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ABSTRACT

Two exercises were developed to demonstrate how Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of novelistic language and creative interpretation are instrumental in teaching students to read creatively. The text chosen for these exercises was "Crime Against Nature" by Minnie Bruce Pratt. According to Bakhtin's scheme, a fiction can be read most profitably by viewing it as a living mix of varied and opposing voices that lend themselves to creative interpretations. In Bakhtinian terms, readers should be trained to recognize how authors "dialogize" both "authoritative" and "innerly persuasive" words of the text. One of Pratt's primary objectives is to ensure that authoritative language loses its absolute authoritativeness. In the first exercise, then, students identify when Pratt dialogizes authoritative language to deprive it of its authority. Pratt adapts the authoritative language of legal statutes against sodomy into her poem. Pratt also decenters authoritative language in her retellings. Thus, students come to understand the uneasy authority of authoritative language. Pratt also dialogizes innerly persuasive words. The second exercise for students entails the analysis of Pratt's inner argument and how this is made public through the poems. Pratt's deep commitment to words results in her dialogizing authoritative and innerly persuasive words, and in her fidelity to "her own words." Thus, literary language is seen for what it truly is: a living mix of varied and opposing voices, developing and renewing itself. (HB)

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I have developed two exercises in order to demonstrate how Bakhtin's conception of novelistic language and creative interpretation are instrumental in teaching students to creatively read a work, in this case, to creatively read Minnie Bruce Pratt's Crime Against Nature. According to Bakhtin, "there are three broad ways in which works can be interpreted":

First, "One can identify the meanings the author specifically had in mind or that his contemporaries may have discovered" (M&E 286). In such a process, the reader's creative activity is then zero. That is, we could read Crime Against Nature as a collection of poems that chronicle the legal and social struglles of a lesbian who desired and was denied custody of her children -- what many people think of as a plot-level analysis.

Second, "One can 'modernize and distort' the work by reading it entirely in terms of current interests" (M&E 286). However, this process is problematic because the writer's creative activity is then zero. Moreover, Bakhtin would argue that nothing is learned; that is, we neither learn about the epoch and nor do we learn anything new when we make the work a version of ourselves. That is, perhaps we could read Crime Against Nature in or to recreate "failed mommy" scenarios by using the

collection as a convenient backdrop for our own versions of "mommy dearests."

Third, "Readers can interpret the work so as to develop and exploit the potentials actually present in it"; this process "while requiring discipline and care, may enrich both readers and work" (M&E 287). That is, we can read Crimes Against Nature as "a living mix of varied and opposing voices" that lend themselves to creative interpretations.

Bakhtin argues that interpretive creativity on the part of both authors and readers is made possible by the fact that:

* authors want to make their works rich in potential, and it is the work's cultural wealth that ensures its potential, and
* "authors intend their works to mean more than their [own] intended meanings" (M&E 286).

As for readers, in order to creatively read a work -- that is, in order to interpret the work so as to exploit its potentials -- the reader should be able to recognize how the author "dialogizes" in Bakhtin's terms both what Bakhtin calls the "authoritative" and the "innerly persuasive" words of the text. I have developed one exercise to help students identify "authoritative" language and another exercise to help them identify "innerly persuasive" language. Finally, we discuss how

authoritative language and innerly persuasive language are dialogized in the text, and as a consequence we become a voice that creatively interprets the work.

Bakhtin explains that "When absolutely authoritative language is included in a novel, one of two things happens. On the one hand, [the language] may ... be dialogized and so lose its absolute authoritativeness. In that case, it becomes but one of many languages aspiring to authority, or it becomes a language polemically (and therefore insecurely) asserting its authority, or perhaps it turns into a language sensed as one that at one time was authoritative but is now 'decentered'" (M&E 314).

One of Minnie Bruce Pratt's primary objectives in writing Crime Against Nature is to ensure that authoritative language -- of the law, of the father, of religion, og morality, of the heterosexual family -- loses its absolute authoritativeness.

In our first exercise we identify when Pratt dialogizes authoritative language in order to do ensure that authoritative language is deprived of its authority: by demonstrating that its hold is insecure, by polemicizing its authority, or by decentering its authority.

The poems in this collection are written to her sons, Ransom and Ben, in an effort to claim them, to create a history they

never shared, and to polemicize -- and thus make insecure -- the authoritative language that prevented a lesbian mother from gaining custody of her two sons. Minnie Bruce Pratt explains, in the final lines of the collection,

> ... I didn't write this story until now when
> they are too old for either law or father to seize
> or prevent [them] from hearing my words,
>
> (CAN 120)

Moreover, in her words, Pratt polemicizes authoritative language through the inclusion of sodomy laws within the narrative structure of the poem. She describes the moment when her lawyer:

> ... pulled the statue book down like a novel
>
> off the shelf, flipped to index, her lacquer-red
> lips glib around the words: crime against nature, and yes,
>
> [her husband] had some basis for threat. I've looked it up
> to read the law since. Should I be glad he only took my
> children?
>
> That year punishment was: not less than five nor more
> than sixty years. For my methods, indecent and unnatural,
>
> of gratifying a depraved and perverted sexual instinct.

> For even the slightest touching of lips or tongue or lips
>
> to a woman's genitals ...
>
> how finger is like tongue (another forbidden gesture),
>
> and tongue like a snake (bestial is in the statute)
>
> (CAN 116)

Furthermore, as Minnie Bruce Pratt revealed at a recent poetry reading, there is a wonderful irony in that she adopted and adapted the authoritative language that legally defines acts of sodomy into her poem -- women's genitals, tongues, and fingers -- and this authoritative, legal language was later cited for lewdly depicting illegal, immoral same-sex desire.

Pratt also "decenters" authoritative language in her retellings. For example, in the poem, "My Life You Are Talking About," she recalls the following interchange with a colleague:

> She says: I didn't know you had children.
>
> So I say: That's what these [poems] are about. Not many people know I have children. They were taken away from me.
>
> She says: You're kidding.

I say: I'm not kidding. I lost my children because I'm a lesbian.

She says: But how could that happen to someone with a Ph.D.?

Her colleague's authority and the authority of a Ph.D. are decentered; they do not ensure Minnie Bruce's protection against the authority of the law and of morality.

By identifying the authoritative langauge at work in the poems, the students come to understand the uneasy authority of authoritative language as it is contrasted with the authority of the authors language. As a consequence, the students gain in authority in their creative interpretations as they question and identify what constitutes authority in the text.

In Crime Against Nature, Pratt also dialogizes innerly persuasive words; the words become what Bakhtin would term "half-ours and half-someone else's" (DI 345). In the poem, "The Child Taken from the Mother," Pratt dramatizes the intense inner struggle of the voices of others as they question her regarding why she allowed her children to be taken from her and her own inner-voice responding again and again to the "why didn't you..."

I could do nothing. Nothing. Do you
understand? Women ask: Why didn't you --?
like they do of women who've been raped.

And I ask myself: Why didn't I? Why
didn't I run away with them? Or face
him in court? Or--

Ten years ago I
answered myself: No way for children to live.
Or: The charce of absolute loss. Or:

I did the best I could. It was not
enough. It was about terror and power.
I did everything I could. Not enough.

This is not the voice of the guilty mother.

In the second exercise, the students analyzed what constituted Pratt's intense inner argument and how this argument is made public in the course of her work. As some students noted, Pratt probably has repeated this inner-dialogue again and again, and she may even be repeating it in her "life outside of the text." Other students noted that her words are simple, conversational, reminiscent of a litany, and because they are rendered as sentence fragments, the words are reminiscent of thoughts. One student creatively read the poem as the responses of various authoritative voices; she explained that, according to her reading:

The Courts would say, "No way for children to live."

> Her embittered husband would threaten "the chance of absolute loss." Her lover might say, "she did the best she could." Yet Pratt herself might feel "it was not enough."

Finally, it is an inner-dialogue which offers solace and then takes it away again: "I did everything I could," and then "It was not enough"; for, as another student interprets the passage:

> Minnie Bruce Pratt declares in the last line that "this is not the voice of a guilty mother"; [however] I think she is not only attempting to convince her readers of that but herself also.

Her inner-dialogues in which she reminds herself about what she wanted to say, but did not say are psychologically convincing, and also excellent examples of how a writer orchestrates inner-dialogues. Bakhtin argues that inner-dialogue "is not wholly our own, because nothing ever is; what is our own is our way of orchestrating the voices of others and the complex and highly specific character of inner speech within us" (M&E 221). Minnie Bruce Pratt recalls how she wanted to slap her colleague who believed that a Ph.D. should have protected her from losing her children. She tells the reader: "I didn't explain: ... a woman with a woman is to be punished. Because this woman was supposed to be a feminist and understand something" (68).

Bakhtin argues that "Ethical responsibility and the project of self hood require a constant readjustment of 'one's own word', 'authoritative words,' and 'innerly persuasive words.' Far from representing a suspicion of language's conceptualizing and ethical powers, these readjustments bespeak a deep commitment to them" (M&E 223). Pratt's deep commitment to words results in her dialogizing authoritative and innerly persuasive words, and in her fidelity to "her own words," to her desire to claim her oxymoronic identity as a "lesbian mother."

Finally, according to Bakhtin, "literary language is not represented in the novel as a unitary, completely finished-off and indisputable language -- it is represented precisely as a living mix of varied and opposing voices, developing and renewing itself" (DI 49). It is this living language that allows Pratt to "swallow their story and turn it inside out," as she triumphantly offers her sons and her readers her "inverted ending" (113); through creating opposing voices, she develops and renews herself and her relationship to her sons. She becomes the lesbian mother.

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Please note, this text retains its original format of an essay to be presented; therefore, the paragraph breaks and the parenthetical citations follow the "logic" of a work I was presenting rather than a work to be submitted for "formal" publication.