

Occasional Paper: Bye Bye Bakhtin

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Alastair Renfrew begins his article [‘Brief Encounters, Long Farewells’](#) (*IJSL* 1) by saying that

The first textual engagement between Bakhtin and Scottish literature came in David Morris’s 1987 article “Burns and Heteroglossia”, published six years after Bakhtin’s vogue had been seriously enabled by the English translation of “Discourse in the Novel”.

In fact, that first textual engagement occurred a good six years earlier, in a piece on Dostoevsky, MacDiarmid and Bakhtin that was read and discussed at the time by Edwin Morgan, Alan Riach, Kenneth Buthlay and others, published in a PhD in 1984 and then in book form by the Scottish Academic Press in 1987.^[1] The book was called *Hugh MacDiarmid and the Russians*, and the work on Bakhtin had been done at Leningrad University in 1980, when I was preparing the PhD. The publisher’s reader was Roderick Watson, and the book was reviewed by Robert Crawford (in the *LRB*) and Christopher Whyte (in the *SLJ*); all of them went on to publish on Bakhtin and Scottish literature. Crawford wrote to me “It may amuse you to know I’m trying to do a conference paper involving Bakhtin. I wish you’d had more on him in your book. Surely all his dialogic ideas are a godsend to Scottish lit?” That was on 23 June 1992: I remember because I used the quote in a cut-up poem shortly after that. I don’t claim responsibility or influence, just precedence: I am the man who signed Mikhail Bakhtin for Scotland, and in that capacity I would like to make the following comments.

The Bakhtin I brought back from Leningrad to Glasgow was not about “prestige and exposure” as Renfrew puts it. He was the critic who, for me and for many others following Professor Byaly’s seminar at Leningrad University, had lifted discussion of Dostoevsky out of the undecidable ambiguities of psychology, using analysis of form to get at other aspects of the novelist’s work.

The Bakhtin I brought away with me spoke of “polyphony” (the break-out from solipsism into acknowledgment that someone else exists), “carnival” (other social arrangements are thinkable) and Menippean satire. I simplify grossly; you would need to read the book.

I had not much use for the polyphony: I was working on MacDiarmid, who had little dramatic sense and never saw solipsism as a problem. The critics discussed by Renfrew tend to latch onto polyphony and heteroglossia as something particularly important in Scotland. I’m sure that’s true. But I’m struggling to think of a country for which it is not true.

The carnival business struck me as dubious, though I could not have told you why. Alastair Renfrew does, quite brilliantly, in his article, though he seems to miss the mark in one sense: although Bakhtin writes with relish of a mediaeval culture where the great cities were on holiday for three to four months in the year, I do not believe he idealised carnival; after all, some of the scenes he describes as carnivalesque in Dostoevsky’s novels are violent in every way.

Menippean satire – to summarise Bakhtin’s description of it – contains more comedy than the Socratic dialogue, more thematic and philosophical invention; fantastic episodes are introduced to test the philosophical ideas. Mystical and religious themes are prominent, but the action is often set in bars, brothels and highways. Academic philosophy is dropped and only the ultimate ethical questions remain. Abnormal moral and psychological states are depicted in dreams and madness that disrupt epic and tragic integrity. (By contrast, dreams in the epic are prophetic or minatory structural devices; they do not disintegrate the character.) The Menippean features scandal and disruption of accepted codes, and abrupt changes of tone and subject; it incorporates other genres and topical issues.

The Menippean satire as defined by Bakhtin seemed to me to be greatly contrived, but contrived with such candour and ingenuity that it won me over. Little or nothing remains of the eponymous Menippus; and no one claims that Dostoevsky had ever heard of him or of his satire. What this virtual genre did was to allow strong connections to be made among works which, on the face of it, had little to do with one another. What it can do for readers in Scotland (and this is where I want to endorse Renfrew’s third conclusion, on the subject of genre) is to locate subterranean connections, and to discard spurious links: *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* is an example of the Menippean genre, and *Cain’s Book*, perhaps surprisingly, fits the bill. But *Trainspotting*, which has its points in common with *Cain’s Book*, owes more to Ealing comedy.

Another point to consider in this light is the remarkable migration from verse to prose in Scottish literature over the last generation. If, to shortcut the argument, the verse/prose distinction is in fact a superficial trait, then the generic shift might have more to do with the market than with

anything else. If readers are looking for work that has the deep affinities we find between certain of these writers, they must learn to reach past Menippus to the presocratic philosophers who, as it happens, tended to write in verse; or to that blinding shock when Greek and Jewish cultures collided. Indeed, they can go back to the first recorded epic - for Gilgamesh is not an epic at all, but a Menippean satire before the fact. Scottish *writers* too could take a harder look at genre: there has been heavy concentration on diction, voice and attitude—to brilliant effect. But where is it going?

Recognition of the Menippean genre that Bakhtin adumbrates depends perhaps too much on the reader seeing a Rorschach test the same way he does. It might be worth taking a step back and viewing this genre less as something transmitted from one practitioner to another and gradually transformed, like the sestina and the sonnet, and more as the result of a set of circumstances which repeat themselves in various situations down the ages, in much the same way as creole languages (some of which are worlds apart from the others) tend to share certain linguistic features such as the double negative, subject-verb-object word order, doubling of nouns for plurals and doubling of adjectives or adverbs as intensifiers.

Creoles are clash languages — often a slaving language mixed with a local one to cope with the basic imperatives of communication; the redundancy built into every language is reinforced, the initial vocabulary is simplified. The Menippean is a clash genre where authors try to deal with the imperatives of survival as a human being or community. When authors are in full command of the media of their tribe, they use and adapt the classical genres. In crises where either those genres can no longer cope or the classes that mastered them have lost their place, something like the Menippean satire is likely to arise: a forceful, impatient and often profane attack on central questions of existence.

Is this where we plug into post-coloniality? I rather hope not. We are far beyond that now, in a world where university-educated domestics wire home enough of their paltry earnings to keep entire economies afloat: \$19 billion cash last year, which is more than the total capital of the Gates Foundation. Also, there is a certain slyness in the way the Scots have told themselves their histories. MacDiarmid was very astute in his separatist take, which got us off Scot-free from the Empire. If academia is now selling Scotland as the archetypal colonised coloniser, then astute is not the word; it should simply not be done until we are sure that school history books are revised so as to include the Scottish Opium Wars along with the Union of Parliaments. If not, then we are having our cake, eating it, and selling tickets for the performance.

NOTES

[1] Peter McCarey, *Hugh MacDiarmid and the Russians: Dostoevsky, Solovyov and Blok, Mayakovsky and Shestov; with a preliminary chapter on Ossian, Scott and Byron in Russian Literature* (University of Glasgow, 1984)