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TRUTH THROUGH DISTORTION: A BAKHTINIAN READING OF “THE RUSSIAN DREAMBOOK OF COLOR AND FLIGHT” BY GINA OCHSNER

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Ochsner is a well-known contemporary American short-story writer and novelist. Most recently, she has published “The Russian Dreambook of Color and Flight”, which, like her other books, is written in magical realism. This story is set in 1994 in Perm, Russia and told through the eyes of four very different characters in a world that is fantastic and absurd. Ochsner is a kind of modern-day Dostoevsky in her employment of multiple voices, magical realism, laughter and the carnivalesque. “The Russian Dreambook of Color and Flight” is an important example of how an author can rearrange this consciousness and hence provide a paradigm for global writers to come.

Key words: novel; carnivalesque; magical realism; poliphonism; humor.

“When an artist working in magical realism sits down to create, it is with the eye and intention to distort. Not because she or he wants to obscure truth or reality, but rather, by exaggerating the distortions, she or he can point to the truth more obviously. In this way, magic realism is an attempt at truth through a distorted lens,” novelist Gina Ochsner explains in an interview with *Margin Magazine* (7/11/2005). Ochsner is a well-known contemporary American short-story writer and novelist. Most recently, she has published “The Russian Dreambook of Color and Flight”, which, like her other books, is written in magical realism.

This story is set in 1994 in Perm when Russia had troubles with Chechnya. Four characters carry the story on their backs and we see the world through each of their eyes at different points in the novel. Olga is a translator/censor at a military newspaper. She's lost her husband in Afghanistan and her own son, Yuri, has recently returned from the Chechen front. In another apartment lives Tanya, a museum employee who is in love with Yuri (who also works at the museum). Yuri doesn't seem to notice Tanya. He's too busy trying to forget the war, and all he really wants to do is to think like a fish and listen to the watery sounds of a better world below. Azade is a middle-aged woman from the south whose family was relocated to Perm during the Stalin era. The apartment building does not have running water, and she takes care of the portable latrine that everyone must use. She is in a unique position to see and hear

all kinds of things about the residents in the apartment building. The world they live in is fantastic and absurd, populated by feral street children and a ghost who really needs to take a shower.

The story follows the lives of these characters, how they must learn to get along despite their very different personalities and how they come to solve the central problem of the story which is procuring a grant for the museum from a group of Russian Americans. The prominent theoretician Mikhail Bakhtin argued for just such a dialogic poetics where texts include multiple points of view such as he found in the works of Dostoevsky. Indeed, I argue that Ochsner is a kind of modern-day Dostoevsky in her employment of multiple voices, magical realism, laughter and the carnivalesque. “The Russian Dreambook of Color and Flight” is an important example of how an author can “to an extraordinary extent broaden, deepen and rearrange this consciousness...in order to accommodate the consciousness of others” and hence provide a paradigm for global writers to come [Bakhtin 1984a: 59]. To begin with, Ochsner chose to integrate an enormous cast of characters into her novel. The central story revolves around the interrelationships of Tanya, Yuri, Olga and Azade, but also draws a larger circle around each of their lives. Each outer circle sheds a different light on the central characters, and we see individual aspects of their lives more clearly. At Tanya's workplace we meet her fellow workers and the Americans who come to visit her museum.

Yuri's life includes his girlfriend, Zoya, and fishing enemy Crazy Volodya. Olga worries about pleasing her editor-in-chief Mrosik and desk mate Arkady, and Azade is visited by her deceased husband Mircha and rogue son Vitek. In his theory of dialogism, Bakhtin argued for a similar multiplicity in human perception where the position of the observer is fundamental: “Reality is always experienced, not just perceived, and further it is experienced from a particular position” [Holquist 2002: 21].

If, as Bakhtin believed, “literature is essentially a perceptual activity, a way to see the world that enriches the world's communicability” [ibid.: 85], then *Russian Dreambook* is great literature. Ochsner introduces a magical world of the absurd that is grounded in the idiosyncrasies of post-Soviet Russia. Some scenes offer themselves as a dream that could take place anywhere albeit with particularly Russian details as when Tanya looks out the window of the museum: “Now summer had gone, the doughy cumulus clouds that rose steadily like good piroshky had drifted away and autumn brought herring-scaled skies. This very morning they'd had their first hard frost. Outside the narrow basement window the clouds congealed like winter soups with skins so thick the grandmothers could skate over them” [Ochsner 2009: 33]¹.

Other settings show everyday details: “Beneath the makeshift awning, kiosks stretched anything from dried fish to hosiery to pirated CDs. Music blared from competing kiosks and, of course, the veterans, pensioners, lame, drunk and holy stood at either entrance, their cups, caps, or hands held ready” (45). Sometimes realistic details and fantasy collide: “For as long as he could remember, Yuri had always imagined that he was a fish. Inside his mother's stomach he swam in salt water. And by some accident when he was born, God looked away for a moment... Yuri, who should have been an eel, a lamprey, a dace, was instead a mere boy” (89). In scenes like this Ochsner provides the reader with locales they are not familiar with and indeed cannot become familiar with because they don't exist. Ochsner explains that she means for the realistic and magical to weave together: “These accounts of the strange, the wondrous, the magical are so seamlessly woven into the narrative, so completely organic, that they are not held apart as pieces of oddity, but rather as evidence of a parallel, invisible world that intersects ours, though we aren't always aware of it” [Ochsner 2013].

In addition to supplying the reader with a large cast of characters and magical settings, Ochsner has peopled her novel with characters that have very diverse beliefs due to their varied religions – Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim – or upbringings (Gypsy, Rus-

sian, Caucus). People who have similar beliefs often cannot see the ironies or discrepancies in those like them. But Ochsner uses this situation to her advantage by employing what Bakhtin refers to as the “surplus of seeing” or the aspects of a situation one person can see but another cannot: “By adding the surplus that has been ‘given’ to you to the surplus that has been ‘given’ to me I can build up an image that includes the whole...in other words, I am able to ‘conceive’ or construct a whole out of the different situations we are in together.” Hence, the characters in the book see each other's traditions, superstitions, different ways of doing things and point these out for the reader. “Lukeria didn't like Jews, Gypsies, Asians or anyone not personally known to her for forty years. Which was to say, living in this building with Yuri and Olga, Jews both, Azade and Mircha, Muslims railed in from the Caucasus, and Vitek whose facial features hinted at Mongol inclinations, Lukeria was completely friendless” (50–51). Ochsner supplies the reader with a multifaceted view of the story through a polyphonic surplus of seeing [Holquist 2002: 36].

Next, Ochsner provides us with the kind of intertextuality Bakhtin lauds in “Marxism and the Philosophy of Language.” Throughout her novel, she includes details, symbols, superstitions and slang unique to the people groups in her story. One humorous example combines these together as the neighbors gather to mourn the death of Azade's husband: “‘Zhirinovsky is a Jew.’ Vitek smiled broadly. // ‘He's a madman,’ Zoya said. // ‘He's inspired,’ Vitek said. // The things people like him call people like us.’ Olga said... // ‘Zids,’ Yuri wagged his head from side to side. // ‘Kikes,’ Azade said. // ‘Dogs,’ Tanya whispered. // ‘Swine,’ Lukeria said nostalgically. // ‘Rodents and murderers,’ Vitek sang” (27). This passage employs a variety of texts and contexts and “in so doing, it manifests the most complex possibilities of the quasi-direct speech that so preoccupies Bakhtin in “Marxism and the Philosophy of Language.” Further, Ochsner uses here and elsewhere aspects of common language that Bakhtin considered to be one of the best ways to battle a monologic viewpoint: “The novel's relation to everyday talk is particularly significant, because it is the very variety of language, the constant reminders of otherness in speech, that constitute the novel's characteristic subject, as well as its formal features.” When multiple voices are employed, Bakhtin believed, the novel told a more complete story and readers would leave it with a greater awareness of the world [Holquist 2002: 76].

Dialogue, as the basis of Dialogism, is of course extremely important to Bakhtin. While he conceived of it being much more expansive of a concept than

what a character in a book says, the latter was also an important marker of his theory. Bakhtin explains, “The contexts of dialogue are without limit. They extend into the deepest past and the most distant future. Even meanings born in dialogues of the remotest past will never be finally grasped once and for all, for they will always be renewed in later dialogue” [ibid.: 39]. One important example is when the ghost Mircha confronts Olga about her job re-writing the news at the newspaper: “Your problem is that you lack the courage to see and tell the truth. Your husband is dead – you and I both know it. You are hiding behind your imagination and that flimsy thing people call hope....They say truth sets people free” (172–173). This quote takes on special significance when held up to Ochsner’s own words: “This is what makes stories of this sort essentially true. It is in strange or extreme situations such as those that our essential human nature can be revealed. This kind of a fiction is an exploration of the human heart (individual or otherwise) by unconventional means” [Ochsner 2013]. Mircha, an outsider by dint of his immateriality, is able to speak truth into Olga’s life.

Mircha, however, is not the only outsider in *Russian Dreambook*. There are also the Americans who come to visit and the street kids. They are all outsiders since they do not live in the apartment building with the others and thus provide an important perspective of people who are both more and less fortunate. Bakhtin believed that “outsideness” was indispensable to seeing: “Outsideness is the most powerful factor in understanding” [Bakhtin 1986: 7]. The Americans’ “other” viewpoint is shown in a conversation between Tanya, Zoya and Yuri as they try to make sense of the form Tanya is filling out: “[Yuri] turned to Tanya, ‘What is positive work ethic? Do such words even belong together?’ // Tanya shrugged, ‘Inscrutable.’ // Zoya smoke fiercely, ‘Americans are mad for work. It’s why they have so much extra money. It’s why they feel so positively about working.’ // I would too, if I got paid for it.’ Yuri scratched his nose’ ” (133). Whether or not, Ochsner is familiar with Bakhtin’s theories, she understands the best way to show a multifaceted view of the main characters in her story is to differentiate them in relation to these “others” [Bakhtin 1986: 7].

The above situation and many others in *Russian Dreambook* are playful and funny. Yet these can have serious consequences according to Bakhtin: “Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint” [Bakhtin 1984b: 66]. If laughter plays this important

role in history and in life, then it certainly can do the same in literature: “Therefore, laughter is just as admissible in great literature, posing universal problems, as seriousness. Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter” [Bakhtin 1984b: 66]. Ochsner herself admits that one of the reasons she reads and writes magical realism stories is because “they make us laugh. They are ridiculous. They are honest. They ask us to see the world differently, as richer, fuller, malevolent, malignant, beautiful, wondrous. They touch a subconscious yearning for the absurd told truthfully, the grotesque with meaning and meaningful consequences. They surprise us with our ability to be astonished” [Ochsner 2013].

Closely linked with Bakhtin’s definition of laughter is his “world upside down”, which is at the heart of his theory of the carnivalesque: “Enormous creative and therefore genre-shaping, power was possessed by ambivalent carnivalistic laughter. This laughter could grasp and comprehend a phenomenon both poles of its evolution in their uninterrupted and creative renewing changeability: in death birth is foreseen and in birth death, in victory defeat and in defeat victory, in crowning a decrowning” [Bakhtin 1984a: 164]. Through this lens we can understand the conclusion of *Russian Dreambook*. The museum is not awarded the art grant being offered by the Americans. Nonetheless, Tanya and Yuri are able to make a new and better sense of their world. Yuri tells Tanya that he had a dream when he was a soldier in Chenya and a bomb exploded near him: “I was thrown clear. I sailed through the air. I flapped my arms and for a moment, I was flying. Until I fell. At which time, I died....then I travelled from death to life, one windowpane of light at a time” (367). Through their conversation Yuri is able to understand clearly for the first time his past, present and possible future with Tanya.

In a quieter way, Ochsner has also fulfilled Bakhtin’s stringent guidelines for a dialogic poetics. Most notably, she has fulfilled what the theorist believed was an author’s greatest duty: “We discharge our responsibility by putting meaningless chaos into meaningful patterns through the authorial enterprise of translating ‘life’ outside language into the patterns afforded by words, by sentences – and above all, by narratives of various kinds.” By providing us with a compelling and well-written novel, Ochsner has fulfilled this task. She is a kind of modern-day Dostoyevsky who is a worthy prototype for all contemporary authors seeking to write for an increasingly globalized world in dialogue with itself [Holquist 2002: 83].

Notes

¹ Further references to this edition include page numbers, placed in parentheses.

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СКВОЗЬ ИСКАЖЕНИЯ – К ИСТИНЕ: РОМАН Д. ОШНЕР «РУССКАЯ КНИГА МЕЧТЫ – ЦВЕТ И ПОЛЕТ» ЧЕРЕЗ ПРИЗМУ МЕТОДОЛОГИИ БАХТИНА

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Д. Ошнер – известная современная американская писательница, работающая в жанрах рассказа и романа. Ее недавно вышедшая книга «Русская книга мечты – цвет и полет» написана, подобно другим ее произведениям, в манере магического реализма. Действие романа происходит в 1994 г. в Перми, в России и показано глазами четырех героев, которые живут в фантастическом и абсурдном мире. В статье утверждается, что Д. Ошнер среди современных писателей наиболее точно следует Достоевскому, используя полифонию голосов, магический реализм, смеховое начало и карнавализацию. «Русская книга мечты – цвет и полет» – пример того, как автор может перестроить сознание и тем самым разработать парадигму для других писателей.

Ключевые слова: роман; карнавализация; магический реализм; полифония; юмор.