

PATRYCJA ANTOSZEK

CARNIVAL REVISITED:
THE RETURN OF THE CLOWN IN THOMAS LIGOTTI'S
"THE LAST FEAST OF HARLEQUIN"

A b s t r a c t. Although carnival as a social phenomenon has been virtually eliminated from cultural life, carnivalesque imagery seems to pervade a lot of contemporary writing. In Thomas Ligotti's "The Last Feast of Harlequin" a modern winter festival turns out to be only a mask for a sinister underground anti-fertility rite. The article explores the ways in which horror literature uses carnival's transgressive potential and leading images to create an ambivalent space of chaos, evil, and perversity. In a truly grotesque reversal of carnival spirit, the Bakhtinian rejuvenating laughter is replaced by a mourning chant and celebration of "many shapes of death." What is more, the dark ceremony in the story may be seen as an enactment of the narrator's own pathological obsessions and private terrors. By revealing a contemporary festival's hidden meaning and function, the story seems to comment upon the very process of the cultural suppression of carnival and gothic fiction's subsequent appropriation of various cultural abjections framed in carnival's ambivalent aesthetics.

Key words: abject, carnival, carnivalesque, clown, gothic, horror literature, transgression.

The use of laughter and the carnivalesque in horror literature has a long tradition. While the Bakhtinian analysis of carnival as a "feast of becoming, change and renewal"¹ focuses primarily on its communal aspect and regenerative powers, carnival's radical questioning of established norms and its subversive potential opens up a "dangerously unstable zone," where perver-

Dr. PATRYCJA ANTOSZEK— Department of American Literature and Culture at the Institute of English Studies, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin; address for correspondence: IFA, Al. Raławickie 14, 20–950 Lublin; e-mail: patbar@kul.pl

¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (1968), trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 10.

sity, anarchy and private terrors come to the fore. As readers of gothic fictions, such as Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" or "The Masque of the Red Death" have realized, carnival, "given a slight shift in imagination, tracks off into the treacherous and transgressive."² Bakhtin's analysis of carnival's ambiguous quality and Terry Castle's of the eighteenth century masquerade both reveal festivity's dangerous potential to disrupt stable categories and revel in the liminal space in between. As a festival of excess and reversal, carnival provides a temporal frame in which what is socially unacceptable and potentially threatening can masquerade as ritual play. "Carnivalesque looseness," Morgan argues, "can open the way to licentious misrule, generating what might be called festive *horror*, a genre in which carnival's 'material bodily principle,' its base of promiscuous carnality, blasphemy, scatology, and ritual degradation, is translated from a comic social discourse into a pathological one."³

The link between the ancient pagan festivities, such as the Roman Saturnalia, the Medieval "feasts of fools" and horror literature is both historical and psychological. In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* Stallybrass and White discuss the process of the suppression of carnival as a cultural practice and the subsequent emergence of such related phenomena as bourgeois hysteria, psychoanalysis and the Gothic. While the Renaissance witnesses the height of carnival life, with the beginning of the seventeenth century carnival as a social practice begins to decline. Displaced from public life, carnival imagery storms into bourgeois literary and artistic discourse as well as into aristocratic salons and ballrooms in the form of "refined mimicry." As the bourgeois consciousness begins to define itself by repudiation and suppression of the physical body as unrefined and vulgar, the grotesque "low-Other" begins to exist as if on the margins of the rational mind as "a raging set of phantoms."⁴ As a consequence of this cultural abjection, the ancient form of carnival with its religious regenerative meaning and communal character becomes aestheticized and replaced by a whole series of carnivalistic forms of "an externally decorative sort," such as court masquerades, the circus or theatre pantomime. At the same time, the carnivalesque love of excess and transgression is taken up by the Romantic

² Jack Morgan, *The Biology of Horror. Gothic Literature and Film* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002), 132.

³ Morgan, *The Biology of Horror*, 135.

⁴ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), 105.

gothic fiction, while Bakhtin's utopian, optimistic model acquires a darker, more sinister aspect. As Allon White puts it,

Romanticism's gothic moment was the formation of the long night's festival—interiorized, privatized, indissolubly linked to the individual psyche structured around transgressive thrill... From romanticism through postmodernism we encounter again and again the dismembered fragments of the social carnivalesque body—its symbols, its elements, its members. But now, lodged in bourgeois fictions rather than in social action, they are privatized, cut off from social protest and pleasure and assimilated to the subjective unconscious. Less and less the figures of social celebration and communal pleasures, they are the emblems of alienated desire, paranoid fantasy and the individual will-to-power.⁵

In the uncanny mixture of comedy and horror, the carnivalesque and the unconscious, “[s]omething frightening is revealed in that which was habitual and secure.”⁶

The darker possibilities of carnival and its transformation from a positive, regenerating ritual to a clandestine, morbid “subterranean sabbath” are explored in Thomas Ligotti's story “The Last Feast of Harlequin” (1990). Written in homage to H. P. Lovecraft, and very much in the tradition of Edgar Allan Poe, this contemporary gothic tale is narrated by a depressed anthropologist focused on exploring “the significance of the clown figure in diverse cultural contexts.”⁷ Prompted by a colleague to investigate an annual festival held in December in the town of Mirocaw, he decides to take part in the winter celebrations and himself perform the role of a clown. While at first the narrator's interest in the festival appears to be mainly academic, it soon becomes clear that his real motives are more personal and related to some “inward conditions” (428). As he confesses, for many years he has suffered from profound depression, “this dark malady, this recurrent despondency in which [he] would become buried when it came time for the earth to grow cold and bare and the skies heavy with shadows” (428). He hopes, therefore, that his participation in the Winter Solstice ritual, where he could play the clown himself, would “diminish the weight of [his] seasonal despair” (428). The narrator's scholarly preoccupation with the figure of the clown is then strongly linked to his personal obsession: his academic career has been devoted entirely to the probing of “the esoterics of celebration” (420).

⁵Allon White, “Pigs and Pierrots: The Politics of Transgression in Modern Fiction,” *Raritan* 2 (1982), 2: 54–5.

⁶Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 39.

⁷Thomas Ligotti, “The Last Feast of Harlequin,” *American Gothic Tales*, ed. by Joyce Carol Oates (New York: Plume, 1996), 420. All subsequent parenthetical references will be to this edition.

Although the Mirocaw festival does not exist in any official record, Ligotti's narrator, or what he calls "the subconscious scholar" in him, finds himself mysteriously drawn to this new research project. The fictional town of Mirocaw, like gothic fiction in general, appears as an uncanny landscape. To reach the town the character has to leave the main highway and take a rather labyrinthine route which marks the boundary between the ordinary reality and the anomalous, almost surrealist world of Mirocaw. Its disturbing topography and disproportional buildings seem to violate the rules of Euclidean geography:

The parts of the town did not look as if they adhered very well to one another... Behind some of the old stores in the business district, steeply roofed houses had been erected on a sudden incline, their peaks appearing at an extraordinary elevation above the lower buildings. And because the foundation of these houses could not be glimpsed, they conveyed the illusion of being either precariously suspended in air, threatening to topple down, or else constructed with unnatural loftiness in relation to their width and mass. This situation also created a weird distortion of perspective. The two levels of structures overlapped each other without giving the sense of depth, so that the houses, because of their higher elevation and nearness to the foreground buildings, did not appear diminished in size as background objects should. Consequently, a look of flatness, as in a photograph, predominated in this area. (422)

The distorted perspective and bizarre geometry of the buildings intensifies the feeling of anxiety created by the fact that the town, as a typical gothic space, is much larger inside than it appeared from the outside. The seven miles between the highway and the outskirts of the town also seem extraordinarily long and full of unexpected detours marking "a divide between ordinary and demonic place."⁸

More importantly, however, underneath Mirocaw's one-dimensional façade there seems to exist the town's gruesome underbelly, the locus of what the society has "othered" away. Consequently, Mirocaw appears to be divided into the "desirable" and "undesirable" sections, or the slums, inhabited by shabby looking, desolate creatures—a kind of "pariah clan existing outside yet within the community" (442). These phantom-like beings—decrepit, lethargic, almost states of living death—seem to exist between life and death, the material and immaterial. Their "nauseating passivity and languor" (440) provoke a feeling of fear and disgust, while the "ghetto down the hill," full of dilapidated buildings and neglected places represents a "lapsed zone"

⁸ Morgan, *The Biology of Horror*, 199.

where the city “is not managing to put up a civilized front—where its fly is open and its nose running.”⁹ Situated in the *southern* part of the town and *down* the hill, the Mirocaw slums with their miserable inhabitants function as the repository of the cultural unconscious, the “unadorned areas of the communal psyche.”¹⁰ Ligotti’s narrator makes the following observation: “Mirocaw has another coldness within its cold [...]. Another set of buildings and streets that exists behind the visible town’s façade like a world of disgraceful back alleys” (435).

Not surprisingly, it is this ghostly community that turns out to play the crucial role in Ligotti’s perverse contemporary version of the ancient fertility rite. As Mirocaw transforms into an enclave of contemporary Saturnalia, the narrator authoritatively explains that “Saturn is also the planetary symbol of melancholy and sterility” and soon discovers that “there is a conflict within the winter festival itself” (440). Apart from the “sanctioned” festival clowns, there appears to exist another group of carnival jesters evoking the morbid figure from Edvard Munch’s “The Scream”: “The thin, smooth, and pale head; the wide eyes; the oval-shaped features resembling nothing so much as the skull-faced, screaming creature in that famous painting” (440). This “clownish imitation,” the narrator observes, “rivalled the original in suggesting stricken realms of abject horror and despair: an inhuman likeness more proper to something under the earth than upon it” (440).¹¹

The intimation of these creatures’ subterranean existence is confirmed in the story’s climactic scene when the clowns descend into a dark chamber under the earth, transform into gigantic worms and literally devour the festival’s fertility queen.¹² In what is clearly an *anti*-fertility rite, or an uncanny reversal of the carnivalesque renewal ceremony, the Bakhtinian

⁹ Morgan, *The Biology of Horror*, 185.

¹⁰ Morgan, *The Biology of Horror*, 185.

¹¹ While the dismal creatures may seem at first to be a negation of everything that a carnival jester should represent, they have a lot in common with the modern image of Harlequin. Adapted from the farcical characters of the *commedia dell’arte*, both Harlequin and Pierrot, once robust and scandalous carnival clowns, reemerge in the nineteenth and twentieth century as emblems of artistic alienation. In the act of bourgeois appropriation they, like carnival itself, become desocialised and left to represent sadness, loneliness and melancholy (cf. White. “Pigs and Pierrots,” 56).

¹² As Jason Marc Harris notes, it is etymologically fitting that the clowns turn out to be worms. He quotes Noel Carroll, who explains that clowns derive from “words that meant ‘clod,’ ‘clot’ and ‘lump’ – that is, formless masses of stuff, like earth or clay.” Therefore, Harris points out, “it seems Ligotti’s clownish worms are returning to their roots in a linguistic, religious, and existential sense.” (1254)

rejuvenating laughter is replaced by the morbid dirge: “[i]t was a choir of sorrow, of shrieking, delirium, and of shame... Their ideals were those of darkness, chaos, and a melancholy half-existence consecrated to all the many shapes of death” (449). As is typical in the Gothic, the monstrous, phantom-like beings incarnate fears and anxieties that are projected into these figures by middle-class writers and readers. Ligotti’s narrator reminds the reader that “[c]lowns had often had ambiguous and sometimes contradictory roles to play” and “the jolly, well-loved joker familiar to most people is actually but one aspect of this protean creature” (434). As a liminal figure, the clown “lurk[s] between accustomed categories ... undercutting its victims’ sense of reality.”¹³ Existing on the borderline between the material and non-material, human and non-human, life and death, Ligotti’s morbid clowns turn out to be the embodiment of the in-between conditions and obsessions that the middle-class subjects have to “throw under,” or *abject* in order to sustain a proper sense of self. In her *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva defines abjection as the process of “throwing off” or suppressing the original state of “the Real,” that is of being half-inside and half-outside the body of the mother at the moment of birth. However, what is expelled is never completely erased from the subject’s consciousness: “while releasing a hold, [abjection] does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger.”¹⁴ The liminal situation of being inside and outside, dead and alive at the same time is, then, “othered” away and approached by the self with a mixture of fear and fascination, disgust and desire. In Ligotti’s story, the ghostly inhabitants of the ghetto become the incarnation of that Other that the middle classes loathe and fear, and therefore feel the need to abject. The story’s narrator writes in his diary: “the normal residents of the town regard those from the ghetto, and especially their clown figures, with superstition. Yet, it’s more than that: there is fear, perhaps a kind of hatred—the particular kind of hatred resulting from some powerful and irrational memory” (443). In a truly Bakhtinian sense, then, “[a]ll that was terrifying becomes grotesque.”¹⁵

¹³ Jason Marc Harris, “Smiles of Oblivion: Demonic Clowns and Doomed Puppets as Fantastic Figures of Absurdity, Chaos, and Misanthropy in the Writings of Thomas Ligotti,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 45 (2012), 6: 1250.

¹⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 9.

¹⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 91.

In what seems to be an almost literal enactment of the return to the primordial state of the Real, the dark ritual of the “cadaverous clowns” involves moving through a “snug little tunnel” (448) into an underground chamber where it is much warmer than outside in the darkness of the forest. As the clowns metamorphose into worms, with a “mouthing umbilicus” for a face, they seem to return to an earlier stage of development. In an article devoted to the meaning of the Mirocaw festival, the narrator’s former professor, Dr. Thoss, alludes to a mysterious sect of the Syrian Gnostics, who believed that “mankind was created by angels who were in turn created by the Supreme Unknown. The angels, however, did not possess the power to make their creation an erect being and for a time he crawled upon the earth like a worm. Later, the Creator remedied this grotesque state of affairs” (427). In the light of this theory, the dark clowns’ final metamorphosis becomes a return to mankind’s true origin as well as a symbolic confirmation of its ultimate condition. At the same time, the worm-shaped beings epitomize the Kristevan unfinished body – a repulsive and terrifying symbol of the abject. The feast in which the goddess of vegetation, like her mother twenty years earlier, falls prey to the worms, is the celebration of death and “the triumph of the anti-reproductive over the reproductive.”¹⁶ In contrast to the Bakhtinian view of death as a hybrid process which includes birth, Ligotti’s underground ceremony enacts only the downward movement, which excludes the possibility of regeneration.¹⁷

Thus, it becomes clear for both the narrator and the reader that “the brightness of an artificial spring” (438), which decorates the streets of Mirocaw, is but a mask to cover “an entirely independent festival—a festival within a festival” (442). The narrator speculates that the Mirocaw winter feast “appeared after the festival of those depressingly pallid clowns, in order to cover it up or mitigate its effect” (442), while the bright “official” jesters serve only as “substitute figures for those dark-eyed mummers of the slums” (443). In this case of what Allon White calls “displaced abjection,”¹⁸ the ghetto clowns and all they represent may be “symbolically confronted and conquered through their counterparts, who are elected for precisely this function” (443). In this way, Ligotti’s story comments on carnival’s less obvious meaning and function: the use of grotesque imagery, fascination with bodily functions, defilement and degradation, as well as ambivalent

¹⁶ Thomas Ligotti quoted in Harris, p. 1263.

¹⁷ Cf. Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 174.

¹⁸ White. “Pigs and Pierrots,” 67.

laughter may serve to symbolically mediate the most uncomfortable aspects of human life. Carnavalesque authorized transgression creates space for such symbolic confrontation; it allows the celebrants as well as the readers of gothic fictions to approach, from a safe distance, the monstrosity of their own physicality and death. But the story also illustrates Stallybrass and White's view of carnival as "the 'staging' of the normally *repressed poles* of certain binary structures through which a culture thinks itself" and its ability to "mediate into periodic ritual the culturally structured 'otherness' of its governing categories."¹⁹ Ligotti's narrator, whose scholarly interest in the winter festival makes him an outsider to the crowd, but who loves to play the clown himself and cherishes this role as nothing else in his life, seems to embody the contemporary subject split between his bourgeois sensibility and fascination with the low, the communal, and the grotesque.

At the same time, Ligotti's story may also be read as a commentary on the very process of the cultural suppression of carnival and gothic fiction's subsequent appropriation of carnival's aesthetic and cathartic functions. Mirocaw's flatness, its neat facades and artificial brightness of celebration, together with the clowns dressed in Santa Claus costumes, appear to be a trivialized contemporary version of the traditional carnival spirit. The ancient ritual, Ligotti suggests, takes place underground or inside the mind of his respectful narrator, that is outside the official festival structures. In its grotesquely perverted form, the dark ceremony appears to be an enactment of the character's own pathological obsessions and private terrors. The narrator's scholarly interest in carnival and clowns, whom he sees as "terrible reminders of the forces of disorder in the world" (434), seems only a disguise for his deeper preoccupation with what threatens his own dissolution as a proper middle-class subject. "He is one of us... He has *always* been one of us," the narrator hears when he tries to run away from the underground cave. In what could be only a projection of his death-infected psyche and a morbid spectacle of personal phobias, the narrator, but also the reader, have to face their deeply buried fears and contradictions, which the contemporary culture has cast into the form of gothic monsters and evil clowns. The horror in Ligotti's tale results, to a large extent, from the fact that "driven in upon the interior darkness of the individual unconscious" the carnivalesque proves "indistinguishable from nightmare and sickness."²⁰

¹⁹ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 189.

²⁰ White. "Pigs and Pierrots," 61.

In its combination of macabre aesthetics and psychological horror, “The Last Feast of Harlequin” is a nod to both Lovecraft and Poe, and the contemporary turn-of-the-century gothic narrative in which what is “othered” away returns as “otherness-in-ourselves.”²¹ However, while the carnivalesque in the story is literally “thrown under” in the act of suppression and distancing of the “low-Other,” Ligotti’s festive horror—like a lot of gothic literature – acquires a new type of purifying potential. As William Veeder observes, “Gothic is reborn at the moment when psychoanalysis is born and carnival is dying, thus helping to assure that healing remains available to repression’s many.”²²

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. 1968. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Harris, Jason Marc. “Smiles of Oblivion: Demonic Clowns and Doomed Puppets as Fantastic Figures of Absurdity, Chaos, and Misanthropy in the Writings of Thomas Ligotti.” *The Journal of Popular Culture*. 45 (2012), 6: 1249–1265.
- Hogle, Jerrold E. “The Gothic at our Turn of the Century: Our Culture of Simulation and the Return of the Body.” In *The Gothic*. Ed. Fred Botting, 153–179. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Ligotti, Thomas. “The Last Feast of Harlequin.” *American Gothic Tales*. Ed. Joyce Carol Oates. New York: Plume, 1996.
- Morgan, Jack. *The Biology of Horror. Gothic Literature and Film*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002.
- Stallybrass, Peter, and Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. London: Methuen, 1986.
- Veeder, William. “The Nurture of the Gothic; or, how can a Text be both Popular and Subversive?” In *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography*. Ed. Glennis Byron and David Punter, 54–70. London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1999.
- Vice, Sue. *Introducing Bakhtin*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997.
- White, Allon. “Pigs and Pierrots: The Politics of Transgression in Modern Fiction.” *Raritan* 2 (1982), 2: 51–70.

²¹ Cf. Jerrold E. Hogle, “The Gothic at our Turn of the Century: Our Culture of Simulation and the Return of the Body,” in *The Gothic*, ed. Fred Botting (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 157.

²² William Veeder. “The Nurture of the Gothic; or, how can a Text be both Popular and Subversive?”, in *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography*, ed. Glennis Byron and David Punter (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1999), 69.

OBLICZA KARNAWAŁU:
POWRÓT KLAUNA W OPOWIADANIU THOMASA LIGOTTIEGO
„THE LAST FEAST OF HARLEQUIN”

Streszczenie

Mimo że karnawał jako zjawisko społeczne został niemal zupełnie wyeliminowany z życia kulturalnego, elementy karnawałowej estetyki odnaleźć można w wielu współczesnych tekstach literackich. W opowiadaniu Thomasa Ligottiego „The Last Feast of Harlequin” karnawałowe święto okazuje się jedynie maską dla ponurego, podziemnego rytuału. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie jednego ze sposobów, w jaki literatura horroru wykorzystuje transgresję i karnawałową poetykę do tworzenia własnej ambiwalentnej przestrzeni. Przeróżający podziemny rytuał w opowiadaniu jest nie tylko groteskowym odwróceniem bachtinowskiego „święta głupców”, ale także odzwierciedleniem osobistych lęków i obsesji narratora. Odsłaniając ciemne aspekty współczesnego świętowania, opowiadanie Ligottiego staje się komentarzem na temat samego procesu marginalizacji praktyk karnawałowych i jednoczesnego pojawienia się poetyki karnawałowej w literaturze gotyckiej.

Streściła Patrycja Antoszek

Słowa kluczowe: abiekt, karnawał, klaun, gotyk, literatura horroru, transgresja.