Performance Novels: Notes Toward An Extension of Bakhtin’s Theories of Genre and the Novel

Arthur J. Sabatini *

With characteristic assertiveness, Bakhtin begins the subchapter ‘Genre and Reality’ in The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship, (hereafter The Formal Method) with the following proposition:

If we approach genre from the point of view of its intrinsic thematic relationship to reality and the generation of reality, we may say that every genre has its methods and means of seeing and conceptualizing reality, which are accessible to it alone. (133)

Several paragraphs later, he specifies his concerns with the statement that the “logic of the novelistic construction permits the mastery of the unique logic of new aspects of reality” (135). Hence, as many of his subsequent essays and books will demonstrate, particular world views, ideological positions, social phenomena or historical perspectives are realized in novels or other literary forms. Since he mentions the “dramatic genres” and the “plastic arts” in this subchapter, this logic doubtless applies to the generic categories in all the arts.

Bakhtin’s conceptions of genre and the novel are, of course, interrelated with his broader theories of language, perception, knowledge, aesthetics, art, history and cultural production. To argue over the above statements, then, is to engage Bakhtin on many fronts; a process which, generally, becomes reflexive and inexhaustible. In any case, such a tactic will not resolve the perplexing and ever-moot questions (which go beyond Bakhtin) surrounding the origins and naming of genres. Therefore, I begin by accepting Bakhtin’s contention that “[G]enre appraises reality and reality clarifies genre” (136); and that the most difficult to classify, fluid and multifarious literary genre is the novel.

* Arthur J. Sabatini is presently working on a PhD dissertation at the Department of Performance Studies, New York University.

Discours social / Social Discourse

Volume III numbers 1 & 2 – spring-summer 1990
"[T]he novel, after all," writes Bakhtin in *Epic and Novel,* has no canon of its own. It is, by its very nature, not canonic. It is plasticity itself. It is a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review. Such, indeed, is the only possibility open to a genre that structures itself in a zone of direct contact with developing reality. (39)

Through such elaborations - on genre in general and the novel in particular - Bakhtin provides a framework for thinking about and recognizing persistent and emerging aesthetic forms. This has meant, as Bakhtin shows in *From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse,* *The Problem of Speech Genres, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* and other texts, that the novel is protean enough to accommodate everything from the cacophonous atmosphere of the Rabelasian marketplace to the vivid depiction of landscapes and historical incidents compressed into the pages of the Goethe's novels. In the process, as he argues in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,*

[Genre is reborn and renewed at every new stage in the development of literature and in every individual work of a given genre...A genre lives in the present, but always remembers its past, its beginning. (106)]

For Bakhtin, the novel is an exclusively literary genre. However, when approached in terms of Bakhtin's emphasis on utterance, speech genres, carnivalization and the complexity with which every word "enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgements and accents," (*Discourse* 276) the novel has the potential to become more than a literary entity. It is, after all, an Intertextually transhistorical, open-ended, "genre-in-the-making" simultaneously implicated with life in the present (of its writing) and the future of its reception. Furthermore, it is an instantiation of a multiplicity of polyglottic and heteroglossic usages, and has the capacity for appropriating and re-presenting extraliterary materiality.

Bakhtin's conception of the novel, then, appraised especially from the vantage point of the history of innovations in the genre during this century, can be viewed as encompassing an Imaginative and functional territory beyond literature. In that regard, the Bakhtinian novel, I submit, can be re-formulated to be recognized as more than a Jamesian "baggy monster," or a grotesque Derridean monstrosity. It can be something of a living Gargantua - - playing hopscotch in Gravity's Wonderland, with a remembrance of the sound and the fury of all things past, including recognitions and sleepwalking at a wak through a magic mountain during a century of solitude on *terra nostra.* In short, the novel - this boundless form - can transverse even the limits already fractured by the works alluded to in the previous sentence. It can, I contend, be recognized in aesthetic productions beyond those that appear as printed, text-bound literary works.
Thus, I propose that Bakhtin's conception of the novel is elastic enough to be applicable beyond literature into the realm of performance. Certain modern and contemporary aesthetic performance works (noted below) are more accurately described and comprehended as Bakhtinian novels, even though they do not exist as printed texts. These works, by artists such as Robert Ashley, Richard Foreman, Spalding Gray, Len Jenkins, Peter Handke, John Cage, Linda Musmanno, Helner Müller and others, contain elements of theater, sound and music, intermedia eventfulness, and verbal and performance art, but they are not readily encompassed by these categories. Such works resemble novels in that the dominant "stratifying" material they employ is language, which functions self-consciously and novelistically in live performance. Moreover, their absorption of discourses and genres (literary, social and theatrical), treatment of characterization and plot, and dialogic relationship with audiences are far more comprehensible through Bakhtinian categories than through the conventional critical vocabularies of theater or related performance disciplines.

Provisionally, I wish to call these works performance novels. They are examples of an historically emergent genre critically anticipated by Bakhtin in several texts, most notably: *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship, Epic and Novel and Discourse in the Novel*. This genre of performed work retains qualities of the novel as formulated by Bakhtin and his theoretics seem explicitly useful for critically responding to it. I chose to assess this work as novelistic, rather than strictly in performative traditions (from storytelling to carnival to theater), since it is only possible for it to have coalesced after the appearance of certain innovations in the novel - as identified by Bakhtin's poetics.

In what follows, then, I will refer primarily to the texts just cited in order to show how certain versions of modern and contemporary aesthetic performances are recognizable as novelistic. This will entail reference to Bakhtin's notions of genre and genre formation in the context of the formation of performance in the 20th century. I will also remark on how the modern and postmodern novel has, as Bakhtin says in *Epic and Novel*, entered into a "zone of contact" and "used" various "extraliterary" material (i.e., performance) to fashion these hybrid manifestations, or performance novels. In the last part of the paper, I will cite several works that I respond to and classify as performance novels.

Naturally, the fact that I, a theoretical Quixotic Bakhtinian, see/read/experience performance novels where others see 'experimental theater,' 'new music operas' or 'performance art' is partly at issue throughout this paper. My initial reason for pursuing this notion is simply that conventional generic categories have proven to be inadequate for identifying or describing new performance work (as has been the case in terms of much artistic practice throughout this century). Secondly, insofar as my argument is substantive, it may suggest extensions of Bakhtin's literary theoretics and allow for effective utilization of his thought in the field of performance studies. At the very least, I hope to suggest that Bakhtin's writings can contribute to an appraisal of certain significant but elusive categories of aesthetic and cultural production.
Genres and Reality

In *The Formal Method*, Bakhtin critiques formalist approaches to genre which "separate the work from both the reality of social intercourse and the thematic mastering of reality" (135). Instead, he argues for an intrinsic or "organically interrelated" conception of genre, perception and consciousness. Each work is dialogically situated, he contends, it

is oriented toward the listener and the perceiver, and toward the definite conditions of performance and perception...the work is oriented in life, from within, one might say, by its thematic content. Every genre has its own orientation in life, with reference to its events, problems, etc. (131)

however, -- and this is crucial, though problematic -- genres are particularly accessible to the artist.

One might say that human consciousness possesses a series of inner genres for seeing and conceptualizing reality. A given consciousness is richer or poorer in genres, depending upon its ideological environment. (134)

For artists, Bakhtin remarks, "seeing and representation merge" and aspects of reality are "mastered." Such representations, in turn, "force us to see new aspects of visible reality." "But these new aspects cannot clarify or significantly enter our horizon if the new means necessary to consolidate them are lacking. One is inseparable from the other" (134). This argument (which, incidentally, extends to all the arts and sciences) allows for the possibility of the appearance of new genres and new types of art and artists in different historical periods (e.g., photographers, performance artists). In addition, new genres may be acknowledged by individuals or specialists, depending upon their "environment"; and they may be represented by artists who, in turn, make them "accessible" to others. Brecht, to cite a parallel example, says something similar in a remark titled "On Form and Subject Matter." Speaking as a playwright living in the 1920s, he explains that

[S]imply to comprehend the new areas of subject-matter imposes a new dramatic and theatrical form... Even to dramatize a simple newspaper report one needs something much more than the dramatic technique of a Hebbel or an Ibsen. (30)
Brecht's "inner genres" and the dramatic forms they took quite significantly altered perceptions – at least in the world of theater. Overall, Bakhtin's notion of genre is succinctly characterized by Holquist and Clark as "an X-ray of a specific world view" (276). They contend that Bakhtin shows little regard for the boundaries of fixed genres and that he went out of his way to propose "an extremely plastic and historically sensitive conception of genres and their interactions" (276). In his scheme, they note, the novel is a wild card, "a kind of epistemological outlaw, a Robin Hood of texts" (276). And, "Bakhtin assigns the term "novel" to whatever form of expression within a given literary system reveals the limits of the system as inadequate, imposed, or arbitrary" (276). Holquist and Clark continue, "the novel is not for him just another literary genre but a special kind of force, which he calls "novelness" (276).

"Novelness," then, must necessarily exist in a multiplicity of forms under different social conditions and within each historical era. It appears within speech, discourse and, given the concept of utterance, it is conceivable in the disposition and formation of Images of the body, gesture, action, etc. Carnivalesque, of course, is one of the primary forms of "novelness" Bakhtin assesses. "Novelness" also appears in other guises. For example, in From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse, it assumes the form of laughter and parodic energy in Greece and Rome; in the essay, The Bildungsroman, it is manifested as the "bookish encyclopedicity" of the late Renaissance. The concept and actuality of the city, in Dickens, Dostoevsky and others provide the basis for yet other versions. As an aside, I should note that "novelness" is a notion not unlike Raymond Williams' "structure of feeling," as elucidated in his book The Long Revolution. Williams essentially uses this formulation in an essay titled "Drama in a Dramatized Society" when he relates how a Frenchman he knew said to him:

'France, you know, is a bad bourgeois novel.' I could see how far he was right: the modes of dramatization, of fictionization, which are active as social and cultural conventions, as ways not only of seeing but organizing reality, are as he said: a bourgeois novel.... 'Well, yes,' I said politely, 'England's a bad bourgeois novel too. And New York is a bad metropolitan novel....' (19)

Bakhtin, one imagines, would have turned the discussion towards the 'good' features of these novels.

Turning to Bakhtin, and the latter part of this century, and looking where he (and to a degree, Williams) did not, I would argue for performance as a category of "novelness." Stated another way, performance is a genre (in Bakhtin's sense; a "structure of feeling" in Williams' terms) that has emerged as characteristic of our social reality.

That is, during this century, one of the most significant Individualized, societal and intellectual tendencies (particularly in Western Europe and America) has been toward the aestheticization of experience and thought in various modalities of performance. In
discourses ranging from critical theory to sociology and journalism, there has been a persistent recognition and theorizing of performance as an ineluctable dimension of human life. This is not to say that life was 'less performed' in any other epoch, but certain distinguishing factors of modernity and its discourses - mainly, the predominance of photography, cinema and video, accessible technological and electronic reproduction media and systems, inter-cultural aesthetic experimentation, and psychoanalytic, structuralist and poststructuralist thought - have contributed to a realization (and valorization) of performance from the most quotidian episodes to the rarefied play of academic texts. Whether in terms of interpersonal affairs or the theatricalization of everyday life, social conflict, or in relation to personal expression, fashion, mass media, political change or artistic production, performance is as manifest in our consciousness as was the concept and effect of progress for 19th century societies. (For extended approaches to performance see Blau, Goffman, Schechner, Sennett, Turner, Williams.) Throughout the century, the novel -- and nearly all other aesthetic forms -- have, to varying degrees, represented and incorporated aspects of performance. In numerous instances, novels have become explicitly concerned with performance; and, as I argue below, they have assumed a radical, extraliterary, non-textual (i.e., non-printed) form that is constituted by live performance. (Hence, performance novels.) Inclusion of performance was, to follow Bakhtin, predictable. Since its inception, Bakhtin boasts in Epic and Novel, "the novel was made of very different clay...It is a different breed, and with it and in it is born the future of all literatures" (39). Thus, novels anticipate future versions and mutations of themselves, even non-literary ones.

Examples of performance within the novel can be found in texts throughout the century. In early avant-gardist manifestations the novel affirmed the performances of authors. Thus, the emphasis on the immediacy of experience and the act of writing in "automatic" surrealist novels/manifestos (Aragon, Breton). The ludic possibilities of novels -- as games, puzzles, fields of play -- have been repeatedly advanced (Queneau, Perec, Ablash). In other versions, the novel literally absorbs - as if it were acting as a form of consciousness - the materiality of visual texts: from graphic, photographic and innovative typographic matter (Calvino, Roché), to "official" and non-fictional data and documentary (Cortázár, Sokhentzyn). or, it includes its own participatory gambits: blank pages, questionnaires and other playful additions (Barthelleme). (Nearly all of this was, to be sure, prefigured by Tristram Shandy and, as Bakhtin demonstrates, to be found after a fashion in Dostoevsky's works). In yet other uses, novels have encouraged literal performances by being coupled with television shows and popular films (sometimes, as plc-novels or spinoffs after the release of the movie!). There are also species of interactive video novels (usually mysteries or sci-fi adventures); and some mystery contest novels which require active participation from reader/players. Finally, many of these characteristics have been explicitly adopted -- though not often acknowledged -- in the historical, biographical and journalistic texts of our era (Mailer, Wolfe, Nalpaul).

Volume III numbers 1 & 2 – spring-summer 1990
In these contexts, performance is realized on different levels. Most obviously, certain novels require "engaged" or participatory acts of reading. Intensely self-referencing and reflexive novels (like Barth's *Giles-Goat Boy* or Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller*) involve the reader in an on-going critical dialogue.

But some novels demand more than purely cognitive performances. Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* offers choices for arranging the chapters, *Finnegans Wake* "says read me aloud," and Raymond Federman's works (*Take It or Leave It* and *Double or Nothing*) require physical positioning in order to decipher their typographical configurations. Related issues here involve critical strategies: e.g., reading as performance, affective stylistics, etc. as investigated by Roland Barthes, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish and others.

But the novels cited above - which have precedents in the history of world literature - still appear on pages in printed books; their original authors are not present. They are novels that represent, incorporate and absorb performance, but they are not *performance novels*. *Performance novels* are not to be found in books: they are performed live.

**From Performance and the Novel to Performance Novels**

Unlike his elaborate commentary on the novel, Bakhtin's characterizations of live performance are limited; and, in any case, are invariably, condensed and assessed mostly for their literary value (q.v., *Rabelais and His World*). Apart from employing the term performance in reference to language use, Bakhtin subsumes performance in its many other dimensions in his analyses of religious, official, folk or public forms, and conventional theater. He barely discusses acting and regards drama as essentially monologic (*Problems 17: Discourse* 266). Since none of the performance genres, as he knew them, attempt to represent language or consciousness, nor are they intentionally self-reflexive or multi-layered textually, he did not explore them as extensions of the novel.

We, however, are in a much different position. After decades of witnessing innovations in avant-garde theater, performance art, intermedia and popular cultural performance, it is possible to find many works that are precisely about language, the problematics of representation, polyphony, self-reflexivity and other Bakhtinian categories. Some performance works in the Euro-American tradition (which he might have been only slightly familiar with) include: Dada evenings and Futurists manifestations, absurdist plays, the parodic productions of the Wooster Group and Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater, Robert Ashley's "operas," and talk poetry/narrations and performances of David Antin. In works by these performers and groups, among others, discourses and language play are both materially and thematically central to performance.
I must emphasize here that not all the work by any given artist or group falls under the category of performance novels; and, obviously, artists do not intentionally set out to establish a new genre. However, an author may consciously attempt to stretch or interrogate the limits of the genres within which he or she works. Others combine materials from different disciplines and genres or technologically modify their works to extremes. Robert Ashley’s "operas," for example, have novelistically complicated plots and narratives, while being architecturally musical and designed for performance in theaters, nightclubs or galleries.

In *Discourse In the Novel* Bakhtin offers a concise definition of the novel:

> The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even a diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized.

(262)

Thus, like the novel, the quasi-theatralized/narratized work I call *performance novels* incorporate, combine, subordinate and organize discourses from numerous sources (and often from different media). Although they often draw on historical and cross-cultural theatrical, performance and narrative traditions (from storytelling to stand-up comedy), they are equally dense with literary and literary/theatrical material - which, in any case, is inescapable when language is involved. *Performance novels*, then, as I conceive them, are performed versions of the novel as already theorized by Bakhtin. He simply neither experienced nor imagined non-theatrical or combinatory and multiplex performance genres (outside of folk forms) that could function with all the "features" of the novel. In part, Bakhtin did not consider the polyphonic decentering of the theatrical experience, either formally (Dada and neo-Dada performances) or through technological means (as in the work of Richard Foreman or John Cage). Nor could he have anticipated the types of extended literary/performance forms that could also be considered as *performance novels*. For a *performance novel* to exist, language must be the central, dominant "stratifying" force of the event. Everything in the performance thus becomes subjected to the signifying processes set in motion by language (from whatever source: spoken or recorded). This results either because of the sheer density of the linguistic elements or because complex verbal or oral elements are augmented by electronic media. As the language in *performance novels* tends to be dense with referential meanings and heteroglossic histories, it functions dialogically with the other elements of the *mise en scène*. Works that evolve through the deployment of simultaneous or multiple voicings, especially when supplemented or propelled electronically, are *performance novels*. Performed works that contain utterances which resemble stream of consciousness recitations rather than monologues, or are more textually or verbally
Performance Novels

convoluted than orally declared, or are more linguistically fragmented and decentered and less character and actor centered, are performance novels. (The actual reading of a novel by one person, incidentally, would not likely be a performance novel).

For the remainder of this paper I want to brieﬂy remark on the work of two artists, Richard Foreman and Robert Ashley, who have produced examples of what I consider performance novels.

Richard Foreman is a playwright, director and performer; Ashley is a composer and performer. To my knowledge neither has written a novel. Each has published scores, scripts and articles and have been considered avant-gardist experimenters in their respective ﬁelds. All of their work does not fall under the category of performance novels. Moreover, since performed works can occur in many versions, I must emphasize that some versions that I name performance novels could be produced more theatrically or as concerts or in other forms. Which is to say, performance novels can only be identiﬁed on the basis of actual performances. The Birth of the Poet was directed by Richard Foreman and scripted by Kathy Acker, whose entire career has been based on rewritings of classic novels. It was produced at the 1985 Brooklyn Academy of Music New Wave Festival. In The Birth of the Poet, Propertius, the major narrator/character in the play incessantly engages in long, often pornographic, diatribes, speeches, confessions, meditations, and harangues. He speaks through a microphone and his words inﬁltrate the movement, action, film, and slide sequences that comprise the mise en scene. The verbal intensity of Propertius (a poet who is most concerned with the decadence of his, and by extension, our society) saturates and propels every aspect of the production. Using language, being used by language and being inseparable from language forms the thematic as well as the expressive force of the work. Propertius, in fact, is engulfed by texts - some of which seemed improvised - that form a polyphonic world around him. This is typical of the work of Richard Foreman, who has often cited Gertrude Stein as a seminal inﬂuence. Stein, he has said, is a writer concerned with the present, which is what Foreman attempts on stage. The present tense of his productions, which are often explicitly theatrical, is nevertheless stratified by language - or at least as much by language as by the action on stage. For the most part, Foreman is the author of his own scripts. Another work, which suggests a novel of psychoanalysis, The Cure, portrays language directly. "From start to finish," critic Marc Robinson wrote, "language was both the medium of concealment (words encasing ideas) and a tool for excavation, unearthing and articulating hidden thought" (87). Robinson goes on to describe the forms of talk and modes of dialogue, speaking, analysis that occurred throughout this performance novel. A similar assessment could be put forth concerning Foreman's City of Rats.

Robert Ashley calls his works Perfect Lives and ATALANTA (Acts of God) operas. In their fullest versions - with sets, television monitors, live musicians and audio technologies - they can be as elaborate as a traditional opera (each runs over six hours). But the performances are precisely segmented and usually involve a narrator/character, several musicians, audio playback equipment and television monitors. Ashley orchestrates these elements through
time, but the dominant figure in performance is the narrator/character (often Ashley himself). The narrator/character speaks in a well-controlled voice; his texts, all pre-scripted, are analytic, stream of consciousness meditations on the characters, plots and evolution of the performed work. Each text is precisely timed and each establishes a dialogic relationship with the other performers and elements (i.e., the video monitor) within the performance. Everything is stratified and dialogized by virtue of the organization of the verbal 'score' and its thematic content. For Ashley, the voice, language and thought are virtually the same. Or, as he says (in ATALANTA (Acts of God), "What is the name of consciousness? Everywhere...Everywhere Everywhere speaks."

Throughout his career, Ashley has explored the voice and language in his work. Apart from purely sonic vocal pieces, or those based upon short texts, his work is concerned with tracing American stories, particularly in the mid-west. One of the first lines of Perfect Lives is 'these are stories of the Corn Belt and the people in it.' Both narrative and music interweave throughout each section of the work and, as with Faulkner or Proust, themes and characters merge and converge as the work unfolds. In these "operas" all the instruments have voices and distinct roles - yet these are orchestrated by the text...

These comments can only point in vague ways toward works that fall into the category of performance novels. To fully establish such a genre will require more investigation and analysis, particularly in terms of assessing the relations between narrative texts, live performance, and reception aesthetics. All of these phenomena are, of course, present in Bakhtin's theoretics and are being brought to light in the contexts of literary studies and cultural studies derived from his work. Any subsequent work on performance novels will rely on this research. Finally, it is necessary to state that performance novels are not to be considered as a genre that will supercede novels or the novel as we know it. However, works within what has been called the experimental theater or performance art are, to invoke Bakhtin's phrasing, "representations merged with seeing" that enter consciousness and experience (of both the artists and audience) as aesthetic forms which, eventually, will require another name. I do not doubt that Bakhtin, had he seen such work, might have coined a term to describe it.
WORKS CITED

Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Epic and Novel." "From the Prehistory of Novellistic Discourse.
"Discourse in the Novel."
---. Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics. Trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minn.
to Sociological Poetics. Trans. Albert Wehrle. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press,
1985.

Blau, Herbert. The Eye of Prey: Subversions of the Postmodern. Bloomington: Indiana

1964.

Clark, Katerina and Michael Holquist. Mikhail Bakhtin. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press,
1985.

Goffman, Erving. The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life. New York: Doubleday and

Williams, Raymond. "Drama In a Dramatized Society." Writing and Society. London: Verso,