

Carnivalising the Sacred: A Bakhtinian Approach to Nikos Kazantzakis' *Christ Recrucified*

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This paper applies Mikhail Bakhtin's insights on carnival and carnivalised literature to Kazantzakis' Christ Recrucified, in an attempt to unearth the subversive elements inherent in the transfigurative novel. The term carnival signifies a long, complex set of traditions and rituals practiced and especially prevalent in the Middle Ages culminating in public spectacles. Ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions and various genres of billingsgate are the three distinct forms of its manifestation. Carnival celebrates "liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order" (Rabelais and His World 10). During carnival, no life exists outside the festival; there are no idle spectators but only participants. Bakhtin characterizes carnival as the working out of a "new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of non-carnival life" (Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics 123). He adds that it "brings together, unifies, weds and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid" (123). There is a co-mingling of all society in the carnival space.

Carnivalised literature emulates the spirit and function of the carnival. Its public square is the page written for the reader/audience. It subverts authority and hierarchy and temporarily equates and eliminates social boundaries. It is oppositional to the formal and hierarchical official culture. Being heteroglossic they contain a polyphony of many voices. Carnivalised literature questions the hegemony of empire, ridicules those in power and delights in reversals. It operates in the context of a two world condition – the official world of rules and hierarchy and then a second world outside of officialdom filled with reversals. Bakhtin writes:

Carnival festivities and comic spectacle and rituals connected with them...offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside of officialdom, a world in which all people participated more or less, in which they lived during a given time of the year (Rabelais and His World 6).

The text becomes the carnival space in carnivalised literature and subsumes the second world of reversals. In this space, like in real carnival, the monologic vision of everyday life (perpetuated by the official hierarchical church and the ruling hegemonic powers) is mocked and the heteroglot experiences of all common people are celebrated.

The carnival represents a utopian space with religious and political implications. It represents the release of a public unconscious from the control of the restrictions of the official church and the state. This unconscious is transposed into narrative, in carnivalised literature, through heteroglossia. Heteroglossia is the novelistic deployment of a "multiplicity of social

voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships” (The Dialogic Imagination 263). All utterances (texts) possess a centrifugal force (dispersing) through the individual act of speech and a centripetal force (unifying) through the notion of a unified language. This heteroglossic nature of utterances/texts, by ensuring a multiplicity of voices, places literature into maximal contact with the world. It gives literature a theoretical relevance to the society as the text becomes a site for class, religious, or ethnic conflict. Thus carnivalised literature, through heteroglossia, celebrates difference and otherness and so becomes a useful tool for those suffering injustice. Hence carnivalised literature is subversive in essence and the vice versa could also be true in certain senses.

Bakhtin’s emphasis on the subversive effects of carnival is attributed mainly to the fact that he wrote his theory under the totalitarian regime of Joseph Stalin. For Bakhtin equality of the masses is a particularly interesting feature of the carnival. He says,

in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession and age...This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life...permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times” (Rabelais and His World 10).

The carnivalised experience is opposed to all that is “ready-made and completed, to all pretence at immutability” (11). Resident in it is a logic of “numerous parodies and travesties” (11). Carnival, as Bakhtin recreates it, allows the participants to be free from the hegemony of the church and the state.

Christ Recrucified – The Narrative

Set in the Greek village of Lycovrissi, *Christ Recrucified* tells the story of a band of friends who are selected to emote the roles of Christ and his three closest disciples – John, Peter, and James, in a passion play. Manolios, Michelis, Yannakos and Kostandis are chosen to incarnate Christ, John, Peter and James respectively. They are so overwhelmed by their roles that they try to identify with them and in the process end up living their roles in real life. Lycovrissi was under Turkish occupation and the Agha was their representative in the village. He detested the Christians, yet they were subservient to his political authority. Pope Gregoris, the village parson was the representative of the Greek Orthodox Church. As the head of the religious domain he headed a parallel power structure having unquestioned dominion over the villagers. This self-proclaimed official dispenser of God in the village is selfish and self-seeking to the core. A group of Christian refugees, tormented by the Turks, who come to Lycovrissi under the leadership of pope Fotis is denied succour by the self-important Pope Gregoris. But, Manolios and his friends, against the will and pleasure of Pope Gregoris and the village notables, help the refugees to settle on Mount Sarakina, near the village.

As the novel progresses each character imbibes the qualities of the figures whose parts they were to play. Agha’s minion Yousuffaki is murdered and he imprisons the village notables, threatening to kill them by turns until the culprit is caught. Like Christ, the innocent Manolios owns up the crime to save the village. But, Katarina, the prostitute, playing the role of Mary Magdalene, intervenes by confessing to be the criminal. As winter approaches, the refugees on Mount Sarakina reel under impoverishment. Manolios, who has been carving the face of Christ

on wood finally discovers that the face is not peaceful but fierce like a warrior's. He decides to lead the refugees into the village to take possession of their inheritance willed by Michelis. Pope Gregoris conspires with Panayotaros, the Judas designate, and misinforms the Agha that Manolios is a Bolshevik and hence a threat to the Turks. In the ensuing fight Panatotaros kills Manolios, who like Christ becomes a sacrifice.

Subversion through Transfiguration

Christ Recrucified is not a fictionalizing biography of Jesus like the novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*. It is a Jesus-transfiguration novel in which the characters and the action are pre-figured very obviously and evidently by figures and events popularly associated with the life of Jesus and the other stories of the Bible. Kazantzakis transfigures the Biblical narratives for the same reason that Bakhtin devises the trope of Carnival – for subversion. The transfigurations in the novel are subversive revisitations into Biblical events, in a triadic sense. On the primary level the protagonist Manolios and his opposition to the institutionalised Orthodox Church and Pope Gregoris, its representative, parody Christ and the official Judaism of the Bible. On the secondary level the Turks, their political representative in Lycovrissi, the Agha and the Christian community's hatred for them, parody the Romans, their representative in Galilee/Judea, Herod/Pilate and the hatred of Jews for them. Finally, on the tertiary level, Kazantzakis postulates a new definition for Christ and a novel interpretation for Christianity, when the Christ-figure Manolios is accused to be a Bolshevik and is alleged to be spreading communism in revolt towards the Turkish occupation. Concisely these levels are: the religious, the political and the ideological, respectively. A Bakhtinian approach to these subversive levels reveals a world of carnival and carnivalesque-grotesque in the novel.

Prophetic Kerygma and Decadent Religion

In *Christ Recrucified*, Kazantzakis, through Manolios, revolts against the vitiated creeds of the institutionalized church. Soon after Manolios' investiture as the Christ of the passion play, he disagrees with Pope Gregoris on the issue of the refugees. Like Christ, he acts on humanitarian grounds to help those people in need whereas the Pope denies them help. He says to the pope, "Pope Gregori, Father...listen to their voice. Christ is hungry, He is asking alms" (*Christ Recrucified* 48). The carnivalesque inversion begins here as the religious head is divested of his custody of God's precepts and the independent layman, a shepherd, assumes the role of the interpreter of God. We hear Pope Gregoris saying, "God speaks by my mouth, mine!...You cannot talk with him direct! It is through me that his word passes" (65). This has parallels with how Christ himself interpreted God to men in ways different from that of the official interpretations of Judaism and its high priests. Manolios is denounced by pope Gregoris just as Christ himself was reprobated by the Jewish leaders by being called a mere carpenter. Pope Gregoris says to him, "Impertinent Manolios...Go and look after your sheep. That is the place God has assigned to you; do not try to go higher"(283). Similar to the way in which the Jewish leaders branded Christ as an ally of Beelzebub, Pope Gregoris denigrates Manolios by saying, "Here is Antichrist" (304). This parody of biblical events is characteristic of the carnivalesque-grotesque, as identified by Bakhtin.

Parody, travesty and burlesque are three related techniques, called "forms of the mask" (Rabelais and His World 40) by Bakhtin. Travesty or an exaggerated parody is found very conspicuously in the novel where Pope Gregoris tries to appease the Agha by offering up a girl to

satiate his minion Brahimaki's concupiscence. This is a travesty of many such incidents in the Bible. Through this incident Kazantzakis advertently alludes to the new role religion as the pimp for political powers. This reference to an unholy nexus is subversion of the highest degree. Here is also a debasement, to the lowest level, of a sacred office. According to Bakhtin it is a part of the carnivalesque. He says, "The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal..."(19). Apparent in this disapprobation of the institutionalized religion is Kazantzakis' own reservations concerning religion. His efforts to liberate Christ from the stranglehold of the Church and to release him to the public space of the ordinary man's life and experience finds fruition in the novel and it reveals the politics of his spirituality. Manolios' retort to the cursing pope is nothing but Kazantzakis' own sentiment: "It is you, the popes, who crucified Christ. If he came down upon earth again, you would crucify him afresh" (Christ Recrucified 305). This is exactly what Kazantzakis had to say to the Church! And it is portentous that towards the end of the novel Manolios, (the Christ-figure) is killed, significantly on the eve of Christmas. Pope Gregoris says to the beadle, "and wash the stones quickly; don't forget that tonight, at midnight, we are celebrating the birth of Christ" (465). In this paradoxical situation, the degradation and downward movement of the Church inadvertently gives way to a regenerative prospect on a different level. Bakhtin is relevant here as he says, "only if something dies, can it spring up to new life (Rabelais and His World 20).

The Realpolitik of Discourse

In Kazantzakis' novel, significantly placed, there is a surreptitiously veiled attack on the Turks. Kazantzakis' nationalist fervour finds expression in these clandestine blitzes, camouflaged as humorous references to the Turkish presence. The Christians of the village live grudgingly under the yoke of foreign occupation. In their private conversations they engage in discussions against the Turks. Even while engaging with the Turks in their daily lives, the Christians resent their presence. This is a parody of the grudge that the Jews harboured against the Romans who ruled over them. Captain Fortounas, one of the village notable, expresses this sentiment well. Even while carousing with the Agha, his heart goes out to the refugees who are Greeks like him. Instead of apprising him of the developments of the encounter between the popes, he joins the refugee pope in glorifying Greece and singing the national hymn. Standing on Agha's balcony and drunk on his liquor, he thinks to himself, "We Greeks are an immortal race. In vain they uproot us, burn us, cut our throats: they can't make us lower our flag!" (Christ Recrucified 43). But this resentment does not prevent them from colluding with the Turks to annihilate apparent threats to them. This is evident when Pope Gregoris seeks the help of the Agha to subdue Manolios. He fiddles with facts and coaxes the Agha into believing that Manolios was a threat to the Turks, as he was a Bolshevik. This is exactly what the leaders of the Jews did with regard to Christ as well. If it was Christ's discourses about the Kingdom of God that was used by the Jews to trouble the Romans, it is Manolios' ostensible affinity towards bolshevism that is used to provoke the Turk.

That Kazantzakis presents the Agha almost always as carousing, is not without significance. The overindulgence in physical pleasures (drinking and homosexual excesses) is ridiculed here in a carnivalesque manner to signify the moral depravity of the Turks. The Agha's insouciance is primarily a result of his wallowing in the pleasures of the body. He comes across as a clownish figure with no real consequence, but for the political clout. When he discovers that it is Hussein, his guard, who killed his minion Youssoufaki, he mutilates the guard: "The Agha

threw himself on him, tore his breeches down, grabbed his private parts, hacked them off at one blow and flung them upon the corpse of Youssoufaki, right in the middle of the jasmines” (242). This description is characteristic of carnivalesque-grotesque where body parts play an important role. In the dismembering of the body, the insides of the body are revealed thereby becoming a site of comedy (although not laughable). Kazantzakis’ intents here are clearly to denigrate the Turks by ridiculing their power structures and repressive apparatuses (the guard) and to repugn the hegemony of the empire.

The Allurments of Ideology

Kazantzakis’ political convictions have had nationalist, bolshevik, metacommunist and socialist stages and his philosophical ideas owe their debt to Jesus, Buddha, Nietzsche, Lenin, Odysseus and St. Francis. He had a complex relation to Lenin, Russia and Marx. He considered Lenin, like Christ, to be a gift for the modern world. His enthusiasm for socialism and his admiration for Lenin and communist Russia are reflected in the novel very well. The Bolshevik revolution of Russia had a great impact on him and the Bourgeois system was no longer a satisfactory social system for him. Bolshevism rose in his mind as a strong alternative to the exploitative bourgeois system and he even started calling himself a Bolshevik. It is in this context that *Christ Recrucified* must be read. The protagonist of the novel, Manolios, has certain resemblances to Kazantzakis himself (like the skin disease he had twice, similar to the disfiguration and restoration of Manolios’ face).

There is a multiplicity of social voices in the novel with regard to the issue of Bolshevism – that of the bourgeois (the Patriarcheas and Ladas), the religion, the imperial power (the Agha) and the proletariat (Manolios). It makes the text a site for class and religious conflict. The Patriarcheas is ignorant of the meaning of Bolshevism though he knows what is happening in Russia. He asks Manolios furiously:

Are we to make this place a second Russia? Country where they eat each other, where everyone tramples on his neighbour, where there is no difference anymore between masters and lackeys, where the louse – Lord have mercy on us – has grown as big as the tortoise? (303).

These are the fulminations of a threatened bourgeois, faced with the dread of losing his property. Here he seems to know the implications. But when Panayotaros says to him that Manolios is a Bolshevik, he asks for an explanation of the term. And he says “That means: If you want to eat, you help yourself, and if you want anything, you grab it! It’s a band of brigands that’s been ploughing up the world for some time now...” (310). Father Ladas (a village notable), another threatened bourgeois, has this perverted interpretation for Bolshevism as he explains to the Agha, “they want there to be no rich and poor anymore; only poor. To be no masters and raias anymore; only raias. There! No your wife and mine any more; all free for all!” (363).

Along with the anxiety of losing property pope Gregoris, the representative of religion, also fears the loss of faith, among the people, in the church. His idea of the church is that of a bourgeois institution. On an occasion, in response to Manolios’s speech, when the people of Lycovrissi prepare to give their properties to the refugees of Sarakina, Pope Gregoris tell them, “The world, remember, rests on four pillars. Along with faith, country and honour the fourth great pillar is property: don’t lay hands on it!... God has made the rich and the poor. Woe to him who dares disturb the order” (283). Manolios questions this capitalist worldview of the

institutionalized church. Hence he is accused of being a Bolshevik. He retorts to the incrimination, “You confess you are a Bolshevik?” (463), by saying, “If Bolshevik means what I have in my spirit, yes, I am a Bolshevik, Father; Christ and I are Bolsheviks” (463). This is reminiscent of a parallel text in the Bible where the high priest asks Jesus, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” and he answers. “I am” (The Holy Bible 884). Manolios practices Christ’s precepts and he is alleged to be a Bolshevik. So he concludes that Christ must also have been one; by which he means Christ’s revolutionary zeal in realizing the Kingdom of God, where all God’s children are equal. The first century Christians understood this well and practiced it before the church became an institution. This is evident in Manolios’ reply when he is asked by the Agha, “Here, tell me frankly what’s meant by Bolshevik?” (363), as he responds “The first Christians, Agha...” (363) before he is interrupted. The implication is that Bolsheviks are the first Christians or vice versa! Kazantzakis seems to be insinuating that Bolshevism is the modern day interpretation and practice of Christ’s words – where an institutionalized church becomes redundant and vacuous.

The Agha behaves like an ignoramus when he is intimidated about the Muscovite’s influence (Lenin), by Pope Gregoris. He says that the Muscovite is far away and he doesn’t want to budge from his pleasures in the village. He doesn’t know who a Bolshevik is, and asks Manolios whether it is a man or a beast or a disease. Certainly, he is aware of the happenings in Russia and the influence of the Muscovite (Lenin) there. But he is uninformed about the ideology of Bolshevism and its implications. He is only agitated by the disturbance caused to his status. Like Pope Gregoris, he is also worried about disturbing God’s order. In these polyphonic responses to Bolshevism, nobody except Manolios, his band of friends and pope Fotis, the refugee pope, is inspired by the prospects of the new ideology. Thus, through heteroglossia, while celebrating difference and otherness in the carnivalesque space of the novel, Kazantzakis invests in the response of Manolios, the fire of revolution. And it becomes a useful tool for those feeling the brunt of injustice (Socio-political and religious).

Manolios explains his actions in a curt statement when he says they were “The words of Christ...Be charitable to the poor, let him who possess two shirts give one, we are all brothers. Nothing else”(304). These words about brotherhood and equality curiously echo Bakhtin’s thought about carnival. For him, the equality of the masses is a unique characteristic of the carnival. In the carnival square, he says,

a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession and age...This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life (Rabelais and His World 10).

Here again we see, ingrained in the primary preoccupation of the novel, carnival sense which is highly subversive in nature.

Conclusion

Though Carnival is not a literary phenomenon, it propagates a carnival sense of the world which continues to exist in literature. Bakhtin explains,

Carnival has worked out an entire language of symbolic concretely symbolic forms – from large and complex mass actions to individual carnivalistic gestures. This language...gave expression to a unified (but complex) carnival sense of the world, permeating all its forms. This language cannot be translated in any full or adequate way into a verbal language, and much less into a language of abstract concepts, but it is amenable to a certain into a language of artistic images that has something in common with its concretely sensuous nature; that is, it can be transported into the language of literature (Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics 122).

Bakhtin coined the term carnivalesque to describe ancient or modern literature influenced by this carnival sense of the world. Literature does not need to depict quintessentially carnivalistic events such as aristocrats and plebeians feasting together to reflect a carnival sense of the world. They may reflect a carnival sense of the world in less obvious ways such as the dialogical opposition by Manolios to the ready-made truths of the institutionalized church and capitalist social system. Obvious carnivalistic imagery like ritual spectacles may be lacking here, yet the novel exhibits a dialogic approach to truth, a propensity for social upheaval and the “pathos of shifts and changes” (140) that characterise the carnivalized literature.

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