

Mikhail Bakhtin and His Novelistic Theory

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Abstract:

The present paper is an attempt to analyze and define novel not merely through literary style but how should we focus on the relationship between different elements that differentiate the novel from other genres. Bakhtin discusses his ideas on aesthetics, phenomenology of self, heteroglossia, chronotope, dialogism, carnival, polyphony, centrifugal and centripetal forces, textuality and intertextuality. According to Bakhtin, an individual cannot be the definition of truth but the phenomenon remains unexhausted and unrevealed. He again is of the view that one cannot examine the prehistory of the novelistic discourse with mere literary styles.

Keywords: Discourse, aesthetics, relation, heteroglot, narrator, carnival

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975) was born in Russia. "His adolescent years were spent in Vilnius and Odessa, two cities that stood out in the Russian empire as unusually heterogeneous in their mix of culture and language" (Lane 9). The uniqueness of Bakhtin's approach to aesthetics is in that it is based not on categories such as the aesthetics attitude, aesthetic object, or aesthetic value (truth, goodness, or beauty) but on the phenomenology of self- other relations, relations that are embodied in actual bodies- in space and time. For Bakhtin our existence is a kind of "dialogue," between the self and the world. The writings of Bakhtin go back to the 1920s, but he remained largely unknown outside of the Soviet Union until translation in 1970s, brought him to world attention. Books such as *Problems of Dostovesky's Poetics* (1929), *Rabelais and His World* (1965) and *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (1972) have established him as a leading theorist of the novel. He writes: "The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types, sometimes even diversity of languages and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized"(Discourse 32). The first mark of the novel as a distinct genre is that it is a discourse, as Bakhtin would have it.

Bakhtin's thought emphasizes language not as an abstract system but as a concrete heteroglot conception of the world, as an arena of social conflict, particularly in the ways the discourse of the characters in a literary work may disrupt and subvert the authority of ideology as expressed as a single voice of a narrator. The novel, according to Bakhtin, is more oriented towards the social / historical forms of rhetoric than towards the particular artistic or aesthetic ideas present at any particular moment. He writes:

These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this moment of theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization- this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistic of the novel (Discourse 32).

Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships. Bakhtin writes:

The internal stratification present in every language of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as a genre... . All languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principal underlying them and making each unique, are specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values (Discourse 32).

The intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relations (chronotope) is aesthetically expressed in literature, especially through literary genres. For instance, the epic is characterized by a chronotope that values a national heroic past rooted in tradition, temporal distance separates it from the present. By contrast, the novel- with a world (and worlds) still in making; rooted in experience and multilayered consciousness; and where knowledge and practice evolve not in relation to past tradition but to contemporary concrete and lived realities- expresses a profoundly different chronotope. Whereas the epic lives in cyclic times, the novel is oriented to contemporary reality. Bakhtin argues:

From the very beginning the novel was structured... in a zone of direct contact with inconclusive present-day reality. At its core lay personal experiences and free creative imagination. It is ever questioning, ever expanding, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review (The Dialogic 38).

"Dialogism refers to the inherent "addressivity" of all languages (Guerin 349). Dialogism assumes that intertextuality and inter-textuality are novel's hallmark, and therefore otherness is at work in the genre's very heart. According to Michael Holquist "dialogism is the name not just for a dualism, but for a necessary multiplicity in human perception" (Holquist 22). The author of a novel, for instance, can manipulate the other not only as an other but as a self. Dostoevsky successfully permits his characters to have the status of an "I" standing over the claims of his own authorial voice, that Bakhtin felt compelled to coin the special term "polyphony" to describe it. His characters never speak without immediately altering or qualifying their discourse in the light of the possible reactions of some real (another character) or imagined (the reader) interlocutor. He writes: "The chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels is a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (Problems 6).

Out of the primordial roots of the carnival tradition in folk culture of the renaissance and medieval times, Bakhtin argues, arises the many voiced novel of the twentieth century. He traces the tradition back to the Socratic dialogues. He delines the carnival thus:

Carnival is the people's second life, organized on the bases of laughter. . .

. As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of the time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal (Rabelais 45).

Bakhtin's analysis of the nature and function of Rabelais' treatment of bells will serve to illustrate the formal means by which themes and devices from the world of carnival are used to subvert and belittle the official ideology of medieval Christian thought. Within the cultures of the Middle Ages, bells took on two quite different functions and symbolic values according to the context in which they were used. Within the context of the official religious ideology, they functioned so as to symbolize spiritual values. Located in the belfries of churches and monasteries, they belonged to the world of "the above". Poised

midway between the earth and heaven, their riggings were a kind of summons to men's higher calling. Within the world of the carnival, however, in which cowbells were frequently tied to horses' halters and smaller bells were used as an accompaniment to festive feasting and dancing, bells were "brought down" from their elevated position to take part in the world of the below", a world of festive merriment and excess. By wrenching church bells from the first of those contexts and placing them in the context of carnival, Bakhtin argues that Rabelais effects a limiting of official ideology, trampling its somber seriousness underfoot beneath the merry dance of carnival. Of particular importance is the ritual crowning and decrowning of a mock king, often through the medium of the grotesque to lower all that is high, ideal and abstract to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity. Bakhtin uses the terms "centrifugal" and "centripetal" to describe the impulse either outwards or inwards, from or towards the centre, to refer to social and ideological rather than physical forces. For him, certain literary genres have a centripetal force, driving readers towards a centre of conformity and uniformity, whereas others have the opposite effect, urging people away from conformity and towards diversity and heterogeneity. He accords poetry an essentially centripetal tendency, while the novel is granted the opposite, a centrifugal force. Not surprisingly, he argues that the novel flourishes during times of diversity and the slackening of the central control. The epic is one of those forces which is aligned with the centripetal forces of language and national authority, associated as it has always been with celebrating an heroic past. Lyric poetry is also a direct subjective expression. But, as Simon Dentith argues that the novel's stylistic and linguistic variety, its openness to the world-in-process presents an entirely different world view.

Bakhtin's importance in the contemporary criticism is evident from the fact that the concepts that he developed in the midst of his obscurity in Soviet Russia came to dominate Western literary theory towards the end of the twentieth century. Julia Kristeva's notion of "intertextuality" is directly influenced by him. Bakhtin shares with Marxists theorists an interest in the historical and social world, an interest in the formation of the "subject," and an interest in language as the means in which ideologies get articulated. Humanist or moral critics address themselves more to his notion of addressivity because "addressing" someone promotes human connection and community. The Poststructuralist notion of decentring had already been anticipated by him. Unfinalizability in Bakhtin results from the fact that what we apprehend are constructions. Therefore, no one person or group can contain the truth because the phenomenon remains unexhausted, with many aspects unrevealed. Therefore, novel in its contemporaneity is made of different clay (form) from the other already completed genres and with it and in it is born the future of all literature. Bakhtin uses literary genre of the novel as an allegory for representing our existence. The novel is not finite, it is open. This discourse is able to reveal ever newer ways to mean.

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