

Bakhtin & His Intellectual Ambience

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Note from the Editor

The articles collected here were selected from those presented at the Tenth International Bakhtin Conference held at the University of Gdańsk, Poland, on July 23–27, 2001. They have been grouped here under the headings which correspond to the titles of sessions in which they were presented at the conference.

I would like to thank all those at the University of Gdańsk who made the conference possible. First of all I am grateful to Andrzej Ceynowa, Deputy Rector, as well as to my colleagues Wojciech Kubiński, Michael Moss and Stanisław Ulaszek who gave me extremely valuable assistance in the final stage of preparing this volume.

Bogusław Żyłko

Polyphony as an Ethical Category

Polyphony is one of the most important terms that Bakhtin coins in his work. He uses this term – borrowed from the realm of music, where it refers to the superposing of various independent but harmonically related melodies – in his 1929 work, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, to produce a specific definition of the nature of Dostoevsky's work.

It is important to remember that the West's comprehension of Bakhtin's concepts was a fragmented process, carried out work by work and lacking a consistent vision of the whole. And perhaps the most "mistreated" of all categories is precisely that of *polyphony*, or the *polyphonic novel*. Through its revelation of a dimension of Dostoevsky's work that had never before been systemically thought out, the term *polyphony* thus migrated to the different theoretical frameworks of linguistics and literary theory. In this appropriation, polyphony was placed within the abstract formal confines of the phrase, where it was interpreted as the occurrence of different points of view, languages or quotations and conflated with the category of simple intertextuality. And even within the more strictly Bakhtinian framework, there is considerable confusion between "polyphony" and "dialogism": polyphony, a concept that is primarily literary, is conflated with dialogism, which within the theoretical framework of Bakhtin's Circle belongs more strictly to the universe of language.

Of course no argument can be made against linguists' or structuralists' use of the term polyphony, just as Bakhtin himself borrowed the word from the realm of music. Nonetheless, it is our interest here to recover its original meaning, as Bakhtin himself defined it. For this purpose, we must re-read the work in which the term appears – *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.

In this work, the term emerges with two basic functions. The first pertains to the definition of the nature of Dostoevsky's literary work.

And what is the fundamental characteristic that up until that point critics had not noted? The fact that Dostoevsky cannot be regarded as *one author, one point of view, one ideologue, one sovereign and fully self-conscious novelist*. What we find in Dostoevsky's mature work are many authors, many autonomous and independent points of view. And the autonomy of Dostoevsky's characters is of such grandiosity that the available theoretical arsenal is incapable of dealing adequately with his work. Thus, from the Bakhtinian point of view, Dostoevsky's literature maintains a fundamental difference from the literature of its time and its predecessors, and thus requires new methods of reading. In its origins, the term *polyphonic novel* is created to define Dostoevsky's mature work. At the same time, upon defining Dostoevsky's work as something essentially new in the history of the novel, the expression also refers to a new narrative genre, which is where its second function comes in. Let us take a look at what Bakhtin himself says:

Dostoevsky is the creator of the polyphonic novel. He created a fundamentally new novelistic genre. Therefore his work does not fit any of the pre-conceived frameworks or historico-literary schemes that we usually apply to various species of the European novel. In his works a hero appears whose voice is constructed exactly like the voice of the author himself in a novel of the usual type. A character's word about himself and his world is just as fully weighted as the author's word usually is; it is not subordinated to the character's objectified image as merely one of his characteristics, nor does it serve as a mouthpiece for the author's voice. It possesses extraordinary independence in the structure of the work; it sounds, as it were, *alongside* the author's word and in a special way combines both with it and with the full and equally valid voices of other characters.¹

We find in this paragraph a synthesis of what Bakhtin means. In the first place, from the Bakhtinian perspective, *polyphony* is a novel's specific quality and it is only in relation to it that the term makes sense; it refers to a *complex set of novelistic voices*, taken as a whole; it is what fundamentally defines *the nature of the relationship between the author's voice and that of its hero or heroes, and the nature of the relationship between the heroes' voices*. Furthermore, although it applies to the structure of the mature Dostoevsky's novels, it constitutes a *new narrative genre*, a new literary genre, which Dostoevsky created. Thus we can rid ourselves once and for all of the notion of polyphonic paragraphs, polyphonic poetry, polyphonic phrases, the polyphonic nature of language, or even any kinship with the so-called intertextuality, quotation or the intersection of grammatical, dialect or other points of view within literary language or outside it. In this realm, the researcher can make use of almost the entire work of Bakhtin's Circle dealing with the *dialogic nature of language and the sign*, which is really another matter, and can be found summarized in Voloshinov's work, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*.

Polyphony is therefore a complex orchestration of novelistic voices whose central and fundamental characteristic is the fact that none of them submits or superposes itself on the others: the voice of the hero has "extraordinary independence within the structure of the work." But in what measure a hero's voice can be "independent"?

Bakhtin's point of departure is in fact one of the most complex and difficult affirmations of twentieth century literary theory. About it, Todorov, for example, will simply say that "nothing justifies this confusion, since it is the author as well who puts forth his/her own ideas, as well as those of the other characters".²

In fact, "nothing justifies such confusion" within the classical universe of linguistics in which language is an abstract code passed from a transmitter to a receiver. Within this universe, to say that a character who is *written* by someone has any degree of autonomy with regard to the author is certainly madness or at best a metaphor. Within this "confusion" of principle, the notion of polyphony falls apart and there is no more to be said, which is more or less what Todorov does; for him, "Bakhtin has picked up well on a particularity of Dostoevsky's work, but he is wrong in the way he assesses it." Is this really so? It becomes evident that there is a serious problem to be dealt with here.

As Bakhtin indicates in *The Author and the Hero*, the narrator is the consciousness of a consciousness and it is the nature of this relationship plus its finalization, that is, the view from the outside, in time and space, that gives the written word its aesthetic stature. Traditionally, the narrator is the one who knows more than the hero, that is beyond him/her in time and beyond him/her in space: the author finalizes architectonically the hero. And furthermore, each one of the author's words about the hero are also evaluative, necessarily representing the author's ideological stance with regard to the hero. This could mean the most devoted submission (as for example in the life of saints) or the most devastating criticism (as in satire). But this relationship, whatever its nature and intensity, will always exist: the consciousness of another consciousness. Here, polyphonic possibility begins to take shape. If in every word there are at least two consciousness connected through a hierarchical relationship, then the idea of the autonomy of voices in the polyphonic novel would not sound as absurd as it sounded in a first moment.

And what are the main features of polyphonic novel? What set of constitutive traits will be necessary to keep the so called *independence of the voices* alive?

The main characteristic of the polyphonic novel is its organic unfinishedness. In other words, so that the novelistic structure does not become monologic, favoring a dominant point of view, it must be an unfinished structure. It is in this sense that Bakhtin points to Dostoevsky's poorly-resolved endings, his purely conventional solutions. Dostoevsky's

"realism in a superior sense" lies in the fact that his representation of consciousness is also a representation of living consciousness as it pertains to all of us, that never closes up, that cannot be ended from the outside, that has no ending – except when we die, which is when the other puts an end to us. But this essential unfinalized nature of polyphony leads to other demands. One of them is "presentification". Dostoevsky's characters live in an eternal present tense – they have practically no biography, no past, no neat and systemic evolution. On the contrary, they always border on the present moment, exactly as each of us lives each moment of life. In Bakhtin's words, Dostoevsky's main category is not evolution, but coexistence and interaction – they live more in space than in time.

One whole chapter of the book is devoted to a specific aspect: the author's position in relation to the character, in Dostoevsky's work. If in the traditional novel the character's consciousness is but a part of reality (that is, the narrator constructs a multi-faceted world, one of the parts of which is the character and her/his consciousness), in the polyphonic novel reality is part of the hero's consciousness. All of the novelistic structure is carried out through the hero's point of view – there is nothing that the narrator knows about the hero that the hero doesn't already know about him/herself. In other words, Dostoevsky destroys the finalizing aesthetic principle, which is the author's knowing more than his/her hero, making this surplus vision the central element of artistic signification. In Dostoevsky, the narrator never ends or forecloses the hero's world. In consequence, another central element of Bakhtinian polyphony is the fact that a person never coincides with him/herself: s/he is never reduced to a mute object of knowledge. In Dostoevsky, life is always an unfinalized whole situated in the present.

Lastly, there is one more essential trait of Bakhtinian polyphony: the role of the idea within the novel. If the traditional monologic novel is based on the myth of the self-sufficiency of a sole consciousness (rationalism, enlightenment, utopianism, always a sole consciousness from a sole point of view), Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel is founded on the notion that the idea is only lived dialogically. Within it, the bearer of an idea is a free, indeterminate and unfinalized nature. In Dostoevsky, the idea is a living event. In other words, he never deals with the idea abstractly, as an isolated concept, but carries out the artistic fusion of world view and personal life. In Dostoevsky's universe, there are no ideas separate from people and from concrete moments in life. For this reason, any critique that searches in Dostoevsky novelist for a closed philosophical and ideological system is doomed to failure. This autonomy from ideological voices brings out another substantial feature of the polyphonic novel, the fact that within it, every hero is an ideologue, and every character is a bearer of an idea and of a world view.

Here, summarized, we have the features that make up Bakhtinian polyphony, as illustrated through Dostoevsky's novels. It is a complex structure whose heroes – each the bearer of a definite point of view rooted in a concrete life situation, autonomous and unfinalized with regard to the author's view of them – live in a perpetual present tense, a dramatic co-existence, not finished and not finite, not reducible to an author's reification. They are not defined by biography nor determined by their past; they cannot even be defined by their physical characteristics, by the gaze from outside, nor even by the characteristics of their language (the more characteristic the hero's language, the more objectified he or she will be, according to Bakhtin). They live the event of life – but they do not live it directly (in which case we would not be speaking of a work of art); they are represented in this dimension, by an author who relates to them from the standpoint of equality. This, in short, is the polyphonic novel.

The question we must deal with now, since Bakhtin has defined this novelistic structure as a “new genre”, is to discover what other works can be classified as “polyphonic” in the Bakhtinian sense of the term. As we have seen, the simple existence of two or three grammatical points of view in the text is not enough – via this criteria, an epistolary novel such as *Dangerous Relationships* by Choderlos de Laclos would be the basic model of polyphony.

It is not our purpose here to go through an exhaustive list of twentieth century authors and works in order to discover their “degree of polyphony” according to the Bakhtinian conception, but at this point it seems no exaggeration to consider Dostoevsky as the only polyphonic writer of literature. Many novels will meet one or another of these requirements, taken in isolation, that is, grammatically, but it seems to me that none of them fulfills all these requirements completely – or at least bases itself substantially on that set of values and formal traits with which Bakhtin defines what he calls a “new novelistic genre”.

Now let us recall a detail not to be underestimated, that in his great essays from the thirties on the novel, Bakhtin does not use the category of “polyphonic novel”. In these works, he distinguishes in the history of European prose two major currents which he refers to as “two stylistic lines”: one of them, conventional centralizing and idealizing stylization; the other, what he denominates the plurilingual current, discourse that opens itself to other discourses. This division was fairly articulated in his 1929 book in which Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel appears as the culminating moment of the “dialogic” stylistic current. Nonetheless, in his works of the thirties, the notion of “polyphonic” genre does not reappear. The very expression “polyphonic” apparently does not reappear in any other writings of his, except in his notes from the seventies, in a rapid remark that seems to confirm our point of view,

when he refers to Dostoevsky, the "great polyphonist", as the only one who was able to feel the unfinalized nature of the dialogue on great questions. It would be pure speculation to assert that Bakhtin gave this category up – that is, he gave it up partially, because when he revised the second edition of his book on Dostoevsky more than 30 years later, he kept all the basic definitions of the second edition. This suggests that he considered this definition perfectly adequate with regard to Dostoevsky, to the extent that he stuck fast to it, but in tracing the genesis, development and history of novelistic discourse in the thirties, he doesn't consider it pertinent as a specific genre. He prefers the division (of quantitative nature, since one current tends to move close to the other) between stylistic monolingualism and plurilinguism, with a wide range of peculiarities and sub-genres created over time.

Let us recall an interview conceded to Zbigniew Podgórzec, shortly before Bakhtin's death in 1975, on the specific topic of the polyphony of Dostoevsky's novels. Bakhtin says: "Dostoevsky is the creator of the polyphonic novel and it seems to me that this is the novel of the future." The only other work that he declares as "polyphonic" is Andrei Belyj's *Petersburg*. "We find in this work Dostoevsky's polyphony", he declares. On another occasion he claims that in France "there are attempts to create a novel that follow in Dostoevsky's footsteps". He continues, "Specifically, there is Camus. His novel *The Plague* and his philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* are based directly on Dostoevsky. There is also a lot of Dostoevsky in Sartre, although I consider Camus more profound."³ In short, the category of the polyphonic novel appears clearly in this interview, almost fifty years after Bakhtin initially coined the term, as the exclusive province of Dostoevsky, more a potential genre than an established one. Yet the mention of Camus and Sartre is very suggestive, and provides some clues as to the roots of polyphony: perhaps it is based on a philosophical rather than a literary concept.

Let us now look at another detail. Bakhtin, at the end of his book on Dostoevsky, emphasizes the importance of the polyphonic novel as a generic variety of novel, considering it "a step forward in humanity's artistic thought" and even "a mode of thought" that enables us to reveal all the facets of the human being that cannot be subjected to artistic assimilation through monologic positions. In short, Bakhtin says that we should give up our "monologic habits" in favor of a new "artistic model of the world."

We are facing here not simply a theoretical conclusion, but rather a philosophical proposal. Bakhtin is giving us a clue as to where the roots of his concept of polyphony really are. They are not so much in literature as in philosophy, and a philosophy that is not contemplative but participatory: "This mode of thinking makes available those sides of a human being, and above all the thinking human consciousness and

the dialogic sphere of its existence, which are not subject to artistic assimilation from monologic positions." "Modes of thinking" and not a simple formal moment: this, in synthesis, is the central idea of the concept of polyphony. In other words, polyphony is more a world view than a technical category. Our hypothesis is that the concept of polyphony emerges more as an ethical than as a literary category – and Dostoevsky will be the great "illustration" of Bakhtin's philosophical project.

To back up our hypothesis, let us focus on Bakhtin's production from the beginning of the twenties, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. The central idea of this unfinished work of the young Bakhtin is the failure of theoretical-discursive thought in dealing with the reality of the event of Being, since all abstraction establishes an irreparable fissure between the world of culture and thought and the world of concrete life. For the young Bakhtin, to cross this abyss means that my act of cognition must also be my action, taking all concrete responsibility for my gestures and my life. The *Prima Philosophia* that Bakhtin advocates here must be capable not of describing the abstraction of my acts but the world in which my acts become responsibly self-conscious and really carried out. Upon sketching his emergent philosophical project, Bakhtin claims:

What we intend to provide is not a system and not a systematic inventory of values, where pure concepts (self-identical in content) are interconnected on the basis of logical correlativity. What we intend to provide is a representation, a description of the actual, concrete architectonic of value-governed experiencing of the world – not with an analytical foundation at the head, but with that actual, concrete center (both spatial and temporal) from which valuations, assertions, and deeds come forth or issue, and where the event-relations in the once-occurrent event of Being (in this context logical relations constitute but one moment along with the concrete spatial, temporal, and emotional-volitional moments).

And then he adds:

In order to give a preliminary idea of the possibility of such a concrete, value governed architectonic, we shall analyze here the world of aesthetic seeing – the world of art.⁴

Young Bakhtin's project – a philosophy that describes the concrete events of life without distancing itself from them nor transforming them into theoretical abstractions in which the self has no place – seeks in literature its "illustration", that is, its real possibility of existence, or the demonstration that such a representation of the event of Being is possible in philosophy. But Bakhtin's philosophical work was not completed, and the example that he pursued in aesthetics turned into his lifelong object of study, literature. However, it is undeniable that when over the course of the twenties Bakhtin created his theory of novelistic polyphony he had his project of a moral philosophy in mind. In other

words, in Dostoevsky's work he found the perfect illustration of the project of his youth: a language capable of describing the event of life in all its polyphonic reality, an architectonics that maintains the multiplicity of points of view, in all its necessary incompleteness, the perpetual "here and now", the representation of the perpetual frontier that we live on in daily life, which cannot be reduced to a monologic and centralizing gaze, a "surplus view" or a theoretical abstraction. Bakhtin says:

It is this concrete architectonic of the actual world of the performed act that moral philosophy has to describe, that is, *not* the abstract scheme but the concrete plan or design of the world of a unitary and once-occurrent act or deed, the basic concrete moments of its construction and their mutual disposition. These basic moments are I-for-myself, the other-for-me, and I-for-the-other. All the values of actual life and culture are arranged around the basic architectonic points of the actual world of the performed act or deed: scientific values and all sense-content values are drawn toward and concentrated around these central emotional-volitional moments: I, the other, and I-for-the-other.⁵

Coincidentally, these "basic moments", these architectonic points of the concrete event of Being, are found in the vital center of Dostoevsky's mature work, as Bakhtin understands it. In Bakhtin's thought, there is a subtle passage from one level to another. At first instance, the moment of pure philosophy, Bakhtin points to the failure of philosophical theorization in dealing with the concrete event of Being; he goes on to advocate a moral philosophy. It should be noted that his "prima philosophia" is necessarily "moral" because it includes its subject in the act of thinking of the world, with all the ineluctable responsibility that this implies; it is not abstraction, but rather participation. Lastly, this new perspective, which finds its most exemplary illustration in the aesthetic gaze, is transformed in Dostoevsky's hands into a new way of seeing the world that does not isolate the subject within the confines of a unilateral and formally finished gaze but places it within the center of the polyphonic event of Being.

Thus, what seems to be simply a purely technical literary definition – the polyphonic novel – is transformed here, within the whole of the evolution of Bakhtin's thought, into a category that is fundamentally ethical in nature. When Bakhtin says that "we must renounce our monologic habits so that we might come to feel at home in the new artistic sphere which Dostoevsky discovered, so that we might orient ourselves in that incomparably more complex artistic model of the world which he created", he is doing much more than simply describing a formal instance. "Renouncing our monologic habits" has the neat appearance of an ethical imperative, going far beyond the description of

a new genre. Given the unending vicissitudes of Bakhtin's life and work it should not be so weird that polyphony may be fundamentally understood as an ethical expression.

Notes

¹ Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis, Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 7.

² Todorov, Tzvetan. In: Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Estética da criação verbal*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1992, p. 13 (Introdução).

³ Bakhtin, M. *Tolstoj*. Bologna. Il Molino, 1986, p. 135.

⁴ Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Austin, Texas Press, 1993, p. 61.

⁵ Id., p. 54.

Резюме

В статье рассматривается понятие "полифонии" в теории М.М.Бахтина и доказывается, что оно обозначает скорее этически-философскую, нежели литературную категорию. Философский проект молодого Бахтина, сформулированный в трактате *К философии поступка*, направлен на поиски способа описания "события бытия" без трансформирования его в теоретическую абстракцию, где нет места для "Я". Бахтин у Достоевского нашел язык, его полифонические черты, актуализацию его возможностей. Но в действительности это философский концепт, своего рода этический императив. Бахтин не щадит энергии, чтобы определить полифонию в литературе, но один лишь Достоевский, всецело вписывающийся в его концепцию, может считаться действительно полифоническим писателем.