

# CARNIVAL AS SYMBOLIC INVERSION AND TRANSGRESSION IN *CAT'S CRADLE*

Chien-chi Liu

劉 建 基 \*

## 摘 要

本論文主要是將俄國批評家巴赫汀(Bakhtin)的理論融入「新歷史主義」(New Historicism)、「意識形態」(Ideology)及福寇(Foucault)的理論,以解讀當代美國小說家馮內果的小說《貓的搖籃》(*Cat's Cradle*)。在形式上,作者力求與「正統」文學敘述(如十九世紀的寫實主義或是二十世紀初期的現代主義作品)背道而馳;在語言上,作者企圖推翻、破壞文學語言的常規(code)。本論文將馮內果的作品歸納在「嘉年華」(carnival)式的笑鬧傳統,主要是凸顯較鮮為人注意的特色。透過巴赫汀的「嘉年華」理論分析,我們可以清楚的了解馮內果的語言意識形態及修辭技巧。

Contemporary fiction questions the novelistic version of the realist dogma and attempts to subvert a critical authoritarianism just as the carnivalesque world — the joyous, inverted world — challenges official, serious, ecclesiastical culture. The ambivalence and incompleteness of contemporary novels recall similar qualities of the carnival, as defined by Bakhtin.<sup>1</sup> In Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963), where

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\* 作者為本校英語系副教授

<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin's discussion of "carnival" has significant applications both to particular texts and to the history of literary genres. According to him, the festivities involved in carnival are collective and popular. Carnival focuses on the spirits of inversion, the transgression, and the topsy-turvy. Its logic is "the logic of 'the inside out,'" of "the 'turnabout'" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 11) and its travesties are implicit with ambivalent nature: it crowns and decrowns, inverts rank and exchanges roles, makes sense from nonsense and nonsense of sense. (Morson, "Who Speaks for Bakhtin" 236) In other words, carnival is characterized by oxymoronic combinations or mesalliances. It mingles opposites; it brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the wise with the stupid, the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, fact with fantasy, heaven with hell, and the like. The "joyful relativity" of all things is proclaimed. Hence, everything authoritative, rigid or serious is subverted, loosened and mocked. As Bakhtin puts it:

Carnival is past millennia's way of sensing the world as one great communal performance. This sense of the world, liberating one from fear, bringing

nearly everything is turned upside-down, the social and literary inversions are typically carnivalesque: the official church discourse is parodically inverted in form and content, and the traditional idea of the representation of truth or reality characteristic of literary discourse is subverted. Broadly speaking, religion, literature, and history are the main concern of the carnivalized world of this novel, in which all of these three are reduced to none other than lies or fictions that are sustained for practical purposes — that is, they are reduced to what Vonnegut's terms "foma": harmless untruth<sup>2</sup>. In other words, the discourse of religion, literature, and history lies about the nature of the world in order to give it a semblance of coherence or system, contriving to make circumstances appear to be reducible truths. This article not only is an attempt to exemplify how Vonnegut legitimates his subversion through transgression in *Cat's Cradle*, but also seeks to analyze how the discourse of religion, history, and literature, in the author's carnival sense of the world, can be used for parody, subversive humor, and inversion, and in turn to explain how the author applies carnivalization to portray and visualize contemporary reality.

In *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut "moves away from the fairly conventional plot structures of *Player Piano* and *Mother Night* to an even more episodic collage, with an unconventional time sequence" (Mayo 28). A carnivalistic-fantastic atmosphere permeates the entire novel, in which he works along the lines of fantasy, with some reference to science fiction. To quote Bakhtin's words, "traditional plot situations radically change their meaning, there develops a dynamic carnivalistic play of sharp contrasts, unexpected shifts and changes" (*Problems* 173). Vonnegut's attack on narrative forms — religious, literary, and historical — and on social structures is embodied in a novelistic world that is carnivalesque in its inversions of those contested norms. Like Rabelais, Vonnegut uses the carnival as a metaphor for legitimized freedom, existing within — though against — the accepted norms. *Cat's Cradle* "manages to transpose high seriousness into a new and wildly comic key" (Pinsker 93). Signaling the spoofing nature of the work, Vonnegut begins *Cat's*

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the world maximally close to a person and bringing one person maximally close to another (everything is drawn into the zone of free familiar contact), with its joy at change and its joyful relativity, is opposed to that one-sided and gloomy official seriousness which is dogmatic and hostile to evolution and change, which seeks to absolutize a given condition of existence or a given social order. From precisely that sort of seriousness did the carnival sense of the world liberate man. (*Problems* 160)

<sup>2</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*. (New York: Dell Publishing, 1963), p. 11. All further references to this work will be included parenthetically in the text.

## Carnival as Symbolic Inversion and Transgression in *Cat's Cradle*

*Cradle* with a play on — a parody of — Ishmael's opening line in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. "Call me Jonah" (11), says the narrator-persona John, who is writing a book to be titled *The Day the World Ended*, a historical account of the holocaust and apocalypse brought about by the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, August 6, 1945. Like *Moby Dick*, this novel is an exploration of good and evil and a chronicle of a quest for truth, or for meaning in life. The cat's cradle (the symbol of connection, its name taken from the children's game of making a series of X-figures out of string held between the hands), akin to "the whiteness of the whale" (Melville 163) that can mean a variety of things to the beholder, discloses no absolute reality or truth<sup>3</sup> Like Ishmael, John (or "Jonah") plays the role of a detached observer of the major conflicts of the novel. Bakhtin's so-called "joyful relativity," which is characteristic of carnivalized literature, is embodied in the key issue of the novel: literature as game. In the epigraph, the author remarks, "Nothing in this book is true" (4). Thus, from the onset, we are taken into an upside-down, or inside-out world, a novelistic world where truths exchange places with and are superseded by lies. As a free-lance journalist, the narrator, by working on the events of past, disclaims the chain of being and the unified entities of historical accounts and visualizes a world in which history and fiction exchange places and intersect with each other<sup>4</sup>. As a Bokononist, the narrator makes an investigation into — and defends — the falsifying nature of religion: "Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book [*Cat's Cradle*] either" (14). Religion is satirized, on a fantastic and cynical plane, in the form of Bokononism, which fits into the category of *foma*. The first sentence in *The Books of Bokonon* states, "All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies" (14). Besides, the epigraph, quoting *The Books of Bokonon* 1.5, makes plain, "Live by the *foma* that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy" (4).

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<sup>3</sup> Cat's cradle is a children's game in which a piece of string is manipulated with the fingers into patterns; the main pattern vaguely resembles the shape of a small, cat-sized cradle. There is no real cat or real cradle involved; it is merely an illusion which requires a great leap of imagination to see any connection with the reality which the name implies.

<sup>4</sup> That is, history and fiction exchange places, history becoming fictional and fiction becoming "true" history. In indicating that American fiction in the Sixties or Seventies found itself moving toward a fantastic actuality and attempting to penetrate the fictionality of the real, Bradbury gives his illuminating remark:

History is itself shown as fictional, not in order to dismiss it but to subvert it; new imaginative structures were generated which both encountered and questioned the world's ugly presentness. (158)

*The Books of Bokonon*, which is parodically designed on a par with the Holy Bible, turns out to be a pack of truthful lies. In *Cat's Cradle*, literature, history, and religion — intertwined inextricably with lies and fantasy — are like the cat's cradle that can be played to a great extent to create a simulacrum of a non-existent reality or truth. The image of the cat's cradle is used to illustrate one point: there is no decipherable meaning in the workings of the world, but we can play as if there were some. The paired carnival images (truth/lie or reality/pretense) are used for their contrast. The carnivalistic mingling of opposites is reflected or refracted throughout the novel with the ambivalent nature: in truth lies are foreseen, and in lies truth; or, in reality pretense is foreseen, and in pretense reality. Max F. Schulz points out the subversive nature of the novel: "Given this 'untruth' as the basis of all it purports to say truthfully about human experience, *Cat's Cradle* becomes an extended exercise in subversion" (56). As in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the novel "creates a radical reconnection of the historical and the imaginary, the realistic and the fantastic" (Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut* 60), which assorts with Vonnegut's cranivalesque perception that establishes a dialogic interaction between oppositions. This work "sardonically blurs veracity and falsehood, treating them as interchangeable for all practical human purposes (Schulz 57). Specifically speaking, in *Cat's Cradle*, there are three writers at work: Vonnegut the author, creating his novelistic world; John the narrator, narrating the story; and Bokonon the mountebank — prophet, writing his *Books of Bokonon*. All these three writers — possessed of the carnival vision of the world — maintain, in Vonnegut's words, the same belief that "lies told for the sake of artistic effect . . . can be, in a higher sense, the most beguiling forms of truth" (*Mother Night* ix). In the carnivalized literary world, the discourse of these writers intersects closely with the cat's cradle, the central metaphor for illusion in the novel, and turns out to be "the box within the box within the box . . . we start with" (Reed 116). In this light may be seen Vonnegut's idea that no unified signification which represents univocal truth or reality can be found in the deferring image of the box; instead, multiple types of signification typifying versions of truth or reality can emerge from the play of the box image. What is involved in Vonnegut's idea here may be as follows:

[T]exts develop semantically as a set of perspectives . . . . None of these perspectives represents Truth, and, because they might be infinitely multiplied, defining truth as their totality would seem irrelevant. (Kinser 124)

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Besides, the carnivalized discourse of these writers can be viewed as “a bunch of X’s” (114) which lead to non-truth or non-reality: no real cat or real cradle is involved. As Newt notes:

No wonder kids grow up crazy. A cat’s cradle is nothing but a bunch of X’s between somebody’s hands and little kids look and look and look at all those X’s . . . . No damn cat, and no damn cradle. (114)

See the cat’s See the cradle? (122)

The discourse “as a bunch of X’s” or as “a box within the box within the box . . .” corresponds well to Jacques Derrida’s concept of *differance*: the system of differences generates forms of play whose meaning always surpasses any attempt to limit their possibility. The authorial voice of literature as game is reflected in Philip Castle’s dialogue with the narrator, the free-lance writer: “What’s new in the WORD GAME?” (155; capitals added) The play metaphor is used to illustrate that literature distinguishes itself from ordinary language by being a conscious and self-given game for the articulation of multiple areas of the real. The exaltation of play marks the anti-modernist side of Vonnegut as well as his break with the tradition of realism in the 1960s. Coupled with the view of literature as play is the therapeutic urge<sup>5</sup> — one of the important attributes of contemporary fiction. As Allen Thiher indicates:

[M]uch of this therapy is directed against the same metaphysical determinants of thought that Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Saussure sought, in their respective ways, to cure us of. In fiction these determinants are especially prevalent in the form of the metaphysical notions about what writing is; its functions as mimesis and representation, the belief in ideal meaning or essentialist signifieds, the subordination of writing to the metaphysics of history, or the text as the representation of the substantial self. (159)

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<sup>5</sup> Yoked with the view of language as play, as Allen Thiher puts it, are the therapeutic aims of the writers of contemporary fiction, which not only inscribes within itself the rules for how to play the game, but also wishes to disabuse us of the wrong ways to play game. (159) Thiher continues:

The play metaphor is often conceived to be a medicine, a pill to cure the reader of ill effects produced by the pills of some earlier doctor. This play therapy is designed to restore a state of health . . . . (159)

Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, then, as it were, inscribes within itself the rules for how to play the game; it also wishes to disabuse us of the wrong ways — for instance, realist or modernist approaches — to play the game. The play therapy is designed to restore a state of health in which the reader emancipates himself from those “determinants,” such as modernist or realist delusions. Hence, it is no surprise that Vonnegut has the narrator learn that a writer is a “drug salesman” (106), who can sell something to cure and rid us of those delusions. In this sense, it is not hard to understand why Vonnegut emphasizes the playful nature of the game and the non-representational nature of the novel.

Questioning the validity of history itself, Vonnegut, in *Cat's Cradle*, reveals his carnival subversiveness and denies that we can ever possess an objective knowledge of history, for even the most scientific methodology for the presentation of the past cannot overcome the problems posed by the subjective, human limitations of the historian who must put that methodology into practice. He maintains that no discourse gives access to unchanging truths or expresses unalterable human nature. For him, historical writing will always become entangled in tropes, and “accurate records of the past” (159) do not exist. The following episode offers an example to support Vonnegut's New Historicist urge<sup>6</sup>:

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<sup>6</sup> For the New Historicists, the past can never be available to us in pure form, but always in the form of representations. For instance, Hayden White argues that any historical narrative “figures the body of events that serves as its primary referent and transforms these ‘events’ into intimations of patterns of meaning that any *literal* representation of them . . . could never produce” (“The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical theory” 22). History as narrative account, then, is unavoidably figurative, allegorical, fictive; it is always already textualized, always already interpreted. White also points out that what we accept as “real” and “true” in historiography, as in fiction is that which “wears the mask of meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only *imagine*, never experience” (“The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” 24). In this perspective, the New Historicists believe that the idea of a uniform and harmonious culture is a myth on history and propagated by the ruling classes in their own interests. The assumptions that H. Aram Veiser lists in his Introduction to *The New Historicism* brings home to us some key points of New Historicism:

1. that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;
2. that every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;
3. that literary and non-literary “texts” circulate inseparably;
4. that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature . . . . (xi)

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“Papa” Monzano was the first man in history to die of *ice-nine*.

I [the narrator] record that fact for whatever it may be worth. “Write it all down.” Bokonon tells us. He is really telling us, of course, how futile it is to write or read histories. “Without accurate records of the past, how can men and women be expected to avoid making serious mistakes in the future?” he asks **IRONICALLY** (emphasis added). (159)

Thus, we see that the authorial voice, through Bokonon’s words, is in dialogue with other socially bonded voices. It is evident that the authorial voice, mixed with the questioning voice, throws challenges to other social voices: place no trust in the historical writing, since an account of the past is by no means detached and objective, and gross mistakes are inevitable. The above episode is, as it were, an ironic comedy, with its laughter directed toward the value of historical records. Hence, it is no wonder that Bokonon writes in his *Books of Bokonon* as follows: “History! Read it and weep!” (168). The reason for bemoaning history, for Vonnegut, emanates both from his endeavor to break the illusion of “historical truths” and from his rejection to monumentalize universalization that denies the individuality and particularity of the past. As Schatt remarks, “[I]n *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut minimizes the meaning of history” (56). To put it simply, Vonnegut makes his attacks on historians’ tendencies to fetishize facts, and his view of history fits in well with Foucault’s New History<sup>7</sup> — not a history of things, but of discourse, of the “terms, categories, and techniques through which certain things become at certain times the focus of a whole configuration of discussion and procedure” (Rajchman 51). Seen in this light, it is not hard to understand why the historical book, *The Day the*

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With the New historicist impulse or urge, Vonnegut directs his carnival subversiveness toward questioning the validity of history itself and unmasking the continuities that are taken for granted in the western narrative tradition.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault emphasizes that discourses are always rooted in social institutions. He shows that social and political power works through discourse. For example, certain dichotomies are imposed as definitive of human existence and are operated in ways which have direct effects on society’s organization. Discourses which use concepts of madness, criminality, and sexual abnormality are taken shape and defined in relation to concepts of sanity, justice and sexual normality. These discourses have no universal validity but are merely historically dominant ways of controlling and preserving social relations of exploitation. In other words, people recognize a specific discourse — such as a particular piece of philosophy or scientific theory — as “true” only if it fits the descriptions of truth laid down by the intellectual or political authorities of the day, by the members of the ruling elite, or by the prevailing ideologies of knowledge.

*World Ended*, which the narrator plans to complete at the beginning of the story, has not been finished in the end; it is still a book of incompleteness, of becoming, which is always “in the making.” Vonnegut seems to say that a true account of the holocaust brought about by the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima is indeed impossible, and that there is nothing valuable that can be ascribed to the historical records the narrator tries to make.

The carnival spirit of “mak[ing] sense from non-sense and nonsense of sense” (Morson, “Who Speaks for Bakhtin?” 236) is vividly disclosed when Vonnegut’s implies that Bokon’s success hinges on his ability to supply “better and better lies” (118) or “bittersweet lies” (11) to counter the painfully obvious, terrible truth that “was the enemy of people” (118). One of Bokonon’s calypsos (poem) illustrates such a kind of spirit:

I wanted all things  
To seem to make some sense,  
So we all could be happy, yes,  
Instead of tense,  
And I made up lies,  
So that they all fit nice,  
And I made this sad world  
A par-a-dise. (90)

This calypso is a clear example to explain how the carnival logic of turnabout is employed in Bokononism: through nonsense (lies), a meaningful universe is created (a paradise is turned into reality). The citizens of San Lorenzo, by practicing Bokononism, can create a paradise of sorts, a lotus land where religious fervor diverts their minds from their hunger and their poverty. It is thereby evident that, in San Lorenzo, sense and nonsense are interchangeable for all practical purposes. In this regard, it may be observed that the authorial voice espouses a religion founded not only upon truthful lies but also upon the carnival logic. The carnival dualistic images (truth/lies) permeate Bokononism:

Truth was the enemy of the people, because the truth was so terrible,  
so Bokonon made it his business to provide the people with better and  
better lies. (118)

At this point, religious belief is based on a dialogic interaction between opposite



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forces. The carnivalistic mingling of opposites is also revealed in the paired images (good/evil) which imbue Bokonism with "joyful relativity": Bokonism is fashioned out of comic-book ads. Bokonon advocates the theory of what he calls "Dynamic Tension," his sense of a priceless equilibrium between good and evil. Intriguingly enough, Bokonon gets the idea from Charles Atlas, a mail-order muscle-builder, who believes muscles can be "built by simply pitting one set of muscles against another" (74). Vonnegut's carnival impulse is thus reflected both in the ludicrous concept of the struggle of good and evil and in the farcical and fantastic association of religion-founding with muscle-building, which implies that the religion of the spirit goes in parallel with the religion of the flesh ("muscles"). Bokonon believes that "good societies could be built only by pitting good against evil and by keeping the tension between the two high at all times" (74). His feelings on the religious subject of good/evil may be summarized in one of Bokononist poems, as depicted in Philip Castle's book:

"Papa" Monzano, he's so very bad,  
But without bad "Papa" I would be so sad;  
Because without "Papa's" badness,  
Tell me, if you would,  
How could wicked old Bokonon  
Ever, ever look good? (74)

On the one hand this poem reveals that Bokononism is a religion that sees evil and good as coexisting in a world filled with paradox. On the other hand, it suggests that Bokononism denies the concept of absolute evil or absolute good; both are relative, and they can only be evaluated in terms of each other. In other words, Bokononism is fraught with the carnival paired images (good/evil) which are ambivalent, interchangeable, and implicit with "joyful relativity." The delightful, carefree carouse found in carnival reverberates in Bokonon's "Fourteenth Calypso," which "he invites us to sing along with him" (75):

When I was young,  
I was so gay and mean,  
And I drank and chased the girls  
Just like young St. Augustine.  
Saint Augustine,  
He got to be a saint.

So, if I get to be one, also  
Please, Mama, don't you faint. (75)

Since *Cat's Cradle* is written as a *Book of Bokonon*, a Bokononist Bible, the authorial voice of the validity of Bokonon's message is emphasized. The whole description of Bokononism is permeated with a markedly familiar and profaning attitude toward the official church discourse, especially that of the Holy Bible. The two founders of Bokononism — McCabe and Bokonon — take on carnivalistic overtones, forming carnival pairs. The entire account of Bokononism and the two founders -- each of whom, in Bakhtin's words, is "on the threshold of insanity," "already a person *not like everybody else*," and one that has "deviated from the general norm" and "fallen out of life's usual rut" (*Problems* 138) — is built on oxymoronic combinations and carnivalistic mesalliances; it is rife with debasing and bringings-down-to-earth, rife with the symbol system of the carnival. Through the narrator's dialogue with Julian Castle, we are offered Castle's fantastic description of "the two main actors": Bokonon and McCabe. Here are some typical excerpts:

When Bokonon and McCabe took over this miserable country [San Lorenzo] years ago, they threw out the priests, And then Bokonon, cynically and playfully, invented a new religion . . . . It was his own idea. He asked McCabe to outlaw him and his religion, too, in order to give the religion life of the people more zest, more tang. He wrote a little poem about it, . . . which does not appear in *The Books of Bokonon*.

So I said good-bye to government,  
And I gave my reason:  
That a really good religion  
Is a form of treason. (118)

McCabe had a good old time making blood-thirsty threats against the Bokononists — which was everybody. And Bokonon went into cozy hiding in the jungle, where he wrote and reached all day long . . . . As the living legend of the cruel tyrant in the city and the gently holy man in the jungle grew, so, too, did the happiness of the people grow. They were all employed full time as actors in a play they understand, that any human being anywhere could understand and applaud . . . . The drama was very tough on the souls of the two main actors, McCabe and Bokonon. As young men, they had been pretty much alike, had both

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been half angel, half pirate . . . but the drama demanded that the pirate half of Bokonon and the angel half of McCabe wither away. And McCabe and Bokonon paid a terrible price in agony for the happiness of the people — McCabe knowing the agony of the tyrant and Bokonon knowing the agony of the saint. They both became, for all practical purposes, INSANE . . . McCabe was always sane enough to realize that without the holy man to war against, he himself would become meaningless. (118-20; emphasis added)

Besides, the excerpts taken from the narrator's speech are as follows:

So good and evil had to remain separate: good in the jungle, and evil in the palace. Whatever entertainment there was in that was about all we had to give the people. (152)

I remember that, for the joy of the people, Bokonon was always to be chased, was never to be caught. (147)

In the above excerpts, we see that Vonnegut has reduced religion to a play, which is saturated with carnivalesque laughter “that resists and even undermines the power of all political-religious-philosophical systems and institutions” (Carroll 87). The main focus of these excerpts is Vonnegut's playful view of Bokononism not only as a game but also as drama. It is important to emphasize that the hide-and-seek game played by McCabe and Bokonon, who “fall out of the ordinary logic and relationship of life” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 173), turns out to be the backbone of the Bokonist faith. The carnivalesque relativity and ambivalence of sanity and madness, intelligence and stupidity, good and evil, and sacredness and profanity are proclaimed. It is thus obvious that Bokononism serves as a means to subvert, loosen, and mock the traditional religion that is authoritative, rigid or serious. Behind the carnival episode of religion-founding is Vonnegut's significant attempt to investigate into the relationship between the exercise of power and religious knowledge. Bokononism is made popular solely through McCabe's highhanded measures taken to play with it and to “give the religions life of the people more zest, more tang” (156). Foucault's theory of power is a good example to explain the creation of religious fervor and the prevalence of Bokononism in San Lorenzo. For Foucault, power describes the relationships in which one agent is able to get another to do what the latter would not otherwise have done: “It is always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their being capable of action”

(Afterword 220), and power “is exercised only over free subjects, and only in so far as they are free” (Afterword 220). In other words, power operates to constrain or otherwise direct action in areas where there are a number of possible courses of action open to the agents in question. Seen in this light McCabe’s strategy is a way of acting upon the citizens of San Lorenzo, who are indeed “free,” “acting subjects,” capable of their action — as revealed by their willingness to believe in Bokononism — in spite of the threat of execution, of being impaled upon a huge iron hook (McCabe, who, like everyone else in San Lorenzo is a Bokononist, will punish any believers in Bokonon by publicly hanging them on the “Hook”). For McCabe, the outlawing of Bokononism and the instillation of religious knowledge are a subtle exercise of the power, which squares with Foucault’s idea: power is a strategy, and the effects of domination associated with power arise from “maneuvers, tactics, techniques, functionings” (*Discipline and Punish* 26). We are thus given a bizarre picture of Vonnegut’s outlook on religion, which takes on a carnivalesque air tinged with Foucauldian power/knowledge relationship. It is through the successful exercise of power that Bokonon’s lies become, as Vonnegut tells us, like the lies of writers, “the most beguiling form of truth” (*Mother Night* ix). Cynical as the “truths” of Bokononism are, they give the people of San Lorenzo something to elevate them spiritually and relieve them of their physical misery. The illusion which Bokonon and McCabe creates therefore becomes reality. Viewed in a wider sense, the discourse of *The Books of Bokonon*, situated on ambivalent bases and set in a framework of power and knowledge, abounds in voices of the carnival which resist, exaggerate, and demystify the distinctions and boundaries that mark and support high culture and well-organized society. Besides, underlying the episode of Bokonon and McCabe is an interesting theme that “religion needs a threat to itself to be important and ‘meaningful’” (Mayo 30). Just as *Cat’s Cradle* turns to carnival for a “gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 11), Vonnegut carnivalizes *The Books of Bokonon* into a book which offers a means of getting outside the prevailing dogmatism of religion or provides a way of escaping from official lies so as to create “better and better lies” (118) and to “produce beauty and enlightenment and comfort at top speed” (156). Klinkowitz significantly indicates:

Vonnegut’s Bokononism is a religion after alienation, for it seeks a way for man to be comfortable in a world he no longer wishes to admit is his own. The “lies” of this particular religion are purgative, reorders of our notion of the finite world so that we may accept it . . . . (“Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. and the Crime of His Times” 46)

## Carnival as Symbolic Inversion and Transgression in *Cat's Cradle*

By and large, Bokononism is implicit with the discourse that not only provides the joyful affirmation of becoming and alternatives to existing socio-ideological languages but also suggests a demystificatory instrument for everything in the social formation. In this sense, the carnivalized discourse of Vonnegut's Bokononism implies an attitude of creative disrespect, a radical opposition to the official church discourse which is morose, rigid, and less accessible.

As mentioned earlier, a free play with the sacred may be represented in the parodic-travesty literature. As Bakhtin argues, parody is "an integral element in Menippean satire and in all carnivalized genres in general" (*Problems* 127), playing "a completely unbridled game with all that is most sacred and important from the point of view of official ideology" (*Rabelais* 84). Carnivalistic disrespect and questioning of higher authority recur throughout *Cat's Cradle*, in which a shift of authorities, truths, and world orders is made through parodies to oppose ruling ideologies and to destabilize and invalidate the conventional religious beliefs and social norms. *Cat's Cradle*, as a parodic-travesty literary work,

introduces the permanent corrective of laughter, of a critique of the one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word, the corrective of reality that is always richer, more fundamental and most importantly *too contradictory and heteroglot* to be fit into a high and straight forward genre. (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 55)

In discussing the nature of parody, Cary Saul Morson points out:

To be what I refer to as a parody, a text or utterance must satisfy *each* of the following three criteria: (1) It must evoke or indicate another utterance, which I will allude to as its "target," "object," or the "original utterance"; (2) it must be, in some respect, antithetical to its target; and (3) the fact that it is intended by its author to have higher semantic authority than the original must be clear . . . . An especially common technique is the introduction of an element — an incident in the plot, let us say, or an unexpected choice of words — that is incongruous with the tone or generic conventions of the original. ("Parody, History, and Metaparody" 70)

In *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut's parodies meet the three criteria Morson defines. It is obvious that *Books of Bokonon* is a parody that refers to another, antithetical target,

the Holy Bible, and that Bokonon's "holy" text is intended to be more authoritative than its original text. It is through parody, which may create a new kind of structure by incorporating elements from an old structure, that *Books of Bokonon* serves as a new "sacred" text with new forms. Broadly speaking, in Vonnegut's carnivalized world, parody, which is "often described as a comic literary work that imitates another literary work by means of exaggeration" (Morson, "Parody, History, and Metaparody" 69), is used to question the legitimacy of holy texts or established truths. As a parodic work invested with a power to transgress the limits of convention, Bokonon's "holy" book "recontextualizes its object so as to make it serve tasks contrary to its original tasks" (Morson, "Parody, History, and Metaparody" 69). The direction and tone of *The Books of Bokonon* is revealed from Bokonon's disapproval of or disagreement with the Bible. From the very beginning of *The First Book*, a parody of the Book of *Genesis*, Bokonon reveals the carnivalesque nature of parody by telling that God created man because of His cosmic loneliness:

In the beginning, God created the earth, and he looked upon it in His cosmic loneliness.

And God said, "Let Us make living creatures out of mud, so the mud can see what We have done." And God created every living creature that now moveth, and one was man. Mud as man alone could speak. God leaned close as mud as man sat up, looked around, and spoke. Man blinked. (177)

Parodic remarks also appear in Bokonon's further answer to man's quest for cosmic meaning and purpose:

"What is the *purpose* of all this?" he [man] asked politely.

"Everything must have a purpose?" asked God.

"Certainly," said man.

"Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this," said God.

and He went away. (177)

In fact, Bokonon's idea that God does not intervene in human affairs and that it is useless for man to turn to God for a definite answer implies that, as Schatt puts it, Bokononism is a comic version of the man-centered

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religion that Wallace Stevens proposes in "Sunday Morning": the sky is less frightening if it is only a sky and not a curtain that separates the helpless human from the omnipotent Divine. (65) In the face of the cosmic coolness, what man has to do is to write his own purpose or meaning — "to make up a lot of new stuff" (145). From another standpoint, the authorial voice as embodied in Bokonon's concept of the cosmic indifference and in his man-centered religion involves "the reconciliation of God's omnipotence and omniscience with some version of human freedom" (Kinser 227) and is precisely an echo of Nietzsche's speculation in *Gay Science*: "[P]erhaps man will rise ever higher as soon as he ceases to *flow out* into a god" (230). In this regard, as Vonnegut reveals, man's sacredness will be ascertained to such an extent that God's holiness is denied. Frank's view, as revealed in his dialogue with the narrator, may be used to exemplify this point:

"What is sacred to Bokononists?" I [the narrator] asked after a while.

"Not even God, as near as I can tell."

"Nothing?"

"Just one thing"

I made some guesses. "The ocean? The sun?"

"Man," said Frank. "That's all. Just man." (143)

At this point, Klinkowitz's remark is enlightening: "The joking in Bokononism is . . . a fundamental reordering of man's values, solving the problem which has made man uncomfortable as the center of the universe" ("Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. And the Crime of his Times" 50). The counterattack against cosmic coolness, along with the debasing of God, as depicted in the following "Calypso," borders on carnivalistic profanation, and bringings-down-to-earth:

Someday, someday, this crazy world will have to end,  
And our God will take things back that He to us did lend.  
And if, on that sad day, you want to scold our God,  
Why go right ahead and scold Him. He'll just smile and nod. (180)

Vonnegut's emphasis on the man-centered religion and "the absence of an active God" (Gilligan 22) is a clear example to illustrate his effort to "downgrade the effect of the spiritual world on our physical world" (Gilligan 22). Through the parody of the scriptures and of religious rites, Vonnegut seeks for a kind of religion

which, in Bakhtin's words, is

freed from the heavy chains of devout seriousness, from the "continual ferment of piety and the fear of God," . . . from the oppression of such gloomy categories as "eternal," "immovable," "absolute," "unchangeable" and instead [is] exposed to the gay and free laughing aspect of the world, with its unfinished and open character, with the joy of change and renewal. (*Rabelais* 83)

"[I]n the autobiographical section of *The Books of Bokonon* he [Bokonon] writes a parable on the folly of pretending to discover, to understand" (13) the nature and limits of God's design. Besides, Bokonon ironically observes about an Episcopalian lady from Newport, Rhode Island, that "she was a fool, and so am I, and so is any one who thinks he sees what God is Doing" (13). "[K]nowing what your limitations are" (34) is thus by no means against Bokonon's grain and is regarded as comparable to "maturity" (134). It is noteworthy that behind the sardonic view of religion lurks a premise implied in the Bokononist definition of maturity as "a bitter disappointment for which no remedy exists, unless laughter can be said to remedy anything" (134). Paradoxically but humorously speaking, laughter as a remedy may be found in the *foma* that offers something man can pretend to believe in. In other words, this remedy lies in the "good advice": "Just pretend you understand" (124). As one of Bokonon's calypsos indicates:

Tiger got to hunt,  
Bird got to fly; Man got to sit and wonder, "why, why, why,?"  
Tiger got to sleep, Bird got to land; man got to tell himself he understand. (124)

This is a remedy that makes man "brave and kind and healthy and happy" (4). At this point, the authorial voice of man's need to be a symbolic "fool," to pretend "to discover, to understand," and to relieve maturity of "a bitter disappointment" through laughter is refracted. The concept of laughter as a remedial and illusionary power to transcend — in the wake of knowing — man's limitations thus plays an indispensable role in Vonnegut's Bokononism. Furthermore, the authorial voice of Bokononism as something that can be laughed at — that is, as a remedy that can evoke laughter — is implied. For instance, *The Fourteenth Book of Bokonon* is an obvious example of evoking laughter with remedial



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power. As the narrator notes:

*The Fourteenth Book of Bokonon* is entitled, "What Can a Thoughtful Man Hope for Mankind on Earth, Given the Experience of the Past Million Years?"

It doesn't take long to read *The Fourteenth Book of Bokonon*. It consists of one word and a period.

This is it:

"Nothing" (164)

It is in the face of nothingness that man must create *foma*, the lies which give him dignity, make him gentle and kind, and allow him to laugh aloud at the comic absurdity with which he is confronted. Stated briefly, Vonnegut's Bokononism "insists on exposing its own role as the happy hoodwinker" (Reed 128), extolling its remedial effects that manifest themselves in the laughing aspect. In one sense, Vonnegut seems to espouse a transcendent power of carnival laughter as Nietzsche does in *Beyond Good and Evil*, in which the latter claims for his own age a unique preparedness

for a carnival in the grand style, for the laughter and high spirits of the most spiritual reverly, for the transcendental heights of the highest nonsense and Aristophanes derision of the world. Perhaps this is where we shall still discover the realm of our *invention*, that realm in which we, too, can still be original, say, as parodists of world history and God's buffoons — perhaps, even if nothing else today has any future, our *laughter* may yet have a future. (150)

This is why Vonnegut endows *Cat's Cradle* with plenty of laughter, much of which works directly to attempt a remedy by emphasizing the ludicrous. What is serious, painful, or even tragic repeatedly dissolves in cosmic incongruity and is reduced to jokes. The laughter embodied in this novel, in Bakhtin's words, "is a specific aesthetic relationship to reality," which cannot "be translated into logical language" (*Problems* 164). That is, such laughter, "simultaneously mocking, triumphant, derisory, assertive, reviving" (Swingewood 107), is "a specific means for artistically visualizing and comprehending reality" (*Problems* 64). In discussing laughter as a remedy that has stood the test of time, Reed is perceptive enough to point out the laughing aspect of *Cat's Cradle*:

Court jesters have undergone changes, but vie with other providers of remedies in claims for the antiquity of their profession. Humor of the kind shown in *Cat's Cradle* seeks to make the injustices, pains and incongruities of life more bearable by emphasizing the ludicrous aspects of their make-up. (140)

The value of Bokononism, therefore, is that, as Klinkowitz suggests, it allows what Nathan Scott terms "the comic katharsis," which helps us see the daily occasions of our earth-bound career as being not irrelevant inconveniences but as possible roads into what is ultimately significant in life. (*Literary Disruptions* 47) For this reason, it is not hard to understand why the narrator, as a Bokononist, denies that he is a nihilist: "[N]ihilism [is] not for me" (59). It is not surprising, given this assessment so far, that Vonnegut carnivalizes conventional church discourse only to create his own discourse. Perhaps it cannot be otherwise in a society Vonnegut perceives to be dependent upon a law of noncarnival, common logic. The plurivocal alternative to the established ecclesiastical voices in *Cat's Cradle* becomes thus both absent and present. Its possibility stands present in the acts of parody but absent in the attempt to institutionalize a new religion based on a counter-ideology. But it also stands present in Vonnegut belief as revealed in the Bokononist credo: "Live by the *foma* that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy" (4).

In terms of the carnivalesque quality of *Cat's Cradle*, the mythic religion of Bokononism moves on one level, and the scientific apocalypse moves on another. Of the three writers at work in *Cat's Cradle*, as previously mentioned, John's or Jonah's — it is note-worthy that the very beginning of the novel is "Call me Jonah" — parodic narration is mainly directed at this scientific apocalypse, which is characterized by comic tones and by close affiliations with "the portrayal of contemporary reality and contemporary everyday life" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 157). In discussing the Apocalypse theme, Schatt points out:

Traditionally, the Apocalypse represents a key moment in the linear movement of history from the Fall to ultimate redemption. With the destruction of the physical world man will experience a revelation, a discovery of something heretofore hidden. American novelists have always been fascinated by the idea of the Apocalypse, and their treatment of it has taken a number of different forms. (67)

As a mock-apocalyptic novel that satirizes such doomsday books as *On the Beach*

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and *Seven Days in May*, Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, as Klinkowitz puts it, deals with the largest possible issue: mankind's threatened self-destruction. (*Kurt Vonnegut* 52) Generally speaking, man's history of sin makes the Biblical apocalypse necessary. So too, the mass destruction in *Cat's Cradle* also grows out of the author's theories of human nature, and in that sense is epistemological or moral rather than purely cosmological. For Vonnegut, "[h]umans are infinitely stupid, clumsy, greedy for happiness, lonely, and selfish" (Hume 90). Vonnegut's concern is with "a history of human stupidity" (190), with the individual's weaknesses, and the motives of the individual that result in the destruction of the world. *Ice-nine*, a destructive substance that can transform watery areas into solidity (that is, change the very nature of Nature), can be carried around in a thermos by anyone who owns a sliver. *Ice-nine* is casually available, and people operating on a personal level would be able to bring about global nuclear holocaust easily. In his presentation of what he feels to be the significant plots involved in the scientific apocalypse, Vonnegut seems to emphasize the personal. In Bakhtin's terms, Vonnegut seems to focus on the individuated ideologue, whose discourse "is always a particular way of viewing the world [and] strives for a social significance" (*Dialogic Imagination* 333). Hence, we see that in the course of the research into the career of Felix Hoenikker, the narrator's narrative becomes mainly concerned with each of Felix's three children and several other individuals related to science-fiction *ice-nine*. In the course of the narrator's future history, we see that our world has reached the capacity for the *ice-nine* to destroy the world — that is, for nuclear holocaust. Given the absurdity of life — which is rife with "human stupidity" — and the end of the world, the proper thing for man to do is seeking for a religion that can serve as a spiritual "oubliette": that is, Bokononism. As the narrator remarks:

His [Bononon's] meaning is crystal clear: Each one of us has to be what he or she is. And, down in the oubliette [used as a refuge, as *ice-nine* covers the world], that was mainly what I thought — with the help of *The Books of Bononon*. (179)

Thus, the sole way apocalypse can be neutralized is through Bokononism. In this sense, Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, in which the apocalypse plays a role in thematic and structural significance, is a comic investigation of epistemology, for Bokonon writes *The Books of Bokonon* to make life meaningful through truthful lies.

The original purpose of the narrator seems to complete a book he once begun, a book about the day the bomb fell on Hiroshima, which he planned to call

*The Day the World Ended*. Ironically, that title applies much more suitably to *Cat's Cradle*, for the book "Jonah" finishes writing is literally a description of the events leading to the end of the world. As is known, Jonah's mission in the Bible is to prophesy the destruction of the city of Nineveh; the mission of our modern "Jonah" seems to be to witness and chronicle the destruction of the world and serve as a final, ironic symbol of man's defiance. Generally speaking, the apocalyptic vision of the world, intended originally to be embodied in the destructiveness of the Hiroshima bomb, is even more suitable in the science-fiction referent, *ice-nine*. In *Cat's Cradle*, the Apocalypse theme is apparent in the uses of science, as manifest in the career of Dr. Felix Hoenikker, Nobel Prize winner and developer of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. He is the unwitting cause of the humorous apocalypse with which the novel ends. Like the founders of Bokkonism, Felix Hoenikker, a character taking on carnivalistic overtones, is the "one who had deviated from the general norm, who has fallen out of life's usual rut" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 138). He is, in the eyes of his youngest son, Newt, like a "grotesque." For example, Vonnegut offers — with grotesque exaggeration — a fantastic description through Newt's speech: "His [Dr. Hoenikker's] pores looked as big as craters on the moon. His ears and nostrils were stuffed with hair. Cigar smoke made him smell like the mout of Hell" (17-18). The most pervasive effect of such corporeal degradation and Satanic evil in grotesque art is to direct our attention to the undignified physicality of existence, and to emphasize it by exaggeration, distortion, or unexpected combination.

Countering expectations that the inventor of the atomic bomb would be a bloodthirsty mad man, Vonnegut creates a child-like, innocent character — who is aberrant by all normal standards. A widower, Dr. Hoenikker is cared for by his daughter, who plays the role of his mother. The carnivalistic inversion of parent-child relation and the ambivalent role-exchange are effected, as his youngest son, Newt, states:

She [Angela] used to talk about how she had three children — me, Frank, and Father. She wasn't exaggerating, either. I can remember cold mornings when Frank, Father, and I would be all in a line in the front hall, and Angela would be bundling us up, treating us all exactly the same. Only I was going to kindergarten; Frank was going to junior high; and Father was going to work on the atom bomb. (19)

Dr. Hoenikker, who has been working on *ice-nine*, shares the child-like fascination

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with the possibilities of play. The Research Laboratory of the General Forge and Foundry Company is devoted to "pure research" (35) or "pure science." In such a world, as Dr. Breed — research director under whom Felix Hoenikker works — points out, men do not concern themselves with

looking for a better cigarette filter or a softer face tissue or a longer-lasting house paint, God help us. Everybody talks about research and practically nobody in this country's doing it. We're one of the few companies that actually hires men to do pure research. When most other companies brag about their research, they're talking about industrial hack technicians who wear white coats, work out of cookbooks, and dream up an improved windshield wiper for next year's Oldsmobile. (35)

When a Marine general, who is tired of wallowing in the mud, brings his problems to the Research Laboratory, Dr. Hoenikker plays the legendary Faust — an over-reacher who believed that it was worth the sacrifice of his immortal soul if he could obtain knowledge — with great vehemence. As Dr. Breed remarks:

"In his playful way, and *all* his ways were playful, Felix suggested that there might be a single grain of something — even a microscopic grain — that could make infinite expanses of muck, marsh, creeks, pools, quicksand, and mire as solid as this desk . . . . One Marine could carry more than enough of the stuff to free an armored division bogged down in the everglades. According to Felix, one Marine could carry enough of the stuff to do that under the nail of his little finger."

"That's impossible."

"You would say so, I would say so — particularly everybody would say so. To Felix, in his playful way, it was entirely possible. The miracle of Felix — and I sincerely hope you'll put this in your book somewhere — was that he always approached old puzzles as though they were brand new. (37)

It is noteworthy that *ice-nine*, like the atomic bomb, is devised from such a cast of mind. Ironically enough, the *ice-nine* that the marines desire to make easier toward war becomes, at the end of the story, the doomsday weapon that eliminates the need for marines by destroying all humanity. For Vonnegut, scientists like Dr. Hoenikker or founders of new religions have the child-like sensibility necessary to

develop a “dynamic carnivalistic play of sharp contrasts” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 173) — to “murder and create” (Eliot 14) — in the carnivalized world. Besides, the authorial voice of the inability of scientists to communicate with others is reflected not only in the exaggeratedly carnivalistic scene of Dr. Hoenikker leaving his wife a tip after a good breakfast, but also in his naive response — “What is God? What is love?” (45) — to Miss Faust’s solution to human problems: “God is love” (45). Miss Faust, a secretary with a name suggesting no attributes of the legendary Faust, disagrees with Dr. Hoenikker’s preoccupation with gaining new scientific knowledge. She has her doubts about science, even if it does lead to truth. She says, “I just have a trouble understanding how truth, all by itself, could be enough for a person” (44). Immediately following this statement, the narrator’s remark, “Miss Faust was ripe for Bokononism” (44), belongs virtually to the authorial voice and represents the subjective belief of the author, who exposes the value judgments of the scientist as something “unripe.” It may be said that Dr. Hoenikker’s child-like response to Miss Faust’s solution to the complexities of the modern world not only renders him a caricatured character but also shows

the complete lack of real communication between those who rely on God to solve their problems and Breed’s scientific community which is totally divorced from any concern for the spiritual or moral problems concomitant with the invention of the atomic bomb. (Reed 61)

His brilliant search for scientific truth, characterized by amorality, is untainted by any sense of the consequences of his discoveries. A description of Dr. Hoenikker from his son, Newt, may illustrate this point:

For instance, do you know the story about Father on the day they first tested a bomb out at Alamogordo? After the thing went off, after it was a sure thing that America could wipe out a city with just one bomb, a scientist turned to Father and said, “Science has now known sin.” And do you know what father said? He said, “What is sin?” (20)

In Lundquist’s words, “Vonnegut’s scientist, with his childlike inquisitiveness, his inability to respond emotionally to others . . . , and his amorality, is too much a caricature to be taken any way except as a straw man in a rigged sermon” (36). In one sense, the authorial view of scientists in *Cat’s Cradle* is an approximation of that which Dr. Breed accuses the narrator of trying to make him face up to:

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“[S]cientists are heartless, conscienceless, narrow boobies, indifferent to the fate of the rest of the human race, or maybe not really members of the human race at all” (34). As a matter of fact, Dr. Hoenikker is a typical scientist who represents one of the ideologues of what Vonnegut perceives is a debased society and who presents viewpoints to be refuted by the authorial voice. Hence, the propensity of the scientist to stand outside of human affairs as well as the scientific impulse toward reductionism — the notion that only through concentrated simplification, can knowledge be advanced, as represented by children’s puzzles and toys with which Dr. Hoenikker’s laboratory is littered — is a target of Vonnegut’s delightful, satiric criticism. Vonnegut’s creation of the winsomely innocent scientist — Dr. Hoenikker — as an ideologue indicates his carnivalistic awareness of and response to the social and behavioral trends of his contemporary scientists.

For Bakhtin, eccentricity is one carnivalistic category revealing a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, things, behaviors, values or gestures, counterpoised to all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life. *Cat's Cradle* is especially illustrative of this carnivalistic aspect. A primary means for Vonnegut to effect eccentricity is to construct an analogy which is considered queer and inappropriate from the vantage of noncarnival life. Vonnegut makes a hyperbolic analogy between an alabaster phallus and “Mother” (48). We are told that at the death of Emily Hoenikker, the children — Angela, Frank, and Newt — are left to their own devices and trying to find some adequate symbol for their emotions, choosing that enormous phallus inscribed “Mother.” It is through the carnivalistic aspect of eccentricity — “the violation of the usual and the generally accepted, *the life drawn out of its usual rut*” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 126) — that the comic incongruity is unloosened and three children emotionally and even physically distorted by social, political, and parental forces are pictured. Besides, Vonnegut’s self-conscious use of juxtaposition of entirely different objects with phonetically similar symbols as a means to achieve the carnivalesque effect — eccentricity — occurs when we are told that Bokonon preaches a doctrine and conceives *boko-maru*, a ritual in which two Bokononists unite their souls by rubbing the soles of their feet together:

We will touch our feet, yes,  
Yes, for all we’re worth,  
And we will love each other, yes,  
Yes, like we love our Mother Earth. (109)

Implicit in the *boko-maru* ritual is the carnivalistic mesalliance, the reunion of

opposites: body ("sole") and spirit ("soul"). Vonnegut's pun on "soul" and "sole" not only presents the playful nature of the word game in the aspect of comic incongruity but also implies a new religion where the flesh and the spirit are placed on a par and become interchangeable. Moreover, the carnivalesque eccentricity may be succinctly illustrated by the comic incongruity in the character of Julian Castle, a Jungle missionary modeled on Albert Schweitzer, whose "saintly deeds" discord strongly with the cynicism of "the satanic things he thought and said" (116).

The carnivalesque attraction of the eccentric, the surprising, and the bizarre may be embodied in Newt, the character whom his father distorts into a "grotesque" and who identifies most strongly with the cat's cradle, the ambivalent symbol of connection. Like Frank and Angela, Newt is a victim of the Nobel-prize-winning father's amorality and complete devotion to science. Reared by his father with scientific curiosity rather than with love, Newt is a midget who draws paintings which cynically depict the meaninglessness of life as well as the indeterminacy of signs. For instance, there is a painting of Newt's which consists of scratches — "made in a black, gummy impasto" — that form "a sort of spider's web" (113). This painting, which either suggests "the sticky nets of human futility hung up on a moonless night to dry" (113) or signifies "the meaninglessness of it all" (116), is a cat's cradle, as Newt says, which is "nothing but a bunch of X's between somebody's hands" with no absolute reality or truth. Vonnegut's carnival sense of the world is reflected in Newt's painting that, suffused with "joyful relativity," pivots on the symbol of cat's cradle, a children's game involving no real cat or real cradle. The comic overtone floods the polyphonic voices of the observers of the painting; yet, surprisingly enough, all of these voices are resolved by Newt's voice of identifying his painting with the cat's cradle, a voice merging with the authorial voice. In brief, Vonnegut's visualization of contemporary reality and everyday life is embodied through Newt's painting, which intersects tightly with the carnivalistic image that is basically ambivalent: the cat's cradle is used "as a reflection of the conflict between illusion and reality that the narrator experiences" (Mayo 33) or as a symbol of the difficulty of distinguishing illusion from the reality.

Sired by his father as another "grotesque," Frank is also a character that is affiliated strongly with the image of the cat's cradle. Offsetting his inability to find any love from his father and to adjust to the real world, Frank, a morally irresponsible technician, creates a "fantastic little country" built of "plywood, an island as perfectly rectangular as a township in Kansas" (56-57). Such an illusory



world, in one sense, is like the one concocted by the cat's cradle. This fantastic island, unfortunately, is too small for the "grotesque" to lose himself in. In a similar vein, Angela, also a "grotesque," is a homely woman denied the normal pleasures of adolescence by her emotionally indifferent father. One solution to her inability to adapt to the real world is to enter his illusory musical world, by playing weirdly authentic blues clarinet, but, "[s]uch music from such a woman could only be a case of schizophrenia or demonic possession" (124). Schizophrenia or demonic possession is virtually the proper name for the madness devouring Vonnegut's world. It is without doubt that the musical world that Angela indulges herself in develops from her paranoid vision, which, like the metaphor of the cat's cradle, leads to nonreality. Taken together, the three eccentric "grotesques" that Dr. Hoenikker sires, fail to adjust to the real world and seek to create a fantastic world — a better, new world — through different kinds of art: painting, architecture, and music. However, each kind of art is reduced to a *foma* or to the carnivalistically ambivalent image of the cat's cradle that reflects "the cruel paradox of Bokononist thought, the heartbreaking necessity of lying about reality, and the heartbreaking impossibility of lying about it" (189). Besides, the characterization of Hoenikker's three children is imbued with the sense of the grotesque — an element of carnivalization — which, as McElroy puts it, "is by nature something exceptional, something set apart or aberrant, and in its most extreme forms, situated in the realm of fantasy, dream, or hallucination — in the realm, that is, of unreality" (6).

Carnivalization allows Vonnegut to deprive society of its codified language by breaking its verbal-ideological structure. The language Vonnegut wishes to use is *extra-vagant*<sup>8</sup>; it is a language wandering outside the bounds of socially instituted ways of thought. In order to achieve this effect, Vonnegut, in *Cat's Cradle*, uses made-up language, reminiscent of Aldous Leonard Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*. Besides *foma* and *boko-maru*, there are many other Bokononist terms which "represent nothing more than concepts that can be expressed without

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<sup>8</sup> In *Walden*, Thoreau writes:

I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be *extra-vagant* enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced. (214)

Thoreau's separation of the word "extravagance," emphasizes both its Latin origins: *extra* (outside) and *vagrai* (to wander). Hence, the language Thoreau intends to use is a language wandering, outside the bounds of the established ideologies.

any special language'' (Karl 169): for instance, *karass* (a team of human beings that do God's Will without ever discovering what they are doing), *wampeter* (the pivot of a *karass*, anything that serves as a hub), *granfalloon* (a false *Karass*), *duprass* (a *karass* for two persons), *zah-mah-ki-bo* (fate; inevitable destiny), *stuppa* (a fogbound child), *duffle* (the destiny of thousands upon thousands of persons when placed in the hands of a *stuppa*), *sint-wat* (a man who wants all of somebody's love), and several others. Concerning Vonnegut's use of a made-up language as a means of creating the *extra-vagant*, Karl gives his enlightening remark as follows:

A special language is functional when it carries with it its own dimension, or when it illuminates elements that would otherwise remain vague. The Bokonon[ist] terms, on the contrary, highlight no other dimension; they state a basic humanism which has no fictional resonance . . . . Vonnegut's charm for the 1960s, as apart from his literary value, was his entrance into a cultural netherland, in which old truths could be gussied up and presented as if fresh. (169)

In conclusion, *Cat's Cradle* is characterized by Bakhtin's carnivalesque discourse which supplies a law that is a transgression — an anti-law — and by the author's carnival sense of the world. Vonnegut's questioning of the established ideologies — religion, history, literature, science, art, and politics — is embodied in a novelistic world that is carnivalesque in its inversions of those contested norms. The dominant image of the cat's cradle itself takes on a carnivalesque air and intersects tightly with other carnival images, carnivalistic laughter, carnivalized episodes, and carnival vision. As a writer of the counter-culture in the 1960s, Vonnegut subverts the ruling ideologies only to create his own voice and envisions a carnivalistic world-view contrary to the established voices.

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