

FLESHLY VOYAGES: BEN JONSON, SPACE AND THE BODY

RUI CARVALHO HOMEM
University of Porto

Taking Ben Jonson's epigram "On the Famous Voyage" as a starting point, and proceeding thence to some of his comedies, this paper will argue the complex relations between body, text, space and representation in Jonson's writing. This is supported by the choice of a corpus composed both of traditionally less considered texts (some of the Epigrams) and of Jonson's most canonical plays. In recent criticism the "middle comedies" are often sidestepped on behalf of a reshaped canon and a less "monolithic" Jonson, but this paper aims to show that those works are, in fact, crucial for highlighting an "opening up" of his universe of representation. This process will be read, concomitantly, in spatial and in ethical terms, in the ways the body is made to relate to the world – as also in the consequences which a gradually conquered "openness" may have for Jonson's understanding of the generic requirements of comedy.

If I were asked to comment on my title, and to define its position with relation to the course of Jonson studies in recent decades, I would have to acknowledge that my concern with "body", "flesh" and mobility confirms the persistence of a major *topos* of Jonsonian criticism in the latter part of the 20th century. That *topos* can be defined by a sense of the necessity of rescuing Jonson from his self-fashioned image as monolithic classicist, literary pedant, and political reactionary—the values today associated with the image of authorship Jonson strove to create for himself, an image textually embodied in his 1616 Folio *Workes*. Although this concern with "rescuing Jonson from himself" has long been in evidence, it is significant that two recently published collections of essays, revealingly titled *Refashioning Ben Jonson* (edited by Julie Sanders, Kate Chedgzoy and Susan Wiseman 1998) and *Re-Presenting Ben Jonson* (edited by Martin Butler 1999), should be defined by a sense of urgency in the task(s) indicated by their titles, explicitly taken on for the sake of a cultural moment not much interested in a classically austere and politically conservative Jonson. Despite the different emphases of the two collections, and the different projects they serve, they represent a common endeavour to present "a new Jonson (...) who is alert to the socio-political contingencies of his age(s)", "a pluralist Jonson"

(Sanders 1998: 4-5), “a twenty-first-century Jonson” (Butler 1999: 1).¹ The counter-canonical drive of this endeavour is in both cases assisted by a near-exclusion of the “mainstream” plays, and by focusing instead on traditionally less privileged areas of the Jonson canon. It also concurs with a counter-authorial strategy, understood as the concern with denying that all-embracing coherence which was so much a part of Jonson’s self-fashioning, and with emphasising and valuing rather the elements of contradiction in Jonson’s *oeuvre*.

As already suggested, that on-going and long-protracted reconfiguration, of which these recent publications are one stage more, finds some of its most salient objects in Jonson’s representations of the body, of its space and its life, and in a corresponding definition of Jonson’s stance as satirist and as comic dramatist. This critical direction intersects at various points with that other *locus classicus*, as well as old scourge of Jonson criticism, which is the opposition with Shakespeare: it is, in this respect, significant that Anne Barton’s *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*, an epoch-making and still justly influential study, should have had the dilution of that old duality for one of its purposes and effects, by convincingly arguing that Jonson evolved, towards the end of his career, in the direction of a more “Shakespearean” praxis in comedy (Barton 1984: *passim*). Further, this global revaluation of Jonson, and its emphasis on his writing of the body, has found (since the 1980s in particular) a fundamental theoretical prop in Mikhail Bakhtin’s famous disquisition of the grotesque in late medieval and early modern popular festive culture.

I acknowledge, from the outset, the importance of Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and his World* (1984) for some of what follows—although I am well aware of how often Bakhtin’s name has been taken in vain. I will thus be alert to the ways in which Bakhtin-influenced readings of the festive element in culture and literature have recently tended to qualify their own potential tendency to idyllicise social and economic relations; and I will take due note of the critique and/or the reflective assimilation of Bakhtin by authors like Anne Lake Prescott and Bruce Thomas Boehrer (Prescott 1998: *passim*; Boehrer 1998: *passim*). Of Bakhtin’s thesis I will retain, in particular, those basic concepts which, despite some critical overuse, still preserve (in my view) their operative and heuristic value—concepts such as the denial of spatial constraint, which he sees as proper to the carnivalesque sense of the world; the correspondence of this in representations of the over spilling body, the body which breaks its boundaries, the “open” body which thus differs from the closed, individualised, spatially definite body of “classical canons”, and of bourgeois individual existence; and the regenerative ambivalence of scatology, laughter and aggression in “grotesque realism”, as opposed to modern forms of the grotesque (Bakhtin 1970: 28-40 and *passim*). I should also add that Bakhtin’s underlining of a positive dimension to verbal and scatological

1. The greater ambition which resonates in Martin Butler’s words reflects the close links between his collection and the new Jonson edition—meant to replace the old Herford and Simpson standard edition—currently being prepared under the joint editorship of Martin Butler, David Bevington and Ian Donaldson.

aggression in grotesque realism, as a form of balancing death with life in the celebration of a collective body, will be understood, in this essay, to be akin to the world of comedy, in its gregarious and exculpating dimension—and distinct from (if not opposed to) satiric violence, in the conventional sense proposed or endorsed by Northrop Frye, Alvin Kernan, and Arthur Pollard (Frye 1973; Kernan 1965; Pollard 1970: *passim*). Despite Dustin Griffin's critique of the excessively schematic and clear-cut models for reading satire offered by such theoretical precedents (Griffin 1994: *passim*), the critical validity of the concept of satire—in particular with relation to comedy, understood both in generic and modal terms (see Farley-Hills 1981: 1-50)—still depends on a well-defined theoretical contour which finds its correspondence in the acknowledgment of a sense of superiority and detachment on the part of the satirist, and of the audience he summons to his side, vis-à-vis the butts of satiric attack.

In general terms, my argument will emphasise the way in which Jonsonian renderings of bodily space, and of the spaces against which it is represented, can provide an enlightening access to his political and ethical universe, taken as an evolving set of attitudes, rather than as a static and ever coherent construction of reality. I will thus have to be aware of the multifarious forms assumed by that “absolute centrality of the body to Renaissance culture” which Jonathan Sawday underlines in his study of anatomy and dissection as master tropes for an early modern epistemology and for its ensuing forms of representation (Sawday 1995: 229 and *passim*). A reference to dissection a propos of a writer like Jonson should, first of all, remind us of how often the scalpel served the allegorical representation of the activity of the satirist—irrespective of whether that activity be understood as a surgical healing, a terrible punishment, or a post-mortem exhibition of flaws (Pollard 1970: 1-2; Paulson 1967: 10-11). But Sawday's study proves relevant to this essay in broader and concurrent ways—not the least of which will be his emphasis on how the body is textualised in Renaissance culture. Ranging from the concept of the *liber corporum* (“the book of the body written by God”), to “the inter-relationship of text and [dissected] body on the page[s]” of books of anatomy, to the description, in the anatomy theatre, of a bodily space fashioned according to an “ordering of discourse” borrowed from logic and rhetoric, Sawday explores that “interplay of organic similarity” which allowed texts (also in their material realization as books) and bodies to mirror one another (Sawday 1995: 129-40). One might add that the cultural vitality of this interrelation can be confirmed in the frequent representations, in early modern writing, of books as tortured bodies (Loewenstein 1999: 93), and (specifically) in Jonson's association, in his “Execration upon Vulcan”, of the burning of his books and the burning of his body (Herford & Simpson 1947: 206).

The pertinence of Sawday's study to my theme (and my title) also derives from his remarks on that “spatial organisation of knowledge” for which he claims the body became a prime model within Renaissance culture—and to which the development of printing further contributed (Sawday 1995: 135-6). Equally cogent for my concern with body and space is his equation of the endeavours of the early modern science of the body (in the process of being accurately mapped),

and the expansion of European knowledge of (and power over) the world: “The body was territory, an (as yet) undiscovered country, a location which demanded from its explorers skills which seemed analogous to those displayed by the heroic voyagers across the terrestrial globe” (Sawday 1995: 23).

A major concern of this essay will be the importance of space for the production of meaning (the space of the body, and the space in which bodies move and interact), and the way in which Jonsonian space arguably “opens up”—both in the scope and dimension of his dramatic space, and in the ethical implications of that expanding space—in particular at one point in the course of his work. But it should be highlighted that Jonson usually shows little enthusiasm for the notion of travelling, or of the voyage as a rewarding endeavour, for mobility (in short) as a mark of a new paradigm of the human. His treatment of such dynamics reflects, in broader terms, a disaffection with the ethos of urban individual mobility proper to early commercial capitalism; more specifically, it is a characteristic instance (even if with an element of idiosyncrasy) of Jacobean satire of travellers. One has only to think of the Politic Would-Be subplot in *Volpone* (to which I shall be returning) for an equation of travelling with false pretensions; and of Jonson’s regular satiric targeting of harebrained “schemes” or greedy “projects”—also lashed at in such epigrams as “The New Cry”, “To Captain Hungry”, or “To Mime”; whilst the collaborative *Eastward Ho!* (written with Marston and Chapman) proposed an entrepreneurial expedition to Virginia as resulting in no more than a drunken, incompetent sally that could go no further than downriver to Cuckold’s Haven.

In this as in other respects, though, Jonson is ultimately found to be less stable and coherent than his self-fashioned authorial identity might suggest. As far as travelling goes, an otherwise derisive treatment is at least rendered equivocal by his contributions, together with other well-known writers, prefacing that peculiar example of travel literature which is Thomas Coryate’s *Crudities*. Those pieces, both in verse and prose, are varied in register, ranging from the satiric thrust—as in some passages less sympathetic to the travelling mania; to some genial buffoonery—as in the Rabelaisian alimentary imagery applied both to the description of moments in Coryate’s travels and to their textual record; to the announcement of some of the verse as “mollifying Cataplasmes to the Tumors, Carnosities, or difficult Pimples full of matter appearing in the Authors Front”—an ambivalent passage, suggestive of the medical troping of a satiric intervention (which had a famous precedent in Jonson’s dramatic appropriations of humoral doctrine), but in this case benevolently (rather than caustically) proposed as a “mollification” (Herford & Simpson 1947: 374-81).

As for Jonson’s views on the mercantile yield of most early modern voyaging, they should seem definitely expressed by the satire of acquisitiveness to be found in much of his work; yet, a text believed to be the most recent addition to the Jonson canon—*The Entertainment at Britain’s Bourse*, a masque rediscovered by James Knowles in 1997, and published in 1999—can easily and surprisingly read like a paean to trade and merchants. Written for the opening, in 1609, of the opulent New Exchange (what Knowles jokingly called, in the article which announced the rediscovery, “Cecil’s Shopping Centre”—Knowles 1997), *The Entertainment*

proposes the opening ceremony itself as a voyage of discovery, by having the Key Keeper introduce himself as the “compasse” that will guide his royal audience “vppon some lande discouery of a new region heere” (Knowles 1999: 132). It contains the occasional jab at the preposterous schemes of projectors, or at “young return’d trauaylors”, who “studyed little and trauayled lesse for that” (Knowles 1999: 133); but it is only uncertainly that it provides the reader with semantic and rhetorical elements that may ironise the celebration of the commodities it itemises in long lists, glittering goods brought home by both straightforward business and far-fetched schemes for the satisfaction of wealthy consumers. Further, *The Entertainment* ends with a generous offer of bargains, and the shopkeeper’s wish that “god make me Rich, which is the sellers prayer ever was and wilbe” (Knowles 1999: 140). According to the text’s editor, the whole description of the New Exchange amounts to “an almost incredible traveller’s tale”, and embodies “Jonson’s vision of the wonder and mystery of the Burse” (Knowles 1997: 15).

As underlined above, instabilities such as caused by this surprising text have in recent years been foregrounded by a context of reception which, rather than regretting Jonson’s contradictions, welcomes them as a means of countering the totalising design of the author’s self-fashioning—a process which found its epitome in the 1616 Folio—and of proposing instead a less “monolithic” and more complex and tolerant Jonson (see Sanders 1998: 1-27 and *passim*). This argument has been accompanied by a reconfiguring of the Jonson canon which entails a shift of attention to the more peripheral texts (dramatic and non-dramatic), deliberately avoiding the so-called middle comedies (see Sanders 1998: *passim*, Butler 1999: *passim*). My argument henceforth will partly gesture in that direction, by departing from one of the Epigrams; but it will, on the other hand, bring the middle comedies (*Volpone*, *Epicoene*, *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair*) again to the fore, to argue that those plays are, in fact, crucial for the argument in the name of which they are often disregarded—to the extent that they illuminate what will here be called the “opening up” of Jonson’s space, in the direction (precisely) of a more tolerant *ethos*, and of a more accepting relation to the body.

That “opening up” will, however, be the point of arrival of this reading: a point of departure, or rather a useful foil, might be found in a text which has voyaging in its title—epigram “CXXXIII, On the Famous Voyage” (Herford & Simpson 1947: 84-9), all the more infamous since Edmund Wilson, in his 1948 essay “Morose Ben Jonson”, elected it as the “fullest and most literal expression” of “the whole malodorous side of Jonson” (Wilson 1948: 256). The mock-heroic design, by which the satirist offers his times and places as debased analogues to Classical figures and landscapes, is apparent from the opening, proemial lines: the new voyagers, whose exploits are announced as surpassing those “Of HERCVLES, or THESEVS going to *hell*, / ORPHEVS, VLISSES” (ll.2-3), etc., are obscure gentlemen of Jacobean London, and their “venture” aims at taking them to Holborn up the Fleet Ditch, a watercourse which had in Jonson’s time become no more than an open-air sewer (Boehrer 1998: 158-9). Up the Fleet Ditch, therefore, the challenges, ghostly encounters, and trials to be faced are totally scatological

in nature (a scatology which may find a structural equivalence in the closing position which “On the Famous Voyage” occupies in Jonson’s *Epigrams*: itself the end of a voyage, the moment of exit or expulsion). Parallel to the risible equation with ancient and mythological voyaging, this “braue aduerture” is compared with other modern epics of mobility—“[of] him that backward went to *Bernicke*, or which / Did dance the famous Morrise, vnto *Normich*” (ll.35-6), “A harder tasque, then either his to *Bristo*, / Or his to *Antwerpe*” (ll.39-40)—which, in their foolishness and lack of consequence, threaten to take on the significance of demeaning synecdoches for all travelling.

The debasement which this voyage involves also affects the space which witnesses and somehow produces it—the space of the early modern city. As Bruce Thomas Boehrer has recently argued, in his suggestively titled *The Fury of Men’s Gullets: Ben Jonson and the Digestive Canal*, there is a socio-historical specificity to this epigram which derives from the way in which demographic expansion, together with decisive changes in patterns of living, was causing England to evolve from “an economy of waste retention” to “an economy of waste expulsion” (Boehrer 1998: 151 and *passim*). There is, then, a historical prominence of sewage systems which entails, in Boehrer’s response to Edmund Wilson’s indictment of Jonson as a severe case of anal neurosis (Wilson 1948: *passim*)—a response which itself attests to the long shadow cast by Wilson’s essay—that “Jonson’s preoccupation with excretory processes should arguably be viewed as culturally paradigmatic rather than individually neurotic” (Boehrer 1998: 14). After all, the very last words in Jonson’s epigram are a tribute to “[him], that sung A-IAX” (l.196)—Sir John Harington, who had celebrated his own invention of the flush-toilet (whilst possibly also satirising wild “projects”) by writing *A New Discourse of a Stale Subject, called The Metamorphosis of Ajax* (i.e., “a jakes”) (Prescott 1998: 106, Boehrer 1998: 151-2).

If these voyagers’ traversing of the city at all times reflects the coexistence of multiple bodies which eat, digest and excrete in an ever more crowded space, it is also true that the expanding city is represented in terms which activate its culturally long-standing analogy with the human body—in this case, one flatulent, congested as much as voracious body, visited in the rank evidence of all its functions. Some moments in the representation of this body might make it tempting to read it as festive and Rabelaisian (in Bakhtin’s influential construction of the word): its ill-defined boundaries, the inversion of high and low (in the conflation or interchangeability of both extremes of the digestive tube), the circularity of food and excrement, the specular relationship of the devourer and the devoured, and that muddled physiology which makes it possible to present an excremental monster, whilst describing the voyagers’ progress “Through her wombe” (l.66) (see Bakhtin 1970: 30 and *passim*). But, despite the element of ambivalence suggested by such features, the regenerative dynamics which characterises the open, uncontained body of Bakhtin’s “grotesque realism” is absent: the reminders of death which punctuate the unsavoury voyage admit of no joyous redemption, and no images of desire and fruition come to balance the revulsion and the debasement. Decisive for this is the pervasiveness of disease:

the soundtrack of the voyage includes, prominently, the screams of “women and men,/ Laden with plague-sores” (ll.16-17), and the allegorical visitations feature “stench, diseases, and old filth, their mother,/ With famine, wants, and sorrowes many a dosen,/ The least of which was to the plague a cosen” (ll.70-2). As Neil Rhodes commented (though not in connection with Jonson) in his classical study of the *Elizabethan Grotesque*, “[the] plague-pit is the ghastly inversion of Rabelais’s festive grotesque, a hideous reflection upon the community of physical experience” (Rhodes 1980: 49). Another revealing clue to the distinction between the scene of “On the Famous Voyage” and a festive celebration of the body is one of the similes for excrement which Jonson proposes towards the end of the epigram, a commonplace analogy with money which is as characteristically anal-retentive as it might be: “heap’d like an vsurers masse” (l.139). The image reminds us that the allegorical body here visited is the space of an egocentric acquisitiveness which is the opposite of that celebratory scatology of grotesque realism, in which excrement, rather than amassed, is joyfully alienated in the form of festive aggression (Bakhtin 1970: 151). And yet another sign of the negative satiric treatment of this voyage is its ultimate static nature, the ineffectuality of the movement attempted: these voyagers brave no challenge, pass no trial, any purposes of mobility are never achieved (see Boehrer 1998: 163-4). The epigram’s closing image is that of a memorial adequate to the voyagers’ achievement and the universe represented: the “Pyramide” of excrement (explicitly compared to money) which keeps growing in the stifling sewer which emblematises circulation in the modern city.

In 1605 Jonson had built the plot of his most famous comedy around the supposed immobility, in a space whose effectiveness depended on its controlled closedness, of a body whose power to attract and accumulate riches was directly proportional to its capacity to inspire disgust to those who visited it, and to persuade them it was bound for an imminent death. The protagonist, owner of the body, the space, and the riches, memorably opens the comedy by hailing and celebrating his heap of amassed treasure—a heap of gold, the “real thing” rather than its steaming substitute, but ultimately as sterile and as compromised with the death-bound evidence of the body as the sewer’s contents, in all their organic rankness. And that is because Volpone’s wealth is generated by—or accrues with—his prospective heirs’ contemplation of a body which is a source of promise and (acquisitive) desire precisely to the extent that it is (or rather, seems to be) dying:

His speech is broken, and his eyes are set,
 His face drawn longer, then ‘t was wont (...)
 (...)
 His mouth
 Is euer gaping, and his eye-lids hang. (...)
 A freezing numnesse stiffens all his ioynts,
 And makes the colour of his flesh like lead. (...)
 His pulse beats slow, and dull. (...)
 And, from his brain (...)
 (...)

Flows a cold sweat, with a continuall rehwme,
Forth the resolved corners of his eyes. (I-4: 38-9, 41-6, 48-9)²

It is around this body that the space of Volpone, the Venetian aristocrat, is organised, but the transgressions caused by the obsessive ambitions which clash within that space also come to be represented as sickly inflated bodies: “Mischiefes feed / Like beasts, till they be fat, and then they bleed” (V-12: 150-1). These are the very last words before the epilogue, and that position as final words suggests the plot itself should be read as an organism which bloats and comes to a point of explosion, expulsion or purge precisely with the harshly punitive ending which has always been one of the more notorious features of this play. That this growth and explosion is hardly a Bakhtinian carnival breaching of the body’s boundaries is ensured, however, by the imagery of sickness which at all times characterises it: the images are organic, but they are also pathological. That is true not only of the description of Volpone’s fraudulent carcass, and of the ethics of his intra-dramatic plot, but also of their outward projection in the shape of the freaks (Nano, Castrone and Androgyno) which people his space, and provide apt entertainment in a setting described by Alexander Lyle as “a superb anatomy of deformity” (Lyle 1974: 75). Even the alimentary function for (and within) the play’s body is not fulfilled by that carnivalesque overfeeding, which nourishes without limits and unbalances the body, but is determined rather by an extravagant culinary imagination which denounces the boundlessness of ambition and the imbalance of a debasing mind—as when, in his attempted seduction of Celia, Volpone voices his dream of turning the phoenix into a dish (III-7: 204-5).

As suggested already, the success of the plot devised and managed by Volpone and Mosca around the former’s body depends on its maintenance within the confined space of the palace: the course of the play makes clear that attempts to expand their histrionic mobility to the city outside threaten exposure and destruction. Mosca’s paean to his own mobility and ubiquity as a parasite is famous:

I could skip
Out of my skin, now, like a subtill snake,
I am so limber.
(...)
(...) your fine, elegant rascall, that can rise,
And stoope (almost together) like an arrow;
(...)
(...) and be here,
And there, and here, and yonder, all at once; (III-1: 5-7, 23-4, 26-7)

But his attempt to move above his station, by becoming autonomous from his master, will doom him, when caught, “[to] liue perpetuall prisoner in our gallies” (V-12: 114)—a sad way of moving about in the world, an ironically literal

2. The source for all quotations from the comedies is the Herford and Simpson edition—vol. V for *Volpone*, *Epicoene* and *The Alchemist*, vol. VI for *Bartholmew Fayre*—as given in my list of references. All passages will be referenced by act, scene and line.

fulfilment of the ambition to “be here, / And there, and here, and yonder”. As for Volpone, his sally in the guise of a mountebank, under Corvino’s windows, earns him a sound beating; and the satisfaction of his irrepressible urge to go out and witness the discomfiture of his would-be heirs ultimately damns and immobilises him, by sentencing the Venetian Magnifico’s previously supple histrionic body to the diseases he had faked:

And since the most was gotten by imposture,
By faining lame, gout, palsey and such diseases,
Thou art to lie in prison, cramp’t with irons,
Till thou bee’st sicke, and lame indeed. (V-12: 121-4)

Even at the risk of allowing the satiric mode to impair one of comedy’s structurally most recognisable elements (the happy ending), the confining spaces which Alvin Kernan proposed as proper to satire, at its most characteristic (spaces like “labyrinths” and “dungeons”—Kernan 1965: 22), are the doom promised the two major characters at the very end.

But there are characters in *Volpone’s* Venice who are free to move in the world, and have come far from their native space—precisely the English characters, Sir Politic and Lady Would-be, plus Peregrine, “a Gentleman traveller”. All serve Jonson’s satire of travellers: the former as victims—the latter as an on-stage commentator, as a foil to their ludicrousness, and eventually as a satirical scourge. Sir Politic presumes to introduce himself to Peregrine as a wise citizen of the world:

Sir, to a wise man, all the world’s his soile.
It is not *Italie*, nor *France*, nor *Europe*,
That must bound me, if my fates call me forth. (II-1:1-3)

But the reasons for his travel to Venice promptly deny these pretensions, when it becomes clear that he was taken to Venice by “a peculiar humour” of his wife’s, rather than by a concern with freedom or knowledge. A later passage suggests that he travelled to allow her wife to trade (on) her body:

“[She] lies here, in *Venice*, for intelligence
Of tyres, and fashions, and behaiour,
Among the curtizans? (II-1: 27-9)

It is, in a way, as if this foolish traveller had also landed in Cuckold’s Haven, like the would-be voyagers to Virginia in *Eastward Ho!*. Besides, Jonson’s satirical treatment of Sir Politic also equates his foolishness with that of “projectors”, since he reveals to Peregrine “certaine proiects, that I haue”, “my thousand ay-mes” (IV-1: 46, 67)—silly schemes which he is eager to dis-close and impart to any-body, breaking his supposed reserve, discretion, and individualist concern immediately after having claimed such an ethos. Characteristically, some of his “proiects” concern voyaging, and large-scale trade between major seaports:

(...) to serue the state
Of *Venice*, with red herrings, for three yeeres,
And at a certaine rate, from

Rotterdam (IV-1: 50-2)

—or a hare-brained scheme to release quarantined ships from their sequestration by using onions as an index of disease. The only scheme that he will come to see fulfilled will be the one organised by Peregrine to publicly shame him, as a consequence of his boastfulness and his indiscretions, in a way that anticipates Sir Pol's return to England: disgracefully trying to (half-)conceal himself under a tortoise shell (a sight which is itself a parody of the self-contained and reserved body), cowardly trying to escape an invented persecution, the foolish traveller will vow to retract his body to his native space, after confessing to the hollowness of his experience of the world—another instance, in short, of inconsequential voyaging:

to shunne, this place, and clime for euer;
 Creeping, with house, on backe: and thinke it well,
 To shrinke my poore head, in my politique shell. (V-4:87-9)

And, in terms of the spaces which frame Jonson's plots, the course of Jonsonian comedy seems to accompany this character on his return voyage—not yet to "*Smithfield, in the faire*" (V-4: 78) (the space to which, freakish under his tortoise shell, Sir Pol is proclaimed to belong to), since *Bartholomew Fair* is still two comedies away; but rather to the domestic London ordinariness of the rather obscure gentry of *Epicoene*, a geographic, social and cultural space whose contrast to the Venetian sophistication of *Volpone* ("a contrast between Italian vice and English folly", as J.A. Barish famously stereotyped it—1953: 104) was already represented in the former comedy precisely in the person of the Would-bes. The difference in setting is paralleled in the textual space, since the tendentially hyperbolic verse of *Volpone* is replaced by prose. But the persistence of the dramatic relevance of an enclosed space, of an isolated (or insulated) body, and of a representation of disease, both unite and distinguish the two plays.

Both *Volpone* and *Morose* depend on their immobilisation in their respective dwellings. But if *Volpone*'s enclosure and immobility are a prerequisite and serve the ulterior motive of his entrapment of others, whom he entices to enter his space; if that domiciliation of his body corresponds to the power to make the outside world organise itself around his room, and is served and balanced by a histrionic agility which seems to elide the physical limits of that space and enable a total domain of what surrounds him, in the case of *Morose* there is no subterfuge, no covert wish to attract other bodies to his (but rather a genuine abhorrence of other presences): there is only an exacerbation of the insulated self in the face of a world felt as a menace, and a misanthropy for which his detestation of sound is an apt synecdoche.

Morose's retreat from an outside whose sounds he abhors finds an increased justification in the bells tolling for the dead, the auditory manifestation of the plague which constitutes a defining environment for much of what happens in *Epicoene*:

now, by reason of the sicknesse, the perpetuity of ringing has made him devise a roome, with double walls, and treble seelings; the windores close shut, and calk'd: and there he liues by candle-light (I-1: 183-6)

The disease lays siege to this body and its “shell”, its apparently insulated house, but it is also to be found within. “Is the disease so ridiculous in him, as it is made?” (I-1: 148-9)—asks the authorised voice of Truewit: the siege could not be more complete.

Morose’s response to the space beyond his body makes him probably Jonson’s most complete dramatisation of the implications of individual isolation, a dream of self-containment and self-sufficiency turned sour. Jonson’s dictum in *Discoveries*, “Speech is the only benefit man hath to express his excellencie of mind above other creatures. It is the Instrument of *Society*” (Herford & Simpson 1947: 620-1), seems to find an answer in Morose’s admission that “all discourses, but mine owne, afflict mee, they seeme harsh, impertinent, and irksome” (II-1: 4-5)—and he demands from those who surround him: “answere me not, by speech, but by silence” (II-1: 9). His argument against prolixity, and in favour of sobriety in action and in discourse, might, outside the dramatic context, grant this character the authority of the reserved man—as when he recollects his father’s advice:

My father, in my education, was wont to aduise mee, that I should alwayes collect, and contayne my mind, not suffring it to flow loosely; (...) that I should endear my selfe to rest, and auoid turmoile: which now is growne another nature to me. (V-3: 48-50, 53-4)

But this paean to self-containment of body and mind is dis-authorised by Morose’s radical refusal of anything in language which may be merely phatic, as the verbal props of social space – “EPI. How doe you, sir?/ MOR. Did you euer heare a more vnecessary question? as if she did not see!” (IV-4: 30-2)—and by his choice of a place to live in town which denies the purpose and the validity of urban space, by preventing, as far as possible, encounter, coexistence, and circulation; in short, a street which will not function as a street: “hee hath chosen a street to lie in, so narrow at both ends, that it will receiue no coaches, nor carts, nor any of these common noises” (I-1: 167-9). This denial of social coexistence also forecloses all forms of festivity: if Morose anathematises those who would seem to stand for a festive dynamics as “sonnes of noise and tumult, begot on an ill *May*-day” (IV-2: 125-6), it is no less true that the roguish gentlemen who mobilise a noisy crowd into his house—for whom “such a festiuall time” (II-4: 199-20) is just a means unto their greedy ends—turn the house into an embodiment of Babel (“Towers of Babel” belonged to the spaces proper to satire, according to Alvin Kernan—Kernan 1965:22), rather than into an image of the great social body engaged in communal celebration. Further, the achievement of their selfish ends almost includes the mutilation of Jack Daw, one of the foolish knights (IV-5: 124-39)—a decidedly non-festive attempt against the integrity of a body.

Finally, the impotence Morose will eventually claim, even if no more than a stratagem to try and get rid of an unwanted marriage, will be symbolically true of a body which refuses all intercourse, all encounters, which cannot find a consequence or extension in another body. The sight of Morose, sitting on the

rafters under the roof with head stopped to all sensation, is the ultimate emblem of the absurdly closed body:

Hee has got on his whole nest of night-caps, and lock'd himselfe vp, i' the top o' the house, as high, as euer he can climbe from the noise. I peep'd in at a crany, and saw him sitting ouer a crosse-beame o' the roofo (IV-1: 21-5)

The connection between tumult and anti-social, self-centred behaviour is also apparent with the opening of *The Alchemist*, and again the grotesque imagery employed in the initial exchanges might suggest a festive dynamics to be rapidly proven false—since the threatened excremental aggression which famously opens the play concerns (as it becomes clear with the unfurling of the plot) incompatible individual desire, and the pitting of bodies against one another, on the verge of assault, disfigurement and murder, rather than involved in the ambivalent sharing of Rabelaisian festivity. As with the previous comedies, disease defines and delimitates the dramatic space—since the indoors mobility of the great con-artists Face and Subtle is enabled by the plague which rages in the city (as in *Epicoene*), and has led the master of the house to flee the contaminated urban space; and their success depends on a careful determination and control of others’ access to the space of their deceit (as in *Volpone*). Yet the differences are also significant: the setting is domestic (in all senses of the word), rather than exotic—and that would suggest a proximity to *Epicoene*. But, if the managers of the space of deceit are no longer a *Magnifico* and his parasite, they are also from a different social space than the cynical gallants who badger Morose in *Epicoene*. The London sub-world represented in the person of Subtle, the accomplice brought into his master’s house by the roguish servant Face, entails that in *The Alchemist* we are faced with a lower and much broader social space, signified in the inclusive clientele which visits the house of deceit. When we reach *The Alchemist*, it is as if the satiric plot of deceit and greed which Jonson had dramatised in *Volpone* were being dramatised anew, centred around the social space and dynamics of those who in the earlier comedy had followed the protagonist to the piazza, in the guise of a mountebank, rather than around the restricted circle of his wealthier victims.

This downward social progression, which is thus accompanied by spatial expansion, can arguably correspond to a toning down of the satiric drive, in its modal intersection of the generic space of comedy. A paratextual support of this reading can arguably be found in the prologues to these comedies—which may even well be one step ahead of the comedies they introduce, in the accomplishment of the purpose of satiric mollification; and all of which are far from the famous representation of satiric violence as bodily mortification in the voice of such an authorised figure as Asper (in *Every Man Out of His Humour*), when he claims to “strip the ragged follies of the time”, “and with a whip of steele,/ Print wounding lashes on their yron ribs” (Herford & Simpson 1927: 428-9). The prologue to *Volpone*, despite the assumption of satiric superiority which one may detect beneath its contempt for popular forms of entertainment, is already moved by an authorial concern with denying that “all he [the author] writes, is

rayling" (10); the move away from the satirist's cavalier and punitive stance, a stance which might be understood to parallel the anti-popular aesthetics of the stern man of letters, is even more evident with the prologue to *Epicœne*, which contains an explicit apology for the need "to content the people" and "to please (...) the guests" (2, 9) and an acknowledgement of "populare" taste; whilst the prologue to *The Alchemist*, though reintroducing the emphasis on correction, panders to native and popular support by defining their space as the best for entertainment ("No countries mirth is better than our owne"), and by suggesting the palliative nature of "sweet (...) remedies" and "fair correctives"—so soft, in fact, that the sick may not even come to recognise the disease as their own: "They are so naturall follies, but so showne,/ As euen the doers may see, and yet not owne" (23-4). It is already a far echo from the embattled satirist's wish to "strip" the "ragged follies" and "whip" the truant body. The ending of *The Alchemist* is characteristically amoral and non-punitive—when the returned master of the house learns of his servant's schemes, and accepts the ill-gotten gain. But, again, in the individualistic ethos which rules it, *The Alchemist* is not that gregarious moment which might foreground the social body and propose a festive enjoyment of the material body (ies).

It is true that *The Alchemist* offers us representations of a pampered and spacious body in the character of Epicure Mammon, a physically inflated character with inflated dreams of unlimited gratifications—one instance more, in his ready belief in the "alchemist's" Midas touch, of Jonson's satire of "projectors". But Mammon's envisaged pleasures, to some extent a translation onto the domestic London space of Volpone's exotic corruption, are dreams of petty acquisitiveness and of its corresponding retentiveness, of the purchase of minor prostitutions—and of individual power, of the self-engrossment of an ego.

To find, in Jonson, representations of a body and a space arguably evocative of the forms of "grotesque realism", rather than an extension of these instances of the "modern grotesque", we need to look into *Bartholomew Fair*—the space of the fair itself, and those who belong to it, rather than the city visitors. Indeed, with the latter, we witness a dis-location to the fair of the gestures and forms of desire proper to the socio-dramatic space defined by the two previous comedies: the socially and economically predatory gallants (similar to the victors in *Epicœne*), Quarlous and Winwife, who will progress from the city to the fair in search of a profitable marriage (much more than an emotionally and a sexually rewarding union); Littlewit, the minor legal agent and would-be author, seeking in the fair's puppet theatre a dramatic glory proportional to his talents—resulting in what is probably Jonson's best attempt at the mock-heroic, a *translatio* of high-culture texts into the space of the Fair; Busy, Jonson's most memorable Puritan (following Tribulation and Ananias, in *The Alchemist*), who tries to conceal a gluttonous body behind a spiritual mission, and will be discomfited at the fair. The fair will have on the city characters the effect of a space of revelation, to be dramatically effected through a foregrounding of the body in its lower functions, manifested through its openness, through the breaking of its boundaries: sudden calls of nature, a sudden vomit, etc.—varying forms of the confrontation with

the question repeatedly posed by the ubiquitous Trouble-all, the madman of the fair, inquisitive of the grounds for authority: “where’s your warrant?”.

The movement from the closedness of their urban domestic space to the open space of interchange, conviviality and nourishment that the fair stands for corresponds to a dramatic regression of a socio-historical tendency, begun at an earlier stage but on the increase through Jonson’s lifetime, for the characteristic convivial space—and in particular the dining space—of the privileged social groups to become closed and private, a space of segregation rather than concourse (Boehrer 1998: 77, 92). The gregariousness to be found at the fair, however, is hardly a utopia of sociability: quarrelling in fact defines the game of “vapours”, with which the rogues and pimps attract outsiders to better con them out of their belongings. But the point to be made, precisely, is the corporative dimension of the game, the way its promoters act as one body before the prospective victims, only play-acting the quarrel, rather than genuinely embarking on it. They are thus in direct contrast to the visitors, easily carried away by the dynamics of inter-individual conflict which defines their space of origin—as they are also in direct contrast to the rogues of *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, or the roguish gallants of *Epicœne*, always ready to betray an alliance (and damn themselves) before the flimsiest prospect of individual gain.

That corporative sense, also evident at times in the salesmen’s mutual help and mutual praise, can take on the implications of yet another historically regressive movement: the wares hawked by the salesmen (“a fine hobby horse”, “some Ginger-bread”, “fine new ballads”—II-4: 3, 9-10) are reminiscent of rural patterns of living and celebration whose erosion by the gradual foregrounding of the urban and individually-based social ethics of early commercial capitalism often becomes (as is well known) the object of conventional laments in English Renaissance texts. The fact that Busy, who is publicly defeated in a *disputatio* with a puppet at the fair’s puppet theatre, comes to that place ostensibly “to prophesie the destruction of *Fayres* and *May-games*, *Wakes* and *Whitson-ales*” (IV-6: 90-1) is a clear reminder that the fair belongs to the festive sphere of traditional rural culture; furthermore, the fact that Busy had ceased to work as a baker (i.e., someone who worked for the nutrition of others) to care only for his own ends (his gluttony in particular), indicates that with his discomfiture a culture and a space under attack is having its revenge.

Social history lets us know that Smithfield, the setting of the fair, was being encroached upon by the city space in the early seventeenth-century (Sanders 1998: 13): the site of this revenge is thus a space under pressure, a boundary between two cultural spaces, one of which is regressing—but not without a fight. When Michael Bristol, writing of the relations between the dramatic literature of the English Renaissance and the festive forms it often evokes, identifies the dual working of: “a negative critique that demystifies (...) the tendency of elites to undertake disruptive radicalisations of traditional patterns of social order” and of “a positive critique, a celebration and reaffirmation of collective traditions lived out by ordinary people in their ordinary existence” (Bristol 1985: 4), he might be commenting on the *agon* of rural and urban in *Bartholomew Fair*.

That *agon* takes place, to an important extent, on the space of the body, and of its troping in terms of the fight between Carnival meat and Lenten fish—the cultural and economic correlatives of a rural economy, and of trades not bound to the land; or rather, in the voice of Ursula, mistress of the pig booth, between herself, “a plaine plumpe soft wench o’ the Suburbs”, and the city woman, “like a long lac’d Conger, set vpright” (II-5: 83, 87)—an opposition in which disease is also invested when Ursula pits her healthy (“wholesome”) body against the “pox’d” or “plagued” body of the city prostitute. Roasting pigs at the centre of the fair, ruling over it as “*Vrsa maior*” (II-5: 190), and indistinctly hailed or derided as the “fleshly woman” (III-6: 33), the “shee-Beare” (II-3: 1), the “mother o’ the Pigs” (II-5: 75), the “fatnesse of the *Fayre*” (II-2: 118), the “Body o’ the *Fayre!*” (II-5: 73), Ursula epitomises her environing space—and its allegorical coextension with the world (as Patricia Parker points out in her study of *Literary Fat Ladies*—1987: 24-6). She is a clear-cut example of the apotheosis of the body in grotesque realism: the ambivalent duality of the grotesque body, as a space where life and death coexist in that circularity which secures the regular triumph of the former, is instanced in her double function as provider of food as well as of the only equivalent to a toilet in the fair—thus foregrounding that other characteristically grotesque trait which is the fusion and interchangeability of bodily functions. She is further represented as the open, uncontained, overflowing body, whose flesh and fat are usable and productive: “She’ll make excellent geere for the Coach-makers, here in Smithfield, to anoynt wheeles and axell trees with (II-5: 81-2). And if this was the satiric voice of the non-understanding gallants, then Ursula herself offers a representation of her fertilising liquefaction on the soil of the fair, the sudatory consequence of feeding other bodies:

I am all fire, and fat, *Nightingale*, I shall e’en melt away to the first woman, a ribbe againe, I am afraid. I doe water the ground in knots, as I goe, like a great Garden-pot, you may follow me by the S.S. I make (II-2:50-3).

This self-description as a macro-instance of womanhood might illustrate Jonathan Sawday’s remark on how “a body which *escapes* its boundary (...) tends to be constructed as female” (Sawday 1995: 9). And the unbounded nature of this body will gain another inflection when its alimentary role in the space of the fair reverts upon itself, when its own flesh, having suffered an injury, is associated with substances that may dress wounds—but also provide dressings for a dish: “oh! I ha’ scalded my leg, my leg, my leg, I ha’ lost a limb in the service! run for some creame and sallad oyle, quickly” (II-5: 161-4).

It will be from her booth that the decisive moment will be produced for bringing *Bartholomew Fair* to a gregarious and absolving ending, in which all bids for individual assertion will be dis-authorised and diluted in food and drink. When the judge’s wife emerges, drunk and vomiting, from the booth whose owner was previously associated with the exemplary first woman, the aptly styled judge Adam Overdo is confronted with an evidence of the bodily “low” that annuls his “high” pretensions, and is thus brought to an Adamic acceptance of his and every-body’s human ordinariness—an acceptance signalled by a general

invitation for food, drink, and entertainment. It is hardly new, in Jonsonian criticism, to read this moment as ironically reflecting upon Jonson himself, the denial of authority to every presumptuous character necessarily including that image of the author in whose promotion Jonson otherwise played a historically pioneering role. The analogy between text and body which Jonson himself stimulated makes it less simplistically biographical to point out, in connection with this deflation of authority, that, by the time of *Bartholomew Fair*, the expansion of Jonson's own body to a near-legendary fatness would already be a conspicuous aspect of his public persona, and one that he himself seems to have associated with the growing spaciousness of his reputation (Boehrer 1998: 83-5). An ironical connection between the ambitions of a physically and literarily growing authorial body and the gluttony for promotion which the fair denounces, offering instead a confrontation with the body as the great leveller, is thus not completely speculative—in particular when the misjudgements of judge Overdo, highest example of the dis-authorized, are named his “discoveries”, precisely one of the titles given by Jonson to his own book of maxims and basic principles.

The point to be made, though, is that the outcome of *Bartholomew Fair* can be seen as a moment of arrival of a writing of the body, and of a management of space, which evolves all through the “middle comedies”—a “voyage” which allows us to counter the conventional view of Jonson as the static and pedantic proponent of a “classical” closure, and endorse rather Bruce Thomas Boehrer's view of him as the practitioner of a “poetics of mobility”, concerned with “notions of movement, kinesis, energy, exploration” (Boehrer 1998: 202); a “voyage” which ultimately calls on the flesh to disprove a monolithic construction of authorship. Rather than relegating them to the condition of hypercanonically suspect texts, this should make the “middle comedies”, then, a dynamic and useful weapon for reconfiguring Ben Jonson as the complex, but also more tolerant and open dramatist that, indeed, the beginning of the new century deserves.

REFERENCES

- Bakhtin, M. 1970: *L'Oeuvre de François Rabelais et la Culture Populaire au Moyen Âge et sous la Renaissance*. trad. Andrée Robel. Paris, Gallimard.
 —1984: *Rabelais and his World*. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press.
- Barish, J.A. 1953: The Double Plot in *Volpone*. > Barish, ed. 1963: *Ben Jonson: a Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice Hall: 93-105.
- Barton, A. 1984: *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*. Cambridge, C.U.P.
- Boehrer, B.T. 1998: *The Fury of Men's Gullets: Ben Jonson and the Digestive Canal*. Philadelphia, Univ. of Pennsylvania Press.
- Bristol, M.D. 1985: *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England*. New York and London, Methuen.
- Butler, M. ed. 1999: *Re-Presenting Ben Jonson: Text, History, Performance*. Basingstoke and London, Macmillan.
- Farley-Hills, D. 1981: *The Comic in Renaissance Comedy*. London and Basingstoke, Ma-

- cmillan.
- Frye, N. 1973: *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957). Princeton, NJ, Princeton UP.
- Griffin, D. 1994: *Satire: a Critical Reintroduction*. Lexington, Ky, The Univ. Press of Kentucky. Ken-
- Herford, C.H., Simpson, P. eds. 1937:
Ben Jonson, vol.V. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- 1938: *Ben Jonson*, vol.VI. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- 1947: *Ben Jonson*, vol.VIII. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Kernan, A. 1965: *The Plot of Satire*. New Haven and London, Yale UP.
- Knowles, J. 1997: Cecil's Shopping Centre: the rediscovery of a Ben Jonson masque in praise of trade. > *Times Literary Supplement* (February 7): 14-15.
- Knowles, J. ed. 1999: [*The Entertainment at Britain's Burse*]. > Butler, M. ed. 1999: 132- 51.
- Loewenstein, J.F. 1999: Personal Material: Jonson and Book-Burning. > Butler, M. ed. 1999: 93-113.
- Lyle, A.W. 1974: Volpone's Two Worlds. > Spencer, T.J.B. ed. 1974: *The Yearbook of English Studies* vol.4. Birmingham, Modern Humanities Research Association: 70 - 6.
- Parker, P. 1987: *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property*. London and New York, Methuen. Me-
- Paulson, R. 1967: *The Fictions of Satire*. Baltimore, Md, The Johns Hopkins Press.
- Pollard, A. 1970: *Satire*. London, Methuen.
- Prescott, A. L. 1998: *Imagining Rabelais in Renaissance England*. New Haven and London, Yale UP.
- Rhodes, N. 1980: *Elizabethan Grotesque*. London, Routledge.
- Sanders, J., Chedgzoy, K., Wiseman, S. eds. 1998: *Refashioning Ben Jonson: Gender, Politics and the Jonsonian Canon*. Basingstoke and London, Macmillan.
- Sawday, J. 1995: *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture*. London, Routledge.
- Wilson, E. 1948: Morose Ben Jonson. > Wilson, E. 1962: *The Triple Thinkers: twelve essays on literary subjects*. Harmondsworth: Penguin: 240-61. essays