

M.M. Bakhtin on Parody

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*Everything has its parody, that is, its laughing aspect [...]
M.M. Bakhtin. Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*

Annotation. The publication presents a dictionary entry prepared for the *Bakhtinskaya Encyclopedia*.

Keywords: M.M. Bakhtin, parody, carnival, irony, *parodia sacra*, Menippean satire.

M.M. Bakhtin's *Rabelais* book of 1965 [Bakhtin 1990a; 1984b] contains *circa* 200 references to parody and his *Problemy Poetiki Dostoyevskogo (Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics)* of 1963, based on his *Problemy Tvorchestva Dostoyevskogo* of 1929 [Bakhtin 2002; 1984a] at least 100. In addition to those works, the subject is discussed in Bakhtin's essays of the 1930s and early 1940s, as well as in his earlier writings, as when, for example, he writes of "humoristic-parody" and the parody of bad Romanticism in his "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" of 1920-1923 [Bakhtin 1990b: 225; 2000: 25].

In addition to his many uses of the ancient Greek term "parodia" (from the prefix "para" to mean "near to" or "opposite" and the noun "ode"), Bakhtin uses the terms "burlesque", "travesty" and "mock-epic", but it is his analyses of parody as "double-voiced" and as "carnivalistic" that have extended discussions by Formalists such as Viktor Shklovsky and Yuriy Tynyanov of parody in the novel, and had the greatest impact.

Tynyanov's comments on the combination in the parody of the texts of more than one author may also be compared to Bakhtin's descriptions of parody, but while Tynyanov speaks of parody as having two "planes" in his *Dostoyevsky i Gogol (k Teorii Parodii) (Dostoyevsky and Gogol [Towards a theory of parody])* of 1921 [Tynyanov 1929: 416, 433], Bakhtin speaks of it in his studies of Dostoevsky as "double-voiced" and as an "internal dialogization", although he also speaks of the carnival square as "dual-planed" in at least one other passage [Bakhtin 1979: 148; 2002: 145; and see the term translated as "two-leveled" in Bakhtin 1984a: 128].

Bakhtin also writes that “parodistic discourse itself may be used in various ways by the author” and continues: “The parody may be an end in itself (for example, literary parody as a genre), but it may also serve to further other positive goals (Ariosto’s parodic style, for example, or Pushkin’s).” Bakhtin continues: “[...] in all possible varieties of parodistic discourse the relationship between the author’s and the other person’s aspirations remains the same: these aspirations pull in different directions, in contrast to the unidirectional aspirations of stylization, narrated story, and analogous forms” [1984a: 194; 1979: 258; 2002: 217]. For Tynyanov too, parody, although close to stylization, differs from it by virtue of the discrepancy of both planes, while “stylization, comically motivated or stressed, becomes parody” [Tynyanov 1929: 416].

In his *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* Bakhtin also speaks of parodies of high genres in the serio-comical genres [1984a: 108], of verse parodies in Menippean satires [118], of the renewal of Menippean satire in the works of Dostoevsky [121], of parody and carnival [123] and of the *parodia sacra* [127], as well as of “parodying doubles” [89, 127, 216] that serve to “renew” the hero.

Writing of Menippean satire, related to the “area of the serious-laughter” [Bakhtin 2002: 123] Bakhtin also draws attention to the “carnivalistic nature of parody” [Bakhtin 1984a: 127] and writes that “Parody [...] is an integral element in Menippean satire and in all carnivalized genres in general”. Here Bakhtin adds that “To the pure genres (epic, tragedy) parody is organically alien; to the carnivalized genres it is, on the contrary, organically inherent”, that in antiquity “parody was inseparably linked to a carnival sense of the world”, and that parody is the “creation of a decrowning double”. For Bakhtin parody is, moreover, ambivalent and not a “naked rejection of the parodied object”, while the self-parody found in the *menippea* is said to be part of its “extraordinary vitality” [143].

Finding parodies scattered throughout Dostoevsky’s novels, some of which he also describes as “ironic-parodic”, Bakhtin goes on to describe parody as discourse with a “twofold direction – towards another’s speech” [185], and as where the author speaks in someone else’s discourse [193], but (in contrast to stylization), while introducing a “semantic intention that is directly opposed to the original one”. While this statement is followed by one that suggests a battle between parodist and target, Bakhtin goes on [194] to speak of the diversity of voices in parody, as well as of the diverse types of polemic in it, while in the classifications given on p. 199 parody is described as “vari-directional double-voiced discourse”. Although Bakhtin sometimes speaks of parody as ridicule [217], he also speaks of Dostoevsky’s parodies of works by Gogol as introducing a parodic and polemical element into the narration “to make it more multi-voiced”.

Bakhtin’s essay “Discourse in the Novel” of 1934-35 takes up both his formalistic analysis of parody as double-voiced and returns to some of the subjects and themes of the Formalists, including Shklovsky’s “laying bare of the device” and to its relevance to Cervantes’ meta-fictional parodic reflections on the author, his creations, and his readers. [Bakhtin 1981: 259-422; Bakhtin 1975: 72-233]. While Bakhtin will write in his later essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel. Notes toward a Historical Poetics” of 1937-38 [Bakhtin 1981: 84-258; 237] on how Rabelais’ laughter is less radical in Sterne – an author praised by Shklovsky in his “Theory of Prose” for his innovations in *Tristram Shandy* – he will in this essay describe Sterne’s parody as being “almost as radical” as Rabelais’ [Bakhtin 1981: 308]. Like both Shklovsky and Tynyanov, Bakhtin also attributes a role to parody in the evolution of the novel and writes [309] that “one could even say that the most important novelistic models and novel-types arose precisely during this parodic destruction of preceding novelistic worlds.”

In his Rabelais book of 1965 Bakhtin develops his concept of carnivalistic parody further from the examples provided by Rabelais, as well as from studies of the ancient carnival and of folklore made by Olga Freidenberg [Freidenberg 1997] and others, and speaks of some “carnivalistic” parodies like the *Coena Cypriani* [Bakhtin 1984b: 286ff.] and of parodic images of the body as “grotesque parody”.

In his “Discourse in the Novel” of 1934-35, Bakhtin had already broadened his description of *heteroglossia* to encompass the role played by popular or folk characters or fools in the parody, and this is a move that is also of significance in forging the link with the carnivalistic, which is to feature in his study of Rabelais and to distinguish his work further from that of the Formalists.

Bakhtin's "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope" of 1937-38 repeats Shklovsky's 1929 comment on Lesage's devil as an observer of private lives [Shklovsky 1990: 100], as well as his description of the jester as parodist [Shklovsky 1983: 218], while also describing the jester as an outside observer of the private life of others and parody laughter as an externalization of that private world [Bakhtin 1981: 160].

Even when he echoes Tynyanov's and Shklovsky's depictions of Sancho Panza as parodying Don Quixote in his conversations with the latter, Bakhtin puts, however, greater stress on the lower region of life represented by Sancho (*Panza* meaning "fat belly", as Bakhtin points out in his *Rabelais* [Bakhtin 1984b: 22; 1990a: 29] than either Tynyanov or Shklovsky had done when discussing Cervantes' novel.

To Bakhtin, both Cervantes and Rabelais are, moreover, representative of what he terms a "Second Stylistic Line", in which "the respectable language of the chivalric romance [...] becomes only one of the participants in a dialogue of languages [...]" [Bakhtin 1981: 386].

Towards the end of his "Discourse in the Novel" of 1934-35 [Bakhtin 1981: 412ff.], Bakhtin makes a distinction between what he terms an "external and crude literary parody", where attack on the target seems to dominate, and a second kind of parody, where the parodist is in "solidarity with the parodied discourse", and it is here that Bakhtin's understanding of parody also seems to extend the definition of the Greek prefix *para* to meanings of both near and opposite.

Bakhtin's essay "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" of 1940 [Bakhtin 1981: 41-83; 1975: 408-446] has further echoed Shklovsky in claiming that one of the characteristics of the novel is its constant self-criticism and renewal. (Shklovsky also noted that parody could make a parodied work immortal [Shklovsky 1983: 278].) Here Bakhtin describes the role of laughter in the development of the novelistic genre, but speaks of its ancient, "ridiculing" forms as a separate force from that of the "polyglossia" and "interanimation of languages" that elevated those forms "to a new and ideological level, which made possible the genre of the novel" [Bakhtin 1981: 50f.; 1975: 417f.].

Bakhtin continues in the following, second section of his essay to comment specifically on parody as "one of the most ancient and widespread forms for representing the direct word of another." He then goes on to describe the parodied sonnets in *Don Quixote* as the "hero of the parody" and adds that "a parody may represent and ridicule [...] distinctive features of the sonnet well or badly, profoundly or superficially. But in any case, what results is not a sonnet, but rather the *image of a sonnet*" — a statement that also points to how a parodied object may be recreated by the parodist, rather than simply reproduced.

Bakhtin goes on to describe the dialogic character of parody: "Thus it is that in parody two languages are crossed with each other, as well as two styles, two linguistic points of view, and in the final analysis two speaking subjects", and adds: "every parody is an intentional dialogized hybrid. Within it, languages and styles actively and mutually illuminate one another." [Bakhtin 1981: 76].

In "Epic and Novel" of 1941, the first of the essays printed in *The Dialogic Imagination* [Bakhtin 1981: 3-40] and the last (and latest in time) in his *Voprosy Literatury i Estetiki* of 1975 [Bakhtin 1975: 447-483], Bakhtin again echoes Shklovsky's comments on the rejuvenating function of parody in the novel, although he now runs together the concepts of parody and travesty without discussing the differences in age or meaning of the two terms: "Throughout its entire history there is a constant parodying or travesty of dominant or fashionable novels that attempt to become models for the genre" [Bakhtin 1981: 6].

Many of the points made in Bakhtin's earlier essays and books about the carnivalesque and the Menippean traditions are repeated in his *Rabelais* book of 1965, notes for which (and for the 1940 thesis on which it is based) date from the mid 1930s.

Bakhtin's Introduction to his study of Rabelais and his world also names parody as one of the forms belonging "to one culture of folk carnival humor" [Bakhtin 1984b: 4] and stresses that "the carnival is far distant" from the negative and formal parody of modern times. Despite this statement, and his comments elsewhere on Cervantes' *Don Quixote* that it stands as a book about other literature between a satiric form of parodic attack and a second kind of parody where the parodist is "in solidarity with the parodied discourse" [Bakhtin 1981: 413], Bakhtin describes Cervantes' *Don Quixote* as

carnivalistic in both his “Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics” [Bakhtin 1984a: 128] and in his “Rabelais” [Bakhtin 1984b: 22-23].

Here it is also interesting to note that Bakhtin knew, amongst other works by the poet and satirist Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), the “Introduction to *Don Quixote*” written at the time of the 1837 carnival in Paris, in which Heine describes Cervantes’ Don Quixote and Sancho Panza as a “Doppelfigur” or “double-figure”, in which each figure “constantly parodies, but also complements (*ergänzt*) the other”, as Bakhtin also suggests to be the case with Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in his Rabelais book [Bakhtin 1984b: 434]. (As noted previously, Bakhtin also writes about parodying doubles in the works of Dostoevsky, and as a phenomenon of carnivalized literature.)

Other parodic works treated by Bakhtin in his Rabelais book include the early mediaeval *Coena Cypriani*, which he describes as “the oldest grotesque parody” (see his *Rabelais*, Bakhtin 1984b: 84 as well as his “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse”; Bakhtin 1981: 70). With regard to the *parodia sacra*, Bakhtin describes it in both works as tolerated as well as liberating, and mediaeval parody as “holiday laughter” [Bakhtin 1981: 72], and in general depicts mediaeval parody not as negative, but as creative.

Bakhtin also describes the “popular-festive language of the marketplace” as addressing a “dual-bodied” world containing both death and renewal in his study of Rabelais [Bakhtin 1984b: 415] and adds [420] that “The parodical litany thus presents a condensed expression of the basic peculiarity of Rabelais’ language, which always combines, more or less clearly, the praise-abuse image and is always addressed to the dual-bodied world of becoming”. (A.G. Kozintsev’s 2007 study of irony and humour also investigates Bakhtin’s concept of “ambivalent praise-abuse”, and his article from 2013 the “double-voiced word”.)

While Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and his World* adds to his other statements on parody in emphasising its laughter and comic aspects, this is, however, done with reference to its more burlesque and grotesque types and images and is not connected in any thorough-going manner with Bakhtin’s analyses of parody as a “double-voiced” stylistic form, so that these two very significant contributions to parody scholarship may be said to remain largely separate. Despite this, Bakhtin’s studies of these sometimes related and sometimes unrelated types of novelistic and carnivalistic parody have together contributed far more than many other studies to an appreciation of the often complex and innovatory literary and pictorial cultural functions of parody.

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М.М. Бахтин о пародии

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