extraordinaire fantaisie [...] vraiment irrespectueuse [...] où] il n’y a guère de préjugé, si vivace qu’il soit encore, qui n’y soit raillé”;<sup>23</sup> and Symons saw it as “the first Symbolist farce [...] most remarkable about it is the insolence with which a young writer mocks at civilization itself, sweeping all art, along with all humanity, into the same inglorious slop-pail”.<sup>24</sup>

This amounted to a positive recognition of the revolutionary and subversive value of the play; most of the critics, however, did not share this “progressive” view, but rather sided with Fouquier in considering the whole work as an obvious, unsuccessful and gross parody of *Macbeth*, and a “fumisterie”, especially directed against their own position: “Il y a trop longtemps que ces farceurs se moquent de nous, la mesure est comble”<sup>25</sup> thundered Sarcey, while general opinion wavered between bafflement and downright indignation at the “élucubration [...] cette mystification qui n’a rien d’artistique”,<sup>26</sup> “prodigieuse imbécillité [...] mauvaise farce à des critiques”,<sup>27</sup> “mystification de fort mauvais goût”,<sup>28</sup> “charentonesque incohérence”,<sup>29</sup> “lamentable farce d’atelier”,<sup>30</sup> “théâtre d’avant-garde-robe [...] où, la musique] ayant été supprimée parce qu’elle gênait la pièce, la pièce aurait sans inconvénient pu être supprimée parce qu’elle gênait la raison”.<sup>31</sup>

On the whole, *Ubu Roi*, despite its appearance to public scrutiny half a year before in print (which apparently went rather unnoticed), caused a completely

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<sup>23</sup> A. Ferdinand Herold, review in *Le Mercure de France*, janvier 1897, *ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>24</sup> A. Symons, *op. cit.*, p. 371.

<sup>25</sup> F. Sarcey, *cit.*

<sup>26</sup> Louis Claveau, notice in *Le Soleil*, 11 décembre 1896, in H. Robillot, *cit.*, pp. 75-76.

<sup>27</sup> Georges Vanor, notice in *La Paix*, 11 décembre 1896, *ibid.*, p. 76-77.

<sup>28</sup> “C’ de N”, *cit.*

<sup>29</sup> “Sarcisque”, notice in *L’Événement*, 11 décembre 1896, in H. Robillot, *cit.*, p. 78.

<sup>30</sup> Notice in *Le Petit Parisien*, *cit.*, p. 79.

<sup>31</sup> “Le Pompier de Service”, *cit.*

unexpected shock in the critical forum, and such a deluge of enraged censure that cannot but highlight how much this play was going against all literary and moral conventions and expectations, and indirectly calling into question the established systems of power that upheld them, from the critics to the social milieus to the political authority it so blatantly caricatured. As Beaumont observes, the main accusations were firstly levelled at the play's "alleged vulgarity and obscenity", then at the whole play "as a theatrical equivalent of the recent spate of 'anarchist' bomb attacks and as an act of anarchist-inspired political subversion"; thirdly, at the fact that it "in no way constituted a 'serious' piece of literature or of theatre, but simply a gigantic hoax".<sup>32</sup>

Undoubtedly, this literary "shock" was part of Jarry's agenda, to avoid complacency towards the audience of the "grand nombre", the one who preferred "les pièces à spectacle [...] leçon de sentimentalité fausse et d'esthétique fausse, qui sont les seules vraies pour ceux-là à qui le théâtre du petit nombre semble incompréhensible ennui".<sup>33</sup> The public at large, "illétre par définition" and comfortable in their aesthetic quietism, was thus, unsurprisingly for Jarry, "stupéfait à la vue de son double ignoble", and "fâchée parce qu'elle a trop bien compris", notwithstanding the fact that "[l]'art et la compréhension de la foule [soient] si incompatibles".<sup>34</sup> Thus Jarry seemed to operate a distinction which recalls that by Bourdieu between the "high" elitist theatre, driven by formal experimentation, and the "popular" one aiming at the audience's self-involvement/identification;<sup>35</sup> but whereas for Bourdieu the easy, popular, vulgar taste is

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<sup>32</sup> K. Beaumont, *Jarry. Ubu Roi*, cit., pp. 16-17.

<sup>33</sup> "Réponses à un questionnaire sur l'art dramatique" (*Dossiers du Collège de 'Pataphysique*, 5), reprinted in *Ubu*, cit., pp. 315-322, p. 317.

<sup>34</sup> "Questions de théâtre" (*La Revue blanche*, 1 janvier 1897), reprinted in *Ubu*, cit., pp. 343-347, pp. 344, 346.

<sup>35</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction: critique sociale du jugement*, Paris : Les Editions de Minuit, 1979, Ch. 1, section 4.



opposed to the refined difficulty of the elitist taste,<sup>36</sup> for Jarry the formal experimentation of the “théâtre du petit nombre” appeared, at least partly, to take the direction of the ultra-popular, the extremely vulgar, the violently uncomfortable that shocks the audience’s “bienséances”: “C’est parce que la foule est une masse inerte et incompréhensive et passive qu’il la faut frapper de temps en temps”.<sup>37</sup>

The following analysis will focus on the issues raised by the critical reception, but viewing them from a new – Bakhtinian – perspective,\* that brings them all together into a coherent set of carnivalesque reversals: literary parody and subversion, gross physicality (the “lower bodily stratum”, in Bakhtinian terms) and linguistic vulgarity (Bakhtin’s abusive “familiar speech of the marketplace”) that especially offended contemporary bourgeois conventions. The text will also be considered in its verbal creativity, the carnivalesque elements of the clown/fool, the puppet, and violence; finally, in its subversive potential with regard to the aspects of kingship and ruling authority. As will emerge, some of these eminently modernist aspects open up a dreary perspective of human baseness and cruelty that undoes the positive connotation of the carnivalesque feast as Bakhtin envisaged it, and which is turned against itself as a sort of accusation of its own destructive potential.

## **2. Literary parody and subversion**

*Ubu Roi* appears to carnivalize the literary scene in three ways: the first is the simple parodic quotation; the second is the mock-reproduction of stock dramatic situations;<sup>38</sup> lastly, the subversion of the contemporary realistic canon and of dramatic

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, “Post-Scriptum”, sections 1, 2.

<sup>37</sup> “Questions de théâtre”, cit., p. 346.

<sup>38</sup> Henri Béhar links this practice of travesty and “profanation” of classic and scholarly culture to what he defines as “la culture potachique”, typical of students at the secondary level of the Lycée, and

conventions at large.

In the first case, the immediately obvious quotation lies in the title, which parallels the illustrious one of *Œdipus Rex/Œdipe Roi*, but where the gawky and grotesque sound of the name “Ubu” undoes the seriousness and solemn nobility of the antecedent;<sup>39</sup> the second instance, which was also manifest to the audience at the time, is the obvious reproduction of the plot of *Macbeth*, with the wife instigating the initially faithful and hesitating army general to murder and usurpation, but in such a simplified and reductive way, both in terms of time and of psychological situation, that it results in a ludicrous *mise-en-abyme*. A further mock-reference to Shakespeare lies in the pseudo-etymology on the dedicatory front page: “Adonc le Père Ubu hoscha la poire, dont fut depuis nommé par les Anglois Shakespeare, et avez de lui sous ce nom maintes belles tragœdies par escript” (p.29), that degrades the poet to a grotesque descent, and where the solemnity of the archaic language forms a comic contrast with the un-seriousness and triviality of the name being related to a pear.

Other instances of direct parodic quotations have been identified by various critics,<sup>40</sup> ranging from verbal parallelisms to similarity of scenes, and taking as their

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entailing “la connaissance approfondie des textes anciens, la parodie des auteurs modernes [...caractérisée] par un langage imitative et parodique; par la création d’un monde, de personnages opposés au monde officiel et aux images modèles; par une thématique triviale et scatologique [...], par une logique du dénigrement, de l’irrespect”: *Les cultures de Jarry*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988, pp. 84-90. This kind of elaboration of sources is at the source of the figure of Ubu, drawing directly on the student saga of Père Hébé/Héb, as was openly admitted by Jarry himself (see for example N. Arnaud, *Alfred Jarry. D’Ubu Roi au Docteur Faustroll*, cit., ch. vi).

<sup>39</sup> Beaumont very appropriately describes the effect of the name as “suggesting something at once comic and sinister. The repetition of the vowel sound introduces a mildly comic resonance [...] But the word as a whole has the suggestion of something primitive, monstrous and grotesque about it which renders it unforgettable”: *Jarry. Ubu Roi*, cit., p. 38.

<sup>40</sup> See for example H. Béhar, *Jarry. Le monster et la marionette*, cit., p. 48; Michel Arrivé. *Les langages de Jarry. Essai de sémiotique littéraire*, Paris: Klincksieck, 1972, p. 167; and K. Beaumont. *Jarry. Ubu Roi*, cit., pp.34-36.

sources milestones of “serious” French or English tragedy, or sometimes comedy by the same well-established authors: Act V,1 only slightly rephrases an alexandrine verse in Racine’s *Andromaque* V,5 (“Grâce au ciel j’entrevois / Monsieur le Père Ubu qui dort auprès de moi” – p.113); Ubu’s exclamations in IV, 4 (p.97) echo those by the protagonist in Molière’s *L’avare* IV,7; the banquet scene has been regarded as a reproduction of *Macbeth* III,4, and the killing of the king as that of the same scene in either *Julius Caesar* or Corneille’s *Cinna*. Queen Rosemonde’s foreboding dream in II.1 parallels Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* II,2; the apparition of ghosts seeking vengeance in II,5 recalls, in a comic multiplication, the same situation in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, I, 5; finally, the scene with the bear (IV, 6) has been connected to *The Winter’s Tale* or to Molière’s *La Princesse d’Elide*.

The treatment of food, together with some verbal expressions (mostly swear-words or insults) have been traced in Rabelais’s *Gargantua et Pantagruel*;<sup>41</sup> the illustrious tradition of the Latin language gets a comic twist in Ubu’s conceited macaronic translation (“Omnis a Deo scientia, ce qui veut dire: Omnis, toute; a Deo, science; scientia, vient de Dieu” – V,1 p.119), as does biblical philology appropriated by Ubu as source for the supreme torture (“le tout tiré des très saintes Ecritures, tant de l’Ancien que du Nouveau Testament, mis en ordre, corrigé et perfectionné par l’ici présent Maître des Finances!” – V,2 pp.122-123). In terms of language, a certain subversion of the classical tradition can be seen both in the choice of a Rabelaisian kind

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<sup>41</sup> For a detailed comparative study of Rabelais and Jarry’s work, see for example Patricia Murphy, who traces Rabelaisian elements in episodes and characters throughout Jarry’s narrative, poetic and dramatic output: “Rabelais and Jarry”, *French Review*, 1977, 51 (1): 29-36; and François Caradec, who concentrates on linguistic affiliation, like the borrowing of the terms “bouzine”, “bouteille” and “jambedieu”, and anatomic detailing: “Rabelais dans l’œuvre de Jarry”. *Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique*, 23 Clinamen 81 (= 1953), 15: 43-47. Dan M. Church establishes a comparison between Ubu and Panurge: “Père Ubu: the Creation of a Literary Type”, *Drama Survey*, 1965, 4: 233-243.

of idiom, and in the Palotins' language with its archaisms and roundabout expressions ("Monsieuye", "par conséquent de quoye") which are also a direct mockery of the solemnity and verbosity of official speech: both instances have the de-familiarizing effect of a pre-classical and therefore reputedly "vulgar" style.

As regards the reproduction of standard dramatic situations, the examples are numerous: the conspiracy scene with the ritual pledging of an oath and attendant arrangement of signals – which here attains a most ludicrous and low level in the agreed signal consisting in stamping on the King's foot and uttering the word "merdre" (I,7); the Queen's assured fatalistic premonition (II,1), and the pathetic scene of her death which is comically speedy (II,5); the escapes through secret passages (II,4); the on-stage battles reduced to one-to-one combat; the typical but perfunctory falling asleep of a character to allow the undisturbed entrance of another (IV,6); the improbable coincidental meeting between the Ubus; the hasty speeches summing up previous happenings. Mère Ubu parodically impersonates an apparition with intended solemnity but constantly relapsing into her own person (V,1); and tit-for-tat exchanges ridicule the traditional verbal play of "mots d'esprit":

MERE UBU Taisez-vous, de par Dieu!

PERE UBU Oh! les anges ne jurent pas!

MERE UBU Merdre! (*Continuant*) Vous êtes marié, Monsieur Ubu.

PERE UBU Parfaitement, à la dernière des chipies!

MERE UBU Vous voulez dire que c'est une femme charmante.

PERE UBU Une horreur. Elle a des griffes partout, on ne sait pas par où la prendre.

MERE UBU Il la faut prendre par la douceur, sire Ubu, et si vous la prenez ainsi vous verrez qu'elle est au moins l'égale de la Vénus de Capoue.

PERE UBU Qui dites-vous qui a des poux? (V,1, pp. 115-116).

All of these, together with direct verbal quotations, of course come across as comic travesties, the "seriousness" of the original situation being invariably undermined by a process of cursory reduction, simplification, or de-contextualization that have a

mocking, caricatural effect with regard to the established classical dramatic literature.

However, the subversion in *Ubu Roi* of the officially recognized literary tradition goes beyond simple textual parallelisms, and has a twofold target: the established conventions of realism and naturalism – besides those of classicism – and those of dramatic art in general.

The Parisian literary scene of the mid-1880s saw the burgeoning of the Symbolist movement, which by the 1890s “had come to designate a broad front of self-consciously ‘modernist’ writers hostile to the hitherto dominant doctrines of ‘realism’ and ‘naturalism’”.<sup>42</sup> Although *Ubu Roi* cannot be considered a Symbolist work tout-court,<sup>43</sup> the production was promoted and supported by artists and critics who were in favour of this new aesthetics, which Jarry’s own programmatic article on the theatre (“De l’inutilité du théâtre au théâtre” – 1896) also upheld, against the realist canon. The latter was in fact one of the “official” styles at the national theatres, besides the *boulevard* and the recognized tradition of classical literary works:<sup>44</sup> French theatre in this period “was almost exclusively a bourgeois institution; and it was essentially a theatre of entertainment to which its bourgeois audiences went to be amused, delighted,

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<sup>42</sup> K. Beaumont, *Alfred Jarry. A Critical and Biographical Study*, cit., p. 34. Henri Béhar sees in this “ensemble” of modern trends a “structure de ‘sommation’, par laquelle sont révoquées les conventions en vigueur, et où le théâtre apparaît au premier chef comme le lieu d’une rupture sur tous les plans”: *La dramaturgie d’Alfred Jarry*, Paris: Honoré Champion, 2003, p. 268.

<sup>43</sup> Rather, as Henri Béhar puts it, “Jarry avait installé un cheval de Troie sur la scène du Théâtre de l’Œuvre, qui allait faire exploser le Symbolisme”: “Jarry joué”, in *Europe. Revue littéraire mensuelle. Alfred Jarry*, 1981, 623-624: 145-159, p. 146.

<sup>44</sup> For a picture of the status of the theatre at the time, see for example Manuel L. Grossman, “Alfred Jarry and the Theatre of His Time”, *Modern Drama*, 1970, 13: 10-21; D. Bablet, *op. cit.*, ch. I-II; D. Knowles, *op. cit.*

rocked into gentle lethargy”;<sup>45</sup> whereas *Ubu Roi*, for all its crudity, is not just plain vulgarity and slapstick, since the frequent, however parodic, intertextual reference to literary precedent presupposes a literariness, a sophisticated culture that strikes a similar note to the Symbolist self-consciously *recherché* style and refusal of easy-going mass-entertainment. Furthermore, the overwhelmingly realist canon “signified in general terms not only truth and accuracy of representation, but also the attempt to portray individuals as part of a concrete social and historical situation, with great attention paid to the authenticating details [...] and the creation of sets which endeavoured to recreate as convincingly as possible the illusion of the world outside the theatre”.<sup>46</sup>

Jarry scornfully dismissed any intent of historical exactness (“Nous ne trouvons pas honorable de construire des pièces historiques”<sup>47</sup>), and indeed everything in *Ubu Roi* appears as radically anti-realistic:<sup>48</sup> the undefined and non-representational scenery consisting of a painted canvas, with placards to indicate the several locations (Jarry’s ironic “conférence” before the performance carelessly stated that the action took place “en Pologne, c’est-à-dire Nulle Part”<sup>49</sup>); the reduction of groups and crowds to one actor, and the few deliberately non-mimetic props (cardboards animals’ heads on stick or worn by an actor, a door and lock “impersonated” by an actor’s arm and hand<sup>50</sup>)

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<sup>45</sup> K. Beaumont, *Jarry. Ubu Roi*, cit., p. 19.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>47</sup> “Programme d’Ubu Roi”, reprinted in *Ubu*, cit., pp. 336-339, p. 337.

<sup>48</sup> For a detailed account of the preparation and mise-en-scène of *Ubu Roi*, see P. Lié, “Comment Jarry et Lugné-Poe glorifièrent *Ubu* à l’Œuvre”, in *Cahiers du Collège de 'Pataphysique*, 22 Haha 79 (= 1951), 3-4: 37-51.

<sup>49</sup> A. Jarry, “Conférence prononcée à la création d’Ubu Roi”, in *Ubu*, cit., pp. 340-342. p. 342.

<sup>50</sup> This was the occasion for another sudden outburst of protests in the audience, as the leading actor Gémier’s recalls: “Pour remplacer la porte de la prison, un acteur se tenait en scène avec le bras gauche tendu. Je mettais la clé dans la main comme dans une serrure. Je faisais le bruit du pêne. « cric-crac », et je tournais le bras comme si j’ouvrais la porte. A ce moment le public, trouvant sans doute que la plaisanterie avait assez duré, s’est mis à hurler, à tempêter”: Firmin Gémier, Interview by Roger

evince no attempt at reproducing concrete, authentic settings; the “historical” inspiration of the play only has a derisory effect, in being just a free manipulation of names with no “real” correspondence. Finally, the characters’ wearing of large masks in a fixed expression shows no care for “faithful” psychological portrayal, but rather a two-dimensional return to pre-naturalistic “types”; and their rigid, blunt movements or sometimes unfeasible actions (like “déchire” or “explose”) make for a totally anti-realistic marionette-effect, which was clearly perceived by the enthusiastic Rachilde, (novelist and wife of Vallette, the director of *Le Mercure de France*), who strongly supported the staging of Jarry’s play. In a letter to Lugné-Poe she advised him that “c’est le plus sage parti que de donner une œuvre extravagante, si vous la donnez tout à fait en guignol [...]. Poussez au *guignol* le plus possible, et, au besoin, j’ai cette idée depuis que je connais la pièce, faites relier vos acteurs (si possible) aux frises de votre théâtre par des ficelles ou des cordes, puisqu’ils sont de plus gros pantins que les autres”.<sup>51</sup> This effect was also in scornful opposition to the contemporary dominance on the mainstream stage of the figure of the actor as the star and focus of the performance.<sup>52</sup>

Jarry himself was very deliberate in his will to subvert the naturalistic canon, as

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Valbelle, *Excelsior*, 4 november 1921, reprinted in *Europe. Revue littéraire mensuelle. Alfred Jarry*, cit., pp. 141-143, p. 142.

<sup>51</sup> *Souvenirs de Lugné-Poe*, reprinted in *Ubu*, cit., pp. 410-433, p. 426, her emphasis.

<sup>52</sup> Beynon observes that the “idea of the actor as puppet [...] recurs frequently in the ’nineties, at a time which witnesses the consecration of the actor as ‘sacred monster’ [...] it forms part of the counter-attack mounted against the prevailing gross convention of the late-nineteenth-century stage in France and England by a brilliant minority of theorists and reformers”: John S. Beynon, “Actor as Puppet: Variations on a Nineteenth-Century Theatrical Idea”, in Eric Salmon (ed.), *Bernhardt and the Theatre of Her Time*, Westport (Ct): Greenwood, 1984, pp. 243-268, p. 245. However, as Jannarone remarks, this theoretical interest of the artistic élite for the marionette was rather on an idealistic level, as “a pure form, an untainted abstraction that would allow for a complete understanding of character to emerge from a work of art” and “because of its complete manipulability”: cit., p. 243.

his own suggestions to Lugné-Poe for the mise-en-scène make clear,<sup>53</sup> and the programmatic writings on the theatre lay out: in “De l’inutilité du théâtre au théâtre”. appeared only a few months before the performance of *Ubu Roi*, he expresses his contempt towards the banality of naturalistic themes (“des sujets et péripéties *naturelles*, c’est-à-dire quotidiennement coutumières aux hommes ordinaires”<sup>54</sup> – where the French word “ordinaire” has a rather depreciative nuance), and the encumbrance of the setting (“Le décor est hybride, ni naturel ni artificiel [...] la stupidité du trompe-l’œil”) which should instead give way to the audience’s free imagination (“il serait très dangereux que le poète à un public d’artistes imposât le décor tel qu’il le peindrait lui-même [...]. Et il est juste que chaque spectateur voie la scène dans le décor qui convient à *sa* vision de la scène”), and be only suggestive of the mood (“décor abstrait, n’en donnant que la substance”<sup>55</sup>). Also among the “objets notoirement horribles et incompréhensibles” is for Jarry the actor, who should “substituer à sa tête, au moyen d’un *masque* l’enfermant, l’effigie du *personnage*”,<sup>56</sup> thus clearly working against both a sense of the “reality” of the character, and the actors’ prominence and celebrity.

All of this helped to trigger enraged accusations of “fumisterie” and “mauvaise farce”, together with the flouting of the most standard dramatic conventions of the time, concerning the rationality of the action, and the dignity of character, subject, style and

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. his often-quoted letter of 8<sup>th</sup> January 1896 to the same, reprinted in *Souvenirs de Lugné-Poe*, cit., pp. 412-413: “Masque pour le personnage principal [...] Une tête de cheval en carton [...] Adoption d’un seul décor, ou mieux, d’un fond uni [...] Suppression des foules [...] Costumes aussi peu couleur locale ou chronologique que possible”.

<sup>54</sup> “De l’inutilité du théâtre au théâtre”, originally appeared in September 1896 in *Le Mercure de France*, reprinted in *Ubu*, cit., pp. 307-314, p. 308, his emphasis.

<sup>55</sup> “De l’inutilité du théâtre au théâtre”, cit., pp. 308-309.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 308. 310, his emphasis.



language.

Firstly, the traditional Aristotelian “unities” are grossly flouted, with an incongruous and surreal plot evolving or rather precipitating at hyperbolic speed (Mère Ubu for example establishes a “unity” of time/action that is ridiculously short given the task at hand: “peut-être dans huit jours serai-je reine de Pologne” – I,1 p.34) and across impossible stretches of space, no attempt at plausible development of motive and action being made, in stark opposition to the contemporary rationalistic attitude; the same goes for the monologues that, typically, sum up previous events, but taking the device to absurd extremes of synthetic enumeration (see for example Ubu’s in III.5, and Mère Ubu’s in V,1). The plot itself, one of the most classical in dramatic history, is treated in a ludicrously schematic and simplified way, with mechanic actions (like the repeated slaughters), rendering it more like a pantomimed mockery of itself, as Bablet also observes: “Ce théâtre se moque du théâtre [...] A travers la virulence de la parodie et son incohérence voulue il apporte un langage nouveau. [...] L’absurd détruit la vraisemblance”;<sup>57</sup> again in opposition to the classical and naturalistic canon which tried to deny the theatricality, the fictitious nature of the performance, *Ubu Roi* deliberately stresses and mocks its own theatrical devices, its own fictional status, against the notion of verisimilitude.

Another “rationalistic” canon the play disrupts is the separation between tragedy and comedy, but in a manner much more radical than is typical of the rather traditional compromise of tragicomedy: *Ubu Roi* in fact takes classical tragic themes like the murdering of a king and heroic fighting, and renders them not just comic but also ridiculous and absurd, turns the characters into nothing more than mechanic puppets, thus devastating the whole perspective of right and wrong, of nobility of character and

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<sup>57</sup> D. Bablet, *op. cit.*, pp. 164, 166.

psychological depth, the absurd and the grotesque undermining the classical sense of decorum built on the dyad of “honneur” and “honte”. and even lowering the comedy to the level of gross baseness. Béhar comments that here “l’homme n’est qu’une figure bouffonne jetée dans un univers aussi dépourvu de sens que lui. Ainsi s’élimine toute esthétique classique fondée sur la raison, la cohérence psychologique, l’anthropocentrisme enfin”.<sup>58</sup> However, this picture of characters not having any shame nor perception of their vulgarity bears some ambiguity of purpose, in that it could also be read as a Symbolist accusation of cultural collapse into lowliness, a more conservative aesthetics upholding the refinement of the arts against mass-culture vulgarity and decay of values.

Echoing Yeats’s comment on the première, White defines this subversive dramatic trend as “savage comedy”, which he claims “broke through many of the frontiers that had separated comic and tragic”:<sup>59</sup> it destroys the principle of the evolution of character, its purpose is “to intimate that Cosmos, science and society are flawed, degrading mechanisms”; it is “quasi-brutal or anthropomorphic; ominous, queasy; cosmic in figurative dreads; barbarous; [...] oneiric; nightmarishly excessive”, and marked by “multilinearity and fragmentation”.<sup>60</sup> In this sort of disillusioned and fearful response to contemporary social, political and ideological tensions, White sees that “[t]ragedy’s popularity is in sharp decline. Its central theme, mortality, has seeped into savage comedy. Mechanical slaughter, in *Ubu Roi*, incites chortles. As tragic purgation fades, comedies of corrosion offer new kinds of solace, those produced by sardonic

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<sup>58</sup> H. Béhar. *Jarry. Le monstre et la marionette*, cit., p. 11.

<sup>59</sup> Kenneth Steele White, *Savage Comedy Since King Ubu: A Tangent to the Absurd*, Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1980. p. 2.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

derision”.<sup>61</sup> This savage laughter could as well be seen as similar to the ambivalent, distorted grin of carnivalesque laughter which indeed pervades the play, mocks seriousness, and derides death while at the same time evoking it through violence and physical degradation.

The centrality given to a low, grotesque character, typically a comic side-figure, is also rather unconventional, in the sense that it creates a vicious anti-hero, the unashamed sum of all the basest human instincts, “cette chose immonde et inconvenante: Ubu. Manifestation des appétits inférieurs, de l’instinct animal [...] s’ouvrant à l’univers carnivalesque”.<sup>62</sup> The play performs a veritable crowning of “l’anti-héros de l’Absurde [...] Ubu, l’envers du personnage, crée un monde réversible [...] Son règne constitue un assaut immédiat et brutal contre le public”.<sup>63</sup> Full vent is given to an eminently grotesque, stupid, ludicrous, wicked, low, cowardly creature that flies in the face of any moral principle, therefore shocking expectations of what is deemed appropriate for a main dramatic protagonist, and upsetting a dramatic hierarchy of social roles, as pertains to the carnivalesque.

A further subversion of dramatic standards lies in bringing a lower form of theatre, the “guignol”,<sup>64</sup> to the level of a supposedly “serious” performance, which also accounts for the contemporary critical response in terms of “farce”, and “imbécillité” typical of the “foires villageoises”.<sup>65</sup> Beaumont remarks on the unconventionality of the world of the “guignol” for the time, as

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<sup>61</sup> Kenneth Steele White (ed.), *Savage Comedy: Structures of Humour*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1978, p. 12.

<sup>62</sup> H. Béhar, “Jarry joué”, cit., pp. 146-147.

<sup>63</sup> Linda Klieger Stillman, *La théâtralité dans l’œuvre d’Alfred Jarry*, York (South Carolina): French Literature Publications Company, 1980, p. 27.

<sup>64</sup> See K. Jannarone, cit., for a close study of the relationship to the puppet theatre.

<sup>65</sup> G. Vanor. cit., p. 77.

a stylized fantasy world with only minimal pretensions to being a copy of the real world. Jarry's originality in this respect was totally unrecognized by almost all of his contemporaries [...who] tried to judge it in terms of such conventional dramatic criteria as coherence of plot, psychological motivation of characters, plausibility, and the like. [...] the special and unique quality of *Ubu Roi* arises above all from a superimposition of the characteristics of the puppet theatre or *guignol* upon a subject, themes and dramatic framework belonging to the traditional live theatre in its most serious, and even most 'noble' and 'heroic' forms.<sup>66</sup>

The overall effect of the language,<sup>67</sup> the deliberate staging in the form of the "guignol", and the marionette-like status of the characters thus amounts to the elevation of an inferior, folk genre to the honours of an "official" position, or, conversely, to an "uncrowning" of the cultivated stage by the insertion of a low carnivalesque element like the plebeian, uncultured entertainment of the puppet show.

Finally, another offence to dramatic conventions, and what many of the criticisms were aimed at, was given by the language of *Ubu Roi*: the scurrility apparent from the very start, and the frequency of swearwords and insults were in fact a direct and strong undermining of the contemporary sense of propriety pertaining to a literary work, especially in a genre so open to immediate public scrutiny; which seems to reinforce the drive of the whole work as a carnivalesque mocking and overthrowing of the seriousness and established literary standards of the theatre of the time.

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<sup>66</sup> K. Beaumont, *Jarry. Ubu Roi*, cit., pp. 30-31.

<sup>67</sup> W. D. Howarth connects *Ubu Roi* with a previous popular form of farce, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century "parade", "associated with the 'charlatans' or 'opérateurs' of the fairs [...]. Characters and plot remained more or less constant, and the attraction of each new play was to be found in the colourful, racy dialogue in which puns and other forms of word-play proliferated, and colloquial obscenities were to be found side by side with the burlesque and the mock-heroic": "From Arlequin to Ubu: Farce as Anti-Theatre", in James Redmond (ed.), *Farce*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 153-171, p. 154. K. Jannarone also observes that the puppet language of the patois tradition was characterized by "rhotalism", "a fiercely rolling *r* decorating a malapropism": *op. cit.*, p. 242.

### 3. “Cette chose immonde”

Also offending against official seriousness, decorum, and morality outside the strictly theatrical frame, are two eminently carnivalesque aspects of *Ubu Roi*: gross physicality, and verbal vulgarity. The former, the “material bodily principle” as Bakhtin terms it, “with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life” and its emphasis on the belly as a way in and out, is part of the grotesque realism with its principle of “degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, [...] a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body”,<sup>68</sup> which becomes magnified to the point of exaggeration. All this is especially true with regards to the figure of Ubu, with two exceptions: firstly, the sexual dimension seems to be almost absent;<sup>69</sup> secondly, as will be demonstrated below, whereas Bakhtin considers the bodily element as “deeply positive”, in *Ubu Roi*, though it has a comic effect, it also acquires a more sinister connotation, especially from being associated with extreme selfishness, violence, and tyranny, and it does not share the “cosmic” and “all-people’s character”<sup>70</sup> of the Bakhtinian description, thus also constituting a critical perspective on the latter.

Ubu’s body is repeatedly described in gargantuan proportions, as immensely heavy and bulky (he admits to being “assez gros”, risks breaking his chair, moves with difficulty and clumsiness, and seems to be able to crush people with his sheer weight); special emphasis is given to his “gidouille”, his big belly, which is always hungry and swallows voraciously<sup>71</sup> (as very soon appears in the banquet scene where he hardly

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<sup>68</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., pp. 18-19.

<sup>69</sup> Unless one considers M. Arrivé’s somewhat strained interpretation of Ubu, his appendages and heraldic elements as phallic symbols: op. cit., pp. 153 ff.; and the sexual reading of the neologism in his “Langage et pataphysique”, in *L’Esprit Créateur (Alfred Jarry)*, 1984, 24 (4): 7-19.

<sup>70</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 19.

<sup>71</sup> Pierre Gobin cleverly observes that “Le ‘pouvoir dînatoire’, en établissant un ‘horizon de satiété’, donnerait un avant-goût du pouvoir – il s’agirait en somme de s’empiffrer pour s’arroger le

leaves food for anyone else; as a king, he offers another gigantic banquet and immediately gets indigestion). His belly is the main focus of the concern for his own welfare (when he gets injured or attacked he fears a laceration of the belly: “je me suis rompu l’intestin et crevé la bouzine” – I,6 p.45; “Ah! Oh! Je suis blessé, je suis troué, je suis perforé” – IV,4 p.97), as well as one of his favourite exclamations. At the same time, his bottom is very early rendered conspicuous in the first discussion with Mère Ubu, as the metaphor for the usurpation of the throne (“ce cul, je voudrais l’installer sur un trône” – I,1 p.33), and it is indirectly implied in his frequent distribution of the famous “merdre”, both in word and in substance (the banquet scene sees, besides the “choux-fleurs à la merdre”,<sup>72</sup> the disgusting aspersion of the guests with faeces by means of a toilet brush, “un balai innommable”, as a sort of food tasting<sup>73</sup> – I,3). A link is further created between belly and anus by Ubu’s greed for “andouille”, which is both nutrition and defecation, a synthesis of food and the digesting organs, and possibly the humblest, lowest step in the scale of food; Mère Ubu is also associated to it, in that she uses it to encourage his voracity and to allure him into usurpation. Thus, *Ubu Roi* impudently brings out in the open some of the most intimate and obscure aspects of the body, that are usually considered unworthy of decent conversation and social sharing; like the grotesque images, Ubu’s low, coarse, heavy materiality, both in its appearance

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pouvoir dont l’un des principaux privilèges serait de toujours ‘pouvoir’ s’empiffrer”: “Goinfrerie et pouvoir: d’*Ubu Roi* (1896) au *Roi Bombance* (1905/1909)”, in *Recherches Sémiotiques / Semiotic Inquiry*, 1994, 14 (1-2): 251-267, p. 256. For a close study of the theme of food, see also Renée R. Hubert, “Raw and Cooked: An Interpretation of *Ubu Roi*”, in *L’Esprit Créateur (Alfred Jarry)*, cit., pp. 75-83.

<sup>72</sup> The banquet once again echoes Rabelais’s treatment of food with its typically carnivalesque unusual creativity.

<sup>73</sup> Which also recalls a carnivalesque ritual of the “feast of fools”: “During the solemn service sung by the bishop-elect, excrement was used instead of incense. After the service the clergy rode in carts loaded with dung, they drove through the streets tossing it at the crowd”: M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 147.

and its activities, is constantly emphasized as “ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of ‘classic’ aesthetics”.<sup>74</sup>

Bakhtin stresses the relevance, within grotesque imagery, of the bowels and anus, orifices where “the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome”, and of activities of “eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination [...] dismemberment and swallowing up” where “the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven”<sup>75</sup> in an enriching and life-giving continuum. Indeed, Ubu’s relationship with the other seems to be defined in these terms: he offers banquets and expects in his turn to be fed, he verbally and physically throws around his relished faeces, most of his threats to other characters are made either in culinary form (“vous allez passer tout à l’heure par la casserole” – I,1 p.33; “en compote les Moscovites” – IV,4 p.98; “je vais te faire cuire à petit feu” – IV,4 p.99; Bordure acting on his behalf towards Ladislas “vient de le couper en deux comme une saucisse” – II,3 p.55), or in terms of dismemberment (“je te vais arracher les yeux” – I,2 p.36; “je vais te mettre en morceaux” – III,1 p.68; “ces messieurs te couperont les ongles” – III,4 p.77; “decollation et torsion des jambes” – III,7 p.84; the frequent “massacrer” and the full torture ritual), or again as some sort of metaphorical swallowing through the medium of the “poche” or “trappe”. As Béhar comments, Ubu “est un ventre, une outre, un avaleur de mondes. Il engloutit tout ce qui est à sa portée, nourriture aussi bien que trésors”;<sup>76</sup> which again parallels the Bakhtinian description of the bodily level: Ubu’s grotesque “openness” to the world through bowels and anus does in fact celebrate an overwhelmingly material movement of ingestion and excretion, swallowing riches and spilling “merdre”. However, what Bakhtin defines as the positive overcoming of

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<sup>74</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 25.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 317.

<sup>76</sup> H. Béhar, *Jarry. Le monstre et la marionette*, cit., p. 103.

confines between bodies in a universal, “all-people” dimension, only takes place in *Ubu Roi* in a single direction, that is in individualistic, “non-choral”, selfish terms, from Ubu to the others, where the latter are exclusively on the suffering, receiving end of the “food” process and of consequent death, while Ubu variously “feeds” on and acquires their life and assets;<sup>77</sup> “the language of excrement [...] closely linked with fertility”<sup>78</sup> has in *Ubu Roi* an offensive, destructive purpose, rather than the positive one Bakhtin attributes to it. Similarly, his bodily heaviness is always threatening and aggressive towards others; he does not hide the instinctive motivations for his actions, the basest lust for food, power and riches; which altogether contributes to the sinister, disturbing effect of these grotesque elements in his figure, and probably partly goes to explain the extremely vexed reaction of the first audience to its “truculence ordurière” and “grossièreté”, but it also sheds a critical light on some implications of the Bakhtinian grotesque when taken to the letter. *Ubu Roi* in fact shatters the classical dignified image of man, and the moral conventions and values involved in it; this way “Jarry dérange plus que les habitudes du public; il semble jeter un doute sur l’existence chez l’homme, et par conséquent chez le spectateur, de ces valeurs qui paraissent élever la condition humaine à des hauteurs satisfaisantes”.<sup>79</sup> Consequently, what is in principle the carnivalesque celebration of the human body and physical life as opposed to the idealizing sophistication of the accepted image of man, turns out to be ultimately a strongly negative denigration of man as a whole, which also undermines the positive value attributed by Bakhtin to the carnivalesque overthrow of the rationalistic view of the human being.

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<sup>77</sup> Charles Grivel sees Ubu as “un principe d’ingestion: c’est un gouffre représentationnel”: “Les représentations Jarriques”, in *Revue des Sciences Humaines. Alfred Jarry*, 1986, 3: 5-28, p. 16.

<sup>78</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 149.

<sup>79</sup> Gérard Damerval, *Ubu Roi. La bombe comique de 1896*, Paris: A. G. Nizet, 1984, p. 34.



As well as the throwing to the front of physical coarseness, *Ubu Roi* prominently stages another element of grotesque folk humour: verbal vulgarity, the coarse “familiar speech of the marketplace” in Bakhtinian terms, characterized by “abusive language, insulting words or expressions”, “profanities and oaths”, and where “verbal etiquette and discipline are relaxed”;<sup>80</sup> again, the main exponent of this feature is Ubu, but his wife and entourage can become vulgar and offensive as well, remarkably towards Ubu himself.<sup>81</sup> There is in fact abundance of “mutual mockery” and aggressively “informal” address, inventive “indecent words and expressions” which are indeed frequently related to bodily images and excrement,<sup>82</sup> and used “as material objects thrown about the stage”;<sup>83</sup> the whole certainly achieving a degrading effect.

The fanciful nature and rather idiosyncratic combination of most of these expressions are reminiscent of the creative language of Rabelais’s works, which were vastly popular among Jarry’s schoolmates who gave birth to the original Ubu cycle; whenever Ubu opens his mouth, it is with imprecations of all sorts, addressed to no one in particular: the infamous “merdre” (occurring thirty-three times, alone or in various combinations<sup>84</sup>), “cornegidouille”, “de par ma merdre”, and “de par ma chandelle verte”

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<sup>80</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., pp. 16-17.

<sup>81</sup> A close semiotic study of the language of the play is in M. Arrivé, *op. cit.*, “Dictionnaire d’*Ubu Roi*” and “Metadictionnaire d’*Ubu Roi*”, pp. 166-307; and in Michael Issacharoff, “*Ubu* and the Signs of the Theatre”, in Robert L. Mitchell (ed.), *Pre-Text Text Context. Essays on Nineteenth-Century French Literature*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980, pp. 277-284. See also Judith Cooper, “Le parler Ubu”, ch. vi in her *Ubu Roi: An Analytical Study, Tulane Studies in Romance Languages and Literature*, 1974, 6; and Linda Klieger Stillman, “The Morphophonetic Universe of Ubu”, *French Review*, 1977, 50: 586-595.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., pp. 147, 319.

<sup>83</sup> Keith Beaumont, “The Making of Ubu: Jarry as Producer and Theorist”, *Theatre Research International*, 1972, 12: 139-154, p. 146.

<sup>84</sup> The aggressive nature of this word, and its frequency, is very well explained by K. Beaumont as “Ubu’s automatic response to any situation in which his will is frustrated or thwarted, and the expression of his desire simply to smash down any obstacle in his way”: Jarry. *Ubu Roi*, cit., p. 48.

are interjections punctuating almost every utterance from the very start; he voices his decision to dethrone the king with “Ah! je cède à la tentation. Bougre de merdre, merdre de bougre” (I,1 p.33). His cowardliness and concern for his own welfare also excite him into colourful exclamations (“Oh! merdre, jarnicotonbleu, de par ma chandelle verte. je suis découvert, je vais être décapité! hélas! hélas!!” – I,5 p.43; “Corne physique, je suis à moitié mort!” – III,8 p.87; “Cornebleu, jambedieu, tête de vache! nous allons périr” – IV,3 p.92); and imprecations are his only way of expressing irritation, towards Mère Ubu (“Sabre à finances, corne de ma gidouille... Mais, corne d’Ubu!” – III,7 pp.83-84), or others (“Cornegidouille! Ouvrez, de par ma merdre, par saint Jean, saint Pierre et saint Nicolas! ouvrez, sabre à finances, corne finances” – III,4 p.77).

Ubu constantly addresses his interlocutor with more or less conventional insults,<sup>85</sup> and remarkably many insults, of a more standard colloquial nature, are also addressed to him by Mère Ubu and others.<sup>86</sup> All this, besides being gratuitous and quite unprecedented within the serious theatre,<sup>87</sup> was clearly intended as an assault on norms of social propriety and decorum both in and outside it. From the very first word, which “se dressa comme un défi au langage, à sa dignité hypocrite”,<sup>88</sup> and on which “subitement se polarise la condamnation de la bêtise et de la lâcheté avec la fureur, la

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Incidentally, the word even sounds similar to “meurtre”.

<sup>85</sup> A complete list renders the insistence of such verbal habits: “bougre”, “chenapans, sacs à vin, sagouins payés”, “bouffresque”, “stupide bougre”, “oiseau de nuit, bête de malheur, hiboux à guêtres”, “garçon de ma merdre”, “bêlître”, “sac à merdre”, “la dernière des chipies”, “horreur”, “harpie”, “charogne”, “sotte créature”, “idiote”, and paronomastic nonsense tirades like “soûlard, bâtard, hussard, tartar, calard, cafard, mouchard, savoyard, communard”.

<sup>86</sup> “gueux voyou”, “misérable”, “grosse merdre”, “affreux sagouin”, “traître, lâche, vilain, ladre”, “coquin”, “vile crapule, vagabond honteux”, “affreux menteur”, “gros pantin”, “vieux gredin”, “révoltante bourrique”, “pourceau”, “goinfre”, “sacripant, mécréant, musulman”, “triste imbécile”.

<sup>87</sup> G. Damerval observes that in *Ubu Roi* “La grossièreté du langage des personnages est fort différente de celle de certains caractères proposés au théâtre par d’autres auteurs [...]: elle est *choquante* car elle est réellement recherchée pour elle-même”: *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>88</sup> Louis Perche, *Jarry*, Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1965, p. 78.

fureur indignée, de l'individu arraché brusquement, par cette provocation retentissante, à sa niaise quiétude bourgeoise”,<sup>89</sup> the play openly claimed “unofficial” familiarity and freedom from linguistic barriers and behaviour norms, that directly impinged on the contemporary bourgeois social and moral codes, “for the speech reflects the established social hierarchy, the official scale of evaluation concerning objects and concepts and the static lines dividing them, as fixed by official philosophy”.<sup>90</sup> The incensed reaction of the cultured and socially distinguished elite to which this was addressed surely testified to the play’s disruptive potential with regard to the current bourgeois morality, certainly undermined by this outrageous “celebration” of the vulgar.

#### 4. Ubu’s linguistic universe

Closely connected to the verbal vulgarity of the play is the experimentation with neologisms: the language of *Ubu Roi*, taken in its entirety, constitutes an idiosyncratic world that envelops Ubu and his immediate adjuncts, and challenges the “normal” world outside the play and the theatre; which can be read both as a carnivalesque aspect and as an example of “heteroglossia”.

New or atypical words include “merdre”, “Palotins”, “bouffre”, “gidouille”, “bouzine”, “giborgne”, “boudouille”, “rastron” and the phonetically modified “oneilles”, “phynance”, “ji lon mets dans ma poche”, “tudez”;<sup>91</sup> swearwords and insults, as noted above, display a remarkably imaginative character, ranging from archaic or

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<sup>89</sup> J. H. Levesque, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>90</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 420.

<sup>91</sup> The origin of these words have been variously ascribed to dialectal variations, to Rabelais’s language, or to the original student saga of Père Hébert (in the case of “merdre”, “phynance”, “gidouille”, “de par ma chandelle verte”, “rastron”, the “poche”): see for example ; M. Arrivé, *op. cit.*, pp. 166-283; F. Caradec, “Rabelais dans l’œuvre de Jarry”, cit.; J. Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 83; Jean-Louis Cornille, “Ubu chassé”, *Nottingham French Studies*, 1998, 37 (2): 48-61; Linda Klieger Stillman, *Alfred Jarry*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983, pp. 47-48.

dialectal or Rabelaisian expressions, to the grouping of everyday words into unusual combinations. This is especially the case with the clusters based on “finance/phynance”, “gidouille”, “merdre”, which also characterize another group of neologisms that variously define Ubu’s weapons or devices, the “noun-à-noun” compounds, a feature that is highly idiosyncratic in Ubu’s speech: “voiturin à finance”, “cheval à phynance”, “croc à merdre”, “ciseau à merdre”, “couteau à Nobles” are only a few examples. with analogous creations such as “chiens à bas de laine”, “ciseau à oneilles”, “couteau à figure”, “bâton à physique”, “machine à décerveler”. All of these almost acquire a life of their own in Ubu’s insistent and self-important enumeration (“Ji tou tue au moyen du croc à merdre et du couteau à figure” – III,8 p.86 ; “Que le bâton à physique travaille d’une généreuse émulation et partage avec le petit bout de bois l’honneur de massacrer, creuser et exploiter l’Empereur muscovite. En avant, Monsieur notre cheval à finances!” – IV,4 pp.99-100).

What is peculiar, besides the unusual associations, is that these compounds (like the carnivalesque form of comic speech “coq-à-l’âne”<sup>92</sup>) do not necessarily make any sense in a “normal”, rational world, like the “ciseau à merdre” or the “bâton à physique”, but rather tend to create the pillars of an individual discourse pertaining to Ubu alone, together with the neologisms and the modified words: they “are used to subvert the normal transmission of sense and reference [...]. Lexical items such as these thus become signs of signs, reflecting one another ad infinitum”.<sup>93</sup> As Ubu himself will self-importantly explain in a fictional interview, “J’écris *phynance* et *oneilles* parce que je prononce *phynance* et *oneilles* et surtout pour bien marquer qu’il s’agit de *phynance*

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<sup>92</sup> “This is a genre of intentionally absurd verbal combinations, a form of completely liberated speech that ignores all norms, even those of elementary logic. [...] It is as if words had been released from the shackles of sense, to enjoy a play period of complete freedom and establish unusual relationships among themselves”: M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., pp. 422-423.

<sup>93</sup> M. Issacharoff, cit., p. 282.

et *oneilles*, spéciales, personnelles, en quantité et qualité telles que personne n'en a, sinon moi";<sup>94</sup> and the same can be said about the rest of his language.<sup>95</sup> His "strategy speech", for example, when giving directions for the main battle, is a compound of fanciful nonsense and mock-warfare discourse that clearly emphasizes Ubu's idiosyncratic person made up of stupidity, aggressiveness, cowardice and self-importance, and subverts the logical and heroic code of battle with vague, inept directions and hardly disguised self-preservation intents:

Nous mettrons les fantassins à pied au bas de la colline pour recevoir les Russes et les tuer un peu, les cavaliers derrière pour se jeter dans la confusion, et l'artillerie autour du moulin à vent ici présent pour tirer dans le tas. Quant à nous, nous nous tiendrons dans le moulin à vent et tirerons avec le pistolet à phynances par la fenêtre, en travers de la porte nous placerons le bâton à physique, et si quelqu'un essaye d'entrer, gare au croc à merdre!!! (IV,3 p.95).

He therefore claims linguistic freedom from the socially generalized logical discourse, a veritable "carnivalization of speech, which free[s] it from the gloomy seriousness of official philosophy as well as from truisms and commonplace ideas",<sup>96</sup> and seems bent on creating a whole alternative universe of significance.

This can be interpreted from the perspective of Bakhtin's considerations on language, both in terms of "world view" and "heteroglossia": Ubu's discourse constitutes in fact a sort of "centripetal" force that serves "to unify and centralize the

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<sup>94</sup> *Almanach illustré de Père Ubu* (1901), reprinted in Alfred Jarry, *Œuvres Complètes* (ed. by M. Arrivé), Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1972, p. 587. The fact that the modification of "phynance" is purely graphic and not audible can be explained by the fact that it originated in the written corpus of the student saga of Père Hébert, enriched and passed on in manuscript, and not necessarily in dramatic form, but often as a mock-heroic poem.

<sup>95</sup> J. Cooper associates Ubu's speech to the form of "*fantaisie verbale* in which verbal play or virtuosity take precedence over meaning and signification", and whose basic features are "repetition, enumeration, and the use of jargon which includes the neologisms and argot [...] as well as technical terms and Latin": *op. cit.*, p. 92.

<sup>96</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 426.

verbal-ideological world” around his own person, thus creating his own monoglossia. his individual “ideologically saturated” language,<sup>97</sup> that forcefully expresses his own self, and directly challenges the external generalized official speech in its drive towards a commonly recognized and uniformed vocabulary. At the same time, this verbal universe is one where ambiguity, abnormality and instability of meaning are a welcome feature also pertaining to the speakers themselves, and in this sense it is an expression of the language’s potentiality for infinite significance and reverberation of meaning. The fact that a term like “bâton à physique” both refers idiosyncratically to a “bâton porteur des traits distinctifs de l’univers ubuesque, particulièrement sous les apparences de la physique”,<sup>98</sup> and is a puzzling hybrid creation (in reference to the “outside” world) open to multiple interpretations, is just one indication that the text welcomes and supports a heteroglot, “dialogized” vision of language, one characterized by ambiguity, creativity and “multivoicedness”, pitted against any attempt to impose an official, univocal discourse claiming exclusive “truth” and referentiality. If this is brought to its extremes in Jarry’s poetry and narrative works, nonetheless behind Ubu’s verbal games and creativity “lies a persistent and profound reflection on the nature of language itself [...]. Behind his incessant wordplay and verbal clowning lies a deep-seated intuition that all ‘reality’ (other of course than material reality) is at bottom a linguistic reality – that all statements of a philosophical, religious, ethical or scientific order are not just [...] ‘imaginary solutions’ but [...] mere words”.<sup>99</sup>

Ubu does in fact seem to conjure up his own world by sheer linguistic power, all his actions and “successes” amount to incessant verbal exertions, and the ultimate foundation of his own alternative rule appears to reside in his ability to talk everyone

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<sup>97</sup> See M. M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”. cit., pp. 270-272.

<sup>98</sup> M. Arrivé, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

<sup>99</sup> K. Beaumont, *Alfred Jarry. A Critical and Biographical Study*, cit., p. 303.

into submitting – which also has significant implications when considered as an example of a ruler, whose power – with Foucault – relies on the support of and compliance with its own discourse. Quite significantly, one of Jarry’s contemporaries, Gustave Le Bon, expressed analogous ideas in his pseudo-sociological study of the crowd, where he claimed that “[i]t is illusions and words that have influenced the mind of the crowd, and especially words – words which are as powerful as they are chimerical”.<sup>100</sup>

## 5. The fool, the puppet, violence

*Ubu Roi* displays further carnivalesque elements in the clown/fool, in the use of folk culture mainly through the figure of the puppet, and the exercise of violence; on the one hand these features again appear to form a subverting instance of liberation from constrictions and conventions, in the Bakhtinian sense; on the other hand, however, they also work together to create a deeply disturbing image of humanity.

Ubu’s character suggests the obvious identification with the popular figure of the clown/fool: he is grotesquely big and clumsy, ridiculous and vulgar in his movements and speech, hopelessly reckless, exaggerated and unsuccessful in his actions, with “a sort of absurd nonchalance in his action, almost as if he weren’t quite aware of what is going on around him”;<sup>101</sup> and he is repeatedly marked as foolish and clownish by all the other characters as well as by his own admission. Mère Ubu’s first veiled suggestion of a coup d’état (“c’est un autre qu’il faudrait assassiner”) is met by Ubu’s utter obtuseness (“je ne comprends pas [...] je ne comprends rien”), which is promptly remarked by her (“tu es si bête”– I,1 pp.31-32); she dismisses his loud complaints of the expensive

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<sup>100</sup> Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd. A Study of the Popular Mind*, London: Ernest Benn Ltd., 1930, p. 101.

<sup>101</sup> D. M. Church, cit., p. 237.

banquet with “Ne l’écoutez pas, il est imbécile” (I,3 p.38), and his sudden fear of the conspiracy being discovered, with “quel homme mou!” (I,5 p.43). Ubu’s gift of the “mirliton” to king Venceslas is commented on by the latter’s son Bougrelas as “est-il bête, ce père Ubu” (I,6, p.45); and any other of Ubu’s political acts is met with contemptuous denigration, like his new taxation system :

PERE UBU Messieurs, nous établirons un impôt de dix pour cent sur la propriété, un autre sur le commerce et l’industrie, et un troisième sur les mariages et un quatrième sur les décès, de quinze francs chacun.

PREMIER FINANCIER Mais c’est idiot, Père Ubu.

DEUXIEME FINANCIER C’est absurde.

TROISIEME FINANCIER Ça n’a ni queue ni tête. (III,2 p.75)

These instances, and other comments like “quel sot homme”, “il est vraiment imbécile”, “ce gros pantin”, “mon gros polichinelle”, “il est encore plus bête que quand il est parti”, “sot personnage”, “il est fou”, “quel triste imbécile”, have the effect of putting him in a critical, “heteroglot” perspective that relativizes and undermines his own self-importance and ambitious planning. Furthermore, he utters expressions of pseudo-wisdom or would-be knowledge which appear completely nonsensical and ridiculous:

j’aime mieux être gueux comme un maigre et brave rat que riche comme un méchant et gras chat (I,1 p.34);

le mauvais droit ne vaut-il pas le bon? (III,1 p.68);

j’ai des oneilles pour parler et vous une bouche pour m’entendre (III,3 p.83);

Je vais allumer du feu en attendant qu’il apporte du bois (IV,6 p.108);

Nous devons faire au moins un million de nœuds à l’heure, et ces nœuds ont ceci de bon qu’une fois faits ils ne se défont pas (V,4 p.127);

le pays appelé Germanie, ainsi nommé parce que les habitants de ce pays sont tous cousins germains. [...] S’il n’y avait pas de Pologne il n’y aurait pas de Polonais! (V,4 p.130):

and the nonsensical anaphoric tirade “Ainsi que le coquelicot...” (IV,5 p.103). Finally, his calling the messenger stupid (“il y a sur tes épaules plus de plumes que de cervelle et



tu as rêvé des sottises” – IV,3 p.94), when being himself obviously in the wrong, comically reflects the insult back to him.

Ubu therefore appears to be dismissed as a worthless fool without importance in the “rational” world; but thanks to his stupidity, he enjoys the freedom, Damerval agrees, “du personnage du Bouffon des cours royales, du Fou qui dénonce, au milieu des pitreries et des grimaces, des vérités que la foule des courtisans et le monarque n’accepteraient d’aucun autre membre de la société”,<sup>102</sup> a freedom also from serious, official wisdom and truth, that is, carnival’s “inverted wisdom”<sup>103</sup> with regard to the surrounding world within the play and outside it. But this also has a more deeply subversive side, when considering that this “fool” not only claims his own alternative knowledge and truth within the “court”, but completely takes over and manages to overthrow the latter, and establish as a veritable “Lord of Misrule” his own upside-down reign of grotesque, base and stupid humanity, which is thus celebrated within the play. The final escape on the boat is just a further example of his absurd mismanagement:

C’est ta faute, brute de capitaine, si nous n’arrivons pas. Nous devrions être arrivés. Oh! oh, mais je vais commander, moi, alors! Pare à virer! A Dieu vat. Mouillez, virez vent devant, virez vent arrière. Hissez les voiles, serrez les voiles, la barre dessus, la barre dessous, la barre à côté. Vous voyez, ça va très bien. Venez en travers à la lame et alors ce sera parfait (V,4 p.128);

which throws the equipage into agonising laughter while causing the boat to ship water. Again with Le Bon, he seems – quite threateningly – to embody the idea of a powerful, though foolish, leader:

The leaders we speak of are more frequently men of action than thinkers. They are not gifted

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<sup>102</sup> G. Damerval, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit.. p. 260.

with keen foresight, nor could they be, as this quality generally conduces to doubt and inactivity. They are especially recruited from the ranks of those morbidly nervous, excitable, half-deranged persons who are bordering on madness. However absurd may be the idea they uphold or the goal they pursue, their convictions are so strong that all reasoning is lost upon them.<sup>104</sup>

It is the Fool's rule, but where carnival also runs mad, crossing the borderline of the feast, as will be discussed below.

The marionette-like treatment of characters and plot, the simplified and suggestive rather than representational scenery, together with the final "Chanson du décervelage",<sup>105</sup> draws on the popular tradition of folk performances, mainly found at fairs and in the marketplace; the joining of this "inferior" culture and the "superior" one of the cultivated theatre is, as noted above, an instance of "bouleversement" whereby Jarry "s'efforce de bâtir une contre-culture pour contre-battre l'idéologie dominante du moment", a "culture unique où se mêlent le bas et le sublime, où le bas est dérision du sublime et le sublime exaltation du bas";<sup>106</sup> the latter probably in the sense that the "high" status of the theatre and of a royal figure magnify and give unprecedented scope to the "low", rather than exalt it. But the portrayal of the characters as puppets, with masks, stylised sharp movements, and rudimentary psychology, adds a further dimension to this overturning: the human being comes across as immersed in a naïve theatricality brought to its extremes, and as a brutal, mechanical, absurd creature with as little dignity as psychological "reality", in a way that is both derisive and self-mocking, and sets off in a crudely comic perspective the lack of humanity and rationality in the character: which altogether acquires an almost "existentialist", certainly upsetting

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<sup>104</sup> G. Le Bon, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

<sup>105</sup> This originated with the students at Rennes, and based on the popular song "Valse des Pruneaux", words by Villemer-Delormel and music by Charles Pourny (cf. *Ubu*, cit. p. 466, n. 54).

<sup>106</sup> H. Béhar, *Les cultures de Jarry*, cit., pp. 19-20.

perspective on man, as Stillman lucidly points out: Ubu

represents man's freedom and the powers of transcendence associated with the mask, but also man's inhumanity (his stupidity and lack of sensitivity) [...], existing on a borderline. It is this vertiginous borderline which is translated aesthetically by using clowning, slapstick, and exaggeration to present a dead-serious and painful existence. [...] The comic force of organized delirium resides in the power of deformation and disproportion that lead the conscious mind astray.<sup>107</sup>

Stillman defines this as tragicomedy, "destined to register absurdity and alienation";<sup>108</sup> however, Ubu seems to actually lack the tragic self-awareness, the moral scruples and remorse that would confer him the duality of a tragicomic dimension: rather, he is mono-dimensional and amoral, he is alternatively a monster and a trickster with no conscience nor perspective on the consequences of his actions; if the outcome of what he wants and does is undoubtedly tragic, to this he nonetheless remains completely and shamelessly indifferent.

A further element belonging to the carnivalesque folk culture, according to Bakhtin's description, is the use of violence, which is connected to its linguistic parallel, verbal abuse, and to the grotesque imagery of the monstrous and of feeding for its element of "anatomizing dismemberment":<sup>109</sup> for Bakhtin it shares the latter's positive value of regeneration within the cycle of life and death,<sup>110</sup> which however does not seem to apply to the present text, notwithstanding its comic and degrading effect. Violence also participates in the "unofficial spirit" of carnival, especially against prevailing law and "political correctness", morality and rules of behaviour; and it

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<sup>107</sup> L. K. Stillman, *Alfred Jarry*, cit., p. 54.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> Cf. M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 202.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 197-198, 217.

contributes to “bring down” authority, being a “symbolic” action mainly “directed at something on a higher level, at the king”<sup>111</sup> (this aspect will be discussed in the next section).

From the very outset, the discourse of Ubu, Mère Ubu and their entourage defines itself in terms of massive, sheer brutality, followed through by their actions, and mainly through images of dismemberment: Ubu’s second line already shows an extreme reaction to his wife’s insult by way of the verb “assommer”, to which her response is to deflect the “assassiner” onto another person. The frequent word “merdre” has a sinister consonance with “meurtre”, while “massacrer” and “tuer/tuder” recur several times, together with the light-hearted and unprovoked uttering of expressions of generalized violence (“je vais faire périr tous les nobles”, “je tuerai tout le monde”, “Décervelez, tudez, coupez les oneilles, arrachez la finance”, “elle aura été bien rossée”, “il lui jette l’ours”), animal ferocity (“je vais aiguïser mes dents contre vos mollets”, “faisant un carnage épouvantable”, “étranglions le vieux bandit”, “saignez, écorchez”), and mutilation.<sup>112</sup> In all this carnage, which attains ridiculously hyperbolic proportions, Ubu mainly holds the role of passive director who delights in envisioning torture, ordering others or, absurdly, his weapons (“baton à physique”, “croc à merdre”, “croc à finances”, “sabre à merdre” – see IV,3-4) to perform the violent acts; furthermore, these threats and unsolicited aggressive reactions are constantly exaggerated in proportion to the context, mainly highlighting the irascible and unreasonably ferocious attitude of this

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, cit., p. 197.

<sup>112</sup> I quote extensively to convey the intensity of such violence: “je te vais arracher les yeux”, “ficher un grand coup d’épée qui le fendra de la tête à la ceinture”, “fend le crane”, “je vais te mettre en morceaux”, “ces messieurs te couperont les oneilles”, “il le déchire”, and the variously formulated “grand supplice” including “décollation du cou et de la tête”, “torsion des jambes”, “torsion du nez et des dents et extraction de la langue”, “enfouissement du petit bout de bois dans les oneilles”, “arrachement des cheveux”, “extraction de la cervelle par les talons, lacération du postérieur, suppression partielle ou même totale de la moelle épinière”, “ouverture de la vessie natatoire”.

“powerful” man.

The effect is one of widespread amoral, not just comic, perversion overturning humanity into a degraded, savage entity that, as Bakhtin claims, does laugh in the face of death,<sup>113</sup> but in a way that goes well beyond the carnivalizing of principles of morality and rational justice. As White observes, *Ubu Roi*, “hyperbole disguised as farce, extends an animalistic metaphor of man’s rapacity, perhaps even of his future. Ubu’s semi-ludicrous ferocity eats away at the bases of logic”;<sup>114</sup> for Beaumont, within the play “is crystallized a vision of the world in which all vestiges of ‘civilization’, all values, ideals and beliefs have vanished – or been destroyed”.<sup>115</sup> The play, thus, seems not only to subvert a certain official discourse through the temporary “cultural” opposition of the carnival spirit, but much more radically to disrupt a whole culture, through the surfacing of the most latent savage instincts of man, that implicate, through a comic, grotesque image, the audience and people at large in the recognition of their repressed, unofficial monstrosity. The kind of humour created by all these grotesque and degrading aspects of *Ubu Roi* may, for Shattuck, “be regarded as a psychological refusal to repress distasteful images. [...] it is a means of domesticating fear and pain [...such] humor offers both a form of wisdom and a means of survival in a threatening world”.<sup>116</sup> But this is probably only part of the effect: on the one hand, in fact, it is the ambivalent spirit of carnival that mocks and is self-mocking, that triumphantly uncrowns “pious seriousness”, spirituality and imposed morality, and asserts the “earthly”, low character of man’s nature, while bringing out the “monster” within amounts to some sort of exorcism. On the other hand, however, the black-comedy type

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<sup>113</sup> See M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., for example pp. 90-91.

<sup>114</sup> K. S. White, *Savage Comedy Since King Ubu*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>115</sup> K. Beaumont, “The Making of Ubu”, cit., p. 151.

<sup>116</sup> Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years. The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France: 1885 to World War I*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1969, p. 248.

of horribly sadistic and irrational cruelty forms such a ghastly portrait of a human being, that it is strongly suggestive of the negative implications of the notion of “subverting all norms”: the carnival spirit is not always positive and liberating, it can become extremely cruel, and the “unofficial”, “repressed”, low side of human nature can attain, when liberated, shocking heights of “inhuman” irrationality, as the historical events of a few decades later were very sadly to show.

## 6. The subversion of kingship

All the aspects of *Ubu Roi* discussed above, the vulgarity of language, the grossness, the grotesque, violent and clownish behaviour, and even the ludicrous sound of the name “Ubu”, converge into an undignified, degrading carnivalization of the role of the king in the person of Ubu as commander/ruler and, hence, a lowering of the value and importance of authority to the comic level of a “fool’s rule” displaying childishness, recklessness, comic debasement, greed, arrogance and cowardice, and even the carnivalesque ritual “beating of the king”; in this respect, it establishes a connection with the degradation of royalty operated by *Enrico IV*. However, this goes deeper than a mere comic rendering, and has a subversive impact that on the one hand offers a devastating and accusatory picture of the handling of power, and on the other hand acquires a disturbing significance when set up against the historical background, thus also undermining the beneficial value of the “liberation” offered by the carnivalesque misrule.

One initial, if marginal factor in the lowering of kingship is the choice of names for some characters, which are not only historically inaccurate,<sup>117</sup> but also a first

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<sup>117</sup> For a meticulous tracing of the source for the names, see J. L. Cornille, cit.; Thieri Foulc, “Jarry et la Pologne” and “Jarry et la Russie”, in *Europe*, cit.: 205-209; and Jarry, *Ubu*, cit., nn. 5-10 pp.

instance of uncrowning of authority: military supremacy is ridiculed<sup>118</sup> in captain Bordure, which is both a heraldic term susceptible of a sexual interpretation as sphincter,<sup>119</sup> and only one letter away from the vile “ordure”; and less evidently in General Lascy, in real life a victorious Russian field-marshal, who is here associated with Ubu’s inept army; Stanislas Leczinski and Jean Sobieski, real Polish kings, and Michel Fédérovitch, founder of the Romanov dynasty, appear here in the humble roles of peasants or plain soldiers, the latter very un-royally racing for a gold chest for King Ubu’s amusement (II,7).

Ubu’s childish behaviour appears not only in some of his verbal expressions which can be read as “baby-language”<sup>120</sup> (“oneilles”, “ji tou tue”, “ji lon fous à la poche”), but also in the way he counteracts the “normal” logic of the “serious” world, exhibiting not the innocent side, but rather the destructive, less endearing aspect of childhood. He throws tantrums to obtain what he wants, and frames his own world around him in a self-centred and simplistic way, that reduces everything to the logic of self-satisfaction, whether of physical or pecuniary appetites; a logic that is well exemplified in the shocking irresponsibility and naivety of his plan: “j’ai changé le gouvernement et j’ai fait mettre dans le journal qu’on paierait deux fois tous les impôts et trois fois ceux qui pourront être désignés ultérieurement. Avec ce système j’aurai vite

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456-459.

<sup>118</sup> It is interesting to notice that Jarry’s own experience in the national army was marked by this kind of comic irreverence, as N. Lennon relates: “Rather than being obviously uncooperative and obnoxious, Jarry continually appeared respectful to the point of obsequiousness, but everywhere he went he nonetheless created havoc and anarchy. During target practice, he utilized his drill with a rifle, along with his sublime sense of the absurd, and managed to reduce the ranks to helpless laughter [...] his robot-like and equally inappropriate motions making him seem like a parody of the perfect soldier”: *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>119</sup> This is the reading given for example by Arrivé (*op. cit.*), but earlier heraldic sources were similarly aware of the potential sexual connotations of these symbols (see Jarry, *Ubu*, n. 4 p. 456).

<sup>120</sup> Beaumont suggests this interpretation: see *Jarry. Ubu Roi. cit.*, pp. 52-53.

fait fortune, alors je tuerai tout le monde et je m'en irai" (III,4 p.78).

Closely connected with this aspect is Ubu's stupid recklessness, which is not only often contemptuously stressed and mocked by the other characters, but also shows in his managing of the coup-d'état and his decision-making as a king, resulting in a very impolitic and irrational, "upside-down" rule: his nonchalant dismissal of Bordure without the promised reward (III,1), regardless of the prophetic warnings of Mère Ubu and Bordure himself; his teasing of the latter, confident in Bordure's being locked behind bars (III,5), which is of course immediately contradicted in the following scene with Bordure free and seeking the Emperor's help. It also appears in the unlawful and ill-judged execution of nobles and magistrates to acquire their titles, riches and powers, despite startled and enraged reactions and advice to the contrary, and the cursory disposition in legal and taxation matters (III,2) which excites despising comments; the unwise decision to have lunch on the day of the battle based on the assumption that the Russians will not attack before midday (IV,3), and the consequent inept handling of the battle; this thoughtlessness is also paralleled by the usurped Polish king Venceslas, who is blind to Ubu's threat and rashly goes without escort to meet his opponent (II,1).

Ubu's figure and actions as a ruler excite ridicule because they are degraded, and strongly contrast with the regal presence and decorum conventionally expected of a king: his appearance in full armour anti-climaxes in Mère Ubu's comparing him to a "citrouille armée" and in his inglorious fall from the horse, which gives a pathetically ludicrous effect to his consequent threats (III,8). His authority is also undermined by Mère Ubu's double dealing as soon as he has left for the war ("Maintenant, que ce gros pantin est parti, tâchons de faire nos affaires, tuer Bougrelas et nous emparer du trésor" (III,8 p.88). A figurative lowering of his royal figure lies in his going by himself to collect the taxes (III,2) instead of delegating, which will shortly have a physical counterpart in his undignified stooping to "ramasser la finance" (III,4) like a common



beggar, as well as in his hectic running around to force people to get married (III,7), going to the battle on foot, dragging his horse (IV,3), and in his many stumbles and falls. Ubu's royalty is disrespected in the frequent insults he receives, which put him in a very critical light, in Cotice's likening him to a dog to be fed ("on pourra lui donner les os" – IV,6 p.109), and again "brought down" in Ubu's admission "j'en fais dans ma culotte" (V,2 p.125); his solemn monologue on his "glorious" behaviour during the battle suddenly deflates in the last words ("Tout ceci est fort beau, mais personne ne m'écoute" – IV,4 p.101) and in the following Russian charge that shatters his army. Finally, his "governing" the boat in the end (V,4) is a piece of pure farce in his helpless misunderstanding of naval terminology and his consequent muddled orders that drench the crew and throw them into sickness or laughter, stressing his silly ineptitude.

The symbolic status of kingship undergoes a comic reduction also in king Venceslas's own drunkenness (I,6), and in the Ubus' identification of it with the ability to "manger fort souvent de l'andouille et rouler carrosse par les rues" and to have "une grande capeline", "un parapluie et un grand caban" (I,1); and by the use of low terms in referring to it: "succéder sur votre fiole la couronne de Pologne" ("fiolle" being analogous to "conk" or "noddle"), "ce cul, je voudrais l'installer sur un trône" – I,1). Perry rightly observes that the series of Ubu's coveted things "associates political ambition with the least heroic and most familiar kinds of appetites [...and] it renders the objects of ambition so trivial [...that] ordinary men driven by enormous appetites kill each other for trifles".<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, royal activity is ridiculed in Ubu's devising of a "petit système" to manage sunny and rainy weather (III,7) and of a "voiture à vent" to transport the army (IV,3); and in his simplistic view of law-making which he treats as just one more item in his first day's agenda (III,2). King Ubu is thus ridiculed from all

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<sup>121</sup> C. Perry, cit., p. 88.

sides, relativized and uncrowned from the moment he decides to take over royal power, so that the “Lord of misrule” is debunked in his turn, and carnival ends up subverting itself.

Also lowering a king’s dignity and politically appropriate behaviour is Ubu’s very overt greed for riches and consequent avarice, to the point that, as Accursi writes, “[l]e cogito ubuesque s’inscrit ainsi: ‘Je gagne, donc j’existe’”:<sup>122</sup> he is paralleled in this by Mère Ubu, as shows in her eager ravaging of the hidden treasure (IV,1); also, Ubu is persuaded into offering a banquet to his people only with the prospect of getting more taxes out of them (II,6); he never wants to give out money (“je veux m’enrichir, je ne lâcherai pas un sou” – II,6 p.61), and wishes to go to war without wanting to pay for it (III,7). He slaughters all the aristocracy to get their property, establishes an absurd taxation to his sole benefit (III,2), and gloats over the people “pliant sous le poids des nos phynances” (III,7 p.83); a greediness, finally, that is not quenched by his defeat, as his ominous departing resolution suggests (“Je me ferai nommer Maître des Finances à Paris” – V,4 p.129), and that is also implied in Ubu’s swallowing of food and “pocketing”, thus offering a grotesquely satirical picture of the ruler as a voracious ogre.

Arrogance and cowardice are other two of Ubu’s “vices” that taint the decorum and bring down the dignity of the sovereign (in contrast with the Russian emperor who will not stoop to the vile resource of espionage to win the battle – III,6 p.81). Arrogance is expressed by Ubu in terms of boastful talk, and is constantly followed by its opposite, his fearful behaviour and self-preoccupation, thus creating a comic ebb and flow that completely undermines the intended solemnity of his precious royal persona. In giving instructions for the battle against the Russians, he conceitedly refers to himself almost in terms of “roi-soleil” (“Je me tiendrai au milieu comme une citadelle vivante et vous

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<sup>122</sup> Daniel Accursi, *La philosophie d’Ubu*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999, p. 24.

autres gravitez autour de moi” – IV,3 p.95), which patently only serves to mask his unwillingness to actively participate in the fight (“ne commettrons point la sottise de descendre en bas”). His long monologue during the battle (IV,4) is delivered in all the solemnity of the royal “we” and a lofty vocabulary, that turns the rapidity of his horse into self-glorification of his “ability” to escape death, but which is immediately contrasted with his cowardly next line (“voici l’occasion de se tirer des pieds” – p.101). After taking shelter on a rock leaving the Palotins to struggle with the bear, again he describes the action by means of a formal rhetoric in the third person that turns his timorous praying into a “vertu magnanime du Maître des Finances, qui s’est évertué, échiné et égosillé à débiter des patenôtres pour votre salut, et qui a manié avec autant de courage le glaive spirituel...” (IV,6 p.107). He even attributes to himself the brave handling of the beast, while fearing to touch it, thus causing great contempt in his attendants (“Quel pourceau”, “Révoltante bourrique”, “C’est révoltant” – IV,6 pp.102-108); and his boastfulness is not even remotely tarnished by his defeat (“c’est que malgré mon incontestable vaillance tout le monde m’a battu” – V,1 p.121).

In contrast to expectations of valour and dignity in a king, his bragging threats to others are always followed by a backing out (“massacrer, creuser et exploiter l’Empereur moscovite. [...] Ah! Monsieur, pardon, laissez-moi tranquille” – IV,4 p.100; “tu vas experimenter la bouillante valeur du Maître des Finances. Ah! Il est parti, sauvons nous” – p.102), or a supplication for mercy (the frequent “j’ai peur!”); and whenever threatened or in difficulty, especially during the fights, Ubu unfailingly reverts to a petty, cowardly creature solely concerned for his own welfare and survival, at the expense of others, along the lines of:

je suis découvert, je vais être décapité! hélas! hélas! [...] Oh! j’ai une idée: je dirais que c’est la Mère Ubu et Bordure (I,5 p.43);

je pense mourir. O pauvre homme que je suis. Que devenir, grand Dieu? Ce méchant homme va

me tuer (III,7 p.84);

Ici il pleut du plomb et du fer et nous pourrions endommager notre précieuse personne. [...] Oh! Je suis blessé, je suis troué, je suis perforé, je suis administré, je suis enterré (IV,4 pp.96-97): il gèle à pierre à fendre et la personne du Maître des Finances s'en trouve fort endommagée (IV,5 p.102).

A final aspect that adds up to the “uncrowning” and lowering of the kingly figure is violence, whereby beaten characters are “subject to mockery and punishment as individual incarnations of the dying truth and authority of prevailing thought, law, and virtues”:<sup>123</sup> Ubu administers physical pain and torture onto others, including two monarchs and the whole of the ruling hierarchy (aristocracy and magistrates) informing the political structure of the country; which characterizes his rule as indecorous and altogether disrespectful of authority – Perche sees the scene of the “trappe” as representing the primordial gesture of the Guignol, “la tradition irremplaçable de la bastonnade”.<sup>124</sup> Then the clown takes over, and his own brief rise and permanence on the throne is also dotted with some sound beatings (he frequently complains about his belly being torn, his feet being stepped on, or his body being kicked); he resorts to violent threats whenever he is contrasted or criticized, and the other characters always comment with disgust and contempt on his vulgarity and brutality. *Ubu Roi* thus stages and comically celebrates the ritual of the “feast of fools”, where the “beating of the king” is the focal point,<sup>125</sup> and represents the liberation from and overturning of the authority in power, together with its attendant social system and official values. A new

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<sup>123</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 212.

<sup>124</sup> L. Perche, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>125</sup> “The clown was first disguised as a king, but once his reign had come to an end his costume was changed, ‘travestied’, to turn him once more into a clown. The abuse and thrashing are equivalent to a change of costume, to a metamorphosis. Abuse reveals the other, true face of the abused, it tears off his disguise and mask. It is the king’s uncrowning”: M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 197.

mock-king, “l’anarchiste parfait”<sup>126</sup> that shouts “je veux tout changer, moi” (III.2 p.74) establishes his irrational, upside-down reign. Accursi seems to speak of carnivalesque subversions in describing him:

En rejetant l’image du Père-fondateur, il s’affirme comme Père-destructeur, comme Père-barbare. Non pas enfant-sauvage mais Père-sauvage. Il ne crée pas le Monde il le saccage, il n’invente pas il déconstruit, il n’enfante pas il avorte, il ne bêle pas il hurle, il ne pleure pas il rit. il ne meurt pas il tue [...] il chante la folie créatrice, la danse des potaches, la liberté des clowns, le chahut sauvage, le zéro de conduite, le désordre rédigé en ordre. Il est le Père-potache, le Père-indigne, le Père-enfant, l’enfant-Père, le Petit-Père de toutes les révoltes.<sup>127</sup>

If he seems to be a windbag in himself, all talk and no action, which is the comic aspect of his sadistic cruelty, nonetheless somebody does perform the slaughtering on his behalf; and this once again throws a very sinister light on the power of words of this, or any other, “mad” ruler. It is a disturbing picture of an absurd Clown/Fool who actually gets the power, fights, survives and carries on unabated, ready to take over France as well, and establish there his anarchic rule, in a time deeply troubled by anarchic bomb attacks and attempted coups d’état.

## 7. The grim face of power

In his Conférence, Jarry dismissed any attribution by his critics of political propaganda (“leur bienveillance a vu le ventre d’Ubu gros de plus de satiriques symbols qu’on ne l’en a pu gonfler pour ce soir”), but he nonetheless acknowledged his openness to interpretations (“vous serez libres de voir en M. Ubu les multiples allusions que vous voudrez”<sup>128</sup>); and indeed he afterwards found the figure of Ubu an expedient conveyor

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<sup>126</sup> A. Jarry, “Les Paralipomènes d’Ubu” (1 décembre 1896, *Revue Blanche*), reprinted in *Ubu*, cit., pp. 323-335, p. 323.

<sup>127</sup> D. Accursi, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>128</sup> A. Jarry, “Conférence prononcée à la création d’Ubu Roi”, cit., pp. 340-341.

of his social and political commentary.<sup>129</sup> The contemporary Franco-Russian alliance with the solemn parading of the Tsar through Paris in October 1896 undoubtedly gave explosive topicality to the actions of the play, where the intervention of the Russian emperor Alexis to save the Polish reign acquires a satirical dimension, when in real life Poland was veritably “Nulle Part”, being appropriated by Austria and Russia itself; and Ubu violently becoming the king of Poland may also be read as a reclamation of a strong, independent Polish rule.

*Ubu Roi* manifestly targets not only the symbolic figure of a king and the associated values of royal dignity, decorum and power, but also the role of political authority at large, the contemporary ideology of a strong state based on military strength and consequently on violence, which in turn raises aggressive responses. While this was certainly not the Stalinist regime that Bakhtin had in mind when describing the subversive value of carnival towards authority, the play does nonetheless appear as a crude and grotesque debunking of political discourse and rule, strongly attacking it and bringing out, beyond the mystifying halo of national valour and strength, the harsh reality of the wielding of power.

If *Ubu Roi* does not directly target a specific person in authority, it nonetheless seems to evoke a fairly recent and controversial ruling figure, that of Napoleon III. Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte was in fact regarded both as an idiot and as a shrewd opportunist, who trampled over “justice, over law, over reason, honour, and humanity”

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<sup>129</sup> As Beaumont observes, it was “with the publication of the first *Almanach du Père Ubu* at the beginning of 1899, that the role of social and political observer became a dominant element in his work”, targeting “the Army, patriotism, the law, and the political institutions, principles and practices of the Republic”: *Alfred Jarry. A Critical and Biographical Study*, cit., pp. 204, 218. For further details on Jarry as “chroniqueur” for periodicals and magazines, see also F. Caradec, “Alfred Jarry, témoin de son temps”, in Bordillon H. (ed.), *Alfred Jarry. Colloque de Cerisy*, Paris: Belfond, 1985, pp. 155-180.

to attain his aim, as Victor Hugo described him,<sup>130</sup> graphically summing up his rule:

he, the Executive Power, assailed the Legislative Power, arrested the Representatives, drove away the Assembly, dissolved the Council of State, expelled the High Court of Justice, suppressed the laws, took twenty-five millions from the Bank, gorged the army with gold, mowed down Paris with grapeshot, and struck terror into France. Since then, he has proscribed eighty-four Representatives of the People, robbed the Princes of Orleans of the property of their father, [...] decreed despotism in fifty-eight articles under the title of a constitution, garrotted the Republic, turned the sword of France into a gag in the mouth of liberty, [...] rifled the pockets of the people, regulated the budget by a ukase.<sup>131</sup>

Ubu's character and the whole plot appear strikingly in line with such a description, and his clownish ferocity excites the same kind of disdain that Hugo felt towards Louis-Napoleon: "although he has committed great crimes, he himself remains paltry. [...] As a dictator, he is a buffoon; as emperor, he will be grotesque".<sup>132</sup>

Like Ubu, he was also remarked for his boundless greed and ambition, being strongly determined "to make his fortune. His needs were immoderate and his wants unlimited. He simply wanted everything",<sup>133</sup> and he did not hesitate to manipulate the army, the police and the judiciary to effect his coup d'état, nor to violently repress any kind of opposition to his personal rule,<sup>134</sup> although his nomination to the presidency had been regarded as some sort of joke.<sup>135</sup> For some historians, Louis-Napoleon even heralded future dictators: the Second Empire, in the "methods that it employed, the politics that it pursued, and the ideas that it proclaimed, anticipated in a vague,

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<sup>130</sup> Victor Hugo, "Napoleon the Little", reprinted in Samuel M. Osgood (ed.), *Napoleon III. Buffoon, Modern Dictator or Sphinx?*, Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1963, pp. 1-5, p. 3.

<sup>131</sup> V. Hugo, *cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>133</sup> Henri Guillemin, "The Coup d'État of December 2, 1851", in S. M. Osgood, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-40, p. 34.

<sup>134</sup> See for example Hendrik Nicolaas Boon, "The Social and Economic Politics of Napoleon III", in S. M. Osgood, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-49.

<sup>135</sup> See H. Guillemin, *cit.*, p. 36.

incomplete way what is now known as ‘fascism’”, Louis being seen as a parallel to Mussolini in his “little vein of madness which was chiefly responsible for his success”.<sup>136</sup> Similarly, White remarks about Ubu that later events would shed an even more sinister light on this grotesquely despotic figure: “As we guffaw, models of historical tyranny rise up: Stalin, Hitler and company”.<sup>137</sup> Such analogies between Napoleon III and Ubu could hardly have escaped the contemporary audience, especially since the reckless ambition of the French emperor had led the country to a disastrous and still burning defeat and to the following riots and bloodshed painfully remembered as the *Semaine Sanglante* of 1871.

The Third Republic, in its turn born on the ashes of the insurrectionist Paris Commune, had indeed been dotted, from the outset some twenty-five years back, with occasional attempts by military men to take over the very divided rule of the country<sup>138</sup> (for example Mac-Mahon in 1877; the minister of war General Boulanger in 1889 raised the hopes of many opposition parties<sup>139</sup>); consequently, a strict control over subversive factions was established by the central government by means of spies and “informateurs”. Therefore, a constant fear of rebellions and a sense of the precariousness of the government haunted Jarry’s contemporaries, especially in the ruling spheres; Ubu – previously King of Aragon and dethroned in his turn – with his manipulation of the army to effect his coup d’état, overturning monarchs and institutions, must have struck a chord and deeply disturbed the audience, presenting a very sinister intimation of the dangers surrounding the seat of power.

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<sup>136</sup> J. Salwyn Schapiro, “Heralds of Fascism: Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, Statesman”, in S. M. Osgood, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-87, pp. 81, 82.

<sup>137</sup> K. S. White (ed.), *Savage Comedy: Structures of Humor*, cit., pp. 15-16.

<sup>138</sup> For a historical background cf. for example Robert Tombs, *France 1814-1914*, London & New York: Longman, 1996.

<sup>139</sup> Cf. R. D. Sonn, *op. cit.*, p. 31.



Ubu's cruelty and mass slaughtering exploding on stage also seemed painfully reminiscent of the recent anarchist attacks against heads of state, political and "bourgeois" institutions all over Europe and especially in Paris,<sup>140</sup> where President Carnot's assassination only two years before, and the unjustified massacres by bombs in cafés and other public buildings in the early nineties left a deep mark in public opinion. In addition, some frequent terms in the language of the play also belonged to the anarchist argot: *marmite* stood for "bomb"; *crever* meant "kill", especially when referred to a "bourgeois", who was defined as *imbécile*, whereas the outcasts, the anarchist "compagnons", were named *misérables*, *vagabonds*, *bougres*,<sup>141</sup> words which are variously referred to Ubu or other characters, and create a diffused reference to the anarchic semantic field. Finally, Ubu's offer of a *mirliton* to king Venceslas (I,6), which appears as a random joke ridiculing the solemn conferring of a title, could also be read as a sideway hint at one of the popular cabaret journals, *Le Mirliton* which, based in the bohémienne Montmartre, attracted and promoted revolutionary, anti-bourgeois and anarchist artists and sympathizers.<sup>142</sup> Thus the "theatrical bombshell" of *Ubu Roi*, with its "anarchiste parfait" in the person of Ubu, undoubtedly also appeared as a more or less overt propaganda of anarchic violent subversion and "liberation" from rules and political authority, of an anarchic culture that "attacked bourgeois morality as much as it did the institutions of state power",<sup>143</sup> as for example Henri Bauër of *L'Echo de Paris*, Ferdinand Hérold of the *Mercure de France* and Romain Coolus of *La Revue Blanche* acknowledged at the time, the latter even complaining that "il ne me semble pas que l'auteur ait tiré tout le parti possible de l'absolue, de l'intégrale liberté qu'il s'était

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<sup>140</sup> See James Joll, *The Anarchists*, London: Methuen, 1979, pp. 111-119.

<sup>141</sup> Cf. R. D. Sonn, *op. cit.*, ch. 4.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-65.

<sup>143</sup> R. D. Sonn, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

octroyée [...] qu'il n'ait pas poussé jusqu'à l'extravagance sa verve outrancière".<sup>144</sup>

The two literary journals *Mercure de France* and *La Revue Blanche*, in fact, besides supporting the burgeoning Symbolist and avant-garde literature, openly sympathized with anarchist principles, the latter even having among its editors the anarchist *littérateur* Félix Fénéon;<sup>145</sup> the two "trends" seemed to go together, their common basis lying in the revolutionary liberation from any conventional or traditional structure especially emanating from a bourgeois culture, be this realistic language or political and social institutions.<sup>146</sup> "Anarchist art", Sonn remarks, "stood simultaneously for aesthetic autonomy and political *engagement*. [...] Anarchist discourse suffused the avant-garde literary milieu so thoroughly in the early 1890s that, just as it is not possible to divorce anarchism from its cultural context, Symbolism can not be fully understood without being aware of this political context".<sup>147</sup> The famous Procès de Trente in 1894, shortly after Carnot's murder, also counted, among plain criminals, nineteen anarchist intellectuals; which shows that even in the public eye "literary anarchism" and avant-garde were regarded as crimes against the establishment;<sup>148</sup> and the angry reaction of the audience at the "fumisterie" of *Ubu Roi* somehow testified to the revolutionary potential perceived in the play: Fouquier numbered Jarry among the "anarchistes de l'art [...] qui] exercent sur le public une véritable terreur. Et cette terreur spéciale, toute

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<sup>144</sup> R. Coolus, *cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>145</sup> See R. D. Sonn, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-24.

<sup>146</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 3-5.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>148</sup> "The general attitude toward anarchist intellectuals was summarized by a professor of criminal law at Lyon [...]: 'There exists a group of keen minds who gravitate around anarchy and constitute its brain. Not content to intoxicate the simple ones by the literary exposure of doctrines, some intellectuals provoke anarchist acts either directly in inciting to commit them or indirectly in publishing formulas for explosive, in poeticising the authors of outrages [...]. Thus is formed, under our eyes, a whole anarchist literature, serving as a vehicle to the guiltiest excitations, and establishing a continuous link between the theoreticians and practitioners of the sect': R. D. Sonn, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

littéraire, est de celles que l'opinion se laisse le plus aisément imposer".<sup>149</sup>

Thus the spectacle of Ubu's rule must have both conjured up phantoms and bloody remembrances from the past, and brought to the fore the imminent dangers surrounding the present government. At the same time, it offered a picture of state leadership that could also be interpreted as a condensed metaphor of the contemporary management of power. Although Ubu establishes himself as a despotic monarch whereas France had been a republic for twenty-five years, Ubu's "misrule" seems in fact to be a gloomy caricature that could also apply to the French government. The latter had for example recently given a strong impulse to the army by means of compulsory mass-conscription and the instillation of patriotic ideals, glorifying it "as the guardian and symbol of the nation, [...] as the repository of its finest virtues and the finishing school of patriotism", whereas in truth the "organization, training and deployment of its coercive forces, *la force publique*, showed that the priority was the defence of the State, rather than the protection of the individuals",<sup>150</sup> and it was perceived as a means of repression both at home and in the colonies. The current imperialistic drive was another factor in the establishment of a strong French state, providing both a unifying target abroad to divert from political divisions at home, and celebrating the nation as powerful and culturally dominating, while it was actually mystifying massacres and ruthless oppression with the idealistic vision of a "redeeming" mission. The same kind of nationalistic glorification through war and oppression would in other countries lead to the cruel and inhuman outcomes of the totalitarian regimes, with their programme of mass-slaughter that is sadly and ominously anticipated in Ubu's carried-out plan of

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<sup>149</sup> H. Fouquier, cit., p. 87.

<sup>150</sup> R. Tombs, *op. cit.*, pp. 55; 197.

“tuer tout le monde”: here indeed, with Ubu’s extreme and unjustified cruelty, the play seems quite disturbingly to anticipate a burgeoning political discourse that was to become dominating a few decades hence, subverting all logic and culminating in the utter horror of the holocaust; and the use by the French government of military force, cruel repression and a ruthless policy to strengthen itself could well be seen through the inhuman ferocity of Ubu to establish his own rule, and in his lack of moral scruples in steadily pursuing his own greed for power.

*Ubu Roi* thus undoubtedly carnivalizes contemporary political authority, both by showing how it is based on coercion, violence, and the imposition of an arbitrary set of values, and by counteracting it with an alternative, comic and grotesque version of it that appears all the more degrading of official discourse, showing the lack of rationality in the political figures. The figure of Ubu – grotesquely gross and clumsy, vulgar and violent in words and actions, foolish and acting like a puppet, closer to the humblest stratum of anti-culture, arrogant, fearful and self-absorbed, childish and greedy – presents a far from flattering picture of leadership, that is a strong and very sinister questioning, although partly carried out in a comic mode, of the underlying nature and foundations of official authority, the political and social system, and the moral discourse supported by it. It is a shocking unmasking of the artificiality and pretentiousness of all those entities, a carnivalesque “liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order”,<sup>151</sup> but which transcends its own comic boundaries, to bring out another face of the human being and of power: their potential for extreme levels of cruelty, irrationality, inhumanity and degradation. Thus, it also undermines the total validity and positiveness of a subversion of rules and authorities, of social and moral values, that pertains to the Bakhtinian description of the spirit of carnival: it shows its

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<sup>151</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 10.

implications in the critical light of an experiment, the staging of the grotesque Clown/Fool's misrule, the subversion of all rules and norms, brought to its own extreme consequences, which are "realistically" far more negative and destructive than envisaged in Bakhtin's theory.

## 4. *Enrico IV*

### 1. “Tragico personaggio”

Written, like the first version of *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, in 1921, *Enrico IV* was first performed in Milan on 24<sup>th</sup> February 1922 at Teatro Manzoni, then in Rome on 18<sup>th</sup> October; the reception of the première was more positive and less controversial than its unfortunate antecedent, as Simoni remembered: “un pubblico a volte sorpreso, a volte incuriosito, a volte commosso ed esaltato, e, dopo due o tre scene, interamente conquistato. Era in tutti gli spettatori la coscienza che assistevano a un’opera che si poteva amare o non amare, ma che, comunque, aveva un valore insolito. una chiusa potenza, talora oscura, talora solo balenante, spesso chiarentesi con un’originalità audace e pur terribilmente ragionevole”.<sup>1</sup> Rocca also expressed the play’s fascinating but bewildering effect: “[u]sciamo dalla trionfale rappresentazione di questa sera con le tempie che galoppiano, con il cranio rintronato”;<sup>2</sup> and Praga similarly wavered between enthusiastic and perplexed appreciation: “cosa nuovissima, tra le più originali che il teatro ci abbia date” but perhaps just a “giocherello cerebrale che v’intontisce lì per lì e magari vi delizia”.<sup>3</sup> The Rome première had analogous responses,<sup>4</sup> and this general mixed response is quite indicative of the drive of the play, where the carnivalesque subversion is less outrageous than the previous texts with regards to common conventions, but conveys a deeper undermining of fundamental

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<sup>1</sup> Renato Simoni, *Confederazione fascista. Celebrazioni siciliane*, Urbino, 1940; as quoted by Corrado Simioni in his Introduction to *Enrico IV* in L. Pirandello, *Sei Personaggi in cerca d'autore. Enrico IV*, cit., p. xxxiv.

<sup>2</sup> Gino Rocca, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 25/02/1922; as quoted in A. D’Amico’s “Notizia” to *Enrico IV* in *Maschere Nude*, cit., 1993, vol. 2. p. 770.

<sup>3</sup> Marco Praga, *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, 27/02/1922; in A. D’Amico’s “Notizia”, cit., p. 771.

<sup>4</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 772-773.

certainties about the self and its relationship with other subjects, exposing some bewildering implications of the Bakhtinian concepts.

The outlook of the play appears in fact, at first sight, less revolutionary than *Sei personaggi*, as it is framed in a “traditional representation” that sustains the fiction, and does not so insistently call attention to itself as a performance nor does it directly address the audience. However, unsurprisingly for a mature play by Pirandello, *Enrico IV* does in fact prove to be more unsettling than first impressions would have us believe<sup>5</sup>: it bears several connections to the preceding play, and it does seem to operate what Bakhtin would identify as carnivalesque overturnings, reversing the traditional, accepted conventions and definitions regarding kingship, time, sanity, life, welcoming madness and the masquerade, and it advocates a multiplicity of significance and experience. At the same time, as *Ubu Roi* did for the aspects of authority, material degradation and unruliness, *Enrico IV* seems to bring those Bakhtinian concepts to their extreme consequences, thus overcoming the original positive connotation, and pointing to the potential tragedy inherent in them.

Only a few attempts have been made at a critical reading in such terms, but with a more general approach: Donati briefly examines *Enrico IV* with reference to Bakhtin’s definitions, but focusing only on the role of the mask and of madness, in their function of liberation from daily hypocrisy and norms of behaviour:<sup>6</sup> “Il teatro, come la follia, sottrae l’Io alla determinazione dei comportamenti obbligati, [...] come strumento di

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<sup>5</sup> In Laura Richards’s opinion, “there are reasons for considering *Enrico IV* equally if not more experimental than the earlier work [...]. Pirandello had subverted the form of the bourgeois naturalistic play [...] most notably in *Sei Personaggi*. In *Enrico IV*, however, he adopted a significantly different strategy, employing the models of both the naturalistic play and the Greek classical tragedy in a way so novel that the play’s literary and theoretical inspiration has remained largely concealed”: “Il buco nel cielo di carta. Pirandello’s *Enrico IV* and Sophocles’s *Philoctetes*”, *The Yearbook of the Society for Pirandello Studies*, 1992. 12: 55-63, p. 55.

<sup>6</sup> C. Donati, *op. cit.*, pp. 189-206.

verifica, di salvezza, di dialogo e, perché no, anche come atto d'accusa verso la teatralità inconsapevole e pernicioso della scena quotidiana".<sup>7</sup> Barberi Squarotti analyses the relationship established in *Enrico IV* between madness and the carnival masquerade, again with no specific reference to Bakhtin's categories, regarding it as a complex reversal, and as both the source and the negation of the "tragic":

La serietà tragica della follia nasce dalla mascherata carnevalesca [...] Del resto, la pazzia stessa, come vacanza carnevalesca dalla vita, di cui capovolge ogni logica, determinando l'angoscia del 'diverso', non può essere, proprio per tale sua natura, l'occasione di nessuna 'reale' manifestazione del tragico [...] e neppure può costituire lo spazio tragico la finzione della pazzia, che esalta all'ennesima potenza la vacanza carnevalesca, essendo, al tempo stesso, l'assenza della logica comune e, perché finzione cosciente, l'assenza dell'illogicità della follia<sup>8</sup>.

On the other hand, Twohill sees the Bakhtinian motifs in this play as deformed into utter horror, "in a macabre light to create the dark laughter of madness".<sup>9</sup>

In this chapter, however, this approach through Bakhtin's conceptual frame will be adopted in a more rigorous and extensive way, considering all the main elements in their relevance to the play, thus unifying various aspects of the play in a coherent frame, and also highlighting the discrepancies resulting from such a juxtaposition with the Bakhtinian categories. *Enrico IV* will be analysed with regards to the carnivalesque subversions of the contemporary taste for historical drama, the official idea of kingship and the consequent relation to the principle of authority, the concept of time, and what constitutes sanity; in its use of the figures of the madman and the Fool, and of the mask and performance; in its portrayal of a problematic and "masqueraded" identity and reality; and finally, in the apprehension of the multivocal nature of language, perception

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>8</sup> Giorgio Barberi Squarotti, *Le sorti del "tragico". Il novecento italiano: romanzo e teatro*, Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1978. pp. 176-180.

<sup>9</sup> T. Twohill, cit., p. 91.



and their role in the relationship to the other. All these elements, however, far from creating a comic or even grotesque result, and going a step further than the exposure of human baseness and the misuse of power in *Ubu Roi*, lead to an overall effect of existential tragedy, of isolation and annihilation of the individual and of its capacity to relate to otherness. This, amplifying the strain initiated in *Sei personaggi*, is probably one of the bitterest statements in Pirandello's dramatic work, and, within the present survey of the chosen texts, most strongly reverses and brings to a crisis the exuberant, optimistic value of the Bakhtinian categories of carnival and dialogism: masks, the grotesque, and the subversion of conventional norms acquire a negative dimension, and the dialogic principle attains in *Enrico IV* a tragic modernist sense of consciousness as "un sogno angoscioso [...] una mischia disperata [...] un continuo cozzo di voci discordi".<sup>10</sup>

## 2. A theatrical mockery

*Enrico IV* seems to jeer at dramatic tradition in some ways: possibly as a reprisal against the criticisms received by *Sei personaggi*, it toys with expectations of conventionality; it also parodies the current fashionable status of the historical pièce, welcoming it and then overturning its solemnity into a medieval/modern pastiche.

Many critics have remarked that *Enrico IV*, appearing soon after the havoc aroused by *Sei personaggi*, must have been in some ways a reaction to the incensed critical deluge provoked by the latter. Those accusations of lack of plot and of irrational, unprecedented and disorienting treatment of the dramatic medium, are here met, for example, by a reassuringly defined character name (as opposed to the generic "characters") that has immediate concrete reference to eminent and well-established

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<sup>10</sup> L. Pirandello, "Arte e coscienza d'oggi", *Saggi, poesie e scritti vari*. cit.. p. 880.

past events; consequently, it promises a defined and “traditional” story-line, inspired by nothing less than assured historical facts. As opposed to the bare, work-in-progress state of the previous stage, a duly drawn curtain will reveal a sumptuously and “realistically” decorated setting, “rigidamente parato” (I, p.127)<sup>11</sup> in the most traditional taste; finally, it brings forward a clear development that never interrupts the flow of the action to problematically address or involve the present, real audience.

Under this compliant surface, however, the author seems not to be able to resist the game of the play within the play, the idea of a performance that is being enacted within the outer frame of the text, which only appears as univocal action for the first few seconds – the time to take in the historical, antiquary setting, before the startled valets, precisely like actors caught by the unexpected lifting of the curtain, run to take their places. The entrance of the four “Counsellors” reveals that what is being performed is not a dramatic rendering of the life of the medieval German emperor Henry IV, but a pièce in which the characters – initially at least – “play” at freely staging the various events of the king’s history, with the additional gag of an “actor” having learnt the wrong script. Santeramo agrees that if not overtly theatre within the theatre, “what is seen on stage is ‘meta-theatrical’”. Such an awareness of the theatrical nature of the event is achieved by making the readers/spectators immediately aware that the action takes place in the 1920s even though the set design and the actors’ costumes are of a much earlier era. A *mise en abîme* is obtained.”<sup>12</sup> The expectations created by the setting and the surrounding apparatus are thus disappointed, the initial feigned compliance with usual canons being only a false start which gives way to Pirandello’s

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<sup>11</sup> The text used is again *Sei Personaggi in cerca d'autore. Enrico IV*, cit.: quotations will be given with act and page reference in brackets; stage directions in italics.

<sup>12</sup> Donato Santeramo, “*Enrico IV: the Perfect Theatrical Machine*”, *Rivista di Studi Italiani*, 1999, 17 (2): 99-109, p. 103.

characteristic disregard for any usual practice, and his taunting defiance of the criticisms to his disruption of conventional drama, which can be made to work even with the most traditional materials.

In this respect, *Enrico IV* is also a deliberate mockery of the contemporary historicist vogue,<sup>13</sup> which is exemplified in the overloaded, antiquarian accuracy of the medieval setting prescribed in the initial stage description, but immediately disturbed by the jarring note of the two modern paintings; also in the four Counsellors' archaic names, and in their amused, mock-solemn, emphatic account of the events to perform, as if reading from a pompous history handbook:

*Ordulfo.* Il grande e tragico imperatore!

*Landolfo.* Quello di Canossa! Sosteniamo qua, giorno per giorno, la spaventosissima guerra tra Stato e Chiesa! Oh!

*Ordulfo.* L'Impero contro il Papato! Oh!

*Arialdo.* Antipapi contro i Papi!

*Landolfo.* I re contro gli antirè!

*Ordulfo.* E guerra contro i Sassoni!

*Arialdo.* E tutti i principi ribelli!

*Landolfo.* Contro i figli stessi dell'imperatore! (I, p.129).

This is also evident in their rushed, simplified briefing of the new actor Fino/Bertoldo on the facts they have to perform; in their pseudo-historical jeering protests at the servant intruding in the throne room ("Un uomo del mille e novecento! Via!", "Messo di Gregorio VII, via!", "Sortilegio, sai! Demonio evocato dal Mago di Roma! Cava,

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<sup>13</sup> "In Italy, until the 1930s, the production of poetic costume dramas seemed a good way to ensure box office success, in the wake of D'Annunzio's *Francesca da Rimini* (1901) and Sem Benelli's *Cena delle Beffe* (1908). These two plays, and those whose authors eagerly followed the trend, exploited a then-fashionable taste for costume drama and dark deeds. [... Pirandello] would certainly have had D'Annunzio and his imitators among his targets in 1921 when writing *Enrico IV*."

I would argue that he also had in mind the various more general trends toward historical accuracy and historicism in the nineteenth century.": J. Dashwood, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-128.

cava la spada!” – I, p.135); and most of all in the open allusion to the fashion of historical drama, expressed in their wish to perform in such a kind of play: “il nostro vestiario si presterebbe a fare una bellissima comparsa in una rappresentazione storica, a uso di quelle che piacciono tanto oggi nei teatri” (I, p.132). But, once again, Pirandello is bent on precisely frustrating the common, established taste, and on creating a carnivalesque, elusive work that does not quite fit in, that prefers to question and unsettle rather than concede to comfortable expectations, like the placing of some useless “low” puppets in an austere drama gone wrong: “siamo così, senza nessuno che ci metta su e ci dia da rappresentare qualche scena” (I, p.132). The historical citation is thus made to go to waste, and from the beginning its solemnity is constantly broken by the Counsellors’ smirks, changes of register, and jumps in and out of their “ancient parts” – a process that is only a mild prelude to Enrico’s own behaviour throughout the drama, playing with his own historical and modern material as Pirandello plays with the audience’s antiquarian tastes and expectations.

### **3. Uncrowning kingship**

In Starkie’s words, it is customary with Pirandello that he “brings his character on the stage and makes him put on the buskin so that he may assume a kingly posture, then slinks in the malicious imp to poke fun at his kingly majesty”:<sup>14</sup> here the overturning of the king and the crowning of a comic mock-king (*le roi pour rire*) – two very typical elements in Bakhtin’s description of the cultural phenomenon of carnival – take place at the same time in the person of Enrico, undermining the solemnity of his “sovereign persona” through grotesque appearance and behaviour, and highlighting the royal role purely as a masquerade with no justified “substance” or “reality”. thereby

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<sup>14</sup> W. Starkie. *op. cit.*, p. 269.

hinting at the nature of authority itself and creating a problematic relation to the contemporary political milieu.

The first hint of the demoting of the king is given with the appearance of Donna Matilde: in preparing to meet Enrico IV as his stern mother-in-law, the royal Adelaide. Matilde is presented with crown and mantle, in a sort of mock-crowning that is made to coincide with a carnival dressing up, performed half seriously and half in jest. The crowning itself, a most solemn ritual of sovereignty, is however deferred to another room, which amounts to a royal figure being deprived of that essential part of the affirmation of power which resides in the symbolic, visual display of the investiture. Then, her supposedly solemn entrance, welcomed with praises of “Ah, magnifica! Veramente regale!” (I, p.159), acts as the strongest hint to the whole play’s portrayal of kingship, immediately falling from the heights of royal decorum with Matilde’s outbursts of laughter, which results in an extremely ridiculous, caricatured rendering of a royal figure.

Matilde’s appearance is a significant prelude to Enrico’s entrance, which is prepared by an extensive discussion in the first act conducted with timorous reverence and caution, thus building up the suspense about his person. He is in fact only referred to as “he” or “him”, said to be awe-inspiring, humoured and treated with caution and respectful submission, and feared for his reactions (“Guai se lui ti parla e tu non sei pronto a rispondergli come vuol lui” – I, p.132; “Guai se vedesse lor signori, così. in abiti d’oggi!” – I, p.154), thus creating a sense of greatness and fear at the same time. The discussion and worries about his insanity and his possible threatening behaviour (“Ma dunque non è così tranquillo, come dicevi?”; “Lo ha fatto montare su tutte le furie! Non possiamo più trattenerlo di là” – I, pp.152-3) again increase the fascination with this “powerful” man that rules undisturbed in his manor. When the longed-for moment of appearance arrives, most solemnly announced as “Sua Maestà

l'Imperatore!" (I, p.161) and with a duly performed procession of attendants, what is ushered in with a flat, downright fall from solemnity, is the perfect "roi pour rire": "*sulle tempie e sulla fronte, appare biondo, per via di una tintura quasi puerile, evidentissima; e sui pomelli, in mezzo al tragico pallore, ha un trucco rosso da bambola, anch'esso evidentissimo*" (I, p.160); it is the mock-king, the crowned clown, with a typically white face, red-dabbed cheeks and manifestly dyed hair, further debased by the wearing of a penitent's sack-cloth.

Enrico's subsequent behaviour throughout the first act is a constant stepping up and down from the pedestal of kingly decorum, his solemn spells alternating with sudden bursts of anger, meek acts of submission, sly mischievous sideways glances (like "*torna a spiare il Belcredi con crescente diffidenza*" – I, p.161; "*ammiccando furbescamente*" – I, p.163), or incongruous tones of voice (such as "*con altra voce, pur senza scomporsi*" – I, p.168). All this disrupts the supposedly collected integrity of the royal image, culminating in that eminently unkingly, impish and grotesque exit when, fearing his imperial crown might be stolen, "*corre a prenderla e a nascondersela sotto il sajo, e con un sorriso furbissimo negli occhi e sulle labbra torna a inchinarsi ripetutamente e scomparire*" (I, p.171).

The solemn and serious tone that Enrico keeps up for most of the second act again breaks down when he explodes against the visitors ("*si volta subito, cangiato. Buffoni! Buffoni! Buffoni! [...] con gaja prorompente frenesia, movendo di qua, di là i passi, gli occhi*" – II, p.193), and although this coincides with the revelation that he is not "really" mad – and therefore with the end of his status as a supposed king – he will nonetheless continue as before to intermittently resume his imperial manner when confronting the other characters ("*Si fa terribile. Ma allora, perdio, inginocchiatevi! inginocchiatevi!*" – II, p.195; "*assumendo un tono di tragica gravità e di cupo risentimento*" – II, p.204; "*Tratteneteli! Vi ordino di trattenerli!*" – III, p.218), thus

protracting the idea of kingship as a “role” one can step in and out of as easily as in a script.

Connected to the idea of role-play is the recurring theme of the “clothes”, first referred to in the attention Enrico is said to have for them (“Guarda più all’abito che alla persona” – I, p.156), and in the necessity for visitors and attendants to “dress up” to communicate with him. One of his first actions on appearing is to tear at the sackcloth with rage and to take it off, thus pulling off the first “layer” of his masquerade, revealing the hidden purpose of the king’s strategic agenda (“Domani, a Bressanone. ventisette vescovi tedeschi e Lombardi firmeranno con me la destituzione di Papa Gregorio VII: non Pontefice, ma Monaco falso!” – I, p.167), a crisis that is immediately solved by putting the penitent’s clothes back on. The play is similarly dotted with moments where the characters put clothes on: Matilde, the Doctor and Belcredi do so at the beginning; Carlo will later parade with Frida as the young Enrico in the original clothes; and the appearance of Frida dressed up as the young Matilde reiterates her mother’s earlier masquerade, calling attention to the dress itself with their worries about its tightness and creases: again, a costume that does not quite fit the character.

When the clothes do come off, it is, for Enrico, to reveal not only the bare nakedness of the body, but the divesting of any role or *persona*: “io senza quest’abito – lei anche... sì, Dio mio, senz’abiti... un uomo e una donna... è naturale... Non si pensa più a ciò che siamo. L’abito, appeso, resta come un fantasma!” (II, p.192): it is a return to a natural humanity that leaves behind all forms of civilization and social image, hanging like costumes with a life of their own. Bakhtin describes carnival as counteracting the established *personae* of power and social roles, thus undermining the solemnity of their public ritual and implying their nature of masquerade. Similarly here, the clothes, like the mirrors or the portraits, are the individual’s double. they represent social roles, a mask that one is forced to wear to relate to others; and kingship – real or

imagined – is no exception: it needs the masquerade in order not to lose itself in the ordinary crowd, so as to support its status, inspire respect, and establish its own power through the involvement of its audience in the ritual.

The double masquerade of the penitent's sackcloth over the royal robe is a further instance of this, being acknowledged as a ruse for political convenience:<sup>15</sup> “Vorreste ora ridere di me, vedendomi così? Sareste tanti stupidi, perché non capireste che sapienza politica mi consiglia ora quest'abito di penitenza” (I, pp.168-169). This tirade of political savoir-faire (the section that Pirandello intended to be cut for the sake of an incisive performance) contains a clear affirmation of royalty as a role-play, as a carnivalesque game involving the wearing and skilful use of masks for the successful management of power: “Vi dico che le parti, domani, potrebbero essere invertite! [...] Un mascherato io, oggi, da penitente; lui, domani, da prigioniero. Ma guai a chi non sa portare la sua maschera, sia da Re, sia da Papa” (I, p.169); this gives a first hint to a theme that will be further developed outside the domain of kingship and into the much more problematic one of subjectivity.

Therefore, notwithstanding the fact that it does not concern a real sovereign, but a feigned one, in *Enrico IV* the role of king is unveiled or debunked as a masquerade, a show put on for a complying audience, a ritual that hides no inherently royal substance but a simple, ordinary human being, and which is exploited to support and maintain a certain kind of authority, and involving the people in the same kind of game. “Non vedi come li paro, come li concio, come me li faccio comparire davanti, buffoni spaventati! E si spaventano solo di questo, oh: che stracci loro addosso la maschera buffa e li scopra travestiti; come se non li avessi costretti io stesso a mascherarsi, per questo mio gusto

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<sup>15</sup> The historian I. S. Robinson remarks on the real Henry IV's use of this penitence strategy for political purposes: *Henry IV of Germany: 1056-1106*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 163-164.



qua, di fare il pazzo!” (II, p.193). That Enrico here is only a pretend-king ruling in his manor does not diminish the validity of his figure as an image of a sovereign in the handling of power; indeed, the fact that madness (real or feigned) is involved, increases the impact of the importance that ritual, masks, and skilful speech and acting have in subduing “normal” people into reverence, obedience, and playing along, even to a “madman”. This ominously connects Enrico to the figure of Ubu, and again recalls Le Bon’s description of the powerful leader who has the ability to sway the masses by means of his personal charisma, based on ritual appearance and authoritative speech.<sup>16</sup>

Certainly this empowered actor/madman has, with hindsight, overtones of a connection with the public figure of Mussolini,<sup>17</sup> especially taking into account historical developments after Pirandello’s death, and this aspect leads to a consideration of his relationship to the current political situation, an issue that has been widely debated and is still problematic. On the one hand is the writer’s openly declared adhesion to the Fascist party, from various supportive newspaper articles to the famous letter to Mussolini<sup>18</sup> only months after Matteotti’s murder; on the other hand is his

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<sup>16</sup> “The mere fact that an individual occupies a certain position, possesses a certain fortune, or bears certain titles, endows him with prestige however slight his own personal worth. A soldier in uniform, a judge in his robes, always enjoys prestige. Pascal has very properly noted the necessity for judges for robes and wigs. Without them they would be stripped of half their authority.”: G. Le Bon, *op.cit.*, p. 149. On the skilful use of public speech, see *ibid.*, pp. 141-143.

<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that both Mussolini and Hitler had read Le Bon’s work on the crowd, which Mussolini applauded; Le Bon in his turn openly praised the Fascist state, and some correspondence took place between the two: see Robert A. Nye, *The Origins of Crowd Psychology: Gustave Le Bon and the Crisis of Mass Democracy in the Third Republic*, London: Sage Publications Ltd., 1975, esp. pp. 3, 86, 158, 177-179. See also Scipio Sighele. *La folla delinquente*, Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 1985, p. 39.

<sup>18</sup> Published in the propagandist Fascist newspaper *L’Impero* on 19<sup>th</sup> September 1924: “Eccellenza, sento che per me questo è il momento più propizio di dichiarare una fede nutrita e servita sempre in silenzio. Se l’E. V. mi stima degno di entrare nel Partito Nazionale Fascista, pregierò come massimo onore tenervi il posto del più umile e obbediente gregario. Con devozione intera.”

For an extended account of facts about Pirandello and the political situation, see for example G.

work, which seems to have no direct connection to the public state of affairs, and in fact constantly struggles against the imposition of a univocal point of view, of a monological version of the truth, of a uniform ideology, that certainly constitutes a clash with the acceptance of the Party policy. Critics have interpreted this conflict in various ways, sometimes justifying Pirandello's adherence to the Fascio as merely instrumental in the pursuit of artistic goals, namely the funding for literary experimentation and the establishment of the permanent Teatro d'Arte; other critics (including Giudice) have postulated the writer's complete separation between the public and the private sphere as a sort of justification for an outward compliance that left to the literary work the task of indicting the social and political situation.

More recently, a certain adherence on Pirandello's part to the Fascist cause has been acknowledged, though again explained in many ways: Muscetta for example remarks that Fascism welcomed a relative freedom of drama within a more general control over literary production – especially in the public dimension of the theatre, which was well suited to its propagandist purposes. However, he excludes Pirandello from such a sphere: “il fascismo usò gli spazi teatrali della piazza, prevede la necessità di ricollocare entro spazi più ampi l'istituzione teatrale, accettò lo spazio piccolo degli sperimentalismi e delle avanguardie, ma fallì negli spazi intermedi, cioè nel teatro di consumo che restò quello del periodo di crisi che aveva preceduto il regime, cioè il teatro pirandelliano”,<sup>19</sup> when actually the latter seems to have fitted well in the experimental stream and benefited from Fascist patronage, though not acquiescing in overt propaganda.

Some critics have tried to reconcile Pirandello's adhesion to Fascism by

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Giudice's accurate biography, *op. cit.*, especially chapters 4 and 7.

<sup>19</sup> C. Muscetta (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 465.

claiming a merely superficial contact that did not involve him in political consent: Giudice explains it away by claiming a somewhat naive embracing on the part of Pirandello of any idealistic form of protest: “erede, sensibilmente ancora, dei miti risorgimentali; disposto in genere a passeggiare, irriflessive accensioni di protesta. [...] predisposto a farsi irretire nelle varie propagande irrazionalistiche, fino a quella del fascismo”.<sup>20</sup> Petronio also stresses his “indifferenza di sempre per la politica; la sua adesione al fascismo, nel '24, dopo il delitto Matteotti, quando intorno a Mussolini si faceva il vuoto; la sua scarsa partecipazione più tardi, quando era famoso e presidente dell'Accademia d'Italia, all'attività del fascismo; l'insofferenza dei fascisti oltranzisti per lui e per la sua opera”.<sup>21</sup> Bassnett thinks that “l'impegno al fascismo [...] era] una presa di posizione ben pensata” in a fight to “conciliare un'ideologia di potere gerarchico con una professione artistica che è sempre stata radicale e marginale”, therefore seeing him as a writer bent on an impossible task, “la creazione d'un teatro vero in un contesto politico dominato dalla teatralità, un contesto che negava i principi fondamentali della plurivocalità del teatro stesso”.<sup>22</sup>

Lauretta claims a fundamental difference of purpose between Pirandello's work and the Fascist agenda, and interprets the writer's position as total opposition to a regime that would not allow a free art expressing a sense of crisis, far from the self-assured slogan of “credere obbedire e combattere”:

Pirandello è nella crisi dell'uomo e dell'esistenza. Il regime era nell'esaltazione della vita come potenza, come impresa storica di uomini proiettati fuori dalle piccole vicende di gente comune, nel clima degli eroi; Pirandello è testimone di sconfitte brucianti, di gente lacerata da problemi, colpita dalle esplosioni della storia, martire di ogni schema ipocrita: la sua è un'arte che dissente,

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<sup>20</sup> G. Giudice, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

<sup>21</sup> G. Petronio, *op. cit.*, p. 858.

<sup>22</sup> S. Bassnett, “Pirandello – Il mito del gigante”. cit. in S. Milioto (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 253-262, pp. 259-260.

sconsacra, polemizza, disprezza l'ossequio al potente.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, Puppa sees the prevalence in Pirandello's work of the anti-hero as opposed to the Fascist "mitologia dell'Eroe volitivo e guerriero [...] attuando una sorta di detronizzazione simbolica del potere", in the same way as he regards the decadent "Famiglia Caos" in *Sei personaggi* as the destructive prototype opposed to the "propaganda martellante sulla Famiglia Felice".<sup>24</sup> The same view is held by Baumrin, who observes that Pirandello "publicly supported Mussolini, but his writing in no way reflects Fascist ideology; in fact, it may resist such authority. The subtle metatheatricality and formalism of Pirandello's plays are also evinced by authors in other nations under authoritarian if not totalitarian regimes".<sup>25</sup>

Bassnett observes that "although he embraced Fascism as a step towards a more stable social order, there is no attempt in his works to portray a model proto-Fascist society. In fact, Pirandello always declared himself to be apolitical, stressing his desire to be seen as 'just an ordinary human being', and insisting that although he might hold a party card, in his writing he was outside politics";<sup>26</sup> to which Witt seems to remark that Fascist statements in the 1920s claimed that "fascist art should not be designed as propaganda. True art produced under the regime, the argument went, would simply turn out to be truly fascist",<sup>27</sup> and Pirandello's separation between art and politics would go along the same lines as this vein of Fascist ideology: "His own statements and those

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<sup>23</sup> Enzo Lauletta, *Pirandello o la crisi*, Milano: San Paolo, 1994, p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> Paolo Puppa, *Dalle parti di Pirandello*, Roma: Bulzoni, 1987, pp. 240, 254.

<sup>25</sup> Seth Baumrin, "No Longer in Search of an Author, a Character Defines Herself: Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and Eugenio Barba's Experimental Performance Methodology", in *Modern Drama*, 2001, 44 (2): 174-187, p. 174.

<sup>26</sup> S. Bassnett-McGuire, *Luigi Pirandello*, cit., p. 135.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Ann Frese Witt, "Fascist Discourse and Pirandellian Theater", in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 1992, 91: 303-331, p. 306.

prevalent in Fascist discourse on the necessary separation between true fascist art and propaganda suggest that one should not expect to find much political or ideological content in his works”.<sup>28</sup>

Stone also sees Pirandello’s “avant-gardism” as compatible with Fascist discourse, in its disruption of bourgeois tradition and establishment, in the break with naturalism, and in a novelty of poetics which, in its subversion of the literary status quo, is very close to futurism, which was welcomed by the regime.<sup>29</sup> Vené agrees with her that Fascism appeared to Pirandello to operate “qualcosa di concreto *contro* le illusioni del sistema liberale e dello spappolato programma socialista; si proponeva come una azione, un gesto spontaneo, una ‘cosa’ contro lo smodato volo di ‘parole’ democratiche e rivoluzionarie.”<sup>30</sup> Witt similarly observes that

Pirandello’s experiments with theatrical form as well as his philosophical relativism are certainly consistent with the 1920s fascist call for revolt against ‘bourgeois’ canons of realism and rationalism and the promotion of the irrational, constant creation, and improvisation [...] Pirandello’s critique of a society based on what he saw as the abstract, worn-out formulae of traditional democratic liberalism, as well as of socialism, is devastating and inexorable.<sup>31</sup>

It is somehow symptomatic of the kind of ambiguity of response aroused by Pirandello’s position, that even in his time his work could be read and praised as upholding an opposition to the regime, while at the same time the writer had been elected Accademico d’Italia; Tomaso Napolitano, for example, in 1934 celebrated the

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 318.

<sup>29</sup> See Jennifer Stone, “Mirror Image/Collage: Reality, Representation and Revolution in Pirandello”, in Francis Barker et al. (eds.), *1936: The Sociology of Literature. The Poetics of Modernism*, University of Essex, 1979, pp. 37-71.

<sup>30</sup> Gianfranco Vené, *Pirandello fascista. La coscienza borghese tra ribellione e rivoluzione*, Milano: Mondadori, 1991, p. 9, his emphasis.

<sup>31</sup> M. A. F. Witt. cit., pp. 318-319; and indeed she quotes Pirandello’s affirmation which appeared in *Il Piccolo* (21<sup>st</sup> October 1924) “that he had nothing to do with politics, but that he joined the Fascist party ‘in the hope of aiding fascism in its work of renewal and reconstruction’”: p. 309.

Russian Communist Academy's publication of Pirandello's selected works: "il Partito Comunista ha favorito la diffusione delle opere del Nostro... Unico, e si credeva impossibile, è il caso di Pirandello, membro della Fascista Accademia d'Italia. onorato nella Russia sovietica come il coraggioso assertore, in terra borghese, di valori morali d'una nuova auspicata società, anti-borghese e anticapitalistica, identificabile in quella proletaria senza classi".<sup>32</sup>

Pirandello's ambivalent position probably cannot be definitively determined. but his public support of the Fascist cause certainly was a response to the latter's early propaganda which claimed to eradicate the inherited tired institutions of Liberal politics and the parliamentary system, the stale bourgeois discourse, age-old modes of thinking, and to promote a liberating action, all elements that also emerge from the writer's work. With hindsight, it is easy to see through these claims as fallacious, but at the time the situation was undoubtedly ambiguous, the Fascist discourse being deliberately elusive in order to captivate the widest possible audience, and it was by no means clear where it would eventually lead, mingled as it was in a whole range of antiparliamentary and demagogic forms of politics. Although violent action like Matteotti's murder was already taking place, Pirandello did not witness the extremism and authoritarian policy to which this agenda led when the Fascio gained total power (like mass-deportation, total censorship of the press, violent nationalist propaganda and military action), which only fully came to light after its demise. In *Enrico IV*, however, the portrayal of the theatricality involved in the role of kingship, and its grotesque debunking seem to be plausibly coherent with the Bakhtinian discourse on the function of carnivalesque elements in the corrosion of the solemnity and solidity of power, which the text projects

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<sup>32</sup> Tomaso Napolitano, in *Quadrivio*, 18th November 1934, as quoted by G. Giudice, *op. cit.*, p. 350, n. 1.

not only in the sovereign himself, but in a whole ideological construct, the inherited establishment of age-old concepts and conventions of a political and social system, to which Enrico reacts by setting up his own, upside-down kingdom. Although he is a powerful ruler within his world, we are never allowed to forget that he maintains his authority by means of a “carnevalata”, a carefully staged show which incidentally relies on a display of madness; and in this context it is interesting to observe that Mussolini himself,<sup>33</sup> and the whole Fascist propaganda, relied extensively on the theatricality of public appearances and rituals to support their discourse and consequently their power, going as far as trying to re-enact the pomp and symbolic displays of the ancient Roman empire – not a far cry from Enrico’s impersonation of the Holy Roman Emperor. If Pirandello probably did not deliberately level this play at the new Party, it could plausibly be read as a way of debating the issue of the theatricality of politics at one remove, in a way that public life would not allow him to: *Enrico IV* then becomes an accusation against authoritarian embodiments of power that claim total integrity and solidity, unmasking them merely as a convenient playing of parts, whether they are a monarchy or the Fascist regime; and it is arguable that such a connection may have been made in the minds of an attentive audience at the time.

#### **4. The madman**

If the king is mad, the mad rules: another carnivalesque reversal implied in Enrico IV’s game is that the “reason” pertaining to the outside world does not have any validity in his own world; more specifically, Enrico’s “madness” has the power, and his carnival kingdom reverses all the “logical” concepts that the visitors bring with them as

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<sup>33</sup> Witt reminds us that “The importance of theatrics for Mussolini is such that he wanted to ‘make a masterpiece of’ and ‘dramatize’ his own life”: M. A. F. Witt, cit., p. 305.

a delegation from the “normal” everyday world, attaining a radical point of rupture<sup>34</sup> – this debate constantly requiring inverted commas as all these categories will be proved to be highly arguable. For Bassnett, in fact, such “relativity of madness is the pivotal point of the whole play and from this various other aspects of relativity are touched on. In this respect, *Henry IV* provides almost a resumé of the principal themes of Pirandello’s theatre – the relativity of perception and of language, the relativity of freedom, existence seen as imprisonment in itself, the notion of life as a game wherein each person plays an assigned role.”<sup>35</sup>

In fact, the only reason why Enrico maintains his power over his attendants, family and visitors, is precisely because he is considered a lunatic with a royal delusion of grandeur, and therefore is indulged and humoured within his own fiction. A proof of this is, that when he suddenly reveals his own “sanity”, the reaction in the other characters will be to spur him to end his royal fiction and go back to the outside world and to ordinary life, as the relieved jesting of the attendants shows, and as Belcredi openly says: “Ma basta ormai con codesta burla! [...]Vorresti rimanere qua ancora,

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<sup>34</sup> Barberi Squarotti holds quite the opposite view of the relationship between Enrico’s madness and carnival: “La serietà tragica della pazzia per Enrico si contrappone all’atteggiamento di Belcredi, che è la non serietà continua delle azioni e della vita e delle parole e dei comportamenti, e l’irrisione, anche, e la degradazione conseguente di ogni cosa, sentimenti come idee, in perfetto accordo con il carattere sostanzialmente carnevalesco della società aristocratica cui appartiene e dalla quale, invece, è uscito in forza della pazzia Enrico IV. Allora la pazzia, in un mondo frivolo, invece di essere lo spazio della degradazione e del grottesco e del ridicolo, è il luogo della serietà e dell’impegno o anche del dolore autentico.” (G. Barberi Squarotti, *op. cit.*, p. 193).

It cannot be denied that Belcredi shares in the element of derision (as will be discussed in the next section), that the “carnevalata” in its essence of pageantry is part of the aristocratic entertainment and lifestyle, and that Enrico takes his mad fiction extremely seriously, but the Bakhtinian concept of carnival goes well beyond the mere opposition serious/ridiculous, in that it upholds an alternative world, truth, reason, discourse, that, like madness, counteract and question those of the outside world.

<sup>35</sup> Susan Bassnett McGuire, “*Henry IV* – The Tragic Humorist”, in J. L. Di Gaetani (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 231-243, p. 238.



scusa, a perpetuare – solo – quello che fu lo scherzo disgraziato d'un giorno di carnevale? E' veramente incredibile, incredibile come tu l'abbia potuto fare. liberato dalla disgrazia che t'era capitata!" (III, p.211).

Enrico rules thanks to his "madness", and relishes the power to make others dress up and behave according to his fancy and follow his whims, like a powerful puppeteer manoeuvring people like marionettes. When the secret of his "recovery" is out, he again resorts to a crazed behaviour in order to manage the situation: he speaks to Carlo di Nolli as if he really was himself at a younger age ("Non sarà morta 'tua' sorella soltanto!" – III, p.208), thus treating the "mad fiction" as real, as he had done before – and which he does again in the end with Frida, wildly claiming her for himself as the actual young Matilda in virtue of the same "mad" principle.

The powerful, controlling value of madness is clear in Enrico's deliberate choice to protract it after his recovery, refusing to re-enter a commonplace life made of pretentiously going to the club, arm in arm "tra i cari amici della vita" (III, p.212), and once again feeling a reject. He opts for a child-like belief in his own fiction, to enjoy the ability to order people about, and to control the – normally – uncontrollable, the future, the development of life; as he rebukes his attendants ("Dovevate sapervelo fare per voi stessi, l'inganno; non per rappresentarlo davanti a me"). The masquerade is to be taken seriously, in earnest, so as to be saved from "un'ansia senza requie di sapere come si determineranno i loro casi [...] Fissati per sempre: che vi ci potete adagiare, ammirando come ogni effetto segua obbediente alla sua causa, con perfetta logica" (II, p.202).

It thus emerges, paradoxically, that in this madness-ruled world there is a "perfect logic": overturning common understanding, it claims rationality for itself, while defining everyday life as at the mercy of an irrational, uncontrollable fate, in which therefore it is real insanity to choose to live. "For the sane, reality is a house of detention as closely guarded as an asylum for lunatics. The penalty for escape is

alienation but there is no other way to achieve wisdom. In *Henry IV* the hero has gained, through madness, insights that sane people lack and do well to avoid. He has discovered the fragility of the structure on which the everyday world is based."<sup>36</sup> Enrico then happily embraces an alternative, carnivalizing "logic" that undermines accepted distinctions and definitions, and vindicates a different discourse that liberates from the staleness and uniformity of ordinary life, that "macchinetta infernale"<sup>37</sup> of rigid, immutable logic: "trovarsi davanti a un pazzo sapete che significa? trovarsi davanti uno che vi scrolla dalle fondamenta tutto quanto avete costruito in voi, attorno a voi, la logica [...] Costruiscono senza logica, beati loro, i pazzi! O con una loro logica che vola come una piuma! Volubili! Volubili! Oggi è così e domani chissà come!" (II, p.198).

This "madness" thus welcomes the ambiguous co-existence of fiction and reality, the liberation from a strict rationality, and the conscious playing of a game that at the same time offers a different kind of stability, the safe predictability of a role-play that can be managed and varied at one's own pleasure, without any regard for social conveniences and conventions. It vindicates its own world of significance, independent from the institutionalised one ("Ma io non sono un pazzo a modo vostro, dottore!" – III, p.217); and it has a carnivalizing function, because it tears off the unconscious public masks, imposing other ones that are comic because they are deliberately put on to masquerade and enter another imaginary world, and are also antithetical to the characters who wear them (for example, the worldly Matilde as the stern Adelaide, the satyr-faced and scientific Doctor as the religious figure of Abbot Hugh of Cluny, the libertine, aggressive Belcredi as the humble and devout little monk).

In this respect, all the Doctor's scientific speeches acquire a dimension of irony.

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<sup>36</sup> Maurice Valency, "On *Henry IV*", in J. L. Di Gaetani (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 223-229, p. 227.

<sup>37</sup> L. Pirandello, *L'Umorismo*, cit., p. 95.

since they refer to someone who is only pretending to be “mad” according to his standards, and his self-assured analyses are completely debunked once it is revealed that what he took for “delirium” was in fact just a game, a “burla” made to defy any attempt at categorical definition. His pompous analytical delight is brought to a comic extreme (“Interessantissimo! Anche nelle cose il delirio che torna così appunto! Magnifico, sì sì. magnifico.” – I, p.139) and toyed with by Enrico (“Caso interessantissimo, dottore! Studiatemi, studiatemi bene! – III, p.212). The Doctor has a ridiculously smug, patronizing attitude towards his “subject” and the others, on whom he looks down from the heights of his almost prophetic knowledge (“Ah, è facile!”; “*apre le mani davanti al volto come per concentrar l'altrui attenzione*” – I, pp.151-2; “*col sorriso di compatimento d'un competente verso gli incompetenti*” – II, p.173); but he is belittled by being often interrupted at the start of his prattles (by Belcredi, for example, or by Bertoldo, bursting on him in his attire as a figurative representation of carnival ridiculing science: “Uno scappato dalla nostra mascherata!” – I, p.152), and by his own cowardice in being reluctant to see Enrico alone (“Dice... io solo?” – I, p.155). Finally, when the “patient” is safely *in absentia*, he offers verbose, sophisticated scientific tirades – a dryness that also strongly contrasts with Enrico’s passionate philosophical speeches – which are full of high-flown terms and complicated “explanations”, and delivered with a self-important, knowledgeable manner. This grotesquely illustrates the authoritarian discourse of “Raison” over “Folie”,<sup>38</sup> where the latter is metaphorized as soft weakness as opposed to the former’s strength (“quella certa elasticità analogica, propria di ogni delirio sistematizzato [...] personalità soprammessa [...] morbido

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<sup>38</sup> In Foucault’s terms, a medical sanity that one-sidedly defines a silenced madness, “shown, but on the other side of bars; if present, it was at a distance, under the eyes of a reason that no longer felt any relation to it and that would not compromise itself by too close a resemblance”: M. Foucault, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

adagiamento in uno stato di malinconia riflessiva [...] Se riusciamo a scrollarlo, dicevo, a spezzare d'un colpo con questo strappo violento..." – II, pp.177-178). But, quite ridiculously – and significantly – this sublime science has to stoop to a grotesque masquerade to perform its "redemption", and will culminate in a "experiment" that results in a complete scientific failure, proving to be, in a carnivalistic reversal, more damaging than therapeutic, the cure more insane than its object: "Sapete, dottore, che avete rischiato di rifarmi per un momento la notte nel cervello? Perdio, far parlare i ritratti, farli balzare vivi dalle cornici..." (III, p.210).

In Bakhtin's terms madness "makes men look at the world with different eyes, not dimmed by 'normal', that is by commonplace ideas and judgements. [...] madness is a gay parody of official reason, of the narrow seriousness of official 'truth'".<sup>39</sup> The "mad" Enrico in fact refuses to conform to a world that has branded him as "pazzo", even before the fatal accident ("Ma se già mi chiamavano pazzo, prima, tutti!" – III, p.212), a world that arbitrarily imposes its own standards of behaviour and categorical definitions. He stands against a social league that decides what is central and what is marginal, and which consequently establishes what is "right" and what is "wrong", what is "true" and what is "false" ("Guai a chi un bel giorno si trovi bollato da una di queste parole [...] Ma dite un po', si può star quieti a pensare che c'è uno che si affanna a persuadere agli altri che voi siete come vi vede lui [...]?" – II, p.194), relegating anyone who disagrees with its discourse as "pazzi":

conviene a tutti far credere pazzi certuni, per avere la scusa di tenerli rinchiusi. Sai perché? Perché non si resiste a sentirli parlare. [...] Voi dite: "questo non può essere!" – e per loro può essere tutto. – Ma voi dite che non è vero. E perché? – Perché non par vero a te, a te, a te [...] e centomila altri. Eh, cari miei! Bisognerebbe vedere poi che cosa par vero a questi centomila altri che non sono detti pazzi. e che spettacolo danno dei loro accordi, fiori di logica! (II, pp.197-199).

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<sup>39</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., p. 39.

Thus the widely accepted “truth” is exposed as a construct, a categorical convention that has no more solid foundations than Enrico’s own royal investiture: it is a fiction, a commonly-agreed invention that gives comfort and a sense of safety to those who embrace it. However, it has a monological rigidity that prevents the tolerance of any differing, alternative discourses: “[l]oro sì, tutti i giorni, ogni momento, pretendono che gli altri siano come li vogliono loro; ma non è mica sopraffazione questa! – Che! Che! – E’ il loro modo di vedere, di sentire: ciascuno ha il suo! [...] vi fanno subire e accettare il loro, per modo che voi sentiate e vediate come loro!” (II, p.194). What is real madness, in Enrico’s carnivalesque, reversed view, is actually this “rational” attempt to separate sanity from insanity, to categorically draw a line between stability and fickleness, between rigidity and mutability, and to establish one univocal version of the truth, when in fact life is constant change and unpredictability, diversity and multiplicity.<sup>40</sup> In Enrico’s eyes it appears to be real madness to mechanically believe in one’s own integrity, in one’s identity as something more substantial than just a mask, a role to play, that can, and has to be, interchangeable: “Perché guai, guai se non vi tenete più forte a ciò che vi par vero oggi, a ciò che vi parrà vero domani, anche se sia l’opposto di ciò che vi pareva vero jeri!” (II, p.199).

A deep and strong respect for the value of madness therefore emerges from this play,<sup>41</sup> as a source of relativity, and as a high ground for a superior vision that sees

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<sup>40</sup> Giovanna Querci agrees that “è pazzia quella verità che pretende di essere tale senza essere categorica, senza avere la pretesa di schiacciare qualsiasi versione alternativa”: *Pirandello: l’inconsistenza dell’oggettività*, Bari: Laterza, 1992, p. 110.

<sup>41</sup> Madness, as a form of creativity, is aptly described by Adam Phillips as tending to the theatrical, as opposed to sanity’s lack of drama, which, he points out, is generally perceived as dull; thus he points to a significant change in our present day culture, from the early twentieth century, when he affirms that sanity “looks distinctly unprosperous in a culture committed to what it likes to think of as individuality and flair, and creativity and enterprise”: an idea that Pirandello seems clearly to share. See his *Going Sane*, London & New York: Hamish Hamilton, 2005, pp.18-20 and p. 40.

through conventions and pretensions, a recurring aspect in Pirandello's work; however, it is with the tragic awareness that this perspective cannot be integrated in common daily life, as will be discussed further below.

## 5. The Fools

Another carnivalesque element, the figure of the Fool – in the historical sense of clown – appears doubled in this play, being represented both by Enrico and by Belcredi, but it reaches a problematic dimension that goes beyond the light-heartedness of the Bakhtinian description. The latter portrays the figures of the clown and the fool as traditionally having “a privilege – the right to be ‘other’ in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available; none of these categories quite suits them, they see the underside and falseness of every situation. [...] These figures are laughed at by others, and *themselves* as well.”<sup>42</sup>

Enrico, physically appearing made up as the typical clown, is immediately identifiable as such and, long before his confinement, his role has always been in fact that of detaching himself from commonplace categories or conventions, and at the same time being laughed at. Although not literally a fool (“non era mica uno stupido” – I, p.147), the fact that he “non era come gli altri” and others “si facevano beffe di lui” (I, p.148) are among the first details given about his past. He stood out for his exalted vitality and earnest passion (“ricco di vita: estroso!”, “La metteva sempre in tutto ciò che faceva, questa ossessione” – I, pp.149,151), which caused the snobbish hilarity of his acquaintances (“aveva scatti di rabbia comicissimi contro se stesso!”, “Appariva incostante, fatuo e... sì, diciamolo, anche ridicolo” – I, p.149), because he did not

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<sup>42</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, cit., p. 159.

conform to their standards of behaviour. As the mad, clownish king in his castle, he enjoys the fool's freedom of speech and action more than ever, indulging his earnest taste for acting ("Concertatore famoso di quadri plastici, di danze di recite di beneficenza; così per ridere, beninteso! Ma recitava benissimo, sa?" – I, p.149) as a way to react to the pretentiousness of the outside world. He sets up his own sincere and deliberate performance as opposed to the unconscious fictitiousness and falsity inherent in everyday life ("questo che è per me la caricatura, evidente e volontaria, di quest'altra mascherata, continua, d'ogni minuto, di cui siamo i pagliacci involontarii [...] quando senza saperlo ci mascheriamo di ciò che ci par d'essere" – III, p.215). Therefore he can flout social taboos with impunity, accusing Matilde of "masquerading" to protract her youth ("siete mascherata anche voi, [...] per codesto ricordo che volete fissare in voi artificialmente [...] l'immagine che vien meno della vostra gioventù" – I, p.166), or unmasking Belcredi's malevolent slandering ("Se non è partita da voi l'oscena voce..." – I, p.162; "Tu che più di tutti ti accanivi contro chi tentava di difendermi!" – III, p.212), and his duplicity towards himself ("E che voi [...] poteste essere amico di quel tale... [...] Che opinione eh? che opinione ne avevate..." – I, p.166). He also teases the Doctor for his presumption of cleverness ("almeno un po' d'astuzia [...] Ma se voi ve la volete tenere tutta per voi... – *Dottore*. Ah, come, io? Vi sembro astuto? – *Enrico IV*. No, Monsignore! Che dite! Non sembrate affatto!" – II, p.189); and exposes them all openly for what he thinks they are, regardless of social propriety ("una è una baldracca, l'altro un sudicio libertino, l'altro un impostore" – II, p.197).

In a truly Bakhtinian carnival spirit, the clown and the madman within Enrico strip down masks and deceptions, exposing the fictionality of images, roles and ideals, and the elusiveness of reality; once again, this carnivalesque aspect recalls the polyphonic function, or double vision of the Pirandellian humourist, whose dialogic "riflessione s'insinua acuta e sottile da per tutto e tutto scompone: ogni immagine del

sentimento, ogni finzione ideale, ogni apparenza della realtà, ogni illusione. [...] La simulazione della forza, dell'onestà, della simpatia, della prudenza. in somma, d'ogni virtù massima della veracità [...] L'umorista coglie subito queste varie simulazioni per la lotta della vita; si diverte a smascherarle".<sup>43</sup> Like the carnivalesque clown, "who has the right to speak in otherwise unacceptable languages",<sup>44</sup> Enrico as a humourist uncovers the hidden side, expresses an alternative, "other" truth which is opposed to the commonly accepted one, and culminates in the outrageous affirmation that the others are just as masked, clownish, and insane as he is ("quest'altra mascherata, continua. d'ogni minuto, di cui siamo i pagliacci involontarii"; "Siamo arrivati, guarda! alla conclusione, che i pazzi adesso siamo noi!" – III, pp.215-216). But this Fool's vindication of another version of the truth comes for Enrico at a dear price: it does not remain the Bakhtinian happy statement of liberation, but crosses the line to become desperate action, in the hopeless struggle to assert himself against the rival fool Belcredi.

Belcredi, in many ways complementary to Enrico, also shares the Fool's function of comic debasing of people and discourses around him, both laughing and being laughed at. With a grotesque half-animal and languid look ("*ha una curiosa testa d'uccello [...] una sonnolenta pigrizia d'arabo, che si rivela nella strana voce un po' nasale e strascicata*" – I, p.138; the bird-like metaphor later replicated by Matilde, amusedly comparing him to an ostrich: I, p.159), he is introduced as someone who has never been taken seriously by anyone including himself ("*che né lei né altri han mai preso sul serio*" – I, p.138; "Io non mi sono mai fatto prendere sul serio!" – I, p.147). He is always the object of laughter and scorn ("Voi fate ridere con la smorfia

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<sup>43</sup> L. Pirandello, *L'umorismo*, cit., pp. 90-91.

<sup>44</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*. cit., p. 405.



d'abbassarvi sempre, [...] a voi, vi si ride in faccia!" – I, p.148; "Voi fate proprio ridere!" – I, p.159), a fact he is almost proudly conscious of ("Ma se avete fatto tanto ridere alle mie spalle! Che ingratitudine!" – I, p.142). He is repeatedly called a fool ("stupido", "scemo", "sciocco" – I, pp.140-141), and he always takes everything as a "joke" ("Capite che scherzi" – I, p.151; "Era per ridere!" – III, p.207; "codesta burla" – III, p.208; "Oh, via, per ischerzo!" – III, p.213; "lo scherzo disgraziato d'un giorno di carnevale" – III, p.211), so much so that when Enrico covertly alludes to Belcredi's part in the accident in pricking his horse, he comments with "Sarà stato anche questo per uno scherzo!" (III, p.213).

Furthermore, Belcredi appears to be halfway between Enrico's reversed world and the Doctor's rational one: he is the voice of a sceptical criticism to the latter's excessive rationalization, without the systematic subversion operated by Enrico. An initial hint is his interruption of the Doctor's first learned speech (*Dottore. [...] E così difatti si spiega che... Belcredi (per interrompere la lezione). Che qualcuno può trovare anche qualche rassomiglianza tra me e lei, caro professore!* – I, p.143), by winding it up with a comic conclusion that deflates the Doctor's air of self-importance. He then questions the latter's dismissive outlook on his "patient" and his assured reliance on his method: "dottore, altro che vent'anni! Sono ottocento! Un abisso! Glielo vuol far saltare davvero con un urtone? [...] Ma lo raccatterà a pezzi col corbello!" (II, p.181). Finally, he expresses doubts about the foundation of the "therapeutic leap", specifically with regards to the presumptuous one-sided nature of the Doctor's rational discourse that does not take into account a difference in the thinking process ("Non ti pare tutto un ragionamento che – secondo noi – egli dovrebbe fare" – II, p.187). He even goes so far as to accuse the Doctor of charlatanism, completely degrading the value of scientific discourse to mystifying charlatanism: "Tutte chiacchiere! E chi più sa chiacchierare, più è bravo! [...]" (II, p.188).

On the other hand, Belcredi is also a foil to Enrico, playing down his importance as a person, as a king and as a madman: he describes Enrico's personality before the accident as ridiculous and preposterous; he criticizes his "royal fiction" – in this respect acting as the veritable King's Fool – belittling it from a prosaic point of view ("è una pazzia che costa fior di quattrini! – I, p.159). In the person of Pietro Damiani he is the involuntary disturbance of the king's composure; in calling his living performance a "burla", he demotes the vital importance it has for Enrico, openly laughing at him and arousing his anger. He is also sceptical about the reality of Enrico's madness ("Ma che delirio, dottore! Riprende a recitare la commedia!" – III, p.208) and derides Matilde for being fascinated by it; Caesar observes that in this he acts as an obstacle, "as that force which seeks to reduce Enrico's reality to the level of a society game".<sup>45</sup> Lausten also sees Belcredi's role as a rival to Enrico in a "metatheatrical sense", because "è lui a trascinarlo [...] via dalla dimensione contemplativa, del dramma astratto, forzandolo a recitare la commedia patetica. [...] Vuole smascherare Enrico perché egli rappresenta un mondo, e meta-testualmente un tipo di dramma, sovversivo e inaccettabile per il mondo comune."<sup>46</sup> But this time the Fool's immunity will not save Belcredi, since his scepticism, the denial of the royal fiction, will have tragic consequences, bringing about his death: his repeating "non sei pazzo!/non è pazzo" will trigger Enrico's revenge; just as in the initial account of the accident, when in a prolepsis of the finale Enrico had drawn the sword in reaction to people not taking him seriously (I, p.150), in the same way he now confronts Belcredi's scepticism at his being "really" mad, by again resorting to the drastic action of the sword.

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<sup>45</sup> Michael Caesar, "Enrico's Foil: The Function of Belcredi in *Enrico IV*", *The Yearbook of the British Pirandello Society*, 1982, 2: 48-54, p. 52. He also remarks on Belcredi's other multiple functions, like "agent of frustration" (p. 48), "delay" (p. 50), "impeder" (p. 51).

<sup>46</sup> Pia Schwarz Lausten, "Le finzioni di *Enrico IV*. Un'analisi del drama *Enrico IV* di Luigi Pirandello", *Revue Romane*, 1997, 32 (1): 113-129, pp. 127-128.

With regard to this last action, which has been interpreted in various ways, Gioanola offers an existential explanation of the role of Belcredi which relies on Laing's study on schizophrenia, *The Divided Self*, and sees him as Enrico's "double", the negative projection of his self: "Belcredi è la personificazione di quanto un io preda della divisione ha staccato da sè e proiettato all'esterno in un altro [...] Belcredi non è un rivale, ma un doppio, maligno e persecutore come si conviene alle figure di sdoppiamento".<sup>47</sup> He therefore goes on to interpret the slaying of Belcredi as "un caso assolutamente tipico di omicidio-suicidio [...] Enrico ha colpito in persona di Belcredi l'altro se stesso rifiutato [...]: per questo non c'è catarsi e non c'è tragedia, c'è solo l'estremizzazione della poetica dell'umorismo, fondata appunto sulle imm modificabili strutture psichiche dell'io diviso."<sup>48</sup> There are indeed some striking similarities between Laing's description of schizophrenic phenomena and Enrico's behaviour and expression (an analogy also observed by Patterson<sup>49</sup>), which seems to justify such a comparison. "Engulfment" for example is defined by Laing as a situation where "the individual dreads relatedness as such, with anyone or anything or, indeed, even with himself, because his uncertainty about the stability of his autonomy lays him open to the dread lest in any relationship he will lose his autonomy and identity. [...] The main manoeuvre used to preserve identity under pressure from the dread of engulfment is

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<sup>47</sup> Elio Gioanola, "Mito e follia nell'Enrico IV", in Enzo Lauretta (ed.), *La "Persona" nell'opera di Luigi Pirandello. Atti del XXIII Convegno Internazionale. Agrigento, 6-10 dicembre 1989*, Milano: Mursia, 1990, pp. 121-140, p. 137.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 139. This interpretation also draws on Otto Rank's work *The Double*, where this literary situation is similarly analysed as an act "through which the hero seeks to protect himself permanently from the pursuits of his self, [it] is really a suicidal act. It is, to be sure, in the painless form of slaying a different ego: an unconscious illusion of the splitting-off of a bad, culpable ego": *The Double*, New York and London: New American Library, 1979, p. 79.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Patterson, "A 'Laingian' Reading of Pirandello's *Henry IV*", *Modern Drama*, 1984, 27: 637-645.

isolation”:<sup>50</sup> this certainly seems to be consistent with Enrico’s perception of the elusiveness of identity and with his sense of loss of self in relating to others. Furthermore, Laing’s concept of the unembodied self as separation from one’s own body and feelings resulting in extreme self-consciousness – as if perceiving oneself “from the outside” – recalls Enrico’s detachment from his own emotions and the consequent enhancement of them in a performance that lies outside his daily persona. Finally, Laing’s description of the “disjunction of one kind or another between the person one is in one’s own eyes (one’s being-for-oneself) and the person one is in the eyes of the other (one’s being-for-the-other)”<sup>51</sup> that remains permanent despite attempts at adjustment – thus indicating a form of insanity – closely evokes Enrico’s desperate sense of discrepancy between his and others’ perception of himself. However, this analysis seems to take Enrico’s madness – within the bounds of the dramatic situation – as “clinically real”<sup>52</sup> rather than just a carnivalesque mask, although Gioanola for one recognizes its challenging role towards social conventions, which seems to be too deliberate and conscious to be written off as madness, but rather amounting to an “alternative sanity”: “la follia [...] come ricerca di autenticità, fuori dei ruoli assegnati

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<sup>50</sup> R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self. An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965, p. 44.

<sup>51</sup> R. D. Laing, *op. cit.*, p. 35. Incidentally, this phrasing about a healthy interrelatedness strikingly recalls Bakhtin’s description of the relationship of the self to otherness: see for example “From Notes Made in 1970-71”: “The reflection of the self in the empirical other through whom one must pass in order to reach *I-for-myself* (can this *I-for-myself* be solitary?)” (cit., p. 137); or “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity”: “we evaluate ourselves from the standpoint of others, and through others we try to understand and take into account what is transgredient to our own consciousness” (cit., p. 15).

<sup>52</sup> A fallacy, this one, which seems to be common to all psychoanalytic readings of Pirandello’s works: see for example André Bouissy’s and Jean Spizzo’s articles in Université de Paris VIII–Vincennes, *Lectures Pirandelliennes*, Abbeville Cedex: Paillart, 1978; Giuliana Sanguinetti Katz, “La pazzia di Enrico IV”, *Yearbook of the British Pirandello Society*, 1986, 6: 50-64; and Chapter 5 in Jennifer Stone, *Pirandello’s Naked Prompt. The Structure of Repetition in Modernism*, Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1989.

dalla società, lontano dalle convenzioni e dai compromessi, in un'ansia di verità che distrugge ogni illusione".<sup>53</sup> It is a liberation from imposed truth, however, which entails a tragic conclusion: the Fool's sudden stepping out of the jest into the dark reality of death. Belcredi appears then to represent not the "refoulé", the repressed side of Enrico, but rather ambivalently both what Enrico has missed out on in life, and the conventional society that he mocks and which represses him with its version of the truth.

Lausten suggests that "Enrico non uccide Belcredi perché è impazzito, ma per poter rimanere nella (finzione della) follia, al suo livello di vita preferito, quello contemplativo, astratto. A livello allegorico la vita di Enrico è un lucidissimo e disperato tentativo di difendere la propria finzione, che è anche un rifiuto e uno smascheramento della vita normale."<sup>54</sup> The Fool's game, then, which has been throughout the play a comic debasing of reason and of scientific self-importance, of social seriousness and propriety, attains – in the interplay of the two "fools" and the violence involved – a negative extreme, in a desperate vindication of the right to define another truth, to speak a different, repressed language, which is far from the carefree and happy role performed by the Fool as envisaged by Bakhtin; this preludes to similarly radical contrasts in the realm of subjectivity and human relationships.

## 6. Overturning time

If carnival represents the reversal of officially and artificially imposed categories, time is certainly one of them, especially in the logical irreversible sequence past-present-future: Enrico IV in his carnivalesque kingdom plays with time, going back

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<sup>53</sup> Elio Gioanola, "Mito e follia nell'Enrico IV", cit., p. 126. In a later analysis, Gioanola will more clearly see *Enrico IV* as "assai più luogo di sfruttamento strutturale della follia che momento drammaticamente rivelativo delle sue autentiche implicazioni e valenze": *Pirandello, la follia*, cit., p. 96.

<sup>54</sup> P. S. Lausten, cit., p. 122.

and forth and involving the others in this game, in denial of that rational division and its fixed, unilateral evolvment, thus also sharing in the modernist discourse on time; *Enrico IV* displays a “tempo interiore fatto di inversioni, di memorie, di fantasmi. di bisogno di eccesso e di deconnessione dall’ordine circostante: un bisogno di percepire la fluidità del tempo e delle cose. Si tratta dunque di un desiderio di linguaggi diversi che va oltre le norme del comportamento sociale e che può essere vissuto, fra altri luoghi, nei carnevali, nei balli e nel teatro.”<sup>55</sup>

The first indication of this appears right at the start, with the juxtaposition of medieval scenery props and the two modern portraits, which in themselves also refer back to another past time, twenty years before the present of the play. This temporal confusion is soon reinforced in the Counsellors’ dialogue, when they tell Bertoldo about their spatial leaping (“*Landolfo* [...] E questa è la sala del trono! *Arialdo*. A Goslar! *Ordulfo*. O anche, se vuoi, nel castello dell’Hartz! *Arialdo*. O a Worms. *Landolfo*. Secondo la vicenda che rappresentiamo, balza con noi, ora qua, ora là.” – I, p.128), which of course involves different times along with the locations; and this confusion is also apparent in Bertoldo’s blunder between the two Henry IV, that is, between the eleventh century and the sixteenth century.

A further playing with past and present is offered by the entrance of the visitors, when Matilde recognizes herself in one of the portraits, as she was twenty years back, but at the same time she sees her daughter Frida in it (“*Donna Matilde*. Ma no! Guarda! Non sono io: sei tu, là!” – I, p.141) – which is a logical impossibility, the portrait having been painted before her birth. The game is repeated twice, at the start of the second act when they both appear in the costume of Matilde di Canossa, and in the third act, when

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<sup>55</sup> Vanda Monaco Westerstahl, “Un possibile *Enrico IV*”, in G. P. Biasin and N. J. Perella (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 117-125, pp. 123-124.

Frida plays the same role as her mother in the portrait, when again three ages are made to co-exist: the medieval, the “twenty-years-ago” and the present. Finally, all the characters are also actively pulled by Enrico into his time-game, in the sense that they are not only forced to dress up in costumes that transport them to another period, but also engaged into dynamically stepping back and forth along the time-line, and constantly guessing and acting from different chronological positions, in accordance with Enrico’s whims and switches in the “script”.

The main time-juggling is then operated by Enrico; the apparent but partial hair-dye is the visual example of the simultaneous passing of time and an exorcism against it; his carefree jumping in and out of his historical character is one instance of this, implying a continuous switching between a very distant past and the here-and-now. Finally, as has already been noted, in his fictional world Enrico handles history as a script, and people like its puppets: this involves the possibility of switching from a certain time to another, just like in a performance rehearsal, and not necessarily in a logical way: “[t]he madman, like the actor, is not bound by the laws of time, space and sequence as ordinary human beings are.”<sup>56</sup> The real death of one of his attendants prompts him to a simple cast substitution, and he assimilates the event with a change of script (“Mi hanno cacciato via Adalberto? E io allora voglio Bertoldo!” – I, p.131). The way death is dealt with here is a prelude to Enrico’s coming to terms with that of his real sister, who figures in his own fiction as his mother Agnes; which is also a key to the significance and purpose he sees in this historical performance:

Mi hanno detto che è morta.

*Pausa tenuta, densa di commozione. Poi sorridendo mestissimamente*

Non posso piangerla, perché se voi ora siete qua, e io così

*mostra il sajo che ha indosso,*

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<sup>56</sup> S. Bassnett McGuire, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

vuol dire che ho ventisei anni.

*Arialdo (quasi sottovoce dolcemente per confortarlo)*. E che dunque ella è viva, Maestà.

*Ordulfo (c.s.)*. Ancora nel suo convento.

*Enrico IV (si volta a guardarli)*. Già; e posso dunque rimandare ad altro tempo il dolore. (I, pp. 163-164)

The relationship with the historical script then, is one of sanctuary, of retreat from time itself into a masquerade that suspends the conventional chronological scheme as is commonly experienced: the subversion of the sequence past-present-future has the purpose of managing events in a way that is not normally possible (“Nessuno vorrebbe riconoscere quel certo potere oscuro e fatale che assegna limiti alla volontà. [...] tante cose avvengono che tutti quanti vorremmo non avvenissero, e a cui a malincuore ci rassegniamo!” – I, p.165). Re-living a happy or less troublesome past is a refuge from having to confront the painful, unwanted facts of life, or a way to control them – like the death of a mother/sister that Enrico overrules by retreating into his historical fiction before and after the event, thus being able to defer pain to a more appropriate, because controllable, time. This amounts to a sort of “manageable eternity”, where a carnivalized historical script is installed and can be experienced at will, and which is less painful and illogical because it is already known and rehearsed, as opposed to the unpredictability of life: “Per quanto tristi i miei casi, e orrendi i fatti; aspre le lotte, dolorose le vicende: già storia, non cangiano più, non possono più cangiare, capite? Fissati per sempre: che vi ci potete adagiare, ammirando come ogni effetto segua obbediente alla sua causa, con perfetta logica, e ogni avvenimento si svolga preciso e coerente in ogni suo particolare” (II, p.202).

Like the time-juggling with the sister’s death, the self-imposed seclusion into this medieval asylum is a direct response to the pain and disillusionment experienced by Enrico twenty years before, when he was hurt by the scorn and derision of the woman he loved, and eight years before, when he re-awakened to a lost youth: “[i]gnorare il



tempo biologico, rifugiarsi nel passato e nella routine di una rappresentazione che ripresenta sempre gli stessi gesti e le stesse parole, significa sottrarsi alla corrosione del divenire”.<sup>57</sup> The eternity of sentiment having failed, in being laughed at by the young and flimsy Matilde, he takes shelter in the eternity of a distant past; the changeability in circumstances and people’s affections gives way to the fixity of the repeatable historical event. The painful loss of twelve youthful years (“arrivato con una fame da lupo a un banchetto già bell’e sparcchiato” – III, p.213) is superseded by the eternal sumptuousness of the young king’s court, and the label of “mad” is deliberately chosen to protect a life-saving fiction that forever replicates the happy chronological mayhem of a carnivalesque performance (“rivestirmela subito, meglio, di tutti i colori e gli splendori di quel lontano giorno di carnevale” – III, p.214): the eternal imaginary present of an “illogical”, subverted temporality.

### 7. The fiction of identity and reality

Pirandello thought that “non esiste per nessuno una rappresentazione, sia creata dall’arte, o sia comunque quella che tutti ci facciamo di noi stessi e degli altri e della vita, che si possa credere una realtà. Sono in fondo una medesima illusione quella dell’arte e quella che, comunemente, a noi tutti viene dai nostri sensi”.<sup>58</sup> Thus, from Enrico’s carnivalesque kingdom, his prophetic voice calls into question the accepted ideas of truth, reality and identity, highlighting how they are all based on fictional conventions, and leading to a tragic vision of the individual that had already been presaged in *Sei personaggi*: “An important metaphor in *Six Characters*, that of role-play as theater, becomes transformed in *Henry IV* into the *masquerade* or the wearing of

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<sup>57</sup> C. Donati, *Il sogno e la ragione*, cit., p. 196.

<sup>58</sup> L. Pirandello, “Ironia”, *Saggi, poesie e scritti vari*, cit., p. 993.

masks in life. Pirandello uses this metaphor to portray his perception of the cleavages or splits in the self.”<sup>59</sup>

Everything in *Enrico IV* points to this: the initial gag of the pages jumping up to take their position in the play hint at the fictionality of the dramatic situation; the visitors’ dressing up and having to play a part are a symbolic reference to a larger human predicament in daily interrelation; Bertoldo having learnt the wrong part, and Frida’s ill-fitting costume, suggest the frequent condition of individuals coming into the world with wrong, unfitting roles, that are not quite suited to their situation; this can also be taken to hint more generally at life as a part that has to be rightly guessed, or that has to be adjusted to the given social milieu.

Enrico’s use of a fixed historical script and a well-known role-play as a barrier against the pains of existence, the mutability of people and the unpredictability of events, is just the choice of another deliberate fiction, which emerges as a far from insane but extremely lucid analysis of social life, to the point that, paradoxically, his “vision of ‘reality’ will eventually be imposed onto the other characters, who will have to accept, and above all suffer the consequences of the world Enrico IV has produced. At the end of the *pièce*, Enrico IV’s vision seems, and is, more real than that of the other characters.”<sup>60</sup>

Enrico plays with the visitors’ masks, alternatively taking them for real or stripping them off, to hint at the fact that individuals are always, and for the most part unconsciously, wearing masks in order to adapt to social situations, to protract a youthful memory of themselves, to set themselves above others, or to conform to

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<sup>59</sup> Alan Roland and Gino Rizzo, “Psychoanalysis in Search of Pirandello: *Six Characters and Henry IV*”, in Roland A. (ed.), *Psychoanalysis, Creativity, and Literature: A French-American Inquiry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1978, pp. 323-351, p. 341.

<sup>60</sup> D. Santeramo, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-106.

others' expectations ("quest'altra mascherata, continua, d'ogni minuto, [...] quando senza saperlo ci mascheriamo di ciò che ci par d'essere" – III, p.215). As Querci affirms, "[c]on quella tintura che non inganna nessuno, meno di tutti se stesso, egli tende a denunciare umoristicamente (ma si tratta ovviamente del tragico umorismo pirandelliano) le meschine finzioni degli altri [...]. Il paradosso che ci propone Pirandello è proprio questo: *Enrico IV è un personaggio che non intende ingannare nessuno*. La sua finzione non è un inganno, bensì la denuncia degli inganni altrui".<sup>61</sup>

Here identity is portrayed as just a series of masks that elude any attempt to believe in a single and true personality;<sup>62</sup> therefore he significantly lacks a "real-life" name like the other characters. He simply chooses a mask he likes, a carnivalesque caricature, in order to reclaim his freedom from these social constraints, and live his life not pretending that what others see is his real self – something more essential than a costume – but precisely flaunting his individuality as a free masquerade, disrupting the numbly pretentious way in which the "sane" people around him live: "Sono guarito, signori: perché so perfettamente di fare il pazzo, qua; e lo faccio, quieto! – Il guaio è per voi che la vivete agitatamente, senza saperla e senza vederla, la vostra pazzia" (III, p.216). It is ultimately a healthy creative act, as Caputi observes: "understanding the place of theatricality in experience serves [...] to bring imaginative depth and density to self-creation [...] to acquiesce in the fact that the role you play is never entirely your own and never completely adequate to the self of your consciousness."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> G. Querci, *op. cit.*, p. 120, her italics.

<sup>62</sup> Vené observes that "Pirandello fu il primo scrittore italiano a capovolgere radicalmente il concetto di evoluzione della coscienza così come lo ponevano i teorici della struttura sociale borghese. In primo luogo egli assegnò alla coscienza la funzione di definire la frattura tra individuo e società. In secondo luogo, egli vide nella coscienza non un 'acculturamento' dell'individuo rispetto alla società esistente ma una manifestazione ribelle dell'io contro l' 'acculturamento' .": G. Vené, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>63</sup> A. Caputi, *op. cit.*, p. 121. Douglas Biow takes however quite an opposite position, regarding

This disillusioned outlook on life comes to Enrico from an exceptional but damning gift: the ability to apprehend himself as if from outside, to look at his own self from an objective, external point of view, which is the core of his "lucid madness", but also of his loss of belief in an authentic subjectivity, and his idea of human life as performance. In a rarely perceptive insight by Belcredi, he is described as often passionately exalted, but at the same time

si vedeva subito, lui stesso, nell'atto della sua esaltazione, ecco. E credo che questo dovesse avvenirgli per ogni moto più spontaneo. Dico di più: sono certo che doveva soffrirne. [...] perché quella subitanea lucidità di rappresentazione lo poneva fuori, a un tratto, d'ogni intimità col suo stesso sentimento, che gli appariva – non finto, perché era sincero – ma come qualche cosa a cui dovesse dare lì per lì il valore... che so? di un atto di intelligenza, per sopperire a quel calore di sincerità cordiale, che si sentiva mancare. E improvvisava, esagerava (I, p.149).

It is the sudden perception of a self-conscious objectivity that parallels that of the actor unexpectedly catching himself in the process of acting, and losing all intensity and truth of feeling in the awkward perception of his role as fictional. Therefore he compensates for this new sense of unreality and lack of sincere emotional coincidence with himself, by exasperating precisely that aspect which brought about the disillusionment in the first place: the fiction, the mask, the cover-up to the gaping void of subjectivity. In some ways, this is similar to the idea of carnival disruption as being also self-directed, embracing everything including itself in the mocking proclamation of

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this role-playing and the "marginality" entailed by it as something negative in the balance of the play: "at first glance, the marginal moment is the moment of complete freedom. [...] But for all its attractiveness as a solution, marginality in the end does not so much provide a solution as becomes an evasion that raises history to a second power and ends in a cul-de-sac. Indeed, as soon as marginality becomes transformed into a mode of existence it risks becoming yet another role to adopt" ("Psychoanalysis, History, Marginality: A Study of Violence and Disease in Pirandello's *Enrico IV*", *Italica*, 1989, 66 (2): 158-175, p. 173), when however this is precisely the core of Enrico's outlook on life, and also his saving grace.

the relativity of truth;<sup>64</sup> but here there is no sense of the mask as “connected to the joy of change and reincarnation”,<sup>65</sup> but only of the sheer instrumentality of it in an attempt at a less deceptive existence. Unlike for example *Arms and the Man*, there is no laughter, no positively comic derision of imposed roles, but rather the heart-felt fear of complete emptiness and lack of a purpose in living:

[i]l personaggio pirandelliano [...] ha una chiara percezione dello sgretolarsi di una realtà che ha perso ogni credibilità nonostante le continue pretese di certezza, di sicurezza, dei suoi antagonisti [...] la tragica consapevolezza di non poter ottenere quello che cerca e di cui ha bisogno: un universo di certezze, un assoluto che gli permetta di consistere, valori che gli creino e definiscano una realtà.<sup>66</sup>

Then, from Enrico himself and the whole picture of life that he puts forward, what comes across as increasingly tragic, and less and less in the happy spirit of Bakhtinian carnival, but in strongly modernist terms, is the painful sense of the elusiveness and unsubstantiality of identity, and the consequent necessity of the fiction, the need to put up some sort of performance in order to achieve some form of life, the mask being essential to “really” live. Enigmatically, Enrico claims that their historical show has to be “Come vero! Perché solo così non è più una burla la verità!” (II, p.203); therefore, truth is not a jest but “real”, only when it is performed *as if* it was true, that is, performed *like* itself. Reality then needs the “double” of fiction in order to be taken seriously – like the portraits (representations) in the throne room are for Enrico identical to the living images of two mirrors (“Immagini, sono. Immagini, come... ecco, come le potrebbe ridare uno specchio” – I, p.133) – and people have to take up their masks willingly and earnestly, so as to be real persons, so that their lives are not just lived “in

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<sup>64</sup> See M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, cit., pp. 11-12.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>66</sup> U. Mariani, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-13.

jest”, the terrifying, light-hearted numbness of Belcredi’s “per scherzo”. As Bentley observes, “[t]he words ‘joke’ and ‘jest’ are reiterated obsessively, and always in connection with making a joke or a jest of something that should *not* be joked or jested about. [...] The ending of the play, which perhaps seems arbitrary when we detach it from the thematic structure, grows organically enough out of the perpetual torturous question: Is anything more than a jest at stake?”<sup>67</sup>

Bakhtin welcomed “the destruction of the rhetorical unity of personality” as a positive disruption of the official, monological image of identity – the heroic canon of the “fully finished and completed being [...] absolutely equal to himself [...whose] view of himself coincides completely with others’ views of him”<sup>68</sup> – and the laughing exposure of the “dynamics of inconsistency and tension between the various factors of this image”, in view of the achievement of “a new, complex wholeness on a higher level of human development”.<sup>69</sup> For Bakhtin, identity is a process, and its non-uniformity makes for a multiplicity and variety, indeed a polyphony, of experience, whereas with Pirandello this “disintegration” is felt as a tragic loss of a substantial and stable personality that *should* be there; and if Bakhtinian carnival is the gay wearing of masks that liberates from everyday constrictions, here the masquerade is only a last resort: the “mad logic” of mutability is the necessary consequence of an elusive identity that changes or deceives at every moment. Esslin remarks that “Pirandello’s use of the contrast between theatrical and extratheatrical reality is [...a] metaphor to give expression to his deeper concerns, his basic theme: the impossibility of ever arriving at any fixed and constantly valid verdict on any human situation, any human personality

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<sup>67</sup> Eric Bentley, “*Enrico IV: The Tragic Emperor*”, in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Modern Critical Views. Luigi Pirandello*, New York and Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989, pp. 16-27, pp. 20-21, his emphasis.

<sup>68</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, cit., pp. 407-408 and 34.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35, 38.

and character – in short, the problematic nature of human identity itself.<sup>70</sup> For Bakhtin in play and illusion “I experience another life without exceeding the bounds of my own self-experience and self-consciousness”,<sup>71</sup> whereas carnival here is the tragically conscious saving lie, put up against the empty delusion of a solid truth to identity and life. Maggi is right in observing that Enrico prefers being a mask rather than not being at all: “aggrappato ancora alla carnevalata della vita, si arresta agli orli del baratro; la sua tragica maschera è l’estrema protezione dall’annientamento, dalla dispersione nella vuota infinità del nulla.”<sup>72</sup> This is where *Enrico IV* most closely approaches existentialist theatre: it projects an outlook that, Brustein agrees, “has existential roots. Indeed it has, because, in Pirandello’s view, the adoption of the mask is the inevitable consequence of being human. If the mask is imposed on the face by the external world, it is more often the construct of internal demands. Hamlet says, ‘I know not seems’ – but Pirandello’s characters know almost nothing else.”<sup>73</sup>

## 8. A carnivalesque tragedy

In *Enrico IV* the principle of carnival then acquires a tragic, almost existential dimension, appearing to reach out to the drama of a few decades later; if *Six Characters* had been the ironic rejection of tragedy, here this is fully embraced, although on a new dimension. The initial note to the play describes it as a tragedy (“un breve passo del I atto che nella rappresentazione della tragedia sarà bene omettere” – p.127), and some early editions are known to have had “Una tragedia” as a subtitle; but its status of

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<sup>70</sup> Martin Esslin, “A Hole Torn in a Paper Sky: Pirandello and Modern Drama”, in J. L. Di Gaetani (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 261-270, p. 262.

<sup>71</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity”, *cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>72</sup> Marina Maggi, “Enrico IV: la maschera e il nulla”, *Esperienze Letterarie: Rivista Trimestrale di Critica e Cultura*, 1995, 20 (2): 71-81, p. 79.

<sup>73</sup> R. Brustein, “Pirandello’s drama of Revolt”. *cit.*, p. 109.

tragedy has been much debated: Fairchild for example sees Enrico as an “absolutist”, who “transforms himself into the near impossible: a twentieth-century tragic hero. [...] He has elevated himself to a level that he will be unable to sustain: this is his tragedy”.<sup>74</sup> Barberi Squarotti thinks that “[l]a dimensione della pazzia, autentica o frutto di scelta e di finzione, è quella della ribellione eroica e tragica [...]. Enrico è personaggio eroico e tragico in quanto è immerso nella pazzia: tanto più tragico quanto più determinata e volontaria è la follia”.<sup>75</sup> On the contrary, Briosi claims that “l’ultimo grido di Enrico, che dovrebbe segnare la *soluzione* tragica del conflitto, non riesce a cancellare l’ambiguità, la compresenza fatale dei termini contraddittori, l’impossibilità – nel mondo di Pirandello – della tragedia. [...] Una tela che cala sulle parole ‘Per sempre!’: quale espressione più chiara della nostalgia di un universo capace di chiarezza, di definitività, di tragedia?”<sup>76</sup> Lausten also claims that Enrico “non è in grado di fondare un autentico conflitto tragico”, and that neither the tragedy of normality nor that of a psychological-existential level, nor certainly that of the bourgeois and naturalistic drama, get a full realization, but only a fragmentary one, with the result that Pirandello “salva il suo protagonista dalla tragedia”.<sup>77</sup> Bentley seems to reach a compromise when he claims that by “producing a real death [...] the nameless one preserves his image of himself as tragic hero, while Pirandello, by the same stroke, decisively detaches his play from tragedy. For, after all, what our hero has just done *is* crazy, *is* ridiculous, and

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<sup>74</sup> Terry Fairchild, “Varieties of Consciousness in Pirandello’s *Enrico IV*”, *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 2001, 34 (2): 29-38, p. 30.

<sup>75</sup> G. Barberi Squarotti, *op. cit.*, p. 192. However, he tones it down when he states that the play is “la rappresentazione dello scacco della ‘diversità’ come ‘tragicità’ [... Enrico IV] si presenta alla conclusione del dramma, sulla scena come l’eroe fallito”: *ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>76</sup> Sandro Briosi, “Il finale dell’*Enrico IV* o l’impossibilità del tragico in Pirandello”, in W. Geerts, F. Musarra, S. Vanvolsem (eds.), *Luigi Pirandello: Poetica e Presenza. Atti del Convegno delle Università di Lovanio e Anversa, 13/16 maggio 1986*, Roma: Bulzoni, 1987, pp. 51-55. p. 55.

<sup>77</sup> P. S. Lausten, *cit.*, pp. 117-119.



objectively he has tragic dignity just as little as other lunatics who pose as emperors.”<sup>78</sup>

It is not however a tragedy in the traditional sense,<sup>79</sup> debating within well-defined values and norms, and where Fate, other external powers, or ineluctable conflicts bring destruction on the characters, but rather a new, modern type described by Pirandello himself in the well-known passage from *Il fu Mattia Pascal* about Orestes and the rip in the paper sky. It is the painful sense of being locked in a tragic situation, and at the same time being aware that it is all a great puppet show (“una grande pupazzata”),<sup>80</sup> a fictional construction surrounded by the void, therefore giving one the privileged view of oneself as if from outside, only to reveal a grotesque scene that does not even have the solid foundation of indisputable principles to make it somehow valid and significant.

The ending as well does not typically offer a cathartic solution of conflicts, one way or another, but a complication of the situation, a murder that is not a dramatic resolution but a problematization that reinstates and protracts the initial situation; nonetheless, the whole play sets forth the picture of a human predicament that is felt to be deeply negative, especially as it typically leaves no way out except the pathetic, willing belief in a self-created lie. Williams calls it stalemate:

This is tragic despair, about other people. [...] the pressure of the reality of others, with their own impenetrable ways of thinking and feeling, their own inevitable conversion of your meanings into their meanings, and such a world is only negotiable by interlocking illusion. The

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<sup>78</sup> E. Bentley, “*Enrico IV: The Tragic Emperor*”, cit., p. 21, his emphasis.

<sup>79</sup> For a general overview of tragedy, I refer to Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1969.

<sup>80</sup> Sister Corona Sharp analyses this use of the puppet imagery, defining various metaphoric levels, where, on the psychological one, “man makes his own puppet, namely his public mask [...] This type of puppet is an assumed role, or a projection of an unreal self before the outer world. It may conceal a different self or the terrible absence of any genuine self”: “Pirandello’s Use of Puppetry as Metaphor and Technique”, *English Studies in Canada*, 1988, 14 (1): 26-38, pp. 28-29.

day before us is never really ours but theirs, and so the personal stalemate becomes a general stalemate, an impenetrable general condition.<sup>81</sup>

This tragic situation regards the necessity of the fiction involved in the lack of identity and reality – as has been discussed above – and also the individual's relation to others which involves language as a failed means of communication, the sense of life as death, and the consequent, although unwanted, withdrawal from it.

The crucial expression of the view of the interrelation of the self with others lies in Enrico's excruciating evocation of "questa cosa orribile, che fa veramente impazzire: che se siete accanto a un altro, e gli guardate gli occhi – come io guardavo un giorno certi occhi – potete figurarvi come un mendico davanti a una porta in cui non potrà mai entrare: chi vi entra, non sarete mai voi, col vostro mondo dentro, [...] ma uno ignoto a voi, come quell'altro nel suo mondo impenetrabile vi vede e vi tocca..." (II, p.199): a doubly tragic picture of an essential impossibility for humans of relating to one another, and of a hopelessly irreconcilable difference of perception and expression which is its main cause. If everybody wears masks in daily life, getting to understand and communicate with another is practically impossible, because every individual is like an isolated monad that has no direct means of relating to others, but only interfaces indirectly, through its own disguise or role-playing, and interprets the outside world exclusively according to its own unique frame of mind, its own highly individualized experiences and perceptions. Consequently others will never be able to access one's real, unmediated self, there can never be true communion and trust between human beings, reaching the point of Enrico's desperate affirmation that believing in such a possibility is utter madness: "Confidarsi con qualcuno, questo sì, è veramente da pazzo!" (III, p.214).

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<sup>81</sup> R. Williams, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-152.

A fundamental negative incommunicability is therefore postulated, based on the same principle from which Bakhtin draws a positive conclusion: for him, the idiosyncrasy of every individual being is the foundation of a positive, enriching, ever changing interrelationship with otherness: “we evaluate ourselves from the standpoint of others, and through others we try to understand and take into account what is transgredient to our own consciousness”.<sup>82</sup> This otherness is also a way out from a lonesome, and reductively subjective point of view: “[t]he *I* hides in the other and in others, it wants to be only an other for others, to enter completely into the world of others as an other, and to cast from itself the burden of being the only *I* (*I-for-myself*) in the world”.<sup>83</sup>

Furthermore, Bakhtin’s view of otherness as the basis of a dialogue between perceptions and points of view, offering a welcome resistance against the monological uniformity imposed by official discourse and the stagnation of experience, also bears on the nature and evaluation of language as a way of describing such an experience. If the individual utterance is the expression of a singular perspective (a “particular language [...which] is always a particular way of viewing the world, one that strives for a social significance”<sup>84</sup>), its outward tendency towards sharing has the positive connotation of cultural enrichment: “I live in a world of others’ words. And my entire life is an orientation in this world, a reaction to others’ words (an infinitely diverse reaction), beginning with my assimilation of them (in the process of the initial mastery of speech) and ending with assimilation of the wealth of human culture”.<sup>85</sup> It also contributes to personal formation and growth: “[t]he ideological becoming of a human being [...] is

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<sup>82</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity”, cit., p. 15.

<sup>83</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “From Notes Made in 1970-71”, cit., p. 147.

<sup>84</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, cit., p. 333.

<sup>85</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “From Notes Made in 1970-71”, cit., p. 143.

the process of selectively assimilating the words of others”<sup>86</sup> whereas for Pirandello such a confrontation is a hopeless blind clash with no possible assimilation. The common point of departure in the view of language as a changeable multiplicity in the transmission of meaning (“[I]n all areas of life and ideological activity, our speech is filled to overflowing with other people’s words, which are transmitted with highly varied degrees of accuracy and impartiality”<sup>87</sup>), acquires in Pirandello, through Enrico’s words, the devastating corruption of one’s original utterance and the misinterpretation of one’s self. This distortion inevitably leads to a social misunderstanding, even to the “branding” of a different, non-compliant voice like Enrico’s, which was considered “mad” well before the clinical insanity: “Parole! parole che ciascuno intende e ripete a suo modo. Eh, ma si formano pure così le così dette opinioni correnti! [...] Tutta la vita è schiacciata così dal peso delle parole!” (II, pp.194-195).

The juxtaposition of two apparently similar passages from the two writers very clearly highlights this difference in their conclusions, and the ultimate asymmetry in their respective outlooks on language and life; Bakhtin’s perspective implies a sense of renewal, of the life-giving importance of dialogue, even of the past, inherited word, almost a re-birth of the self through shared language:

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even *past* meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) – they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue.<sup>88</sup>

Pirandello’s view signifies, conversely, an intimation of death weighing down on every day of a life which is only the delusion of itself, where language and social experience

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<sup>86</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, cit., p. 341.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 337.

<sup>88</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, “Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences”. cit., p. 170

are nothing but the stale, deadening rehearsal of their own ghost-like past double, a sort of dialogism gone tragically wrong:

Vi sembra una burla anche questa, che seguitano a farla i morti la vita? – Sì, qua è una burla: ma uscite di qua, nel mondo vivo. Spunta il giorno. Il tempo è davanti a voi. Un'alba. Questo giorno che ci sta davanti – voi dite – lo faremo noi! – Sì? Voi? E salutatemi tutte le tradizioni! Salutatemi tutti i costumi! Mettetevi a parlare! Ripeterete tutte le parole che si sono sempre dette! Credete di vivere? Rimasticate la vita dei morti!” (II, p.195).

After the murder of Belcredi – Enrico's desperate and perfunctory reassertion of his own private definition of meaning over the word “pazzo” – the only makeshift solution seems to be the necessary and definitive – and consequently tragic – withdrawal into his own fiction of madness: “Ora sì... per forza... [...] qua insieme, qua insieme... e per sempre!” (III, p.219). It is necessary because the vindication of his point of view, his language, his mask, is also felt as unavoidable isolation, as the impossibility of a compromise that would entail the destructive submission of his own self to the common language, the common perspective. Thus, the “disguise motif, so crucial to the play, moves from being comic in the first scene to the tragic moments at the end of the play, when Henry realizes that he will never be able to take off his costume”.<sup>89</sup> Surprisingly, Mariani sees this solution as un-tragic: “[p]osto davanti alla tragica scelta, di sopravvivere umanamente, compromettendo però la propria natura di eroe tragico e condannandosi quindi all'oscurità, o di asserire la propria eroica natura anche a prezzo della morte, l'eroe tragico sceglie la fine tragica ed eroica. Invece Enrico IV [...] sceglie di sopravvivere e di controllare il suo mondo, continuando a portare la maschera”,<sup>90</sup> whereas it seems that precisely this bleak survival attains the condition of a – modern – tragedy.

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<sup>89</sup> S. Bassnett McGuire, “*Henry IV* – The Tragic Humorist”, cit., p. 242.

<sup>90</sup> U. Mariani, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

This final withdrawal, in fact, is all the more tragic as it is carried out notwithstanding Enrico's extremely strong, almost voracious longing for life and relationships;<sup>91</sup> his vitality, remembered at the beginning, also transpires from the constant intensity of the look in his eyes, always lively and shrewd in movement, expression and feeling,<sup>92</sup> and always seeming to aim to a straightforward but frustrated communication with the other's deep self: for example "*la fissa così acutamente negli occhi, da farla quasi smorire*" (I, p.166); "guardandomi negli occhi, proprio dentro gli occhi" (II, p.174). This intensity and vitality are also expressed in the powerful image of his reawakening as coming back "con una fame da lupo a un banchetto già bell'e sparcchiato", and only finding himself starving to the condescending leftovers of "magra o molle pietà, o [...] qualche lisca di rimorso" (III, p.213). As Maggi affirms, "Enrico IV è ancora affamato di vita, la sua tragica mascherata non lo ha del tutto immunizzato dai germi insidiosi, dagli impulsi delle passioni",<sup>93</sup> but the passionate desire for a full enjoyment of life is then seen to be shattered against the disillusionment with people and the impossibility of a real, authentic, and meaningful experience.

Thus, with regard to this play, Bazzoni seems only partially right when she refers to Pirandello's plays as containing a "life force" that is connected to carnival,

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<sup>91</sup> André Bouissy also remarks that "l'aspiration à la vie est bien plus intense et pathétiquement exprimée dans la tragédie d'*Enrico IV* que dans aucune des pièces qui l'ont précédée! [...] Il n'y aurait pas de tragédie si le refoulement avait définitivement triomphé du vouloir-vivre": see his "Réflexions sur l'histoire et la préhistoire du personnage 'alter ego'", in Université de Paris VIII–Vincennes, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-174, pp. 127-128.

<sup>92</sup> Here an extensive list of quotations is useful to convey the insistence of the stage-directions on this feature: "*negli occhi una fissità spasimosa*" (I, p.160); "*torna a spiare*", "*sogguarda*" (I, p.161); "*ammiccando furbescamente*" (I, p.163); "*strizza un occhio*" (I, p.164); "*con un sorriso furbissimo negli occhi*" (I, p.171); "*con gaja prorompente frenesia, movendo di qua, di là i passi, gli occhi*" (II, p.193); "*col lampeggiare degli occhi*" (III, p.207); "*con gli occhi sbarrati*" (III, p.219).

<sup>93</sup> M. Maggi, *cit.*, p. 78.

since the outcome is not so positive as she envisages,<sup>94</sup> but leads to a tragic renunciation. Notwithstanding the carnivalesque elements that this play enacts, the caricaturing of traditional drama and of kingship, the use of the figures of the madman and the fool, the masquerade, and the subversion of accepted categories such as time and identity, the overall effect is not one of joyous liberation and enriching polyphony, but one that can be viewed as the painful exposure of the “side-effects” of the Bakhtinian ideas of carnival and the dialogic principle: a reversal of conventions which leads to isolation, a diversity of perception that entails incommunicability; the admission of a complex, non-univocal reality that shatters rather than liberates, and which requires a fictional shelter as the make-shift mending of a disrupted, ungraspable self.

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<sup>94</sup> “His drama demonstrates the double aspect of the world and of human personality which carnival both acknowledges and exploits. Instinct, deceit, trickery, surprise, role-playing, discovery, exaggeration, madness, and the mockery of ‘rules’ form the dramatic action of Pirandello’s carnival, in repeated reminder of the life force which connects us not to the gods but to the earth, to change, to birth, to death, our own mortality and fragility, to revival or renewal”: J. Bazzoni O’Keefe, cit., p. 421.

## Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to re-describe some of the well-established literary critical issues about four modernist dramas by using the Bakhtinian conceptual framework. The objective of this exercise has been twofold: first, to investigate a connection between these plays, and second, to assess the validity of that theory when applied to a different genre from the one originally intended by Bakhtin. His formulations of carnival and dialogism or heteroglossia have been used to highlight and bring together various patterns of parodic subversion, grotesque exaggeration, and ideological questioning carried out in the chosen modernist works, that have indeed brought to the surface a web of interconnected themes; and the fact that this analysis has conveyed some useful insights also proves the working hypothesis that Bakhtinian categories can be successfully applied to literary genres other than the novel. Therefore, I believe this theoretical approach has revealed its merits within this comparative study, and at the same time its limitations, as has gradually emerged in the discussion of more and more problematic issues.

The concept of carnival has been useful in establishing a link between the plays under consideration, with regards for example to literary parody and the subversion of dramatic conventions. These features have been shown to be more than an end in themselves, but rather part of a wider undermining purpose towards an inherited tradition, with implications for the cultural system the texts inhabit. These plays, in fact, set out to criticize the rigidity and staleness of the dramatic habits and assumptions they face, by caricaturing, distorting, reversing or altogether going against them, so as to show their arbitrariness, their coercive nature, and their ultimate irrelevance to a more or less identifiable reality. They deploy a carnivalesque laughter that not only derides,



but undermines the stability of its target, by suggesting its fundamental artificiality. *Arms and the Man* travesties and overturns common images and concepts from epic and romance, for their inherent mystification of the much harsher reality of war, for their unrealistic portrayal of men-women relationships, and their role in sustaining the fossilized social and political status-quo. *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* caricatures and erodes the conventional habits of bourgeois and veristic drama, ridiculing their claims to tragic pathos, veracity of representation and coherent action, and questioning the inherent accepted view of a distinction between reality and fiction, which actually transcends the boundaries of the theatre to affect everyday perception of life. *Ubu Roi* loudly and grotesquely deforms an illustrious dramatic tradition, naturalistic canons and bourgeois bienséances by displaying a low puppet show characterized by a recurring component of carnival in these plays, the grotesque, in an attempt to shock the honoured cultural entourage and disrupt social norms of decorum and rationality that pertain to it. Finally, *Enrico IV* derides the artificiality of historical drama and serious performance, by staging an upside-down history play that carnivalizes any accepted notion of coherence, logical unfolding, and the rationalistic perception of dramatic – or indeed real – time, and places a grotesque clown in the revered position of historical personage.

Thus a shared pattern of reversals and subversions, which characterizes the phenomenon of carnival as described by Bakhtin, emerges from the four plays, targeting common assumptions and conventions that lie well beyond the mere confines of dramatic art, and reach out to the cultural environment and the social and ideological frameworks; these are therefore the indirect object of caricature and undermining: an operation that was clearly sensed by the audiences of these dramas, as can be evinced by the generally intense and disconcerted reactions in their reception. The act of subversion that characterizes carnival in fact also clearly transpires from these plays and connects them, also with regards to the political status-quo and the prevalent ideology,

in various degrees of intensity: from the attack on militaristic propaganda, imperialism and a paternalistic society carried out by *Arms and the Man* in a rather rational and self-contained mode, to a much more radical and outrageous accusation towards the increasingly nationalistic and tyrannical drive of centralized power in *Ubu Roi*, which projects the ominous spectre of anarchic revolution; from the generalized criticism of an accepted hierarchic and bourgeois society in *Sei Personaggi*, to the debunking in *Enrico IV* of political authority as a game of masks, and the desperate attack on the stultifying rigidity and obtuseness of the prevailing common set of notions and social conventions. A more pointed overturning of the concept of kingship is effected by *Ubu Roi* and *Enrico IV*. Kingship is portrayed in these plays as the embodiment of a political power that is exposed as intransigent and oppressive, as a grotesque puppet or clownish show uncritically acquiesced in, without perception of its pompous artificiality and arbitrariness, and which is allowed – in the figure of Ubu – to attain atrocious extremes of irrational cruelty, through the unhindered overturning of all social and moral norms.

Humanity at large is also portrayed in all these plays as constantly involved in a more or less grotesque game of role-play, a component of carnival that once again links these texts together in a significant way: people wear masks throughout their lives, to assert themselves as individuals and to relate to others in a pretentious and deceiving social interaction. If this is perceived in a rather easy-going way in Shaw's play, where the game eventually comes to an end, and in Jarry's work it is reduced to a ludicrous puppet show with no deeper implications for subjectivity, it emerges in Pirandello's dramas as increasingly ambiguous, deceptive and destabilizing of a definite sense of individuality, to the point where, in *Enrico IV*, this carnival of identities reaches a tragic point of desperate annihilation of the self as unitary and ultimately definable. Then the Bakhtinian masquerade has on the one hand the positive function of mirroring and exposing the daily fictionality of public roles, but on the other the negative side-effect

of destroying even the belief in a fundamental substance of the human being, thus bordering on an Existentialist apprehension of life.

Within the idea of role-play is also implied the Bakhtinian principle of dialogism or heteroglossia which, in an analogous way to carnival, welcomes ambiguity and multiplicity of perspective, and which therefore has a role in the questioning of norms and conventions, and upholds a principle of plurality as opposed to the intransigent imposition of monologic ideas or perceptions. This has appeared in the above plays in various forms: as the constant counterpointing of different versions of the truth or of a particular story, as in *Arms and the Man* and *Sei personaggi*, or as the foundation of an alternative universe of significance in *Ubu Roi*, or again as the confrontation of hopelessly irreconcilable points of view and perceptions of the self and of others in *Enrico IV*.

From all the above aspects of carnival and dialogism, the limitations within the Bakhtinian system have also become clear, especially in the last two plays *Ubu Roi* and *Enrico IV*, which have thus allowed a critical testing of those categories. The subversion of moral norms, social conventions, political structures and ideology inherent in the carnivalesque principle, and described by Bakhtin as unconditionally positive and liberating, are still contained within the realm of comedy or tragic-comedy in the first two plays, *Arms and the Man* and *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*; but they attain a tragic point of utter cruelty, inhumanity and extreme destructiveness towards society and the individual in the last two dramas, thereby revealing the abstract and utopian nature of those notions. Furthermore, the multiplicity of vision and the welcoming of an enriching difference in relation to otherness, upheld by the principle of heteroglossia, are shown throughout the succession of plays to be increasingly disruptive of the fundamental core of subjectivity, and of a healthy relationship with other individuals, which both become entangled in a whirlwind of elusive ambiguity and fragmentation.

These flaws within the Bakhtinian theory do not seem completely to invalidate the results of an analysis based on it, but they do open up some concerns. While the Bakhtinian description can be applied to non-novelistic works – one of the limitations Bakhtin himself imposed – the surfacing of those theoretical discrepancies has, I believe, offered a practical assessment of the implications of this framework, as too sweepingly positive and leading to a black-and-white opposition of categories, such as carnival–subversion–dialogism against authority–norms–monologism. Its abstract quality has been demonstrated in the exploration of the “real” destructive consequences of taking such concepts as the subversion of norms or the dialogic principle to the extreme; which perhaps also suggests that the “open”, un-systematic and flexible character of the Bakhtinian approach can be too elastic and generalized.

However, bearing in mind these concerns, I still maintain that the Bakhtinian concepts have proved useful in illuminating and bringing together apparently disparate aspects of the four dramas into a coherent and plausible interpretation: in particular, they have been helpful in highlighting the relationship of the texts to their respective backgrounds, making sense of parodic and grotesque elements by connecting them to broader instances of subversiveness towards political, social and cultural conventions and systems which are portrayed or implied as mystifying and coercive. In this respect, two further issues are raised: firstly, context has proved very relevant to a Bakhtinian reading, which indicates on the one hand that this approach poses interesting questions such as “what is projected as a monologic concept” and “what is being debunked/undermined” by the text, thus helping to pinpoint a dominant ideology or convention, and the specificity of a given culture. On the other hand, it poses a limitation, in that it seems to imply that a certain context is essential to the possibility of such an interpretation of a literary work: a certain “chronotope” – to use another

Bakhtinian synthetic term<sup>1</sup> – which is not perceived as authoritarian or oppressively conventional, or a text that is deliberately informed with a rigid ideology will probably not encourage a Bakhtinian description. By the same token, a difference in context will confer a different slant to those categories, suggesting the possibility of varying degrees within them, each text reflecting back its own distinctive Bakhtinian “mood”. as has been exemplified by the various implications raised by the reading of the four dramas: Shaw’s “happily enlightened” carnivalization, Jarry’s crude and sinister grotesque. Pirandello’s disorienting or tragic carnival.

Secondly, Bakhtin’s theory seems to be particularly productive in connection to modernist works, as I believe has appeared from the analysis of the above plays; in fact, its focus on the debunking of prescribed ideologies and norms seems to share in what has been identified as a distinctive trait of Modernism: “the result of and reaction to a crisis of authority which affected every sphere of activity in Western Europe and America”, and not only as literary “crisis of confidence in the authority of the author or creator”,<sup>2</sup> but in the broader sense of questioning cultural and political categories and manifestations of power, criticizing acquiescence in prescribed rules and beliefs perceived as authoritarian and “essentialist”. Consequently, based on this similarity of agendas, Bakhtinian concepts can perhaps offer, as has been the case here, a frame of reference against which the modernist work can be measured, according to its more or less radical deployment of Bakhtinian themes: the more moderate debunking of ideology that a proto-modernist play like *Arms and the Man* displays is distinguishable from the extreme subversiveness of themes and method in *Ubu Roi*, and this from the

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<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin defines it as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature”: “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”. in *The Dialogic Imagination*, cit., pp. 84-258, p. 84.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Josipovici, “The Lessons of Modernism”, in his *The Lessons of Modernism and Other Essays*. London: Macmillan, 1977, pp. 109-123. p. 109.

more philosophical questioning through radically innovative means prompted by *Sei Personaggi* or *Enrico IV*; and thus possibly for many other modernist dramas – for example Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, or Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*.

It seems to me that the usefulness of a theoretical frame such as Bakhtin’s can only be affirmed once it is tested through the practical reading of literary works; and if it makes for different, interesting descriptions of those works, then it has served the purpose of a comparative study which – far from having “had its day”<sup>3</sup> – is, I believe, at the core of any literary study: the exploration of the significance and inter-relatedness of a piece of literature in regards to a wider web of significance, the heteroglossia of the cultural, social and ideological spheres, highlighting both the specificity of a culture and its connections with other cultures. With Bakhtin, I see it as an analysis that takes “each element of the artistic structure as a point of refraction of living social forces, as a synthetic crystal whose facets are structured and ground in such a way that they refract specific rays of social evaluation, and refract them at a specific angle.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature. A Critical Introduction*, Oxford (UK) & Cambridge (USA): Blackwell, 1993, p. 161.

<sup>4</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, cit.. Appendix I, p. 276.

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