

NARRATIVE DISCOURSE: AUTHOR/HERO/OTHER II

Bakhtin's early views, as expounded in the last chapter, seem to have been constructed by his biographers from their own historically extralocal vantage point. Specially discordant in reference to Bakhtin's essay is the intimation that the self others itself (Clark and Holquist 1984: 65), emphatically asserted by Holquist to be

the suggestion of Bakhtin's total oeuvre, conceived as a single utterance.

(Holquist 1986: 315)

Unlike Todorov (1984a) who is faithfully closer to Bakhtin in his celebration of alterity, Holquist's application of the authorial metaphor comes close to reducing Bakhtin's radical decentering of the location of personality to a cozy "self" - perpetuation. What of course must be borne in mind here are the limitations of Bakhtin's presuppositions when pitted against his better known later work. The authorial position in

this early piece is a rather exploded notion, however provocative his deconstruction of interiority and privileging of alterity may be.

No longer resisting prolepsis, we can now discuss some of the departures in the Dostoevsky book. In "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" self-consciousness was seen as impossible in that any attempt at self-reflection invariably split the self and foreclosed the possibility of an accurate vision of the self as a finished whole. Now it appears that it is precisely this impracticable self-reflection which is the key to the unity of Dostoevsky's novels. Moreover, Bakhtin's notion of self-consciousness is nevertheless virtually unchanged:

Dostoevsky's hero is an infinite function...

(He) never for an instant coincides with himself.

(Bakhtin 1984: 51)

But Bakhtin does not renounce his earlier view of author-hero relations. In Tolstoy, for instance,

the total finalizing meaning of the life and death of each character is revealed only in the

author's field of vision, and thanks solely to the advantageous "surplus" which that field enjoys over every character, that is, thanks to that which the character cannot himself see or understand. This is the finalizing, monologic function of the author's "surplus" field of vision. (1984: 70)

It needs to be pointed out here that the two modes of characterization - monologic and dialogic - are not really rival methods of representing the same "reality", but rather two discrete art-forms. One has to do with the representation of concrete existence, the other with the representation of consciousness. They would, however, seem to exclude each other within a single work. A free dialogism of discourse is foreclosed by an authorial extralocal surplus. Bakhtin now seems to acknowledge the darker side of the other:

In a human being there is always something that only he himself can reveal, a free act of self-consciousness and discourse, something that does not submit to an externalizing definition. (1984: 58)

But can autonomy exist as anything but a response to an other? It is daring of him now to take Notes from Underground as a prime example of the new found autonomy of Dostoevsky's characters, since we may be inclined to agree with the hero's own position, and that of the frame narrator, that his hyper-consciousness is a disease, a paranoia, R. D. Laing's "ontological insecurity": psychic death anxiety, the terror of ceasing to exist in being defined by another consciousness. Essential is the external persistence of alterity:

To be means to communicate dialogically. When dialogue ends, everything ends.

(1984: 252)

It is aesthetically irrelevant to argue with the irrationality of such an equation of psychic definition from without with death. Instead of diagnosis what is needed is dialogics. For Bakhtin, as for the existentialists, the "clinical" approach is entirely unsatisfactory. Bakhtin may be seen to have taken the "critical" path as opposed to the "clinical" - the two

readerly response options which Derrida speaks about. (Derrida 1978) Such a choice is symptomatic of a revolution in Bakhtin's own views and indicative of an enhanced appreciation on his part of the self as subject.