

M.M. BAKHTIN IN RUSSIAN CULTURE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

M.L. GASPAROV
TRANSLATION, NOTES AND COMMENTARY
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Translation

Mikhail Bakhtin systematized his ideas on language and literature in the 1920s, but it was not until the 1960s that they became generally known and the subject of wide discussion. Every age has its “struggle of the ancients and the moderns,” and in the present round of the struggle Bakhtin’s works and utterances have become an important weapon. They are used more often by the “ancients” than by the “moderns”: Bakhtin is made into the bearer of the lofty spiritual values of the past, the organic integrity of which is threatened by the soulless analytical methods of today. There are good reasons for such a view, though not much foundation for it. For this view leaves out too much in the logical coherence of Bakhtin’s ideas. What exactly it leaves out will become clear if we recall the period in which Bakhtin’s ideas were formed.

In Russian culture, the twenties meant social revolution, cultural revolution, and a new class that felt itself to be the bearer of culture. It was the time of the slogan: “We’ll build our world, a new world!”—we’ll build such a heyday of world culture that in face of it all past culture will fade away of its own accord, and we’ll build it from scratch without looking back at past efforts. This was the time of Mayakovsky, Meyerkhol’d, Eisenstein, and Marr.^[1] The feeling “I too can be a bearer of culture” could be experienced in two ways: either “I too can create and not just look up at other creators” (this was like Bakhtin with his cult of active disputatious thinking); or “I too can have an effect on others, not just them on me!” (this was the

Formalists with their cult of constructive verbal technology). The hostility between Bakhtin and the Formalists was so obstinate precisely because the struggle was between people of the same cultural formation: the most heated arguments are always over tints, not colors.

Hence, the main point for Bakhtin was his stress on the expropriation of other people's words. I begin to create, but all the tools have already been used, they are grubby and the worse for wear, they are the legacy of the cursed past, they are unpleasant to use, though impossible to do without. For this reason the first thing to do is to sort them out ("to hierarchize other people's languages in one's own consciousness"), and to use them, realizing that they are warped and the worse for wear. Every word is someone else's, every phrase is someone else's free indirect speech. An obsession like this is natural in someone who comes into an unexpected inheritance, who has had no time in advance to get used to the idea of his future possessions, but who gets it all at once and indiscriminately. The task of creation is then to express one's own thoughts in the words inherited from other people.

Hence the second point for Bakhtin: his stress on dialogue, i.e. on an active attitude towards the inheritance. Things are valuable not in themselves, but for the use to which they have been put and, more importantly, to which they can be put. (Bakhtin calls this their "intentions".) For him a work of literature is not words but the overcoming of words: it is not what has been used by the workers of the past, but what one can manage to make out of it in spite of the workers of the past. The work is made not from words, but from reactions to words. But whose reactions? The reader who enters into a dialogue with the work can either fit into its context, or fit the work into his own context (dialogue is a struggle: who will give in?). The first alternative is one possibility: Bakhtin acknowledged, though unwillingly, Eikhenbaum's merits for having identified in Tolstoy's works the contexts of his day which everyone else had long since forgotten. But this is tiresome work and, besides, hardly necessary. The second alternative for Bakhtin and for the men of the twenties came much more naturally: not to give in to the thing, but to make it give in, to take from the old world for the construction of the new only what you yourself think is needed and to throw the rest away with contempt. All the culture of the past is merely raw material for the culture of the future.

Hence Bakhtin's third point: a nihilistic selection of values. If

genuine culture is in the future then there is no point clinging emotionally to the culture of the past. In fact he had no kindred feeling for either Pushkin, or Shakespeare, or even Tolstoy. He accepted only two things—first, the carnival tradition and Rabelais and, second, Dostoevsky: in other words, either comic chaos or tragic polyglottism. (It is curious to note with what indifference to the facts he exaggerated the quantity and quality of medieval parodies from other people's accounts and how flippantly he disregarded whole lines in the history of the novel. They were "bad," their authors did not understand what a novel is.) This attitude came about because any harmoniously constructed verbal structure from the cultural past rouses the fear in a new reader: what if it is not I who will master it, but it me?

And hence Bakhtin's fourth point: the opposition he sets up between "novel" and "poetry," and his sharp hostility to poetry, as indeed to "authoritarian language" in general, which dominates the reader too much. We know that poetry, no less skilfully than the novel (and maybe even more skilfully), plays with "someone else's words"; Bakhtin was against poetry not for this reason, but because it is "the language of the gods," exasperating to a person of the new culture, and because poetry is "authoritarian" language which paralyzes the reader's own creativity. But then even the novel was acceptable to him only as long as it was a chaotic, fluid, not fully formed, element: he calls Socratic dialogues and Cicero's letters novels, but refuses so to define the classic novels of the nineteenth century. "Novel" and "epic" are for him not genres, but stages in the development of genres: he might have said that every genre begins as a novel and ends as an epic. If one substitutes "anti-novel" (a term not invented in Bakhtin's time) for "novel" in his writings, then the sense of his utterances is much clearer and more coherent.

Bakhtin is the mutiny of the self-asserting reader against the pieties imposed on him. But in this mutiny there is not, of course, only nihilism. The dialogic approach is not only the arrogance of mastering other people's voices with one's own intention; it is also the humility of hearing out the voices of other people before mastering them. This is what Bakhtin was teaching in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, and this was important for him: for of all the things which he thought deeply about in the 1920s, he published only *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* under his own name.

The irony of Bakhtin's fate was that he thought in dialogue with the twenties, but was published, read and respected at a time when his colleagues had already left the scene and strangers had gathered

around him. The prophet of the new renaissance became canonized by the age of the new classicism. The overthrower of every kind of piety has himself become the object of piety. His followers have come too late and made a research theory out of his program for creativity. And these are things which are in principle opposed: the point of creation is to transform an object, whereas the point of research is not to deform it. The organic integrity of Bakhtin's philosophy has been broken up into separate tenets: on the dialogue, on laughter, culture, etc. This is as it should be: for as Bakhtin called on his contemporaries to take from the culture of the past only what they thought necessary for themselves, so now his new adherents take from his writings only what they think is necessary for them. But it is always best when this is done consciously, as Bakhtin himself did. To use Bakhtin's provocatively imprecise language we might say: Bakhtin's work is a novel, don't make it into an epic.

Commentary

When Mikhail Gasparov's passionate defence of the libertarian Bakhtin was published in the Tartu publication, *Secondary Modelling Systems (Vtorichnye modeliruyushchie sistemy)*, ed. Yu. Lotman, Vyach. Ivanov, et al., Tartu, 1979), the editors appended the following paragraph:

From the Editors:

Vital ideas always provoke discussion in scholarship. Bakhtin's ideas are vital and they belong to the present as well as to the past of our scholarship. The Editors made their attitude to Bakhtin plain in Volume 6 of *Works on Sign Systems*.^[2] We are publishing M.L. Gasparov's article not only because a scholar has an unquestioned right to his opinion on a point of scholarship, but also because we are deeply convinced that polemics can sometimes express respect, and may indeed even serve as protection against a certain kind of praise, the kind of which Baratynsky^[3] wrote:

"A hymn of praise will be composed
To the singer by a present-day Zoilus,^[4]
Who is already censuring the corpse
In order to strike the living with the censor."

In this way the very “moderns” (Lotman, Ivanov, *et al.*) whom Gasparov was seeking to defend against the “ancients” in their right to the Bakhtin inheritance distanced themselves from their knight-protector. But then who are the “ancients” and who represents the Zoilus whose praise of the dead Bakhtin is intended rather as an attack on the living? And why should the “moderns” seek to distance themselves from their would-be defender?

The answer to the first of these questions lies in the history of the publication of the Bakhtin *oeuvre* in the last few years. Gasparov's essay was written before the appearance late in 1979 of the volume of Bakhtin's collected papers entitled *The Aesthetics of Verbal Art* (*Estetika slovesnogo tvorchestva*, Moscow, 1979). But passages from the papers in this volume had been published in extract form in various Soviet journals and almanachs from the early seventies onwards.⁵ It was the very selective publication of these extracts, especially in the almanach *Kontekst* (*Context*), that seems to have drawn Gasparov's fire in the first place, for *Kontekst* was started as a Moscow-based Party-line literary almanach to counter the allegedly “textual” orientation of the Tartu-based semiotics publications. The fact that this almanach became one of the channels through which Bakhtin's writings were to reach the world would seem to the uninitiated to make of Bakhtin a “safe,” establishment figure. But there was another slant to *Kontekst*'s editorial policy, which was an emphasis on the specifically Russian heritage of literary criticism, a heritage to which the Formalists of the twenties and the semioticians of recent times are allegedly alien. The irony, of course, is that the semioticians have used the new methodologies to embark on some of the most penetrating and original studies of Russian culture.⁶

On one level, then, we can read Gasparov's essay as his attempt to wrest Bakhtin from the grips of the “ancients” by claiming that Bakhtin can only be understood in the context of the avant-garde of the twenties. Bakhtin is thus presented as quarrelling kinsman of the Formalists and comrade-in-arms of the radical intelligentsia of the new proletarian culture. The “ancients” on the other hand are attempting to make of Bakhtin “the bearer of the lofty spiritual values of the past” and an opponent, alongside the “ancients,” of “the soulless analytical methods of today,” i.e. structuralism/semiotics. The trouble is that Bakhtin did have that side to him, and consistently all through his life he opposed “depersonalization” whether it was by “abstract objectivism” as he called structuralism, or by Freudianism as he understood it. One of his last jottings was against structuralism which operates with mechanical categories—“whereas I hear voices

in everything.”⁷ On the other hand, though, Lotman and his school were singled out for particular praise in Bakhtin’s review of recent works on literature (“An Answer to the Question put by the Editors of *Novy Mir*,” *Novy Mir*, 11, 1970), a review which included, incidentally, a plea for pluralism in literary studies.

As recent research has revealed⁸ Bakhtin was deeply involved with the foremost thinkers of the 1920s—but not the ones whom Gasparov singles out. He was for instance friends with the biologist I.I. Kanaev and even published two articles on vitalism under Kanaev’s name (“Contemporary vitalism,” *Chelovek i priroda*, Nos. 1, 2, 1926). The physiologist A.A. Ukhtomsky and the geochemist and philosopher, V.I. Vernadsky were also among his friends, none of them “builders of the new culture,” but all of them pioneers in advancing the frontiers of their sciences. Bakhtin’s literary friends included the off-beat novelist Konstantin Vaginov rather than the demagogue Mayakovsky; and the about to be disgraced Formalist, Boris Eikhenbaum, rather than the “ostensible surrenderer” Victor Shklovsky. In the 1920s Bakhtin was on the fringe—both in the negative sense of being outside the main current of these builders of proletarian culture, and in the positive sense of being associated with the most original and forward-looking scientists of his day. There was some affinity between the Bakhtinians and the Formalists in their approach to literature (Gasparov has a point) and this was that they both approached literature and the literary work through an awareness of the medium of language. But beyond that the differences were overwhelming: for the Bakhtinians, content, aesthetically condensed, was all important, for the Formalists, the device and the arrangement of devices. Nowhere is this more succinctly stated than in Medvedev’s (Bakhtin’s) article “Scholarly Salieri-ism” of 1925.⁹

So Gasparov’s rescue-operation curiously misfires, a point which the editors of *Secondary Modelling Systems* make when they refer to its defensively polemical tone. But the uneasiness of the editors may well have another source which might be hinted at in *their* defensive reference to Ivanov’s article on Bakhtin of 1973. In this article Ivanov makes a strong case for Bakhtin as a pioneer of contemporary semiotic thought. This reading puts Bakhtin in the same category as (to name but a few of Ivanov’s references) Jakobson, Benveniste, Lévi-Strauss, Sartre . . . i.e., Bakhtin is incorporated into the intellectual world of the sixties and the heyday of structuralism. But does he really belong there either?

The trouble with Bakhtin is that he defies categorization in period

terms—and how could it be otherwise with a writer who proclaimed the primacy of the individual consciousness and its personal relationships at the time of the first Five-Year Plan (the book on Dostoevsky) and who glorified the vitality of the body and the disruptive forces of the carnival at the time of the great purges (the book on Rabelais)?—“There is no alibi from being,” Bakhtin is quoted as saying and there is no escape from temporality, it is our human predicament. Gasparov is right in sensing this about Bakhtin, just as he is right in sensing the fighter in Bakhtin, but Gasparov is wrong about what Bakhtin was struggling against and rejecting: it was not Shakespeare (we can read what Bakhtin thought about Shakespeare on pp. 411-12 of *The Aesthetics of Verbal Art*); it was not Tolstoy (the two Tolstoy “prefaces” of 1930 bear witness); it was not Pushkin and poetry (though he did not write about either all his working life he taught these topics). He did not only proclaim the “anti-novel”—how could he when he devoted long pages to those endless late Greek novels of love and adventure (see “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, University of Texas, Austin, 1981)? No, Bakhtin’s struggle was not with the shop-soiled word and the previous user of it, not with literature (though some forms of it he preferred to others), but with the forces of stagnation and finalization, with the determinism of being, whether it was manifest in the set forms of bourgeois morality, genre conventions in literature, in rigidity of thought patterns. In that sense Bakhtin belongs neither to the “ancients” nor to the “moderns,” but rather to both, and to all of us.

NOTES

¹ V.V. Mayakovsky (1893-1930), best known of the Russian Futurist poets and singer of the new proletarian order; V.E. Meyerkhol’d (1874-1942), avant-garde theatrical director; S.M. Eisenstein (1898-1948), best-known of Soviet film directors; N. Ya. Marr (1864-1934), the philologist, dominated Soviet linguistics at a certain period. Some of Voloshinov’s writings reflect Marr’s ideas (See *Bakhtin School Papers*, Ed. A. Shukman, Oxford, 1983).

² Reference to the article by Vyach. Ivanov, “The Significance of M.M. Bakhtin’s Ideas about Sign, Utterance and Dialogue for Contemporary Semiotics” (*Trudy po znakovym sistemam*, 6, Tartu, 1973, 5-44). This article, which was the one to drop the

bombshell about Bakhtin's authorship of the works published by Voloshinov and Medvedev is available in two English translations: 1) by E. Tolstaja-Segal, *Papers on Poetics and Semiotics*, 4, Tel Aviv, 1976; and 2) by H. Baran, In *Semiotics and Structuralism*, Ed. H. Baran, White Plains, New York, 1976.

³ E.A. Baratynsky (1800-1844).

⁴ The grammarian Zoilus became proverbial in Classical times as a malicious critic.

⁵ *Voprosy literary*, 8, 1965; 1, 1970; 6, 1972; 3, 1974; 10, 1976; 12, 1978. *Voprosy filosofii*, 7, 1977. *Literaturnaya ucheba*, 1, 1978, *Kontekst-1972*, *Kontekst-1973*, *Kontekst-1974*, *Kontekst-1976*, etc. The process continues.

⁶ See the papers on Russian cultural history by Lotman and Uspensky, *Semiotics of Culture*, forthcoming, University of Michigan.

⁷ "On the Methodology of the Humanities," In *Estetika slovesnogo tvorchestva*, 372.

⁸ See the forthcoming biography of Bakhtin by J.M. Holquist and K. Clark.

⁹ English in *Bakhtin School Papers*.