Dostoevsky’s carnival

by René Wellek

A review of Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics (Theory and History of Literature) by Mikhail Bakhtin

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE

Mikhail Bakhtin
Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics (Theory and History of Literature)
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Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), a Russian scholar, has recently found translators, expounders, and admirers in the West. In the introduction to a collection of Bakhtin’s posthumous essays, The Dialogic Imagination (Austin, Texas, 1981), Michael Holquist proclaimed him “one of the leading thinkers of the twentieth century.” Bakhtin was indeed an immensely erudite, perceptive, and acute literary scholar. His first book, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Work (1929), was known in the Thirties and after to every student of Dostoevsky who could read Russian. Just after the publication of that book, Bakhtin was arrested and banished to a small town in northern Kazakhstan, where he was made to work as a bookkeeper. Even after he was allowed to return to central Russia and resume his studies, his dissertation on Rabelais was rejected. At last, in 1936, he was appointed to the faculty of a teacher’s college (later made a university) in Saransk, in the remote Mordvinian Republic. Only after his retirement, in 1963, was a new, expanded, and revised edition of his first book, renamed Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, published. This was followed, in 1965, by a book on Rabelais. In 1975, the year of Bakhtin’s death, a collection of early essays, some dating back to the Twenties, appeared as Questions of Literature and Aesthetics. Another miscellany of articles, Aesthetics of Literary Creation, came out in 1979.
Bakhtin’s work was first noticed in France. Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian scholar living in France, wrote an article on him in 1967, and the Dostoevsky and Rabelais books appeared in French translations in 1970. An English translation of *Rabelais and His World* was published by the mit Press in 1968 and in 1973 Ardis Publishers brought out *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, translated by R. W. Rotsel. Caryl Emerson’s new translation improves greatly on the earlier one: it is fluent and accurate, though Emerson is given to using unlovely abstract nouns such as “unfinalizability,” “dialogicality,” and “addressivity,” presumably in an attempt to reproduce Bakhtin’s clumsy style.

Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics should appeal to every student of Dostoevsky, since it was one of the first Russian books to consider him “first and foremost an artist and not a philosopher or a publicist.” Though Bakhtin claims Dostoevsky to be “one of the greatest innovators in the realm of artistic form,” his study is not at all formalist, if we understand formalism to refer to the doctrines of the Russian formalist group. Indeed, Bakhtin sharply rejected those doctrines as “materialist,” that is, as too preoccupied with the linguistic material of poetry. Neither is Bakhtin’s study a Marxist book, which would see Dostoevsky as a chronicler of the evils of nineteenth-century Russia and as a propagandist for a reactionary politics and traditional religion. Rather, Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky’s novels are “polyphonic”; they present us with a chorus of independent voices that are fully equal and do not serve the ideological position of the author.
Dostoevsky, no doubt, has the gift of entering the mind of his characters, of putting into their mouths ideas and feelings that might be totally alien or even repulsive to him personally. One can argue that he deliberately allows some of his most objectionable characters to expound his favorite ideas and, vice versa, his most sympathetic characters to voice the most perverse opinions. Bakhtin, however, pushes this insight to the extreme when he says that Dostoevsky “retains for himself, that is for his exclusive field of vision, not a single essential definition, not a single trait, not the smallest feature of the hero.” Polyphony is, after all, merely a metaphor, first used, as far as I know, sometime before 1865 by Otto Ludwig, the German playwright, in his reflections on the novel. Applied to the novel, polyphony can only mean the same as “counterpoint,” or “many voices,” or “dramaticity.” Dostoevsky’s works, as the successful dramatizations of his novels by the Stanislavsky troupe show, are built around a series of scenes that often explode in angry quarrels or even in physical violence. He belonged to the strand of the modern novel that proclaimed the ideal of “objectivity,” though he was—in contrast to Flaubert or Henry James—far from dogmatically committed to it. The long narrative expositions and comments of the “chronicler” testify to that. But this power of evoking the most contradictory feelings and ideas does not obscure Dostoevsky’s definite and clearly articulated angle of vision.

Bakhtin’s appeal to relativism, his comparison of Dostoevsky’s world with the Einsteinian universe, is totally unwarranted. Dostoevsky’s ample notebooks and drafts show on every page that he reflected at length on what to say and what to withhold from his characters and that he preserved full control over them. In a review of a play he expressly asserts that “it is too little to display all the given qualities of a character; rather one should resolutely illuminate it by one’s own artistic point of view. An artist must not remain on the same level with the characters he depicts.”

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Bakhtin depicts the Dostoevsky hero as a disembodied consciousness or soul. He says that the hero is “a pure voice, we do not see him, we hear him.” But this is an exaggeration if we think of the Adam’s apple of Fyodor Karamazov, or the curves of Grushenka, or of Myshkin in the railroad carriage, or of many other occasions. Bakhtin is right in saying that Dostoevsky is less interested in the physical world and nature than many other novelists, but to say that in Dostoevsky “there is no objective representation of the environment, of everyday life, of nature, of objects” is again to go too far. We need only think of the images of Petersburg that emerge from his writings (and these images are not only in the minds of his dreamers or of Raskolnikov), or the house of Rogozhin, or of the pictures by Claude Lorrain, Holbein, Raphael, and others described by his narrators, sometimes in minute detail. Similarly, the statement that Dostoevsky’s hero is a “man of
the idea; not a character, not a temperament, not a social or psychological type” is refuted by many exceptions. We are told by Dostoevsky that the Underground Man “is one of the representatives of a generation still living.” In The Possessed, Stefan Trofimovich Verkhovensky is characterized as an old-time sentimental liberal in contrast to his son Peter, the nihilist, a representative of the new generation. Both the Raw Youth and his father, Versilov, are presented as social types. Dostoevsky even held an elaborate theory of literary typology. Nor is it true that in the novels of Dostoevsky “there is no causality, no genesis, no explanations based on the past, on the influences of the environment or of upbringing.” It is sufficient to point to the carefully worked out chronology of The Possessed, or to the accounts of the childhood of the Karamazov brothers, or to the early life of the Raw Youth to see that this is not always so. One need not be an adherent of a simpleminded concept of art as “reflection of reality” to see that Dostoevsky is deeply involved in his place and time, however far he transcended them as an artist of universal appeal, and that his novels were meant to serve very concrete purposes, such as the polemic against nihilism.

One could suspect Bakhtin of embracing this theory in order to make Dostoevsky more acceptable to the authorities in power. And indeed, Anatoli Lunacharsky, the Soviet Commissar of Education just before Bakhtin’s book appeared, praised the first edition; he saw Dostoevsky’s supposed “inability to take a definite ideological stand” as a symptom of an early stage of capitalism. Still, Bakhtin’s view could not have been merely opportunistic. It is based on his commitment to the ideal of objectivity. “If the umbilical cord uniting the hero to his creator is not cut, then what we have is not a work of art but a personal document.” And yet Proust’s great series, most lyrical poetry, and the novels of Sterne, Mann, or even Tolstoy do not cut the umbilical cord, and they cannot be condemned by this criterion. Nor can I see why drama is more controlled by the author and thus “especially monolithic,” as Bakhtin states. Isn’t Shakespeare at least as “polyphonic” as Dostoevsky? We still argue about Shakespeare’s world view, while there cannot be any doubt about Dostoevsky’s, at least in its outlines.

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For Bakhtin, the genres are divided by insuperable barriers, and the novel in particular is in a privileged position. It is the only genre that uses what he calls the “double-voiced” word, a discourse that overtly or implicitly addresses “the other.” One of Bakhtin’s main assumptions is that in the novel in general, and in Dostoevsky’s novels in particular, there is a dialogic relationship that may be contained even within a single utterance, inside an individual word.
Dostoevsky’s discourse thus refers not only to the referential object but to another’s discourse, to someone else’s speech. In chapters commenting on many works of Dostoevsky, particularly *The Double* and *Notes from the Underground*, Bakhtin shows that in Dostoevsky “almost no word is without its intense glance at somebody else’s word.” Some of his examples are passages that can be described as parody, stylization, or what is today called “intertextuality”; some are addresses to imaginary audiences, such as the Underground Man’s irritated speech. All are sensitively analyzed by Bakhtin in order to argue that “the thinking human consciousness and the dialogic sphere in which this consciousness exists” cannot be reached through a monologic artistic approach. Bakhtin criticizes linguistic stylistics for being incapable of coping with the question of dialogue. He calls his method “meta-linguistics,” a misleading term since it implies a metaphysics of human community. Bakhtin alludes to Martin Buber’s “I and thou” he could also have appealed to Schopenhauer’s “I am you.” Bakhtin’s participation in a religious group was apparently one of the reasons why he was persecuted.

In the 1963 edition of *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin’s claim for Dostoevsky’s uniqueness is buttressed by an argument absent from the first edition. In studying Rabelais, Bakhtin discovered the rich world of medieval folk humor and the role of the carnival in medieval life. Their importance was the main theme of his book on Rabelais, which minimized Rabelais’s humanism and scholasticism. The study of medieval popular forms sent Bakhtin back to antiquity, to the so-called “Menippean satire,” the Socratic dialogue, and other genres outside the canon of the drama and heroic epic. Bakhtin calls this entire tradition—which embraces many miscellaneous forms—“menippea” and he emphasizes the impact of “carnivalization,” one of its aspects, on the development of the novel. (This genre concept is very similar to what Northrop Frye calls “Anatomy,” one of his four basic genres of literature.) Bakhtin traces this tradition through its decay in the Enlightenment and claims that Dostoevsky belongs to it. He analyzes two short sketches: *Bobok* (1873), a macabre dialogue of the dead, and *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* (1877), a Utopian vision. He claims them to be “menippeas.” Indeed, “all Dostoevsky’s work has elements of menippea: the Socratic dialogue, the diatribe, the soliloquy, the confession.”

Raskolnikov’s first visit to Sonya is “an almost perfect christianized menippea.” The dream of Svidrigailov before his suicide, Ippolit’s confession, Stavrogin’s visit to Tikhon—all are menippeas. The famous conversation between Ivan and Alyosha in the tavern and “the Legend of the Great Inquisitor” are “remarkable menippeas.” The term becomes so all-inclusive that it allows Bakhtin to describe almost every prominent novelist as “carnivalesque”: Cervantes, Rabelais, Voltaire, Diderot, Sterne, Goethe, E. T. A. Hoffmann—finally, even Balzac, George Sand, and Victor Hugo. And of course Bakhtin finds the carnivalesque all over Dostoevsky: in every scandal scene and in every mass scene, such as the feast in *The Possessed* or the orgy of Dmitri Karamazov in Mokroe before his arrest.

But “carnivalesque” is not a
But “carnivalesque” is not a correct characterization of Dostoevsky’s general tone and attitude, even though we may grant it might fit some scenes in his novels. Bakhtin says that “carnival is a way of sensing the world as one great communal performance,” as “joyful relativity,” but nowhere in Dostoevsky can be found a depiction of collective rapture. There is nothing in Dostoevsky of Rabelais’s corporality, of the lust for life of the Roman *saturnalia*, or the comic exuberance of the Italian *Commedia dell’arte*. Dostoevsky represents rather the opposite of the carnival spirit. He was a man of deep commitments, of profound seriousness, spirituality, and strict ethics, whatever the lapses in his own life.

Bakhtin is oddly enough committed to an almost Platonic conception of the nature of genre. He assumes that there is such an entity as “menippea” and the “carnivalesque” that enters into all kinds of relationships, transforms itself, and combines with other genres but nevertheless preserves its identity throughout history. He speaks of the “essence” of a genre, of Dostoevsky working through “the objective memory of the genre” (whatever that may be); he says that “the menippea has a remarkable capacity to absorb into itself kindred small genres and to penetrate as a component element into other larger genres” and that it “absorbed the diatribe, the soliloquy and the symposium.” We must conclude that Bakhtin has again overstated his case.

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The polyphony of Dostoevsky’s novels is not unique and is misinterpreted if it denies a definite angle of vision to Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky does not belong to the carnivalesque tradition, though there are some occasional similarities. His novels cannot be taken out of the tradition of the European adventure novel (which was rightly emphasized in the first edition of Bakhtin’s book), out of the proximity of Gogol, Dickens, Balzac, and the French sensationalist novelists such as Eugène Sue. Dostoevsky is a great artist, and Bakhtin describes and analyzes some of his specific traits, but “polyphony,” in his sense of extreme neutrality and relativity, and “carnivalesque” are not among them.

This new translation is introduced by Wayne C. Booth, the author of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, in which he argued persuasively against the dogma of objectivity as it was propounded and practiced by Flaubert and Henry James. He defended the frankly subjective novels of Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne, and Jane Austen, who comment freely on characters and situations. Mr. Booth professes to be converted to a new objectivity by Bakhtin’s book. This conversion seems to me quite unnecessary, since Dostoevsky remains a novelist with a single vision, a definite point of
view that cannot be mistaken. That point of view has been expounded by Dimitri Merezhkovsky, Nikolay Berdayev, Konstantin Mochulsky, André Gide, Reinhart Lauth, Vyacheslav Ivanov, and others with only minor disagreements. Bakhtin is right, however, to warn against the danger of reducing Dostoevsky to an ideologist, a propagandist of an abstract creed. If Dostoevsky had expounded his views in treatises, he would appear only as an episodic figure in the history of Russian thought and would be known only to specialists in the West. He created, instead, a world of imagination with a deep insight into human conduct and the perennial condition of man, a world peopled by human beings who are, as Bakhtin argues, speaking to each other and to us intimately and persuasively, speaking of things Dostoevsky cared about and believed in passionately, personally.