

Bakhtinian Thought

An introductory reader

Simon Dentith



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BAKHTINIAN THOUGHT

Mikhail Bakhtin, and the writers associated with him, have come to be recognised as writers of trail-blazing importance. Working in the extraordinarily difficult conditions of Stalinist Russia, they nevertheless produced a body of writing in literary theory, linguistics, the history of the novel, philosophy, and what Bakhtin called 'philosophical anthropology', which continues to inspire and challenge people working in a number of different areas. Above all, Bakhtin insists on locating all utterances, whether spoken or literary, between the participants in a dialogue and thus involves them in considerations of power and authority.

This introduction and reader serves a double function. In the first place, Simon Dentith provides a lucid and approachable introduction of the work of Bakhtin and his circle, taking the reader helpfully through the many areas of their thought, and indicating the points of controversy, difficulty and excitement. This introductory section culminates in a discussion of the particular emphases lent by Bakhtin to current debates in literary theory. The other feature of the book is the anthology of writing by Bakhtin, Voloshinov and Medvedev, drawn from all the major areas of their work. This provides an especially helpful reader for a body of work otherwise published in disparate and relatively inaccessible forms. Special emphasis has been given to the still unsurpassed linguistic thought of Voloshinov, and the practical analyses of the novel found in Bakhtin's writing on Dostoevsky and Dickens.

This book will be especially interesting to readers new to the work of Bakhtin and his circle. The combination of an introduction and an anthology will allow such readers a context for their reading of Bakhtin, an indication of his importance for contemporary debates in literature, language and social history, and the opportunity to engage directly with the writings of this important and indeed, for the student of literary theory, essential writer.

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BAKHTINIAN THOUGHT

An introductory reader

SIMON DENTITH



LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1995
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk.”

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Reprinted in 1996

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Dentith, Simon

Bakhtinian Thought: An introductory reader/Simon Dentith.
p. cm.—(Critical readers in theory and practice)
Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Bakhtin, M.M. (Mikhal Mikhailovich), 1895–1975.
2. Philology. 3. Criticism—Soviet Union. 4. Philosophy,
Russian—20th century. I. Title. II. Series.

P85.B22D46 1995
801'.95' 092—dc20 94—16524

ISBN 0-203-43044-1 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-39623-5 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0-415-07751-6 (hbk)
ISBN 0-415-11899-9 (pbk)

For my parents, Edward Dentith and Ann Dentith

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General editor's preface

The interpretation of culture never stands still. Modern approaches to familiar problems adjust our sense of their importance, and new ideas focus on fresh details or remake accepted concepts. This has been especially true over recent years when developments across the humanities have altered so many ideas.

For many this revolution in understanding has been exciting but difficult, involving the need to integrate advanced theoretical work with attention to specific texts and issues. This series attempts to approach this difficulty in a new way by putting together a new balance of basic texts and detailed, introductory exposition.

Each volume in the series will be organized in two parts. [Part One](#) provides a thorough account of the topic under discussion. It details important concepts, historical developments and the contemporary context of interpretation and debate. [Part Two](#) provides an anthology of classic texts or—in the case of very recent work—essays by leading writers which offer focused discussions of particular issues. Commentary and editorial material provided by the author connect the explanations in [Part One](#) to the materials in [Part Two](#), and in this way the reader moves comfortably between original work and enabling introduction.

The series will include volumes on topics which have been of particular importance recently. Some books will introduce specific theoretical ideas; others will re-examine bodies of literary or other material in the light of current thinking. But as a whole the series aims to reflect, in a clear-minded and approachable way, the changing ways in which we understand the expanding field of modern literary and cultural studies.

Rick Rylance

Preface

It is now some twenty-five years since the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) began to make an impact in the West—since, that is, the publication of *Rabelais and his World* in 1968. During that time his influence has grown enormously, not only in literary criticism but also in history, anthropology, linguistics and philosophy. But during that time also, the nature of his influence has been constantly changing, both as the range and variety of Bakhtin's own writing has gradually emerged and been translated, and as the intellectual, social and political climate in Europe and America has altered. In the heady days of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Bakhtin, in France at any rate, was the celebrator of carnival, of the force that subverts and upturns everything official, authoritarian and one-sidedly serious. As the work on Dostoevsky and the novel became known, Bakhtin came to be seen more as the supreme theorist of the novel, speaking directly to the openness of the novel form and praising Dostoevsky above all as the novelist of polyphony. When the connection became established between Bakhtin and two other Russian writers from the 1920s, P.N. Medvedev and V.N. Voloshinov, they jointly appeared as critics of Saussurean linguistics and Russian Formalism, and thus, to their readers in the West in the 1970s and 1980s, as pointing beyond the structuralism and formalism then prevalent. But during those decades also, different Bakhtins have appeared, first in Russian and then in English. He can now be seen as providing a profound, socially and linguistically grounded history of the novel; and also as a philosopher who emerges from early twentieth-century neo-Kantianism and in whose thinking ethics and the I—Thou relationship are central.

Moreover, this real diversity within the writings of Bakhtin and those connected with—what has been called the Bakhtin circle—has meant that he has been appropriated by writers and critics of widely different intellectual and political persuasions. In Russia, indeed, his apparent commitment to some kind of Christianity—though *what* kind exactly

remains unclear—has meant that he has appealed, though not exclusively, to intellectuals of a conservative, Orthodox cast. In the West, by contrast, he is appealed to by writers whose allegiances are as various as liberal humanism, deconstruction, and Marxism—though Bakhtin's relationship to Marxism is as controversial as his relationship to Christianity. There are many now, doubtless, who would disclaim allegiance to any of these 'isms' and simply describe themselves as Bakhtinians. But at all events, there is now a struggle going on over the legacy of Bakhtin, Voloshinov and Medvedev, as indeed one would expect over the meanings and direction of any large, attractive and fruitful body of writing, especially when it is complicated, as it is in this case, by difficult questions of attribution, censorship, and a thirty-five-year interruption in publication history.

This book is an introduction to the work of Bakhtin and his circle, and therefore aims to give its readers some of the materials for judging amongst these various positions. I am suspicious of any attempt to find a real or definitive Bakhtin that will explain or explain away the evident diversity that marks his writing, especially if you include in that the writing of Voloshinov and Medvedev. In my account of the writings I shall seek to give as full weight as possible to the arguments as they actually appear—and not seek to find elaborate counter-interpretations of them, a practice often resorted to in the sometimes justified belief that conditions of publication in the Soviet Union demanded elaborate ruses and, especially, bows in the direction of the official version of Marxism. I am an agnostic on the question of the disputed authorship, for it has been strongly suggested, and widely believed, that the books attributed to Voloshinov and Medvedev were actually written by Bakhtin himself. However, in the first chapter I will set out what is at stake in the controversy that surrounds this question. None of which is to say that I am indifferent to the various claims that have been made about Bakhtin and his circle, or that I do not find some aspects of their writing more appealing than others, for I am especially attracted by the socially and historically grounded account of language and writing that emerges in the writings of the 1930s and in Voloshinov's book on language. You will see these preferences reflected in the anthology, and you may, if you choose, discount them as you read the text that follows.

The book falls into two parts. The first part consists of an introduction, which aims to give an overview of the writings of Bakhtin, and of the relevant works by Voloshinov and Medvedev. The second part consists of an anthology of these writings, and a brief word is required in explanation of my selection here. Bakhtin, notoriously, is not a succinct writer, his expansiveness and repetitions reflecting a philosophical and critical attitude

in favour of argument by accumulation and averse to theoretical synopsis. This makes his writing difficult to anthologize, especially if one has a preference, as I do, for complete sections of argument rather than excerpted paragraphs. As a result I have chosen, in the case of Bakhtin, a small number of lengthy extracts rather than a large number of short ones, and I have chosen extracts that demonstrate Bakhtin's actual analytical practice. As to Voloshinov and Medvedev, in each case I have chosen an extract which is sufficient to give you a sense of their distinctive manner of argument, and which equally gives some sense of their wider intellectual position. It need hardly be added that the book only aims to orient you with respect to a considerable body of writing, and that it is hoped that it will both encourage and equip you to embark on a much fuller engagement with the writings of Bakhtin and his circle.

Acknowledgements

My primary thanks are due to the many translators and editors of Bakhtin and his circle who have made an introductory work of this kind possible. Thanks are also due to Rick Rylance, Kay Richardson and John O'Brien who read all or part of the manuscript, who made many helpful suggestions, and who saved me from many embarrassing errors. Any that remain are of course solely my own responsibility.

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Academic Press, Inc., for 'Language, speech, and utterance' and 'Verbal interaction', in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* by V.N.Vološinov, translated by Ladislav Matejka and I.R.Titunik, copyright © 1973 by Seminar Press; the Johns Hopkins University Press for 'The proper formulation of the problem of the poetic construction', 'Social evaluation and its role', and 'Social evaluation and the concrete utterance', in *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics* by M.M.Bakhtin and P.N.Medvedev, translated by Albert J. Wehrle, copyright © 1978 by the Johns Hopkins University Press; the University of Minnesota Press and Manchester University Press for 'The hero's monologic discourse and narrational discourse in Dostoevsky's short novels', in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* by M.M.Bakhtin, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson, copyright © 1984 by the University of Minnesota Press; the University of Texas Press for 'Heteroglossia in the novel', reprinted from 'Discourse in the novel' in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* by M.M.Bakhtin, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, copyright © 1981 by the University of Texas Press; the MIT Press for 'The grotesque image of the body and its sources', in *Rabelais and His World* by M.M.Bakhtin, translated by Helen Iswolsky, copyright © 1968 by the MIT Press.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations have been used:

- AA M.M.Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M.M.Bakhtin*, edited by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (University of Texas Press, 1990).
- DI M.M.Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist; translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (University of Texas Press, 1981).
- FM M.M.Bakhtin and P.N.Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, translated by Albert J.Wehrle (Harvard University Press, 1985).
- FMC V.N.Vološinov, *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, translated by I.R.Titunik (Academic Press, New York, 1976).
- MPL V.N.Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, translated by Ladislav Matejka and I.R.Titunik (Academic Press, New York, 1986).
- PDP M.M.Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson, with an introduction by Wayne C.Booth (Manchester University Press, 1984).
- RW M.M.Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky (Indiana University Press, 1984).
- SG M.M.Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, translated by Vern W.McGee (University of Texas Press, 1986).

In general I have followed standard transliterations in writing Bakhtin and Voloshinov; however, where authors or translators have used Baxtin or Vološinov I have retained these spellings when providing references.

PART I

*An overview of the writings of Bakhtin and
his circle*

Introduction

One of Mikhail Bakhtin's basic principles is that communicative acts only have meaning, only take on their specific force and weight, in particular situations or contexts; his is an account of the *utterance*, of the actual communicative interaction in its real situation. Nothing demonstrates this principle more clearly than the fate of Bakhtin's own utterances, many of which could have no life, no specific force and weight, in his own lifetime, because they could not be published in the Soviet Union; and when they were published and translated in the West, they issued into specific situations which lent them the force of other expectations and agendas. There is no betrayal here, no departure from a fixed original meaning, for the life of any word is as a succession of utterances, in each of which its meanings are enriched, contested, or annexed. The words of Bakhtin himself are no exception. Yet there is an interesting corollary to this emphasis on the 'situatedness' of all utterances, which is that they must issue forth from one historically unique and particular place to another, indeed from one person to another, necessarily caught up in the complexities and inequities of social life. In this first chapter I aim to give you a sense of the situation out of which Bakhtin, and Voloshinov and Medvedev, speak. These are extraordinary and courageous voices that speak out of the aftermath of the Russian Revolution about language and literature, and about ethics and history; and they speak to us in the West, now spectators of another Russian Revolution which might yet, among its more minor consequences, upset our notions of some key Bakhtinian themes. In short, dialogue with another—at the heart of Bakhtin's thinking—does not invite us to cancel what historically separates us but rather to understand that other's historical specificity as fully as possible.

I

The only biography of Mikhail Bakhtin was published in 1984, written by two American scholars, Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist.¹ What follows is of course deeply dependent on this pioneering work. It is a considerable achievement, not only for what it managed to discover, in inauspicious circumstances, about the actual life histories of Bakhtin and the members of his circle, but also because of the way it weaves together these biographical facts with the intellectual history which makes them important. For although Mikhail Bakhtin led a scholarly life, and was profoundly committed to such a life in the great tradition of the Russian intelligentsia, his life was not without its dramatic vicissitudes, thrust upon him by the times he lived in. There is reputed to be a Chinese proverbial blessing: 'May you not live in interesting times.' If anyone lived in interesting times, it was Mikhail Bakhtin, who was twenty-two at the time of the Russian Revolution in 1917, and thus lived through the Revolution, the Civil War that followed it, the excitements of the 1920s, the imposition of Stalinism, the purges of the 1930s, the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the cultural freeze of the Cold War, the Khrushchev thaw, and the stagnation of the Brezhnev years. Bakhtin's writings were profoundly affected by this extraordinary history, not least because they could not be published between 1929 and the 1960s.

Mikhail Bakhtin was born in 1895 into a provincial banking family. He was the younger of two sons, and his elder brother Nikolai was to prove equally gifted. Mikhail grew up in Orel, and then in Vilnius and Odessa, both polyglot cities which gave him early experience of the linguistic heterogeneity which features so markedly in his later accounts of language. In addition, the two boys had a German governess who early made them fluent in German and introduced them to Classical literature. After studying for a year at Odessa University, Bakhtin followed his brother's footsteps to study classics in the University of Petrograd between 1914 and 1918. But the paths of the two men permanently diverged as a result of the Revolution and Civil War, for Nikolai joined the army during the First World War and was then persuaded that he should join the White Guards. As a result he followed them into exile. When he died in 1950 he assumed that his brother had perished in the purges in the 1930s.

But this was not the case, though Mikhail did indeed come in danger of dying from Stalinist repression. In 1918, along with many other Petrograd intellectuals, he moved to Nevel, and then in 1920 to Vitebsk, small towns in which many sought to escape the hardships of the Civil War period in the great cities. Here he formed the intellectual friendships that were to

last in some cases for the remainder of his life, though most of the friends of the 1920s were to die within twenty years, killed either by purges, illness, or the German invasion. At all events, in Nevel, Vitebsk, and from 1924 in Leningrad, Bakhtin was part of small informal groups of young intellectuals who together discussed philosophical and perhaps religious questions. Some of these intellectuals, like V.N. Voloshinov, whom Bakhtin met in Nevel, and P.N. Medvedev, whom he met in Vitebsk, wrote in an avowedly Marxist way; others, like the Jewish philosopher and mathematician M.I. Kagan, wrote and thought in quite a different idiom. Clark and Holquist do well to capture the heady excitement of those early revolutionary years, when the young members of Bakhtin's circle could debate endlessly with themselves and with the equally young Marxists who governed in Nevel and Vitebsk; where the walls of the one-storey wooden buildings of this small provincial town were covered with avant-garde paintings; and where endless philosophical projects could be formed despite the acute poverty in which Bakhtin in particular lived. This was compounded by Bakhtin's poor state of health—throughout his adult life Bakhtin suffered from osteomyelitis (an inflammatory disease of the bones), which was so severe that in 1938 he had to have his right leg amputated. In 1921 he married, though he was not to have a secure and permanent source of income until after the Second World War.

A number of unpublished writings have survived from the 1920s, of which the longest has now been published in English as 'Author and hero in aesthetic activity' (in AA, pp. 4–256). Characteristically for Bakhtin's early concerns, it seeks to combine considerations of aesthetics with epistemology and ethics. Though there are undoubted continuities with the later work, and though Bakhtin was to return to some of the same questions at the end of his life, the extent to which this early writing is to be thought of as a 'key' to the whole of Bakhtin's career is in fact controversial. The only piece of writing he published before 1929 was a short but dense article on the philosophy of authorship in a miscellany published in Nevel in 1919 (also in AA, pp. 1–3).

The year 1929 marks the end of this first phase of Bakhtin's adult life, for it saw two important events: the publication of his book on Dostoevsky, and his arrest as part of a purge of religious intellectuals in Leningrad. While in Leningrad Bakhtin had no regular job, and was supported by small pensions due to him for his illness. He was at the centre of a group of active scholars and thinkers, but had no institutional position, though he did give private lessons. He was also a member of, or on the fringes of, some unofficial religious groups, which in their various ways sought to reconcile theology with the intellectual and scientific

currents of the day. It was because of his association with one of these groups that he was arrested; he was variously charged with being part of anti-Soviet conspiracies and of ‘corrupting the young’, for which he was at first sentenced to five years in the rigours of Solovetsky Islands. However, after numerous appeals on his behalf, on the grounds of his health, and perhaps thanks to a favourable review of the Dostoevsky book by the Bolshevik intellectual Lunacharsky, the sentence was reduced to five years of internal exile in the Kazakh town of Kustanai. Bakhtin left Leningrad in early 1930.

Bakhtin was to see no more of his writing published—except for an article on book-keeping in collective farms—until the 1960s. Thanks to his arrest he was now politically suspect, and his fortunes wavered with the political climate. Yet, paradoxically, the 1930s were an especially productive period for him; in this time he wrote a full-length study of the novel of education, several book-length articles on the history of the novel, and a doctoral dissertation on Rabelais. He did not spend the whole of this period in Kustanai. After he had served out the time of his sentence, he got a job at a teacher training institute in Saransk, in Mordovia, about four hundred miles east of Moscow. However, he was forced to resign from this post after a year at the height of the Stalinist repression in 1937, and in August of that year moved to a small town north of Moscow called Savelovo, where he remained until the end of the War. This was the nearest that one-time political exiles were permitted to live near Moscow. The mild political thaw at the end of the 1930s meant that his book on the *bildungsroman* or novel of education was accepted for publication and that he was permitted to submit his thesis on Rabelais for examination.

However, the German invasion of Russia prevented both of these projects from coming to fruition. Although the dissertation was submitted, the onset of war meant that it was not be examined until the late 1940s when the political climate had again changed and it became politically controversial. But a still more extraordinary fate overtook the book on the novel of education. The only complete manuscript was destroyed by a German bomb on the publishing house where it was stored. Two of Bakhtin’s own vices combined to destroy the partial manuscript that remained. Throughout his life he was cavalier with respect to his writing and his manuscripts; in addition he was a lifelong and incessant cigarette smoker. He solved the acute shortage of cigarette papers during the war by smoking the manuscript. Only a portion of it remains.

After the war he was reinstated in his job in Saransk, and played the role of an active teacher and academic administrator until his retirement in 1961. He was eventually awarded the candidate’s degree—not a full

doctoral degree—for the dissertation on Rabelais in 1952 after political controversy had dogged the examination process. In brief, Bakhtin fell foul of the ‘anti-cosmopolitanism’ campaign of the late 1940s, which was not just a code for anti-Semitism but which made all intellectual students of non-Russian literature suspect. In addition, the celebration of the ‘lower bodily stratum’, which characterizes the thesis, offended the puritanism of the Soviet literary establishment. But in general Bakhtin was not productive during the years of his full-time employment. It was not until his rediscovery by a group of younger intellectuals in the early 1960s that he began to be published. One striking essay on ‘Speech genres’, written in the early 1950s, contrasts markedly with the prolific creativity of the 1930s.

The story of Bakhtin’s rediscovery in the 1960s is itself an interesting one. In 1960 some postgraduate students at the Gorky Institute in Moscow came across Bakhtin’s book on Dostoevsky and then his dissertation in the archives. At first they believed him to be dead. When they discovered he was still alive they undertook to get his work published. Even in the relatively liberal climate of the 1960s this was not easy, and the Dostoevsky book was successfully brought out, with substantial revisions by Bakhtin himself, before the more controversial Rabelais dissertation was finally published in 1965. Bakhtin became a cult intellectual figure in the Soviet Union before and after his death; in 1969 his state of health was such that he was brought from retirement in Saransk to a clinic in Moscow, and eventually, after his wife’s death, he was found a large flat with constant nursing attendance. He produced a series of notes and interviews in his final years, returning especially to the philosophical themes of his young adulthood. He died in 1975, and in the same year a collection of his writings from the 1930s and early 1940s was published. Since then practically all his unpublished writing has been brought out in Russian and translated into English.

In the most substantial of the early unpublished writings, ‘Author and hero in aesthetic activity’, Bakhtin insists that a life never appears completed from within; that since, strictly speaking, we do not experience our own birth and our own death, only the life of another can be complete for us. Thus we can never be the hero of our own lives; a condition of heroic completedness is that it should be perceived by another, situated outside the hero’s life. Bakhtin’s life is now certainly completed, and others, rightly and necessarily, have been busy constructing a completed meaning for it. But all such constructions are two-way affairs—dialogues—in which one historically specific moment comes into contact with another. Like many of Bakhtin’s ideas, this has at once the status of a description, apparently of

the absolute conditions of human knowledge, and simultaneously appears as an ethical imperative, a profound urging to respect the otherness of the other person. In his early writing Bakhtin certainly felt the two to be inseparable. Part of the disagreements about the subsequent course of his writings involve precisely this issue, the extent to which these early, ethically-based concerns persist in the later, more explicitly social writing. Above all, the question is important with respect to the Marxist writings of V.N.Voloshinov and P.N.Medvedev, which have been confidently attributed to Bakhtin. This celebrated 'authorship question' is the topic of the next section.

II

In 1970 the Russian linguist Vyacheslav Ivanov attributed to Bakhtin books previously thought to be by Voloshinov and Medvedev. These books are the former's *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique* (1927), and *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929), together with some articles also written in the 1920s; and the latter's *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928). The actual documentary basis of the attribution remains unclear, and when Bakhtin himself was asked directly on the matter he was silent or evasive. However, Clark and Holquist have accepted the attribution, though other scholars have challenged it. In the absence of any conclusive evidence either way, much of the argument on both sides of the question has been frankly speculative. But this much is clear. There really were two people called Voloshinov and Medvedev, who were members of the same intellectual circle as Bakhtin throughout the 1920s. So we are not dealing with a simple case of writing being published under pseudonyms. These two writers also published, under their own names, writing that is undoubtedly their own—indeed, Medvedev was a considerable journalist and publishing functionary in Leningrad in the late 1920s and 1930s. It is also clear that there is a very substantial coincidence between the arguments of the books appearing under their names, and, in particular, the arguments produced by Bakhtin in his unpublished writings of the 1930s. It is also clear that the books by Voloshinov and Medvedev are explicitly Marxist in idiom, while those of Bakhtin are less so, though at the very least Bakhtin, in his own writing, both published and unpublished, makes obeisance towards Marxism, and, more strongly, appears to be influenced by it in some fundamental respects.

So what is at stake in the dispute about the authorship of these books by Voloshinov and Medvedev? First and most evidently, of course, is the highly charged question of Bakhtin's relationship to Marxism. If it can be

shown that Bakhtin was the author of the disputed texts, it would follow, would it not, that he was therefore 'really' a Marxist; if it could be shown that he was not the author, then the attempt to claim him for Marxism and the left more generally would be that much weaker. But things are not quite as simple as that, so I will attempt to lay out what seem to me to be the fundamental argumentative moves in this remarkable controversy.

There are certainly those who have gratefully accepted the attribution of explicitly Marxist writing to Bakhtin as a way of claiming Bakhtin for a sophisticated and non-reductive Marxist account of literature and language. They are not altogether helped by the fact that there is some writing, indisputably by Bakhtin, which is written in the rather reductive idiom of Soviet Marxism of the late 1920s—two prefaces to Tolstoy which Bakhtin wrote in 1929, and which form part of a collected edition. At all events, the substantial coincidence between the writings of Voloshinov, Medvedev and Bakhtin has formed the ground for some intelligent appropriations of the whole Bakhtinian canon by writers on the left.

But in fact this has not been the dominant strategy adopted by those who have insisted on Bakhtin's authorship of the disputed texts. In the West this position has most prominently been occupied by Clark and Holquist. In their biography they argue that the Marxism of the books by Voloshinov and Medvedev is more a matter of idiom—even, in one extreme formulation, a matter of 'window-dressing'—which permitted otherwise controversial arguments to be published. This permits them to preserve the essentially non-Marxist character of Bakhtin's writing intact. The philosophical key to unlock the whole body of writing, in this account, is to be found in Bakhtin's neo-Kantian inheritance, and is grounded in the I-Thou relationship. Hence Holquist's insistence, especially, on 'dialogism' as an overarching concept for encompassing the range of the writing. In this account, therefore, the Marxism of the disputed texts has almost to be argued away.

On the other hand those who have resisted the attribution have equally done so for different reasons. There have always been those who have done so on scholarly grounds—that the documentary evidence for changing the traditional attributions of the books to Voloshinov and Medvedev is simply too slight to warrant such a major change. But these scholarly reasons are inevitably caught up in ideological ones also. Thus there are those who wish to drive a wedge between Voloshinov and Medvedev on the one side, and Bakhtin on the other, because they are impressed by the sophisticated Marxism of the former two and are suspicious of what appears the softer, even liberal-humanist accents of the latter. In this they may have been excessively influenced by some of the ways in which

Bakhtin has been assimilated in the West. Finally, there are those who wish to separate Bakhtin from the others because they do not see Bakhtin as an essentially Marxist writer. They see the Marxist gloss given to what are undoubtedly shared ideas as simplifications, distortions or 'monologizations' of Bakhtin. Sometimes this is driven by straightforward anti-Marxism, sometimes by a more productive recognition of the genuine differences that separate the various writings of the three.

So it can be seen that the stakes in this dispute are high—no less than the overall direction and emphasis to be given to the writings of Bakhtin and his circle. It has, moreover, generated some not always productive reading practices, in which the overt and primary meanings of the writing have been overlooked in order to decode those writings or to make them fit some constricting model of coherence. Nevertheless, whatever the extent of Bakhtin's responsibility for the disputed texts, there is a substantial convergence between the ideas expressed in them and in those which are indisputably by Bakhtin alone. And finally this is what matters: the content of the arguments far outweighs the interest of the authorship question. So while the resolution of the attribution remains unsettled, and is likely to remain so, the sensible course seems to be to continue to refer to the authors of the various writings by the names which originally appeared over their writing. I shall be content to note both differences and similarities between the three authors as appropriate. And finally it is important to recognize that there is as much variety of argument and idiom within the indisputably Bakhtinian texts as there is within the whole body of writing from the circle.

III

Whatever the status of the disputed texts, we need to get a better sense of the intellectual milieu out of which Bakhtin, Voloshinov and Medvedev emerged in the second and third decades of the twentieth century in Russia. If the most remarkable event of that period was the Russian Revolution, this by no means meant that the dominant intellectual force of the time was Marxism, or that Marxism was immediately imposed as the deadening intellectual orthodoxy one version of it was later to become. Both before and after 1917, Russia was a place of lively intellectual excitement, in which different currents of thought emerged and contested each other. Indeed, it is out of the contestation of several such currents that the distinctive emphases of Bakhtin and his circle emerge. It is by virtue of the extraordinary mutations of twentieth-century intellectual

history that these emphases now appear, some sixty years later, to speak with the force and resonance that they do.

Bakhtin's own intellectual formation, both before and during his time at university, was above all in classical German philosophy, especially in its then dominant form of neo-Kantianism. This influence largely reflects the prestige of German academic culture throughout Europe before the First World War, but this prestige was particularly important in Russian universities. At all events, Bakhtin's starting-points for his intellectual development were in neo-Kantianism, though that certainly does not mean that his whole development is to be explained by the surviving writing in that tradition.

Neo-Kantianism is a philosophical position (or rather, the general name for a range of particular positions) which was especially important in German academic thought at the end of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century. It is a general philosophical orientation which sought to go back to Kant, in part as a reaction against what was felt to be the excesses of nineteenth-century positivism and empiricism. Perhaps its particular attraction to intellectuals is that it grants especial importance to the activity of consciousness; in this way of thinking, consciousness cannot be explained as a mere reflection of the external world, for the mind is not a blank sheet on which the objects of the external world are impressed. On the contrary, consciousness brings its own independent forms to apprehending and explaining the world outside itself, especially conceptions of time and space which cannot be deduced from the world itself. But Bakhtin's interest springs not from these general questions in the theory of knowledge (indeed he is consistently hostile to arguments conducted solely in this dimension) but in the particular way that he can modulate this neo-Kantian way of thinking into a way of talking about the relationship between self and other.

Bakhtin's longest essay in this manner is the extensive philosophical fragment, unpublished in his lifetime, called 'Author and hero in aesthetic activity'. Bakhtin's starting-point in this essay is the relationship between self and other, between I and Thou. Our sense of self, and our sense of the otherness of the other person, are grounded in and indeed constituted by this relationship. Bakhtin goes on from there to describe the aesthetic act as only a more developed version of this founding and constitutive relationship. So in one way the essay can be thought of as an attempt by the young Bakhtin to provide a phenomenology of aesthetic activity in the immediacy of the relationship between the self and the other, between I and Thou—that is, in the essay Bakhtin seeks to ground the aesthetic in the inescapable relationship with others in which our sense of self is

constituted and in which our sense of the other is constituted. In this account, the aesthetic act—the attempt to give form and meaning to another’s life in art—is a supreme form of all genuine human interactions, in which our sense of another person emerges from the distance which divides my situation from yours, and from the various bridges which can be built across that distance, which can never, for all that, be abolished.

Bakhtin generates a formidably complex argument in this attempt to combine aesthetic questions with ethical concerns and with problems of knowledge. But the constant emphasis of the essay—it is scarcely an essay since it runs to 250 pages—is on aesthetic activity as the expression of a *relationship*, not as the product of an isolated consciousness. This can be seen, for example, in what he has to say about aesthetic form:

Contrary to ‘expressive’ aesthetics, however, form is not *pure* expression of the hero and his life, but an expression which, in giving expression to the hero, also expresses the author’s relationship to the hero, and it is this relationship that constitutes the specifically aesthetic moment of form. Aesthetic form cannot be founded and validated from within the hero, out of his own directedness to objects and meaning, i.e., on the basis of that which has validity only for his own lived life. Aesthetic form is founded and validated from within the *other*—the author, as the author’s *creative* reaction to the hero and his life. As a reaction, that is, which produces values that are transgredient in principle to the hero and his life and yet are essentially related to the latter. (AA 89–90)

For those of us who are not familiar with the idiom of neo-Kantian philosophy, this manner of writing poses its own problems, though it is not the manner which will be characteristic of the mature Bakhtin. Moreover, when he wrote this he did not have the incentive of probable publication to lead him to a more popular style. Nevertheless, the main shape of the argument is I hope clear. Aesthetic form is neither the ‘natural’ shape into which a life falls, nor an arbitrary imposition of shape upon that life by an author, but emerges from the complexities of the relationship between the two, complexities which Bakhtin seeks to map but which can never transcend the particular situations of both.

This is undoubtedly a central emphasis throughout Bakhtin’s writing life—that artistic form and meaning emerge *between people*. This has led some writers to see these *dialogic* relationships, given their first full expression here, as providing the fundamental context for all of Bakhtin’s writing. Equally, others have found in the undoubted ethical element in this early