

Boundaries Versus Binaries: Bakhtin in/against the History of Ideas

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Who or what is Mikhail Bakhtin? The two monographs we have on him agree on an identity: Bakhtin is a *philosopher*. The compliment, however well meant, could be lethal.

Bakhtin was born in Orel in 1895 and died near Moscow in 1975. This bald statement of a life defined by its extremities elides the tortuous route that took him from one time and place to another; it also glosses over both the fellowship of a 'circle' which it was his good luck to have around him in the early years and the intellectual loneliness that followed in the Stalin period, six years of which he spent in internal exile. These biographical motifs find their echo in a thinking which is preoccupied with dialogue and with the time-space of narratives, and these themes in their turn exactly characterize the thought itself: Bakhtin always speaks with more than one voice and his concepts are nothing if not 'wandering', in the sense of being internally open-ended. After an early Neo-Kantian phase, polemics were published against Freud and Saussure and Russian Formalism under the signatures of Valentin Voloshinov and Pavel Medvedev. Between a monograph on Dostoevsky in 1929 and another on Rabelais in 1965 Bakhtin published nothing; what he wrote in that time has now seen the light of day, along with the early writing to whose spirit he is held to have returned in the fragments of his final years. It is this extraordinarily varied body of work that is now being raked over for whatever it can yield of unity or inner logic, and this at a time when (witness the great movements of democratic renewal going on before our eyes) we should rather be celebrating its singular ability to make the various idioms of modernity – secular and spiritual, political and personal, 'high' and popular – speak to each other.

One such project of unification is that of Tzvetan Todorov, for whom Bakhtin belongs to the 'intellectual family' of existentialism.¹ Tucked away as it is in a footnote, this affirmation might escape our notice if it weren't implicitly announced in the bold script of a sub-title borrowed from Martin Buber: *The Dialogical Principle*. Bakhtin in Todorov's rendering becomes a proto-existentialist distinguished from all others by his elaboration of a theory of discourse or what Bakhtin himself, seeking to move beyond the sentence to encompass the 'whole utterance', calls a 'translinguistics'. Even this is doubtful when we think of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's grounding of language in intersubjectivity and his contestation of dominant linguistic theories very much on their own terrain. Bakhtin is neither a phenomenologist with a flair for semiotics nor (like Emile Benveniste) a linguist who leavens and widens his technical interests

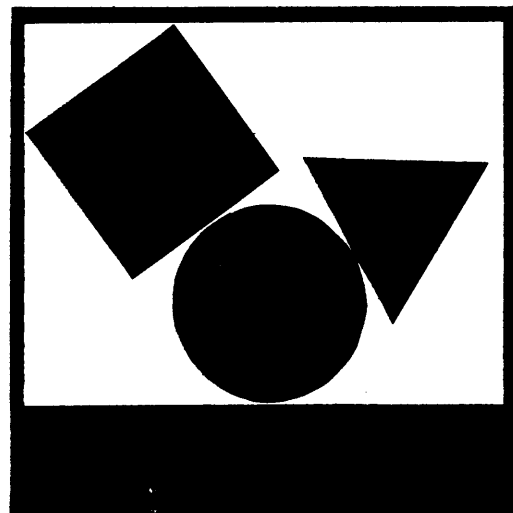
with a little phenomenology. Rather than affirming an identity we should turn our attention to his *specificity* as a thinker, and we can do this by saying that language for him takes place not in the neutral space of 'communication' but in a charged and irreducibly sociopolitical space of its own endless making and remaking. It will not do to deny either the existentialist or the semiotician in Bakhtin, but merely to add to each other these two moments of his thinking without that third dimension modifying both is to throw away the subversive potential of these two major bourgeois responses to the twentieth-century crises of (respectively) the subject and of representation. Bakhtin then enters the history of ideas as a character with an honoured minor role in the great Western narrative of 'human freedom'.

Against this precipitate appropriation of Bakhtin by the liberal academy it is of no use appropriating him as precipitately for 'Marxism'. What can safely be said is that his thinking is very closely akin to the tradition of Western Marxism and at odds with the Soviet Marxism dominant in his time. This uncritical internalization of high-bourgeois scientism, incipient in Friedrich Engels, congealed in the period of the Second International into a dogmatic historical optimism and an economic determinism – in short, a metaphysics of the 'base'. Western Marxism by contrast is characterized by a preoccupation with the 'superstructure' and a deep dialogical engagement with those novel Western discourses which were then beginning to call themselves the 'human sciences'. A reductive account might suggest that this current of thought had simply internalized the opposing 'romantic' pole of the antinomy identified by Marx himself in the *Grundrisse* as besetting bourgeois thought 'until its blessed end'; that it was little more than a late-bourgeois variant of that Romantic anti-capitalism which posed against the dystopia of a society commodified from top to bottom the utopic possibilities of 'art'.² This may be true of Georg Lukacs, whose cultural conservatism helps to found such alliance as existed between Soviet and Western Marxism. It is in Walter Benjamin that we find a means of moving beyond Marx's paralysing antinomy. Benjamin's welcome to aesthetic modernism is a recognition that the text of dissident and experimental late-bourgeois writing must be engaged in its textuality rather than dismissed in its ideality: the way out of the *Entfremdung* of reification is not through the category of the totality but through *Verfremdung*, an alienation-effect which makes 'art' directly political.

Now Bakhtin also represents this insight, with the differ-

ence that *his* engagement with modernism is rather with its theoretical and philosophical than with its literary discourses. He constructs in this engagement an anti-Hegelianism which is compatible with, though by no means the same as, Marx's, and which is characterized by what we might call a return to a *pre-Hegelian* moment in the German philosophical tradition. He makes this move in the context of a polity and an economy that constituted the world's first exception to bourgeois hegemony, and if in one respect he is the beneficiary of this placing – forever sharpening as it does his sense that the theoretical is inescapably the political – he is also in the short term its victim: in the atmosphere of understandably suspicious defensiveness that reigned in the workers' state under siege, his tactical heterodoxy might look like treason. In the sub-text of the polemics of the 1920s – and then more overtly in the Dostoevsky book, where the signature of Dostoevsky perhaps protected him – we can sense a critique that aligns itself with Lukacs's in *History and Class Consciousness*, while at the same time distancing itself from the Hegelianism of that text. The moment on which Bakhtin fixes is that of Kant and Goethe: he finds in the discourses of this moment a means of resisting Hegel's total absorption of the world in the absolute self-knowledge of Spirit, his abolition of a multiform objectivity in a uniform subjectivity. Ernst Bloch's use of Goethe against Hegel and Ernst Cassirer's similar use of Kant provide close parallels for Bakhtin's project in this early period. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* is a text acknowledged by Bakhtin and Voloshinov as a Western ally of their own enterprise, and its publication in the year of Lukacs's heterodox offering dramatizes its importance in the latter's formation. In Bakhtin the word and the body live on their boundaries, just as the sensible and the intelligible do in Cassirer and the present and future do in Bloch. Bakhtin takes his cue from a stage of bourgeois thought in which (as in Schiller, for example) the aesthetic had yet to lose its worldly moorings and be launched to lose itself in the sea of Spirit, as a mere cancelled phase of which philosophy is the sublimation. He interrupts the passage of this stage into that hypostasis of cognitive consciousness which is idealism at its limit, 'philosophical monologism' at the height of its ambition. It is not for nothing that Bakhtin cites Kant at the beginning of his essay on the chronotope – the time-space complex that unites in one perspective the events of narratives and the texts that realize them – and insists on the *Bildungsroman* fragment on the chronotopic character of Goethe's thinking.

Where does this leave Bakhtin? In my view he ends up somewhere between Western marxism and post-structuralism, more politicized than the latter and with a more sophisticated theory of discourse than the former has ever produced. Encoded in the polemic with Freud and Saussure and Formalism – not as its 'truth' but simply as one of its bearings – is a complex dialogue and critical consensus with the Neo-Kantianism of Cassirer, the heterodox Marxism of Lukacs, and (to bring another name into the equation) the existential theology of Buber, whose *I and Thou* was also coincidentally published in 1923. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* makes a tactical alliance with some of the motifs of classical Marxism in its Soviet variant in order to ventilate the claims of an alternative, at once anti-scientistic and anti-Hegelian, to the dominant Marxist tradition. In the NEP phase of early Soviet history the die had not decisively been cast, and a re-invention of Marxism which is fructified by a dialogue with Western discourses that offer an alternative route out of Hegel was still a possibility. What we choose to call these discourses matters little: the important point is that they provide a ground for



dissent from the official triumphalism of the (then) communist movement and for a rejection at once of the classical speculative dialectic and of the dialectics of nature. In its polemic against the available versions of a proto-structuralism, Bakhtinism precociously invents a post-structuralism which also revives aspects of Marx's project that had been lost in the philosophizing of his heirs.

One of these aspects is the ambivalence of Marx's dialectic of history, its suspension between a 'tragic' and a 'progressivist' perspective. This comes through in the books on Dostoevsky and Rabelais and in the profound meditation upon the relationship of the serious and the comic that is contained in them. Bakhtin castigates utopian socialism as idealist, but it is equally clear that the alternative of 'scientific' socialism establishes a dichotomy that he would want to undermine. Against the monologism of 'actually existing' scientific socialism in the Stalinist period he poses the popular utopia of 'laughter' and 'carnival', dialogism that has taken to the streets. The other aspect of Marx's project revived in Bakhtin is apparent mainly in the polemical phase of the 1920s: it is his anti-systemic, critical, deconstructive way with the concepts of bourgeois thought. Marx's deconstruction of the commodity is echoed in a deconstruction of that severest of all casualties of commodification as Bakhtin and his colleagues saw it: the sign. They do for linguistic and poetics/stylistics what Marx had done for economics. What Lukacs in 1923 calls the 'formalism' or the 'abstract and formal method' of political economy is replicated in the 'abstract objectivism' of Saussure's linguistics and in the famous 'formal method' in Russian literary studies.³ In short, we find in works like *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* the prolegomena of a *Capital* of the 'superstructure'.

I

Perhaps the most direct route to an understanding of Bakhtin's specific anti-Hegelianism is through his pronouncements on the dialectic. A gnomic sentence from one of his later works provides a starting point: 'Dialectics was born of dialogue so as to return again to dialogue on a higher level.'⁴ What this seems to imply is that the classical speculative dialectic is itself the product of a dialectical process; it is the 'abstract product' which results when dialogue (in Bakhtin's strong sense, discourse conceived as inherently 'double-voiced' or dialogical) is monologized by being located in a 'unique abstract consciousness' – when, in short, its 'division of

voices' is abolished in a single voice.⁵ By staying there, however, we have only explicated the first stage of Bakhtin's critique, a preliminary resituation of the dialectic within a process which it claims to transcend as that process's privileged metalanguage. We remain in this explication at the level of the signified. Moving to that of the signifier – reading Bakhtin's sentence not *as* a sentence but as an utterance, not as exhaustible in a paraphrase but as an (inexhaustible) *answer* – we can see in its language nothing less than a *parody* of the language of the classical dialectic, bringing out the critical force of the (non-)concept of dialogism by putting dialogue into priority. He blows apart the closure of the thesis-antithesis-synthesis model (the negation of the negation) by putting what for dialectics would be mere 'mediation' in the place of the thesis, so that it undergoes rather than effects the *Aufhebung*. Thus:

DIALOGUE DIALECTIC DIALOGISM ('synthesis')

What is 'restored' is not identity or self-coincidence but non-identity; the 'synthesis' is a term which undermines as an active force all synthesizing and homogenizing projects whatever. Bakhtin's mock synthesis is that which all institutional or conceptual syntheses endlessly posit themselves against. The philosophy of Hegel is from this perspective a kind of *felix culpa* of discourse, propelling dialogue-in-itself into the dialogue-for-itself which is dialogism. The logic of particular and universal is first reversed and then displaced altogether. That which lives unselfconsciously outside itself encounters a unitary meaning on its inside – it acquires what Bakhtin calls in an early formulation an 'inner territory'⁶ – only to recoil from this discovery into a militant 'outsideness', an explicit politics of the boundary removed altogether from the logic and implicit politics of the binary. Thus:

OUTSIDE	INSIDE	BOUNDARY
Others as given	Self	Others for others ...

In Bakhtin's 'philosophy' there is a use of the language of rationality which is always at the same time a parodic displacement of that language, a dialogization of its monologism. Dialectics does not magically convert itself into an (or *the*) antagonist of metaphysics by taking on the attribute or assuming the 'content' of matter rather than spirit. It will remain a metaphysics unless and until it is truly radicalized in that self-parody of dialectics which now goes by the name of deconstruction.

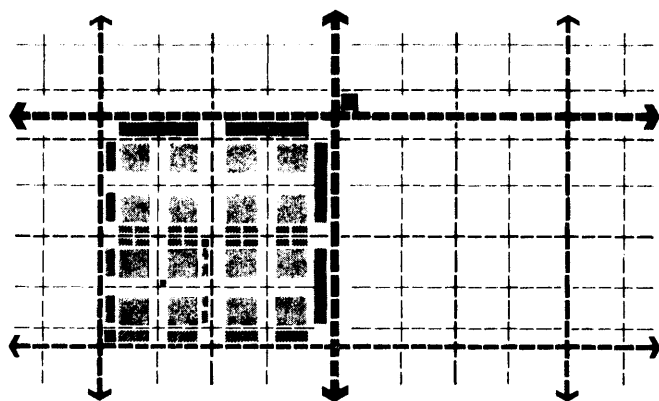
This radical politics of the boundary has its fullest elaboration, for Bakhtin, in the existential poetics of Dostoevsky. What the various existentialisms have in common is a (petty-bourgeois) protest against Being in general, a revolt of being-in-the-world against a metaphysics experienced as unfreedom, a disempowering tyranny of the essence. Now if Bakhtin's anti-philosophy is refracted through the tragic personalism of Dostoevsky it is nonetheless no more to be identified with the latter than with an optimistic collectivism imposed from above. Orthodox Marxism recognized only one route out of Hegel: that of *diamat*. Bakhtin asserts the right to dialogue with other post-Hegelian voices which do not implicate the thinker in the materialism/idealism binary and which help him to question the very *form* of the dialectic itself. Idealism is opposed not because it is a philosophy of the spirit but because it is the most authoritarian and totalitarian monologism imaginable. Spirit is opposed not because it is not matter but because it is one of the names of the identical subject-object, and to assign the role of identical subject-

object to anything else (even the proletariat) is to remain within an identitarian or idealist problematic. Any systematic alternative to the latter sooner or later finds itself to be no alternative at all. There can be no 'dialogics' – to use a barbarous and falsifying term much in use now but with no basis whatever in Bakhtin. Indirection is not simply a response to the danger of direct assertion under Stalinism; it is an *internal* imperative of Bakhtin's thinking. Which is as much as to say: there are in Bakhtin only 'philosophy effects' generated by discourses that are not in themselves 'philosophical'. The liminal discipline of translanguistics is not a philosophy – not even a 'philosophy of language' – but rather a discourse which signals certain philosophical bearings and has effects that might be called philosophical, while it is more directly preoccupied with other business: either polemicalizing with other disciplines of the sign or working on and within these special sites of dialogism called 'novel' and 'carnival'. Bakhtin's 'philosophy' is in this sense *strategic* rather than systematic, a matter of polemical or parodic glancing blows that avoid confronting systems with their elaborated antitheses or antidotes because of the complicities this entails. We are not surprised to find that the late 'experiments in philosophical analysis' never get beyond the status of the 'note' or the fragment. 'Every entry into the sphere of meaning is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope': thus Bakhtin, concluding his last completed piece of writing.⁷ Even abstract thought (he claims) is impossible without 'temporal-spatial expression': like Marx and Derrida Bakhtin knows that theory is always situated in and exceeded by history and materiality.

Some of Bakhtin's radical readers might have a problem with the parenthesis that closes the sentence we have taken as our starting point and which for the purposes of this analysis I have thus far suppressed. The full sentence actually reads: 'Dialectics was born of dialogue so as to return to dialogue at a higher level (a dialogue of *personalities*)'. Now it is obvious that Western canonizers of Bakhtin would seize on this parenthesis as a means of identifying him with a personalist 'philosophy' (rather as Western political commentators view *glasnost* in the Soviet Union and similar experiments as so many approximations to a perfected liberalism in their own far from democratic politics). Our answer to this should not be to excuse a late aberration in Bakhtin but rather to affirm the burden of his parenthesis by first of all reconstructing the context to which it plainly alludes – I mean the moment of the Dostoevsky book of 1929 – and then showing how this emphasis on 'personalities' might be remobilized in *our* context, and without any awkward apology. I have already implied that Bakhtin's 'strategic' (anti-)philosophizing is inseparable from the positive hermeneutic of this great monograph, a hermeneutic which has as its negative obverse a critique of the instrumental rationality of class society. What needs to be emphasized now is that this text marks the transition from the polemicalizing and sociologizing of the 1920s to the politicizing and historicizing work of the 1930s – from the deconstruction of theories of signification which perpetuate the inside/outside binary in theory to an exploration of the forms and institutions which deconstruct it in practice. In the polemical work under other signatures we have something like a sociolinguistics or a speech-act theory: translanguistics in this phase tends perhaps to take the sociopolitical space of discourse as 'given' whereas in the later phase it extends to an exploration of how hegemonies are organized, how the space of the sociopolitical 'real' is created. When the whole of Bakhtin's *actual* context was in creative flux – when the revolution still enabled a carnival of ideas – there was a

tendency for the subject and the referent to be substantialized. When this carnival is over, Bakhtin is driven to seek out sites and times where the play of signifiers is a manifest material force and 'play' is itself the 'work' of history.

Against the Formalists, for whom 'discourse in art' was the function of a cancellation of the text's social dimension, Bakhtin and his colleagues then rethought 'art' as an intensified sociality, a deepening and opening-out of the immanently



social character of 'discourse in life'. If in the 1920s 'art' is thus assimilated to 'life', in the 1930s 'life' is assimilated to 'art': in the midst of 'ideology' Bakhtin conjures up (in Karl Mannheim's sense) a 'utopia' of popular and novelistic deconstruction. It doesn't require much perspicacity to read the supersession of carnivalesque counter-culture in a new official culture described in the Rabelais book as an allegory of the betrayal of the revolution of 1917. Much more fundamental is the shift from the implicit homogeneity of a referent given before discourse to a referent understood as both irreducibly heterogeneous and issuing ceaselessly from the 'creative work' of discourse itself, in an active and collective making of the future. Discourse is never conceived by Bakhtin as anything other than actively interventionist, but in the 1930s he moves from a stress on the power of the utterance to 'resolve situations' to an almost hyperbolic affirmation of the power of popular assertion to turn the world upside down. Bakhtin's answer to the abolition of popular politics under Stalinism is a reconstruction of the space of the sociopolitical as the realized and realizing self-activity of the 'people' – of 'historical becoming' as inseparable from powerful acts of meaning which no 'power' can destroy without ultimately destroying itself.

Hindsight makes it possible for us to see the Dostoevsky book as the point of transition between these two phases: defined by its difference from both of them. Between the sociologizing imperative of the polemical texts and the historicizing imperative of the work on carnival and the novel, this book is the *locus classicus* of that existentializing imperative which we need to recognize – and affirm – as a perennial force in Bakhtin's thinking. By contrast with the aggressive assertion of an alternative objectivism to the 'abstract objectivism' of Saussurean linguistics and Formalist poetics, the book on Dostoevsky seems almost wilfully 'subjectivist'. Now from one perspective this could be seen as Bakhtin grasping and closely engaging with the problem of the subject which (as I have argued elsewhere) the Formalists had 'prematurely and

undialectically' bracketted out, in a cancellation of the subjectivity matching that cancellation of sociality already mentioned.⁸ From another perspective this text's (alleged) 'subjectivism' could equally be seen as a tactical return to Bakhtin's earlier meditation on the ethics and aesthetics of intersubjectivity. If the polemics sought to contextualize the text (against Formalism), and if the later work on carnival textualizes the context (against Stalinism) – thereby opening up the referent as a site of praxis – then the Dostoevsky book may be said to *textualize the subject*, against a composite opponent which includes idealism, its literary analogue in the homophonic novel,⁹ and their common root in the 'reification of man' under capitalism.

This then is the project of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*; and at first glance it seems somewhat quixotic and other-worldly to be proposing a definition of dialogism as 'a dialogue of *personalities*' in the first year of the First Five-Year Plan, arguing the epistemological merits of a kind of writing in which 'self-consciousness' is the 'dominant' when collectivization was already in train. Of course Bakhtin's notion of the 'personality' has nothing whatever to do with the monadic individual of bourgeois individualism. Dostoevsky's 'profoundly personalized' world is also (Bakhtin insists) 'profoundly pluralistic':¹⁰ by 'personality' we are to understand the subject as a shifting function of intertextual boundaries. Still, there is – as Ken Hirschkop has argued – a problem with the idea of a plurality of interacting consciousnesses, inasmuch as their interaction in the space of the text somewhat dubiously stands in for the truly objective space of the social itself. We can (on this view) only rescue Bakhtin from the charge of 'subjectivism' either by associating polyphony with carnival, or by opposing to the humanist reading which sees behind the 'roles of real life' a 'certain irreducible freedom', a radical reading which sees the unfinalizability of the Dostoevskian 'personality' as an emblem of 'the ever-present possibility of change'.¹¹

Two points need to be made here. First, the link with carnival only becomes available in the edition of 1963. Secondly, unexceptionable as both this link and the alternative (radical) reading may be, they are not necessary. Even in the 1929 edition the space of the text is not as falsifying of the social as Hirschkop makes it out to be: Dostoevsky's hero-ideologues are not all that unlike the subjects of a genuine Gramscian hegemony: 'philosophers' or potential author-functions whose 'commonsense' must be rendered critical and self-critical by the dialogical agency of those professional authors of change called 'intellectuals'. At the very least we could say that there is a strong proto-political or quasi-political dimension to the Dostoevsky book, with polyphony shadowing forth the strategies and forms of subjectivity proper to a real politics of popular sovereignty.

The parallel with Antonio Gramsci can be carried further. The image that Bakhtin hits upon when trying to distinguish Dostoevsky's 'pluralistic' world from the 'unified, dialectically evolving spirit, understood in Hegelian terms' is an institutional metaphor that his Italian contemporary would have approved: namely, the church 'as a communion of unmerged souls, where sinners and righteous men come together'.¹² Gramsci's concept of the revolutionary party is not far removed from this catholic inclusiveness ascribed by Bakhtin to Dostoevskian polyphony. Gramsci's more general philosophical project – in which, centrally, metaphysics is redefined against vulgar-materialist orthodoxy as 'any systematic formulation that is put forward as an extra-historical truth, as an abstract universal outside of time and space'¹³ – is very close to the specific anti-idealism of Bakhtin's text of

1929. (Bakhtin, moreover, would have had before him in the writing of Nikolai Bukharin the representative of orthodox anti-idealism who is the object of Gramsci's critique.) A close look at the metaphors Bakhtin uses to give a sense of the relationship between author and hero in the homophonic novel leads us ineluctably to a homology between the poetics of the latter and the politics of absolute rule. Consider, for example, the claim that everything from the author's side which might have 'as it were, sentenced' the hero functions in Dostoevsky not as a means of his 'finalization' but as 'the material of his self-consciousness'. Besides this forensic metaphor, there are recurring tropes of surveillance and rebellion: the Dostoevskian hero is not 'a being that can be spied on, defined, predicted apart from its own will, "at second hand"', and he is in 'revolt' against 'his literary finalization'.¹⁴

After 1929, the insistence on Dostoevsky's exceptionalism is played down and 'polyphony' disappears from Bakhtin's vocabulary until the edition of 1963. Radek's association of Dostoevsky with Proust and Joyce in 1934, not to mention Lukacs's denunciation of two years before, would of course have made any heroization inadvisable. Bakhtin's recourse to generalizations about 'the novel' springs however not so much from caution of this specific kind as from a more general logic of his politics of theory in the 1930s: it was inevitable that the dialogized 'voices' of Dostoevskian polyphony would become the dialogized 'social languages' of novelistic 'heteroglossia' (that is, 'many-language-ness') when his argument was not (overtly) with philosophies and novel types – or indeed with the reification of class society – but (covertly) with the Stalinist state itself. The difference between this position and that of the Dostoevsky book is nonetheless in no sense the difference between a covert presence of the political and its overt absence: what after all unites them is the emphasis on the novel as an image of civil society, in Gramsci's (rather than Marx's) sense. Polyphony stands for the ideal condition of civil society; homophony for its contamination by the 'I-it' relations of the state. That this homology is not fanciful should be clear from the occasional excursions Bakhtin makes into the 'sociological' explanation of Dostoevskian polyphony in a text otherwise given over to its immanent 'formal' description. Dostoevsky's work is the novelistic correlative of the effect of capitalist relations upon the hitherto mutually deafened and blinded sectors of Russian civil society. Capitalism arrives with 'catastrophic suddenness' and breaks down the insulation of these 'diverse worlds

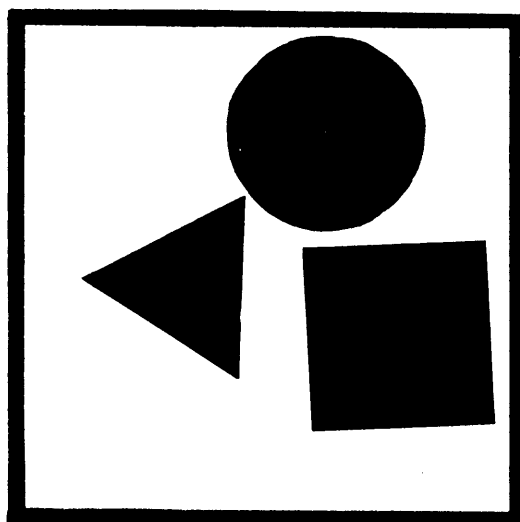
and spheres', bringing them to self-knowledge through knowledge of each other, making their contradictory unity and interdependence a fact of consciousness.¹⁵ The 'art' of Dostoevsky is nothing less than the orchestration of these voices.

II

If we need any further proof of the political thrust of the Dostoevsky book we need only turn to Anatoly Lunacharsky's (broadly favourable) review, written by the People's Commissar of Education when Bakhtin was already on his way to internal exile in Kazakhstan, and thereby starkly dramatizing the contrast between state repression and dialogue within civil society which is not only implicit in the book but actually brought into the open (to be sure, as a matter of 'history') in the review itself. Dostoevsky is presented by Lunacharsky as one of those 'great personalities' of nineteenth-century Russia who sought and tragically failed to organize the forces of civil society against the absolute state.¹⁶ This 'first great petty-bourgeois writer in the history of our culture' not only reflected the confusion of his class but also served as its 'powerful and much-needed organizer'.¹⁷ His project, within his fiction and without, was to detach the "inner" understanding of Orthodox religion from its 'outward forms' – in other words, to compel an institution compromised by its relation to the state into an institution of civil society from which that state might be opposed.¹⁸ The church as a utopic 'coinherence of souls' [*sobornost*]¹⁹ provides him with the means to take his distance not only from the autocracy but also from any revolutionary socialist solution. In Lunacharsky's reading of Dostoevsky-through-Bakhtin the writing is effectively construed as a positive gain conjured out of Dostoevsky's inevitable failure – inevitable not just because of his impotence as an individual, but also because he is an organic intellectual springing from a class with no historic mission and little power to rescue Russian civil society from what Gramsci would later call its 'gelatinous' condition.

It is also a reading which is not without a more sharply contemporary relevance than Bakhtin would have felt free to enforce. Lunacharsky ends his review with (among others) the following very striking observation: 'If we ourselves find no positive ideas in Dostoevsky we must remember that we are not as yet a majority in the country.'²⁰ In this formulation Lunacharsky makes the leap from 'Dostoevsky' as the name of an active intervention in civil society under the autocracy to 'Dostoevskyism' [*Dostoevshchina*] as a force within civil society under the workers' state. The perspective held out here is one of proletarian hegemony as something to be fought for politically and dialogically in a situation where not only the vanguard party but also the proletariat itself is a numerical minority. 'Dostoevskyism' is a material force within civil society which Lunacharsky seeks not to repress by administrative decree – in a move which would threaten the very survival of civil society itself – but to redeem (as it were) by promoting a critical inflection of its motifs, by acknowledging its hold over the other classes making up the 'people' and engaging it in critical dialogue.

I would not wish to suggest that Lunacharsky's case is identical with some supposedly Bakhtinian 'message' contained in the Dostoevsky book. Neither would I claim that 'Hegel' in that text is (as Fredric Jameson says it is in Louis Althusser) a code for 'Stalin'. What I am suggesting is that this powerful Soviet official's appraisal of Bakhtin-Dostoevsky is itself a political intervention within contemporary civil society; that it is predicated upon the permanence and value of this site of the dialogical negotiation of power; and



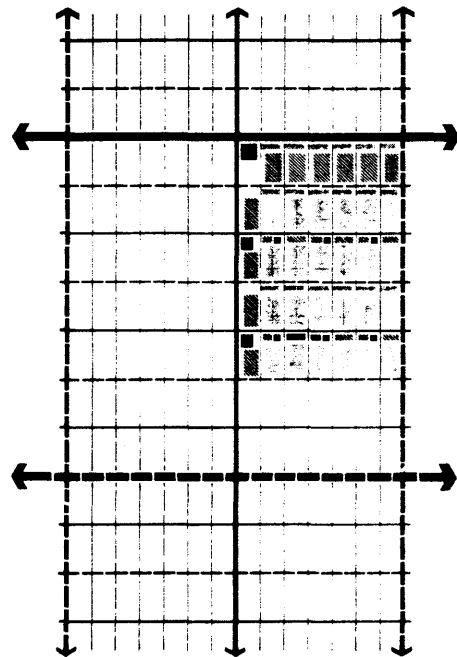
that it brings out for us what is at stake when the name of Dostoevsky is invoked by Bakhtin (or anybody else) in 1929. Invoking that name in that year is not perhaps after all as perverse an act as it might have seemed. Beyond this, affirming Dostoevskian personalism as an 'ideology of the text' (rather than as the 'philosophy' of Dostoevsky 'himself') is not inconsistent with that open-ended logic of the collective always in the process of becoming which is the dialectic in its non-speculative version. 'Polyphony' as a metaphor for that spiritual diversity which is the 'dialogue of *personalities*' is admittedly wildly at odds with the kind of metaphor favoured by the contemporary Russian *avant-garde*. Formalism and Futurism take their metaphors from the economic base, in an aggressive detheologization of aesthetics which landed them in an ahistorical and abstract objectivism that saved them neither from the revenge of the subject nor from official denunciation. Bakhtin's metaphor is not only a musical one: it calls to mind (more specifically) a particular kind of ecclesiastical music and therefore by extension the church itself – that is to say, that part of the social formation which pre-revolutionary intellectuals like Dostoevsky sought to claim for civil society against the state.

Putting the Formalists' 'device' alongside 'polyphony' we can see that the more traditionalist of the two metaphors is by far the more politically astute, however unrevolutionary it might sound next to its modernist and productionist counterpart. Its great merit is that it identifies – against the complementary reifications of 'art' and the 'economy' – the real hegemonic battleground in any society undergoing revolutionary transformation, where sociality and subjectivity are forever born together. But 'polyphony' also has a philological meaning from the late nineteenth century, which Bakhtin (trained, like Gramsci, as an historical linguist) must surely have known: 'the symbolization of different vocalsounds by the same letter or character'.²¹ The senses of phonemic-diversity-within-graphic-unity on the one hand and melodic-diversity-within-harmonic-unity on the other cross-fertilize (as it were) to produce a translinguistic concept of considerable power, in which the 'characters' of a certain kind of fiction are conceived as bearing within themselves the difference they have with respect to each other.

Such 'characters' are of course precisely those dispersed author-functions Bakhtin calls 'personalities'. If I am to make good my claim that a radical reading needs to affirm rather than apologize for this emphasis on the subject, then I must show not only that this subject is exhaustively textualized but that its textualization has ethico-political and theoretical implications that challenge Western rationality. The Dostoevskian 'personality' is defined by Bakhtin as 'pure self-consciousness in its totality',²² polyphony being the kind of novelistic discourse in which such self-consciousness is the 'dominant of representation'. In effect, this 'free' personality is a principle of radical immanence – or (better) a zone of absolute resistance to transcendence, situated where no meta-language or metanarrative can reach it. It is 'free' in the sense that it is only ever represented under the aspect of its own self-positing activity. Its work is like that of a black hole in discursive space, exerting so strong a gravitational pull upon all around it that it has always already drawn *into itself* all actual or potential 'final words' *about itself*. If the characters of homophony are not in this sense personalities that is because they are merely empirical individuals from whom the 'direct power to mean' has been confiscated and monopolized by the 'author-monologist'. In a dialogue of personalities the power to mean is freely exercised on all sides, and the obverse of this thoroughgoing authenticity is the abolition of all idio-

syncrasy. Bakhtin uses the concept of this 'consciousness for its own sake' to counter the monological or philosophical fiction of the unincarnated and unsituated idea, the idea which 'belongs to *no one*' and does not happen in time.²³ Homophony combines an empiricism of the character with an idealism of the author: the ideas of characters are mere psychological attributes (more or less erroneous, or at least non-affirmable) while those of the author alone are *meanings*. 'That which is individual' is not essential; conversely that which is essential is not individual but rather *Bewusstsein* überhaupt, 'consciousness in general'. Or, as Bakhtin puts it in the shortest sentence he ever wrote: 'Only error individualizes.'²⁴ Truth and individuality are reconciled (can coexist) only on the side of the author: in the hero the power of an idea to mean is either negated by her or his individuality or only affirmed at the cost of the latter.

There is no paradox in saying that this extreme personalism is the very reverse of any subjectivism. Not to understand this is not to have understood that Bakhtin thinks by way of extremes: subjectivity thought as pure immanence inverts itself into an immanent sociality; when everyone is absolutely an author no one is absolutely in authority. If Bakhtin's metaphor-concepts are at odds with those of Formalism, it is nonetheless certain that he had already matched their extremist gestures in his own style of thinking. If he textualizes the subject (as I have suggested he does), he does so by giving the subject the same status as Formalism gives to the text: instead of the 'self-valuable word' freed from 'motivation' we have 'pure self-consciousness' freed from the heteronomy of 'character' and 'plot'. The (linguistic) signifier privileged by Formalism becomes the signifier *as actor* specialized to the task of signifying itself in the world and the world in itself. The result is something not unlike what Jameson calls the "abso-

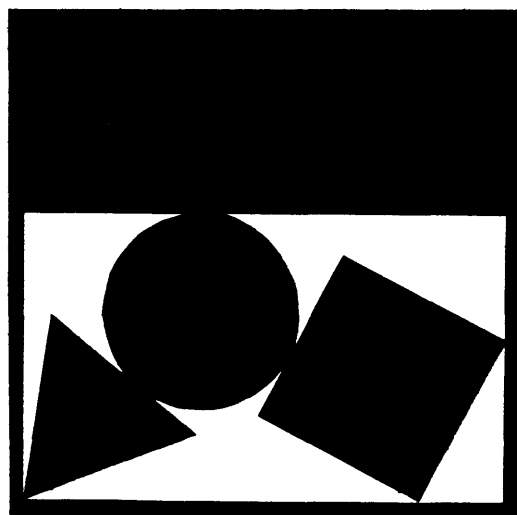


lute formalism" of Marxism itself" with its 'dialectical and historical self-consciousness': in short, an absolute formalism whose other face is an absolute historicism, Gramsci's 'absolute humanism of history'.²⁵

Listen to Gramsci himself, on the special stance of the Marxist philosopher:

Consciousness full of contradictions, in which the philosopher himself, understood both individually and as an entire social group, not only grasps the contradictions, but posits himself as an element of the contradiction and elevates this element to a principle of knowledge and therefore of action.²⁶

Bakhtin would find little to disagree with in this Gramscian



summary of how the 'philosophy of praxis' refuses with its refusal of the Hegelian dialectic the 'single position outside of history' on which its system rests.²⁷ The philosopher of praxis and the polyphonic author have in common a continuing existential act of auto-situation – an ongoing self-positing which at once presupposes similar acts in others and opens a space for those others to empower themselves. The dialogue of the intellectual and the class is as much a dialogue of personalities as that of all the subjects (author included) in the polyphonic novel: both would define themselves against what Bakhtin calls the 'pedagogical dialogue'²⁸ of idealism in which knowledge confronts ignorance unilaterally and unequally.

III

Authenticity, historicity, legitimacy: it is the profound relationship that Bakhtin's thinking helps us to develop between these three terms – their transformation into each other, their dynamic homology so to speak – that unfits it for the purposes of that repressive parochialism which the West seeks to pass off as universality and freedom. Authenticity is what the heroes of polyphony display supremely; polyphony is the interaction of authentic existents who resist in all their discourse the bad faith of objectivization. It is at the same time (at least in Dostoevsky) an exclusively synchronic interaction, its contradictions coexisting in textual space rather than unfolding in fictional time. Polyphony's association with synchrony is to be explained by its suspicion of diachrony as a dimension compromised by the latter's association with the classical dialectic. Diachrony fosters the illusion that the dialogue of personalities can be resolved in some higher unity. The resolute synchrony of polyphony not only offers a

dimension in which authenticity and irresolution can flourish; it is also the condition of a founding of historicity against that History which is only one of the more subtle guises of Being. The synchrony inhabited by the subjects of polyphony is a formal or textual allegory not of stasis but of perpetual possibility. This specific temporality of the *project* is the natural element of the unfinalizable hero and it is bound up also with the narrative that is always enterable, in which everything is a pure instance of discourse, and in which the power of hypothesizing an end to the story is in no one subject's hands. The roles of author and hero stand in a relation of infinite asymptomatic approach to each other, in a distinction which is always relative and never absolute. When there is nothing outside this pure immanence of consciousnesses there is by the same token nothing outside of the pure immanence of history, nothing given from somewhere else in the sense of escaping that implication in narratives which is shared by representer and represented alike. Posed in directly political terms, these issues of 'representation' become issues of 'legitimation'; the idioms of authenticity and historicity undergo translation, opening up a perspective of a legitimacy which explicitly carries over into the realm of power their (already powerful) challenge to a dominant ontology and epistemology.

I am not suggesting that polyphony is to be precipitately re-read as a code for 'democracy': to do so would be equivalent to reading Dostoevsky as a realist of the English or Western European variety. Polyphony offers us a position from which Western humanism and universalism can at the very least be problematized – that is to say, seen in the light (or rather dark) of what they exclude or repress. It is the poetics of a politics that in Western Europe found fleeting expression in the insurgent stage of the bourgeois revolution, rather than the poetics (like realism) of an established bourgeois order. Its bearings lie among those classes which have never ruled and which epitomize *revolt* rather than revolution: either the subaltern classes of the late pre-capitalist period who speak an antinomian language (like the Ranters), or those intermediate classes of late capital whose language of crisis is one or other version of existentialism. Women under patriarchy, the global underclass of imperialism – any group which has reason to suspect Reason – will gravitate towards this idiom of revolt. Occupying the ground of Bakhtin-Dostoevsky what we gain is not an alternative 'philosophical' vision but a scepticism about the legitimacy of all victorious classes that do not listen to these marginalized voices, a sense of the complicity of 'enlightenment' and (yes) secularization itself with the hegemony of the European bourgeoisie. If the class whose mission it is to end classes as such is not to become an author-monologist of history like its immediate forerunner, it will need to establish its legitimacy on the quite new basis of a complex dialogue with the discourses of groups for whom the tragedy of enlightenment is a matter of direct experience. In the Soviet Union in 1929 the refusal of a dialogue of personalities within civil society (that is, of groups or individuals with an equal power to mean) would lead to a forced collectivization of the economy and over it all a state which had effectively swallowed civil society and reduced it to a 'cult of the personality' of the leader himself.

Such a dialogue will not be the mere verbal accompaniment of an opportunistic alliance between a hegemonic (or hegemonizing) class and other constituencies, a tolerance of unpalatable idioms for the sake of the masses they deliver into action. 'Unpalatable' in this case means unpalatable from the philosophical standpoint of a vulgar materialism or from the political standpoint of a 'workerism', given that the themes of

these discourses are usually either religious or personalist or nationalist, or a combination of these three. Polyphony adumbrates a hegemonic style which gives these supposedly superseded languages their full weight. Religion is more than the mere epiphenomenon of a past mode of production – precapitalist, culpably ‘pre-scientific’, even ‘objectively reactionary’: a third-world liberation theology is at this moment re-inventing religion as a mode and code of popular assertion. Personalism as a post-Hegelian revolt against the category of the totality might have been caricatured by Marx in the early example of Max Stirner; in Dostoevsky (as Bakhtin points out) he is one of the prototypes of Raskolnikov.²⁹ We should perhaps attend as much to Dostoevsky as to Marx in evaluating this tradition as it develops through Nietzsche to existentialism. If nationalism is irredeemably petty-bourgeois and therefore always politically suspect for any narrowly instrumental-functional ‘class analysis’, it is indubitably also an indispensable force in the current movements for liberation from colonialism and neo-colonialism – without which even the organized working class would not get beyond corporatism and trade-union consciousness.

Indeed it is in the revolt of the colonized against their subalternity that the dialogue of personalities has been most effectively mobilized of late. Bakhtin’s philosophizing is of the kind that finds Dostoevsky’s writing (in a Lévi-Straussian phrase) eminently ‘good to think with’; today’s followers of Bakhtin would do well to ‘think with’ the great living and ongoing narratives of decolonization, whose supreme hero-ideologue must surely be Frantz Fanon. ‘The truth about the world, according to Dostoevsky, is inseparable from the truth of the personality’:³⁰ what Bakhtin says of the polyphonic novel’s typical protagonist applies also to the writing of Fanon; confession and generalization interpenetrate in a discursive ambience where every uttered or imaginable ‘final word’ of the colonizer about the colonized is answered, anticipated, matched, faced and fought past. The anti-philosophizing of *Black Skin, White Masks* takes the form of an autobiographical narrative which is at the same time an allegory (a sort of putative or potential history) of everybody in the colonized condition. It is unmistakably the writing of a person *in a situation*, apostrophizing friends and foes, casting backward and sideways glances as he takes his distance both from *negritude* and from a sympathetic metropolitan view which sees this antithesis to colonial racism as a mere phase to be dialectically transcended. What Fanon’s writing insistently says to us is that a politics of the boundary is nothing if not *incarnated*: any exposition courts the danger of reducing this order of intensely engaged thinking to the bloodless categories of a metaphysics. If that is all one can say about it, that is because ‘it’ is an inapposite pronoun in this context; because it demands to be spoken or written not ‘about’ but ‘with’, in solidarity rather than commentary. Such agonistic thinking always throws a merely cognitive consciousness into disarray. Fanon’s whole output shows that the adumbration or institution of a Bakhtinian ‘dialogue of *personalities*’ is nothing less than a revolutionary act.

The question ‘Who or what is Mikhail Bakhtin?’ resolves itself into the question ‘Where is he today?’ Now that Fanon is dead, his project is most closely paralleled in the pedagogic writing of Paulo Freire – that Gramsci of the Third World, for whom revolution is impossible without ‘dialogical cultural action’ – and in the theatre of Augusto Boal, whose ‘poetics of the oppressed’ moves beyond a (Brechtian) poetics of the ‘enlightened vanguard’ to free the spectator into action – action which is a ‘rehearsal of revolution’. In the work of these living teachers of liberation the discourse of ‘high

existentialism’ has (as Jameson says of Fanon, who inspired both of them) ‘fallen into the world’; its motifs have ‘migrat[ed] outside philosophy departments altogether, into a more frightening landscape of praxis and terror’.³¹ They are doing for the margins what Western Marxism sought to do for the revolutionary process in the metropolis – tracking the oppressor and exploiter down the latter’s last outposts in culture and in consciousness, inventing new ways of activating the self-articulation of the oppressed – and doing it moreover in writing that is first and last pragmatically oriented: like Bakhtin’s writing, in short, in being only strategically ‘philosophical’ and yet more devastating in their philosophical implications than any Western ‘system’. It is a profound irony of our postmodern era that these genuine correlatives of Bakhtin’s thought should both be found in the southern half of the American continent: while the liberal academics of that continent’s aggressive northern *imperium* produce and reproduce themselves as intellectuals in misreadings of his work, Bakhtin himself lives in the fighting, praying, dialogizing, carnivalizing thinkers of the continental body’s transgressive lower half.

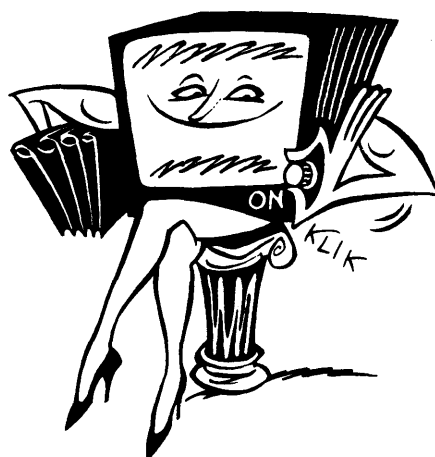
Notes

- 1 Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984, p. 118.
- 2 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973, p. 162.
- 3 Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, London, Merlin Press, 1971, p. 105.
- 4 *Speech Genres and Other Essays*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1987, p. 162. This sentence comes from a text of 1974.
- 5 *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984, p. 293 (note: there is no complete English translation of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*, the 1929 version of this book); and *Speech Genres*, p. 147.
- 6 ‘Toward the Aesthetics of the Word’, *Dispositio*, 4, 11-12 (p. 305). This text dates from 1924, and was first published in the Soviet journal *Kontekst* in 1974.
- 7 *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 258.
- 8 Graham Pechey, ‘Bakhtin, Marxism and Post-Structuralism’, in F. Barker *et al* (eds.), *Literature, Politics and Theory*, London, Methuen, 1986, p. 121.
- 9 The homophonic novel is Bakhtin’s term for novels with a ‘monological’ dominant; polyphony is the converse case of dialogism in dominance.
- 10 *Problems*, p. 26.
- 11 Ken Hirschkop, ‘The Social and the Subject in Bakhtin’, *Poetics Today*, 6, 4 (1985), p. 774.
- 12 *Problems*, pp. 26-27.
- 13 Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, p. 437.
- 14 *Problems*, pp. 51, 58, 59.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 16 Anatoly Lunacharsky, *On Literature and Art*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1973, p. 88.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 102.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- 21 *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* entry on ‘polyphony’.

- 22 *Problems*, p. 48.
 23 *Ibid.*, p. 79.
 24 *Ibid.*, p. 81.
 25 Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 373; Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 417.
 26 *Prison Notebooks*, p. 405.
- 27 *Marxism and Form*, p. 365.
 28 *Problems*, p. 81.
 29 *Ibid.*, p. 90.
 30 *Ibid.*, p. 78.
 31 Fredric Jameson, 'Periodizing the 60s' in *The Ideologies of Theory*, Volume 2, London, Routledge, 1988.

Women need open and safe communication about sexual matters, including the power relations of sex. We don't need new forms of guilt parading under the banner of political correctness. We need a safe, legal working environment for sex workers, not repressive laws or an atmosphere of social stigma that empowers police and punters to brutalize them. We need sexually explicit material produced by and for women, freed from the control of right wingers and misogynists, whether they sit on the board of directors or the board of censors. We need an analysis of violence that empowers women and protects them at the same time. We need a feminism willing to tackle issues of class and race and to deal with the variety of oppressions in the world, not to reduce all oppression to pornography.

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