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Outhouses, Plant Monsters,and the Nowhere City: The Grotesque Body

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Honors Project

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Title: Outhouses, Plant Monsters, and the Nowhere City: The Grotesque Body

Author: Mark Verdin

Outhouses, Plant Monsters, and the Nowhere City:

The Grotesque Body

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May 3, 2010

Abstract

I consider Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque representation of the body in dialogue with literary and critical works of the twentieth century. Focusing on its fundamental traits—openness, heterogeneity, connectivity, multiplicity, and historic becoming—I trace a selective genealogy of the grotesque. James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, and Alan Moore's run on *Swamp Thing* are analyzed for their respective takes on the human body, the body of the city, and the body of Nature, each of which is understood as grotesque in its own particular way.

Contents

Introduction 1

I. Openings: Leopold Bloom in the Outhouse 5

"Calypso:" structure • The classical and the grotesque • Fundamental grotesqueness: the chiasma • Digestive structure • Utopia and ideology: Rabelais's two-world condition • "Calypso:" the body's openings • Material consciousness • "Calypso:" utopia and anxiety

II. The Plant Monster: The Body of Nature as Grotesque Ideal 24

Swamp Thing: origins • The folkloric chronotope: the fusion of human life and nature • Swamp Thing: a grotesque ideal • The cycle and history • Becoming • The dissolution of fixed identity • Vegetable sex • Rhizome: heterogeneity, connectivity, multiplicity • Outgrowths, overflows, middle states • It was all a dream • Grotesque ideal and allegory • Nature (capital N) against the city

III. Nowhere: The Proliferent City 46

Abstract network and material flux: the triumph of sewage • Noir's living city • *City of Glass*: proliferation of pseudo-meanings • Quinn and the city • New York—nowhere—connecting to connections • Fragments and becoming • The forking path • Nowhere—utopia

Conclusory 59

Appendix: Images 62

Works Cited 68

Introduction

The goal of this study is modest: I hope simply to elaborate Bakhtin's articulation of the grotesque through a comparative close reading with other texts.

In the beginning it seemed easy enough, too. But the more it developed, the more complex it became. Pieces were growing out of my writing that I hadn't put there—other works were coming in, bodies of thought were merging in ways I couldn't explain. I panicked. I would weed everything out, I decided. But then I realized that this gross commingling of texts was utterly appropriate. Form and content had united without my knowing it. The study of the grotesque was proliferating in every direction at once, and every attempt I made to stop it, to fix it in static form under my analytic gaze, was ineffectual. Like Quinn's name, it flew "off in so many little directions at once" (*City of Glass* 117).

Bakhtin argues that the grotesque "expresses the inner movement of being itself in the passing of one form into the other" (*Rabelais* 32). Here is the crux of this study. What is this inner movement of being? What sort of being is it that moves like this? Reading Bakhtin with three texts that seem to share his central concerns, I attempt to answer these questions. The working definition at which I arrive is that the grotesque body is one that is open, connective, heterogeneous, multiplex, and perpetually becoming. All of these characteristics are wrapped up in each other in this form of representation. The grotesque is one mode of heterogeneity, of multiplicity, a special kind in which all these main aspects overlap and intertwine. This sheds some light on the subject, but in getting there many other questions are raised. What role does genre play in determining the function of the grotesque in a work? What significance does the developing form of the grotesque

have in the twentieth century—why are different elements stressed in "Calypso" and *Swamp Thing*, for instance? How does the shifting cultural landscape of the Western world in the twentieth century affect these texts' ways of conceptualizing and representing the body? What is the significance of the fact that the most consistently grotesque body in this study is not a human body at all, but a city? And that this formulation of the grotesque is also the most utopian? The historical—and literary historical—contexts of each of these texts needs to be examined much more closely to approach anything like an answer. For the purposes of this analysis, though, I decided to stick with a close reading of the texts themselves—if only for the sake of length. This study is meant to be provisional—it is meant to act as the ground upon which these latter questions can be answered. It is only one projection of the grotesque's development through history. Many others could be found that would reveal other characteristics. It is one of multiple possible lines of the grotesque; it is not meant to cancel the others out or subordinate them to its claims.

The first chapter interrogates an episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in order to draw out some of the central characteristics of the grotesque, as well as to address criticisms of the utopian prospects of Bakhtin's theory. I chose Joyce for this initial task because he seemed both radically similar to and different from Rabelais. At base these authors have the same preoccupation with the way the human body opens onto the world. They both fill their texts with open bodies in the process of becoming. The function of these grotesque bodies, however, is vastly different for each of them: what makes for utopia in one is the cause of paralytic anxiety in the other. This difference is instructive. Examining Bakhtin's reading of the Rabelaisian grotesque in relation to Joyce, I draw out

some rudimentary characteristics of the grotesque body: openness, becoming, and a materialized consciousness. Accounting for the utopian vision of Bakhtin's theory as a matter of historical contingency, I conclude that this is not an inherent quality of the grotesque. The underlying principle remains, but where the presence of a strong collective nonofficial ideology in Rabelais's time bolsters the regression to base materiality into a nonhierarchical paradise, the lack of an analogous structure for Joyce leaves Bloom staring only at his contingency and the promise of death. This is not a pure negation, even though Bloom finds it unpleasant. It affirms the material bodily principle at a profound level. Grotesque images are ambivalent; but one side, the positive or the negative, will always dominate. Bakhtin sees Rabelais stressing the positive, regenerative side of the grotesque; Joyce stresses the negative. But the same principle underlies them.

From here I shift to an entirely different realm. From James Joyce to *Swamp Thing*—what a strange move. Yet it makes perfect sense. *Swamp Thing*'s celebration of grotesque nature is an antidote to the desolation Joyce sees in the "abundant material principle"—even if I am forced to conclude that it hands over its grotesque multiplicity to an empty subjective unity (*Rabelais* 274). It is a choice of object which I am convinced Mikhail Mikhaĭlovich himself would have approved. What better means by which to grasp the fundamental principles of the grotesque than a comic book—that low, popular genre? And right alongside one of the most critically revered novels in modern literature! I like to think of it as a sort of generic carnival: dissolving hierarchic boundaries, putting all genres on one horizontal plane.

Swamp Thing discloses a few more fundamental characteristics of the grotesque: its heterogeneity, connectivity, and multiplicity. Its emphasis on the organic metaphors of

the grotesque draws out its essentially rhizomatic structure. The vegetable sex scene in particular suggests such a model with its cascade of partial, multiform shapes and proliferating lines of connection. This is essentially a utopian vision of the grotesque body of Nature. In idealizing the grotesque, however, *Swamp Thing* employs an allegorical structure that seeks to freeze the process of becoming and offer up the unfinished form as a full object in a larger, meaningful whole. This totalizing unity is revealed in Swamp Thing's individual will, which subordinates the multiplex world of becoming to itself. In a way, it is *Swamp Thing*'s particular utopian vision that cancels its grotesqueness.

The final act concerns the city, starting with the triumphant flow of Viennese sewage in the film adaptation of *The Third Man* and moving to the proliferating and indefinite extensions in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*. The noir focus on the living, breathing city reveals a grotesque structure of lines, fragments, intersections. The formulation of the grotesque in this novel is essentially the same as that of *Swamp Thing*, but it remains in full force throughout the novel and is never compromised by an overarching unity. Quinn's dream of nowhere shows that this grotesque, too, has its utopian vision—a utopia where it does not matter which direction is chosen because they are all equally affirmed.

This study would not exist without the help and encouragement of the following people: Casey Jarrin, Gitta Hammarberg, Sonita Sarker, Jonathan Katz, my parents, and Gary Kirk. Thank you all very much.

I. Leopold Bloom in the Outhouse: The Open Body

Bloom's body plays the central role in the "Calypso" episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The content of the episode might be termed a digestive cycle in miniature: Bloom hungers, prepares food, eats, and excretes. The sheer materiality of Bloom's body rises to the foreground as the episode unfolds. We see Bloom's body as an object among objects—its physical actions upon surrounding things, its movements, its open-ended relationship with the world by which it brings things into itself and pushes them out. At the same time, one cannot simply reduce *Ulysses* to the sum of the actions that move the plot. Most of "Calypso" is Bloom's thought processes, his consciousness idly playing with the ideas and images that he perceives around him. With this in mind, it is important to point out that the main moments of physical action in the episode—buying the kidney, eating it, and sitting in the jakes—take place as Bloom reads something—a pamphlet, Milly's letter, a "prize titbit" story (83). The digestive cycle never separates from a process of reading and understanding.

It seems to me that this intertwining of the processes of the body and of consciousness is rooted in the same theoretical structure as Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body. In recent years some scholars have rejected this concept as inappropriate to an analysis of Joyce's work because of its utopian vision. Joyce, it is true, does not have the same sort of optimism as Bakhtin. Yet their preoccupations with the human body and its relation to the world are very similar, even if Joyce does not treat the body as the means of attaining "the return of Saturn's golden age to earth" (*Rabelais* 48). The following analysis will attempt to clarify this shared theoretical structure in order to approach a general theory of the grotesque. To do this I will first examine the basic

claims Bakhtin makes about the human body, and place them in dialogue with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological understanding of the body, to which they bear a resemblance. I will then apply these claims to Joyce's work, developing them while at the same time addressing the question of the grotesque's utopian vision.

Bakhtin clarifies what he means by the grotesque body by comparing it to what it is not: the individualized body of classical thought. This model, he argues, treats the body as "a strictly completed, finished product," an unchanging form that is totally "isolated, alone, fenced off" (*Rabelais* 29). It eliminates all signs of low bodily functions—it closes all orifices, smoothes out all protuberances, excises those parts "through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world" (26). This form of representation is based on "the individual, strictly limited mass," the self-sufficient unit wrapped in an "impenetrable façade:" in it, "the opaque surface and the body's 'valleys' acquire an essential meaning as the border of a closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies and with the world" (320). Nothing penetrates this body, nothing emerges from it. The interior and the exterior are scrupulously separated.

This aesthetic finds its philosophical counterpart in what Merleau-Ponty terms operational thought, which figures the body as simply the vehicle or tool of an immaterial consciousness. "Science"—operational thought par excellence—commits a gross abstraction because it "manipulates things and gives up living in them," treating "everything as though it were an object-in-general—as though it meant nothing to us and yet was predestined for our own use" ("Eye" 159). In this renunciation of "living in things," the body comes to be considered the simple material arrangement of organs

acting as the instruments of a "consciousness in general," a machine made to move by a "transcendent cause" (*Phenomenology* 64). Operational thought thus pretends to forget what we know "through our own situations:" it refuses to take into account the order of knowledge that stems from "the sensible and opened world such as it is in our life and for our body" ("Eye" 160). This mechanical instrument of a disinterested consciousness is the isolable body that Bakhtin identifies in classical representation: it is not a "living body," not "that actual body I call mine," but one that has been objectified and abstracted out of its material situation (160). It has been made into a closed off, completed, stable object.

The major difference between the grotesque and classical canons is that the grotesque body appears always and above all "in the act of becoming" (*Rabelais* 317). It "is never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body" (317). Thus its areas of passage with the world play the "essential role" (317). These are the parts where it "outgrows its own self, transgress[es] its own body," where it "conceives a new, second body" (317). In this sense, the grotesque body is never one. It cannot be defined as a single unit: there is no clear line demarcating it from the world, because its borders are always open and permeable. The focus rests on its "convexities and orifices," where "the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome," and "there is an interchange and an interorientation" between them (317). Acts like "eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination...copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, and swallowing up by another body" are emphasized because they are "performed on the confines of the body and the outer world" (317). This in-between position denies any possibility of a claim to impenetrability or static completeness. It

expresses instead "the inner movement of being itself:" "the passing of one form into the other, in the ever incompleted character of being" (*Rabelais* 32).

Bakhtin's explanation is more than just a catalog of the generic characteristics of the grotesque. It entails a metaphysics of the body and its relationship to the world. A reading of Merleau-Ponty becomes useful here in understanding what Bakhtin is saying. Merleau-Ponty wants to "return to the world of actual experience which is prior to the objective world," to "rediscover phenomena" as that "layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given to us" (*Phenomenology* 66). This requires figuring access to phenomena not as the operation of some interior mental state, but as the actually lived experience of the body that has at its base a "fabric of brute meaning" ("Eye" 161). In the essay "Eye and Mind," he examines the question of vision and the peculiar association between the body and the world that it implies. "The enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen:" "immersed in the visible by his body, itself visible, the see-er does not appropriate what he sees," he does not grasp the world as a representation set up before the mind (162). Rather, vision takes place along an "open circuit [that goes] from seeing body to visible body" (168; translator's parenthetical). In this circuit the see-er "opens himself to the world" (162). Such an opening is made possible through the "inherence of the one who sees in that which he sees," a crossing-over between the two that constitutes a self not through transcendence but through being "caught up in things" (163). This chiasma of self and world precludes any attempt to conceptualize the body as closed-up or finished-off:

> Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing...vision happens among, or is caught in, things—in that place where something visible undertakes to see, becomes visible for itself by virtue of the sight of

> things; in that place where there persists...the undividedness [*l'indivision*] of the sensing and the sensed. (163; translator's parenthetical)

This "undividedness of the sensing and the sensed" is precisely what underlies Bakhtin's grotesque body. The body sees and is seen in the same way that "the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world" (*Rabelais* 317). It is "*voyant-visible*" just as much as eating-eaten ("Eye" 168). Merleau-Ponty's philosophy brings home just how fundamental this grotesqueness of the body is. While it might seem at first that the overcoming of the confines "between the body and the world" occurs only in those acts that the grotesque celebrates—eating, drinking, elimination, copulation—it becomes clear that these are only the most explicit instances of this crossing-over, this openness (*Rabelais* 317). In this respect we see the deeper meaning behind Bakhtin's claim that the grotesque representation of the body expresses "the inner movement of being itself:" the passing of one form into another reveals the chiasma of the body and the world, the "undividedness" of the self that sees or eats or shits and that which is seen or eaten or shit (32). How can one form become another unless they are both open to each other, caught up in each other, caught among things together? Beneath Rabelais' "gross exaggeration" of body parts and functions, Bakhtin perceives the body's perpetual overlap with the world (303). The grotesque representation is so important for him because this more fundamental grotesqueness characterizes living reality itself.

For the moment I will ignore the question of the particular ideological effects or motivations of the grotesque and instead move directly to the text in question. The representation of Bloom's body in "Calypso" exhibits grotesque characteristics. As stated above, the episode figures as a digestive cycle in miniature, beginning with a hungry Bloom and ending with the act of excretion. Its very structure points to its investment in

an aesthetic that refuses the isolable body in favor of a fundamental openness. The first sentence puts Bloom in the act of devouring, in the midst of bringing the world into his body: "Mr Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls" (Joyce 65). He chomps on "inner organs:" he swallows that which also swallows ("gizzards"), digests, and lives. The rest of the episode moves toward the climactic moment when he eats the kidney, only to be followed by a coda of defecation: it follows Bloom's travels through the lower bodily stratum, his consuming and excreting. In this sense, the episode is structured entirely around those acts the grotesque prefers—the ones that emphasize the body's openness to the world.

This grotesqueness, however, does not remain simply at the level of plot and actions. The second paragraph changes the meaning of the first. "Kidneys were in his mind as he moved about the kitchen softly:" the primary act of devouring has not occurred on the material level of the world represented in the text; it was only a sort of image (65). Nor does Bloom actually eat those "inner organs" within the time of the represented world. The first sentence is a characterization of Bloom—he tends to eat and enjoy this food—but it also suggests a perpetual devouring, where Bloom is always consuming the world and always in a grotesque process of becoming. The second paragraph effects a displacement from the definite and singular to the ongoing and perpetual that divorces Bloom's state of openness to the world from any specific act, presenting him instead in the constant grotesquerie that is the "undividedness" of the eater and eaten, the "open circuit" of the body and the world ("Eye" 163 and 168).

This shift between the first and second paragraphs indicates another matter that must be dealt with regarding the presence of the grotesque representation of the body in

"Calypso." The text portrays Bloom's actions through a free indirect discourse that melds bodily perception with narrative, thought and memory. "Kidneys were in his mind," not his mouth (Joyce 65). That is, we do not just see a grotesque body—we hear its thoughts, we are in its head. How does the grotesqueness of the body affect the nature of consciousness? What sort of relationship between thought and matter does such a conceptualization of the body presuppose? For the moment, I will leave this question standing. Before going any further in this analysis it is necessary to address the utopian vision of the grotesque.

Bakhtin traces the source of the grotesque representation of the body, as it appears in Rabelais specifically, to the carnival culture of the Middle Ages. This in turn has its roots in "the early stages of preclass and prepolitical social order," where both "the serious and the comic aspects of the world" were "equally 'official'" (*Rabelais* 6). As state power and class structures began to consolidate, the serious aspect of the world gained a monopoly, and "all the comic forms were transferred...to a nonofficial level" (6). They were preserved in carnival rituals, which "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order" (10). This official, serious order maintained a "private sphere of isolated individuals" defined according to the stratifications of class and an absolute vertical hierarchy (23). But in these rituals, "all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" were suspended, allowing for a "special form of free and familiar contact...among people who were usually divided by barriers of caste, property, profession, and age" (10). During carnival time, that is, all social and ideological boundaries became porous, and people circulated freely among them. Thus the carnival in its pure form was not just a spectacle or performance, it was

the lived reality of its participants: the people "live[d] in it, and everyone participate[d] because its very idea embrace[d] all the people" (7). It was "a special condition of the entire world," "a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations," "a second world and a second life outside officialdom" (6-7). The very order of things was suspended in carnival—it was a movement toward an "entirely different sphere," where the relationships between all things appeared in new ways, where new meanings and a new hierarchy of meanings emerged (7).

The grotesque representation of the body comes into play here as a means of overturning the official order. "All that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract" during normal time is degraded and brought down "to the material level" in carnival (19). But this debasement does not aim simply at negation. It is ambivalent: "it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one" (21). It brings the elevated, serious order down to the "lower stratum of the body," the site of the grotesque's favorite acts, the site of "defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth" (21). This level is essentially generative. The new order of carnival stems from this productive degradation, and the grotesque body becomes the main vehicle for its birth because it "knows no other lower level...it is always conceiving" (21). The grotesque acts as a means of providing a "popular corrective of laughter" to all the forms of "narrow-minded seriousness" present in the dominant discourse (22). It throws the pretenses and concerns of the individualizing, idealizing order back onto an awareness of a fundamental bodily participation in the world. It is with this in mind that Bakhtin argues that "the grotesque liberates man from all the forms of inhuman necessity that direct the prevailing concept

of the world," subverting the old order and putting people in a new, non-hierarchical framework (49).

This utopian vision of the carnivalesque causes hesitation in applying Bakhtin's grotesque to other works without any qualification. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, for instance, dismiss it as "wishful" and as a result "unusable as an analytical tool" (10). Kelly Anspaugh follows their lead in his analysis of the use of excrement in Joyce's work. Because of the deep anxiety that lurks in these images, Anspaugh rejects Bakhtin's "sunny portrait of the grotesque body." He draws instead on Julia Kristeva's "paradigm of abjection" in order to conceptualize the role of shit in Joyce's work as symptomatic of his process of writing. According to Anspaugh, Joyce revels in images of excrement as a "self-abjection" with the ultimate aim of sublimation: degrading and materializing his language in order to transmute it into art. While this analysis seems spot on in some of Joyce's other works,[1] it does not seem able to fully account for the complexities of Bloom's embodied character in *Ulysses*. Anspaugh focuses on the "Circe" episode, "where Joyce's excremental hero is put on trial for his many copro-crimes" and "suffers the most agonizing abjection." Reading the trial as a manifestation of "Bloom's repressed guilt over his coprophilic tendencies," he reduces all of Bloom's anxieties to the solitary cause of an inordinate interest in excrement, overlooking a variety of other phenomena for which Bloom feels guilt or anxiety and which crop up in this scene and throughout the rest of the novel.

Anspaugh underscores the fact that "Joyce's shit...has an abject aspect to it that Rabelais's shit, according to Bakhtin, lacks." It is true that Joyce's use of the grotesque

[1] Anspaugh cites the poem "The Holy Office," Stephen's epiphany at the end of the fourth chapter of *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*, and Shem the Penman's recipe for ink in *Finnegans Wake*.

body and its products is intonated differently from Rabelais's. There is nothing unequivocally positive or optimistic in Bloom's bodily acts. However, Anspaugh's dismissal of the grotesque is based on the assumption that this utopian turn is an inherent quality, when in fact Bakhtin's "sunny portrait" results from its engagement with concrete historical practices in a particular ideological moment: the "two-world condition" of Rabelais's time (*Rabelais* 6). The utopian vision of the Rabelaisian grotesque stems from the acute split that existed between the official world and the world of the carnival: "The men of the Middle Ages participated in two lives: the official and the carnival life. Two aspects of the world, the serious and the laughing aspect, coexisted in their consciousness" (96). "Both these lives were legitimate, but separated by strict temporal boundaries:" they coexisted, but each determined people's behavior only within their specific time frame (*Problems* 130). It is in this respect that the grotesque "discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life," and "leads men out of the confines of the apparent (false) unity, of the indisputable and stable:" when it is time for carnival to take effect, the grotesque steps in to strip away the authority of the official order (*Rabelais* 48).

These "two worlds" are essentially two ideological systems coexisting with equal validity. A quick explanation of the Bakhtin circle's concept of ideology will help to understand precisely what this means. V.N. Vološinov maintains that ideology refers at the most basic level to a system that provides meaning. Its fundamental element is the word or sign, which "represents, depicts, or stands for something lying outside itself" (9). In this sense it has both a material existence and a social value: it "does not simply exist as a part of a reality—it reflects and refracts another reality" (10). This refracted reality is

that of the given ideology, which exists according to its own particular indisputable logic and its own "unconditional" necessity (*Rabelais* 49). The particular meaning of a sign, Vološinov argues, comes from the actual lived reality in which it is experienced:

> the constituent factor for understanding the linguistic form is not recognition of "the same thing," but understanding in the proper sense of the word, i.e., orientation in the particular, given context and in the particular, given situation—orientation in the dynamic process of becoming and not "orientation" in some inert state. (70)

The ideological sign does not exist as a static form to be recognized by an abstract consciousness. Its meaning derives rather from particular interactions in the world. The ideological understanding of consciousness is a concrete, material, living process. It requires bodily participation in ideology's refracted reality. Ideology is not abstractly recognized as true—it feels true, on a visceral level. It permeates the very substance of the body.

Vološinov argues that "consciousness takes shape and being in the material of signs created by an organized group...it reflects their logic and laws...If we deprive consciousness of its semiotic, ideological content, it would have absolutely nothing left" (13). When, as in Rabelais's time, there is a two-world condition, consciousness will take full part in both. During carnival time, then, there is complete participation in the nonofficial world, an absolute removal from the official hierarchy: "life is subject only to its [carnival's] laws" (*Rabelais* 7). The nonofficial ideology was not grasped by "abstract thought" but was "lived by the whole man, in thought and body" (48). This is why the grotesque body is so powerful an expression of the carnival world: its function is to "turn [its] subject into flesh" (20). "This bodily participation in the potentiality of another world, the bodily awareness of another world" confronts the official order's claims to

indisputable "truth" and "destroys [its] limited seriousness and all pretense of an extratemporal meaning and unconditional value of necessity" (48-9). The "indisputable" nature of the ideological construction of the order of things falls away before this bodily participation in a different order (49). The power of the Rabelaisian grotesque to realize this nonofficial world is not so much due to any utopian vision as it is to the nature of ideology and the historically contingent circumstances of Rabelais's time. When considering the role of the grotesque in Joyce's work we obviously do not expect to see such a liberatory power, because the two-world condition of Rabelais's time has long since been monologized by the serious order.

On the other hand, it is true that Bakhtin does prefer the carnival form and its grotesque aesthetic—perhaps there is some utopian element in this glorification of the nonofficial, this "generous but willed idealism" (Stallybrass and White 10). But this is not simply the result of a populist sympathy or a political conviction. Bakhtin's preference stems, rather, from a metaphysical understanding of the body and its relation to the world mentioned above. The grotesque, according to Bakhtin, shows us "the inner movement of being itself[,] the passing of one form into the other" (*Rabelais* 32). This must be kept in mind: the grotesque articulates a profound understanding of being. It is the aesthetic expression of the real "flux of becoming" (52). This fundamental understanding of the human body and its openness to the world, this grotesque chiasma in which forms pass into each other, lies beneath it. In this light, we can follow Tzvetan Todorov in attributing "Bakhtin's obvious preference" to his philosophical and "aesthetic beliefs:" he privileges the grotesque, in short, because it is the most accurate reflection of human existence itself (80).

With this criticism out of the way, it is time to return, at last, to "Calypso." There are three moments in which the miniature digestive cycle is played out. The scene in "the jakes" provides the easiest entrance by which to address this question of the relationship between consciousness and the grotesque body (83). Bloom reads a short story as he defecates. This image clearly falls into Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque representation of the body with its preference for the bodily lower stratum. What is interesting here, though, is the particular way Bloom's narrated thoughts represent both actions. The two seem to slide together, the specific referent for certain phrases remains ambiguous. His search for something to read is described: "Asquat on the cuckstool he folded out his paper turning its pages over on his bared knees. Something new and easy. No great hurry. Keep it a bit. Our prize titbit" (83). The ease he is looking for refers both to what he wants to read and to the act of defecation, as the fear of its "bring[ing] on piles again" makes plain (84). Similarly, the urge to linger applies as much to the leisurely perusal of a story as to what Anspaugh terms Bloom's "inordinate" enjoyment of "his morning defecation." The phonic overlap between "Keep it a bit" and "Our prize titbit" suggests a conflation of reading and shitting: on the one hand, the action of a mind that might be figured as immaterial, and on the other, that of an open and permeable body. In the text, these actions are not separated by any categorical distinction: they are playfully and punningly combined—not just placed next to each other in order to effect some satirical attack on the literary quality of the stories in *Titbits*, but brought together into one action. The consciousness that reads does so only because it is also a body—and this body also shits.

The scene goes on: "Quietly he read, restraining himself, the first column and, yielding but resisting, began the second. Midway, his last resistance yielding, he allowed his bowels to ease themselves quietly as he read, reading still patiently, that slight constipation of yesterday quite gone" (83-4). These sentences develop further the fusion of the two actions. He resists and yields both to the urge to read quickly and to the relaxation of his bowels. Both actions have been merged together into the single process of a conscious body that in its undividedness with the world brings discursive matter into itself in the same way that it expels waste matter. The adverbial modifier "quietly," coupled with the parallel of the phrases "quietly he read" and "quietly as he read," also unites these actions into one seamless opening. The suggestion here is of a formal non-differentiation between these two actions: both are possible only on the basis of a fundamentally grotesque body that opens itself to a material and social world. They are simply two modes of this body's "interchange and interorientation" with the world (*Rabelais* 317). "Neat certainly," positioned between Bloom's "own rising smell" and a fragment of the "prize titbit," ties together the twin products of these actions, the residue of story and shit, that linger with Bloom as the moment ends (Joyce 84).

The point is that the text's oscillation between these two actions forbids any division between mind and body: the grotesque understanding consciousness realizes the body as an open undividedness of self and world, not a collection of unrelated points of operation. In fact the attempt to separate consciousness from the body is one and the same as the attempt to isolate material forms as static and impenetrable objects. Consciousness takes shape only through bodily participation in the material and social world of ideology, and the basis of this participation is a fundamentally grotesque body.

Open and permeable, becoming in the world, it is among things, a sensing that is also sensed, that is cut of the same cloth as the world. Its boundaries are in constant flux because it is a thing of the world and so participates in the perpetual becoming of the world. The grotesque understands this: the body knows, through its contact with the world, some level of "brute meaning" that is not strictly limited to the definite boundaries of isolable consciousness and the order of things ("Eye" 161). And consciousness does not exist except through this sensing and being sensed, this being in the world; it is intertwined with, maybe identical to, the body.

The scene in Dlugacz's shows a similar materialization of consciousness as in the outhouse. Here, Bloom's "soft subject gaze" is the focus, functioning as a physical agent: "The shiny links of forcemeat fed his gaze and he breathed in tranquilly the lukewarm breath of cooked spicy pig's blood" (70). His gaze devours the sausages, making explicit the link between vision and ingestion that is suggested by their common foundation in the open, grotesque body. His breath, also, that model of the ethereal soul, is brought down to the most basic material level as it merges with the breath of "pig's blood" (70). The "outward and inward features" of his body and of the sausage—their breaths and their blood—are "merged into one" (*Rabelais* 318). As he waits, he picks up a Zionist tract: "He held the page from him: interesting: read it nearer, the blurred cropping cattle, the page rustling...He held the page aslant patiently, bending his sense and his will, his soft subject gaze at rest" (Joyce 71). This is an embodied reading, not the operation of an incorporeal subjectivity that brings the words on the page into some inner mental state. It is wholly physical: it emphasizes the materiality of vision that lets reading and conscious understanding to happen. Along with the words and images on the page, Bloom hears the

"page rustling," its movement in the physical world; it is a concrete object. His gaze, reading and devouring, is out among things. It is the presence of his body to the world around him.

But this representation of the body does not come with any liberatory fever. As stated above, Anspaugh is correct in wanting to dissociate Joyce's grotesque from Bakhtin's optimistic vision. The awareness of being a material thing caught in the ceaseless flux of the world of becoming awakens in Bloom a deep fear that Henry Staten terms the "reality affect"—"anxiety, the pervasive, overwhelming, boundless anxiety of individuation, of being a contingent particular" (387). Faced with this openness to the world and the base materiality of consciousness, Bloom must face the fact "that [he] might not have existed and will certainly cease to exist" (387). Staten focuses on Bloom's observation: "everybody eating everyone else. That's what life is after all," which pushes the undividedness of eater and eaten to an anxious limit where individual identity is lost in the contingent materiality of the world (Joyce 155, Staten 383). This anxiety is a function of the same principle that motivates the Rabelaisian grotesque's utopian vision. "Born of folk humor," the grotesque "always represents in one form or another...the return of Saturn's golden age to earth—the living possibility of its return" (*Rabelais* 48). Without the "two-world condition," however, this return and the loss of individuality inherent therein do not carry any connotation of "the irresistible triumph of the new immortal people" (274). For Joyce, it simply provokes a raw and anxious understanding of the body's thingness. Whereas in Rabelais the grotesque representation of the body is positively charged because of the "two-world condition" of his historical moment, Joyce,

in the absence of such another possible world, figures the grotesque more as a simple loss of individuality than a gain of utopia (6).

It is no coincidence, then, that in this episode where Bloom's open body takes center stage there occurs one of the novel's most disturbing visions of death, sterility, and insignificance. The tract Bloom holds before him in Dlugacz's calls up visions of the Holy Land as he walks home. Though the paper promises agricultural fecundity, he is struck by a horrifying vision of the exhausted wasteland left behind by centuries of life:

> A barren land, bare waste. Vulcanic lake, the dead sea: no fish, weedless, sunk deep in the earth. No wind would lift those waves, grey metal, poisonous foggy waters. Brimstone they called it raining down: the cities of the plain: Sodom, Gomorrah, Edom. All dead names. A dead sea in a dead land, grey and old. Old now...It lay there now. Now it could bear no more. Dead: an old woman's: the grey sunken cunt of the world.
>
> Desolation.
>
> Grey horror seared his flesh...Cold oils slid along his veins, chilling his blood: age crusting him with a salt cloak. (73)

The fact is that an open body that is part of the world can ultimately promise nothing for the individual consciousness but the certainty of death. For Bakhtin, one of the most positive aspects of the grotesque representation of the body is that it strips away individuality and replaces it with an "all-people's" understanding of human life and society that emphasizes communality rather than subjectivity (*Rabelais* 19). In a pure carnival setting, perhaps, the positivity of this grotesque power is unquestionable, as the people come together in their perpetual movement into the future. When this understanding of the body confronts a modern subject, like Bloom, the reaction is horror: in the face of the world, he is nothing; if even the land that "bore the oldest, the first race," cannot withstand the march of time, then his own openness to the world is nothing less than the assurance of his own death and ultimate insignificance—and not only his

own, but perhaps even the whole human race's. The land that is so wracked with death is figured as a human body, "grey and old," with the vestiges of a once-great (re)generative power that has been worn out (73). The "grey sunken cunt of the world" is the inverted mirror image of the "fertility, growth, and brimming-over abundance" of the grotesque, yet it maintains the tendency to map the qualities of the body onto the earth (*Rabelais* 21). Only now this body is exhausted and sterile and gray: it has come up against the decay of time and the material world's promise of death. It is used up; it can "bear no more," laying there in its senescence (Joyce 73). Material objects wear out; bodies grow fatigued, gnarled, and stop working. Bloom grasps the ceaseless flow of becoming in only its negative aspect: transience and decay. The "grey horror" this inspires sinks into Bloom's body: it burns itself into his flesh and slides through his veins (73). The transience of the material, the passing of one form into another, lurks within him: as an individual subject he can grasp the perpetual becoming of the world only as the death that is promised by his body (73).

Clearly there is nothing unambiguously positive in Joyce's use of the grotesque. The open, unfinished body that is its basis results, in the absence of any really lived two-worldedness, in a paralytic anxiety before the flow of becoming. The utopian element has fallen away; instead the grotesque marks an emergence out of the ideological order of things only in order to throw the individual back on its own brute materiality. This analysis has revealed three important characteristics of the grotesque: the open, unfinished body; the materialization of consciousness; and perpetual becoming. Tied up with all of these is the loss of individuality that Bloom faces. The utopian vision with which Bakhtin invests the grotesque is not inherent in its form, because it results from

contingent historical practices. The dissolution of identity in the face of the wholeness of the world remains, but its function has changed. In the next chapter, I will expand on these general observations by analyzing a text that, among other things, attempts to reclaim the grotesque as a vision of utopia.

II. The Plant Monster: The Body of Nature as Grotesque Ideal

Putting Joyce and Bakhtin together has afforded a working definition of the grotesque as a representation of the body that stresses its openness, incompletion, and material commerce with a world of becoming. These characteristics demand that consciousness be conceived of as inseparable from and entwined with the body. This signals a loss of subjective individuality in which Bakhtin sees a move toward a utopian collectivity. For Joyce, on the other hand, this means nothing more than the triumph of decay and exhaustion. With this definition in hand I will turn to another manifestation of the grotesque: Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing*. This text complicates the above characteristics by figuring the grotesque body as composed not of flesh but of plant matter. This difference will develop the theory of the grotesque by revealing more of its structural characteristics. Because of its own particular vision that figures utopia in the body of Nature, it will serve as a counterpoint to Joyce's anxiety about the grotesqueness of the body.

The original explanation for Swamp Thing's existence went like this: while developing a bio-restorative formula that will enhance plant growth, Alec Holland's research is sabotaged by a bomb planted in his cabin in the middle of the Louisiana bayou. In the explosion, he is drenched in his own formula, and, burning alive, vanishes into the swamp. He emerges a mutant, half-human and half-vegetable, created, presumably, by the interaction of the formula with the intense heat of the explosion.

Moore changes this story in his first issue. In the hope of discovering the secret of the bio-restorative formula, the Sunderland Corporation has captured Swamp Thing and

frozen his body. Dr. Jason Woodrue, a minor villain who can control plants, studies the frozen corpse. The initial hypothesis that Swamp Thing is some "human-vegetable hybrid" seems less and less likely as his study proceeds (*Saga* 18). Nothing about Swamp Thing's body makes sense. Woodrue sums up his autopsy as "hauling organs that couldn't work out of a body that had never needed them" (20): "Pod-like structures" that look like lungs but have no capillary tubes, that merely "suck and blow;" a "spongelike vegetable brain" with no synapse gaps; a "useless heart;" "unworkable pseudo-kidneys"—strange green lumps with no possible purpose (19). Woodrue is finally able to account for Swamp Thing's organs by a theory suggested to him by a study of planarian worms: namely, "that *consciousness* and *intelligence* can be passed on as foodstuffs" (22). Dr. Woodrue reconstructs the events leading up to Swamp Thing's birth: the powerful explosion kills Alec Holland, and

> his body goes into the swamp along with the formula that it is saturated with. And, once there...it decomposes...But what about the plants in the swamp? The plants that have been altered by the bio-restorative formula? The plants whose hungry root systems are busily ingesting the mortal remains of Alec Holland? Those plants eat him...and they become infected by a powerful consciousness that does not realize it is no longer alive! (23)

Swamp Thing is born when the plants altered by the bio-restorative formula ingest Alec Holland's body, and his consciousness along with it. The grotesqueness of this fact is plain: immaterial consciousness is brought down to a purely bodily level, not just materialized but digested, coming into "contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time" (*Rabelais* 21). Woodrue explains further as the green embryo slowly takes human shape: "We thought that the Swamp Thing was Alec Holland, somehow transformed into a plant. It wasn't. It was a plant that *thought* it was Alec Holland! A plant that was trying its level best to be Alec Holland..." (*Saga* 24). The

plant, not realizing it does not need them, has formed those inexplicable organs in its attempt to recreate Holland's human body. Swamp Thing is just "a mass of plant fiber that [has] somehow been *infected* with the consciousness of Alec Holland. Just the moss-encrusted *echo* of a man. Not a man at all" (40). The body of Alec Holland is dead; his consciousness has somehow been diffused throughout some vague sphere of plant cells; and Swamp Thing, we know now, is not Alec Holland. Moore's revision removes *Swamp Thing* from the individualistic framework of the first origin story—where the individual seeks only to reverse the transformation he has suffered—and places it squarely in the realm of the grotesque: consciousness has been materialized, ingestion equals birth, and the individual, it seems, was only ever a confused abstraction.

This new version of *Swamp Thing* attempts to make the grotesque representation of the body literal. In the last chapter we saw that the grotesque focuses on the signs of the body's "unfinished character, of its growth and proliferation...its protuberances and offshoots [and] its convexities (signs of new sprouts and buds)" (*Rabelais* 29). It "is looking for that which protrudes from the body," its "shoots and branches [and] all that prolongs the body and links it to other bodies or to the world outside" (*Rabelais* 316-7). It is no accident that Bakhtin speaks of the grotesque body as though it were a plant: underlying this representation is an understanding of the body modeled on the natural cycle of growth, death, decay, and re-growth. This model equates the processes of the body with those of organic plant life.

Tracing the historical bases of the Rabelaisian chronotope, Bakhtin describes a theoretical stage in human prehistory structured according to "productive and generative time" (*Dialogic* 206). Todorov summarizes Bakhtin's ideas concerning this framework:

> This primitive world is characterized by working and living collectively; by the importance of the role granted to *natural rhythms* (*the growth of plants*, *the change of the season*); the orientation toward the future; the domination of the concrete; continuous and cyclical time; the equal value of the elements of life. (78, emphasis mine)

"This is the time of *productive growth*," Bakhtin explains: it is marked by "blossoming, fruit-bearing, ripening, fruitful increase, issue" (*Dialogic* 207). Because it is "collective," meaning that "individuality is not isolated," all forms of death or negation become "nothing more than aspects subordinated to growth and increase" (207). This must be understood against the worldview of the "individual sealed-off consciousness," for which "death is only an end," lacking "any real and productive associations:"

> Death and birth of new life are parceled out into different sealed-off individual life-sequences: death ends one life and birth begins a completely other life. Individualized deaths do not overlap with the birth of new lives, they are not swallowed up by triumphant growth, for these deaths have been taken out of that whole in which such growth occurs. (*Dialogic* 216)

In the collective, folkloric chronotope, death and birth are not differentiated: they are the same moment. Nothing ends without also marking a new beginning, because "perishing and death are perceived as a *sowing*, after which follows increase and harvest" (207). The division of actions and moments collapses under these "conditions that did not admit the isolating of individual life-sequences and that took for granted the immanent unity of time" (210). Everything is "lumped together into a single event, each phenomenon signifying different sides of one and the same whole—the whole growth, of fertility, of life conceived under the sign of growth and fertility" (210).

For Bakhtin, this theoretical social structure is in many respects the root of carnival and the grotesque representation of the body. What is most important, as pertaining to the grotesque in *Swamp Thing*, is that this theoretical social structure

emphasizes the non-differentiation between the human and the natural that emerges in the grotesque: "the life of nature and the life of man are fused together in this complex" (210). The folkloric chronotope's focus on growing plant life and changing seasons develops into "the very core of the carnival sense of the world—*the pathos of shifts and changes, of death and renewal*:" pathos here in its meaning as transience, impermanence (*Problems* 124). The union of human life with the generative processes of nature forms the basis of the grotesque body as a site of offshoots, buds, and sprouts, and makes it essentially "a point of transition" (*Rabelais* 318). Carnival uses this growing and changing body in order to celebrate "the shift itself, the very process of replaceability, and not the precise item that is replaced:" it is "functional and not substantive"—the body that dies is not important; it is the act of dying, and the implied generative process, that is of the essence here (*Problems* 125).

Now, Swamp Thing's body is one whose "new sprouts and buds" are more than just metaphor. At one point, Abby wonders why his "skin" is changing color: "The autumn...is coming," Swamp Thing replies (*Saga* 112). His body visibly alters with the changes of season: he is plugged into the wholeness of the world that is constantly transforming. The folkloric subordination of death and negation to the "single event" of "whole growth" is enacted in Swamp Thing's body (*Dialogic* 210). Noticing a bird dying on the ground, he stoops, lifts it, and ushers it into death. Rearranging the mossy green of his chest, he hollows out a space for its corpse, explaining the purpose to Abby: "Placing it...inside me...that I may absorb its *riches*...as it decays...Death...shall nourish life...and nothing...shall be *waste*." (*The Curse* 154). Here, death *is* literally a sowing. The corpse enters his living body, marking death as the beginning of new

growth. Or again, a panel depicting the rotting skull of Alec Holland surrounded by the tendrils and fauna of the swamp is followed immediately by one where the Swamp Thing's green fetus fills in for the skull's position, and death fuses into birth (*Saga* 23-24; see Appendix: Images 1 and 2). In a sense, his body is the body of Nature itself: he has flesh made of moss, a skeleton of branches, muscles of "supple plant fibers" (24). The fusion of human life and nature that the grotesque uses to express the openness and incompletion of a perpetual becoming has perhaps never been manifested so literally. One might even say, in this respect, the Swamp Thing is a grotesque ideal, if such a concept is possible: expressing a grotesqueness so pure that it can only be achieved through a total retreat from the flesh of the human body.

Before exploring the implications of this claim, however, it is important to first distinguish this folkloric chronotope from the grotesque. The difference lies in its cyclic conception of time: "Time's forward impulse is limited by the cycle. For this reason even growth does not achieve an authentic 'becoming'" (*Dialogic* 210). The grotesque does not properly emerge until this "cyclical character is superseded by the sense of historic time" (*Rabelais* 25). This is because the cycle cancels the unfinished character of being. It wraps everything into its unifying whole and guarantees that any shift occurs only to return to the same initial point. The collective order Bakhtin describes constitutes essentially "a world where nothing is posited beyond the present," to use the words of Georges Bataille—the present understood as the immediately cyclic tendency of any moment or action (18).[2] Although Bakhtin maintains that this chronotope is "maximally

[2] This social framework finds a common point with Bataille's notion of intimacy or animality. The single event into which all the phenomena of life are compounded makes up an uninterrupted and "indistinct continuity," a world "where the subject has a part in the elements it distinguishes," and from which the subject is not separated by the positing of the object as such (Bataille 27-8). Bataille identifies the moment

tensed toward the future," he qualifies this with the claim that this future is not differentiated from the present or the past: they are enfolded in a cycle that figures time as an essentially static series of returns to the same initial point (*Dialogic* 207). It is an awareness of historic, "changing time"—the awareness that any moment grows out of its past into its future, a time that takes place on a plane and not a circle—that distinguishes the grotesque from this folkloric chronotope (*Rabelais* 25).

The grotesque expresses the human body's situation in the "wholeness of the world" that is marked by incompletion, death, renewal, and growth (*Rabelais* 12). Obviously this is a wholeness that is by its nature never finished, but always in a process of becoming. Recall that in the grotesque representation "there was no longer the movement of finished forms, vegetable or animal, in a finished and stable world; instead the inner movement of being itself was expressed in the passing of one form into the other, in the ever incompleted character of being" (32). As argued in the previous chapter, it thus becomes plain that Bakhtin's emphasis on the grotesque body and its carnival roots is not born merely of a sympathetic populism, but is, rather, an ontological matter. Its importance resides in the fact that it is the aesthetic expression of a deep truth of being itself: the unfinished, overgrown body articulates the perpetual becoming of the world.

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of the positing of the object in "the human use of tools," where the tool is strictly subordinated to its user and made with a particular result in view (27). For Bakhtin, however, the uninterrupted continuity of the "single event" is not broken simply by the use of tools, so long as the individual subject has not been isolated from a collective body that does not distinguish human life from the greater sphere of the world. It is only through the isolation of the individual that the subject's transcendence of objects can be achieved—a transcendence that makes of objects "interruptions in the [otherwise] indistinct continuity" (Bataille 27). Within the collective framework, individuals and tools and all elements that take part in productive growth remain within the community of the single event. In other words, Bakhtin posits a framework wherein humans exist in something very much like the seamless immanence that Bataille attributes to animality. Ultimately the grotesque is strictly incommensurable with animality, because it requires an emergence out of this single event into historic time.

The importance of the notion of becoming for the grotesque rests in its paradoxical structure. Gilles Deleuze, in *The Logic of Sense*, explains that becoming strictly "eludes the present" (1). This is particularly clear in comparative statements. Deleuze illustrates this with the sentence "Alice becomes larger," which indicates at once a becoming-larger than she was and a becoming-smaller than she will be (1). The "simultaneity" of the categories of larger and smaller registered in this instance occurs because there is also a simultaneity of before and after. This is what Deleuze means when he says that becoming eludes the present: it "does not tolerate the separation or the distinction of before and after, or of past and future. It pertains to the essence of becoming to move and to pull in both directions at once" (1). Becoming is essentially paradoxical because while "good sense affirms that in all things there is a determinable sense of direction (*sens*)[,] paradox is the affirmation of both senses or directions at the same time" (1).

It is easy to see how the cyclic unity of the folkloric chronotope must shift to an awareness of historic time in order to realize the grotesque, which takes place on the "horizontal plane of the becoming of the cosmos in time" (*Rabelais* 365). Cyclic time can affirm only one direction—forward, to the "future," the single direction of the cycle. But historic becoming points to and affirms both directions at once—the past and the future—and maps them concretely onto the same moment. Becoming "always eludes the present, causing future and past, more and less, too much and not enough to coincide in the simultaneity of a rebellious matter" (Deleuze 2). For the grotesque, this rebellious matter is the human body itself, the matter in which the horizontal plane of becoming, with its multidirectional affirmations, is realized (*Rabelais* 365). It is important to note that the

non-distinction between before and after that occurs in becoming differs categorically from that of cyclic time. In the former, before and after are not separated because both are fully affirmed in the same moment, whereas in the latter they are simply collapsed into each other as subordinate elements of one single event. It is only with the awareness of historic time, the awareness of history as a "ceaseless flow of becoming," as the endless passing of one form into another, that the grotesque emerges (Vološinov 66). The grotesque moves beyond the perpetual present of the folkloric chronotope by affirming that any event takes place in time, and so is always becoming—becoming larger, becoming smaller, becoming different. Because the process of becoming moves in multiple directions at once, recognizing this characteristic of an event amounts to understanding that it extends beyond itself every which way, that it is at every moment outgrowing itself. This is not a growth conceived in some "abstract thought about the future," but a growth in the here-and-now, a change that has its future and its past entangled in it, a lived sense of growing-becoming in history (*Rabelais* 367).

The multiple senses of becoming have one consequence, according to Deleuze—the destruction of fixed, static identity, assigned to objects by substantive names. These names "are carried away by verbs of pure becoming," with the result that "all identity disappears," leaving instead a pure sliding away from fixed points (3). In this sense, the paradox of becoming is "the paradox of infinite identity"—"the infinite identity of both directions or senses at the same time" (2). The grotesque is concerned precisely with this disappearance of static identity: "The last thing one can say of the real grotesque is that it is static; on the contrary it seeks to grasp in its imagery the very act of becoming and growth, the eternal incomplete unfinished nature of being" (*Rabelais* 52). The dualism

that maintains the boundary between the dimension of becoming and the dimension of clearly delimited entities collapses in the grotesque, which foregrounds becoming in order to expose the abstraction inherent in the vision of constant and finished-off bodies, to reveal change and transience as the reality of being. To do this it deploys that fusion of human life and nature inherited from the folkloric chronotope, treating the human body as a site of new growth and offshoots, disclosing "the abundant material principle, change and becoming"—the becoming that always lurks in the depths of material and sensible things, no matter how firmly one attempts to fix their identity (274). The grotesque thus uses the model of natural shifts and changes in order to express the horizontal plane of historic time.

This lengthy digression will hopefully help us to make sense of the particular manner in which the grotesque functions in *Swamp Thing*. We see this grotesque dissolution of identity in the vegetable sex issue (this is perhaps the most positive vision of the grotesque in the late twentieth century—it stands in stark contrast to Joyce's anxiety). Abby and Swamp Thing declare their love for each other, and as a consummation, because physical sex is not possible or even desirable, Swamp Thing removes a tuber from his body and offers it to Abby, telling her to eat it. When she does, she begins to see the world differently—she begins to see as Swamp Thing sees: "You ate...the *fruit*...Abby...You absorbed...a little...of my *consciousness*...my *perceptions*..." (*Love* 196). In order to convey Abby's drastic perceptual shift, the comic form alters: the page turns on its side, so that one must rotate the book ninety degrees in order to read it. The changed formal framework corresponds to the new frame by which Abby knows the world. Easy square panel divisions (never very strong in *Swamp Thing*

to begin with) fall away, and images overlap and merge together. Where the panel divisions do appear, they do so only partially, and separate images only in order to join them more completely through the prose narration. "My hand shatters the pool," Abby thinks, and four central panels dissolve into each other at their bottom in a splash of water: droplets fly up and cover the panels themselves (198). Any single form radiates beyond itself, veins of color extending beyond its boundaries and linking it to another body on the page. All the conventions of linear narrative, the cohesion of which depends on isolable elements—closed-off frames, individual bodies, single and definable events—dissolve, strict divisions disappear, and a grotesque commingling of inchoate forms rises to the forefront.

Beyond this formal shift, Abby's experience affords her fuller knowledge of the complex system of connection that is the Swamp Thing's grotesque nature. Seeing a new texture of the world—forms flowing one into another, determinate objects dissolving—she understands that "everything's *alive* and...and it's all made from the *same stuff*!" (197). Vision blazes out from her eyes, in yellow and red flora: the colors of Swamp Thing's eyes. This is the world that Swamp Thing sees. This new framing of the world is not simply visual; Abby experiences it throughout her whole body, and anything she might have treated as an isolable part of her self dissolves:

> Where we touch, the fibers merge and intertangle. I am no longer certain where I end...where he begins...I feel my own hand as *he* feels it, a warm bird caged within my strong green fingers...We blur together, unresisting ...There is a delicious ambiguity...A tide of emerald engulfs me. I'm falling into him[.] (198-9)

In the center of the page, their hands clasp together, with Abby's arm a shade of green that suggests the merger that has taken place. The pronouns of the narration and its point of view become unstable. Abby looks up and sees "the pale woman gaz[ing] down:" "she

is... so beautiful... *I*... am... so... beautiful" (199). Abby's individual ego struggles to retain its priority, oscillating at this point between the "I" and the other against which it is defined, trying to maintain the line that separates her from the world. But this distinction ultimately disappears before the overwhelming chiasma of self and world: not only does the line between Abby and Swamp Thing fall away, but so do all demarcations. Over a figure that is both Abby and Swamp Thing at once and that emanates beyond its borders into a dense web of roots and tendrils that overlap a series of other images, these words appear: "We...are...one creature...and all...that there *is*...is in *us*" (200; see Appendix: Image 3). Discrete material bodies exist suddenly in each other and outside of each other, stand alone only to slide away into the non-differentiation of the surrounding substance.

After she eats the fruit, a new order of knowledge is revealed to Abby:

> Together we know the light, exploding upward in a birdcloud, fragmenting into whirring feathered shrapnel, dancers in the glare...but the light is not *all* that we know. Together we bathe in raw life: honey rolls across our tongue. The fragrance of decay, mesmeric and overwhelming, excites our nostrils. We savor both equally...for life is not *all* that we comprehend. We are the world. (201)

The oscillation of the pronouns settles, for lack of any other word, on "we"—not in the sense of "we two distinct subjects—Swamp Thing and I—are the world," but rather in the sense of an indefinite plurality. This is an order of knowledge that knows light in cloud, life in decay, and the interlocking of bodies in the world. And it expresses all as it speaks "we." This is a grotesque knowledge that distinguishes the singular only in order to emphasize its inherent connectivity, that says "I" as Abby, Swamp Thing, a rat, a hawkmoth, only in order to affirm that "there is no contradiction...only the *pulse*. The pulse within the world. Within us. Within me" (201). The final image of Abby and

Swamp Thing's consummation takes up a full page: the two face each other in profile, their borders extending into a clod of dirt in which a cluster of fragmented forms, only some of which are identifiable, intertwine. This is the "we" that spoke before—an indefinite plurality of fragments, at once decaying and glowing with life, and which, finally, no words need affirm: the final narration box contains only an ellipsis, because any words would try to fix identity and break apart the entanglement that has been discovered (203; see Appendix: Image 4).

The explosive grotesqueness of this scene is clear. Open and incomplete forms blur together and pass into each other on every page in a heterogeneous snarl of connections and dissolutions. This movement from open bodies to heterogeneity, connectivity and multiplicity suggests that the grotesque body as figured in *Swamp Thing* might be termed rhizomatic, to use the vocabulary of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari advance the rhizome as a model of thought that would break with dualism. Before explaining the rhizome, they first explain two dualist models from which they distinguish it: in the first place, it is fundamentally different from a dichotomizing "root-tree" system, which "has never reached an understanding of multiplicity," because it rests upon a "strong principal unity," "the One" from which any other point derives (5). One point branches into two separate points, which each branch into another two, and so on. The second system to which the rhizome is opposed they term a "radicle-system" (5). Such a system is marked by "an immediate, indefinite multiplicity of secondary roots," but this multiplicity is in turn succeeded by an "even more comprehensive secret unity:" "Most modern methods for making series proliferate or a multiplicity grow are perfectly valid in one direction, for example, a linear

direction, whereas a unity of totalization asserts itself even more firmly in another, circular or cyclic, dimension" (5-6). That is to say, the apparent multiplicity is brought together under a unifying sign: unity is reclaimed by being posited "in an empty dimension supplementary to that of the system considered" (8). Both of these systems remain entirely within dualistic thought: the root-system explicitly so, and the radicle-system because in it "unity is consistently thwarted and obstructed in the object, while a new type of unity triumphs in the subject," a more pervasive and comprehensive unity that works not by deriving the multiple from itself but by utterly subsuming it (6).

Over against these two kinds of systems, Deleuze and Guattari posit the rhizome as a model of thought that has nothing to do with any unifying or totalizing operation. It treats the multiple "as a substantive, 'multiplicity'" (8). Through substantiating the multiple, "any relation to the One as subject or object" is removed (8). Such a multiplicity with no relation to the One, or the many that would be derived from the One, is thereby "an affirmation that is irreducible to any sort of unity" (*Anti-Oedipus* 42). In the rhizomatic multiplicity, there are no subjects or objects, "no points or positions" such as would be found "in a structure, tree, or root" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 8). There are instead only "determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions" proliferating across a "*plane of consistency*" in which all dimensions are occupied, such that an empty "supplementary dimension," in which a unity might operate, is never present (8-9). It is in this sense that they argue that the rhizome operates "at $n - 1$ dimensions:" the multiplicity always has n dimensions flattened across the plane of consistency from which a totalizing unity, whether actual or possible, is always subtracted (6). Any "totality" that might appear to form out of this multiplicity can only be "peripheral:" "it is a whole *of* these particular

parts but does not totalize them; it is a unity *of* all of these particular parts but does not unify them; rather, it is added to them as a new part fabricated separately" (*Anti-Oedipus* 42). This is a "*map and not a tracing*:" it is produced alongside the rhizome, not forced ready-made onto the structure (*A Thousand Plateaus* 12). This flattened plane of consistency is composed of a series of heterogeneous elements, ceaselessly establishing connections between each other: "unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature" (21). Rhizomes follow the law of the production of production—"'and...' 'and then...'"—according to which any of their elements is connected to another element from which it draws some "flow," but this element itself produces a flow which is drawn off by another element (*Anti-Oedipus* 5). In this sense, there is no beginning or end to the rhizome: "it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing," a proliferation from the middle in transverse lines of communication between heterogeneous elements, always in motion toward connectivity (*A Thousand Plateaus* 25).

Bakhtin's notion of the historic becoming of the grotesque takes place on precisely such a flattened plane of consistency. The general tendency of thinking about the universe in Rabelais's time, from which Bakhtin traces the articulation of the grotesque, is marked by a shift wherein

> all things in the universe...moved to the single horizontal plane of the world of becoming, where they began to seek a new place and to achieve new formations. The center around which these perturbations took place was precisely the human body, uniting all the varied patterns of the universe. (*Rabelais* 365)

On the flattened plane of becoming, all elements are connected to other elements, in multiple senses or directions affirmed at the same time. The "center" of which Bakhtin speaks, the human body, is not a static, isolated, fixed center, since it is invariably the

grotesque body: "never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body" (*Rabelais* 317). The grotesque body exists only in its prolongation: it *is* simply its linkage "to other bodies or to the world outside" (317). This is a body whose essence is to be a "middle," an interbeing, because "the events of the grotesque sphere are always developed on the boundary dividing one body from the other" (322). The grotesque body is the "center" of this shift insofar as it is the "middle" from which the rhizomatic structure proliferates connections on the horizontal plane, the "middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and overspills" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 21).

This rhizomatic grotesqueness is at play in *Swamp Thing*'s depiction of vegetable sex. The clod of dirt (if that's what it is): the climax of fragmented forms, heterogeneous objects flowing into each other, objects of the body (a breast, a stomach), objects of nature (roots trailing through it with no visible unity, no prime trunk), symbols of love (a heart, a gem). On either side, Abby and Swamp Thing connect into the cluster, but not as derivatives from its center, nor as primary units feeding its multiplicity. The connections affirm multiple directions at once, the irreducible multiplicity of this "we" that speaks, in which "all...that there *is*...is in *us*..." (*Love* 200). This mess of forms does not reduce to One, nor does any form reduce to another: they are not brought together by some unifying principle or subject. There is nothing fixed, nothing ready-made or constant in the cluster of fragmented forms: it is an assemblage of outgrowths, overflows, proliferations, middle states: "all manner of 'becomings'" (21).

During the vegetable sex sequence, the irreducibly multiple, heterogeneous, and connective grotesqueness of Swamp Thing is graphically realized. And yet there is a coda, an "it-was-all-a-dream" moment. Everything stabilizes, and Abby and Swamp

Thing stand facing each other as two distinct subjects, self-identical unities. They embrace in the traditional romantic manner. Although there is a certain irony to this scene—the grotesque extravagance of the preceding pages offsetting the unspeakable normality of the final embrace—nevertheless it marks the triumphant return of linear narrative and stable characters that will never really be challenged again throughout the rest of the series. The fundamental grotesqueness of the vegetable sex scene was only ever asserted as an aspect of Swamp Thing as an individual: it is revealed, finally, as subordinated to the unifying force of his conscious will. "You mean...*this*...is how *you* see things?" Abby asks—"Not...*all*...of the time...Only...when I...*wish* to," replies Swamp Thing (*Love* 196). What appears initially as a rhizome falls back into the dualism of the radicle-system, where "a new type of unity triumphs in the subject" despite the heterogeneity and multiplicity of the elements in the system (*A Thousand Plateaus* 6). The proliferation of fragmented objects falls under the sign of Swamp Thing's "wish;" it is brought together in the self-identity of his will.

We see here *Swamp Thing*'s particular utopian vision: the harmony and wholeness of the open body of Nature. Swamp Thing offers the fruit of knowledge to Abby, and, in an inversion of the Biblical Eden, consuming this fruit allows her to reach paradise. Through it she grasps the grotesque ideal in a Nature that is posited as the joyous opposite of mundane human life. She enters a new order of knowledge that revels in the heterogeneous, the connective, in fragmented forms and their becoming. This utopian vision of the grotesque, however, cannot be sustained. Figuring Nature as the grotesque ideal subordinates the becoming of the world to cyclic time, to natural cycles. The fact that all the elements of the vegetable sex scene are ultimately unified under

Swamp Thing's will is a symptom of the failure of natural rhythms to adequately express the grotesque.

The idealization of Swamp Thing's grotesque aspects will become clearer with another look at the way Moore articulates his origin story. In order to come to terms with his grotesque birth, Swamp Thing must renounce his humanity. Woodrue observes, tellingly: "Imagine all those years of hoping that one day he'd retrieve his humanity...only to find he'd never *had* any in the first place" (*Saga* 40). Prior to Woodrue's investigations into his origins, Swamp Thing's primary quest had been to find a way of reversing his mutation and becoming human again. This motivation is cancelled by Woodrue's findings. Upon reading the report, Swamp Thing returns to the Louisiana swamp, puts down roots, and withdraws entirely from conscious interaction. A dream sequence shows the crisis the report has caused: Swamp Thing carries his humanity in the form of a skeleton, fighting off monsters that want to claim it for their own. In the process, pieces of the skeleton get lost, until all that remains is the skull, which speaks to him, urging him on in "the human race:" "I'm your *humanity*. I'm *important*. I'm what keeps you going...without *me* there'd be no point" (*Saga* 54-55). Despite these entreaties, Swamp Thing lays down, takes root, and moss slowly grows over the skull.

The Swamp Thing's rejection of the death's head of humanity is an act both grotesque and idealized. Grotesque, because death has here lost its individuating power—the fear of death recedes before the wholeness of the world in which Swamp Thing finds himself. And idealized because the denial of death elevates Swamp Thing beyond the level of the human—he transcends human temporality through his immersion in the material. It is in this sense that he is hailed as a "deity" by the people of Gotham,

attracting "pilgrims" to his "*savage Eden*" (*Earth* 66, 52). Swamp Thing is the ideal of the grotesque material intertwining of the body and consciousness: the material grotesqueness of his being affords him a godlike nature.

This idealization of the grotesque occurs through the logic of allegory. The philosophical bases of allegory, as explained by Walter Benjamin in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, are the same as those that underpin any attempt to idealize the grotesque body. The core of allegory is a "movement from history to nature," or rather a particular way of seeing a coincidence of the two (182). The overlap consists in both of their primary aspects being seen as processes of transience and decay. In allegory, "everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face—or rather in a death's head" (166). The "death's head" of history finds its corollary in man's subjection to nature—a nature conceived as "eternal transience," with its primary aspect as "over-ripeness and decay" (179). Benjamin uses the analogy of the ruin to illustrate this coincidence: "Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things" (178). "In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting," he explains, in the form of the "irresistible decay" that has toppled the edifice and overgrown the structure, leaving behind only a pile of amorphous fragments (177-8). This "irresistible decay" is also nature—the natural growth, the eternal transience, that has overtaken what people made.

This is where the connection to Bakhtin becomes most clear, insofar as the most crucial element of the allegorical is an acute awareness of precisely that "inner movement of being itself" expressed by the grotesque, "the passing of one form into the other" (*Rabelais* 32). But the tendency of allegory is rather the inverse of Bakhtin's vision of the

grotesque, because along with this "appreciation of the transience of things" the allegorical also expresses a "concern to rescue them for eternity" (Benjamin 223). Allegory assembles fragments, insufficient in themselves, and combines them in order to create a complex of significance that extends beyond them, making them "appear no longer commensurable with profane things:" sanctifying them, as it were (175).

The fragmentary and unfinished is the particular domain of the grotesque. It is explicitly opposed to the "strictly completed, finished" form; the grotesque body's "protuberances and offshoots," its fusion of human life with the life of nature, are the "signs of its unfinished character" (*Rabelais* 29). But whereas the grotesque recognizes in this incompletion a becoming that affirms multiple senses or directions at once, the allegorical concern for the fragment—the fragmentation of forms and bodies by nature and history—is a concern that seeks to freeze it in the process of changing forms in order to preserve these incomplete objects for all time through the meaning they express as a part of the allegorical complex. For the allegorist, the becoming of nature and history moves in one direction, towards eternal decay. The allegorist seeks to preserve the decaying object by fixing it in the midst of this process. Allegory suspends its object in the act of becoming in order to extract a true, eternal meaning. The fragment thus becomes a "new-born object," a self-sufficient form (208). This is allegory's "disjunctive, atomizing principle," which is strictly opposed to the movement of the grotesque (208).

Such an attempt to fix the indeterminate forms of becoming takes place in the idealization of the grotesque body that is the Swamp Thing. His open and fragmentary body "acquires a dignity equal to that of gods" in and through its resignation to material transience (Benjamin 208). The passing of one form into another, it becomes plain, was

embraced only in order to be transcended. The radicle-system: fixing the multiplicity and heterogeneity of becoming under a unifying sign, that of Swamp Thing as the ideal consciousness of a "Nature" that in fact has nothing to do with history, freezing the grotesque proliferation of connections under the sign of a one-directional transience that can never realize an "authentic becoming" (*Dialogic* 210). This dependence on a monolithic, cyclic Nature undermines the grotesque in *Swamp Thing*. Cyclic time can never reach full becoming, because it adheres to an all-encompassing unity of identity, sense, and direction. *Swamp Thing*'s idealization of the fusion of human life with Nature can work only through denying the grotesque's fundamental structures of multiplicity and heterogeneity. In effect, it is *Swamp Thing*'s particular utopian vision that forfeits its real grotesqueness, because the ideal Nature is figured as outside of normal human experience. This results in a retreat from the flesh of the human body: the transitory flesh, the grotesque human body, is forsaken in favor of the cyclic (and therefore timeless) utopia of Nature. Because, like allegory, the cycle is essentially unitary and unidirectional, it effectually freezes transient becoming.

We cannot look to *Swamp Thing* as an effective articulation of the grotesque, because its attempt to idealize the grotesque openness and connectivity of the body betrays its necessary temporal and rhizomatic principles. Instead of a grotesque body, we find the body of sanctified, cyclic Nature. "*Do... you warn... the hurricane? Do you warn... the earthquake?*" Swamp Thing demands as he pits himself against the city of Gotham (*Earth* 41). He becomes a natural disaster. From his empty supplementary dimension of conscious will Swamp Thing unites the multiple forces of Nature against the sprawling city: "If Nature were to *shrug*... or raise an *eyebrow*... then you should all

be *gone*..." (*Earth* 42). No, this is not a grotesque body. This is human consciousness deployed over above a frozen process of becoming, a cyclic synchrony; the unifying principle of a radicle-system using all the powers of its false multiplicity to crush the city.

The vegetable sex scene, however, offers a glimpse of a new development in the theory of the grotesque. In addition to the openness, incompletion, and becoming that were central to "Calypso," *Swamp Thing* posits the grotesque body as heterogeneous, connective, and irreducibly multiple. Though these characteristics are ultimately forfeited by *Swamp Thing*'s investment in the utopian ideal of Nature, still they have been shown to be integral components of the grotesque. This last image of Swamp Thing crushing Gotham shows where to go next. We have looked at the grotesque body of Nature; let us now turn to the city.

III. Nowhere: The Proliferent City

Swamp Thing, in emphasizing the body's plant-like offshoots, has revealed that the grotesque is not only open and unfinished—as we saw in Joyce's formulation—but also essentially connective, heterogeneous, and multiplex. The utopian vision of Nature, however, undermines the comic's own grotesque project. This study will look now to the city, in the hope of finding an authentic and uncompromised grotesque representation.

Carol Reed's film adaptation of *The Third Man* takes place in Vienna shortly after the Second World War, a city divided into five separate sectors controlled by four governments.[3] Beneath this compartmentalized city, a commercial underground is thriving—the black market. Items circulate in a fluid network of exchange in the midst of the bombed-out debris. Major Calloway explains in his introductory voiceover: "I never knew the old Vienna...I really got to know it in the classic period of the black market. We'd run anything if people wanted it enough and had the money to pay for it." This is a liquid city, where everything is for sale, interchangeable with anything else. And everyone is selling. Harry Lime, a major player in the black market, reveals that the logic of liquid exchange extends beyond objects like boots and watches. From a car in the Wiener Riesenrad, he draws Martins' attention to the people on the ground below:

> Look down there. Would you really feel any pity if one of those dots stopped moving forever? If I offered you twenty thousand pounds for every dot that stopped, would you really, old man, tell me to keep my money—or would you calculate how many dots you could afford to spare? ...Nobody thinks in terms of human beings. Governments don't. Why should we?

For Lime, the city is an abstract network of points—objects of utility as well as human bodies—which are equal and interchangeable. One dot that stops moving is the same as

[3] For the purposes of this analysis, I will look only at Reed's film, not Graham Greene's source novel.

any other—except, of course, Lime, the dot around which the system centers. The motivating principle behind this network is Lime's individual ambition, his will to gain. It is an account of the city formulated, quite literally, from on high—from the top of the Wiener Riesenrad—from a position absolutely removed from the field it describes. Bakhtin would describe this as "a basically private, egotistic, and alienating" logic, an individualism that insists on its own absolute ideality (*Rabelais* 22). This, of course, is strictly opposed to the grotesque sphere.

Ultimately, however, the materiality of the city asserts itself. Lime is chased into Vienna's sewer system—a descent into the underworld. The liquid city, the abstract network, yields to shit city; Lime wades through rivers of sewage trying to evade the police. The path through the sewer shows us the city itself in the act of defecation: Vienna becomes the grotesque body exceeding its boundaries in this flow of excrement. In the grotesque representation, "the stress is always laid on those parts...through which the body itself goes out to meet the world" (*Rabelais* 26). So Lime threads his way through the surge of waste in "the main sewer," which, as Sergeant Paine tells us, "runs right into the blue Danube." The city flows out into the world—and all of the stable, interchangeable points in Lime's city disappear in the ceaseless flux. We see the city seething with refuse, and although there is nothing else particularly grotesque about this film, the sheer excess of this substance points us toward "the abundant material principle, change and becoming;" the flow of becoming maps onto the flow of excrement (*Rabelais* 274). We are in the underworld here, the bodily lower stratum, the bowels of the city. The material underworld stands as a foil to Lime's commercial underworld and its insistence on universal liquidity, battering that system down with a much different sort of liquid.

The contrast of "the top and the bottom"—the city as a system of values and the city as a material body in flux—and the affirmation of the low material principle reveal "the core of the object's concrete reality, [in order] to free it from its shell and to show its material bodily aspect—the real being outside all hierarchical norms and values" (*Rabelais* 403). Lime, his hands smeared with blood and shit, reaches his fingers up through a sewer grate, yearning for that abstract network, grasping at its punctiform silence amidst the mad roar that is washing away all stability, all identity. A sublime image—all his carefully calculated points "dots" bleed out, lose all meaning in the immense torrent. For there is, above all, no stable identity, no firm fixture of points, in the flux of the sewer: "stable, immovable, and unchangeable being" is set up by the abstract network, but the real being that is exposed in its material bodily aspect when these values wash away is a real becoming (*Rabelais* 364).

The triumphant flow of sewage in *The Third Man* can be understood as a symptom of the noir genre's concern with the physical landscape of the city,[4] exemplified by the introductory narration of Jules Dassin's *Naked City*. This film is a story "of the city itself...This is the city as it is: hot summer pavements, the children at play, the buildings in their naked stone." We see "the face of New York," and are told that "there is a pulse to the city—and it never stops beating." *Naked City* makes explicit the ambition of the noir genre of bringing the urban mise-en-scène in as a living part of the work, and, significantly, it does this through realizing the city as a massive body with

[4] There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, noir films that take place outside of an urban setting, or place little emphasis on location. In understanding genre, I follow Jurij Tynjanov in considering the unity of a genre as being dependent on its secondary features, which need not be present to the same degree in all individual works. The setting of "the city" is precisely one of the secondary features of noir, which, although they are not strictly necessary to the individual work, nevertheless characterize the genre itself. Cf. Tynjanov's "Literary Fact" in *Arkhaisty i novatory*.

"pulse" and "face." The genre's insistence on the physicality of the city results, in *The Third Man*, in the sewer scene, where the city as an abstract network is broken down by bodily lived reality. In this sense, *The Third Man* develops *The Naked City*'s deployment of the metaphor of the body for the city and brings it closer to the grotesque, highlighting its lower functions, its "abundant defecation," as Bakhtin might put it (*Rabelais* 22). Yet the characterization of the city remains split between two incompatible notions that vie for supremacy as the film shifts between two models of representation. The latter model, the excremental torrent, points us toward the possibility of developing a fuller account of the city as a grotesque body.

Paul Auster's noir-inflected vision of New York in *City of Glass* offers an authentic representation of the city as a grotesque body as it has been defined in the last two chapters. The novel concerns Daniel Quinn, the author of mysteries who finds himself inexplicably working a case of which he can make no sense. Quinn's own theory of detective novels is the model according to which this one unfolds:

> In the good mystery there is nothing wasted, no sentence, no word that is not significant. And even if it is not significant, it has the potential to be so—which amounts to the same thing...nothing must be overlooked. Everything becomes essence; the center of the book shifts with each event that propels it forward. The center, then, is everywhere, and no circumference can be drawn until the book has come to its end. (15)

The detective is constantly "in search of the thought, the idea that will pull all these things together and make sense of them" (15). Such a novel is the precise model of the grotesque "decentralization of the universe" (*Rabelais* 369). Bakhtin explains that because the grotesque takes place on the horizontal plane of consistency, it posits a universe whose "center [is] not in heaven but everywhere; all places [are] equal" (369). For the grotesque, everything is a potential center; no circumference can ever be drawn

unconditionally. It can and does always shift. The detective's urge to pull everything together around a central point is essentially the same as Harry Lime's view of the city as an abstract network of dots. If the center can be fixed, the potential significance that everything else in the novel holds will fall away and become a relative significance. The instability of a system where everything could at any time become the center will balance out; all elements will enjoy a full identity derived from the center. The detective novel, as Quinn sees it, is grotesque before the circumference is drawn. Afterwards, it is just a closed, abstract system.

As the case develops, Quinn is caught in the grip of this search for meaning, trying to get to the bottom of things. He follows his target, Peter Stillman, for days, watching him wander around the city picking up random objects on the street: "broken things, discarded things, stray bits of junk" (95). This surveillance leaves him frustrated that "he could do no more than observe, write down what he saw in the red notebook, hover stupidly on the surface of things;" he is unable to find the thought that will imbue Stillman's actions with significance (95). "He want[s] there to be a sense to them, no matter how obscure," and so traces out Stillman's path on a given day, "ransacking the chaos of Stillman's movements for some glimmer of cogency," refusing to accept them as arbitrary (108-9). Later on, he is unable to contact his employer (also named Peter Stillman, the son of his target): each time he calls he gets a busy signal. Even this he attempts to reconcile to some deeper meaning: "The busy signal, he saw now, had not been arbitrary. It had been a sign" (169). Unable to make sense of any of it, he falls back on some vast impersonal agency, "something like the word 'it' in the phrase 'it is raining' or 'it is night,'" which would unify the disparate and meaningless happenings (169).

The reader—the implicit reader, the reader seeking to interpret and analyze the events of the text—is engaged in a quest similar to Quinn's, but on a different level: we attempt to draw the circumference of the novel, to find the pivotal center and pull everything together around it. Series of clues accumulate, but each one is incapable of encompassing the entire novel under its sign. Such, for instance, is the "egg" series: Peter Stillman the elder explains to Quinn that Humpty Dumpty is "the purest embodiment of the human condition," and from that point on eggs appear or are alluded to in what seem like crucial moments (127; the egg series is 104, 127-30, 133, 148-9, 197). Is the egg the hinge on which the meaning of the novel swings? A facile egg-related interpretation offers itself: just like Paul Auster the character in the novel, Paul Auster the writer is making an omelet, but first he has to break a few eggs. The omelet becomes a metaphor for the novel, the entire work a metafictional commentary. But other series run throughout the novel, also offering the semblance of a total meaning: the double (16, 90, 117, 157, 162, 170, 182-3, 194), the fall of language/the conformity of words and objects (70, 75, 119-123, 200), William Wilson and the correspondence with the work of Edgar Allan Poe (7, 9-10, 65, 85-6, 111, 130, 195-6), to name a few. These sequences circulates throughout the novel, each one suggesting itself as the key to it all, the "right" solution—but each registers just as strongly as another and no sequence cancels another out or reduces it to its own logic. Rather than sets of clues that fall away in the end when the correct solution is revealed, we get a proliferation of pseudo-meanings that all seem equally true and equally false. In a sense, the novel demands that its interpretation remain unfinished; it sets up multiple solutions only to suspend them in their possibility. Lines travel in every direction, and every attempt to trace them back to an initial center, a root

of ultimate meaning, fails. Recalling Deleuze and Guattari's definition of the rhizome as "an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states," it could be argued that the inevitable failure of any such attempt in *City of Glass* indicates the presence of such a structure in the novel (*A Thousand Plateaus* 21).

This proliferation of interpretive possibilities is an extension of the novel's affiliation with the noir genre, with its desire to make the city a concrete and integral part of a work's fabric. As in *The Naked City* or *The Third Man*, the bare stone of the city rises up at every turn in *City of Glass*. Quinn wanders through the city, and every move he makes is recorded in precise detail. From 107th Street to "70th Street and Fifth Avenue" (22), down to "the corner of 72nd Street and Madison Avenue," he is constantly mapped onto the material body of the city (59). The cataloging of his movements and the interchange between his body and the city, the way that he gives "himself up to the movement of the streets," means that New York is made palpable not only through descriptions of the setting but in Quinn himself (8). The cityscape stands out with each thought, each movement he makes. This is illustrated very clearly in Paul Karasik's and David Mazzucchelli's graphic novel adaptation: a tight-knit image of buildings disperses into a maze of lines and intersections, which in turn become the swirls of Quinn's fingerprint on a window, which is seen above Quinn's naked foot in the act of motion (4; see Appendix: Image 5). Quinn's bodily presence is also the presence of the city—and because we are with him throughout the novel, we never lose sight of the material reality of this landscape through which he moves.

The city itself is characterized as immeasurably excursive, spreading out along various paths, an acentric system composed of pure extensions. The interpretive possibilities keep multiplying because proliferent city is such a constant structural presence. Early in the novel, we are told that Quinn's favorite pastime is taking long, aimless walks. The reason why is worth quoting at length:

> New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighborhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well. Each time he took a walk, he felt as though he were leaving himself behind...The world was outside of him, around him, before him, and the speed with which it kept changing made it impossible for him to dwell on any one thing for very long...By wandering aimlessly, all places became equal, and it no longer mattered where he was. On his best walks, he was able to feel that he was nowhere. And this, finally, was all he ever asked of things: to be nowhere. New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized that he had no intention of ever leaving it again. (*City of Glass* 8-9)

Like the novel itself, the city through which Quinn rambles is a vast and indistinct accumulation of series and lines, "neighborhoods and streets" (8). As in the grotesque sphere, "all places [become] equal," and nothing within the city can act as its center "for very long" (8-9). The center moves with him; not because he is the center, but simply because all places in the city are equal. Any place is as valid a center as another. He cannot possibly reach the end of this city: it is "inexhaustible," it cannot be finished-off (8). It cannot be circumscribed by any centralizing sign. It is for this very reason that it is a "nowhere:" it lacks definition, its borders continually shift along with its center (9). Such a city has no coordinates like any isolable point or place would. But this is not a nowhere simply through lack or negation: it is filled with a positive material principle that spreads out and gives way, that perpetuates itself in its "endless steps," and in it Quinn can "leave himself behind," he can lose stable subjectivity in the living reality of

the world "around him" (8). The city proliferates like a grotesque body: its streets and neighborhoods are its offshoots and protuberances. After Quinn loses track of Stillman, he spends a day walking around. His entire itinerary is recorded precisely. "He walked down Broadway to 72nd Street, turned east to Central Park West, and followed it to 59th Street and the statue of Columbus:" this is an extended catalog in which streets, neighborhoods, and landmarks come together, connect only to fly off again in different directions (163). Quinn's paths are offshoots that hook up to excursions that plug into branches: connections pile on connections—"'and...' 'and...' 'and...'" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 25).

Not only is the New York of *City of Glass* represented as an indefinitely extensive and connective series of lines, it is also composed entirely of fragmented and unfinished forms. When Quinn asks Peter Stillman the elder about his work, he explains that he is trying to rediscover the language of God, a language that will actually conform to its objects. The problem with language as we know it, Stillman explains, is that it is unable to "'embody the notion of change:'" "'every object... serves a function,'" and the word we use to designate a given object is inextricably linked to that function (121-2). But even "'when a thing no longer performs its function,'" we go on calling it by the same name—we have no other word for an umbrella that can't open than "'umbrella'" (122). Stillman's self-designated task is to collect broken objects and invent new names for them, new words that will fully express their function. New York, he maintains, is the perfect place for such work: "'it is the most forlorn of places, the most abject. The brokenness is everywhere, the disarray is universal. You have only to open your eyes to see it. The broken people, the broken things, the broken thoughts'" (122). In terms of his

work, Stillman finds "the streets an endless source of material, an inexhaustible storehouse of shattered things" (123). The "inexhaustible labyrinth" of New York is also an "inexhaustible storehouse": it proliferates endlessly in fragmentary, partial objects, things that lack the full definition of a name. Recall that according to Bakhtin the grotesque representation of the body evolved out of the carnival experience, which was "opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretense at immutability," and "demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms" (*Rabelais* 11). The objects that compose New York are incapable of being expressed in a word; they cannot be finished off or made definite, their identity cannot be fixed. Rather, they embody the very notion of change and becoming: their incompletion is a sign of the constant flow of time as a force that prohibits static, unchanging identity and operates only in terms of "undefined forms."

This is not simply the transience or eternal decay of history: in breaking, in no longer performing its function, the fragmented object finds itself entrenched in the process of becoming, finds itself at once in terms of what it was and what it will be. Stillman wants to fix names to these objects precisely because of this unstable, in-between condition—in the same way that allegory attempts to freeze the process of becoming. Giving the broken thing a name will remove it from the process of change and fix it in a firm state; it will no longer affirm multiple directions but will move only along a single eschatological path. Stillman's purpose is to discover the "original language of innocence" that was spoken in Eden so that "man" might "recover a state of innocence within himself" (76). If only Stillman could make these changing objects conform to a static name, an immobile being, then language "will at last say what we have to say," and

bring the heterogeneous and multidirectional objects of the world into a unified "whole" that would move toward one end—the reconstruction of paradise on earth—effectively the end of history (121). This language is never revealed—the novel instead concerns itself with the intractable becoming that ceaselessly fragments in multiple directions, the historic flow in which objects "slide into the language of events [and] all identity disappears" (Deleuze 3).

The ambivalence of becoming is more fully developed in the forking paths of the case. Quinn starts tailing Stillman when he arrives at Grand Central Station. He gets his first glimpse of his target while waiting in the rush hour crowd. But then he sees another man whose "face [is] the exact twin of Stillman's":

> Quinn froze. There was nothing he could do now that would not be a mistake. Whatever choice he made—and he had to make a choice—would be arbitrary, a submission to chance. Uncertainty would haunt him to the end... There was no way to know: not this, not anything (90-1).

Later, as Quinn is trying to figure out what to do now that he has lost track of Stillman, he thinks: "There could not be two answers. It was either this or that" (170). But the path forks in more than just two directions. For the reader, every series in the novel offers itself as the possible solution. Faced with the multiple, the reader follows Quinn's lead in attempting to reduce it to one: there can only be one answer, there can only be one direction. One way must be the correct solution, all others must be wrong. The circumference must be drawn. As the case collapses, however, Quinn begins to realize that "it [doesn't] matter anymore" (191). He lies down on the bare floor of Peter Stillman the son's apartment and wonders idly about all the strange concurrences of the novel, among them "what would have happened if he had followed the second Stillman instead

of the first" (197-8). But he is past caring. He has the same order of wonder about whether it is night or day:

> but then he decided it did not matter. If it was not night now, he thought, then night would come later. That was certain, and whether he looked out the window or not, the answer would be the same...Night and day were no more than relative terms; they did not refer to an absolute condition. At any given moment, it was always both. (194)

At every moment the novel affirms multiple possibilities, multiple directions. The lines of the city, the lines of the case, and the lines of the novel point towards their connections, all of them, at once. Quinn realizes "it doesn't matter"—not because everything in the city is a dot in an abstract network of interchangeability, but because every event "'flies off in so many little directions at once,'" as Stillman observes (117). The logic is not "either-or," not "one or the other," as in Harry Lime's city. It is the "and... and..." of the grotesque, a logic in which everything is unfinished and connective and heterogeneous and multiple and perpetually becoming. The forking path, when Quinn simultaneously sees two Stillmans, is the figure for this grotesque logic.

This, finally, is the vision of grotesque utopia that *City of Glass* offers. Quinn begins to realize that it doesn't matter as he finds himself going nowhere. When Stillman disappears, Quinn realizes that he is "nowhere now" (159). But being nowhere is "all he [has] ever asked of things:" to be in that state where "all places became equal, and it no longer mattered where he was" (9). This is precisely the labyrinthine city where every step leads in multiple directions down the path of becoming. Every path is as valid as another, not in the sense that they are reduced to one ultimate (cyclic or circular) direction, but because both are extensions, pure extensions, pure possibility. Stillman points out that "utopia [is] nowhere—even...in its 'wordhood'" (75). The word nowhere

becomes thus coded throughout the rest of the novel. Quinn's nowhere city is indeed a model of utopia, but not in the way that Stillman means. It is not a spiritual state "within man himself," not the bliss of a pure interiority that has finally been able to fix the flow of becoming as an aggregate of determinate forms (75). It is grasped, rather, in "the very act of becoming," as Bakhtin puts it (*Rabelais* 52). Quinn finds his utopia by "leaving himself behind," letting static individuality dissolve in the material reality of the world, and becoming part of "the movement of the streets" in their multiple directions, their extensive connections (*City of Glass* 8). Karasik and Mazzucchelli's graphic novel adaptation represents Quinn's journey to nowhere as the merger of his body with the bricks of the building against which he leans: utopia is realized in the grotesque body of the city where it joins with Quinn's body, in the becoming-city of Quinn and the becoming-Quinn of New York (111; see Appendix: Image 6). "It was as though he had melted into the walls of the city;" this, in the end, is all Quinn wants: to proliferate and make connections, to follow the lines of the city (*City of Glass* 178).

Conclusory

Quinn's New York is a grotesque body: it is connective, heterogeneous, multiplex. Its fragmented forms open one onto another in multiple directions on the horizontal plane of becoming. It is utterly material, not at all fixed, a series of concrete extensions that emanate from no center. All this means that it is the expression of "the inner movement of being itself" (*Rabelais* 32). This is the definition of the grotesque body that started this study, and it is where it will end. The various paths that have been taken, through the outhouse and the swamp, phenomenology and comic books, come back eventually to this claim. This return is by no means cyclic. The preceding analysis has added new layers of meaning to Bakhtin's claim. The grotesque has developed beyond Rabelais into an anxiety, into Edenic nature, into a proliferent city. It has passed from one form into another, retaining some principles, finding new ones, losing sight of others. It has drawn lines between things; it has moved in multiple directions at once. It has shown us humans and plants and buildings, sewers and swamps and toilets. It has been all of these at once; and it will continue to change, continue to connect. The last thing we could say of it is that it is static: because the grotesque, too, has its becoming.

The different forms of the grotesque seen in this study might to some extent be accounted for through the historical shift from modernity to postmodernity taking place in the twentieth century. Frederic Jameson describes this as a "shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology [that] can be characterized as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject" (63). This certainly seems to be the case when we look at the radical gap between Bloom's anxious embodiment and Quinn's calm dissolution in the city streets. The "subject as a monad-like container" quaking in fear in

the face of its own raw and open material body is replaced by a body that revels in its own "*decentring*" as the pure extension of fragmented and connective forms that can only ever be temporarily and conditionally circumscribed (63). *Swamp Thing* perhaps wavers between these: deploying the transience of nature only in order to fix it and affirm more strongly Swamp Thing's cohesive subjective will as the totalizing force that subordinates all objects under its sign. This in essence marks the triumph of the monadic subject over the anxiety provoked by the fragmenting material body: it uses the thematic concerns of postmodernism in order to reinstate what Mikhail Epstein calls the modernist propensity for a "comprehensive theoretical metanarrative" (189). This metanarrative is that of the monadic subject as "a self-sufficient field and a closed realm in its own right," as master of a closed-off interior space; it triumphs in *Swamp Thing* by asserting its power to transcend even the multifarious becomings of the external material world (Jameson 63-64).

This short sketch of the historical sphere surrounding the transformations of the grotesque needs further elaboration. For the moment I will do no more than indicate that this is the direction in which this study ought to move next. Questions of genre inevitably arise: how does the intertwining of text and images in a comic book like *Swamp Thing* affect the articulation of the grotesque? In what way does the comic book genre's affinity for the superhuman, the superhero, complicate its representation and interrogation of human reality? What is the relationship between the generic self-reflection of *City of Glass* and its insistence on the impossibility of affixing a totalizing interpretation? Does the particular historical moment in which *Ulysses* was written automatically involve it with the modernist project of monadic self-sufficiency and comprehensive metanarrative?

This last question points to the hesitation we should have about drawing mechanically causal links between history and literature. Over against Bloom's anxiety in "Calypso" is Molly's final "Yes" with which the novel ends (933). This affirmation is orgasmic and ambivalent and not at all anxious. Staten points out that Molly's is a "menstruating, urinating, farting body," "self-pleasuring [and] promiscuous" (385). All these physical actions—the actions of the material bodily lower stratum—are detailed in the "Penelope" episode, and in the final stretch the rhythms of her narrative begin to imitate the rhythms of the orgasm that flattens out hierarchic and historical distinctions, bringing together her childhood in Gibraltar and Bloom's marriage proposal, material bodily sensation and the abstract field of emotion and love. Thus the grotesque nature of Molly's body is articulated to much different effect than Bloom's. To what extent, then, does the gendering of bodies influence the vision of the grotesque? And how would the preceding trajectory of the grotesque in the twentieth century—the historical narrative onto which the developing forms of the grotesque might be mapped—be different if it had begun with Molly Bloom instead of Leopold? These are the most pressing questions that remain at the end of this study. It seems appropriate to close with them—in order to leave this study open, to allow it to project itself into future connections, to link up with other texts, other lines of thought.

The images in this Honors Project have been removed, with the knowledge of the author. They may be seen in the print version of the Honors Project available in the DeWitt Wallace Library Archives.

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