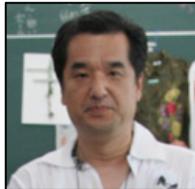


Comment on Groys' essay "Between Stalin and Dionysus: Bakhtin's Theory of the Carnival"



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Groys' arguments on the author

This comment focuses on Groys' understanding, or misunderstanding of Bakhtin's polyphonic novel and, in particular, the polyphonic author. Groys argued, on the one hand, that there is no author for Bakhtin's polyphonic novel as there can be no author inside of the polyphonic novel and there is, according to Bakhtin, no one outside of the novel. He argued, on the other hand, that there is a super-author outside of the polyphonic novel who controls all what happen in the novel. Then, he compared the super-author to Stalin, arguing that Bakhtin's view on polyphonic novel justifies the totalitarianism of Stalin's regime. Groys' view of the polyphonic author comes from his failure to grasp the unique characteristics of Bakhtin's polyphonic author who exists simultaneously in and out of the novel and has two roles.

Let me see more about Groys' argument in detail. Groys wrote on Bakhtin's polyphonic novel and its author as follows:

For Bakhtin, each word is just a remark in the endless dialogue of everyone with everyone else: it is always originally passive, separated from the speaker, contains in itself the reduced voices of "others" – and this is also true about the author's voice. Not only does the word [i.e., discourse], as a material "body of the thought," lack independence, autonomy and authenticity... (Groys, DB:2)

Groys says that each word is "passive" and "separated from the speaker" in the polyphonic novel. This argument might come from the fact that every word exists in relation to other words in the polyphonic novel. However, this fact does not mean that every word is reduced to the sum of all the other words, or the context. Though every word exists in relation to other words and not independent in that sense, it does still have its autonomy and authenticity. So each word clashes with other words, but is not reduced to them. Bakhtin wrote as follows:

[a] word directed toward its referential object [i.e., the topic] clashes with another's word within the very object itself. (Bakhtin 1984 p.195)

This is a simple case in which clashed words are just two that relate in the sense that both refer to the same object. In the polyphonic novel, the structure must be more complex, in which one word would clash with many other words which relate to the first word in various ways. It should be noted that words can clash with each other because they are not independent, and also because each word has its uniqueness, autonomy and authenticity. So, we cannot use the collective noun "people" to describe individuals in the polyphonic novel who speak these clashing words as Groys did.

A "polyphonic novel" transcends individual authorship and, therefore, is rooted, according to Bakhtin, in carnival, which refutes all individualization...This means the destruction of the isolation, independence, and individuality of the word and the removal of the author's rights to private discourse diffused in the general polyphony of the language, which belongs collectively to the "people" (Groys, DB:2).

As for the author of the polyphonic novel, Groys asserts two apparently contradictory arguments. On the one hand, He argues that there is no author for Bakhtin's polyphonic novel.

Such a novel, in fact, cannot even have an author, because an author should exist outside of the novel – which, according to Bakhtin, is not allowed to anyone (Groys, DB:3).

Though Groys says that Bakhtin does not allow anyone to be outside of the polyphonic novel in this quote, he provides nothing to support his argument. I will show the readers that Bakhtin argued, contrary to Groys' statement, that the author is both outside and inside of the polyphonic novel. Either way, it should be noted that Groys' argument that the author must be outside of the novel would be based on the implicit assumption that there is no author inside of the polyphonic novel. For Groys, there can be no one with the unique role such as an author inside of the novel as there is only "people", a homogenous collective, in the novel. His line of arguments is: there cannot be an author inside of the novel, so, the author must be outside of the novel, and Bakhtin said that there is no one outside of the novel, so consequently, there is no author at all for the polyphonic novel.

Contrary to this argument, Groys says that there is the author outside of the novel, and this author is a super-author who directs the novel, as follows:

The context of Stalin is also supported by the fact that both the polyphonic novel and carnivalesque act, though being allegedly born in the people's mind, are still directed, according to Bakhtin, by a certain super-author – Dostoyevsky or Rabelais...(Groys, DB:4)

Though Groys' two arguments seem to be contradictory, there is still a sort of consistency in his line of reasoning. Groys cannot think that there is an author inside of the polyphonic novel, and Bakhtin says, according to Groys, there can be no one outside of the novel. Consequently, there is no author at all for the polyphonic novel. However, provided that the novel is the product of someone, there must be someone who produced the novel: the author. Groys believes that the author cannot exist either inside or outside of the novel. Then, the author should be posited as the transcendental one who has no dialogical

relations with the "people" in the novel. So, this author is characterized by Groys not as just an "author," but as the "super-author". As the transcendental one, the super-author directs the "people" in the novel.

Bakhtin's view on the author of polyphonic novel

I think that Groys' arguments are based on his misunderstanding of Bakhtin's view on the author of the polyphonic novel. Contrary to Groys' arguments, the author of the polyphonic novel is inside of the novel, and simultaneously is outside of the novel, not transcendently but dialogically relating with the individuals in the novel. This feature, that is, the author plays two roles simultaneously, is the important characterization of the author by Bakhtin. Morson & Emerson (1990) pointed out this feature clearly.

The polyphonic author, in short, necessarily plays two roles in the work: he creates a world in which many disparate points of view enter into dialogue, and, in a quite distinct role, he himself participates in that dialogue. (Morson, & Emerson 1990, p.239)

Bakhtin himself describes these two roles as an organizer and a participant as the following quote shows.

The entire work would have been constructed by him as a great dialogue, but one where the author acts as organizer and participant in the dialogue without retaining for himself the final word... (Bakhtin 1984, p.72)

The term "organizer" would be better than the term "creator" to describe the role played by the author outside of the novel, as the author outside of the novel does not create the world of novel transcendently as Groys' super-author does, but organizes the novel by presenting some stimulating problems to the individuals in the novel and provoking them to generate their voices. Bakhtin analyzed Dostoevsky's case, saying that Dostoevsky presented the adventure plot to the individuals in the novel.

In Dostoevsky, the adventure plot is combined with the posing of profound and acute problems; and it is, in addition, placed wholly at the service of ideas. It places a person in extraordinary positions that expose and provoke him, it connects him and makes him collide with other people under unusual and unexpected conditions precisely for the purpose of testing the idea and the man of the idea, that is, for testing the "man in man". (Bakhtin 1984, p. 108)

The adventure plot provided by the author Dostoevsky provokes the characters to generate new voices from them. The new voices are unique responses of the characters to the unexpected situations of the adventure plot. They must be new and unexpected to the author. This author, although he/she exists outside of the novel, has dialogic relations with characters.

There is one more important way in which the polyphonic author relates with characters dialogically: listening to various possible voices of the characters. According to Bakhtin, listening is another important way for Dostoevsky to relate dialogically with his characters.

Dostoevsky possessed an extraordinary gift for hearing the dialogue of his epoch, or, more precisely, for hearing his epoch as a great dialogue, for detecting in it not only individual voices, their dialogic *interaction*. He heard both the loud, recognized, reigning voices of the epoch, that is,

the reigning dominant ideas (official and unofficial), as well as voices still weak, ideas not yet fully emerged, latent ideas heard as yet by no one but himself, and ideas that were just beginning to ripen, embryos of future world views. (Bakhtin 1984, p. 90)

It should be noted that Bakhtin emphasized that Dostoevsky listened not only to the loud and already recognized voices, but also to latent, possible voices. He could listen even to voices whose speakers themselves had not yet noticed. Dostoevsky as the author could bring out the voices which were not only new for Dostoevsky but also for the speakers themselves. Though Bakhtin does not explain explicitly, listening would be used both for the author who is outside of the novel to organize it and the author who is inside of the novel and participates the dialogue with characters.

So, Bakhtin's author of the polyphonic novel exists simultaneously both inside and outside of the novel. The author sometimes provokes the characters to generate new voices, and sometimes to listen to characters to bring out the new voices from them. The author is not the transcendental super-author who just direct the "people" in the novel, but a dialogic author who relates dialogically with the individual characters in the novel.

Lesson for the dialogic pedagogy

Groys' failure to understand the unique feature of Bakhtin's polyphonic author is not irrelevant to the research of the dialogic pedagogy. In the dialogic pedagogy, the teacher should be given his/her rightful place in the dialogic classroom. I believe that Bakhtin's view on the author of the polyphonic novel is useful to characterize the place and work of the teacher in the dialogic classroom. The teacher who organizes the dialogic classroom can be compared to Bakhtin's author of the polyphonic novel (Lensmire, 1997; Miyazaki, 2013).

I have been showing the effectiveness of the comparison between Bakhtin's polyphonic author and the dialogic teacher by examining the thoughts and the classroom lessons of the Japanese dialogic pedagogy (Miyazaki, 2010; Miyazaki, 2013; Matusov & Miyazaki, 2014). In such classrooms, the teacher plays two roles. The teacher organizes the class as the arena on which students experience the dialogue with other students. Simultaneously, the teacher participates in the dialogue with the students. Within the teacher's work to organize the class to be dialogic, it is most important to discover and present the questions on the learning contents that can challenge students to generate their new, unexpected voices. Japanese practices show that such a question should be an authentic one in the sense that not only students but also the teacher doesn't know their answers. This is a sort of the question Miyazaki (2013) named an "unknown question". Teacher's presentation of this type of question to students is comparable to the polyphonic author's presentation of adventure plot to the characters of the novel.

Another work of the dialogic teacher is listening to students' possible voices, which is also comparable to another work of Bakhtin's polyphonic author, that is, listening to the latent, not yet fully emerged voices of the characters. In the case of the teacher, most important listening is to discover questions in students' utterances that are new and unexpected to the teacher and are latent for the students themselves. The teacher does listen to students' questions in the dialogue in which the teacher herself participates. The teacher brings out the latent questions from students and makes them explicit to the students, and new dialogue develops from the new questions. As the discovered question is new to the teacher, it is another sort of an "unknown question".

Thus, the dialogic teacher works as the author of the dialogic classroom, first, by discovering the new, authentic questions in the learning contents and presenting them to the students to organize the dialogic classrooms, and second, by listening the new questions in students, and giving them back to the students in the dialogue. The teacher exists, as Bakhtin's polyphonic author does, simultaneously both outside the dialogue as the organizer and inside the dialogue as the participant.

Dialogic teacher's unique way of being is not well understood in studying the dialogic pedagogy. Sometimes, the equality of the teacher and students in the classroom is emphasized too much so that dialogic teacher's role as the author of the dialogic lesson is denied. It seems to me that the denial of the role of the author for the dialogic teacher derives from the failure to understand Bakhtin's characterization of the polyphonic author as in Groys. Matusov (2011), for example, denies the view on the dialogic teacher as Bakhtin's polyphonic author as follows:

I respectfully disagree with my colleagues in dialogic pedagogy Lensmire's (1997) and Miyazaki's (in press) very interesting claims that in the authorial poly-phonic teaching the teachers author their students like Dostoevsky authored his characters in his polyphonic novels (Bakhtin, 1999). (Matusov 2011, p. 40)

He further argues that the teacher as the polyphonic author will impair the student's agency.

The parallel of authorial teaching with Dostoevsky's polyphonic novels in Bakhtin's interpretation can be dangerous as, in my view, it leads to unavoidable stifling, arresting, endpointing, and manipulating of the student's agency. (Matusov 2011, p. 40)

However, there is a misunderstanding on Bakhtin's view of the polyphonic author behind his criticism. His statement cited below on the relations between the author and characters in the novel shows most typically his understanding, or misunderstanding of Bakhtin's view.

[t]he characters in the literary artwork remain transparent to the authors who are their creators. (Matusov 2011, p. 40)

The view that the author creates the novel is rather common-sensual. It is needless to say that it is completely different to Bakhtin's understanding of the author of the polyphonic novel in which the author stimulates and listens to the characters. This "common-sensual" author is just a transcendental super-author Groys assumes as she creates and controls all aspects of the novel. If this view on author is applied to the classroom, the teacher would be the super-teacher who control all the aspects of the students so that their agency will be lost as Matusov describes. Matusov's criticism on the dialogic teacher as Bakhtin's polyphonic author can be made only because of his neglect of Bakhtin's unique characterization of the polyphonic author, as Groys' criticism of Bakhtin is also based his misunderstanding of Bakhtin's view.

Matusov's view on the dialogic teacher as the polyphonic author is not exceptional. Though Bakhtin's dialogical theory is widely adapted in studying the classroom, his view on the dialogic author is rarely used to analyze the teacher in the classroom. This would be because Bakhtin's view on the polyphonic author is opposed to the common-sensual view on the author and difficult to understand. Groys' criticism of Bakhtin is another instance of this difficulty.

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