Mikhail Bakhtin

Mikhail Bakhtin (16.11.1895, Orel — 07.03.1975, Moscow) — Russian phenomenologist, semiologist and one of the founders of structuralism.

To understand a ‘dialogic’ approach to language and the world, we must first abandon normal preconceptions about the Academy and its scholars. The criteria that we now consider ‘normal’ for the evaluation of work, university tenure, the publication of scholarly ‘books’ and ‘articles’, the ‘originality’ of the thought, the authenticity of the texts they wrote, and the protection of the output for reasons of posterity and promotion, simply don’t apply here. The most important figure in the story, who is not of reasons discussed further on to be isolated from persons with whom he worked, is Mikhail Mikhailovitch Bakhtin (1895-1975), a wide-ranging thinker who spoke and wrote about diverse issues relating to literary theory, philosophy of language, linguistics, psychology, theology, historical poetics, axiology, history and vitalism. And the implications of his work for other areas of research stretch even further, into almost all areas of contemporary social sciences. Up until 1929, only one short article, in an obscure provincial newspaper, had appeared under his own name even though he had by then elaborated an entire philosophical project which was to encompass every domain of everyday life, from literature to law to religion.

The work undertaken by Bakhtin in the 1920s and 30s formed a corpus of nine large books. One of them, Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics, came out in 1929, while he was in prison following the purge of Leningrad intellectuals. This was the beginning of his reflections on the novel, the work for which he is now best known. Three others were published under different names. Some were partially lost during his many forced moves (during his early years, 1895-1913, he moved from Orel to Vilnius to Odessa; in 1914 he moved to St. Petersburg, in 1920 to Vitebsk, in 1924 to Leningrad, in 1929 he was exiled to Kazakhstan, in 1936 to Saransk, in 1937 to Kimry, in 1940 Moscow, and after the war, back to Saransk. He retired in 1961 and in 1969 moved back to Moscow). Some disappeared when the Nazis burned down the publishing house that had accepted his book on the Erziehungsroman (the German novel). He smoked the only other copy of the latter manuscript during the Nazi invasion of the USSR. The only other books to appear under his name during his lifetime, Rabelais and His World and a collection of essays partially published in English as The Dialogic Imagination, appeared almost half a century after they were written. The book on Rabelais was a revised version of his Ph.D. thesis, which he submitted for consideration in 1940. He was rewarded with a seven-year wait before being notified that he should appear to defend it. His defense was brilliant, leading him to be nominated for the normal degree of candidat and the coveted title of Doktor. In fact, because of conservative opposition to the views in the thesis he received no degree until 1951, at which time he was named candidat. It took another fourteen years of frustrating battles waged by his allies before it was actually published.

Today, it seems that every country has its own ‘Bakhtin’; in France he is known almost exclusively for his work on Rabelais, although Todorov tried to claim him for his work on structuralism (in Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogic Principle). In Italy his work is viewed as a contribution to anti-Bolshevik Marxist thinking, in the tradition of Gramsci. In England his work is viewed with regards to a much larger ‘Slavic studies’ corpus, but has also broadened the domain of cultural studies as originally undertaken by Raymond Williams. In Canada his work underwrites whole research programs including social discourse theory and socio-criticism. In the United States there are different factions who claim him for projects as different as Christian fundamentalism and small ‘m’ marxism. And in the former Soviet Union, his homeland, he is considered by many as a religious philosopher in the Orthodox tradition.

To further complicate matters, there are many texts that seem to have been mostly written by him but which, for political reasons and also for reasons that reflect his views on our (non-) ownership of discourse, were signed and claimed by friends. Huge battles over this territory rage even today. Most people who had direct knowledge of events surrounding the work are now deceased, including all of Bakhtin’s family and most of his early friends. The exception is his old friend I. I. Kanaev, who only reluctantly speaks with foreigners. Very few letters written by Bakhtin exist, and many potentially-useful documents are locked up by Russian authorities. Moreover, Bakhtin himself managed to leave behind, smoke (!), or otherwise misplaced documents that most people hold most dear — including manuscripts. Only relevant pieces of this wonderful story can be told here — the rest is available (in English) through Holquist/Clark’s biography, Holquist’s book, on dialogism (in English) or other sources published more recently (again, mostly in English).
The story is now further complicated in light of recent disputes concerning the accuracy of translations; indeed the same Russian texts have been rendered quite differently into Italian, French and English. And a huge project for the re-publication of Bakhtin's work is currently underway in Russia.

The friends who did, or did not, write the books now variously attributed to Bakhtin include a musicologist named Valentin Voloshinov (1895-d.1936 of tuberculosis), a journalist and organizer of literary events named Pavel Medvedev (1891-1938, shot after being arrested), and a biologist and historian of science named Ivan I. Kanaev. Other people in the early Bakhtin Circle include Lev Pumplianskij, later professor in the Philological Faculty at Leningrad University. M.V. Judina, later one of Russia’s greatest concert pianists, I.I. Sollertinskij, later artistic director of the Leningrad Philharmonic, B.M. Zubakin, archaeologist and eccentric, and Matvej Isaac Kagan, philosopher. In addition to the many persons from the domain of literature (which may explain the many musical references in his work), he had direct contact with the artists El Lisitskij, Malevich and Marc Chagall during his years in Vitebsk, and he frequented scholars and writers in a full range of scientific and humanistic studies. Many people in Bakhtin’s various ‘circles’ were eventually arrested for their work, and some died in prisons or camps. The people who have been instrumental in describing the importance of these theoreticians include Michael Holquist (USA), Tzvetan Todorov (France), Andre Belleau (Quebec), Clive Thomson (Canada) and Augusto Ponzo (Italy).

The Bakhtin Chronotope

Once again, when it comes to the periodization of Bakhtin’s work, readers must learn to abandon normal categories. Bakhtin and his Circle were interested in a huge range of philosophical issues, and anybody familiar with the entirety of Bakhtin’s corpus will be privy to long discussions of literature, music, philosophy, and theology. Nevertheless, many examples that Bakhtin offers in his writings are from the domain of literature, in particular the novel, because this was a privileged place of free and open interaction.

A full elucidation of this interaction, deemed ‘dialogic’, appears in the Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics book, published in 1929 and then reissued in 1963. But one year earlier, in 1928, the (at that time) influential book Formal’nyi metod v literaturovedenii appeared, (translated into English in 1978 as The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship) under the name of P.N. Medvedev. One could suggest, therefore, that the Bakhtin corpus dates back to the 1920s, but that its role and status were confined and perturbed by national events in the USSR.

Bakhtin’s rediscovery in the USSR occurred in the 1960s, and his ‘discovery’ in the West really began in 1966 when Julia Kristeva referred to Bakhtin in her article ‘Le man, le dialogue et le roman.’ The French, enthused by Kristeva’s description, would soon have access to Bakhtin’s work directly. The Rabelais book was translated into French in 1970, and his Esthétique et thorie du roman, the most frequently-read text for literary studies, appeared in French in 1978. The American foray into Bakhtin studies, which was led by Michael Holquist (and two of his own students, Caryl Emerson and Gary Saul Morson), began in earnest in the early 1980s, which helped shape the crucial role that Bakhtin has played for literary and language studies.

Adequate discussion of dates with regards to Bakhtin and his Circle would require a full-length monograph in itself, but the role that Bakhtin and his Circle, whatever their importance in terms of when his work appeared and had influence, has been various, uneven, and largely dictated by forces far beyond the spectrum of ‘normal’ academic considerations.

As was the case with the formalists, the entire theory I’ve grouped under the name ‘dialogism’ originated in the former Soviet Union. The peculiarities of Russian history, the special characteristics of Russian Orthodox religion and the monumental impact those notable events had upon everyday life must all be considered, or at least respected, before any generalizations about work coming from that country can be made. The Russian Revolution (1917) overthrew autocratic Tsarist rule that had oppressed the population for hundreds of years, this same Revolution led to the erection of a powerful and ruthless totalitarian state led by the likes of Lenin and Stalin, the collectivization of peasants (1930s) led to the deaths of around twenty million people, that World War II (1939-1945) cost the lives of another twenty million people, and the Cold War (1945-1992) isolated Soviets behind a wall of protection and confinement from what Westerners take to be ‘normal’ values and actions. Add to these mind-boggling statistics the fact that most Westerners of university age were bombarded with incredible anti-Soviet propaganda throughout their lives, and one begins to see some of the obstacles to understanding the context within and to which Bakhtin’s work was elaborated. All of this bears upon our (necessary) misreading of Bakhtin’s works.

Bakhtin and ‘Everyday Life’

The theories of Bakhtin and his Circle touch upon virtually every aspect of everyday life, and V. Maklin, a personal friend of Bakhtin and the head of the Bakhtin Center in Moscow, recently revealed that Bakhtin was trying to establish a philosophy of discursive action for each of the principle speech situations. In terms of literary theory, Bakhtin’s interests were multifaceted. The early book, The Formal Method of Literary Scholarship, attempted to reintegrate sociohistorical concerns into a study of literature that had become intensely narrow as a result of the formalist project. But this does not mean that Bakhtin, Medvedev, or Voloshinov were simply adapting a Marxist viewpoint; they were instead addressing the vital nature of human interaction through reference to settings of ideally open-ended discourse such as the carnival and the dialogic novel.

The knowledge claim of the Bakhtin Circle is not ‘scientific’ according to the narrow (and wrong-headed) definition suggested by the formalists or the structuralists, a definition which considers the labeling of particular speech phenomena ‘scientific.’ Instead, Bakhtin situated knowledge in the realm of the creative, the unexpected, the contextual-specific and the spontaneous. When taken as a whole, the theories from this group don’t deny the Formal project, but rather they place emphasis upon the areas of discourse that are most likely to fall between the cracks of a formal analysis.

Why Bakhtin?

Bakhtin’s work can be applied to any theorization of language, and the corporeality of his approach, emphasizing ‘situatedness’ and the ‘chronotope’ within which utterances occur also make it highly pertinent for work on the elusive subject of ‘the body.’ His articulating the various ‘genres’ of discourse, and how they come to be delimited, also make his work crucial for the study of professionalized discourse, such as legal discourse, as I have tried to demonstrate with regards to the discourse of convention refugee hearings. And his notions of revitalizing discourse through the infusion of works from different perspectives, including cultural, linguistic or economic, also make his work valuable for studies of intercultural communication of all sorts. The importance of Bakhtin’s work for a study of aestheticized discourse through the infusion of works from different perspectives, including cultural, linguistic or economic, also make his work valuable for studies of intercultural communication of all sorts.

The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship
What is interesting in the aesthetic act, therefore, is neither the form nor the content, the fabula or the siuzet, but the ways in which they are treated within my own world at a given moment. The same is true for a conversation that I might have with someone. For Bakhtin, the truly interesting aspect of a dialogic interaction is not the perspective of one speaker or another, but the way that their dialogue produces unexpected utterances, ideas and notions not typical of either speaker. One person directs his or her ideas toward the perceived ‘other.’ This other understands the utterance according to a particular set of contextual elements and then responds, taking for granted certain kinds of contextual constants but adding to what was just said. This way, the conversation creatively constructs dialogue in the space that exists between the two speakers. In such a model, no single speaker is complete because she or he needs the other to fill-in the spaces that she or he cannot see and she or he needs to become answerable for the utterances of the other.

When applied to the novel, this theory suggests (as Kristeva did) that there is a complex dialogue (in text) that goes on between the author and his or her characters, particularly the hero, the reader and the characters, and the reader and the author (via the characters). In this respect, the reader becomes another character, whose point of view (which is peculiarly situated) gives particular meaning to the interaction that is not only unique to the text at hand, but unique as well to the particular context within which the text is read. The next time, the reader will be differently situated, if only on account of his or her being familiar with the text from the first reading.

This theory should be studied by those concerned with the sociohistorical moment of utterances, broadly conceived. For persons interested in the novel as a living interaction, which not only exists (in memory) long after being read but which is reborn differently with each subsequent reading, the theory of dialogism is essential. Because it touches on such fundamental human concerns as creativity, it also bears deeply upon questions of originality, repeatability, de-valorization (i.e. of ‘privileged discourses’), and so on. The theory also speaks to the attempts undertaken in society to isolate, vilify, consecrate and otherwise demarcate some texts or discursive practices from others by showing that speech is an act that addresses particular situations and that uses materials drawn from previous speech acts and previous speakers. Its implications for political work are therefore far-ranging.

Bakhtin and Literary Analysis

There is no ‘Bakhtinian method’ for analyzing literary texts. At first this looks to be a drawback, but in fact it forces the theoretician to recognize that the literary text is not some mechanical contraption to be assembled and disassembled by trained practitioners. A Bakhtin-inspired theoretician applies some of the critical notions to illuminate rather than objectify the literary text. Just as Jakobson’s theory has its own genre, poetry, and its own corpus of authors, especially Baudelaire and the Russian poets, Bakhtin’s theory is also demarcated by its own objectives and its paradigm. And just as the key to formalism lies in a careful reading of poetry, the key to dialogism lies in a careful reading of dialogic prose. The best description of Bakhtin’s theory Fyodor Dostoevsky short story called Bobok. So rather than offering a long introduction to Bakhtin’s work, I will simply recall the story of Bobok and examine it in light of Bakhtinian categories.

Bobok is an authentic carnivalesque text. The narrator, Ivan Ivanovich, is accused by Simon Ardalyonovich of being constantly intoxicated. This state apparently gives Ivan the ability to perceive things otherwise invisible. But Ivanovich disputes Ardalyonovich’s accusation, so the reader cannot be sure of Ivanovich’s actual state. Ivanovich then goes on to describe himself as ‘timid’, but then recalls that Ardalyonovich makes him out ‘to be mad.’ The only adjective that they both agree on is that Ivanovich is ‘literary.’ So Ivanovich is described, and he even describes himself, as neither this nor that, neither here nor there.

The setting of the story is a graveyard during a burial and is, like Ivanovich’s condition, betwixt-and-between, somewhere between two states (living and dead, up and down, worldly and non-worldly). This notion is crucial to carnival as it denotes the strangeness of being neither here nor there, i.e. being neither inside nor outside, neither awake nor sleeping, neither living nor dead, neither sober nor drunk. In short, within a few lines at the very opening of this short story, the nature of fiction as perceived by Bakhtin is wonderfully described.

Bakhtin’s theory insists upon the humanity of literary discourse, its openness and accessibility to the world at large. Ivanovich, following the recounting of the incident between him and his friend, immediately pauses and says ‘how can people be so blunt in print? In print everything must be noble, full of ideas, but this!’ The setting-off of literary discourse according to formal conventions, style or content is refused by Bakhtin, and the exemplification of this refusal also occurs at the outset of this story. The narrator of this story suggests that ‘the cleverest of all, is the man who calls himself a fool at least once a month — nowadays an unheard of talent.’ This suggests that the carnival of Lent as event, a yearly festival when all things are seen as (potentially) their opposite, is a healthy and necessary state of affairs. The narrator himself also suggests that he is succumbing to madness, for he ‘sees and hears very odd things. Not exactly voices, but as if somebody close to me was going ’bobok, bobok, bobok!’’

So the first element of this analysis is the carnivalization of the text, recognizing its betwixt-and-between character as revelatory, composed of voices, rich in sights and sounds, and topys-turvy, inverted. A literary analysis undertaken in this vein recognizes the peculiar capacities and characteristics of literature, and a further examination of this story, with reference to some of Bakhtin’s critical notions, helps us to clarify what these characteristics are.

The story itself is a window to Bakhtin’s approach. The narrator, realizing that ‘something strange’ is happening to him (just as something strange is happening to the reader), comes across a funeral of a distant relative of his. He does not participate directly in the events, but rather watches from a distance because he is poorly dressed and badly-regarded by other relatives. He describes the scene, noting that the smell of rotting corpses is overwhelming, and that the dead bodies displayed in the palls make him ‘dream.’ It is a cold October day, between summer and winter, when things are apparently dying, only to be revived in the spring. Again, the whole scene evokes elements of Bakhtin’s own vision of literature as down-to-earth, and privileged (but in a journalistic rather than ‘belles lettres’ sense) because it is able to describe all aspects of human experience, including the temperature, smells, sights and sounds of the occasion. When Bakhtin analyzes context, each possible detail contributes to the nature of the utterances spoken, and herein Dostoevsky shows how such analysis should be done.

The narrator then sits down to reflect upon ‘the Moscow Exhibition’, from which he draws a number of conclusions related, once again, to literature. First, he reflects upon the nature of surprise, trying to understand whether it is good to be surprised at everything or nothing. Then, sitting down on a tombstone, he ‘let [his] thoughts stray.’ Eventually he lies down ‘on a long stone like a marble coffin’, and, most unexpectedly, begins to hear different voices. In his dreamlike half-asleep (?) state, he becomes privy to a multitude of voices that seem to emanate from beneath the surface of the earth, where the bodies of the recently-deceased lie.

Notice how close this whole description is to the act of reading; we enter a place of a moribund linguistic inscription, like the writing on tombstones (which the narrator would rather not read). In our dreamlike state (of absorbing the text) we become sensitive to voices that lie below the surface. Eventually these voices take form in our minds, as though the ‘dead’ characters are given new life. And eventually, we cannot distinguish between the people amongst whom we are, and the people who are created (through our own interaction) in literature. In short, just as the ‘Bobok’ provided a good description of literature according to Bakhtin, it has now provided a good description of the act of reading.
The characters who speak underground come from all walks of life. Some of them are just witnessing the revival of their voices following their death, others are succumbing to silence and decay after having experienced their brief rebirth, while still others are in the height of their rebirth as characters. So the community of speakers is continuously in a state of flux, with new voices and perspectives being added, and others fading away or dying. The period during which the body is revived in its new state, which just happens to be purely linguistic and ‘concentrated in the mind’, lasts for a few months; afterwards, the dead body utters one sound, ‘bobok’, as though to indicate that a vital spark remains. This is a wonderful description of the ‘community of speakers’ described by Bakhtin, whose voices emerge and die out continuously. The individuation of each voice, which is the basic definition of ‘character’ in the Bakhtin opus, is a measure of the importance that Bakhtin applied to our linguistic existence as opposed to (say) our psychological makeup or our actions.

The advantage of the state prior to ‘bobok’ is the advantage of all novelistic discourse: everything at all can be uttered. This being the case, the characters of ‘Bobok’ decide to ‘abandon all shame’ and to tell the truth: ‘It’s not possible to live on earth without lying, because life and lies are synonymous; well, here we’ll tell the truth for fun. Damn it, the grave means something, you know! We’ll all tell the stories of our lives and not be ashamed of anything.... Let’s strip ourselves naked’! This whole setting is an ideal description of dialogism; there is a free and unfettered dialogue. There are no constraints, no censorship, no shame, nothing to lose. People who participate in this kind of interaction are likely to learn things that, living ‘on earth’, they cannot learn. This is the privilege of this strange state.

The wacky dialogue of ‘Bobok’ goes on, with insults and innuendos and interchanges between this strange lot. Suddenly, the narrator sneezes, and ‘everything became as silent as the grave, the whole thing vanished like a dream.’ He doesn’t understand why, but he concludes that ‘they must have some secret unknown to mortals, that they are careful to conceal from every mortal.’ He realizes that this place of interaction was a model of debauchery, ‘the debauching of the last aspirations, depravity in crumbling and decaying corpses, — not sparing even the last moments of consciousness!’ And he concludes, in an optimistic tone, that ‘I shall visit other classes of graves, I shall listen everywhere. That’s it, one must listen everywhere, not only at one place, in order to form an understanding. Perhaps one may stumble on some consolation as well.’

The length of my citations, and the importance I have allocated to this story, seem to suggest that we can read Bakhtin through this short tale. This is exactly my point, and by examining the basic notions of Bakhtin with reference to the aforementioned descriptions and citations, the reader will have a chance to see the fortuitousness of such an approach.

One of the characteristics of the ‘Bobok’ story is the strange dialogue that occurs between the characters. If it is to be fully understood in a Bakhtinian sense, dialogue must go beyond the extensive set of conditions fashioned in the exchange between persons, and include the communication that occurs between differences. Differences, — of perception, point of view, time, place and situation, — therefore make up a huge portion of Bakhtin’s philosophical enterprise. Two characters cannot occupy the same space (in the largest sense of the word), and therefore their interaction is founded upon difference. But the relationships implied in the dialogic relationship must become utterances, knowable to the reader through a creator whose position it expresses. This creator is not the author, but the speaker who utters, and then receives a reply which comes in the form of a dialogic reaction. Each voice that the narrator of ‘Bobok’ is able to hear expressed as a position, a difference, or some relationship defined by the speech situation. This relationship, whereby each character has a life of his/her own, is in Bakhtin’s view an approach to the novel established by Dostoevski. The power of Dostoevsky’s novels emerges from the relationships set up therein, that is, once again, it is not the point of view of a particular character but the way that she or he shapes this point of view in light of the dissension of other characters bearing different points of view.

The novel that contains a multitude of voices, point of views, and autonomous characters is deemed polyphonic by Bakhtin, a term that originates in the domain of music. It is used by Bakhtin interchangeably with the other overriding term, dialogic, to characterize the particularity of Dostoevsky’s artistic achievement. The range of points of view represented in the short text Bobok is a testament to Dostoevsky’s achievement, for it alone contains the voices of the young and old, distinguished and loathed, beautiful and disgusting, all in a situation of riotous interaction.

Dostoevsky’s novels are also characterized by their in-between spaces, previously discussed, which suggests things like shared meaning, struggle, multiplicity, diversity, randomness, stratification, all summed up in Bakhtin’s own term, heteroglossia. This heteroglossia ensures the dynamics of language in light of two forces, a centrifugal force which tends to limit language according to profession, class, style, and period (recall the earlier discussion of ‘professionalization’ of language use), and a general centripetal force that decentralizes and disunifies language. Again, the uproarious situations, the frequent interjections, the loud assertions, and the linguistic conflict permeate the entire story. The constant renewal of voices ensures that no single voice will ever come to dominate or control the polyphony.

This description of languages limited by the repetition of particular speech situations leads to another of Bakhtin’s notions, speech genres, which denotes the ways that speech is organized or cast in particular situations in terms of genre, length, and compositional structure. In this sense, the ‘speech genre’ goes beyond its linguistic cousin, register, to include social elements of speech. This allows speakers to orient their languages properly for particular situations, and their mastery is similar to one’s mastery of languages as a whole. There are many kinds of speech genres, from greetings, congratulations, wishes, business, or inquiries about somebody’s well-being. A novel will contain many of these genres, sometimes couched in particular forms of expression, so that there will be imitations of parliamentary discourse, utterances of the poor to one another, genres appropriate to particular formal situations like addressing a person of authority, and so on. In a story like ‘Bobok’, one of the pleasures is to read how these genres are subverted, sometimes through laughter, sometimes through overt disrespect, sometimes through interruption, and sometimes through the general hullabaloo — subversions that occur seldom in the more rigid world of daily life. This subversion is also an element of civilized literature, and testament to the novel’s (or in this case the dialogic short story’s) ability to incorporate huge elements of human experience.

Despite the open-ended ness of the novel, it nonetheless has an ability to bridge differences through communicative strategies. Addressivity is the condition of the world as it presents itself to consciousness. Our relation to this world is communicative, which implies that we are dialogic by nature. The structuring force that organizes communicative relations between self and self, self and other, different selves, or self and the world, requires that connections be made between disparate materials, a function that Bakhtin calls architectonics.

The questions of self and other, so central to Bakhtin’s opus, also bring us to the relationship between author and hero. In the collection of essays brought together as Art and Answerability, Bakhtin speaks of the author-hero relationship. The hero creates an autonomous hero who then incarnates acts out one possible philosophical perspective, as it were, independent of the author’s meddling. This way the author can see the consequences of a particular point of view as it interacts with other possible points of view, incarnated in other characters who themselves have other points of view. The archetype for this is the novel Crime and Punishment, in which Raskolnikov tries out the idea that it is justifiable to kill slovenly and superfluous individuals for the betterment of the community. In so doing, he also is given the opportunity to evaluate if he is a ‘superman’ character, able to step over the slain and move forward in his quest. In this story the detective represents civic justice, Sonya the Orthodox religious perspective, and so forth.

The other key terms in the Bakhtin glossary include chronotope, the time (chrono)-space (tope) relationship, which is peculiar in Bakhtin’s work because he doesn’t favor one or the other but looks at them as utterly interdependent. This is another way in which Bakhtin views all meaning as an interactive process, where individual parts relate to the whole. This interrelation of parts from various domains recalls heteroglossia, previously described, and hybridization of discourse, which suggests a mingling of different linguistic consciousness.
How to Employ Bakhtin's Insights

It is obvious from the previous discussion that as much as formalism was applicable to a poetic analyses, dialogism is most applicable to prosaic ones. In fact, Bakhtin spoke out against the poetic genre, characterizing it as monologic which, as the name suggests, is the very opposite of the dialogic texts that were of interest to him. Monologic texts have one authoritative voice that dominates and suppresses, refusing the potential that interaction opens up. It would be a mistake, however, to say that Bakhtin disliked poetry. In fact, in the long tradition of Russian literary figures, Bakhtin memorized huge tracts of poetry, which he would spill out on occasion. But his work was just not oriented toward a discussion of the poetic genre or, for that matter, the theatrical one. This has not stopped contemporary critics from extending his work to un-Bakhtin like texts, but considering his admirancy in this regard, critics should be wary.

My own sense is that Bakhtin was interested in idealized spaces, spaces containing the greatest potential for unfettered interaction. The carnival, the dialogue, and the dialogic novel all share the capacity for the inclusion of huge and diverse material. It should also be noted that Bakhtin had no fear of intense, even violent confrontation. The carnival is not some country fair. It is a place of radical creativity, intense sexuality, grotesque spectacle, and constant inversion of natural order. This is a dangerous place, just as the novel is a dangerous place, because it contains the seeds for unexpected juxtaposition and potentially unwelcome confrontation.

As the Dostoevski example suggests, there is a real Bakhtin canon. Bakhtin is so favorable to Dostoevski, and has learned so much from his work, that it is sometimes difficult for the sensitive reader of both Bakhtin and Dostoevski to distinguish between the two. This is yet another proof that careful readers of literature have already absorbed literary ‘theory’, and my own use of Dostoevski to explain Bakhtin is hopeful evidence of this.

One might also suggest that Bakhtin’s partiality to the Dostoevski corpus leads him to unfairly condemn whole genres (poetry or theatre) or else great authors, on the basis of his categories. As much as Dostoevski serves the role of the dialogic author, and Dickens the example of the author of hybridized texts, Tolstoy becomes the author of monologic texts. Once again, this has leads defensive critics scurrying to the defense of their favorite authors, which is justifiable but probably misses Bakhtin’s point about ideal spaces.

Bakhtin’s Blindspot

One of the principal problems with this theory, which is not really a flaw but rather a consequence of its strange origins, is the difficulty that it poses for contemporary readers. The examples used by Bakhtin are little-known, many of the texts and authors he refers to are obscure, his style is often heavy and laborious, and the whole aura surrounding these rat-eaten, smoked, blown-up, lost, copied, mistranslated, and strangely compiled texts makes for heavy going. Readers have to immerse themselves into a whole unfamiliar world, lest they be tempted to co-opt Bakhtin to incompatible projects, or reduce Bakhtin to a small number of trite insights.

The other problem concerns methodology. This is related to the first point, because the careful reader of Bakhtin’s work is bound to note the way that texts turn on themselves, words appear to mean different things in different places and conclusions don’t always seem to follow the arguments. Further, although the examples provided are extremely illuminating, they are often few and far between, which puts the burden of the application upon the critic.

The next problem, also unrelated to Bakhtin himself, concerns the ways in which Bakhtin has been co-opted into various national traditions. If one were to read the small number of critical works written about Bakhtin in French, she or he would likely come away with a very skewed vision of Bakhtin, and might lead one to question the value of his work for literary studies beyond structuralism. On the other hand, the obscurity of much of his work, or at least its context, means that he can also be made to sound like a theologian of the religious American right, or a social democrat of the syndicalist left. This means that readers must read his works in their original texts, or risk being led around by the proverbial nose.

Bibliography


