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The Honest and Dishonest Critic: Style and Substance in Mikhail Bakhtin's "Discourse in the Novel" and Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*

I. Similarities

On January 7, 1929, Mikhail Bakhtin was arrested on a set of charges increasingly common in Stalin's USSR. His name was reportedly discovered on a list of counter-revolutionaries in Paris; he was accused of membership in the Brotherhood of Saint Serafim, an underground religious order; and he was cited with "corrupting the youth" in the course of private lectures. On the latter Socratic charge he was sentenced to ten years' labor at the notorious Solovetsky Island gulag. Thanks to the intervention of some well-placed friends, Bakhtin's sentence was reduced to six years' exile in Kazakhstan, where he worked as a bookkeeper for the Kustanai District Consumers' Cooperative. He helped calculate agricultural quotas and witnessed the famine that resulted when these quotas were not significantly reduced during the poor crop of 1932-33. In 1934, Bakhtin published his first work since 1929's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*: an article in *Soviet Trade* entitled "Experience Based on a Study of Demand among Kolkhoz Workers." At the same time he was at work on something very different, "Discourse in the Novel," which he was unable to publish until much later.

While Bakhtin was writing "Discourse in the Novel," Erich Auerbach was leading a different sort of life in Germany. He held the chair in Romance Philology at Marburg, and in this enclave lived—as he told Walter Benjamin in a letter written in 1935—"among honorable people, who . . . all think as I do" (748). It was an existence as precarious as pleasant. In April of 1933 the newly-elected Nazis had enacted a law banning Jews from the civil service, which with Hitler's self-promotion to Führer in 1934 was being enforced with increasing strictness. Life in Marburg, Auerbach recognized, was untenable: "it conduces to foolishness," he wrote to Benjamin: "it leads to the belief that there is something on which one could build—while the opinions of individuals, even if there are many of them, don't matter at all" (748). Auerbach was dismissed from his position on October

16, 1935, and left the next year with his family for Istanbul. There, cut off from his colleagues and without a proper library, he wrote *Mimesis*.

Many parallels tempt the critic of Bakhtin and Auerbach. Both were exiles—exiles of the most notorious totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. Both wrote their best-known works in exile: Bakhtin wrote "Discourse in the Novel" in 1933-34 in Kazakhstan and Auerbach wrote *Mimesis* in Turkey from 1942 to 1945. The works themselves have much in common: both are analyses of literary style, and both carry out their analysis by means of a grand opposition—for Bakhtin, the distinction between poetic and novelistic style; for Auerbach, the opposition of Homeric and Old Testament style. The conclusions of the two works are also remarkably similar: both favor a multivoiced, multiperspectival style, which Bakhtin calls dialogism and Auerbach "multipersonal representation of consciousness" (536). We can also speculate about a common historical motivation for their championing such styles. Faced with parallel experiences of exile from authoritarian states, it seems reasonable that these trained literary analysts should have sought to understand their predicament in its linguistic basis, and should have sought in response to theorize a linguistic style capable of defeating or upsetting the styles of those in power.

II. Honesty in Literary Style

But what of these terms "honest" and "dishonest"?[1] Later I will use them to distinguish the critical styles of these two stylistic critics: to determine whether Bakhtin or Auerbach is the more "honest critic"—the one who comes closest to writing in the style he advocates. But initially I want to argue that the question of honesty supplies further common ground between "Discourse in the Novel" and *Mimesis*. Honesty in literary style, I contend, is the central preoccupation of both. In "Discourse in the Novel," honesty undergirds Bakhtin's structuring dichotomy of poetic and novelistic style. Bakhtin praises novelistic prose because it is honest: because it acknowledges and reproduces the dialogism—the ineradicable condition of interactivity and responsiveness in all signification—that he sees as the natural condition of language. He attacks poetry because it is dishonest: because it actively suppresses and conceals dialogism. For Bakhtin, the route from any word to the object it represents is necessarily complex, qualified, and contested. "The word," he writes, "directed toward its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group . . ." (276). The prose writer acknowledges this. He "confronts a multitude of voices, roads and paths that have been laid down in the object by

social consciousness." In novels, "the objects reveals first of all precisely the socially heteroglot multiplicity of its names, definitions and value judgments" (331). This is not the case in poems. Though a poem's words too "must break through to its object, penetrate the alien word in which the object is entangled" (331), it is much less interested in the journey than the destination, "the inexhaustible wealth and contradictory multiplicity of the object itself, with its 'virginal,' still 'unuttered' nature" (278). Bakhtin characterizes the poem as embarrassed at having to run the complicated gauntlet of word to object at all. "The prose art," Bakhtin says,

> presumes a deliberate feeling for the historical and social concreteness of living discourse, as well as its relativity, a feeling for its participation in historical becoming and in social struggle; it deals with discourse that is still warm from that struggle and hostility, as yet unresolved and still fraught with hostile intentions and accents.   (331)

In poetry, on the other hand, "the records of the passage remain in the slag of the creative process, which is then cleared away (as scaffolding is cleared away once construction is finished), so that the work may rise as unitary speech" (331).

Dialogism is the stylistic feature that keeps novelistic discourse warm from struggle; metaphor and rhythm are the cooling elements poured over the dishonest edifice of the poem. Metaphor, Bakhtin says, is specifically incompatible with dialogism: "Social diversity of speech, were it to arise in the [poetic] work and stratify its language, would make impossible both the normal development and the activity of symbols within it" (298). He illustrates this by distinguishing prose dialogism from poetic ambiguity. While the poetic word can possess multiple meanings, the difference from dialogic prose is that "the poetic word is a trope, requiring a precise feeling for the two meanings contained in it." He continues, "it is impossible to imagine a trope (say, a metaphor) being unfolded into the two exchanges of a dialogue, that is, two meaning parceled out between two separate voices" (328). As for rhythm, Bakhtin says that *"by creating an unmediated involvement in every aspect of the accentual system of the whole,"* it "destroys in embryo those social worlds of speech and of persons that are potentially embedded in the word" (298). Poetic language is not only mimetically false but actively dishonest; its patterns of rhythm deliberately reduce the stratified linguistic universe to a common denominator. By "stripping all aspects of language of the accents and intentions of other people, destroying all traces of social heteroglossia and diversity of language," Bakhtin says, "a tension-filled unity is achieved in the poetic work" (298). The honest prose writer "welcomes the heteroglossia and language diversity of the literary and extraliterary language into his work not only not weakening them but even intensifying them" (298). In a statement that goes

some way toward associating the poet with the Stalinist state, Bakhtin adds, "The prose writer does not purge words of intentions that are alien to him, he does not destroy the seeds of heteroglossia embedded in words, he does not eliminate those language characteristics and mannerisms glimmering behind the words and forms" (298). The dishonest poet does all this: refusing to recognize that language in its natural state is made up of opinions, ideas, and mannerisms opposite to his own, he labors to make his words express only his own one-sidedness.

The question of honesty is also central to Auerbach's analysis of Homeric and Old Testament styles in "Odysseus' Scar," the first chapter of *Mimesis*.[2] But it is much more difficult than with Bakhtin to say which of the two styles Auerbach considers honest. At first it seems that he is on the side of the Old Testament. Underlying Auerbach's opposition of Homeric and Old Testament styles in "Odysseus' Scar" is his distinction between legend and history. History is literal truth: things as they actually happen, in all their contingent, confused meaninglessness. Legend, on the other hand, "arranges material in a simple and straightforward way; it detaches it from its contemporary historical context so that the latter will not confuse it; it knows only clearly outlined men who act from few and simple motives" (19). Of the two, history is the more honest, and at first it seems that Auerbach is on the Elohist's side against Homer for this reason: "Homer remains within the legendary with all his material," he says, "whereas the material of the Old Testament comes closer and closer to history as the narrative proceeds" (19). Between the "clearly outlined, brightly and uniformly illuminated" style of Homer and the fraught, mysterious style of the Old Testament, Auerbach prefers the latter because it is truer to life.

But in the first of many argumentative reversals, Auerbach turns on the Elohist. While the historical style of the Old Testament is to be commended for its honesty, its teleological narrative structure forces its reader into acts of interpretive dishonesty. Homer's story coexists happily with others: "before it, beside it, after it, other complexes of events, which do not depend on it, can be conceived without difficulty" (16). The Biblical narrative, however, insists on its literal, exclusive truth:

> The Bible's claim to truth is not only far more urgent than Homer's, it is tyrannical — it excludes all other claims. The world of the Scripture stories is not satisfied with claiming to be a historically true reality — it insists that it is the only real world, is destined for autocracy.   (14-15)

"Autocracy" and "tyranny" are not epithets we would expect Auerbach to apply to his preferred style, especially given his historical situation. If the world of the Old Testament is more "realistic" and complex than Homer's caricatures, our interpretation of this world is much less free than in Homer. Because it presents

itself not merely as "realistic" but as exclusively true, everything must be fitted, however awkwardly, into its interpretive framework.

Having made this argument, Auerbach again changes direction. His next argument is that, because the Old Testament employs the techniques of history rather than legend, the conflicted decision-makers that populate its narrative are far more compelling than anyone in Homer. "What a road, what a fate," Auerbach exclaims, "lie between the Jacob who cheated his father out of the blessing and the old man whose favorite son had been torn to pieces by a wild beast!" The historical Biblical narrative shows its reader that real personalities develop from a process and do not arrive ready-made as in legend:

> The old man, of whom we know how he has become what he is, is more of an individual than the young man; for it is only during the course of an eventful life than men are differentiated into full individuality; and it is this history of a personality which the Old Testament presents us as the formation undergone by those whom God has chosen to be examples. (18)

What a road, what a fate lie between the competing valuations of the Old Testament's historical style in Auerbach's opening chapter! It is praised for its realistic complexity, condemned for its tyrannical attachment to truth, and praised again for its truthful portrayal of personality as a process.

Auerbach's next critical move confuses things further. Turning from the ancient world to the present day, Auerbach asks whether a Biblical historical style or a Homeric technique of legend would better be able to explain the Nazis. His answer is "neither":

> Let the reader think of the history which we are ourselves witnessing: anyone who, for example, evaluates the behavior of individual men and groups of men at the time of the rise of National Socialism in Germany, or the behavior of individual peoples and states during the last war, will feel how difficult it is to represent historical themes in general, and how unfit they are for legend; the historical comprises a great number of contradictory motives in each individual, a hesitation and an ambiguous groping on the part of groups; . . . and the motives of the interested parties are so complex that the slogans of propaganda can be composed only through the crudest simplification. (19)

"To write history," Auerbach concludes, "is so difficult that most historians are forced to make concessions to the technique of legend" (20). History is still the honest style; it would be better if historians didn't need to resort to legend. Faced with the task of representing the vast panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history, however, Auerbach argues that writing honestly is actually impossible.

III. Differences

There exist, as we have seen, many similarities between the works of Bakhtin and Auerbach. "Discourse in the Novel" and *Mimesis* are both interested in discovering and promoting honest literary styles, and both do so by means of stylistic contrast. But already an important difference has presented itself: while Bakhtin is able to locate honesty absolutely in an existent style (and dishonesty absolutely in another), Auerbach is not. For Bakhtin, dialogic novelistic style as practiced by Dostoevsky and others is the stylistic Jerusalem; the style of poetry—though few concrete examples are provided—is Babylon. For Auerbach, things are much less clear-cut. His argument repeatedly changes its mind about whether Biblical style is more honest than Homer's. Then, with his reference to the rise of fascism in Germany, he questions whether honest writing is possible at all.

Beside this difference in their respective analyses of literary style, there is also the difference of their own critical styles. From the passages I have cited, it is already possible to derive what I regard as the major difference between them: that Bakhtin is "quotable" and Auerbach is not. I mean two things by this. First, Bakhtin's prose is more exciting, dramatic, and memorable than Auerbach's.[3] Let us recall, for instance, his remarks about the normalizing effects of poetic rhythm: *"Rhythm, by creating an unmediated involvement in every aspect of the accentual system of the whole* . . . destroys in embryo those social worlds of speech and of persons that are potentially embedded in the word" (298). Bakhtin commands attention. His tone is aggressive, determined, merciless, and unequivocal; in the italicized portions and beyond he seems to be yelling; his metaphors (the destruction of worlds and embryos) are violent and lurid;[4] he speaks in sweeping, unqualified terms ("unmediated involvement," "every aspect," "the whole," "social worlds," "persons"). Auerbach's prose, by contrast, is hesitant and full of qualifications. He introduces a long paragraph on the differences between Homeric and Old Testament style by stating "It would be difficult . . . to imagine styles more contrasted than those of these two equally ancient and equally epic texts" (11). This is the most positive statement of the gap between the poles of Auerbach's stylistic binary; yet he spends more of the sentence drawing similarities ("equally ancient and equally epic") than contrasts. Later, discussing the "multipersonal representation of consciousness" in the modernist novel, Auerbach says it "yield[s] something that we might call a synthesized cosmic view or at the very least a challenge to the reader's will to interpretive synthesis" (549). Beginning by asserting that modernist style is synthetic, he finishes by stating that it also resists synthesis. Bakhtin is full

of memorably worded, strongly phrased positive statements; Auerbach is lucky to get through a sentence without changing his mind.

My second meaning for "quotable" is closely related. Because of the different shapes of their arguments—Bakhtin's static, Auerbach's always in motion—it is very difficult to quote Auerbach in a way that captures his meaning. In making my argument about Bakhtin thus far, for example, I have drawn quotations from all over "Discourse in the Novel": a passage from the end of the book is put next to another from the beginning to support a third from the middle. This is possible because Bakhtin's argument does not really progress. He begins "Discourse in the Novel" by immediately identifying his prey, and spends the rest of the work circling and swooping. Ken Hirschkop remarks, "'Discourse in the Novel' is in essence one claim—'the novel is an artistic genre'—justified and explained for more than 150 pages" (77). You can be quite certain that if you open any page at random, Bakhtin will be at work either debasing poetic style to praise the novelistic or praising novelistic style to debase the poetic. As a result, it is nearly impossible to take a quotation out of context in the user-friendly "Discourse in the Novel." With Auerbach it is a different matter. In explaining Auerbach's valuation of the Old Testament and Homeric styles, for example, I was forced to follow his argument almost page-by-page. This is because Auerbach is constantly questioning his provisional hypotheses, qualifying them, and then arguing against them only to return eventually to something resembling the original position. One can cite Auerbach's remarks on the mimetic faithfulness of the Old Testament style and use this to support a claim that he is anti-Homer. But this would be an act of critical dishonesty, for on the previous page Auerbach attacks the Old Testament's tyrannical attachment to truth. If one is to cite Auerbach, one must be prepared to devote several pages to explaining what qualifications and antithetical arguments modulate the quoted passage. Quoting from *Mimesis* requires effort.

IV. Honesty in Critical Style

"Discourse in the Novel" and *Mimesis*—these two otherwise similar works of stylistic criticism—are written in very different styles. But which of these styles is more "honest"? Which of the two works is closer in its own style to the style it argues for? Let's begin with Bakhtin, and ask what an honest critical style would look like in the context of "Discourse in the Novel." I earlier quoted Bakhtin's remark, "The prose writer does not purge words of intentions that are alien to him, he does not destroy the seeds of heteroglossia embedded in words, he does not eliminate those language characteristics and mannerisms glimmering behind the words and forms" (298). A style that "does not purge words of intentions that are

alien to it" would acknowledge the inescapable semantic openness of (dialogic) language, and would not attempt to force or control meanings. We might expect it to be playful, hesitant, self-conscious, or diffident — maybe funny, silly, difficult, obscure, evasive, or indirect. A style that "does not eliminate those characteristics and mannerisms glimmering behind words and forms" would ventriloquize in a variety of voices — serious academic language would give way to buffoonery, poetry, slang, official pronouncements, song, etc. Bakhtin's style, as we have seen, is nothing like this. He is clear, purposeful, uniform, and persistent.

We would further expect a style that "does not destroy the seeds of heteroglossia embedded in words" willingly to admit opposing voices. It would acknowledge dissent and admit counterarguments to its own assertions. If the thesis of "Discourse in the Novel" is, as I have represented it, that dialogic novelistic style is totally honest and poetic style totally dishonest, then we can imagine three such counterarguments. The first, facile riposte would be the inverse of Bakhtin's: that poetry is totally honest and the novel totally dishonest. More serious would be the following: (2) that neither form is totally honest or dishonest, and instead both poetry and prose are occasionally honest and occasionally dishonest, dialogic and monologic; and (3) that Bakhtin's terms "poetry" and "prose" are meaningless in practice, where many poems contain elements of what he calls novelistic style, and many novels exhibit what he calls poetic style. I am not aware that Bakhtin entertains this first objection in the pages of "Discourse in the Novel," though certain critics of poetry have made the argument on his behalf.[5] Bakhtin does, however, acknowledge the more serious second and third objections—though he does so in a way that manifests a clear critical dishonesty. It comes in the form of a footnote.

"Discourse in the Novel," so critical of poetic tropes, finally succumbs to one. In an exemplary demonstration of bathos, just as his argument against poetry reaches one of its passionate crescendoes, it awkwardly overshoots the mark. Bakhtin has just stated that "the language of poetic genres, when they approach their stylistic limit, often becomes authoritarian, dogmatic, and conservative, sealing itself off from the influence of literary social dialects" (287) when he adds the following in a footnote:

> It goes without saying that we continually advance as typical the extreme to which poetic genres aspire; in concrete examples of poetic works it is possible to find features funda-mental to prose, and numerous hybrids of various generic types exist.   (287n12)

It is a brazen admission. On the next page, while castigating the poet for his spurious attempts to present "unitary" language, Bakhtin complains that poetic language "is unitary only as an abstract grammatical system of normative forms, taken in isolation

from the concrete, ideological formulations that fill it" (288). Bakhtin admits in his footnote to treating poetry the same way: as an abstraction deliberately isolated from the real world—an "extreme" without clear relevance in practice. Central to "Discourse in the Novel" is the assertion that poetic and novelistic discourses are irreconcilable sides of a binary opposition. He calls novelistic style "the expression of a Galilean perception of language, one that denies the absolutism of a single and unitary language" (366) and says that poetry presents "a unitary and singular and Ptolemaic world outside of which nothing else exists and nothing else is needed" (286). There is nothing to be gained from dialogue between Ptolemy and Galileo: one is right and one is wrong. And yet Bakhtin admits in his footnote that in practice there is no Galilean or Ptolemaic style, only hybrids. The footnote is an admission of critical dishonesty—one whose manner of confession only compounds this fact. Why does Bakhtin make his confession in a footnote? Because his critical style in the body of his work—his quotable, determined, forceful, militant, straightforward style—is not "dialogic," and cannot support counterarguments. Even though these objections "go without saying," Bakhtin must exile them from his argument and relegate them to a paratext.

Is this not unavoidable in literary criticism? Mustn't one sacrifice "dialogism" to the imperative of making a comprehensible argument? Is not the attempt to write "honestly" about non-straightforward literary style responsible for much obnoxious and incomprehensible criticism? And, anyway, does the fact that Bakhtin doesn't write in the style he advocates somehow invalidate his findings? Sidney and Shelley, after all, wrote their respective defenses of poetry in prose. Whatever the validity of these concerns, Auerbach does prove that honest literary criticism is possible: that one can write in the style one champions, even when this style is "dialogic." Consider his treatment of Woolf and Proust in the final chapter of *Mimesis,* "The Brown Stocking." Auerbach begins by praising two stylistic features of modernist prose: its dialogic "multipersonal representation of consciousness" (536) whereby "the writer as narrator of objective facts has almost completely vanished; almost everything stated appears by way of reflection in the consciousness of the dramatis personae" (534); and its interest in representing "minor, unimpressive, random events" (546). By focusing on everyday events, modernist writers reject the grand, tyrannical, "crudely simplified" master-narratives of the Bible and twentieth-century tyrants. By dethroning the author as the arbiter of meaning, these modernists give voice to a wider social spectrum of characters and allow for the competition of differentiated voices whose interactions preclude reduction to a single truth. The reader of a modernist novel is thus confronted with "not one order and interpretation,

but many," whose mutual "overlapping, complementing, and contradiction" both tempt and frustrate the reader's desire to make sense. To repeat Auerbach's pointedly contradictory phrase, modernist style "yield[s] something that we might call a synthesized cosmic view or at least a challenge to the reader's will to interpretive synthesis" (549). These narratives—synthetic but resistant to synthesis—teach their reader an important skill for survival in the modern world. "There is always going on within us a process of formulation and interpretation whose subject matter is our own life," Auerbach writes,

> We are constantly endeavoring to give meaning and order to our lives in the past, the present, and future, to our surroundings, the world in which we live; with the result that our lives appear in our own conception as total entities — which to be sure are always changing, more or less radically, more or less rapidly, depending on the extent to which we are obliged, inclined, and able to assimilate the onrush of new experience.   (549)

"These are the forms of order and interpretation the modern writers here under discussion attempt to grasp in the random moment," he concludes. Staging the interaction of multiple, contradictory narratives irreducible to simple interpretation, the style of the modernist novel trains its readers both to reject dishonest, spuriously coherent narratives and to construct flexible, honest narratives of their own.

Auerbach would not be an honest critic if he did not immediately follow these coherent assertions by challenging his reader's will to interpretive synthesis with another of his argumentative reversals. This twist comes in the course of his second reference to contemporary history. The reading of modernism he has been advancing would be a very optimistic one if applied historically: modernism, training its readers to be suspicious of grand triumphant narratives, would teach them to suspect, for instance, those of Stalin and Hitler. He follows this optimistic reading with a demonic one, however. He turns on the very stylistic devices upon which he has built his positive account: modernist attention to the ordinary and the multipersonal representation of consciousness. Reading the development of the latter historically, he concludes that multiperspectivalism is not an ingenious invention of modernism so much as an inevitable symptom of modernity. Modernist style simply mirrors a modern world characterized by the "violent clash of the most heterogeneous ways of life and endeavor" (549):

> At the time of the first World War and after — in a Europe unsure of itself, overflowing with unsettled ideologies and ways of life, and pregnant with disaster — certain writers distinguished by instinct and insight find a method which dissolves reality into multiple and multivalent reflections of consciousness. That this method should have been developed at this time is not hard to understand.   (551)

The other stylistic feature, the focus on the everyday, is re-read as quietism. Modernist writers are like stubborn historians who refuse to condescend to the techniques of legend, and so deal only with the narrow slice of reality that can be represented honestly. They "prefer the exploitation of random everyday events, contained within a few hours and days, to the complete and chronological representation of a total exterior continuum" and "hesitate to impose upon life, which is their subject, an order which it does not possess in itself" (548). The modernist novelists Auerbach discusses are entirely honest; but this stubborn honesty, Auerbach charges, actually abets the rise of fascism. In the chaos of competing ideologies that characterized the early twentieth century, he says,

> The temptation to entrust oneself to a sect which solves all problems with a single formula, whose power of suggestion imposed solidarity, and which ostracized everything that would not fit in and submit — this temptation was so great that, with many people, fascism hardly had to employ force when the time came for it to spread through the countries of old European culture, absorbing the smaller sects.   (550)

Modernist style is exempt from the fascist techniques of cliché, hypnosis, and directed interpretation. But if the role of fascism is to quell the interpretive unease of modernity, then modernism serves to amplify the confusion that fascism employs as a pretext for control. In Auerbach's pessimistic reading, modernism reproduces in its readers the ontological state that made Mussolini's and Hitler's rise to power so effortless.

Auerbach briefly twists out of this gloomy reading of modernism, only to twist again. Reading Woolf's treatment of the eponymous brown stocking in *To the Lighthouse*, Auerbach produces an apostrophe as enthusiastic as that about Jacob: "what realistic depth is achieved in every individual occurrence, for example, the measuring of the stocking!" Woolf's focus on the random, everyday particular—free from the grand narratives and social hierarchies of contemporary history—attains renewed utopian social promise:

> In this unprejudiced and exploratory representation we cannot but see to what an extent — below the surface conflicts — the differences between men's ways of life and forms of thought have already lessened. . . . It is still a long way to a common life of mankind on earth, but the goal begins to be visible. And it is most concretely visible now in the unprejudiced, precise, interior and exterior representation of the random moment in the lives of different people.   (552)

This is yet another false apotheosis. Woolf's style seems to provide a way of apprehending latent commonality behind the ravages and enmities of Europe during the Second World War, and thus also seems to promise an escape from it. But without taking a breath or inserting a paragraph break, Auerbach makes his final

argumentative turn. He does this by re-reading his own phrase, "a common life of mankind on earth." Losing its associations with horizontality and democracy, the phrase comes to mean dishonesty, legend, "crude simplification":

> So the complicated process of dissolution which led to fragmentation of the exterior action, to reflection of consciousness, and to stratification of time seems to be tending toward a very simple solution. Perhaps it will be too simple to please those who, despite all its dangers and catastrophes, admire and love our epoch for the sake of its abundance of life and the incomparable historical vantage point which it affords. But they are few in number, and probably will not live to see much more than the first forewarnings of the approaching unification and simplification.   (552-3)

Thus ends *Mimesis*. Praised as an antidote to the simplifications of fascism, then maligned as a reproducer of the chaos that fascism feeds on, then praised as a style that overcomes the divisions of contemporary history, modernism is finally charged with complicity in the simplifying project of fascism.[6]

This pessimistic conclusion only provides further evidence of Auerbach's critical honesty. He too, like Bakhtin, makes an important confession in the course of his work: that he is himself a modernist. "It is possible," he coyly admits, "to compare the technique of modern writers with that of certain modern philologists":

> Indeed, the present book may be cited as an illustration. I could never have written anything in the nature of a history of European realism; the material would have swamped me. . . . as opposed to this I see the possibility of success and profit in letting myself be guided by a few motifs which I have worked out gradually and without a specific purpose . . . (548)

Like the modern novelists whose style he discusses, Auerbach is suspicious of overarching narratives. He prefers to focus on random particulars, on individual passages, and not to force his reading of them in a prearranged narrative. His style is modernist also in its "multipersonal," multivoiced, "twist and turn" style. Like the modern novels it alternately praises and blames, *Mimesis* demands that its reader be willing to engage actively in the production of meaning, and yet also be able to accept that its message is not reducible to a single truth. Of course this means that Auerbach's judgment of modernist style also applies to his own book: though it might in theory be construed as capable of opposing fascist modes of thought, it can just as plausibly be seen as implicated in promoting them, and in any case was unsuccessful in preventing or halting fascism's advance.

V. Consequences

Perhaps it is hyperbolic to see critical style as an actor in defeating or propping up totalitarian regimes. But one of the principal similarities between these two critics — and the similarities no doubt outweigh the differences — is that both Bakhtin

and Auerbach ask us to make this leap. They both tell us that there are ways of speaking other than dishonestly, and imply that speaking thus can have profound political effects. Bakhtin speaks of "poetic absolutism" (315) and of "the time when poetry was accomplishing the task of cultural, national and political centralization of the verbal-ideological levels" (273). He calls the language of poetic genres "authoritarian, dogmatic and conservative" (287) and argues that "[t]he poet must assume a complete single-personed hegemony over his own language" (297). Though he never states it directly—possibly because to do so would imperil his life—the language of poetry is everywhere implicitly linked to the Stalinist state. Dialogism, its opposite, is implicitly advanced as a strategy for defeating it. Auerbach's two references to contemporary history are more directly concerned with the ability of literary styles to combat tyranny. In "Odysseus' Scar" he is interested in Homer and the Bible not only for their influence on the historical development of literary style, but also for the possibility that they might help us to explain the phenomenon of Nazism. In "The Brown Stocking," as we have seen, he investigates from many angles the role of modernist style in defeating or abetting fascism.

It is because they themselves take so seriously the political dimension of literary style that we must take seriously the question of their critical honesty. Bakhtin, who is so very sure that dialogic novelistic style can trump authoritarian poetic speech, speaks like an autocrat. He is passionately opposed to monologic speech: he spends the entirety of his lengthy work attacking it and outlining the endless ways in which a dialogic style is more honest. But his stylistic technique is to invert monologism—to turn monologism against itself, rather than write dialogically. Auerbach, who ends *Mimesis* by admitting that his own modernist style probably can't do anything to defeat fascism, nonetheless takes his own analysis seriously enough to learn from it. He seems to want nothing to do with the fascist voice, and so rather than inverting it writes in a completely different way. Where the fascist style is coherent, simple, and straightforward, Auerbach's is discontinuous, complex, and travels in manifold byways.

But enough of these accusations of *Hypocrite auteur.* Let us leave Bakhtin alone in frozen, remote Kustanai and play instead the better-known but far less popular game, *Hypocrite lecteur.* For the question remains: why is Bakhtin so much more widely read than Auerbach?[7] Why, when they say such similar things, do we like "Discourse in the Novel" so much more than *Mimesis*? It must have something to do with style. Bakhtin, after all, is so quotable! His prose is memorable; his voice is passionate and energetic; his argument is clear from beginning to end.[8] As for Auerbach, if one is to do justice to all the reversals and qualifications of his

tortuously-conducted argument, one must thoroughly bore one's reader: one must litter one's argument with endless unsightly block quotations and spend page after page just to explain his valuation of a single literary style. While we are prepared to agree with Bakhtin and Auerbach that honest writing admits counterarguments, engages in dialogue with implicit objections, and avoids categorical declarations of universal truth—given the choice we are not terribly interested in reading or teaching such stuff. We are ourselves dishonest critics!

Notes

I would like to thank Melba Cuddy-Keane, Andrew DuBois, Malcolm Woodland, Greig Henderson, and Marta Balcewicz for their invaluable help with this essay. Thanks are due also to my anonymous reviewer at *Style,* whose helpful and enthusiastic comments spurred me on in my final revisions.

[1] What appeals to me about this pair of terms, "honest" and "dishonest," is their adaptability to various needs and contexts. They can be neutral (expressing the simple fact of accuracy or inaccuracy) or carry the strongest moral force. I too am trying to be an honest critic; I don't want to limit the many meanings of these evocative words. Therefore I leave them undefined.

[2] Remember that the subtitle of *Mimesis* is *The Representation of Reality in Western Literature.* Auerbach values realism.

[3] This has, of course, much to do with their translators, and the different stylistic possibilities and conventions of Russian and German prose. What I am attempting in this article, however, is primarily a syntax of critical attitudes and intellectual concepts—attitudes and concepts that survive a good translation. (The quality of the translations in question is evidenced by their stability; Trask's is now well over fifty years old, and Emerson's and Holquist's turns thirty this year.)

[4] Despite his opposition to the trope of metaphor, Bakhtin does frequently employ it.

[5] Several critics have attempted to "save" Bakhtinian analysis for poetry, and poetry from Bakhtin's analysis. In his "Bakhtin on Poetry," Michael Eskin argues, "far from being relegated to the realm of discursive and, by extension, sociopolitical monologicity, poetry may plausibly be construed as *the* dialogically and sociopolitically exemplary mode of discourse in Bakhtin's writing" (379). Mara Scanlon makes a similar case in "Ethics and the Lyric," arguing that only Bakhtin himself can show us how thoroughly wrong he got poetry: she will "counter Bakhtin's contention that all poetry is necessarily monologic and therefore unethical" by counterintuitively "employing Bakhtin's own theories of dialogue"

(1). A methodological flaw underlies these attempts to rescue poetry from Bakhtin by means of a Bakhtinian theory of dialogism predicated on the absolute rejection of poetic discourse. Donald Wesling, caught between his love of poetry and his belief in dialogism, is particularly forthright in recognizing the dilemma: if he is to show that "poetry as a form of utterance should be reckoned into [Bakhtin's] account of speech genres," he says, then he must first "rescue poetry from Bakhtin's stingy and grumbling description of it" (17).

[6] Simplification is not, in Auerbach's writing, an exclusively fascist project. "Philology and *Weltliteratur*" (1952), for example, describes a "process of imposed uniformity" by which "All human activity is being concentrated either into European-American or into Russian-Bolshevist patterns" (2-3). In this final chapter of *Mimesis*, however—so concerned with the relationship of modernist narrative to the specific phenomenon of fascism—Auerbach seems to me to envision "the approaching unification and simplification" as a consequence of fascism rather than of American or Soviet ways of life. *Mimesis* was written in Istanbul between May 1942 and April 1945, during which period fascism was the more pressing threat (the Nazis began to surrender to the Allies only in late April 1945). By the time Auerbach published "Philology and *Weltliteratur*," he had been living in the United States for five years.

[7] As an index of this, a search performed in the MLA database (2000-present) on March 15, 2010, for "mikhail and bakhtin" produced 999 results; the same search for "erich and auerbach" produced 73.

[8] Many other theorists, conversely, have achieved their celebrity through murkiness and obfuscation. Such obscurity at the micro-level seems to be more acceptable in general than the macro-level complexity of Auerbach's *Mimesis*, whose individual sentences are very clear. I can offer no explanation for this perplexing phenomenon.

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be a useful when explaining how literary fiction absorbs media and new media. To rephrase Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase, one could say that the medium is also the message in many postmodern novels, and in this respect *Glamorama* certainly is no exception.

Adam Hammond. "The Honest & Dishonest Critic: Style and substance in Bahktin and Auerbach." **/ 638**

I begin my essay by noting some striking similarities between Mikhail Bakhtin's "Discourse in the Novel" and Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*: both were written in exile from totalitarian regimes, and both responded to the experience of exile by championing multi-voiced, multi-perspectival literary styles. Bakhtinian "dialogism" and Auerbachian "multi-personal representation of consciousness," I go on to argue: can both be understood as attempts to theorize an "honest" literary style in response to the "dishonest" styles of the Stalinist and Fascist states? I next ask which of these two critics is himself the more "honest" — which employs the critical style closest to "dialogism" or "multipersonal representation of consciousness." Bakhtin's forceful, dogmatic, single-voiced style, I argue, is "dishonest" by his own terms; but Auerbach's discontinuous, self-reflexive, multi-voiced style is "honest." I conclude by asking why Auerbach, the more honest of the two, is, by comparison to Bakhtin, so little read.