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# The Old New Bakhtin

*Essays from Mikhail Bakhtin's early years in volume one of his collected works are discussed and contextualized.*

The first volume of the Bakhtin *Collected Works*[1] contains his early philosophical studies from the Nevel′-Vitebsk period (1919–1923) and the major methodological project undertaken after his move to Leningrad, which critically analyzed the principles of "the young Russian poetics" (eventually known as the formal method in literary studies) and devised an alternative approach to literature and to "the aesthetics of the written word" (1924). The Appendix contains courses of lectures given by Bakhtin to a narrow circle of friends in 1924 and 1925, and recorded by the remarkable theoretical philologist Lev Pumpianskii. The topics covered in those courses—Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason,* the new philosophical aesthetics of "author" and "hero," the philosophy of religion (not "religious philosophy")—tell us a lot. All these works had been published earlier, but the *Collected Works* has made them look almost new again, and in essence they read as brand new texts. What we have here is a supposedly famous but actually not so well-known and even less well-understood Russian thinker and scholar, with none of that ersatz-Soviet mimicry and masking—someone so like his many famous contemporaries in philosophy and so unlike any of them. What we have here is an old new Bakhtin.

Now no longer part of *their own* time, these texts have been published with exhaustive archival backup and come complete with thorough and highly diverse commentaries. But, although the commentaries occupy over

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two-thirds of the book, it would be difficult to call them excessive. They reveal, in a varying degree of detail, a context derived from the philosophy and scholarship of the time that is little known today, the "dialogic backdrop" (a borrowing from the Bakhtinian lexicon) against which for all but the first time it now becomes possible to see and assess what it was in Bakhtin that made him, as Averintsev said, "one of a kind."[2]

The work done here may without exaggeration be called selflessly, heroically meticulous. Prior decipherings of badly preserved early manuscripts have been rechecked and refined; previously unread passages have been closely read and published for the first time; and cuts made in Soviet times have been restored. One can only imagine what an effort this must have been for Bocharov's team and Bocharov himself. But those efforts were, in my view, completely justified: this first volume, while not "the biggest and best" is at least a key contribution to the project. Among its revelations are the scholarly-cum-philosophical and the religious-cum-philosophical *underpinnings* of Bakhtin's thought (up to and including the "philosophy of language" and the "grotesque body"). The word "dialogue" is still absent, but the *agenda* of "dialogism" is outlined in the framework provided by the socio-ontological reversal and transformation of the mainstream Western European tradition of "the first philosophy," from Plato and Aristotle to Hermann Cohen and Edmund Husserl.

This new "revolution in modes of thought" that took place in the West (primarily in Germany) between 1919 and 1924 could never come normally and fully into its own in Russian philosophy, and this has made something of a mark on the commentary to a programmatic fragment by Bakhtin that Bocharov long ago aptly titled "Toward a Philosophy of the Act" [K filosofii postupka]. The fragmentary nature of, and the outcomes for, the majority of the texts that have found their way into this first volume prove emphatically that what actually did happen in Russian philosophy was something that, in fact, could never be.

Anyone rereading Bakhtin's early writings and spoken words cannot fail to be struck by the almost incredible (by today's standards) maturity of this young thinker—the maturity and integrality of his thought, which tackles pan-European problems yet is recognizably Russian not only in its language but also at its very core. The linear historical flow-chart of Bakhtin's ostensible emergence and ascent that underlies currently prevalent notions of his "creative phases" and was uncritically borrowed from the nineteenth-century setting is open to question, as is the idealized, "literocentric," late-Soviet notion of what was happening during the twenties, which is also prevalent in Western "Russistics."

This first volume opens with the brief article and manifesto "Art and

Answerability" [Iskusstvo i otvetstvennost′] (1919), which reveals the key semantic syntheses of Bakhtin's new—*postidealist and postsymbolist*—thinking, to which neither pre-Soviet religious-idealistic nor scientific-materialist Soviet criteria apply. It begins by speaking of a "whole," and all the works in this volume do go on to demonstrate the intercalation and interpenetration of "the three domains of human culture—science, art and life" (I, 5).*

Rereading these texts—long-familiar but here rendered new again, so clear but lacking the more familiar and allegedly definitive clarity—I could not shake off a keen sense of, on the one hand, Bakhtin's creative continuity and integrality of expression and, on the other, the lack of moral precedent for his dicta. "Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself" said Ludwig Wittgenstein,[3] but from the very beginning, Bakhtin seems to have been able to accomplish that very difficult thing. His early philosophical manuscripts contain none of the philosopher's normal theoretical unilateralism and are also lacking the usual "existential" fuss and bother—no despair, no hysterics, no pretensions, no demolition of prior theories and thought systems, no "deconstruction" of traditions with which the young thinker actually did take issue. Evident in every remotely expanded statement are a grand manner [*bol′shoi stil′*] and an emphasis on the common sense that was so little valued by Bakhtin's Russian and Western contemporaries, whose inclinations ran instead to "reverie and a drunken exuberance."

Bakhtin's speech-thinking [*rechevoe myshlenie*] is difficult to access precisely by virtue of the primordial moral veracity of his thought. That authenticity is founded in a determination to recognize thought as effectual only if it refuses to accept the ultimate guarantees and gifts: "I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life" (I, 5 [*A&A,* p. 1]). This means that neither art nor science nor life suffices to itself or exists simply in its own right, with a value all its own, although once these spheres of human culture are abstracted from personal responsibility,** the impression arises (accompanied by an ostensible guarantee) that they are indeed self-sufficient (autonomous). In fact, though, nothing is autonomous and there are no guarantees. Only the *individual person* [*lichnost_*'] can assume the responsibility for the "inner link" among the intrinsically fragmented "elements of the personality"—a responsibility that is not rhetorically public, not theoretical, not aestheticized, and to that extent *not* "official." "Nor will it

*_Art and Answerability,_ ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 1 (below, *A&A*).—Trans.

**Also renderable as "accountability" or "answerability"—Trans.

do to invoke 'inspiration' in order to justify want of answerability. Inspiration that ignores life and is itself ignored by life is not inspiration but a state of possession" (I, 5–6 [*A&A,* p. 2]).

*Common sense* and *common words,* the good, common sense that avoids the extremes of various cognitive strategies and styles, from empiricism to naturalism; the good, common words that all reasoning must have and that are needed only so that we can clarify the tradition of their past usage and thus include them into a new, *contemporary* conversation—that, if I have it right, is the hermeneutic wellspring of Bakhtinian thought in its historical-philosophical dimension.

The expansional, informal understanding of "good sense," the link between *common sense* and *common words,* in the tradition of sound Western thought, is founded particularly in the eighteenth-century Scottish School of Common Sense.[4] Unlike the reputation of Thomas Reid (a Scottish thinker who in his day even eclipsed the authority of David Hume, his contemporary), that of Russian philosophers of a comparable caliber was far more modest. These would be Nikolai Strakhov and, in some measure, Vasilii Rozanov (who acknowledged himself as a student of Strakhov's), among others, and Lev Tolstoy whose oeuvre (all the way from the early stories to *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*) was rarely valued expressly for its "good sense."[5]

How are life and thought possible in an age that has abolished all the traditional idealizations, the theoretical and generally "bookish" meanings of what we know as culture, in an age that certainly did not begin (if that word "begin" has any place here at all) today? What are the options for a person who found himself in a rift between centuries and millennia and, in particular, at a *philosophical* crossroads?

A *philosopher,* a *thinker* should, Bakhtin thought, begin again and afresh, by rejecting naivetes of thought per se—this being thinking for thinking's sake, or for "art's" sake, or for "science's" sake, or even for "just life's" sake. Bakhtin begins with something that in his time had almost run its course in "creativity," namely, with a newly achieved intellectual "sobriety," with the establishment of mutual contact between "the one and only I," the thinking entity, and *the others outside me,* those who generally allow the thinker to, one might say, "eclipse" himself.

The sobriety and soundness of "utterances," of *logoi,* lies in the ability to speak without pontification of everything that is perturbing or interesting, without pretending that my addressee is "the public," "mankind," or "the omnitude" [*vsemstvo*]; that what I say has never been said, thought, or wrought before; that therefore what I have said or done ("a global first") frees me from responsibility for everything else (including the consequences of what has

been said) and guarantees me, to borrow Bakhtin's own expression "an alibi in the event of being." The rejection of any spiritual guarantees whatsoever, of the reckless wager on a "new world" (that many in the past century did "buy into") also permits one, paradoxical as this may sound, *to start thinking responsively and responsibly,* while confidentially drawing those (and no other) contemporaries and conversation partners of mine into an actual conversation.

This is a radical, primordial rejection of the concepts of the "I" or (the same thing in reverse) the "One and Only" (in Bakhtinian terms, of "monologism"), a genuine "*moving away from the mirror*" (the mirror that is inevitable in aestheticism or "theoreticism"). Unfortunately, it seems to me that insufficient allowance has been made for this by Liudmila Gogotishvili in her commentary on "Toward a Philosophy of the Act." Gogotishvili relies in her use of language on the "Ich" of German Idealism and Romanticism (seemingly more serviceable on Russian terrain) that follows a model dating to 1800 and even in part to 1910, that is, on a model of thought with whose critique here, in this programmatic text, Bakhtin's "dialogism"—not in letter but in spirit—begins (as, for that matter, do all the basic varieties of Western "dialogic thought" of the 1920s and beyond).

Writing about all this is no simple matter. The Bakhtinian word is voluminously effectual, "performative"; it would be wholly inaccurate to reduce it to a standard of rigor or to an imperative. Bakhtin's philosophical word is a free verbal actuality, in which the eternal positive senses of human existence are freely selected and construed in a patent unity. The early Bakhtin is not even slightly less difficult than the studies in literary theory and culturosophy that followed, from the mid-1920s to the mid-1970s. But the young Bakhtin is more concretely historical, more authentic; he is directly (and therefore more comprehensibly) correlated with the scientific and ethical problems of his time, with his "ideological milieu of consciousness" that was already dissolving away in the 1930s and then, "an epoch on"—to borrow Bocharov's expression—(beginning in the 1960s, that is), would turn out to be very nearly "stolen air" [Mandel′shtam's metaphor for a work written "without permission"—Trans.].

The *commentaries* to the texts are, as I have mentioned, very diverse. The writers, each in his or her own way, combine classical, historical-philosophical commentary with elements of their own research. And in this respect, the commentaries by Liudmila Gogotishvili and Nikolai Nikolaev are diametrically opposed. Nikolaev, as a rule, maintains a critical distance from the texts he is discussing. He works, as it were, in "the third person," and his commentaries are distinguished by the bibliographical and historiographical punctiliousness

that is so seldom encountered in scholarly editions today. Gogotishvili's commentaries, by contrast, are more "metatheoretical," representing a "first-person" attempt to "assimilate" another's speech. She constructs a self-sufficient metatheoretical text, identifying 16 semantic "blocs" in "Toward a Philosophy of the Act" and employing them in a valiant effort to close the gap between Bakhtin and the Russian religious-idealistic tradition.

Vitalii Makhlin's commentaries stand somewhat apart, as they manifest a systematic interest in Bakhtin's program of scientific philosophy. What they offer is, as it were, a set of monographic novellas on the history of Bakhtinian concepts and of the entire conceptual array [*poniatiinyi riad*] whose absence makes it difficult to achieve a well-considered attitude toward the tradition of Bakhtin's world of concepts or to grasp its inherent semantic novelty.

Taken all together, so thorough is the historical-philosophical and historical-scholarly apparatus of this first volume that an attentive reading of the commentaries will not only bring to light the systematized net results of, and future prospects for, Bakhtin studies worldwide with respect to Bakhtin's initial theoretical frames of reference but will also offer new answers to questions regarding the legitimacy of Bakhtin's body of work.

I think that Bakhtin, being a thinker *who did not say all he wished to* for the historical record and who lies preserved in the archives of various epochs, is a treat awaiting contemporary Russian philosophers and students of the humanities. This first scholarly edition of Bakhtin's early philosophical works comes to the reader at a time when the prior "paradigms" are failing, in both spiritual and ideological terms, and nostalgia for a now-lost "sublime experience" is rampant. Standing amid the wreckage of their hard-won autonomy, the humanities are tacitly but none the less persistently. . . waiting for Bakhtin.

*Belgorod*

## Notes

1. M.M. Bakhtin, *Sobranie sochinenii,* 7 vols., ed. S.G. Bocharov and N.I. Nikolaev, commentaries by S.S. Averintsev, L.A. Gogotishvili, V.V. Liapunov, V.L. Makhlin, and N.I. Nikolaev (Moscow: Russkie slovari/Iazyki slavianskoi kul′tury, 1997–2012); vol. I: *Filosofskaia estetika 1920-kh godov.* The volume and page numbers given in parentheses in the text refer to this edition.

2. S. Averintsev, "Lichnost′ i talant uchenogo (1976)," in *M.M. Bakhtin: Kriticheskaia antologiia,* ed. V.L. Makhlin (Moscow: Izdatel′stvo Rossiiskoi politicheskoi entsiklopedii, ROSSPEN, 2010), p. 93.

3. L. Vitgenshtein, "Kul′tura i tsennost′," in Vitgenshtein, *Filosofskie raboty,* pt. 1, compilation, introduction, and notes by M.S. Kozlova, trans. from German by M.S.

Kozlova and Iu.A. Aseev (Moscow: Gnozis, 1994), p. 443. [Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value,* translated by Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 34e.—Trans.]

4. See, for example, T. Rid [Thomas Reid], *Issledovanie chelovecheskogo uma na printsipakh zdravogo smysla* (St. Petersburg: Aleteiia, 2000). [Original title: *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*—Trans.]

5. In this connection, see P.A. Ol′khov, "Zravyi smysl i istoriia (zametki k polemicheskoi epitafii N.N. Strakhova 'Vzdokh nad grobe Karamzina')," *Voprosy filosofii,* 2009, no. 5. [http://vphil.ru/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=19, accessed May 2014—Trans.]