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Bakhtin's Discovery and Appropriations: in Russia and in the West

Galin Tihanov
Queen Mary University of London
(*London, United Kingdom*)
e-mail: g.tihanov@qmul.ac.uk

Abstract. This article sets itself a twofold task. On the basis of recently published scholarship, it wishes to revisit the history of Bakhtin's discovery in Russia and the West since the 1960s; but it also intends to offer a tentative answer to the question: 'What did Bakhtin discover as a thinker'? The two dimensions, captured in the ambiguity of the genitive — 'Bakhtin's discovery' — are closely interrelated. In a very significant sense, what we perceive to be Bakhtin's discoveries as a thinker and a theorist is a dynamic target rather than a fixed apparatus. As I try to demonstrate through a plethora of examples, Bakhtin's discoveries and the lessons we draw from them have been articulated differently at different historical junctures and in different cultural settings; the Bakhtin we see is a fluctuating image, resulting from superimposed perspectives involving growth, modification, loss, and a complex adjustment of meaning, as his body of writing travels across time and traditions and meets inherited patterns of reasoning. Bakhtin's discoveries are thus not a reliable supply of knowledge or wisdom; they rather derive from the elusive, sometimes blurred, and never quite finished work of mediation and translation. Equally important, the optics we apply towards Bakhtin in discerning his contributions as a thinker is affected by the stories of his discovery at home and abroad. Processes that look as awkward time-lag or distortion are often marks of intense appropriation and a high impact factor in disguise. Over time, we realise that the very narratives employed in telling and re-enacting the story of Bakhtin's discovery in Russia and the West are saturated with the cultural and ideological heteroglossia which he came to analyse in his writings. In tracing some of these narratives, I hope to arrive gradually at a Bakhtin, whose legacy is the function of multiple historical articulations, a thinker in transit, a theorist subject to dialogue.

Keywords: Bakhtin, Russia, the West, discovery, narrative, mediation, translation, dialogue

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Bakhtin's discovery in Russia in the early 1960s constitutes a veritable "novel of adventures",[1] where the accidental and the comical sometimes conceal the serious, if not the inevitable. To this day, it remains difficult to determine how exactly Bakhtin re-entered the Russian intellectual stage after 30 years of oblivion. A factor may have been Vladimir Seduro's book *Dostoevsky in Russian Literary Criticism, 1846–1956* published in the United States in 1957.[2] There Seduro drew attention to Bakhtin's 1929 Dostoevsky book and to Lunacharskii's famous review of it. Kozhinov certainly knew Seduro's book, as he makes a reference to it in the short biographical note about Bakhtin that he wrote and managed to publish — anonymously — in the first volume of the *Short Literary Encyclopaedia* ("Kratkaia Literaturnaia Entsiklopediia").[3] Whether from Seduro or through other sources, Kozhinov became aware of Bakhtin's book some time at the very end of the 1950s.[4] As chance would have it, he discovered it in the personal library of Vladimir Ermilov (1904–1965), a highly visible member of the Soviet academic and ideological establishment who was perceived as a conservative authority on the great 19th-century classics, particularly Chekhov and Dostoevsky. Back in the 1920s, Ermilov was known as one of RAPP's leaders but then succeeded in joining the mainstream by aligning himself with the Party doctrine. The distinguished literary scholar Iulian Oksman, who had suffered persecution and imprisonment in the Gulag, thought of Ermilov as a "critic-gangster who inflicted so much evil on our scholarship during the time

[1] The expression ('avantiurnyi roman') is Kozhinov's; cf. "Kak pishut trudy, ili proiskhozhdenie nesozdannogo avantiurnogo romana (Vadim Kozhinov rasskazyvaet o sud'be i lichnosti M. M. Bakhtina), in *Dialog. Karnaval. Khronotop*, 1992, No. 1, pp. 109–122, here p. 118.

[2] Vladimir Seduro, *Dostoevsky in Russian Literary Criticism, 1846–1956,* New York: Columbia UP, 1957.

[3] Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich, in *Kratkaia literaturnaia entsiklopediia*, 1962, Vol. 1, cc. 477.

[4] Nikolai Pan'kov reports that in 1959 Bakhtin's book was mentioned disapprovingly by G. L. Abramovich in an article published in The Gorky Institute of World Literature volume "Tvorchestvo Dostoevskogo" (cf. the extensive selection of Kozhinov's correspondence with Bakhtin, edited and published by Nikolai Pan'kov as "Iz perepiski M. M. Bakhtina s V. V. Kozhinovym (1960–1966 gg.)", in *Dialog. Karnaval. Khronotop*, 2000, No. 3–4, pp. 114–290, here pp. 116–117).

of his dictatorship".[5] As fate would have it, Ermilov was not just a frightening embodiment of dogma and the power to enforce it; he also happened to be Kozhinov's own father-in-law, a fact Kozhinov does not seem to mention in his copious publications highlighting his role in the discovery of Bakhtin. As he was browsing one day in Ermilov's home library, Kozhinov stumbled upon a copy of Bakhtin's 1929 Dostoevsky book.[6] Kozhinov then persuaded Bocharov and Gachev to read the book for themselves. The fascination was overwhelming, and on 12 November 1960 Kozhinov wrote his first letter to Saransk, where an unassuming Bakhtin was about to celebrate his 65th birthday with the wisdom of a man who had reached reconciliation with his ambitions.[7]

Kozhinov's role thus no doubt appears to have been central and crucial, much more so than either Bocharov's or Gachev's. The irony is that Bakhtin's discovery in the early 1960s was facilitated precisely by Ermilov, an obscurantist who happened to be influential at the moment of need. (In 1928, some thirty years before becoming, unbeknownst to himself, a transmitter of Bakhtin's work, Ermilov had accused Pavel Medvedev, the prominent member of the Bakhtin Circle, of "Kantianism, Formalism and other forms of darkest obscurantism".[8]) Kozhinov resorted to Ermilov's services when negotiating the re-publication of the Dostoevsky book which finally came out in 1963 (Ermilov wrote one of the two internal reviews for the publisher[9]). The complex mediation between the various centres of power assumed at times a carnivalesque dimension. At least once, the resourceful Kozhinov had to fake a German

[5] Mark Azadovskii, Iulian Oksman, *Perepiska, 1944–1954*, ed. K. Azadovskii, Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1998, p. 131.

[6] Cf. Dmitrii Urnov. "Vadim i Bakhtin", in *Nash Sovremennik*, 2006, No. 2, pp. 242–252, here p. 245 (there is now a fuller version of Urnov's memoirs: D. Urnov, in *Literatura kak zhizn'*, 2 vols., Moscow: izdatel'stvo im. Sabashnikovykh, 2021).

[7] See "Iz perepiski M. M. Bakhtina s V. V. Kozhinovym (1960–1966 gg.)", in *Dialog. Karnaval. Khronotop,* 2000, No. 3–4, pp. 114–115.

[8] Quoted in "The Bakhtin Circle: A Timeline", in *The Bakhtin Circle: In the Master's Absence*, ed. C. Brandist, D. Shepherd and G. Tihanov, Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2004, pp. 251–275, here p. 265.

[9] See "'Ia prosto blagodariu svoiu sud'bu…' (Vadim Kozhinov vspominaet o tom, kak udalos' pereizdat' "Problemy tvorchestva Dostoevskogo")", in *Dialog. Karnaval. Khoronotop*, 1994, No. 1, pp. 104–110, here p. 109.

accent (and to pose as Günter Grass) when phoning the secretary of Konstantin Fedin at the Writers' Union, seeking to enhance the otherwise meagre impact of his own voice and to win Fedin for the re-publication of Bakhtin's book.[10]

Before I finish piecing together the stories of boundless elevation of the mind and sobering earth-bound ruses of the will, with which Bakhtin's discovery in the 1960s confronts the historian, let me bring in another episode, long known, that corroborates the irony implicit in the process. When in 1969, the ailing Bakhtins were in need of a temporary place to stay, they were moved under the auspices of Iurii Andropov, the chief of the KGB, to a Kremlin hospital. Andropov acted only because his daughter, Irina, had implored him to do so. Until recently, it has been assumed that Irina herself got involved following a prompt from Vladimir Turbin, another admirer of Bakhtin's who frequented Saransk and had been an instructor of Andropov's daughter at Moscow University.[11] It has now been claimed by Dmitrii Urnov that here, too, Kozhinov played the leading part. He and Urnov became close with Irina who was at the time an editor at the Young Guard Publishing House (Molodaia Gvardiia), responsible for the popular biographical series "The Lives of Remarkable People" (Zhizn' Zamechatel'nykh Liudei), which is still being published today. Irina was the editor of Urnov's biography of Daniel Defoe, and Urnov himself produces the association between the object of his study, the English novelist who was also enlisted as a government spy, and his editor's father. Charmed by Kozhinov and the even younger Urnov, Irina Andropova had to succumb to their request; this is how, according to Urnov, Andropov became one of Bakhtin's guarding angels.[12]

The fact that Bakhtin's post-retirement fame was managed by Kozhinov, Bocharov, and Gachev is consequential in one very significant respect: their own conservative, if often anti-dogmatic, orientation in the Soviet literary and ideological debates of the time

[10] The story is told in Vadim Kozhinov, "Tak eto bylo…", in *Don*, 1988, No. 10, pp. 156–159, here p. 159.

[11] Cf. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, Mikhail Bakhtin, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1984, p. 336; S. S. Konkin and L. S. Konkina, *Mikhail Bakhtin. Stranitsy zhizni i tvorchestva*, Saransk: Mordovskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1993, p. 272–273.

[12] Cf. Urnov, op. cit., p. 248.

set the direction for the appropriation of Bakhtin in Russia for decades to come. In Russia, even beyond the collapse of the Soviet Union, Bakhtin's name was written on the banners of tradition, be it religious, moral, aesthetic, or academic. By the late 1960s, when his name had become widely known, the Soviet school of semiotics and Structuralism was gradually asserting itself, and even in purely academic terms Bakhtin looked as the reliable anti-dote to fashion. Later, in the 1990s, the consumption of his ideas became often entwined with loyalty to the East Orthodox Christian tradition. Bakhtin was mobilised as the latest brand name in a long succession of lay saints, whose lives and thoughts were deemed reassuringly otherworldly, and thus unfailingly instructive. One could even see religious wars being waged for him: despite its utter implausibility, over the years Dmitrii Urnov's (and Petr Palievskii's) assertion of Bakhtin's Catholicism, in essence and in name, must have come as a repeated affront to all those mainstream interpreters eager to recruit the Russian thinker for the Orthodox Pantheon.[13]

2

While in Russia Bakhtin was thought to be a foe of Formalism and Structuralism — and by extension, in the eyes of his future opponents (such as Mikhail Gasparov), a denier of 'exact' literary science — his career in the West, particularly in the Anglophone world, began and evolved for about two decades under the auspices of Formalism and Structuralism. Ladislav Matejka, an émigré scholar from Prague who had reached the United States via Sweden, published in 1962 a slender anthology titled *Readings in Russian Poetics*, incorporating texts in Russian by, amongst others, both Voloshinov and Bakhtin. The second edition (1971), which was considerably expanded and published in English, carried the telling subtitle "Formalist and Structuralist Views"; it became the first major collection in the West to include translated work by Bakhtin and Voloshinov. Bakhtin was represented here with a portion of his 1929 Dostoevsky book which Matejka had first read in a class offered at Harvard by the truly ubiquitous Dmitro Chizhevsky.[14]

[13] For a recent example, cf. Urnov, op. cit., pp. 247 and 248.

[14] Cf. Peter Steiner, "Interview s Ladislavem Matějkou", in *Česká literatura*, 2007, Vol. 55, No. 5, pp. 733–738, here p. 735.

Matejka was very clear about Bakhtin's status as a critic rather than a proponent of Formalism, and yet he described both Bakhtin and Voloshinov in his postscript as "followers of the Russian Formal method".[15] The trend of packaging Bakhtin together with the Formalists continued all through the 70s, often on the grounds that his Dostoevsky book put the study of the *ideas* of Dostoevsky's novels second to the exploration of categories that originated in aesthetics, such as voice, author, or hero.

I will return shortly to this trend, which persisted for two decades until Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist began translating and editing Bakhtin's essays on the novel, whose appearance marked a new stage in the discovery of Bakhtin during the 1980s and beyond. But before that, let me briefly point to the more difficult fortunes of Bakhtin's writings in two continental environments with strong domestic philosophical traditions. In 2008, Bakhtin's early texts "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" and "Towards a Philosophy of the Act" were finally translated into German, thus rounding off the canon of his works available in that language. To be fair, an important text of Bakhtin's, "Epos i roman" ("Epic and Novel") had first appeared in German translation — at the end of 1968, with a publication date of 1969 — in a collective volume in the GDR, before appearing anywhere else in any other language, including Russian.[16] As Edward Kowalski reveals in his essayistic epilogue to the 2008 German translation of "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity", the typescript of Bakhtin's article "Epic and Novel" was smuggled out of the Soviet Union following encouragement from Kozhinov. The Russian text was published only in 1970, in the journal "Voprosy literatury" ("Questions of Literature"). Bakhtin's Dostoevsky and Rabelais books, as well as his other essays on the novel, were also translated into German without much

[15] See Ladislav Matejka, "The Formal Method and Linguistics", in L. Matejka and K. Pomorska (eds.), *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971, pp. 281–295, here p. 290; cf. also Pomorska's statement that the anthology wanted to "present theoreticians who 'rounded up' and transformed the work of the *Opojaz*" (K. Pomorska, "Russian Formalism in Retrospect", ibid., pp. 273–280, here p. 273). Both Matejka's and Pomorska's texts were reprinted in the 1978 edition as well.

[16] Edward Kowalski, "Bachtins langer Weg zum deutschen Leser", in Michail M. Bachtin, *Autor und Held in der ästhetischen Tätigkeit*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2008, pp. 353–356, here pp. 353–354.

delay. Yet in Germany, his discovery seemed to have been hampered by the resistance of a rich and elaborate domestic philosophical tradition which found it difficult to relate to Bakhtin's evocative but — by the standards of that tradition — largely loose and floating style of reasoning. Bakhtin's impact in Germany hardly went beyond Slavic Studies, with the exception of some Bakhtinian presence in art and film theory.[17]

In France, Bakhtin's discovery faced similar barriers. In a 1998 interview with Clive Thomson, Julia Kristeva complained that Bakhtin's style was alien to the Cartesian spirit of the French humanities.[18] Bakhtin's writing seemed to generate too many ambiguities and too little terminology. As if to placate these concerns, in her own work Kristeva had taken Bakhtin's unstable, fluid yet extremely productive notion of dialogue and had rather controversially 'upgraded' it to intertextuality, a shift which, she believed, not only made Bakhtin her contemporary but also added that indispensable degree of lucidity which the French public appears to have missed in his works.[19] Kristeva is acutely aware of Bakhtin's precarious status as a thinker: measured by the requirements of the different fields of knowledge, he doesn't quite fit anywhere. The central categories of his mature writings, body and discourse, were perceived as either too vague or too obsolete by the French psychologists, anthropologists and linguists. Bakhtin's proper realm, the in-between territory that he inhabits with such non-negotiable sovereignty and where he crafts his own metaphors which enable

[17] For Bakhtin's appropriation in Germany, see Anthony Wall's articles "On the Look-Out for Bachtin in German", *Le Bulletin Bakhtine/The Bakhtin Newsletter*, 1996, No. 5 (Special issue "Bakhtin Around the World", ed. Scott Lee and Clive Thomson), pp. 117–141; and "How to Do Things with Bakhtin (in German)?, *Recherches sémiotiques/Semiotic inquiry*, 1998, Vol. 18, No. 1–2 (special issue "Bakhtine et l'avenir des signes/Bakhtin and the future of signs"), pp. 267–294.

[18] The interview appeared in *Recherches sémiotiques/Semiotic inquiry*, 1998, Vol. 18, No. 1–2 (special issue "Bakhtine et l'avenir des signes/Bakhtin and the future of signs"), pp. 15–29. See also Kristeva's earlier interview about Bakhtin (with Samir El'-Muallia): "Beseda s Iuliei Kristevoi", *Dialog. Karnaval. Khronotop,* 1995, No. 2, pp. 5–17.

[19] Todorov later followed this move from 'dialogue' to 'intertextuality', thus continuing the process of domesticating (or rather enfeebling) Bakhtin's key concept (cf. Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtine: Le principe dialogique*, Paris: Seuil, 1981, p. 95, where he adopts Kristeva's terminological change).

him to move between different levels of argumentation and address issues located above the particular fields of knowledge — all this was a space yet to emerge for most of his readers, its contours were still too dim and distant to render his prose immediately appealing to those who did not share his intellectual background and mindset. At best, as Kristeva puts it, in France Bakhtin could offer some guidance, but the work of the specialist remained to be executed by the specialist himself. If we reverse this relationship for a moment, an early lesson could already emerge from Bakhtin's mastery of the uncomfortable zone located in-between the disciplinary fields. Concisely formulated, this lesson admonishes us that no matter how passionately we delve into the history of particular disciplines in search of antecedents to Bakhtin's categories, we can never quite capture Bakhtin's often elusive, but always extremely stimulating usage of these categories on the meta-level that raises them above the conceptual constraints of their home fields and instils in them new life by obliterating their previous conceptual identity. Such is, to take one example for many, the notion of dialogue. We hear in Bakhtin's use of 'dialogue' a linguistic substratum, which can probably be attributed to Iakubinskii and to a host of other early Soviet linguists, and yet Bakhtin's specific interpretation of this category is so much wider, applicable to entire narratives and whole domains of culture, that focusing exclusively on its linguistic origins, even when these are attestable, would not explain the power and fascination Bakhtin's texts continue to hold. To further shore up my case, let us recall that in 1977, well before the publication of Bakhtin's essays on the novel in the United States, Jan Mukařovský's important essay "Dialogue and Monologue", written in 1940, was translated and published in English.[20] Terminologically, Mukařovský's text is much more disciplined, and yet in its scope and inventiveness it lags behind Bakhtin's own version of dialogue. Mukařovský remains trapped in a narrowly linguistic

[20] Jan Mukařovský, "Dialogue and Monologue", in Jan Mukařovský, *The Word and Verbal Art. Selected Essays*, trans. J. Burbank and P. Steiner, New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1977, pp. 81–112. Mukařovský was aware and highly appreciative of some of Voloshinov's writings; in 1964 in Prague, Kozhinov spoke with him at length about Bakhtin and his work on speech genres (cf. "Iz perepiski M. M. Bakhtina s V. V. Kozhinovym (1960–1966 gg.)", ed. N. Pan'kov, *Dialog. Karnaval. Khoronotop*, 2000, No. 3–4, p. 266.)

juxtaposition of dialogue and monologue; Bakhtin ventures out, he refreshes our understanding of dialogue by inviting us to hear, with him, the dialogue within a single uttered word, or the dialogue embodied in voices that convey conflicting outlooks and perspectives on the world, or indeed dialogue that becomes the foundation stone for a wide-ranging typology of cultural forms. This transformation which subjects the term to inner growth — sometimes at the expense of exactitude –, a transformation whereby the term expands its scope of relevance to the point of turning into a broader metaphor, is the most important feature informing Bakhtin's prose, the hallmark of his writing that gives his readers a very special sense of optimism and light associated with the privilege being present at the movements of a burgeoning meaning that exfoliates on an ever larger scale before our eyes. And it is this transformative energy that sets him apart from his likely, or even demonstrable, predecessors coming from various specialisms, be they linguistic, sociological, theological, or art-historical for that matter. It is not difficult, for example, to demonstrate how several of Bakhtin's concepts — 'architectonics', 'space', 'gothic realism' — were derived, at least to a significant degree, from the German art-historical tradition;[21] this, however, would tell us very little about the significant transformation of these concepts when thrown into the melting pot of Bakhtin's argumentation. Bakhtin's originality as a thinker is actually (and here lies another important lesson for his students) the originality of the great synthesizer who took at liberty from various specialised discourses — linguistics, art history, theology — and then reshaped, extended and augmented the scope of their concepts.

The question invites itself: what was the ground that enabled him to do so? My brief answer is: he did so by accomplishing a transition, indeed an evolution, from ethics and aesthetics in his early writings to philosophy of culture in his mature works. Let me illustrate this move with the help of an extended comparison between Bakhtin's and Gustav Shpet's take on the novel.

[21] For a very good study of the origins of the term 'gothic realism' in Bakhtin, see Nikolai Pan'kov, "Smysl i proiskhozhdenie termina 'goticheskii realizm'", in *Voprosy literatury*, 2008, No. 1, pp. 227–248. (there pp. 237–239 on Max Dvořak's impact and pp. 241–248 on classicist aesthetics in *Literaturnyi kritik* and Bakhtin's implicit polemic with it in the Rabelais book).

3

Shpet and Bakhtin shared something fundamental: they were both exceptions on the Russian intellectual scene, in that they were neither religious nor Marxists thinkers. That said, Shpet's extensive notes on the novel from 1924 bring into sharp relief the differences between his and Bakhtin's approaches. The notes, which remained unpublished until 2007, were perhaps part of Shpet's larger (also unpublished) work titled "Literaturovedenie" ("Literary Studies"), announced in 1925 as one of GAKhN's ongoing projects.[22]

Shpet here relies to a great extent on authors, notably Hegel, Erwin Rohde and Georg Lukács, who later feature prominently (explicitly or implicitly) in Bakhtin's discussion of the novel. Shpet borrows from Hegel and Lukács, as does Bakhtin, the conceptual framework that juxtaposes epic and novel (57–8). But while Bakhtin overturns Lukács's scheme and emancipates the novel, transforming it from an underdog of literary history into a celebrated *écriture*, and from a purely literary into a wider cultural form, Shpet abides by the old opposition and validates the role of the novel as a 'negative' genre. For Shpet, the novel is marked by a string of fatal absences. It lacks 'composition', 'plan', and, most importantly, 'inner form' (57). For Shpet 'inner form' suggests, let us recall, crucial evidence of the potential of art to produce serious, non-arbitrary versions of reality. The lack of 'inner form' stands, more broadly, for the lack of necessity and compelling direction in the work of art. The novel is thus no more than a 'degradation' of the epic (63): the epic offers access to an *idea* (in Plato's sense), whereas the novel furnishes only *doxa* (66). The novel, with its arbitrary inventions, is the result of the disintegration of myth (84). It therefore has no 'plot in the strict sense of the word', only a 'theme' which deals not with the 'construction of an idea' (what plot should really do), but simply with the 'empiric commonality of the motif' (79).[23] Lagging

[22] See Tat′iana Shchedrina's comments on "O granitsakh nauchnogo literaturovedeniia (konspekt doklada)", in Gustav Shpet, in *Iskusstvo kak vid znaniia. Izbrannye trudy po filosofii kul'tury*, ed. T. G. Shchedrina, Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2007, p. 507. All references to Shpet's notes on the novel will be to this volume, with the relevant page numbers appearing in brackets in the main text.

[23] In Russian: 'empiricheskaia obshchnost′ motiva (ona ne obshcha, a obshchna)'.

behind not just the epic, but also Greek tragedy, the novel knows no catastrophe, only irresolvable conflict and antinomy (67). In accord with his condescending evaluation of Russian philosophy, Shpet interprets the whole of Russian literature as a 'novel', for there has been, for him, no sense of epic reality in it (79); even *War and Peace* is called not an epic, but an ironic, and therefore, 'romantic' novel, 'romantic' being the damning label attached to any narrative permeated by arbitrariness. We thus begin to understand why in the *Aesthetic Fragments*, as well as in his notes on the novel, Shpet gestures towards the novel as a mere 'rhetorical' form: the epic is about an 'organic embodiment of the idea', the novel is all about 'an analysis of opportunities' (81), about the multitude of equally valid free wills and the choices the individual faces after leaving the epic cosmos. The novel is not about *incarnatio*, it is only about *inventio* and *elocutio* (81), the skills involved in unfolding and charting the ephemeral and accidental private world of opportunities without conclusion, of journeys without destiny.

It is against this background that Bakhtin's utter dissatisfaction with Shpet's denigration of the novel becomes clear.[24] Bakhtin, too, begins from the premise of negativity: the novel does not have a canon of its own; it is possessed of no constant features which generate the stability and cohesion marking most other genres. He reinterprets this negativity, however, as strength: the novel knows no ossification, its energy of self-fashioning and re-invention is unlimited, its versatility accommodates and processes vast masses of previously submerged and neglected discourses. In brief, the novel is anything but a merely 'rhetorical form' in the pejorative sense Shpet gives this term in the *Aesthetic Fragments*, in his notes on the novel, and in *The Inner Form of the Word*. For Shpet, the novel signals impasse; it holds no prospect: 'When a genuine flourishing of art occurs, the novel has no future' (84).[25] The novel, unlike poetry, is a genre for the masses; it corresponds to their 'average moral aspirations' (88). Bakhtin, by contrast, extolled the democratic charge of the novel and dreamt, as we know, of a literature (and indeed culture) colonized by the novelistic.

[24] Cf. Bakhtin's criticism of Shpet in "Discourse in the Novel", in M. Bakhtin, in *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 268.

[25] In Russian: 'Pri nastoiashchem rastsvete iskusstva roman budushchego ne imeet'.

It is important to position Shpet's work on the novel vis-à-vis the larger scene of Soviet literary theory. In the early 1920s, it was dominated by sociological, Formalist, and psychoanalytic approaches, with some vestiges of a more traditional historical poetics and morphology of literature. Shpet's work did not belong to any of these paradigms; it was dictated clearly by philosophical concerns and, if anything, called for a return to aesthetics as the proper home of literary studies. Thus Shpet, along with his colleagues and disciples at GAKhN, appeared to swim against the current, denying literary theory the right to exist outside the realm of aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

Shpet's preference for discussing the verbal work of art, including the novel, in the framework of aesthetics actually parallels Bakhtin's early interest in categories such as form, author, hero and dialogue from the point of view of aesthetics rather than from a perspective grounded specifically in literary theory. But while in the latter half of the 1920s, Shpet continues to discuss literature in a fashion informed by, and committed to, aesthetics and a neo-Humboldtian philosophy of language, Bakhtin's theoretical discourse gradually breaks away from aesthetics and evolves towards a philosophy of culture. It is from this vantage point that Bakhtin addresses in the 1930s various aspects of genre theory and historical poetics, two areas which remained alien to Shpet, as his notes on the novel confirm. Throughout the 1930s, Bakhtin writes as a philosopher of culture rather than as a thinker drawing his agenda from aesthetics. His entire conceptual apparatus during that time stands under the auspicious sign of grand narratives about the inner dynamics of cultural evolution, of which the novel proves a confident and forceful agent (and epitome). If Shpet and Bakhtin do share some common ground it is their departure from literary theory as an autonomous and self-sufficient field — and mode — of enquiry: from that point, Shpet moved backwards to aesthetics, while Bakhtin set out on a journey forward, to the ill-defined but enormously exciting terrain of cultural theory and the philosophy of cultural forms. It was this innovative shift forward to philosophy of culture that secured the propitious ground on which Bakhtin erected his own theoretical edifice, synthesising different intellectual traditions and reworking and expanding creatively concepts stemming from a range of different specialised discourses.

4

I wish now to return to the seemingly scandalous labelling of Bakhtin as a Formalist and a structuralist that accompanied his early discovery in the West, particularly in the Anglophone world.[26] The process lasted for so long (good twenty-five years)[27] and affected so many mainstream intellectual contexts (the American, partly the German and also the French, although there the appropriation of Bakhtin in the context of Structuralism flowed imperceptibly into a post-structuralist and psychoanalytic Bakhtin, mainly in the work of Kristeva[28]), that it appears to be utterly improbable for these two designations — 'formalist' and 'structuralist' — to have been just resilient misnomers. Needless to say, there is a most regrettable degree of simplification involved in calling Bakhtin a formalist or a structuralist (as he no doubt was in the Anglophone world or in France in the 1970s, in the wake of Kristeva's well-known 1967 and 1970 articles that elevated 'structure', in Clive Thomson's observation, to a 'keyword' in analysing Bakhtin[29]); it might even appear to be plain wrong to employ these appellations with reference to him.

[26] Beginning in the early 1970s, Bakhtin's work would also be included under the rubric of Marxism, something worth noting, for Western Marxism would continue to draw on Bakhtin, especially on the Rabelais book, into the late 1990s; thus, for example, the first article by Bakhtin to be translated into Danish (on Rabelais and Gogol) appeared in an edited volume titled *Marxistisk litteraturanalyse* (Marxist Analysis of Literature), ed. L. S. Andersen, Copenhagen: Rhodos, 1970 (see A. Gemzøe, "Mikhail Bakhtin and the History of Literature. The Past in the Present and the Present in the Past", in *Understanding Bakhtin, Understanding Modernism*, ed. P. Birgy, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, pp. 33–49, here p. 49 n. 21). On a number of substantive parallels between Russian Formalism and Marxism, see Galin Tihanov, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond*, Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2019 (ch. 1).

[27] As late as 1988, in the widely used reader compiled by David Lodge, Bakhtin's "From the prehistory of novelistic discourse" was assigned a place in the rubric "Formalist, structuralists and post-structuralist poetics, linguistics and narratology"; cf. David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory. A Reader*, London and New York: Longman, 1988.

[28] On the French (mis)appropriation, see Karine Zbinden, *Bakhtin between East and West: Cross-Cultural Transmission*, Oxford: Legenda, 2006, esp. Ch. 1, "The Structuralist in the Closet".

[29] See Clive Thomson, "Bakhtin in France and Québec", *Le Bulletin Bakhtine/ The Bakhtin Newsletter*, 1996, No. 5 (Special issue "Bakhtin Around the World", ed. Scott Lee and Clive Thomson), pp. 67–87, here pp. 69–71.

And yet there is, after all, a grain of truth in all this. In the history of ideas, we need to be able to detect sometimes undercurrent affinities that do not manifest themselves on the surface. Of course, Bakhtin is not a formalist, nor is he a structuralist, in the sense that he did not partake of these specific practices of interpreting literature. But he partook of something much more important: the general episteme, the regime of enquiry that bracketed out the subject and the individual. This is what he had in common with the Formalists and the structuralists; he didn't use their instruments, their tools of analysis, but he shared some of their basic epistemological premises, while opposing, admittedly, others. Before I seek to differentiate him from both Formalism and Structuralism, also on the level of basic epistemological premises, let me dwell a little bit longer on the fundamental proximity between Bakhtin and these two influential streams.

The whole evolution of Bakhtin as a thinker can be described as a struggle against psychologism and an ever more powerful negation of subjectivity (in its classic version). He admitted to Kozhinov that Husserl and Max Scheler played a vital role in his re-education into a thinker who mistrusts psychologism.[30] Beginning with a celebration of Dostoevsky as a unique and inimitable writer of singular achievement, stressing, albeit even then in a somewhat subdued fashion, Dostoevsky's creativity — "tvorchestvo Dostoevskogo" — Bakhtin ends up in 1963 focusing on the impersonal memory of genre, leaving no room for creativity as such and examining instead the inherent laws of poetics ("poetika Dostoevskogo"). Bakhtin's entire work and intellectual agenda have been a battle ground against a traditionally conceived, stable subjectivity: from the question of the body that we gradually cease to possess and be in control of, most radically in the Rabelais book, to the question of language which reaches us through established generic patterns and is never quite our own, as it has always already been in someone else's mouth. The fortunes of the novel embody this rejection of classic subjectivity in full measure: the individual writer is virtually irrelevant, he or she are no more than an instrument through which the genre materialises itself, no more than

[30] See V. V. Kozhinov, "Bakhtin i ego chitateli. Razmyshleniia i otchasti vospominaniia", in *Dialog. Karnaval. Khoronotop*, 1993, No. 2–3, pp. 120–134, here pp. 124–125.

a mouthpiece that enunciates the calls of generic memory. Bakhtin, in other words, despite his apparent attraction to canonical figures such as Goethe, Dostoevsky and Rabelais would have ideally liked to be able to write a history of literature without names. (The formula, "history without names", was, of course, derived from the work of art historian Heinrich Wölfflin and had received approval from the Russian Formalist Eikhenbaum and also from Pavel Medvedev, who, together with Matvei Kagan, was the most important transmitter of art-historical and art-theoretical knowledge in the Bakhtin Circle.[31])

On the other hand, it seems important to recall the features that differentiate Bakhtin from Formalism and Structuralism. Bakhtin's fundamental disagreement with the former is over the formalists' lack of interest in meaning. But Bakhtin does not construe meaning as a stable category that inheres in the text and is then mobilised from time to time to serve an ideological agenda. Nor is he really a thinker in the hermeneutic tradition, despite all protestations to the contrary and despite all semblances. Bakhtin is not excited about involving the work of art in a circle of questions and answers where the parts and the whole participate in a process of mutual disclosure, and do so from a particular historical perspective that eventually fuses with that of the critic's interrogating mind. His idea of meaning is inspiringly monumental: it is cold and distant in its celebration of 'great time' as the true home of meaning; at the same time, it is reassuring and inviting, in that it addresses the uncertainties of the future with composure and a triumphant declaration of openness and acceptance of that which, to quote Bakhtin, "lies ahead and will always lie ahead". Unlike Structuralism, Bakhtin is interested in the inner dynamics of meaning revealed in the transitions between different discursive genres/types. This change is sometimes context-dependant; sometimes it is bound to the flow of time and is measured on the scale of centuries and

[31] Cf. M. M. Bakhtin/P. N. Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship. A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, trans. Albert J. Wehrle, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1978, pp. 50–52 (with a quote from Eikhenbaum's earlier endorsement of Wölfflin on p. 52). On the idea of "history without names" in the Bakhtin Circle, see also Felipe Pereda, "Mijail Bajtín y la historia del arte sin nombres", in *Mijail Bajtín en la encrucijada de la hermenéutica y las ciencias humanas*, ed. Bénédicte Vauthier and Pedro M. Cátedra, Salamanca: SEMYR, 2003, pp. 93–118.

epochs; yet most frequently the inner dynamics is generated by the alteration between pre-set discursive possibilities: monologue and dialogue, grotesque and classic, official and popular — as was the case with Bakhtin's great teachers in the art-historical tradition: Wölfflin who constructed the opposition between classic and baroque, or Max Dvořak and Worringer with their juxtaposition of naturalist and abstract art. Bakhtin's history of discursive genres operates on such a vast scale that sometimes the historical dimension in it gets entirely dissolved, and what the reader ends up with is a typology rather than a diachronic account. The conflicts implicit in these typologies are often of epic proportions; Bakhtin enacts in his works a discursive typomachia of an intensity and scope rarely seen before him. His narrative is grand not just in Lyotard's sense, but also in the more immediate sense of breathtaking solemnity and wide-open vistas revealed in his texts.

If Bakhtin's labelling as a formalist and a structuralist teaches us something about the ways in which his thought was integrated and his reputation made outside the Soviet Union during the 1960s and the 1970s, we also need to ask how Bakhtin's work was able to negotiate the transition to postmodernism and post-structuralism that began to be acutely felt already in the 1970s and occupied centre stage until about the close of the 20th century. For all the virtues he had, he would not have been able to stay afloat in the market of ideas if he was perceived solely as a traditional 'grand narrative' type of thinker, whose work was shaped and peaked during the first half of the past century.

Here I come to Bakhtin's most important claim to still being our contemporary today. I think Bakhtin's intellectual brand, that which he did better than most, was the gradual forging of a theoretical platform informed by what I would call humanism without subjectivity (or at least without subjectivity understood in the classic identitarian sense). In the mature and late writings, we find an odd Bakhtinian humanism, decentred, seeking and celebrating alterity rather than otherness (in Kristeva's distinction), and revolving not around the individual but around the generic abilities of the human species to resist and endure in the face of natural cataclysms and in the face of ideological monopoly over truth. Bakhtin is probably the single most gifted and persuasive exponent

in the 20th century of that particular strain of humanism without belief in the individual human being at its core, a distant cosmic love for humanity as the great survivor and the producer of abiding and recurring meaning that celebrates its eventual homecoming in the bosom of great time. In the Rabelais book this new decentred humanism takes on the form of a seemingly more solidified cult of the people, but even there it rests on an ever changing, protean existence of the human masses that transgresses the boundaries between bodies and style registers and refuses their members stable identifications other than with the utopian body of the people and of humanity at large. This new brand of decentred humanism without subjectivity is Bakhtin's greatest discovery as a thinker and the source, so it seems to me, of hiss longevity on the intellectual scene where he sees off vogue after vogue, staging for each new generation of readers the magic of witnessing the birth of proximity without empathy, of optimism without promise or closure.

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ИНФОРМАЦИЯ ОБ АВТОРЕ / INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Тиханов Галин, PhD, DPhil, профессор сравнительного литературоведения им. Джорджа Стайнера, Университет Куинн Мэри (Лондон, Великобритания); ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0007-6908; e-mail: g.tihanov@qmul.ac.uk.

Galin Tihanov, PhD, DPhil, Queen Mary University of London (London, United Kingdom); ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0007-6908; e-mail: g.tihanov@qmul.ac.uk.

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