

Nietzsche's Influence on Bakhtin's Aesthetics of Grotesque Realism

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### Recommended Citation

Mazour-Matusevich, Yelena. "Nietzsche's Influence on Bakhtin's Aesthetics of Grotesque Realism." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11.2 (2009): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1472>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1472)

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**Volume 11 Issue 2 (June 2009) Article 7**  
**Yelena Mazour-Matusevich,**  
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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss2/7>>

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**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11.2 (2009)**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss2/>>

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**Abstract:** In her article "Nietzsche's Influence on Bakhtin's Aesthetics of Grotesque Realism" Yelena Mazour-Matusevich discusses Bakhtin's concept of grotesque realism in the light of Nietzsche's influence, particularly his notion of chaos and its expression of the Dionysian blended with and perceived through Russian religious thought and mythological consciousness. Mazour-Matusevich postulates that Nietzsche's influence on Bakhtin is most obvious in the latter's seminal work, *Rabelais and His World*. In order to demonstrate Nietzsche's influence on Bakhtin, Mazour-Matusevich provides an overview of Nietzsche's reception in Russia during Bakhtin's formative years as well as of the current state of research concerning the correlation between the ideas of Nietzsche and Bakhtin. Unlike previous scholarship, Mazour-Matusevich explores the "Nietzschean connection" beyond *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by including Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, *The Gay Science*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Will to Power*, *The Antichrist*, and *Twilight of the Idols*.

## Yelena MAZOUR-MATUSEVICH

### Nietzsche's Influence on Bakhtin's Aesthetics of Grotesque Realism

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between Bakhtin's theory of grotesque realism and carnival and Nietzsche's thought. To do so, I focus with regard to Bakhtin on his *Rabelais and His World* because it is in this work that Bakhtin formulates and develops the concept of grotesque realism. With regard to Nietzsche -- in order to demonstrate his influence on the said concept -- I provide an overview of Nietzsche's reception in Russia during Bakhtin's formative years, as well as of the current state of research concerning the correlation between the work of Nietzsche and Bakhtin.

The idea of this study emerged by an intuitive recognition of "Nietzschean tunes" in Bakhtin's writings, in particular in *Rabelais and His World*. I begin with the following citations from Nietzsche which speak for themselves when compared with Bakhtin's text:

This world ... eternally changing, eternally flooding back ... a becoming that knows no satiety, no disgust, no weariness: this my Dionysian world of the eternally self-creating and eternally self-destroying (*The Will to Power* 1067). Eternal life, the eternal return of life ... the triumphant Yes to life beyond all death and change; true life as the over-all continuation of life through procreation... of pregnancy, and of birth (*Twilight of the Idols* 4). The world exists ... it comes to be, it passes away, but it has never begun to come to be and never ceases to pass away -- it maintains itself in both ... It lives on itself: its excrements are its nourishment (*The Will to Power* 1066). The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming ... the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis. (*Rabelais and His World* 24). The [grotesque] body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body, the link in the chain of genetic development. (*Rabelais and His World* 26)

The correlation between the two thinkers' work has attracted attention of some scholars previously although none of the following studies, except James M. Curtis's, actually centered on Bakhtin-Nietzsche connection. Mark Weeks or Gary Shapiro use Bakhtin to analyze Nietzsche: Weeks in his study on the latter's evolving idea of laughter in comparison, although briefly evoked, with Bakhtin's model (Weeks 1-17) while Shapiro finds Bakhtin "helpful in describing the nature of carnival laughter" (109-10). Chris Klatell notes that "as much of Nietzsche's work can seem amazingly carnivalesque much of Bakhtin's can sound strangely Nietzschean ... The themes in [*Zarathustra's*] Book Four are so similar to those described by Bakhtin (the holding of a large meal; parody of religious festivals, often centered on the worship of an ass; a contest of songs; the inversion of hierarchical roles; the fulfillment of a prophecy; comic crownings and uncrownings; physical humor and the foregrounding of sexuality; and an emphasis on the lower stratum of the body, especially those parts which open up to or stick out into the world) that the comparison seems nearly obvious" (Klatell 8-12). Michael Holquist and Katerina Clark state cautiously that there are "hints of Nietzsche in his [Bakhtin's] work" (55), and according to Dragan Kujundzic "this identification [with Nietzsche] seems implausible at first" (55). James Curtis writes that "we can best understand Bakhtin in a historical context by relating him to Nietzsche" because "the juxtaposition of statements about the principles Bakhtin believed in and the images that he used shows a remarkable, and remarkably consistent, similarity to those of Nietzsche" (332). Peter Zima talks, although in passing, about "decisive affinities" between Nietzsche and Bakhtin, especially concerning the concept of ambivalence (79). Rainer Grübel also points out the similarity between Bakhtin's carnivalesque reincarnation of people and Nietzsche's eternal return (Grübel 59). Graham Pechey believes that Bakhtin "follows Nietzsche in his conception of epics as a 'wholly Apollonic genre'" and hints at Nietzsche's influence on Bakhtin's during the latter's formative years (Pechey 67). Michael Andre Bernstein observes an uncomfortable similarity between what Bakhtin understands by the "dialogical imagination" and Nietzsche's account of the slave's consciousness and suggests that "there are numerous fragments of Nietzsche uncannily similar, except for the temporal perspective, to some of Bakhtin's formulations" (110).

In the study at hand I aim at elucidating the proposed Nietzsche-Bakhtin correlation further. Unlike previous scholarship, I explore the "Nietzschean connection" beyond *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by

including *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871), *The Gay Science* (1882-87), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), *The Will to Power* (1888), *The Antichrist* (1888), and *Twilight of the Idols* (1889). I leave aside such important concepts as *chronotopos*, seemingly not influenced by Nietzsche, as well as polyphony and popular laughter (discussed by Curtis mentioned above), and the dialogical imagination discussed by both Curtis and Bernstein. I concentrate on Bakhtinian themes of the glorification of bodily life, lower stratum, simple folks, the earth and their premise, and the valorization of primordial chaos as the source of all life and creativity. I postulate that Bakhtin's concept of grotesque realism is a result of Nietzsche's influence, in particular his notion of chaos and its expression of the Dionysian, blended with and perceived through Russian religious thought and mythological consciousness. In order to do this, I locate Bakhtin in the larger context of Russian cultural tradition and in what is commonly referred to as Russian religious philosophy of the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The historical evidence of Bakhtin's familiarity with Nietzsche is not hard to find. As a student of St. Petersburg University" Bakhtin studied with the great Polish-born classicist Tadeusz Zielinski (1859-1944) ... who taught Bakhtin to think in Nietzschean terms" (Curtis 331). According to Curtis, Zielinski was "unique among European classicists in that he hailed *The Birth of Tragedy* as a great work" (331). Both Zielinski and Bakhtin may be described as "academic Nietzscheans" (Curtis 351). Although important, Zielinski was not the only channel of Nietzsche's influence on Bakhtin. This influence went far beyond academia and it was diffused in non-academic circles. According to the writer Vassily Rozanov, even Pushkin "never knew a period of popularity comparable to our "Nietzschean period" at its height" (Crone 111). Poets, artists, philosophers, writers, critics, and all those who considered themselves free thinkers shared the fashionable fascination with the German genius. Among them were the most prominent figures of what would later be referred to as the Silver Age of Russian culture: Viacheslav Ivanov, Alexander Block, Andrei Bely, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Fedor Sologub, Mikhail Vrubel, Konstantin Balmont, Valery Briusov, Innokenty Annensky, and Leonid Andreev.

Nietzsche's omnipresence in Russian cultural life sharply contrasts with the fact that Bakhtin hardly ever mentioned his name in his writings. This omission is explained by two major factors. First is the fact that under the Bolshevik regime Nietzsche's works were removed from all libraries and the very mentioning of Nietzsche's name was dangerous. The second reason is the general and common unwillingness of many Russian intellectuals to recognize their debt to the German thinker. As Peter Zima rightly asserts, "Nietzsche's importance for Bakhtin ought not to be underestimated because of various negative remarks dropped here and there by the Russian author." (Zima 83) A lack of acknowledgement does not mean a lack of influence. On the contrary, after the initial frenzy for Nietzsche, Russian intellectuals absorbed his ideas to the point that his influence became even more ubiquitous and inescapable, present in almost every Russian artistic, social, or political movement of the day, from Symbolism to Bolshevism. As Susan Ray puts it, "various Russians approached and interpreted Nietzsche's own ideas, taking what they could use, manipulating it when necessary, and abandoning or ignoring the rest" (393). Consequently, it is difficult to distinguish the actual impact of Nietzsche's writings from the reflections and parallels with Nietzschean themes which were simply in the air in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century.

By the time Bakhtin became a student, he was exposed not only to a direct influence by Nietzsche (Bakhtin was fluent in German) and Zielinski's teachings, but also to many powerful, although often concealed, Russian "Nietzscheanisms." These were mostly odd hybrids between Nietzsche's ideas and various artistic or political tendencies. Bakhtin was not a professional philosopher and, like most Russian thinkers, was subject to a more "popular" understanding of Nietzsche. This understanding typically exhibited one constant and recurrent trend, which I identify as an obsession with the collective consciousness and its innate creativity. If, according to Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, "in some circles Nietzsche meant individualism, while in others he meant loss of self in a ... collective creativity" (3), I believe that it was the latter which prevailed. The examples and illustrations of this tendency are not hard to find and I list a selection: the writer Andrei Bely stressed the importance of "uniting the individual with the masses" and believed that "Collective Russian symbolism would be able to infuse life into what he considered to be moribund forms of art" (Bely qtd. in Bennett 172); the poet Alexander Block associated Nietzsche's Dionysian principle with the collective creativity of the common folk; the mystic Nicholai Fedorov used Nietzsche's ideas to create an "outline of the common task, a vast pro-

ject of universal salvation" (Zakydalsky 113) and while Nietzsche demanded the individual's self-transcendence in his concept of the *Übermensch*, Fyodorov talked about super-humanity for "he understood this task as a collective" (Zakydalsky 115); Sergei Bulgakov was concerned in his philosophical idealism with the "entire mankind, the Soul of the Universe, the Divine Sophia, *Natura Naturae*" (147); the poet Viacheslav Ivanov stressed "the communal and collectivist aspects of Nietzsche's thought" in his project to inspire "a culture-creating process in Russia" (Glatzer Rosenthal 21): for Ivanov the Dionysian principle was a "self-transcendence in a cultic [sic] commune" where "all alike are living by the choral spirit and collective hopes" (Glatzer Rosenthal 21) and his ultimate hope was the creation of a society based on the Russian ideal of *sobornost'* (organic and harmonious religious community).

The idea of *sobornost'* -- "originally an ecclesiastical principle that connoted the unity of all believers in the mystic body of Christ" (Glatzer Rosenthal 21) -- brings to mind Vladimir Soloviev, the most influential philosopher and religious thinker of the period. Soloviev, a believer in the collective gradual divinization of mankind, openly opposed Nietzsche on the grounds of his aggressive anti-Christian and neo-pagan position. Yet, paradoxically, Soloviev's criticism did not prevent his followers from blending his ideas with those of Nietzsche (see Lane 65). Moreover, the prominent Neo-Idealist philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev "believed that the influence of both Soloviev and Nietzsche was a fundamental factor in the development of the Russian religious renaissance of the early twentieth century" (Lane 66). This perplexing mixture was only possible owing to what the Petr Sapronov identifies as Russia's "abysmal paganism" (393; unless indicated otherwise, all translations from the Russian are mine). According to Sapronov, the "old mass of paganism was more internally familiar, more recognizable, and more essential for Russian intellectuals than the nine hundred years of Christian Orthodoxy and life in the Church" (393). Furthermore, the Russian reception of Nietzsche finds its explanation in the fact that "Soloviev and particularly Florensky happen to be cognizant of the fundamental particularities of mythological consciousness" (Sapronov 240): "Abysmal paganism" and mythological consciousness were intensified by Nietzsche who, according to Merezhkovsky, was "particularly relevant to Russians" (Glatzer Rosenthal 85). In sum, this fusion fueled creativity of such artists as the painter Mikhail Vrubel, the composers Alexander Scriabin and Igor Stravinsky, the poets Alexander Blok and Viacheslav Ivanov, and others. It was the Dionysian potential, the earthiness, the exaltation of the body, and the renewed fascination with Greek antiquity that creative minds in Russia drew from Nietzsche: "The result was an intoxicating new vision of the world and its future -- a 'new religious [Russian] consciousness' ... [which] not only made the body the equal of soul, but prophesied an imminent golden age, in which that equality would transfigure the earth" (Scanlan 17).

Several major traits of this "intoxicating new vision" are perceivable in Bakhtin's conception of popular culture with its neo-pagan, mythological, and utopian characteristics. Born in 1895, Bakhtin belonged to the generation that "grew up on the soil of subjective-idealistic [Russian] philosophy" (Curtis 332). Also, around 1916 Nietzsche's influence revived in Russia "paralleling and reinforcing the revival of revolutionary sentiment and eschatological expectations" (Glatzer Rosenthal 31). Already his teacher Zielinski "welcomed the resurgence of Dionysus as a much-needed counterbalance to what he decried as the highly moralistic influence of Judaism in Christianity" (Curtis 345). Like Zielinski and most Russian thinkers, Bakhtin took from Nietzsche mainly the Dionysian potential. Bakhtin fully shared the Russian communal tendency and was inclined, like his seemingly unlikely predecessor Fedorov, to talk not about man, super or not, but rather about humankind, people, folks, and community. Bakhtin associated the Dionysian potential with organic and earthly energy of the popular masses. Before him, the poet Alexander Blok had already taken the same step and Blok's vision of popular culture is similar to Bakhtin's: "Blok, obsessed by Nietzsche's concept of culture as the spirit of music, associated culture with the Dionysian principle, the elemental folk, which he compared to a volcanic eruption breaking through the 'encrusted lava' of bourgeois civilization" (Glatzer Rosenthal 29). Bakhtin's notion of Renaissance, which he perceived as the last "tense struggle against the stabilizing tendencies of the official monotone culture..., the struggle of the grotesque against the classic canon" (433) represents precisely such an eruption. Such a perception of the Renaissance also echoes Nietzsche, who saw it as the last resurgence of what he called the "healthy noble natural spirit ... the last

great cultural harvest which Europe could still have brought home -- that of the Renaissance" (*The Antichrist* 61 653).

Furthermore, Bakhtin's view of the Renaissance carnival as a celebration of the material bodily principle, as a "cosmic," "gay and gracious ... banquet for all the world" (Bakhtin 19) reveals, besides Nietzsche's and many Nietzsche-inspired Russian artists,' nostalgia for the pre-Christian Dionysian consciousness. This nostalgia fully transpires in *Rabelais and His World*. Although Bakhtin died as a Christian Orthodox, Ruth Coates's arguments aimed to prove *Rabelais and His World* a "Christian" book fail to convince me. It seems to me that behind such attempts is a sincere will to find the presence of Christian beliefs in all of Bakhtin's works. However, there is also another, complex cultural factor. The temptation to see in *Rabelais and His World* a Christian Orthodox oeuvre might be overdrawn because of its emphasis on the collective, communal salvation, which may be linked with the "very Russian association of sin with the loss of 'connection with kin" (Gustafson 180). In this case the existential overlapping of the deeper, pagan layers of Russian paganism which "considered the individual only as a transient moment in the eternal life of the Rod [clan]" (Fedorov 19) and the Eastern Orthodox reading of the consequence of the Fall (especially Gregory of Nazianzus) might be misleading. This reading, according to which "original sin is caused by the individual's separation from God and results in the individual's separation from other individuals" (Gustafson 177) was later adopted, reinforced and developed by Soloviev. But to apply such a reading to *Rabelais and His World* seems to me an unfounded aggrandizement. I do agree with Coates, however, that "The primary target of carnival is arguably not so much ... the Catholic (or Protestant) Church ... rather it is the captivity of the human spirit as such, its enslavement to fear" (127). This claim only proves that Bakhtin's and Nietzsche's rejection of the Western Church has the same cause. And I agree partly with Charles Lock that Bakhtin "targets the Catholic Church specifically [because] what Bakhtin says about its hierarchical authoritarianism is not applicable to the decentralized conciliar organization of the Orthodox Church" (73). However, it must be noted that Bakhtin's anti-clericalism targets not only the hierarchical organization of the Catholic Church but also other aspects of Christianity (humility, seriousness, emphasis on suffering) that might be even more pronounced in the Eastern Church than in its Western counterpart. This inconsistency has been noticed by Sergei Averintsev who insists on the fundamental intolerance of the Orthodox Christianity to laughter contrasted by the far more tolerant position of the Catholic Church (30). Bakhtin's rejection of "serious tones of supplications, lament, humility, and piety" (380) as forms of fear could be applied just as well to the old Orthodox virtues of total submission, blind obedience, and self-abnegation. Indeed, in *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin manifests, to a rather amazing degree, a rather radical and general anti-Christian spirit along with the major accusations against the whole "poisoning" of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which Bakhtin does not hesitate to call ideology: "The very contents of medieval ideology -- asceticism, somber providentialism, sin, atonement, suffering ... all these elements determined this tone of icy petrified seriousness. Only permanent seriousness, remorse, and sorrow for his sins befit the Christian (Bakhtin 73).

This tone reminds Nietzsche's virulent criticism of Christianity for its "poisoning, slander, negation of life, contempt for the body, the degradation and violation of man through the concept of sin" (56) In *Rabelais and His World* the future common folks, as imagined by Bakhtin, are, like the *Übermensch*, the ones who have already overcome, surmounted, and left the Christian past behind. In this he is faithful to Nietzsche. Moreover, monotony, and the monological rather than dialogical discourse for which Bakhtin reproached medieval Christianity echo what Nietzsche called "Christian monothetism" in *The Antichrist* (19 586). Carnavalesque popular culture correlates the "mono-principle" of official culture and organized religion in the same way as "Dionysiac music does to civilization" (*The Birth of Tragedy* 59). Needless to say, in *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin sides with the former. By siding with "this grotesquely uncouth Dionysian power" (*The Birth of Tragedy* 39), Bakhtin sided, together with Nietzsche, against "the fundamental, yet impossible, task of modernity -- the imposition of order onto chaos" (Klatell 2; it might well be that the very word "grotesque," as it is understood by Bakhtin, also comes from Nietzsche). Chaos is "a concern central to Nietzsche's work as a whole" (Douglas 45). The theme of chaos as the reality lying behind classical Greek civilization gains importance in the *The Birth of Tragedy* and continues in *Gay Science* where the author speaks of the "beautiful chaos of existence" (277). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* brings not only a full recognition that



"the world is deep -- deeper than day had ever been aware" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 3 278) but also a fully positive notion of chaos as the source of all life: "I say unto you: one must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star" (5 129).

The same attitude is true for Bakhtin's grotesque realism -- "non-individualized, incomplete and constantly intertwined with the earth which gives it birth and swallows it up again" (Bakhtin 24). Indeed, Bakhtin's grotesque realism is the aesthetic which is the "Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction, exception or selection" (*The Will to Power* 1041), organically embracing "unholy, forbidden, contemptible, fateful" sides of existence (*The Will to Power* 459). In *Rabelais and His World*, joyful chaos erupts through "various deformities ... symptoms of pregnancy or of procreative power" and hell appears as a "cornucopia" that "had burst and has poured forth abundance" (91). Grotesque realism presupposes the acceptance of chaos, welcoming it as an eternal reservoir of boundless potentiality. It has no need to cover the "bottomless void never satiated laying hidden beneath all" (Kierkegaard 30). Grotesque realism is equally extraneous to Kierkegaard's leap of faith and to Schopenhauer's "negative value of life." For Bakhtin the value of life is always positive. The main purpose of *Rabelais and His World* can be said to celebrate, like an orgiastic ritual, "the periodical retrogression of the world into a chaotic modality" (Eliade 79), vital for the "complete regeneration of life and hence the fertility of the earth" (Eliade 147). Consequently, Bakhtin's grotesque realism finds itself beyond good and evil since good and evil are only possible if chaos is qualified as an anti-world, thus becoming a moral category. When identified with evil, chaos must be fought, and this necessity justifies the chaos-battling project of modernity. The latter is nothing but the continuation of the Christian and even pre-Christian (Platonic or Apollonic, according to Nietzsche) undertaking of humanity. Yet, if chaos is an organic part of the world, it stops being an absolute evil while order, civilization, and organized religion stop being an absolute good. Consequently, the existence of any unconditional, absolute truth becomes impossible for it is justifiable only as long as the project of modernity is recognized as essential. Any truth pretending to be absolute excludes chaos and all that is pertinent to it -- the low stratum of the earth and body. Such truths are therefore incomplete, that is a lie, as Nietzsche puts it: "Likewise, as truth should be complete, all inclusive, comprising, as every given moment, both chaos and order, "more whole as human beings" are also "more whole as beasts" (*Beyond Good and Evil* 257). The world is "'in flux,' as something in a state of becoming, as a falsehood always changing but never getting near the truth approaches the truth: for -- there is no 'truth'" (*The Will to Power* 616). The truth of this world, when any unearthly realm is fully rejected, makes any abstract, metaphysical "faith in the antithetical nature of values" impossible (*Beyond Good and Evil* 2)

Similarly, Bakhtin does not recognize any "objective abstract truth" but only the material truth that cannot be "torn from the earth ... preserving the earth's universal and cosmic nature" (285). For Bakhtin the material truth can only be relative or ambivalent, as he likes to say. This truth is neither good nor bad, neither right nor wrong and it is not an ethical category either. It is a reality of momentum equal to being in the most basic, bodily, tangible and non-metaphysical sense of the word. This is Bakhtin's "people's unofficial truth" -- a victory over the fear of chaos and therefore over the "anti-chaos" authority, whoever this authority may be. Nietzsche and Bakhtin equally refuse to be bereaved of this truth, the basic truth of existence that they see as being sacrificed throughout history to 'otherworldliness': "I beseech you, my brothers, remain faithful to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes!" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Prologue 3 125) and the "continual ferment of piety and the fear of God" (Bakhtin 83). This truth is so dear to Nietzsche that he welcomes the eternal recurrence of this very life, of this world, just the way it is. The same is true for Bakhtin for he opposes "sterile eternity by pregnant and birth-giving death" (395) willingly preferring "earth and its lower stratum as a fertile womb, where death meets birth and a new life springs forth" (395) to any form of perfect yet unearthly reality whatever it might be. Bakhtin recognizes the bodily, earthly element as "deeply positive" (19) Positive here is not an ethical category; it means "life-affirming," pertaining to being, to physical existence: "the gay and laughing aspect of the world, with its unfinished and open character, with the joy of change and renewal" (Bakhtin 83). For him, all abstract, metaphysical categories (soul, spirituality, faith, virtue, spirit, God) are sterile. This reasoning elucidates the puzzling omission of these categories in *Rabelais and His World*. Only the body is fertile and life-creating and this is the leitmotif of the book. Bakhtin's concept of grotesque realism endorses the

"Dionysian value" that "culture should begin in the right place -- not in the 'soul' ... the right place is the body, the gesture, the diet, physiology; the rest follows from that" (*Twilight of the Idols* 47 552).

Nonetheless, in spite of unmistakable similitude, Bakhtin's "stand" *vis-à-vis* chaos and body differs essentially from Nietzsche's. The grotesque realism is an expression of the connection between "the single procreating earth" and the collective body of the people, while breaking this connection constitutes the very drama of the modernity. According to Bakhtin, this breakage "had not yet been completed for the artistic and ideological consciousness of the Renaissance" (23) and this explains the phenomenon of Rabelais: "in Renaissance literature -- the drama that leads to the breaking away of the body from a single procreating earth, the breaking away from the collective, growing, and continually renewed body of people with which it had been linked in folk culture" (23). In this regard he shares the "folk-loving tradition" of "worshipping simple people, the folks, which was proper to Russian intelligentsia well before Bakhtin" (Mazour-Matusevich 136). This tradition, emphasizing the importance of the "lower" strata of culture as opposed to the uniform and official culture, found new justification in the Dionysian principle. Nietzsche himself gave ground to the association "freedom-Dionysian-earth-collective" in his *The Birth of Tragedy*, the work most widely read in Russia in Bakhtin's time: "Not only does the bond between man and man come to be forged once more by the magic of the Dionysiac rite, but nature itself, long alienated or subjugated, rises again to celebrate the reconciliation with her prodigal son, man. The earth offers its gifts voluntarily ... The chariot of Dionysos is bedecked with flowers and garlands; panthers and tigers stride beneath his yoke. Now the slave emerges as a freeman; all the rigid, hostile walls which either necessity or despotism has erected between men are shattered. Man now expresses himself through song and dance as the member of a higher community" (*The Birth of Tragedy* 1).

Yet, although Nietzsche understood the collective roots of the Dionysian in *The Birth of Tragedy*, he later broke with the archaic type of Dionysian potential and chose an individual (but not individualistic), conscious, lucid, heroic, virile, "Germanic" (in a sense of old Germanic sagas) path to freedom: "The free man is a warrior" (*Twilight of the Idols* 38: 543). Nietzsche does not suppose that the world will naturally become a better place for people because he loves the universe just the way it is (eternal recurrence). It is modern "degenerate" man who is unworthy of this life and this world, unable to appreciate it, because he is always obstinately looking for another, unearthly truth and reality. Nietzsche's aspiration is that future man will need nothing but himself for he will be complete like Dionysus was complete: "It is here I set the *Dionysus* of the Greeks: the religious affirmation of life, life whole and not denied or in part" (*The Will to Power* 1052). This completeness is total because it embraces, includes chaos: "But I am one who can bless and say Yes ... I carry my blessings of my Yes into all abysses" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 3 277). For Nietzsche, an individual who could consciously, with complete lucidity, face and embrace the chaos of existence without losing himself/herself in it, while remaining cheerful, is an *Übermensch*. In the past only god -- Dionysus -- could do this for -- being born from chaos like all gods -- he could remain or rather keep becoming god without falling back into chaos. So Nietzsche's *Übermensch* is in fact or (would be) a god. Mastering chaos without trying to eliminate it and without becoming it means to become a god, a living man-god. It means to acquire the highest, complete self-sufficiency and therefore the highest, complete individual freedom. Nietzsche believed that the best of men, "another stronger sort of human being," "higher creatures," by conscious superhuman effort, can strive to become completely free like gods (*The Will to Power* 1041). For Bakhtin such "self-sufficiency is, of course, another manifestation of closure, which is described as 'spiritual death'" (Coates 163). Contrary to Nietzsche, who envisioned a future for higher individual men, Bakhtin's future is communal and plebian, belonging to "the low folks," to "a truly egalitarian and radically democratic community" (Gardiner 75) Like the majority of Russian thinkers, Bakhtin saw the liberation of modern man through regaining togetherness: "They [marketplace festivals] were ... the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance" (9). This togetherness should emerge from the low strata of society where folks have not completely cut ties with the earth (whence comes his fascination with the Renaissance). He diverts Zarathustra's private, "little brave nonsense, some divine service and ass festival" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 4: 428) to the streets, to the popular carnival where there was no "distinction between actors and spectators" and "life was subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom" (Bakhtin 7). Personal heroism is



replaced here by people's collective courage challenging the oppressive establishment. Thus, when Bakhtin talks about "victory over ... oppression" (88), he means, like the mystic Fedorov, not individual self-overcoming but a victory of the "great generic body of the people" (Bakhtin 90). Although Bakhtin speaks of historical progress, his *Rabelais and His World* is an enthusiastic, unrestrained celebration of the return to or, rather, into the earthly, the collective, the subconscious, and feminine principle of the mother earth. Men's liberation comes from below, from the "fruitful womb of the earth" (23). Bakhtin's insistence on the "soberness" and "consciousness" of the popular collective celebrations might originate from the Nietzschean principle of "self-overcoming" applied in the context of the collective consciousness.

The all-inclusive openness of the Bakhtinian carnival is an organic non-resistance to chaos; it is a careless, playful and joyful embrace of the familiar lower strata for "there can be nothing terrifying on earth, just as there can be nothing frightening in a mother's body" (Bakhtin 91). His festive folks are "drunken philosophers," oblivious to themselves, forgetting and relieved of their fears during carnival "joyous recreation" (91). It is a "festive madness, opposed to the tragic madness of 'individual isolation'" (39). Together with Fedorov, Block, Ivanov, and other Russian intellectuals, Bakhtin embraces the collective Dionysian of the *The Birth of Tragedy*, which was closer to the Russian idea of *obshina* (primitive commune) and especially to the legacy of Russian paganism than to the concept of *sobornost*. This legacy, which "preserved the quality [of Earth] of a living and animated being, of a universal mother" (Fedorov 136) emphasizes not its beauty but its fertility: "Mother Earth is "shapeless and faceless ... the embracing, the enveloping, rather than the contemplated" (Fedorov 20) Bakhtinian fascination with folk mentality and the promises it holds, expresses the deep Russian longing to fuse, to be swallowed, to become one with the great, warm body of the earth (expressed in the Russian concepts of "mother Russia" and "raw mother earth" (*mat' syra zemlja*). Indeed, while Nietzsche's yearning for earth was a cry of a man from a society overripe and saturated with civilization, Bakhtin's celebration of chaos evokes a rejoinder with the familiar, enduring and still vibrant connection with the mother-earth. Thus, the Bakhtinian "collective body" replaced lonely Zarathustra. This replacement has many consequences. One of them is Nietzsche's "surprisingly consistent" (Weeks 1) anxiety toward laughter -- a direct outcome of his opting for the individual, rather than the collective, Dionysian stand. Zarathustra's lonely, "the loneliest of all" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 3 276), laughter fails to produce the desired effect: it is not contagious. Nietzsche's individualism probably prevented Bakhtin from recognizing in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* a true carnivalesque spirit that he so clearly discerned in Gogol and Dostoyevsky: "Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. ... it is universal in scope" (11-12): Zarathustra laughs alone while Bakhtin's folks (as people in general) laugh together.

Also, the individual "self-overcoming," as Zarathustra puts it, requires noble, heroic discipline that characterized Nietzsche's life and Zarathustra's character: "Who sees the abyss but with the eyes of an eagle; who grasps the abyss with the talons of an eagle -- that man has courage" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 4 400). Bakhtin's domestication of chaos by associating it with the earth's motherly belly represents a collective, fundamentally Russian, voluntary discharge of all individual burden, the temporary fall into a happy child-like drunken oblivion. For what is plunging into collective organic life if not the return to the primitive consciousness and even deeper, into the life-germinating and future-bearing chaos? The fundamental feature of collective ritual is to liberate the creative energy of chaos - - collective, material and organic -- from the oppression of individual, spiritual and moral. This collective deliverance is not without charm. Western intellectuals have greeted Bakhtin's celebration of carnival chaotic freedom with enthusiasm: "Such meaninglessness may be a blessed moment of release, a temporary respite from the world's tyrannical, compulsive legibility ... from the terrorism of excessive significance" (Eagleton 185). Others, however, sense in *Rabelais and His World's* eagerness to "respond to cathartic energy of the Saturnalia" what Nietzsche scornfully refers to as the "joy of the slaves" (Bernstein 119). Indeed, while for Nietzsche facing chaos entails the highest degree of individual freedom, for Bakhtin the encounter with chaos turns into collective relief from this very freedom. In this sense Bakhtin's use of the word *svoboda* (freedom) might be misleading because what is really meant here is *osvobojdenie* (liberation). In this, as Averintsev rightly put it, Bakhtin's experience with popular culture is fundamentally Russian (33).

In conclusion, Bakhtin's attitude toward chaos appears to me to be the key to the understanding of his concepts of grotesque realism and popular culture. Ecstatic acceptance, valorization and celebration of chaos as the birth of all things and an eternal source of creative energy lies at the basis of Bakhtin's notions of grotesque realism, ambivalence (Nietzsche's "ambiguity"?), collective creativity, and carnival. Bakhtin's notions of glorification of the earth, bodily life, people's truth also stem from Nietzschean ideas of love of the earthy, celebration of body and its very physiology and rejection of any abstract, high, and otherworldly truth. They both oppose "official culture" and authority as detrimental attempts to eliminate, suffocate, and control the life-creating energy of Dionysian chaos. But while Nietzsche is interested primarily in the inner Dionysian realm of an individual, in organizing chaos within, or, in other words, in the intrapersonal sphere, Bakhtin focuses on the interpersonal sphere of the collective. Thus, Nietzsche's ideas, blended with Russian utopian aspirations, mythological consciousness, and religious tradition allowed Bakhtin to produce his own utopia "born of extreme and consistent idealization" of popular culture (Averitsev 32) or, as the historian Aron Gurevich put it, a "charming myth of laughing majority" (qtd. in Mazour-Matusevich 136). Yet, in the end, myth-making might be the most suitable approach in representing the collective consciousness, mythical in essence, and always (and not only during carnivals) inclined to irrationality and a descent into primordial chaos.

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