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## Bakhtin's "Theory" of Genre

### Abstract

The originality of Bakhtin's fragmentary and partial theory of literary genre is underlined in this article. Bakhtin's reflexion on genre is very different from that of his Formalist contemporaries. Instead of proposing elaborate typologies or generic categories, Bakhtin more often devotes his attention to showing that a meaningful approach to the topic must be diachronic. From an epistemological point of view, the possibility of *exact* duplication or repetition of the same generic device from text to text is denied. Each text (or reading of a text) is a new performance in which generic material is reworked and re-presented. There are affinities, therefore, between the positions of Bakhtin and Fredric Jameson (in *The Political Unconscious*). Generic categories are useful only if they are seen as diagnostic tools which help us to better understand how texts enter into dialogic relations with each other.

### Keywords

Bakhtin, literary genre, theory, typologies, generic, diachronic, epistemological, Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious, dialogic

## BAKHTIN'S "THEORY" OF GENRE

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A genuine poetics of genre can only be a sociology of genre.

(P. N. Mevedev, *The Formal Method and Literary Scholarship*, 135)

The novel is the end of genre . . .

(Fredric Jameson,  
*The Political Unconscious*, 151)

If we mean by a "theory" of genre a coherent and abstract system which would account for a wide variety of literary practices, then it would seem to be misguided to seek such an abstract system in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Nor is it reasonable to reconstruct for Bakhtin anything like a typology of genres of the kind that one finds in traditional histories of literature or in school manuals and textbooks. The fundamental assumption of this study is that Bakhtin's discursive and theoretical procedures are radically opposed to traditional concepts of literary genre. The objective here is to understand and to situate the originality of his theoretical and methodological enterprise in the general field of genre criticism. This will be accomplished by contrasting Bakhtin's notion of genre with that of his Formalist contemporaries, by examining the philosophical underpinnings of his notion of genre, and finally, by instituting a dialogue between Bakhtin and Fredric Jameson, who is one of the leading contemporary proponents of genre criticism.

In the work of the Russian Formalists who were interested in

literary evolution (among other topics), genre is a central concept for discussion. The characteristic conception of genre in their work, if we first take Tynyanov as an example, involves “three levels of internal reference”:

1. All factors in a literary work relate intentionally to the entire work as a system.
2. The system itself, in turn, relates intentionally to the entire system of literature and its evolution.
3. Finally, literature itself and its evolution are, through language, which is the medium both of literary creation and of social communication, related intentionally to the whole human environment in its historical and social development. (J. Striedter, 2-3)

Genre, then, is “a system of the functional coordination of specific devices with ‘dominants’ which characterize the system. . . . Genre exists and is effective only as a system of references.” The key term used in these theoretical statements is “system” and genre is seen ultimately as an abstract construct that is situated at a higher level than the individual literary work. Missing from what is essentially a hierarchical and classificatory scheme is an account of how we move from specific text to generic type (in other words, from the *first* to the *second* levels), and, even more importantly, an account of how genre relates to historical processes (movement from the *second* to the *third* levels).

Tynyanov’s study of parody in Dostoevsky and Gogol contains a more interesting view of the role of genre in literary evolution. Genre, in general, is not a question of continuous straight-line development, according to Tynyanov. It should be seen rather as struggle in which worn-out forms are destroyed and replaced by new ones. Parody plays an essential role in this discontinuous process of generic evolution by acting as a kind of catalyst or motor. Parody, therefore, is not a genre in the same sense that lyric poetry, drama and the novel are genres. It has a way of remaining a vital force in some way or another at all historical periods. Tynyanov’s view of parody has been developed greatly, especially by more contemporary theorists of intertextuality. There are similarities in Bakhtin’s and Tynyanov’s notions of the importance of parody in the history of literary genres (we shall return to this point).

Boris Tomashevsky’s article, “Literary Genres” contains the following speculative comments on genre and literary evolution:

It is intriguing how constantly high genres are pushed out by low ones. *This too may be analogous to social evolution*, whereby the 'upper' ruling classes are gradually squeezed out by the democratic 'lower' orders—the feudal lords by the petty service nobility, the whole aristocracy by the bourgeoisie and so on. (53, my emphasis)

Tomashevsky's comments on the connections between literary and socio-historical evolution are limited to a vague kind of speculation ("may be analogous"). In the same article, however, he proposes to categorize novels in terms of four types of closure:

1. The traditional situation, such as the hero and heroine marrying . . . or the hero dying.
2. The dénouement of the framing (or ring) story.
3. A staircase structure novel.
4. The 'epilogue,' a kind of crumpling of the narrative towards the end. (86-87)

The criteria proposed here are basically structural in nature. And yet another typological principle applied to the novel by Tomashevsky relates to narrative point of view (91-92). Seven types (not all mutually exclusive, as Tomashevsky hastens to point out) of narrative are listed: 1. The adventure novel; 2. The historical novel; 3. The psychological novel; 4. The parodic and satirical novel; 5. The fantastic novel; 6. The publicistic novel; 7. The plotless novel. The assumption is that every novel can be said to demonstrate one 'dominant' narrative point of view. But the problem here is that the seven types of novels are set up according to a mixture of criteria: the 'plotless' novel, as a category, refers to structure or form, whereas the 'psychological novel' refers to thematic content. Bakhtin's theoretical reflection on genre (with the exception of parody) is quite opposed to the approaches of Tynyanov and Tomashevsky. Whereas the Formalists tended to discuss genre in terms of abstract typology, closure and narrative perspective, Bakhtin emphasizes ideology, differentiation and polyphony (or multi-voicedness).

Before going on to a detailed discussion of Bakhtin's ideas on genre, I must comment on two underlying philosophical assumptions that characterize his work. This is a way of situating the Bakhtinian position(s) in an *epistemological* context.

Any theory of genre has, sooner or later, to deal with the epistemological question of repetition or reproduction. In a tradi-

tional perspective, to classify two given texts from the same historical period in the same generic mode is to imply that the two texts have an element in common, or that the second text has repeated or reproduced an aspect of the first. For example, adventure novels, according to Tomashevsky, present a common feature: "a typical condensing of the hero's adventures and his constant transitions from dangers that threaten death to safety" (91). The exact nature of the reproduction of the common feature is not viewed, however, as an epistemological problem. Bakhtin demonstrates his awareness of this theoretical difficulty in an article written in 1959-1961 and first published in 1979 ("Problema teksta v lingvistike, filologii i drugikh gumanitarnykh naukakh. Opyt filosofskogo analiza") ["Problems of text in linguistics, philology and other human sciences. The experience of philosophical analysis"] It is a mistake, he says, to assimilate the mechanical reproduction of a finger-print, for example, and the reproduction of a literary text. The distinction is based on Bakhtin's theory of the fundamental difference between the objects of study in the human sciences and in the natural sciences. The object of study in literature is the reproduction of a text by a subject (T. Todorov 46), whereas in the natural sciences the position of the studying subject is not part of the phenomenon to be examined.

Bakhtin maintains, therefore, that each reproduction of a text by a subject (and, by extension, for the purpose of the present discussion, each new example of a given generic type) is in fact a new performance, a new text, a new event. Reiteration (or exact reproduction) of a literary text is theoretically impossible. The implications of such an epistemological position for genre study should be clear: the validity of abstract generic typologies that hypostasize a group of texts synchronically is denied in favour of a diachronic perspective where the operative factor is transformation.

A second philosophical point that Bakhtin develops in some notes written in 1970-1971 ("Iz zapisej 1970-1971 godov") ["From the notes of the years 1970-71"] deals with the relationship between meta-language and text. A traditional generic typology (we could once again use the previously discussed article by Tomashevsky as an example of this) postulates a fundamental difference between abstract classificatory meta-languages and the language of the individual texts to which the meta-language refers. For Bakhtin, meta-language is not an abstract code different in kind from the text that it supposedly accounts for. There is no basic difference between the discourse to be studied and the discourse used to study a discourse ("le discours à

connaître et le discours connaissant," Todorov 39). The relationship between meta-language and the language (or texts) that it analyzes is always dialogical. This is a radical attack on another of the typical epistemological assumptions in traditional genre criticism. Furthermore, the meta-language invented by Bakhtin for discussing genre is never an end in itself but rather a mediatory tool that will be used to describe and analyze the complexity of individual texts.

Although genre is a matter (directly or indirectly) for discussion in most of Bakhtin's works, we find nothing like an attempt to develop a systematic theory. According to Todorov, a full-length study of discursive genres was planned but Bakhtin never went beyond the initial stage of making some preparatory notes. For the purposes of discussion here, Bakhtin's comments on the subject can be grouped under two headings: firstly, those of a programmatic kind, designed to outline an approach for the study of genre, and secondly, those of a more analytical and applied thrust which shed light on how genre works in the case of specific texts. Statements of the first type are most often to be found in the early work by Bakhtin and his collaborators, while the second more analytical approach can be seen in the later articles which are signed by Bakhtin alone.

"Poetics should really begin with genre, not end with it" (*The Formal Method and Literary Scholarship* 129). This imperative, from Chapter 7 of *The Formal Method* ("The Elements of the Artistic Construction"), is the point of departure for the most sustained discussion of genre written by the Bakhtin group in the early years. The great mistake of the Formalists had been to "define genre as a certain constant, specific grouping of devices with a defined dominant. . . . Genre was mechanically seen as being composed of devices. Therefore the Formalists did not understand the real meaning of genre" (129). Genre belongs rather to the collective and the social—hence the conviction that a "genuine poetics of genre can only be a sociology of genre" (135). And the transformations in generic forms must be seen in relation to social change. This early discussion of genre, as seen in the work published under the name of Medvedev, is made up of prescriptive statements, such as those just quoted, and a polemical critique of the Formalist posture. What we have is essentially the statement of a programme. There are some small indications as well, however, of a dialectical view of the way genre functions. The idea of genre as a mediating or modelling entity is evident in the following statements: "The artist must learn to see reality with the eyes of the genre," and "Genre appraises reality and

reality clarifies genre" (134, 136). Medvedev goes on to underline the double-orientation of genre as follows:

In the first place, the work is oriented toward the listener and perceiver, and toward the definite conditions of performance and perception. In the second place, the work is oriented in life, from within, one might say, by its thematic content. Every genre has its own orientation in life, with reference to its events, problems, etc. (131)

What becomes of this programme in Bakhtin's later work? In his study of Dostoevsky and in the articles written during the 1930s and 1940s, Bakhtin will be more interested in studying the second orientation (genre as a relationship between text and world). In 1940, while writing his study, "Epic and Novel," he will maintain that genre is both a formal and socio-historical entity and the question of genre as performance will receive little attention. Nor in the later work will Bakhtin pursue or develop Medvedev's ideas on genre as finalization ("The problem of finalization is one of the most important problems of genre theory" 129).

In turning from the programmatic statements to the more analytical kind, we shall keep in mind that the predominating tendency in both cases is to view genre as a mediating entity. Chapter IV of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* contains many eloquent and metaphorical comments on genre:

A literary genre, by its very nature, reflects the most stable, "eternal" tendencies in literature's development. Always preserved in a genre are undying elements of the *archaic*. True, these archaic elements are preserved in it only thanks to their constant *renewal*, which is to say, their contemporization. A genre is always the same and yet not the same, always old and new simultaneously. Genre is reborn and renewed at every new stage in the development of literature and in every individual work of a given genre. This constitutes the life of the genre. Therefore even the archaic elements preserved in a genre are not dead but eternally alive; that is, archaic elements are capable of renewing themselves. A genre lives in the present, but always *remembers* its past, its beginning. Genre is a representative of creative memory in the process of literary development. Precisely for this reason genre is capable of guaranteeing the *unity* and *uninter-*



*rupted continuity* of this development. (Bakhtin's emphasis.)  
(106)

V.V. Ivanov has underlined Bakhtin's conception of genre memory as an outstanding achievement because it eliminates the opposition between synchronic and diachronic poetics (191). We should also point out that the key term in the passage just quoted is "constant renewal" and that the determining factor in this renewal of genre is to be located in history itself. The form of the dialogic novel, as represented by Dostoevsky, has largely been determined by the carnival ("We are calling his transportation of carnival into the language of literature the carnivalization of literature"). Genres, therefore, and this is the way in which we would like to formulate Bakhtin's basic position in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, are not to be viewed as abstract constructs but as literary forms closely influenced and determined by historical forces. Genre will be the central object of study in Bakhtin's new science of translinguistics (announced in Chapter V of *Problems*). And although partial generic typologies appear in the course of Bakhtin's analysis of Dostoevsky, such hierarchies are ultimately shown to be inappropriate in the sense that the novel characterizes literature as a whole.

Let us now turn to Bakhtin's "Discourse in the Novel," written in 1934-35, because this study has received somewhat less critical attention. The primary objective of this long article is to promote a stylistics of genre. It contains some of the most original and potentially useful ideas of Bakhtin on the subject of genre.

Genre is presented as just one of five factors which both stratify and differentiate the form of literary works. The others are the author's profession, social class, age, and regional origin (288). Genre is, therefore, one of many factors or conventions that determine literary form. Among the five factors cited, genre is distinguished only by its having been neglected as an object of study. According to Bakhtin, this is probably because genre, a verbal factor, is a less *obvious* differentiating entity than a writer's profession or social class. The study of genre, then, is the diachronic study of form, or more precisely, the diachronic study of how forms enter into combinations with other forms. Saussure, says Bakhtin, completely neglected this particular area of study by concentrating on forms within *langue*. By emphasizing genre as a differentiating or diversifying factor in the production of texts, Bakhtin is opposed to those commentators who tend to concentrate only on stratifying factors. How

does Bakhtin define the various types of genre? He clarifies this point in his article on the chronotope ("Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," written in 1937-1938):

The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic *generic* significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions. . . . (Bakhtin's emphasis) (84-85)

The nature of the chronotope will not be discussed here. Suffice it to say that once again Bakhtin's conception of genre is that of a modeling entity, intimately determined by socio-historical factors.

Equally original is Bakhtin's extension of genre types to the whole range of everyday uses of language. The question, the exclamation, the order, the request, are examples of primary or simple genres, whereas the novel, drama and poetry are examples of more complex secondary genres. The primary "small everyday genres" are the speaking styles determined by social situations. The distinction between primary and secondary genres is in no way an absolute and is rather an indication of the two ends of a continuous spectrum. Bakhtin thus breaks down a barrier between public and private (or between political and non-political) genres. Fredric Jameson has criticized as follows such barriers in contemporary critical practice:

From this perspective the convenient working distinction between cultural texts that are social and political and those that are not becomes something worse than an error: namely, a symptom and a reinforcement of the reification and privatization of contemporary life. Such a distinction reconfirms that structural, experiential, and conceptual gap between the public and the private, between the social and the psychological, or the political and the poetic, between history or society and the "individual," which—the tendential law of social life under capitalism—maims our existence as individual subjects and paralyzes us from our speech itself. (20)

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of Bakhtin's comments on genre (if we again return to his "Discourse in the Novel") is the seemingly radical distinction between prose, the development of which is the result of decentralizing, weakened, ideological forces, and poetry, the result of unifying, centralizing, ideological and

historical forces. Whereas poetry is more characteristic of stable historical periods, the novel is a synonym of heteroglossia. M.L. Gasparov, in his article "M.M. Bakhtin in Russian Culture of the Twentieth Century," accuses Bakhtin of a "sharp hostility to poetry," thereby implying that the prose/poetry distinction is based on value judgement and personal preference for the novel. Ann Shukman has pointed out (in her notes to the Gasparov article) that such a view would seem to be unfounded, given Bakhtin's high praise and admiration for the poetry of Blok and Pushkin (among others). What then is to be made of this simplistic view of poetry? T. Todorov points to another aspect of this same problem when he questions Bakhtin's view that the novel seems to expand and develop most when centralizing political power is weak (91). On the contrary, asks Todorov, couldn't we say that the modern novel blooms precisely during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when centralizing forces, such as those that created national languages, are at their strongest (92)? Todorov's point is well taken and Bakhtin can be said to have exaggerated the causal connection between centrifugal ideological forces and the rise of the modern novel. But the distinction between prose and poetic genres may not be as radical as it appears, if we look at a variety of passages where Bakhtin specifically discusses poetry. Bakhtin admits, for example, that

even the poetic word (in the narrow sense) must break through to its object, penetrate the alien word in which the object is entangled; it also encounters heteroglot language and must break through in order to create a unity and a pure intentionality (which is neither given nor ready-made). But the trajectory of the poetic word toward its own object and towards the unity of language is a path along which the poetic word is continually encountering someone else's word, and each takes new bearings from the other. ("Discourse in the Novel" 331)

Such comments show that even poetry is a phenomenon characterized by heteroglossia, at least in the process of its formation and in its striving for the creation of a "single-voiced purity and unqualified directness" (331). The use of terms like "striving" indicates that poetry, like prose, never achieves monologic status in any *absolute* sense of the term. Our way of looking at this apparent problem is based on a conviction that Bakhtin is not an absolutist. He seems to be saying that all genres demonstrate some degree of heteroglossia and

the critic's objective must be, therefore, to oppose strong and less strong accounts of how texts demonstrate heteroglossia.

A comparison between Bakhtin's and Fredric Jameson's ideas on genre will allow us to summarize the main points of our discussion and to draw some conclusions. The latter critic, in *The Political Unconscious*, reveals an admiration for Bakhtin's work. The similarities in their theoretical approach to the study of genre are very striking. There is, however, a fundamental difference which can be formulated in the following way: on a methodological level, Jameson is a highly systematic dialectician, whereas Bakhtin is primarily an analyst and a practitioner of pragmatics. Jameson expands Bakhtin's basic conception of genre as a mediating entity and turns it into a methodological construct. As already pointed out, genre, as presented in "Discourse and the Novel" and in other works, is both a stratifying and diversifying factor in the evolution of literary forms. Jameson extends this position and articulates a concept of mediation which is only implicit in Bakhtin's work:

We must therefore repudiate a conception of the process of mediation which fails to register its capacity for differentiation and for revealing structural oppositions and contradictions through some overemphasis on its related vocation to establish identities. (42)

A similarly methodological extension occurs when Jameson appropriates the concept of dialogism. The dialogical principle, in Jameson's hands, becomes a methodological procedure:

the dialogical then allows us to reread or rewrite the hegemonic forms themselves; they also can be grasped as a process of the reappropriation and neutralization, the cooptation and class transformation, the cultural universalization, of forms which originally expressed the situation of "popular," subordinate, or dominated groups . . . this operation of rewriting and of the restoration of an essentially dialogical or class horizon will not be complete until we specify the "units" of this larger system. . . . This larger class discourse can be said to be organized around minimal "units" which we will call *ideologemes*. (86-87)

Whereas Bakhtin describes how dialogism works in a wide variety of texts, Jameson expands the concept, and it becomes a tool to be used

for ideological analysis in a Marxist perspective. Such an expansion of Bakhtin's basic concepts is in no way a subversion or a deformation. In the final analysis, Bakhtin would probably agree that generic categories, as Jameson so eloquently states, are of essentially "strategic value":

This final moment of the generic operation, in which the working categories of genre are themselves historically deconstructed and abandoned, suggests a final axiom, according to which *all* generic categories, even the most time-hallowed and traditional, are ultimately to be understood (or "estranged") as mere ad hoc, experimental constructs, devised for a specific textual occasion and abandoned like so much scaffolding when the analysis has done its work. (145)

In the preceding discussion of Bakhtin's theory of literary genre, we have tried to show how he is basically opposed to some of his Formalist contemporaries and to many current genre critics whose typologies are intended to have an absolute status. For Bakhtin, as for Fredric Jameson, genre is a modelling device that is neither a reflection of reality nor a reflection of the texts that the generic category supposedly covers or refers to. Bakhtin situates himself firmly in opposition to those who see genre as an end in itself. His view of parody, which is similar to Tynyanov's view (as suggested at the beginning of this article), could be expanded to cover all genres. Parody is ever-changing as it responds to changing historical conditions in its unceasing attempt to modify other literary forms which have become monologically hypostasized. Genre is therefore not something external to individual texts but rather another form of material that texts are constantly reworking. Ultimately, genre, for Bakhtin, is a constitutive factor in the production of textuality.

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