

## ***Bakhtin on poetry, epic, and the novel: Behind the façade***

Sergeiy Sandler. 128<sup>th</sup> MLA Convention, Boston, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

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Interpreting the work of a thinker is rarely a straightforward task. Still, Mikhail Bakhtin's writings, more than those of most 20<sup>th</sup>-century authors, pose significant methodological challenges for their reader, challenges which have misled many a scholar.

Bakhtin's difficulty stems from a convergence of several factors, some have to do with the cultural traditions to which he belonged, while others resulted from the political environment in which he lived and worked; some are extraneous to his own writings (caused by editors, publishers, translators), while others are intrinsic to the way he writes.

Since our panel deals with Bakhtin and poetry, I would like to focus in this talk on one particular group of misconceptions that is quite widespread in the literature on Bakhtin, at least in English-speaking countries. The misconception in question is about Bakhtin's use of extended conceptual contrasts, such as the one between poetry and the novel, discussed in the second chapter of "Discourse in the Novel" or the closely related contrast between epic and novel. Of these two examples I would actually like to focus more on the latter, because it allows bringing more colorful evidence, but everything I will be saying here will equally be applying to the contrast between novel and poetry, which is our more immediate topic today.

The longest and most developed discussion Bakhtin devoted to the contrast between epos and novel appears in a paper titled "The Novel as a Literary Genre," based on a lecture delivered at the Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow in March 1941. Plans to publish the paper as a chapter in a collected volume fell through because of the War. The paper was published in 1970 with some omissions (crucially, without its original opening paragraph) under the title "Эпос и роман (о методологии исследования романа)", reprinted in Bakhtin's first (posthumous) collection of papers in 1975, and translated into English under the title "Epic and Novel." In volume 3 of Bakhtin's collected writings, the article is reproduced in full, under its original title, together with Bakhtin's lecture notes and a record of the discussion that followed the lecture.

To summarize the distinction Bakhtin makes in this article in brief (and somewhat simplistically), the epic and the novel are presented as radically different from one another in their representation and evaluation of time. While the epos recounts and valorizes the events of the heroic past, separated from the present time—the time of the epic poet and his contemporaries—by an absolute distance, the novel takes place in the author's and readers' present time, and valorizes the future.

Now, this contrast between epos and novel drew some fire from, mostly Western, commentators for being too rigid, and especially for damning epic poetry as a whole with some characteristics found, at most, only in Homer (to be fair, some members of the audience of Bakhtin's original lecture seemed to have exhibited a similar misunderstanding). Bakhtin's discussion of poetry received a similar treatment: I think most of us here have come across papers, whose authors find dialogic, polyphonic, or novelistic features in this or that poem, epic or lyric, and claim this to be a counterexample to, or refutation of, Bakhtin's thesis. Scholars have imputed to Bakhtin a "theory of poetry," and had then criticized that theory; one author called it "somewhere between naïve and outrageous" (Scanlon 1).<sup>1</sup>

But, as I shall now explain, such critiques, while perhaps serving the purposes of their authors in developing their own theses, miss Bakhtin's point. When contrasting between epos and novel, Bakhtin clearly does not mean to offer a general characterization of all epic poems on the one hand and of all novels on the other. Similarly, when contrasting the novel and poetry, Bakhtin is not thereby offering a theory of poetry.

Bakhtin has no problem referring to the novel genre itself as a sub-category of the epos on several occasions, including in the discussion that followed the lecture in which he introduced the contrast between the two:

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Stephen Pierson for bringing that nice quote to my attention.

[In my lecture] I have in mind the epopee as an absolutely real historical genre. I have in mind, first and foremost, Homer, as far as antiquity goes, but not quite epos in general. *The novel is an epopee too.* The epic sequence includes the epopee, the novel, and a whole series of other genres, which at times tend toward the epopee, and at other times—toward the novel (Bakhtin, “The Novel as a Literary Genre—Discussion,” *Collected Writings* 3: 647, emphasis added).<sup>2</sup>

Nor did Bakhtin have any qualms when he changed the title of his book on Dostoevsky to *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.

Bakhtin also brings examples of *novelized* literature and does so in the very lecture in question. These examples include: “Drama (for example Ibsen, Hauptmann, the whole of Naturalist drama), epic poetry [*poema*] for example, *Childe Harold* and especially Byron's *Don Juan*), even lyric poetry (as an extreme example, Heine's lyrical verse)” (Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel” 5–6; Russian Original: “The Novel as a Literary Genre”, *Collected Writings* 3: 611).

Indeed, almost all particular examples of the epic Bakhtin analyzes are noted for their *deviation* from the essence of the epos. Thus, *The Tale of Igor's Campaign* and *The Song of Roland*, and even Hesiod, are said in his notes from the early 1940s to play a role in “The process of the epopee's disintegration and the creation of new epic genres.”<sup>3</sup> The only “pure” example of an epos that Bakhtin discusses is, as we just saw, the Homeric epos. But then he also adds the following:

As for the completeness [*zavershennost'*] of this epopee, let me say that I know no work more perfect than Homer's epopee. I am a passionate fan of it, I know it by heart, and no novel can bring me one percent of the pleasure I derive from this epopee (Bakhtin, “The Novel as a Literary Genre—Discussion,” *Collected Writings* 3: 647).

Which refutes the commonly-held view that Bakhtin, who was as keen as any Soviet intellectual to cite and analyze poems and poets, somehow had a preference of personal taste for the novel over the epic or poetry in general. Moreover, in another context he remarks: “There are almost no immortal novels (without caveats – only Rabelais, with caveats—Cervantes and Dostoevsky)” (Bakhtin, “On the Stylistics of the Novel,” *Collected Writings* 5: 139).

What's going on here? To understand this, we should first realize the purpose Bakhtin pursues by making such contrasts. Focusing on the contrast between epos and novel, we can first of all now reconstruct the scholarly context in which this contrast was made. As the working notes published in Bakhtin's *Collected Writings* (3: 557+, 583+) show, the lecture in question grew out of a critical discussion of a claim made in the mid 1930s by Georg Lucács, who, following a remark made by Hegel, argued that the novel is a bourgeois epos, i.e. that it is somehow capitalist society's equivalent of what the epos was for earlier social formations.<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin, of course, felt he had to stress the essential *functional* difference between the two genres.

This is not to say that the contrast between epos and novel can just be restricted to the context of this specific debate with Lucács. Bakhtin clearly uses this contrast to make a

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<sup>2</sup> All translations from Bakhtin's *Collected Writings* are my own (when there is a published English translation, it is cited directly). For the original Russian, see: (Bakhtin, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, *Sobranie sochinenii*).

<sup>3</sup> Here's the quote in its original context: “The process of the epopee's disintegration and the creation of new epic genres. The role of Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, of *The Song of Roland* and of *The Tale of Igor's Campaign* in this process. Elements of narrowly-literary and generally-ideological polemics (religious, political). *The Tale of Igor's Campaign* is not a song of victory, but a song of defeat (as is *The Song of Roland*). For this reason it contains significant elements of slander and opprobrium (the defeat in question is not of the enemy, but of one's own side)” (Bakhtin, “*The Tale of Igor's Campaign* in the History of the Epopee,” *Collected Writings* 5: 39).

<sup>4</sup> For the relevant references and further discussion, see Sergey Bocharov's and Vadim Liapunov's commentary to these notes, in Bakhtin, *Collected Writings* 3:809.

broader point. But as the now recovered opening paragraph of Bakhtin's lecture paper clearly shows (and as is also clear from several points in the discussion that followed the lecture), this broader point he is making is a *philosophical* point. He describes his lecture as a contribution to what he calls "the philosophy of genres."<sup>5</sup>

But then as a philosopher, Bakhtin is working in a distinctly continental, and specifically German, tradition, which significantly reflects on his understanding of genre and of typology more generally. Typology, in this tradition, is not a matter of classification or categorization, but rather a historical or archaeological affair. Bakhtin draws this contrast himself, when replying to a comment on his lecture: "The genre of the category often betrays us precisely in the places in which the most interesting elements reveal themselves to the historian" (Bakhtin, "The Novel as a Literary Genre—Discussion," *Collected Writings* 3: 653).

So, when characterizing the epos and the novel in the way he does, Bakhtin does not make statements that aim to be descriptively correct of all epic works or of all novels. To describe what he *does* aim at he sometimes uses the term *первофеномен*, a Russian rendition of the German term *Urpheänomen*, usually translated to English as "archetypal phenomenon" (or just "archetype"), which originates in Goethe's scientific works. An archetype in this sense is rather a principle of development, expressed in different ways and to different degrees in members of a given category of phenomena, than a direct characterization of the phenomena or the category. It is not so much that a particular literary work *is* an epos or *is* a novel; rather, it can follow, to some degree, and always in its own unique way, the "logic" of the epos or that of the novel (or even of both, in different respects).

Moreover, again, Bakhtin was interested not so much in the study of genres *per se*, as he was in the philosophical import of that study. In a text from the mid-1940s, Bakhtin notes: "The archetypal phenomenon of poetic discourse is *the name*. The archetypal phenomenon of prosaic discourse is *the nickname*" (Bakhtin, "Additions and Changes to the *Rabelais* Book," *Collected Writings* 5: 103, emphasis in the original). But, looking at Bakhtin's discussion of the name and the nickname—another contrast—in the context of which this aphorism appears, we can see that he characterizes the name and the nickname in terms of the basic *tones* of praise and invective, which are, according to Bakhtin, the basic building blocks of a person's evaluation of the world, and especially of a person's relation to others. This in turn leads back to the architectonics of self—other relations, first discussed in Bakhtin's explicitly philosophical works from the 1920s. So, in the end, the contrast between poetry and novel serves to illustrate and develop aspects of Bakhtin's original philosophy.

Summing up, the notion that there should be something contrary to Bakhtin's own position in talking about dialogic poems may largely reflect a misunderstanding, an extension to Bakhtin's texts of some reading habits that we developed for coping with scholarly works belonging to our own academic environment. And I'm not only talking about the fact that our publish-or-perish world rewards taking cheap shots at our colleagues, ignoring complexities in their positions. Bakhtin belongs to an intellectual tradition that Anglo-American academia had always had difficulty understanding, and moreover, Bakhtin's own focus was on many issues that fall exactly into our blind spots.

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<sup>5</sup> Here's the opening paragraph in full: "Genre theory, as a historically systematizing science, should rely on a *philosophy* of poetic kinds and genres. But, regretfully, we do not have such a philosophy, which would satisfy the demands of Marxism-Leninism and of the current state of literary science, with all the richness of historical material that it has accumulated. Hegel's philosophy of genres cannot satisfy us, not only due to its idealism, but also as a result of the limitedness and obsolescence of the historical material, on which it relied. Presently, in our study of the nature of genres, we lack a solid and well-developed philosophical anchor. This makes our work very difficult, and frequently forces it to stray into a systematizing description and registering of disparate, *intrinsically* unconnected facts. In the present talk, devoted to the rudiments of the theory of the novel genre, we therefore had to allocate a lot of space to the preliminary development of some issues, belonging directly to the field of the philosophy of genres" (Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Novel as a Literary Genre* [Epic and Novel], *Collected Writings*, Vol. 3, p. 608, emphases in the original).

We assume, when we encounter such genre labels as “epos,” “novel,” or “poetry,” that these are names of categories, or of genera in the original Aristotelian sense, that they refer to *groups* of literary works. But, as we saw, that is not what Bakhtin has in mind.

We expect stark conceptual contrasts to be used to make extreme claims, to be painting a picture in bold lines, and to be open to refutation by counterexample. But Bakhtin belongs to a tradition which rather uses such contrasts to *construct* a conceptual space, not to describe a preexisting one.

We expect a discussion of literary genres to be about literature, but for Bakhtin literature itself is a philosophical matter, and such discussions are there to make a philosophical point.

Last but not least, we expect scholars to use their terms much like mathematicians use variable labels in equations: consistently. We expect them to stand by their terminology. But Bakhtin cared little for words and for fights over words. He used his terms opportunistically, sometimes even in quite opposite senses in different contexts, in order for his text to convey the meaning he wanted it to convey.

When Bakhtin contrasted the novel with poetry and with epos, he distinguished between them according to how they reflect one’s awareness of otherness and sense of time. We should realize that in drawing these conceptual contrasts, Bakhtin was actually talking not about poetry, epos, and novel, but about otherness and time.

### References:

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