

Misogyny and the Carnavalesque in Wyndham Lewis's *The Wild Body*

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ABSTRACT

Throughout this paper I will concentrate on two short stories from Wyndham Lewis's collection The Wild Body («The Cornac and his Wife» and «Brotcotnaz»), which illustrate his author's carnivalized and misogynous representation of women. My analysis will have as theoretical framework Bakhtin's discussion of the ambivalent image of woman: its positive representation in the medieval popular comic tradition -as related to fertility, the womb, the earth- and its later denigration and trivialization as «the bodily grave of man, an inexhaustible vessel of fertility which condemns to death all that is old and finished» (Bakhtin, 1984b:240).

KEY WORDS: Wyndham Lewis, Mikhail Bakhtin, representation of women, carnival tradition

RESUMEN

El objetivo del presente trabajo es analizar dos cuentos de la Antología The Wild Body de Wyndham Lewis («The Cornac and his Wife» y «Brotcotnaz») que ilustran la representación carnavalesca y misógina de las mujeres en Lewis. La base teórica de mi análisis es la interpretación Bakhtiniana de la imagen ambivalente de la mujer: su representación positiva en la tradición cómica popular medieval en relación a los conceptos de fertilidad, útero y tierra, y su posterior imagen negativa y trivialización como la «bodily grave of man, an inexhaustible vessel of fertility which condemns to death all that is old and finished» (Bakhtin, 1984b:240).

PALABRAS CLAVE. Wyndham Lewis, Mikhail Bakhtin, representación de la mujer en la literatura, tradición carnavalesca

I. INTRODUCTION

Feminists writing on Bakhtin all seem to agree that, despite the fact that Bakhtin never alluded directly to feminism, nevertheless his «theories of dialogism and heteroglossia, in which meaning emerges on the borders of conflict seem to be tailor-made for feminist criticism», Denise Heikinen writes in her provocative essay, «Is Bakhtin a Feminist or Just Another Dead White Male?» (1994:114). Wayne Booth in «Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenges of Feminist Criticism», initially would seem to reject the adequacy of a feminist appropriation of Bakhtin's theories: «nowhere in Rabelais does one find any hint of an effort to imagine any woman's point of view or to incorporate women into a dialogue. And nowhere in Bakhtin does one discover any suggestion that he sees the importance of this kind of monologue, not even when he discusses Rabelais's attitudes towards women» (1981: 166). However, towards the end of his article, Booth suggests that «sexual difference might yield a further source of hybridization» (1981: 171) to Bakhtin's theories: «another language means another philosophy and another culture, but in their concrete and not fully translatable form» (1984b: 472-3). This conclusion coincides with that of Heikinen's, for whom

it is possible to extend dialogism to include feminist critiques by appropriating the languages of others and making them our own, allowing us to read internally persuasively rather than authoritatively, and allowing for a plurality of feminisms instead of one. Furthermore, we can do without apologizing for Bakhtin or make excuses for him. His theories allow for such a development of different selves if we seek meaning at the everchanging borders of language and context (1994: 126).

My choice to look into Wyndham Lewis's grotesque representation of women in his collection of stories *The Wild Body* (1927) aims at deconstructing the patterns of his misogyny, which is a constant in his writing as it is in most other major male modernists like T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and D. H. Lawrence, to name a few.¹ I shall do this while inquiring into the ambivalent

1. For a further discussion of this polemical issue, *vide* Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *No Man's Land. The War of the Words* (vol.1), particularly the chapter "Tradition and the Female Talent: Modernism and Masculinism" (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1988); Lyn Pykett also provides a good discussion of the subject, particularly in relation to D.H. Lawrence in *Engendering Fictions. The English Novel in the Early Twentieth Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995); see as well Peter Middleton's interesting contribution to this debate in "The Martian

image of woman in a text which, as I will try to argue, preserves, to use a Bakhtinian concept, a deep «carnival sense of the world».² As I have argued in a previous essay (Macedo, 1991), while *The Wild Body* is primarily a comedy of action, where the tragic is a direct consequence of the «primitive», in *Tarr*, a semi-autobiographic novel published in 1918 and later highly revised in 1928, Lewis exposes bluntly his misogynous views, and all the ambivalence and «atmosphere of joyful relativity» that characterizes *The Wild Body* has been lost and replaced by moral sententiousness and abstract concepts (Bakhtin, 1984b: 53), even though the writing of the novel and many of the *Wild Body* stories was concomitant. *Tarr* focuses on two main topics, art and sex. Its hero, Tarr, is a kind of Nietzschean *Übermensch*, who argues throughout the novel, which has aptly been called a *roman à thèse*, that women can only fit into a lower stratum of life, which he identifies with raw, untamed nature, to which he is submissive but which he ultimately fears. The argument, reiterated in his writings, that women were closer to nature and therefore alien to culture was a common one at the time and vehemently used by the Anti-suffragists.

The writing of *The Wild Body*, a collection of stories many of which first appeared in various reviews between the years 1909-17, only to be published as an anthology in 1927 (and reedited in a fully annotated version by Bernard Lafourcade, in 1982, as *The Complete Wild Body*), marks the beginning of Lewis's career as a satirist and creates a style which Lewis developed in his subsequent writing. These texts are linked with Lewis's «formative years», particularly the years between 1901 and 1909, during which he lived in Paris and travelled through Europe, particularly French Brittany and Galicia. Women are generally absent from the scene of *The Wild Body* stories, or, at least, they are certainly not protagonists; the narrator, or, as Lewis puts it, his «showman», is here mostly interested in depicting male characters, with the exception of the tale «Brotcotnaz» and, to a certain extent, «The Cornac and his Wife», which, for that reason, will be the focus of the present analysis.

The Wild Body is a gigantic circus peopled by puppets/machines worked by the «deft fingers» of a «showman» who assumes in the narrative a dual role: on the one hand he participates in the events as one of the actors, while, on the

Landscapes of Modernism: Joyce, Yeats, Lawrence" in *The Inward Gaze. Masculinity and Subjectivity in Modern Culture* (London: Routledge 1992).

2. According to Bakhtin, parody is "inseparably linked to a carnival sense of the world", it is a "world turned inside out". and for this very reason "ambivalent" (1984a: 127). The carnival image strives to encompass and unite within itself both poles of becoming or both members of an antithesis: birth- death, youth-old age, top-bottom, face-backside, praise-abuse, affirmation-repudiation, tragic-comic, and so forth" (1984a 176).

other hand, he is an external observer fascinated with «the imbecility of the creaking men machines» (1982: 149). In the first story of this collection, also intended as a kind of general Preface, he is ironically named «A Soldier of Humour»; later on, in the revised stories, he gains a proper name. Ker-Orr who, as Lafourcade claims, is «far more than a simple mouth-piece for the author», and a «voyeur» fascinated with the «grotesque otherness» of his primitive puppets (1980: 80). The trace of his presence in the tales is more easily found in the echo of his laughter than in the action he develops as a character, for as he claims, «A primitive unity is there, to which, with my laughter, I am appealing. Freud explains everything by sex, I explain everything by laughter» (1982: 18).

Laughter, «the emotion of tragic delight» (1982: 151), is also the subject of two major essays that compose the anthology *The Wild Body*, namely, «Inferior Religions» (1917), and «The Meaning of The Wild Body» (1927). The former was meant, as Bernard Lafourcade argues, as «an introduction to the overall collection of short-stories» (1982: 148). «The Meaning of The Wild Body» was in turn designed as a study on «the root of the comic» and the concept of the absurd. In Lafourcade's words, it «does stand as a landmark in the history of the comic - somewhere between *Le Rire* and André Breton's *Anthologie de l'Humour Noir*» (1982: 157).

Elsewhere, in *Men Without Art*, a collection of essays first published in 1934, Lewis defined laughter as the satirist's privileged «weapon», an «anti-toxin» inseparable from what he terms a «non-ethical satire», a concept which, despite its nietzschean filiation, expresses a deeply rooted humanist concern: «Freedom is certainly our human goal, in the sense that all effort is directed to that end: and it is a dictate of nature that we should laugh, and laugh loudly, at those who have fallen into slavery, and still more, those who batten on it» (Lewis 1964: 116).

The symbolism of the «Wild Body»'s laughter partakes, in our view, of the ambivalence studied by Bakhtin in the carnivalesque medieval popular tradition. The «fierceness» of the wild body's «visi-gothic fighting-machine», Lewis writes, has become transformed into laughter: «Mystical and humorous, astonished at everything at bottom ... he inclines to worship and deride, to pursue like a riotous moth the comic and unconscious luminary he discovers: to make war on it and to cherish it like a lover, at once» (1982: 20).

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin claims that, in medieval folk tradition, laughter symbolized the carnivalesque affirmation of life and earth over the «mystic terror» inspired by death and hell: «If the Christian hell devalued earth and drew men away from it, the carnivalesque hell affirmed earth and its lower stratum as the fertile womb, where death meets birth and a new life springs forth. This is why the images of the material bodily lower stratum pervade the carnivalized underworld» (1984b: 395).

The carnivalesque ambivalence of Lewis's outlook on the world, his emphasis on the grotesque and the regenerative power of laughter, as well as his reified and clownesque representation of men and women gains a new perspective if seen in the light of Bakhtin's claims that the carnival sense of the world, which permeated all forms of popular culture throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, survived until contemporary times in different forms of «carnivalized literature», always and by different means challenging the official culture's belief in: «a static unchanging world order» and positively emphasizing «change and becoming» (Bakhtin 1984b: 395).

II. BAKHTIN, WOMEN'S AMBIVALENCE AND THE *QUERELLE DES FEMMES*

In order to understand the meaning of the «ambivalence» attributed by Bakhtin to women in the Renaissance and to clarify my usage of the same concept in relation to Lewis's representation of women in *The Wild Body* it is worthwhile recalling the famous *Querelle des Femmes* which divided the intellectuals throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

The *Querelle des Femmes* was an intense debate around the nature of women and marriage which took place in France between 1542-1550, but which had been present all along the Middle Ages, involving poets, writers, philosophers and large sectors of the public. Bakhtin gives us a general view of this debate in his book on Rabelais (1984b: 239-242), claiming that throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance two conflicting opinions on this issue could be found concomitantly: the «Gallic tradition» and the «idealizing tradition». The Gallic tradition is itself a complex and contradictory phenomenon composed of two tendencies, the popular comic tradition and the medieval christian ascetic tendency. The latter considers women as the incarnation of sin, the temptation of the flesh, often using material from the popular comic tradition. The former is not hostile to women and bears no prejudice against them. In the Gallic tradition, women are linked to the «bodily lower stratum», meaning both a debasement and a renewal. They are deeply ambivalent figures: women debase, bring down to earth, to the body, to death, but they are also the principle of life, the womb.

In the Gallic tradition women are the bodily grave of man, a sort of incarnated injury, personified, obscene, related to at all that is limited and finished; they are an «inexhaustible vessel of fertility which condemns to death all that is old and finished» (1984b: 240). Bakhtin further claims that in the Gallic tradition the image of woman is presented through the angle of the «ambivalent laughter, at once mocking, destructive, and joyfully reasserting» (1984b: 241). Hence Bakhtin's question is whether this tradition conveys a hostile and negative

judgement of woman. He answers negatively: in this tradition the image of woman is highly ambivalent, as all images in the Gallic tradition are. However, since this image was used by the ascetic tendencies of Christianity and the abstract and moralising thought of the satirical authors of the modern times, it occasionally becomes totally negative and loses its positive pole, presenting woman as a merely «wayward, sensual, concupiscent character of falsehood. materialism and baseness» (1984b: 240). Such is the case in the medieval and Renaissance encyclopedic works which accuse women, using against them impoverished and deformed images of the Gallic tradition. Rabelais, according to Bakhtin, was the true representative of the Gallic tradition, since he did not take side with the enemies of woman, the moralists or the epicureans, nor with the platonic idealists. Those who defended women were closer to him than the abstract moralists. It is now time to find out where Wyndham Lewis and his *wild Body* stand in regard to the depiction of women.

III. «THE CORNAC AND HIS WIFE»

Following the Soldier of Humour's excursions through Britany we will encounter him in this tale as a spectator, gathering with peasants around a circus. The narrator's interest in the circus has obviously to do with his interest in the philosophy of laughter. The kind of laughter one finds here is extremely primitive and violent in origin. He describes it as «a realistic firework, reminiscent of war» (1982: 101).

The story is the anatomy of a circus troupe and its small world; the descriptions of the members of this troupe -from the bitter, sickly showman to his skinny wife and their «haggard offspring»- challenge all our expectations of a jolly crowd. They do not perform gladly for the audience, but play *against* them with an «implacable grudge». Animosity and terror are the constant feelings of this troupe. Moreover, both the Cornac (showman or «patron») and his wife, as well as the public, are described as inhuman antagonists, the former containing their anger with difficulty: «like a dog under lock and key ... maddened by this other animal presence, the perspiring mastodon that roared at it with cheap luxurious superiority» (1982: 91).

All the characters of this little joyless unit are lifeless automatons or mechanical beings displaying their sad and routine performance:

These displays involved the insane contortions of an indignant man and his dirty, breathless wife, of whose ugly misery it was required that a daily mournful exhibition should be made of her shrivelled legs, in pantomime hose. She must crucify herself with a scarecrow abandon, this iron and

blood automaton, and affect to represent the factor of sex in a geometrical posturing (1982: 91-92).

These shows are repeated over and over again, in a desperate attempt to charm and appease the monster/public. Public and showman, though, are identified through one wish: both wait for the moment when the family of acrobats will crash to the floor, or the clown will smash his face against the ground. The showman «wished steadily and all the time, it was quite certain, that the earth would open with a frantic avulsion ... that everybody there would immediately be hurled into this chasm, and be crushed flat as it closed up» (1982: 92). The public in turn share the patron's eschatological desire, wishing that «the entire family might break their necks one after the other, the clown smash his face every minute he fell, and so on.» (1982: 92)

Amidst the grotesque exhibitions of the unhealthy proprietor performing acrobatics with crepitations of his joints and exhibiting his bulky, unathletic stomach, his wife makes an unexpected entrance to complain, in a «harsh and indignant voice», against the mean rewards the public is giving them: «Here are hundreds of people standing round, and there are hardly a dozen sous on the carpet! We give you entertainment, but it is not for nothing! We do not work for nothing! We have our living to make as well as other people!» (1982: 99)

Notoriously. the narrator's description of the woman -«the neck strained forward, the face bent down, and the eyes glowering upwards at the adversary» (1982: 100)- emphasizes her strength and her capacity to dominate the public much more than her husband had been able to: The public, says the narrator, «took much more notice of her than of the man; she thoroughly interested them, and they conceded to her unconditionally their sympathy. There was no response to her attack -no gibing or discontent; only a few more sous were thrown» (1982: 100).

The conclusion drawn from this episode by the narrator is that the woman somehow distanced herself from the rest of the troupe, exposing herself as a figure of authority and invoking a mock-violence which, the narrator argues, is «of the essence of laughter» (1981: 101). The female figure in this story is then disruptive and ambivalent. If, as an acrobat whose function is to entertain the public, she is one more member of the troupe, at the same time she suddenly transfigures herself and enters the scene as an overpowering matriarch, demanding and obtaining the respect which neither the showman nor the clowns had managed to gain yet. In this sense, in her grotesque duality as an «unfinished body», the Cornac's wife can be seen as an ambivalent carnivalesque figure like those pertaining to the grotesque realist genre and the popular comic tradition of the carnivalesque. such as it was defined by Bakhtin. Besides, the space where the

action takes place, the circus, is itself, as Bakhtin states, a privileged field where «many ancient forms of carnival were preserved and continue to live and renew themselves» (1984a: 130).

As I referred earlier in this essay, *The Wild Body* stories rely strongly on Lewis's theory of laughter and his philosophy of the absurd as the root of the comic, which is itself already a parodic inversion of Henri Bergson's theories, very popular at the time. «The root of the Comic is to be sought in the sensations resulting from the observations of a *thing* behaving like a person. But from that point of view all men are necessarily comic: for they are all *things*, or physical bodies, behaving as persons,» he argues in the essay «The Meaning of The Wild Body» (1982: 158). Besides, he claims, at the root of every true philosophy is this «sense of the absurdity, or, if you like, the madness of our life», since «there is nothing that is animal ... that is not absurd.» (1982: 157). However, the fact that the heroes and heroines of Lewis's stories are «wild bodies» or «puppets», ironic «shadows of energy, not living beings», as he calls them, does not diminish the violence of the satire they enact, nor their realism: «Satire is the great Heaven of Ideas, where you meet the titans of red laughter» (1982: 150). In fact, in the essay «Inferior Religions» he explains that his stories «of rather primitive people» are «studies in a savage worship and attraction» against whom laughter erupts like «a bark of delight» (1982: 151). Likewise, he writes in «The Meaning of the Wild Body», «[l]aughter is only summer lightning. But it occasionally takes on the dangerous form of absolute revelation» (1982: 158).

IV. «BROTCOTNAZ»

As we have seen, Lewis said in «The Cornac and his Wife» that the function of his humour was to evoke the primitive while keeping it at bay, and to transform the «drama of mock-violence of every social relationship» into a «simulacrum of mortal combat» (1982: 101). We will see that happening again in the last of his Breton stories, «Brotcotnaz», which closes the cycle of *The Wild Body* in an atmosphere of «disorder» and «emptiness» (1982: 144).

Mme Brotcotnaz suffers from a regular «illness» which she calls «erysipelas», caused by equally regular beatings by her husband. The tale starts with a sarcastic portrait of Mme Brotcotnaz, immediately alerting us to her most «secret vice»:

The distillations of the Breton orchard have almost subdued the obstinate yellow of jaundice, and Julie's face is a dull claret. In many tiny strongholds of eruptive red the more recent colour has entrenched itself. ... Her eyebrows are for ever raised. She could

not depress them, I suppose, any more, if she wanted to. ... The flesh of the mouth is slightly more alive: it is parched and pinched in. so that she seems always hiding a faint snicker by diving it primly into her mouth. Her eyes are black and moist, with the furtive intensity of a rat (1982: 133).

This is a crude and merciless description, which overtly betrays Lewis's misogyny. However, this description should also be seen in the context of the Wild Body's carnivalized world as exposing eccentricity and excess, carnivalistic debasings, and, in addition, parodies of prohibitions and restrictions -in this particular story, alcohol. Julie's image is quite ambivalent, and hence close to the image of women in the medieval popular comic tradition, where, as we have already referred, women are both represented positively in related to fertility and the womb, and negatively as incarnations of sin and temptation; in sum, they appear as both a «debasement and a renewal» (1984b: 240).

Mr. Brotcotnaz himself is also a grotesque creature, part animal, part machine:

The dimensions of his eyes, and their oily suffusion with smiling-cream, or with some luminous jelly that seems still further to magnify them, are still remarkable. They are great tender mocking eyes that express the coquetry and contentment of animal fats. The sides of his massive forehead are often flushed, as happens with most men only in moments of embarrassment. Brotcotnaz is always embarrassed. But the flush with him, I think, is a constant affluence of blood to the neighbourhood of his eyes, and has something to do with their magnetic machinery (1982: 137).

He also too had a sin, jealousy. Out of jealousy, the narrator sarcastically tells us, he had already beaten a previous wife to death, a fact which had not however prevented Julie from marrying him. The day after battering his wife, he would be lovingly looking after her, like a doctor looking after a patient, addressing her with compassionate gentleness, and receiving the neighbours' «commiserations» on her behalf (1982: 139).

At the apex of this tragi-comedy there is a drastic change in the couple's routine and, in Bakhtin's terms, a «carnivalistic *mésalliance*»³ implying a reversal

3. "Camivalistic *mésalliances*" are defined by Bakhtin as another category of the "camival sense of the world": "A free and familiar attitude spreads over everything: over all values, thoughts, phenomena, and things. All things that were once self- enclosed, disunified, distanced from one another by a non-camivalistic hierarchical worldview are drawn into camivalistic contacts and combinations. Camival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane,

of the previous hierarchy: Julie comes to control her domestic situation. One day, we are told, Brotcotnaz comes home to find Julie in bed all bruised and bandaged. not as a consequence of his violent temper but of having been run over by a cart. The atmosphere of the house becomes noticeably different, with the neighbours all around Julie and Brotcotnaz looking miserable, a «dejected figure», wondering in a semi-consciousness, «had Fate acted without him?» Julie, however, showed «a desperate snigger of secretive triumph, very well under control and as hard as nails» (1982: 142).

The situation was not normal: yet the condition of Julie was the regular one. The intervention of the neighbours and the present dejection of Brotcotnaz was what was unaccountable. ... But he whom I was always accustomed to see master of the situation was stunned and changed, like a man not yet recovered from some horrid experience. He, the recognized agent of Fate, was usually so above the *melée*. Now he looked another man, like somebody deprived of a coveted office, or from whom some privilege had been withheld. Had Fate acted without him? (1982: 141).

Brotcotnaz sees Julie's accident as a «rival cause», with which he cannot contend and that has completely «dethroned» him of his power situation and, in carnivalistic terms, decrowned him from his position of «carnival king».⁴

He is assailed with a sudden incapacity to think of injuries in his wife's case except as caused by a human hand. He is solicited by the reflection that he himself had not been there All his wild jealousy surges up. A cause, a rival cause is incarnated in his excited brain, and goes in an overbearing manner to claim its effect. A moment of great weakness and lassitude seizes him (1982: 143).

Brotcotnaz's suspicion of a rival cause, his jealousy, is the highest parodic moment in this story. The extent of Julie's injuries is described by Ker-Orr in minute detail and there is doubtlessly a close identification between his voyeurism and Brotcotnaz's sadistic care for his wife: «You have seen my wife's fingers? ... Higher up it is worse. The bone is broken. The doctor says that it is possible she

the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid" (1984a: 123).

4. As Bakhtin claims: "The primary carnivalistic act is the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king. Under this ritual act of decrowning a king lies the very core of the carnival sense of the world -the pathos and shifts and changes, of death and renewal... From the very beginning, a decrowning glimmers through the crowning" (1984a: 124-5).

will lose her arm. Her leg is also in a bad state» (1982: 142).

The narrator perversely observes: «He could scarcely proceed to the destruction of the trunk only» (1982: 142). However, Julie's «dismembered body», a typical «carnival anatomy» consisting of an enumeration of parts,⁵ is responsible for the complete reversal of the household relations. Unable to continue with his set routine, Brotcotnaz falls into a deep depression. His violence having become pointless, he feels threatened and powerless: «Whatever the upshot of the accident as regards the threatened amputations, the disorder and emptiness that had declared itself in his mind would remain» (1982 144).

The conclusion of the tale is grotesque, but no doubt the narrator rejoices in this transgression of the previous hierarchy, and in this new image of a defiant Julie, lifting her glass in the open:

After the removal of her arm and possibly a foot, I realized that she would be more difficult to get on with than formerly. The bottle of eau-de-vie would remain no doubt in full view, to hand, on the counter, and Brotcotnaz would be unable to lay a finger on her (1982 144).

This tale is interpreted by critic Alan Munton (1982) as an image of the carnivalesque beatings or «cuffing», which are symbolic, since «they both kill (injure) and regenerate». While discussing an early version of the «Brotcotnaz» called «Brobdignag», Munton writes: «Brobdignag unites in himself both injury and cure. He takes upon himself both the necessary functions. ... For when his wife is injured under the wheel of a can, Brobdignag is overcome with jealousy: he has a rival!» (1982: 150) Munton's response indicates the special closed scheme of the Carnival «cuffing», which is destroyed if it is violated from outside. In Carnival terms Brobdignag is quite right to object to the sudden intervention of the can (1982: 150). This claim echoes Bakhtin's study of this carnivalesque practice in Rabelais and His World: «The blows have here a broadened, symbolic, ambivalent meaning; they at once kill and regenerate, put an end to the old life and stand the new» (1984b: 205).

The «new life» for Julie means her becoming free from Brotcotnaz's jealousy and master the situation of the household, hence the «mocking gaze with which she welcomes the narrator (1982: 144). It is worth noting that Bakhtin also remarks that the word «cuffing» in the popular carnivalesque tradition has sexual

5. "Carnival anatomy" is an enumeration of the parts of the dismembered body. Such "enumerations" were a widespread comic device in the carnivalized literature of the Renaissance (Bakhtin 1984a: 162).

connotations, as in «the bridal cuffing». These connotations may not altogether be absent from the world of Brotcotnaz.

The carnivalesque beatings and «dismemberments» are, according to Bakhtin, carried out as a ritual, as comic play. They are the «tangible equivalent to improper speech» and supposedly «organized in great style», in an atmosphere of freedom and impunity (1984b: 269-270). In fact, the kind of beatings that Julie suffers from her husband are «unserious», not regarded by either of them as «real injuries». When Brotcotnaz hears of his wife's accident, he can only repeat: «What's that? My wife injured? My wife seriously injured! ... - 'Seriously' was the word stressed naively by him. He repeated these words and imitated his expression» (1982: 143).

The comic and farcical tone of this tale is recovered at the end, with Julie peacefully drinking from her bottle of *eau-de-vie*, comforted by the neighbours, and openly defying with her «mocking gaze», her «changed» (now powerless) husband whose mind was now for ever filled with «disorder and emptiness» (1982: 144), in an atmosphere which can be identified with that of a carnivalesque «world turned inside out» (Bakhtin 1984a: 127).

CONCLUSION

From the above analysis of these two stories one can see that their atmosphere is strongly pervaded with a «carnival sense of the world», which, as Bakhtin claims, «with its joy at change and its joyful relativity, is opposed to that one-sided and gloomy seriousness which is dogmatic and hostile to evolution and change, which seeks to absolutize a given condition of existence or a given social order» (1984a: 160). The «carnival sense of the world» is «hostile to any sort of conclusive conclusions: all endings are merely new beginnings; carnival images are reborn again and again» (1984a: 165). Bakhtin claims as well that carnivalization relativizes all that is «externally stable, set and ready-made.... It proved remarkably productive as a means for capturing in art the developing relationships under capitalism» (1984a: 166).

The Wild Body is throughout serio-comical, pervaded with exaggerations, hyperboles and eccentric behaviors. It is an «inappropriate world» that mixes the fantastic with philosophical remarks, extraordinary people, parodies, blasphemies and obscene language, and that is permeated with a deep sense of the absurd. It is, in sum, a satirical and picturesque world upside-down, a «pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators» (Bakhtin 1984a: 122). However, this atmosphere of carnivalesque ambivalence and open-endedness does not justify the misogynous tone of the stories and the sadism that, time after time, lurks through Ker-Orr's destructive irony and abjection in relation to

women. Lewis's representation of women in *The Wild Body* is, in our view, both the result of a fascination and an anxiety before womanhood which, once again, partakes of Bakhtin's fascination with the images of the woman's body produced throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and it also shares in the concept of the womb as «double-edged, both regenerative and frightening» (Bakhtin 1984b: 240).

However, as Lisa Gasbarrone writes, Bakhtin is «surely among a very few male writers who have invoked and elaborated images of pregnancy and the womb. ... For Bakhtin, the ambivalence of the womb -its terror and delight- is precisely what defines it as a grotesque» (1994: 10-11). Similarly, we would argue, the image of women in *The Wild Body*, in all its perplexing hybridity, is in fact close to the complex image of women claimed by the «Gallic tradition» within the *Querelle des Femmes*, i.e., «the bodily grave of man», but also «an inexhaustible vessel of fertility which condemns to death all that is old and finished» (Bakhtin 1984b: 240).

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