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1. Introduction:

In preparation for the foregoing interview all materials written by and about E. Neizvestny were scrutinized in a desperate attempt to grasp the main features of this famous and complex phenomenon. Phrases from his prose works like: "Низ народного тела побеждает верх, но не в положительном смысле карнавала, а в самом прямом смысле,"¹ and the titles of some of his Dostoevsky illustrations: "Полифония", "Голоса", "Двойники" etc., indicated an affinity with Mikhail Bakhtin. When furthermore the sculptor's Manifesto "*О синтезе в искусстве*" presented us with such concepts as "synthesis", "polyphony" and "dialogue", it became clear that the affinities between Bakhtin and Neizvestny were not accidental but, in fact, essential to the understanding of Neizvestny's art.

The interview supported this assumption. The theoretical foundation of Neizvestny's art is clearly influenced by Bakhtinian polyphony—a concept which is based on studies of Dostoevsky's novels. In the interview Neizvestny admitted that Bakhtin's books, especially the one on Rabelais, were of fundamental (основополагающее) importance to him, although he pointed out that Bakhtin cannot be considered the initiator of this school of thinking, which can be traced back to XIX century Russian philosophy.²

In Dostoevsky, Bakhtin and Neizvestny meet, both having taken him as their starting point. Bakhtin develops a theory of literature, or even philosophy of culture, and Neizvestny, inspired by both Dostoevsky and Bakhtin, creates a new concept of visual art.

The connection becomes even more interesting when we learn that the two men knew each other personally, that Bakhtin had written a letter in defence of the sculptor's Dostoevsky illustrations, and that he had commented on them in a very flattering manner, for instance, as in this interview given to Zbigniew Podhoretz:

Иллюстрации Э. Неизвестного произвели на меня огромное впечатление. Я впервые в иллюстрациях почувствовал подлинного Достоевского. Ему удалось передать универсализм образов Достоевского. Это не иллюстрации, это эманация духа писателя. Затем, Неизвестному удалось передать незавершенность и незавер-

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шимость человека вообще, и в частности героев Достоевского. Ему удалось передать своеобразную иерархию Достоевского, когда отдельные моменты приобретают решающее значение. В то время, как Достоевского иллюстрируют так, как если бы это были драматические или бытовые события. В лучших иллюстрациях какие я знаю, удалось только показать Петербург Достоевского [...] А в иллюстрациях Э.Неизвестного я впервые увидел универсального человека. Они интересны и с чисто художественной точки зрения. Это совсем не иллюстрации. Это продолжение мира и образов Достоевского в другой сфере, сфере графики.³

Thus, Bakhtin unconditionally accepts Neizvestny's recreation of the polyphonic essence of Dostoevsky. This unique triangular relationship: Dostoevsky–Bakhtin–Neizvestny urges one to reflect on how the “dialogic imagination” (to use Michael Holquist's term), which Bakhtin discovered in Dostoevsky's literary creativity, has been transferred to a concept of visual art and transformed into actual works of art by Neizvestny. Even an inexperienced student of art cannot resist the temptation of making a few “preliminary” comparisons between Neizvestny's interpretations of Dostoevsky and the Bakhtinian point of view. “Preliminary,” because in the context of a short article it is impossible to go into all aspects of Neizvestny's art or for that matter Bakhtin's theory. The following interpretation of the Dostoevsky illustrations will therefore be limited to indications of only the essential (at times rather abstract) parallels between Bakhtin and Neizvestny. There is some risk in doing this, because Neizvestny's illustrations have become an integral part of the literary text of *Crime and Punishment* (as a new voice in the dialogue) since their appearance in the rare Soviet 1970 edition of the novel, which brought on a series of strong attacks on the artist. Nevertheless, I believe that the approach will reveal new aspects of both Neizvestny and Bakhtin, and thus be helpful to further studies of the subject.

2. Neizvestny's “Polyphonic” concepts.

The basic features of Bakhtin's “polyphony” theory are as follows: *Dialogical imagination*, or perhaps, *dialogical thinking*. Whatever Bakhtin is dealing with is seen in some kind of dialectical relationship to its opposite (antithesis). Man is viewed not as a closed-off entity but as an open consciousness. The hero of Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel is, in Bakhtin's interpretation, a new form of this artistic view of man: we do not see *who* he is, but *how* he perceives himself (*self-consciousness*). Man is free and Dostoevsky's hero is independent in the sense that we meet him in a dialogue with others and with the author himself. This presupposes a plurality of equal minds which are being transformed into one unified consciousness.⁴

The *idea* does not arise from a simple juxtaposition of facts and statements, it

exists only in the dialogical intercourse between minds. Only the unfinalized and indetermined "man in man" can be the carrier of an idea. In Dostoevsky the ideology carried by the hero is inseparable from his self-consciousness. Ideology is not a unified whole but is revealed by the clashes (antitheses) in the dialogue between points of view, consciousnesses, voices. A similar concept of dialogicity is applied to the *word*. The word acquires its full meaning only in relation to (in dialogue with) *other words* (another's word)—in antithesis or opposition.

Polyphony (which is almost synonymous with dialogicity), then, implies an ongoing dialogue of independent and unmerged consciousnesses, ideas and words. It is not difficult to see why Dostoevsky in the Bakhtinian interpretation is close to Neizvestny:

Достоевский же мне близок полифоничностью своего искусства, его многоголосьем и борьбой противоречий, которые соединяются в нем самом [...], мировоззрение у Достоевского является координированным, а форма выражения подчиняется мировоззрению. Мне ближе художники, влекомые идеей.⁵

One of the basic elements of Neizvestny's concept of art is *synthesis*. Whatever he does—a painting, a graphic illustration, a sculpture or a series of sculptures—is all part of a "larger monumental scheme", which he describes as *polyphonic* and *synthetic* in principle. By "synthesis" is meant:

"...организм, где каждая часть выполняет принадлежащую ей функцию, а в целом части составляют эстетическое единство, а чем сложнее внутренняя жизнь произведения, чем больший круг явлений вбирает оно в себя, чем симфоничнее переживания, тем больше частей, больше разнообразия. Но это разнообразие объединено первоэнергией замысла."⁶

By "a large monumental scheme" Neizvestny is alluding to his concept of *monumentalism* and, more specifically, to his projected "lifework" *Древо жизни*. Everything he has done and is doing is seen as part of this gigantic synthetic monument which: "содержит в себе проблемы дуалистического противоречия человека, человека и природы, человека и второй природы. Тема эта уже сама по себе полифоническая."⁷

Neizvestny defines the aim of art as to: "показать растерявшемуся от обилия информации человеку ценность и беспредельность человеческого "Я". In order to do so the artist must, according to Neizvestny, believe that man is a complex being dualistically composed of both cosmic and carnal forces; and he must create a new *polyphonic* language, capable of conveying not only visual elements but also contradictory ideological and metaphysical elements. It must be able to convey the many voices which constitute the

inner self (man in man).⁸

To Neizvestny a polyphonic sculpture is not merely a quantity of material formed in space but a dialogue between flesh and spirit—rich in content and spiritual practicality:

Для искусства полифонического человек и пространство не понятия, изучаемые и изображаемые извне, они есть самореальности. Экстатичность и напряженность не противоречат человеческому, они подчеркивают антиномичность человеческой жизни, человеческой души, они раздирают внешнюю привычную форму, но они не уничтожают человека, а просто дают возможность зримо изобразить бесконечность человеческого "Я".⁹

Neizvestny's *О синтезе в искусстве* is not a coherent theory of art—and he does not insist that it is—but rather a set of guiding principles. However, surrounding Neizvestny's theoretical and artistic creativity is an aura of intellectual thinking and religious belief which in its all-embracing character and striving for the universal is very similar to the thinking of Bakhtin.¹⁰

The universal philosophical character of Bakhtin's and Neizvestny's thinking makes it impossible to avoid generalisations and abstractions. They both think in universal abstract terms like the polarity of "life-death", but as John Berger has pointed out in relation to Neizvestny, such a generalisation is not banal: "[...] for him (Neizvestny) it is particular and unique."¹¹ We shall return to concrete examples of how such abstractions are implemented in the graphics of Neizvestny.

As can be seen from the very brief outlines above, Neizvestny's guiding principles do indeed reflect the most important aspects of Bakhtin's "polyphonic" theory. The underlying philosophical concept of man's dualistic nature is the same, and they both advocate the Judeo-Christian view that man is free,¹² and that in his limitlessness he strives to combine opposites in a universal wholeness. Man or man's spiritual situation is always in focus. Truth or idea or *word* are not static finished concepts, they exist only in the dynamic process of the dialogue, that is, in the interplay of antitheses. This, in art, is reflected in a polyphony of independent voices. And, by choosing Dostoevsky as the prototype of this, both Bakhtin and Neizvestny turn to art which deals with the self-consciousness of man.

Bakhtin and Neizvestny share another view—both trace the roots of this kind of art back to folkloristic art and literature. Bakhtin stresses the importance of grotesque carnivalistic folk literature in the Middle Ages with its dualistic imagery of sublimation and desublimation (downgrading).¹³ Neizvestny talks about essentially the same thing in connection with the dialogue between flesh and spirit in such ancient figures as the mermaid, the sphinx or the centaur: "создание таких образов вообще характерно для народной гротескной фантазии. Но это не формотворчество. Эти персонажи несут определенный,

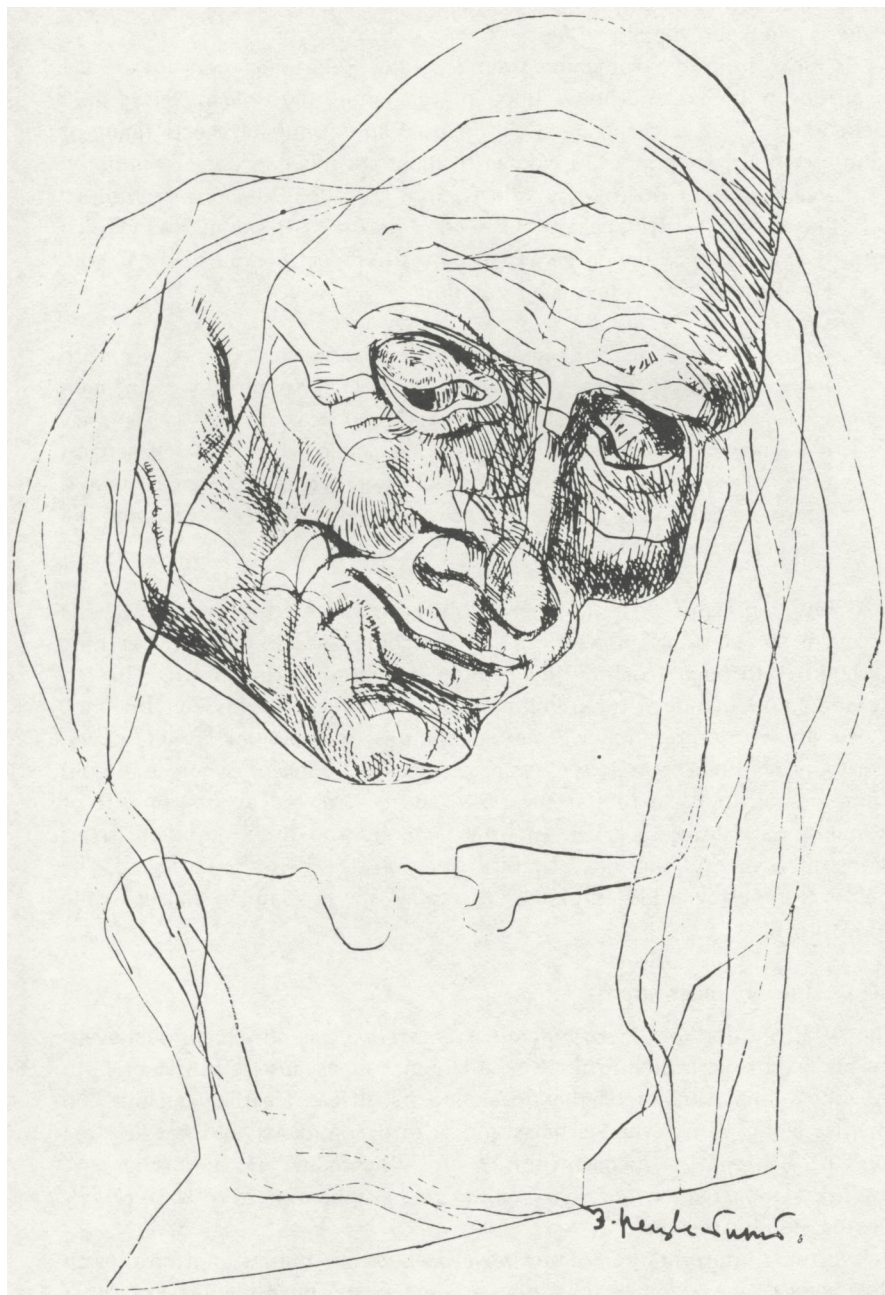


Illustration 1. Neizvestny's "Смеющаяся старуха."

нравственный смысл.” And in his own modern version of this he sees a dynamic relationship between *законченность* and *движение*, between old and new, dying and living, metal and flesh.¹⁴

As is clear from the foregoing interview, the Bakhtinian concept of the carnivalistic up (вверх) and down (низ) plays an important role in Neizvestny’s understanding of art and culture. Bakhtin used an ancient terracotta figure of a dying, pregnant, laughing, old woman to illustrate this concept.¹⁵ Similarly, one of Neizvestny’s Dostoevsky illustrations is called *Смеющаяся старуха (Сон)* (Illustration 1). It refers to the second dream of Raskolnikov in which he returns to the site of the crime and attempts to repeat the murder of the old woman: He hits her, but she just laughs at him:

Старушонка сидела и смеялась, так и заливалась тихим, неслышным смехом [...]. Вдруг ему показалось, что дверь из спальни чуть-чуть приотворилась и что там тоже как будто засмеялись и шепчутся. Бешенство одолело его: изо всей силы начал он бить старуху по голове, но с каждым ударом топора смех и топот из спальни раздавались все сильнее и сильнее, и старушонка так вся и колыхалась от хохота.¹⁶

In Bakhtinian terms this would probably be interpreted as the carnivalistic (the dream as carnival) process of downgrading (desublimating) the king (Raskolnikov) through laughter. Everything is turned upside down. The old dying woman is laughing at Raskolnikov from above, ridiculing his high thoughts. In Neizvestny’s interpretation we see exactly this: Raskolnikov is lying *down*, his contours are unclear, as if they were an idea or a concept, whereas the old laughing woman looks at him from *above*, and is depicted as the opposite of Raskolnikov’s idealism, its antithesis—she is blood and flesh. Another aspect of the carnival theory—the idea of rebirth through death—is also indicated. The woman is leaning towards Raskolnikov as though she is about to engage in the act of kissing him.

3. The Dostoevsky illustrations:

The 1970 edition of *Преступление и наказание* was an exceptional event in the history of publishing in the Soviet Union, not because it contained both Dostoevsky’s final version of the novel and its different earlier versions and fragments, along with several articles and critical comments, but because the editors of “Литературные памятники”—V. Vinogradov, D. Likhachev, V. Zhirmunsky—took the extraordinary daring step of including 24 of Neizvestny’s 33 Dostoevsky illustrations.¹⁷

Neizvestny’s interpretation of the novel is built on the assumption that all of Dostoevsky’s works make up a whole complex of inner themes and ideas:

То есть намечена отдельная тема, которую я нащупываю в разных романах, причем, если углубиться в чтение Достоевского, то можно увидеть, что его героями являются не персонажи, а идеи, которые насквозь проходят через все его романы...¹⁸

These main themes and ideas, which are never presented directly but always in the form of antithesis and thesis, are, according to Neizvestny: man's struggle with himself, his mastery of himself through his own efforts, and the idea that man is not a self-contained whole but has, in addition, an inner *cosmic* dimension.

Let us now turn to concrete examples of how Neizvestny has applied his theory and interpretations to the illustrations. I have chosen four illustrations as most clearly reflecting the "polyphonic" intentions of the artist.

Полифония (Голоса) (Illustration 2): The faces (or profiles) confining this head from the surrounding space are those of Raskolnikov (they are repeated in other illustrations as well). The well-defined demarcation suggests that what is important here is taking place inside this head, in Raskolnikov's self-consciousness. This assumption corresponds with Bakhtin's interpretation of Dostoevsky and with what Neizvestny has said about it:

[...] пространство у Достоевского—метафизично. Это не петербургский пейзаж, это пространство не трехмерно. Все, что у него описано, носит определенный фантастический характер. Переход из пространства в пространство носит глубоко идеологический характер, а не визуальный.¹⁹

However, inside the head—so calm and silent on the outside—what looks to be an "existential" cry is on the verge of breaking out (another one of the illustrations is called "крик"). This is indicated by the three open mouths which seem to be screaming. The growing impulse to scream is shown by elements of the motor system of the human body—the fingers and the arm. Something is being born, probably the thought of death (killing), and it is being born in a polyphony of voices and ideas. A cross section of Raskolnikov's soul is shown as a wedge plunged into the head. In this cross section a voice, perhaps *the* inner voice, is confronted with a crowd of skull-like faces—the faces of pure naked ideas brutally stripped of any kind of wrapping. It is here in the depth of Raskolnikov's soul that the polyphonic dialogues between ideas in the emerging self-consciousness take place.

According to John Berger, Neizvestny takes *death* as a starting point, from which, through his self-consciousness and will to live, man can approach a universal experience. Oppositions, like *life* vs. *death*, generate new meanings and new connections.²⁰ Such a process takes place in Raskolnikov's inner dialogue.

Лицина Раскольникова (Illustration 3) pictures the state of Raskolnikov's soul, his schizophrenia. The shape of the face is reminiscent of Edward Munch's



Illustration 2. Neizvestny's "Полифония (Голоса) ."



Illustration 3. Neizvestny's "Лицина Раскольникова."

"The Scream", but in Munck's painting the surrounding space reflects the state of mind, while what is shown here is a concrete picture of Raskolnikov's divided spirit. Here again we have a naked skull, stripped of all flesh; an "idea" is just about to break out in a scream. The face is torn to pieces as if looking into a broken mirror. The broken mirror symbolizes the split self of Raskolnikov and points out once more that we are concerned primarily with what is taking place in Raskolnikov's soul.

Двойники (Свидригайлов — Раскольников) (Illustration 4): Here the split in Raskolnikov's soul is concretized: between Raskolnikov and Svidrigajlov. Like Bakhtin, Neizvestny interprets Svidrigajlov as Raskolnikov's double.²¹ He considers the novel *Двойник*: "ключевой книгой для понимания всего творчества писателя."²² This must, of course, be seen in the light of the dualistic view of man, and the idea that meaning, thought, truth, word can only become fully realized in the antitheses of the dialogue between conflicting minds. Svidrigajlov and Raskolnikov are doubles like Goljadkin the younger and Goljadkin the older. The opposition is part of the inner dialogue; it is supposed to reveal "new meaning" in his understanding of himself, to show how he perceives himself. In this open head of Raskolnikov we see a devil-like Svidrigajlov (presumably to the left) and a Christ-like Raskolnikov (presumably to the right); in between a "new idea" emerges in the form of a vague cross with the suffering Christ on it. The idea of Christ ("purification through suffering"; as one of the other Dostoevsky illustrations is called) and the symbol of the cross both play important roles in Neizvestny's artistic universe. They appear together inside Raskolnikov as a vague concept during the confrontation between two opposed ideologies: *Raskolnikov* and his ridiculous idea of being a super-being (Christ) and *Svidrigajlov* (the satanic man of flesh and blood), separated by a cross-like image. I call Raskolnikov's ideology "ridiculous" because this is how it is perceived by both Bakhtin and Neizvestny. To Bakhtin, Svidrigajlov is a parodic double of Raskolnikov,²³ and the same might well be Neizvestny's intention in providing this head with the child-like gesture of a finger in its mouth. It is furthermore hard to tell who is the double of whom—is Svidrigajlov the devil and Raskolnikov Christ? As a matter of fact both have features of Christ and of the devil, as if they were two aspects of the same concept.

Raskolnikov does not become a saint because of the murder. But this he does not realize in the confrontation with Svidrigajlov (i.e., in the inner confrontation of the saintly aspect of his soul with evil); he realizes this fully only when the sinful aspect of his soul is confronted with the idea of purification through suffering in the image of Sonia.

Соня и Раскольников (Illustration 5). One hesitates to call the relation between the two "voices" of this illustration an opposition, because the opposites are merging, the contradiction is in the process of fading away. The minds of Raskolnikov and Sonia are in the midst of a unification process. Sonia (the idea of purification), who is well defined, and Raskolnikov, still unclear and unfinished, are becoming one in an act with clear sexual overtones. The dark side of Ras-

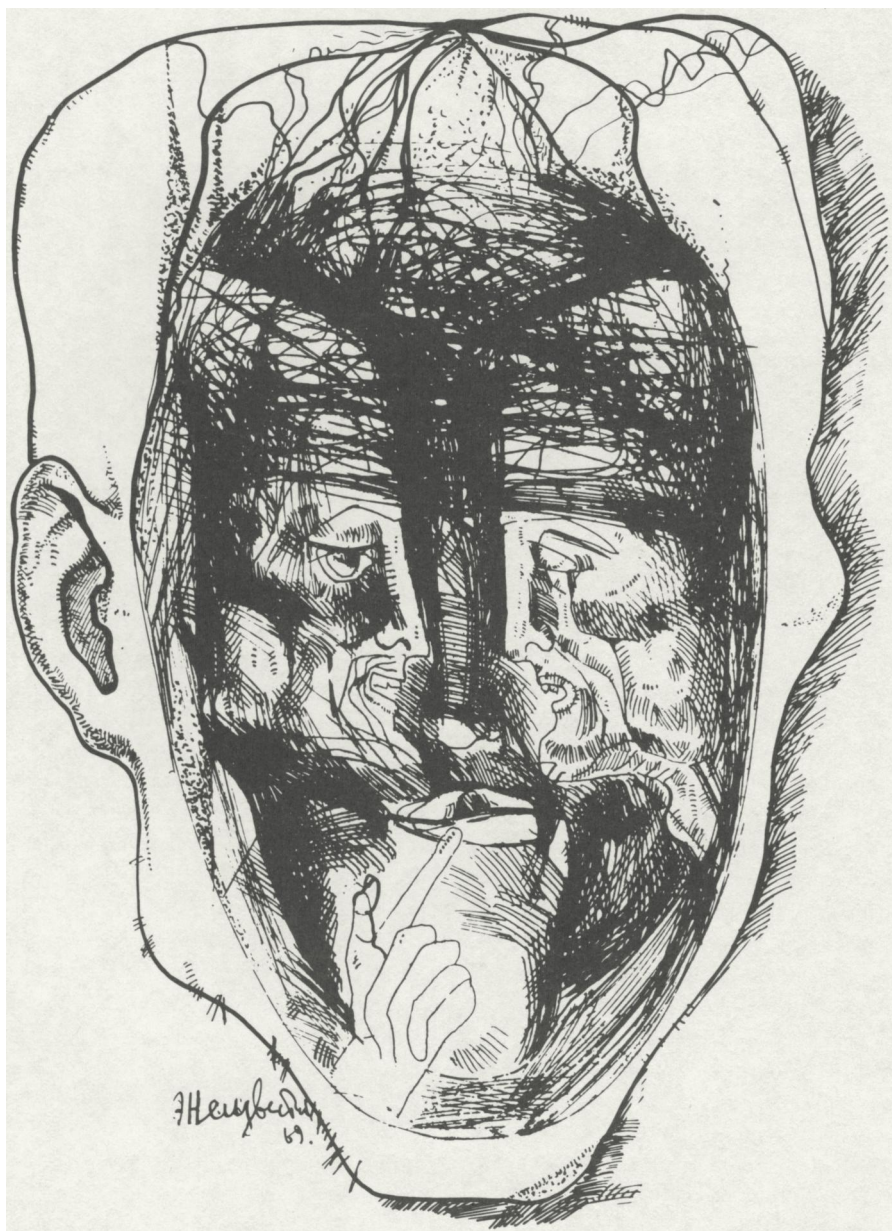


Illustration 4. Neizvestny's "Двойники (Свидригайлов-Раскольников)." "



Illustration 5. Neizvestny's "Соня и Раскольников"

kolnikov's soul is here confronted with the idea of God and the result is a development toward *unification* and *universalization* of the dualistic nature of man, man and God, man and nature.

4. Conclusion:

Before drawing any definite conclusions it should be emphasized that it has not been my intention in any way to suggest a straight-forward influence of Bakhtin on Neizvestny. It would probably be more accurate to say that Dostoevsky influenced both Bakhtin and Neizvestny and that there are clear affinities in the way they have perceived Dostoevsky. The sole aim of this article has been to show certain parallels between the ideas of Bakhtin and Neizvestny and to elaborate on the implementation of these in the artistic creativity of Neizvestny. My preliminary interpretations of selected illustrations suggest that Neizvestny perceives Dostoevsky in a very polyphonic manner. These illustrations have captured the essential moments, voices and themes of the novel, and have themselves become a new voice in the dialogue of universal polyphony. But although Dostoevsky and Bakhtin are dead—Neizvestny made Bakhtin's death mask—they too have by no means stopped taking part in the dialogue.

NOTES

1. E. Neizvestnyj, "Tri fragmenta," *Kontinent*, No. 21 (1978), p. 14.
2. A. Leong, "Ernst Neizvestny and the Legacy of the Russian Avante-Garde," forthcoming.
3. Zbigniew Podgurec, "Mikhail Baxtin: O polifoničnosti romanov Dostoevskogo," (interview), *Rossija/Russia*, Vol. 2 (no date), [Torina], pp. 197-8. After I finished this article I learned from professor Edward Mozejko, the University of Alberta, that Neizvestny's painting "Smex i plač" in 1973 was made the cover picture of a volume of articles in honor of Bakhtin: M.P. Alekseev (ed.), *Problemy poëtiki i istorii literatury* (Saransk, 1973).
4. See chapter three in: M. Baxtin, *Problemy poëtiki Dostoevskogo* (Moscow: Sovetskij pisatel', 1963).
5. E. Neizvestnyj, *O sinteze v iskusstve* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Hermitage, 1982), p. 18.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-18.

10. For a discussion of this see B. Ogibenin, *Ernst Neizvestny—Createur d'une archaïque nouvelle* (Ghent: The Peter De Ridder Press, 1975); John Berger, *Art and Revolution: Ernst Neizvestny And the Role of the Artist in the U.S.S.R.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969); or some of the many Polish articles on religious and cultural themes in Neizvestny, for instance: E. Schiffers, "Rzezbiarski alfabet Mistrza Ernesta Niezwiastnego," *Znak*, No. 241-242 (1974).
11. *Art and Revolution*, p. 97.
12. *O sinteze*, pp. 10, 24.
13. For an account of this phenomenon see the theoretical part of my book: *The Function of the Grotesque in Vasilij Aksenov*, (Aarhus, 1982).
14. *O sinteze*, pp. 14-15.
15. See Chapter one in: M. Bakhtin, *Tvorčestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaja kul'tura srednevekov'ja i renessansa* (Moscow: Xudožestvennaja literatura, 1970).
16. F.M. Dostoevskij, *Prestuplenia i nakazanie* (Moscow: Nauka—"Literaturnye pamjatniki", 1970), p. 216.
17. The remaining 8 illustrations are contained in *O sinteze*. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss why only some of the illustrations were included, as is the controversy caused by the illustrations in the Soviet Union.
18. *O sinteze*, p. 19.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 20-21.
20. *Art and Revolution*, p. 114.
21. *Problemy poëtiki*, pp. 118-19.
22. *O sinteze*, p. 18.
23. *Problemy poëtiki*, pp. 118-19. I would like to thank professor Robert Solomon, The University of Alberta, for useful suggestions and kind assistance.