MEDIEVAL MYSTERY PLAYS
AND THE PROTOPOLYPHONICITY OF ARTISTIC FORM

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The present article re-examines Bakhtin's view of the historicity of polyphony. He argues that the treatment of polyvocality in ancient and medieval literature can be only formal due to the lack of favorable conditions for dialogizing the entire chorus of voices to the utmost degree as in Dostoevsky's novels. This view establishes a clear typological boundary. Our objective here, however, is to present medieval mysteries (*The Second Shepherds' Play*) as a serio-comical genre illustrating the historical continuity of polyphony.

Key words: Bakhtin, medieval drama, mystery plays, polyphony, protopolyphonicity, The Second Shepherds' Play

Historically, it is the novel that eventually provides the optimal verbal medium for polyphonic thinking. There are other compositional forms, however, that are also conducive to its growth. As regards the contribution of the serio-comical realm to the maturation of polyphony, essential to medieval drama are two characteristics of the crumbling epic world view, namely the overcoming of historical inversion through the positioning of the artistic image within the zone of familiar contact and the semantic variability of fictional characters. Undoubtedly, some of the aspects of polyphony as researched in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* require further explanation. In Bakhtin's view, medieval drama, in particular mysteries, being part of the serio-comical realm, epitomize only the preparatory, not the final stage of multivoicedness and internally dialogized discourse. We will try to critically re-examine this problem by analyzing *The Second Shepherds' Play* (*Secunda Pastorum*). The main points of historical continuity in the play are the close contact with the object and carnivalization. Not only do they introduce the compositional-stylistic elements of medieval farce but they also parody scripture history. The present article aims to support the thesis that polyphony can be scrutinized and defined not only in terms of the opposition between its

„embryonic" and „real" stage, but also as a continuous process of development that reached its peak in Dostoevsky's work.

According to Bakhtin, the theoretical and practical interdependence between the represented object and artistic form and between a research methodology and its subject is essential to literary scholarship. On the synchronic plane, the interdependence between the represented object and the representing method underlies the artistic design of the polyphonic novel, which is based upon the combination of polar-opposite narrative elements. Bakhtin points out that Grossman quite reasonably places emphasis on the anti-canonicity of Dostoevskian discourse, which is owing to the latter's propensity for destroying the „organic unity of material" (Bakhtin 1984: 14). This is what proves to be the main distinguishing trait of internally dialogized multivoicedness. That rift, caused by the disintegration of the absolute and unitary truth of monologism into a bunch of singularities, explains the advent of a completely new type of artistic viewpoint and the setting of a new agenda of compositional-stylistic unities. And since the subject of art is not just modern life but its multi-leveledness and controversial nature, the author develops an effective method of description which finds expression in „his joining together of the most varied and incompatible elements in the unity of novelistic construction, and in his destruction of the unified and integral fabric of narration" (Bakhtin 1984: 14). In Bakhtin's view, Grossman, in spite of the insufficient explanatory power of his analysis, rightfully attached importance to the fact that „Dostoevsky merges opposites" (Grossman 1925: 174 – 75 – qtd. in Bakhtin 1984: 14 – 15). Dostoevsky's idea to combine complete opposites into an organic artistic design explains quite clearly why the historical maturation of his style is influenced by sources which we would otherwise define in many ways as monologic and therefore as generic opponents of the fully developed polyphonic novel. Thus, on the diachronic plane, one of the lines of development, showing the consistency between the represented object and the representing artistic form, is observable in the poetics of medieval drama. On the one hand, the growing importance of modern life is reflected in literature, but on the other hand, the methods of artistic representation necessitate wiping out any distance and drawing depicted objects into the zone of close contact. All this seems to be challenging the truth of Holy Scripture and the views of the clergy inasmuch as they lose their unattainability and remain below the threshold of unambiguous reception. Another central premise of Bakhtin's work is the interdependence and hence consistency between a research methodology and its subject because that is the key to gaining the

right perspective on all issues for discussion. However, this basic requirement is not always met. Literary practice is usually ahead of the analytical potential of literary theory which needs updating because of the shaken status quo of the high distanced genres. The problem is caused by the relatively new genre of the novel and by the need for an appropriate research methodology. This consideration leads to a conclusion – „Studying other genres is analogous to studying dead languages; studying the novel, on the other hand, is like studying languages that are not only alive, but still young" (Bakhtin 1981: 3) – which is also a call to adapt the scientific outlook to the emerging challenges. Improvements should reflect both the new characteristics of the represented object and the new artistic vision of it. And if this requirement applies to the theory of the homophonic novel, it holds good to an even greater extent for its polyphonic version. Therefore, on the synchronic plane the poetics of the polyphonic novel makes use of ready-made polar-opposites, while from a diachronic perspective drama, providing one of the routes for the maturation of the polyphonic method, contributes to the gradual shift from monologism to dialogism in the multi-genre medium of medieval literature whose artistic experience eventually flows into Dostoevsky's oeuvre.

The cases of explicit contactology are not always confirmed by documentary evidence and therefore identifying sources of influence can be a difficult or even impossible task. Yet aesthetic experience does not exist in isolated orders because otherwise we would not be able to explain how its fields – those of theme, style, and genre – manage to reproduce much the same patterns in subsequent periods. Undoubtedly, the links and continuity between classical antiquity and the Middle Ages have mapped one of the historical routes of polyphony preserved in the objective memory of genre. Bakhtin places special emphasis on the value of this legacy with regard to the medieval ideas about the structure of the world since in the menippea „a three-planed construction makes its appearance: action and dialogic syncrisis are transferred from earth to Olympus and to the nether world" (1984: 116). However, it does not remain there as „The three-planed construction of the menippea exercised a decisive influence on the corresponding structure of the medieval mystery play and mystery scene" (Bakhtin 1984: 116). The generic language of the menippea is not closed off in its initial socio-historical context and does not fade away with the creation of the early exemplary works such as the nonextant writings of Menippus, deriding the Epicureans and Stoics, *A True Story* and *Dialogues of the Dead* by Lucian, and Marcus Terentius Varro's *Menippean Satires*

in 150 books.[1] On the contrary, it continues to live and to exert influence much later on, to adapt to the author's world view and the qualities of his object, and to move the latter from the far off distance to the zone of direct contact for there is always a tension between unitary language and actual heteroglossia (see Bakhtin 1981: 270), not least because „At any given moment of its evolution, language is stratified ... into languages that are socio-ideological: languages of social groups, „professional" and „generic" languages, languages of generations and so forth" (Bakhtin 1984: 272). Monologism and dialogism as modes of thinking have always existed, but the dominance of either of them is conditioned by the approach to the object of representation. And it is in this sense that we should understand the shift from monologic to dialogic discourse (cf. Manchorov 2011: 49). Medieval literature tends to exploit the potential of the serio-comical across a broad front. As Bakhtin argues, besides Christian Latin writing the complex interaction among genres inspired by the menippea is also targeted at „such dialogized and carnivalized medieval genres as „arguments," „debates," ambivalent „panegyrics" (*desputaisons, dits, debats*) morality and miracle plays, and in the later Middle Ages mystery plays and *soties*" (Bakhtin 1984: 136). Therefore, the very fact that polyphony has its roots in classical antiquity with regard to some guiding principles of composition is an important clue to its inherent historicity and centuries-long development. The view that the menippea is „the *universal genre of ultimate questions*" (Bakhtin 1984: 146) has definitely furnished the concept of the atemporality of metageneric poetics (Tihanov 2000: 210) with a relevant example. The reason behind this is the menippea's flexibility to continuously adapt to different periods and forms of literature, and it is in consequence of this fact that it pervades both drama – „The mystery play is, after all, nothing other than a modified medieval dramatic variant of the menippea" (Bakhtin 1984: 147) – and Dostoevsky's novels where „the menippea is brought close to the mystery play" (Bakhtin 1984: 147). Certainly, this ongoing process of conceptual interaction and stylistic innovation in literature and culture reveals the phenomenon under scrutiny in terms of its continuity and intrinsic historicity. Quite understandably, the question then arises: what is the author's role in preserving previous artistic experience? Does he play a role in it? Obviously, literature is self-reflexive which helps it turn back to past centuries and make use of innovative modes of artistic vision and new literary devices according to modern living conditions and the proper perspective on them. In Bakhtin's

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[1] *Saturarum Menippearum libri CL.*

words, credit for the long-term influence of Menippean satire must go to „the objective memory of the very genre" (1984: 121) rather than Dostoevsky himself.

The question of the continuity and ahistoricity of aesthetic experience, on the one hand, and of the role of the individual author, on the other hand, is essential to the proper understanding of both the development of polyphony and the reasons for its careful study. The continued existence of polyphony goes far beyond the confines of any literary genre for the simple reason that, just like allegory, it is a supergeneric entity. In fact, it is a world view that is relevant to the characteristics of different genres and different eras, i.e. a specific mode of perception and representation which can ultimately be conceived of as an attitude of mind rather than a specific set of rules. However, this attitude cannot have been adopted all at once: it evolved slowly within the genres of medieval literature where a number of transformations take place during the transition from epic to novel. Not surprisingly, then, in order to capture the very essence of mature polyphony, one has to study its past. We can judge its nature by Dostoevsky's „A Funny Man's Dream"[2] since in that short story, which has acquired the universality of both the classical menippea and the medieval mystery play, „this internal kinship between the two genres emerges very clearly" (Bakhtin 1984: 149). In effect, the work contains a description of the family tree of the novel that reveals the crumbling epic world view and the long way of dialogic discourse. As stated above, it is important to clarify how the individual writing style of an author is related to literary history. This issue assumes importance in regard to the fallacious assumption of rationalism concerning „the contraposition of the objective *qua* rational to the subjective, individual, singular *qua* irrational and fortuitous" (Bakhtin 1993: 30). For instance, when he discusses Kaus's contribution to Dostoevsky studies, he approves of his penetrative observations on the correlation between genre and social environment, namely that the polyphonic novel was bound to appear under capitalism and that it was Russia that was most likely to see its advent. His assertions that there is where „the objective preconditions ... for the multi-leveledness and multi-voicedness of the polyphonic novel" (Bakhtin 1984: 20) appeared and that „it was not Dostoevsky's subjective memory, but the objective memory of the very genre in which he worked" (Bakhtin 1984: 121) that stores the aesthetic experience of antiquity and transmits it from age to age, the term „objective" can be best described as „not influenced by

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[2] In Caryl Emerson's translation of Bakhtin's book on Dostoevsky the short story has been entitled „The Dream of a Ridiculous Man."

personal feelings or opinions in considering or representing facts" and „not dependent on the mind for existence" ("Objective" 1998). The emphasis on continuity is strong enough, although the language and aesthetic structures that ensure permanence are very much likely to bottle one's individual creativity up. This, though it may come as a surprise, would bring Bakhtin closer to some rival theoretical movements. Among the general contact points between him and some structuralist-oriented scholars, in spite of their fundamental disagreements, is the social nature of language (see also Wertsch 2007: 648 – cf. Manchorov 2011: 92). It reflects the inherited vocabulary that everyone begins to study as early as the initial stage of language acquisition. Its words and modes of thinking exist outside of and prior to the mind and are, therefore, beyond the scope of individuals, i.e. they are objective in a very real sense. Accordingly, individual artistic consciousness is strongly influenced by the objective remembrance of genre. Only thus can we understand why transhistorical aesthetic constructs assume greater importance than any given writer's contribution to literature (cf. Wertsch 2007: 648). The unresolved tension between history and typology provides further confirmation of it since, by virtue of metageneric poetics (cf. Tihanov 2000: 210)[3] and its inherent ahistoricity, the menippea not only sends polyphony forward in time, but also deindividualizes the subject's aesthetic activity. Polyphonic discourse is the creation of supraindividual forces that ensure artistic succession. When explaining polyphony, whether we choose to highlight the role of historical continuity or the isomorphism of artistic vision in metageneric poetics, we just cannot ignore the invisible links between generations of artists and ages on account of the keenly imitative nature of art which is invariably rooted in already existing contexts, whether it adds to or departures from tradition and previous attainments.

The original purpose of liturgical drama was to clearly illustrate the most important biblical narratives, such as Genesis, The Fall of Lucifer, the Original Sin, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, Abraham and Isaac, the Nativity, the Raising of Lazarus, the Passion, the Resurrection, etc. Its detachment from the initial socio-ideological horizon of religious dogma and the interaction with alien discourse broadens its previous sense. There begins to form another „apperceptive background" (Bakhtin 1981: 281) that outgrows the passive understanding of the object of representation by means of double-voiced discourse. Thus, some important transformations occurred during the transition to the cycles of mystery plays. The first one

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[3] „What is more, Bakhtin's ahistorical metageneric poetics presents Dostoevsky's novel and the menippea as essentially identical" (Tihanov 2000: 210).

is related to the demand for a wider theater space for more people and to the changing conceptual image of drama. From the church interior they moved to the churchyard and hence to other places such as the town square, the streets, and suburban lawns. As a result of this removal, the plays passed into the hands of the laity, i.e. the city guilds. Generally, they retained their thematic focus and, therefore, the new ideological accents were still within the system of religious beliefs, and yet change occurred. Another significant transformation is related to the direction and significance of language shift. The language of the Roman Empire was the lingua franca of the Middle Ages and a tool for building the communication and spiritual community of Christendom in Western Europe thereby refining local language and cultural practices (Ziolkowski 1996: 506). After the collapse of the Empire and the initial formation of the Romance languages, it became increasingly unintelligible, which brought about its replacement in the liturgy of the Mass for French, German and English, etc. This was the result of its unintelligibility that began to „sabotage" the main purpose of the Mass – to re-enact the sacrament of the Eucharist in the New Testament symbolizing the spiritual connection of Christians with God and reaffirming the doctrine of transubstantiation, according to which the priest consecrates the bread and wine that represent the body and blood of Christ (*King James Version* 1984: Mat 26.26 – 28; Mar 14.22 – 24; Luk 22.19 – 20). The registered examples of the coexistence of Latin and local languages in many texts, however, gave conclusive proof that the aforesaid replacement was certainly not a fast process. As to the grief of the three Marys and St. John during the crucifixion of Jesus, it is widely known that „Such planctus exist both in Latin and the vernacular" (Chambers 1903: 39 – 40). Similar bilingual services epitomize „the verbal and semantic decentering" (Bakhtin 1981: 367) that leads to the emergence of national and social languages. After perceiving a serious threat to spiritual integrity – in the West it was the unfamiliarity of both priests and laymen with Latin, which was the reason for the Proclamation of Tours (813) (Forse 2002: 54), and in the East it was the „trilingual heresy" (“трьзычьн ересь": Jakobson 1985: 297) strongly opposed by Saints Cyril and Methodius – the clergy understood that the liturgy should be comprehensible to both the educated elite and the ordinary people. Even etymologically, the terms „Eucharist"[4] and „Holy Communion"[5] indicate an intention to build a spiritual community rather than maintain a social hierarchy. In the Middle Ages, illiteracy remained

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[4] Gr. εὐχάριστος – „grateful, thankfull".
[5] Lat. *communionem*, nom. *communis* – „fellowship", „mutual participation".

the biggest barrier between the word of God and the vast majority of the population. Of course, the term „literacy," which meant a good command of Latin, is fairly vague by modern standards in terms of its constituent skills (reading, writing, and composition) as well as its improvement and varying rates in different parts of Europe. Medieval culture, however, was not oral. Indeed, the written word was represented by the spoken word during religious ceremonies, sermons, and readings, but information was stored in books. And it is writing that erected the pillars of education and learning, which explains why „The need of writing that served a wide variety of purposes is evident in the development of *ars dictaminis*" (Bäuml 1980: 237). The stages of religious drama, which literary studies and history have managed to reconstruct, reveal its changes in form and content. The original musical nature of liturgical worship failed to provide adequate communication since many episodes lost their meaning due to the impenetrability of Latin. This brought about to re-enactments of the Resurrection, which was the first step in dramatizing the Mass. Tropes, the earliest of which is part of the Easter service and commonly known as the *Quem quaeritis* (Whom you seek), played a major role in staging liturgical plays. Of course, there is no reason to accept the terms „drama" and „play" just as they are. „The rite remains a rite," contends Leonard Goldstein, and then, listing the main symbolic acts during the festive chant, he concludes that they „are not parts of a drama" (Goldstein 2004: 50). Serving as the basis of the Easter Mass, these episodes were played out within the church walls. As a result of the growing number of people and the expanded thematic scope including both the Old and New Testament stories, there emerged whole cycles whose staging needed more space: at first, that of the church yard and then entirely outdoors. It was during the transition from sacred to profane places and through the involvement of laymen that the clergy loosened its grip on those narratives to leave room for double-voiced discourse. The contact between religious dogma and festive non-canonical treatment of those episodes exposed their content to the powerful impact of secularization and hence realism and the topical issues of the day. In place of the previous officious liturgical scenes reaffirming the notion of faith, there appeared performances that were nothing but „spectacula for mirth, wonder, and delight" (Chambers 1903: 69). Despite the disagreement between the widely held view of the origin of drama (e.g. Young 1967; Craig 1955)[6] and some rival theories (see Goldstein 2004: 15

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[6] According to these scholars medieval drama is derived from the 10th-century liturgical chant.

ff.),[7] it is obvious that in both cases it is heavily dependent upon mimeticism and the ensuing role-play that involves dialogued speech as is evident in the antiphonal psalmody known to us as the *Antiphonarium* imposed by Gregory the Great in the 6th century (Chambers 1903: 6 – 7). As a result of the aforementioned transformations, drama formed a new apperceptive background that benefited from the potential of genre memory. With the advent of the culture of laughter the previous passive state of piety toward the object of the representation is replaced by active participation, because „Carnival is a pageant ... without a division into performers and spectators" – it is a dynamic process in which „everyone is an active participant" (Bakhtin 1984: 122).

The most significant change occurs in consequence of the global transition from epic to novel (Bakhtin 1981: 3 – 40). The confluence of opposing aesthetic and axiological categories that destroys the absolute epic distance results from the carnivalization of literature (see Bakhtin 1984: 122 – 23). Thus, the interaction between the sacred and the profane word (cf. Бахтин 2002: 389) leaves room for a zone of familiar contact in the serio-comical genres of medieval literature and particularly in the mystery play. Among the key assumptions is that in comparison with the system of official language rooted in hierarchy and submission, the carnivalistic world view is based upon lived experience for „in carnival everyone is an active participant" (Bakhtin 1984: 122). Another key assumption refers to the socially-determined purpose of carnivalistic folk culture: it has always provided a vivid counterpoint to all that is sublime, officious, and serious, and therefore „there was no break in tradition between antiquity and the Middle Ages" (Bakhtin 1984: 129). Undoubtedly, carnivalistic laughter „novelizes" the represented world and, consequently, its long-term goals while heading to the aesthetics of dialogism tend to be the disintegration of hierarchical distance, the dissolution of man's epic wholeness, and the moving of the human image from the past to the present. All these shifts testify to the historical continuity of polyphony, which is a good reason for studying its development in previous centuries. *The Second Shepherds' Play*, which is part of the Wakefield Cycle, illustrates the development of medieval drama at a stage when it is still within the subject area of biblical narrative, but is divorced from the direct functions of religious ritual. While studying the work, one may adopt different approaches. Some scholars have been

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[7] One of the issues in his revisionist methodology is „Why does the new ritual ... take the form of an imitation of an action (plot), an imitation of persons (impersonation), and an imitation of conversation (dialogue)?" (Goldstein 2004: 214).

dealing with historical and aesthetic problems such as the folk origins of the play (Cosbey 1945: 310 – 17; Johnson 1966: 47 ff.), the presence of *prima pastorum* and *secunda pastorum* in the Wakefield Cycle and the reason for the embedding of a farcical plot line into the lofty Nativity story (Johnson 1966: 47 ff.); others consider the play's humor to be a symptom of class conflict in feudal society whose power structure and property rights oppress the masses (Davis 1992: 3 – 20), and still others direct their energies to the interaction between the aesthetic categories of the sublime and the base forming an organic whole (Maynard 1978: 78). From our perspective, the case typifies the development of polyphony in the carnivalized speech environment of drama and of medieval culture as a whole. The „strange" combination of the serious theme of the Nativity and farcical episodes diversifies not only the tone of the play, but also its critical assessment. Not surprisingly, some researchers consider the comic and parodic plot line either as intolerably offensive – „The Second Shepherds' Play ... is an artistic absurdity; as a farce of Mak the sheep stealer it is the masterpiece of the English religious drama" (Malone and Baugh 1969: 281) – or as disproportionately long as compared to the whole work (Campbell 1986: 109). One possible explanation is that the mixture in question is a consequence of anachronistic thinking which tends to put together cultural realities of different ages and geographical areas. Another reason is the very aesthetics of genre at different stages (cf. Bakhtin 1984: 122). The tripartite classification of ancient Greek drama (i.e. tragedy, satyr plays, comedy) is not even remotely applicable to the basic types of medieval stagecraft. For instance, in the former both tragedy, whose „themes and subjects are for the most part drawn from the heroic age" (Storey and Allan 2005: 2), and comedy, which dares to ridicule gods and humans alike, are easily recognizable genres and neither of them can replace the other. As for the mystery play, however, the comic is not unique only to it. It is firmly rooted in medieval drama (Hardison Jr 1997: 136) which, therefore, deals with contrasting states of mind and values and is indifferent to the genre divisions of classical literature (cf. Mincoff 1976: 184). An important corollary of the concomitance of the serious and the comic is the ongoing development of historical inversion which is essential to the absolute epic distance and hence the high distanced genres. In getting rid of the hierarchy of time zones established in them, artistic consciousness no longer goes back in time and remains in its present and begins to exploit it. Such a fundamental change, however, does not occur overnight. Initially, the past retains its importance, but another continuum is soon attached to it, that of the present, which results in the formation of a

two-layer temporally valorized structure. In it the „then" of 1st-century Judea coexists with the „now" of medieval Wakefield, i.e. the temporal zones of the epic and the novel, as in medieval romance (see Manchorov 2011: 199 – 219). Contemporary medieval culture first comes into view through the three shepherds: Coll complains about the hard life of peasants who are „hammed, / for-taxed and rammed" (*The Wakefield Second Shepherds' Play* ll. 15 – 16, 368) by the gentry; Gib shares his problems of married life since „These men that are wed have not all their will. / When they are full hard bestead, they sigh full still" (*The Wakefield Second Shepherds' Play* ll. 73 – 74, 370); and Daw grumbles about the weather for „Was never sin Noah's flood such floods seen" (*The Wakefield Second Shepherds' Play* l. 127, 371). Mak, the sheep stealer, and his wife Gill provide a blasphemous counterpoint to the Nativity story and, therefore, epitomize contemporary life as well. Contemporization is also due to the city guilds inasmuch as their members used stock motifs of their own life and failed to put a strictly theological interpretation on those dramatic re-enactments. Carnivalization does provide a suitable verbal environment for the development of polyphony. The comic treatment of religious ritual and the reconsideration of historical inversion undermines the monologic integrity of man and takes on great significance on account of its field of action and the movement of literary language from the epic to the novel. As medieval drama ignores the aesthetic distinctions between the serious and the comic, it favors alternative approaches to its object and adopts axiologically and theologically ambivalent attitudes. The movement of its generic language toward the novel is due to the fact that drama also contributes to the introduction of contemporary reality through the carnivalizing function of the serio-comical.

In conclusion, at this early stage of its development medieval drama is a literary form that is still taking shape and is not divided into genres as ancient Greek drama. It fulfils a didactic function and is closely linked with religion, and that is why modern views are irrelevant to it. It provides a suitable environment for the development of polyphony for obvious reasons: the dialogic nature of antiphonal singing and the already examined transformations trigger evolutionary processes taking place until the middle of the 13th century. From then onward, every single change will push those plays further away from the original intent to visually represent the liturgy (see Chambers 1903: 7). The interanimation of ideological languages paves the way for the complete polyphonizing of novelistic discourse in modern literature. What comes to the fore is the progressive

development of the dialogic potential of words whose state in this particular context reflects the potopolyphonicity of artistic form.

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