

Fictional Text and the Matter of Freed Perspectives

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This paper is, in many respects, based on Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*: the author's critique of the formalisms of his time and period (especially Russian formalism and Saussurean linguistics) seemed to open new ways for novel theory, leaving behind New Critical and neo-Aristotelian formalisms. Yet, rather than providing a real alternative to formalism, Bakhtin's language philosophy in fact extends the logic of Henry James's aesthetic theory into a full-blown social theory. His approach actually responds to both the need to move beyond aesthetic formalism and the equal need to retain the essential tenets of social formalism.

The quality of good fiction does not depend so much on whether or not the author claims omniscience or exercises inside views. It does not depend on the author's effort to produce a single unified effect either. Its subject is not the handling of technical means in order to obtain certain effects so much as the quality of the author's imaginative gift – the willingness and the ability to allow voices into the work that are not under the control of the novelist's own ideology.

The implied author's moral vision is probably what makes great fiction. The author's self, by containing other voices, becomes more than the limited subjectivity of an actual author. The artist's essential duty is to achieve a view of the world superior to all other views; fiction of the proper kind, pursuing the right tasks, is the best instrument of understanding the world. It is the only conceptual device that, by achieving a kind of objectivity, can do justice to the essential polyphony of human life. Getting us free from narrowly subjective views, the best novels achieve a universally desirable quality, that of the freed perspectives.

We agree to the idea that great fiction is polyphonic and we consider that an author gains this superior rank view not by egotistical self-projection but by supplementing it with other voices, other consciousnesses that, combined, constitute a total, and therefore ideal, vision.

What we want to show is that the author's voice in fiction, his moral position, is always there if one knows how to look for it, no matter how cleverly it might be veiled. The power of authorial self-expression institutes a kind of rivalry between character and narrator for self-representation. The novel as a genre is meant to represent characterological alterity; the novelistic technique of polyphony insures that characters behave not as created beings that voice the author's intention, but as truly autonomous subjects who speak for themselves. The quality of the author's imaginative gift means the author's ability to allow his characters free expression and fictional resources (narrative techniques) are instrumental in the practice of authorial altruism.

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