

Response to Nina Perlina, "Ol'ga Freidenberg on Myth, Folklore, and Literature," Slavic Review, vol. 50, No. 2 (Summer 1991), 383-4 (full version below).

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FREIDENBERG AND BAKHTIN

It would seem at first glance that Freidenberg and Bakhtin had everything in common. They were contemporaries; both were cultural historians who refused to separate the aesthetic function from other aspects of life -- ideology, politics, mythology. But what kind of dialogue took place between these two scholars?

Bakhtin mentions Freidenberg only once, in a note to the introduction of his book Rabelais and His World.¹ This is apparently the only evidence that Bakhtin knew Freidenberg. In fact, Freidenberg and Bakhtin seem never to have been in the same place at the same time. Bakhtin was at Petersburg University from 1913 to 1918, when he left for Nevel'. Freidenberg graduated from the Gymnasium in 1908, but as a woman she could not enroll in the university until after the Revolution. Their lack of scholarly contact can also be attributed to timing and the vicissitudes of Soviet publishing. The works of Bakhtin Freidenberg would have found most interesting came out after her death -- the book on Rabelais (1965) and the essays from various periods published as Questions of Literature and Aesthetics (The Dialogic Imagination) (1975) -- even though they were written in the 30s and 40s. "Discourse in the Novel" and "Epic and Novel" were read in 1940 and 1941 -- but at the Institute of World Literature in Moscow. Freidenberg's Lectures and Image and Concept, also written for the most part in the 40s, were published only in 1978, after Bakhtin's death.

That Freidenberg never knew Bakhtin is suggested by the diary in an entry which also supports the claim that Bakhtin wrote Marxism and the Philosophy of Language. In 1930 Freidenberg met

¹Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul'tura srednevekov'ia i renesansa (M: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1965), 62, n. 1.

N. V. Iakovlev, whom she describes as the right hand man of Desnitskii, the Marxist head of the Institute of Verbal Culture. Iakovlev had his own right hand man. "This was Voloshinov, an elegant young man and esthete, the author of a linguistics book written for him by Blokhin."¹ Freidenberg's distortion of Bakhtin's name shows that she still did not know him in 1949 or 1950, when she wrote this entry. Unfortunately, there is no clue as to when or from whom she heard that Bakhtin had written Voloshinov's book for him.

But Bakhtin had read Freidenberg's Poetics of Plot and Genre, which he mentions in the introduction to his book on Rabelais:

Among Soviet works, Olga Freidenberg's book The Poetics of Plot and Genre (1936) is very valuable. The work contains an immense body of folklore material directly related to the culture of folk humor (especially Classical culture). But this material is mainly interpreted in the spirit of the theories of prelogical thought. The problem of the culture of folk humor is not posed.

As Bakhtin suggests, his materials and Freidenberg's overlap. Both study Menippean satire, Lucian, rituals of laughing invective, Saturnalia. But there the resemblance stops. Their interpretations of this material diverge. For Bakhtin parody is opposed to its original; for Freidenberg it is a shadow, but it affirms the same values. For Bakhtin parody is revolutionary, liberating, the epitome of free speech; for Freidenberg it reaffirms the status quo. Bakhtin sees in parody evidence of religious decline, a form ruthlessly driven from the official sphere by the church; Freidenberg sees in parody the apogee of religious consciousness that can use even laughter to affirm its forms. For Bakhtin the model of parody is medieval carnival, with its rebellious freedom; for Freidenberg parody is the hubristic "other aspect" of all that is real, authentic, official.

¹IV:226.

Freidenberg and Bakhtin approach the same problem from opposite directions. The problem: unity in opposition. For Bakhtin unity is a product of dialogue which preserves the opposition. Phenomena are presented to consciousness in opposition--two ideas, doubles, an original and a parody, two discourses--and it is the task of consciousness to unite them as a dialogue. For Freidenberg the opposition is always merely an illusion of contemporary consciousness. As they are given, the apparently opposing phenomena are already the result of a semantic unity in another plane. Usually Freidenberg describes this unity as lying "behind" the phenomena, in the depths of primitive consciousness. Bakhtin creates a unity while retaining duality in a microhistorical dialogue--here and now; Freidenberg reduces the duality to an underlying semantic unity through a macrohistorical perspective that reaches from the present to prehistorical times. Bakhtin sees difference in spite of unity; Freidenberg sees unity in spite of difference.

Put another way, Freidenberg's and Bakhtin's views of the causality of unity and opposition are mirror images of each other. For Bakhtin a given opposition is a potential cause of dialogic unity (cause : effect :: opposition : unity). For Freidenberg a given opposition is an actual result of semantic unity (cause : effect :: unity : opposition). Note that Freidenberg claims to find an actual and necessary cause, while Bakhtin claims only accidental potential for entering into a dialogue here and now. Bakhtin's whole is found on the level of syntagm--the actual putting together of two opposites in a concrete dialogue. Freidenberg's whole is paradigmatic--she compares each of the opposites to a third unit that is in fact absent, but which shows their semantic identity.

Bakhtin develops his idea of the whole in the context of Dostoevsky's novels. According to Bakhtin, before Dostoevsky the only unity had been in the monologic domination of the text by one authorial consciousness.¹ In Dostoevsky the single authorial consciousness is merely a part of the whole: there is not one voice, but many equal ones--polyphony. And polyphony and dialogue

¹Problemy poëtiki Dostoevskogo (M: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1979), 52.

cannot be further reduced to single-voiced unity; the unity in Dostoevsky is in the polyphony itself, in the dialogue itself. Even agreement among characters, writes Bakhtin, retains its dialogic character:

It is important to stress that in Dostoevsky's world even agreement retains its dialogic character in that it never results in the merging of voices and truths into one impersonal truth such as occurs in the monological world.¹

Dialogic unity is a phenomenon of consciousness. It can only be created through contact among consciousnesses. This unity is thus, in Bakhtin's terminology, a so-bytie ("co-existence" or "event") rather than mere existence.²

Freidenberg's unity is the mythological image, which is expressed in concrete metaphors. The mythological image, like Bakhtin's dialogic unity, is a phenomenon of consciousness, but it is a product of primitive consciousness rather than a project of contemporary consciousness. It cannot be perceived by the untrained modern consciousness and must therefore be recovered by paleontological semantic analysis. The mythological image captures the semantic unity or semantic identity of the various metaphors.

Freidenberg considers the ability to see semantic identity behind formal difference a major advantage of the paleontological method over the formal method. The formal method does not compare formally different phenomena. Paleontological analysis enters into the cause of the phenomena and knows that they may be produced through antithesis and contradiction.³ Thus Freidenberg seeks out the genetic identity that may underlie functional opposition:

¹"Thamyris," Iafeticheskii sbornik, 5, L., 1927, 110.

²Problemy poëtiki Dostoevskogo, 100.

³"Evangelië--odin iz vidov grecheskogo romana," Ateist, No 59, 1930, Dek., 129.

From the point of view of genesis and myth what is compared and what it is compared to are the same; functionally they are already opposed.¹

While Freidenberg ignores functional opposition to emphasize genetic unity, Bakhtin emphasizes function at the expense of genesis or essence. In his book on Dostoevsky he specifically states that he will pay no attention to the content of Dostoevsky's ideas, concentrating only on their function in the novels.² In a monologic novel the substance of the ideas presented may be ascribed to the author, but in Dostoevsky's polyphonic world their function must be considered dominant:

It is important to discover the function of the ideas in the polyphonic world of Dostoevsky and not only their monologic substance.³

According to Michael Holquist, at the heart of everything Bakhtin ever did lies the concept of a ceaseless struggle between centrifugal and centripetal forces in language.⁴ In literature these two poles may be roughly represented by the monologic epic and the heteroglot novel. Heteroglossia, Bakhtin's "master trope," is unequivocally preferred by Bakhtin. In her analysis of the same literary process, Freidenberg invariably privileges the one over the many; her master trope is the one "mythological image" (as she calls it) that makes sense out of the various "metaphors"--her term for the actual concrete realizations of the undifferentiated image. The two approaches can most effectively be compared in the areas Freidenberg refers to as "parody" and "the hubristic" ("vulgar

¹"Proiskhozhdenie èpicheskogo sravneniia," Trudy iubileinoi nauchnoi sessii LGU, Sektsiia filologicheskikh nauk, L., 1946, 103.

²Problemy poèтики Dostoevskogo, 89.

³Problemy poèтики Dostoevskogo, 106.

⁴Michael Holquist, ed., The Dialogic Imagination (Austin: Univ. of Texas Pr., 1981), xviii.

realism" in Poetics), which Bakhtin calls the "folk culture of humor," "carnivalization of literature," and "grotesque realism."

Both Bakhtin and Freidenberg warn their readers not to confuse ancient with modern parody. Bakhtin criticizes modern parody because it lacks creative or regenerative ambivalence--it lacks the potential to enter into a creative relation with consciousness through dialogue. For Freidenberg, however, the problem with modern parody is different. Modern parody is intentional, premeditated, striving for literary effect--she rejects it precisely because it is forward-directed, a creation of individual consciousness. For Bakhtin modern parody and medieval parody act as different causes to produce different effects (in consciousness and in dialogue); for Freidenberg they are different effects resulting from different causes (that is, literary intention in the case of modern parody, and semantic unity in the case of ancient parody).

Bakhtin's carnival parody is revolutionary, as he writes in his book on Rabelais:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated a temporary liberation from the reigning truth and the existing order, a temporary suspension of all hierarchical relations, privileges, norms, and prohibitions...

The pathos of change and renovation, the consciousness of the gay relativity of the reigning truth and power runs through all the forms and symbols of the language of carnival...

During carnival time one may live by its laws only, by the laws of carnival freedom. Carnival has a universal character; it is a special condition of the entire world, its rebirth and renewal in which all take part.¹

Bakhtin downplays the temporary nature of this liberation, revealing himself in the "gay relativity" and revolutionary nature of folk

¹Rable, 10-14.

humor. Freidenberg's view of carnival rituals is more sober. She writes in an article called "Three Plots" that

of course it would be excessively optimistic to consider that these were days of some kind of social regroupings; their connection to the agrarian feast days and to the new year bespeak their cult character.¹

But Bakhtin did consider them revolutionary and socially leveling.

How Bakhtin's accent on carnival as a kind of utopia differs from Freidenberg's analysis can be seen in their description of the central image of crowning and uncrowning the carnival king. In Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics Bakhtin emphasizes carnival ambivalence and gay relativity:

Crowning-uncrowning is a biunite ambivalent ritual which expresses the inevitability and at the same time the constructive nature of change and renewal, the gay relativity of every structure and order, of every system in power and every (hierarchical) stable situation. The idea of the coming uncrowning is already contained in the crowning: it is ambivalent from the very beginning. And the man who is crowned is the very opposite of the real king--a slave or a fool, which reveals and sanctifies the carnival inside-out world.²

The same ritual is described by Freidenberg in Poetics of Plot and Genre:

The king in the clothes of a slave and captive serves the new king of life. But the image does not end here. There is a third act to the drama: the king overcomes death and in a new form, as a new king, returns to his kingdom.

¹"Tri siuzheta ili semantika odnogo," Poètika siuzheta i zhanra (L: 1936), 344.

²Problemy poèтики Dostoevskogo, 143.

What metaphor functions in this phase? A struggle with the temporary ruler, with death in the guise of the slave-captive, which ends for him an beating and violent death.¹

Freidenberg, unlike Bakhtin, brings out the ritual reestablishment of the old order that completes the last act of the carnival drama. Where Bakhtin speaks of the "constructive nature of change and renewal," "the pathos of change and replacement," of carnival as the "holiday of all-destroying and all-renewing time,"² Freidenberg speaks in the same terms, but adds another temporal perspective:

And Saturnalia, this holiday full of movement and life, illustrates the same simple image of statically changing life...

There are no moments of unity and separation as something set off, and even change and unchangeability coexist. The sky is born constantly and once again; there is one king and he is sacrificed; the bridegrooms are new, but the husband is always the same. Plants and the sun die and come back to life in the same form. And all of this changing and altering in the same unchanging way.
[И все это одинаково неизменно, сменяясь и меняясь]
(Emphasis mine--KM)³

Freidenberg, then, views this ritual macrohistorically, as an affirmation of the status quo. Bakhtin, on the other hand, considers carnival and Saturnalia microhistorically from the inside as a denial of official hierarchy. This microhistorical perspective is typical of Bakhtin.

In Marxism and the Philosophy of Language Bakhtin sets up an opposition between what he calls the unreproducible theme of an

¹Poètika, 90.

²Problemy poèтики Dostoevskogo, 143.

³Poètika, 90-91

utterance as a whole in its concrete historical setting and the reproducible self-identical meaning. According to Bakhtin's definition the theme of the utterance "What time is it?" will differ in different situations, while its meaning remains the same. Bakhtin then cites Marr on prehistoric man's use of one word to denote a wide variety of phenomena:

Suffice it to say that contemporary paleontology of language allows us to reach in our research the epoch in which the tribe had at its disposal only one word which could be used in all meanings consciously recognized by humanity.¹

The absurdity of Marr's claim should be obvious, but it is interesting to see what use Bakhtin made of this quotation from his rival creator of a Marxist linguistics. Marr's life work was devoted to finding the unity in multiplicity. He reduced his primal elements (essentially morphemes that Marr thought underlay all human language) to twelve, then seven, then five, then four..., to finding links between phenomena referred to by one element. Bakhtin, on the other hand, points out the difference in theme this usage of one element entails. He writes,

As to the all-meaning word N. Ja. Marr speaks of, we can say the following: such a word, in essence, practically has no meaning; it is all theme. Its meaning is inseparable from the concrete situation in which it is realized. This meaning is different every time, just as the situation is different every time.²

Marr's view is macrohistoric: he looks back to origins and unity; Bakhtin's view is microhistoric: he looks at different concrete dialogues to find multiplicity.

¹Marksizm i filosofiia iazyka (L: RANION, 1930), 73.

²Marksizm, 103.

Bakhtin's nearsightedness has been noted before. Holquist and Clark point out that Victor Turner, whose communitas is very similar to Bakhtin's carnival, considers the temporary release from hierarchy an affirmation of the official structure through programmed antistructure.¹ It must be significant after all that carnival is fixed to an official calendrical cycle--the cycle of the official feasts of the church, as even Bakhtin points out. In order to prove their different points, Freidenberg emphasizes the genetic and other links of parody with the official cult, while Bakhtin stresses that carnival activity was systematically placed outside the official church.

Freidenberg's interpretation of parody sheds an interesting light on her own publications, many of which appear to use parody in the atheist cause against Christianity. "The Entry into Jerusalem on an Ass," "The Gospel as a Type of Greek Novel," "The Myth of Joseph the Beautiful,"-- all of these articles of Freidenberg's deal explicitly with the connection between official religion and humorous and novelistic forms. Freidenberg's 190 page monograph, An Anthology of Antireligious Motifs in Literature, remains unpublished, but the letters and diary show that she was at the very least sympathetic to the religion her cousin embraced.

Bakhtin's relation to religion provides an instructive contrast. It was for his connection with the Christian Voskresenie group that Bakhtin was arrested and exiled to Kustanai in 1929. Voskresenie aimed at combining communism and Christ in a kind of religious revolution against official state Orthodoxy. Thus it was that Bakhtin, arrested for his connection with a religious group, emphasizes in his work reaction against official religion, while Freidenberg, who published in the journal The Atheist, considers parody an official form of religion, as a strengthening of content.

¹Victor Turner, The Ritual Process (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Pr, 1969); Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, unpubl. MS.