Mikhail Bakhtin’s “Discourse in the Novel”

Mikhail Bakhtin’s seminal 1941 critical essay “Discourse in the Novel” offers a vigorous and in-depth examination and reconsideration of the stylistic nature(s) and purpose(s) of the novel. In his essay, Bakhtin calls for a radically different method—different, at least in terms of the early structuralist and poetry-focused methods of criticism being employed by most Western literary critics at the time he was writing—of understanding and interpreting both novelistic style and the very nature and structure of language.

In this essay, Bakhtin draws from the field of linguistics to conceptualize the novel as offering a wide variety of different viewpoints and attitudes, more so than other literary arts—such as poetry and theatre—are capable of. For Bakhtin, novels allow for the enactment of very different forms of linguistic style and meaning than traditional works of poetry—especially epic poetry—can. While a work of poetry, according to Bakhtin, usually offers a single language and style throughout, novels are a “phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice,” (261) hence novels can be understood as consisting of “several heterogeneous stylistic unities, often located on different linguistic levels and subject to different stylistic controls” (261).

Novels, Bakhtin contends, follow five basic linguistic or compositional styles:

1. Direct authorial narration.
2. Everyday, common, narration.
3. Literary or written narrations (such as diary entries and letters between characters).
4. “Extra-artistic authorial speech” (262), such as scientific or philosophical presentations.
5. The individual speech of different characters.

Taken together, Bakhtin argues, these “heterogeneous stylistic unities, upon entering the novel combine to form a structured artistic system, and are subordinated to the higher stylistic unity of the work as a whole” (262). The essence and uniqueness of the novel, Bakhtin asserts, comes from the combination of different styles, voices, viewpoints and philosophies that the novel is capable of presenting. The novelist, he insists, welcomes and embraces the various languages and discursive styles the form demands, which allows the novelist to provide countless levels of linguistic meaning and possibility, thanks to the countless social and historical voices that populate any given language. The very diversity of voices and perspectives that can exist within novels, then, is the defining element of novels, for, according to Bakhtin, the essence of a novel comes from the conflict between different voices—and, hence, points of view and perspectives—that can be presented within such.

Bakhtin sees the critical approaches of his time as being focused on exploring and interpreting works of poetry—which he views as being singular in language and style—and thus in need of very different critical terms for conceptualizing the novel. He asserts that the novel is a uniquely rhetorical and discursive form of literature, and must be
conceptualized as a work of rhetoric; hence the principles of rhetoric and linguistics should be applied to novels in order to properly critique and understand them.

In many respects, this essay also offers Bakhtin’s most direct and fully realized statement of his linguistic philosophy. Here, he introduces the term “heteroglossia,” which he defines as the conflicting discourses within languages, which are, nonetheless, common across all forms of language, such as slang, regionalisms, and other language variations that occur within a particular language. This notion prefigures—and, to some measure, influenced—later post-structural notions of the structural differences that exist within a language.

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