

Rethinking Theory

GENERAL EDITOR

Gary Saul Morson

CONSULTING EDITORS

Robert Alter

Frederick Crews

John M. Ellis

Caryl Emerson

BAKHTIN AND THE CLASSICS

Edited by

R. Bracht Branham

Northwestern University Press
Evanston, Illinois

*Coming to Terms
with Bakhtin's Carnival:
Ancient, Modern,
sub Specie Aeternitatis*

Caryl Emerson

Protean carnival has long held center stage in debates over Bakhtin's legacy. In the postcommunist period alone, Russian readings present us with a remarkable spectrum. Some see Bakhtin's enthusiasm for carnival as Christian, godly, eucharistic, inspired by the reverence for transfigured matter that is characteristic of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Others, equally visionary, see carnival as sinister energy—demonic, violent, nihilistic, indifferent to individual pain and death, and thus in its essence and its effects Stalinist. Still others have classified carnival as a form of play—either the dangerous, disobedient sort of playfulness that strategically opposes itself to centralized power, or the more stupefied sort of foolishness that emerges in a population already traumatized by terror. A final, more sober group of scholars has investigated the carnival worldview in a neutral, hermeneutic way, as part of the academic study of folklore or theories of literary evolution.

These are all worthy, if incompatible, readings. But Bakhtin's legacy in this realm deserves more than a mere catalogue.¹ Carnival logic is too organically prominent, too omnipresent as that which stitches together his religious and secular concerns.² Coming to terms with carnival and its place in Bakhtin's philosophy would also bring real benefit to literary studies. It would help discipline the cult and trim back those ideas that now have the force of sanctified truth (for example, the canonical authority of Bakhtinian carnival for all types of "magic realism" in the Latin American lands); it might also help us to separate fact from fiction in Bakhtin's biography, so strewn with the heroic grotesque of rumor and legend that one is tempted to dismiss the life itself as hopelessly carnivalized.³ Happily, a mass of archival material, in Bakhtin's own hand and by the hands of students and friends, has been published in the last ten years. The intellectual sources of Bakhtin's theories are being filled in by scholars and sleuths.⁴ Much of this testimony is contradictory, however, and even seems calculated to mystify: as Ken Hirschkop

put the matter in his recent study: "For a long time, we knew very little about Bakhtin's life. Thanks to the efforts of postglasnost Bakhtin scholarship, we now know even less."¹⁵ In one area, however, there is no dispute: Bakhtin was devoted to the carnival idea throughout his life. He associated it not only with the medieval feast and the public square but with a more general freedom from institutions—and also, increasingly, with gratitude. During the war years at Petrograd University, he and his brother ran a mock study circle, "Omphalos" [Navel], whose members took pride in being "jesters from scholarship";¹⁶ near the end of his life, Bakhtin frequently remarked on the "purely carnivalesque good fortune" of his fate—a political exile who survived Stalinism and spent his final years in a well-equipped hospital through the intervention of Andropov's daughter, one of his devoted students. In this essay, I will ask what it means to see and to feel life in a carnival way. I will also point out several paradoxes in Bakhtin's attitude toward the comic, suggest how contemporary genre theorists and philosophers of laughter might provide a context for Bakhtin's sacralized carnival idea, and wonder out loud whether such a spread of sensitivities and concerns can ever be reduced to an ethics.

Carnival: A Defense

It has seemed to many that the dynamics of carnival contradict the responsible and individualizing impulses of dialogue. Bakhtin himself saw no fatal contradiction, however. At no point did he consider the carnival mode necessarily disrespectful of personal freedom or indifferent to real history. Quite the contrary: he loaded an enormous number of virtues onto carnival space and time—and we might remind ourselves of some of them. Carnival-type laughter dissipates fear, encourages free inquiry, and is thus a route to knowledge. What is more, laughing on the public square is radically democratic: everyone is free to participate in it, there are no entry requirements except an open mind and a thick skin, nothing has to be learned or earned. But in an odd twist, laughter—especially when incongruous or unexpected—can also be elitist and aristocratic. As with the early Christians who laughed while being fed to the lions, under certain conditions it takes fantastical discipline, spiritual courage, and a degree of self-confidence that approaches arrogance to be able to laugh. Bakhtin, like Freud in his fragment "Humor," surely sensed that ridiculing oneself—that is, "laughing down" the coward in oneself—can preempt (or better, usurp) another's unfriendly response. As such, self-ridicule is a resoundingly healthy gesture, a profound form of self-affirmation and even of self-praise.

In a curious way, then, laughter can enable us and empower us—but not as our contemporary theorists of power assume. Carnival laughter, which is based on modesty, inclusivity, and a sense of our relative smallness and transitoriness in the

world of others (or in God's world), is in fact a rebuttal of power-based etiologies. Laughter, in Bakhtin's use of it, alters personal attitudes; it does not change the givens of material existence. It facilitates what Epicurus held to be the proper limit of our pleasure, namely the removal of pain, understood as both physical discomfort and mental anxiety. We know that Bakhtin stubbornly adhered to this beneficent, transfiguring view of laughter throughout his life, insisting—despite all the demonstrated meanness of satire and all the potential for hurt in parody—that the central moment of true laughter was the moment of relief and joy. Among the archival fragments published in the first volume to appear of Bakhtin's *Collected Works* (volume 5, the writings of the 1940s–1960s), we find a brief and rather critical reference to *Le rire*. Henri Bergson's 1899 study of laughter (Bergson 1959): "Bergson's entire theory knows only the negative side of laughter," Bakhtin writes. "[But] laughter is a corrective measure; the comic is the nonobligatory."¹⁷

The carnival spirit, then, is not only democratic, aristocratic, a carrier of knowledge, an agent for self-correction and relief; it is also healthy. Since it laughs down the bad, and since it contains no well-developed categories of memory, it does not look backward for its answers, as do most psychoanalytic therapies—which would explain, at least to a Bakhtinian mind, their mediocre rates of cure. Carnival laughter is simply not equipped to look for scapegoats or to glorify old hurts. It is not designed to keep us endlessly in analysis. What is more, although carnival is group oriented and strenuously interpersonal, still, in contrast to many archaic primal cures, there is no trace in it of that impersonal, violent, maniacal element associated with some Nietzschean variants of the Dionysian impulse. Carnival laughter does not complain, nor will it embarrass us in public or in private. And since it does not remember, it has nothing to forgive.

Finally: throughout his writings, Bakhtin hints that laughter serves as a precocious means for deflating the genuinely corrosive emotions: regret, envy, disappointment, anger. As far as we can tell, Bakhtin was not especially alert to the benefits a given culture might reap from the results of *collective* anger, or envy, or disgust—such benefits, say, as political reform movements, cleanup campaigns against public corruption, or revolutionary social change. Such responses he tended to denigrate as satire, "one-sided," and thus uncreative: a merely instrumental response to the world. Bakhtin was a personalist. In addition he was something of a phenomenologist. He knew that anger and envy hinder perception. Obstruction of vision is a serious handicap, for, like his early mentor Kant, what Bakhtin values above all is clarity of perception, so essential to the scope and calibration of intellect. One theme that runs through all Bakhtin's writings is the immense difficulty of seeing ourselves soberly, from the outside, as another person might see us—a person for whom we are peripheral, no more than a temporary convenience or a passing stimulus. In a rueful insight appended to some notes toward an essay

my own self, it is only natural that *what* I see—the noble shadow, as it were, cast by Hegel's self-alienated Subjective Spirit—will appear to me as "someone else." Such self-alienation, celebrated with gusto in the essay "Epic and Novel," caused Bakhtin little anguish. He saw in it an endless potential for rejuvenation and an exciting new understanding of wholeness. But his attachment to the carnival idea, so rich in distancings, is nevertheless paradoxical within the context of his thought as a whole.

Several Paradoxes

First, Bakhtin is committed to laughter—as a physiological, psychological, and sociological truth—but in general, he is not a rigorous student of the passions. (The closest we can come to placing him in a "school" is probably alongside David Hume and Adam Smith, who also held that communication is pleasurable and natural, and inspires us toward sympathetic coexperience.) Sentiments other than pity and love are hardly ever invoked in Bakhtin's writings; much less are the passions examined, ranked, or sequenced. Again like his mentors Hegel and Kant, Bakhtin believed that human understanding of a culturally valuable sort—and the survival of culture was the highest priority for philosophers of the Marburg school—is not mystically emotive or untranscribable. Understanding is knowable, conscious, and cognitive. But unlike his august predecessors Hegel and Kant, Bakhtin never systematically discussed the relation between the comic and tragic passions, between laughter and tragedy, or between comedy and ethical duty. And so our first paradox: laughter and the comic are reflexes that the highly cerebral, morally astute Bakhtin embraces and places at the center of his carnival scenarios. What sort of knowledge can they offer, and are there any duties that come with the terrain?

Once we raise the specter of "duty," another paradox follows. The carnival experience is defined as humanizing, consoling, wisdom-bearing. But try as we might, it is difficult to picture for long a laughing carnival face. Does carnival *have* a face? Does that face have eyes? If it does, then those eyes don't make eye-contact. It's the mouth and the cheeks that matter, a sort of buttocks promoted to above the neck. Eye contact is heavy with obligation, and laughter is "the realm of the non-obligatory." In fact, this realm is so effaced that Bakhtin's carnival laughter appears not to be attached at all to individual bodies with histories or memories of their own. What does the carnival body want? It is not overtly political or greedy for material goods. Least of all is it allowed to be mean-spirited, superior to others, aggressive, or satirical, even when it is the featured hero of those sadomasochistic passages in Rabelais. What is more, Bakhtin intimates that there is something precious about "carnival experience" that we are no longer able to appreciate—something that people of earlier historical epochs were able to grasp, but that modern humanity

on Gustave Flaubert, composed in 1944, Bakhtin wrote: "Everything gets in the way of a person having a good look back at his own self."⁸

Precisely laughter will help us to get this "good look," since it promotes modesty and scales down pretensions to authority. In his personal behavior, Bakhtin was a Stoic; in his values and literary tastes, this admirer of Diogenes and Menippus was most certainly a Cynic. When disgusted, disillusioned, or angry, he would recommend silence—or laughter. Such options are absolutely in keeping with everything we know about Bakhtin's personality and relations with the world: distanced, dignified, apolitical to the extent that this was possible, nonresponsive to negative criticism, ungoadable, and honorable in the old-fashioned, condescending sense that he expected little self-control from others but large amounts of it from himself. Bakhtin desired and respected dialogue—but doubtless felt that not everyone in his immediate environment deserved it; if the interlocutors on hand did not measure up, then it was no less real to hold dialogues with Socrates, Dostoevsky, or Rabelais, personalities far less dead and far more available for responsible exchange. Under stress, in public situations, when answers are expected, the words we utter tend to explicate things and thus to obligate us. Laughter, in contrast, is "the realm of the nonobligatory." A laugh is responsive—but it preserves the privacy and multiple meanings of the response. It loosens up definitions, but without insisting on any specific replacement terms. It cannot insist on them, because laughter, as a reflex of muscles and lungs, is in principle dynamic, that is, destructive of fixed states. One cannot engage in this activity for long or at the same level of intensity without appearing (and perhaps even becoming) hysterical or possessed. It works in bursts. Since a burst of laughter—like a burst of shame—is a bridge to a new state or perception, it is always transitory.⁹

Thus laughter is a wonderful human resource. It should be stressed, however, that the virtues Bakhtin sees in carnival are not unique to his vision: they are the mainstream arguments on behalf of laughter routinely made by literary theorists and psychologists who would rescue the comedic genres from the millennia of neglect they have suffered through Aristotle's casual dismissal, at least in his extant texts, of all that is "nontragic."¹⁰ Of the three basic theories about why we laugh—because we feel superior (the view of Plato and Aristotle), because we are struck by an incongruity (the view of Kant, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Bergson), and because we seek relief (Freud's psychophysiological explanations)¹¹—Bakhtin would have endorsed the second and sympathized, probably, with the third. Where he departs from these classic theorists and contributes an intonation of his own is in his emphasis on the sanity, goodness, and normalcy of a self that is split and "alienated" by laughter. Laughter not only makes me feel good (and bonds me with other laughers); it is also the most reliable means at my disposal for remaining "noncoincident with myself."¹² This is the most ordinary move in the world, Bakhtin insists, not at all the stuff of trauma. When I look back (or over) at

no longer can. We have now arrived at the second paradox, which feels like an inconsistency in Bakhtin's sense of history.

In general, Bakhtin was an optimist about the growth and differentiation of human consciousness over time. If we take as normative his essay on the chronotope and his drafts for a study of the bildungsroman, we see how profoundly Bakhtin believed that over time, meaning must always *grow*. As literature matures, the consciousness and initiative of its heroes are ever more individuated and personally "voiced": slowly, the disjointed moments, interchangeable fates, and blind chance of a Greek romance give way to metamorphosis and then to genuine agency, culminating in the fully distinct and answerable personalities created by Goethe and Dostoevsky. One of Bakhtin's most thoughtful critics, Graham Pechey, has even suggested that Bakhtin, after putting forth several successive and provisional "candidates for immortality" in his work (the personality, the common people), ultimately cast *meaning itself* in the role of major hero.¹³ "The story of meaning," Pechey writes, "is, like much of Bakhtin's own story, a tale of exile which is often the richer in outcome for the length of its duration." That is, no matter where we start or end our journey, the longer we take to get there, the more of value we will have to say. Ideas, as they age, are not purified or reduced to a single point. Duration itself is a virtue. In Pechey's words, this cumulative, unregulated, unsystematized concept of historicity—what Bakhtin calls "Great Time"—reflects a faith in the "eternity of semantic potential."

This faith that Bakhtin professed in the antientropic growth of meaning Pechey calls "the epistemological sublime." I will return to this idea, for such a sublime state of affairs can be said to characterize an entire subset of literary genres, all of which feature a mode of laughing self-awareness that insists on seeing the world as chaos. This is chaos not so much in the negative, stressful sense of that word as in the positive sense that the term enjoys in classical Chinese philosophy, where it indicates not the absence of order but the sum of all orders, chaos understood as a field that can always accept *one more variable* and not be violated by it.¹⁴ Such a chaotic mode of being, I believe, can house all that is truly essential in Bakhtin's carnival. In the Western tradition, we glimpse such a worldview at work in Diogenes and Menippus. Closer to our own time—and to philosophers dear to Bakhtin's heart—it is the *Kunstschaos* of the German Romantics, especially Friedrich Schlegel, who struggled to elevate the genre of the fragment into a genuine art form. This "chaotic" principle is also germane to Hegel's discussion of the aesthetic shape of history. What remains to us after tragedy has exhausted itself, removed its masks, replaced its masks, and—willingly or no—had a good look back at its own self: That precious residue Hegel calls "The Self-Conscious Language: Comedy."¹⁵

If, however, laughter and the comic are so indispensable to Bakhtin, and if the steady growth of meaning over time is a central preoccupation of his philosophy, one cannot help but notice that carnival laughter is radically unlike

other historically developing entities in Bakhtin's cosmos. To this general growth pattern of good things, laughter is the major exception. Looked at over historical time, laughter has gotten thinner and worse.¹⁶ It is "reduced," collapsed into satire, moved from day to night, from Eros to Thanatos, from the public square to the smutty closet. Elsewhere in Bakhtin's scenarios, the future is favored over the past; the forward-looking novel preferred to the "closed-down" epic. But here, in the realm of carnival, there is nostalgia and regret. The past of human laughter is rich—and irretrievable. How might we explain this grim vision?

Several hypotheses are possible. Gary Saul Morson has suggested that political cunning might have played a role. According to Morson, Bakhtin celebrates an archaic, anarchic, Dionysian vision of carnival in his study of Rabelais but ignores the more documentable influence of Attic comedy—because, in the Stalinist 1930s, Bakhtin himself was playing the role of Aristophanes; he too was a cultural conservative in a Saturnine state corrupted by mob rule, and that fact had to be masked.¹⁷ Another explanation, hinted at earlier in this essay, might lie in the relationship between laughter, privacy, and modesty. During the Stalinist years, when lyrics were being routinely politicized and epics (even opera libretti) Sovietized, it could well have seemed to Bakhtin that only laughter of the most primal, unworked sort stood a chance of resisting the distortions of "progressive" historical treatment. Some have even suggested that carnival was part of a larger archaic protest on Bakhtin's part against industrialization and modernization. From what we can tell, Bakhtin did not particularly welcome industrialized society, whether communist or capitalist.¹⁸ Imperfectly or partially realized, modernization meant economic hardship. And when successful, it smoothed out difference, stuffed people with ready-made things, taught you to swallow and hoard what you earned, harnessed you to the golden calf, and killed carnival.

Against that philistine model, Bakhtin would advise us to cultivate the ability to put ourselves in many different places—rapidly, sequentially, and at will. We should struggle against the natural tendency to affirm our own *I* as a fixed center of anything, and withhold from the experience of that *I* anything like a final word. We must, he insists, accomplish a Copernican revolution on our own self—not, note, by denying that self or by discrediting its experience (to do so would simply dissolve the self) but by *multiplying* its experience, by moving it continually and temporarily outside of itself, and by striving to "look back in at itself" from an outside position. And this must be done joyfully, gratefully, with the awareness that all these athletic maneuvers will never change the material givens of the world.

Conceived of in this way, and invoking the religious imagery that permeates many of Bakhtin's most intimate scenarios, a carnival attitude (again displaying its archaic side) can bring to a person the same benefits that gazing at an icon can bring to a soul in distress. We turn toward an icon in a needful state, when the spirit requires new ways out. Gazing at an icon is not a denial of the world. Nor

is it a seriously intended substitute for the world. Least of all is it the "bad gaze" of contemporary literary theory, which is supposed to reify, objectify, rigidify, and thus insult the thing it looks at. Gazing at an icon always consoles and transfigures the one on the outside. Transfiguration occurs in part because the holy image is not merely an object. In itself it contains dialogic energy—which is to say, the icon is gazing back. (The two parties look *into* each other, *not at*.) Also, the proper reading of iconic space, like a proper orientation of the body during carnival, requires that we dislocate ourselves from single-point perspective. I must free myself from the prejudice that my body is at some focal center of the universe, poised along a visual corridor, ready to "walk into" the painting on my own terms. In short, we must be liberated from the thought that the comfortable perspective on things from my body is the only perspective that is real.

To be sure, if measured against the realistic optics of a photograph or a Renaissance portrait, Christian Orthodox icons do contain "inconsistencies." The flat, inverted planes of an icon offer the viewer a set of incompatible, internally irreconcilable, "unrealistic" perspectives.¹⁹ Inconsistency and visual paradox are part of the strategy. Gazing along those strange planes can enrich our repertory of responses and help us to survive. I believe that on some level Bakhtin—a devout Orthodox believer—hoped that carnival would function as an icon in just this sense. Of course, the *incarnations* of carnival are governed by an aesthetics wholly opposite to that of Eastern Orthodox religious art: ample three-dimensional volumes (forbidden in the Orthodox sanctuary); folds of flesh in place of the ascetic and serenely seeing eye; scuffles—albeit always cheerful—on the public square instead of contemplation and stasis. But the spiritual harvest is comparable. We become more agile and hopeful. For Bakhtin, carnival is a "moment of transfer" from one mood to the next, an organ, as it were, for the production of one's own freedom of response. In this sense only can we speak of Bakhtin's modernism. As regards literature there is hardly a trace of it. But twentieth-century modernist icons such as Picasso's Cubist guitars, with their flexible mapping and overlapping of space, provide the sort of visual freedom that the carnival vision also holds out. Carnival is always surplus oriented (*izbytochnyi*) and produces *more* ways in, and more unexpected ways out, than one needs. Thus such art can never be fully utilitarian, representational, or accountable in a strictly economic sense.

The above argument is yet another reason why Bakhtin might have been so drawn to Dostoevsky. That great Russian novelist argued in much the same way against the economic materialists and nihilists of his own 1860s. If I am to be free—Dostoevsky wrote *à propos* of the radical journalists who boasted of valuing boots over Shakespeare and cabbage soup over the Sistine Madonna—what I really need in my life is an unreachable *ideal*, not some balance sheet.²⁰ An ideal will always grow alongside us, whereas a balance sheet breathes death. It also explains why Dostoevsky and Bakhtin, living out their lives in a materialist age,

were almost clinically interested in miracles, those moments where the absolutely unaccountable occurs. Several fine studies have been carried out recently on the theme of Bakhtin and the "apophatic tradition"—which is, in effect, the ideal of *not* naming, of resisting any attempt to limit a thing through frames or definitions for it.²¹ At its extreme point, apophatic practice approaches the ideal of a kenotic emptying-out. Such kenosis leaves the spirit nourished but the body, and the future, unencumbered. Key for Bakhtin, it appears, was the freedom to be found in plenitude without accumulation.

Plenitude that does not pile up: such is the logic of carnival abundance. It comes, goes, does not stick, should not stick: it is useful only as a lubricant for the spirit. One can see, in Rabelais's novel, how all those outrageous carnival catalogues—that menu of codpieces and arse swipes for Gargantua that we get in the opening chapters, for example—are hilarious precisely because they provide us with superfluous abundance, and a parody of both epic heroism and utilitarian bookkeeping. Here is your list, since you require a list—but all it proves is that the richness of the material world is inexhaustible and not to be contained within it. Carnival writing takes the sober, archaic genre of the catalogue and the inventory and makes it joyous and fertile. And this, Bakhtin insists, is what all true novels do.

Larger Contexts

Let me now attempt to put Bakhtin's "spiritualized" tasks for carnival into some broader perspective. As suggested earlier, the virtues that Bakhtin bestows on carnival laughter—fearlessness, flexibility, survival, ambivalence, mental and psychological relief—are the routine ones celebrated by philosophers of laughter and apologists for the comedic. To illuminate Bakhtin (and as a tribute to his classificatory mind), we will briefly consider sections of three other studies that, in defiance of Aristotle, raise the comedic to serious and even quasi-religious heights. I will then close on a concern that lies deep at the core of Bakhtin's thought, at the intersection of his most precious genres and modes: how a carnival approach to the world is inherently a theory of creativity.

Our first case study is the third and final part of Peter Berger's *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (1997). Berger, an eminent sociologist of religion, shares Bakhtin's positive vision of the comedic, but without any trace of Bakhtinocentrism. (Bakhtinian carnival gets only brief and dutiful mention, as part of a chapter entitled "*Homo Ridiculus: Social Constructions of the Comic*.") Displaying the familiar reflex of dependence on Aristotelian criteria, Berger classifies the comic dimension according to the way it deals with its putative opposite, the tragic sense. Half a dozen types are identified. *Benign* humor—mellow, relaxing, valuable to us as a diversion—simply banishes the tragic. *Black* or *gallows* humor defies the

tragic, laughing directly into its face. *Grotesque* humor absorbs the tragic into a generally absurd universe, usually without explanations. *Tragicomedy*, in contrast, aims to provide consolation within a recognizably real world—and thus balances the miserable and the marvelous, with the result that the tragic is, as it were, confused and “suspended.” There are also less evasive comedic strategies (many with real teeth in them): *satire*, for example, which turns the tragic side of life into a weapon. The final category discussed, *wit*, transforms the potentially tragic into an intellectual game. In his final part, Berger addresses the “theology of the comic.”

“Some religions,” Berger writes, “are more humorous than others” (1997: 197). Compared with the laughing gods of the Orient, the monotheistic, Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are a mournful lot. But one counter-phenomenon catches Berger’s attention: the Eastern or Byzantine Orthodox Holy Fool, or “Fool for Christ’s sake,” poised on the border between East and West. What appeals to Berger about holy foolishness is not so much its laughableness (indeed, the figure invites aggressive violence sooner than it does comedy) as its enduring, absolute otherness—and the rapture that such a nonbelonging, liminal, humiliated human being inspires in the faithful. There is no way that this exaggerated gap between self and other can be bridged: “Holy folly, in its grotesqueness, makes explicit the otherness breaking into ordinary reality, but also the impossibility of containing this otherness in the categories of ordinary reality” (ibid. 188). In the context of the present essay, a Bakhtinian virtue akin to noncoincidence can be seen to radiate paradoxically through this revered figure. Although a site of social exchange, the Fool in Christ does not offer rest or reconciliation; regardless of the abundance that surrounds it, the fool’s body is an *apophatic* site that must remain naked, restless, homeless. Nakedness is always a reproach—and always comic. In an Orthodox faith system (as, we might add, in cultures of the potlatch), these gestures of nonaccommodation and nonaccumulation are uncommonly powerful. As we have seen, carnival creates its special buoyancy by similar methods.

Our second case study is Paul H. Grawe’s *Comedy in Space, Time, and the Imagination* (1983).²² Grawe is a genre theorist who would lay all the blame for the “bad press” of comedy at Aristotle’s door. Unlike Berger, he refuses to accept as self-evident the Aristotelian legacy. In fact, he faults Aristotle not only for making “the ludicrous a subdivision of the ugly” (Grawe 1983: 4), the linchpin assumption of the superiority theory that would equate comedy with the malformed, but also for enabling later theorists to define comedy merely by inverting the mode for tragedy while retaining identical criteria for dramatic action. If tragedy is serious (so the argument has gone), then comedy is trivial; and yet comedy continues to be understood as “the imitation of an action.” But according to Grawe, there is no specific comedic act akin to a tragic act; there is only comedic patterning. In Grawe’s view, tragedy entails that we die consciously and for a cause, urged on to fatal action by high moral concern. Comedy, in contrast, is about one thing

only: getting on with it, getting over it, adjusting to what exists so as to survive (ibid. 16–17). Not a single string of irreversible acts but a whole fabric of attitudes and actions make up its plot. This comedy can be “hero oriented,” focused on the survival of the exceptional talent, or it can be comedy of the “everyman-social” sort, where people working together is the key to survival (ibid. 35–37). In both instances, comedy cannot be measured by some highlighted action of the sort one “dies for,” because comedy is a recurrent attitude toward life. It asserts not facts but a pattern of faith (ibid. 18).

The fifth part of Grawe’s study is of interest to this essay, for it is cast on another and higher plane: “Comedy in Ultimate Reality.” What is “ultimately real” about the survivalist values of comedy turns out to resemble what is ultimate about Bakhtinian carnival, namely: one must know how, and under what circumstances, to laugh at oneself. Grawe too is made sober by the fact that the laughter reflex is so promiscuous and unpredictable. It does not describe objective reality but asserts.²³ He distributes the ultimate “comedic assertions” of the Western tradition among four contexts: Old Testament Comedy, Gospel Comedy, Everyman and Pilgrim’s Progress, and Apocalyptic (Miltonic) Comedy. In each, mistakes and errors of judgment are the order of the day; in each, my individual wisdom is never sufficient. But within a comedic framework, rectifying a wrong is complex. A self-centered, heroic, or sacrificial resolution of conflict and sin is usually suspect. We are destined—that is, doomed—to survive. Whether as a people or as an individual personality, we confront trials that again and again compel us (in Bakhtin’s formulation) to accomplish that most difficult of all tasks: to take “a good look back at our own self.” That self is always concrete but shapeless, denied an elegant closure, and for that reason always more or less alive.

In our attempt to place Bakhtin’s spiritualized carnival in context, our third and final comedic exemplar is in certain ways the most obvious, the one worldtext that comes immediately to mind. This is, of course, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Bakhtin himself devotes only a few provocative paragraphs to that masterpiece, where he associates its structure with the vertically constrained unfreedom of the medieval worldview in tense contradiction with real time.²⁴ But his lead has been taken up by others. In the 1970s, genre theorists from the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture began to read Dante’s cosmos through a Bakhtinian lens; their essays are collected in a useful anthology edited by Louise Cowan, entitled *The Terrain of Comedy* (1984). In it Cowan provides an equivalent of Bakhtin’s chronotope, but without his egregious privileging of the novel. She distributes human affects and strivings equitably among the four major genres, or as she prefers, “terrains,” of lyric, tragic, comedic, and epic.²⁵ For her and her students, the most complex and interesting of these terrains is the one closest to Bakhtin’s carnival chronotope: comedy. The work of this group, especially as it pertains to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*,

suggests a possible common comedic denominator among these disparate affects and passions.

Indeed, only a cosmos as large as Dante's, and ultimately as redeemable from the perspective of the mortal who travels through it, could encompass all the benefits that comedy is supposed to provide while spending so much time, as it were, "down below." The terrain of comedy, Cowan affirms, is always "the realm of hope in a fallen world." It is a place toward which we can be guided, even if the *Inferno* is our first and most protracted exhibit. Cowan and her colleagues spend some time on this topographical progression upward, with special attention to the types of heroes we can expect at each level: infernal, purgatorial, paradisaical. Let us move quickly through them, and then adapt them to Bakhtin's Russian context. How is comedy stratified, and what sort of survival is promoted at each level?

In brief, their argument is this. The realm of *infernal comedy* is populated with rogues, tricksters, deceivers, cynical minds in tough, vigorous bodies. Wickedness is omnipresent and naturally multiplies. Since there is so much evil around, it cannot be defeated by frontal attack, which would be suicidal; it can only be outwitted. In infernal comedy, the only resistance possible is "deception and delay." Only by deceiving the deceivers and by delaying the final word can we avoid abandoning, for all time, *all hope*.

The next tier, *purgatorial comedy*, offers a different cast of characters and plots. What reigns here is not malicious or aggressive evil but the gentler, more common delaying tactics of confusion, suspension, interruption, "waiting to see." Although time *can* heal things, it rarely does so in a wholly coherent way. The world of purgatorial comedy is not all of one piece; and that, surely, is part of its comedic effect, part of the reason why it survives. It contains pockets of rest and restoration, marked off from the stressful everyday world. (Consider the Forest of Arden in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.) In such gardens and forests, deception is again present, but only in its soft, "lovely" variant, as disguise. Such deception is used not to hurt or punish people but to make things more bearable, to make the world smile and laugh, to help events work out.

What about Paradise? *Paradisaical comedy* is comedic precisely because we are lifted to this level not by our own efforts and receive there more than we know we deserve. The god of comedy is nowhere a jealous god. Thus in Paradise, the theme of deception and disguise—which, in infernal comedy, was straight-out cheating and lying, and in purgatorial comedy was lighthearted cross-dressing—is at this ultimate level associated with divine grace, with magic, and with art. In connection with this highest realm, Louise Cowan makes a wonderful observation that is permeated with Bakhtinian intonations. The comedic terrain, Cowan writes, is always about "the hope . . . of being loved" (L. Cowan 1982: 15). For this reason, "not revelation . . . but *receptivity* leads to its summit."

Let us now walk through Dante's landscape, with our basic texts taken from

Bakhtin's Russia and Russian literature. First, the *Inferno*. This lowest tier of comedy helps us to grasp how Bakhtin could laugh at Stalinism while neither dismissing nor trivializing its evil. The Terror of the 1930s and 1940s was beyond any punitive response. In an infernal realm, justice and virtue, if pursued too rigidly, are positive handicaps. Naiveté will simply perish. To survive not only physically but also in some sense morally—that is, to avoid being forced to compromise or betray others—the appropriate tools are masks, duplicity, and multiplicity. If one must perform some distasteful public act in order to stay alive (as Bakhtin had to do in the early 1950s, in his capacity as Chair of the Department of World Literature at Saransk State Teachers' College, prefacing each of his official presentations with a hymn of praise to Stalin), then make sure there is no concrete addressee who might be hurt by it; make sure that everyone who matters in that hellish landscape understands that words like this are merely phatic. For there is one prime, rock-bottom value respected in comedy of every type (and, I will argue, in Bakhtin's carnival as well): that *not everyone perish*, that someone to whom we have made a difference be left alive. Only if that remains true, do our scattered selves have a chance to survive in the minds of others.

Is purgatorial comedy also a haven for Bakhtin's carnival vision? I believe it is: in five centuries of *amoral* self-serving picares, all those Sancho Panzas whom Bakhtin always prefers to the Don Quixotes. Such virtues also permeate Chekhov's plays, which Chekhov intended as "comedies" precisely in the purgatorial sense. Failure in them is caused not by malice but by an inability to connect, by bad timing, by weakness, and by weariness. And, of course, there are the petty adventurers and resourceful pretenders of Bakhtin's beloved Nikolai Gogol. As a rule, Gogol specialists are not enthusiastic about Bakhtin's "carnivalization" of their writers' weird, demon-ridden landscapes. They consider Bakhtin too quick to lighten the situation up, to romanticize the effects of Gogol's grotesque, to see humor and spiritual receptivity where in fact there is nothing but blank, voided space.²⁶ But such benevolent readings are characteristic of Bakhtin. Dostoevsky is read through the same optimistic filter. A blank space for Bakhtin is not a void but only a temporarily *cleared* space, a space that is waiting for new meaning to flow in along newly available perspectives—which is, indeed, the message of purgatorial comedy. All is not yet over, dying again is no longer possible so reconcile yourself to working off one sin at a time, keep your aspirations small, entropy can be reversed. By definition, all sinners are on an upward path.

The highest realm, paradisaical comedy, is also a crucial part of Bakhtin's carnival mode. Perhaps it is not so much a part, however, as it is a *moment*, because Paradise (like the *Inferno*) does not know true, developmental time. Thus this highest domain can explain, as no other locus can, carnival's most ecstatic moments, those moments that Bakhtin unabashedly calls "miraculous." Here belong the mass of "interpenetration" metaphors that have been traced throughout the text of *Rabelais*

and *His World*—with their theological resonances of divine intercession.²⁷ Here also belong the best moments of Dostoevsky's *Idiot*, Prince Myshkin, who, in his foolishness and outsidership, resides in a "carnival heaven." What is possible in paradisaical comedy is not permitted in realms farther down—and one good index of this special status of Paradise is the vexed relationship between comedy and memory.

Infernal comedy—or "carnival hell," as Bakhtin calls it²⁸—knows the wrong sort of memory. It is static, obsessive, stuck on itself, like the "carnival hell" of Nastasya Filippovna in *The Idiot* or like Anna Karenina in her final moments, giving herself up to the punitive downward slide. Purgatorial comedy, in contrast, is time-sensitive, developmental, always potentially creative, and thus knows the right sort of memory. This is Konstantin Levin (to continue from Tolstoy's novel) deciding to live and not to die when he realizes, quite by accident at the end of the book, that even sinners can be trusted to make the right choices and invest in the good, on the spot. Paradisaical comedy, of course, is already at a height beyond earthly right and wrong. Thus it can transcend memory, even the tragic memory of an unjust death. Here, of course, belongs the glorious and transfiguring scene at the end of Dostoevsky's final novel, Alyosha Karamazov at the Stone, rallying a group of enthusiastic young disciples who have gathered for the funeral of their prematurely departed friend. The Stone serves both as a gravestone and as a pulpit.²⁹

One final word on this three-tiered Dantean model, which I have just filled up with literature from farther east. A theme underlying all these treatments of the comedic (Berger, Grawe, Cowan), and what explains its phenomenal variety, is that the genre of comedy always presumes abundance.³⁰ Comedy is backed up with a mass of things, acts, and words. These words or things can be truths or lies, precious artifacts or simply junk; it doesn't much matter, because comedy rejoices in sheer diversity and species survival, regardless of local outcome. Comedy is optimistic, again, *not* because it denies the existence of evil or trivializes it—comedy takes evil very seriously—but because it thinks it can engulf evil, outwit it, swamp it with a mass of things, dilute it, and thus terminally confuse it. The comedic outlook thoroughly rejects the Platonic idea that true things don't change. On the contrary, true things *must* change, and change constantly; otherwise evil (which is much more single-minded and humorless) will seek out the good and put it to death. If tragedy clears the stage, kills everyone off, and finds out the truth (consider Oedipus), then comedy in contrast clutters the stage, impregnates everything, and resolves nothing. Just this sort of clutter, transitional energy, and lack of resolution constitutes Bakhtin's trademark landscape.

In comedy, and in Bakhtin's carnival as I have tried to reduce it to its essential energies here, life must be kept going at any cost. The *continuity* of life—the proliferation of options, the filling-up of every possible niche, the Menippean refusal to die because the experiment is still going on—all this must be valued over

the logic of life. It is this conviction that sits at the comedic core of Dostoevsky and is tested in each of his great novels. I would even suggest that this rather crude criterion is what keeps Shakespeare's two dark "problem comedies," *Measure for Measure* and *The Merchant of Venice*, within the realm of comedy. Although injustice in those dramas is everywhere and the lives of major heroes are saved quite by accident, by the final scene, barely, through all sorts of incongruous and impetuous moves, marriages *do* occur—which is the dramatist's shorthand for assuring us that not everyone is dead.

For comedy to happen, then, final endings must be put off, or diluted, or—in the lighter and delightful varieties of the genre—shown to be arbitrary in their coming about. This, again, resembles Hegel's view of comedy: a universal solvent that does not renounce the real world but significantly does not award that world any permanence.³¹ In comedy, as in Bakhtin's carnival of Great Time, duration in itself matters, because at no point is a whole ever fully confirmed. Since nothing is fated in past or future; an accident or a miracle can change things at any moment. Heroes who take themselves and their acts with high seriousness—the types of hero that flourish in lyric, epic, tragedy and determine the plots of those genres—are rare in comedy. If they do appear, they strike us as inflated, self-absorbed, of limited vision, and they are immediately parodied. To work properly, both carnival and comedy need modesty, fertility, diversity, and slack: that is, they need a great deal of space to get lost in or hide away in, a rich and cluttered environment, and lots of time to change. Here, in closing, we return to the questions posed in the opening parts of this essay.

Bakhtin is an ethical philosopher. Are there any *duties* that come with comedic or carnival terrain? The type of laughter that Bakhtin appears to have valued most is *not* verbal (that is, not satire, wit, wordplay, or the genius of Aristophanes, who goes almost unnoticed in Bakhtin's world). It does not manifest itself in fixed structures or narratives. It will not tell you what is good and what is evil. It is an attitude, a flexibility of the spirit. What are its obligations? They reduce, I believe, to one: wherever we find ourselves, our duty is to *add* options to the terrain, not to subtract them. Since I always remain free to set a new goal for myself as long as I remain alive, nothing ever *has* to fail—and every event is always not yet over.³²

One of the gains of the recent debates over carnival is that this omnibus concept is already asked much less often to answer for the big things: mass political rallies on the public square, the wholesale redemption of souls, their hopeless demotion. Carnival is beginning to be seen more as a personal attitude, an inner form of truth—and indeed, this is precisely how Bakhtin referred to carnival laughter in his book on Rabelais, a book which, Russian scholars have now determined, in its original version as a dissertation made no mention of the word "carnival" at all.³³ This turn toward the hopeful, the humorous, the flexible, and the small makes good sense. It appears to have been an instinct for Bakhtin,

which helps explain his lack of sympathy for the epic and his relative indifference to formal problems that arise in more sculptured poetics. For the mission and obligation of comedy everywhere is to spread out, to return things to normal, to restore the natural order of things. What mattered to Bakhtin—who himself lost so much throughout his material life—was the survival of the field, its eventual repopulation and plenitude.

Carnival laughter, therefore, does not break forth because we feel superior, and it is not merely a response to incongruity or the body's need for relief. It is the energy that permits us to procreate in the broadest sense, to create. Arthur Koestler had just this idea in mind in his study *The Act of Creation*, a book that Bakhtin would have found deeply compatible.³⁴ A burst of laughter, Koestler argues, is genetically akin to a burst of discovery and a burst of inspiration. All three are *Abai* experiences that do not just release or rid us of things—although they are indeed experienced by us as a release of pressure; more important, they feed us cognitively, and in highly efficient ways. To laugh when we get a joke and to smile when we have solved a problem afford us much the same pleasure. Thus the minimum triad for humanness, Koestler suggests, is the sage, the artist, and the jester. Those who cannot laugh will have trouble knowing and creating. This point of faith is not everyone's idea of salvation, but for Bakhtin it was the sublime.

Notes

1. I present just such a catalogued spectrum in my sampling of postcommunist Russian views of carnival in *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* (1997), chap. 4: "Open-ended Bodies and Anachronistic Histories." Dissatisfaction with that approach, which set in immediately upon publication, was the stimulus for the present essay.
2. For a pioneering discussion that documents, with great philological precision, Bakhtin's integration of profane and spiritual matters through carnival imagery during the Stalinist years, see Mihailovic 1997, chaps. 4–6.
3. Publication of Bakhtin's *Collected Works* is under way in Moscow, with two volumes (vol. 5, 1996, and vol. 2, 2000) now in print. The Bakhtin Centre in Sheffield, England, has launched an ambitious electronic project to correct and standardize translations, provide instant glosses and glossaries on disputed terms and contexts, and tie Bakhtin in to the enormous databases for classical antiquity and philosophy already extant on the Web. See Brandist and Shepherd 1998. The Centre also publishes a journal, *Dialogism* (1998–), under David Shepherd's editorship.
4. Not all of this sleuthing is complimentary to Bakhtin; see, for example, Brian Poole (1998: 540–47), who has demonstrated that Bakhtin simply incorporated verbatim (that is, moved into Russian without credit) long stretches of Ernst Cassirer's published work on the medieval and Renaissance worldview; see also Hirschkop 1999: 113–14.
5. See Hirschkop 1999: 111. In his chapter "Bakhtin Myths and Bakhtin History," Hirschkop, in a debunking but respectful spirit, points out falsifications in biographical fact (Bakhtin compiled a c.v. for himself that borrowed events from his brother's life); unsubstantiated legends about completed typescripts sent to publishing houses and subsequently destroyed in bomb raids or serenely smoked away as cigarette papers; an awesome reputation for erudition, which on inspection is based entirely on German secondary sources. Hirschkop is harsher on credulous Bakhtin scholars who have accepted colorful rumor as fact than he is on Bakhtin himself, precarious survivor in a myth-laden, poorly provisioned, high-risk era (Hirschkop 1999: 112–15).
6. See Duvakin 1996 (*Beisty V. D. Duvakina s M. M. Bakhtinyim* [*Conversations of V. D. Duvakin with M. M. Bakhtin*]): 50–56; for Bakhtin's reference to "jesters from scholarship [or: "science"]," *ibid.*: 52. The word for "jester" used in the phrase here (*shuty*) is not the word for "simpleton" (*durak*) or "holy fool" (*yurodivyi*), each of which has specific resonances, respectively folkloric and spiritual. A *shut* is a civilized, mannered, even learned "court" fool (such as one finds in Shakespeare).
7. "Smekh—eto mera ispravleniia; komicheskoe—eto nedolznoe" ("K voprosam teorii romana, k voprosam teorii smekha" ["Toward a theory of the novel and of laughter"], "O Mayakovskom" ["On Mayakovsky"], in Bakhtin 1996: 50). As the copious annotations to this jotting make clear, Bergson's theory of the comic is grim: laughter is uniquely human in that it is marked by an absence of feeling ("laughter has no greater foe than emotion") and by the stance of a disinterested spectator. But it is also naturally social ("laughter appears to stand in need of an echo"). *What* we laugh at, Bergson surmises, is always rigidity, inelasticity, the body reproducing itself blindly, repeating itself, or otherwise acting like a machine; there are verbal equivalents of these gymnastics as well (i.e., wit). Although we might initially sympathize with the target of our laughter, our dominant impulse is to humiliate: "By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness. . . . It has no time to look where it hits. Laughter punishes certain failings somewhat as disease punishes certain forms of excess, striking down some who are innocent and sparing some who are guilty, aiming at a general result and incapable of dealing separately with each individual case." See Bergson 1959, esp. 61–75, 185–88.
8. "Vsyvo prepiatstvuet tomu, chtoby chelovek mog oglianut'sia na sebia samogo" ("O Flobere" ["On Flaubert"], in Bakhtin 1996: 130–37, esp. 137). The Flaubert fragment ends on this sentence. These notes by Bakhtin were found

clipped together with a bibliography (and additional commentary in another's hand), all of which suggests that Bakhtin projected a book on Flaubert during the Savelevo years.

9. In his recent Russian treatment of the philosophy of laughter, Leonid Karasev argues that the opposite of laughing is not seriousness or weeping but rather a sense of *shame* (Karasev 1996: 67, "Shame is the reverse side of laughter, its symbolic inner seam."). Since like can be compared solely with like, laughter should not be contrasted with weeping and seriousness. The latter modes can go on forever; they make sense in prolongation and can become "institutions." But laughing and shame do not build lasting structures; both are instantaneous emotive explosions that sweep over us like little miracles, altering our moods radically. Although it is true that laughter—in the best of worlds—opens us up to new potential whereas shame (not to be confused with its more durable intellectual counterpart, guilt) makes us cringe and closes us down, both laughter and shame are borderline states: responsive, transitory, transfiguring. If a burst of laughter brings relief and the bond of benevolent communion, then the moment of shame is the moment of acknowledgment of one's own participation in evil. "Authentic laughter," Karasev writes (very much in the spirit of Bakhtin), "is born at the juncture of Good and Evil, as Good's answer to Evil: a good-intentioned response to Evil's opening line ["blagoi otvet na repliku zla"] (60)." For a complementary discussion of "why we laugh" by an eminent psychological critic who approaches the laughter reflex through stimuli and catharsis, see Holland 1982, part 1.

10. Our knowledge that there once did exist a now lost second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, which addressed the comedic, must of course temper this argument. For a defense of the comedic in a testy anti-Aristotelian vein, see Grawe 1983, esp. chaps. 1 and 2.

11. In some form, these three categories are standard for most treatises on the subject; for an efficient survey, see Morreall 1983, part 1. Peter Berger (1997: part 2, 99–173) divides up the terrain somewhat differently, between laughter as "diversion" (benign humor), as "consolation" (tragicomedy), as "intellect" (wit), as "weapon" (satire), and then the special psychological benefits of folly and redemptive transcendence.

12. See Bakhtin 1990b: 126–27: "What is the basis of my inner confidence? What straightens my back, lifts my head, and directs my gaze forward? . . . Once again, it is my being present to myself as someone yet-to-be—that is what supports my pride and self-satisfaction; . . . The form of my life-from-within is conditioned by my rightful folly or insanity of *not coinciding*—of not coinciding in *principle*—with me myself as a given."

13. Pechey 1993: 62, 63. The "eternity of potential" that Pechey posits for Bakhtin is saved from the dangers of relativism and abstract metaphysics by its

inistence on the "positional absolute." That absolute, Pechey argues, is one of the few fixed points in Bakhtin's profoundly non-Platonic world.

14. In a paper that has not, to my knowledge, been followed up in Western Bakhtinistics, James H. VanderMey (1994) has argued for a connection between Chinese thought and Bakhtin's patently non-Platonic system of values. "A changeless principle of Being behind it all is the cosmogonic vision that lies at the base of Western mythologies," he writes. "Chaos, linked with changeableness, contingency and relativity, then becomes the evil absence of order. The relationships between particulars become uninteresting and even threatening to the developed logocentric order. Bakhtin's architectonic project cuts against the grain of Western logocentrism . . . [in the classical Chinese tradition,] chaos is not the absence of any order; it is the sum of all orders—the plenitude, the field upon which particular events emerge. Chaos is not bad, empty, or separate. . . . What Chinese thought can add to the Bakhtinian project is its experience in thinking in terms of difference, 'eventness' and harmony, rather than in terms of identity, being and Truth."

15. For provocative discussions of Hegel's connection to a comedic or carnival vision, see Tihanov 1997, Tihanov 2000 ch. 9 ("Hegel and Rabelais"), and Bainard Cowan 1982. Cowan draws on material that can be found in Hegel's *On Tragedy*, at the end of comments on Ethics and Tragedy (B. Cowan 1982: 298–301). The actual self exposes the pretensions of the universal abstract nature, the mask is dropped, the self plays with the mask, "which it once puts on, in order to be its own person; but it breaks away from this seeming and pretence just as quickly again, and comes out in its own nakedness and commonness. . . . It is the return of everything universal into certainty of self, a certainty which, in consequence, is this complete loss of fear of everything strange and alien. . . . Such certainty is a state of spiritual good health and of self-abandonment thereto, on the part of consciousness, in a way that, outside this kind of comedy, is not to be found anywhere."

16. This trajectory of impoverishment is especially troubling to those who look to Bakhtin as an analyst of Dostoevsky and Rabelais. Why would Bakhtin presume as central to the texts produced by these writers a construct or value that can work for them only in a hobbled way? Why would literary masters seek to make central to them an inevitably enfeebled tradition?

17. Comment by Gary Saul Morson to a paper by Anthony Edwards, "Historicizing the Popular Grotesque: Aristophanes and Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*," delivered at "Bakhtin and the Classics" Conference, Emory University, 26–28 March 1998, and included in this volume; see below.

18. See Brandist 1997a. In Brandist's view, Bakhtin was inspired in his "historicizing" shift from Kant to Hegel by Cassirer's *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. It will be recalled that Cassirer endorses Hegel's faith in the forward motion of human thought but replaces Hegel's rigid logic with a more open-ended dialectic fueled by the "law" of symbolism, which everywhere works toward freeing us from

the authoritative power of myth. Bakhtin picks up on this opposition between the liberating multivoiced symbol and myth's petty tyranny. "Myth" becomes a universal stand-in for the dead past, the inert epic, the single-voiced—and thus impoverished—lyric. Indeed, Bakhtin's novel-centric, lyrophobic, and epic-phobic essays of the 1930s all attest handsomely to this conversion. But Brandist then proceeds to argue a more contestable position, that Bakhtin was not immune to the appeal of myth—although of a more sociopolitical sort. The myth that Bakhtin integrates into this revived, loosened-up Hegelian dialectic is Russian nineteenth-century populism (Brandist 1997b). As was Bakhtin himself, the Russian populists were influenced by German Romanticism and were heavily invested in the mystique of "the people"—which, in their polemical tracts, was presented as uncomplicated in its needs, unstratified in its social organization, and utopian in its virtues. At this point Brandist makes a fertile remark that can bridge the two eras, prerevolutionary and postrevolutionary, and help relocate Bakhtin within his own time. The Russian populists (unlike the more urban-minded industrialists and Marxists) put their faith in the peasant commune; its ethos of collective responsibility and routine redistribution of wealth were destined to define Russia's future as distinct from the crumbling, consumer-oriented West. Populists tended to distrust "primary capital accumulation" of any sort. Bakhtin, who was in this respect a populist "fellow traveler," transferred the traditional distrust shared by populists under the old regime to the new-regime *Stalinist* "capital accumulation project"—which was, in its aggressive scale and vicious single-mindedness, a leviathan to the minnow of the preceding century.

19. Charles Lock, an astute early student of Bakhtin and Orthodox thought, has carried this icon analogy further. Perspective itself, Lock affirms, is a modern development that protects what is "inside the frame" from crude and unwanted contact. The subject in perspectival art, for all its roundedness and realism, is somehow disembodied and safe—because inside the frame, Lock writes, "the optical becomes supreme, and the senses are valued insofar as they operate over distances (7)." Compare this comfortable distance with the carnival body, which celebrates almost every organ except the eyes; it relishes being inside, on top, underneath all at once, and it breaks the frame down. See Lock 1997.

20. See Dostoevsky 1963 [1861]: 126. "How, indeed, is one to determine clearly and uncontestedly what one has to do in order to approach the ideal of all our desires and of all that mankind desires and strives for? One can make a guess, one can invent, conjecture, study, dream and calculate, but it is impossible to calculate every future step of the whole as one does a calendar. Therefore how is one to determine *absolutely correctly* what is harmful and useful?"

21. See Randall Poole 2001 and Isupov 1997. Poole makes the case from the more sober perspective of intellectual history; Isupov, from mystical theosophy.

own study forthcoming from Southern Illinois University Press, 2002, *A Concept of Dramatic Genre and the Comedy of a New Type*, draws on systems theory to circumvent the constraints of Aristotle's plot-driven poetics in favor of character-driven ones (comedic consciousnesses employing positional and combinational strategies to survive).

23. If literally anything (superiority, cruelty, incongruity, pity, embarrassment, joy) can make us laugh, then laughter itself cannot be a starting point for any ultimate thing: "Good comedic criticism must explain how the laughable works as part of a comedic assertion, not assume the presence of comedy from the presence of the laughable" (Grawe 1983: 269). And although "God is *necessity*" (ibid. 332)—a fact, Grawe asserts, that we do not always like but cannot live without—this necessity is not a neatly plotted structure.

24. See Bakhtin 1981: 158. The "extraordinary tension that pervades all of Dante's world," according to Bakhtin, is "the result of a struggle between living historical time and the extratemporal other-worldly ideal. The vertical, as it were, compresses within itself the horizontal, which powerfully thrusts itself forward. There is a contradiction, an antagonism."

25. See L. Cowan 1984: 1–18, "Introduction." Reaccented in terms of its time-space and expanded somewhat in its implications for temporality, Cowan's genre cycle (ibid. 9) has the following parameters. The *lyric* is immediately present, emotional, chamber-sized, the realm of "consummation and love." *Tragedy* is less compact, a matter of families rather than lovers: as the realm of suffering, loss, fragmentation, tragic time "looks backward" for its meaning and its pain. *Epic* is larger still; it is the realm of struggle, of building, restoring, or founding the just city; and in this duty-driven mode, epic heroes travel the world, confident of their success because the privileged time of epic (in contrast to tragedy) is the future, the *end* of the quest.

26. See Bakhtin 1976 for this "lightened-up" interpretation. Exemplary of this skepticism is the essay "Karnaval i ego okrestnosti" by Yurii Mann, dean of Soviet/Russian Gogol scholars, which concludes (1995: 181): "The forms of comedy which we have touched on here not only interact with the carnival tradition, but also resist that tradition and cast it off—at times rather strenuously."

27. See Mihailovic 1997, esp. chap. 5, "Carnival and Embodiment in *Rabelais and His World*," esp. 149–55. For a darker, more Protestant interpretation of Bakhtin's religious imagery, with an excellent discussion of Bakhtin's distinction between "bad" (official) and "good" (open, tragic, pathos-producing, unofficial) types of seriousness, see Coates 1998, chap. 7 ("Christian Motifs in Bakhtin's Carnival Writings").

28. The reference is made in connection with Nastasya Filippovna in Bakhtin 1984a: 173–74.

29. I was guided toward these speculations on memory by Will R. Russ,

Princeton Class of 1999, whose ambitious senior thesis, "A Preacher, a Prophet, and the Struggle to Solve Life: The Literary and Philosophical Visions of L. N. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and F. M. Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*" (April 1999), also applies the Dallas critics (of whom his father is one) to the classics of Russian literature.

30. For this cluster of ideas I am indebted to Robert Dupree (1984). He opens on Bakhtin's complaint that literary criticism has been hobbled by the "skimpy and impoverished" examples of comic literature available during the last three centuries. However, Dupree does not consider this bias of Bakhtin's against the present state of the laughing arts to be paradoxical. Dupree thinks that the modern world of comedy is indeed "shrunken," and he goes on to explain why Bakhtin is correct. The essence of comedy, he maintains, is not to be sought in Aristotelian categories of character, plot, spectacle, song, idea—all devised for tragedy—but in a more raw, unreworked dimension: in simple *coplia*, in the presumption of plenitude and abundance. Great eras of comedy sense the immense and optimistic security in this procedure, but nowadays, Dupree concludes, "we fear the comic inventory as much as we do tragic self-knowledge" (1984: 190). One reason we do, surely, is that "comedy is not about knowledge, but about change" (*ibid.*: 169–70).

31. See Bainard Cowan's illuminating discussion (1984: 98–102).

32. Vladimir Turbin, in a posthumously published essay on Bakhtin and Dostoevsky, speculated along these lines on the relationship between life and art. "Metaphors accompany each of us sinners," he wrote, "[metaphors] that place each of us on that boundary beyond which life turns into art. Every person is potentially artistic, artficed. But [Turbin continues] what is important is that this possibility not be realized until the very end of our days—and may God preserve us from attempts to realize it prematurely" (Turbin 1997: 156). Carnival as a worldview and laughter as a strategy keep us from becoming, once and for all, the metaphors we cling to.

33. Vitaly Makhlin, personal communication, 17 February 2000.

34. Koestler 1964: 27–28.