MIKHAIL BAKHTIN "DISCOURSE IN THE NOVEL" (1935)

Towards a Synthesis of Marxism and (Russian) Formalism

Bakhtin contends that literary criticism has historically tended to focus either exclusively on "abstract ideological examination" (260) (the province of critical schools such as Marxism) or on "concrete problems of artistic craftmanship" (260) (the province of formalist criticism [e.g. the Russian Formalists]). In other words, traditionally, novelistic analysis has tended to isolate questions of form from those of content or theme (i.e. ideology). Given that ideology is semiotic in form (ideas do not exist apart from the medium of language), Bakhtin's thesis in this essay is, rather, that the form taken by and the ideology of the literary work are inseparable, something he hopes to prove by focusing on the novel. In other words, form is ideological at the same time that ideology must take some form.

Bakhtin contends, firstly, that the novel does not consist in a single, unified form. To put this another way, the novel as a genre subsumes several sub-genres (what Bakhtin terms in typical Bakhtinian fashion "several heterogeneous stylistic unities" [261]). Secondly, the novel, unlike lyric poetry (in his view), does not express a single voice or point of view, traditionally assumed to be the author's (i.e. it is not *monological*). The novel is, rather, *heteroglot* or many-voiced (in an earlier discussion of Dostoievsky, he first used the synonym *polyphonic*), that is, expressive of a multiplicity of points of view (voices) that includes but is not limited to the author's. In short, as Bakhtin puts it, the novel is "multiform in *style* and variform in *speech and voice*" (my emphases; 261). These voices or perspectives include:

- the author's own voice, so-called direct authorial interventions (these are passages in which the author's own voice can be clearly heard commenting upon the action or articulating some moral sentiment that may have little to do with the progression of the plot itself);
- the narrator's voice (usually following a particular literary style or convention);
- the voices of various characters (usually in an oral or semi-literary style).

In other words, the author's voice is merely one among the many to be found in the novel. For Bakhtin, these points of view or voices are less the solipsistic expressions of the points of view of particular individuals than broader class-based perspectives. It is through this diversity of voices and concomitant speech genres or types that *heteroglossia*, i.e. the "internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects" (262), each of which correspond to the ideological perspective of a particular class, enters the novel. The novel's centrifugal dispersion (as opposed to centripetal unification) is what constitutes its "dialogisation" (263).

It is precisely because the novel is heteroglot in this way that criticism of the novel must be simultaneously formalist *and* sociological in orientation. Bakhtin puts it this way: the

> internal social dialogism of novelistic discourse requires the concrete social context of discourse to be exposed, to be revealed as a force that determines its entire stylistic structure, its *form* and *content*. (my emphases; 677).

That is, the novel must be forced to reveal the "social and historical voices populating language . . . which provide language with its particular concrete conceptualisations" (678).

The Dialogic Nature of Language and the Heteroglot Nature of the Novel

Bakhtin claims that the language of poetic discourse, i.e. lyric poetry, is unitary and monologic: only one voice, the poet's, he argues, is to be heard: his poetry, Bakhtin writes, is the "pure and direct expression of his own intention" (674). Moreover, a given poem does not subsume several 'stylistic subunities.' In short, lyric poetry is neither multiform in style nor variform in voice. (Don Bialostosky argues that Bakhtin's claim about lyrical poetry is not true of Wordsworth, for example.) By contrast, Bakhtin contends, heteroglossia is the dominant characteristic of prose fiction. Most traditional critical approaches to the novel, Bakhtin argues,

are oriented towards the interpretation of poetry. As a result, they most often reduce the novel's ideological and stylistic diversity to the ideological monologism and stylistic unity of poetry.

Bakhtin argues that the novel does not fit into existing critical frameworks which are oriented towards the study of poetry because the latter ignores the fact of heteroglossia. From this point of view, any utterance, including the novel, takes shape "at a particular historical moment in a socially-specific environment" (670) and is an "active participant in social dialogue" (670). In Bakhtin's view, language is dialogical (rather than monological) in nature in that it is an arena in which the competing socio-linguistic points of view or fixes on reality that correspond to the several classes which comprise that society, as opposed to a single dominant perspective (the dominant ideology, that of the ruling class), struggle for ascendancy. Within a single, seemingly unified national language and the broad "socio-ideological conceptual horizon" (669) which it subtends, consequently, there are many class-specific sub-languages and outlooks.

The notion that the novel is, like poetry, a monological utterance has predominated in literary criticism because historically it, to paraphrase Bakhtin, 'served the forces of centripetal unification in the verbal-ideological evolution of specific social groups' (in other words, it facilitated the process of economic, political, social, and cultural centralisation in the emergence of European nation-states and the rise to dominance of the middle class). This is why, by the nineteenth century (the so-called 'golden age of realism'), the novel had become the literary genre most favoured by the bourgeoisie. In fact, however, centripetal socio-linguistic forces (in the form of a firm linguistic and ideological nucleus at the core of a common unitary language) coexist and compete with centrifugal forces within what is in actuality a heteroglot national language. "Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject" (668) is, accordingly, the locus in which these centripetal and centrifugal forces confront each other. Every utterance is, as such, both heteroglot and the "individualised embodiment of a speech-act" (668). In other words, every utterance is *both* "anonymous and social as language" (668) *and* "simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accented as an individual utterance" (668). Each utterance is, as such, necessarily "contradiction-ridden" (668) and "tension-filled" (668). This is as true of the novel as it is of any other utterance.

In short, literary criticism in general has long ignored the dialogic nature of language and the heteroglot nature of the novel, preferring to view the novel as a "hermetic and self-sufficient whole" (668), that is, as a "closed authorial monologue" (669). This ignorance of the ideologically-saturated nature of language and of the "multilanguagedness" (669) of any society has led critics to underprivilege those genres such as the novel which were carriers of the decentralising tendencies of language or at the very least to read them wrongly. Where the 'high' genres (such as poetry) were undoubtedly integral to European cultural and national unification in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, 'low' (i.e. at first unrespected) genres such as the novel grew out of the ribald comedy of the fairs and the buffoon spectacles frequented by the lower classes (what Bakhtin calls the 'carnivalesque folk humour' of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance). At those levels, Bakhtin argues in Rabelais and his World and elsewhere, there was no 'language centre,' no one dominant ideology, merely a playing with various official languages and versions of reality, none of which could lay claim to authenticity or absolute fidelity to the truth.

The Critique of Realism

In the light of the foregoing, it ought to be clear that Bakhtin's views on the heteroglot nature of the novel offer an important critique of both Empiricist / Humanist and Marxist notions of Realism. From Plato onwards, art has frequently been defined as a 'mirror held up to nature.' As Ian Watt points out in The Rise of the Novel, it is not for nothing that the so-called rise of the novel occurred in tandem with the rise to dominance of Lockean Empiricism, as a result of which the novel form has come to function as the classic paradigm of literary Realism. From

this point of view, the novel verbally re-presents 'Life' as apprehended through the physical senses of its novelist.

A mimetic model of the novel informs, by contrast, the point of view of Georg Lukács in his classic Marxist study The Historical Novel. Here, he contends that any *properly historical* literary work accurately depicts the class conflict intrinsic to the place and time which it depicts. For Lukács, truly realist literature captures the dynamic changes which constitute European history (to be precise, the dialectical progression from one mode of economic production to its successor). Each moment in history is one of conflict between a dominant class eager to protect its interests and others struggling to take its place. Historical change is the product of the dialectical synthesis of these antithetical forces and this is what truly realist literature mirrors. Crucial to the historical accuracy of all such works is what Lukács terms the *typicality* of their characters. To be *typical*, in Lukács's sense of this term, characters must embody in their individual fictional existence the place of similar real individuals in the class-struggle and, by extension, in the dialectical progression of history. The realism of a literary work, for Lukács, is a function of the degree to which the plot successfully mirrors the conflict between the dominant and emerging classes characteristic of a given stage of history and which is the dynamo, according to Marx, of history. To accomplish this, the plot of truly historical novels almost always revolves around a conflict between characters representative (or 'typical') of their respective classes.

Both the Empiricist / Humanist (Watt) and Marxist (Lukács) views of the novel are informed by a referential model of signification in which a given sign is thought to directly correspond to a particular referent. In this mimetic scheme of things, the "direct word" (669), as Bakhtin puts it,

> encounters in its orientation toward the object only the resistance of the object itself . . . but it does not encounter in its path toward the object the fundamental and richly varied opposition of another's word. (669)

Bakhtin argues, however, that in reality

> between the word [sign] and its object [referent], between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme. (669)

That is, any

> concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it was directed already . . . overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped . . . by the 'light' of alien words that have already been spoken about it. (669)

From this point of view, any "artistic representation" (670) which purports to offer an "'image' of the object" (670) is necessarily "penetrated by this dialogic play of verbal intentions that meet and are interwoven in it" (670).

Poetry, Bakhtin claims, forgets that the object of description "has its own history of contradictory acts of verbal recognition" (671). By contrast, in prose fiction the

> object reveals . . . the socially heteroglot multiplicity of its names, definitions and value judgments. Instead of the virginal fullness and inexhaustibility of the object itself, the prose writer confronts a multitude of routes, roads and paths . . . laid down in the object by social consciousness. (671)

For the author, in short, the object of description is a "focal point for heteroglot voices among which his own voice must also sound; these voices create the background necessary for his own voice" (671), given that all discourse is always already "oriented toward the 'already uttered', the 'already known'" (671).

The dialogical nature of language and, by extension, the heteroglot nature of the novel implies the "possibility" (328), indeed, the inevitability of "another's point of view" (328) intruding between the author and the object of his description. For the novelist, there is seemingly "no world outside his socio-heteroglot perception" (330) (i.e the novelist confuses his own socially-inspired 'take on' reality with reality itself) precisely because the "'already

bespoke quality of the world is woven together with the 'already uttered' quality of language" (331). This is why Bakhtin claims that what the novel represents or offers an image of is not reality per se but language (i.e. what people say about reality). The central problem of the novel, Bakhtin argues, is that "of *artistically representing language, the problem of representing the image of a language*" (qtd. in Morris, 117). Moreover, at best, what a novel offers is not a dialectical contest of characters and the respective classes which they represent that concludes in the synthesis of their points of view but, rather, an unresolved agon of ideological points of view, sometimes given voice to by particular characters, in which the 'truth' is always suspended and deferred. As Bakhtin puts it, the "human being in the novel is first, foremost, and always a speaking human being" (116), each "bringing with them their own unique ideological discourse, their own language" (116). The novel, as an *intentional hybridisation* of languages, creates an artistic image of the various socio-lects which exist in competition with each other, serving to sharpen the reader's perception of such socio-linguistic differentiations. The plots of novels function to represent and oppose individuals, their discourses and the world views that these imply. The result is that the novel is a literary hybrid, an "artistically organised system for bringing different languages in contact with one another" (118) without, however, offering any resolution or transcendence of these competing perspectives.

Bakhtin contends that there are three basic devices for "creating the image of a language" (117) which, although separable for the purpose of analysis, are in fact "inextricably woven together" (117):

- "pure dialogues" (117) where characters literally engage in dialogue with each other;
- "hybridisations" (117), that is, a "mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor" (117); sometimes, this intentional or deliberate but sometimes it is unconscious or unintentional;
- "dialogised interrelation of languages" (117): the difference between this and hybridisation is a subtle one, to be precise, in the former "there is no direct mixing of two languages within the boundaries of a single utterance – rather only one language is actually present in the utterance, but it is rendered *in the light of another language*. The second language is not, however, actualised and remains outside the utterance" (118). With the dialogised interrelation of languages, however, two or more languages are present within a given utterance.

Bakhtin gives the term *parodic stylisation* to the process by which authors, by incorporating various (literary) languages, parody the logical and expressive structures of these discourses. This takes two principal forms:

- In the case of *stylization* per se, a writer borrows or *appropriates* a style and/or ideas from another writer but not polemically, i.e., with the desire to 'populate' it with his own intention. (Bakhtin insists, however, that even the very act of borrowing in this way installs a certain difference from the original.)
- In the case of *parody* per se, a writer appropriates others's discourses but with a desire to subject the same words to a different intention, to re-place them in a different context, to abrogate them, as it were.

In short, each utterance (parole) is a *hybrid* construction (it is *double-voiced, double-accented*), that is, in the utterance of a single speaker intersects two or more different styles and corresponding world views. In incorporating these, the novel thereby offers an image of the multiplicity of languages and verbal-ideological systems that these imply in a given place and at a given time. Of course, in so doing, the work as a whole also interacts dialogically with other ideological horizons, thereby opposing one value system to another. By using a variety of languages, however, the author avoids giving himself up to any one of them.

The Decentering of the Author

Bakhtin's critique of Realism has important implications for traditional assumptions concerning the Author and the process of 'self-expression.' From at least 'Longinus,' as M. H. Abrams reminds us in The Mirror and the Lamp, the literary work in general and lyric poetry in particular has frequently been viewed as, to a greater or lesser degree, the *original* expression of some novelist's *innate* and *unique* genius. Such attitudes towards the author persisted historically even in the course of the rise to prominence of Lockean Empiricism which so shaped the corresponding 'rise of the novel,' according to Ian Watt. David Lodge argues in After Bakhtin that even when it comes to the golden age of the novel in the nineteenth century, for example, it is more accurate to speak of *Expressive Realism*. By this Lodge intends the popular (sometimes explicit, sometime implicit) view of the novel as simultaneously the "more or less powerful expression of a unique sensibility or world view – the author's – and as more or less truthful representations of reality" (12). In short, the view predominated that the truly classic author, whether novelist or poet, has an accurate understanding of reality which he is able to express in some unique way. To put this another way, expressive realism implies an emphasis upon both the

> idea of the author as a uniquely constituted individual subject, the originator and in some sense owner of his work . . . [and] on the mimetic function of verbal art, its ability to reflect or represent the world truthfully and in detail. (Lodge 14)

Such a view of authorship is clearly undergirded in part by a referential or mimetic model of consciousness (one's ideas can label or refer to the referent) and in part by an expressivist or instrumentalist view of signification (ideas about reality exist in the writer's consciousness without the aid of or prior to language, signs being merely vehicles by which to express and communicate them with others).

According to Bakhtin, however, given the dialogic nature of signification, authors necessarily have intentions (i.e. they set out to say something) but these are at least in part not of their own choosing. To put this in a more Bakhtinian way, the semantic centre of a novelist's own personal intentions is supplemented by intentions and tones alien to him / her as the novelist compels signs, already populated with the social intentions of others, to serve his own particular intentions. His / her own voice coexists and competes with those of others that lurk in his / her 'own' creation. In other words, the novelist necessarily and often unwittingly 'appropriates' a wide range of discourses (paroles) that pre-exist him / her in order to rearrange (and even abrogate) them in alternate ways to suit his or her own intentions. The consequence of this is that the necessarily heteroglot language which an author makes use of serves sometimes to express his intentions, sometimes to refract them and sometimes even to deny them. That is, the novelist's view of reality is always already mediated by other's views thereof which he or she regurgitates at least to some degree in his or her own work and as a result of which his/her novel is not monologic but dialogic. In a novel, the author's perspective is important but it is not the sole point of view. Perspective is fragmented in the novel, dispersed in several different and competing directions. The author's voice must coexist with those, for example, of his various characters who all possess to varying degrees a certain amount of ideological autonomy (even when their views are closely allied to that of the author).

Bakhtin suggests that point of view in a novel is dispersed in at least four directions:

- through direct authorial intervention;
- through the use of a *narrator / teller* (the author uses a posited teller / narrator to illuminate the object in question, to shed a new light on it and thereby to refract his own intentions through another's utterance);
- through the languages used by characters which are to some degree verbally and semantically autonomous, embodying their particular value systems at the same time that they reflect / refract the author's intentions (in other words, the characters' speeches are themselves inherently dialogical: each utterance is really a double-voiced discourse and serves two speakers, simultaneously

expressing two different intentions (the author's and the character's). Heteroglossia is not merely a dialogising background: each character is an ideologue whose words are always ideologemes that reflect a particular way of viewing the world. Characters' languages stratify authorial language by introducing heteroglossia. Each character's mode of speech demarcates a definite ideological positionality. Speech is not the indice of character, rather of an ideology: any use of language ought to be placed within quotation marks because the inherently intertextual nature of language destroys any illusion of originality;

- through the incorporation of *sub-genres*: each genre consists of verbal and semantic forms for assimilating reality. The novel is a "secondary syncretic unification of other seemingly primary verbal genres" (319) for "appropriating reality" (319). The novel incorporates genres drawn from both artistic and non-artistic sources (e.g. the letter): the effect of this is to stratify the novel's socio-linguistic unity, each layer existing in various degrees of proximity to authorial intentions.

From this point of view, the author is something akin to a ventriloquist or choir conductor: the polyphony (or medley) of voices / stylistic subunities in a novel is 'artistically organised,' as Bakhtin puts it, i.e. assembled in a particular way by the novelist, to form the "higher stylistic unity of the work as a whole" (261).

In short, the novel's "structured stylistic system" (678) serves to express the "differentiated socio-ideological position of the author amid the heteroglossia of" (678) his or her place and time. Novelists do not simply 'express' the dominant ideology of a given society nor do they simply oppose it. Any novel is an ideologically complex discourse in that although the novelist is necessarily from a given class, given the dialogic nature of the sign, his / her novel necessarily also incorporates voices not belonging to his / her own class. The reason for all this is that any individual's consciousness is necessarily the product of the struggle for hegemony over the individual of competing ideological discourses. The ideological coming to consciousness of a human is the process of selectively assimilating the languages of others (whether these be authoritative [i.e. those of important personages such teachers or priests] or non-authoritative [friends]). It is therefore wrong to speak of the autonomous subject, i.e of a free, unique and undetermined individual, because no individual is so unfettered ideologically-speaking. In each individual's parole, there is an ongoing dialogue between his or her own ideological value-system and that which informs others's paroles. Each individual's utterance implies a socio-lect(s), a concrete socio-linguistic (verbal-ideological) belief-system which he or she partly carves out for him/herself and which is partly carved out for him/her within the boundaries of the general language or verbal-ideological system of a given society.

Literary History / Intertextuality

Given the foregoing, it ought to be clear that Bakhtin offers us a model of intertextuality which reinserts parole, diachrony, and agency where the Structuralists and Deconstructionists emphasise langue, synchrony, and impersonality (what Barthes called the 'death of the Author') without reverting to the expressivism of models of literary history rooted in the nineteenth century (e.g. Hippolyte Taine's). Just as signs are inevitably caught up in a dialogue of social voices, so too is each literary text. Each use of a sign (and thus each text) is a rejoinder to previous uses thereof as much as it also anticipates future responses. Thus, each writer may be said to be always in the process of 'writing back' to (or 'parodying') other writers, sometimes deliberately, sometimes accidentally, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly (or in hidden form). Linda Hutcheon's point in both The Politics of Postmodernism and The Poetics of Postmodernism is that all literary texts parody each other but that the hallmark of Postmodernist fiction is that it does so self-consciously. In short, no text is an island unto itself because writers inevitably 'abrogate and appropriate,' to use the famous

formulation of Ashcroft, and co., the writings of other writers. Bakhtin argues that literature should be studied in terms of its socio-historical context, rather than as an autonomous object, in terms of both continuity *and* discontinuity (to be precise, how the work of each writer is simultaneously indebted to previous discourses in circulation and attempts to differentiate itself therefrom), rather than either continuity (Taine) or discontinuity (Structuralism). Consequently, no literary text or, by extension, movement should be studied as if it exists in a vacuum: writers and their literary texts must be studied in terms of their relationship to their precursors and their successors. The history of any body of literature begins with the literatures which preceded it and from which it is derived and from which it attempts to distance itself in some ways.

The Role of the Reader

Bakhtin talks little about the exact role played by the reader in the productive activation of the meaning of a novel. However, given the dialogic nature of language, he stresses that the writer necessarily writes with, among other things, the point of view of potential readers in mind: the "contradictory environment of alien words is present to the speaker [or writer] not in the object [being described], but rather in the consciousness of the listener [or reader], as his apperceptive background, pregnant with responses and objections" (672). Every "concrete act of understanding . . .assimilates the word to be understood into its own conceptual system . . . and is indissolubly merged with the response, with a motivated agreement or disagreement" (673). It is towards this "alien conceptual horizon" (673) that the speaker / writer must orient his discourse in an attempt to "get a reading on his own word" (673). In short, in much the same way that each writer inevitably responds to his own precursors, so too will others respond in the future to this work.

Conclusion

Bakhtin offers a view of the novel that is different both from conventional Empiricist accounts (e.g. Ian Watt's) and Marxist conceptions (e.g. Lukács'). The novelist 'appropriates' different verbal-ideological discourses already in circulation (this is the langue upon which he draws) and rearranges them to different effect within his own literary paroles (e.g., novels). Moreover, texts are not saturated solely with the dominant ideology. Just as the sign is dialogic in nature, so too is the novel multi-voiced. Each novel is heteroglot, the voices of different social classes coexisting with each other and vying for ascendancy in the text in the form of the various sociolects belonging to particular characters, the narrator, and the author him/herself. Writers are always involved in the process of 'writing back' to their predecessors and, in turn, anticipating the future responses of others.