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Northrop Frye and Mikhail Bakhtin: Parallel, Opposing, Converging Views

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Northrop Frye and Mikhail Bakhtin: Parallel, Opposing, Converging Views

Manuel Jofré

I. Introduction[1]

Although both authors were concerned with similar subjects, comparing such different lives is almost impossible. In both cases there is a whole life devoted to literature, to literary study, history and culture.[2] Frye and Bakhtin lived in very different worlds - Canada and Russia-without mutual knowledge of each other, completely ignoring each other's intellectual creation.[3]

To better understand their intellectual production, the size of the total work of each author is important to contrast. Frye published 35 books and over 500 articles. Bakhtin had only five books published, most posthumously. The complex work of Frye –29 or 30 volumes of the Complete Works– has been unfairly reduced from a full critical method to an archetypal criticism. Bakhtin's work is full of conceptualizations and Bakhtin himself declared that the general name of his studies was 'historical poetics.'

Frye won academic awards worldwide while Bakhtin was denied everything, including his brilliant doctorate. While Frye received 39 honorary doctorates and travelled invited by universities worldwide, Bakhtin always had difficulty maintaining a fixed and stable university work, not to mention his inability to move due to a permanent disability.

While Frye freely travelled and moved around the world receiving honors, apparently Bakhtin left Russia only once for a brief stay in Italy, in the late 1920s. However, this fact is not fully proved, and a good part of his life was lived under the Stalinist state of terror.[4]

Their relationship with religion is also very important to contrast. Frye was very theological and religion constantly permeated his vision while Bakhtin, who claimed not to be religious (according to his own writing), was accused of participating in religious discussions. There is a great mystery about religion in Bakhtin's case, and the pervasiveness of religion in literature as a historical explanation in the case of Frye. While Frye confirmed the Bible to be central for the literary system, Bakhtin instead used the living carnival for literature.

II. An Exegetical Comparison

Frye and Bakhtin reread the entire history of Western literature and they both rewrote it several times. Certainly, both of them gave different versions of the literary history of the Western world in their writings. Bakhtin did, at least, five readings of universal literary history (Socratic dialogue-Menippean satire, laughter, the grotesque, the chronotope, grotesque realism versus classical realism). Frye reconstituted at least three or four versions of Western literary history in Anatomy of Criticism, and a couple more considering only the influence of the Bible as a key intertext. And he offers more versions in his books on Blake and Shakespeare.

Taking into account their analytical and interpretive systems, both scholars independently discovered the important role Menippean satire has played throughout Western cultural history. They also described irony as the intellectual condition of our time. Intertextuality takes place as a basic concept in the system of the two authors, where some literary works necessarily connect with others, and where literary writings constantly refer to previous ones.[5]

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[1] This essay and its delivery at the Northrop Frye International Conference at the University of Toronto was partially funded by Program U-apoya of the University of Chile.

[2] While Frye (1912-1991) was academically very successful while alive, Bakhtin (1895-1975) was ignored until after his death, and his writings only posthumously known worldwide.

[3] However, they both created complex, autonomous, original and everchanging theoretical systems, with their own terminology, both being unique, dynamic and discursive constellations of thought.

[4] In regards to their personal life, Bakhtin had a full life supported by his wife, Elena Alexandrovna, who lived with Bakhtin from 1920 until she died in 1970. Elena even accompanied him into exile in the 1930s. In the case of Frye, Helen (matching wife names) had a full presence and she also died first (1984) than her husband Northrop while being abroad (in Australia), on a deplorable journey for the couple. Both creators had a life without children.

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[6] It is now known, that both were considered dangerous intellectuals by police in their respective countries. While Frye was spied upon, Bakhtin was persecuted, imprisoned and his work purposefully banished. However, nothing stopped their literary inquiries.

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In the long run, Frye can be seen as a follower of Aristotle's Poetics, pushing the Estagirita's statements to his last consequences, while Bakhtin was a consistent opponent of the Poetics, in various different ways (without ever declaring it in writing).[6]

III. Contrasting Systems

Frye was a great organizer of historical and conceptual models that evolved, just like Bakhtin, but the latter always refuse to be confined into a single terminology and into a final system, always moving toward a new way of examining the literature.

Both pose, in different ways, what would be a canon of Western literature. Frye does it through modes, genres, myths, archetypes and symbols in various forms, and Bakhtin certainly does it through monologic and dialogic lines, the two types of realism (grotesque and classical), high and low genre and the centripetal versus centrifugal forces. In Frye, the center of the Western canon and literary history, as likewise of intertextuality, is the Bible. In Bakhtin, however, there is no center and no canon as such, but successive versions of literary history with different accents, where usually the central is the rescue of the popular and marginal above the cultured and official.

Both critics studied literature within culture but Christian culture was only decisive for Frye, because Bakhtin could not do very open references about culture. And while Frye was a passionate commentator on Canadian literature, especially on the contemporary one, Bakhtin could not be equally critical of Russian literature. Frye could analyze contemporary Canadian literature because he cared for it very much (Canadian nationalism) while Bakhtin could never refer to contemporary Russian literature, which did not have a great quality at the time. And while Frye paid great attention to Canadian poetry and its criticism, Bakhtin pointed rather to the limitations of poetic discourse, highlighting alternatively, the great importance of the novel as a revitalizing and questioning genre.[8]

Both students of literature devoted especially to study the genology, meaning the great transformations of literary genres throughout human history, from its earliest beginnings to the present. Also both of them gave basic importance to the novel in literary transformations; Frye defining the role of the romance form of the late Middle Age and the Renaissance, and Bakhtin emphasizing post-Renaissance novelization processes where the novel as a non canonical genre influences and challenges other canonized forms.

Frye and Bakhtin study the world as a conglomerate of speeches and both views are clearly historic. The discursive world is seen by both as a constant succession of formats, constantly mutating one after another. Neither of them feels conceptually to be a structuralist or functionalist, but both lived in a time with these characteristics.

Especially notorious is the fact that in both of their writings they convey a profound ethical perspective. Literature and writing cannot be separated, because in both the actions of human beings are ethical, inescapably. From this point of view, both had a strong discrepancy with Marxism (that is stronger in the case of Bakhtin) and also with respect to Freudianism. These were two types of determinism overly rejected by both intellectuals.

IV. Beyond the Convergences

Every work, every text, every speech can be approached in multiple ways, in the case of both analysts. The re-accentuation of one or other aspects made their theoretical systems function like real, finally, as open unstable systems, changing in constant and not finalized processes of articulation and re-articulation.[9]

While Frye appears more focused on the study and variation of more complex forms of discourse, Bakhtin positioned himself in a more Heraclitean line; Socratic, ironic and relativist. Frye tries, through patterns and cycles, to contribute into a more scientific consolidation of literary studies; whereas the Bakhtin system opposes metonymically, face to face (vis-á-vis), to the real-discursive. Contrastingly, the Frye system attempts to be a metaphor of the real-discursive.

Both authors gave great importance to the methodology of literary studies. Both of them thought that the mode of approaching the object of study was very decisive, and both explained that the produced result emerges according to the methodology used. For Frye and Bakhtin, methodology is based on human freedom and in the use of analytical and hermeneutical tools that each one considers necessary and that are required by the body under examination. But their

[7] A Slavic training (with no studies in Europe) in Bakhtin's case, including a large initial formation in classical Greco-Roman culture, contrasts with Frye's Canadian training on Anglo-European literature (with a stay in England). There was clearly a broad knowledge of languages in both cases. Frye knew English, French, Greek and Latin. Bakhtin mastered Russian, German, French, Greek and Latin.

[8] Frye was a prolific writer whose complete works today consist in 30 volumes and also wrote numerous personal notebooks that were published posthumously. Bakhtin wrote just five books, of which he only saw the publication of two during his life time. However, both theoretical writings, mainly in essay and criticism forms, contain and present poetics (or several indeed), incorporating many common points, similarities, convergences, as well as differences, distances, separations.

[9] Both literary scholars worked with a great amount of bibliographic materials. The huge amount of literary works covered by each one is impressive. The discursive evidence they present for their overall interpretative theories is overwhelming. Frye works with more modern materials while Bakhtin uses more antique sources.

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specific position is to successively use a sum of methodologies.

Close examination will show that both authors considered when studying literature that focusing on the hero was central to its relationship with the represented world, and that also centering their studies on the transformation and inter-influence of discursive and literary genres. They also studied one literary phenomenon (apparently) from different views and diverse optics.[10]

Both critics created idiolectic writing styles of their own, which were part of a grand creative project. In Frye, the project includes multiple contributions and is very organic, whereas in Bakhtin the project is ongoing, but fragmentary. The completion of the eight major concerns by Frye ("ogdoad") involved modes, genres, archetypes, myths and symbols in the history of literature, in regards to the national and Western literature (even in relationship with other disciplines, such as education, history, philosophy). In Bakhtin's case, there is a grand project dealing with the action of the Western novel, implying interdiscursivity (intertextuality), chronotopical development and the carnivalesque (all implying culture, history, anthropology).

V. The Significance of Works and Writings

Frye's system, as Bakhtin's contains at least five elements: an ontology of the literary work, a methodology for literary analysis, a history of Western literature, a theory of criticism, and a study of culture. Both intellectuals emphasize the inescapable dialogue of critical theory (as Frye defined his system in Anatomy of Criticism) with the literary work itself, that is to say an ineludible dialogism between literature and literary studies (be theory, criticism, analysis, history).[11]

For Frye, his idea of circular or cyclical patterns has a cosmogonic origin, centered "mythos" (plot or story) that is organized around the four times of day (morning, midday, afternoon and night) or the four seasons (spring-comedy, romance-summer, fall-tragedy and irony and satire in winter), as postulated by archetypal criticism. According to it, any time progresses to a higher stage hopelessly condemned to roll back bringing previous elements, which cause the circular or cyclical.[12]

The two historic and discursive lines, monologic centripetal and dialogic centrifugal postulated by Bakhtin, can be contrasted with the two trends that Frye notes in his Anatomy of Criticism: the mythical tendency (the story told, the supernatural, the open, the cyclical, the multivocal) and mimetic tendency (the verosimilitud, the finished product, the linear-progressive, the worldliness). The relationship between the two trends is an "agon", as in Bakhtin, 'a struggle'.

For both authors, the question of the hero in literature is extremely complex. Both operate referring to Aristotle's Poetics, as long as they compare the superior hero (of ancient epic) with the low hero (of modern novel). For Bakhtin, this difference is related to the contrast of monologism regarding dialogism, without a strong sense of progress in the historical transition, which rather follows a spatial order, actantial, pragmatic and temporary.

For Frye, the typology of heroes (he distinguishes five varieties) adheres to the development of the modes, and therefore goes first from a divine and mythical to a higher hero, second, until, to a third, a hero who is a leader, and fourth, a common hero, until someone who finally becomes, fifth, less than a human or less than the reader. This typology does not have a sense of progress either.

Concluding, without ultimate deductions and final reflections, it should be recognized that both authors study seem to give the popular and folk a decisive role from the beginning of literature to the later development of it. Bakhtin's carnival does this, of course, but especially with his idea of the unity of the serious-comic genres, and Frye does it, similarly, with his emphasis on the early mythic-religious stories.

Thus, facing each other and converging the two discursive lines of human consciousness distinguished by Bakhtin, and the two fictional modes taking as reference the external reality distinguished by Frye; it

[10] The following authors have continued the theories proposed by Frye: Harold Bloom, Jonathan Culler, Fredric Jameson, Paul Ricoeur; while in the case of Bakhtin, followers that could be mentioned are: lury Lotman, Tzvetan Todorov, Julia Kristeva. The Frye revolution happens first during the 1960s (in the U.S. and Canada, as it affects academic literary studies) while the Bakhtin revolution will come later, during the 1990s.

[11] Although the lives of both intellectuals concluded in the last third of the twentieth century, nevertheless, both Frye and Bakhtin were fully able to fully understand the historical and cultural time ahead of them both. In the writings of these mayor scholars are numerous traces of how the study of the modern perspective allowed them presage postmodern ideas and lifestyles that swept the world from 1980 onwards. At the high level of temporary macro-models (grand time) that both established, it could be said that the realizable future polyphony, announced by Bakhtin, has its first base in the present constitution and the counterpoint between the dominant monologic line (idealizing, centralizing, cultured, stylized, subjective) with the emerging dialogic line (popular, material, disseminating, intersubjective, transformative).

[12] In both authors, it can clearly be seen an opening and overcoming of a previous paradigm, basing the new contribution on the importance of the discourse, the semic (meaning) and the interpretative. Thus, this move implied overcoming textualism, a derivative of functionalist structuralism, while contributing simultaneously to the creation of a signic consciousness and semiotic awareness. The historic nature of their inquiry is centered on the ideas of process and cycle.

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follows that both would eventually favor the transit from the mimetic-monological to dialogical-fantastical (fabulation).

These thoughts might not have a stopping point, no doubt, but now we must conclude.

VI. Final Starting Points

The analytical and purposeful looks on Frye and Bakhtin were indeed multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary. Although they were clearly located within a sector of human knowledge, that is, literary studies; their research claims were projected into other fields. Anthropology, history, philosophy, and cultural studies among others, were some of the disciplines affected by the investigations and writings of these scholars: one Canadian and one Russian.

Frye and Bakhtin were theorists and critics, historians and cultural researchers, philosophers of the language, intellectual thinkers not prefigured by the system. They both emerged as highly complex consciousness discussants of great creative expression, presenting simultaneously, in their writings, an understanding of the literary phenomenon and of the artistic process, as well as great producers of the critical-theoretical necessary considerations of their time. For this purpose, both forged powerful and convincing languages.

All this discussion allows us to finally state that Frye and Bakhtin were the two most important scholars of the twentieth century literature in Canada and in Russia, mostly for their contribution to cultural studies, literature, literary theory, semiotics and media that covered both, the fields of Humanities and Social Sciences.

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