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FROM REPRESENTATION TO PERFORMANCE: A BAKHTINIAN PERSPECTIVE ON LITERATURE AND ETHICS

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The “ethical turn” in literary studies over the past twenty years has taken different forms, ranging from thematic articulations to deconstructive performances, from a view of literature as “moral philosophy” to discussions of the ethics of reading, canonicity, and ideology. Most of these discussions, however, take philosophical conceptions of ethics as their point of departure, relating to literary works as test cases, illustrations, sublimations, or concrete representations of norms, values, and attitudes. The insistence on the ethical import of literature is sometimes rather reductively translated into ideological pieties and polemics and even—in extreme but not very rare instances—into demands to strike some allegedly offensive classics off the canon. But good literature, as we well know, is all too often resistant to political, ideological, and even moral correctness. A good story does not always have a good moral, evil characters are often more real, attractive, and memorable than virtuous ones, and the best literary works tend to leave us with more questions than answers. This is not to say that literature can be disassociated from the question of value, but it does suggest that the limitations of the representational approach should be seriously examined when we consider the nexus of literature and ethics.

The following discussion draws on a broader study, Between Philosophy and Literature: Bakhtin and the Question of the Subject (Stanford University Press, 2013), which offers a view of the Russian philosopher through Western eyes, as it were. Bakhtin, as portrayed in this study, is a member of what I have called the “exilic constellation” along with thinkers like Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas: torn between a profound temperamental religiosity and a post-Nietzschean sensibility, compelled by his own thinking to turn from philosophy to literature (which is, at least according to the Cartesian model, philosophy’s traditional “other”) and engaged, throughout the various phases of his work, with questions of ethical subjectivity. The position of Bakhtin’s work “between” philosophy and literature, as indicated in the title of this study, is highly relevant to the concerns of the present essay as well.
1. Bakhtin’s Architectonics of Subjectivity: Early Writings

The discovery of the Russian philosopher in the West, spearheaded by Julia Kristeva’s introductory essays in the 1970s, inaugurated what may well be called the “Bakhtinian decade” in the humanities. By the end of the 1980s Bakhtin was virtually canonized in the West as a precursor of postmodernity, a cultural climate that can be loosely characterized by a militant de-authoring of meaning and a debunking of master narratives. The assimilation and appropriation of Bakhtin’s work into the cultural climate of the time was, indeed, easy enough. It was based on a series of Bakhtinian concepts—dialogicity, polyphony, heteroglossia, and the carnivalesque—which had appeared in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, Rabelais and His World, and “Discourse in the Novel,” whose common denominators seemed to be the transgression of borderlines, a celebration of plurality, and resistance to any and all forms of hegemony. No wonder then that Bakhtin was so readily, all too readily, digested and at the same time, I would suggest, domesticated by Western academia.

In the early 1990s, however, some of Bakhtin’s earlier essays—a long fragment subsequently entitled Toward a Philosophy of the Act and a very long essay titled “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” (both of which were probably written between 1919 and 1924)—were translated into English and published in the West. These publications were initially met with academic silence, which can only be accounted for by a profound philosophical embarrassment at the apparent disparity between what had become known as the Bakhtinian outlook and these earlier texts. “Author and Hero” in particular is steeped in religious rhetoric, thoroughly conservative in orientation and profoundly concerned with the importance—indeed, the necessity—of borderlines and frames.

The touchstone of this disparity is Bakhtin’s evaluation of Dostoevsky’s work. Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, on which much of Bakhtin’s claim to fame rests, revolves around and celebrates Dostoevsky’s “small-scale Copernican revolution” (Bakhtin, [1922–1924/1977–1978] 1984a, p. 49). In “Author and Hero,” however, Dostoevsky’s work is discussed, albeit in passing, as a case of an aesthetic failure. This long essay reads like an oddly anachronistic or naïve apologia for authorial omniscience and presents the relationship of the author to his characters as one of complete and benign “outsideness” (“transgredience”). This relationship allows the author to have a “surplus of vision” in relation to the character, to see what he cannot see about himself, to know him as a whole and to frame (or, as Bakhtin calls it, to “consummate”) him (notably, Bakhtin writes of both the author and the characters in the masculine). Within these parameters Dostoevsky is indeed a maverick. He does not subsume his characters under his authorial eye. He does not frame them. He does not have the last word. No wonder then, that when “Author and Hero”