

## Humor, Literary Theory and Terror.

By Wisam Mansour

In his theories of the Carnavalesque Mikhail Bakhtin<sup>1</sup> celebrates among other things the lower strata bodily functions. He believes that one of the spirits of the carnival is to celebrate the low, the banal, the popular as opposed to the classic and mainstream. This Bakhtinian notion brought to my mind a joke in the form of an angry exchange among several parts of the body: Brain, Heart, Lungs, Stomach, and Rectum, each disputing its right to the leadership of the body. The Brain declares its right to lead on the merit of its superior functionality and its capability for reasoning; the Heart sees itself as the engine of life; the Stomach contests its assumption for leadership on the noble ground of feeding and nourishing all the body; and finally the Rectum claims with a bang that it is more important than the other contesters, because if it shuts down none of the other organs will be able to function reasonably or properly. The joke has it that the other organs eventually yield and confer leadership upon the Rectum after the latter has shut down for a couple of days.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin, a Russian intellectual and critic, is considered the father of the notions of dialogism and the carnivalesque in literary studies. In his book *Rabelais and His World* (trans. Helene Iswolsky: Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984) he celebrates the spirit of the carnival in the literary tradition because it accentuates the presence of the lower parts of the body and all its manifestations such as defecation, urine, mucus, semen, etc.; and because it “undermines the Kantian duality of subject and object that underlies conventional Western approaches to the relationship between individuals and their surroundings.” See Robert Stam. *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film*. Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkin’s UP, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> The original joke goes like this: “All the organs of the body were having a meeting, trying to decide who was in charge. The brain said: "I should be in charge, because I run all the body's systems, so without me nothing would happen." "I should be in charge," said the heart, "because I pump the blood and circulate oxygen all over the body, so without me you'd all waste away." "I should be in charge," said the stomach, "because I process food and give all of

With the ascendancy of the Rectum, this joke in essence demonstrates Bakhtin's views of the Carnavalesque, on the one hand, and celebrates, on the other hand, a postmodern, deconstructive view that sees the eminence of banality, marginality and the coming of the irrational as a mode of liberation from conventional social and cultural hierarchies.

Scientifically speaking, in terms of life sustaining organs, the brain, the heart, the lungs are seen to be more essential to the body than the rectum. If the heart, the brain or the lungs, for instance, shut down, the body may hardly have few minutes of life before lapsing into eternal unconsciousness. While the collapse of the rectum would eventually lead to degeneration and death, eternal unconsciousness occurs over a longer period of time. In this respect, the so considered primary bodily organs based their primacy on their power to control the life span they can remove from the conscious body and on the speed with which they can do so. And because the rectum is slow in terms of removing life from the body, it is not held in high esteem by the upper organs.

In the joke as well as in the postmodern reality, the Rectum now - armed with Bakhtinian notions of the Carnavalesque, Marxist and Foucauldian<sup>3</sup> notions of

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you energy." "I should be in charge," said the rectum, "because I'm responsible for waste removal." All the other body parts laughed at the rectum and insulted him, so in a huff, he shut down tight. Within a few days, the brain had a terrible headache, the stomach was bloated, and the blood was toxic. Eventually the other organs gave in. They all agreed that the rectum should be the boss."

<http://www.withfriendship.com/jokes/manager/boss-organ.php>

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault is the author of *Discipline and Punish* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* among many other influential books. Foucault contends that the desire for power dictates all motives of the human race. His ideal subject is the person who succeeds in subverting the prevailing order and hierarchies in favor of a new order. See Michel Foucault. *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon, 1984.

knowledge, power and discipline, and a welter of postmodern deconstructive notions of the referentiality of language to language in all forms of textualities including the body as a text- rebels against the hierarchies and power structures that divide the body into upper and lower regions. The Rectum, coming from the lower part of the body and confined to guard and expel the filth of the upper parts of the body, suddenly recognizes its own centrality to the life force of all the organs that occupy and colonize its upper strata.<sup>4</sup> The rectum begins to understand that first of all, it is less malign and treacherous than the brain, the lungs or the heart, as it does not kill instantly or whimsically as they do. One always hears of heart and cerebral attacks that kill on the spot. In medical history there is nothing recorded about a rectum attack! In this respect the rectum sees its benignity as a quality that deserves recognition and celebration by others. The rectum here admittedly expresses its gratitude to some notions inspired by the writings of some postmodern feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, the rectum comes to fully comprehend that it is not without power to take hostage and cripple the other traditionally elitist organs through irrational acts of mutiny and terror.

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<sup>4</sup> This notion is based on deconstruction where the technique of position reversal on a binary opposition scale is employed. In the conventional sense, for example, White is the other of Black. White in logo centrism is given primacy over Black. Deconstruction subverts this order by arguing that White is what it is because of the color Black, and thus Black becomes more important than White as there will be no White without Black, and so on. In negative terms, deconstruction, particularly as articulated by Derrida, has often come to be interpreted as "anything goes" since nothing has any real meaning or truth. See G. Douglas Atkins. *Reading Deconstruction, Deconstructive Reading*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1983.

<sup>5</sup> Some feminist theoreticians stipulate that the subject should, in her struggle to ameliorate her conditions, understand her body, accept it as it is and convert the traits that the other disadvantages her for into points of strength. See Toril Moi. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. London: Methuen, 1985.

The rectum realizes that the brain by virtue of its elitist predispositions will in no normal circumstances condescend to negotiate with it. The rectum cannot plea with the bloody heart or the airy lungs because it is stereotyped by them as foul, low and stuck in feces.<sup>6</sup> In short, the rectum, after situating itself in the discourses of some postcolonial and feminist pundits such as Edward Said's, Homi Bhabha's, Franz Fanon's, and Simone De Beauvoir realizes that it signifies "the rest" and "the other".

Driven by despair and fatal narcissism, and inflame by a revolutionary Marxist ideal it processed some while ago, the rectum realizes that there is nothing to lose but the bodily filth it is confined to live with.<sup>7</sup> It rebels against and terrorizes the other organs in an attempt to gain their recognition. In the joke, the irrationally rebellious rectum coerced the other organs to acknowledge its right to leadership. Ironically enough, though the rectum succeeds in getting what it wants, nothing has changed in its positionality and functionality. It remains a rectum, situated where it was before and is still processing and producing the same product.

The rectum joke marks a postmodern era in which signifiers and signifieds keep referring to each other in a vicious cycle of language detached from real or

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<sup>6</sup> The notions of elitisms and stereotyping are inherently part of Feminist, Marxist and Postcolonial discourses. These theories roughly pose respectively that man, the capitalist and the colonialist are elitists while the woman, the worker and the colonized are seen as inferior and cast into negative stereotypes. See Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. New York: Bantam, 1961; Terry Eagleton. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: UMP, 1983; Edward Said. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

<sup>7</sup> The reference is to Marx's cry for the Proletariat to resist their bourgeois oppressors as they have nothing to lose in the process but their chains. See Louis Althusser. *For Marx*. Harmondsworth, England: Allen Lane, 1969.

universal referents<sup>8</sup>. The joke, like the Bakhtinian carnival, celebrates simultaneously the banality of the irrational and the submission of the rational to the irrational. Since the irrational does not reason, it becomes suicidal.

Postmodern terrorists those days adhere to the rectum's irrational techniques in coercing the other societal organs to yield to their demands. The way the rectum terrorizes the brain into yielding to its demands in the joke, terrorists aspire for similar results in the real world. The blind terror and the ruthless campaigns of intimidation and indiscriminate killings taking place in many parts of the world, especially in the Middle East, are but a manifestation of the work of irrational recta armed by parochial ideals of conflict management, and convoluted readings of postmodern notions of the self and the other.

The post-11-September 2001 era has witnessed the rise and demise of so many recta trying to intimidate and take over control from the other organs without success. In other places recta are still trying hard, and even if at one point or another they temporarily manage to intimidate others into recognizing their presence, they will always remain recta.

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<sup>8</sup> The notion of the arbitrariness of meaning and the referentiality of language to language rather than to a transcendental reality was first introduced by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and then found its way into the discourses of deconstruction via thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes. See Vincent B. Leitch. *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction*. New York: Columbia UP, 1983.