

# Bakhtin's "Carnavalesque" and Bosman's *Cold Stone Jug*

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## Summary

This paper applies Bakhtin's views on the carnival world-view as a problem of the poetics of genre to Bosman's *Cold Stone Jug*. The book's combination of the serious and the comic testifies not to the author's "idiosyncrasy", but to his adherence to a well established European cultural tradition.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel pas Bakhtin se beskouings oor die wêreld-siening van die karnaval as problematiek van die poëtika van genre op Bosman se *Cold Stone Jug* toe. Die boek se samestelling van die ernstige en die komiese getuig nie van die outeur se "idiosinkrasie" nie, maar wel van 'n getrouheid aan 'n goed gevestigde Europese kulturele tradisie.

Commentators of *Cold Stone Jug* are unanimous that it is difficult to define the genre of this book. Bosman's biographer, Rosenberg, states that "it is a rather difficult book to classify", it is "a novel" with humour that is "callous", a book of "anecdotes", "an autobiographical novel" (Rosenberg 1974: 199–201). She herself identifies the mode of the book as "black humour". Bernard Sachs compares Bosman's humour in *Cold Stone Jug* with that of Heine, where "sadness overlays with laughter" (Sachs 1974: 52). Stephen Gray calls the book "the awkwardly mixed, ferocious fictional confession", and a paragraph later classifies it as "a documentary, presenting a 'sociologised' world-view" (Gray 1986: 25).

Bosman himself did not help to clarify the issue of genre: while calling the book "a chronicle" on its title page, he contradicted this subtitle in the Epilogue, where the book is termed a "love story". What unites these statements is an admission of the presence of both the serious and the humorous in the book, and it is this combination which seems to be at the core of the problem of classification.

In a broad sense, *Cold Stone Jug* belongs to the category of prison notes – a genre in its own right which acquired significance in the post-world war era with the rise of totalitarianism in Eastern Europe. Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* and *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* have become the classics of political prison notes. It is possible to relate the serious pages of Bosman's book to this kind of prison notes through the critique of officialdom and of the social environment, and through its addressing philosophical and legal issues in lyrical monologues (Mondry 1992). However, Bosman estranged himself from this "serious" mode by allying himself, in the Epilogue, with Villon and One-Eyed Raoul. This puts the book into the tradition of adventure, of the picaresque of European literature.

According to Bakhtin, the mixture of the "serious" and the "comic", of the "rhetorical" and "laughter", is an indicator of the "carnavalesque world-

view", where the "carnivalisation of literature" is an important "problem for the historical poetics of genre" (Bakhtin 1979: 124). The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that *Cold Stone Jug* contains elements of "the carnivalesque world-view", both as an element of poetics and as an integral part of the European cultural tradition. The latter will help to rid Bosman's writing of one of the most popular labels it carries – that of "idiosyncratic".

Bakhtin develops his ideas of the carnival in literature in his book on the poetics of Dostoevsky's novels, *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo* (1979). Here, he maintains that Dostoevsky introduced a new kind of novel, a polyphonic novel with the poetics of dialogism. It is thanks to this dialogism and the equality of the heroes' voices that Dostoevsky's novels do not offer a single correct opinion. Dialogism helps avoid the single-purpose moralising of the novel. The carnivalesque is one such mode of poetics and world-view which does not permit dogmatism and rhetoric to entrench a set opinion, since in the carnival there is nothing permanent, everything changes, old forms of life give birth to new. Laughter has the role of a catalyst for the continuous change of forms, at times laughter may be "reduced" (*redutsirovannyyi smekh*), its voice becoming weaker, but its function remains unchanged – to counterbalance the serious and the official, the dogmatic and the rhetorical.

It is significant that in his chapter on the carnivalesque, Bakhtin devotes a footnote to prison notes – Dostoevsky's *Zapiski iz mertvogo doma* (*Notes from the House of the Dead*) (1979: 201). Bakhtin observes that prison, or *katorga* (penal colony), is itself a place close to the carnival as it is a meeting place of persons of different social strata, who would not have met under more normal circumstances.

The autobiographical narrator in *Cold Stone Jug* calls himself "a lonely eagle", he notes that by the nature of his crime he is isolated from the rest of the convicts. A wall is erected between him and the rest of the prisoners already on the first day, as we learn in the Preamble. Nobody talks to him on learning of his crime, "the bunch of prisoners in the cell, the whole dozen of them, moved right across to the other side, to the corner that was furthest away from me" (1984: 8). The situation, however, changes sharply after the reprieve. This change is symbolised in the way the warden treats the narrator by applying an inexhaustible number of swear words indicated in the text by "-" signs. The use of foul language Bakhtin regards as a necessary "accessory" of the *plushchadnyi* (street) carnival. Used extensively by Rabelais, it serves the function of turning the frightening into the non-frightening. This scene in its very essence – as a symbol of conquest of life over death – is presented in a carnivalesque mode by the nature of the miraculous metamorphosis. The impossible has been made possible, the result of the return to life being symbolised by turning the total isolation of the condemned man, who as long as he belonged to the world of the dead was treated with respect by warders, into an ordinary man. The mode of "familiarity" – another "accessory" of the carnival – is present as a result of the metamorphosis: "You are a bleeding hard-labour ---- convict now" . . . See? And we don't want none of your ---- sanguinary cheek here. You broke your ---- mother's heart and we'll break your ---- heart" (p. 32). This foul and profane

language is to signify victory of life over death: "You're not a blooming condemn' cell favourite no longer. You'll be ---- sorry it wasn't the hangman by the time we finished with you" (p. 52).

The pairing, or duality (*parnost'*) (Bakhtin 1979: 189) of images like life and death – another attribute of carnival atmosphere – with the duality of the tragic and the comic, where duality is to signify ambiguity, is represented in *Cold Stone Jug* by the fact that there are two condemned men in the condemned cell. One is the narrator, the other is Stoffels; one is to be executed, the other to be reprieved. While in the condemned cell the narrator and Stoffels make a pastime out of mocking the warder. It is significant that the narrator gives the warder the nickname Clown. The warder is depicted as extraordinarily stupid – "he had a very simple heart" (p. 18). He is, in fact, the archetypal Fool of European folklore. Although a fool, he tells the two men stories of the outside world that "sounded like the tread of kings" (p. 17). The Fool who, by the power of storytelling and spinning lies can be taken for a king, and the presence of a *porog* (threshold) between the outside world and the prison cell, which will need a miracle to be crossed, are among the most stable motifs of the European folk culture embodied in the carnivalesque world-view.

The inversion of roles, where the victim becomes a master, is another important theme of the carnival. The two convicts make Clown dance, and while he, in his simple-mindedness, believes that he dances well, the condemned men "laugh uproariously". The result of this inversion of roles leads to the birth of a new unity – of the three men "joined in laughter", where one laughs at himself, while the other two are "roaring louder than ever" (p. 19).

It is significant that in the chapters proceeding the reprieve, inversion results in a representative of officialdom being ridiculed for the very thing for which after the reprieve, when the death is conquered, the self-ridiculing is done. This time, appearance and clothing as "carnival accessories" are ridiculed.

Before the reprieve it was "the Clown [who] certainly cut a ridiculous figure, with shapeless pieces of feet leaking out of his socks" (p. 20). After the reprieve the roles are inverted – this time the convicts become the fools, their appearances are ridiculed and their clothes are now described in a theatralised fashion: "the average convict is less good-looking than the average healthy-minded citizen who is too clever to manifest his criminal tendencies". "Then, you just got to think how the convict is dressed. Those battered, shapeless boots; those ridiculous knee-breeches surmounting legs encased in black stockings variegated with horizontal red stripes; . . . and that comical-looking white canvas ticket-pocket, hanging on your chest like a burlesque decoration" (p. 71). To complete the picture of the archetypal Fool of European folklore, is the preference for the colour red, expressed in the Russian saying "*Durak i krasnomu rad*" ("A fool is quite happy with the red colour"). An old Afrikaans saying "'n Oulap se rooi maak mooi" permits a small dose of red as a positive, beautifying component. Bosman makes his convicts wear "red spotted handkerchiefs" thus bringing an element of ambiguity into the

positive – negative poles of the official judgment. The reversal of roles, of the former inversion, signifies the ambiguity of the carnivalesque world-view where laughter does not destroy the components of the serious or even the tragic: once punishment by death has been avoided the serious manifests itself in self-parody.

Before death was distanced, however, it had to be ridiculed. In *Cold Stone Jug* this manifests itself in what Bakhtin calls a “carnavalesque anatomy” (1979: 189). Listing separated body parts is “a typical comical device of the carnival literature of the Renaissance” and was extensively used by Rabelais and Cervantes (p. 189). It is significant that Bosman uses this device in the description of Stoffels’s execution. Serious and comical here are intertwined with the duality motif: in the logics of the carnival only one of the two condemned men is executed. The fact that Stoffels is the first one to be hanged allows Bosman to “celebrate” his own rebirth through applying “carnavalesque anatomy”. Theatralisation of the execution is achieved through such descriptions as “actors in this early morning drama” (Bosman 1984: 30) who know their “part tolerably well” (p.30). Stoffels’s body is being “partitioned” into the “voice” which does not come “out of his throat”, but rather “out of his belly”. Bosman admits that he was not shocked by Stoffels’s death so much, as during their imprisonment in the condemned cell he did not feel “the breath of life” in Stoffels’s “lungs” and “veins” (p. 31). Bosman did not feel “breath of life” in Stoffels because of the two only one can have this “breath of life” – the other can carry “rot”, “unpleasant odour” (p. 16), which are the attributes of death.

“Stench” is an important motif of the “carnival” mode, and is linked to the profanation of cemeteries and funerals. Bakhtin names these the “symbols of the carnival which contain elements of naturalism” through which a “familiar” treatment of death is achieved (1979: 160). Bosman has employed all these aspects in the book. In *Cold Stone Jug* there is a description of the mortuary and of the “bone-yard”, which abounds in descriptions of varieties of “smells”: “the stench of death constantly overhangs the small area between the mortuary-gate and the gallows tower” (p. 58), “I don’t know what has put that stink there” (p. 58). Bosman admits that it could be either “the stink of corpses” or “the smell of fear”, although he notes that there is no difference between the two, “for mass-fear stinks just like death, the stink of carrion” (p. 59), and is not different from the “odour of decaying bones” from the “bone-yard” (p. 59). It is significant that Bosman makes a sign of the cross every time he passes the mortuary, but he does it not entirely religiously. Once more the serious and the comical are associated with the profane, and ambiguity – the very essence of the carnivalesque world-view – is achieved as a result.

Bosman started making the sign of the cross when passing the mortuary after he saw an Irishman crossing himself at the gates of the mortuary. And he “imitated his actions” (p. 58). Imitation of actions resulted in Bosman crossing himself four times a day. This ritual is clearly theatralised, the archetypal piety of Catholicism is parodied in a figure of an Irishman whose name is not given – all of which contributes to a parodying mode through

ambiguity of images. Some twenty pages later Bosman reaffirms this ambiguity in the second description of him crossing himself in front of the mortuary: "And from the force of habit I again made the sign of the cross, religiously, when our gang marched through the mortuary gate" (p. 75). Gang and mortuary, out of habituality and religiosity – all these contrasting pairs bring the *parnost'* (duality) mode through which the ambiguity of the carnival atmosphere is realised.

The culmination of the carnival world-view in *Cold Stone Jug* takes place in the subchapter devoted to the description of the celebration of Mother's Day in prison. Mother's Day is described as a holiday of the Dutch Reformed Church and it takes place on the first Sunday the narrator spends in the prison. A special significance of the episode is marked by its compositional role: it opens the first episode in chapter one and it follows immediately on the confessional lines of the author-narrator at the conclusion of the preamble. The cardinal Bakhtinian principles of the carnival are reflected in this description.

During the day service "to honour the mothers of the country", paper labels were passed around the convicts, significantly of two colours – green and purple – which convicts were asked to attach to their jackets. Green labels were meant for those whose mothers were still alive, purple for those whose mothers were dead. The narrator explains that no pins were provided, but the paper labels were gummed. They were stuck on the jackets "with spit". The carnivalesque mode of the "paired" colours, of the profane spitting on the sacred labels, is further reinforced by the convicts' inability to understand the instructions: most convicts ended up with strips of both green and purple attached to their jackets. This, however, did not effect the sentimental mood of the service. All the convicts were moved to tears by the Predikant's speech. The coexistence of laughter and tears, of life and death, brings in the most important ambiguity of the carnival world-view through its relation to birth. It is significant that in the text, "mother's day" is not written with capital letters, as if to reinforce the moment of parody and the profane: birth – of which green is a symbol – is followed in line by death – the purple strip, which then, in turn, is followed by a green label, which is followed once more by purple. The process has no definite end, which is the very essence of the carnival, which epitomises continuity, change and transformation through metamorphosis of poles. Bakhtin stresses that in the "living carnival images, death herself [is] pregnant and give[s] birth, but a birth-giving mother's bosom turns out to be a grave" (1979: 191).

Bosman further reinforces the carnivalesque mode by alluding to erotic thoughts during the ceremony. This is introduced through once more the notion of *porog*, a threshold between the prison and the outside world: "They are having mothers' day outside, also", one convict would say to another" (Bosman 1984: 9). The notion of "outside" in turn makes the narrator think of people outside as "men as well as women", and "the enchanting sound of the word women" reminds him that they are "wearing little labels like these on their breasts". The convicts' labels are attached on their chests, women's labels are worn on breasts. The duality carries the same symbolism as the

green and purple labels – feeding women carry labels, some of which are purple – that of birth and death, which through the carnival laughter are put together and estranged from their logical polarity.

The very mixture of the serious and the comical, which the book's commentators have taken for a major puzzle in their attempts to classify its genre, for Bakhtin serves as a sign of belonging to a cultural tradition with its own historical poetics, within which writers of various trends and modes find common unity (*obshchnost'*). Once the carnivalesque mode penetrates the structure of a genre of a particular work, it can be used in different modes: romanticism, enlightened realism, critical realism, or the pure adventure story (1979: 186). Bakhtin stresses that the problem of the carnivalesque should not be regarded as a question of influence, but rather as a sign of sharing a common poetics and a common tradition of genre. The presence of the carnivalesque in *Cold Stone Jug* does not put into contradiction what without this mode would have been regarded as a contradiction – the subtitle of the book as “a chronicle” and its burlesque epilogue. In the epilogue Bosman puts together Villon and One-Eyed Raoul, he calls forth the shadows of the underworld, and holds a conversation with Villon – one of the writer-convicts with whom he “feels a queer sort of spiritual intimacy” (p. 220). Here once more the title of the book – a slang expression used by the British underworld for jail – is paired with the underworld in the eschatological sense. Ambiguity here results in a blurring of the borders between life and death, between the criminal and the legal, between officialdom and freedom – all of which, being attributes of the carnival, do not allow dogmaticism to take over in life (Bakhtin 1979: 186).

Bosman further learns from Villon that One-Eyed Raoul, with whom Villon served his sentence, treated him “as a rat”. The ambiguity in this allegorical epilogue regarding eternal questions of the relationships between art and life, of the power of the living over the dead and vice versa, shows that Bosman is linked to the cultural tradition of the European carnival, and that elements of his “black humour” are not to be explained exclusively by the influence of Allan Edgar Poe and Baudelaire, as is commonly maintained, but through *obshchnost'* – the communality of genres within the poetics of the carnival.

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