
PHILOSOPHY AS GROTESQUE: THE CASE OF NIETZSCHE

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Reading philosophy through the figuration of the grotesque might provide us with an ontology that embraces change, fluidity, and disorder. In my estimation, such ontological framework gives rise to an epistemology that stands out for *an incapacity to represent and be represented* via classical tools of philosophy. I will argue that Nietzsche conceived of philosophy precisely in this fashion. Viewing Nietzsche through the lens of the grotesque, thus, holds the promise for enhancing our understanding of his style, outlook, and overall philosophy. More specifically, insights may be gleaned on different features of his work by comparing them to facets of a 'grotesque theory,' as the latter presents philosophy the way Nietzsche sought: as *exceeding*, ambiguous, unstable, eclectic, and heterogeneous.

Everything that is profound loves the mask.
(Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche¹)

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Introduction

Viewing Nietzsche through the lens of the grotesque holds the promise for enhancing our understanding of his style, outlook, and overall philosophy. More specifically, insights may be gleaned on different features of his work by comparing them to facets of 'grotesque theory,' as the latter presents philosophy the way Nietzsche sought: as *exceeding*, ambiguous, unstable, eclectic, and heterogeneous.

Nietzsche's Dionysian viewpoint and attendant concept of truth is, above all, *exceeding* and *complex*. Undeniably embodied, the Dionysian resists clarity and simplicity. Instead, the Dionysian embodied subject must be understood as one in constant flux, always exceeding his or her own limits. As a result, a monolithic, closed, immutable, and well-defined concept of truth or the subject is untenable. With this in mind, the objective of the present article is to elucidate this very perspective through a figuration of the grotesque. However, before setting out on this path, I shall explain how various theoreticians have grasped the grotesque subject.

¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich/Berlin: dtv/de Gruyter, 1999), v. 5, p. 57 (henceforth *KSA*); idem, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (New York: The Modern Library, 1927), s. 40, p. 425 (henceforth *BGE*).

The Grotesque Subject and the Problem of Representation

While the term grotesque derives from the visual arts, various theoreticians have applied it to bodies and concrete subjects.² Grotesque bodies are hybrids,³ a jumble of sundry parts, including those of animals, objects, plants, and human beings. For this reason, the term is often associated with monstrosities,⁴ the irrational, confusion,⁵ the absurd,⁶ and deformed heterogeneity.⁷

Given its embodied, open, and transcendent subjectivity, the grotesque cannot be presented or fathomed by means of a standard system of knowledge or taxonomy, that is, a framework designed to avoid ambiguity by seeking a clear, rational characterization of its research object. Consequently, the grotesque has been cited as a paradigm of phenomenological and postmodern conceptualizations of embodied subject.⁸

Due to their unclean, open, amorphous, gross, and asymmetrical traits, Grotesque bodies stand in stark contradistinction to the classical bodies of, say, the Renaissance.⁹

² See Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1965); Harpham, Geoffrey G., *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Kayser, Wolfgang, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1963); Kuryluk, Ewa, *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1987); Thomson, Philip, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen, 1972); Yates, Wilson, "An Introduction to the Grotesque: Theoretical and Theological Considerations," in eds. James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 1-68.

³ On the grotesque as hybrid, see Kuryluk, *Salome and Judas*, pp. 17, 75, 76, 319; Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, pp. 11, 21, 62; Thomson, *The Grotesque*, p. 50; Yates, "An Introduction to the Grotesque," p. 16.

⁴ On the monstrous grotesque, see Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in ed. idem, *Monster Theory Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 3-25; Garland Thomson, Rosemarie, "Introduction: From Wonder to Error – A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity," in ed. idem, *Freakery. Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 1-22; Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p. 8; Kuryluk, *Salome and Judas*, p. 302; Adams, James Luther, "The Grotesque and Our Future," in eds. Adams and Yates, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, pp. 69-74; Wright, Thomas, *A History of Caricature and Grotesque in Literature and Art* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1968), p. xxx; Yates, "An Introduction to the Grotesque," p. 7.

⁵ On the grotesque as irrational, see Clayborough, Arthur, *The Grotesque in English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965); Wright, *A History of Caricature*, p. x.

⁶ On the grotesque as absurd, see Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, pp. 37, 53, 184-188; Yates, "An Introduction to the Grotesque," p. 18.

⁷ On the grotesque as deformity, see Kuryluk, *Salome and Judas*, pp. 303, 304; Thomson, *The Grotesque*, pp. 26, 27; Yates, "An Introduction to the Grotesque," pp. 42, 44, 55, 56.

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, for instance, adopts a grotesque-like approach that emphasizes vagueness and complexity as the basic elements of existence and epistemic processes (such as perception). See, for example, Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 3, 4.

⁹ Bakhtin draws a distinction between grotesque bodies and the classical bodies that were rendered during the Renaissance; idem, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 24, 25.

The former is the uncanny body *par excellence*, defying straightforward definitions and boundaries. Moreover, it straddles the fence between death and life,¹⁰ subject and object, and one and many.¹¹ While not a single body *per se*, it avoids losing itself in the homogeneity of an undifferentiated wholeness. The grotesque body is a *distinct* entity that, nevertheless, remains intensively connected to the world and others.

Ceaselessly escaping its own skin and boundaries, this *plethoric* body is beyond categorization.¹² In essence, the grotesque predicates its relation to the world on the very phenomenological condition of human subjects. As Mikhail Bakhtin put it:

[T]he grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is *unfinished*, *outgrows* itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are *open* to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself *goes out to meet the world*. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body *discloses* its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking and defecation. This is the *ever unfinished, ever creating* body... This especially strikes the eye in archaic grotesque.¹³

It is precisely this sort of figuration of the grotesque body that helps ground the subject in corporeality and a vague gender identity. Moreover, it prevents the subject from becoming *neutral*, de-sexualized. Unlike classic and modern representations of the subject (e.g. Descartes'), this sort of *flesh-oriented* base precludes a full-fledged avoidance of embodied existence and corporeality.

Ontologically speaking, this kind of existence is indicative of a *plurality within a totality*, namely an image of reality that stresses interconnectedness and unity with the world, other subjects, and objects. However, it correspondingly emphasizes difference, heterogeneity, and multiplicity. Even though the grotesque is perpetually involved in syntheses, distortion, and intermingling, it is never overcome by confusion and manages to retain its singularity.

Against this backdrop, the grotesque can be understood as an ontology that embraces change, fluidity, and disorder. In my estimation, such an image of the world or ontological existence gives rise to an epistemology that stands out for *an incapacity to represent*

¹⁰ On the grotesque as uncanny, as straddling the fence between life and death, see Thomson, *The Grotesque*, p. 35; Kuryluk, *Salome and Judas*, p. 318.

¹¹ This should be understood as a consequence of grotesque hybridity and its conflictive essence. On the Grotesque as struggle, see Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p. 45; Thomson, *The Grotesque*, pp. 11, 18, 20, 60; Wright, *A History of Caricature*, p. xxxviii; Yates, "An Introduction to the Grotesque," pp. 44, 45.

¹² On the grotesque as intrinsically *excessive*, see: Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 320, 321; Harpham, *On the Grotesque*, p. 31; Kuryluk, *Salome and Judas*, p. 302; Thomson, *The Grotesque*, pp. 38, 39.

¹³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 26; my emphasis.

and be represented via classical tools of philosophy. If reality is indeed fragmentary, non-homogeneous, hybrid, protean, and continuously shifting, then it is impossible to describe or comprehend through systematic, logical, and discursive thought. How can one grasp and frame a reality that is essentially deformed and contradictory, that is delineated by nebulous, highly-permeable borders? A reality of this sort cannot be portrayed or discerned by either an *identity thought* (a thought which negates everything that does not adhere to the *law of identity*) or system, for these frameworks are invariably constricting and thus immobilizing. Alternatively, one of the pillars of rational schools of thought, *inter alia*, is the notion of purging the research object from its excesses, namely parts that are not crucial to its existence. A case in point is Occam's razor, which calls for the elimination of anything that is not *absolutely necessary* to the system in question. As we have seen, though, this very surfeit is an integral part of the grotesque.

In sum, the grotesque must be apprehended through its flaws, inter-subjective hybridity, and excess. Paradoxically, this kind of epistemology attests to *the impossibility of representing or attaining knowledge* through an all-encompassing-system that leaves no residue. Wolfgang Kayser indeed elaborates on how irrationality and absurdity constitute essential features of the grotesque. In so doing, he reveals the deep divide between classical paths to truth and representation and those taken by adherents of grotesque theories.

Kayser's Grotesque

Among the key elements in Kayser's figuration of the grotesque are the irrational, distorted, and *absurd*. From his standpoint, it is the absurd that ties the grotesque to the terrible, the daunting, and the shocking¹⁴.

In Kayser's estimation, confusion, fear, and even horror are frequently sown on account of the grotesque's strange and chaotic nature, so that the grotesque appears to share a close affinity with the fantastic for the world of dreams and surrealism. Furthermore, he avers that the grotesque radically contradicts rational laws and disrupts order, to the extent that those confronted with its presence feels engulfed by madness and dissimilitude. It is a realm where everything happens in an arbitrary fashion, through abstruse processes. Therefore, according to Kayser, the subjects feel as though they are in a tenuous position that is beyond their control:

The various forms of the grotesque are the most obvious and pronounced contradictions of any kind of rationalism and any systematic use of thought... [G]rotesqueness is constituted by a clashing contrast between form and content, the unstable mixture of heterogeneous elements, the explosive form of the paradoxical, which is both ridiculous and terrifying... THE GROTESQUE IS A PLAY WITH THE ABSURD.¹⁵

¹⁴ Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, p. 21.

¹⁵ Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, pp. 53, 187-188; emphasis in the original. Like Kayser, Yates and Thomson consider the absurd to be one of the main features of the grotesque. Thomson even argues that the Theater of the Absurd of, say, Beckett and Ionesco could be dubbed "grotesque theater." Yates, "An Introduction to the Grotesque," pp. 18; Thomson, *The Grotesque*, pp. 29-32.

It bears noting that Kayser refrains from attributing this sense of horror exclusively to the discord that is wrought by the grotesque. Rather the trepidation stems in part from the subject's perception of *change*, from the *passage* from a known, orderly state to one of confusion. In other words, the anxiety is a product of the *dissonance* that is generated by the sudden transformation of objects or situations that were familiar, pliable, and certain to something absurd and unpredictable.¹⁶ In this respect, Kayser's grotesque is reminiscent of Freud's *uncanny*, as both concepts are feature a *metamorphosis from familiar to strange*.¹⁷ On the other hand, these attributes set Kayser's conceptualization apart from that of, say, Bakhtin, who stresses laughter, humor, and enjoyment.

The Dionysian as Grotesque

For the purpose of explicating Nietzschean thought by dint of a grotesque outlook, it is incumbent upon us to relinquish some widely-held conceptions. Instead of continuing to regard Nietzsche as a metaphysician who was either unwilling or unable to liberate himself from the rationalist tradition and its systematic, logical quest for absolute truth, he should be seen as one of the first thinkers to reject classical metaphysics and propose a new philosophy of *difference*—one that underscores the contingency of language and rational distinctions as well as the epistemic-cum-ontological shortcomings of classical or metaphysical schools of thought¹⁸—in its place.

As various scholars have shown, there is a close affinity between the grotesque and the Dionysian, one of the mainstays of Nietzsche's philosophy.¹⁹ An archetype of exaggerated sexuality and *lust for life*, the Dionysian personifies corporeality, lack of order, excess, irrationality, and instability. Nietzsche himself described the Dionysian thus:

[T]he *Dionysian*...is brought home to us most intimately perhaps by the analogy of *drunkenness*. It is either under the influence of the narcotic draught...or with the potent coming of spring penetrating all nature with joy, that these Dionysian emotions awake, which, as they intensify, cause the subjective to vanish into *complete self-forgetfulness*...

¹⁶ Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, pp. 37, 184-185.

¹⁷ On the Freudian *uncanny*, see Freud, Sigmund, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, v. 17 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), pp. 19-60.

¹⁸ Such pictures of Nietzsche generally surface in the numerous works on the connection between Nietzschean thought and postmodern ideas and concepts. Among the important works in this corpus are Kain, Philip J., "Nietzsche, the Kantian Self, and Eternal Recurrence," *Idealistic Studies* 34:3 (Fall 2004): 225-237; Wolin, Richard, "The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism," *Ethics* 115:3 (April 9, 2005): 638-642. Also see Ansell-Pearson, Keith and Caygill, Howard, "On the Faith of the New Nietzsche," in eds. idem, *The Faith of the New Nietzsche* (Hants: Avebury, 1993); van der Will, Wilfried, "Nietzsche and Postmodernism" in eds. Keith Ansell-Pearson, Howard Caygill, *The Faith of the New Nietzsche*.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Danow, David K., *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995) pp. 138-140; Harpham, Geoffrey G., "The Grotesque: First Principles" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34:4 (Summer 1975): 466; Harpham, "An Introduction to the Grotesque;" Russo, Mary J., *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

Under the charm of the Dionysian not only is *the union of man and man reaffirmed*, but Nature which has become estranged, hostile, or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her prodigal son, man... Now, each one feels himself not only *united, reconciled, blended* with his neighbor, but as one with him... In song and in dance man expresses himself as a member of a higher community; he has forgotten how to walk and speak; he is about to take a dancing flight to the air...²⁰

There is a striking resemblance between this passage and Bakhtin's descriptions of the grotesque, especially the carnival. Nietzsche's Dionysian seems to express an almost *mystical union* between "man and man" and between subject and nature. These bonds are indeed highly-reminiscent of the *holistic, amalgamating* spirit of the Bakhtinian grotesque. The Russian intellectual's subject *fuses* with nature to the extent of nearly losing his or her individuality, thereby creating a *fleshed-whole* of nebulous and indefinite borders and limits. Moreover, Bakhtin's grotesque celebrates life and, as above-noted, spiritual *amity*. It also bears a resemblance to Kayser's grotesque, as they both share the irrationality and disorder of the Dionysian. At any rate, Bakhtin's grotesque is closer to Nietzsche's Dionysian on account of its inherent mirth.

John Sallis contends that Nietzsche's Dionysian is the epitome of *excess*.²¹ According to Sallis, Nietzsche used this paradigm to eclipse the classical and metaphysical models of thinking and aesthetics. The Dionysian surfeit is achieved by breaching limits and erasing borders between subject and the world and between subject and other. Like the grotesque excess, this outlook turns the world and its logical dichotomies on their head, even questioning truth and order. In Sallis' view, Nietzsche sought to create an image of unbridled ecstasy that deconstructs all *normal, completed, and fixed* types of subjectivity. The Apollonian's restrained subjectivity is transgressed by the Dionysian's excessive subjectivity. This distinction is quite similar to the one that informs Bakhtin's description of the official feasts and carnivals during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance:

In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that *it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators...* Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it... As opposed to the official feast, one might say that the *carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order*; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of *becoming, change and renewal*. It was hostile to all that was *immortalized and completed*.²²

²⁰ Nietzsche, *KSA*, v. 1, pp. 29, 30; idem, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Clifton P. Fadiman (New York: The Modern Library, 1927), s. 1, pp. 955, 956.

²¹ Sallis, John, "Dionysius – In Excess of Metaphysics," in eds. David Farrell Krell and David Wood, *Exceedingly Nietzsche: Aspects of Contemporary Nietzsche Interpretation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 3-13.

²² Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 7, 10; my emphasis.

The carnival is a paradigm of grotesque realism, for its chief objective, according to Bakhtin, is to lower “all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract...to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity.”²³ Likewise, the carnival blurs the differences between actors and spectators; it is where the self becomes a *Dionysian* (i.e., one that is tightly intertwined with the world), to the point of being unable to accurately characterize or determine his or her limits.

Against this backdrop, Nietzschean thought is clearly one of *surfeit* and *exaggeration* – features that bind his thought to the grotesque outlook. Insofar as Peter Burgard is concerned, these traits not only permeate the content of Nietzsche’s work, but his style as well.²⁴

Nietzsche’s plethoric style is indeed laden with grotesque forms.²⁵ In the pages ahead, I will touch on some other aspects of the intellectual’s style that bear witness to the inherent grotesqueness of his entire approach.

The Mask

The grotesque characteristics of the Dionysian notwithstanding,²⁶ I would argue that perhaps a more interesting, if less obvious, resemblance to the grotesque can be found in Nietzsche’s very way of thinking and, all the more so, in the *style* with which he forms and conveys his ideas. In fact, given its penchant for *exaggeration* as well as its unstable, heterogenic, and incoherent nature, his entire philosophy can be said to fall under the heading of the grotesque. More specifically, Nietzschean thought is never based on a single, straightforward principle, as it invariably shuns the lucid, constant, and one-sided. It is without doubt an eclectic philosophy, built from the ‘*remains*’ of sundry—at times even contradictory—pieces that ultimately form a variegated, *grotesque* aggregate.

As befits a philosophy stressing the unclear, the complex, and the bewildering, the *mask* is a central theme in Nietzsche’s work. From his standpoint, any attempt to think or talk about *the truth* or *reality*, much less extract the *naked* truth, is obscene. The mask is a compulsory need for anyone seeking to delve beyond a superficial understanding and fathom the intricacy of the world and the numerous meanings that aptly describe reality. As Nietzsche himself remarked:

Everything that is profound loves the mask: the profoundest things have a hatred e-

²³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 19-20.

²⁴ Burgard, Peter J. (ed.), “Introduction,” in *Nietzsche and the Feminine* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), pp. 12-13.

²⁵ On the relationship between *exaggerated writing* (hyperbole) and the grotesque, see Harpham, “The Grotesque First Principles,” p. 466. Among the works that explore the function of hyperbole in Nietzschean thought is the chapter “Hyperbole and the Case of Eternal Recurrence,” in Magnus, Bernd, Mileur, Jean-Pierre, and Stewart, Sanley, *Nietzsche’s Case: Philosophy as/and Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 138-145.

²⁶ The description of the Dionysian world as a “monster of energy,” a world of power that grows out of itself, bursts out and *swallows* everything is highly reminiscent of Bakhtin’s accounts of the grotesque carnival. *KSA* v. 12, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967 [1885]), s. 1067, pp. 549-550.

ven of figure and likeness... [T]here is not only deceit behind the mask – there is so much goodness in craft. A man who has depths in his shame meets his destiny and his delicate decisions upon paths which few ever reach, and with regard to the existence of which his nearest and most intimate friends may be ignorant; his mortal danger conceals itself from their eyes, and equally so his regained security.²⁷

In Nietzsche's view, then, the mask represents complexity and deepness. The simplicity and shallowness of reality itself and the *transparent subject* must be replaced by a *masked reality* and a veiled subjectivity. In contrast to the philosophical ideal of trying to be as transparent or *naked* as possible, Nietzsche wrote of the need for *disguise*. It is precisely this feigning spirit, this irony, ambiguity, and the distance between ourselves and our own beliefs that will allow us to be true philosophers, self critical and profound.²⁸

The mask as well as the puppet are typical grotesque objects. Both exemplify ambiguity in the sense that it is never clear to which world they belong. The mask imitates life, but is an inanimate object; whereas the puppet takes this one step further by moving and gesturing as though it were alive. For example, Bakhtin notes that

The mask is connected with the joy of *change* and reincarnation, with *gay relativity* and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to *transition*, to metamorphoses, the *violation of natural boundaries*... It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image... [I]t reveals *the essence of the grotesque*.²⁹

In my estimation, the chief expression of this need for masks is not to be found in the *content* of Nietzschean thought. Besides helping us comprehend the abstruse and hidden dimensions of the world, the mask symbolizes, above all, an epistemological position. Moreover, it speaks to the way in which philosophy must be written, formulated, and expressed: instead of aspiring to a *naked truth* through the normative rational dichotomies and paradigms of classical philosophical language and thought, thinkers must adopt a masked writing style and search for a truth that is veiled in its own right. Against this backdrop, it would appear as though a grotesque perspective, especially that of the mask, not only inform several of Nietzsche's philosophical ideas, but underpin his entire approach to philosophy.

²⁷ *KSA* v. 5, p. 57; *BGE*, s. 40, p. 425. For more on Nietzsche and the mask as an important philosophical (mainly epistemological) resource, see Lampert, Laurence, "'Beyond Good and Evil': Nietzsche's 'Free Spirit' Mask," *International Studies in Philosophy* 16 (1984): 41-52; Zanardi, William J, "Nietzsche's Speech of Indirection: Commentary on Laurence Lampert's "'Beyond Good and Evil': Nietzsche's 'Free Spirit' Mask,'" *International Studies in Philosophy* 16 (1984): 53-56; Alderman, Harold, "Nietzsche's Masks," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 12:3 (1972): 365-388; Brogan, Walter, "Zarathustra: The Tragic Figure of the Last Philosopher," *Research in Phenomenology* 24 (1994): 42-56; *inter alia*.

²⁸ *KSA*, v. 5, pp. 57-58; *BGE*, s. 40, pp. 425-426.

²⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 39, 40; my emphasis. The mask and the puppet are also typical *uncanny* objects; see Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* v.17, pp. 31-37. As such, they turn up not only in Bakhtin's grotesque, but in most studies on this topic. E.g., Thomson, *The Grotesque*, p. 35; Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*.

Philosophy as Literature: Metaphor, Aphorism and the Grotesque

‘Is this philosophy or literature?’ There is a wide consensus that this question does not apply to Nietzsche, for he clearly integrated philosophy with fictional writing.³⁰ Moreover, he was one of the first thinkers to exhibit this combination in such a conspicuous manner. This hybridity or clashing synthesis also hints to a *grotesque* Nietzsche, an attribute that is even more salient in other aspects of his work.

Nietzsche’s *metaphorical* style inevitably brings to mind the grotesque. Much has been written on the role of metaphor in his writing.³¹ The German philosopher not only employed these devices, but emphasized metaphorical interpretations. In fact, he believed them to be the original meanings of all concepts in language (including the truth). However, according to Nietzsche, most people, philosophers included, have forgotten these meanings. He even argued that one of the cardinal ‘sins’ of philosophy has been to interpret concepts *literally*, rather than metaphorically:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.³²

This passage suggests that Nietzsche’s metaphorical style also connects him to the grotesque worldview. Like the grotesque, the metaphor *plays* with the world, transforming it into a picture, a work of art that incorporates both the *imaginary* and the *real*. Although the metaphor can never be equated with a concept, the latter is hardly foreign to it, as the concept always refers to a metaphor.³³ Both key elements in Nietzsche’s writing,

³⁰ For more on Nietzsche’s philosophy as literature, see Magnus et. al., *Nietzsche’s Case*.

³¹ E.g., Moore, Gregory, *Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Sarah Kofman also expounds on Nietzsche’s use of metaphors. See, for instance, Kofman, Sarah, *Nietzsche and Metaphor* (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), pp. 17, 18.

Nietzsche’s metaphorical style steers his philosophy towards the world of poetry and literature. Through metaphor, the limits between *the real* and *imaginary worlds* are blurred and a new synthesis is created between the two realms. The result is one of the most prevalent ‘grotesque combinations.’ For more on this topic, see Deming, Richard, “Strategies of Overcoming: Nietzsche and the Will to Metaphor,” *Philosophy and Literature* 28:1 (April 2004): 60-73; Heckman, Peter, “Nietzsche’s Clever Animal: Metaphor in ‘Truth and Falsity,’” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 24:4 (1991): 301-321; Gooding-Williams, Robert, “Literary Fiction as Philosophy: The Case of Nietzsche’s ‘Zarathustra,’” *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (November 1986): 667-675; Schrift, Alan D, “Language, Metaphor, Rhetoric: Nietzsche’s Deconstruction of Epistemology,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 23 (July 1985): 371-396; *inter alia*.

³² Nietzsche, *KSA* V. 1, pp. 880-881; idem, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), pp. 46-47.

³³ Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, pp. 14-15. According to Kofman, this runs counter to the metaphysical Aristotelian tradition whereby metaphor always refers to a concept.

metaphor and aphorism are dynamic, kinetic, and mercurial.

Sarah Kofman suggests that one of the main characteristics of Nietzsche's style—even surpassing his metaphoric writing—is his willingness to approach language in a humorous manner. In fact, spontaneity, laughter, and a strong reluctance to take language, truth, or philosophy seriously undergird his opposition to any form of philosophical tyranny.³⁴ As already noted, this blithe-cum-iconoclastic attitude is redolent of Bakhtin's ludicrous, playful, and amusing grotesque, which is manifest in the following passage from *Rabelais and His World*:

[Carnival laughter] is, first of all, a festive laughter... [–] the laughter of *all the people*. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed to all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its *gay relativity*. Third, this laughter is *ambivalent*: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival.³⁵

Nietzsche's metaphorical-aphoristic writing is vibrant, combustible, ever-changing, and “essentially incomplete.” It is comprised of different pieces, morsels, and is a never-ending work in progress. The same can be said for Nietzsche's philosophical *content*, which is metaphorical in its own right. In an effort to assay the strong link between both Nietzsche's metaphorical-cum-developmental writing and his holistic view of the world and between his fluid writing and his conception of reality as a dynamic whole that lacks clear limits and boundaries, Alison herself draws a correlation between *metaphor* and *metamorphosis*: “the system Metaphor-Metamorphosis is essentially *one*... [W]ord is no longer opposed to thing, nor thought to nature, *logos* to *physis*, soul to body, speech to writing, presence to absence. In short, Man is no longer opposed to World.”³⁶

Likewise, the grotesque and grotesque body can represent an embodied, ambiguous, hybrid, undetermined, and ever-shifting reality. The grotesque body exemplifies *flexible* human subjectivity: an open and interconnected embodied subject who, pursuant to the Nietzschean view, is at peace with the world. This argument is perhaps best illustrated by Bakhtin:

The *unfinished* and *open* [i.e., grotesque] body (dying, bringing forth and being born) is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is *blended* with the world, with animals, with objects. It is cosmic, it represents the entire material bodily world in all its elements.... Thus the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the *closed*, smooth and *impenetrable* surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths.... [The grotesque is] the most vivid expression of *the body as not impenetrable but open*.³⁷

Kofman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, p. 3.³⁴

³⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 11-12; my emphasis.

³⁶ Allison, David B. (ed.), “Introduction” in *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, pp. xviii, xix.

³⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 24, 26-27, 317-318, 339; my emphasis.

Conclusion

In my estimation, the grotesque constitutes an untapped model of inter-subjective reality and disparity that offers a comprehensive new meaning for Nietzsche's philosophy. The grotesque *traces* his style and content, especially the unique view of reality as all-encompassing and interconnected, on the one hand, and multi-faceted, heterogenic, dynamic, fluid, and changing, on the other. Moreover, this school of thought has the wherewithal to *portray* reality as Nietzsche sought to: a commingled, inter-subjective, and excessive totality.

Just like Nietzschean philosophy, grotesque worldviews prefer embodiment to disembodied consciousness as well as surfeit and hybridity to clean, measured, balanced, and perfectly-defined spaces. In essence, this predilection for irrationality, excess, and hybridity is what connects both the grotesque and Nietzsche's thought with a holistic reality. Furthermore, the excesses of the body (and excesses in general) are an important symbol of heterogeneity. More specifically, they are the portions that are extracted or eliminated when philosophers try to overcome disparities. The need to root out the superfluous comes up time and again in numerous schools of thought. Like Nietzsche's philosophical style and content, the grotesque is profuse and thus imbued with difference. Surfeit epitomizes the palpable and irreducible. Neither philosophy nor science can abstract, reduce, or generalize excess, which by very definition is immune to this sort of abridgment.

Philosophers can take stock of heterogeneity and otherness by renouncing the objective of reaching the eternal and absolute, of achieving a-historical and universal abstract knowledge. Any work or corpus (not least grotesque theories and Nietzsche's philosophy) that explores the irrational, the irreducible, the accidental, and the excessive are compelled to embrace difference – that which transcends our own selves and threatens our sameness, our normality, our well-defined and snug presence in the world. I contend that this alterity—this absolute otherness that we are totally immersed in and from which we garner our existential meaning—can be rendered tangible and *concrete* through Nietzschean thought as viewed from the lens of the grotesque.

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