Celebrations in the Texts of Vernon Lee : The Disruption of the Carnivalesque

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As ritual(ised) festive events linked to collective or individual merry-making and commemoration, celebrations inevitably suggest breaks and breaches in the trivial pursuits of daily life; yet, although such disruptions are temporary and ephemeral, they are neither fortuitous nor accidental: they must be considered as privileged moments, in that they are both *central* (the acme and reason for any individual's or community's identity and coherence) and *eccentric*: they are usually characterised by extravagance and squandering, excess, exuberance, etc., and they also aim at incorporating otherness. In their various forms and functions (social, political, moral, cosmological; private or communal; spontaneous or formal) all celebrations, moreover, include both *self-celebration* and *self-satire*: a chaotic disruption of the Dionysiac within Apollonian frameworks (that of social rules and codes maintained within the bonds of the Establishment), the Carnivalesque rejoicing and wild revelry of celebrations remind us, at best, of *Saturnalia*, and in the worst cases (when celebrations *fail*), of *Bacchanalia*.

All celebrations accordingly retain some characteristics of the original Saturnalia, meant to commemorate Saturn, "the Italic god of agriculture later (rather wrongly) identified with Greek Kronos, father of Zeus, ruler of the world in a golden age of innocence and plenty" (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*). Because of this, celebrations have always had an extravagantly luxurious aspect. Contrary to what René Girard affirms, (the festive elements are not the true *raison d'être* of a celebration), we think, along with Vernon Lee, that it is precisely because of its festive and ritualised aspects, because every celebration idealises and idolises most significant cultural items (a celebration is

first of all a performance, a display, an exhibition) that its very pomp and pageant are easily reversed into their own caricature. Was not Saturn the associate of double-faced Janus? The buffoonery, the jumble, the Proteus-like harlequinades of celebrations, from medieval tournaments, to operas and masques, are *inherently* subversive.

Originally, Saturnalia extended to slaves, and included the inversion of social hierarchies, masters serving their own slaves at table and obeying their orders. Celebrating Saturn (Kronos) that way was a revival of the day when he had actually dethroned his father, and a reminder of the fact that he himself was to be in his turn dethroned by his own son, Jupiter (Zeus). Actually, Saturnalia, strongly redolent of modern Carnival, but also a predecessor of modern Christmas-tide, briefly allowed the people to inflict on its leaders the very fate the latter had inflicted on their own fathers, the very fate Saturn had inflicted on his own father... as an enactment of the murder of the father, the God, the master.

This well-established fact, usually insisted upon in scholarly literature concerning the topic of celebrations, from carnival to jousts, games, tournaments of all kinds, including bull-fighting, is dramatised and analysed by all turn-of-the-century artists, all deeply affected by the sense, made poignant by the imminent cessation of the century, of the melancholy side of celebrations. As William James noted:

> For naturalism, fed on recent cosmological speculations, mankind is in a position similar to that of a set of people living on a frozen lake, surrounded by cliffs over which there is no escape, yet knowing that little by little the ice is melting . . . The merrier the skating, the warmer and more sparkling the sun by day, and the ruddier the bonfires at night, the more poignant the sadness with which one must take in the meaning of the total situation (James 142).

Vernon Lee (Violet Paget), whose remarkable work is pregnant both with the agony shared by her fellow artists and with the nostalgia of bygone things and remote places (especially the Italy of the XVIIIth century) is no exception. From her anthropological and aesthetic studies of the archaic and folklore sources of the Comedy of Masks, in *Studies*

of the Eighteenth Century in Italy (1880) to her fiction — *The Prince of the Hundred Soups* (1883) "The Legend of Madame Krasinska" (1892) or "Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child" (1905) —, and her essay on wine-making and the return of the Gods ("Dionysus in the Euganean Hills" (1921), she stresses the relation that must be made, and was actually made by later critics (especially René Girard, Roger Caillois, Mikhail Bakhtine), between the notion of *celebration* and that of *sacrifice*. Indeed, a celebration commemorates the sacrificial crisis defined by René Girard. In this sense, not only does the celebration allow for transgressions, but it *organises* them within a wider frame, that of the "founding violence" (see Girard). This is strongly felt, to the point of a fascinated revulsion, by Vernon Lee, on her first encounter with the Roman carnival:

> This is carnival, and as usual a wretched affair. A few dirty masks running about throwing handfuls of dusty chalk *confetti* into the faces of the passers by. One or two Americans and Russians go about in smock frocks and throw caramels into windows on the Corso; here and there a car with bouquets and bonbons. To-day there was a procession of masks representing the Belgian crusade which is to come and restore the Pope. There are races along the Corso; eight or twelve horses (*Barberi*) without riders, their backs covered with spikes, spurs, rockets and bits of metal which shine and jingle, are let loose at the Piazza del Populo. The howlings of the mob, the spurs and the going off of the rockets frighten the poor beasts so that they tear along the narrow Corso at full speed, till they are stopped at the Piazza di Venezia. This race is a disgusting affair; the horses are frequently wounded before they get to the goal, besides which people are often run over; the day before yesterday a soldier was severely hurt, if not killed. I shall be heartily glad when this Saturnalia be over.[1]

What she finds "disgusting" in that particular encounter with the disruptive elements of a distinctly Dionysiac event, she will — interestingly enough — dramatise, refine, analyse in her later fiction.[2] The

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[1] Letter from Rome (8, Via San Sebastianello, Feb 15th 1871) to Mrs Jenkins (*Letters* 19).

[2] See for instance the following account of the same event in her *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* in which Vernon Lee explains the plebeian origins of the opera as derived from street performances: "Then the excitement of the

theme of the ball, highly privileged by her fellow-writers and music composers, will enable her to make sense of the mixing up of all hierarchies, be they natural or social (animals and men here), the blotting out of differences symbolised by the aesthetic signals linked to celebrations: a miscellany of visual details (colours, figures, forms), of smells, sounds, tactile impressions... A gigantic and generalised *coq-à-l'âne*, an all-covering Harlequin's costume made up of variegated patches. Of course, such an aesthetic ephemeral monument to an exceptional conjuncture involves the "sacrifice," the squandering, the lavish spending of the fruit of labour accumulated (not necessarily for that particular purpose) and saved over the rest of the year. Work makes it possible for a celebration to take place; moreover there is no celebration without wasting; yet, work and celebrations appear as mutually exclusive.[3]

It must then be added that, in spite of its exhilarating effects, the abolition of differences is nevertheless associated with violence and conflicts; yet, as René Girard has shown, this violence is organised (in the form of games, sports, and other competitions) and ritualised; it is aimed at channelling not only everyday violence but even the particular kind of violence generated by the festive that blots out differences. But whereas Bakhtine has been reproached with forgetting "the dangers of carnivalistic violence and antinomian energy" (Morson and Emerson 470), Vernon Lee, by retracing the origins of celebrations to the

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final performance: the pasquinades, the applause, the triumph; the Carnival amusements, with the windows crammed full of friends; the riderless Barbary horses rushing down the Corso; the stream of masks harlequinading along, throwing up flowers and sweetmeats, amidst a rain of plaster comfits and witticisms; the waxlights lit, and snuffed out, between street and window; the yells, grimaces, quips and cranks, and everything that is childish, barbarously amusing" (175).

[3] The price to be paid for celebrations is often alluded to in Vernon Lee's texts. For instance, *The Prince of the Hundred Soups* mentions (Ch. V) the tax raised on snuff for five years so as to engage the "celebrated Signora Olimpia Fantastici," a singer, whose performances involve tremendous expense in terms of candles and tallow, wax, military music, torches, processions.

sparagmos[4] effected within the Bacchanalia, is aware of that danger. The following extract from "Dionysus in the Euganean Hills," in which she reminds us of Euripides' *Bacchae*, setting in parallel "the ambiguous Dionysiac nature" with "the superstitious awe" of onlookers, is particularly clear on that point. She describes those

> delicate women turn about suckling and tearing to pieces the cubs of wild beasts; . . . dewy woodlands strewn with scraps of almost living, nay, human flesh, and its sanctioned, at least nowise purified away, abomination of a mother inspired by the god to lynch her own son in orgiastic madness (*Dionysus* 349).

All those elements are present in Vernon Lee's "festival texts," from her essays to her curious "puppet-show in narrative form" entitled *The Prince of the Hundred Soups*, to her Fantastic texts ("The Legend of Madame Krasinska," 1892; "Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child," 1905), texts that are truly Flaubertian or Balzacian in their formal perfection (one is reminded of Balzac's "Sarrasine," "Massimila Doni," or of Flaubert's *Salammbô*). She is particularly interested, for purely aesthetic reasons, in the beauty of variegated costumes, perfumes and musics, and, for sociological and psychological reasons, in the themes of masks, disguise, and make-up, themes generally made to contrast with the simplicity and genuineness of things rustic and... ancient. What is extremely striking, moreover, is her (already Bakhtinian) approach to the celebration, as well as her perception of the Carnival as a preparation to sacrifice. "The apotheosis is a funeral rite."

The highest expression, in terms of *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism and of artistic control over such disruptive elements, is a recurrent purple-patch in contemporaneous texts: the masked ball. Indeed, there is hardly any author who has not tried his/her hand at that painting of a society seen as a microcosm of mankind, in its geographical, ethnic, historical and social diversity embodied by the reunion, in a whirl of dances, of incredibly different people. We think, for instance, of E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Princess Brambilla*, set in the context of a Carnival in

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[4] The *sparagmos* refers to a ritual ripping up, or tearing to shreds (of clothes, living people, animals) effected by the Bacchae.

Rome, or Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes* (1869), or else of the funerary processions very often set in Venice, the fin-de-siècle symbol of beauty, death and decay, as Thomas Mann has shown in *Death in Venice* (1913). Even "realistic texts" offer celebratory scenes.[5] This traditional theme harks back to XVIIIth century Venetian chronicles, theatre plays, or operas, such as for instance Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, *Cosi fan tutte*, *Nozze di Figaro*). The vogue of the musical genre of the *notturno* or *Nachtmusik* also testifies to the importance of the public's demand for such items.[6] It is hardly surprising that the characters of the *Commedia dell'Arte* (Harlequin, Pantalone, etc.) should be absent from such Couperin-like urbane pageants or rhapsodic friezes. This exclusion may also explain the extremely ritualised aspect of baroque dances: a mechanical aspect that is almost equivalent, according to the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, to the symptom of schizophrenia.[7]

Here is, in "The Legend of Madame Krasinska," Vernon Lee's own contribution, in which we are confronted with a similar confusion of differences, linked to a confusion of identities, and to the problematic of disguise versus selfhood. Yet, the way in which this is dramatised testifies to the evolution (manifest in European cultures and deeply regretted by our author) from genuine, popular celebrations (from which derived the comedy of masks, and puppet-shows) to the dangerously decorative artificiality exemplified by decadent masked balls.[8]

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5 Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), Zola's *Nana* (1880), Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899).

6 See for instance Schubert's E flat *Adagio nocturne* (1826), John Field's *Nocturnes for the piano* (1814); Chopin composed 18 notturnos between 1830 and 1846.

7 "Les actions et réactions font place à un enchaînement de postures réparties de part et d'autre de la distance . . . le 'maniérisme' est un des traits les plus pathétiques de la schizophrénie. On a rapproché (Blankenburg et Evelyne Sznycer) la schizophrénie et les danses baroques, l'allemande, la pavane, le menuet, la courante etc. Sznycer rappelle Freud sur la reconstruction du monde et les modifications intérieures du schizophrène et dégage une fonction d'excès, dit 'hypercritique'" (Deleuze 93).

8 This aspect is akin to the *Spanish* baroque, according to Vernon Lee, which she characterises as "a decorative imbecility."

In the following climactic scene, the reader follows Cecchino, the narrator, who, as if "wearing an invisible cloak," enjoys himself observing an ostentatious crowd displaying itself while dancing in an overwhelmingly saturated space. The splendour of it all, just like the baroque "glory," is meant to impress the onlooker: its sociological impact — the exhibition of one's wealth and rank — is doubled by an ideological function. In fact, the profusion of details is finally seen not only as a "vanitas,"[9] but also as a screen: the splendour of all the "variegated brocades and iridescent silks and astonishing arrangements of feathers and flowers," the magnificence of "the constellated sparkle of diamonds on neck and head . . . and [of] the strange, unaccustomed splendour of white arms and shoulders," all this is a film, a veil, a gigantic mask, "to hide people's secrets and romances."

> They seemed to him like exquisite children, these creatures rustling about in fantastic dresses, powdered shepherds and shepherdesses with diamonds spurting fire among their ribbons and topknots; Japanese and Chinese embroidered with sprays of flowers; children, but children somehow matured, transfigured by the touch of luxury and good breeding, children full of courtesy and kindness (*Krasinska* 167).

This is all "a beautiful, fantastic" show. Yet, the "secrets" can best be seen through the gaps and crevices of the show: the "notes of bad taste" mentioned by Cecchino are precisely relevant to our approach to the popular celebration, the Saturnalia. There were "people dressed as marionettes, champagne bottles, sticks of sealing wax, or captive balloons." There were "men arrayed like females," and a girl dressed up like her (deceased) grandmother. We understand, then, that "bad taste" to the alienated eyes of refined society people, consists in erasing the differences between sexes, between animate and inanimate objects, between dead and alive people, between generations and ages. This is indeed the very mark of Dionysus, whom Vernon Lee describes as the embodiment of that phenomenon: "the priestly, bearded divinity in Ionian feminine weeds, his wreathing tresses reddened with henna to

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9 "[The ladies'] skirts [were] *displayed* as finely as a *peacock's train*" (my emphasis). "The Legend of Madame Krasinska" (*Vanitas* 166).

match the russet vines still hanging from the elms" (*Dionysus* 353), Cecchino was

> borne hither and thither by the well-bred pressure of the many-coloured crowd; pleasantly blinded by the innumerable lights, the sparkle of chandelier pendants, and the shooting flames of jewels; gently deafened by the confused murmur of innumerable voices, of crackling stuffs and soughing fans, of distant dance music; and inhaling the vague fragrance which seemed less the decoction of cunning perfumers than the exquisite and expressive emanation of this exquisite bloom of personality. Certainly, he said to himself . . . *there is a transfiguring magic, almost a moralizing power, in wealth and elegance and good breeding* (my emphasis) (168).[10]

As we know, "la fête est le moment où un groupe se réconcilie dans son image unifiée par l'idéal commun; elle est auto-représentation spéculaire, re-identifiante; elle rétablit la coïncidence des Mois avec l'Idéal lointain, inaccessible ou perdu" (Court 127).

Yet, the ideological impact of this, the elite's self-celebration here, is demonstrated thanks to a *reductio ad absurdum*, with the intrusion of the real, hence idiotic — in the original, Greek sense — Sora Lena, whose grotesque, Hoffmann-like figure is close to the characters of Maenippean satire:

> . . . a lumbering, hideous figure, with a reddish, vacant face, sunk in an immense, tarnished satin bonnet; and draggled, faded, lilac silk skirts spread over a vast dislocated crinoline. The feet dabbed along in the broken prunella boots; the mangy rabbit-skin muff bobbed loosely with the shambling gait; and then, under the big chandelier, there came a sudden pause, and the thing looked slowly round, a gaping, mooning, blear-eyed stare.
> It was the Sora Lena.
> There was a perfect storm of applause.[11]

The figure of Sora Lena reminds the reader of Goya's mesmerising witches gathered for another kind of celebration in *The Witches'*

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10 Interestingly enough, we find indeed a similar treatment of that theme in Jean-Paul Richter, E. T. A. Hoffmann or composer Schumann.
11 « The Legend of Madame Krasinska », op. cit., p. 168.

Sabbath (1820), a reference which ironically undermines the irrelevant "perfect thunder of applause." This urbane crowd is thus implicitly compared to Goya's horrified crowd. Indeed, the short story stages the victory of carnivalesque Sora Lena — in the Bakhtinian sense — against the over-sophisticated semblance of Madame Krasinska and her likes. The originality and subversive side of the text lie in the reversal of roles: the obvious scapegoat or *pharmakos* (Sora Lena) is, eventually, not to be sacrificed. It is finally Madame Krasinska who, because the spirit of Sora Lena she has just foolishly ridiculed suddenly takes possession of her own body and soul, turns out to be "carnivalised." Initially she had been the embodiment of the celebration of the elite's virtues; but she is finally turned into a parody of herself. Her monologue is turned into ventriloquy, *i. e.* polyphony, since she is gradually compelled to voice the words of Sora Lena.

This Fellini-like celebration goes wrong, precisely because of the absence of any "positive," sacrifice, *i. e.*, ritualised and propitious to catharsis. Instead, as we learn at the end of the story, everything in the life of those puppet-like characters is based on the consequences of war. And according to the pacifist Lee, war is not a proper basis on which the foundations of a healthy civilisation can be built. The "deritualised celebration," despite its festive aspect, can then hardly be said to celebrate or commemorate anything; being cut off from the original reference to the scapegoat (Girard's "*victime émissaire*") and the unity it helped reconstruct, it leaves no other way out but a situation of crisis, that is to say, mutual, meaningless violence. The very definition of *war as sparagmos* in Lee's eyes.[12]

In reaction to that kind of decadent celebration, or Bacchanalia, Vernon Lee' s works basically attempt at a rehabilitation of Saturnalia, in the guise — among others — of Menippean satire. For example, her

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12 See for instance her pamphlet *Satan the Waster, a Philosophic War Trilogy with Notes and Introduction.* (London: John Lane, 1920). There again, it is extremely striking to realise that Vernon Lee analyses the Baccahnalian mechanism in terms very similar to René Girard's: "La saturnale s'est changée en son contraire, la bacchanale est devenue carême, mais le rite n'a pas changé de but" (183).

preface to *The Prince of the Hundred Soups* ("A Puppet-Show in Narrative." Florence October 1882) clearly states the argument: celebrations, because they are based on misrule, have a political significance; they testify to the universality of "the folkloric body" as a whole; she opposes the notion of "typicality" to "the individual and the fortuitous" (*Prince* xxi).

What is dramatised and staged in this "puppet-show" is conceptualised in her *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, especially in the chapter entitled "the Comedy of Masks," strikingly close to Bakhtin's conclusions. In fact, defining this "Comedy of Masks" and its characters as derived from the "satyr-like buffoons of the dionysiac revels," Vernon Lee here also prefigures Girard's or Caillois's definitions, since, not only does she define celebrations by reference to Euripides' *Bacchae* and Dionysus, but also as the very foundation of both the Italian nationality and the Italian language,[13] through the mechanism of the original sacrificial crisis. Although it might seem paradoxical, the archaic "masks" finally symbolise truth and genuineness. But those are original masks, those inherited from "the Atellan farces of old Italic days,"[14] and have nothing to do with their adulterated forms in decadent masked balls.

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13 I am particularly impressed by the similitude of Bakhtine's well-known demonstration (dated 1963) and her own (dated 1880). See for instance the following developments by the former: "The sacred Latin word was a foreign body that invaded the organism of European languages. And throughout the Middle Ages, national languages, as organisms, repelled this body. . . . [it was] rather the repelling of . . . a conceptualising discourse that had made a home for itself in all the higher reaches of national ideological thought processes. The repulsion of this foreign-born sacred word was a dialogised operation, and was accomplished under cover of holiday and festival merrymaking. . . . Such was the 'parodia sacra'" (Bakhtin 151). I would personally go as far as to wonder whether Bakhtine had read Vernon Lee's works.

14 For instance, Pulcinella's ancestor was Maccus; the Oscan Pappus and Casnar gave birth to the Venetian Pantalone and the Roman Cassandrino; Harlequin is derived from the *sanniones*, who also gave birth to the two Zanni Arlecchino and Brighella.

Celebrations, in this farcical, Rabelais-like dimension, must be seen as standing, politically, socially, linguistically and culturally speaking, in direct opposition to the more urbane mores imposed both by the Catholic Church and by the State.[15] This is the reason why they were rejected as coarse and rustic, although

> when the austerity, which is always the companion of the highest depravity, began to grumble with the Stoics and thunder with the Saints against the written and polished comedy, when the Christian Emperors and Popes began to proscribe the elegant abominations of the stage, the old Italian farce, safe from imperial and ecclesiastical censure in its unwritten licence, began once more to raise its head (*Studies* 233).

During the Middle Ages, the ancient masks coming from the celebrations of antiquity,

> lurk[ed], with the last remnants of paganism, in the rural festivals, playing their pranks in honour of antique gods disguised as medieval saints. . . . the Church absorb[ed] them, as it absorbed all the life that remained, and let them loose to dance, gesticulate, and jest among the donkeys and drunken clerks of the feast of fools or the mummers of shrovetide, humouring the love of the ridiculous and the gross in the same way as it did in the dirty and grotesque apishness of the cathedral fronts (*Studies* 234).

They showed themselves "in the carnival processions of Italy, by the side of the mummers, of shoemakers, of pastrycooks, of grasshoppers, and of antique divinities for whom Lorenzo de' Medici wrote his clever indecencies" (ibid.). Yet, the humanists of the Renaissance, while they devoted themselves to the festivities of court and "the

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15 "The Comedy of Masks, the farce partially improvised by typical buffoons, is as old as the Italian race. It has existed in rudiment ever since the earliest days of Latin, Oscan and Italo-Greek civilisation: it is the elder comedy . . . the unwritten for ever banished by the written; . . . despised, reviled, ignored; forced to hide in fair-booths and village taverns, till at last after 2000 years of ignominious lurking, it issues forth strong, brilliant, and victorious with the great invasion of the dialect literature of the lower classes, of the peasants and lazzaroni and vagabonds who saved the Italian nationality in the 16th and 17th centuries" (*Studies* 233).

decorative imbecility" of the plastic art, [16] "drove back the barbarous mimes ... into the arms of the uneducated classes." (ibid.) But in fact, because of the heavily repressive forces of "Spanish solemnity" and the violence of the Inquisition, the old buffoons reappeared. Celebrations, then, acquire a national and ethic dimension, becoming a case of "laughter in misery:" "buffooneries [were meant to] drown the recollection of ignominy, merriment to hide seditious sorrow, local satire to hide national satire, dialect to save Italian" (*Studies* 235, my emphasis). We see how the local reflects the global precisely when it is at its most fractal: "crushed and mangled as a whole, the country maintained its vitality in its fragments" (*Studies* 235). It is Harlequin's motley stripes and patches that best represent this conception of the Italian celebration as a fruitful jumble, a meaningful Babel of languages, "the product and the expression of this provincial life ever tending towards forbidden national unity" (*Studies* 235).

The celebratory, derisive, subversive *Commedia dell'Arte* becomes downright revolutionary (*i. e.* endowed with a Saturnalian dimension) at the peak of XVIIth century Italian decadence, which, on the contrary, is endowed with a Bacchanalian dimension. When the weight of Spanish oppression became unbearable,[17] Italy's national unity became possible because the people had then found the adequate sacrificial victim.[18] Then, in *A Beggars' Opera* revisited:

> the beggars and vagabonds, the illiterate, the whipped serfs; . . . the malaria-poisoned peasants . . . the starved artisans . . . all the tattered, bruised, ulcerated, homeless, workless, nameless oppressed, upon whom national degradation and foreign tyranny fell hardest, arose in their rags and filth, and proclaimed . . . that Italy was not dead. . . .

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16 Vernon Lee gives the example of the wedding of the Grand Duke Francesco dei Medici with Bianca Capello: "there were, together with tournaments, pageants, verse reciting, and scenic shows, long musical performances, complicated pieces set in learned contrapuntic mazes by Strozzi and Peri, sung by men and boys trained" (*Studies* 160).

17 Italy was then "weighed upon and oppressed by the huge rotting mass of dead Spain" (*Studies* 241).

18 Spain, as defined as follows: "Spanish unmeaningness and inflation," "sad and imbecile," "solemnity and vacuity" of the higher classes (*Studies* 235).

> Everywhere swarmed new varieties of masks, acrobats and jesters; grotesque, terrible; obscene and ludicrous shapes, only half-human, suggesting the broken egg-shells, melon-rinds, and bundles of rags of their native dust-holes and drain-vaults. Spanish Rodomonts . . . swaggered about with bristling whiskers and mangy plume before the Spanish garrisons . . . dancing, kicking creatures; . . . tumbled about in the face of the monks and Jesuits, singing heathen songs with jargon burdens; the Inquisition, the Jesuits, the viceroys were powerless against this ever-increasing, ever-varying swarm of buffoons . . . The masks of the comedy, — bold, insolent, serious, jesting, unseizable Proteuses —, were saving the Italian lower classes from the fate of their Spanish fellow-sufferers (*Studies* 243).

These democratic, popular celebrations have nothing to do either with the typically "baroque" celebration, or "glory," meant to impress, subjugate and overwhelm the people. We see this impact of the Church and its attempt at taking over profane celebrations in the guise of religious celebrations in another curious text, "Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child; an eighteenth century legend" (1906), a short story dealing with the efforts of the Church to "direct popular piety into authorised channels" (*Benvenuta* 10). Interestingly enough, one of those authorised channels is the famous Carnival in Venice, a lay festival yet eminently dignified, while it is deemed highly shocking that the yearly procession in honour of the Beata Benvenuta, conducted by little children without any ecclesiastical guidance and celebrated by an unusual display of puppet-shows and the singing of a specially composed rhyme, should be authorised... The Church accordingly imposes its own framework; for example, the liturgical calendar, associating each day with the commemoration of a saint, generates a host of daily celebrations, which finally trivialises the celebration.

What is dangerous for the Church is not Carnival but "the Carnivalesque," *i. e.* the attitude consisting in laughing at the Evil One. Of course, the interdict is counter-productive. The laughter of Little Sister Benvenuta at the sight of Beelzebubb Satanasso is an apt reminder of

medieval *parodia sacra*, from *Cena Cypriani* or *Cyprian Feasts* [19], based more often than not on the Bible itself (*Pileata Biblia*)[20], to the parodic "Holiday of Fools," by reference to *festa stultorum*, [21] and "Holiday of the Ass" well known and celebrated in the churches themselves by the lower clergy, an occasion for *risus paschalis*, (paschal laughter),[22] or *risus natalis* (Christmas laughter)[23] to take place. Sister Benvenuta's turns the holy relics and holy words upside down, but the puppet-show itself (staging the story of Judith) is redolent of traditional school festivals predominantly staging parodies and travesties "of everything from Sacred Writ to school grammar" into, literally, "grammatical Saturnalia, *grammatica pileata*." Last but not least, a whole medieval genre, the *missa potatorum* ("liturgies for the drunks") using "parodic Latin, macaronic prayers, comic beast epics" testifies to the vitality of the tradition of linguistic Saturnalia — "*lingua sacra pileata*" (Bakhtin 146), and before him, Vernon Lee, interprets this in the light of the survival of Saturnalia in later forms of merrymaking. What is more, this popular transcription of sacred texts into vernacular dialects finally creates "an intentional dialectological hybrid" (ibid.). Laughter and polyglossia are linked. Now, if, in Bakhtine's lines, this hybridisation essentially "paved the way for the novelistic discourse of modern times" (ibid.), the evolution from carnival to dialogism is, for

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19 That is "a narrative concerning the marriage feast of King Johel at Cana of Galilee." Often read "at the banquet tables of kings, and performed during the paschal festivals by pupils of monastic schools" (Bakhtin 149).

20 The entire Bible was cut up into scraps and rearranged so that "a picture emerged of a grand feast at which all the personages of sacred history from Adam and Eve to Christ and the Apostles eat, drink, and make merry. . . . The entire Sacred Writ is transformed into carnival, or more correctly into Saturnalia. This is 'pileata Biblia'" (Bakhtin 146).

21 "A form of *ludus* in which everything is reversed, even clothing: trousers were worn on the head; . . . an operation that symbolically reflects . . . the jongleurs, who are depicted in miniatures head-downward" (Bakhtin 146).

22 "During the paschal days, laughter was traditionally permitted in church. The preacher permitted himself risqué jokes and gay-hearted anecdotes from the church pulpit in order to encourage laughter in the congregation" (Bakhtin 146).

23 "Serious church hymns were sung to the tunes of street ditties. " Moreover, "Christmas carols mixed with folk motifs [gave birth to] The French 'Noël'" (Bakhtin 148). This was one of the most popular generic sources for the revolutionary street songs.

Vernon Lee, of utmost political importance, and even, in the case of Italy, revolutionary.

These characteristics are staged in dramatic form in *The Prince of the Hundred Soups,* a curious narrative about life in "the Serene and Unvanquished Commonwealth of Bobbio." A number of celebrations punctuate the various episodes in the life of the new Doge, the "Prince of the Hundred Soups"[24] and of the city of Bobbio. These celebrations commemorate events of special importance in the Doge's personal life and in that of the "commonwealth." The first one in that series of celebrations is the public rejoicing organised on the election day, symbolically set on 1 January (1695). The election puts an end to a painful crisis, due to the competition between the rival families of the two candidates, one being a rather popular, lowly character, the other the heir to a long tradition of patricians.[25] That time, the elected Doge is different from his predecessors: the community, thanks to the celebration (Saturnalia), is going to overcome its fear of otherness. As Jean-Paul Vernant writes:

> La seule solution, c'est que, par la transe contrôlée, . . . par la joie du vin, du déguisement, de la fête . . . l'Autre devienne une des dimensions de la vie collective. . . . que l'altérité s'installe, avec tous les honneurs, au centre du dispositif social (Vernant 239).

The election is accompanied by the promise of an impending revenge from the loser's supporters. A threatening refrain counterbalances the exhilaration generated by these celebrations: "we shall see whether thou wilt swallow thy hundredth soup." This apparently grotesque leitmotiv testifies to the presence of a plotting party, whose "anti-celebrations" punctuate the narrative, and alternate with the Doge's lawful celebrations. There is indeed a Rabelaisian dimension in

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24 This name is due to a tradition according to which the Prince's duty is to consume 100 plates of soup "during his 100 days' tenure of office," a habit dating from the time of Charlemagne.

25 Bobbio's population is made up of 30000 inhabitants, 40 Senators, one (newly-)elected Doge. Lord Pantalone Busdrago I (an upstart) is elected against his rival Scappino Scappini, the Generalissimo of the Republic, Count of Brighella, a descendant of Ugolino Brighella (despot of Bobbio in the 13th c.).

the title itself, setting forth — contrary to Macchiavelli's Prince! — *food* as the basis of the prince's power.[26] The election is accompanied by much bell-ringing, cannon-firing, heart-beating, military show, trumpet blowing, and the cries, yells and applause of the crowd. The emblems of the Doge's military power are particularly insisted on, as well as those of his responsibilities and privileges in the field of commerce and trade: this is a particularly overwhelming show of force.

> He [the rival] looked out, up and down the street, whose windows and balconies were decorated with carpets and draperies, while garlands of box, set with artificial flowers, hung from cresset and torchholder. He could see the crowd in the palace square, the sheen of the breastplates of the Swiss guard, the banners of the guilds; he could hear the crowd still shouting for the new Doge, Pantalone Busdrago (*Prince* 14).

Soon, a more festive celebration will take place. The pomp and pageant described are worthy of the baroque glory suitable for a Doge. But his "difference," his otherness *show*, revealed at the precise moment when he is trying so hard to erase it. He genuinely enjoys the celebration, while he was expected to take it as a mere exhibition... meant to impress and not to express. By expressing his joy, he shows himself as impressed, but not as impressive! As the onlookers say, His Magnificence's joy is "a sign of low birth" (18). Similarly, he cannot help reacting at the sour and bitter taste of the soup, and "he blushed internally at the thought that it was doubtless his baser origin, his coarser plebeian palate, which was at fault" (*Prince* 52).

> A string of immense gilded coaches, with cherubs, armorial bearings, and all manner of devices painted and sculptured on their panels, was drawn up in the little square before the Busdrago palace: a magnificent structure, brilliant with whitewash, in the most gorgeous architecture of the day, with columns like piled cheeses, sustaining vases filled with plastic fire, and broken arches bound with stucco garlands

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26 Rabelais's "manipulation and crossing of 'drinking series,' 'food series,' 'sex series' and death series returned common verbal clusters into monsters. Death somehow merges with defecation and sex with overeating. Indecency and comic juxtaposition forced a rethinking of all fixed categories. A grotesque word-matrix drags the messy body into territory previously occupied by disembodied, hierarchical word systems."

> and inhabited by stucco virtues. Over the entrance door two Cupids upheld the escutcheon of the Busdrago family, with the marquis' coronet . . . and the arms: in a field of gules an azure dragon (Draco), covered with silver stars, eating a golden ox (Bos); the two together constituting the arms of the Busdrago, or Bos Draconis family (*Prince* 15-16).

Such is the aesthetic and ethical framework: vehicles crowding in around, converging towards, revolving around the architectural hub of the republic, a profusion of often absurd and irrelevant decorative details, characteristic of the superfluity of baroque exuberance, but symbolic of the wealth and riches of Bobbio — a cornucopia and a realm of virtue. Inside the palace, the decoration is overwhelming too, matching the façade, in that it is... a façade itself: the reception-room itself is converted into a gigantic status symbol: the furniture, gilding, stuccoing, liveries are "all new, brand new" (*Prince* 18). The coat of arms itself adequately foreshadows the victory of the Dragon (Dionysiac) over the sacrificial Ox (civilisation of peaceful cattle breeders): Cain against Abel?

The procession is highly significant, too, because the order in which the visitors stream in to pay homage to the Doge, reflects the hierarchies of the Bobbio microcosm: ambassadors, senators, officers, cardinals, prelates, are first shown in, accompanied by an army of richly clad pages; a host of ladies then follow, themselves richly clothed, bejewelled, made up and attended to, and surrounded by a troop of pages and "their *cavaliere servente* in chief, . . . surrounded by a constellation of minor *cavalieri serventi*, carrying their fan, their handkerchief, their nosegay, or their smelling-bottle" (*Prince* 17). There again, wantonness, artifice and vacuity prevail.

This celebratory homage involves several steps according to etiquette rules. First, the politically necessary congratulations from grandees,[27] then the "frigid and forced" congratulations from the aristocratic "lobby" of senators. This ritual is followed by the poets'

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27 "all the ambassadors, cardinals, and grandees . . . mostly with real pleasure, on account of his money, his generosity and his good humour" (*Prince* 17).

cultural tribute "in honour of the new Doge, [who] was compared to Jupiter, Mars, the sun, moon, stars; and Fame was invariably invited to blow her trumpet for his benefit." The poets' artistic display is completed by a theatre performance of a pastoral in music: "symphonies of harpsichords, viols, lutes and flutes," with "sundry nymphs, . . . sundry ancient heroes . . . a mysterious shepherd, Glaucus, the richest and wisest shepherd of Arcadia, the beloved of the Gods" (*Prince* 20).

The bouquet of the ceremony then takes place: a "grand supper," with people seated according to etiquette, thus very different from the *thusia*, presided over by the God of life's pleasures, and closely linked to Hades, just like abundance (plenty, from the Greek *Plutos)* is linked to Pluto (the God of Hell):[28] "the god about to be trampled to death in the vat, [is] ready to resurrect like the sun at the winter solstice . . . [since] the wine-god is also the god of death" (*Dionysus* 353). Lastly, the ball takes place, another rite, in which extremely codified dances[29] and flirting foreshadow an impending disaster, due to a radical misunderstanding: the ill-starred lover's love-letter is given — and received — like a public insult.

Simultaneously, an anti-celebration is taking place in a (sleepy) hollow. The official cook falls in an ambush organised by the party opposed to the new Doge. The reference to witches' Sabbath (anti-celebration) is clear:

> The wizard had taken him... They were flying through the country for miles and miles towards that terrible hollow in the mountains where the devil was wont to appear with the legs of a cock. . . . They had got to the hollow, to the witches' meeting place. He was to be fried by the witches and the wizards, enchanted candles were to be made out of him (*Prince* 35-36).

The outcome of the misunderstanding generated by the celebration and by the anti-celebration testifies to the vacuity and terrorism

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28 "Le festin dionysiaque réalise parfois une passagère conjonction des deux mondes" (Daraki 55).

29 "*courantes* and *allemandes* and stately minuets..." (*Prince* 21).

of those glorious shows: the Doge evinces virtually no power: "for the republic of Bobbio . . . arranged matters in such a way that he should be wholly unable to stir a finger"(*Prince* 48). The multiplication of rites and ceremonies, while glorifying the ideology of absolutism, in fact impinges on the real exercise of power. The obsessive (childish) rite of soup-eating shows how far the Prince's subservience to etiquette can go. He is systematically evaluated on his ability to cope with celebratory rituals: soup-eating, managing opera singers (especially the famous Olimpia Fantastici). His final trial must be seen in terms of an expulsion, followed by a rehabilitation, significant of the collective acceptance of his otherness. An acceptance adequately represented in the most sacred form of celebrations (in the eyes of Vernon Lee): the opera sung by Hoffmann-like Olimpia Fantastici. For music is the ideal medium for expressing emotions: there can be no celebration without music.[30] And the opera, equivalent to "the chryselephantine colossus" of antiquity, embodies the creative disruption of the Carnivalesque. It is the sole positive outcome of the evolution of celebrations from profane, popular, carnival Saturnalia, to decadent, meaningless, overwhelmingly glorious Bacchanalia induced by the heavily repressive influence of the Church.

Sophie Geoffroy-Menoux[31]

30 "A few years later, at other court feasts, we meet music even more developed; choruses sung to pastorals like those of Tasso or Guarini, players and singers sitting round the harpsichord, viol, lute, and fife in hand, as we see them in the concert pictures of Nicolo Abati and Leonello Spada. . . . Is this a rudimentary opera or merely a play interlarded with concerts?" "[W]hy not give up the Aristotelian canon . . . why not satisfy the noble lords and ladies assembled to celebrate a wedding or birthday, and the citizens and artisans come to enjoy their carnival or Ascension amusement, and neither at all wishing to be moralised,-why not satisfy their craving for pleasant impressions by making the play . . . wind up cheerfully?" (*Studies* 166).

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