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**THINKERS**

**Deep Fecology:  
Mikhail Bakhtin and the Call of Nature\***

By Michael Mayerfeld Bell

*Shit* is a superb word, really. Sometimes *shit* can be music to my ears. It doesn't have to be spoken in hushed, moralizing tones. SHIT! OH, SHEEIT! A versatile, articulate, and colorful word, it is indeed a pleasure to shout, to roll along one's tongue. A perfectly audible—if not ear-shattering—remarkably decent, and modest everyday word.

Kathleen Meyer, *How to Shit in the Woods*, 1989

**1. Introduction**

Since the late 1960s, intellectuals have been passing on to one another (as it was first described to me) "an odd book—I think you might like it" by Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World* is a highly original work that has tickled academic souls in an incredibly wide range of fields.<sup>1</sup> The old boundaries between academic disciplines have been weakening of late. This quirky book has been one of those works that has been able to slip through the barbed wire and guard posts of the

\* This paper is the product of (and I hope open to) much dialog. In writing it, I have had the rare benefit of the following voices: Tom Demske (who suggested the title), Ramachandra Guha, Iverson Griffin, Diane B. Mayerfeld, James O'Connor, Sean Redding, Kevin Rozario, James C. Scott, Peter Siegelman, K. Sivaramakrishnan, and the participants in the session of the 1993 American Society for Environmental History conference where I first presented it.

<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University, Helene Iswolsky, trans., 1984 [1965]).

divided City of Academia. I have seen it in the hands of sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, geographers, social historians, art historians, and literary scholars.

Yet I have never seen an environmentalist with a copy. The purpose of this article is to suggest that those who are concerned about our ecological condition should also give it a close look. Bakhtin is normally read for what he says about language, culture, humor, and social hierarchies. But there is an ecological side to Bakhtin as well, a facet that glitters particularly brilliantly in the pages of *Rabelais and His World*, among Bakhtin's many works.

In what follows, I try to portray that side. I must confess, however, I am not certain that I portray what Bakhtin himself completely intended. My scholarly morality tells me I should worry about this. But Bakhtin, I think, would not have been distressed. The kind of texts Bakhtin admired were what he called "dialogic," texts written with an openness to the reader—as a kind of dialog. The meaning of a word, wrote Bakhtin, "is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant....A word is *territory shared*...."<sup>2</sup> The best writing keeps this in mind. A text's meaning is not as fixed as the letters on the pages of culture make it seem. Nor is it as completely open to the reader as some deconstructionists have implied. Still, we may take the text beyond the author's own intentions. Indeed we must, if it is to live.

And indeed we ought to, with Bakhtin, I hope to suggest, if we are to understand our ecological predicament and what we should do about it. With Bakhtin's help, I will argue that our hierarchical desires lead us to repudiate our festive, bodily connections with the ecological world. Until we discover the gaiety of a more ambivalent, dialogic attitude towards our class conscious and elevated sense of self—until we join in the laughing chorus of social and bodily unity—continued ecological decline is inevitable.

## 2. The Ecology of Dialog

Bakhtin is best known for the aforementioned concept of "dialogics," the dialectical character of true communication and language. In the relativistic aftermath of radical deconstruction, Bakhtin's dialogic conception of meaning as something we all have a hand in creating and recreating has been widely embraced by scholars who study culture. The author is dead (or may as well be), said the

<sup>2</sup> V. N. Volosinov (Mikhail Bakhtin), *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Seminar Press, Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik, trans., 1973), p. 86 (my emphasis).

deconstructionists; all we really have in culture are texts whose meanings depend on whatever the reader decides. Writing some 50 years earlier, Bakhtin had already moved beyond this claim to point out that what we have (or ought to have) is not mere texts, but dialogs—conversations not between an author and a reader, but between two authors, as it were, an author who writes and an author who reads. As Bakhtin put it, "there is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context."<sup>3</sup>

Strikingly, the relationship of authorship to meaning has been particularly stormy with regard to Bakhtin's own texts, for there is great dispute among scholars over what books Bakhtin himself actually authored. The generally accepted corpus of Bakhtin's work includes the following books (with their dates of first publication): *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929), *Rabelais and His World* (1965), and three collections of essays which appeared after his death in 1975—*Art and Answerability* (1990), *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), and *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (1986). In addition, there are three books from the 1920s which have often been attributed to Bakhtin, despite having different authors' names on the title pages: *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928), published under the name of P. N. Medvedev, and *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique* (1926) and *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929), both published under the name of V. N. Volosinov.

Bakhtin was not popular with Soviet authorities throughout most of his life, particularly in the 1920s when he was forced to live as an unemployed scholar and in the early 1930s when he was sent into exile in Kazakhstan. After the war, he was able to regain the teaching post he had once briefly held at the Mordovia State University in Saransk. But he remained an obscure figure (most Russian literary scholars thought him dead) until the 1960s, when some graduate students at Moscow's Gorky Institute discovered him. Bakhtin fast became something of a *cause célèbre*. From the circle of fascinated younger scholars that formed around him emerged the rumor that, in addition to the book on Rabelais (which was now finally published, 25 years after Bakhtin wrote it) and the book on Dostoevsky, Bakhtin had also written the Medvedev and Volosinov books. As an unpopular social critic, the story went, Bakhtin was unable to publish any more than the Dostoevsky book under his own name, until the eventual release of

<sup>3</sup> Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, eds., *Mikhail Bakhtin, Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, Vern W. McGee, trans., 1986), p. 170.

*Rabelais and His World* in 1965. And, indeed, these three other books (especially *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*) deal with ideas that seem central to Bakhtin's intellectual projects. The truth of their authorship has been the focus of considerable argument ever since, an argument which Bakhtin himself refused to settle in his last years.

The bulk of scholarly opinion now appears to agree that Bakhtin did not write any of these three books, although there is still no consensus on this.<sup>4</sup> But the very debate misses one of the key insights of the concept of the "dialogic." Volosinov and Medvedev we now know were actual people, writers and close friends of Bakhtin, part of the same literary circle that formed in the 1920s. Whoever penned the actual published words is, dialogically, irrelevant, for these words, these meanings, were the product of the intimate dialog between them and others in their circle. In refusing to assign authorship in the last interviews he gave, Bakhtin may have been making a sublimely dialogical point.

What does any of this have to do with ecology and the environment? Not that much—until one realizes that the Bakhtinian-Volosinovian-Medvedevian (plus others from the intellectual habitat of their 1920s circle) concept of dialogics is extremely ecological.<sup>5</sup> It speaks of mutuality, interchange, interaction, of a dynamic holism. Moreover (and this is an improvement on some visions of ecology), it is not static. There is no final word, just as there is no final ecology. The concept of dialogics also speaks to the dangers of its opposite: the *monolog*, as Bakhtin termed it, of the authoritarian state and the authoritarian authors who speak and write but do not listen. This, too, is the danger of the authoritarian monolog of modern technologies of production which do not listen to, and perhaps are constituted so as to be unable to listen to, ecological responses in the dialog of life.

Most of Bakhtin's works, and those of his circle, however, do not focus on the ecological implications of dialogics. There is one that

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<sup>4</sup> For the case for Bakhtin's authorship of the disputed works, see Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1984). For the case against Bakhtin's authorship of the Volosinov and Medvedev books, see Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> One of the few works which have noted this connection is Patrick D. Murphy, "Prolegomenon for an Ecofeminist Dialogics," in Dale M. Bauer and Susan Jaret McKinstry, eds., *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1991).

does, though, and in a striking (if largely implicit) way—*Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin's exploration of the dialogics of the infamously scatological novel of Francois Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. The Carnival of Life

The writings of Francois Rabelais have long made readers uncomfortable. From the time his works first appeared in 1532 until the present day, many people have found his writing distasteful and obscene, plainly offensive to basic sensitivities. Rabelais's novel (published over 20 years in a series of four books) follows the fabulous careers of Gargantua and his son Pantagruel, both fantastically obese and vulgar giants. They live an outrageous life centered wholly on bodily acts—eating, drinking, excreting, copulating, giving birth. Rabelais spares no detail in describing these acts. In a word, Rabelais is gross.

It is not hard to understand why Rabelais's early readers felt discomfort. He intended the books as satires of the French society of his day, and he filled them with witty parodies of contemporary events. Consequently the authorities at the Sorbonne regularly condemned him, for some of the powerful found that his books hit too close to home.

We are well removed from the political contests of that time. So why have so many modern readers found Rabelais so repulsive, or at best an enigma? Why have so many missed the basic point about the huge feasts of tripe and salt, the consumption of vast quantities of drink, the drenching of people in urine, the smearing of all in excrement? Why have so many missed that this is all very, very funny?

The reason, Bakhtin argues in *Rabelais and His World*, is that for many of us Rabelais hits too far below the belt. From the lofty perspective of societies Bakhtin calls bourgeois—and by bourgeois, Bakhtin had in mind his own Soviet Union as well as the capitalist West—the degrading quality of Rabelais's humor is threatening, not funny. For what Rabelais does is level social differences, level them to what Bakhtin calls the "material bodily principle" we all share. Beneath the pretenses of society, this principle links us all to the same "bodily lower stratum"—the stratum of the stomach, the genitals, and the anus.

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<sup>6</sup> A compressed version of the basic ideas worked out in *Rabelais and His World* appears in some passages of Bakhtin's earlier book, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson). This book was first published in Russian in 1963.

Official culture tries to rise above this material truth. Rabelais brings it back to earth with a deep belly laugh.

It's important to see who is laughing here. Bakhtin argues that the sources Rabelais used for his themes were various forms of medieval folk humor. The laughter we hear in Rabelais is, in Bakhtin's phrase, "the people's laughter." Medieval folk poked holes in the velvet curtain of official culture by gaily inverting it with gleefully wicked curses, bawdy oaths, and outrageous parodies. Through inversion, the very presence of hierarchy is suddenly made plain, at the same time that it is torn down. Bakhtin suggests that perhaps the most characteristic form of medieval folk humor was the marketplace carnival, the day when beggars would ride, turnips were watches, and effigies of the mighty appeared draped in rags. The festive, ever-laughing, group spirit found in all these forms Bakhtin labeled "carnival" and "carnavalesque."

Carnavalesque laughter is not mere inversion, however. At the same time that it shatters the official world, it recreates a new one. "Folk humor denies, but it revives and renews at the same time."<sup>7</sup> It "uncrowns and renews," it "degrades and materializes."<sup>8</sup> This new world is the people's world. Carnival points out the egalitarian oneness of material life, a life that connects us all. It is Saturnalia, a utopian return to a festive time of mirth, plenty, and equality. In other words, carnival laughter is not just the mocking of the high and mighty: "It is also directed at those who laugh."<sup>9</sup> Thus, the egalitarianism of earthy truth gathers us all into the grand medieval folk joke. The laughter of carnival, then, is both a form of protest and a utopian statement about the fundamental unity of people.

#### 4. The Carnival of Nature

Carnival is also about the fundamental unity of people and nature. These two unities—people with people and people with nature—find expression in the body imagery characteristic of Rabelais's humor.

That imagery is gross imagery. Gargantua and Pantagruel are stupendously gross, gross in looks and in actions. Their body parts are enormous. Even as a baby, it took "sixteen ells and a quarter" of cloth (an ell being 45 inches square) to make Gargantua's codpiece.<sup>10</sup> Their appetites are huge. Pantagruel "supped up the milk of four thousand six

<sup>7</sup> *Rabelais and His World*, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 24.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Francois Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952 [1532 to 1552]), p. 10.

hundred cows" at every meal.<sup>11</sup> Their manners are atrocious. Gargantua in his youth "pissed in his shoes, shit in his shirt, and wiped his nose on his sleeve....He sharpened his teeth with a top, washed his hands with his broth, and combed his hair with his bowl."<sup>12</sup> Their companions are likewise. They are given to such acts as breaking wind in "a great baker's fart, for the bran came after" and covering each other at various times in urine, excrement, and vomit.<sup>13</sup>

Bakhtin calls this imagery the "grotesque realism" of the "grotesque bodily canon." Its method is hyperbole, always directed at culture's lower strata, the body and the earth. Rabelais mixes with gay abandon themes drawn from these levels, themes of fertility, cornucopian plenty, copulation, birth, and death, tying them together into what Bakhtin calls "one grotesque knot."<sup>14</sup>

Grossness, then, is the festive holism of life. At the heart of the grotesque bodily canon is a different sense of the self and its earthly relations, a conception pervasive in medieval folk culture. The medieval "grotesque ego" was oriented towards the collective of people and nature, not the individual. For this reason, grotesque realism celebrates the protrusions, orifices, excretions, and fluids of the body. Through them the individual body is continually connected with the world. The canyons, mountains, and welling springs of the body keep it immersed in nature and society. As Bakhtin put it, "all these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and the world are overcome..."<sup>15</sup>

The grotesque realism of carnival is therefore organic—a unity of bodies with bodies through bodies. Grotesque culture emphasizes that we are united in our materiality. Material reality connects us to each other and to nature through birth, death, exchange, and renewal. When a man (or a woman, of course) eats, he "tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself."<sup>16</sup> Bakhtin makes the same point about *belle matière fécale*, one of Rabelais's most cherished themes:

In grotesque realism and in Rabelais's work the image of excrement, for instance, did not have the trivial, narrowly

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>14</sup> *Rabelais and His World*, op. cit., p. 222.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 317.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 281.

physiological connotation of today. Excrement was conceived as an essential element in the life of the body and of the earth in the struggle against death. It was part of man's vivid awareness of his materiality, of his bodily nature, closely related to the life of the earth.<sup>17</sup>

In this and other ways, the holism of grotesque realism links birth and death, renewal and violence, plenty and loss. Carnavalesque laughter overcomes preoccupations about mortality, aging, and the unidirectional course of the life process. Take the birth of Pantagruel, who is so large that his mother, Badebec, dies in childbirth. Before the emergence of Pantagruel from her womb, however, came first

three score and eight tregeneers, that is, salt-sellers, every one of them leading in a halter, a mule heavily laden with salt; after whom issued forth nine dromedaries, with great loads of gammons of bacon, and dried neats' tongues on their backs. Then followed seven camels loaded with links and chitterlings, hogs' puddings, and sausages. After them came out five great wains, full of leeks, garlick, onions, and chibots, drawn with five-and-thirty strong cart-horses...<sup>18</sup>

The midwives rejoiced in these fertile out-pourings as a good omen, as all these foods are thirst-creating "spurs of wine," in Rabelais's words—medieval tortilla chips and hot sauce, basically.<sup>19</sup>

This violent yet ridiculous birth transforms the medieval horror of a mother's death in childbirth. Grotesque realism laughs away these mortal fears with festive drink and brimming-over plenitude. The sting of death disappears in the merry fertility of birth. Rather than a terminal creation, the body becomes "a point of transition in a life eternally renewed, the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception."<sup>20</sup> There is no need to fear death here because death is part of birth, fertility, and plenty, the living cycle of grotesque unity. As Bakhtin says of Rabelais's work, "It is the most fearless book in world literature."<sup>21</sup>

This fearless, laughing holism speaks of a world of social and natural connections. The feast and the womb are the central images in this cyclical, regenerative, ever-growing canon of community. Rabelais's feasts of superabundance establish a secure connection with

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>18</sup> Rabelais, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>20</sup> Rabelais and his World, *op. cit.*, p. 318.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

the productiveness of the world that sustains and creates us. So, too, with the womb. Badebec's womb (described as having a circumference of "full six acres, three rods, five poles, four yards, two feet, one inch and a half of good woodland measure") was capable of producing the superabundant fertility of salt, bacon, sausages, leeks, garlic, and onions.<sup>22</sup> As Bakhtin writes:

We thus obtain a truly grotesque image of one single, super-individual bodily life, of the great bowels that devour and are devoured, generate and are generated....We see looming beyond [the] womb the devoured and devouring womb of the earth and the ever-regenerated body of the people.<sup>23</sup>

The combination of the themes of over-flowing abundance, astonishing fertility, and ceaseless regeneration of life makes the grotesque body "cosmic and universal."<sup>24</sup> This is a body which "reunites in itself all the elements and kingdoms of nature, both the plants and the animals."<sup>25</sup> The grotesque body, then, is "territory shared," the product of a dialogic world. Here is deep nature—with a huge grin.

### 5. The Dour Bourgeois Body

All of this stands in great contrast to the predominant bodily images of our day. Bourgeois life brought with it a new image of the body, what Bakhtin calls the "classic canon" of the body.

In the classic canon so familiar to polite society and official settings, the ideal body is one without convexities and orifices. It is an "entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body....That which protrudes...is eliminated, hidden, or moderated. All orifices of the body are closed."<sup>26</sup> The processes of bodily exchange are deemed vulgar, gross, and signs of personal failure. The classic body does not spit. It does not sweat. It does not cry. It is dirty even to speak of excrement, urine, vomit, ejaculate, and menstrual blood except in polite, disdainful, or scientific language which sanitizes and distances material truth, like plastic wrapping around a supermarket chicken—as in this very sentence.<sup>27</sup> The necessities of material life which no one may

<sup>22</sup> Rabelais, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>23</sup> Rabelais and his World, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 318.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 364.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 320.

<sup>27</sup> Note the special disdain that the classic canon has for menstrual blood, evidently a substance so horrifying that contemporary English doesn't even

ignore and still live are handled only behind a curtain of manners, refinement, division of class labor, and technology. Meals are eaten with a knife and fork, the anus is cleaned after defecation with disposable paper, garbage is handled by lower classes, and food is grown by machines.

What has changed is our sense of self. With the expansion of modern class society and the decline of folk life came a more individualized way of conceiving personhood, what Bakhtin calls the "bourgeois ego" that underlies the classic canon. The significant feature about the classic body is that it is an individual body. "The basis of the image," says Bakhtin, "is the individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable facade."<sup>28</sup> Emphasis is on the individualizing features of the body—the head, lips, eyes, total appearance of the face, and the place of the body in the external world. These are never exaggerated as distortion would reduce them to vulgar commonality. When the mouth appears (for it cannot always be hidden), it fulfills only expressive functions. Gone is the gaping material symbolism of the grotesque, forever eating. And the substances of the body's exchanges with the world have disappeared behind the bathroom door and down the toilet.

Gone as well is the festive sense of material bodily life as something funny. Rather, materiality is something to fear. In grotesque realism "laughter, food, and drink defeat death."<sup>29</sup> But the bourgeois ego fears death as a finality. The inevitable materiality of life becomes a threat. As Bakhtin described it:

The body of the new canon is merely one body....All that happens within it concerns it alone, that is, only the individual, closed sphere. Therefore, all the events taking place within it acquire one single meaning: death is only death, it never coincides with birth; old age is torn away from youth; blows merely hurt, without assisting an act of birth. All actions and events are interpreted on the same level of a single, individual life. They are enclosed within the limits of the same body,

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have a slang term for it (at least that I know of), although there are some for the process of menstruation. Even in many slang terms for the menstrual process, like "on the rag" and "the curse," the sense of disdain carries on for this essential aspect of the grotesque cycle of fertility and renewal. In fact, many slang usages are not grotesque, but merely gross. The grotesque ego is not a matter of dirty, disdainful talk, but of a regenerative awareness of the material fullness of life, as I will discuss.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 320.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299.

limits that are the absolute beginning and end and can never meet.<sup>30</sup>

What has really died is the festive sense of life's egalitarian holism. The classic canon sees the connections that regenerate life as discrete, mechanical operations. The carnival of continuity has been banned. The laughter of ecological renewal has died away in a dead world where individuals are uncoupled from society and the community of nature. Instead of a circus train, we ride through life in private cars.

## 6. Talking It Over

If I were limited to only one word to describe what Bakhtin is talking about, that word would be "ecology." If I were limited to two words, they would be "social ecology." Bakhtin may not have agreed. The word ecology never appears in his book. But it is important to recall that *Rabelais and His World* was completed in 1941 (it was Bakhtin's dissertation), many years before it was finally published. At that time, the word ecology did not have the wide currency it does today. But I think Bakhtin would have liked the word, if he knew it, and if it had then the same significance it does today.

The strength of Bakhtin's environmentalism lies in how he connects three realms rarely brought together in scholarly writing: the realms of culture, the body, and ecology. Culture is often linked with either of the other two. It is the rare work that brings all three together. Some ecofeminist works manage it. Yet nowhere else has it been done for the cultural factor of greatest concern to Bakhtin: class.

Because it integrates so much, I was immediately intrigued by this "odd book" when I read it, as so many others have been. But we still need to ask Bakhtin (and ourselves) a couple of tough questions. One is a sociology of knowledge question: Why are these realms of experience connected? The other is a historical question: Why has what we might call "grotesque ecology" faded, and why has what might be called "bourgeois ecology" largely taken its place?

Unfortunately, Bakhtin does not spell out clear answers to either of these important issues, although he does give us some hints as to his views. His caginess on matters of theory may in part be a result of the political climate in which he worked on the book, a climate of dogmatism and Stalinism. In his writings, Bakhtin had to walk a fine line between theory that was rigorous versus the need to use theory that was *de riguer*. He knew only too well the consequences of crossing

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 321-322.

over to the wrong side of this line, having already spent some years in internal exile.

Although *Rabelais and His World* had to be oblique on many matters, Bakhtin's answer to the sociology of knowledge question relied on an old argument, one that has been used by many environmental thinkers. This argument seeks to explain what is perhaps the most widely documented finding in the sociology of nature: We seem to think about both nature and society in similar ways, with similar language and categories of thought. Words and images flit easily across the boundaries between the two. As Raymond Williams put it (in the gendered language of an earlier day), "in the idea of nature is the idea of man."<sup>31</sup> Marx and Engels noted long ago the striking parallels between Darwin's theory of natural selection and capitalist morality, both of which emphasize competitive selection of the fittest in a Hobbesian war of all against all.<sup>32</sup> More recently, Ruth Hubbard and Emily Martin have pointed out that stereotypes about passive females and active males also found their way into Darwin's work, and continue to influence our understanding of biology.<sup>33</sup> Other authors have noted parallels between conceptions of nature and social experience in a wide range of historical and contemporary settings.<sup>34</sup> These parallels extend beyond thought to action. As Wendell Berry once noted, "there is an

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<sup>31</sup> Raymond Williams, "Ideas of Nature," *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980 [1972]), p. 71.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Marx's 1862 letter to Engels cited in Ronald L. Meek, ed., *Marx and Engels on the Population Bomb* (Berkeley: Ramparts, 1971).

<sup>33</sup> Ruth Hubbard, "Have Only Men Evolved?" in Ruth Hubbard, Mary Sue Henifin, and Barbara Fried, eds., *Biological Woman: The Convenient Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1982); and Emily Martin, "The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles," *Signs* 16, 3, 1991.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984); Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875* (New York: Oxford University, 1980); Anastasia Shkilnyk, *A Poison Stronger Than Love* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), esp. pp. 232-238; John Maynard Smith, "Dinosaur Dilemmas," *New York Review of Books*, 38, 8, 1991; Neil Smith, *Uneven Development* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984); Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500-1800* (London: Allen Lane, 1983), esp. pp. 61-67; Langdon Winner, *The Whale and the Reactor* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1986), esp. pp. 135-136.

uncanny resemblance between our behavior toward each other and our behavior toward the earth."<sup>35</sup>

Why should this be so? Marx and Engels suggested that human knowledge can never be separated from human interests, interests framed by economic relations. "Ruling ideas"—like those about God, truth, and nature—in the end are only "the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas."<sup>36</sup> Marx and Engels considered the parallel between capitalism and Darwin's theory of natural selection to be a clear example of this grasping.

Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss saw it somewhat differently. In their view, all thought is based on "sentiments" derived from social life. "Logical relations are thus, in a sense, domestic relations.... There are sentimental affinities between things as between [human] individuals, and they are classified according to these affinities."<sup>37</sup> Feelings of kinship and non-kinship give us the mental structures we apply everywhere; everything in the world is, in a way, a totem.

Despite their different approaches, these two schools of thought (sometimes described as "German" and "French" sociology of knowledge) actually make the same basic point, one that Bakhtin seems to be trying to make as well: Social experience is so important to us that it provides us with ways of thinking which we apply everywhere. Ideas about nature, the body, machines, and the cosmos are mirrors of ideas drawn from social experience—a perspective that we might call "reflection theory." For Marx and Engels, the most important part of that experience was the economy. For Durkheim and Mauss, it was kinship.

For Bakhtin, it is both. His contrast between grotesque ecology and bourgeois ecology integrates both the French and German approaches. The group-oriented sentiments of medieval folk and the individually-oriented sentiments of the bourgeoisie can be found in the nature each sees. Moreover, Bakhtin noted that, ultimately, these sentiments stem from the material relations of class life.

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<sup>35</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club, 1977), p. 124.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels "The German Ideology," in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1972 [1846]), p. 136-137.

<sup>37</sup> Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, *Primitive Classification* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Rodney Needham, trans., 1963 [1903]), pp. 82-85.

Bakhtin's combination of these two approaches, sometimes regarded as antagonistic, is a real advance. But he does not provide an answer for what I regard as the central problem of reflection theory: What is the origin of ideas about society? Where do ideas about material relations and kinship come from in the first place? Barry Schwartz put the problem this way: "The existence of society in the mind presumes the existence in the mind of the categories by which society is known."<sup>38</sup> French and German reflection theory thus both founder on their socio-centrism. Reflection theory can't get outside of itself to push this bus, as the old adage goes, in which it rides.

I will not attempt an answer to this problem here. I only wish to point out the theoretical importance of the issue and that Bakhtin's version of reflection theory does not address it.<sup>39</sup>

In Bakhtin's defense, this was not an issue that preoccupied him. The central problems he sought to answer were the moral and historical questions. Bakhtin was more concerned with recovering "the positive regenerating power of laughter" which issues from the "mighty and deep stream of grotesque realism."<sup>40</sup> He aimed his work mainly at the Stalinist orthodoxy of his day, an orthodoxy which had banned the grotesque for being bourgeois.

In fact, says Bakhtin, puritanical attitudes like these are "guided by the narrow spirit of the bourgeois period"—a spirit Bakhtin felt was as prevalent in Stalinist Russia as in capitalist Europe.<sup>41</sup> My reading is that here Bakhtin was trying to back away from the Stalinist academe's deterministic base-superstructure model of the relationship between capital and culture to a more dialectical conception of this interplay. The economic individualism of the market is not the only route to the cultural individualism Bakhtin saw in the classic bodily canon. (In fact, the cultural collectivism of carnival is itself, as Bakhtin repeatedly stressed, the product of the medieval marketplace with its fairs, comic shows, and pageants.) Instead, Bakhtin appears to link individualism more (or equally?) with the formation of elites who dominate the people, portraying individualism as inherent in the ethos of any elite.

<sup>38</sup> Barry Schwartz, *Vertical Classification* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981), p. 171.

<sup>39</sup> My views on resolving this problem can be found in Michael M. Bell, *Childerley: Nature and Morality in a Country Village* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 227-241.

<sup>40</sup> *Rabelais and his World*, op. cit., pp. 45 and 53.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.

This is an important point, if it is right, one that is very relevant to our post-Cold War world. Bakhtin recognized that capitalist elites achieved their position through the marketplace—the very same marketplace which the people periodically turn upside down at carnival time, partly in recognition of the market as an agent of their oppression. But Bakhtin seems to have seen the marketplace as paradoxically capable of encouraging both the collectivism of the Medieval carnivalesque, by bringing the people together in a communal feast of exchange, and the individualism of the bourgeois spirit, by keeping them apart through the competitive privacy of private bodies and their accumulated private property. Thus, Bakhtin's villain is not the marketplace *per se* (or at least not the marketplace alone), but rather the hierarchical individualism of the ruling classes for which the market is one tool (albeit an extremely important one) among many. For Bakhtin, then, class is a characteristic of *all* modern, privatized, hierarchical societies, not only capitalist ones—and he calls them all "bourgeois."

With the Renaissance, the bourgeois spirit experienced a great flowering and the classic canon came increasingly to dominate literature and other forms of acceptable culture. As the bourgeoisie and its distinctive ego expanded in influence, "the carnival spirit was transposed into a subjective, idealistic philosophy."<sup>42</sup> Cervantes was a transitional author. The spirit of carnival shows its merry face in Sancho's fat belly, great appetite, thirst, and love of abundance. Yet the classic canon appears in Don Quixote's struggle over the lofty aims of the individual spirit.<sup>43</sup>

With the passing of folk culture, the festive ecology of grotesque realism soon passed from memory. Elements of carnival remain in the humor and satire of the present day, but mainly "dead and purely negative remnants of the grotesque" which convey

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>43</sup> Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon, 1971) made a argument which has some striking parallels with that of Bakhtin. Working quite independently, they both isolated a fundamental shift in the premises of ordering knowledge across the many fields of human endeavor which occurred around the beginning of the seventeenth century. Paralleling to some degree Bakhtin's bodily canons, Foucault found a change from an "episteme" based on resemblances derived from principles of similitude and signatures to one based on identities and differences—in other words, a shift from communitarian to individualistic world views. Foucault also described Don Quixote as a transitional book.



nothing but senseless abuse....Laughter [has been] cut down to cold humor, irony, sarcasm. It [has] ceased to be a joyful and triumphant hilarity.<sup>44</sup>

Here Bakhtin is cautioning us not to mistake the regenerative and positive principles of carnivalesque laughter for that kind of gross humor which is merely degrading. The laughter of carnival reunites us and renews us on the same earthy level. Bourgeois gross humor does the reverse; its very purpose is to create hierarchy and to construct boundaries. In contrast, the ambition of the grotesque humor of carnival is to bring us together into the greater cosmic, ecologic, and dialogic whole of the people and the living earth we share.<sup>45</sup>

Such is Bakhtin's historical—and moral—argument. It is, I think, a compelling account—but not without its own problems.

A prominent one is the romantic haze that surrounds his depiction of folk life. A Golden Age has been lost, it seems. Gone is the close community of the past, a life which was closer to "nature." *Gemeinschaft* has given way to *gesellschaft*, to use Ferdinand Tönnies's terms, as folk life has given way to bourgeois life.

Bakhtin's portrayal of this transition is certainly overdrawn. His eye passes over the many forms of *gemeinschaft* in the present, even in the city among the members of that famously insular urban product, the bourgeoisie. Even urban professionals go to bars after work, lend a hand on moving day, and watch after one another's kids. Nor does Bakhtin's gaze linger on the presence of *gesellschaft* in folk life. Even peasants must contend with the market and the state. Both *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* exist simultaneously in all human societies, as Tönnies himself argued—although the strength of one side or the other of this dialectic may be greater in specific places at specific times.<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, we must take note of Bakhtin's lack of comment on Rabelais's portrayal of women. In Rabelais's novel, men are the main active agents. Women principally appear as caverns of copulation and conception. Worse still, the violence of a scene like the death of Badebec could be read not as fearlessness in the face of childbirth, but

<sup>44</sup> *Rabelais and his World*, op. cit., pp. 28, 38.

<sup>45</sup> The warm, regenerative, and ultimately caring connectiveness of carnival also distinguish it in important ways from the degrading and often cruel carnality of de Sade.

<sup>46</sup> Ferdinand Tönnies, *Fundamental Concepts of Sociology (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft)* (New York: American Book Company, Charles P. Loomis, trans., 1940 [1887]), p. 18.

as oppressive ridicule of women's fears—ridicule which leads not to women's own renewal, but to the renewal of men, for it is a male that is born.

In other words, much of Rabelais's portrayal of women could be read as degrading women, not uniting them on the same level of carnivalesque truth with men—at least so it appears to me. This patriarchal excursion from the grotesque to the merely gross is something we need to be quite wary of. It is also something we should certainly wish Bakhtin had observed. Moreover, the boundary between the grotesque and the merely gross may be more slippery than Bakhtin imagined. Still, we can envision a feminist grotesque ego which materializes men as much as women—as it renews them both. Indeed, a true grotesque ego that seeks to materialize all instances of hierarchy must be feminist. That it is not in Rabelais is due to the social limits of his own vision.

Furthermore, it is my sense that we who live in bourgeois societies are far more ambivalent about the grotesque than Bakhtin suggests. By that I mean we do not reject the grotesque entirely. Many of us, it seems to me, relish an occasional uncrowning of the status boundaries of our classical bodies. This is perhaps part of the joy we find in children, for they constantly cross the bodily boundaries of the bourgeois adult world. I suspect that I, at least, love my five year old son in part for these gifts of transgression—gifts of social and spatial boundaries ignored, of muddy shoes to mop up after, of the diapers I used to change and scrape, of wide open eyes and mouth in happy communion with the world. We love children, and perhaps animals too, in part for the way their transgressions help resolve the classical body's deepest fear: that it is alone.

But although we do not reject the grotesque entirely, I think it would be fair to say that we reject it to a considerable degree. Bakhtin, I think, is asking us to balance the scales, to seek a more dialogic sense of our materiality—to seek a point of hovering suspension between the communion of the grotesque and the individuality of the classical. He is not asking us (or, at the very least, should not be asking us) to give up all forms of the individual and to embrace only the grotesque instead. For one thing, it is only in the context of a classic conception of the ecological body that the grotesque can have its cultural impact. The grotesque needs the classic. But we who have repudiated much of our connection to bodily and material truth also need the grotesque.

In fact, our repudiation of the grotesque may be one of the most powerful cultural forces behind the ecological degradation of the

planet. Elites need to distinguish themselves from the common people, to create a boundary, and separation from nature and bodily functioning is a striking way to do so. Servants, machines, impractical clothes, big houses, the rituals which close the bathroom door—to acquire these forms of ecological separation requires money and power. This separation is far less attainable for lower classes, clearly establishing who is on top.<sup>47</sup> In other words, we signal our social height by ritually elevating ourselves from the material world. Seeking to live only the images of the classic canon, we in bourgeois society are willfully blind to the material truth of grotesque realism. We cannot see how our efforts at social distinction are devastating other life forms and the resources upon which we all depend, for admitting these connections would undermine the feeling of separation bourgeois life seeks. The problems of social inequality and ecological decline are thus indissolubly linked.

As I read it, this is the environmental message of *Rabelais and His World*.

### 7. The Dour Ecology of Environmentalism in the West

I imagine Bakhtin would say that the environmental movement in the West has yet to absorb fully this message.

True, some aspects of ecologic thought do reverberate with the gay realism of the grotesque. As Clarence Glacken observed, “modern ecologists in stating the scientific case for conservation have said that the more rich and varied life is, the more stable is the ecosystem.”<sup>48</sup> Here is the grotesque theme of super-abundance, the communal ecological feast. And while Darwin’s theory of natural selection does echo capitalist competitive individualism and Victorian ideas about

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<sup>47</sup> Much of what I (and Bakhtin?) say in making these connections parallels paths followed by other thinkers. For example, the link between the rise of bodily vulgarity and the rise of class society was something the Swiss sociologist Norbert Elias traced in great detail. In his monumental *The History of Manners* (New York: Pantheon, Edmund Jephcott, trans., 1978 [1939]), he argues that politeness around body functions was invented as a means of making the cultural distinctions of class. As class society developed, the need to keep the goal posts on the move led to continual elaboration of the forms of bodily politeness. Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1967 [1899]) made much the same point, noting how the leisure class signals its elevated social position in part by distancing itself from the dirt of nature.

<sup>48</sup> Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p. 6.

male and female roles, it also makes the merry point that all anyone cares about in the end is sex. Throughout the ecologic literature, we hear the themes of interconnection, of holism, and of the regenerative potential of the group through the constant cycling of energy from individual to individual and species to species.

It is also worth pondering the historical connection between the environmental movement and the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s. This was a grotesque time which interwove many themes familiar to Rabelais: community, organic egalitarianism in consensus decision-making practices, food-sharing, rediscovery of the body and sexuality, openness concerning bodily functions, the celebration of dirt and physical labor close to the land, the joy of compost, and recycling. This was also a time of utopian and cosmic thought, such as Bakhtin found to be characteristic of carnival. These themes remain leaves in the greenery of popular environmental culture.

Yet Bakhtin might argue that, in order to recapture the full carnivalesque awareness of human materiality, we must recognize that this represents only the beginning of a more grotesque view of the world. For the current ecological bodily canon in the West is clearly still infused with the bourgeois ego, although perhaps less so than it once was.

Let me explain. Holism has definite limits in the Western environmental canon of today. Westerners frequently go to nature to be alone, to satisfy the lonely spirit of bourgeois desire. Our travels in nature are often individualistic endeavors of finding our *selves*, not principally of finding *ourselves*—the super-individualistic body. Moreover, nature is still something we must go to. It is still something separate that calls to us from the distance—from way off in national parks and faraway countries. Thus it is that the religious spirit of ecology is dominantly one of awe, an attitude of distance, not familiarity. Environmentalists rarely find nature in those familiar places where most Westerners live: cities.

When we do find nature in our own backyards, it is often mainly a way of converting it into a “positional good,” something I own which you therefore cannot.<sup>49</sup> The old dichotomy between nature and people is too valuable a idea to give up when it is so convertible into financial and cultural capital, like that of the house with a country view. It could thus be said that one of the principal achievements of Western

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<sup>49</sup> Fred Hirsch, *The Social Limits to Growth* (London: Routledge, 1977).

environmentalism to date has been to add nature to the list of goods available for conspicuous consumption.

Is this a just balancing of grotesque ecology and bourgeois ecology?

Bakhtin, at least, would certainly miss in the current environmental canon of the West a gay, festive sense of the ecological body. Whether or not contemporary ecology is properly balanced between the grotesque and the classic, one thing is for sure: It isn't very funny. Rather, it is usually fearful, severe, ascetic.

Bakhtin—and Rabelais—would probably consider this the real “shallow ecology.” Their kind of ecology is lower down, at a level, happily, we all share. They would counsel us to work on recovering a joyous, ever-laughing, irreverent sense of connection with the great bowels of the people's earth. They would ask us each to raise our glass of ale and drink to the festive truth of nature's daily call. For we're all in deep shit.

## **MOVEMENTS**

### **Animals and the Green Movement: A View from the Netherlands**

*By Barbara Noske*

#### **1. Introduction**

In 1988, the Dutch municipality of Harderwijk received the so-called Environment Prize from Ed Nijpels, then Dutch Minister of Environment. Harderwijk got the prize for having made a serious effort to reduce the environmentally harmful surpluses of animal manure produced by the numerous broiler duck factory farms in the area. What measures did the local authorities take? Rather than urging farmers to keep fewer ducks so that the soil and surface water would be less affected by animal wastes, they opted for more intensive indoor systems where the ducks could be locked away permanently. Here is a typical example of band-aid capitalist technology, countering the harmful effects of one type of technology (factory farms, surplus wastes, pollution, and acid rain) by summoning another technology, and introducing supposedly more environmentally responsible policies by means of animal-hostile measures. One would have thought — rather naively perhaps — that animals were part of the environment, too! Nothing is further from the truth. Animals as objects of capitalist production are hardly ever seen as part of “the environment.” Animals are not “green.”

What then are the different issues denoted by the term *green* when used by Dutch (and many other) environmentalists?

This umbrella term ostensibly covers a wide range of issues. These include nature conservation; protection of endangered species; concern for water, air and soil pollution; energy; technology; small-is-beautiful