Carnival Knowledge

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In *Problems of Dostoyevski's Poetics* Mikhail Bakhtin celebrates Dostoyevski's multi-voiced, dialogical mode and asserts that the deepest realms of consciousness are inaccessible to Tolstoi's single-voiced, monological mode. In the following essay I will first evaluate the distinction he makes between monological and dialogical approaches to fiction, and then determine if I, like Bakhtin, should consider Tolstoi's language of gesture, his obsession with observables, as a sign that vividly portrayed surface in fiction implies superficiality.

I

Whereas Tolstoi's fictional world always stands in relation to a single, unified consciousness—namely, that of Tolstoi's—Dostoyevski, Bakhtin maintains, creates coexistent and unmerged consciousnesses whose unresolved battles or dialogues represent not the mere confrontation of Good and Bad, but the crisis of separate-but-equal consciousness. Bakhtin indirectly accuses Tolstoi of objectifying his heroes, of employing them as pulpits. His heroes evolve; they either do or do not come to understand the implication of the words "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity." For Dostoyevski, however, characters are not partial glimpses or facets of the author's gradually unfolding higher awareness. For example, when Ivan and Alyosha confront each other we are witnessing Dostoyevski's willingness to live with spiritual diversity. The interaction of differing consciousnesses, in fact, is fundamental to what Bakhtin calls Dostoyevski's dialogical mode. Faith and humanistic scepticism tangle in the Capital City tavern on the market square but are not resolved. They are not simply stages in an evolving unified spirit.

Before moving on let me introduce Eikhenbaum's approach so that Tolstoi's monological or single-voiced mode can be fairly contrasted with Dostoyevski's dialogical mode.

Eikhenbaum, in *The Young Tolstoi,* wisely differentiates between artistic creation and psychological process. Because the evolution of

Tolstoi's artistic insight parallels the spiritual evolution his heroes undergo in the course of their fictional lives, Eikhenbaum chronicles the writer's preoccupation with himself as reflected in his diaries. The Tolstoi we are shown is fascinated by organization. The diaries overflow with classifications, rules of conduct, schedules and lists. Nascent forms of the sustained monologue techniques are found in the experimental sketches and studies of psychic states. The impression one gets is of a writer extremely self-conscious of the effectiveness—and inadequacy—of his own methodology.

Tolstoi's monological approach, Bakhtin asserts, means that he does not engage in dialogues with his characters, does not let them respond to the author's point-of-view. But Tolstoi intentionally cultivates an authorial stance which accommodates what he perceived as objective observation of gesture and environment. He is not a narrator who

> links himself with his heros in one
> way or another, but an out-
> sider, a sharp-sighted observer . . . [1]

He uses a "peepshow" technique by which details of movement, gesture, and intonation are rendered serially, and without any apparent emotional shading. Eikhenbaum explains Tolstoi's emphasis on elaboration of detail, description and portrayal of people and things—all of which follow from his obsession with self-observation and self-experimentation—as an attempt to free himself from the strictures of his literary heritage. Tolstoi's development of the technique of bestrangement (making us see the familiar in light of its components) was possible because of his refusal to engage in dialogues with his characters: he bestranges our notion of "courage," for example, when he shows us cossacks who have simply gotten up when they can't. Tolstoi speaks *about* such men, not *with* them.

Tolstoi's world is always bigger then his characters'. They can die, achieve, as Bakhtin puts it, a finalization, because a larger world—Tolstoi's—will continue to exist. But death in the Tolstoyan sense is foreign to Dostoyevski's world. He places his individual consciousnesses in crisis, both with themselves and with others and emphasizes the ensuing dialogue rather than the promised land of universal unified truth. For him self-consciousness is the most basic element of human existence, and interaction and debate between world views the most potentially illuminating. Death throws a wet blanket over the possibility of dialogue for Dostoyevski, while for Tolstoi it is nature's way of saying "Hi." Tolstoi tends to dwell on concrete description be-

cause for him, people are wise or foolish, real or artificial according to what they invest with value. Death often catches his characters by surprise. They are wrenched from their engagement with things and people and fall helplessly backwards into their own mortality.

When Bakhtin claims with self-satisfaction in *Problems of Dostoyevski's Poetics* that Dostoyevski depicts life on the brink of madness, despair, or self-dereliction, and, by inference, that Tolstoi does not bring his characters to the very edge of moral precipices, we need only to read Tolstoi's handling of Avdeev's death (in *Hadji Murad)*, or Ivan Ilych's, or Alyosha the Pot's to sense the limitation of this analysis. Like the black backing on a mirror, Tolstoi—whether or not he brings his people to the brink of death—is always projecting his characters' self-importance, vanity and ambition against the fact of death. The journey a Tolstoyan character makes through the course of a novel, then, is really a journey across a widened brink. Knowing that he will die, Tolstoi, the omniscient author, asks himself, "How shall I live?" His heroes struggle consciously or unconsciously with that question, while his fools squander their mortal lives, ascribe value to the temporary and artificial, stray from what Tolstoi felt was an intuitive understanding of wisdom and goodness.

Because in Dostoyevski's polyphonic novels many voices and points of view exist simultaneously, he is neither "with" Alyosha Karamazov nor "against" Alyosha's brother, Ivan. His point of view does not hover majestically and knowingly above his characters' fictional struggles. He dramatizes the evolution of spiritual insight simultaneously rather than consecutively. Whereas Tolstoi's Pierre (in *War and Peace)* moves through periods of scepticism and faith, Dostoyevski places the sceptical Ivan and the faithful Alyosha in dialogue with one another, allowing him to condense the intra- and inter-consciousness warfare which for him characterize psychic life. To stage the contradictions inherent in all individual consciousnesses, why not (Dostoyevski seems to have asked himself) let characters figuratively and even literally encounter themselves? Just as Tolstoi's unrelieved omniscience gives birth to descriptive and bestranging techniques designed to focus our attention on those objects, events and enterprises we have either foolishly or wisely deemed important, so does Dostoyevski's impulse to see the stages of spiritual growth side by side—in space rather than through time—cause his characters to engage in dialogues with their doubles. Wishing to compress the greatest amount of spiritual diversity within the briefest amount of time, Dostoyevski tends to gather his characters into group scenes. Because these scenes corral forces in opposition to one another—I am thinking, for example, of Father Zossima's cell in *The Brothers Karamazov* and Marmeladov's funeral

feast—they usually terminate in confusion and discord. I would now like to discuss the nature and form of these recurrent chaotic arenas wherein we find Dostoyevski's most memorable dialogues.

II

Dostoyevski uses the dialogue not as a temporary battleground between the true and the less true, but as a forum for bringing into play the contradictory, incongruous impulses which he deemed representative of our warring psychic states. Bakhtin suggests that Dostoyevski consciously used a literary form of the *carnival* because it so perfectly lends itself to his vision of the clamorous soul of man.

A carnival is a pageant, a ritualistic dissolving of the social structures ordinarily maintaining the order of things. The cynosure of the carnival is the mock crowning, a ceremony which unites the elements of the carnival by celebrating what Bakhtin terms the "jolly relativity" of every system and order.[2] In the Middle Ages, and especially during the Renaissance, fools were handed symbolic scepters and mantled in royal cloaks in recognition of the ultimate ambivalence of crowning any man, of placing anyone in a position of power. Noblemen and peasants mingled in the carnival square; rulers watched joyously as the ruled strutted clownishly in overlarge crowns. Because these newly appointed "kings" and "popes" were soon de-throned (to the great delight of the crowd), the ritual acknowledges the antinomious nature of all things. Crowning and denunciation are unified. The whole unfolding process of acquiring, maintaining and losing power (by death or revolution) is crystalized in the crowning-discrowning ritual. The seeds of condemnation are embedded in the praise.

Carnivalistic imagery enshrines the absurd ambivalence of all things:

> Paired images, chosen for contrast . . . and for similarity (doubles and twins) are characteristic of the carnival mode of thinking. . . . The utilization of things in reverse is also characteristic, i.e., putting on clothing inside out, trousers on the head, dishes in place of headgear, the use of household utensils as weapons, etc.[3]

In carnivalistic *mésalliances,* all things normally kept isolated—the holy and the lowly, the wise and the stupid—are encouraged to merge.

There are two other aspects of the canival which are relevant to my discussion. The first, *profanation,* has its roots in the Menippean satire: all that is considered proper in terms of etiquette and behavior is violated, debased, made incongruous and absurd. The second, *carnival laughter,* gives voice to the mockery and ridicule of compartmentalized social, moral, and psychological modes of existence.

Scenes with carnival overtones occur often in Dostoyevski's work.

Rooms, religious cells, taverns—the enclosed areas in which Dostoyevski masses his characters—can be seen as carnival squares, historically the main arena for rituals of carnivalistic *mésalliance,* mock crowning, and profanation. Gathered in Marmelodov's rooms the characters make a travesty of the funeral banquet. Death is celebrated with dissidence and mad laughter. *Crime and Punishment* echoes with carnivalistic laughter. After the tradesman accuses Raskolnikov of being a killer, Raskolnikov re-enacts his murder of the old woman in a dream—only this time, laughter and death are juxtaposed. The woman laughs as Raskolnikov strikes her. A crowd appears. Raskolnikov—a man who would be king, a man testing his ability to stand beside Napoleon as a "superman"—is mocked by the people's silent rebuke. In the midst of death and murder rises incongruous laughter, and a self-crowned "king" is deposed.

In a sense, then, all of Dostoyevski's work is a carnival of the soul where reason and instinct, like the noblemen and peasants of the Middle Ages who flocked to the carnival, are not resolved or conjoined but look upon, mock and mingle with each other.

Truth existed for Tolstoi, and he looked for ways to embody and demonstrate the evolutionary process of achieving that truth. Just as all life stands in relation to the single and ultimate fact of death, so did Tolstoi stand in relation to his fictional world. His narrative omniscience about his characters' lives reflects his awareness of death's inevitable demand. Because we all stand in the shadow of one large truth, it is natural for him to contrast his characters with this single fact. In this sense is Tolstoi "monological." Even as Tolstoi's characters endure moments of psychological reassessment and reflection, the fact of death is all the while tapping them on the shoulder.

With its description and monologues and analyses, Tolstoi's fictional world seems less rich somehow than Dostoyevski's dark carnival. But if Tolstoi's explorations appear superficial, are concerned with observables, it is because his artistic process and authorial vantage mimic our way of living with and relating to what we see around us: by vividly creating a sweeping world of significant things, he is asking us to consider how we ourselves have chosen to live in this world of people and events. We inform the world of "real" things with our souls. In Hadji Murad's large, animal-like eyes we perceive naturalness and nobility just as clearly as we see arrogance and distasteful artificiality in Napoleon's soft white hands. Tolstoi once said that he was one of those writers for whom the "real" world exists. Perhaps this was his warning to us never to overlook the fascinating surface for the mere depths.

[1] Eikhenbaum, Boris, *The Young Tolstoi* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1972), p. 48

[2] Bakhtin, Mikhail, *The Problems of Dostoevski's Poetics* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1973), p. 102

[3] Bakhtin, p. 104