Chapter Two
From Carnival in the Marketplace to Carnival in the Public Square

I think I understand them: they have the impression that the circle they are describing on the ground is a magic circle uniting them like a ring. And their chest swell with an intense feeling of innocence: they are united not by marching like soldiers or fascist formations, but by dancing, like children. What they are trying to spit on the cops’ faces is their innocence.¹

--Milan Kundera

This magic carnival circle publicly marks the line between two parties in Wenceslaus Square: the majorities are those who dance in this circle, and the minorities are excluded from it. The image of the ubiquitous circle is noticeable, since the circle composed by merry participants stabilizes the visible frame in context, and meanwhile has erected as an invisible border to deter the entrance of the unwelcome. Though this carnival circle summons participants with same faith and allows them to transgress social norms when the party is going on, it is never a real carnival. We can tell this by analyzing the composition of the magic circle and the difference between the insiders and outsiders.

It is the ring of radical young men that seemingly shapes as carnival in the public square in “Part Three, The Angels.” Their ring dance decorates this city with carnivalesque revelry, yet it merely completes the distinction of unfriendly exclusiveness. Its exclusiveness means no hostility to the outsiders, but indicates its limited mission to collect people with common faith. Most characters in this novel do

¹ The quotation is from “Part III, the Angels,” The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, p88.
not belong to this circle, for they think and laugh differently from the people holding hands. Furthermore, it is these people with different thoughts and incongruous laughter that catch Kundera’s attention and lie in the foreground of this book. Being crossed out from this circle is not merely Clementis’ or Mirek’s destiny, Sarah, Tamina, and Jan all share the complex when outsiders find the biased circle deterring them from the merry crowds. Like the forbidden characters, Kundera knows that once being left out from this circle, he would no longer be allowed to participate in this public carnival. After being expelled from the Communist Party, Kundera has found this magic circle unapproachable. To describe this situation, he said, “I wandered among them, I came very close to them, but I was forbidden to enter any of their rings.” Since a circle is a closed formation, “if you go away from it, there is no way back (BLF 92).” However, this circle not only divides people into two parties, but also metaphorically distinguishes angels from the devil. People of the magic circle, like angels, can fly high and laugh in the sky, while outsiders merely wander around the border as the wingless lonely devil. As Kundera, like a falling devil, is expelled from the magic ring, the majorities, circling like angels, laugh and dance, yell and spit, with innocence.

**The Crowd of the Magic Circle**

This magic circle preserves popular-festive idea of carnival, but it is preserved only for innocent, angelic participants. This restricted festive representation is dichotomous to the carnival we have known, since carnival, according to Mikhail Bakhtin’s interpretation, is a short-term festival before fasting Lent when people are allowed to temporarily suspend “the entire social system with all its prohibitions and hierarchic barriers” (RW 89). ² When angelic people wildly dance in the public square, religious cult is never their concern; their modern carnival is a political event. It is a

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² This quotation is from Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*. This book is henceforth abbreviated as *RW* for convenience.
circle composed by young men in jeans and T-shirts with common Communist faith, occupying the center of the street. They circle by hands and dance, taking two steps in place, stepping forward first the left leg, and then the right. As they dance gaily, they ignore the presence of the official system—the police in rows behind them. On the very day after the Bohemian surrealist\(^3\) being hanged for false charge, they frenziedly dance hand in hand to keep their hands clean in the same place. Like naughty innocent angels, these young men even try to spit on the cops’ faces, showing their least concern and most contempt for the authority. However, once only these angelic men are allowed to participate in this circle, they unconsciously transform this carnival into a private affair, instead of a popular-festive celebration. They hold this carnival neither for temporarily emancipating themselves from social codes nor for challengingly turning over the hierarchy. Under the watch of the police, these young men are allowed to participate in this carnival to show their innocence.

A Phony Carnival Circle

This magic circle in Wenceslaus Square seemingly contains the form of carnival but fundamentally changes its carnivalesque essence. This very result derives from the presence of the police and the composition of the chosen participants. Firstly, cautiously under arms, the police behind the magic ring ambiguously bridge the official system and the carnival crowd. They play double roles at the carnival scene, for representing both the custodians of the people and the guardians of the authorities. They tolerate despiteful spits and skittish derision from the crowd without a grudge. On the other hand, they scrupulously examine any hidden inverse speech or action within this carnival. As they accept the derision and mockery from the magic circle, they carefully discourage these young men from violating the official system.

\(^3\) Zavis Kalandra (1902-1950), a Czech surrealist poet and friend of both Andre Breton and Paul Eluard, was unjustly accused betrayer and hanged in June 1950. Kundera describes this event in “Part III, The Angels,” p 92-93.
Although the magic ring expresses its carnival spirit by temporarily deriding and suspending the official system, this can be demonstrated only with the permission of the authorities concerned. That is, this carnival in Prague is on the watch by the authorities. The second is the exclusiveness of this carnival. Only men with common Communist faith are allowed to participate in this magic circle. Once this magic circle sides with the Communist government, its inverse essence to threaten the authorities concerned dismantles at the same time. As a consequence, participants of this carnival are regarded innocent for their common faith and their inoffensive carnival. People of the same faith heartedly embrace their Communist government, dancing and spitting on the cops’ faces without being falsely charged or expelled. Though this magic circle of loose manners preserves the popular-festive appearance of carnival, its function to temporarily invert the official system disappears in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.

**The Problematics of this Thesis**

Before we examine the carnival in Wenceslaus Square, we have to bear in mind that the “Prague” in this novel “is not described in its politico-historico-social aspect but as a fundamental existential situation” (*Art 39*) mentioned by Kundera in *The Art of the Novel*.\(^4\) It is against Kundera’s intention if we stiffly relate the plot to the sociopolitical context from a historical perspective, or to meticulously restore the memories of characters while we ignore the importance of laughter for them. Since this background represents less the maelstrom since the take-over of Communist Party than “a fundamental existential situation” of a paradoxical carnival, where some are deprived of their free pass. Carnival is desperately wanted for all in the age when the contents of carnival have changed. In “Part I, Lost Letters,” the carnival of modern Prague is held when

\(^4\) This book is henceforth abbreviated as *Art* for convenience.
the guardians of the idyll saw themselves forced to remove microphones from private apartments, the borders were opened, and the notes were escaping from the enormous Bach score for everyone to sing in his own way. It was an unbelievable gaiety, it was a carnival!” (BLF 19).

It is the “unbelievable gaiety” derived from the pleasure of transgressing social codes or demolishing borders as carnival aims that paradoxically creates the illusion of carnival. The illusion enables the police to invade the private apartments and allows everyone to sing and dance in his own way. Then, we see one lives in a place where the police can violate his apartment for no prohibitions when he dances in the angelic circle. Indeed, both the police and the individual can enjoy the pleasant moments to transgress the laws while demolish borders of social systems as in carnival. But carnival composed only by some groups of disordered people is no carnival.

Yet, even if Kundera intends to reveal a carnival out of tune, he simultaneously represents the essence of carnival in depicting the idiosyncratic laughter from those people outside this magic circle. People crossed out from the public carnival are no sheeplike angels who never doubt the totalitarian rule, but think critically and even laugh in a different way—laughing at the absurd that punctures the meaningfulness of life. To distinguish the black sheep from the majorities, Kundera in “Part Three, The Angels” sharply contrasts angels with the devil, the people in the circle with the outsiders. Instead of ascribing the dichotomy of good and evil to angels and the devil, Kundera reminds readers things are much more complex, since “angels are partisans not of Good but of divine creation. The devil, on the other hand, is the one who refuses to grant any rational meaning to that divinely created world” (BLF 86). Being partisans of divine creation, angels focus on the bright side of the world and keep their solid faith. They are amused and consent for things, and they have no
idea of laughing until they seriously mime the devil’s exaggerated expression. But the devil does not belong to the joyous partisans. Being alone, he has a critical mind and laughs at aping smiles worn on angels’ faces; refusing to rationalize things as angels do, he is amazed at the angelic docility. The devil laughs at angels whenever they perceive everything with meanings and seriously ape his mockery laugh. Unsurprisingly, angels do not know that demonic laughter is not meant to praise God for the divine creation, but to puncture his monolithic rule. It is demonic laughter that recalls the malicious and the derisive of carnivalesque laughter, which enables people to transgress the limits of manmade border momentarily in carnival.

Grafted onto Rabelaisian humor, Kundera pays tribute to the maliciousness and the meaninglessness of laughter to puncture the absolute rule, to reveal the absurdity of the totalitarianism. Laughter, in Kundera’s understanding, belongs to “the devil’s domain,” as it has “something malicious about it (things suddenly turning out different from what they pretended to be), but to some extent also a beneficent relief (thing are less weighty than they [appear] to be, letting us live more freely, no longer oppressing us with their austere seriousness)” (BLF 86). His “demonic laughter” echoes Bakhtin’s “carnival laughter” in Rabelais and His World, since Bakhtinian laughter “[is] sent to earth by the devil, but it appear[s] to men under the mask of joy, and so they readily [accept] it” (RW 38). In a sense, their laughter might be malicious when detecting the ironic discrepancy of things, and most of the time, is meant to mock the overloaded meanings. Pursuing the archetype of laughter, Kundera reduces it to the purest state, where meanings are redundant. In the Book of Laughter and Forgetting, Kundera reminds readers the pureness of laughter by juxtaposing two kinds of laughter: angel’s laughter and the devil’s. The former could be found from the joyous angelic circle, while the demonic laughter could only be heard outside the
circle. Being expelled from the public carnival, the outsiders therefore laugh lonely and aimlessly, as the devil does.

Like Kundera, Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* highly praises occasional carnival laughter, and believes that only by laughter the repressed can be temporarily released from their agonies and torments. Carnival laughter was undoubtedly important for people in Rabelais’ time, since they were forbidden to laugh at the ridiculous hierarchy and social codes, or to laugh meaninglessly in the public on regular days. The same condition happens in the background of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, when laughter becomes meaningful and full of complex meanings in the mid twentieth century. Laughing at Klement Gottwald’s baldhead might be regarded insincere to the party, laughing at the funeral is considered sacrilegious to the solemn ritual, and laughing at the classmates’ representation is no more than a naughty intervention. In other words, facing an age when people no longer laugh for laugh’s sake, Kundera reveals the value of demonic laughter by ridiculing the joyous partisans of a phony carnival, and he is aware of demonic laughter that really reveals the spirit of carnivalesque laughter which is both ironic and meaningless. However, demonic laughter in Kundera’s time, like carnival laughter in Rabelais’ time, is frightening for the angelic domain where orders and social conventions function uncompromisingly. Thus, once an outsider of this circle laughs untunefully, his laughter not only frightens the merry crowd but also penetrates this bogus carnival; once he laughs, he transgresses the border.

**The Meaning of Carnival**

If the magic circle in the public square is merely a carnival without carnival spirit, that is, an inauthentic one, then, it is necessary to elucidate the meaning of carnival here. Carnival essentially remains a public festival for everyone. In the beginning, it is a religious festival preceding fasting Lent, always accompanied by
multifarious festive celebrations or public parades in Roman Catholic countries. The period of carnival differs, either from two weeks before the traditional Christian fasting of Lent, or on Septuagesima, the third from the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday. The climax of carnival ends on Mardi Gras, Shrove Tuesday, which is the final day before Lent. To face the following rigorous Lent, the plebeians are allowed to engage in revels, temporarily suspending their social codes and hierarchy during carnival season. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin identifies that the “purely jesting character” of carnival is well preserved “with particular stubbornness” since Renaissance. Carnival defenders tend to associate carnival with their daily lives and rationalize its meaning. In an apology written in 1444, it said,

> so that foolishness, which is our second nature and seems to be inherent in man might freely spend itself at least once a year. Wine barrels burst if from time to time we do not open them and let in some air. All of us men are barrels poorly put together, which would burst from the wine of wisdom, if this wine remains in a state of constant fermentation of piousness and fear of God. We must give it air in order not to let it spoil. This is why we permit folly on certain days so that we may later return with greater zeal to the service of God (*RW* 75).5

The plebeians enjoy in their periodic feasts for “later return with greater zeal to the service of God.” After temporarily absorbing in the rare deviation, they will be less reluctant to yield to the authorities and the almighty. Carnival functions as the catalyst to dispel the banality of life. In an age of the fixed hierarchy and strict social codes,

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5 According to Clark and Holquist, unlike Lunacharsky, who regards carnival as mere “safety valve” for the authority to control its subjects, Bakhtin positively accepts the popular power of carnival and believes that carnival is able to temporarily invert the authority. “Whereas Bakhtin maintains that in carnival the lower orders deal a blow to the epistemological megalomania of the official culture, Lunacharsky concludes that institutions like the carnival are merely ‘safety valve’” (Clark and Holquist 313).
carnival has long been regarded as the air preventing barrels from bursting, and the air is meant for all.

**Carnival as a Festive Stage without Footlights**

Bakhtin shows his penchant for the popular characteristic of carnival and the inverse power of carnival laughter in *Rabelais and His World*. In this book, he thoroughly reviews multifarious celebrations and the traditions of folk humor, examines vulgar language in social context, and explains the meaning of carnival laughter for the proletarians in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Tracing the genealogy of the comic, Bakhtin finds laughter and its representations were “marked by exceptional radicalism, freedom, and ruthlessness” out of their “unofficial existence” (*RW* 71) in the Middle Ages, and had been regarded as “the least scrutinized sphere of the people’s creation” (4). Comments on laughter, such as exceptional radicalism, freedom and ruthlessness, all indicate that this biological individual act was hard to be scrutinized by the government then, and unsurprisingly was stained with menace. Without permission, the proletarians could not aggressively express their happiness in the public sphere. Besides, laughter was “forbidden in every official sphere of life and ideology,” even though it was bestowed “in the marketplace, on feast days, in festive recreational literature” (71-2). To reveal the popular spirit of the proletarians, Bakhtin scrupulously listens to laughter spreading from carnival, because “the medieval culture of folk humor actually belonged to all the people. The truth of laughter embraced and carried away everyone; nobody could resist it” (82).

Carnival provides all with a popular-festive stage beyond the strict watch of the official system. It awakens laughter of the people and encourages its participants to present themselves creatively while abandon social codes and the hierarchy at the same time. Facing the process of carnival, the authorities concerned take laissez-faire,
even though the fact is that they rely on the releasing functions of carnival to control the people. But the laissez-faire policy turns carnival into an autonomous sphere where all can indulge in revels and be protected from the watch of the official system. As carnival functions as a friendly sphere for all, its participants confidently can exhibit themselves on the stage at will. The metaphor of carnival recurs as a stage without footlights in *Rabelais and His World*, in Bakhtin’s words, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is only subject to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants (*RW* 7).

Footlights do strengthen theatrical effects and catch our attention on the lighted spectacle, but they make the popular stage unbalanced and conceal the popular spirit of carnival. In fact, people regard the existence of carnival part of real life, not a theatrical performance, and they turn the marketplace into their splendid theatre without footlights by masquerade, disordered parades or frenzied revels.

The marketplace plays an important role in carnival for providing a protective stage to keep the plebeians from social norms. The result is derived from the characteristic of the marketplace, for
The marketplace of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was a world in itself, a world which was one; all “performances” in this area, from loud cursing to the organized show, had something in common and were imbued with the same atmosphere of freedom, frankness, and familiarity. Such elements of familiar speech as profanities, oaths, and curses were fully legalized in the marketplace and were easily adopted by all the festive genres, even by Church drama. The marketplace was the center of all that is unofficial; it enjoyed a certain extraterritoriality in a world of official order and official ideology, it always remained “with the people” (RW 153-4).

Notwithstanding carnival does provide a stage without footlights for all, this stage always locates in the marketplace where the unofficial centre remains “with the people.” Admittedly, the marketplace not only promises an absolutely unofficial space for the carnival crowd, but also functions as a second world to contrast or threaten norms of the official world. Since, the unofficial folk culture of the Middle Ages and even of the Renaissance had its own territory and its own particular time, the time of fairs and feats. This territory, as we have said, was a peculiar second world within the official medieval order and was ruled by a special type of relationship, a free, familiar marketplace relationship. Officially the palaces, churches, institutions, and private homes are dominated by hierarchy and etiquette, but in the marketplace a special kind of speech was heard, almost a language of its own, quite unlike the language of Church, palace, courts and institutions (RW 154).

In other words, the marketplace enables everyone to be a hero on the stage while freely speaking familiar languages, such as “abuses, curses, profanities, and
improprieties” which are “the unofficial elements of speech” (187). The masses tend to be easily moved by the intimacy and merriment in the marketplace. Everyone is equal here; no certain persona can possess this stage and footlights too long or catch extraordinary attentions. Besides, the intimate marketplace deters the presence of bystanders, because “while carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it.” Once carnival begins, everyone is bound to step in this unofficial theatre.

**Inverse Carnival**

Social codes and the hierarchy are temporarily suspended in carnival, since this event encourages its participants to invert conventions and exhibit their eccentricities. Eccentric figures in real life, like fools and clowns, play leading roles in carnival for their audacious behaviours and outspoken words. For this change during carnival, Bakhtin approves their importance by considering fools and clowns “which often figure in Rabelais’ novel, [were] characteristic of the medieval culture of humor” (*RW* 8), since these roles remained fools and clowns always and wherever they made their appearance. As such they represented a certain form of life, which was real and ideal at the same time. They stood on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar mid-zone as it were; they were neither eccentrics nor dolts, neither were they comic actors (*RW* 8).

Fools were revered for frankness. Being treated as jesting and outspoken sages, they brought the masses illogical ecstasies and unreserved facts. Moreover, in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, schoolmen and lower clerics regularly held “feast of fools” to praise their frank sages. For Bakhtin, these feasts represent “a particular obstinacy and force of survival in France. This feast was actually a parody and travesty of the official cult, with masquerades and improper dances” (74).
Clowns, on the other hand, are closely related to popular-festive forms for their inverse power. Abject clowns and noble crowns are juxtaposed not only for wordplays, but also for mirroring doubles. Bakhtin mentions that Rabelais describes a clown boy, who is rewarded abuse, thrashing and twenty crowns after being sodomized, as happy “as a king—or a pair of kings, for that matter” (RW 197) in his novel *Pantagruel*. This metaphor “king” implies both the climax of this boy and his reward—crowns. After being indecently treated, this clown is crowned a king. This whole procedure reflects a conventional scenario of degradation in carnival: the uncrowned has to suffer abuse, thrashing and mockery, while the crowned receives praise from others. Bakhtin points out that

[i]n such a system the king is the clown. He is elected by all the people and is mocked by all the people. He is abused and beaten when the time of his reign is over, just as the carnival dummy of winter or of the dying year is mocked, beaten, torn to pieces, burned, or drowned even in our time. They are “gay monsters.” The clown was first disguised as a king, but once his reign had come to an end his costume was changed, “travestied,” to turn him once more into a clown. The abuse and thrashing are equivalent to a change of costume, to a metamorphosis. Abuse reveals the other, true face of the abused, it tears off his disguise and mask. It is the king’s uncrowning (RW 197).

Degradation reverses the ranks of the hierarchy by crowning clowns as if “kings and clowns have the same horoscope” (RW 198). “The same horoscope” of kings and clowns is more like a wishful thinking or expectation of the public, since degradation do make they feel relieved from the tense hierarchy and social codes. Carnival allows them to have a good time in thrashing and deriding their new “king.” Furthermore, degradation in carnival not only consoles but also liberates the
proletarians who remain the base of the hierarchy. During carnival, the masses can be the top of the hierarchy, the clown a king, and the fool is worshiped as a sage. Facing the changes of the festive period, Bakhtin said,

this life is organized as a typical carnival. Everything here is inverted in relation to the outside world. All who are highest are debased, all who are lowest are crowned. The enumeration offered by Rabelais is nothing but a carnivalesque travesty of antique and medieval heroes (RW 383).

The masses are liberated through the uncrowning of a king in carnival. As they abuse and thrash the crowned clown, they know that “debasement and interment are reflected in carnival uncrowning, related to blows and abuse. The king’s attributes are turned upside down in the clown; he is king of a world ‘turned inside out’” (370).

People turn the hierarchy upside down, and “the jester was proclaimed king, a clowning abbot, bishop, or archbishop was elected at the ‘feast of fools’, and in the churches directly under the pope’s jurisdiction a mock pontiff was even chosen” (81).

As they can crown a clown in carnival, the proletarians believe they are capable of turning the official system upside down. However, uncrowning the old and crowning the new is a necessary passage in carnival, as the masses all involve in this ritual to crown for a better life. Fundamentally, “carnival is the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter. It is a festive life” (8). This festive life

did liberate human consciousness and permit a new outlook, but at the same time it implied no nihilism; it had a positive character because it disclosed the abundant material principle, change and becoming, the irresistible triumph of the new immortal people (RW 274).

It is this irresistible triumph of carnival that has fascinated its participants.
However, after taking fieldwork research of contemporary Mardi Gras in rural Louisiana, Carl Lindahl regards carnival is a highly structured event, since all the male participants have to obey the command of the capitaine, or be punished. Apropos of carnivalesque hierarchical transgression, Lindahl thinks carnival “did not destroy hierarchy, but simply rearranged its contents” (Lindahl 65) in Rabelais’ time, and so does contemporary carnival which “inverts but does not subvert the power structure that it mocks”(63). The crowned clown and the boy bishop of Mardi Gras only supplant the hierarchy, neither to dismantle nor to subvert it. Even though Lindahl revises Bakhtin’s overconfidence in carnival, he stresses on the temporary “inversion” of the official system rather than subversion during carnival.

The Bodily Principle in Carnival

To liberate their minds from the hierarchy, firstly, the proletarians are taught to freely express their bodies in carnival. In the Middle Age and Renaissance, people regarded human bodies paralleled to the cosmos where they lived, and connected the bodily topography with the cosmic topography. Being confident of this topographically grotesque association, they found two parallel universes, the macrocosm and the microcosm. Aristotelian philosophy and the four elements (earth, water, air, and fire) had long been the main ways for the public to understand the world, so did the well-ordered hierarchies. Thus, bodies turned to be a grotesque microcosm with strict hierarchies; the higher part of bodies contained superior organs, such as brain and heart, and the lower stratum near the earth was regarded inferior and abject, let alone the protrusive reproductive organs. Under this fad, to free one’s bodies should be the first step to liberate one from the hierarchy. Bakhtin reminds us “the human body [is] the centre of a philosophy that contributed to the destruction of the medieval hierarchic picture of the world and to the creation of a new concept” (RW 362). To destruct then to create, indicates the most important function of carnival
bodies. However, as we have mentioned, the negligible liberation of the hierarchy can be achieved by bodily manifestation only in carnival.

To scrupulously examine Rabelais’ works, we could find the “material bodily principle” plays “a predominant role” in carnival. “Images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life” are not only recorded but are also presented in an “extremely exaggerated from,” (RW 18) said Bakhtin. The feast, masquerades, thrashing the crowned clown, praise for the bodily lower stratum or the exhibition of the grotesque body, all these festive forms merely reaffirm the importance of bodies and bodily expressions in carnival. Being free from the boundaries of the microcosm, one is liberated from the hierarchy.

I. **The Act of Eating**

An enjoyable feast is inevitable in carnival, since it is “part of every folk merriment” (RW 279). The feast undoubtedly encourages all to enjoy their excessive devouring in festivals. But it would be oversimplification by regarding the temporal excessive feast negligibly a preparation for the following rigorous fast. First of all, the feast “has no utilitarian connotation (as has daily rest and relaxation after working hours),” but “means liberation from all that is utilitarian, practical” (276). Excessive devouring lacks the decorum, but is viewed as a way to excess one’s limits. When one devours, he not only fulfills his appetite but also excesses the boundaries of his microcosm. Bakhtin said, “man’s encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself. The limits between man and the world are erased, to man’s advantage” (281). As he devours without being devoured, he has conquered the hierarchy imposed by the macrocosm. It is this grotesque cosmology that makes him proud.

In fact, eating is closely connected to life, such as bodily needs for survival, pure merriment or meaningful procreation. As one devours the external sources of the
macrocosm, he renews his microcosm simultaneously. This dual meaning of eating significantly means for the carnival masses. In fact, the feast that “transgresses all limited objectives” (RW 276) liberates the masses from social regulations and empowers them triumph and happiness of life.

Wine is never absent in a merry feast. It provides the crowd the most reasonable excuse to linger on their unofficial stage—being drunken. Rabelais does justify the rightness of wine for his characters, so does Kundera. In The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, though the feast diminishes or minimizes, the leading catalyst of feasting—wine, appears when the transition of stories occur. In “Part Four, Lost Letters,” wine plays a significant role to decide the later relationship between Tamina and Hugo. After accepting Hugo’s invitation, Tamina goes to his flat for an international dial. Hugo has a crush on Tamina, and he intends to seize the chance for intimacy. “Tamina too down[s] her whisky in one gulp, and put her glass on the coffee table. She [is] about to sit down again, when Hugo suddenly embrace[s] her” (BLF 151), then

he had taken her in his arms without knowing how it happened. He was frightened initially by his own gesture, and if Tamina had pushed him away, he would have retreated timidly and virtually apologized. But Tamina did not push him away, and her grimace and averted head aroused him enormously (BLF 151).

At this moment, wine becomes the excuse to rationalize Hugo’s ill intention. If Tamina refuses this accident, he could pretend his rudeness is driven by alcohol then apologize; but if Tamina does not refuse him, alcohol is the catalyst of their relationship.

The mini-carnivalesque orgy happened in “Part Five, Litost” contains the archetype of carnival feasting. Several excellent Bohemian poets gather in the Writers
Club. They drink and chat, brag and harmlessly deride each other. Accompanied by laughter, poets turn this modern club into a Renaissance marketplace, and they all become eloquent heroes with drunken lines. The woman worshiper Petrarch expresses his unbelievable affair for all, while Boccaccio ironically derides this story. Drunken Goethe tirelessly writes a beautiful poem to praise the student’s vulgar lover; cynical Lermontov is consensually regarded as discontented celibate. The final climax reaches when drunken Goethe is too stumbling to go home, junior poets carefully carry him to the cab, in case of hurting their sage. Poets and wine, delicate poems and boastful talks, all blend in this autonomous sphere beyond the reach of the official system. Admittedly, this carefree orgy unreservedly represents a modern carnival scene.

II. Liberal Masquerades

Masquerades, like uncrowning, challenge the hierarchy and social norms in a direct yet complex way. Masks provide double changes for the masses—the change of appearances and the change of identities. Even though the plebeians can put on masks only for a moment, their temporary masquerades do release them from the hierarchy and renew their identities in carnival. For Bakhtin,

The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nickname. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles (RW 39-40).

Bakhtin finds “the gay relativity and the merry negation of uniformity and similarity” of masking. The gay relativity is caused by the change of appearances and identities;
to negate the uniformity and similarity basically is a challenge to social norms. Furthermore, though the mask is a man-made product, it brings us the chance to cross the border by changing our faces and violating our fixed hierarchy.

However, images of the human body are overemphasized in carnival, they often appear coarsely or are exposed as grotesque shapes, instead of formed ones. In carnival, all the bodily features are welcomed for representation, while the grotesque ones are highly revered. Even those features of the lower bodily stratum, which are regarded secondary and obscene, and should be hidden from the sight, are presented in grotesque way, such as the protrusive eyes, the gaping mouth, the big bowels and the huge phallus. The grotesque body is exaggeratedly represented in carnival. The main reason is that it transgresses the limits of its own body and transgresses social disciplines. The grotesque body is, as in its general definition, “is a body in the act of becoming” (RW 317). To concretize the idea of the grotesque, Bakhtin takes figurines of senile pregnant hag of Kerch terracotta as an example to examine the grotesque body.6 From this ambivalent image, Bakhtin finds pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its two-fold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. And such is precisely the grotesque concept of the body (RW 25-6).

The senile hag is too old to be pregnant, but the fetus inside her womb indicates new life. To give birth is the extreme power of man. Because “the birth of generation after generation, a never-ending succession that fills the gods with fear (367),” man is able

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6 Bakhtin rereads H. Reich’s interpretations of the figurines of senile pregnant hags. Reich views the figurines as representations of natural spirits. Bakhtin disagrees with Reich and detects the carnivalesque grotesque in these figurines. *Rabelais and His World*, 7: 25.
to create as God by giving birth to his generation. Thus, the pregnant senile hag is
dreadful for the dissymmetry of her age and the coming new life, so she is frightening
for her procreative power. When the old hag and a new life are juxtaposed on the
same body, they make this ambivalent body a grotesque one. For this, Bakhtin further
explains that “the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and
impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and
orifices, only that which leads beyond the body’s limited space or into the body’s
depth” (317-8). The essence of the grotesque body is the ambivalent act of becoming,
and this essence empowers the body to transgress both its own limits and the social
boundaries.

**The Meaning of Carnival Laughter**

Carnival does redeem people laughter by multifarious festive forms and
eccentric exhibitions, but it is carnival laughter that unveils their humanities in the age
whenever laughter in public becomes luxury only allowed on occasion. As laughter
cannot be examined and is easily interpreted as aggressive to the authorities, its
potential transgression is prohibited from representing except in carnival. Frank W.
Stevenson illustrates Marvin R. Koller’s four macrotheories of humor based on
“superiority, relief, ambivalence and incongruity” (Stevenson 78) in his “Comic
Noise and the Textual Surface.” According to Stevenson’s distinction, Bakhtin’s
carnival laughter is based on the principle of superiority, since it is
“[s]corn-laughter”—the mocking of an “inferior” person or group by a
“superior” one for the ostensible purpose of distancing or ostracizing
the inferior (or abnormal, or minority) party—may seek only a
temporary social distancing, with the purpose ultimately (as in Bergson)
of “correcting” the abnormal party; through an exaggeration of social
difference a “normal order” is finally restored. Bakhtin’s carnival is a
variation on this: the normal social hierarchical order is inverted but only temporarily, thus restoring and “renewing” society (Stevenson 79). Stevenson does approve that carnival laughter is capable of transgressing the official system, but he reminds us what follows this temporary inverse is a restored, renewed society. This indicates the liberation of carnival is temporary, since the following restored society is the final aim of the authority concerned.

Even though carnival laughter only temporarily threatens the official system, its mightiness is preserved intact in the marketplace in carnival. To identify complex carnival laughter, Bakhtin lists its characteristics as follows,

[it] is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated ‘comic’ event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival (RW 11-12).

Carnival laughter firstly is festive since it is comprised of carnival and belongs to carnival. Though carnival is primarily a religious festival preceding Lent, this folk festival is meant to liberate its participants temporarily from social norms and the hierarchy. Besides,

[the basis of laughter which gives form to carnival rituals frees them completely from all religious and ecclesiastic dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety. They are also deprived from of the character of magic and prayer; they do not command nor do they ask for anything. Even more, certain carnival forms parody the Church’s cult (RW 7).
Carnivals laughter is derived from the laughter of all the people and directed at all of them. Once carnival is held, all are invited to be heroes in the marketplace. Religious cults and the hierarchy can be temporarily suspended, even parodied by all the participants in carnival. They transgress the hierarchy and parody religious cults through various festive forms, such as the rituals, the uncrowning, masquerades, the feast or the exhibition of the grotesque body in carnival. They merrily participate in celebrations without forgetting to deride their ranks labeled by the official system, or to mock the church by crowning a fool bishop. In other words, their carnival laughter is gay and mocking, triumphant and deriding at the same time. The ambivalent laughter keeps the masses clearly aware of their relationships with the external world. Bakhtin considers

[l]aughter showed the world anew in its gayest and most sober aspects. Its external privileges are intimately linked with interior forces; they are a recognition of the rights of those forces. This is why laughter could never become an instrument to oppress and blind the people. It always remained a free weapon in their hands (RW 94).

This free weapon, though doest not appear till carnival, functions best in the hands of the masses in the marketplace.

Laughter can be the weapon of the plebeians only in the marketplace in carnival, and this weapon targets on those who do not belong here and never laugh. To distinguish these two groups, Bakhtin, like Rabelais, takes laughter as the measurement to denote the difference between them. Firstly, carnival laughter can invert the hierarchy and religious dogmatism for being unrelated to the norms and regulations. Bakhtin explains this power in “Epic and Novel,” and said,

[l]aughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it
familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down the prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically (Bakhtin 23).7

In other words, laughter has the power to demolish the absolute grandeur into an object of familiar contact for the subject, thus a laughing individual would be fearless before the unknown. This is the power of laughter.

The Nature of Carnival Laughter

However, compared with the masses, people of another group do not conquer the unknown power by bursting out into laughter, for they take sides with the absolute and the powerful ones. Besides this, they would even prevent the offensive laughter to violate the official system or demolish the absolute God.8 Since laughter is long regarded as the gift “sent to earth by the devil, but it appeared to men under the mask of joy (RW 38),” it is banned in the public sphere and forbidden from the religious domain. People who believe in the state and God did not laugh unreasonably, in case to be regarded as traitor or profaners. They showed their piety and zeal by being solemn and serious, and well repress their merry emotions. In Rabelais’ novel, the sacristan Friar Tappecoue refused to lend Mater Francois Villon vestments for a show

7 The excerpt is from Bakhtin’s “Epic and Novel” in the Dialogic Imagination. Though in this phase, Bakhtin focuses more on “the comic,” instead of carnival and carnival laughter. This definition of laughter indicates Bakhtin’s faith in fearless laughter that is capable of puncturing the ideology.

8 From Bakhtin’s footnote, he said, “in the sixteenth century Protestant circles deplored the joking and degrading used of sacred text in familiar verbal intercourse” (87). He takes Henri Estienne’s “Apology of Herodotus” for complaining the profaning use of sacred words as the example.
containing diablerie, for he thought diablerie a sacrilege. But Friar Tappécoue’s pious seriousness irritated Master Villon and cost him dearly: Friar Tappécoue was killed by the dressed devils in the marketplace. For the miserable fate of Friar Tappécoue, Bakhtin explains that “[h]e was the very incarnation of that which the author most detested. He was what Rabelais has called an agelast, a man who does not know how to laugh and who is hostile to laughter” (267). The agelast Tappécoue aggressively demonizes the idea of laughter, like other zealous patriots or fellow pious Christian believers. These serious people may live in the castle, the governmental hall, the monastery, the church and everywhere, except the marketplace. Bakhtin finds that

[t]his old authority and truth pretend to be absolute, to have an extratemporal importance. Therefore, their representatives (the agelasts) are gloomily serious. They cannot and do not wish to laugh; they strut majestically, consider their foes the enemies of eternal truth, and threaten them with eternal punishment…They continue to talk with the majestic tone of kings and heralds announcing eternal truths, unaware that time has turned their speeches into ridicule. Time has transformed old truth and authority into a Mardi Gras dummy, a comic monster that the laughing crowd rends to pieces in the marketplace (RW 212-3).

Those agelasts like Friar Tappécoue would finally find it hard to escape from the fate of being torn into pieces by the carnival crowd. They do not belong to the marketplace and they are no participants of carnival. Once the agelasts step into the territory of carnival without laughing heartedly, they will easily be differentiated from the masses.

If Bakhtin is right to defend for Rabelais about this cruel punishment of Friar Tappécoue, what he acclaims for is the poetic justice of carnival laughter. From the Renaissance to the twentieth century, as collective carnival laughter diminishes to
chamber intimacies\textsuperscript{9} or private enjoyments, the masses no longer recognize the collective folk humor or popular-festive forms. They gradually are unfamiliar to carnivalesque laughter that well preserves their individualities, and forget how pure and meaningless laughter used to be. Out of this anxiety, Bakhtin turns to Rabelais, who preserves carnival laughter and its devastating power against the official system, the absolute God, and the agelasts in his writings. In our age, laughter on Tappécoue’s death is hard to be perceived or justified. We find carnival laughter sounds bitter or disgraceful, but our empathy dichotomously indicates the fact that we do not belong to the carnival crowd and tend to complicate the meaning of laughter. This anachronistic empathy could be avoidable, since death was no end in Rabelais’ times, what followed was the expectable new life. This is the duality of carnival that enriches the meaning of carnival laughter.

The world of carnival is an ambivalent and unfinished one, where “a world dying and being born at the same time, possessing as it were two bodies” (\textit{RW} 166). The death of the agelast is neither fearful nor cruel, as it simply reminds Rabelais’ later readers the dual characteristic of folk culture. For Bakhtin, the protagonists of carnival (the people) are the absolutely merry hosts of the earth flooded with light, because they know that death is pregnant with new life, because they are familiar with the gay image of becoming and of time and are in full possession of this \textit{stirb und werde}. The heart of the matter is not in the subjective awareness but in the collective consciousness of their eternity, of their earthly, historic immortality as a people, and of their continual renewal and growth (\textit{RW} 250).

\footnote{In the seventeenth-century, the literary traditions of grotesque realism slightly diminish as the contents of the comic gradually reflect the bourgeois spirit. The rhetoric of bodily lower stratum is replaced by decorum of private manners. In \textit{Rabelais and His World}, “[t]he popular frankness of the marketplace with its grotesque ambivalent lower stratum is replaced by \textit{chamber intimacies} of private life, heard from behind a curtain,” (105) said Bakhtin. My emphases.} 

33
The poetic justice of the comic finally accomplishes the death of the agelast. After Friar Tappecoue’s death, the devils perform diablerie on stage for the masses the very next day. Carnival simultaneously liberates the masses from social prohibitions and unifies them by laughter. Laughing people are fearless, since “terror is conquered by laughter” (336) during carnival.

**The Function of Laughter**

In Bakhtin’s perspective, carnival laughter positively embodies the power to emancipate the plebeians from daily codes and the hierarchy, and preserves, even exalts their individualities through various festive celebrations. But as Bakhtin emphasizes the folk power, he acknowledges a dichotomous power structure and the graded social stratum at the same time. In Rabelais’ world, the marketplace is a seemingly autonomous world, because carnival laughter “builds its own world in opposition to the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state” (88). Though the graded cosmos and the hierarchy derived from neoplatonism is rooted in Rabelais’ time, Bakhtin contours this cosmos with a blank space kept for the masses to change their ranks in carnival. Ken Hirschkop admits the controllership of the upper world, but he thinks this world made up by the official fear would finally be challenged by carnival laughter. “It is official fear was capable of constituting a world, then only a principle of equal depth could counter—the principle of carnival laughter and the public square,” (Hirschkop 275) said Hirschkop. Like Hirschkop, Brian Poole agrees with Bakhtin’s philosophizing of carnival laughter, because “humor is thus not antireligious, not latent atheism, but rather the banner of tolerant religion, the litmus test of true tolerance” (Poole 554). Poole optimistically believes, by carnival laughter, “the polarity in the relationship between the macrocosm and the microcosm is reversed so that man’s dignity and autonomy become the metonymic source for the grandeur of the heavens” (541). In
other words, the common faith in carnival to invert the hierarchy has initiated at the very beginning of carnival. This is exactly what Bakhtin pays tribute to Rabelais’ world.

In the forward of *Rabelais*, Krystyna Pomorska said, “in defiance of this prohibition (of laughter), both Rabelais and Bakhtin cultivated laughter, aware that laughter, like language, is uniquely characteristic of human species” (Pomorska xi). This similar consideration inspires Bakhtin to write “the least popular, the least understood and appreciated” (*RW* 1) Rabelais. He knows that in Rabelais’ world, “laughter was precisely a liberation of the emotions that dim the knowledge of life. Laughter proves the existence of clear spiritual vision and bestows it” (141). Bakhtin admits the distinction between the marketplace and the official system, but he positively regards carnival as popular stage to liberate the public from the hierarchy. He said “Rabelais’ basic goal was to destroy the official picture of events,” and “he strove to disclose its (of his time) true meaning for the people” (*RW* 439) by painstakingly depicting the carnival scenes and the merry folk. As Bakhtin revisits carnival in Rabelais’ works, he aims at excavating the precious individualities hidden in Rabelais’ “philosophy of laughter” (133), rather than to provide an anthropological research or a historical writing of carnival in Renaissance. Rabelais’ soul concern is derived from his extraordinary concern on the public, and so does Bakhtin. As “truth cries out in the streets” (qtd. in Poole 562), Bakhtin grasps the spirit of time from the marketplace, from the carnival crowd and their precious laughter.

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10 Bakhtin’s idealized interpretation of carnival is always the target of later criticism. Bernstein said “Bakhtin’s love for Rabelais and for what he sees as the redemptive energy of the Saturnalia, at time blinds him to the fact that it is only because Rabelais’ novels are manifestly nonmimetic that he is able to assimilate them to anthropological and folkloristic records of actual carnivals, many of which, as recent studies have shown, ended in a violence that proved devastating both to the innocent victims and to the community as a whole” (118). See Bernstein, Michael Andre. “When the Carnival Turns Bitter: Preliminary Reflections Upon the Abject Hero.” *Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on His Work*. Ed. Gary Saul Morson. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986. 99-121.
Michael Holoquist said “both Rabelais and Bakhtin knew that they were living in an unusual period, a time when virtually everything taken for granted in less troubled ages lost its certainty, was plunged into contest and flux” (Holoquist xv). Facing turmoil, Rabelais and Bakhtin sternly guard the gate of folk humors and festive forms. Through writing carnival and carnival laughter during an age of silenced laughter, Rabelais and Bakhtin stubbornly keep individualities of the crowd intact.

**Carnivalesque Laughter in the Angelic World**

Kundera writes *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* in an age that Bohemian people lack their abilities to laugh without musing meanings. After the chaotic socio-economic change in Bohemia, people feel confused with or forget their changeable histories, and the worst, they forget how to laugh meaninglessly, to laugh for laughter’s sake. In the beginning of “Part Three, The Angels,” two American girls with archangel’s names, Gabrielle and Michelle, seriously discuss how to read Eugene Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* taught by Madame Raphael. They urgently prepare a talk for the next class session:

“Michelle!” Gabrielle again cries out.

“What?” asks Michelle.

“Did you forget? You’re the one who said it!”

“What?” asks Michelle again.

“This dialogue is certainly intended to create a comic effect!” (*BLF* 90)

Paradoxically, they cannot laugh until they ascertain the dialogue is “the comic effect” created by the author, that is, these two angelic girls cannot laugh unless they

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11 Rabelais’ age is the end of “a millennium of folk humor” (Bakhtin 72). Since laughter becomes “the expression of a new and critical historical consciousness,” (73) it is prohibited from the public. In Renaissance, laughter is related to humanist concern and knowledge, the festive, the collective, and the ambivalent characteristics of carnival laughter diminish. Thus, Rabelais’ novel records an age that is more familiar for his ancestors, not his temporaries.

Bakhtin gradually mused and wrote *Rabelais and His World* in the forties, when Russians suffered for Stalin’s dictatorship and the Communist totalitarianism.
are informed a comic play is a comic to laugh. This meaningful reading of a comic reminds us the death of the solemn agelasts in Rabelais’ times. These two angels cannot laugh at what they see, but laugh at what they believe. This result is Kundera’s agony, since laughter is no longer pure, malicious and meaningless. As there are more and more angelic people, laughter becomes more and more meaningful. This is a world where most of the people are docile, joyous and angelic; they might be at school, in the church, the railroad station, the Baroque palace of Prague, even at home, in case they might be caught by the nearby secret police. In his *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera said, “in the twentieth century, Rabelais’ merry epic has turned into the despairing comedy of Ionesco, who says, “There’s only a thin line between the horrible and the comic. The European history of laughter comes to an end” (Art 135). As Gabrielle and Michelle “emitted short, shrill, spasmodic sounds very difficult to describe in words,” (BLF 78) Kundera knows these horrible sounds are no longer humorous laughter he has been familiar with.

Though it is a utopian ideal to preserve individuality of man by carnival laughter in an age of diminishing carnivalesque humor, Kundera still grasps some lonely demonic laughing figures in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. They are those who are crossed out from the magic circle. Their names might appear on the blacklist of the Communist Party, and they might be kicked out from Barbara Marshal’s domain. In other words, they belong to the other side of the world; they belong to the border and laugh for laughing. Their pure laughter distinguishes them from the angels, and this is the reason they are expelled from the angelic party.

Like Bakhtin and Rabelais, Kundera believes laughter is “of the devil’s domain,” because the devil “refuses to grant any rational meaning to that divinely created world” (BLF 86). That’s the reason why Sarah triumphantly kicks Gabrielle and Michelle; she refuses to read the horn of rhinoceros merely as the comic strategy,
and finds the comic effect from the serious presentation of her classmates. The marginal figures, like the devil, laugh when perceiving the ironies of things. Demonic laughter, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is essentially the incarnation of carnivalesque laughter, gay and mocking, triumphant and deriding at the same time. Despite true carnival laughter diminishes in this angelic age, outside the magic circle, carnivalesque laughter can be heard of from the lonely devil.