The truth of laughter: Rereading Luther as a contemporary of Rabelais

Hub Zwart, Radboud University Nijmegen

Introduction

The narrative of Luther's life and performance has triggered considerable attention throughout the ages. Countless biographical studies about him have been published. As a rule, he is presented as a serious, fanatic, depressed, even gloomy figure. In his own self-narrative, however, another, often neglected side of his personality emerges. Notably in his *Tischreden* - Table Talk or Prandial Conversations - Luther stands out as a gay and jolly figure, a contemporary of Rabelais.[i] These conversations, although predominantly devoted to comments on the Scriptures, are crammed with jokes, verbal abuse, parody, franc-parler, colloquialisms, folksy witticisms and laughter. Bakhtin's book on Rabelais (1968) allows us to recover this 'comical side' of Luther. Moreover, by relying on Bakhtin's reading of Rabelais, we become aware of the crucial and intimate relationship in Luther's writing between truth and laughter. The turning point in his biography, as well as in his reading of the Bible, is the so-called Tower Experience ('*Turm Erlebnis*'): a comical scene, quite in accordance with the genre conventions of late Medieval and Renaissance comical narrative. His extraordinary gift for language and his profound acquaintance with vernacular speech genres (the unofficial and unpublished spheres of language) allowed him to revitalize and familiarize Christianity, to reform its standard chronotopes, and to create the German language.

In my re-reading of Luther, Bakhtin's book on Rabelais will function as my principal guide, although I will rely on other works by Bakhtin as well (notably Bakhtin 1988). In my article, Bakhtin's basic methods and concepts will be 'applied' to the case of Luther. That is, I will read Luther in a way that is reminiscent of Bakhtin's reading of his grotesque French contemporary. Yet, every 'application' always entails a reassessment of the 'instrument' as well.

The objective to read Luther as a contemporary of Rabelais may seem somewhat far-fetched and fabricated at first sight. In this article, however, I will point out that those

who regard Luther as an excessively serious figure, an 'agelast', someone who does not laugh, simply have not read him. In his writings - that is: in the original, un-adapted, unexpurgated versions of his writings - laughter, verbal abuse and other elements of the grotesque aesthetics are omnipresent.[ii] Indeed, whoever glances through introductions and editorial comments to the published versions of his works will notice the countless apologies made by editors with regard to the crudeness and coarseness of his language - they are hardly ever absent. Time and again we are urged to ignore the grobian aspects of his style and in many editions, considerable effort is made to tone down his notorious earthiness. My article, however, is an effort at retrieval and rehabilitation. If Luther's verbal laughter is silenced and omitted, he is bound to be misunderstood. The established reading strategy which relies on the distinction between serious 'content' and grobian 'residue', cannot be rejected firmly enough. Those who read Luther with an unprejudiced eye will be struck by the Rabelais-like tone and quality of his style.

In this article I will first of all 'summarize' Bakhtin's book on Rabelais by pointing out the basic set of oppositions on which it rests. Subsequently, I will re-read Luther as a contemporary of Rabelais. First of all by drawing attention to a crucial scene in Luther's life in which the grotesque setting of his work is exemplified in a highly condensed and emblematic form. Next, by stressing the importance of the 'excremental grid' as a basic perspective that allows Luther to come to terms with his ideological environment, without disavowing his rustic, down-to-earth origins. Finally, I will briefly present Luther's biography as a sequence of typical chronotopes, separated by instances of metamorphosis.

Rabelais and his world

Bakhtin's famous study of popular genres of literary laughter (1968) is no doubt a rich and complex work. Yet, it relies on a fundamental scheme that consists of a series of basic oppositions, such as: (1) the opposition on the level of discourse between the lofty and serious speech genres of official discourse versus the language of the market square; (2) the opposition on the level of basic moods between the basic mood of late medieval 'gothic' terror versus the basic mood of laughter; (3) the opposition on the level of aesthetics between classicist canonization (the aesthetics of the sublime) versus the aesthetics of the grotesque. Let me briefly explain these oppositions that allow us to

'summarize' Bakhtin's impressive book. The serious speech genres of official discourse aim at stabilization through self-canonization and the production of an artificially neutralized nomenclature: ideologically reliable words, functioning in a quasi-automatic manner; a basic set of terms, concepts and neologisms, constituting a stable, reliable, predictable circuit. Once one enters this circuit, its inherent logic will prove irresistible. It seems impossible to detach the official words from their established ideological meanings. The production of legitimate speech acts is predetermined by fixed procedures. Those speech acts that fail to meet the established criteria are regarded as illegitimate. In the 16th Century, the paradigmatic example of such a system of ideologically reliable elements was of course the mechanical discourse of scholastic theology: the truth game of the Sorbonnites, relying on a particular, technical kind of Latin, containing a large sample of typical neologisms and academic phrases, fixed and unavoidable short-circuits between terms and meanings, fixed procedures for producing legitimate verbal utterances. For those who entered this system, it was impossible to escape from its powerful grid, its firm discursive sway, its truth regime, from the powerful, invisible hand guiding the production of written as well as spoken discourse.

The unstable and ideologically unreliable languages of the market square, however, functioned as its counterpart. In these unpublished spheres of speech the ideological and vulnerable nature of official discourse was suddenly revealed. Serious idioms were ridiculed, degraded and travestied, and found themselves accompanied by their 'comic double'. On the market square it was revealed that there are no ideologically reliable genres, no indifferent or neutral words, only artificially neutralized ones. All words belong to particular speech genres, and every genre has a peculiar logic and persuasiveness of its own. The language of the market square constituted an encyclopaedia of genres, idioms, dialects, proverbs, jargons, in short: a living heteroglossia. It constituted a setting in which the questionable nature of an apparently inviolable discourse suddenly found itself exposed to ridicule. On the market square, the mood of seriousness, the sway of terror suddenly gave way to the liberating mood of laughter.

Laughter is regarded by Bakhtin as an essential form of truth in its own right: "certain aspects of the world are only accessible to laughter" (1968, p. 66). True laughter is a philosophical principle in its own right with a peculiar 'logic' of its own that liberates from "the great interior censor: fear" (p. 11, 16, 66, 70). Laughter opens up the deep comical aspect of the world. It allows reality to appear in a carefree manner. What the

mood of laughter reveals is that there are no extra-temporal truths. Laughter is the sudden awareness of the lack, the shortcomings, the vulnerabilities of established discourse, of the official truth, otherwise held to be eternal and indisputable. Gay and carefree laughter is a positive, affirmative force, an affirmation and rehabilitation of life, notably of its bodily aspects.

Laughter's peculiar logic relies on a series of basic techniques. One of them is comic reversal or the practice of turning serious connections upside-down. Socrates may stand as an example here: the philosophical jester, the hero of the famous serio-comical dialogues whose speech acts abound with laughter - although much of it is lost in the serious (modern) translations of Plato's work. In the famous farewell scene in Phaedo, for example, Socrates mocks and ridicules the tragic view of life, in which life is equated with health, while death is regarded as the ultimate illness. In Socrates's speech acts, however, typically tragic phrases are parodied, put between quotation marks and cited jestingly (Zwart 1996, 95 ff.). The tragic view of life gives way to an atmosphere of gaiety and laughter when Socrates turns the logic of tragedy upside-down by proving that life itself is the disease and death the ultimate remedy. In other words, the short-circuit life=health : death=disease that had functioned as the apparently indisputable grounding of the tragic view, suddenly finds itself abolished and dis-unified, in order to give way to a completely new, unexpected and liberating set of equations: life=illness : death=remedy - equations that were to become quite important during subsequent centuries. The basic signifiers of ancient morality were put between quotation marks and, subsequently, their interconnections became radically reversed. Socrates's version of a 'cheerful death' parodied tragic conceptions of life and death and rendered them less self-evident.

A second technique consists in playing with words, notably by omitting or adding a limited number of characters. Bakhtin of course gives many examples of this. Take for instance the last words uttered by Christ on the cross: *Sitio* ("I am thirsty") and *consummatum est* ("It is accomplished"). In medieval parodies, the latter phrase was deliberately distorted into *consumatum est* ("It is consumed"), thus charging it with digestive and even sexual connotations. A minor change (the omission of merely one letter) immediately has a comical effect and transforms a solemn tragedy into a much more jovial scene. This example also involves a third technique: the degradation of the serious and lofty by connecting it with elements of bodily life, preferably the body's lower stratum. Due to the omission of the letter *m*, the final words of Christ suddenly become

associated with eating, drinking and intercourse. This technique is of central importance to the speech genres of the grotesque. Elements functioning on a lofty plane are degraded by associating them with eating, digestion, defecation and other bodily processes. Let this suffice as a 'summary' of Bakhtin's study. What can be gained by reading Luther from this perspective?

Luther as a contemporary of Rabelais (1): the issue of locality

The official reading of Luther relies on a basic procedure, a reading strategy, a basic prejudice. From the very outset we are urged to distinguish between the theological content of his work - which is to be preserved and purified - and the vulgar remainder, the grobian elements that are abundantly present in his writings (and even highly characteristic of his style), but must be regarded as irrelevant or even inconvenient from a theological point of view.[iii] The canonization of Luther from the 17th Century onwards involved a purification of grobian, pre-modern elements. My re-reading of Luther, however, starts form the contention that it is impossible to detach 'official' content from the vulgarities and obscenities of his language, simply because there is a fundamental congeniality between the both. It was the basic mood of laughter that allowed him to discern a new and liberating truth in a setting that was still dominated by gothic terror.

In Luther's standard biography two decisive turning-points emerge. The first of them came to be known as the *Stotternheim Erlebnis* - the Stotternheim experience. One day, while approaching the small village of Stotternheim near Erfurt, young man Luther was suddenly overtaken by a terrible thunderstorm that frightened him to death. Paralyzed by a sudden flash of lighting quite near, he made his vow to become a monk. The whole scene is an emblematic picture of the late medieval gothic terror, of the gloomy atmosphere in which Luther spent his earlier years. Yet, this horrible scene finds its antipode, its 'comic double' so to speak, in another decisive turning-point that can be detected in his biography. This second turning point constitutes the transition from a gothic, inhibited youth[iv] into an astonishingly productive mid-life. It is known as the *Turm Erlebnis* - the Tower experience - and it constitutes a grotesque scene par excellence. It is recounted by Luther himself during one of his *Tischreden* [Prandial Conversations, Table Talks] and recorded by visitors in three versions. Before analysing the narrative as

such, however, we must first pay attention to the genre characteristics of the document that contains it.

The *Tischreden* constitute a remarkable part of Luther's work. Luther's ideological heirs tended to regard it as a huge collection of material from which the theological content had to be carefully isolated at the expense of an enormous residue of grotesque and histrionic waste.[v] From a Bakhtin-like perspective, however, it is a crucial part of Luther's output, for several reasons. To begin with, it is a work that provides considerable support for the picture of Luther as a 'popular fool', someone remarkably familiar with the genres of grobian and popular laughter; someone moreover whose reading and writing practice was intimately connected with abundant food intake, with eating and drinking, with laughter. Indeed, the *Tischreden* revitalize the time-old affinity between food, drink and the spoken word. The laughing tone, the carefree vocabulary, the gross exaggerations, the fearless truth and the astonishing, uninhibited scholarship of Luther's *Tischreden* are quite in accordance with the speech genre referred to by Bakhtin as "the Banquet form of speech, liberated from fear and piousness" (1968, p. 297). In his later years, he inhabited with his wife (a former nun) and family the former Black Cloister. Besides his many children, a variable number of poor students lived with him and shared his hospitable table. Over dinner, while eating and drinking heartily, he was in the habit of entering into discussions with them in a rather carefree manner. The bulk of these conversations are devoted to comments on the Scriptures. Until the end of his life, Luther continued his intense reading of the Bible, and the Prandial Conversations basically contain the protocol of this reading practice.[vi]

Yet, other genres are present in it as well. Notably, the Prandial Conversations contain a huge series of comic stories and jokes. Luther's talents as a comic writer never have received the attention they deserved, but should we collect these jokes and stories from the *Tischreden*, a comic novel could easily be composed out of them. These stories are crammed with jovial indecencies and comic expressions and they often built on jokes.

Take for instance the story about the lazy priest who, instead of saying his obligatory prayers, was in the habit of reciting the alphabet, adding, "Lord, please receive these letters and be so kind as to compose from them the canonical chants Yourself" [2973]. Or the story about the butcher's dog who mistook his master's testicles for the

bowels he was cleaning and swallowed them - a story which arose during a discussion over the etymology of the word 'monk' which, according to Luther, was derived from an old German name for 'castrated horse' [2981]. Or the story about the priest who, as he witnessed a dog urinating in his censer, asked whether the animal had turned Lutheran. Such gay-hearted stories, reminiscent of Boccaccio, Rabelais and others, narrated by Luther over his hospitable table, contributed considerably to the merry atmosphere of his prandial conversations. Indeed, the world seemed full of gaiety, with everyone mocking everyone else, and Luther joining in with Renaissance laughter. These *Tischreden* were recorded by the visiting students mentioned above, who were in the habit of taking notes. They functioned as the 'third person' in Luther's private life, 'eavesdropping', as Bakhtin calls it, on the private, intimate spheres of his speech, making the private public (1988, p. 124). The compilation of these notes eventually resulted in enormous, macaronic heaps of text, scattered over no less than six bulky, carefully annotated volumes, with vernacular, untrimmed German constantly passing over into scholarly Latin and vice versa - offering the modern reader a reading experience beyond comparison.

Now somewhere in these conversations we suddenly find it narrated how young Luther, after having experienced a gloomy and gothic childhood and adolescence, full of hardship, while brooding over some very disturbing passage from the Scriptures, all of a sudden discerns a new and unexpected truth. And Luther quite frankly points out that this happened to him while dwelling inside a monk's latrine. Let us look into these entries in the *Tischreden* in more detail [3232a-c].

For days and weeks young man Luther, a monk in the monastery of the Black Friars, had been pondering over a well-known phrase taken from the Epistles of Saint Paul, a terrifying phrase that drove him into utter despair: *Iustitia Dei*. Nowadays we may find it difficult to understand why these words meant so much to him, but in Luther's epoch they constituted the very heart of the omnipresent gothic atmosphere of moral anxiety - as depicted for example in the famous painting *The Last Judgement* by Hieronymus Bosch. In those days, Luther (like many of his contemporaries) was overwhelmed by a sense of guilt, an awareness of his deficient, sinful nature, spotting devils everywhere. In the established circuits of gothic theology, the phrase *Iustitia Dei* had acquired a fixed and indisputable meaning: Divine Justice = Divine Punishment. Justice and punishment functioned almost as synonyms. And this short-circuit of gothic theology inevitably produced a terrible syllogism, the basic syllogism of the gothic ethic

of fear: (1) We are constantly falling short and unable to improve ourselves, (2) We will be judged by God, (3) Ergo, God will punish us. The frightening image of the punishing Deity greatly reinforced Luther's aptitude for depression and melancholy. There simply was no prospect of escape. The Renaissance solution - by continuous exercise we are able to re-sculpt ourselves into an elegantly cultivated harmonious body and even to realize the typical grandeur of Renaissance man - was not available to late medieval monasticism.[vii] For although monastic *askesis* was devoted to self-improvement through physical and spiritual exercise, it was *askesis* in the sense of abstinence rather than moderation, and Luther had experienced that sexual abstinence increases the bodily drives, rather than subduing them, transforming them into a truly diabolical force. In short, we are unable to improve ourselves and the terrifying prospect of an omnipotent, punishing God was an image omnipresent in gothic art. It was a prospect that greatly reinforced Luther's physical ailing as well. His rural, folkish body never managed to adapt itself to monastic asceticism and he continuously suffered from severe constipation.

Many years later, during one of his Prandial Conversations, an obese and good-hearted Luther told those gathered around his hospitable table the following story. In those days, he told them, the terrible words 'just' and 'justice' used to strike him like lightning and it terrified him merely to hear them uttered. For in his still gothic mind, justice was inevitably associated with punishment. But one day, while lingering in the tower in which the monk's cloaca was located, reflecting on a most obscure phrase in the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Christians of Rome, where it is suggested that those who are justified through faith shall live (1:17), it suddenly dawned on him that, rather than being punished by God, it is God's justice by which we are justified or rectified and saved from sin. For a modern reader, it may be difficult the grasp immediately the tremendous significance of this new translation. Yet, in these words the nucleus of Protestant theology is contained. Indeed, Luther's gigantic corpus of writing is simply the discursive echo of that tremendous roar of laughter that overtook him *in hac turri, in qua secretus locus erat monachorum*. It was a laugh that applied, not to a particular phrase or concept, but to a whole epoch, a whole world: a laughter with historical generative force, a triumph of life over gloomy seriousness (Bakhtin 1988, p. 194). A new style of reading was bestowed on him in a monk's privy - *Dieße Kunst hatt mir der Heilige Geist auff diser cl[oaca] auff dem thorm gegeben*.[viii] It was an experience of relief and release. Luther was suddenly able to relief himself from his burden, both mentally and physically. The one-time melancholic

suddenly changed into an astonishingly energetic maniac who was to produce a Gargantuan corpus of writing.[ix] The Holy Spirit - a name for the astonishing human possibility of introducing new and unexpected associations between words and meanings[x] - acted as midwife in giving birth both to Protestant theology and to the German language. In the introduction to the Latin edition of his works, Luther stressed that, due to the Tower Experience, the terrifying words *Justitia Dei* suddenly became his "gate to paradise" - a formula in which the excremental grid is noticeable.[xi] Even more so if we remember that the excrements constituted an item of some importance in the theological images of earth and paradise produced by high scholasticism. Thomas Aquinas, for example, points out that in paradise, original man did eat and defecate, but that his excrements - *faeculentia* - had nothing indecent or embarrassing about them (1922, 1a 97, 3), whereas in Luther's experience, the whole world seemed transformed into a huge malodorous latrine.[xii]

Luther's comical retrospect stresses the sudden nature of the transformation. In fact, his autobiographical account concords with what Bakhtin (1988) refers to as the chronotope of metamorphosis. One of the characteristics of metamorphosis-time is that decisive life events are compressed into a single moment of crisis and rebirth, a time of exceptional, unusual events. This we find in Luther. His claim that his re-reading, his liberating translation of the word *Divine Justice* was completely original and unprecedented, a Dionysian impulse so to speak, ignores the fact that it had already been used by others, with whose work Luther was quite familiar. In his idealizing retrospect, however, a gradual development is condensed and compressed into a single decisive emblematic moment, so that we are faced with a Gestalt-switch - a sudden transformation of a gloomy catholic into a jolly protestant, a sudden shift from gothic horror into Renaissance gaiety - due to the decisive experience of laughter. Two basic and relatively stable images of one and the same individual are separated from one another by a sudden metamorphosis. Young Luther, who desperately devoted himself to asceticism, had been suffering from melancholy and constipation. In his autobiographical account, the *Turm Erlebnis* is the turning point between the gloomy, inhibited monk he used to be and the jolly, highly productive ringleader of Protestantism he came to be. A long-term effort of intense reading and reflection is compressed retrospectively into a

sudden inspiration by the Holy Spirit.

But the metamorphosis-scene as such also constitutes a typical, emblematic Gestalt in its own right, at least from the point of view of the aesthetics of narrative laughter. The 'context of discovery' of the very nucleus of Protestant theology was a monastery's latrine. The Holy Spirit revealed the truth to Luther when he was dwelling in a medieval cloaca. It pleased God to bestow His precious gift on him while emptying his buttocks. In such a grobian locale, the terrible short-circuit of scholastic theology was suddenly turned upside-down. From that time onwards, Luther became a literary giant who produced an enormous bulk of writing in which excremental and scatological metaphors, images, abuses and expressions are omnipresent.[xiii] The excremental environment in which the truth was conceived remains noticeable throughout his writings. But all this is not quite as astonishing as it might seem to a modern reader. In fact, the *Turm Erlebnis* is a grotesque scene par excellence, quite in accordance with the style conventions of the grobian, popular aesthetics of late medieval farces and fabliaux. It simply is a genre image, an emblematic scene that can be encountered throughout the genres of laughter that flourished 'on the market square'. We find this reflected in Rabelais where, quite in accordance with the logic of popular laughter, monastic life is systematically brought into connection with defecation, vomiting and pissing.[xiv] In fact, the congeniality between Luther and Rabelais has been noticed by Erikson (1958/1962, p. 145) who, speaking about Luther's preoccupation with the lower parts of his body, paraphrases a letter in which he, after having suffered from severe kidney problems for some time, triumphantly reports the release of "Gargantuan quantities" of urine, eleven buckets at one time![xv]

Yet, it goes without saying that Luther's frank and carefree account of the birth of Protestantism became a source of embarrassment to his pious, serious, even hagiographic readership. By that time, the aesthetics of the grotesque had already been dethroned by neo-classicist aesthetics and laughter had been dispelled from theological discourse. Some of Luther's heirs tried to conceal the true circumstances of their master's conversion by relying on a symbolical re-interpretation of the story. It was claimed, for example, that the cloaca or secret, heated room in the tower was a metaphor that indicated the spiritual prison in which Luther spent his monastic years.[xvi] Meanwhile, biographers belonging to the catholic party were severely criticized for taking advantage of Luther's lack of prudishness by over-emphasizing the supposedly negligible details of his decisive experience.[xvii] One of them was Hartmann Grisar, the Jesuit author of an impressive,

three-volume standard biography (1911/1912). When in the first Volume Grisar cautiously pointed out that the tower experience actually took place in a monk's cloaca, located in a tower that was apparently part of the adjacent city-wall,[xviii] this raised a storm of indignation among his Protestant reviewers. Grisar was severely criticized for taking Luther's comic reminiscence literally. They even claimed that Grisar's objective was to make strategic use of the locality of Luther's revelation, similar to the way in which the Catholic Church in its struggle against Arianism had successfully exploited the fact that Arius had happened to die in a latrine.[xix] In view of this criticism, Grisar added a substantial supplement (Vol. 3, pp. 978 ff.) in which the 'issue of locality' - *die Lokalfrage* - is given due attention. As a result, the fact that Luther was telling a real-life story in a frank and straightforward manner is now considered beyond doubt. It could not have been his monastic cell (which was not heated), nor was he granted another private cell somewhere in a tower in order for him to quietly pursue his reading, as had been suggested, nor is it likely for these words to have been added by impious rogues in later versions of the manuscript.

Luther as a contemporary of Rabelais (2): the excremental grid

In Luther, as well as in Rabelais, the 'Sorbonnites' or 'agelasts' functioned as a community of scientists who devoted themselves to establishing fixed connections between terms and meanings, relying on the apparently indisputable a priori parameters of their speech genre.[xx] On the market square, however, the artificial conditions for the production of scientific discourse were suddenly abolished and the contestable nature of serious discourse became apparent. The exposing bluntness of the fool's language is closely linked with the chronotope of the public square. Extra-temporal truths were exposed to ridicule, due to the techniques of laughter. As was explained above, one such technique consisted in degrading lofty discourse by reconnecting it with corporeal life, notably the body's lower stratum. In Luther's work, this technique is very important. It is quite prominent in his Prandial Conversations, but present in other, more 'official' works as well. Verbal abuse, relying on degradation, is a characteristic ingredient of his style. The persistent reference to bodily life is inherent to his carefree vocabulary, allowing

him to articulate his fearless truth.[xxi] In the Prandial Conversations, many entries read like scenes borrowed from popular farces rather than theological arguments. But the grotesque humour of the market square is noticeable throughout his work. The importance of excremental metaphors in Luther's corpus was stressed for example by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1986) who indicates that the Prandial Conversations - Propos du Table - and other writings basically rely on an excremental scheme. In Luther's perception, the world is a heap of shit. We ourselves are the excrements that fall from the devil's aperture and the words of his enemies are time and again referred to as shit produced by the Devil's behind.[xxii] Throughout his writings, Luther relies on an anal or excremental grid that allows the world to appear in a comical manner. The terrifying image or prospect is ridiculed, that is: familiarized by it.

Notably, there is in Luther a close link between words and shit. Writing and defecation are associated on countless occasions.[xxiii] In Luther's libel *Against Harry Sausage - Wider Hans Wurst -* for example, the act of writing a book is compared to letting go a fart. In the *Tischreden* we find it often recorded that, whenever Luther gets himself in a difficult position while disputing with the Devil, he simple tells him to kiss his ass.[xxiv] The predominance of the excremental scheme or grid is indeed quite astonishing. At times, it even allows him to solve some tedious theological issue or other in a grotesque manner. Take, for example, the way he responds to a question concerning God's responsibility for the existence of evil in the world, which came up in the course of a discussion on how a certain section of the 2nd Book of Samuel had to be interpreted. Although in principle God is able to prevent all evil, He sometimes (for reasons that are bound to remain obscure to us) restricts Himself to alleviating or containing its harmful consequences. This is explained by Luther by means of the following example. If someone is about to shit somewhere, God may, instead of preventing it, induce him to retreat into some corner or other, rather than emptying his bottom on the table.[xxv] Luther boldly tells us that he wants to empty his buttocks on the papal crown [218], while on the other hand he confesses that, had he been present at some of the heroic events recorded in the Bible, he would most certainly have wetted his pants [335]. Of course the comical effect of all this is intensified by Luther's peasant-like tone of voice, his perfect mastery of the grotesque mode of speech, which remains unsurpassed, provided his language is judged according to the standards of the genre. The transformation of the terrifying and bewildering thought of God as the omnipotent origin of evil into something rather

comical is Luther's access to moral truth. It is part of what Bakhtin refers to as the "specific truth of table talk" (1968, p. 117)

Luther's remarkable reliance on excremental jokes, metaphors and abuses is part of his epoch-making effort at 'vulgarizing' the Scriptures. Centuries of scholastic theology had turned the language of the Bible into something quite inflexible and serious. Fixed and lofty meanings had been attached to words and scenes that were originally located in everyday settings. We must not forget that the medieval Bible itself was called *Vulgata*, i.e. the vulgarized version of the official Greek and Hebrew one. Its language, however, had become canonized once again and therefore, a subsequent effort at vulgarization was called for - and this was Luther's great achievement. He did not translate the Bible into a language already present. Rather, by translating and commenting on the Bible, he baptized the German vernacular and created the German language (much like Hieronymus had created Medieval Latin). It was a language event - a *Sprachereignis* - that allowed the German language to become responsive to the language of the Other, not by merely repeating it, but by revitalizing it. Let me give one telling example of Luther's technique. In *On Councils and Churches* (1539) Luther explains the original and proper meaning of the word *ecclesia*. According to Luther, ecclesia simply means a bunch of people, a crowd gathered on the market square. For this is how the word is used in *The Acts*. It has nothing to do with the official, momentous, hierarchical institute with which it came to be identified later on. It is a horizontal, rather than a vertical phenomenon. According to Luther, the word ecclesia might refer to any gathering of Christians. And in *On Translating* (1530), Luther stresses that, in order to produce an adequate translation, the translator should pay attention to the housewife, the children in the street, the ordinary people gathered on the market square, watching them closely while they speak. Luther's marvellous technique allowed the language and idiom of the market square to appear in print, to enter published discourse.[xxvi] In Luther's writings, the vulgar, the down-to-earth and the sublime somehow seem to coexist. As in the case of Rabelais, many words borrowed from popular discourse were used in a written form for the first time by Luther. He succeeded in familiarizing the Bible, much like the French translation of the Bible, done by Olivétan, reflects the influence of Rabelais's language and style

(Bakhtin 1968, p. 100). It is, as Bakhtin phrases it, nearer in style to Rabelais, to Calvin in thought.

This revitalization of the language of the Bible by transposing it to vernacular German inevitably produced a comical, parodical effect. According to Bergson (1940/1969) the transposition of a certain idea or phrase into a different tone of voice is always comical and this notably applies to the transposition of solemn ideas into the colloquial language of contemporary life. Bakhtin claims that the language of French literary prose was created by Calvin and Rabelais, where Calvin's language already was "an intentional and conscious lowering of, almost a travesty on, the sacred language of the Bible" (1968, p. 71). As for the German language one could say that Luther represents both Calvin and Rabelais, fused into one heroic person.[xxvii] Although his translation contains elements of degradation, this is necessary in order to familiarize and revitalize the Bible and to evade a mechanical and insensitive translation. To the official practice of distancing the word (along the vertical axis) by means of canonization is thus opposed the horizontalizing practice of familiarizing the word by means of vulgarization. The vertical distance between the exalted lofty atmosphere of official discourse and the carefree atmosphere of the unpublished spheres of speech is reduced. In the case of Rabelais, Bakhtin stresses the enormous importance of extra-literary sources, but his argument is fully applicable to Luther as well.[xxviii] Like Rabelais, Luther incorporated into his writings the crude frankness, jokes, short stories, proverbs, puns, catchwords and sayings of popular culture. Whenever he refers to the Pope, for example, he cannot resist from comparing him to an ass, a pig or any other degrading object. What Bakhtin says with regard to Rabelais applies to Luther as well: the representatives of the old clerical world: monks, religious fanatics, priests, even the Pope himself - are constantly treated as absurd (1988, p. 240).

In the introduction to his famous essay *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation: on how to improve the Christian Ranks* Luther refers to himself as the "court's jester" (1520; WA 6; 404-469). Due to his caps and bells, he has the right to frank and unrestricted speech. Indeed, he appeals to the court jester's privilege of unrestricted speech - *Ich sage aus meinem Hofrecht frei heraus* - when he tells us, for example, that it is as idiotic to ban sexual intercourse from life as it would be to pronounce a ban on eating, drinking or defecation. In *On Marital Life* it is likewise claimed that sexual intercourse is as natural and unavoidable as eating, drinking and defecation (1522; WA 10; 2; 275-304).

The vow of chastity is as ridiculous as the pledge to bite off one's own nose. Tetzel, the unfortunate Dominican who happened to be selling indulgences in Wittenberg on behalf of Saint Peter's Dome when all of a sudden Luther took the floor, was one of those shouting voices - a *grosser Clamant* - on the market square of late medieval gothic life, relying on circus, theatre and bombast to convey the message. He and other enemies were overloaded by Luther with verbal abuses, often of an excremental nature. As Bakhtin points out, the phrase 'verbal mudslinging' still builds on the ancient gesture of besmirching, not with mud, but with excrement. But Luther's abuse is not merely a negative phenomenon. By verbal degradation, the terrible powers of the church became humanized, the intimidating vertical distance of the Word suddenly found itself reduced. Excremental abuses indicated that all human beings, whether Pope or peasant, are basically equal because the daily life of our bodies (notably their lower half) is basically equal. And this has a crucial *topological* effect. Due to carefree abuse, the frightening silhouettes of Pope, Cardinals and all the other once dreaded spokesmen of verticalized official truth are familiarized into human beings quite like us. The jolly abuse of the fearless and impious excremental grid allows the world to appear in an everyday and horizontal manner. The papal blackguards have been mocking us German simpletons and drunkards long enough, Luther tells us, and he subsequently compares the Pope as the head of the church to the painted heads that are carried around during Carnival processions on Shrove Tuesday. His verbal abuse is less vicious than it might seem at first glance: he allows the Pope to die comically, and this is part of his destruction-by-parody of the lofty spheres of medieval ideology (Bakhtin 1988, p. 221).

Like in the case of Rabelais, Luther's language and laughter destroy the "false idealization" of the established speech genres and render them implausible, in order for new forms of communication to become possible. The essence of his method consists in the destruction of habitual matrices - such as the identification of ecclesia with the Church of Rome, or the identification of Divine Justice with Divine Punishment - and the subsequent creation of unexpected associative matrices, including the most surprising logical links and linguistic connections - a freeing of consciousness that had become imprisoned within a tyrannical discourse (Bakhtin 1988 p. 60-61, p. 169). False connections, false associations, established and reinforced by tradition and sanctioned by official ideology, are dis-unified in order to rebuild in a creative manner the entire picture of the world. Like in the case of Rabelais, the 'defecation series', as Bakhtin calls it, is of

crucial importance in this process. The defecation series "creates the most unexpected matrices of objects, phenomena and ideas, which are destructive of hierarchy and materialize the picture of the world and of life" (1988, p. 187). In Luther we find a joke in which papal Decretals are brought into connection with excrements by referring to them as *Drecketalen* instead of *Deckretalen*.[xxix] They are pieces of shit that are swallowed by the people in order to become shit again, subsequent to being digested (provided one has a strong enough stomach). Likewise, in Rabelais we find a section called *In Praise of Decretals* were papal decrees are entered into the defecation series. Friar John used them for an arse-whipping while Panurge suffered a severe case of constipation after reading one of them. What is ridiculed in, for example, late medieval scholasticism by Luther, Rabelais and others is the mechanical, machine-like manner in which the established matrices are applied.

As Bergson (1940/1969) has pointed out, the mechanical is always comical. We laugh whenever something gives the impression of functioning automatically and in a mechanical manner, like a puppet or a machine. We laugh when someone's movements or speech acts become mechanical and resemble the dull, obstinate patterns of machines (1940/1969, pp. 38 ff.). We laugh whenever a human being seems to be transformed into an automaton, someone who has lost all responsiveness and flexibility. Laughter corrects mechanical forms of discourse. In this respect, Bergson's analysis of laughter is quite in accordance with Bakhtin's. What is corrected by Rabelais is the mechanical functioning of the speech genre of the Sorbonnites. A basic set of terms and items, once installed, has the tendency of functioning automatically. Due to the grotesque and scatological strategies of Luther and Rabelais, the hierarchical arrangements of concepts and words collapse, the established matrices find themselves de-automized. Notably, the enormous vertical distance between learned and obscene language disappears. And this makes it possible for academic discourse to stretch-out, to become more horizontal as it were. Terrifying images had situated themselves along the vertical axis, thus reinforcing an unfortunate misunderstanding, even of the most liberating words of the Other, such a *Justitia Dei*. Luther allowed the practice of reading the Bible to become dialogical once again. The abyss between the Word and the body was mitigated. The fixed links between words and ideas that had organized monastic life for centuries, and had been reinforced by scholasticism, suddenly became contestable. Monastic-scholastic life became drenched

in a Gargantuan burst of laughter - until a series of counter-initiatives (Trent, the founding of the Jesuit Order, etc.) partly succeeded in re-verticalizing the world again.

By way of justification for his considerable reliance on laughter, Luther at times refers to Christ, and this is another issue worthy of our attention. For it is a well-established prejudice among theologians that Christ never laughed (Morreall 1983). Luther, however, held the opposite position. As an unsurpassed and gifted reader of the Bible, the mockery by Christ Himself did not escape him. In the *Tischreden* he points to several instances of mockery and ridicule in the Gospels where Christ utters Himself jestingly - *hat spottisch geredet*.[xxx] In fact, he regarded his own prandial conversations, his discourse *über Tische*, his *colloquii convivali* in which he emerges as such an amiable fellow, as similar to the ones conducted by Christ and his disciples, described by Luther as most jolly and intimate [3268]. Indeed, everything we believe in, Luther tells us, is ridiculous from the point of view of reason. And yet we cannot resist Christianity's gay truth.[xxxi]

Luther's biography as a sequence of chronotopes

Bakhtin defines a chronotope as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" and as "temporal and spatial indicators [that are] fused into one ... concrete whole" (1988, p. 84.). It is the "typological stability" of chronotopes that allows us to identify genres or generic types. Examples of chronotopes are: the chronotope of the road, the provincial town, the castle (notably in the Gothic novel), the parlours or salons of bourgeois life, and so forth. A chronotope allows time to become visible and concrete, to take on flesh. It is the basic structure out of which the narrative scenes of the novel unfold. I already referred to the chronotope of metamorphosis: two or more basic images of one and the same individual are separated from one another by an exceptional event, a cross-road or turning-point, whereby real biographical time is compressed and condensed into one single decisive moment. The whole world is experienced in terms of crisis and rebirth, as the sinner (for example) is suddenly transformed into a saint. It involves an experience of purification, a leap-like event leaving a deep, ineradicable mark on the individual's entire life (p. 116). What was drenched in muteness and invisibility suddenly enters the public sphere (and vice versa).

Luther's biography entails a sequence of important chronotopes discussed by Bakhtin, namely: (1) the chronotope of the medieval monastery, (2) the chronotope of the expanded world of the Rabelaisian great man, and (3) the chronotope the protestant family home. Each of these basic chronotopes is preceded by crucial, metamorphosis-like turning-points, namely: The Stotternheim Experience, The Tower Experience and, finally, the former monk's marriage to a former nun (an emblematic, comical, farcical scene in its own right).

The chronotope of the medieval monastery is of considerable importance in the history of the novel.[xxxii] The architectonics of the monastery are the materialization of what Bakhtin refers to as a completely verticalized and hierarchicalized world (p. 156 ff.). The monastery is, so to speak, an inhabited clockwork. Its architectonics mirror the supra-temporal structure of the world, the synchronicity of everything. Time is deprived of its directedness towards the future and reduced to a circular, spherical movement, oriented upwards, copying the eternal movements of the heavenly bodies. At the same time, the monastery is shot through with horizontalizing elements of popular laughter. In the genres of the grotesque, monastic life is time and again brought into connection with the physical processes of the body's lower stratum.[xxxiii] The comic stories projected onto monastic life de-verticalize the monastery, flatten it as it were, while the monastery itself desperately tries to secure and maintain its vertical orientation, its disregard of horizontal time - the time of the cheerful and popular novellas. The chronotope of the monastery provides the setting for a considerable part of Luther's (auto)biography, as well as for the supreme narrative plot of his youth: the Tower Experience.

Subsequently, another chronotope is called in to organize and assimilate the astonishingly complex plethora of events of Luther's life into a coherent, narrative whole, namely the chronotope of what Bakhtin refers to as the expanded world (the macro-cosmos) of the Rabelaisian great man whose actions affect enormous, extraordinary spatial and temporal expanses (p. 167); a man, as Bakhtin tells us, who eats, drinks, defecates, passes winds, etc., but on a grand scale (p. 241). Indeed, in those days, a burp (or fart) produced in Wittenberg was audible in Rome, as Luther in one of his famous sayings rightly claimed. Everything is as big, as wide and as horizontal as possible, much in contrast to the vertical orientation of monastic life, centred around a tiny, secluded monastic cell. In the Rabelais novels, even the monastery - the abbey of Thélème - is inconceivably large. The time made visible in this expanded world is a time of epoch-making events, of military campaigns and high politics on a grand scale, of ideological

and political struggles with emperors and Popes, of debates and warfare of unprecedented intensity. Luther exemplifies, in his own peculiar way, the Rabelaisian great man in this expanded world by producing an enormous amount of printed matter in a limited period of time and by exerting an astonishing influence on the decades and centuries to come. His life during this period is completely exteriorized - he was a public figure. Everything he said was said in public, his thoughts and convictions were immediately published, immediately assimilated into the new emerging realm of published speech. At the same time, he remained a clownish figure, and the bluntness of his language was still linked with the older chronotope of the public square.[xxxiv]

Finally, the great man finds a comfortable retreat in his version of the Protestant family idyll, the Protestant, petty bourgeois 'home'.[xxxv] His marriage to a former nun marked another metamorphosis that made the advent of this third chronotope possible. The demonic rebel turned into a *pater familias*. Withdrawn from the noisy, public sphere, he established a new and intimate integrity in his now limited spatial world (p. 224 ff.). His body changed and grew into the obese figure with whom he is now usually identified. The energetic man of great deeds suddenly found ample opportunity to relax. As Bakhtin points out, this chronotope - with husband, wife, children and intimates gathered around the family table reading the Bible - is to become of tremendous importance in the history of the Protestant novel. A new form of communication is made possible by it. One of the many remarkable facts in Luther's biography is that the final chronotope is located in the very same monastery in which he had spent part of his monastic life. After the Black Cloister came to be deserted by its original inhabitants (the Augustine monks), Luther once again inhabited the place, but this time as head of a family. That is, the locality remained the same, but the chronotope changed completely. The one time monastery now functioned as an accommodation for a new type of space where idyllic family life flourished. The transformed locale from now on displayed a private, cosy, chaotic-but-charming atmosphere, far removed from the grand political world outside (Bakhtin 1988, p. 227, 232.), with which Luther had lost contact. The emphasis is now on the domestic, private, everyday details of life: eating, drinking, friendly discussion, joint reading. The one time giant withdrew into his little corner of the world, a spatially limited, familiar world of his own, with his children and students gathered around the table enjoying their collective family meal. Still a man-of-the-people, notorious for his earthiness, Luther has

now become the hero of a different kind of novel, the family idyll. The wandering, inconspicuous monk, who travelled to Rome on foot, encountered all sorts of people and suddenly became a man of the world, finally retreated into a delimited locale where, during shared meals around the family table, he displays the deep humanity characteristic of idyllic man, ignoring the great but abstract world outside. Life has finally become familiarized and humanized. Seen from a grand perspective, the new heroism of the idyllic man is petty and ridiculous no doubt, especially in comparison with his one-time greatness and world-historical significance, but the jovial atmosphere of his Table Talk is authentic and irresistible. The idyllic image of Protestant family life, centring around the joint reading of the Scriptures and the daily family meal, is the new matrix of "objects, phenomena, ideas and words" (Bakhtin 1988, p. 187, 205) that Luther put together after having destroyed the old medieval matrix, centred around the monastic ascetic cell. Yet, this idyll was made possible by the extraordinary, gigantic force of Luther's world-embracing laughter that destroyed the ideological apparatus that had managed to verticalize the world for centuries.

The three chronotopes also become manifest in Luther's physical appearance, as well as in his writing practice. At the time of the monastery-chronotope, those who met him were struck by his ascetic looks and his demonic glance. For years, his writing practice was restricted to marginal notes and glosses. Shortly before 1518, however, he suddenly started to look fatter and more healthy - *habitior et corpulentior*. From now on "he begins slowly to put on weight... A physical and psychological climacteric seems to occur at this crisis time in Luther's life" (Todd 1964, p. 136). And from 1518 onwards, public events on an expanded scale provide the challenge for an intense activity: "For the next twenty years Luther was averaging something like a writing a fortnight. The sheer energy is astonishing. He must surely have had to eat more... It is sometimes said that with a growth in his public importance a man may experience a physical enlargement - he grew in bulk... Fatter he became" (Todd 1964, p. 136). All these publications, written in great haste, had an immediate, astonishing, world-wide impact.

After his marriage, however, nothing outstanding happened in his personal life. His world became a micro-cosmos. Surrounded by his growing family, in a largely open house, students in and out all the time, copying down his every word, the fabulous Table Talk emerged. He became relaxed and jolly, and his verbal abuse became even less restrained than before. "He grew fatter, until he was very large; he drank much and boasted of it" (Todd 1964, p. 220).[xxxvi] Notwithstanding the disturbance, the noise, the

heaps of papers and books, Todd tells us, the picture of something like a lively idyll does not seem to be very far from the truth. Luther, becoming more and more jolly, obstinate, deep-drinking, expounding and contradicting, "set an example ... of something like the new kind of Christian household" (p. 242).

Ambivalence: a final comment

Throughout the centuries, Luther's voluminous writings met with a mixed response, triggering enthusiasm and euphoria, but also uneasiness, resentment and outrage. Even those who take a sympathizing stance towards his output are likely to have their experiences of reservation and ambivalence. In this article I tried to reveal the extent to which Luther's work will suffer from any effort to transform him into a 'pure' (serious) theologian, expurgated of his notorious earthiness, along the line of a Lutheranism-without-Luther. Indeed, Luther is one of those authors who remains physically present in his work. Bakhtin offers a reading strategy that allows us to perceive and appreciate the significance of the physical and comical aspects of his writings and sayings that are too often disregarded. Notably, it recalls attention to the bulky Table Talk where laughter and corporeal existence are often called in to assist his understanding of the Word as well as of the world.

This does not mean, however, that ambivalence is thereby silenced altogether. Although it was my objective to provide something of a restorative by stressing the gay and carefree aspect of Luther's words and gestures, it must be kept in mind that, besides being one of the heroes of grotesque laughter, there always remains this other, gloomy, demonic side to Luther. In terms of the three chronotopes distinguished above, it appeared in the demonic, obsessive glance of Luther-the-monk, in his disastrous role during the peasants revolt of the Luther-as-Politician, and, finally, in outbursts of anti-Semitism during his later years. The latter defect is all the more astonishing in view of the sincerity with which he, as a translator, tried to recover what he regarded as the unsurpassed grandeur of the original Hebrew language. It all adds to Luther's 'complexity', no doubt. In judging Luther, there always remains some troublesome element or other to check our enthusiasm.

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[i] All references refer to the Weimar Edition of Luther's works, containing the Tischreden in six volumes - D. Martin *Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Weimar: Böhlaus, 1913-1921.

[ii] Many of his writings are written in an offensive tone, built up in the form of abuse of others and expressed in the vocabulary "of coarse and excremental expletives, to which he was particularly addicted" (Todd 1964, p. 6). Luther's verbal abuse, however, was not a purely negative phenomenon. Being witty and jolly, he "enjoyed an occasional prank" (p. 8).

[iii] This is the Lutheran version of Voltaire's image of the *Temple du Goût* [Temple of Taste], referred to by Bakhtin (1968): an intellectualist image of heaven in which all the great works of world literature are thoroughly rewritten and purified by angels.

[iv] A youngster "drenched in muteness and invisibility", in "the mute and invisible spheres of life" (Bakhtin 1988, p. 135).

[v] The catholic biographer John Todd also urges us to exercise care in using the Table Talk. "It is quite easy to make a selection from passages ... and produce a lurid picture of a coarse blasphemer" (Todd 1964, p. 8).

[vi] Certain connections could be discerned between his daily digestion of the Bible and food intake, a connection that complements the obvious one (made by Luther at several occasions) between writing and defecation

[vii] Nietzsche, a great admirer of the Renaissance practice of self-improvement, in the course of which individuals transform their life and body into a work of art, recognized that this effort at glorification - *Verklärung* - of the body eventually met with an insurmountable limit: the *Unterleib* – "Der Unterleib ist der Grund dafür, dass der Mensch sich nicht so leicht für einen Gott hält"

(the abdomen is the reason why man does not easily take himself for a god - Beyond Good and Evil, § 141; 1966, p. 89.

viii This art [of reading] was bestowed unto me by the Holy Spirit in this c[loaca] in the tower [3232b]. He now read the Scriptures, notably this terrifying passage, with a completely transformed eye. Suddenly, he tells us, "the words came up to me on every side jostling one another and smiling in agreement".

ix The Tower Experience functions as a 'comic double', not only of Luther's own Stotternheim Experience (a gloomy experience, complemented by a comic one), but also of the famous revelation Saint Augustine's experienced when reading and reflecting on that same Epistle of Saint Paul. In contrast to Luther, however, Saint Augustine was dwelling, not on a latrine, but in a beautiful garden and instead of defecating, he wept abundantly (St Augustine, 1912/1950, Book VIII, Ch. 12). Indeed, we must not forget that young man Luther was an Augustine monk. His experience was a kind of comic follow-up as compared to the paradigmatic experience reported by the highly-esteemed founder of the monastic order to which he belonged. In his commentary on the Psalms, on which he was working at that time, Luther returns several times to the Confessions Book 8, a passage that obviously had a deep effect on him. Another important support was the work of Tauler in which Luther underlined sections on distress and birth.

x 19. Lacan (1994), notably: *Le signifiant et le Saint-Esprit* (pp. 41-58).

xi Even this *Introduction* betrays Luther's congeniality with the aesthetics of the grotesque. After having apologized for the rough and chaotic state of most of his writing, a series of biographical scenes is presented in short-hand, speaking of being dead drunk with Papal doctrines, of the market square noises produces by brawlers selling indulgences, of the contemptuous "Italian gesture" made by someone from Cardinal Cajetan's train, of the women in a pub who, asked for their opinion regarding the Holy See, wanted to know whether it was made from stone or wood, and, finally, of his own "rebirth", the crucial experience that had opened the gate for him and allowed the terrible signifier *Justitia Dei* to take on quite a different countenance [WA 54; 179-187].

xii As the reigning ideology refused to make sense out of it, the life of the body could only be crude, dirty, self-destructive. Between the word and the body there was an immeasurable abyss. In short, there was, according to Bakhtin, a close connection between medieval ascetic ideology and the coarseness of medieval bodily practices (1988, p. 171).

xiii In terms of publication, Luther's "literary spate" set off in 1518, when his "reforming and scriptural impulse was running at high speed through the narrowest funnel in a pure Lutheran jet. From Martin's room began in 1518 to shoot the spate of writings which never dried up" (Todd 1964, p. 141).

xiv In *Forms of time and of the chronotope in the novel* Bakhtin (1988) gives the following explanation for the stereotypic link between monastic life and crudity in popular laughter, already pointed at above. Due to the oppressive influence of catholic *askesis*, Bakhtin tells us, the natural functions of the human body were denied "ideological directives". As a consequence, they became crude and bestial. Since the reigning ideology refused to make sense out of the life of the body, it could only be licentious, crude and dirty. Monastic ascetic ideology on the one hand and the coarseness and licentiousness of medieval bodily practices - the coarse, hawking, farthing, yawning, spitting, hiccupping, noisily nose-blowing, endlessly chewing and drinking medieval body - paralleled one another. "The coarse debauchery of medieval man was but the reverse side of the ascetic ideal" (p. 192). Therefore, from the point of views of popular laughter, monastic asceticism was intrinsically connected with vulgarities. Indeed, as a consequence of the "falseness inherent in the ascetic world view, gluttony and drunkenness flourished precisely in the monasteries. A monk in Rabelais is first and foremost a glutton and a drunkard" (p. 185).

xv The bulk of his writings likewise attained Gargantuan dimensions. From 1518 onwards, he achieved an enormous literary output. There is so much of his writing material, Todd tells us, that the mere task of setting out a precise chronological list of all the publications is something belonging to specialists (1964, p. 171). Indeed, the flow of his printed word became ceaseless.

[xvi] I find it rather ironical that for Luther himself, the Tower Experience was the very thing that freed him from this time-old practice of allegorical re-interpretation. When I was still a monk, he tells us in one of his *Tischreden*, I applied this interpretative strategy to everything. Even a cloaca was interpreted in an allegorical manner - Antea allegorisabam etiam cloacam et omnia... Zuvor allegorisirte ich, und deutete geistlich, auch die Cloaca, und nur alles... [335]. On the other hand, The symbolic reading of the Tower Experience is not completely incorrect. It constitutes an emblematic scene. In Luther's experience, the world at large had acquired on the depressing aspect of an enormous diabolical latrine. Due to his decisive experience of laughter, however, the conditions of spiritual and physical life were suddenly cleaned-up in a Herculean manner - and Hercules' heroic reposition of a river might be compared to Luther's heroic reposition of the great stream of words known as the Bible.

[xvii] But we find even catholic readers embarrassed by the locality in which the discovery (often alluded to as 'tower theology') came to him: A whole myth had grown up around the phrase 'tower-theology', Todd tells us, and the precise room to which Luther was referring "has been identified by some with a lavatory in that part of the building, to the delight of some and the dismay of others" (1964, p. 79).

[xviii] The sewage having egress outside the town boundaries, an arrangement quite customary at that time (Grisar 1911/1912, p. 323)

[xix] A few days before his death, Luther informed his wife that he himself almost died in a latrine, due to a huge stone in the ceiling that happened to come off (Letter to his wife, 10 February 1546). The comic technique of degrading someone by having him die in a latrine was a stock element in the serio-comic genres of ancient literature, Cf. for example Seneca's *Ludus morte Claudii* where the emperor dies at the moment of defecation (Bakhtin 1968, p. 150) - another exemplification of the remarkable vitality and persistence of what Bakhtin refers to as 'genre memory'.

[xx] According to Luther, the intellectual methodology which commonly passed as theology was in effect little more than a crossword puzzle, an intellectual game played with counters devised by philosophers (Todd 1964, p. 155).

[xxi] According to Todd (1964) Luther's "addiction to excremental and coarse words" was an attempt "to bring before his opponents the brute facts as an ordinary man would express them; it was all part of the departure from the scholastic abstractions back to a vocabulary for the Gospel in which the nouns, verbs and adjectives were those in everyday use" (p. 240).

[xxii] As an example of this may stand the following entry: "Ich bin der reiffe dreck, so ist die Welt das weite arschloch... Ich danke dir, lieber Gott, das du mich lessest unter deinem geringen heufflein sein" - I am ripe shit, and so the world is the great ass-hole... I thank Thee, dear Lord, for allowing me to be among your petty little heaps [5537].

[xxiii] For example, when Luther refers to the nose as our facial latrine - latrina capitis - he does so in order to point out that all our prayers are produced from under a latrine - unter dem Scheishaus [2807]. And so forth, and so forth.

[xxiv] Lecke mich im a. [83]; The devil will dispute with me until I tell him to kiss my ass - Der teufel disputirt mit mir, so lange bis ich sage: Leck mich in gem A. [141]; Der teuffel disputiret heindt mit mir et accusabat me ... sed ego nolebam ei respondere et dicebam: Lecke du mich im a. [248]; etc.; I often chase the devil away by letting go a fart, saying: Devil, yesterday I likewise produced a fart, did you make note of it in your record? - Jag ihn offt mit eim furz hinweg... dico, Teuffel, gester thett ich auch ein furz; hast du ihn auch angeschriben in den register? [122]; etc.

[xxv] In the original, the argument runs like this: "Als, wenn einer scheissen will, das kann ich nicht weren, aber das ers hieher thue auff den disch, das will ich weren und sprich: in winckel!" [5225].

[xxvi] Janssen writes: "Er schöpfte aus den reichen Quellen der Volkstümlichen Redeweise; in volkstümlicher Beredsamkeit kamen ihm wenige gleich" (1915, p. 252). Thus, Janssen emphasizes that, as a writer, Luther borrowed from the rich resources of popular speech. And yet at the same time the concise, cheerful statements in which he articulates the profundity of his faith are sublime.

[xxvii] Whereas Calvin, the 'agelast' of radical Protestantism, rebuked Rabelais in a rather stern manner, Luther regarded gaiety as an appropriate Christian mood. Unlike Luther, Calvin was already part of what Toulmin (1990) referred to as Counter-Renaissance. He represented the dawn of a new seriousness. When troubled by heavy thoughts, Luther tells his visitors in some of his earliest Prandial Conversations, he usually has recourse to sturdy drinking - einen starken trunck birs [17] - or a good joke - so mus ich ein hohen starken bossen reissen [19].

[xxviii] "Rabelais's first and foremost source was the unofficial side of speech, with its rich stores of curses... with its various indecencies... To this very day, the unofficial side of speech reflects a Rabelaisian degree of indecency in it, of words concerning drunkenness and defecation and so forth..." (1988, p. 238).

[xxix] Book 4, Ch. 52; mentioned in Bakhtin 1988, p. 188.

[xxx] Likewise, Jacques Lacan points out that whenever the Pharisees (the precursors of the Sorbonnites so to speak) try to trap Jesus by asking questions that apparently are impossible to answer without offending either the worldly or the spiritual authorities (for example when he is asked whether a Jew is obliged to pay taxes), he manages to escape by means of a formidable joke - Show me the coin... (as if he had never seen one before; Lacan 1986, VII 3). The dilemma at hand is simply eliminated as Jesus manages to reveal the ridiculous nature of the established truth game as such - and the audience must have laughed, since at that time, His innovative, light-hearted words were not yet charged with their present theological gravity.

[xxxi] Even the connection between excrement and words is present in the Gospels. When Jesus is asked by the Pharisees why his disciples break the canon by not washing their hands before eating, He replies by saying: "No one is defiled by what goes into his mouth; only by what comes out of it" (Mt 15:11) and He adds that whatever goes in by the mouth passes into the stomach and is discharged at a certain place without really defiling us, but what comes out of the mouth (wicked thoughts, fornication, etc.) defiles us (Mt 15: 17).

[xxxii] Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* can be regarded as the rehabilitation and glorification of this historical chronotope, as an artistic effort to reveal and revive its astonishing narrative possibilities.

[xxxiii] In Eco's novel, the desperate and grim campaign of medieval asceticism against laughter is part of the monastery's continuous war against its grobian, horizontalizing environment.

[xxxiv] . Although Bakhtin does not refer to Luther in this respect, he does mention Thomas Murner (p. 163), the catholic German satirist whose masterpiece - *Von dem grossen Lutherischen Narren* (1533) - depicts Luther as an obese, clownish, ridiculous, medieval figure, with the objective of containing his performance within the spatially restricted laughter of the medieval market square - unsuccessfully of course. A similar effort was made by the Dutch catholic poet Anna Bijns, who especially focussed on the fact of Luther marrying a former nun. Their laughter is much more negative than the one expressed by their grotesque target - Luther.

[xxxv] According to Weber, the Lutheran 'home' differs from the puritan or Calvinist home in that the vitality and frankness of life remained intact. From the outset, the emphasis was on piety and disposition, rather than on regulation and control. This, Weber tells us, was also the reason why the coarse drunkenness of Lutheran courts contrasted so strongly with the ethical norms of other protestant courts (Weber 1965/1991, p. 97). Indeed, Luther's own household is depicted as rather chaotic and disorderly by his biographers while in his later years Luther's appreciation of a sturdy drink was notorious. Cf. the description of Luther's home by Delumeau (1965/1991): "Towards the end of his life he grew fat, developed a drinking habit, and found pleasure in shocking his visitors with obscene witticisms".

[xxxvi] Luther recommends a stout drink as the perfect remedy against temptations and depression: *ego bibo einen starken trunck birs, quando habeo graves cogitationes* [17]. Similar remarks can be found throughout the Table Talk.