

Hearing Voices

The Uses and Limits of Bakhtinian Readings of O'Connor

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The strength of Bakhtinian readings of O'Connor is that they make it easy to point out something that is really there. O'Connor's fiction is very often a web of different voices, different discourses. It is important to notice O'Connor's characters hearing those different voices, which are sometimes the language of a race, or a class, or an ideology, or of an attitude toward life. Who her characters turn out to be often depend on which of those voices they listen to--or can't help listening to, no matter how hard they try.

There are also some problems, I think, in Bakhtinian readings of O'Connor. (Though fewer than in other theory-based reading: the last Lacanian reading I looked at seemed to have absolutely nothing to do with the books I'd read, while with Bakhtinian readings I always know that we are talking about the same subject.) One problem is the inclination to over-identify different discourses. O'Connor often lets a voice speak for just a moment. (For example, when the cant of social work appears for a second, as when Bishop is described as an "exceptional" child.) Another aspect of this problem is the tendency to over-describe a voice, to attribute to it characteristics that don't seem justifiable. For example, Robert Brinkmeyer describes O'Connor's narrator as "Fundamentalist." Since the narrator seems to me the sort of impersonal narrator prescribed by the New Critics, I can't see that at all. I can't see how the narrator as an independent voice can be described as having any beliefs, much less specifically Fundamentalist ones that are brought into dialogue with other voices.

One of the pitfalls of any literary theory is that its central terms become synonyms for “Good” and “Bad.” The New Critics looked for tension and ambiguity, so ambiguous poems were good and straightforward ones were bad; it seemed that all literature aspired to be one of the more confusing poems of Donne, and if there wasn’t ambiguity in a poem that a New Critic wanted to praise, he would create some. In Bakhtinian theory we have the same tendency; Dialogic = Good, Monological = Bad, Heteroglossia = Good, Monoglossia = Bad. And when doing a Bakhtinian reading, there is the temptation to find lots of voices so that a work can be praised, or else to damn it because there is a clear controlling voice.

I think we should question the assumption that the free play of voices is a good in itself. I don’t think it necessarily is. (And to take Bakhtin’s own examples of the “dialogic” and the “monologic,” I don’t think Dostoevsky a better novelist than Tolstoy.) If we want to see works that really give us the free play of voices, we get something like Robbe-Grillet’s anti-novels--or Joyce’s Finegeans Wake. I think those have been a dead end in fiction. The novels that work better are those that impose some order on the free play of voices--or find some order in it.

We might here look at Bakhtin’s celebration of the carnivalesque. While the carnival allows the free play of voices and the disruption of all hierarchies, social and linguistic, it’s important to remember that the carnival is itself a limit on heteroglossia. Carnival allows the voices of disorder to rule--puts the Lord of Misrule on the throne--and reverses all hierarchies and opposition--even disrupting gender distinctions with extravagant drag. But it does all that only on Fat Tuesday. On Ash Wednesday the voices of disorder are nursing their hangovers, while our totalizing, master discourse

takes control again and relegates them to what I suppose today we would call their subaltern position.

For the re-establishment of hierarchies of voices is often what is important, not their free play. Some discourses need to be given primacy, some should be kept under control. If we think of the dialogic as being the process of that ordering of voices, I think we can use fruitfully in understanding O'Connor.

It will help especially with the touchiest subject in O'Connor studies, which is, of course, racism. Racism is a language, a voice, a discourse of its own. We all know its vocabulary, we can all rehearse its postulates. We hear this voice both in our interaction with society and in our own minds. But who among us wants to see it given free play? I think most of us don't want to see minstrels in blackface even at our carnivals. But it is certainly a voice that can't be silenced. O'Connor, I would argue, lets the voice of racism speak and puts it in its place. (A close look at "Revelation" will find the language of racism speaking in Mrs. Turpin's mind, and then often rejected when she hears it on the lips of the White Trash woman.) O'Connor does indeed let the voice of racism speak, but she then puts it in its subaltern place in a rightly constructed hierarchy.

Seeing O'Connor using and controlling the voice of racism will help us understand other parts of her work, particularly her letters. Think of why we let the language of racism speak. One reason is to express racist ideas. Another is to establish intimacy through the use of the forbidden. (People used to use the voice of obscenity or profanity to establish intimacy, but that's now too common to be the sign of anything.) Where O'Connor uses the voice of racism, another voice is clearly in control, one that, for its own purposes, allows the racist voice to speak.

In O'Connor's fiction, it is important to notice what voices or discourses characters listen to. And one limitation I see in much Bakhtinian criticism is that it pays more attention to the speaking voice than to any hearer. That is not dialogue; it is lots of monologues. O'Connor's characters often become what they are because of the voice they listen to, for good or bad. Thomas in "The Comforts of Home" is ruined when he listens to the voice of his Father; Mrs. Turpin sees glory itself when she hears the voice of God echoing her question, "Who do you think you are?"

One Bakhtinian idea that will help us understand O'Connor is the suggestion that the personality itself is constructed of a dialogue of voices. Certainly this is true to human experience: we all hear ourselves speaking in the voices of others occasionally. And I think we pick up more than an occasional turn of phrase. We are indeed, to a large extent, the voices that speak in our head. That's why the advertisers make sure that their slogans and jingles echo in our minds. That is why we teach certain discourses and discourage others. The voices we hear shape what we say and do.

I do not want to make it sound as if we are determined by independently existing voices or discourses, that we are determined by forces of discourse as the Marxists say we are determined by forces of economics. I dread the day when the new "science of memes" takes over from dialogism and discourse analysis to show how we are all simply the meme machines that virus-like units of meaning use to replicate. For I think we choose, at least to some extent, the voices we hear, the discourses that shape our personality. In O'Connor's stories, the characters are what they are because of what voices they choose to listen to or cannot bring themselves to ignore.

I think we have to take this idea very seriously. Like O'Connor's characters, we need to be careful of what languages we let speak in our selves. We need to see which are good and which pernicious, not simply to celebrate their free play. I agree with Wayne Booth that one of the problems in Bakhtin is that he does not say that some voices must be controlled, put in subordinate position. Bakhtin does not, for example, object to the voice of misogyny in Rabelais. But if the voices we hear construct our personalities, we will want to at least control that voice, even if we cannot silence it. For I think that Bakhtin and Booth are both right, we are constructed by the voices we hear, by the company we keep. The listener is changed by the voices he hears.

And in paying attention to the listener whose very self is changed by what he hears, I think we can be truest to both O'Connor and Bakhtin. It's important to remember that Bakhtin's world-view was also a religious one, and that, like O'Connor, he thought that there was a divine voice that needed to be heeded.

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