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Estranged and Degraded Worlds: The Grotesque Aesthetics of Tolstoy's Resurrection.

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2012

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Kokobobo, Ani. (2010) Estranged and Degraded Worlds: The Grotesque Aesthetics of Tolstoy's Resurrection. Tolstoy Studies Journal, 24, 1-14.

Published version: http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA325496164&v=2.1&u=ksstate_ukans&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w&asid=c58f091cba4f4b6c97d9a8b9e2fb4b48

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Tolstoy Studies Journal

Volume XXIV: 2012

Tolstoy Studies

An annual refereed publication of the Tolstoy Society

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Tolstoy Studies Journal is supported by the College of Arts and Sciences and the Russian Studies Program at Stetson University. It receives additional assistance from the Centre for Russian and East European Studies and the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures of the University of Toronto.

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Subscriptions: Journal subscription is included in membership to the Tolstoy Society. Annual dues are as follows (note that all prices are in US dollars): Institutions: $50.00; Overseas Institutions: $55.00; Individual: $35.00; Overseas individual: $40.00; Students, Emeriti: $20.00. Subscription information and payment is available at www.tolstoystudies.org.

Back Issues: Please see our website www.tolstoystudies.org for information on back issue availability and pricing.

Submissions: The journal uses the *MLA Style Manual* (2nd ed.). Our stylesheet can be found at www.tolstoystudies.org. All manuscripts and non-subscription correspondence should be addressed to:

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ISSN: 1044-1573

Visit the journal's website at http: //www.tolstoystudies.org

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Tolstoy Studies Journal Volume XXIV: 2012

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Estranged and Degraded Worlds: The Grotesque Aesthetics of Tolstoy's *Resurrection*

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Tolstoy's *Resurrection* has the dual honor of being both its author's last full novel and also the final Russian realist novel of the nineteenth century.[1] The historical associations of its date of publication have shaped and divided critical receptions of the novel. The date 1899 corresponds to a period when Tolstoy's worldview was entrenched in post-conversion theology, as well as to an age of social tumult in Russian society—a time when discontent with the tsarist regime rose as underground revolutionary activity intensified. These social and philosophical factors had their effects on the makeup of *Resurrection*, but they have also, and perhaps primarily, influenced criticism. The novel is often seen as either purely a container for the rhetoric of Tolstoy the religious thinker, or as a reflection of sociopolitical struggles in tsarist Russia.

The first approach, prominent in Western criticism, has led to a conflation of *Resurrection* with Tolstoy's theoretical writings from the period. "[N]ever had Tolstoy's pedagogical bent assumed such gargantuan proportions as in *Resurrection*," writes Edward Wasiolek, "nor had it ever posed so grave a threat to his art" (191). Whenever studied, *Resurrection* is compared to *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* and deemed a lesser novel due to its ideological bent. R. F. Christian commences his analysis of *Resurrection* with the assertion that "no serious critic would deny that Tolstoy's last novel is a vastly inferior work of art to the two great novels which preceded it" (221).

By contrast, *Resurrection* has received great acclaim in Soviet criticism as a socio-ideological novel that recreates the milieu at the turn of the nineteenth century. N. K. Gudzii and E. A. Maimin declare that "Tolstoy's last novel is undoubtedly a social novel" and perhaps "not simply a novel, but a novel and a proclamation at the same time" (Гудзий and Маймин 483, 485). Such arguments are reaffirmed by Mikhail Bakhtin who refers to *Resurrection* as a "socio-ideological" novel in his 1929 prefaces. Bakhtin aligns *Resurrection* with works like Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?*, Herzen's *Who Is to Blame?*, and the novels of George Sand. As he puts it, a socio-ideological novel has at its core "an ideological thesis," which helps launch a "critique of all existing social relations and forms" ("Preface" 242–243). In what we can surmise to be ironical praise, Bakhtin extols

Resurrection as the "most consistent and perfect example of the socio-ideological novel not only in Russia but in the West as well" (253).

In spite of the novel's strong ties to Tolstoyan theology, or its treatment of social inequities in Russia, *Resurrection* has neither the simplicity of a theological pamphlet, nor the ideological direction of *What Is to Be Done?* Even scholars who find the novel entrenched in Tolstoy's post-conversion theology insist that "the teacher and the prophet […] did not (seriously) mar *Resurrection*" (Wasiolek 192). As George Steiner posits, despite Tolstoy's "puritanical conception of art," the genre of the novel, with its extensive, multi-layered storylines, permits narrative freedom, making it possible for Tolstoy's theoretical "abstractions [to] assume a colour of life" (284).[2] Likewise, Soviet critics find *Resurrection* to be less than a perfect model of the ideological novel; Galina Galagan argues that though Tolstoy attempted to come up with a "novel of a new type" by bringing his hero closer "to the people and to revolution," it was ultimately Maksim Gorky who fully accomplished the task of writing a new social novel (262).[3]

In this essay I do not dispute the fact that Tolstoy's last novel has an ideological bent; in fact, considering how closely this novel's ideological messages have been explored in past criticism, my focus will be not on ideology per se, but rather on the poetic forms that accommodate it. In *Resurrection*, Tolstoy captures a thoroughly inverted social reality, a world turned upside-down, where the unnatural is natural; where immorality is legitimized and automatized to the point of comfortably replacing morality; where human beings treat fellow human beings inhumanly while losing basic human traits themselves. As I argue, all these features, these inversions and distortions, give the reality of *Resurrection* a distinctly grotesque flavor.

A number of scholars have already noticed that Resurrection does not function quite like Tolstoy's other realist novels. The presence of satire in *Resurrection* and in late Tolstoy in general is already recognized,[4] which indicates that the grotesque cannot be very far behind, since the styles are closely related. Further, both Wasiolek and Harriet Murav have used the term to describe characters and images in *Resurrection* as grotesque. Wasiolek mentions that the Korchagins appear grotesque to Nekhliudov after his moral awakening (194), whereas Murav, who highlights the intense physicality of *Resurrection*, cites images from the prison as "grotesque" (37). In this essay, I further the implications of these earlier works by addressing manifestations of the grotesque as a proper literary style in *Resurrection*. In my analysis, I employ the seminal works on the grotesque by Mikhail Bakhtin (*Rabelais and His World*) and Wolfgang Kayser (*The Grotesque in Art and Literature*). I borrow different concepts from both critics and define the grotesque as a style that estranges the familiar and disrupts narrative expectations by despiritualizing and lowering reality to the level of body and materialism.

Though Tolstoy does not recreate the grotesquery of E.T.A. Hoffmann or mirror the contortions of Magritte's or Dali's surrealist canvases, he still captures essential characteristics and the general aura of the grotesque in his last novel. I trace the grotesque aesthetic both in small-scale form through depictions of the body, as well as in large-scale depictions of social institutions. Reverberations of the grotesque through disfigured and disproportionate images of both the body and the body politic reveal that instead of using *Resurrection* as an empty vessel for his ideological ponderings, Tolstoy managed to redefine his aesthetics in the work.

At the root of the grotesque images in *Resurrection* are the familiar narratives of Tolstoy's past novels. In a recent study on Tolstoy, Justin Weir argues that in his later years "the more didactic Tolstoy repeatedly returns to his early fiction, recasting a moral light" (3). Working on *Resurrection* in 1891, Tolstoy expressed great

enthusiasm about the prospect of writing a novel armed with his new theology. "I was so happy [...] to start a big work of fiction," he writes in his diary, "My earlier novels were an unconscious creation [...]. Now I know what is what and I can mix it all up again and work in this mix" (*PSS* 52: 5–6). He did "mix it all up again" in *Resurrection*, but his past novels remained in this mix, and he used and abused them to arrive at his new novel. In *Resurrection*, Tolstoy returned to the novel form and the romantic theme, but redefined their meaning, recycling and distorting earlier motifs, which grew into the basis for his new grotesque aesthetic. The familiar worlds of Tolstoy's past novel emerge as warped and estranged from themselves, the basis for an inverted reality populated by soulless individuals and grotesque bodies.

Unnatural Beginnings

Resurrection starts with Tolstoy's celebrated device of "defamiliarization," which consists of the author's refusal to "call a thing by its name," instead "describ[ing] it as if it were perceived for the first time" (Shklovsky 6). Since *Resurrection* is aimed as an exposé of immoral social practices and institutions, defamiliarization turns from occasional device into a major mode of narration. It is not limited to the opera stage, but rather stretches to capture the world as a whole. The expanded scope of defamiliarization becomes evident from the start of the novel when Tolstoy seeks to expose the very creation of cities as fundamentally flawed.

The novel opens with descriptions of spring in the city where natural beauty is a fragile commodity, since human beings often suppress nature. To show the failures of urban life, Tolstoy provides a defamiliarized characterization of urbanization, and everything it gives rise to, as inherently unnatural:

> No matter how hard men tried, one hundred thousand of them gathering in one small place, no matter how they disfigured that land where they had crowded themselves, no matter how they paved the land with stones so that nothing could grow in it, no matter how they cleared away every blade of grass, no matter how they filled the air with coal and gas, no matter how they cut down every tree and chased away every animal and bird—spring was spring, even in the city. (*PSS* 32: 3)

Whatever preconceptions the audience might have about the formation of cities, Tolstoy is intent on exposing the underlying violence of this process for the reader too habituated to notice. Urbanization is shown as an unnatural practice that disrupts natural splendor and the flow of the seasons.

This defamiliarized rendering of the city in its entirety prefigures Tolstoy's treatment of every local institutional layer of Russian society in *Resurrection*. As Bakhtin argues, "this wide and purely philosophical picture of the urban spring, the struggle between the good spring and the evil city culture […] sets the tone of all subsequent exposures of human inventions: prisons, courts, high society, and others" ("Preface" 245). In the opening sentence, the juxtaposition of nature to the aberrations of social reality—a reality which depletes the earth of its fecundity and drives away animals—suggests that as we transition from the large-scale urban panorama into the city's various institutional divisions, we will simply alternate among levels within the same world built upon unnatural premises.

In this unnaturalness Tolstoy includes behaviors and practices he construes as immoral, though this choice does not necessarily anoint the natural as the ethical standard in the text. Rather, in the defamiliarized picture of the city, Tolstoy uses nature as a neutral measuring tool for the logic and humanity of social practices. The world of nature is described straightforwardly while everything else is subjected to the unforgiving gaze of defamiliarization and deemed a deviation from

the natural. The literal unnaturalness behind urbanization, the violation of natural landscape it necessitates, stages the philosophical unnaturalness and illogicalness Tolstoy uncovers in social reality.

Through the opening Tolstoy fully exploits this contrast between nature and society in his presentation of a key locus in the novel: the prison. Shortly after the opening statement, Tolstoy shows how "plants, birds, insects, and children" are happy in the spring, while adults are busy trying to "wield power over one another" (*PSS* 32: 3, 4). After this statement, the narrative gaze drastically shifts to the prison corridor, where human attempts to "wield power over each other" are enacted. Seen in the context of natural harmony, the prison emerges as the core of societal and institutionalized unnaturalness. "The fresh, bracing air of the fields had made its way even into the prison yard […]," writes Tolstoy, "[b]ut in the [prison] corridor the air was heavy with the germs of typhoid and the smell of sewage, tar and putrefaction" (*PSS* 32: 4). The stench of excrement and disease contrasted to the pure spring air signals, through its unnaturalness, the immorality and cruelty that define the prison. Disease and excrement can be associated with the barren land in the novel's opening, and their presence implies that unjust social institutions also defy natural principles.

Images of nature as well as the contrast between the natural and unnatural are not accidental in *Resurrection*. In Tolstoy's two earlier novels, nature and the natural rhythm facilitated the most authentic and most privileged moments. "No novel," writes George Steiner about *Anna Karenina*, "brings language closer to the sensuous activities of farm life, to the sweet smell of a cow shed on frosty nights or the rustle of the fox through the high grass" (91). Similar statements have also been made about *War and Peace*. Gyorgy Lukacs argues that Tolstoy's *War and Peace* captures "a life based on a community of feeling among simple human beings closely bound to nature, […] adapted to the great rhythm of nature, which moves according to nature's cycle of birth and death and excludes all structures which are not natural" (9). An event like the strange and disturbing opera witnessed by Natasha is so unusual in the nature-bound core of *War and Peace* that it is artistically separated from the rest through the defamiliarized gaze.

But if nature and the natural rhythm were an essential presence in Tolstoy's earlier art, in *Resurrection* one is confronted with quite a different perspective. As the narrative gaze abruptly transitions from images of springtime into prison corridors, one is left to wonder whether nature in all its glory will receive the same attention it was given in earlier novels. In fact, as we consider this opening scene as a whole, the author's arrangement seems to be a deft and deliberate choice that captures, in perfect narrative economy, the aesthetics of the novel at large. Bakhtin argues that Tolstoy takes a Rousseauian approach to civilization in *Resurrection*, showing the social as inferior to the natural and the primitive ("Preface" 244–46). I would suggest that Tolstoy is taking an even more extreme position. Not only is he criticizing social reality from a Rousseauian point of view, but he also seems to have abandoned nature and the natural perspective altogether. In *Resurrection*, it is not the natural that is in focus, but rather the unnatural. Tolstoy condemns this unnaturalness, but it is difficult to find a safe haven from it. Like the stench coming from the prison, it overwhelms the world of the novel.

Whereas in Tolstoy's two earlier novels the narrative was bound to the "great rhythm of nature" (Lukacs 146) and language existed close to "the rustle of the fox through the high grass" (Steiner 91), in *Resurrection* the narrative retreats from nature and embraces manmade unnaturalness. Just as Nekhliudov cannot indulge in countryside natural beauty after Maslova's trial because he remembers her sufferings in society, so the author seems morally obligated to renounce nature for social unnaturalness. In fact, the

depictions of the natural world in *Resurrection* are like the few patches of grass that Tolstoy tells us have managed to grow despite urbanization and the paving of the land. "[T]he grass," writes Tolstoy, "grew and shone green everywhere where they had not scraped it away, not only on the narrow strips of lawn on the boulevards, but between the paving-stones as well" (*PSS* 32: 3). Like the few patches of grass, glimpses of nature occasionally manage to pierce through Tolstoy's estranged vision of an unnatural society. These depictions are scarce and surrounded by the unnatural, but they serve as a measure of contrast in a world where unnaturalness reigns.

In-Between Worlds

Tolstoy's focus on unnaturalness through extensive uses of defamiliarization is the motivating force behind the grotesque aesthetics of *Resurrection*. As the author abandoned rich descriptions of natural realities for a world marred by unnaturalness, he required a fresh approach to accommodate his new artistic perspective. Whether Tolstoy meant for this or not, his extensive use of defamiliarization led him to push his realism into the territory of the grotesque. In *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, Wolfgang Kayser settles on a comprehensive definition of the grotesque as defined precisely by unnaturalness. "THE GROTESQUE IS THE ESTRANGED WORLD" (184, capitals Kayser's), he writes, and explains that the grotesque renders our worlds unreliable and strange. Using the fairy tale as a counterpoint for the grotesque, Kayser argues that when "viewed from the outside, the world of the fairy tale could also be regarded as strange and alien," yet unlike the grotesque, this "world is not estranged […] the elements in it which are familiar and natural to us do not suddenly turn out to be strange and ominous" (184). What defines the grotesque and differentiates it from a similar style like the fantastic is its deformation of the familiar and the natural. In this sense, the grotesque aesthetic may be said to share features of Tolstoy's device of defamiliarization, which renders our familiar worlds strange and, when used as extensively as in *Resurrection*, can estrange them to the point of the grotesque.

But if Tolstoy has graduated from defamiliarization to grotesque estrangement in *Resurrection*, the effect would not work without awareness of his earlier works. As Robert Helbling argues, if "the fantastic creates a world governed by its own esoteric law," the grotesque shows "a disquieting estrangement of our world from itself" (6). Among various transformations, one could expect still to find traces of the familiar in the grotesque; "[i]n the midst of an overwhelming impression of monstrousness there is much we can recognize, much corrupted or shuffled familiarity" (Harpham 5). Since grotesque estrangement requires at least some small token reminder of the familiar, the grotesque aesthetic in *Resurrection* captures two worlds: one well-known to the eye and mind and a monstrous world where familiarity gives way to aberration. In the novel's opening these two worlds are nature and the prison, but in the novel as a whole the mixture consists of the familiar world of Tolstoy's previous novels, which is constantly being encroached upon by the unfamiliar, unnatural realities found in *Resurrection*. To return to the image of the few patches of grass surrounded by concrete, Tolstoy juxtaposes small glimpses of the familiar and natural to the alien and unnatural, generating pronounced contrasts that constantly frustrate the reader's expectations.

From this perspective, when the narrative moves into Maslova's life story, a vein of unnaturalness retrospectively unravels the familiar world of Tolstoy's pre-conversion writings, thus forming the core of the grotesque in *Resurrection*. As the sixth child of the daughter of a serf-woman, Maslova was almost destined to die at birth—which in itself reads like an affront to nature. She only survives due to the accidental entrance of the lady

of the house (Nekhliudov's aunt) into the cowshed where her mother was nursing. In an enraged tone limited to terrible facts, Tolstoy tells of how Maslova grew up feeling like half-servant, half-young lady, because Nekhliudov's aunts differed in their treatment of her. Eventually, she is cast out of that world when Nekhliudov seduces her and she becomes pregnant with his child. Her baby dies from illness and neglect, thus meeting the fate its mother should have met as an infant, while Maslova herself winds up a prostitute after repeated sexual advances and poor choices.[5]

In the course of telling Maslova's story, Tolstoy introduces the gentry estate, a pivotal space in earlier novels, brimming with organic energies and designed for the replication of generations. (Levin's Pokrovskoe in *Anna Karenina* is one such example, where not only the Levins produce offspring, but also the cow Pava.) However, in Maslova's life story, this familiar space is almost unrecognizable and redefined as a site of death and sterility. The spinster aunts with no heir except Nekhliudov live upstairs, while innocent babies die in the barn from neglect and poverty. Despite any earlier associations we might have with this locus, it is no bucolic haven in *Resurrection*, but rather a distorted, grotesque double of the earlier ideal. The natural progression of generations is obstructed, as virtually all children either do not live past infancy or seem at risk for illness or death.[6] Families and the children that would normally inhabit the estate are moved to the corridors of the prison where they accompany their parents. The presence of a baby in a prison cell, just like the sterility of the estate under the guardianship of spinsters are key tokens of the unnaturalness that reigns over *Resurrection*.[7] If the world in *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* was full of health and virility, in *Resurrection* that world appears diseased and decayed, infected by the rancid air of typhoid emanating from the prison. What makes this reality disturbing is that everything that was familiar in it, like the gentry estate, emerges as warped and grotesque.

In fact, one might say that the few glimpses of earlier narrative realities only reinforce the grotesque in *Resurrection*. Nekhliudov's flashbacks about his past with Maslova send the narrative back into the familiarity of earlier Tolstoyan novels.[8] These chapters have been lauded by critics as the best, most artistic portions of *Resurrection* and are the most reminiscent of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. Like the depictions of spring at the novel's beginning, they evoke a sense of innocence untarnished by social conventions. Nekhliudov retreats to the country and is shown in perfect "communion with nature" (*PSS* 32: 47) as he wanders the fields or naps in the garden. His romance with Maslova commences in this idyllic haven and is described by Tolstoy as the "innocent" love "between an innocent young man and a similarly innocent young girl" (*PSS* 32: 45). The natural world punctuates every moment of these early encounters between characters as they accidentally kiss and Maslova wipes her face on a white lilac from a nearby bush.

The reader nostalgic for Tolstoy's earlier works is temporarily satiated with these images and invited to feel at home in the comforts of old narrative patterns. But the illusion is short-lived because *Resurrection* is not a common realist novel. Indeed, to ensure that this message is clear, Tolstoy sandwiches these scenes between Maslova's terrible fall and depictions of the corpse of a merchant she is accused of killing. The pastoral reality of Nekhliudov and Maslova's romance is constantly encroached upon by unfamiliar narratives of death and decay.

In fact, as Tolstoy implies, there is considerable kinship between familiar narratives of the past and the nauseating autopsy report of the merchant's organs. Nekhliudov mentally equates this body to his own treatment of Maslova. "Katiusha's life," he thinks, "and the pus that seeped out of the [merchant's] nostrils, and the eyes coming out of their sockets, and his act with her—all were, it seemed to him, objects that belonged to one and

the same category, and he was surrounded from all sides and swallowed by these objects" (*PSS* 32: 69). Whereas earlier Tolstoy had naturalized sex through depictions of the family within the confines of the gentry estate, the conflation of Maslova's seduction with the dead body, the mixture of the familiar narrative with gruesome anatomical depictions, exposes all its hidden grotesquery. If, as we are told in the earlier *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889), to have sex with a woman is equivalent to killing her, by showing us the corpse, Tolstoy is implicitly suggesting that Maslova is no less dead. However habituated we might be to stories of seduction and sexual transgression, the obese body of the merchant anatomized in all its gory detail shatters all expectations of normalcy and familiarity.

The appearance of natural beauty alongside the filth of the prison, or of the beautiful estate of Nekhliudov's memory alongside the place of Maslova's degradation, and, in general, the presence of a world familiar to readers of Tolstoy alongside a darker incarnation of that world, all have the markings of the grotesque. Tolstoy inserts small glimpses of a familiar reality in the midst of a darker one and mixes the natural with the unnatural as his reader's expectations of familiar narrative turns are frustrated. He jerks us away from the familiar by shoving the vomit-inducing body of the merchant in front of our eyes, just as he thrust us into the prison shortly after indulging in the glories of the spring. His intentions for doing so might vary, but since "the grotesque is experienced only in the act of reception" (Kayser 181), we might see these aesthetic maneuvers as building toward a grotesque aesthetic. Since the grotesque is in the eye of the beholder, in *Resurrection* Tolstoy, whether he meant to or not, produced the grotesque effect for readers of his earlier novels.

The Objectified Subject

As we consider other components of the grotesque in *Resurrection*, we must turn to representations of the body, one of the most important components of the grotesque in the novel. Kayser associates the grotesque with romanticism and modernism and argues that when realism flourished, the grotesque lost some of its prominence. "It stands to reason," he writes, "that no genuine grotesques will be found in the art of the [nineteenth century], and that the best we can hope for is a weak or impure manifestation of the genre" (104). However, when he looks outside of Germany, Kayser discovers that writers like Charles Dickens could give life to the grotesque even within the bounds of a realist novel. Tolstoy was no different. Without leaping into the supernatural, he gave life to the grotesque through the human body and its physical contortions and distortions.

Though *Resurrection* may recycle and distort earlier familiar narratives, as the grotesque builds up, narrative depictions of the body push the novel into definite unfamiliarity and monstrousness, thus producing the full grotesque effect. From the merchant's dead body to Maslova's "exorbitant body" (Murav 35), to the bodies of prisoners, or the bodies of the Korchagins, to the whole social body, *Resurrection* stands out as a novel where individuals are depicted (and treated) first and foremost as bodies. Tolstoy's career-long preoccupation with depictions of the physical side of reality and the body in particular has been noted and has prompted scholars like Dmitry Merezhkovsky to call him a "seer of the flesh." But even against this background, *Resurrection* stands out as a novel fixated on the body and physicality.

Of the two primary definitions of the grotesque, Mikhail Bakhtin's definition most directly engages the body as a fundamental component of the style.[9] In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin views the grotesque as the aesthetic of choice for the carnival—a social ritual that upends hierarchies and parodies authority (11). As Bakhtin argues, the carnival inversion of hierarchies is carried out through laughter that degrades everything to the body and physicality. It is this

comical physicality that Bakhtin associates with the grotesque, which he describes as a style that "turns [its] subject into flesh" (*Rabelais* 20). As he suggests, "the essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation—the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body […]" (*Rabelais* 19). Though Tolstoy's grotesque is marked by collective descriptions of social reality and whole groups as grotesque bodies, thus keeping with the collective spirit of the carnival, the world of *Resurrection* is hardly defined by the laughter and joyous spirit of the masses that Bakhtin associates with the carnival. In fact, in order to apply some of Bakhtin's theories of the grotesque to the darker reality of Tolstoy's novel, we have to account for the seriousness of the grotesque in Tolstoy. Bakhtin's own later Dostoevsky book proves useful in this case. In that work, while discussing works permeated by the carnivalesque spirit, Bakhtin argues that "in carnivalized literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, laughter is as a rule considerably muffled" (*Problems* 165). Considering the date of *Resurrection*, we might construe its grotesque poetics as impure, and therefore devoid of the laughter Bakhtin ascribed to the grotesque due to its carnivalesque heritage.

Indeed, the widespread degradation of human beings in *Resurrection* is hardly as comical or regenerative as the Renaissance grotesque Bakhtin traces in the context of Rabelais. For instance, when looked at through the lens of Bakhtin's theory, the corpse of the merchant that spills out from every orifice, breaching boundaries between the inside and the outside, is the quintessential degraded subject that functions as a focal point for the grotesque in the novel. As John Bayley puts it, the body of the merchant "poisons the air of the whole novel" (258). Rendered piecemeal as a medical artifact—an assortment of pus, enlarged organs, and rotting skin—the merchant's corpse almost cannot add up to an actual, whole human being. He is, in Bakhtin's words, the subject "turn[ed] […] into flesh." By way of the merchant whose identity is reduced to a pound of flesh, Tolstoy anatomizes the societal malaises of despiritualization and dehumanization. The body of the merchant functions as a metonymic reflection of everything that is monstrous in the world of *Resurrection*: the wider loss of spiritual identity first signaled by Katiusha's transformation into the prostitute Liubka.

Maslova is shown in a state of living death as a prostitute, utterly devoid of spirituality and burying herself in alcohol and cigarettes. "This woman is dead," thinks Nekhliudov to himself when he first sees Maslova at the jail (*PSS* 32: 149). The fact that Tolstoy does not literally kill Maslova does not make much difference since her life as a prostitute strips her of all spirituality and reduces her to a mere body. This complete degradation commences with the consummation of her romance with Nekhliudov. During that scene, Nekhliudov hears Maslova's resistance and her pleas to stop the act, but ignores the words and gives preference to her body language. He hears her say: "'How can you? Your aunts will hear,'" but feels that her "whole being cried, 'I am yours'" (*PSS* 32: 62). As Tolstoy notes, "it [is] only *this* [body language] that Nekhliudov underst[ands]"; while Maslova's words reject his advances, he believes that her body welcomes them (*PSS* 32: 62). Everything in Maslova is thus lowered to the level of the body.

This initial perception of Maslova as nothing more than a body leads to her downward spiral toward prostitution. In fact, over time we can see her becoming an accomplice in her own degradation to the level of a grotesque body. She agrees to register formally as a prostitute because, as Tolstoy mentions, "Maslova imagined herself in bright yellow silk trimmed with black velvet—décolleté—and she could not resist so she handed over her identity papers" (*PSS* 32: 10). Maslova sees herself as a beautiful body in a seductive dress and

hands over her identity papers and, indirectly, her spiritual identity, for a version of herself as a subject degraded to the level of flesh.

The degree to which Maslova is dead while still alive is best illustrated by comparing her to past Russian heroines. As early as "Poor Liza," suicide provides tidy closure in many Russian stories of amorous affairs gone astray. Two immediate literary forerunners, with close intertextual ties to *Resurrection*—Turgenev's "A Quiet Spot," which is mentioned in *Resurrection* as Maslova's favorite work, and Tolstoy's own *Anna Karenina*—both end with the death of their heroines. In light of such literary precedents, the moment in *Resurrection* when Maslova also considers suicide as an escape becomes especially poignant. "A train will come," she thinks to herself, "I'll throw myself under and all will be over" (*PSS* 32: 131). Eventually, however, Nekhliudov's baby moves inside her and Maslova gives up the idea. Yet at this same moment she renounces God, embraces drinking and smoking, and enters the path that ends in prostitution.

The choice of prostitution over death, of liquor and cigarettes over emotional anguish, can be equated to a choice of materialism over spirituality, of body over spirit. Though Tolstoy does not put his heroine under a train as he did Anna Karenina, repeated sexual violations have buried Maslova's soul so deep that she may well be dead—a thing-like body no different from the oozing object that is the merchant's corpse. In this case, the estrangement of the familiar heroine and plot happens through grotesque degradation; to echo Bakhtin, in the grotesque, "all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract" is lowered "to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body" (*Rabelais* 19). Maslova goes from being a reader of Russian literature and a spiritually pure soul to an intoxicated, sexualized body.

But the prostitute Maslova is not the only character in the novel with a lost spiritual identity. Physical degradation and the loss of spiritual identity are not limited to the sexually defiled body of the prostitute, but emerge as systemic phenomena. The carnival as Bakhtin traces it in Rabelais' work was a collective community event defined by grotesque degradation. In *Resurrection*, Tolstoy similarly creates a collective, though considerably less benevolent, grotesque. In addition to degrading the favorite Russian heroine by turning her into a grotesque prostitute, Tolstoy also depicts respected members of the gentry, like the Korchagins, as grotesque bodies devoid of spirituality. The Korchagins belong to the same circles as the Rostovs from *War and Peace* or the Shcherbatsky family from *Anna Karenina* and participate in the same social activities. Despite similarities, however, they are emptied of their spiritual essence and stand as grotesque doubles of these earlier characters.

When visiting the Korchagins after Maslova's trial, Nekhliudov is confronted with the alien and grotesque side of them. "At that moment," writes Tolstoy about Nekhliudov, "strange images [rose] in his imagination for some unaccountable reason" (*PSS* 32: 97). These strange images take the shape of singled-out body parts that force their way into Nekhliudov's field of vision. The false teeth and lidless eyes of old Korchagin, his red face and smacking lips, stick out to Nekhliudov. Instead of seeing a man, we see body parts extracted from the whole of him; in Tolstoy's description, old Korchagin is a collection of unappealing appendages menacingly protruding outwards.

These images and many others in the scene recall Bakhtin's arguments about the grotesque as a style of unwieldy body parts that disrupt smooth, shapely imagery. According to Bakhtin, grotesque bodies are "ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of 'classic' aesthetics […]" (*Rabelais* 25); they are always transgressing boundaries and venturing outside through apertures such as "the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose" (26). Aside from old Korchagin, virtually every character in the scene

reflects these traits of the grotesque. Missy, whom Nekhliudov considered marrying, has wrinkles, sharp elbows, and fluffed hair sticking out. Her paralyzed mother is so physically unappealing that she is terrified of being seen in the light of the sun or without her expensive silk outerwear. Nekhliudov also sees the friend of the family Kolossov, whom he sees as "a stomach like a melon, a balding skinny, and whip-like arms" (*PSS* 32: 97). Like Sofia Vasilevna's shoulders, the protruding belly takes on grotesque qualities.

Automated Bodies

The loss of spiritual identity at both high and low levels of society and the transformation of familiar character prototypes into grotesque bodies is symptomatic of socially endorsed processes of dehumanization—processes aimed against those at society's mercy, that unexpectedly reflect back on the privileged or indifferent. The prison is the center of the alien, estranged world of *Resurrection*, but instead of being an isolated, peripheral phenomenon, it has a spider-like reach; directly or indirectly, virtually everyone on the outside participates in or validates its abominations. "There is a thing called government service," writes Tolstoy, "which allows men to treat other men like they were things" (*PSS* 32: 352). He elaborates on this notion by suggesting that in dealing with prisoners, those in power act as though prisoners were not fellow human beings but inanimate objects. A revolutionary Nekhliudov meets during his visit to St. Petersburg corroborates these statements by describing her first arrest as precisely a dehumanizing experience. "I realized," she states, "that I was no longer a human being, but had become a *thing*" (*PSS* 32: 294; emphasis mine). The extent to which prisoners are objectified and deprived of their humanity becomes most apparent when Tolstoy describes their procession to Siberia. Dressed alike, walking in line, the prisoners look like a giant machine making its way through the city. Tolstoy describes this procession in detail, highlighting its dehumanizing nature:

> The procession was so long that the men in the front were out of sight by the time luggage carts and feeble-bodied prisoners were on the move. […] It had become very hot. There was no wind, and the dust raised by thousands of feet constantly stood over the prisoners, as they moved to the center of the road. They were walking with a quick step, and the slow-trotting horse of Nekhliudov's cab could barely catch up to them. Row after row walked unknown, strange and fearful creatures dressed alike, thousands of feet shod alike, all in step, swinging their arms as if to keep up spirits. There were so many of them, they all looked so alike and their circumstances were so extraordinarily odd, that to Nekhliudov they no longer seemed like men, but peculiar and dreadful creatures of some sort. (*PSS* 32: 330)

The description of the marching prisoners, by way of Nekhliudov's gaze, as "strange fearful creatures" or as "peculiar and dreadful creatures of some sort," indicates that these men and women are no longer viewed as human subjects, but have morphed—at least in the eyes of society—into something strange and unnatural, a grotesque, multi-headed body. The strangeness of these moments aligns with the "strange images" that come into Nekhliudov's mind at the Korchagins. Yet in this case, despite how others might see the prisoners, Nekhliudov is able to recognize individual faces and humanity in the dehumanized procession in front of him.

The procession of prisoners, marching forward as one, gives the impression that these individuals are blindly following orders with no will of their own. The prisoners have been turned into empty vessels for societal mandates, which guide their automatized march forward. The image of prisoners set into motion by an overwhelming social force has strong grotesque overtones. When

discussing the grotesque in the work of a realist author like Charles Dickens, Kayser writes that, unlike Lewis Carroll whose *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* "immediately remove[s] us to [his] fantastic realm," Dickens "appears to lead his readers through the familiar everyday world" (122). Yet, as he adds, the Dickensian world is filled with "mechanical" characters "always unwinding and on the move." "The energy they expend in the course of their activities," writes Kayser, "is not part of their personality but points to an impersonal force which drives them" (123). Turned into automatons by the system, the prisoners in *Resurrection* have been robbed of personal identities, degraded, made to wear uniforms, have had half of their heads shaven, and have been sent on a journey that, for many of them, will end in death. Persons with a will of their own would not so obediently undertake a death-bound exodus.

But if prisoners are turned automatons by those in power, the process of dehumanization and automatization is a vicious cycle in *Resurrection*. The rich and mighty of the world, despite their power in society, are the source of Tolstoy's grotesque aesthetic. As Tolstoy shows, characters like the Korchagins have themselves lost their basic humanity and wander about like grotesque soulless bodies driven by impersonal forces. Once the aesthetic gaze is fixed on the prison, the familiar spaces and people of Russian literature (and of Tolstoy's past novels) cannot be seen in the same light due to their complicity in that system. Those complicit in the transformation of human beings into vessels of a merciless social machine simply through their silence are themselves shown as soulless marionettes. In fact, if the soulful prisoners are forced to abandon their free will and spirituality because they are part of the penal machinery, members of society are shown as inherently soulless.

The Korchagins are not only grotesque in their physical appearance, but also in behavior. When they converse about various cultural events, Nekhliudov cannot help noticing that they do so simply out of habit, without personal investment. Images of individuals speaking or acting without strong interest or personal opinion reverberate throughout the novel. Impersonal forces like the law give rise to such moments. Those involved in legal processes do not think about the special circumstances of each individual case, but blindly apply legal principles. Even Nekhliudov's friend Selenin, who had a strong sense of right and wrong in his youth, has abandoned individual morality and allows his opinions and actions to be exclusively guided by legal principles. Some even subjugate their personal opinions to more ridiculous and more arbitrary forces. The third juror in the opening of the novel counts steps and mechanically decides life questions based on the results of these counting processes.

Tolstoy does not spare from his grotesque lens even religion, which might be seen as the last bastion of spirituality. When it comes to organized religion in the Orthodox Church, quite the opposite seems to be the case in *Resurrection*. As Amy Mandelker argues, in Tolstoy's late works, with *Resurrection* as a key example, "institutional Christianity becomes a negative social force, legitimizing the worst sorts of inhuman injustice" (117). As we can see in *Resurrection*, instead of being spiritually motivated, actions of those affiliated with the church are as automatized as those of lawyers and jurors. The most grotesque, automated, and soulless being in the novel is Toporov, Chief Procurator of the Most Holy Synod. As Hugh McLean points out, this character is "an obvious caricature" of the arch-conservative Chief Prosecutor Konstantin Pobedonostsev, who was a major advisor to Alexander III (107). Nekhliudov notes that Toporov "in the depths of his soul […] really believed in nothing" (*PSS* 32: 297). An underlying nihilism is obvious in the "[p]ale, immobile mask" that is his face (*PSS* 32: 298). When Toporov surprisingly decides to help the sectarians, Nekhliudov describes a grotesque

body at work, moving about automatically to accomplish a task in which he has no sincere investment. "Nekhliudov continued to stand," writes Tolstoy, "looking down on the narrow bald skull, at the hand with thick blue veins swiftly moving the pen, and wondered why this man, who was obviously indifferent to everything, was doing what he was doing, and why he has doing it with such care. What for?" (*PSS* 32: 299).

The depiction of one of the main guardians of spirituality in Russian society as a soulless automaton fits with Tolstoy's general treatment of Orthodoxy as a religion that has inverted Christ's thought. In a scene that has become notorious for precipitating Tolstoy's 1901 excommunication by the Holy Synod, the author depicts the Eucharist through a defamiliarized gaze. Tolstoy shows the priest blessing the bread and wine and then praying afterwards, because "he had eaten a small piece of God's flesh and swallowed a sip of His blood" (*PSS* 32: 135). Following the priest, the children in the prison congregation also take communion. Tolstoy shows the priest "wiping the children's mouths" and then "sing[ing] a song about the children eating God's flesh and drinking His blood" (*PSS* 32: 136). Scholars have understood these descriptions as highly satirical (McLean 101), but the effect they produce is also grotesque and fits with other grotesque manifestations in *Resurrection*. Kayser cites the German poet Christian Morgenstern, who provocatively asserts that: "God's material form is grotesque" (205). The discussions of communion as "eating God's flesh" or the images of innocent children "eating God's flesh" are disturbing because they despiritualize the process, removing its mystery, while reducing the theological ritual into a physical exchange.

Instead of seeing the Eucharist as a recognizable ritual, Tolstoy focuses on the physical side of the rite—the bread and wine—and the fact that there is eating and drinking involved. To echo Morgenstern, the implication of the semi-cannibalistic rite Tolstoy recreates, that God has flesh and blood, or worse still, that his flesh and blood are edible, provokes a grotesque effect by degrading the deity to the level of flesh. But then, this is precisely Tolstoy's aim, which is why this scene is a key component of the grotesque in *Resurrection*. Not only are characters degraded and reduced to mere bodies, but also the mystery of their deity, the center of their spiritual life, is degraded into flesh and blood.

The few fragmented glimpses of Tolstoy's earlier narratives in *Resurrection* house a theater of grotesque marionettes where spirituality is scarce and individuals motivated by largely impersonal forces. The only individuals immune to Tolstoy's poetics of the grotesque are the political prisoners. When depicting political prisoners, Tolstoy dwells primarily on eyes, large sad eyes looking through peepholes in solitary cells. And the eye, as Bakhtin points out, is not very relevant to the grotesque, unless it is somehow deformed. By virtue of their emotional investment in the cause, political prisoners, even self-aggrandizing ones like Novodvorov, have managed to preserve their spiritual identities.

Conclusion

After Tolstoy analyzes the various layers of the grotesque in *Resurrection* on both a social and an individual level, the protagonist and, indirectly, the narrative itself eventually retreat from this reality. At first, political prisoners guide Nekhliudov as he leaves society. As their fellow traveler to Siberia, he renounces the injustice of his past, thus abiding by Thoreau's famous dictum that during times of injustice (such as during slavery in America) "the only proper place for the honest citizen […] [is] the prison" (*PSS* 32: 304). Yet even though he temporarily joins the revolutionaries and admires them for their sincerity and spiritual commitment to the cause, this cause ultimately does not provide Nekhliudov with a positive vision for a better world. Instead, the desire for change among revolutionaries often takes exclusively destructive

form; Kryltsov, whom Nekhliudov befriends, desires the "destruction of the established order of things" that made possible the death of his young comrades (*PSS* 32: 378). He would like to "go up on a balloon" and effectively annihilate everyone below as if they were bedbugs (*PSS* 32: 409).

Through this line of thinking Kryltsov indirectly participates in the grotesque degradation that plagues his world. After all, the grotesque in *Resurrection* is very much in the eye of the beholder. Society members perceive prisoners as grotesque things, whereas the Korchagins are dehumanized in Nekhliudov's gaze. By seeing people as on the level of bedbugs, Kryltsov adopts the morally flawed perception of others we face throughout the novel. In order to escape the injustice of his reality in full, Nekhliudov must therefore go beyond Thoreau and abandon the revolutionaries and their call for violence. He must learn to see others in a new way.

It is uncertain what Nekhliudov's fate is at the end of *Resurrection*. He is left a pilgrim on the open road: someone who has seen the grotesquery of his world and who chooses to abandon it for a new path. In a sense, he thus fulfills the fantasy of his earlier literary incarnation in Tolstoy's first (and failed) attempt at writing a didactic novel—"A Landowner's Morning."[10] At the end of "A Landowner's Morning," Nekhliudov becomes enthusiastic thinking about the travels of a peasant boy and begins to wonder why he himself cannot travel the world rather than be bound to his estate. Nekhliudov gets his wish in *Resurrection* when he unburdens himself of his patrimony and "experiences the joy of the traveler who discovers a new, unknown, and beautiful world" (*PSS* 32: 361). This unknown and beautiful world is not explored in *Resurrection*, but the sheer vision of it suffices for Nekhliudov. Ultimately, though it appears that the novel ends with him at the crossroads, through his reading of the gospels, Nekhliudov has learned the only lesson necessary: the importance of approaching others with love rather than dehumanizing them. The novel's open ending suggests that all that is needed to escape the horrors we witness in *Resurrection* through Tolstoy's elaborate grotesque poetics is a new perception based on love.

Notes

All translations from the *Jubilee* edition of Tolstoy (*PSS*) are the author's.

1. In my view, *Hadji Murat*, which Tolstoy finished in 1904, after *Resurrection*, is a novel manqué. Tolstoy sets the scene for a full-blown novel, but then drops all the other characters after Hadji Murat dies.

2. This argument is echoed by Irving Howe who suggests that *Resurrection* "is much richer in felt life and far less monochromatic than 'The Kreutzer Sonata,' if only because the novel as a form forces Tolstoy to reveal himself" (32).

3. Bakhtin similarly wavers on Tolstoy's merits as a social writer; he mentions that despite the novel's ideological force, Tolstoy is "deprived of a genuine sense of history" and unable to envision social change, which prevents him from embracing the revolutionaries he portrays ("Preface" 138).

4. See, among others, McLean (96–110).

5. Tolstoy traces the character's fall through plot devices similar to those that dominate late works like "The Forged Coupon" or *The Kreutzer Sonata*. In *The Kreutzer Sonata* sexual desire leads to murder, while in "The Forged Coupon" even as harmless an act as the forgery of a ruble note leads to several deaths and many other misfortunes as the forged money is passed down among people who either suffer or make others suffer as a result of the coupon.

6. One exception is the young child that Nekhliudov meets in Siberia, when the governor's daughter insists that he meet her child.

7. Murav takes note of the plight of infants in the novel and argues that *Resurrection* is a "motherless utopia" where Tolstoy replaces the birth-model with the

"resurrection" of ancestors advocated by Nikolai Fedorov. See Murav (41–42).

8. In fact, these two different versions of the same events also clash stylistically, as Maslova's story is told in curt, almost-telegraphic sentences, while Nekhliudov's flashbacks are much more elaborate and literary.

9. In fact, Bakhtin's opposition to Kayser's definition is largely motivated by the fact that it doesn't leave enough room for the body (*Rabelais* 48).

10. For the evolution of Nekhliudov from "A Landowner's Morning" to *Resurrection* and the reasons for why he is significant to Tolstoy as a character, see Orwin (473–486).

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