



Polyphony (Bakhtin)

In the chapter on the prehistory of the novel in DI, Bakhtin elevates the structure of the European novel into an entire model of meaning. That is, for him, the novel is not just an art form or a form of entertainment but has a philosophical and even ontological function. It develops in European Modernity (the Ancients did not have a prose form – they used drama and poetry and parody to model the world) in parallel with a new secular view of the world, which is transgressive and which challenges all authority. Thus without even looking at its content, the European novel is according to Bakhtin always an oppositional cultural form, challenging existing cultural norms and ideologies.

The novel manages to be a transgressive form due to the fact that *parody* is built into its structure, whether a writer thinks of himself as a comic writer or not. All *adventure novels* of the 18th century (the so-called picaresque novels which feature a rogue hero or picaro) are parodic. They represent a hero who goes through the vicissitudes of life without losing his optimism and high spirits because he looks at society in a somewhat detached and parodying manner thanks to which he can see both sides of any situation.

Parody for Bakhtin is not only a genre form. It is a quality of discourse which is polyphonic. The novel is for Bakhtin a model of polyphonic discourse. The quality of polyphonic discourse that is parody can also be described with another term: intertextuality. ‘Polyphonic’ or ‘intertextual’ means that one’s own word is always penetrated by the speech or intonation (accents) of an Other. Bakhtin claims that there is no ‘zero’ language or ‘zero’ utterance: no utterance is unmarked. Every utterance and every word in discourse is polyvalent: it has multiple meanings or associations of meanings and always alludes to other meanings. It is this ability to allude to the word of an Other which makes the word in the novel polyphonic or dialogic. Thus the novel is for Bakhtin a repository of many different social speech registers or speech types, all of which are marked ideologically, philosophically, and stylistically (high, low style, official language, folk expression, swearing etc.). The novel thus becomes a model of society but society seen not in terms of its means of production, its statistics or its laws. Instead, the novel reflects society as a giant tapestry of social languages or discourses all of which are in a dialogic relationship with each other. This is how Bakhtin formulates this point:

“The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and as a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized. The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour (each day has its own slogan, its own vocabulary, its own emphases) – this internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence is the

indispensable prerequisite for the novel as a genre. The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types [*raznorechie* = literally: “differing speech” = **heteroglossia**] and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional units with whose help heteroglossia [*raznorechie*] can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships. These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization. And this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel.” (M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* [“Discourse in the Novel”, pp. 262-3).

Thus for Bakhtin, the novel is a model of society. What Bakhtin maps in the quoted segment above is how the novel manages to do this through its structure.

Bakhtin’s model of the structure of the novel is expounded in Chapter 5 of his book on the poetics of Dostoevsky’s novel. Bakhtin regarded Dostoevsky’s prose works of the 19th century as perfect examples of what he, Bakhtin, described as the polyphonic texts. The polyphonic text is determined by the relationship of the different ‘voices’ inside the structure of the novel’s text.

Bakhtin’s model is in part a *typology*: he speaks of three types of “words” which are possible in the novel: 1) unmediated discourse directed at a referent 2) discourse of a repented person which is ‘objectified’ and 3) discourse directed towards someone else’s discourse (double-voiced discourse) .

The third type of word in Bakhtin’s typology features either parody or stylization or both. That is, the third type or polyphonic discourse is always intertextual.

Bakhtin analyses some text fragments of Dostoevsky’s fiction (Bakhtin never produced a total analysis of any one of D’s works). What emerges from B’s analysis is that D’s characters never have a *finalized* position in discourse. Their speech is always open-ended. The Dostoevsky text is thus always an “open text.” What this means is that D’s novels require an *active reader* who will insert him/herself into the text and act as one of its elements: as an interpreting instance or function.

The reader reception of the polyphonic (dialogic) text is summed up in a *structural model* which is a model of *any* artistic text – verbal, visual, filmic, even musical. It has been extrapolated from B’s ideas about the novel of Dostoevsky. The structural model was developed by a German scholar, Wolf Schmid (University of Hamburg) and translated into English and adapted by me in *Narrative Principles in Dostoevsky’s Besy [The Possessed]: A Structural Analysis* (1979). This was based on my PhD and published under my maiden name (S Vladiv).

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Sources:

M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Chapter 5.

M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ("From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse"), pp. 41-83.

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