CHAPTER 2

Polyphonic Novel

The first book bearing Bakhtin’s own name is Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics. Bakhtin begins his work thus: “The plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness and the genuine polyphony of full-valued voices are in fact characteristics of Dostoevsky's novels (sic).” In his polyphonic novel we do not find a multitude of characters and fates within a unified objective world illuminated by the novelist’s unified consciousness but the “plurality of equal consciousnesses and their worlds.” These worlds are combined into the unity of a given event, while at the same time retaining their unmergedness (Problems 4-5).

Lynne Pearce considers this text as the pivotal Bakhtinian one: the dialogic nerve centre from which all the other books and essays, all the key concepts and theories may be seen to radiate. This is the text in which the dialogic principle brought to conceptual consciousness in Marxism and the Philosophy of Language is given its official launch: dialogue, dialogism, polyphony and double-voiced discourse here enter Bakhtinian vocabulary and thus to the vocabulary of literary criticism (Reading Dialogics 43).

For Bakhtin “Dostoevsky is the creator of the polyphonic novel.” Dostoevsky began an essentially new novelistic genre. For this reason Bakhtin cannot confine his work within any boundaries as it does not submit itself to any of the historical-literary schemata which was usually applied to manifestations of the European novel. In Dostoevskian novel, hero is one whose voice is constructed in the same way that the voice of the author himself is constructed in the usual novel. “The hero’s word about himself and about the world is every bit as valid as the usual authorial word; it is not subordinated to the objectivized image of
the hero as one of his characteristics, nor does it serve as a mouthpiece for the author’s voice.” It is exceptionally independent in the structure of the work, standing as if alongside the author’s word and in a peculiar way combining with it and with the full-valued voices of the other heroes (Problems 4-5).

“Dostoevsky’s plan presupposes the plurality of consciousness of equal value, together with their worlds. In Dostoevsky’s novels the usual plot pragmatics plays a secondary role and fulfills special functions, different from their usual ones.” The final links which create the unity of his novelistic world are of another sort; the basic event disclosed by his novel is not amenable to the usual plot-pragmatic interpretation (Problems 5). Kundera often renounces story; his novel is just one big manifold digression, one long festival of episodes whose “unity” – deliberately and comically fragile – is stitched together by only a few eccentric characters and their microscopic, laughably pointless actions (The Curtain 11).

In such a novel the very orientation of the narration, be it by the author, a narrator or one of the heroes must be completely different from those in novels of the monological type. The position from which the story is told, the image is constructed, or the information is given must be oriented in a new way to this new world, the world of full-fledged subjects, not objects. “The irrational, representational, and informational word must work out some sort of new relationship to its object” (Problems 5).

In this way for Bakhtin all of the elements of Dostoevsky’s novelistic structure are profoundly original. These novels are all determined by the new artistic task in which Dostoevsky alone has succeeded. It is “the task of constructing a polyphonic world and destroying the established forms of the basically monological (homophonic) European
novel.” Precisely because of this reason from the point of view of a consistent monological vision and comprehension of the represented world and of the monological canon of novelistic construction Dostoevsky’s world may appear to be chaotic, and the construction of his novels a conglomerate of alien materials and incompatible principles of design (Problems 5).

With the above “thesis” in mind Bakhtin analyses the way in which the basic characteristic of his work as suggested by him has been interpreted in the critical literature then. Until Bakhtin the “essentially new artistic will” was perceived from an old and accustomed point of view. Some critics overwhelmed by the content of the various heroes’ ideological views attempted to reduce those views to a systematic monological whole, ignoring what Bakhtin calls “the essential plurality of unmerged consciousness” which he considers as “a deliberate part of the author’s artistic intention.” While other critics who resisted “the charm of unadulterated ideology, turned the full-valued consciousness of the heroes into materialized psyches perceived in an objectified way, and perceived Dostoevsky’s world as the ordinary world of the European social-psychological novel.” For Bakhtin “in the first instance the result was a philosophical monolog in place of the event of the interaction of full-valued consciousness”; and in the second it was only a “monologically understood objectified world, correlative to a single and unified authorial consciousness.” In both these cases the artistic problems proper are either avoided altogether or treated merely accidentally or superficially (Problems 5-6).

For Bakhtin the important method that remained in the critical literature on Dostoevsky was philosophical monologization. Critics like Rozanov, Volynsky, Merezhkovsky, Shestov and others followed this path. He observes that the basic structural plurality of Dostoevsky’s artistic world was first though “only gropingly”
discovered by Vyacheslav Ivanov. “The affirmation of another man’s ‘I’ – ‘Thou art’ – is, according to Ivanov” the important feature of Dostoevsky’s work (Problems 7).

“Thus the affirmation of the other’s consciousness as a full-fledged subject, and not as an object, becomes the ethico-religious postulate which defines the content of the novel . . . .”

But Bakhtin’s observation is that Ivanov shows only the purely thematic aspect of this principle in the content of the novel – “Affirmation – and non-affirmation of the other’s ‘I’ by the hero is the theme of Dostoevsky’s works.” But this theme is altogether possible in a novel of a purely monological type as well. The limitation of Ivanov is that he did not demonstrate how this principle of Dostoevsky’s weltanschauung (world view) becomes the principle of his artistic vision of the world and of the artistic construction of a linguistic unit – the novel. This principle is relevant to the literary scholar as the principle of a concrete literary construction, and not as the ethico-religious principle of our abstract weltanschauung. Here also the task of constructing a polyphonic novel first achieved by Dostoevsky, remained undiscovered (Problems 7-8).

Another critic S. Askoldov gives a similar definition, of Dostoevsky’s basic distinguishing characteristic, to that of Ivanov. His formula is to “Be a personality!”. Personality for Askoldov differs from character, type, and temperament in literature which usually serve as the object of representation in literature by means of their exceptional inner freedom and absolute independence from the external environment. But for Bakhtin, Dostoevsky’s originality lies not in the fact that he monologically proclaimed the worth of the personality which others had done before him. Instead, it lies in the fact that he was able to see and to show it with artistic objectivity as another, a foreign personality, without
lyricizing it or merging it with his own voice, while at the same time not reducing it to
materialized psychic reality. The high appraisal of the personality’s worth did not appear for
the first time in Dostoevsky’s weltanschauung, but the artistic image of a foreign personality
(Askoldov’s term) and of multiple unmerged personalities joined in the unity of a given
spiritual event, was realized for the first time in his novels (Problems 8-9).

But this astonishing inner independence of Dostoevsky’s heroes agreed to upon by
Bakhtin is achieved by specific artistic means. “It is achieved above all through the heroes’
freedom and independence vis-a-vis the author in the very structure of the novel, or, more
precisely, through their freedom and independence in relation to the usual externalizing and
finalizing authorial definitions.” This however does not mean that the hero disappears from
the author’s plan. His independence and freedom are precisely a part of author’s plan
which, as it were, predestines him to be free (though relatively) and introduces him as a free
man into the strict and the calculated plan of the whole. The hero’s relative freedom no
more destroys the strict specificity of novel’s construction than the presence of irrational or
transfinite quantities destroys the strict specificity of a mathematical formula. This new
position is not achieved by the abstract choice of theme (though theme has its significance),
but by the totality of the special artistic devices of novelistic construction first introduced by
Dostoevsky (Problems 10).

Thus Askoldov too monologized Dostoevsky’s world changing the dominant of that
world into a monological sermon. Though Askoldov correctly identified that the basic
feature in Dostoevsky is a totally new vision and representation of the inner man he carried
his explanation over into the plane of the author’s weltanschauung and into the plane of the
character’s psychology. Bakhtin recognizes L.P. Grossman who approaches this basic
characteristic of Dostoevsky from the point of view of the novel’s artistic construction itself
as the founder of the objective and consistent study of Dostoevsky’s poetics. Bakhtin quotes Grossman as follows:

Dostoevsky merges opposites in spite of the age-old traditions of an aesthetic which required a correspondence between the material and its treatment, which took for granted unity and, certainly, homogeneity and kindredness of the structural elements of a given work of art. He issues a decisive challenge to the basic canon of the theory of art. His task is to overcome the greatest difficulty facing the artist: to create a unified and integral work of art from heterogeneous, profoundly foreign materials of unequal value. This is why the Book of Job, the Revelation of St. John, the New Testament texts, St. Simeon the New Theologian, and everything that feeds the pages of Dostoevsky’s novels and lends the tone to one or another of their chapters is combined here in a unique way with the newspaper page, the anecdote, the parody, the street scene, the grotesque, and even the pamphlet. (Problems 11)

Kundera makes a similar observation on Broch’s contribution to the novel. For him the integration of non-novelistic genres into the polyphony of the novel was Broch’s revolutionary innovation. These non-novelistic genres that Kundera identified, namely, short story, reportage, poem and essay and more are integrated into Kundera’s polyphonic novel also beginning with Life is Elsewhere, and especially in The Book (The Art 75).

Bakhtin agrees that Grossman’s is a brilliant descriptive characterization of the generic and compositional features of Dostoevsky’s novels. But where Grossman errrs is in his explanations. The whirlwind movement of events and the unity of the philosophical plan are hardly sufficient to fulfil the complex and contradictory compositional task which
Grossman has neatly illustrated. For Bakhtin the most ordinary contemporary film can outdo Dostoevsky in whirlwind movement of events, while the unity of philosophic plan in and of itself cannot serve as the final basis of artistic unity. Besides, “Grossman’s assertion that Dostoevsky’s entire heterogeneous material takes on the profound stamp of his personal style and tone is also” “false.” “The unity of Dostoevsky’s novel is above personal tone and above personal style as they were known in the pre-Dostoevskian novel” (Problems 12).

Given a monological understanding of the unity of style (and that is as yet the only such understanding), polyphonic novel is multi-styled or styleless; given a monological understanding of tone; polyphonic novel is multi-accented and embraces contradictory values. Contradictory accents intertwine in every word of such works. If Dostoevsky’s utterly heterogeneous materials were developed in a unified world corresponding to a unified monological authorial consciousness, then the task of joining the incompatible would not have been solved and Dostoevsky would be an inferior, styleless artist (Problems 12). Novelistic thought for Kundera is always “unsystematic,” “undisciplined,” and “similar to Nietzsche’s,” forcing rifts in all the idea systems that surround us (Testaments Betrayed 174).

For Bakhtin the utterly incompatible elements of Dostoevsky’s material are distributed among several worlds and several full-fledged consciousnesses; they are presented not within one field of vision, but within several complete fields of vision of equal value, and not the material directly, but rather these worlds and these consciousness with their fields of vision, are joined in a higher unity of second order, the unity of polyphonic novel (Problems 12).

Because of these varied worlds the material is able to fully develop in uniqueness and
specificity without interrupting or mechanizing the unity of the whole. It is for Bakhtin as if the varying systems of calculation were joined in the complex unity of an Einsteinian universe. Had Grossman made connection between Dostoevsky’s compositional principle of the unification of utterly heterogeneous materials and the plurality of consciousness centres which are not reduced to a common denominator he would have arrived at the artistic key to Dostoevsky’s novels – polyphony.

Symptomatically Grossman conceives of dialog in Dostoevsky’s work as a dramatic form and every dialogization as necessarily a dramatization. For Bakhtin “the dramatic dialog in the drama and the dramatized dialog in the narrative genres are always enclosed in a solid and unshakable monological framework.” The speeches in a dramatic dialog do not disrupt the world that is being depicted, nor do they make it multilevelled; on the contrary, they require the monolithic unity of that world in order to be truly dramatic. The world of the drama must be made of a single piece. Any weakening of monolith leads to a weakening of the dramatic effect. The characters meet in the unified field of vision of the author, the director and the audience, against the clear-cut backdrop of an unstructural world. The concept of dramatic action as the resolver of all dialogical conflicts is a purely monological one. True multileveledness would destroy the drama, because dramatic action rests upon the unity of the world and is incapable of tying together and resolving multiple levels. In the drama the combination of integral fields of vision in a unity which stands above those fields of vision is impossible because the dramatic construction offers no support for such unity. Therefore the true dramatic dialog can play only a quite secondary role in polyphonic novel (Problems 13-14).

In polyphonic novel the important thing is not the ordinary dialogical form of unfolding the materials within the limits of its monological conception against the firm
background of a unified material world. But the important thing is the final dialogicality, which is the dialogical nature of the total work. It is not constructed as the entirety of a single consciousness which absorbs other consciousness as objects, but rather as the entirety of the interaction of several consciousnesses of which no one is fully objectified (Problems 14).

The novel not only gives no solid support outside the dialogical conflict for a third, monologically engulfing consciousness – on the contrary, everything in it is so constructed as to make the dialogical opposition perpetual. Not a single element of the work is constructed from the viewpoint of a non-participating “third party,” and in the novel itself this “third party” is in no way represented. There is no place for him either in the composition or in the sense and meaning of the novel. This is not the author’s weakness, but his greatest strength; it makes possible a new authorial position, higher than the monological one. (Problems 14)

Another critic Otto Kaus also points out the plurality of equally authoritative ideological positions and extreme heterogeneity of material as the important feature of Dostoevsky’s novels. Kaus also maintains that Dostoevsky’s world is a pure and genuine expression of the spirit of capitalism. Those worlds and those planes – social, cultural and ideological – which collide in Dostoevsky’s work were in the past self-sufficient, organically self-enclosed, consolidated, and had inner significance as separate units.

There was no real, material plane in which their essential contact and mutual penetration could take place. Capitalism destroyed the isolation of those worlds and broke down the seclusion and inner ideological self-sufficiency of those social spheres. With its
tendency to make everything level leaving no other divisions but the division into proletarians and capitalists, capitalism caused those worlds to collide and welded them together in its own contradictory, evolving unity. Those worlds had not yet lost their individual mien which had been acquired over the centuries, but they were no longer self-sufficient. Every atom of life trembles with the contradictory unity of the capitalist world and the capitalist consciousness, allowing nothing to rest easily in its isolation, but at the same time resolving anything. The spirit of this world-being-formed found its fuller expression in polyphonic novel (Problems 15).

Bakhtin finds Kaus’s explanations correct in many respects. “The polyphonic novel could, indeed, have come into being only in the capitalist epoch.” Russia provided the most favourable soil for polyphonic novel because capitalism’s near-catastrophic advent found an unprecedented variety of social world and groupings which had not, as was in the West, had their individual self-enclosedness weakened in process of the gradual advent of capitalism. The contradictory nature of the evolving social life in Russia, which no longer fits into limits of a self-assured and calmly reflective monological consciousness, was bound to be particularly rash. At the same time the individuality of the worlds that were thrown off their ideological balance and were colliding with one another was bound to be particularly complete and striking. In this manner the objective preconditions for the essential multileveledness and multivoicedness of the polyphonic novel were met (Problems 16). Capitalism progressed to high capitalism and Kundera’s novels are products of this period and this influenced the polyphonic effect on the novel to a much higher degree.

Kaus, however, failed to elucidate his findings. The “spirit of capitalism” was reflected in artistic language especially in the language of a particular variety of the novelistic genre. For Bakhtin the necessity is to discover the structural characteristics of
Dostoevsky’s multilevelled novel which is devoid of familiar monological unity. Kaus did not do this task. After having exactly pointed out the fact of the novel’s “multileveledness and the multivoicedness” Kaus moves his explanation from the plane of novel to the plane of reality (Problems 16).

The age in which Dostevsky lived made the polyphonic novel possible. He was subjectively involved in the contradictory multileveledness of his time. He changed camps, he switched from one to another, and in this respect the planes which existed in the objective social life were for Bakhtin the stages on his life’s path and in his spiritual evolution. This was a profound personal experience, but Dostoevsky did not give it direct monological expression in his art. It enabled him to comprehend more profoundly the coexistent, extensively manifest contradictions between people. Thus the objective contradictions of the age determined Dostoevsky’s art and he came to objectively view them as simultaneously coexisting forces. For Bakhtin the principal category of Dostoevksy’s artistic vision is not evolution, but “coexistence and interaction.” He saw and conceived his world chiefly in space, not in time (Problems 23).

Lunacharsky considers Shakespeare and Balzac as forerunners in the realm of polyphony. For him “Shakespeare is polyphonic in the extreme,” and the social conditions of Shakespeare’s age are analogous to those of Dostoevksy’s. Bakhtin approves of this to the extent that certain elements, certain rudiments, certain germs of polyphony can be discovered in Shakespeare’s dramas. Shakespeare, together with Rabelais, Cervantes, and others, belongs to that line of development in European literature in which the germs of polyphony ripened and of which Dosotoevsky became the culminator (Problems 28).

But no completely formed and deliberate polyphony is present in Shakespeare’s
plays. The following are the reasons, Bakhtin enumerates: Firstly, “the drama is by nature alien to genuine polyphony; the drama can be multilevelled, but cannot contain multiple worlds; it allows for only one, not several, systems of measurement.” Secondly, Shakespeare achieves plurality of full-valued voices only in relation to his work as a whole, and not in relation to the individual plays. “In each play there is essentially only a single full-valued hero’s voice, while polyphony requires a plurality of full-valued voices within the bounds of a single work; only then do the principles of polyphony apply to the construction of the whole.” “Thirdly, the voices in Shakespeare’s work are not points of view vis-a-vis the world in the same degree as they are in Dostoevsky’s; Shakespeare’s heroes are not ideologists in the full sense of the word” (Problems 28). There are elements of polyphony in Balzac’s work also but they are only elements. Balzac has a position in the polyphonic line of development of European novel.

“Lunacharsky devotes most of his attention to an explanation of the social and historical causes of Dostoevsky’s multivoicedness.” Kaus and Lunacharsky expose the extraordinarily acute contradictions and duality of Dostoevsky’s own social personality and his oscillations between revolutionary materialistic socialism and a conservative (reactionary) religious weltanschauung. These waverings never brought him to a final conclusion. This genetic analysis of Dostoevsky’s polyphony, for Bakhtin, is profound. For Bakhtin the exceptionally harsh contradictions of early Russian capitalism and Dostoevsky’s duality as a social personality – his personal inability to make a particular ideological decision – when taken by themselves are negative and historically transcient phenomena. But they provided the optimal conditions for the creation of the polyphonic novel and of “‘that unheard of freedom of the voices . . . in Dostoevsky’s polyphony’ ” which was without doubt a step forward in the development of the Russian and European novel (Problems 30).
Both Dostoevsky’s epoch, with its concrete contradictions, and his biological and social person, with its epilepsy and its ideological duality, have long since faded into the past, but the new structural principle of polyphony discovered under those conditions, retains and will continue to retain its artistic significance under the totally different conditions of subsequent epochs. Great discoveries of the human genius are possible only under the specific condition of specific epochs, but they never perish and lose their value along with the epoch which gave them birth.

The important thing in Dostoevsky’s polyphony is what takes place between various personalities that is their interaction and interdependence. One should not learn from Raskolnikov, Sonya, Ivan Karamazov or from Zosima, isolating their voices from the polyphonic whole of the novels (and thereby distorting them), – one should learn from Dostoevsky himself as the creator of the polyphonic novel (Problems 29-30).

For Bakhtin in the direction of discovering the polyphonic form of the Dostoevskian novel Viktor Shklovsky’s book Pro and Contra, Remarks on Dostoevsky is of particular interest. Shklovsky proceeds from the position began by L. Grossman, that it is precisely the conflict, the struggle of ideological voices that lies at the core of the artistic form of Dostoevsky’s works, at the core of his style. But Bakhtin says Shklovsky is interested not so much in Dostoevsky’s polyphonic form as in the historical (epochal) and biographical sources of the ideological conflict which gave birth to that form. Bakhtin specifically points out agreeing with Shklovsky’s statement, “Dostoevsky died without having resolved anything, avoiding solutions and remaining unreconciled.” But though Dostoevsky died without resolving any of the ideological questions posed by his epoch he nevertheless died having created a new artistic form – “Polyphonic novel, which will retain its artistic significance even after the epoch with all of its contradictions has faded into the past”
Bakhtin finds two of Shlovsky’s observations very interesting from the point of view of polyphonic novel. First is Dostoevsky’s plans are by their very nature incomplete. Shklovsky’s reason for it is thus: as long as a work remained multilevelled and multivoiced, as long as people in it were still arguing, despair over the absence of a conclusion was postponed. The conclusion of a novel signified for Dostoevsky the collapse of a new Tower of Babylon (Problems 33).

Bakhtin then elaborates: Dostoevsky does not work at making objectivised images of people; he seeks no expressive, graphic, finalizing authorial words. Above all he presents his hero in words which are maximally pregnant with meaning and seemingly independent of the author, words which express not the hero’s character (for his typicality) and not his position in given real-life situations, but rather his final ideological position in the world, his point of view vis-a-vis the world. For the author as author he seeks words and plot situations which provoke, tease, and elicit response. Herein lies the profound orginality of Dostoevsky’s creative process. Further in Dostoevsky’s novels we in fact observe a unique conflict between the internal unfinalised nature of the heroes and the dialog on the one hand, and the external (in most cases compositional and thematic) completedness of every individual novel. Almost all of Dostoevsky’s novels have a conventionally literary, conventionally monological ending (especially characteristic in this respect is the ending of Crime and Punishment). Precisely speaking The Brothers Karamazov only has a completely polyphonic conclusion, and hence from the ordinary, monological point of view remains uncompleted (Problems 34). Characteristic of a polyphonic novel it is futile to seek in Kundera’s novels a systematic monological philosophical finalizedness, even of a dialectical nature, not because the author failed to achieve it, but because it was not part of
his intention. Almost all the novels of Kundera have a polyphonic conclusion.

Shklovsky’s second observation which Bakhtin enumerates is that not only Dostoevsky’s heroes disagree but individual elements of the plot development seem to stand in mutual contradiction: facts are unriddled in different ways and the psychology of the heroes is self-contradictory; the form is the result of the essence.

Dostoevsky could perceive dialogical relationships everywhere, in all the manifestations of conscious and intelligent human life; for him dialog begins at the same point where consciousness begins. Only purely mechanistic relationships are not dialogical, and he categorically denies their significance for an understanding and interpretation of life and of man’s acts. Therefore all of the relationships of the internal and external parts and elements of his novel have a dialogical character, and the whole of the novel is constructed as a “great dialog.” The “great dialog” is illuminated and intensified by the dialogs of the heroes which take place within it, within the composition of the novel, and ultimately the dialog goes to the very core, into very word of the novel, making it double-voiced, into every gesture, every mimical movements of the hero’s face, making the novel irregular and erratic; here we have already the “microdialog” which determines the characteristics of Dostoevsky’s verbal style (Problems 34). Nothing in the Kundera novel stays a secret exclusive to two persons: everyone seems to live inside an enormous resonating seashell where every whispered word reverberates, swells, into multiple and unending echoes (Slowness 10).

The last critical work which Bakhtin considers in his survey is the collection of essays by L.P. Grossman Dostoevsky the Artist published in 1959, especially the chapter entitled “The Laws of Composition.” For Grossman the basis of the composition of all
Dostoevsky’s novels is the principle of two or several converging stories which in contrasting ways augment each other and are connected in accordance with the musical principle of polyphony (Problems 35).

Grossman points out that Dostoevsky himself drew attention to the musical direction in his composition, and once drew an analogy between his structural system and the musical theory of “modulations” or counterpositions. He quotes Dostoevsky’s comments in one of his letters on the forthcoming publication of Notes from the Underground:

The novella is divided into three chapters . . . The first chapter is perhaps one-and-one-half printed sheets in length . . . Should we really print it separately? People will laugh at it, the more so since without the other two (main) chapters it loses all of its juice. You know what a modulation is in music. It is exactly the same thing here. The first chapter is obviously idle chatter; but suddenly this idle chatter is resolved by an unexpected catastrophe in the last two chapters. (Letters qtd. in Problems 35)

Bakhtin concurs with Grossman’s observations on the musical nature of Dostoevsky’s composition stating that they are “very correct and subtle.” According to Bakhtin when we transpose one of Dostoevsky’s favourite composers M.I. Glinka’s statement that “everything in life is counterpoint” from the language of musical theory into language of poetics, we can say that for Dostoevsky “everything in life is dialog, i.e., dialogical antithesis.” And in essence, for him from the point of view of philosophical aesthetics, contrapuntal relationships in music are the manifestation of the musical variety of broadly understood dialogical relationships. What makes Grossman different from other scholars is that he approaches Dostoevsky’s polyphony from the standpoint of composition. He is interested in
the strictly compositional application of counterpoint as the bond between the various stories included in the novel, the various plots, the various planes (Problems 36).

Bakhtin faults majority of critical and historical-literary studies of Dostoevsky’s work because they ignore the uniqueness of his artistic form and instead seeks his originality in content. But in the process, the content itself inevitably becomes less rich: the most essential of its element is lost, namely those new things which Dostoevsky saw. One must understand new form of vision, to correctly understand those things which have been seen and discovered by means of that new form. “Artistic form, correctly understood, does not formulate content which has already been prepared and discovered, but rather allows it to be found and seen for the first time” (Problems 37). Kundera’s “own imperative” is to rid the novel of the automatism of technique, of novelistic verbalism; to make it dense” (The Art 73). This is Bakhtin’s defence of his theory of the novel which is liable to be criticized as a technical point of view having nothing to do with the content.

That which in the Russian and European novel prior to Dostoevsky constituted the ultimate whole – the unified monological world of the author’s consciousness – becomes in Dostoevsky’s novel a part, an element of the whole; that which was all of reality becomes here one of the aspects of reality; that which bound the whole together – the pragmatic progression of the plot and the personal style and tone becomes here a subordinate element. There arise new principles of the artistic combination of elements and the construction of the whole there arises to speak metaphorically – novelistic counterpoint. (Problems 37)

Bakhtin regrets that the consciousness of critics and scholars of his time are enslaved
by the ideology of Dostoevsky’s heroes. The artistic will does not receive theoretical attention. For Bakhtin it seemed that anyone who enters the labyrinth of polyphonic novel lost her/his way and could not hear the whole for all the individual voices. Without understanding the artistic principles of the combination of voices everyone interpreted Dostoevsky’s final word in their own way. All of them interpreted it as a “single word, a single voice, a single accent,” and this is their basic mistake. “The unity of the polyphonic novel which stands above the word, above the voice, above the accent remains undiscovered” (Problems 37).

As Umberto Eco observed in a different context Kundera’s novels are labyrinths and to be specifically the kind of labyrinths which is a net or rather what Deleuze and Guattari call rhizome. The rhizome is so constructed that every path can be connected with every other one. It has no centre, no periphery, no exit because it is potentially infinite (57).

Kundera’s novels therefore very often become booby-traps for readers and critics, as evident from the following factually erroneous critical statements: David Lodge in his essay “Milan Kundera, and the Idea of the Author in Modern Criticism” speaks of “Marketa’s priggishly enthusiastic letters [to Ludvik] from a party training camp” (111) while Ludvik got only one letter; “. . . she sent me a letter full of earnest enthusiasm . . .” (The Joke 34), says he. Then Lodge talks of Ludvik as a “student at Prague University” (111) and Zemanek as “Chairman of the Party disciplinary tribunal” (112) both of which are factually wrong. Regarding the sentence in The Book, “Sarah is out here somewhere, I know she is, my Jewish sister Sarah. But where can I find her?” (76), David Lodge says “I confess that I do not know what that last short paragraph means. Is it a reference to R. - if, so why are her first name and race revealed so belatedly? Is this an allusion to the Biblical Sarah? Is it a real or a mythical person Kundera wants to ‘find’?” (120). Here it seems that Lodge has
been misled by Kundera’s narrative style. Sarah surely is the “young Israeli girl named
Sarah” (The Book 73), in Madame Raphael’s class. Gopinathan Pillai in his book says
regarding The Book: “It is revealed that Eva had already established sexual intimacy with
Karel before she knew his wife” (71) while no such revelation is there in the text which
reads: “she introduced him to her best friend [Marketa introduced Karel to Eva]; in fact, she
gave her to him” (37). Burt Feintuch of Western Kentucky University in his essay says,
“Upon learning that it is her life which has been destroyed, thanks to Ludvik’s attempt at
revenging himself on her husband, Helena tries to kill herself” (32). The text nowhere gives
any indication that Helena understood that Ludvik is revenging upon her. Ludvik himself
says “. . . it was of no use trying to explain everything to her . . .” (283). François Ricard in
his essay talks as the hero of Life is Elsewhere as the “forty year old-er” (63) while “Jaromil
(not quite twenty years old) . . . diagnosed pneumonia” (302) dies of it. Tom Wilhelmus in
his review of The Joke, “Time and Distance” says, “The novel begins as its principal
character Ludvik stands at a crossroads in a small Moravian village where he grew up on the
day before a festival celebrating the traditional Ride of the Kings” (Hunter and White 348).
But “It was Friday afternoon, two days before Sunday’s Ride of the kings” (The Joke 125).

Bill Robinson’s review of Ignorance has, “Irena his female character, left
Czechoslovakia in 1968” whereas the text reads as “That was in 1969, Irena and her
husband emigrated to France” (11). As regards the painting that his brother took from the
hero (Joseph), Robinson says “painting that he purchased” whereas the texts says that is was
actually a “gift” (62). Ian Čulík of University of Glasgow states, “Eventually Tamina is
taken from her isolation in France to an island . . .” “while the town my story takes place in
I leave anonymous” (The Book 79) says Kundera. Čulík thus overlooks the anomastic
instability of the novel which undermines all certainty of a linear reading (Fuentes, “In
praise of the novel” 612). As regards Agnes the heroine of Immortality Ivan Sanders says “she sits down on a busy highway and stays there until killed by a speeding car . . .” (108) while the text reveals that Agnes got killed when her car “crashed into a ditch” (296) while avoiding hitting the girl when “Agnes saw the upright figure of a girl in front of her, a figure sharply hit by the car’s head lights . . .” (298).

In his essay “Speed,” reviewing Slowness in New York Times Book Review Angeline Goreau speaks of “A motor cyclist bent on passing” (Hunter and White 359) while actually it is a car – “Still the same car unable to pass me” (Slowness 55).

These are some of the numerous misreadings of Kundera’s texts including that of some outstanding critics. What is intended here is not a supercilious nit-picking but to illustrate that many a critic lost their way when entered the “labyrinth” of Kundera’s polyphonic novel as Bakhtin visualised of a polyphonic novel. This also shows how much resistant Kundera’s novels are to interpretations with critical verisimilitude as aim.

Three aspects of polyphony

The three aspects of polyphony identified by Bakhtin are: first, relative freedom and independence of the hero and his voice in the framework of the polyphonically conceived novel; second, special means of stating ideas in the polyphonic novel and; third, new principles of connection which bind together the whole of the novel.

The hero interests Dostoevsky not as a manifestation of reality possessing specific, fixed social-typical and individual-characterological traits, not as a specific figure constructed of unambiguous and objective features, an aggregate answer to the question ‘who is he?’. The hero interests him “as a particular point of view in relation to the world and in relation to the hero himself, as the semantic and judgement-passing position of a man
in relation to himself and to surrounding reality.” Dostoevsky gives importance not to “how the hero appears to the world, but, most importantly, how the world appears to the hero and how the hero appears to himself” (Problems 38).

The above for Bakhtin is a fundamental characteristic of the hero’s perception.

The hero as point of view as position vis-a-vis the world and vis-a-vis himself requires unique methods of development and literary characterization. That which must be developed and characterized is not the hero’s specific milieu nor a fixed image of him, but rather the sum total of his consciousness and self-consciousness, in the last analysis the hero’s final words about himself and about his world. (Problems 38)

Therefore the elements from which the image of the hero is constructed are not real facts of the hero himself and of his environment but rather the significance of these facts for the hero himself, for his self-consciousness. For Kundera “A character is not a simulation of a living being. It is an imaginary being. An experimental self” (The Art 34). All of the hero’s fixed, objective qualities, his social position, his sociological and characterological typicality, his habitus, his spiritual milieu and even his physical appearance, i.e. everything usually employed by the author in creating a concrete and substantive image of the hero—“who is he?” – in Dostoevsky becomes the object of the hero’s own reflection, the subject of his own self-consciousness. Thus the function of the hero’s self-consciousness becomes the subject of the author’s vision and representation. While self-consciousness is usually only an element of the hero’s reality, merely one aspect of his integrated image, here all of reality becomes an element of the hero’s self-consciousness. The author does not retain for himself that is exclusively for his own field of vision a single essential definition, a single
characteristic, a single trait of the hero. He introduces all of these into the hero’s field of vision, casting them all into the crucible of the hero’s self consciousness (Problems 39).

In The Book Bibi, the aspiring writer after her discussion with the writer, Banaka acts as a mouthpiece of the same conviction: “Right! Look at me from the outside and I don’t seem special. From the outside! Because it’s what goes on in me, on the inside, that’s worth writing about, that people will want read about” (90). Kundera nowhere in any of his novels describes the physical features of the characters in detail. These features whereever is mentioned will remain the barest minimum and incidental. Even Tamina the heroine of The Book confirms to this: “Tamina I picture her as tall and beautiful, thirty-three, and a native of Prague” (79). “Kundera” adds: “the town my story takes place in I leave anonymous. It goes against all rules of perspective, but you’ll have to put up with it” in the dialogic way (79). A little further in the text the reason for this sort of conviction and narration in the novel is offered by a character. The greatest adventure in our lives is the absence of adventure. All adventures now take place within man. “The islands, the sea, the sirens seducing us, and Ithaca calling us home – they have all been reduced to voices within us” (90). It is these voices within us, voices within each of us or within each of the other that the dialogic novels of Kundera cope with. These novels teach us to comprehend other people’s truth and the limitations of our own truth. For this the novel should be non-ideological. Kundera considers novel as essential as bread to our insanely ideological world. The novel contradicts ideological certitudes the way Penelope undoes each night the tapestry that philosophy and learned men wove the day before (Hunter 350).

Dostoevsky in the Gogolian period of his career itself transferred the focus from the poor government clerk to the self consciousness of the poor clerk. What in Gogol was the aggregate of objective traits forming the hero’s fixed social-characterological image is
introduced by Dostoevsky into the field of vision of the hero himself and becomes the object of his agonizing self-awareness. Dostoevsky even made his poor government clerks, whose external appearance was depicted by Gogol, to contemplate themselves in the mirror. “As a result of this method all the concrete features of the hero, while retaining their content, are transferred from one descriptive plane to another and take on an entirely new artistic significance: they can no longer finalise and enclose the hero, giving the artist’s answer to the question ‘who is he?’.” We see not who the hero is, but how he perceives himself; our artistic vision focuses not on the reality of the hero, but on the pure function of his perception of that reality. This is how the Gogolian hero becomes Dostoevsky’s hero (Problems 39).

The simplified formula that Bakhtin arrives at on the way Dostoevsky revolutionised Gogol’s world is: he transferred the author and the narrator with the totality of their points of view and the descriptions, characterizations and definitions of the hero given by them, to the purview of the hero himself, thereby turning the finalized integrated reality of the hero into the material of the hero’s own self-consciousness (Problems 39). For him Dostoevsky’s making Makar Devushkin read Gogol’s “Overcoat” and to perceive it as a story about himself, a slander against him is a deliberate act in this line. The functions that the author performed earlier are now performed by the hero as he elucidates himself from all possible points of view; the author no longer elucidates the reality of the hero, but rather his self-consciousness as reality of a second-order.

“Not only the reality of the hero himself, but also the external world and way of life surrounding the hero are drawn into the process of self-awareness and are transferred from the author’s field of vision to that of the hero.” They no longer reside in the same plane as the hero, beside him and external to him in the unified world of the author. “Only the
objective world – the world of other equal consciousness – can be counterposed by the
author to the all-engulfing consciousness of the hero” (*Problems* 40).

Dostoevsky sought a predominantly perceiving hero, a hero whose entire life was
concentrated in the pure function of perceiving himself and the world. Thus the “dreamer”
and the “underground man” appear in his works. Bakhtin quotes the following passage
from *Notes from the Underground* by Dostoevsky:

> Oh, if only it were out of pure laziness that I don’t do anything. Lord, how I
would respect myself then. I would respect myself precisely because then I
would at least be capable of being lazy; then I would have at least one definite
trait which I myself could be sure of. Question: ‘who is he’? Answer: ‘A
lazy lout’. How awfully pleasant it would be to hear that about myself. That
would mean that I’m definitely defined, that would mean that there is
something to say about me. ‘A lazy lout!’ – that’s already a calling and a
purpose. That’s a career (IV 147) (*Problems* 40-41)

The underground man thus dissolves in himself all possible concrete traits of his
image by making them the subject of his own reflection. “He has no fixed definition,” “he
figures not as a person taken from life, but rather as the subject of consciousness and
dream.” The author’s vision is directly focused on the self-consciousness and at the
inescapable unfinalizability and vicious circle of that self-consciousness. “Thus the social-
characterological definition of the underground man and the artistic dominant of his image
merge into one” (*Problems* 41).

Dostoevsky’s hero is all self-consciousness and self-consciousness as the artistic
dominant of the hero’s image is enough in itself to break down the monological unity of the
artistic world. Such a hero is in fact not “depicted” nor “expressed” meaning that the hero does not merge with the author, or become his mouthpiece. Consequently, monological unity is broken when the accents of the hero’s self-consciousness are in fact objectivized and when in the work itself a distance between the hero and the author is maintained. If the umbilical cord binding the hero to his creator is not cut, then we have before us not a work of art, but a personal document” (Problems 41).

Dostoevsky’s works are profoundly objective. The hero’s self-awareness becomes the dominant and then breaks down the monological unity of the work, without destroying the artistic unity of a new, non-monological type. The hero becomes “relatively free and independent.” This is because everything which qualified him once and for all as a completed image of reality now no longer acts as a finalizing form, but acts as a material of his self-consciousness (Problems 41).

In a monological framework the hero is closed and his range of meaning is sharply outlined. The hero’s acts, experiences, thinking and perception are within the boundaries of what he is. Within the boundaries of his image defined as reality he cannot cease being himself. The hero’s self-consciousness is presented against the background of the external world and is contained within the fixed framework of the author’s consciousness. This defines and portrays the hero and remains inaccessible to him from within.

Dostoevsky renounces all such monological premises. Dostoevsky hands over to hero all that the monological author retained for himself and used to create the ultimate unity of the novel. Bakhtin sees Notes from the Underground as the work of Dostoevksy which is most typically polyphonic. Nothing can be said about the hero of Notes from the Underground that he does not already know himself, his typicality for his time and social
position, the sober psychological or even psycho-pathological definition of his inner
countenance, his comicality and tragicness, all the possible moral definitions of his
personality, etc..

The “underground man” thinks most about what others think or might think of him
and tries to keep one step abreast of other consciousness, everyone else’s thoughts about
him, every other point of view about him. At times he interrupts himself to anticipate
possible definitions and assessments of him by others, to guess the sense and tone of those
assessments and to carefully formulate the potential words of others. Bakhtin quotes the
following:

“‘Isn’t that shameful!, Isn’t that degrading !’, perhaps you would say to
me, scornfully shaking your heads. ‘You thirst for life, but you solve the
problems of life with jumbled logic . . . Yes, there is some truth in you, but no
modesty; out of the pettiest pride you make a show of your truth, you expose
it to disgrace, to the market place . . . You do indeed have something to say,
but out of fear you hide your final word because you haven’t the courage to
pronounce it; you possess only cowardly insolence. You boast of your
consciousness, but you vacillate because, although your mind functions, your
heart is clouded over with depravity, and without a pure heart a real
consciousness is impossible. And how importunate you are, how you force
yourself on people, how you put on airs! Nothing but mendacity and more
mendacity!

Of course I’ve made up all of your words myself. That’s also from the
underground. For forty years straight I’ve listened through a rack in the
underground to these words of yours. I thought them up myself, but they were the only ones that came to me. It’s no wonder that I’ve learned them by heart and given them literary from . . .” (IV, 164-165). (Problems 42-43)

The hero of the Notes from the Underground takes into account the viewpoint of a “third party.” He knows that all of these definitions, both biased and objective cannot finalize him. He instead knows that he has the final word and seeks to retain for himself the final word about himself. “His self-consciousness lives on its unfinalizedness, its open-endedness and indeterminacy” (Problems 43).

Here we find the author leaving the final word to his hero. He constructs his hero not out of words that are foreign to him and not out of neutral definitions. The author does not construct a character type, a temperament or an objectified image of the hero, but precisely the hero’s word about himself and about his world.

“Dostoevsky’s hero is not an objectified image, but rather an autonomous word, a pure voice, we do not see him, we hear him” (Problems 43). All that the readers see and know independently of his word is non-essential. The entire artistic construction of the Dosotoevskian novel is directed toward the exposition and elucidation of the hero’s word. The epithet “a cruel talent” applied to Dostoevsky has its basis in Dostoevsky’s forcing his heroes to the sort of moral torture to elicit from them the word of ultimate self-consciousness.

Though the expressionists accurately comprehend the dominant of self-consciousness in the construction of the hero they fail to make the self-consciousness reveal itself spontaneously and in an artistically convincing way. This results in a crude experiment with the hero or a symbolical drama.
In Dostoevsky no pre-determination of the hero’s self-elucidation, his self-revelation and his own words about himself is there by a neutral image of the hero visualised by the author as the final goal of his characterisation. This even accounts for an occasional bit of fantasy in Dostoevsky’s novels. “Versimilitude of character is for Dostoevsky versimilitude of the hero’s own inner word about himself in all its purity” (Problems 44). But in order to sense and express that inner word the author must find some fantastical viewpoint outside the normal field of vision.

The “truth” at which the hero must arrive is for Dostoevsky essentially the truth of the “hero’s own consciousness” (Problems 45). For Dostoevsky the final word about an individual can be given only in the form of a confessional self-utterance. Bakhtin continues: “self-consciousness, as artistic dominant in the construction of the hero’s image, demands a radically new authorial position in relation to the character depicted.” “. . . the point is precisely to discover a new integral view of man – ‘the personality’ (Askoldov) or ‘man in man’ (Dostoevsky) – which is possible only through an approach to man from a correspondingly new and integral authorial position” (Problems 47).

Bakhtin then illustrates the fundamentally new forms of the artistic view of man. Dostoevsky in his first work shows how the hero (Makar Devushkin) himself revolts against literature in which the “little man” is externalized and finalized without himself being consulted. Makar Devushkin read Gogol’s “Overcoat” and felt personally hurt by it. He identified himself with Akaky Akakievich and took umbrage by the fact that his poverty had been spied upon and his whole life had been found out and laid bare. Devushkin is particularly outraged because Akaky Akakievich died the way he was, an unchanged man.

In the image of Akaky Akakievich hero Devushkin saw himself totally quantified and
measured and defined to the last detail saying as if “you’re all here, there is nothing more in you there is nothing more to be said about you. He also felt the falsity of the author’s approach to Akaky Akakievich. “The hero’s characteristic ‘revolt’ against his literary finalization is represented by Dostoevsky in the sustained primitive forms of Devushkin’s consciousness and speech (Problems 47).

Bakhtin summarizes the deeper sense of this revolt thus: One shall not turn a living person into the voiceless object of a second hand (Zaochnoe) finalizing perception. “In every person there is something which only he himself can reveal in a voluntary act of self-consciousness and expression, something which is not amenable to an externalizing, secondhand definition.” Though vaguely in Poor Folk Dostoevsky attempted to show “something innerly unfinalizable in man” something that Gogol and other authors of “stories about poor clerks” could not capture from their monological authorial positions (Problems 47-48). “. . . ‘novels are the fruit of the human illusion that we can understand our fellow man. But what do we know about each other?’ ” asks Bibi, in the The Book (89).

Though no longer any literary polemic by heroes is there in subsequent works they all struggle furiously against such secondhand definitions of their personalities. “They all acutely feel their own inner unfinalizedness and their capacity to outgrow and make untrue any definition that externalizes and finalizes them. So long as a man is alive he lives on the fact that he is not yet finalized and has not yet pronounced his last word.” As mentioned earlier the underground man listens in on all actual and potential words others say about him, Bakhtin calls the hero in Notes from the Underground the first hero-ideologist in Dostoevsky’s work. “One of the basic ideas, which he sets forth in his polemic with socialists, is precisely the idea that man is not a final and determinate quantity upon which stable calculations can be made; man is free and therefore can overturn any rules which are
forced upon him.” “Dostoevsky’s hero always seeks to shatter the finalizing, deadening framework of others’ words about him. Occasionally this struggle becomes an important tragic motif in the hero’s life (Nastasya Filippovna, for example).” For Bakhtin this profound sense of personal unfinalizedness and indeterminacy are realised through the very complex means of ideological thought, crime or heroic feat. “Man is never coincident with himself. The equation of identity A=A is inapplicable to him.” “The genuine life of the personality can be penetrated only dialogically, and then only when it mutually and voluntarily opens itself.” “The truth about an individual in the mouths of others nondialogical, second-hand truth, becomes a degrading and deadening lie when it concerns his ‘holy of holies’ ie. the ‘man in man’” (Problems 48). Banaka the writer in The Book resonates the same view when he says, “The only thing we [sic] do” “is to give an account of our own selves. Anything else is an abuse of power. Anything else is a lie” (89).

The second aspect of polyphony identified by Bakhtin is the special means of stating ideas in the polyphonic novel. The idea of polyphony is incompatible with the representation of a single idea executed in the ordinary way. Dostoevsky’s originality lies in the particular sharpness and clarity in the statement of the idea. The hero in Dostoevsky is not only a word about himself and about his immediate environment, but also a word about the world. Yet the dominant of the hero’s representation remains unchanged and “it is the self-consciousness.” For this reason the hero’s word about the world merges with his confessional word about himself. For Dostoevsky the truth about the world is inseparable from the truth of the personality. “Therefore the loftier principles of weltanschauung are the same as the principles of the most concrete personal experience” (Problems 63).

The monological artistic world does not recognize the thoughts and ideas of others as an object of representation. In the monological order a thought is either confirmed or
negated, or else it simply ceases to be thought of full significance. Polemically negated thoughts are also not represented, because negation excludes the possibilities of the genuine representation of an idea. A negated foreign thought instead of breaking out of the monological context becomes the more harshly and implacably shut up within its own borders. A negated foreign thought is not capable of creating a full-fledged foreign consciousness alongside another consciousness. The principles of ideological monologism found their most striking and theoretically distinct expression in idealistic philosophy. “In idealism the monistic principle, that is the assertion of the unity of existence, is transformed into the principle of the unity of the consciousness” (Problems 65). The unity of consciousness, which replaces the unity of existence, is inevitably transformed into the unity of a single consciousness. As per idealism he who knows and possesses the truth instructs him who errs and is ignorant of it, that is the interaction of teacher and pupil. Consequently only a pedagogical dialog is possible (Problems 66). Kundera parodies such sort of pedagogical dialog in The Book. For Kundera the “art of the novel” “teaches the reader to be curious about others and to try to comprehend truths that differ from his own” (Testaments Betrayed 8).

According to Bakhtin monological conception of the consciousness prevails in other spheres of ideological creative work as well. All that is significant and valuable is everywhere concentrated around a single centre – the carrier. For Bakhtin “European rationalism with its cult of unified and exclusive” “reason” and especially Enlightenment during which the fundamental genres of European prose were formed, promoted the consolidation of the monological principle and its penetration into all spheres of ideological life. “Utopian socialism with its faith in the omnipotence of convictions” is also monological in principle. “Unity of meaning is everywhere represented by a single
consciousness and a single point of view” (Problems 66). Kundera warns the reader against “keeping exclusive company” with anything because for him “all privileged positions are dangerous” (The Book 181).

An idea does not live in one person’s isolated individual consciousness – if it remains there, it degenerates and dies. An idea begins to live, that is to take shape, to develop, to find and renew its verbal expression, and to give birth to new ideas only when it enters into genuine dialogical relationship with other foreign ideas. Human thought becomes genuine thought that is an idea, only under the conditions of a living contact with another foreign thought, embodied, in the voice of another person that is in the consciousness of another person expressed in his word. It is at the point of contact of this voice-consciousness that the idea is born and has its life. The idea, as seen by Dostoevsky the artist, is not a subjective individual psychological formulation with a “permanent residence” in a person’s head: it is interindivdual and intersubjective. Like the word, the idea is by nature dialogical, the monolog being merely the conventional form of its expression which arose from the soil of the ideological monologism of modern times. Dostoevsky viewed and artistically represented the idea exactly as a living event “played out between consciousness – voices.”

As observed of Dostoevsky Kundera never presents “completed ideas in monological form” (Problems 72). Kundera uses the term “misomusist” for those who feel humiliated by the existence of something that is beyond them. He even includes people for whom a work of art is merely a pretext for deploying a method – psychoanalytic, sociological, etc. under this category of absolutists (The Art 140).

The features of the polyphonic novel called for a totally new treatment of the aspect of genre and plot compositions. The hero, the idea, or the polyphonic principle of the constructions do not fit into the genre and compositional forms of the dominant literary
forms like, what Bakhtin calls, “biographical, social-psychological, or family novel, or the novel of everyday life” (Problems 83). The plot of the biographical novel is inadequate to polyphonic hero. This is because in it “there must be a deep organic unity between the hero’s character and the theme of life.” The hero and the objective world that surrounds him must be made of a single piece. In this sense Dostoevsky’s hero is not, and cannot be, concretely embodied and dream of joining in a normal-life plot. Polyphonic novel is built on a different plot-compositional base and is connected with other traditions of genre in the development of European prose (Problems 83). Kundera’s writing tempts one to revise one’s definition of plot. Instead of calling it an action that arouses expectations one might describe it as a series of verbal gestures that arouse curiosity (Lehman-Haupt, “Novel Re-examined”).

The main drawback of the “social-psychological, family, and biographical novels and the novel of everyday life” is that they bind “hero to hero not as person to person, but as father to son, husband to wife, rival to rival, lover to loved one, or as landlord to peasant, proprietor to proletarian, the well-to-do bourgeois with the déclassé vagrant, etc.” The contacts between characters are on the “firm, all-determining basis” of family and biographical relationships of social standing and class. And “chance is excluded here” (Problems 85).

The hero’s positions in these novels are determined by the plot and they can meaningfully come together only on specific, concrete grounds. “The heroes as heroes are born on the plot itself. The plot is not only their clothing; it is their body and soul. And conversely: their body and soul can be revealed and finalized only within the plot” (Problems 85). Significantly, contrary to this, the adventure plot “is precisely the hero’s clothing, clothing which he can change as often as he pleases.” It rests not on what the hero
is and on his position in life, but on what he is not and what, from the point of view of any already-existing reality, is unexpected and not predetermined (Problems 86).

The adventure plot rests not on existing and stable situations – domestic, social, biographical; it develops inspite of them. In the adventure situation any person may appear as a person. The adventure plot in Dosotevsky is combined with the problematic dialog, the confession, the life and the sermon. From the point of view of the conception of genre dominant in the nineteenth century this seemed unusual. This alien quality of genre and style is given meaning and is overcome by Dostoevsky through the consistent polyphonism of his work. Only Distoevksy’s polyphonic application and perception of this combination of genres was new. Bakhtin traces its roots to the remote antiquity.

The epic world view knows only a single and unified world, obligatory and indubitably true for heroes as well as for authors and audiences. Neither world view nor language can, therefore, function as factors for limiting and determining human images, or their individualization. The destruction of epic distance and the transferral of the image of an individual from the distanced plane of the zone of contact with the inconclusive events of the present and the future, resulted in a radical re-structuring of the image of the individual in the novel. The individual in high distanced genres is a fully finished and completed being. This has been accomplished on a lofty heroic level, but what is complete is also something hopelessly readymade. The character is all there from beginning to end coinciding with him absolutely equal to himself. He is further more, completely externalized (Dialogic Imagination 34-35). One of the basic external themes of the novel is precisely the theme of the hero’s inadequacy to his fate or his situation. The individual is either greater than his fate, or less than his condition as a man. He cannot become once and for all a clerk, a landowner, a merchant, a fiancé, a jealous lover, a father or a surgeon as in Tomas’s case in
Unbearable Lightness. An individual cannot be completely incarnated into the flesh of existing socio-historical categories. There is no mere form that would be able to incarnate once and forever all of his human possibilities and needs, no form in which he could exhaust himself down to the last word, like the tragic or epic hero. There always remains an unrealized surplus of humanness; there always remains a need for the future and a place for this future must be found (Dialogic Imagination 37).

The disintegration of the epic wholeness of an individual happens in other ways as well. A crucial tension develops between the external and the internal man, and as a result the subjectivity of the individual becomes an object of experimentation and representation - and first of all on the humorous familiarizing plane. Co-ordination breaks down between the various aspects. Man for himself alone and man in the eyes of others. This disintegration of the integrity that an individual had possessed combines in the novel with the necessary preparatory steps toward a new, complex wholeness on a higher level of human development (Dialogic Imagination 37-38).

Novelistic discourse has a lengthy prehistory, going back to centuries, even thousands of years. It was formed and matured in the genres of familiar speech found in the conversational folk language (genres that are as yet little studied) and also in certain folkloric and low literary genres. In the prehistory of novelistic discourse one may observe many extremely heterogeneous factors at work. From his point of view Bakthin finds two of these factors to be of decisive importance; they are laughter and polyglossia. The most ancient forms of representing language were organised by laughter which originally was nothing but ridiculing another’s language and another’s direct discourse. Polyglossia and the interanimation of languages associated with it elevated these forms to a new artistic and ideological level and this made possible the genre of the novel (Dialogic Imagination 50-
Polyglossia is the simultaneous presence of two or more national languages interacting within a single cultural system. Bakthin’s two historical models are ancient Rome and the Renaissance. Polyglossia had always existed. The new cultural and creative consciousness lives in an actively polyglot world. The world becomes polyglot, once and for all irreversibly. The period of national language, coexisting but closed and deaf of each other comes to an end. Languages throw light on each other: one language can, after all, see itself only in the light of another language. The naive and stubborn co-existence of “languages” within a given national language also comes to an end. Thus a peaceful co-existence between territorial dialects, social and professional dialects and jargons, literary language, generic languages within literary language, epochs in language and so forth. All this set into motion a process of active, mutual cause and effect and interillumination. Words and language began to have a different feel of them; objectively they ceased to be what they had once been. In contrast to other major “completed genres” novel emerged and matured precisely when intense activization of external and internal polyglossia was at the peak of its activity. The novel could therefore assume leadership in the process of developing and reviewing literature in its linguistic and stylistic dimension (Dialogic Imagination 12).

Closely and inseparably connected with polyglossia “is the problem of heteroglossia within a language that is the problem of internal differentiation, the stratification characteristic of any national language.” Heteroglossia is of primary importance in understanding the style and historical destinies of the modern European novel by which Bakhtin means the novel since seventeenth century. “This latecomer reflects in its stylistic structure, the struggle between two tendencies in the languages of European peoples: one a
centralizing (unifying) tendency, the other a decentralizing tendency (that is, one that stratifies languages).” The literary-artistic consciousness of the contemporary novel, sensing itself on the border between two languages, one literary, the other extra literary, each of which now knows heteroglossia, also senses itself on the border of time; it is extraordinarily sensitive to time in language, it senses time’s shifts, the aging and renewing of language, the past and the future (Dialogic Imagination 67). At any given moment of its historical existence language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form. These “languages” of heteroglossia do not exclude each other but rather intersect with each other in many ways. Bakhtin seems to suggest language as any communication system employing signs that are ordered in a particular manner. Some of the languages he points out as examples are the Ukrainian language, the language of the epic poem, of early symbolism, of the student, of a particular generation of children, of the run-of-the mill intellectual, of the Nietzschean and so on. All languages of heteroglossia are specific points of view of the world, forms of conceptualizing the world in words, specific world view, each characterized by its own objects, meaning and values (Dialogic Imagination 291-92).

“The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized.” The internal stratification of a national language into social dialects, characteristic group behaviour, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations of various circles and of passing fashions, at any given moment of historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as a genre. Authorial speech, the speeches of
narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unites with whose help heteroglossia (raznorecie) can enter the novel. Each of these permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships always more or less dialogized (Dialogic Imagination 262-63).

Such a combining of languages and styles into a higher unity is unknown to traditional criticism, Bakhtin repeatedly emphasises that in the majority of poetic genres the unity of language system and the unity of the poet’s individuality as reflected in his language and speech, which is directly realized in their unity, are indispensable pre-requisites of poetic style. The novel, instead not only does not require these conditions but even makes of the internal stratification of language, of its social heteroglossia and the variety of individual voices in it, the pre-requisite for authentic novelistic prose (Dialogic Imagination 264).

The whole of the novel and the specific tasks involved in constructing this whole out of heteroglot, multi-voiced, multi-styled and often multi-languaged elements remain outside, the boundaries of traditional criticism (Dialogic Imagination 265). Traditionally criticism and philosophy of language dealt with only two poles in the life of language: “on the one hand, the system of a unitary language and on the other the individual speaking in this language” (Dialogic Imagination 269).

The strength and simultaneous weakness of all such categories are seen as conditioned by specific historical destinies and by the task that an ideological discourse assumes. These categories are shaped by historically actual forces at work in the verbal-ideological evolution of specific social groups. They comprised the theoretical expression of actualizing forces that were in the process of creating a life for language. “These forces
are the forces that serve to unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world” (Dialogic Imagination 270).

Unitary language constitutes the theoretical expression of the historical processes of linguistic unification and centralization, and expression of the centripetal forces of language. A unitary language is not something given but is always in essence posited and at every moment of its linguistic life it is opposed to the realities of heteroglossia. But at the same time it makes its real presence felt as a force for overcoming this heteroglossia, imposing specific limits to it and acting as an agent of “correct language.” Aristotelian poetics, the poetics of Augustine, the poetics of the medieval church, of the one language of truth, the Cartesian poetics of neoclassicism, the abstract grammatical universalism of Leibniz (the idea of a “universal grammar”), Humboldt’s insistence on the concrete – all these despite their differences in nuance give expression to the same centripetal forces in sociolinguistic and ideological life; they serve one and the same project of centralizing and unifying the European languages (Dialogic Imagination 271).

But the centripetal forces of the life of language, embodied in a unitary language operate in the midst of heteroglossia. Alongside the centripetal forces the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the un-interrupted process of decentralization and disunification, go forward (Dialogic Imagination 271-72).

Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. The process of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance. While major divisions of poetic genres were developing under the influence of the unifying, centralizing,
centripetal forces of verbal-ideological life, the novel and those artistic-prose genres that gravitate towards it was being historically shaped by the current of decentralizing, centrifugal forces. At the time when poetry was accomplishing the task of cultural, rational and political centralization of the verbal-ideological world on the stages of local fairs and at buffoon spectacles the heteroglossia of the clown sounded forth, ridiculing all “languages” and dialects, there developed the literature of the fabliaux and schwanke, of street songs, folk sayings, anecdotes, where there was no language-centre at all, where all “languages” were masks and where no language could claim to be an authentic, uncontestable force (Dialogic Imagination 272-73).

Heteroglossia as organised in these low genres, was not merely heteroglossia vis-a-vis the accepted literary language but was a heteroglossia consciously opposed to their literary language. It was parodic, and aimed sharply and polemically against the official languages of its given time. It was heteroglossia that had been dialogized. Linguistics, stylistics and the philosophy of language that were born and shaped by the current of centralizing tendencies in the life of language have ignored this dialogized heteroglossia, in which is embodied the centrifugal forces in the life of language (Dialogic Imagination 273).

The dialogic orientation of a word among other words (of all kinds and degrees of otherness) creates new and significant artistic potential in discourse, creates the potential for a distinctive art of prose, which has found its deepest and fullest experience in novel (Dialogic Imagination 275).

Bakhtin then focuses his attention on various forms and degrees of dialogic orientation in discourse and on the special potential for a distinctive prose art. In traditional stylistic thought word acknowledges only itself (that is, only its own context), its own
object. It acknowledges another word, one lying outside its own context only as the neutral word of language. The direct word, as traditional stylistics understands it encounters in the orientation toward the object only the resistance of the object itself but it does not encounter in its path toward the object the fundamental and richly varied opposition of author’s word. No one hinders this word, no one argues with it.

But no living word relates to its object in a singular way; between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme. This is the environment that is often difficult to penetrate.

Indeed, any concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist – or on the contrary, by the “light” of alien words that have already been spoken about it. It is entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgements and accounts.

The living utterance having taken meaning and shape of a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance. It cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. After all, the utterance arises out of this dialogue as a continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it – it does not approach the object from the sidelines (Dialogic Imagination 276).

The way in which the word conceives its object is complicated by a dialogic interaction within the object between various aspects of its socio-verbal intelligibility. And in the artistic representation, an image of the object may be penetrated by this dialogic play
of verbal intentions that meet and are interwoven in it, such an image need not stifle these forces, but on the contrary may activate and organize them. Such is the nature of the image in “artistic prose” and especially that of “novelistic prose” (Dialogic Imagination 277-78).

The dialogic orientation of discourse is a phenomenon that is, of course, a property of any discourse because the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object. However, for Bakhtin “In the poetic image narrowly conceived (in the image-as-trope), all activity – the dynamics of image-as-word – is completely exhausted by the play between the word (with all its aspects) and the object (in all its aspects).” Therefore it presumes nothing beyond the borders of its own context except of course what can be found in the treasure-house of language itself (Dialogic Imagination 278). Except The Farewell Party significantly all Kundera novels are an exploration of some abstract words.

“Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other”. The orientation toward the listener is an orientation toward a specific conceptual horizon, toward the specific world of the listener; it introduces totally new elements into his discourse. In this way different points of view, conceptual horizons, systems for providing expressive accents, various social “languages” come to interact with one another in the text. The speaker breaks through the alien conceptual horizon of the listener and constructs his own utterance on alien territory against the listener’s appreciative background. This new form of internal dialogism of the word bears a more subjective, psychological and frequently random character, sometimes crassly accommodating and sometimes provocatively potential (Dialogic Imagination 282). Thus the novelistic discourse is characterized by a sharp internal dialogism and this discourse is further dialogized in the
belief system of the reader, whose peculiar semantic and expressive characteristics the novelist acutely senses. This phenomenon of “internal dialogization” or “double-voicedness” as Bakhtin calls it, in contrast to “the external, compositionally marked, dialogue” (Dialogic Imagination 283) is present in varying degrees in all discourse. But in “extra-artistic prose” this dialogization stands apart, forming with a special kind of act of its own and runs its course in ordinary dialogue or through other compositionally clearly marked forms whereas in artistic prose and especially in novel the dialogization penetrates from within the very way in which the word conceives its object and its means of expressing itself reformulating the semantics and syntactical structure of discourse. All novels of Kundera except The Farewell Party are an exploration of some abstract words. In his novelistic discourse one can “find a rich world of diverse forms that transmit, mimic and represent from various vantage points another’s word, another’s speech and language” (emphasis added) including the languages of other genres (Dialogic Imagination 50).