Bakhtin and his Others

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(Inter)subjectivity, Chronotope, Dialogism

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TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

Unless otherwise stated, translations are by the authors.

With the exception of some commonly occurring names, Russian words are transliterated in a simplified version of Library of Congress system (without diacritics). The soft sign is not used and *ц* is transliterated as *c*.

Introduction

THE ACTING SUBJECT OF BAKHTIN

Liisa Steinby and Tintti Klapuri

The international study of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin has recently witnessed a significant reorientation. Bakhtin was originally introduced in the West, from the 1960s to the 1980s, by two important structuralist theoreticians, Julia Kristeva and Tzvetan Todorov, who represented him as a forerunner of structuralist thinking. In Bakhtin's 'dialogism' and 'polyphony' they saw forms of intertextuality (Kristeva 1980; Todorov 1984), defined by Kristeva as follows: 'Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality comes to take the place of the notion of intersubjectivity' (Kristeva 1980, 66). In this interpretation, Bakhtin is placed within a framework of thinking in which the constitutive meaning of the interpretative subject is erased and the subject of narration is 'reduced to a code, to a nonperson, to an anonymity' (Kristeva 1980, 74). As an extension of this, it is in the framework of late structuralist discourse pluralism that Bakhtin's concept of 'dialogism' has since the 1980s flourished especially in the United States (Holquist 2002). This interpretation of Bakhtin as a textualist is now recognized as an undue 'familiarization', occurring in an intellectual atmosphere in which structuralism was dominant (cf. Zbinden 2006).

The recent reassessment of Bakhtin's thinking has resulted from the contextualization of his work in its original intellectual background: on the one hand in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German thought in the areas of philosophy, aesthetics and the theory of the novel, on the other in a Russian and early Soviet context, which itself was in general deeply influenced by German thinking. This work of reassessment, due largely to British scholars – among them David Shepherd (e.g. Shepherd 1998), Ken Hirschkop (1999), Galin Tihanov (2000) and Craig Brandist (2002; see also Brandist and Lähteenmäki 2010) – has contributed to our present new understanding of Bakhtin's thought. The most important German sources

of Bakhtin's work are identified in this new scholarship as being Kant and Hegel; the Neo-Kantians; the 'philosophers of life'; Georg Lukács, in both his early, Neo-Kantian–Hegelian and his later Marxist phases (cf. Tihanov 2000); the phenomenologists Edmund Husserl and Max Scheler (cf. Poole 2001; Brandist 2002); and thinkers who, while proceeding from philosophy, figure among the founders of sociology, including Georg Simmel. Among the Neo-Kantians, those most important for Bakhtin are considered to be Hermann Cohen and Ernst Cassirer (cf. Steinby 2011; Poole 1998), while the relevant 'philosophers of life' include such diverse thinkers as Wilhelm Dilthey and Henri Bergson.[1] An essential cause of the earlier misunderstanding was that Bakhtin notoriously tended to leave his sources unmentioned, especially philosophical ones – perhaps primarily because in the Stalinist era it might have been dangerous to quote a 'bourgeois' thinker. The writers he drew upon were in any case most probably familiar to his Russian fellow-intellectuals; when his writings were introduced in the West in the 1960s, however, this background was not recognized by his new audience. He was therefore read as more original than he actually was, even as an entirely unique thinker, without precedent, whose main theoretical concepts – the polyphonic novel, the chronotope, and carnivalism – were entirely his own creation. In addition to the work of British scholars, the studies of Caryl Emerson and Gary Saul Morson (Morson and Emerson 1990; Emerson 1997), working in the United States, and Renate Lachmann (1982) and Matthias Freise (1993) in Germany, have helped to contextualize Bakhtin's thought and have hence contributed to the ways in which Bakhtin's ideas now appear in a new, less unique light.

A fact which comes into sight when Bakhtin is contextualized in German idealist thinking is that he formulates problems and resolves them within the framework of the philosophy of subjectivity, with a strong emphasis on intersubjectivity (cf. Hirschkop 1999, 5, 52, 58, 86, 153, 240; Brandist 2002, 40, 44, 81). Questions of subject and intersubjectivity have been given different interpretations and different weights in understanding Bakhtin.

The Question of Subject(ivity)

Since we are used to reading Bakhtin together with P. N. Medvedev's *Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1978 [1928]) and V. N. Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1986 [1929]) – works that for a long time were attributed to Bakhtin (cf. Brandist 2002, 8–9) – we tend to think about his idea(s) of intersubjectivity in terms of his view of language. Together with his above-mentioned co-workers in the so-called Bakhtin Circle, Bakhtin and his dialogism are seen as a forerunner of the social, or 'sociological', conception of language: speakers use discourse types that are socially and ideologically

determined. 'Heteroglossia' then refers to the plurality of socially determined discourses, and 'dialogism' to the encountering or mixing of these discourses in speech. Focusing on the concrete speech situation, however, underlines not only the different sociolects of language but also the active role played by the individual speaker, a view that has affinity to later developments in linguistics. While structuralist theories of language tended to reduce the speaking subject to a position assigned to him by the linguistic system (cf. Benveniste 1966), in linguistic pragmatics – especially following the 'interactional turn' (cf. Tanskanen et al. 2010) – the subject in a speech situation not only makes choices from among a vast number of socially relevant modes of discourse, but also responds individually to the specific content and circumstances of his or her interlocutor's message.[2] In this theoretical framework, 'intersubjectivity' refers to the individual's involvement, in any given encounter with interlocutors, in a process of speech production based on a variety of socially determined discourses.

However, there are also scholars who in view of the newly uncovered German connection doubt whether this social (or 'sociological') emphasis on discourse is Bakhtin's fundamental and original view. In an article published in 1985, Hirschkop writes that 'an idealist conception of the subject – as the primary, irreducible unit of human society, ideally autonomous and free – is ultimately preserved [in Bakhtin's thinking]' (Hirschkop 1985, 770).[3] In their recent, quite fierce attack on Bakhtin, Jean-Paul Bronckart and Christian Bota claim that this 'idealistic' view of the subject is Bakhtin's actual conception; the 'sociological' and truly dialogical view of subjectivity and discourse derives from Voloshinov (see Bronckart and Bota 2011, 185, 293, 539–41). Here some conceptual clarification is needed. To what extent is the 'idealistic' view of subjectivity in the German philosophies in Bakhtin's background contrary to the idea of the social determination of subjectivity? Is intersubjectivity excluded from this view of the individual subject?

In German philosophy, from Johann Gottfried Herder, the Romantics and Wilhelm von Humboldt to Dilthey and Scheler, the individual subject is in no way a self-sufficient atom or monad. For example, when Herder writes of the person acquiring his or her mother tongue that 'he is not only a child of reason, but a nursling of the reason of others. Into whose hands he falls, decides about his forming',[4] he relativizes not only the universal reason of the Enlightenment but also the self-sufficiency of the individual as a subject of cognition and action. Language was for Herder and his follower Humboldt the true realm of intersubjectivity: it is language that endows the linguistic community with its common, shared view of the world. In addition, all cultural products, such as works of art, regardless of their origin in the creative work of the artist, exist as artefacts bearing an intersubjectively attainable import.

Neo-Kantian philosophy saw itself as a whole as a philosophy of culture, comprising science, morality and the arts; this means that culture in its intersubjective existence was at the focus of interest for the thinkers closest to Bakhtin. Thus the revelation of Bakhtin's German intellectual background does not mean that he was confined to an 'idealistic' concept of subjectivity which excludes the social dimension.

However, there is more to Bakhtin's concepts of the individual subject and intersubjectivity. The philosophies of language and of culture were of major interest for Bakhtin; yet his primary interest was in the individual as an ethically acting subject. In this volume, we suggest that the ethical subject is at the core of Bakhtin's thinking about subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

The Acting Subject

Ethics was of course one of the major fields not only in Kant's system of philosophy, but also in Neo-Kantian thought such as that of Cohen. Bakhtin, however, criticized this ethics for its great level of abstraction: it is unable to grasp the concrete acting individual, making ethical decisions in actual life situations. Bakhtin's earliest writings concern precisely this problematic. We have fragments of his unfinished ethical *magnum opus* in his *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (1993), written around 1920–24 or possibly somewhat later,[5] and in 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity' (1990), written around 1920–23 or possibly 1920–26. Thus the early aesthetics in 'Author and Hero' was planned as part of a major work on ethics (cf. Bakhtin 1993, 54; Bocharov 1993, xxi–xxiv).

Neither of these early texts is among the favourites of readers and scholars. In scholarly works on Bakhtin they are mostly dealt with in passing, often with seeming reluctance and hesitation. The reason for this is obvious: there appears to be an embarrassing discrepancy between these texts of abstract philosophizing and Bakhtin's later, famous texts on more concrete subjects, such as the novels of Dostoevsky and Rabelais or chronotopic forms in the novel. It is in these early texts that the direct influence of German philosophy is at its strongest (e.g. Brandist 2002, 40). Morson and Emerson, for example, point out the Neo-Kantian influence observable in Bakhtin's early writings, but they see this as something that is totally left behind in the 'mature' Bakhtin, and therefore as relatively insignificant. In their *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (1990), they discuss 'Author and Hero' and *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* briefly in the introductory chapter alone, since according to their view Bakhtin's early manuscripts from the 1920s do not suggest

a smooth continuity, but something closer to a decisive break – a watershed – between them and the works for which Bakhtin is currently best known […] If all

that Bakhtin had done was to restate and apply the ideas in these manuscripts, he
would not have become the original and profound thinker that he later became.
(Morson and Emerson 1990, 7)

Some scholars are, however, of the opposite view. Brandist contends that
Bakhtin succeeds in adding something new to the ideas of his German
predecessors by applying his ethical philosophy 'to the question of art in general
and of authorship in particular' (2002, 40). In his book from 1999 Hirschkop
goes still further, claiming that Bakhtin 'abandons his philosophical project
[in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*], but then, in effect, rewrites it, and not once,
but over and over again, never really moving on to a new problem' (1999, 54).
These views imply that one important perspective from which Bakhtin's later
work ought to be seen is his continuous commitment to problems of ethics,
as presented in his early ethical project. This is something we develop further
in the current volume. We also consider *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* as a key
text to understanding his concept of intersubjectivity, and consequently to the
derivative concepts of polyphony and dialogism.

   Toward a Philosophy of the Act was meant to be the introduction and beginning
of the first part of the *magnum opus*, dealing with the 'architectonic of the actual
world of the preformed act or deed – the world actually experienced, and not
the merely thinkable world' (Bakhtin 1993, 54). The work on aesthetics was
to be the second part, while the third and fourth parts were to deal with the
ethics of politics and with religion, respectively (Bakhtin 1993, 54; Bocharov
1993, xxi–xxiv). The project as a whole thus comprises different fields of
philosophy, organized under the ruling perspective of ethics. This dominant
position assigned to ethics is new, compared to Bakhtin's Neo-Kantian and
other philosophical sources. What is more, Bakhtin's claim that philosophy
has to be re-established as the study of the actual human act is not only new
compared to Kant and the Neo-Kantians, but actually transgresses the limits
of any philosophy. This is because his idea of a non-abstract philosophy is an
obvious *contradictio in adjecto*: can philosophy operate otherwise than in abstract
concepts? In Bakhtin's view, this is necessary. He criticizes the philosophy of
his day, and Neo-Kantianism in particular, for its endeavour to determine
the abstract, general laws of different domains of culture, such as Kant's
'categorical imperative' in the realm of ethics. According to Bakhtin, such
a philosophy does not deal at all with what actually should be taken as the
subject of the 'first philosophy': the unique ethical act of the individual human
subject involved in a concrete event of Being (Bakhtin 1993, 19–20).[6]

   By 'real' or 'concrete' human act Bakhtin thus refers to the act of an
individual participating in a concrete situation or 'event' (cf. Bakhtin 1990a,
14; Bakhtin 1993, 30–33, 56; Morson and Emerson 1990, 46, 98). An 'event'

for Bakhtin consists essentially of an encounter between human beings. As Brandist remarks, the Russian word 'event' (*sobytie*) also means 'co-being', and is for Bakhtin closely connected with the joint experience of two or more subjects (cf. Brandist 2002, 39). An event thus never consists of the encounter of a subject with an object alone; it always comprises the encounter with a co-subject, another person considered as a 'thou'. Being is thus basically intersubjective in its character; in the phrasing of Heidegger, Being (*Sein*) is essentially co-Being (*Mit-sein*) (cf. Heidegger 1979, 117–25). This was a common view in German philosophy from Herder onward. Encountering the other person as another subject has been discussed by thinkers from Herder and Friedrich Schleiermacher, through Hegel, to for example Dilthey, Cohen, Martin Buber and Scheler (cf. Hegel 1986, 244–50; Buber 2006; Scheler 1923), and Bakhtin's debt to these thinkers has been widely acknowledged. Bakhtin's emphasis on the ethical aspect of an encounter with the other is particularly strong: being in the world with other human subjects means for Bakhtin first and foremost that we are obliged to show 'responsibility' or 'answerability' (*otvetstvennost*) towards the others.

Thus the individual human being's thinking in a concrete human situation is 'participative' and 'unindifferent' thinking (Bakhtin 1993, 44), in which cognition contains a moment of 'ought', the obligation to perform an ethically responsible act. The individual 'understands the ought of his performed act, that is, *not* the abstract law of his act, but the actual, concrete ought conditioned by his unique place in the given context of the ongoing event' (Bakhtin 1993, 30; emphasis in the original). The subject in which Bakhtin is primarily interested is thus not the socially (or 'sociologically') determined subject but the individual as an ethically acting subject in a concrete human situation. Ethics presupposes a subject who is autonomous in the sense of being able to make choices: a being who lacks any freedom of choice cannot be the subject of an ethical act. It was Kant who first emphasized this aspect of morality: we have to presuppose a freely acting subject to make morality possible (see Kant 1975, 163). In this sense, and only in this one, are subjects for Bakhtin autonomous. This does not mean that as individuals they are free of any social determination; but insofar as we consider them as ethically acting persons, we have to assign to them the freedom of choice. From his early works onward, however, Bakhtin sees the problem of ethical action as lying in the fact that we do not make ethical decisions *in abstracto* but as part of a concrete event, i.e. in real encounters between two or more individuals.

By grounding his ethics, or his philosophy of the act, on the individual's actions in concrete situations in the real world, Bakhtin wanted to avoid the 'fatal theoreticism (the abstracting from my unique self) [which] occurs in formal ethics as well: its world of practical reason is in reality a theoretical world, and

not the world in which an act or deed is actually performed' (Bakhtin 1993, 27). That he failed in his attempt to found a new 'first philosophy' was more or less predictable: how could he possibly formulate a theory about the concrete act without relapsing into 'theoreticism'? However, we suggest that he did not abandon his project but found another way to carry it out: he turned to aesthetics and literary theory, because in the arts (more specifically in literature) he found the closest substitute for the longed-for new 'first philosophy'.

On the basis of 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', it is evident that what art deals with are for Bakhtin human beings, concrete individuals participating in concrete events. The author's task is to create an aesthetic object that is a 'consummated whole' of the hero and his lived life (cf. Bakhtin 1990a, 12, 13, 25). To him- or herself the individual is formless, among other things because he or she is constantly open to new acts (Bakhtin 1990a, 143); only another person, a creative artist who contemplates the person from a distance, is able to bestow upon him or her a 'consummating' or 'meaning-governed form' (Bakhtin 1990a, 25, 138). While abstract theories and concepts of philosophy and the sciences cannot grasp the concrete, acting individual, art seems to achieve what Bakhtin saw as the task of the 'first philosophy': it preserves the individual in his or her concreteness. More precisely, art is the only medium in which the individual is graspable as a whole. In turning to a theorization of art, particularly the novel, Bakhtin has thus not given up his primary interest in ethics: he does so because the ethically acting concrete individual is most completely presented in the arts.

Certain passages in the rather long and repetitive text of 'Author and Hero' show a clear affinity to the efforts of some post-Kantian philosophers to 'save' the unity of a human being in aesthetic perception. For Kant, the human being belongs simultaneously to two realms: the realm of nature and the realm of morality. As a being belonging to nature man is completely determined; as a moral being he is free. It is generally thought that Kant endeavoured to reconcile these contradictory aspects of the human being in his theory of aesthetic experience: aesthetic experience was meant to bridge the gap between 'theoretical reason', whose realm is nature, and 'practical reason', which concerns morality or ethics (cf. e.g. Gasché 2003). However, as the aesthetic experience for Kant excludes both cognition and morality, it is difficult to understand how this could be achieved. Cohen, in contrast, states in his aesthetic theory that both cognition and morality are included in the content of a work of art:

> A work of art must, *first*, be an object of nature and as such an object of the knowledge of nature. *Furthermore*, an artwork must be, along with the first precondition and in inner connection with it, an object of morality and

conceivable as a *pure* object of ethical knowledge. *Both of these conditions remain inescapable preconditions of a work of art and of artistic creativity.* (Cohen 1912, 80; emphasis in the original)[7]

Thus in the signifying aesthetic form a human being can be grasped both as a natural and as an ethical being. We find the very same idea in 'Author and Hero', where Bakhtin writes that 'the center of value for aesthetic objectivity is the *whole* of the hero and of the event of his lived life, and all values that are ethical and cognitive must be subordinated to that whole', and that '[e]very concrete value in an artistic whole is rendered meaningful in two value-contexts: in the context of a hero (the cognitive-ethical context) and in the encompassing and consummating context of an author (the cognitive-ethical plus the formal-aesthetic context)' (Bakhtin 1990a, 13, 230–31; emphasis in the original). 'Cognitive' is here used following the conceptualization in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), referring to the 'pure theoretical reason' by which we grasp natural phenomena; 'cognitive-ethical' thus means a combination of the worlds of nature and of morality. Bakhtin puts it even more clearly in 'The Problem of Content, Material and Form in Verbal Art': it is art that '*creates the concrete intuitive unity of these two worlds*' (1990b, 279; emphasis in the original), i.e. of human beings as naturally determined *and* as free, ethically acting subjects. The content of a work of art comprises both aspects of life, the natural and the ethical, and they are reconciled in the aesthetic form of a work of art. Thus art is not only the 'first philosophy' but also the 'last' or consummative one, a realm of culture which is able to deal with the 'double nature' of man, who as a natural being is determined but whom we nevertheless consider as an autonomous ethical subject.

This interpretation opens up a view not only on Bakhtin's philosophy of art, including his more specific theorizing on the novel, but also on his understanding of intersubjectivity. If the philosophy of the act, i.e. of real human beings making ethical choices in concrete 'events' or encounters with other human beings, is the perspective applied by Bakhtin in his writing on art and language, the most fundamental concepts will be 'subject' and 'intersubjectivity' as understood in the framework of his ethical thinking. Therefore, dialogism and heteroglossia are phenomena on the level of interpersonal relations – in which the social aspect is included – rather than on that of the general social determination of language. Moreover, in the aesthetic creation of forms the ethical aspect of the content is essential. 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity' is Bakhtin's earliest account of how this creation of the meaningful aesthetic form or 'architectonics' of a work of art takes place; *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963) is another (cf. Steinby 2011).