

Carnival and Intertext: Humour in *What the Crow Said* and *The Studhorse Man*

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Mikhail Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World*, sets forth a theory of Rabelaisian humour that takes as its basis three manifestations of the "folk culture humor"¹ of the Middle Ages. For Bakhtin, carnival laughter is,

first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated "comic" event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. (11)

Bakhtin goes on to say that "it is characteristic for the familiar speech of the marketplace to use abusive language, insulting words or expressions, some of them quite lengthy and complex" (16). Furthermore, he suggests, carnival speech emphasizes defecation, copulation, conception, and birth—functions of the "lower body stratum" (21).

Robert Kroetsch, who has expressed critical interest in Bakhtin's work, particularly in his essay "Carnival and Violence: A Meditation,"² uses Bakhtinian humour overtly in *What the Crow Said* and *The Studhorse Man*. Kroetsch's humour, like that defined by Bakhtin, is ambivalent, mocking, and deriding even while it is triumphant and gay, and it denies and buries even as it asserts and revives. It is also degrading and abusive, filled with insulting words that instill laughter through its frequent references to the "lower body stratum." If we examine these two novels in light of Kroetsch's comment that the "promise of carnivalesque is a promise of renewal by destruction" (118), and that

¹ Trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1965) 12.

² *Open Letter* 8 (1983): 111-12.

"many of our best novels . . . assert the primacy of the act of speech over writing,"³ we can see how Kroetsch's humour works.

Another theorist through whom we can profitably examine Kroetsch's humour and concern with oral language is Roland Barthes. In "The Theory of the Text," Barthes explains:

The text redistributes language. . . . One of the paths of this deconstruction-reconstruction is to permute texts, scraps of texts that have existed or exist around and finally within the text being considered: any text is an intertext; other texts are present in it, at varying levels, in more or less recognisable forms: the texts of the previous and surrounding culture. Any text is a new tissue of past citations. . . . The intertext is a general field of anonymous formulae whose origin can scarcely ever be located.⁴

In *What the Crow Said* and *The Studhorse Man*, the intertext traces a connection, through its humour based on the "lower body stratum," back to Swift, Rabelais, Chaucer, Juvenal, Aristophanes, and even Homer. Barthes comments on the complexity of intertext by stating that text "is a tissue, something woven":

But whereas criticism . . . hitherto unanimously placed the emphasis on the finished "fabric" (the text being a "veil" behind the truth, the real message, in a word the "meaning" had to be sought), the current theory of the text turns away from the text as veil and tries to perceive the fabric in its texture, in the interlacing of codes, formulae and signifiers, in the midst of which the subject places himself and is undone, like a spider that comes to dissolve itself into its own web. (39)

Intertext is part of all texts, of course, and tracing the lines of the web is an essential critical act. But equally important is the unravelling of that web. To strip away the layers of intertext—even though, in one sense, such stripping simply creates new intertext and solves nothing at all—is to reach towards the origins of that text. If we treat the critical unravelling of the intertext as an act analogous to a Foucaultian archaeological dig (Kroetsch has both acknowledged and individualized Foucault's archaeological theories in "On Being an Alberta Writer" and

³ "On Being an Alberta Writer," *Open Letter* 5 (1983): 69.

⁴ *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge, 1981) 39.

"Beyond Nationalism: A Prologue"), we can understand this search for origins perhaps a little better. At the basis of both activities is a desire to know where things come from; and, even though Derrida and Foucault, among others, have denied the validity of a search for origins, I suggest that the desire still exists. What Kroetsch seems to be doing, throughout his writing, is playing the denial camp against the desire camp, setting Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault against George Steiner, Mircea Eliade, and Frank Kermode. He continues the search for origins—that is, he demands that we attempt to unravel the intertext—all the while denying that a total unravelling is even possible.

Kroetsch himself links carnival and intertext (albeit the latter only indirectly) in "Carnival and Violence: A Meditation." The link is Julia Kristeva. Kristeva is, Kroetsch notes, "one of the most important interpreters of Bakhtin" (114), and she is also, as demonstrated by her work in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, one of the most important theorists of intertextuality. Another of Kristeva's interests is violence; thus she is an appropriate reference point for a second theme of Kroetsch's essay. I have not focused my paper on the violence of the carnivalesque, however, for two reasons: first the subject of violence in Kroetsch's work is significant enough to merit a study of its own; second, Kroetsch himself suggests that violence is essential to the carnivalesque, but still only a part of it. When he states, "The promise of the carnivalesque is a promise of renewal by destruction" (118), furthermore, he shows violence as one side of carnival; my essay assigns violence a similar role by subordinating it to degradation and condemnation.

Peter Thomas, in *Robert Kroetsch*, calls *What the Crow Said* a "comedy of silence."⁵ By doing so, he acknowledges both the novel's comic elements and its attempt to explore George Steiner's "shores of silence." He also reflects the interest Kroetsch has displayed in silence, in such articles as "Effing the Ineffable" and "The Canadian Writer and the American Literary Tradition."⁶ But Thomas reaches two conclusions about the work that seem only partly correct. First, he states that "silence is what the crow said" (103); second, he writes that "Liebhaber's humiliation and the abundance of shit in the novel are reductive in a way that is new in Kroetsch's fiction; . . . to bring the quest for love down to . . . a matter of shit and silence makes enormous demands upon the [novel's] aesthetic virtues" (115). Silence is

⁵ (Vancouver: Douglas, 1980) 97.

⁶ Robert Kroetsch, "Effing the Ineffable," *Freelance* 8 (1976): 23, and "The Canadian Writer and the American Literary Tradition," *English Quarterly* 4 (1971): 11.

partially what the crow says—indeed what the crow ends with—but he says a great deal else. In particular, he says “asshole,” his favourite denunciation of most of the main characters. This spoken word, “asshole,” represents humour that links humiliation, shit, and, because the crow later shuts up, silence. In a similar manner, the use of dysphemisms for “penis” in *The Studhorse Man* results in an oral humour about procreation. Kroetsch uses dysphemisms for the procreative and excretive parts of the body, I argue, to produce a humour that forces us to attempt to unravel the intertext of each novel. Where that unravelling seems to lead, if we examine the novels against the theories of both Bakhtin and Barthes, is towards a Kroetschian language that firmly links Barthesian intertext with Bakhtinian carnivalesque.

Immediately apparent in the direct speech of the characters in *What the Crow Said* is the predominance of faeces. But scatology itself is less important to the novel than is the body part through which faeces exits. “Asshole” is a frequent term in *What the Crow Said*; in fact, it is the most common term of Bakhtinian degradation that the black crow uses. The crow’s very first words reflect the novel’s degrading humour:

“Liebhaber,” the crow said. It had never spoken before that moment, had hardly bothered to say caw. “Liebhaber, you don’t know your ass from your elbow. You are a ‘dumbkopf’ beyond my worst expectations. . . . Why don’t you go out to one of Vera’s bee yards, take off your right boot, hook your dirty big toe onto the trigger of a borrowed shotgun, and hope for the best?”⁷

Afterwards, during the schmier game, the crow calls Liebhaber “asshole” on three consecutive plays. When the game finally ends, he presents his final harangue. “Well, Lieb,” he says, “. . . I’ve got to hand it to you. You are finally a total asshole.”

“Total asshole,” in fact, becomes the crow’s main expression of denunciation; he applies it to Liebhaber and to most of the other men. When combined with the very frequent references to faeces in the novel, “asshole” becomes more than simply humorous. It becomes prophetic, especially since Liebhaber, as he clings to the overturned boat later in the book, in fact *becomes* a total asshole:

His voice was failing him. He realized his voice was gone blank. His pleading went silent from his

⁷ Robert Kroetsch, *What the Crow Said* (Markham: Paperjacks, 1979) 65.

lips. He heard the skittering of the bird's toes on the top of his skull. He'd been there forever. He wanted to die.

Liebhaber's right foot touched the river bottom. The humiliation melted his arms. He shat himself. At that moment, against the constricting cold of the spring runoff, his sphincter opened; he felt the warm shit ooze softly into his underwear.

Liebhaber let go of the wooden rib, he dived a foot and a half into the muddy water, he surfaced. (164-65)

Peter Thomas claims that this scene is inhumane, and he is probably quite right. But, inhumane or not, it is terribly funny. It plays on humiliation, to be sure, but the humiliation is near the end of a novel that almost continually uses terms emphasizing humiliation and degradation. What is significant is that Liebhaber defecates, and this is his most important act in the book. He has fulfilled the crow's earlier metonymic expression by becoming totally asshole, in that we now identify him not through his personality, but rather through his faeces and the anus through which they have emerged.

In *The Studhorse Man*, we see a similar process at work. Here, too, the oral humour within the characters' speeches provides an understanding of the novel's directions. The main source of humour here, though, is the wealth of dysphemisms in the English language for "penis," the body part that dominates *The Studhorse Man*. In one scene, Hazard Lepage and a truck driver are having a shouting match on a bridge:

A truck driver had the courtesy to stop while Hazard tried to calm all his fine collection of horses; they responded by pulling the milkwagon crosswise on the road. The truck driver responded by yelling at Hazard, "Get that bloody milkwagon out of the way, you little peckerhead."

"You hangnail pecker yourself," Hazard replied. . . . Get that roaring truck out of the bloody way and I'll get out of the way myself."

The driver . . . turned off his engine. "Don't ekerpa me, you pandering redcoat pecker."

By this time an appreciative audience . . . had begun to collect; little did they realize the trucker was offending the very core of Hazard's being.

"You tool," Hazard said. "You faltering apparatus."

"You whang and rod and pud," the trucker replied. . . .

Hazard saw his chance to drive away but missed it in order to shout, "You dong. . . . You drippy dong. You dick. . . . You Johnny and jock."

The trucker in his excitement was beginning to stutter. "You diddly dink. You d-- you d-- you dink. You dick. . . . You dofunny copper." . . .

"I'm no damned copper," Hazard shouted. . . . "Dohicky to you." . . .

"You shlongs," another trucker yelled.⁸

Even as the anus operates as the central symbol in *What the Crow Said*, not for what it is but for what comes out of it, so the penis dominates *The Studhorse Man*, again for what issues from it rather than for what it is. As the narrator tells us, to insult the penis is indeed to offend—in Bakhtin's terms, to degrade—"the very core of Hazard's being," since Hazard's quest depends on the success of both his penis and his horse's.

The humour surrounding the penis in *The Studhorse Man* assumes an especial importance during hazard's resurrection from the dead. Hazard has, it seems, died in the priest's house, and has been taken to the icehouse. Demeter Proudfoot arranges for the undertaker, then is shocked to find that the death has caused, not solemnity, but rather a spirit of joking. This joking is about the penis:

To make matters worse, I found a number of people speculating about the cause and implications of the recent tragedy—and, I confess with embarrassment, even joking about it.

"This undertaker," a farmer from St. Leo was saying, "he was preparing a body when he noticed the fellow had the biggest whang he had ever laid eyes on. He called in a friend who was just then doing a little work in the next room. 'Look at this,' he says to his friend. 'Did you ever see one like this?' 'I've got one just like it,' the friend says. 'The hell you have. That big?' the undertaker says. 'No,' the friend says. 'That dead.'"

The laughter was enormous; it rattled and smashed at my eardrums. Only the obligation to go on wiping tables kept me from passing out. "I'll bet Mrs. Laporte could have raised it,"

⁸ Robert Kroetsch, *The Studhorse Man* (Markham: Paperjacks, 1979) 42-43.

someone added, and got a few more lascivious laughs. (149)

This laughter has, as its basis, Bakhtin's notion of degradation. Emphasizing the "lower body stratum," in this case the penis (expressed again dysphemistically as "whang"), and then linking the penis to both sex and death, the men's laughter is, in Bakhtin's terms, carnivalesque. It is even possible to suggest that, in their easy acceptance of death and their refusal to be either solemn or decent, the townsfolk fulfill Bakhtin's condition that carnival humour affirms even while it degrades. Demeter does not understand such a notion, but Hazard's subsequent resurrection suggests the possibility anew.

Hazard's resurrection, which follows this scene of joking, is important to the novel in several respects. First, as Demeter explains, it marks the beginning of the story's "end" (132). Second, it signals the transfer of the role of studhorse man from Hazard to Demeter, and thus it represents the point at which the novel eschews biography in favour of autobiography. Third, the scene marks a shift in the importance of the penis symbol itself: here it becomes a mythic symbol, providing the means by which the myth of the death of Socrates can be extended to represent the rebirth of Hazard Lepage.⁹ And the account of the resurrection, like most of the other penis-associations in the novel, relies on humour.

Martha Proudfoot arrives at the icehouse and spends some time alone with her dead fiancé. Demeter peeks in and relates what transpires:

Hazard, let me recapitulate, beneath the blanket, beneath the coat I had so lovingly laid upon his torso, was stark naked. Martha, in her disbelief that her beloved must be dead, put first a hand upon his bare foot (one thinks of the death of Socrates). It was, apparently, warmer than she had anticipated, though nevertheless fearfully cold in the room full of sawdust and buried ice. Thus did she in succession put her hand upon his anklebone, his shinbone, his knee.

The groping hand was to grope on, for what she would ignore in life, Martha could not ignore in death. Old Blue was next in line in that sequence. So regal and so tall and brave there in the long twilight, she touched first a finger to the cold nose of the mystery, then a second finger to

⁹ Neil Randall, *The Novels of Robert Kroetsch: Explorations in Mythmaking*, unpublished MA thesis, University of Waterloo, 1981, 39f.

the shrivelled fact, then a comforting hand. Superstition would have it that in death there is one final standing-to, and Martha, at this stirring, grieved all the more. . . .

The dead man opened his eyes to the grip of four fingers and a thumb, to a quick impatience that might erase the hanging gloom. Martha believed him dead; the dead man said, "Hurry."
(152-54)

This passage, like much of *The Studhorse Man*, is humorous because of its emphasis on the penis. Unlike the verbal battle between Hazard and the truck driver, however, the humour in this passage is the result of euphemism rather than dysphemism. The penis becomes "Old Blue," a "mystery," even "that sturdy pillar of the night." It becomes "so regal and so tall and so brave," and the erection becomes a "standing-to." After this scene, when Demeter takes the quest for himself, the oral humour of the carnival is essentially gone. It cannot be sustained, it seems, because Demeter has no sense of the dual role—simultaneous affirmation and denial—of degrading, indecent humour.

In these two novels, the main subjects of humour—anus and penis—are important not only in a thematic or symbolic sense, but also because they force intertextual readings. Specifically, we must relate Kroetsch's use of "asshole" and the many forms of "penis" to all literary and oral uses of the words. Kroetsch uses the terms as elements in what Barthes calls the "sociality" of language: "the whole of language, anterior or contemporary, comes to the text, not following the path of a discoverable filiation or a willed imitation, but that of a dissemination" (Barthes 39). For Kroetsch, the most social language is oral language. "What I was tuning in on in . . . *What the Crow Said*," he says in *Labyrinths of Voice*, "was the kind of self-creation that goes on orally," a point he also makes in "The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues."¹⁰ He goes on in the Neuman interview to discuss anecdote, the oral form that, for him, has gained new significance. The anecdote is very frequently funny, as, in fact, is much oral language: people converse not only with stories but with jokes, and anecdotes often take the form of both jokes and denunciations. The anecdote and the denunciation, expressed orally and humorously, dominate both novels and recall again Bakhtin's carnivalesque.

¹⁰ Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, *Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch* (Edmonton: NeWest P, 1982) 39. And Robert Kroetsch, "The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues," *Open Letter* 5 (1983): 30.

The incident in *What the Crow Said* that occupies its critical middle third is the schmier game. From an innocent before-dinner card game involving three players, it quickly becomes an undertaking of great length and consequence. The game is filled with characteristics of the carnivalesque, featuring the novel's most consistently degrading tone and language. The black crow constantly berates the players for their play or their participation, and it is during the schmier game that the crow most often uses the term "asshole." He is the first to sense "the desperate nature of the playing," the first to understand that the men are, like Liebhaber under the boat, "scared shitless" (85). But with the realization that a man's life is at stake, the fear becomes a determination to keep the condemned man alive.

At this point, the game's purpose shifts to reflect an important element of Bakhtin's notion of carnival: the simultaneous affirmation and denial of life itself. Even though *What the Crow Said* seems reductive in its disrespect for its characters (hence for life itself), the schmier game, because it becomes a struggle for the preservation of a man's life, finally affirms life. Like the resurrection scene in *The Studhorse Man*, the schmier game insists that love, and hence life, can indeed conquer death, or at least can coexist with death. And this, as Bakhtin insists, is the essence of carnival, that two such seemingly contradictory notions can, indeed must, be part of celebration. Furthermore, and again congruent with Bakhtin, the saving of Hazard's life in *The Studhorse Man* and of Jerry Lapanne's in *What the Crow Said* are both treated humorously, and in both cases the humour is not the sarcastic wit of either Demeter Proudfoot or the black crow, but rather a humour that links the ludicrousness of the situation to the morality of the action, a humour that affirms life in the presence of death.

In another sense, too, we can understand the schmier game in Bakhtin's terms. The game centres around the idea of feast. Contextually, the game begins at Tiddy Lang's dinner table, immediately before a Sunday dinner, and it ends, once again at Tiddy's, as she promises the remaining players a feast-like meal should they stop playing:

The table was set. Tiddy had beaten the men to the house, driving around by the road. Tiddy's daughters had seen the men coming up the valley: they had sliced long strips off a slab of smoked bacon. They were frying eggs and pancakes. It was Rose, not Vera, who broke the honey-filled combs into a dish; it was Anna Marie who toasted thick slices of homemade bread in a wire rack on top of the stove. Old Lady Lang was

pouring coffee from the huge pot that was used during threshing time. She poured the rich, steaming coffee into cups set in a row beside the cream pitcher; the aroma seemed to lift the frost from the frozen cheeks of the gasping and puffing men. (128)

To the undernourished, near-famished men, this spread is, of course, a feast. The coffee aroma lifting the frost from their cheeks is itself suggestive of a life-giving action, and the meal as a whole is described very sumptuously.

The meal takes on special significance when we consider Bakhtin's comments on the importance of medieval feasts:

The feast is always essentially related to time, either to the recurrence of an event in the natural (cosmic) cycle, or to biological or historical timeliness. Moreover, through all the stages of historic development feasts were linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man. Moments of death and revival, or change and renewal always led to a festive perception of the world. (9)

Each of Tiddy's feasts, the dinner before the game and the one following it, mark such a moment of crisis, a "breaking point" in the society of *What the Crow Said*. The schmier game's beginning and end mark changes in the characters' lives and in the structure of the novel itself: the novel has three parts, with the schmier game centring the endless winter and the later War Against the Sky. Thus, the opening feast (which is never partaken of, but which is present nonetheless) marks the dissolution of order, while the closing feast celebrates a return to that order. Inside the schmier game, moreover, is another feast, the wedding of Cathy Lang and Joe Lightning, the event responsible for the game's moving to the basement of the church. Significantly, the game takes place at a table in the church's basement, with twelve men, including a priest and a hangman, and a bottle of wine. It thus not only reflects an absurd wedding celebration (itself a "feast of becoming, change and renewal"), but also alludes strongly to the Last Supper, with its own emphasis on crisis and change, where Christ, like the schmier players, played to lose so that lives could be saved.

Finally, the game begins, includes, and ends with Bakhtinian carnival humour. The narrator tells us, "That was the cause of the schmier game—the inadequacy of truth" (76), an inadequacy that is the direct result of Gladys Lang's unnatural pregnancy. The characters are trying to establish the truth about the

child's father, when in fact she was impregnated by "everybody" (75) at the hockey game. The pregnancy itself is humorous because it is ludicrous, and humour surrounding pregnancy is carnivalesque. More importantly, though, the black crow's and Liebhaber's most obviously carnivalesque speeches immediately follow the schmier game, at Tiddy's feast:

The black crow watched Liebhaber pull off the rags that had once been a camel-pile coat. "Well, Lieb," it said, "I've got to hand it to you. You are finally a total asshole."

"Listen, crow, go fuck yourself with a wire brush," Liebhaber said; that same Liebhaber who had defended the black crow against its critics. Liebhaber, for the first time in 151 days, lost complete control of his temper. "Crow," he went on, "you are a little turd. A teeny-weeny turd. You are a prick with ears."

"Gentlemen," the crow said, ignoring the insults, "I want to welcome you back. We missed your filthy mouths and your slovenly behavior. We missed your abrasive laziness and your dirt and your stink. May you all die abnormal deaths."

JG, locked up in the parlor, hearing the men return, was excited beyond all reason; but he couldn't speak a sound. He farted loudly out of pure joy. (128-29)

The crow has emphasized anus, filth, abrasiveness, and stink, all in insulting and degrading terms, while Liebhaber has responded in kind with dysphemisms for faeces and the penis. But despite the Bakhtinian degradation of their exchange, it is JG who provides the link to carnival humour: he farts, out of pure joy, and farting and pure joy are carnivalesque in their merger of "the lower body stratum" with the joy of life itself. The humour, then, while retaining its emphasis on degradation, especially on the anus and on faeces, is interpreted through the silent child as being an affirmation of life.

The Studhorse Man's similar feast is the wedding of Tiberius Torbay Proudfoot and Catherine Melnyk. The bridegroom's father sets the feast in motion by suggesting, "even if our joy cannot equal the bridegroom's, at least we can celebrate in our own way" (101), and Demeter watches Hazard begin to devour the food:

But first we must eat. The speeches and toasts and applause were over. Uncle Tad had completed the awarding of his compliments and insults. Before us, for each of six persons, stood a bottle of

whisky and a bowl or dish or plate of each kind of food.

In the midst of all that extravagance I could only nibble at a shimmering jellied salad in one corner of my heaped plate. Meanwhile, by subtly straining and shifting, I was able to watch Hazard as he helped himself to tender fried chicken and more turkey, to thick slices of roast beef. I saw him ask about and then try the *holubci*—the steaming cabbage rolls. He took from the woman who was about to serve him the plate of cheese and potato dumplings with sour cream—*pyrohy*, I believe, is the name. He could not resist the sizzling steaks, the hamburgers smothered in onions, the sweet and sour, the variety of cold meats. . . . Dill pickles, sweet pickles, sour pickles, relish, tossed salad, cole slaw, johnny bread, biscuits and buns—no dish could pass Hazard's plate without being seized up and attacked. The bowls and platters seemed to skim back and forth along the tables, yet women began to refill them before they were empty. Someone had already tapped one of the six fat kegs that lay on trestles in a row by the door; waiters came with pitchers of beer and foam even while the guests tried to choose among varieties of cookies and cakes, date squares and brownies, pies and tarts and cheeses and candies and nuts and fruits. (101-02)

This feast marks, significantly enough, Demeter's "first glimpse of Hazard Lepage" (100). In a novel that overtly stresses and parodies the difficulties of constructing biography, the first spark of the biographer's interest is nothing less than a moment of origins. Since the biographer seeks order, as Demeter tells us throughout *The Studhorse Man*, a biography's origin is not the beginning of the subject's life. In fact, Demeter's obsession for autobiography rather than biography, combined with Kroetsch's insistence that the biographical act (like literary form itself) is essentially futile, conspires to place this moment of origins near the middle of the novel instead of the beginning. And the formality is further disrupted by the scene's carnivalesque setting.

Demeter, the orderer, is in the wedding party. His role is formal, responsible, and serious. Dressed "in black trousers and a white jacket complete with a carnation" (100), he performs his function automatically and unmemorably. Hazard, by contrast, does not bother "to wait for the prayers and toasts and greeting," the instruments of formality. Instead, he tears at "a leg of turkey . . . like a starved animal, all the while ignoring a kind lady who offer[s] him a glass of water and a napkin" (100). As he

seems to do throughout the composition of his biography, Demeter immediately loses Hazard, and, when he finds him again, his subject is engaged in behaviour that once more sets him squarely in carnivalesque:

I found Hazard—I could not resist looking for him—with a group of men around the beer kegs. They were all of them cracking lewd jokes, now and then breaking into a jig, each man alone. Eugene Utter especially was cutting up; with a mug of beer in each hand he concluded a jig by kicking high over Hazard's head.

"Like the fellow said," Utter told his circle of admirers, "I was just crazy to get married, but I didn't know it until after." The crowd of men guffawed in appreciation. "Ah yes," Utter went on. "Like my old man always told me—if a man gets married a second time, he didn't deserve to lose his first wife." A waiter broke into our circle of laughing men with a pitcher of beer. Glasses were raised in various toasts.

"What's the fastest two-handed game in the world?" someone wanted to know. (104)

"I find such talk offensive," Demeter concludes. By saying this, he further contrasts his and Hazard's sensibilities. Demeter has represented the formal aspect of the wedding, while Hazard, again in a collocation with sexual humour, has represented the carnivalesque. This dichotomy is itself formalized with the concept of the charivari, a custom that, by its nature, renders the sex act an object of humour. Demeter, predictably, is part of the scheme to prevent this carnivalesque custom.

Early in *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin differentiates official feast from carnivalesque celebration:

[T]he official feasts of the Middle Ages, whether ecclesiastic, feudal, or sponsored by the state, did not lead the people out of the existing world order and created no second life. On the contrary, they sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it. . . . Unlike the earlier and purer feast, the official feast asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions. . . . This is why the tone of the official feast was monolithically serious and why the element of laughter was alien to it. The true nature of human festivity was betrayed and distorted. . . .

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation

from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. (10)

The feast of marriage in Western culture is one of Bakhtin's official feasts, one that has survived from the Middle Ages. As a cultural institution, a wedding does indeed assert "all that is stable, unchanging, perennial" (divorce statistics are never cited in wedding speeches). But the post-wedding celebrations, including the wedding feast, allow the formal celebration to flirt with carnival. It offers one of the places where formal and carnival meet, a place where, in *The Studhorse Man*, a biographer may begin ordering an insistently disordered life.

According to Bakhtin, carnival humour links degradation with affirmation. It does this by employing an oral humour, one that emphasizes defecation, procreation, and the sequences of birth and death. *What the Crow Said* and *The Studhorse Man* link us intertextually to Bakhtinian carnival, since Kroetsch's humour, in its degradatory use of anus and penis, hence defecation and procreation, is essentially carnivalesque. Furthermore, according to Barthes, intertext points the way to the "sociality" of language—surely a primary function of language—just as Bakhtin shows us the "sociality" of the oral humour of the carnival. Thus, since unravelling an intertext is at least partly an attempt to find the cultural and authorial origins of that text, and since Kroetsch's use of and interest in Bakhtinian humour demand of us an intertextual reading of the two novels, the humour of *What the Crow Said* and *The Studhorse Man* leads us on a search, through intertext, for the origins of text itself. Whether or not it is possible to locate such origins, which even by Barthes' reckoning do not exist, Kroetschian humour suggests that the search itself is an essential critical activity.

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