The Voices of Mikhail Bakhtin

Joseph Frank

Mikhail Bakhtin
by Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist.
Harvard University Press
(Belknap Press), 398 pp., $25.00

Mikhail Bakhtin:
The Dialogical Principle
by Tzvetan Todorov,
translated by Wlad Godzich.
University of Minnesota Press,
132 pp., $29.50; $10.95 (paper)

Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics
by Mikhail Bakhtin,
edited and translated by Caryl Emerson,
introduction by Wayne C. Booth.
University of Minnesota Press,
333 pp., $35.00; $14.95 (paper)

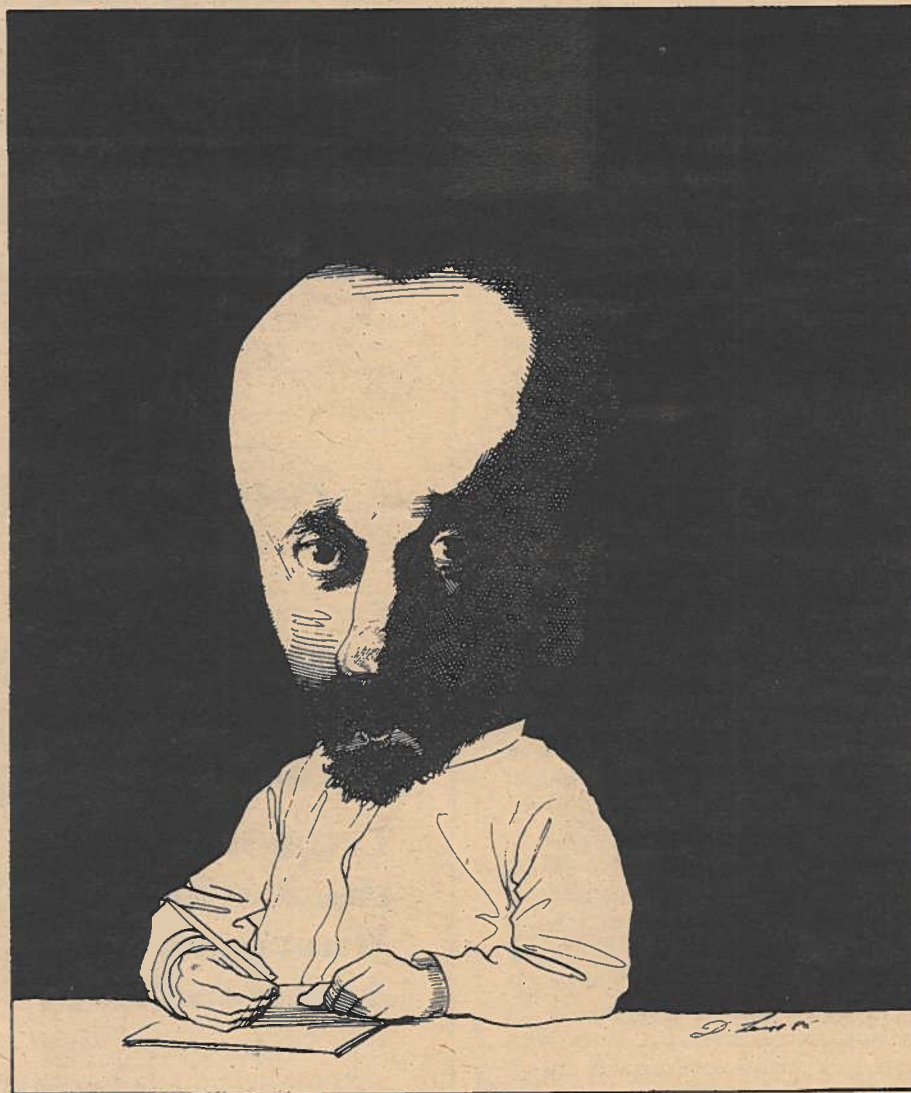
1.

Twenty years ago, the name of Mikhail Bakhtin would hardly have been known outside Russia except to Slavic scholars, and even then only to those with a special interest in Dostoevsky. At the present time, however, the works of Bakhtin are exercising a considerable influence among literary critics and cultural historians not only in his native land but in Europe and the United States as well. Bakhtin is the only Soviet Russian scholar one can think of whose writings have radiated so far and so extensively beyond their native borders; and the phenomenon is all the more surprising because Bakhtin, though hardly a conventional Marxist-Leninist, did all he could to avoid conflict with the Soviet state while maintaining his intellectual independence.

The prestige his work enjoys in the West thus does not derive from any overt political dissidence or opposition to Soviet authority. It is purely a product of the appeal of his ideas and the insights they offer into issues that occupy his Western admirers. The situation is somewhat different in the Soviet Union, where his belated fame does originate, at least in part, from his struggle to evade the straitjacket of Soviet official thinking, and to keep alive some of the élan of the apocalyptic and millenarian Russian culture of the early part of this century and the immediate post-Revolutionary years—the culture that was suppressed by Stalinism. But if Bakhtin can be considered to have been unhappy with the narrowness and dogmatism of the Soviet cultural establishment, there is not the slightest reason to believe that he ever doubted the wisdom and ultimate validity of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Bakhtin, however, is not a product of the Revolution itself; he was formed in the ferment of the years immediately preceding this great upheaval. Very little about him personally was known until very recently; but thanks to the researches of the husband-and-wife team of Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, readers of their pioneering and enthusiastic critical biography now have more information at their disposal than the Russians themselves possess (at least in public print). Indeed, the work of Clark and Holquist, which is based on research in obscure Russian archives, and on personal interviews in the Soviet Union with people who knew Bakhtin personally or had the opportunity to obtain information about him, uncovers a hidden corner of Russian cultural life that continued to survive through the 1920s. In addition to Bakhtin himself, his milieu will prove of great fascination to all students of Russian culture; and since no work of this kind is likely to appear in the Soviet Union in the foreseeable future, one would not be surprised to learn eventually that it had been translated and was circulating in *samizdat*. By contrast, Tzvetan Todorov's book is a slighter but valuable and scrupulous attempt to scrutinize Bakhtin's thought in a more systematic fashion, and the two works complement each other very neatly.

Born in 1895, Bakhtin sprang from an old noble family that had deigned to soil its hands with commerce; his grandfather had founded a bank, and his father worked as manager in various branches. His parents were cultivated and liberal, and the Bakhtin children (he had three sisters and an older brother, Nikolai, who went into exile and ended his days as chairman of the linguistics department at the University of Birmingham[1]) were given a careful and superior education. Mikhail learned German at a very early age from a governess, who also instilled in the brothers a reverence for classical culture. Both eventually became classical scholars, and Bakhtin's extensive knowledge of Greek and Latin literature is everywhere evident in his work. Clark and Holquist also note the influence of Nietzsche and of Russian Symbolism (particularly of the poet and scholar Vyacheslav Ivanov, whose writings on Dostoevsky anticipate Bakhtin's own views). At age fifteen Mikhail also began to read Martin Buber and Kierkegaard, and was so impressed with the second that he tried to learn Danish.[2]



Bakhtin studied at the University of St. Petersburg between 1914 and 1918, and there came into contact with the person he called "the closest thing to a teacher I ever had." He was referring to F.F. Zelinsky, a Polish-Russian classicist of international reputation, whose ideas, in some sense, Bakhtin can be said to have drawn on all his life, though he extended them in ways going far beyond the study of the past. Zelinsky had conjectured that "all types of literature were already present in antiquity," and Bakhtin maintains that the modern novel (particularly beginning with Dostoevsky) is really a latter-day version of the Menippean satire, which goes back to the third century BC. For Zelinsky, the dialogue form was "the literary expression of philosophical freedom," and Bakhtin elevated the notion of dialogue into the basis of a world view incorporating a metaphysics of freedom. Zelinsky also stressed the importance of the folk element in the culture of antiquity, and the subversive role of the satyr play in undermining the official culture—just as Bakhtin was to do with the folk elements in Rabelais that parodied and exploded the high culture of the Renaissance.

On graduating from the university in 1918, Bakhtin lived for two years in the provincial town of Nevel and then moved to neighboring Vitebsk, which had by then become a center of avant-garde art. Chagall, who was born there, had returned to found a museum and academy of art, which was then taken over by Kasimir Malevich and turned into a cradle of the Suprematist style. Sergei Eisenstein, who passed through Vitebsk in 1920, noted with astonishment that the walls of the houses had been whitewashed and were covered with "green circles, orange squares and blue rectangles." Bakhtin and his friends (the first of the circles that were to form around him) read Kant and Hegel, Saint Augustine and Vladimir Soloviev, and Vyacheslav Ivanov's books on the Dionysiac elements of Greek religion, which bore such strong and strange resemblances to the dying God of Christianity. To keep alive, Bakhtin taught in a high school, gave numerous lectures, and worked as a bookkeeper and economic consultant. Having suffered from a bone disease since childhood, he also received a small pension as an invalid, which was his only regular income for many years. Luckily, his devoted wife Elena Aleksandrovna, whose image appears in a touching photograph snapped shortly after their marriage, took charge of their finances and miraculously managed to make ends meet.

Four years later he moved to Leningrad, where most of his original circle were already living. Clark and Holquist's chapters on these Leningrad years provide a more detailed account of the Bakhtin circle, which now included musicians, writers, natural scientists, and scholars in diverse disciplines, some of extraordinary gifts and considerable attainments. One member later became artistic director of the Leningrad Philharmonic; another was a famous pianist (whose talent, if rumor is right, was appreciated by Stalin), and

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[1]It is fascinating to learn that Nikolai Bakhtin was a friend of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein when they were together at Cambridge in the 1930s. Clark and Holquist report that Nikolai's "conversations with Wittgenstein were one of the factors influencing the philosopher's shift from the logical positivism of the *Tractatus* to the more broadly speculative *Philosophical Investigations*."

Professor Brian McGuinness of Oxford University, an authority on Wittgenstein's life, was kind enough to inform me that there is a solid basis for believing the influence of Nikolai Bakhtin on Wittgenstein to have been considerable.

[2]An article which appeared in an émigré journal simultaneously with the book of Clark and Holquist indicates that Bakhtin preserved his admiration for Martin Buber to the very end of his life. The author, who visited Bakhtin in a hospital sometime between 1969 and 1971 (the dates can be established because his wife was still present at his bedside) recalls another visitor asking him what he thought about Buber. The question was posed because a mutual friend, when queried about Bakhtin's opinion of this thinker, had remained strangely silent.

Bakhtin responded wearily that this mutual friend, being an anti-Semite, would not have wished to dwell on such a connection. But then he gave his own view: "Of Buber Mikhail Mikhailovich thinks that he—Buber—is the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century, and perhaps, in this philosophically puny century, perhaps the sole philosopher on the scene." Bakhtin then went on to explain that while Nicholas Berdyaev, Lev Shestov, and Jean-Paul Sartre are all excellent examples of thinkers, there is a difference between them and philosophers. "But Buber is a philosopher. And I am very much indebted to him. In particular, for the idea of dialogue. Of course, this is obvious to anyone who reads Buber."

See Mariya Kaganskaya, "Shutovskoi Khorovod," *Sintaksis* 12, 1984, p. 141. I am greatly indebted to my colleague at Stanford University, Professor Gregory Freidin, for his kindness in having called my attention to this article and providing me with a copy.

of strong guilt feelings, worlds apart from a story about "fine people but not my own."

A large part of Benvenisti's book is devoted to the period in which he was, as a deputy mayor, responsible for East Jerusalem. During this time he was considered by everyone Teddy Kollek's certain successor as mayor of Jerusalem. It is tantalizing to think what might have happened had Benvenisti really been the heir. (The potential explosive power of two huge egos like Kollek's and Benvenisti's could blow apart more than one city hall, so that the succession had no real chance from the start.) Teddy Kollek could be called Jerusalem's La Guardia. Jerusalem is a city in which the conflicts and contradictions of Israeli society are probably more amplified and expressive than in any other place. Jews versus Arabs is only one of the conflicts. Twenty-eight percent of the city's population are ultra-Orthodox Jews, some of them fiercely militant. It is a community in open cultural confrontation with the secular community, mainly with the Ashkenazi section of it. This confrontation is violent on the Orthodox side, and full of hatred—anti-Semitic in some of its manifestations—on the secular side. An increasing number of the city's nonreligious educated young come to see Tel-Aviv as their hope for a free life. Tel-Aviv's attractiveness is to be found in its Juniah syndrome—the hedonistic Christian enclave north of Beirut where eating, drinking, and fornicating goes on while Beirut itself is burning.

Another conflict is that between Ashkenazim and Orientals. The Oriental community in Jerusalem traditionally supports the Likud; alone of the Labor leaders, Kollek has attained a majority even in this community. Kollek succeeds in keeping the city in one piece. Benvenisti seemed the only hope of maintaining Kollek's achievements in the city once Kollek retired. True, Kollek's "unified Jerusalem" is illusory in many ways. But still Kollek makes the difference between Jerusalem and Belfast. After him, so it seems, the deluge.

Benvenisti's book makes a significant contribution to the question of democracy in Israel by radically redefining it. He believes it is a mistake to consider the West Bank as a problem of foreign affairs, a matter of territories whose future will be decided in future negotiations, one way or the other, between the obvious claimants. According to Benvenisti the occupied territories have for a long time been an internal Israeli problem. They are already inseparable from the state of Israel from the point of view of politics, economics, transportation, security, and more. In light of the fact that the occupation is now nineteen years old—exactly the length of time that Israel existed within the Green Line—the territories have to be seen as a permanent attachment to Israel. The Israeli regime, in Benvenisti's view, is not that of a democracy within the Green Line and of a colonial power outside it, but rather that of a *Herren* Democracy in the Greater Israel.

This difference has political implications. It means for Benvenisti that Israeli doves have to rid themselves of the illusion that the occupation is temporary and will one day end in a single dramatic act. Since annexation has become a fact, even if it is not yet legally entrenched, the rights of the Palestinians in the territories have to be fought for as much as those of the Galilee Israeli Arabs.

Benvenisti does not err with the facts, but he errs, I believe, with their interpretation. To begin with, the forces working to preserve the status quo of annexation exist within the Green Line, not in the "facts" that have been established over the past nineteen years outside it. These "facts" have, to my mind, a secondary, if not a marginal, importance. I also believe that the forces of annexation are the same ones that will be mobilized for the expulsion of the Arabs, to ensure that under no circumstances will a binational state be formed. In my view it is easier and makes better sense to struggle for the separation of the West Bank and Gaza from Israel than to struggle for liberal democracy for all the inhabitants residing in all areas of the Greater Israel. The importance of Benvenisti's challenge for the doves is that it forces them to relate themselves to the everyday reality of occupation, not just to an "eschatological" treaty.

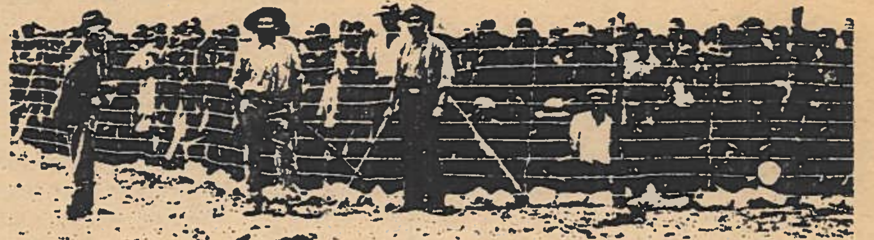
Benvenisti does not propose a schematic solution. The power of this book lies in its ability to convey a sense of a living, breathing, suffering reality in the most immediate and concrete terms. It is a book that, in its more intimate sections, is truly moving, and its analytical sections succeed in revealing the deep contradictions in the attitude of Labor Zionism to the Arabs—contradictions that have well-nigh turned it into a stylistic variant of the Likud.

Benvenisti, like Avishai, writes about the West Bank. All eyes are turned toward the West Bank, none toward Gaza (although Benvenisti recently issued a devastating report on conditions there). The Gaza strip is a dark place, out of sight, and out of mind. In a nondemagogical description it is the Soweto of Tel-Aviv. The reality of life in the strip is terrible. A population that explodes in a relatively small area—from a quarter of a million people in 1967 to half a million today. A veritable rag proletariat, of whom the lucky ones, including young Dickensian children, work in Israel in shocking conditions of exploitation, while the unlucky are left to rot in the degenerating conditions of the camps.

Prime Minister Peres has been talking lately of "Gaza first"; his hope being to reach a separate agreement with Egypt concerning the strip. The underlying assumption is that while Israel is not being pressured by the Americans to do anything with the territories of the West Bank, both the US and Mubarak are apprehensive about the future of the peace with Egypt. Hence Peres's attempt to work out, with US support, a plan for the autonomy of the Gaza strip, perhaps under a trusteeship. Egypt, in return, will get increased American aid. The negotiations will be conducted by Peres during his term as foreign minister, after he rotates his position with Shamir this month. The treaty, if reached, will then be brought to the government, under the Likud premiership of Shamir. If it is turned down, the government will fall, with the Americans backing Peres. If it is ratified, then Peres would take credit for it.

I myself believe that the slogan "Gaza first" is right since it would help educate the Israeli public to come to terms with the evils of occupation. It is the wrong slogan, however, if it spearheads a drive for a solution to the Gaza problem separate from the larger solution to the problem of the occupied territories. Should Peres try to press now for separating the problem of the strip from that of the West Bank, I fear that he may find himself, like Milton's Samson, "eyeless in Gaza, at the mill with the slaves." □

South Africans



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to remain, a classic of Dostoevsky criticism. What makes it so, however, is not the theory of the polyphonic novel but rather his detailed discussion of the self-other relations between Dostoevsky's characters, which no one else has ever explored with such care and insight. From his very first novel, *Poor Folk*, as Bakhtin points out, Dostoevsky's characters are afflicted with an excruciating self-consciousness; they constantly view themselves as they are reflected in the eyes of others, but just as constantly refuse to remain frozen in the definition of themselves offered by such reflections. Invariably they rise in revolt against them, and Bakhtin perceptively traces the various modalities of this revolt, showing how it develops from the initial reaction against a literary stereotype provided by Gogol into a struggle against *all* attempts to enclose them within "any externalizing and finalizing definitions." (Such definitions were provided—as Bakhtin well knew but was unable, or unwilling, to state—by the ideology of the radical intelligentsia of Dostoevsky's time.)

Bakhtin illustrates this point with a series of examples in his fifth chapter, which also contains a valuable typology of various kinds of discourse. Particular attention is paid to what he calls "double-voiced discourse," that is, linguistic usage affected and deflected by awareness of the discourse of another (examples might be an exchange in conversation, or a work written with a parodistic relation to its model). Of great systematic and theoretical interest, this chapter has always been exempted from the criticism leveled at the theory of the polyphonic novel; and since it deals with the relations of characters inside the text, not with the relation of the author to his characters, it does not depend on that theory for its validity. Bakhtin here is primarily interested in illustrating the various means by which Dostoevsky's central figures react against all attempts to restrict and confine the infinitude of their personalities, and in analyzing the various types of double-voiced discourse through which they assimilate the voices of others and respond to them in ways strongly affected by such assimilation. The rhetoric of the Underground Man, for example, is framed to take into account and to overthrow the anticipated responses of a hostile reader, even though the Underground Man pretends to be writing for himself alone. In the course of these analyses, however, and without making the point directly himself, Bakhtin nonetheless manages to illuminate one of the most striking features of Dostoevsky's art as a novelist.

No reader of Dostoevsky can have failed to experience the impression that his characters are linked together in a fashion different from the ordinary; they seem to exist, not only on the level of those commonplace social interactions standard for the novel of realism, but also as bound together in some subterranean manner that imparts a special, almost hypnotic intensity to Dostoevsky's narration. Effects of this kind are quite well known in gothic and Romantic novels, where the supernatural can be drawn on to motivate such mysteriously "magnetic" relations between characters. But while Dostoevsky was familiar with, and greatly admired, such a writer as E.T.A. Hoffmann, he nonetheless took great pains (with the single exception of *The Double*) to remain within the conventions of verisimilitude dear to the nineteenth-century novel. Yet he managed to obtain the same effect by other means; and it is here that Bakhtin, more than any other critic, aids us in grasping exactly how this was accomplished.

By focusing on the acute sensitivity that each Dostoevsky character exhibits toward the others, and exploring how each echoes and vibrates in the others' psyches, Bakhtin hits on the secret that distinguishes Dostoevsky so perceptibly from other novelists working in the same tradition. "Two characters are always introduced by Dostoevsky," Bakhtin acutely remarks,

> in such a way that each of them is intimately linked with the internal voice of the other.... In their dialogue, therefore, the rejoinders of the one touch and even partially coincide with the rejoinders of the other's interior dialogue. A deep essential bond or partial coincidence between the borrowed words of one hero and the internal and secret discourse of another hero—this is the indispensable element in all of Dostoevsky's crucial dialogues.

As Bakhtin further says of Raskolnikov:

> It is enough for a person to appear in his field of vision to become for him instantly an embodied solution to his own personal question, a solution different from the one at which he himself had arrived; therefore every person touches a sore spot in him and assumes a firm role in his inner speech.

These words contain a fundamental insight into an all-important aspect of Dostoevsky's method of creation, and they brilliantly clarify the close-knit texture of Dostoevsky's novels—the manner in which characters continually reflect aspects of one another rather than existing as self-enclosed psyches. Even though this was not his purpose, it is only Bakhtin who allows us to understand how Dostoevsky creates this inimitable impression of subliminal psychic interweaving, which again anticipates one of the features of the stream-of-consciousness novel.

4.

As should by now be amply clear, however, Bakhtin's writings go far beyond the limited domain of literary criticism. One can well understand why the graduate students at the Gorky Institute, just emerging from Stalinism in the middle 1950s, should have responded with such fervor to Bakhtin's insistence on the infinite freedom of the human personality, and to his Kantian demand that mankind be treated as an end rather than as a means to be "finalized" in any manner agreeable to the authorities.[6] And Bakhtin's Rabelais book, with its glorification of an irreverent and bawdily obscene folk culture in revolt against all the sacred taboos of its time, could also be—and certainly was—read as an appeal against the stifling restrictions of the Soviet cultural establishment.

It was in 1968 that the Rabelais book was translated into English—the year of the student uprisings in Paris and elsewhere, in the midst of a period when street theater, riotous rock concerts, and orgiastic "happenings" were flourishing. Bakhtin's celebration of what he called "the carnival sense of life," which turns the ordinary world upside down and is not performed but *lived* by those who take part in it, could not have been more up to date; and he was instantly hailed as a genial precursor of the revolutionary cultural events that were transforming the modern sensibility. Similarly, his Dostoevsky book was translated into French at a time when the French *nouveau roman*, following Sartre, had pronounced a death sentence on all omniscient narrators and dominating points of view. Immersion in subjectivity was declared to be the only legitimate fount of literary creation, and Bakhtin once again immediately took his place at the center of contemporary concerns. Once the earlier works of the Bakhtin circle began to appear, they were also eagerly read by Western Marxists laboring to create a sociology of culture that would go beyond the limits laid down in the Party prescriptions of the past.

The ideas of Bakhtin have thus now become a ferment within Western culture itself, and Clark and Holquist have performed an extremely valuable service in tracing them back to their Russian roots. For whatever reservations one may have about this or that particular thesis of Bakhtin, it is impossible to contemplate his life without feeling admiration and immense respect for his achievement. That he should have written so much of value under conditions that were so discouraging, amid hardship and neglect, and afflicted by a crippling bone disease; that he should have preserved and kept alight the spirit of the intelligentsia of the Russian silver age despite the pressures of the iron age of Sovietism—this can only be considered a triumph of private courage and unassuming integrity.

One catches in him a glimpse of the same culture that Pasternak recreated in *Dr. Zhivago*, and, in his lesser way, Bakhtin has also handed on some of the heritage of that culture to posterity. There was, as a matter of fact, some occasional personal contact between the two men through mutual friends, and there are strong specific resemblances both in their acceptance of the Russian Revolution and in their devotion to a Christianity that inspires and supports a reverence for the infinite value of the human personality. Most important, though, is that, like Yury Zhivago, Bakhtin remained true to his highest values and never allowed his mind or sensibility to be objectified, reified, closed. Not to hear his voice, and to carry on with him in friendship "the great dialogue" of which he saw all human life composed, would be to strengthen all those forces making for the impoverishment and diminution of the human spirit, in Russia and elsewhere, against which he labored so untiringly. □

[6] The article by Kaganskaya, already cited, also contains a revealing glimpse into how Bakhtin's works were received and read in the Soviet Union.

"Yes," she writes, "our relation to Bakhtin was not disinterested; his texts, already so packed, were overloaded with a subtext, and the criticism of the monologic form of artistic expression we took as the negation of monolithic ideology in general, and of the one that occupied us in particular (or, more exactly, that occupied itself with us); we read *The Problem of Dostoevsky's Poetics* like a novel: in L.N. Tolstoy, for example, we divined an allegory of Soviet power (which, speaking honestly, is not such a strained interpretation, if one keeps in view a structure whose basic categories, not political but aesthetic, are 'the people,' 'simplicity,' and 'moral benefit'); Dostoevsky was our positive hero (a symbol of spiritual freedom), and a personage by the name of 'Polyphony' stepped forward as an allegory for 'pluralism' and 'democracy.' Ridiculous?—Ridiculous. Painful?—Painful." See Kaganskaya, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

or the extreme compression of his time sequence. Rather, he concentrates on the author-character relationship, which, in his interpretation, parallels Dostoevsky's thematic essence as defined by Ivanov (the affirmation of "someone else's 'I' not as an object but as another subject"). According to Bakhtin, this is exactly how Dostoevsky as author is related to his own creation of character. "Thus the new artistic position of the author with regard to the hero in Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel is a *fully realized and thoroughly consistent dialogic position*, one that affirms the independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminacy of the hero." A few pages earlier, Bakhtin had written that "the genuine life of the personality [a term he distinguishes from literary "character," which lacks the dimension of inner freedom] is made available only through a *dialogic* penetration of that personality, during which it freely and reciprocally reveals itself." Dostoevsky as author is thus assigned the function previously assumed by Christ in Bakhtin's thought; as literary creator he is connected to the I-for-myself of others (his characters) by an attitude of such "dialogic penetration."

As a result, Bakhtin views the structure of Dostoevsky's novels as a polyphony of independent voices (hence his term), each of which is grasped from within his or her own world view and not arbitrarily merged into any single dominating (monologic) position of the author's. "Dostoevsky," Bakhtin declares, "created a fundamentally new novelistic genre"; all previous novelists had been monologic or homophonic (though the only instance given of this type is Tolstoy), while in Dostoevsky "a hero appears whose voice...is just as fully weighted as the author's voice usually is." Indeed, "it sounds, as it were, *alongside* the author's word and *in a special way* [my italics] combines both with it and with the full and equally valid voices of the characters."

Bakhtin's historical claim is a very strong one, and though he leaves it unchanged in the revised second edition of his book, it is, all the same, considerably weakened by a new fourth chapter, in which he attempts to trace the origin of the polyphonic novel back to the Socratic dialogue and the Menippean satire. For some of the problems created by such a genealogy, the reader can consult Todorov, who gives Bakhtin's theories closer scrutiny than the more or less uncritical Clark and Holquist. Todorov notes that Bakhtin identifies the essence of the novel form by works with which "the genre of the novel is [not] ordinarily associated." His definition of its attributes actually represents "a massive and uncritical" borrowing, "without notable alteration, from the great Romantic aesthetic, the reflections of Goethe, Friedrich Schlegel, and Hegel" (particularly the little-known but highly influential second name in this list). But an evaluation of Bakhtin's extremely suggestive and stimulating theory of the novel would lead too far afield; it is with the novels of Dostoevsky that we are primarily concerned here.

Ever since the publication of Bakhtin's first edition, one of the issues constantly raised in the by now widespread critical reaction is that of the place of the author in his scheme. What becomes of him or her if, as Bakhtin claims, the author does not assert any dominating control or authority over the characters? Bakhtin's view contains a superficial plausibility because, as is well known, some of Dostoevsky's most powerful characters (the Underground Man, Raskolnikov, Ivan Karamazov) represent points of view that he wished to combat and dethrone. In this sense, Bakhtin is right in asserting their relative independence; and he is also right in stressing Dostoevsky's projection of them from within their own world view. But since his critical terms (dialogue, monologue) ultimately derive from the Christ-man paradigm of his philosophy, he is constantly tempted to suggest an absolute independence that cannot in fact exist (except perhaps in aleatory writing, of which Dostoevsky's novels are certainly not an example).

Bakhtin of course knew this as well as anyone else, and tried to circumvent the problem by vague phrases of the kind already underlined (i.e., Dostoevsky combines his own voice and that of his characters "in a special way"). In the notes for his revised second edition, in which he specifically addresses such criticism, he writes: "The author is profoundly *active*, but his activity is of a special *dialogic* sort." Bakhtin was never able to get beyond such feeble declarations, which clearly do not explain anything. And Caryl Emerson rightly points out that, in the preface to his second edition, Bakhtin honestly admits that his book does not contain any treatment of "questions as complex as that of *the whole* in a polyphonic novel." This failure leaves a gaping breach in Bakhtin's theory and nullifies his ambition to show the unity of form and content in Dostoevsky.

In fact, then, if we take the term "polyphonic novel" in the strong sense asserted by Bakhtin, it does not define a new form at all because he is unable to explain how the absolute independence of fictional character can combine with the unity of a work of art. In a weak sense, however, it does highlight Dostoevsky's ability to dramatize his themes without intrusive authorial intervention (though more exists than Bakhtin is willing to concede), and especially through the power with which each character expresses his inner world view. These features of Dostoevsky's technique, however, have long been recognized in Anglo-American criticism, where Dostoevsky has been viewed as a precursor of the later stream-of-consciousness novel, from which old-fashioned narrators have entirely vanished.[4] Indeed, Bakhtin's concept has been so successful precisely because it appears to turn Dostoevsky into our literary contemporary. But to take Bakhtin only on this level is to falsify both his own ambitions and those of Dostoevsky. For Bakhtin dearly desired that Dostoevsky's technical innovations should be seen as arising out of, and as carrying, the full ethical and religious import of his themes. Regrettably, too, as Todorov has recently argued in a new book, Bakhtin's ambiguities are such that he opens the way to an erroneous view of Dostoevsky as a moral relativist, and scants the tragic dimension of his struggle to uphold the moral values of Christian conscience in an increasingly secularized world.[5]

But if, at least in my view, Bakhtin's theses about the polyphonic novel ultimately fail to carry conviction, this does not mean that his book is negligible; quite the contrary, it is, and will continue

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[4]See Melvin Friedman, *Stream of Consciousness: A Study in Literary Method* (Yale University Press, 1955).

[5]See Tzvetan Todorov, *Critique de la critique* (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1984). The penetrating discussion of Bakhtin, "*L'humain et l'interhumain*," is on pp. 83–103.

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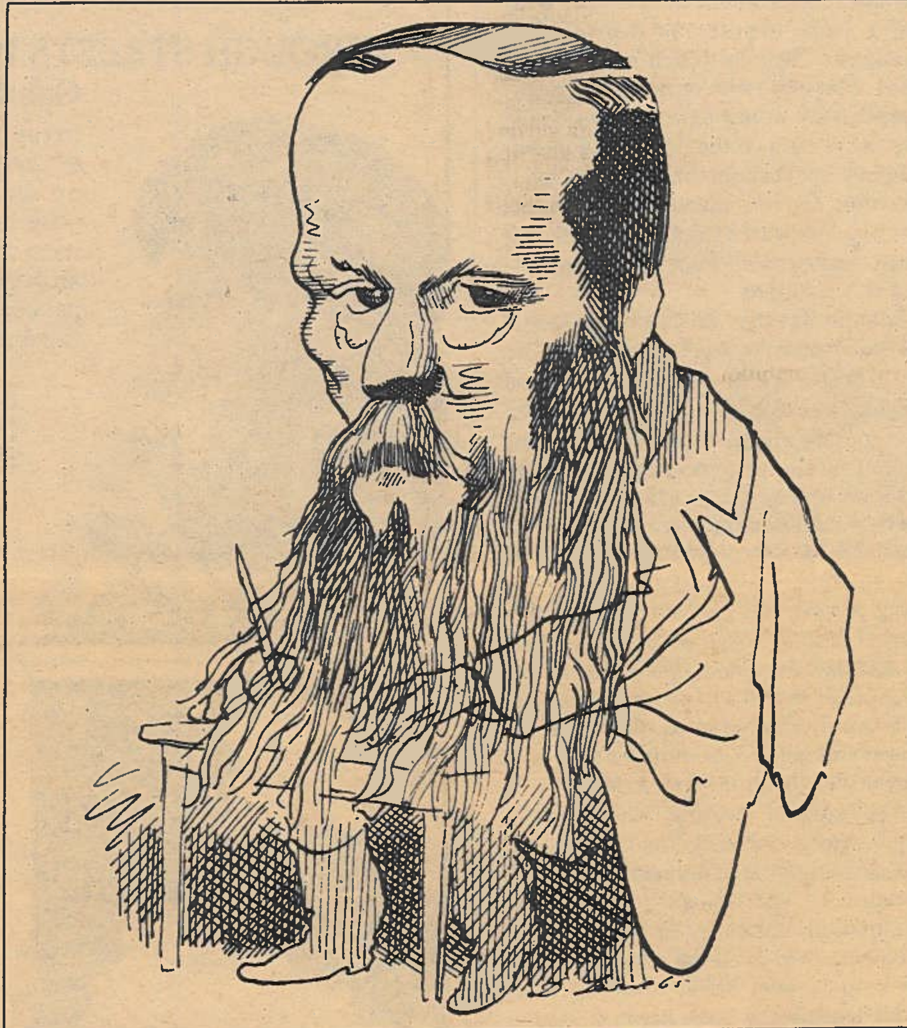
lifetime—the one on Dostoevsky, the study of Rabelais, and the volume of essays that he saw through the press the year of his death. But in 1971, a well-known Soviet semiotician who was close to Bakhtin stated unequivocally that he was also the author of three other books and several essays signed by two members of the Bakhtin circle, V.N. Voloshinov and Valentin Pavel Medvedev.[3] To what extent these works were written by Bakhtin himself, or were collaborative efforts, remains a matter of dispute; Clark and Holquist are inclined to accept them as entirely the work of Bakhtin, while Todorov is more circumspect. But there is little doubt that the leading ideas can be attributed to Bakhtin if we assume, as is generally accepted, that he was "the philosopher" of the circle and supplied the dominating intellectual inspiration for views that might equally well be used and applied by others.

Much light has recently been cast on such views by the publication in 1979 of an unfinished philosophical work on which Bakhtin labored in the early 1920s. Left untitled, and not yet published in English, it contains the ideas that (both) Clark and Holquist and Todorov agree remain central to Bakhtin's thought throughout his career. Bakhtin's fragmentary text is a work of both aesthetics and moral-religious philosophy—a combination that will continue to remain typical, since Bakhtin's linguistic and literary categories, however neutral they seem, will always have a moral meaning. It deals primarily with the relations between the self and the world, especially that aspect of the world formed by other human beings. Some of Bakhtin's analyses of these interpersonal relations anticipate those of Heidegger and Sartre, though he hardly works them out with the same degree of philosophical rigor; and Clark and Holquist seem to me to exaggerate the importance of Bakhtin's strictly philosophical ideas. Other remarks of theirs, however, agree with Todorov in the more plausible view that Bakhtin's achievement lies in his ability to translate his philosophical intuitions into the terms of psychology, the philosophy of language, literary criticism, and cultural history.

At the center of Bakhtin's thought, which can be described as a variety of religious existentialism, is the paradigm of Christ. "Christ gave up the privileges of divinity, his uniqueness," explain Clark and Holquist, "to share the general condition of humanity, a model establishing the priority of shared as opposed to individual values." But, at the same time, Christ also infinitely deepened the sense of human self-consciousness. As Bakhtin himself wrote, "in Christ we find a synthesis—unique in its profundity...for the first time there appears an infinitely deepened I-for-myself [individual self-consciousness], yet not a cold I-for-myself, but one which is boundlessly good toward the other." Christ thus supplied the ideal model of all human relationships, and, to cite Bakhtin again, "what I must be for the other [person], God is for me [for my I-for-myself]."

[3]All three books have been translated into English. See V.N. Voloshinov, *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, I.R. Titunik, trans. (Academic Press, 1973); P.N. Medvedev and M.M. Bakhtin (BIP): *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, Albert C. Wehrle, trans. (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); V.N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik, trans. (Seminar Press, 1973).



Bakhtin thus conceives the self and the other as inseparably linked, the medium of this linkage being language. It is through language that self-consciousness achieves expression; it is language that defines the relations between the self and the other which, ideally, should mirror the modality of the dialogue between man and God. Whatever hinders or blocks this dialogue is necessarily blameworthy; whatever favors or facilitates it is automatically to be preferred. These are the polarities of Bakhtin's thought, which work everywhere in and through his other seemingly descriptive and value-free categories.

The first three works published by the Bakhtin circle, whose titles are given in footnote 3, all sprang from the application of such ideas. In psychology, Freudianism was criticized for reducing consciousness to a complex of biological drives and neglecting its social dimension, which is present both in the language through which consciousness has been formed and in the verbal exchanges of the patient-analyst relationship. The same point is made in the work on Marxism and the philosophy of language, which quarrels with all contemporary schools of linguistics. It takes issue with those linguists like Saussure who, studying language solely as a mechanism for the production of meaning, eliminate actual usage from consideration; but it also criticizes "Romantic subjectivists" like Karl Vossler and Leo Spitzer, who are presumably concerned *only* with usage and individual linguistic creation. Language for the Bakhtinians is "utterance," which involves the relation between the self and the other person; it is a living word exchanged between existing people, and can only be properly understood in the full range and richness of the moral and social meanings contained in discourse.

The members of the Bakhtin circle next moved from linguistics to literary criticism; and their book on Russian Formalism, which created a small stir on publication, is now recognized as among the most effective contemporary polemics (written from an extremely flexible and nondogmatic Marxist point of view) against the first phase of that movement. Bakhtin and Medvedev forcefully attack the Formalist separation of art from any specific content, the exclusive concentration on technical devices and on an "aesthetics of the material" (in the case of literature, the purely phonic and perceptual qualities of language). The work of art, they argue, is not simply an artifact but a medium of communication—like language itself, it is an "utterance" involving an exchange between the (artistic) self and the other, and must be understood within the ideological context of its time. But Bakhtin and Medvedev are equally critical of vulgar Marxism, which interprets ideological content as a direct reflection of social reality and pays no attention to how such content is mediated through the work of art as a whole; it is the work of art as a unity that constitutes a response to its time, not one or another of its aspects taken in abstraction. As Todorov remarks, one of Bakhtin's "major options" is a systematic refusal to separate form and content; and the attempt to apply this principle lies at the heart of his Dostoevsky book.

In the course of their polemic, Bakhtin and Medvedev compare the Russian Formalists with those whom they consider to be their European counterparts. And they point out that while the Russians, in their reaction against positivist scholarship and criticism, simply abandoned the issue of semantic or ideological content altogether, the European Formalists (they cite primarily specialists in art history like Konrad Fiedler, Wölfflin, and especially Wilhelm Worringer), interpret form itself as containing an ideological meaning. It is for this reason that the Europeans do not eliminate semantic significance in favor of formal interests. Inspired by this example, Bakhtin is one of the few literary critics who has nourished the ambition to demonstrate the ideological import of a purely formal *literary* style or technique; and this is exactly what he tries to do in the case of Dostoevsky. For Bakhtin claims that Dostoevsky created a new novelistic form (he calls it the "polyphonic novel") which reflects in its workings the moral-religious values expressed in its content. And these moral-religious values are precisely the ones that Bakhtin had previously spoken of as appearing in the world with the advent of Christ—a sense of the infinity of human personality, and thus the moral task of relating to this infinity not coldly and externally but with an attitude of boundless goodness.

3.

Bakhtin's study of Dostoevsky's poetics, now available in an excellent English version, is such a rich work, and raises so many issues—not only involving the interpretation of Dostoevsky, but also fundamental questions of literary genre and narrative theory—that only scant justice can be done to it in these brief remarks dealing mainly with his central thesis. The first chapter, which contains a survey of the previous critics (mostly Russian) whom Bakhtin deems worthy of consideration, charges them all with the same error of which the vulgar Marxists had been accused earlier. Just as the Marxists had ripped certain elements of a work out of their artistic context and seen them as a direct reflection of social reality, so critics had taken one or another of Dostoevsky's characters as a direct reflection of the author's ideas. Bakhtin quite justifiably dismisses what he calls this "path of philosophical monologization" as an inadequate approach, even though, one should add, it has led to some sharp insights into Dostoevsky's ideological themes. Even Bakhtin, as a matter of fact, admits that he has found helpful suggestions toward his own formulations in the "gropings" of Vyacheslav Ivanov.

Citing and paraphrasing Ivanov, Bakhtin writes that

> to affirm someone else's "I" not as an object but as another subject—this is the principle governing Dostoevsky's worldview. To affirm someone else's "I"—"thou art"—is a task that, according to Ivanov, Dostoevsky's characters must successfully accomplish if they are to...transform the other person from a shadow into an authentic reality.

Bakhtin's conception of "the ethico-religious postulate determining the *content*" of Dostoevsky's novels is exactly the same, though with more emphasis on the personality; but where Ivanov falls short, as Bakhtin sees it, is in his failure to connect this content properly with its formal expression. Ivanov called Dostoevsky's works "novel-tragedies" (it is he who invented this widely used term), and Bakhtin considers that this generic hybrid misses the true nature of Dostoevsky's creation of form. In my view, Ivanov's term is preferable to the one by which Bakhtin replaces it (the "polyphonic novel"), and Bakhtin's arguments against Ivanov on this point are by no means completely persuasive. He speaks himself of Dostoevsky's content as involving the "tragic catastrophe" of a consciousness which, disconnected from others, remains immured in "solipsistic separation"; and he also points out accurately that Dostoevsky "saw and conceived his world primarily in terms of space, not time. Hence his deep affinity for the dramatic form." Why, then, the rejection of a term that brings these artistic qualities to the foreground?

Clearly, Bakhtin rejects the designation because he does not wish to define Dostoevsky's form in relation to the central conflict of his plots (tragic catastrophe),

who played Shostakovich, Hindemith, and Bartók when it was hardly politic to do so; a third translated Spengler and Wölfflin into Russian; and there was, as well, a petroleum geologist, a biologist, and a specialist in Buddhism and ancient Indian and Bengali literature. What united all these people, aside from friendship, was an intense spiritual need and intellectual curiosity that could not find nourishment in the prevailing cultural climate; and so they supplied what was lacking by their own efforts.

Here is one description of the activities of the group given by Clark and Holquist:

> The Bakhtin circle was not in any sense a fixed organization. They were simply a group of friends who loved to meet and debate ideas and who had philosophical interests in common.... Usually one of the group prepared a short synopsis or review of a philosophical work and read this to the circle as a basis for discussion. The range of topics covered was wide, including Proust, Bergson, Freud, and above all questions of theology. Occasionally one member gave a lecture series to the others. The most famous of these was a course of eight lectures on Kant's *Critique of Judgment* given by Bakhtin in early 1925.

None of this was in accord with the Marxist ideas favored by the reigning authorities, and the pronounced interest in theology would of course have been particularly suspect. Indeed, it was Bakhtin's theological orientation that soon led to his fateful brush with the power of the state.

Despite all their laudable efforts, which produce a good deal of quite interesting information about minuscule religious groups of the 1920s, Clark and Holquist are unable to turn up much solid material concerning Bakhtin's religious convictions. Aside from the indisputable fact that he was known to be "a believer in the Orthodox tradition," very little can be said specifically about the doctrinal nature of this allegiance. He was, however, associated with the Voskresenie group (the word means "resurrection"), one of whose animators was Georgii P. Fedotov, later a professor at Harvard, who wrote what is unquestionably one of the great modern analyses of Russian culture, *The Russian Religious Mind* (unfortunately left incomplete at the time of his death in 1951). This is not primarily a study of theology, but a brilliant example of what now would be called *histoire des mentalités*.

Fedotov believed at that time that "revolutionary Marxism [was] a Judeo-Christian apocalyptic sect," and that it was inspired, particularly in Russia, by a "religious idea" that "hides a potential for Orthodoxy." Bakhtin presumably felt much the same, though such a conclusion can only be inferential; and like Fedotov he probably "saw in communism the seeds of a superior social order." Other members of the Bakhtin circle also attended meetings of the same group, whose social program "envisaged something like the communist ideal of the early church fathers" and was based on the Russian Orthodox conception of *sobornost*, or "togetherness"—a "true sense of community" whose initial Russian advocates, as Clark and Holquist fail to mention, had been the Slavophils. Bakhtin's affiliation with such conventicles finally involved him in the Josephite schism of 1928, which refused to accept the decision of the Orthodox patriarch acknowledging the temporal power of the state over the Church. The October Revolution had freed the Church from the state control that had existed under czarism, and the Josephites did not wish to see it reestablished.

Arrested and sentenced to a prison term in the arctic Solovetsky Islands, which would have meant a speedy death, Bakhtin was saved by a series of circumstances. Mutual friends enlisted the aid of Aleksei Tolstoy and Maxim Gorky; and a favorable review of Bakhtin's book on Dostoevsky happily appeared, written by no less a personage than the then commissar of enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky. A man of letters himself, about whom Clark and Holquist might have furnished a little more information, Lunacharsky could appreciate literary quality when he came across it and knew immediately that Bakhtin was no run-of-the-mill scholar. Since he had once written a large treatise on *Religion and Socialism* (1908), in which he had identified Marxism with true Christianity, Lunacharsky would have been especially responsive both to the underlying moral-religious implications of Bakhtin's interpretation and his attempt to disengage Dostoevsky's works from those particular ideological elements manifestly unacceptable to the Soviets.

Bakhtin was thus exiled to Kazakhstan for four years, where he again used his bookkeeping skills to stay alive and taught the subject to the cadres of collective farms engaged in implementing Stalin's disastrous agricultural policy. In 1936 he obtained a teaching post in a lowly pedagogical institute buried in the provinces of European Russia, which he left voluntarily a year later for fear of being purged. His past always made him suspect, and although he wrote his book on Rabelais for a doctorate at the Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow, he was only allowed to teach foreign languages in high school during the Second World War. After the war, he returned to the pedagogical institute, which eventually became a university, and served very conscientiously as chairman of the department of Russian and foreign literature until his retirement in 1961.

Bakhtin lived in almost complete obscurity until the later 1950s, when references to his Dostoevsky book began to appear both abroad and in the Soviet Union. Some graduate students at the Gorky Institute, discovering he was still alive, organized a campaign for the republication of the Dostoevsky text (which he substantially revised), and also worked successfully to publish the Rabelais manuscript, which had been reposing all this while in the files of their alma mater. Other essays also began to appear, written at various periods: one collection was published in 1975, the year of Bakhtin's death, and another collection, containing mostly early work, was issued in 1979. During these later years Bakhtin enjoyed extraordinary prestige among the younger Soviet intelligentsia, and "had...become a veritable guru" for them, according to Clark and Holquist. Besides the intrinsic interest of his writings, he was also, in the eyes of the younger generation, the survivor of an almost legendary past; and they could still hear in his words the voice of that lost pre-Revolutionary world with whose values they wished to renew contact.

2.

One problem that immediately arises in any approach to Bakhtin's work is that of authorship. Bakhtin published only three books under his own name during his

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