

MARXIST READINGS/REVISIONS

I am not here repeating the rather well-worn critique of the marginalization of academic Marxism, denouncing the self-perpetuating closure of a high-theoretical, and therefore safe, Marxist discourse, unfolding within a privileged environment, hermetically sealed from the famous "outside world". Such a seemingly radical critique actually prevents posing the most difficult questions. For Marxism would emphatically deny that there could ever be such an absolute separation of the academic from the "outside" world, a separation which implicitly posits this latter "real world" as "society", such that the University itself is again, in a familiar ideological fashion, put outside of society, made "unreal". But I teach in a university whose motto is: "In the Nation's Service"; and they mean it. To address the very real problems of the relationship of Marxist activity within the very real ideological apparatuses of this social world, to Marxist activity, or the supposed lack of it, in other social apparatuses (trade unions, mass organizations, etc.) requires specifying the relationship

among such apparatuses, a relationship which never is, as bourgeois ideology always wants to project it, one of total autonomy. In fact, as a Marxist, I do not believe for a second that there is no Marxism out in that American "real world", nor that it has been totally unaffected by what we do in the academy. The perceived, over-whelmingly "obvious" absence of Marxism in the real world is the effect of an ideological media apparatus, an effect that we err in taking at face value. After all, who would guess, from watching the CBS Evening News, that American universities are crawling with Marxists?

(Kavanagh 1983: 31)

Notwithstanding the radical enthusiasm in the epigraph, it can be safely said that the almost non-existent political power of a Marxist tradition in the United States is only accentuated by the recent growth of Marxism in the literary-critical domain. Unlike its British counterpart, the -ism has no base in the public sphere and has made few inroads in the social sciences. Cuba, Vietnam, the evolution of the New Left, and the

racial and sexual revolutions in the early sixties, coupled with the activity of entry of student radicals now in their forties, in the professoriat, no doubt provided the impetus for what is called the "rise" of Marxism in the American academy. The recent heightening of interest, particularly among some literary theorists, has been intensified by a reaction against the success of deconstruction. Since around 1980 a historicist reaction against deconstruction has been taking place, epitomized in the publication of Frank Lentricchia's After the New Criticism in that year. Extending deconstruction to social and political contexts, Lentricchia and Edward Said, for instance, have appropriated only those strategies that are most amenable to their interests and have frequently preferred the hypothesis offered by Foucault over those of Derrida. This is particularly visible in Said's analysis of the concept of orientalism in western culture and in Lentricchia's theorizing about the structure of history. Michael Ryan and Gayatri Spivak, although committed to the deconstructionist approach, represent an important expansion of it in seeking in

Marxism answers to questions concerning cultural and literary problems.

In this context, what appeal does Bakhtin have for Marxist literary theory in the United States? The discussion in this chapter will revolve primarily around Frederic Jameson's response to Bakhtin, not only because Jameson is the guru figure of avant-garde Marxist theory in the United States but also because he addresses the major problems (albeit largely indirectly and by gaps and silences in his texts) relating to the appropriation of Bakhtin. The discussion will also center around Robert Young, because his article "Back to Bakhtin" seems to have answered the question posed here by raising further questions of import.

Raymond Williams was probably the first to develop, though not fully, the implications of Volosinov's/ Bakhtin's Marxism and the Philosophy of Language. In his Marxism and Literature (1971: 35-42) he recognized not only the potential of Bakhtin's sociological critique of structuralism but the much-required materialist theory of language, so far absent in the field. Williams

is in favour of Bakhtin's notion of the "usable sign" as a product of the "continuing speech activity between real individuals who are in some continuing social relationships". In contrast to Saussure's model of the sign as an abstract element in an 'always given' language system, usable signs are

living evidence of a continuing social process, into which individuals are born and within which they are shaped, but to which they can also actively contribute in a continuing process. This is at once their socialization and their individuation.

(Williams 1977: 37)

Williams's dialogic understanding of the dominant/dominated works to put before concrete social relations over an abstracted hierarchy of hegemony:

The reality of any hegemony ... is that, while by definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the society. We shall need to

explore their conditions and their limits, but their active presence is decisive not only because they have to be included in any historical ... analysis, but as forms which have had significant impact on the hegemonic process itself ... any hegemonic process must be especially alert and responsive to the alternatives and oppositions which question and threaten its dominance.

(Williams 1977: 113)

The dominated political and cultural voices, in other words, establish a dialogic response in the dominant. Echoing Williams, and seeking to detach Marxist criticism from its nexus in bourgeois aesthetics, Tony Bennett declared that "Bakhtin's study of Rabelais would seem fully to exemplify what a Marxist - that is, a historical and materialist approach to the study of literary texts should look like". (1979: 95) The Russian Formalists' intertextual concept of defamiliarization overturned, he believed, "the assumption that the text has a once-and-for-all existence, a once-and-for-all relationship to other texts which is marked and

determined by the circumstances of its origin". (69)

But the Saussurean linguistics which the Formalists had adopted was unable to explain literary change in social and political terms. Such an explanation materialized, according to him, in the form of Volosinov/Bakhtin's notion of the "dialogical" in place of langue. Medvedev/Bakhtin in The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship explained the ways in which literature - by presenting language use itself as a locus of class conflict - refracted (as opposed to Lukacsian reflection, one might add) socio-economic reality. Bakhtin in the Rabelais book thus demonstrates how Gargantua and Pantagrue has been appropriated by different critical schools with their own ideological axes to grind. The process of consumption, in fact, is important for Bennett: historical analyses, he emphasizes, must be accompanied by studies of reception.

Exploring interrelationships between text, ideology and history, is also the goal of the post-Althusserian British critic Terry Eagleton. Placing Bakhtin's Rabelais and His World in its historical context, he considers it a classic of Marxist criticism, something to be emulated, in that it constitutes a direct political intervention, produced (although not

allowed publication) during the Stalinist era at a time when Bakhtin ominously disappeared:

... it blasts Rabelais's work out of the homogeneous continuum of literary history, creating a lethal constellation between that redeemed Renaissance moment and the trajectory of the Soviet State ... in what is perhaps the boldest, most devious gesture in the history of 'Marxist criticism', Bakhtin pits against that 'official, formalistic and logical authoritarianism', whose unspoken name is Stalinism, the explosive politics of the body, the erotic, the licentious and semiotic.

(Eagleton 1981: 144)

Yet for Eagleton the concept of carnival is suspect because despite its value, it is an "officially licensed affair". (1986: 129) Therefore, "any politics which predicates itself on the carnivalesque moment alone will be no more than a compliant, containable libertarianism. Bakhtin is too little attentive to the incorporating, politically defusing effects of popular humour ...

(Eagleton 1986: 129)

An Althusserian conception of ideology also provides the frame for Frederic Jameson's critical theories. It has been pointed out, and rightly so, that The Prison-House of language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism (1972) does not even mention Bakhtin. But then before 1972 only Rabelais was available in English translation. The book reviews, only a few in number, did little but provide brief summaries of the contents. And when they went beyond, it was only to make comments like the one in The New York Review of Books to the effect that the Bakhtin method has got it all wrong. Jameson made amends in 1974 in his review article on Marxism and the Philosophy of Language. In praising Bakhtin but damning his critics, he, in fact, isolated what he saw as obstacles that Bakhtin's works faced "in seeking an American Public". "Decades of cold war propaganda have programmed us to believe that Soviet works deal with nothing but their so-called totalitarian system, in a peculiar kind of collective obsession: thus Volosinov's book is only apparently about linguistics; in fact it's really about linguistics under Stalinism, etc." The second obstacle "is the fall-back position in which it

is disqualified on the grounds of its Marxism itself. Here the strategy consists in seeing Marxism as one method among others, and thus a Marxist work on linguistics (!) as a specialized category and indeed a historical curiosity in its own right (to be listed next to Stalin's pamphlet in the bibliography, one would think). Better to study some 'objective' introduction to linguistics, than to be misled by such self-avowed ideological bias". (53 -535) Jameson goes on to admonish the editors for minimizing the Marxist character of the work and stresses that Volosinov/Bakhtin's concept of dialogical speech - a synthesis, he says, of the various trends and problems in contemporary linguistics, particularly what Volosinov/Bakhtin label as the "individualistic subjectivism" of Vossler and the "abstract objectivism" of Saussure - must be understood "programmatically".

This view of Bakhtin is extended in his later work The Political Unconscious (1981), where Jameson defines his 'program' of appropriating Bakhtin among other thinkers. The function of Jameson's doctrine of the political unconscious is to recover the repressed political content of past episodes in the history of

class struggle. In other words, he addresses himself to the problem formulated by Lentricchia: "If we refuse to retreat to a Cartesian conception of an innocent self operating in the halo of natural light, can we construct a theory of reading and textuality that would permit interpretation that can claim to produce not self-expression but knowledge? Can we devise a theory of reading that would respect and seek intertextual determinants and some participation in a history that is not purely the retrospective imposition of ourselves?" (Lentricchia 1980: 188) Marxism, because it denounces specialization, is seen by Jameson as the absolute horizon that contains all interpretive systems. Three social frameworks are visible on that horizon: "the narrowly political" such as Levi-Struss' readings in 'The Structural Study of Myth', where the individual narrative is construed as the production of ideology; the social, where the text is "little more than an individual parole or utterance" (an "ideologeme") (76) within class discourse; and lastly the historical where the text is seen in terms of a battleground of conflicting synchronic modes of production.

Reconstructing the repressed voices in the second framework and delineating the modes of production (in Althusserian terms "the synchronic system of social relations as a whole" (36)) in the third, are the functions that Jameson assigns to criticism. He invokes Bakhtin's idea of dialogism in his program of rewriting "the antagonistic dialogue of class voices". (85) But it is, as LaCapra points out, only to observe that "Bakhtin's use of (dialogism) is 'relatively specialized' to apply to moments of carnival or festival whereas the 'normal form of the dialogical is essentially an antagonistic one'" (84) (laCapra 1983: 258) Canon formation (which is necessarily sans popular culture), for Jameson, thus involves the foregrounding of voices belonging to the hegemonic classes.

Jameson's view of genre is influenced by Bakhtin's. And Bakhtin's theory of genre is quite different from that of the formalists Tynyanov and Tomashevsky. As Clive Thomson puts it: "Whereas the Formalists tended to discuss genre in terms of abstract typology, closure and narrative perspective, Bakhtin emphasizes ideology,

differentiation and polyphony (or multi-voicedness)". (Thomson 1984: 31) In contrast to the generic constants theorized by the Formalists, Bakhtin denies the possibility of replication of the same generic device:

A literary genre, by its very nature, reflects the most stable, "eternal" tendencies in literature's development. Always preserved in a genre are undying elements of the archaic. True these archaic elements are preserved in it only thanks to their constant renewal, which is to say, their contemporization. A genre is always the same and yet not the same, always old and new simultaneously. Genre is reborn and renewed at every new stage in the development of literature and in every individual work of a given genre.

(Bakhtin 1984: 106)

Thomson points out that "on a methodological level, Jameson is a highly systematic dialectician, whereas Bakhtin is primarily an analyst and a practitioner of pragmatics. Jameson expands Bakhtin's basic conception of genre as a mediating entity and turns it into 'a methodological construct'. (38) He also rightly goes

on to say that Jameson assimilates the concept of dialogism for the purpose of ideology critique. Dialogism, in fact, drops out of Jameson's principal method:

the ideological then allows us to reread or rewrite the hegemonic forms as themselves; they also can be grasped as a process of the re-appropriation and neutralization, the cooptation and class transformation, the cultural universalization, of forms which originally expressed the situation of "popular", subordinate, or dominated groups ... this operation of rewriting and of the restoration of an essentially ideological or class horizon will not be complete until we specify the "units" of this larger system ... This larger class discourse can be said to be organized around minimal "units" which we will call ideologemes.

(Jameson 1981: 86-87)

In Thomson's view such an expansion is not a "subversion" or a "deformation" of Bakhtin's ideas. (39) But, of course, it is. Living in a dialogue between different ideas, Bakhtin's concept of dialogism cannot be really

recontained in the totalizing tendencies of a stringent Marxism.

In asserting the primacy of totalization, what Jameson in fact argues is that the poststructural stress on heterogeneity actually "requires the fragments, the incommensurable levels, the heterogeneous impulses, of the text to be once again related, but in the mode of structural differences and determinate contradictions". He later goes on to insist that the novel is not so much "an organic unity as a symbolic act that must reunite or harmonize heterogeneous narrative paradigms which have their own specific and contradictory ideological leanings". (144) But Bakhtin does not argue for unity; rather, he sees the novel as reinforcing heterology in contradistinction to other genres because its narrative cannot be contained centripetally. His conception of language as dialogic underlies the notion of heteroglossia:

At any given moment in its evolution, language is stratified not only into linguistic dialects in the strict sense of the word ... but also - and for us this is the essential point - into languages that are socio-ideological: language

of social groups, 'professional' and 'generic' languages of generations and so forth ... Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forth.

(Bakhtin 1981: 271 - 2)

In his theory of narrative, the novel is the genre that institutionalizes heteroglossia. Thus he argues: "The language of the novel is a system of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other. It is impossible to describe and analyze it as a single unitary language. (1981: 47)

Dominick LaCapra in his critique of Jameson, extends the debate as follows:

... whatever its limitations the work of Bakhtin, with its dialogical and carnivalesque "rewriting" of dialectics, as well as its stress upon the role of carnival-type phenomena over time, was more than a relatively specialized mode of cultural analysis to be contrasted with "normal" forms of class conflict, it was a critical effort to

elaborate a historically and genealogically informed model that might situate the utopian element in literature and suggest institutions to come effectively to terms with the tendencies Jameson decries - one of the few such efforts that the history of modern thought reveals.

(LaCapra 1983: 265-6)

In his essay "Bakhtin, Marxism, and the Carnavalesque" LaCapra locates Bakhtin's importance in his study of the carnivalesque. But he does not see Bakhtin perceiving clearly the extra-literary sources of carnival. (1983: 297-324) LaCapra, by virtue of being an intellectual historian and not a critic, unlike Jameson, does not really engage in revisionary appropriations.

Robert Young, a Derridean and founding editor of Oxford Literary Review, in his article "Back to Bakhtin" takes stock of and questions the easy assimilation of Bakhtin by materialist critics. The thrust of his argument is that the liberal politics of Bakhtin make his ideas unsuitable for incorporation by radicals. Two of Bakhtin's concepts, "dialogism" and the "carnavalesque" are, according to Young, dubious material

for any radical program of historicization. Bakhtin's incompatibility with radical criticism, however, does not discourage the radicals from reading out his liberalism. (That, of course, is in striking contrast to the liberal interpretation, as we saw in the last chapter, of Bakhtin as happy pluralist.) In defense of Derrida, Young also observes that, Bakhtin instead of "offering an alternative to Derrida in the sense of an entirely oppositional position, he (Bakhtin) seems to allow the assimilation of some of the more compelling aspects of his thought while placing them within a more acceptable sociohistorical framework, Derrida himself can then be more or less rejected altogether". (Young 1986: 74)

An important point that Young makes is that the Marxist critics' claims for Bakhtin's overreaching of poststructuralism rely on dialectical instead of dialogical arguments. Thus Jameson

readjusts Bakhtin's dialogism so that it comes to signify straightforward class antagonism within the overall framework of dialectical materialism ... Bakhtin, on the other hand, makes it clear in those texts signed with his

own name that dialogism cannot be confused with dialectics.

(75-76)

Young's suspicion of Bakhtin's popularity is based on the notion that to indulge in Bakhtin is to somehow retreat intellectually, to go back to a position already left behind. He is at one with critics like Lionel Gossman who in fact go back to the days when the cold-war suspicion of Marxist thinking and Russian practice loomed large in the minds of Western conservatives and liberals alike. At the end of a review essay Gossman observes:

Since, moreover, Bakhtin's work has been notoriously attacked and suppressed by "orthodox" or "official" Marxists, it has the added advantage of being perceived as an alternative to Marxism, one that retains only what is "good" and generous in Marxism based more on sentimental notions of sharing, communication, and breaking down barriers that are hostile to "life" than on any analysis of economic systems.

Frankly, what disturbs me about the Bakhtin vogue is that it seems to me we may have been here before.

(Gossman 1986: 349)

The "time" of Bakhtin, however, is problematic. The time of a thinker's physical existence does not necessarily synchronize with the time when, at a certain critical juncture, his/her ideas find a more meaningful resonance. That time for Bakhtin perhaps is now when he can be fruitfully juxtaposed with Derrida, Barthes, Foucault, Lyotard, and so forth. "The historical life", as Bakhtin himself stressed, "of classic works is in fact the uninterrupted process of their social and ideological re-accentuation". (1981: 421) Re-accentuation is exactly what seems to be happening to his works; and Young, in fact, as Allon White in his "fraternal" reply points out, despite his seeming desire to be only an observer becomes a participant in the process. (White 1987-88)

If Bakhtin is so easily accommodable to non-Marxists, Young's argument runs, then obviously Bakhtin is not really a Marxist: that hard-line Marxists have to rewrite Bakhtin. But a contrary explanation is possible: there is in America, as Ken Hirschkop has pointed out, "an ideological drift, the ultimate effect of which is to evade the most radical aspects of Bakhtin's work". (Hirschkop 1986: 70) In analyzing

how Bakhtin's dialogism is downplayed by economicistic/pragmatic Marxists but seized on by liberal pluralists, Young really comes out on the side of the critics who have de-emphasized and cut off the radical Bakhtin. Apparently concerned for marxism, Young finds Bakhtin not up to it. Young's rigid definition of marxism is the one that belongs to the uncontaminated purist realm of Hegelian dialectics. Bakhtin, by no means, is a strict adherent to that brand; but that does not preclude him from being a marxist in his own right for the simple reason that Marxism is not a static, unstratified school of thought.

Young, interestingly, would like to foreground the Medvedev and Volosinov texts as they are more radical. Clark and Holquist, on the other hand, see the really radical aspect of the work to belong not to Bakhtin but to Volosinov & Co; they would therefore like to foreground the later texts. "The second part", they affirm, "while not free of Marxist declarations, seems more purely Bakhtinian in its stress on context and intonation". (Clark & Holquist 1984: 167) Pick and choose. That seems to be the name of the game.

Above all, it goes against the spirit of what Bakhtin (and/or his circle) meant by dialogism and heteroglossia. "There are not nor can there be any pure texts" (Bakhtin 1986: 105)

Like Eagleton and others, Young too questions the liberatory nature of carnival. There, admittedly, are limitations in Bakhtin's understanding of the carnival, especially his equation of it with a revolutionary politics in the Rabelais book. There is no interrogation in Bakhtin, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White note in their study,

concerning the politics of carnival: its nostalgia; its uncritical populism (carnival violently abuses and demonizes weaker, not stronger, social groups - women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who 'don't belong' - in a process of displaced adjection); its failure to do away with the official dominant of culture, its licensed complicity.

(Stallybrass & White 1986: 19)

The recognition of these limitations leads Young to view carnival the way he does. It is not possible here to summarize the lengthy critique that Stallybrass

and White offer of the view of carnival as a safety valve whereby the official culture, the established order is only reaffirmed. Suffice it to say that

It actually makes little sense to fight out the issue of whether or not carnivals are intrinsically radical or conservative, for to do so automatically involves the false essentializing of carnivalesque transgression (White 1982: 60). The most that can be said in the abstract is that for long periods carnival may be a stable and cyclical ritual with no noticeable politically transformative effects but that, given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act as catalyst and site of actual and symbolic struggle".(14)

Another important point the authors make is that "there is no a priori revolutionary vector to carnival and transgression". (16) Both politics and carnival are not in stasis; they are dynamic, shifting notions. Young commits the error of overlooking their diachronically unfolding vectors.

What must be recognized - and it has been recognized to a certain extent - is the immense potential that Bakhtin's idea has in inaugurating a whole area of research for social historians. And of course for literature: especially in opening up a dialogic interaction with Marxist theory.