

INTRODUCTION : RECEPTION

The process of re-accentuation is enormously significant in the history of literature. Every age re-accentuates in its own way the works of its most immediate past. The historical life of classic works is in fact the uninterrupted process of their social and ideological re-accentuation.

(Bakhtin 1981 : 420-21)

Jacques Derrida's paper "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences", presented at a symposium at John Hopkins University in 1966, virtually inaugurated the advent of a new critical movement in the United States. Deconstruction was launched with a bang; Derrida and Co. (mostly American) soon gave rise to an academic industry. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895 - 1975), by contrast, appeared with a whimper on the critical scene. His first recognition in the United States as a thinker of some import came in 1968 when he was grouped with a band of internationally respected theoreticians writing for a special issue of Yale French Studies (No. 41,

September) devoted to the theme of "Game, Play, Literature". Bakhtin's contribution, "The Role of Games in Rabelais", was actually a fragment from Rabelais and His World which had just appeared in Helene Iswolsky's translation. There is "an unmistakable diffidence" (Holquist in Bakhtin 1986 : ix) about the way Bakhtin is introduced in the notes on contributors:

M. Bakhtin ... is reaching the end of a long career, but only recently have the boldness of his speculation and the breadth of his ideas been appreciated outside the restricted circle of his Russian friends and colleagues.

In the western world, in languages other than Slavic, Bakhtin remained unknown until 1967. In that year, while Julia Kristeva in France wrote a critical account of Bakhtin's Dostoevsky and Rabelais books, elucidating his post-Formalism, stressing his non-static version of a structuralist approach to the study of literature, and recognizing the potential in his implicit formulation of intertextuality, a reviewer in the United States in 1969 was blissfully unaware of the revolutionary nature of

Rabelais and His World. Writing in The New York Review of Books he could observe:

The Bakhtin method has come up with totally wrong answers.

(Yates 1969 : 16)

The reviewer of the book in The New York Times Book Review, while not realizing the implications of Bakhtin's work, was nevertheless able to sense its seminal nature:

At the core of this book, then, past the flabby tissue of vast generalization, past the dense Marxist rhetoric, lies an important and original thesis.

(Miller 1969 : 36)

After 1973, however, with the appearance in English translation of Volosinov's/Bakhtin's Marxism and the Philosophy of Language a more critical appreciation of the quarrel with his Formalist contemporaries and his contributions to linguistics, semiotics, stylistics, and literary theory in general was being increasingly recognized.<sup>1</sup> Frederic Jameson's penetrating review article on the book in 1974 is a case in point as was Yale University's preparation - forestalled by Bakhtin's death in 1975 - to award him an honorary degree. The

English language publication of Volosinov's/Bakhtin's Freudianism: A Marxist Critique in 1976 and Medvedev's/Bakhtin's The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics in 1978 did not make much of a cumulative impact largely because of the vexed and ambivalent nature of their authorship. The idea of a Bakhtin school, however, gained currency. By the late 70s the trickle of critical articles and monographs had turned into a steady stream. Besides, he had begun to appear frequently in footnotes.

But it was only in the early 80s, which also saw the translation in America of Bakhtin's important essays under the title, The Dialogic Imagination (1981), the retranslation of Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics (1984), and the reissue of Rabelais and His World (1984), that the momentum caught on and opened the floodgates of Bakhtiniana. Churning out of the academic mills were special issues of journals (for instance the Critical Inquiry issue of December 1983 and Studies in Twentieth Century Literature of Fall 1984) on things Bakhtinian, sessions devoted solely to Bakhtin in conferences, a critical biography in 1984, finally the

Bakhtin Newsletter, two issues of which are already out at the time of writing, and a bibliography of and on his works. (Nordquist: 1988)

Bakhtin had arrived. But a thinker who believed that nothing is ever absolutely dead, that every meaning will have its "homecoming festival" someday, still has to wait for his homecoming festival. While the academic boom in Bakhtin testifies to the fact that he is not just another theorist, but a theorist seen by some as offering panaceas for what has been called a "crisis" in criticism ever since deconstruction invaded the portals of academe in America, there is a tendency to use him, to appropriate him in ways that refuse to do full justice to the complexity of his formulations.

My effort in this thesis will be to chart just two strands - strands which I perceive to be the most important - of these appropriations. After giving a short account of the assimilation and deployment of Bakhtin in Anglo-American literary theory and criticism (which will also suggest what he means for feminist criticism, the impact of his 'translinguistics' on traditional linguistics, and his contribution to the poetics of fiction), the body of my essay will concern

itself with the liberal-humanist reception of Bakhtin spearheaded mainly by the Slavacists in American universities. It will then deal with the appeal that Bakhtin's theory of language holds for a Marxist criticism. What unites the two strands is the unease that has been generated by the institutionalization of deconstructive literary theory. The last portion of the dissertation is mainly an attempt to examine critically Bakhtin's formulations concerning the creative act.

In the following pages, however, I will attempt to recapitulate some of the key ideas in Bakhtin's texts and to point out some of the other directions that Bakhtinian criticism has lead to.

Michael Holquist's edition of The Dialogic Imagination and Tzvetan Todorov's Le Principe dialogique (translated as The Dialogical Principle) served to bring forward "dialogic" as a master-category over other competing categories in Bakhtin's conceptual arsenal such as "polyphonic", "heteroglossia", and "carnavalesque". In his notebooks where he reviews his earlier works Bakhtin asks himself the question: what is special, unique, and distinctive about his own work? Nezaverssen-

nost is the word he uses to answer the question.

'Unfinishedness' or 'unfinalizability' is praised as the loophole in any text that generates infinite possibilities of further dialogue. The open-ended text lives because it allows freedom for the reader.

(N)othing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future.

(Bakhtin 1984: 166)

A thinker of Bakhtin's stature can be expected not to confuse the openness that loophole allows with sheer muddleheadedness. The positive kind of unfinalizability is enacted in his texts (something that has led some critics to call him a confused thinker) and contrasted implicitly with an author's fuzziness and inability to fathom adequately the subject of his choice. When Bakhtin places the novel over the other genres, it is its unfinalizability that he is emphasizing. Dostoevsky is great because he communicates the sense of individual identity as postponed. His characters



all acutely sense their own inner: unfinalizability, their capacity to outgrow, as it were, from within and render untrue any externalization and finalizing definition of them. As long as a person is alive he lives by the fact that he is not yet finalized, that he has not yet uttered his ultimate word ...

A man never coincides with himself. One cannot apply to him the formula of identity  $A=A$ .  
(Bakhtin 1989: 59)

Finally, Bakhtin's concept of nezaversennost remained unfinalized in his texts.

His refusal to systematize was at the heart of

his quarrel with the Russian Formalists. Language is always a conglomeration of different "languages", forever vying for hegemony. Official culture constitutes a centripetal, uniformizing force; unofficial culture upsets predictability by exerting a centrifugal force. "Heteroglossia" in other words, is the internal stratification and at the same time interanimation of language so that dialect, sociolect, register, and genre all come into play. Defining the stylistics of the novel, Bakhtin notes:

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 (raznorecie) 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 unities with whose help heteroglossia (raznorecie) can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized).

(Bakhtin 1984: 263)

"Dialogism" is the epistemological form of a heteroglossic world. It is the idea that each utterance is moulded by and becomes meaningful in its directedness towards other utterances. No utterance is undirected. Even if the addressee is not actually present, the dialogic anticipation of response is always already there. Meaning therefore exists in intersubjective communication.

(L)anguage is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated - overpopulated with the intentions of others.

(Bakhtin 1984: 294)

The canonised genres - lyric, epic, tragedy - are monologic in that they seek to establish a single world view. Prose fiction and comedy, contrastingly, are dialogic in that they contain discourses of various types without curbing any of their expressive capacities. Another facet or formulation of the dialogic is Bakhtin's concept of the "polyphonic", which refers to "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" in intense relationship with one another. Dostoevsky, unlike Tolstoy, loosens the grip of the authorial discourse and allows other discourses to interact in the text. The novel's dialogicality or polyphony in such cases deconstructs other literary forms. As Terry Eagleton says:

What Bakhtin has done in fact is to take up the terms drawn up by Georg Lukacs in his Theory of

the Novel - the epic as lost totality, the novel as doomed to 'transcendental homelessness' - and bodily invert their values.

(Eagleton 1986: 114-5)

Inversion is also central to Bakhtin's notion of the "carnavalesque". Though, carnival is a specific medieval festival, it may arise, according to Bakhtin, wherever genuine laughter challenges the centripetal, official forces and values of existing norms. Preaching the "joyous relativity" of all things, its spirit is not reformist but parodic, as medieval carnival parodied

all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions.

(Bakhtin 1968: 9)

The carnivalesque in his formulation becomes an epistemological category applied synecdochically to the whole of popular culture. Opposed to the classical and the serious, the grotesque abounds because carnival laughter is hostile to the complete, the finalized. The significance of Bakhtin's book on Rabelais, as

Peter Stallybras and Allon White demonstrate in their study on the politics and poetics of transgression,

is its broad development of the 'carnavalesque' into a potent, populist, critical inversion of all official words and hierarchies in a way that has implications far beyond the specific realm of Rabelais studies.

(Stallybrass and White 1986: 7)

NOTE

1. The book appears under the name of V. N. Volosinov as does the other work entitled Freudianism: A Marxist Critique. But I will throughout the thesis continue to separate by a slash the author(s) of the disputed texts. The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship will thus be attributed to Medvedev/Bakhtin. When I refer to "Bakhtin's work" or "Bakhtinian", I am following the convention utilized by I. R. Titunik, who applies the name Bakhtin to refer to the undisputed texts as well as the disputed ones which together form a corpus of writings belonging to the so-called Bakhtin School.

The question of Bakhtin's role in the composition of the so-called "pseudonymous" works (see Clark & Holquist 1985: 356-57) is still by no means resolved, mainly because of a paucity of factual evidence. Attempts to resolve the question on the basis of Bakhtin's stylistic or intellectual competence are of course vulnerable to charges of self-substantiation. Perlina (1983) and Clark and Holquist (1984; 1985: 146-70) seem to have investigated the most. Even though Perlina's work is based

largely on evidence unearthed by Clark and Holquist, there is still a certain dissonance between the two, particularly where "Medvedev's" book on formalism (1928) is concerned. Their researches in the Soviet Union, which included an interview with Volosinov's widow, have led them to conclude that Volosinov "played only a minor role in the composition of the article 'Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art' and of the book Marxism and the Philosophy of Language. He played a somewhat larger role in Freudianism: A Critical Sketch". (Clark and Holquist 1984: 121-22) They do not hesitate (ibid.: 125) in attributing the whole of Medvedev's Formal Method in Literary Scholarship to Bakhtin, although the matter is not so simple according to Perlina.

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