

The Polyphony of Trinity in Bakhtin

The term polyphony comes into Bakhtin's writings only with his first book on Dostoevsky, *Problemy tvorchestva Dostoevskogo* (PTD), published in 1929. In the unpublished and incomplete manuscripts that survive from this period, most of which were brought out only posthumously, the term is absent.

In his foreword to the Dostoevsky book, Bakhtin singles out the symbolist poet and classical philologist, Vyacheslav Ivanov, as the first scholar who perceived the basic structural feature of Dostoevsky's artistic universe. In his article, "Dostoevsky and the Tragedy Novel" (1911), Ivanov had defined Dostoevsky's realism as a "realism based not on cognition (objectified cognition)," but on "penetration":

To "affirm someone else's "I" —"thou art" — is a task that, according to Ivanov, Dostoevsky's characters must successfully accomplish if they are to overcome their ethical solipsism, their disunited, "idealistic" consciousness, and transform the other person from a shadow into an authentic reality." (PTD, 16; PDP, 10)

What Ivanov described as "principle governing Dostoevsky's worldview" — the "thou art" — Bakhtin redefined as the *principle of form* in Dostoevsky's novels, implicitly rejecting Ivanov's definition of Dostoevsky's form as "tragedy novel" (roman tragediia). And, as recently pointed out by Sergei Bocharov, it was through his critique of Ivanov's definition that Bakhtin arrived at his own idea of Dostoevsky's "polyphonic novel" (Bocharov 2000, 436). Yet, according to the Japanese Dostoevsky scholar, Sadaesy Igeta, Ivanov may have played a positive role here, too. In Ivanov's article, "Two principles in contemporary symbolism" (1908), "musical polyphony" is defined as corresponding to the aesthetics of the transitional period between the "unison" art of the Middle Ages and the "monologue" of post-Renaissance modernity: "In the polyphonic choir, every participant is individual and subjective, as it were. However, the harmonious restitution

of consonant order affirms to the full the objective intentionality of an apparent dissonance [...] But the epoch of subjectivism declares itself through its struggle for musical monologue, and the invention of the clavichord and the piano is a purely idealistic replacement of the symphonic effect by the effect of an individual monologue, retired into itself and by itself alone reproducing the whole multivoiced abundance of universal harmony" (Bocharov 2000, 436).

As Bocharov rightly concludes, "the author of PTD inherited from this construction not only the concepts of polyphony and monologue, but also an understanding of them as principles of different epochal worldview" (Bocharov 2000, 346). Consequently, in M.M.B., the principles of the "monologic world" are the "principles of the entire ideological culture of modern times," which he, like Ivanov, associates with the principles of philosophical idealism. Against this, Bakhtin develops his theory of Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel as an adequate aesthetic expression of the novelist's *ontologic realism*.

At the beginning of the 1920s, when Bakhtin was already working on his Dostoevsky book, he was also trying to formulate a phenomenological theory of aesthetics, referred to by the Russian Bakhtin scholar I. N. Fridman as the "Aesthetics of complementment. The study was never completed, but large parts of it survived in manuscripts and have been published posthumously as independent essays and translated into a number of western languages (Bakhtin 1975, 1978). In the following I shall go more deeply into one of these essays, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" (AH), (Bakhtin 1990, 4-256).

Discussing the aesthetic relationship at the base of Bakhtin's theory, Fridman defines it as the "concrete outsideness of me myself and the outsideness-for-me of all other human beings" (AH 23). This aspect of being escapes objective, generalising cognition, but is, Fridman claims, fully accessible to phenomenological contemplation. On the basis of this contemplation a terminological triade is formulated: outsideness, excess of seeing, consummation. With the help of these concepts Bakhtin constructs his model of the aesthetic act. My outsideness in relation to "the other" guarantees an excess of seeing with whose help I consummate this "other,"

i. e. “gives birth to him as a new human being on a new plane of existence” (AH 14). Consummation is understood as “aesthetic salvation”: art “finds an emotional equivalent for what is transient in the world . . . an emotional equivalent that gives life to this transient being and safeguards it (AH 191). Insofar as Bakhtin makes a distinction between soul (“I experience the inner life of another as his *soul*) and spirit (within myself, I live in the *spirit*) (AH 110) the following key statement may be called his “phenomenology of the spirit”: “The form of my life-from-within is conditioned by my rightful folly or insanity of *not coinciding* — of not coinciding *in principle* — with me myself as a given . . . I live by eternal faith and hope in the constant possibility of the inner miracle of a new birth . . . I know that in the other as well there is the same insanity of in principle not coinciding . . . Yet . . . I am situated outside him, and the last, consummating word belongs to me (AH 127, 128). The essence of the matter is expressed in Bakhtin’s formulation: “What I must be for the other, God is for me” (Bakhtin 1990, 56) (Fridman 1992, 52ff.).

In his lectures on the philosophy of religion, given in 1924, i. e. at the time when he was working on AH, Bakhtin discusses prayer, ritual, repentance and hope as a special type of dialogic forms requiring a set towards a transcendent Third addressee. Citing New-Testament parable about the righteous Publican he maintains that:

Where, for moral consciousness, there are two persons, — for religious consciousness there is a *third* one: a possible someone who evaluates. Consider the Publican who is right in religious terms, in the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee in Luke 18:9-14. Let us imagine that he would render the justification of himself immanent. If he did so, he would immediately become unrighteous. Thus, his justification is possible only by an incarnated Third One. Meanwhile, the Pharisee absorbed this Third consciousness *into himself*, whereas the Publican dismantled the possible myth about himself through the Third One.” (Bakhtin 1992, 235; 2001).¹

¹ My own reading and translation of the text differs from that of Vadim Liapunov (Bakhtin 2001, 208) in the understanding of the last sentence, where Liapunov has “unsealed” instead of my “dismantled.”

In his book from 1997, *Corporeal Words: Mikhail Bakhtin's Theology of Discourse*, Alexandar Mihailovic notes that "as people have intuited, there is much in Bakhtin's criticism that does indeed lend itself to theological paradigms: his conceptions of dialogue and polyphony seemingly resonant with trinitarian unity within diversity and the notion of embodied social discourse highly suggestive of an incarnational model" (Mihailovic, 1997, 1).

What then, is the core of trinitarian theology? Let us very briefly go back to the first and the fourth Ecumenical Councils in order to recall how they defined the nature of the Trinity.

At the he first council, held in Nicaea in 325, the consubstantiality (Greek, *homoousia*; Latin, *consubstantio*; Russian, *edinosushchie* of Christ the Son with God was declared. Christ is *one in essence* with the Father, no demigod or superior creature, but "true God from true God," as it says in the creed drawn up by the council, "begotten not made, *one in essence* with the Father."

The work of the Nicaean Council was continues by the second Ecumenical Council, held at Constantinople in 381. Thanks to the efforts of the Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory of Nazianzus (?329-?90), his friend, Basil the Great (?330-79), and Basil's brother, Gregory of Nyssa (died 394), it was now possible to expand the teachings of Nicaea, in particular with regard to the divinity of the Holy Spirit, whom the Cappadocians insisted was God even as the Father and Son are God. While the Nicaean Fathers, first and foremost Athanasius of Alexandria, had emphasised the unity of God – Father and Son are one in essence (*ousia*) – the Cappadocians stressed God's threeness – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three persons (*hypostaseis*). Preserving the delicate balance between the threeness and the oneness in God, they were able to give full meaning to the classic summary of Trinitarian doctrine: *three persons in one essence*.

The next important stage in the development of Greek theology came at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, traditionally regarded as the fourth. Here, the bishops stated their belief in "one and the same Son, perfect in Godhead and perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man ...

acknowledged *in two natures* unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the difference between the natures is in no way removed because of the union, but rather the peculiar property of the nature is preserved, and both combine in one person and in one *hypostasis*" (Ware 1980, 34).

A similar insistence on union without confusion is found in the trinitarian theology of the Orthodox Fathers. The Holy Trinity, according to Timothy Ware, quoting Gregory of Nazianzus and John of Damascus, "is a mystery of unity in diversity, and of diversity in unity. Father, Son, and Spirit are 'one in essence' (*homoousios*), yet each is distinguished from the other two by its personal characteristics. 'The divine is indivisible in its divisions', for the persons are 'united yet not confused, distinct yet not divided; 'both the distinction and the union alike are paradoxical'" (Ware 1980, 219).

In the passages from Orthodox christology and trinitarian theology cited above, we find a number of terms that we recognise from Bakhtin's writings, words such as "unconfusedly," Russ. *neslitno*, inseparably, Russ. *nerazdel'no*, "indivisible," Russ. *nerazdelimo*, etc. In addition, I should like to include the Greek term *perikhoresis*, Russ. *vzaimoproniknovenie*, which we today translate as "interpenetration." It was taken over by Gregory of Nazianzus from the Stoicist legacy in the meaning of the passing through, coextension, or interpenetration of physical bodies at all points of each other (Wolfson, 1970, 418-21). Interpenetration or "*vzaimoproniknovenie*," is another of the theological terms frequently used by Bakhtin.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Chalcedonian "interrelational paradigm" turns up in Russian theology, philosophy, and aesthetics. For Bakhtin, the philosopher Vladimir Solovyov's use of Chalcedonian terminology seems to have been particularly important.

According to Mihailovic, the Chalcedonian paradigm is found in several of Solovyov's writings. In "The General Meaning of Art" he talks about the "impenetrability" (*nepronitsaemost'*) of egoism which he contrasts to an ideal state of "interpenetrability" (*vzaimo-pronitsaemost'*), where individuals find themselves in others and each sees himself in everybody

else (*vse nakhodiat sebja v kazhdom, i kazhdyi — vo vsekh drugikh*) (Mihailovic 1997, 129).

In 1979, four years after Bakhtin's death, his executor, Sergei G. Bocharov, edited and published a collection of his manuscripts under the general title of *Éstetika slovesnogo tvorchestva* (*The Aesthetics of Verbal Art*) (Bakhtin 1979). The longest of the manuscripts, supposed to have been written during the first half of the 1920s, was given the title of "Avtor i geroi v èsteticheskoi deyatel'nosti." It was translated into English as "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" (in the following AH) and published in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (Bakhtin 1990).

Already here, the commentators, Sergei Averintsev and Sergei Bocharov, emphasise the close link between AH and Bakhtin's *Problemy tvorchestva Dostoevskogo* (*Problems in Dostoevsky's Art*), published in 1929, but according to the author written four or five years earlier (Bakhtin 1997).

The close relationship between the two texts is again stressed by Bocharov in his commentaries to *Problems in Dostoevsky's Art* (henceforward PTD) in vol. 2 of the collected works.

In AH, Bakhtin states at the very beginning that he is first going to examine "the necessary foundation of the author-hero relationship," then "outline some of the modes and types of its individuation," and, finally, verify his conclusions "by an analysis of this relationship in works by Dostoevsky, Pushkin, and others" (AH 4). However, the manuscript of AH abruptly ends with "The problem of author and hero in Russian literature." After the heading there is nothing but blank pages. (Bocharov 2000, 447).

One may guess, Bocharov argues, that the unwritten chapter was meant to be a reworking of an already existing tekst about Dostoevsky which would have represented a theoretical alternative to the conception lying at the basis of AH, that this turned out to be too problematic, and that Bakhtin instead decided to develop his alternative theory in a more fundamental way by drawing on all the new material that had accumulated during the 1920s, not least in connection with the Dostoevsky

jubilee in 1921. The result of this elaboration is, according to Bocharov, the Dostoevsky book of 1929.

Whether we accept or not Bocharov's reconstruction of the Entstehungsgeschichte of the PTD, is not the point here. What is important, is his idea of the PTD as both a continuation and an alternative of the AH.

Fundamental to Bakhtin's definition of the person, is his insistence on the *non*-fusion of self and other. In AH, this opposition is formulated as the opposition between an "I-for-myself" (how my inner potential looks and feels to my own consciousness), and "I-for-the-other," and "the-other-for-me" (how others experience my external behaviour, and I theirs) (AH, esp. 22-25). In the second chapter of AH, "The Spatial Form of the Hero," Bakhtin introduces his concept of *excess of seeing*:

When I contemplate a whole human being who is situated outside and over against me, our concrete, actually experienced horizons do not coincide. For at each given moment, regardless of the position and the proximity of this other human being whom I am contemplating, I shall always see and know something that he, from his place outside and against me, cannot see himself: parts of his body that are inaccessible to his won gaze (his head, his face and its expression); the world behind his back, and a whole series of objects and relations, which in any of our mutual relations are accessible to me but not to him. As we gaze at each other, two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes. . . .

This ever-present *excess* of my seeing, knowing, and possessing in relation to any other human being is founded in the uniqueness and irreplaceability of my place in the world. For only I — the one and only I — occupy in a given set of circumstances this particular place at this particular time; all other human beings are situated outside me. (AH 193-194)

In AH, however, as Caryl Emerson has noted, aesthetic activity is not seen exclusively in spatial terms: "artistic visualization of whatever sort works within two parameters created by the artist at the outset: a spatial world with its evaluative centre in a living body and a temporal world with its evaluative center in a soul" (Emerson 1997, 210). In giving form to

the soul, to the inner life of another person, the artist also works from outside:

on the boundaries of *inner life*, i. e. at the point where the soul is inwardly turned ('adverted') to *the outside* of itself. . . . The other's inner experiences (his joy, anguish, desire, strivings, and, finally, his directedness to meaning), even if they are not manifested in anything external (are not uttered, are not reflected in his face or in the expression of his eyes, but are only surmised or guessed by me from the context of his life) — all these experiences are found by me *outside* my own inner world, outside my *I-for-myself* (even where I experience them in some way, they are not imputed to me as mine); *for me*, they are located in *being* — they are constituents of the *other's* axiological existence. (AH 101-102)

In Bakhtin's description of the aesthetic construction of the living body and soul of the other, we find, as Bocharov points out, a remarkable combination of Christian concepts with "plastic-pictorial," sculptural characteristics of the aesthetic achievement (Bocharov, 2000, 449-450). Not only the special activity of the author-artist, Bakhtin argues:

but my own aesthetic activity, in my one-and-only life, undifferentiated and not disengaged from non-aesthetic factors, contains within itself syncretically the seed, as it were, of creative plastic images, and finds expression in a number of irreversible actions that issue from within myself and affirm the other axiologically in respect to those features which constitute his outward consummatedness: such actions, for example, as embracing, kissing, or "overshadowing" him. (AH 41)

The English "overshadowing" a translation of Russian "osenenie," one of several concepts Bakhtin has taken over from Orthodox theology and introduced into AH. Another example is the concept of "excess of seeing," which coincides with the concept of "aesthetic grace" in a way that reminds us, as Bocharov points out, of the "exceeding grace" in 2 Cor. 9: 14 (Bocharov 2000, 449). One may wonder whether this is a translation of Christian theological and anthropological concepts into aesthetic and even poetic categories, or, on the contrary, a translation of aesthetics into the language of Christian theology and anthropology, when, for instance, the author-hero relationship is described as "the relationship of a gift to a need; of an act of freely granted forgiveness to a transgression; of an act of grace to a sinner" (AH 90) (Bocharov 2000, 449). This *creative* reaction of the

author, the *other*, to the hero and his life, Bakhtin calls “aesthetic love.”

The immediate sources of Bakhtin’s concept of *aesthetic love* were the writings of the neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen. But as with most concepts taken over from contemporary philosophy by Bakhtin, this concept, too, acquired a new meaning in his context. In Bakhtin, it is closely associated with the idea of “sin” and “redemption.” Bocharov argues that Bakhtin’s idea of redemption was a response to N. A. Berdyaev’s much-discussed book, *Smysl tvorchestva* (*The Meaning of Creation*) (1916), where *creation* and *redemption* are regarded as irreconcilable antinomies (Bocharov, 2000, 448). In contrast to Berdyaev, Bakhtin sees creation and redemption as one and the same task. To Bakhtin, who in AH writes that heroes are “saved and redeemed by aesthetic salvation,” redemption is “the meaning of creation.” Asking, how Bakhtin could arrive at this “distinctively Orthodox” understanding of redemption, Bocharov suggests that it may have been brought about by the particular intuition of being as the “given,” and as “in principle sinful.” It is possible, according to Bocharov, that this intuition goes back to the young Bakhtin’s reading of Kierkegaard (Bocharov 2000, 449). In AH, the hero is redeemed from this state of sinfulness through the loving activity of the *other*.

the idea of grace as the bestowal — from outside — of a lovingly merciful acceptance and justification of the given, as of that which is in principle sinful, and, therefore, cannot be surmounted from within itself. This includes the associated idea of confession (total and utter penitence) and absolution. From within my own penitence, there is negation of the whole of myself; from outside myself (God is the other), there is loving mercy and restoration. In himself, a human being can only repent; and only the other can give absolution” (AH 57).

The designation in this passage from AH of God as the other, has to be seen in the light of another passage from the same text, where Bakhtin underlines that “even God had to incarnate himself in order to bestow mercy, to suffer, and to *forgive* — had to descend as it were, from the abstract standpoint of justice,” in order to “assume a unique place in the

unitary event of being” (Bakhtin 1990, 129). In the Christ of the Gospels, we find, Bakhtin asserts:

a synthesis of unique depth, the synthesis of *ethical solipsism* (man’s infinite severity towards himself, i. e. an immaculately pure relationship to oneself) with *ethical-aesthetic* kindness toward the other. For the first time, there appeared an infinitely deepened *I-for-myself* — not a cold *I-for-myself*, but one of boundless kindness toward the other; an *I-for-myself* that renders full justice to the other as such, disclosing and affirming the other’s axiological distinctiveness in all its fullness. . . Hence, in all of Christ’s norms the I and the *other* are contraposed: for myself — absolute sacrifice, for the other — loving mercy. But the *I-for-myself* is the *other* for God. . . . What I must be for the other, God is for me. (Bakhtin 1990, 56)

The final argument of this passage is amplified at a later stage in AH, where Bakhtin speaks of the inner life of another as his *soul*, whereas “within myself I live in the *spirit*” (AH 110). Spirit is the soul “experienced from within” (AH 53). The soul, in another formulation, is “spirit-that-has-not-yet-actualized-itself as it is reflected in the loving consciousness of another (another human being, God) (AH 111).

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