

## The Gravity of the Grotesque / *A importância do grotesco*

Galin Tihanov\*

### ABSTRACT

I propose to take the grotesque, both as a discursive genre and a cultural attitude and practice, as a point of departure that allows us to comment more widely on Bakhtin's Rabelais book and its significance for current debates on subjectivity. In carnival, the epic reverberates in humanity's boundless memory "of cosmic perturbations in the distant past," while the novelistic lives in the grotesque fluctuation and removal of distance, and in the irreverent and joyful celebration of resilience through laughter. Like the epic, carnival is about the maintaining of traditional practices, but in an open and charitably insecure, "novelistic" way. The book on Rabelais seems to be the point where, on reconciling and synthesizing culture and life in the acts of the human body, reworking and redrawing the boundaries of cultural taboos, and championing a symbiosis between the epic and the novelistic, Bakhtin sponsors a new sense of tradition inscribed in the irreverent life of folk (community) culture. This celebration of the people re-opens the vexing question about the political implications of Bakhtin's pronouncements on the epic and the novelistic, on communitarian and individual culture, and on their desired synthesis. But it also enables us to locate Bakhtin's style of thinking and his specific brand of decentred, indeed dislocated, humanism.

KEYWORDS: Grotesque; Body; Cultural value; Subjectivity; Humanism; Bakhtin

### RESUMO

*Proponho a consideração do grotesco tanto como gênero discursivo, atitude e prática cultural, quanto como um ponto de partida que nos permite comentar mais amplamente a obra de Bakhtin relativa a Rabelais e seu significado para as discussões atuais referentes à subjetividade. No carnaval, o épico reverbera a memória ilimitada "das perturbações cósmicas passadas", enquanto o romanesco vive na flutuação grotesca e remoção de distâncias e, por meio do riso, na celebração irreverente e alegre da resiliência. Assim como o épico, o carnaval relaciona-se com a manutenção de práticas tradicionais, porém isso ocorre de forma "romanesca", aberta e indulgentemente incerta. O livro sobre Rabelais parece ser o ponto em que, ao reconciliar e sintetizar a cultura e a vida em atos do corpo humano, ao retrabalhar e redesenhar as barreiras de tabus culturais e ao defender uma simbiose entre o épico e o romanesco, Bakhtin advoga uma nova percepção da tradição inscrita na irreverente vida da cultura do povo (comunidade). Essa celebração das pessoas reabre a incômoda questão a respeito das implicações políticas dos pronunciamentos de Bakhtin sobre o épico e o romanesco, a cultura comunitária e a individual, e a desejada síntese entre eles. Mas ela também nos permite situar o estilo do pensamento de Bakhtin e sua específica marca de humanismo descentralizado, de fato, deslocado.*

*PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Grotesco; Corpo; Valor cultural; Subjetividade; Humanismo; Bakhtin*

---

\* Professor at Queen Mary, London University, London, London, United Kingdom; [g.tihanov@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:g.tihanov@qmul.ac.uk)

In this article I propose to take the grotesque as a point of departure that allows us to comment more widely on Bakhtin's Rabelais book and its significance for current debates on subjectivity. Bakhtin's essays on the novel and the book on Rabelais, both written largely during the 1930s (with work on the Rabelais book continuing into the mid-1960s), articulate two recognizably dissimilar positions: the essays insist on the incompatibility between epic and novel, valorizing the novelistic at the expense of the epic, while the book on Rabelais charts a gradual rapprochement and synthesis of the two. In carnival, the epic reverberates in humanity's boundless memory "of cosmic perturbations in the distant past," while the novelistic lives in the grotesque fluctuation and removal of distance, and in the irreverent and joyful celebration of resilience through laughter. Like the epic, carnival is about the maintaining of traditional practices, but in an open and charitably insecure, "novelistic" way.<sup>1</sup> The book on Rabelais seems to be the point where, on reconciling and synthesizing culture and life in the acts of the human body, reworking and redrawing the boundaries of cultural taboos, and championing a symbiosis between the epic and the novelistic, Bakhtin sponsors a new sense of tradition inscribed in the irreverent life of folk (community) culture.

This celebration of the people re-opens the vexing question about the political implications of Bakhtin's pronouncements on the epic and the novelistic, on communitarian and individual culture, and on their desired synthesis. But it also enables us to locate Bakhtin's style of thinking and his specific brand of decentred, indeed dislocated, humanism. In light of all this, the problematic of the grotesque reveals its larger significance: hence the title of my paper, 'the gravity of the grotesque'. To examine this 'gravity, I explore the dynamics of Bakhtin's idea of the human body as a cultural value from the essay 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity' to *Rabelais and His World*. I also outline some of the most relevant sources of Bakhtin's interest in this problem and reflect on how Bakhtin's treatment of it bore on the idea of history.

I will begin by briefly examining Bakhtin's 'Author and Hero' essay, written in the first half or perhaps even in the middle of the 1920s<sup>2</sup>. Here for the first time

---

<sup>1</sup> More on this see in my article "Bakhtin, Joyce, and Carnival: Towards the Synthesis of Epic and Novel in *Rabelais*", *Paragraph*, 2001, Vol. 24, No. 1, p.66-83.

<sup>2</sup> The precise dating of 'Author and Hero' remains an open issue. Nikolai Nikolaev submits that both *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* and 'Author and Hero' were written between the summer of 1922 and the spring of 1924: see 'Publishing Bakhtin: A Philological Problem (Two Reviews)', *Dialogism* 4

Bakhtin poses seriously the problem of the cultural value of the body. Bakhtin's treatise analyses the individual human body, the body of a certain 'I'. The 'Author and Hero' essay seeks to outline the boundaries of this individual body. The spatial boundaries of my own body, however, turn out to be inaccessible to myself. The radical shift in Bakhtin's interpretation of the body lies in his contention that it is not a unitary entity; it is neither 'so single', nor 'so my own' (as one of Bakhtin's contemporaries, Osip Mandelstam, would have it in his poem of 1909, 'I have been given a body'), for it subsists on the experience of estrangement and self-alienation. The unitary body of Acmeist poetry is split into an 'inner' and an 'outward' body. The inner body, Bakhtin says, is 'my body as a moment in my self-consciousness'. It represents 'the sum total of inner organic sensations, needs, and desires that are unified around an inner centre'. It is the inner body that is accessible to and controllable by me. But there is also the outward body which is given to me only in a fragmentary fashion and to which I cannot react in an 'unmediated way' (BAKHTIN, 1990, p.47). The external body is the mode of existence of our bodies which bestows on us the feeling of entirety. We feel complete and integral only through the life of our external bodies. The problem is that no one can produce and consummate this sense of entirety alone. As Bakhtin puts it, 'the value of my external body [...] has a borrowed character: it is constructed by me, but is not experienced by me in any unmediated way' (1990, p.48-49). Bakhtin's division of the body into internal and external originates in Max Scheler's phenomenology. Scheler speaks of the 'animate' body (*Leib*) and the 'physical' body (*Körper*)<sup>3</sup> to suggest—similarly to Bakhtin—that it is someone else's feeling of sympathy directed towards my physical body that endows me with the sense of unity and with the gratifying experiencing of the boundaries of my body as a whole. Bakhtin's term *sochuvstvie* is a precise rendition of Scheler's *Sympathie*. We hear the echo of this significant concept in Bakhtin's contention that 'I myself cannot be the author of my own value, just as I cannot lift

---

(2000), p.67-111 (70-71). Brian Poole, on the other hand, suggests 1926 as the year in which the texts of both *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* and 'Author and Hero' were still being revised by Bakhtin (see B. Poole, 'Bakhtin's Phenomenology of Discourse', unpublished paper read at the Eighth International Conference on Mikhail Bakhtin, Calgary, 1997, p.2); in a later essay, Poole claims that Bakhtin's 'early works' cannot be dated earlier than 1924, and 'were written perhaps as late as 1927' ('From Phenomenology to Dialogue: Max Scheler's Phenomenological Tradition and Mikhail Bakhtin's Development from *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* to his Study of Dostoevsky', in K. Hirschkop and D. Shepherd (eds.), *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001; 2nd edition), p.109-35 (125).

<sup>3</sup> See M. Scheler, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* (Bonn: Friedrich Cohen, 3rd edn, 1931), p.260.

myself by my own hair. The biological life of an organism becomes a value only in *another's* sympathy and compassion [*sostradanie*] with that life' (BAKHTIN, 1990, p.55). Thus, with Mandelstam's agenda in mind, Bakhtin arrives at a dramatically different solution: the body, he concludes, 'is not something self-sufficient: it needs the other, needs his recognition and his form-giving activity' (1990, p.51). In a recognizably neo-Kantian distinction between given (*gegeben*) and posited (*aufgegeben*), Bakhtin claims that only the inner body, or in his parlance, 'the body experienced as heavy' (1990, p.51) is *given* to a human being himself; the outer body, that which 'encloses the inner body' (1990, p.61) and shapes its otherwise inarticulate mass into a whole, is '*set as a task*' (1990, p.51) for someone else to complete. In short, the giver and the receiver of the blessed sensation of entirety are separated in Bakhtin's essay, and this separation becomes the prerequisite for a desirable human existence in which the body assumes cultural value. The numerous references to the gratuitous character of the form-bestowing act and its interpretation by Bakhtin as a 'gift' from the other bespeak the overtones of ethical harmony between the one who gives and the one who receives, between the shaper and the shaped in the process of aesthetic activity. Neither the practice of philosophizing nor that of sexual love or religious communication could unfailingly generate this gift. In an utterly ascetic spirit—compatible with his lifestyle such as Georgii Gachev portrayed it in his recollections—Bakhtin sees in art the only human activity which can fully realize the generous act of creating for the other a sense of his/her entirety. Thus Bakhtin's treatise is about the ultimate coincidence of the ethical and the aesthetic in the imaginary act of artistic creation. Being detached from life, this act becomes suspiciously pure; in art, the artist does not have the other in front of him or herself in the same insurmountable way, in all their graphic presence as in life, for that which is created as the fruit of one's imagination does not, after all, stand a very good chance of posing a threat of resistance. It is only in aesthetic activity that we can simultaneously produce something as concretely given and embody in it its own meaningfulness, which would have otherwise remained unembodied, to haunt us as a challenging task and to confront us with the dire world of reified existence, or, in Bakhtin's words, borrowed from Simmel, with the realm of 'objective culture' (1993, p.56).

In the 1930s Bakhtin, under the influence of contemporary physiology and biology (exerted by Ukhtomskii's lectures)<sup>4</sup> and of his friendship with Kanaev, turned to a different idea of the human body. In his book on Rabelais, written in the latter half of the 1930s and in the 1940s, Bakhtin analyses the collective body, whose identity is shaped not by drawing a boundary between the self and the other, but through the experience of transgressive togetherness.

The whole of the Rabelais book can be said to be centred on the problem of those human features which, while exclusively human, still manifest themselves without tragically separating humans from the totality of the universe, without dissevering their ties and unity with nature. It is the laughing human body that, for Bakhtin, becomes the emblem for this longed-for harmony between culture and nature.

The theme of laughter resounds with its original meaning, which can be found in Bergson's well-known eponymous book. Bakhtin's interest in the human body and its cultural value seems to have been considerably spurred by reading Bergson, whose complete works appeared in Russian in 1910–1914, and to whom Bakhtin referred in the early 1920s in his own philosophical treatises *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* and 'Author and Hero'<sup>5</sup>. For Bergson, laughter is the embodiment of suppleness in a society and a punishment to those who ossify in their habits, reactions and attitudes and therefore cease to perform sufficiently well. But Bakhtin also modifies Bergson in that he frees his conception of laughter from its punitive elements by stressing the liberating and joyful experience of laughing.

For Bakhtin, laughter is an organic blend of physicality and spirit, a proof of the essential unity of nature and culture. Indebted to Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and to the neo-Kantian tradition in theorizing laughter, drawing heavily as it does on

---

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of Bakhtin's interest in biology, see M. Holquist, 'Bakhtin and the Body', in M. Díaz-Diocaretz (ed.), *The Bakhtin Circle Today (Critical Studies 1.2 [1989])*, p.19-42; on Bakhtin and Ukhtomskii, see N. Marcialis, 'Michail Bachtin e Aleksej Uchtomskij', in F. Corona (ed.), *Bachtin, teorico del dialogo* (Milan: Angeli, 1986), p.79-91. For a provocative interpretation of Bakhtin, medicine and the problem of the body, see P. Hitchcock, 'The Grotesque of the Body Electric', in M. Bell and M. Gardiner (eds.), *Bakhtin and the Human Sciences* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), p.78-94.

<sup>5</sup> On Bergson and Bakhtin, see L. Rudova, 'Bergsonism in Russia: The Case of Bakhtin', *Neophilologus*, 80 (1996), p.175-88; see also the broader perspective in Frances Nethercott, *Une rencontre philosophique: Bergson en Russie, 1907-1917* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995), and Hilary Fink, *Bergson and Russian Modernism, 1900–1930* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999).

experimental psychology<sup>6</sup>, in *Rabelais* Bakhtin believes that laughter, being a product of the body, generates cultural values (e.g. courage at the thought of the inevitability of death) while still preserving its conspicuously physiological identity. It is precisely this view of laughter as a kind of symbolic form that is poised between its bodily origins and its status as a cultural form that enables Bakhtin to attempt in *Rabelais* a history of laughter as a form of *Weltanschauung*.

If it is legitimate to describe Bakhtin's notion of laughter as generated at the intersection point of Spirit and body, the history of laughter should appear closely interwoven with the history of the body. Laughter thrives in the time when the so-called non-classical bodily canon reigns. The non-classical body is protean and supple, exemplifying the will for constant and unlimited change. This ever-evolving and open body gradually degenerates into a neatly delineated classical body in the post-Renaissance epoch. Bakhtin laments this change because it denies the body a direct connection with the universe and closes it off from nature. Bakhtin's fascination with the grotesque body in Rabelais's work bespeaks his profound reluctance to follow the modern project of historicist linearity and progressivism. The way in which bodily functions are treated in *Rabelais* makes it a perfect example of Bakhtin's phenomenological reductionism. One also encounters this specific feature of Bakhtin's thinking in his text on Goethe, where he tries to substitute the omnipotence and infallibility of seeing for the appropriation of reality through labour and production. Similarly, in *Rabelais* Bakhtin strives to 'stabilize' the variety of human activities around the basic acts of eating, drinking and copulating. If we recall Bakhtin's celebration of the eye in his analysis of Goethe in the text on the *Bildungsroman*, we will be surprised to find that in the book on Rabelais the eyes are an immaterial detail of the human body, at best, and a hindrance to the affirmation of the grotesque ideal of the body, at worst. The eyes 'express a purely *individual*, so to speak, self-sufficient *inward* human life' (1984, p.316; 1965, p.343)<sup>7</sup> and for this

---

<sup>6</sup> See, above all, two works by Th. Lipps known to Bakhtin, *Grundtatsachen des Seelenlebens* and *Grundlegung der Aesthetik*, in which Lipps advances a psychological re-formulation of Kant's understanding of laughter and the comic; for more on Nietzsche's and Lipps's impact, see G. Tihanov, *The Master and the Slave: Lukács, Bakhtin, and the Ideas of Their Time* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.266-67.

<sup>7</sup> M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (trans. H. Iswolsky; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p.316. I have slightly modified the existing English translation which omits the words 'purely' and 'inward' and does not reproduce Bakhtin's emphases (original Russian *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul'tura srednevekov'ia i Renessansa* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1965), p.343. Hereafter 1984; 1965, followed by page references to English and Russian editions.

reason cannot be of any use in grotesque realism. Thus Bakhtin did not hesitate to sacrifice the divine gift of seeing to the desired unity with nature. (Characteristically, here, too, the reader of Bakhtin's book can find a striking parallel to Mandelstam's poem of 1932 'Lamarck', which depicts the preparedness of the hero to give up the gift of seeing in order to be able to join the lower ranks of life.) He came to recognize the human eye as an obstacle on the road to the complete fusion with the primordial element of Being.

Bakhtin's *Rabelais* is rather controversial in its suggestions and philosophical orientation. The temporal contiguity of the texts on Goethe and Rabelais is one of the most striking examples of simultaneous accommodation and expression in Bakhtin's opus of irreconcilable values. The championing of contradictory ideals of social development in this period of his work is consistently premised on phenomenological reductionism. The text on the *Bildungsroman* seems from this point of view to be only one step on the road to this reductionism. Here Bakhtin still lingers on the power and the art of seeing as a distinctly individual human gift. In *Rabelais*, he abandons this humanistic notion of man and gladly descends the ladder of organic life to stop at the basic functions of the body, which make it indiscernible among other bodies. The deeper man sinks into the abyss of the organic, the brighter the redemptive star of utopia shines above him: deprived of individual dignity, he appears to be granted in exchange a guarantee that his every breath and his muscles' every movement will inevitably produce culture and freedom in the warm embrace of community. Thus we can see Bakhtin's readings of Goethe and Rabelais as transmitting, with equal ardour, the opposing values of modern individualism and pre-modern collectivism, always with the serious belief that culture springs without any tension from the essentially physical nature of man and is the subject of constant construction and destruction in the process of his organic existence.

These observations lead us to differentiate between three conditions in which the body is theorized by Bakhtin: there is, first, the individual body endowed with sight and speech; then there is a communal body (the body of the people) marked by overwhelming vitality, enhanced appetite and reproductive desire; and, finally, there is the pale image of the 'body of the species', an explicitly Hegelian metaphor for humankind more than a palpable reality. Of these conditions, only the last two are thematized in *Rabelais*. In *Rabelais*, Bakhtin posits as the main object of his reflections the collective body of the people, which never comes to know the split into

*Bakhtiniana*, São Paulo, 7 (2): 165-178, Jul./Dec. 2012. 171

interior and exterior. In his early work ('Author and Hero'), the body is one of those phenomena that direct the attention towards the problem of boundaries; *Rabelais* celebrates the boundless body, that which lives, in Bakhtin's own terms, in the non-classical canon of free transition and transgression.

All these crucial changes, in which Bakhtin's immersion in Hegel's philosophy in the 1930s is, as we have seen, one of the main factors, may be better appreciated if we recall one more text written in the milieu of the Bakhtin Circle. In Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* the body is problematized for the first time in the light of broader social concerns. Voloshinov poses the question of the capacity of the body to serve as a social sign. He answers this question, however, in the negative. The body cannot be the source of social symbolization, for it 'equals itself, so to speak; it does not signify anything but wholly coincides with its particular, given nature' (VOLOSHINOV, 1986, p.9). Such being the case, the body cannot be utilized as a sign and therefore cannot partake of ideology. In *Rabelais*, on the contrary, Bakhtin affirms the power of the body as an expressly social phenomenon. The body is an autonomous entity, but it does not coincide with itself because its mode of being has already grown essentially different. The non-classical canon encourages an ever-changing body, one that has no primordial image to fit, and no state of perfection to reach. No longer a singular organism, possessor of a 'particular' (*edinichnaia*) nature, Bakhtin's body in *Rabelais* is poised, much like Hegel's objective Spirit, between the materialization (objectification) of self-sufficient acts of abundantly physical character and the condition of an abstract identity which is revelatory of powers of a higher order: immortality, endless regeneration, limitless 'courage' in the face of nature and death. In *Rabelais*, the body is already a *symbol*: it stands on its own, performing the reassuringly healthy functions of every body, but it also points to a transcendental togetherness of bodies which constitutes a Body that not only copulates, eats or fasts, but also abides in the opposite state of solemnity and spiritual elevation, as if it had never committed the transitory acts of copulation, feasting and fasting. Thus Bakhtin endows the concept of body with two different meanings: the first represents its verifiable physicality while still shunning away from the condition of singularity, known from 'Author and Hero'; the other looks out over a state of collectivity where the bodily eventually comes to represent the spiritual.

The representation of the body as a collective spiritual entity is itself of Hegelian provenance. The objective Spirit—we will recall—seeks to liberate itself



from naïve subjectivity (singularity). In this process it gives rise to collective formations, such as the nation and the state, which Hegel considers to be advanced forms of historical self-reflection on the part of the Spirit. In Bakhtin, however, we witness a regressive embodiment: the Spirit materializes itself in the anachronistic and idyllic body of a socially homogenized and emphatically primitive community. The Spirit objectifies itself in the body of the undifferentiated people to bestow on it the gifts of animation. Accordingly, this body assumes wide-ranging faculties. All functions of the singular physical body—from generation to urination (to recall the *Phenomenology*)—are now sublated in the controversial gesture of preservation through erasure. They are brought closer to a pervasive spiritualization, and their effects are seen to endorse the unearthly reward of immortality.

If it is legitimate to describe Bakhtin's notion of laughter as being generated at the intersection point of Spirit and body, then the history of laughter and the body should duplicate the irreversible upward movement of the Spirit. But this is not what one finds in *Rabelais*. Bakhtin's history of laughter and body incorporates the double perspective of growth and decline, of progress and decomposition. Characteristically, the degeneration of laughter in post-Renaissance culture is measured by its sinking to the level of addressing private vices rather than conveying universal outlooks. Laughter ceases to be associated with the collective embodiments of the Spirit: it no longer originates in them, nor does it serve to strengthen their vitality. Referring to one of the key concepts of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, 'the universal individuality', Bakhtin concludes in a resigned fashion: 'The historical universal individuality ceases to be the object of laughter' (1984, p.115; 1965, p.127; translation amended).

It is at the juncture of this transition to degenerated laughter, paralleled and supported by the transition to the classical bodily canon, that Bakhtin's historicist adventure suffers its most ostensible drawback. Faced with the need to explain away the presence of 'grotesque anatomy' in the ancient and mediaeval epics (Bakhtin's examples are Homer, Virgil, and Ronsard) he diminishes its value by having recourse to reasons that fly in the face of his general scheme. 'The grotesque anatomization of the body in the epic', Bakhtin claims, 'is rather numb, for here the body is too individualized and closed. In the epic, there are only relics of the grotesque conception which has already been overpowered by the new [classical] canon of

body'<sup>8</sup>. At first glance, one might find this to be a plausible reinforcement of Bakhtin's established preference for the novelistic over the epic: on this reading, the epic should be declared by its very nature an enemy of the grotesque canon and it lends itself to being accused of bluntly precluding the depiction of an ever-evolving decentred and open body. There are two obstacles in our way, though. The first is the fact that Bakhtin's tone is not one of invective: rather, he regrets the dissipated and weakened presence of grotesque elements in the epic. The epic, he implies, did not engender the classical bodily canon; instead, this new canon eliminated the residual elements of the grotesque lingering in the epic. Effacing the difference between the novel and epic, at an earlier point Bakhtin even reproaches Hugo for never understanding 'the epic quality [*epichnost*'] of Rabelaisian laughter' (1984, p.128; 1965, p.140). This being the case, it remains unclear where the origins of the problem should be sought. The second point which makes one cautious about writing everything off at the expense of the epic is Bakhtin's mention of Homer. If the flourishing of the non-classical (grotesque) canon is located in the sixteenth century, in the novel of Rabelais, how is it possible for earlier forms to have been already conquered by the classical canon, especially given the impossibility that this role could have been performed by the epic? Moreover, what literary forms can be accepted as having been in existence prior to Homer? This patent incongruence in Bakhtin's narrative may suggest that he considers the Renaissance to be an exception, a solitary island in the predominantly non-grotesque history of the human body. But this clearly contradicts his assertion that 'the grotesque mode of representing the body and bodily life prevailed in art and creative forms of speech over thousands of years' (1984, p.318; 1965, p.345). The other possibility is that Bakhtin regards the Renaissance as the peak in a cyclically revolving process, one that transforms the classical body into a grotesque one and then reanonizes it back to classical order and closure. If this version is taken to hold good, one will be struck how non-Hegelian Bakhtin's attempt at historicizing the idea of the human body is. Bakhtin's fascination with the grotesque body in Rabelais's work bespeaks his profound reluctance to follow the modern project of historicist linearity and continuity. The past, in turn, is only selectively praised as the beneficial ground on which 'germs and shoots' of the future are grown: the indisputably grotesque elements of the ancient and the

---

<sup>8</sup> These two sentences are absent from the published English translation; they are to be found on p.385 of the Russian edition; the word in square brackets is my addition.

mediaeval epic are left out as unsublatable; they are undone before the opportunity arises for their redemption in the non-classical canon of the Renaissance. Thus Bakhtin's endorsement of Hegel's progressivist historicism in the description of Renaissance laughter as a new stage in the rise of consciousness is eroded and betrayed by his inconclusive historical accounts of the representation of the body.

This rupture in Bakhtin's 'will to history' invites an even more radical interpretation of his strategy. It uncovers Bakhtin's desire to enact the history of human views of the body as a timeless battle between two primordial principles: the grotesque and the classical. Placed in succession, the former being obviously older than the latter, they are nevertheless endowed with the status of eternal organizing forms. This is a powerful way of reading the above passage, with Bakhtin's implicit assumption that the start and the first successes of the grotesque canon should be sought in the time before Homer. Folklore, as is usual with literary and cultural theory after German Romanticism, is the omnipotent alibi for a-historical arguments. Bakhtin's vision of the origins of the grotesque imagines them as disappearing in a remote unrecorded (and unrecordable) past. History, then, is reshaped into the struggle of two constantly acting principles. The impression of peaks and troughs is no more than a camouflage for an equilibrium sustained by means of tension and competition. The brilliant yet controversial rhetoric of Bakhtin's narrative depicting the gigantic clash between the grotesque and the classical suppresses and de-emphasizes his own occasional points as an historian. The reader is invited to forget that the classical canon 'never prevailed in antique literature' and that in the *official* literature of European peoples it has become wholly dominant only in the last four hundred years' (1984, p.319; 1965, p.346; translation amended)<sup>9</sup>. Rather, as the text presents and amplifies the evidence for the outstanding domination of the grotesque in the Renaissance, it encourages the belief that the grotesque view of the body had a potent enemy all along (from Homer to Virgil to Ronsard, as we have seen).

It would be fair to argue in conclusion that, while bound together by the centrality of the body as a philosophical problem, Bakhtin's significant works 'Author and Hero' and *Rabelais* stand for two strongly divergent positions: the earlier one searching for the limits of privacy and identity in the exchange with others; the later one cherishing the abolition of these limits, the removal of every boundary separating

---

<sup>9</sup> The English translation does not preserve the italics of the Russian *ofitsial'noi*, and it renders *stal vpolne gospodstvuiushchim* simply as 'existed'.

one human body from the other, the activation of a grotesque mode of existence that thrives on disproportion, deliberate distortion, and rejection of the sense of proportion. These changing trajectories of Bakhtin's thought, as well as his passionate search for the cultural value of the primitive, the organic and the natural, could partly account for the fascinating richness and suppleness of his thought. But they also exhibit his dramatic swinging between a joyful appreciation of historical detail and particularity, and an essentialist belief in the unalterability of human nature.

All this appears to be suggestive of the wider significance of the grotesque in Bakhtin's writings, of its theoretical 'gravity' as not just an aesthetic category but a more encompassing mode of conceiving and interpreting the world. The grotesque becomes for Bakhtin a vantage point from which a different conception of the human arises, a humanism that is no longer bound to a belief in the individual and is no longer underpinned by an embrace and promotion of the virtues of measure, proportion, or reason. It is a humanism that manages to incorporate and process the 'darker side' of humanity<sup>10</sup>, the sometimes aggressive and unpredictable mode of action that carnival poses. The grotesque, in other words, sponsors in Bakhtin a different kind of humanism. Bakhtin's intellectual brand, that which he did better than most, was the gradual forging of a theoretical platform informed by what I would call humanism without subjectivity (or at least without subjectivity understood in the classic identitarian sense). In the mature and late writings we find an odd Bakhtinian humanism, decentred, seeking and celebrating alterity rather than otherness (in Kristeva's distinction), and revolving not around the individual but around the generic abilities of the human species to resist and endure in the face of natural cataclysms and in the face of ideological monopoly over truth. Bakhtin is probably the single most gifted and persuasive exponent in the 20<sup>th</sup> century of that particular strain of humanism without belief in the individual human being at its core, a distant cosmic love for humanity as the great survivor and the producer of abiding and recurring meaning that celebrates its eventual homecoming in the bosom of great time. In the Rabelais book this new decentred humanism takes on the form of a seemingly more solidified cult of the people, but even there it rests on an ever changing, protean existence of the human masses that transgresses the boundaries between bodies and style registers and refuses their members stable identifications other than with the

---

<sup>10</sup> I paraphrase here the titles of Walter Mignolo's well-known books *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* (1994) and *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (2011).

utopian body of the people and of humanity at large. This new brand of decentred, indeed dislocated, humanism without subjectivity is Bakhtin's greatest discovery as a thinker and the source, so it seems to me, of his longevity on the intellectual scene where he sees off vogue after vogue, staging for each new generation of readers the magic of witnessing the birth of proximity without empathy, of optimism without promise or closure<sup>11</sup>.

## REFERENCES

BAKHTIN, M. M. Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity. In: BAKHTIN, M. M. *Art and Answerability*. Trans. by V. Liapunov and K. Brostrom & Edited by M. Holquist and V. Liapunov. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990, p.4-256.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Trans. by V. Liapunov & Edited by V. Liapunov and M. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. H. Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

FINK, Hilary. *Bergson and Russian Modernism, 1900–1930*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999.

HITCHCOCK, P. The Grotesque of the Body Electric. In: BELL, M.; GARDINER, M. (eds.). *Bakhtin and the Human Sciences*. London: Sage Publications, 1998, p.78-94.

HOLQUIST, M. Bakhtin and the Body. In: DÍAZ-DIOCARETZ, M (ed.). *The Bakhtin Circle Today (Critical Studies 1.2 [1989])*. Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 2006, p.19-42.

MARCIALIS, N. Michail Bachtin e Aleksej Uchtomskij. In: CORONA, F. (ed.). *Bachtin, teorico del dialogo*. Milan: Angeli, 1986, p.79-91.

MIGNOLO, Walter. *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

NETHERCOTT, Frances. *Une rencontre philosophique: Bergson en Russie, 1907-1917*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995.

NIKOLAEV, N. Publishing Bakhtin: A Philological Problem (Two Reviews). *Dialogism* 4, 2000, p.67-111.

RUDOYA, L. Bergsonism in Russia: The Case of Bakhtin, *Neophilologus*, 80, 1996, p.175-88.

---

<sup>11</sup> More on this see in my article "Mikhail Bakhtin: Multiple Discoveries and Cultural Transfers", *Wiener Sawistischer Almanach*, 2010, Vol. 78, pp. 45-58.

SCHELER, M. *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*. 3. ed. Bonn: Friedrich Cohen, 1931, p.260.

TIHANOV, G. Bakhtin, Joyce, and Carnival: Towards the Synthesis of Epic and Novel in *Rabelais. Paragraph*, 2001, Vol. 24, No. 1, p.66-83.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Master and the Slave: Lukács, Bakhtin, and the Ideas of Their Time*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p.266-67.

\_\_\_\_\_. Mikhail Bakhtin: Multiple Discoveries and Cultural Transfers, *Wiener Sawistischer Almanach*, 2010, Vol. 78, p.45-58.

VOLOSHINOV, V. N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Trans. L. Matejka and I. Titunik. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1986.

*Received September 10,2012*

*Accepted November 11,2012*