BAKHTIN

Katerina Clark Michael Holquist

Mikhail BAKHTIN

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To Billye Holquist

PREFACE

The history of reputations is a chronicle of greater or lesser discrepancies. There is always a gap between what someone does and what the world perceives that person to have done. Some discrepancies are temporal, such as the belated "discovery" of Vico; others are spatial, such as the low standing of Jack London in the United States versus his high status in the Soviet Union. But few discrepancies are so myriad as the anachronisms and ironies that characterize the career and reputation of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895–1975).

Bakhtin is emerging as one of the major thinkers of the twentieth century. His writings encompass linguistics, psychoanalysis, theology, social theory, historical poetics, axiology, and philosophy of the person. In addition, he produced more specialized works devoted to Vitalism, Formalism, Dostoevsky, Freud, Goethe, and Rabelais. Yet in the West, where he has already achieved considerable status among anthropologists, folklorists, linguists, and literary critics, the philosophical work on which are based his contributions to these areas is largely unknown. Major discrepancies in the establishment of his reputation are still in process of being overcome.

Up to this point, the most glaring discontinuities in Bakhtin's reputation have been temporal. During the 1920s Bakhtin was a marginal figure on the Russian intellectual scene, employed by no institute or university and known only to a small group of friends and admirers. For the first half of the 1930s he was in political exile in Kazakhstan. For a brief interlude in 1936–1937 Bakhtin held an academic post at a teachers' college in Mordovia, far from Russia's intellectual centers. Afterward he retreated to a small town near Moscow for the worst of the Stalin purges, where he re-

mained during the Second World War. He returned to his job in Mordovia after the war, retaining it until he retired in 1961.

Throughout this time Bakhtin was writing, but little of what he wrote saw publication. By 1929 he had published under his own name only one short article in an obscure provincial newspaper, all his other works having been published under the name of friends. In that year Bakhtin's fortunes seemed to be changing with his book on Dostoevsky scheduled to come out under his own name, but it appeared only after he had been arrested in a purge of Leningrad intellectuals. Through the rest of the Stalin era Bakhtin published only one article, about bookkeeping on collective farms, which was based on his work in exile and appeared in a trade journal. At the end of the 1930s he attempted to reenter the mainstream of intellectual life by writing a dissertation on Rabelais, but years of jockeying passed before it was accepted. Even after Stalin's death Bakhtin was able to publish only one or two articles, and these only in Mordovian sources.

Thus, in the eyes of the world, Bakhtin had to all purposes died in 1929. He was not reborn until the eve of his retirement from academic life, when Soviet literary scholars again took an interest in him. This revival led to the publication in 1963 of the second edition of the Dostoevsky book, thirty-four years after the first. The reappearance of this book, followed in 1965 by Bakhtin's book on Rabelais, brought him into rapid prominence. He was able to move to Moscow, and a sample of his work in exile, partially translated into English as *The Dialogic Imagination*, was published in 1975, the year he died. Four years later another book of his writings came out, translated into English in two volumes as *The Architectonics of Answerability* and *The Aesthetics of Verbal Creation*. This book, made up mostly of pieces from Bakhtin's earliest years, epitomizes the feature of belatedness that haunts his career.

This pattern of discrepancy between date of creation and date of publication, combined with Bakhtin's habit of publishing under different names, explains some of the bewilderment that has characterized attempts to assess his achievement. As in the case of Jack London, Bakhtin has also been evaluated differently in different countries. The circumstances that accompanied his discovery outside his homeland account for many of these differences. For example, translations of the books on Dostoevsky and Rabelais ap-

peared in France in the late 1960s, during the high tide of Structuralism, so that they seemed best understood in the context of Structuralism or semiotics. Bakhtin's prominence in the Anglophone world arose in the wake of his vogue in Paris, which made it difficult to think of him as other than a literary critic in the Formalist tradition or a theorist of carnival and ritual inversions of hierarchy. The gap widens in the Soviet Union, where many see Bakhtin as a religious philosopher in the Orthodox tradition.

While this discrepancy might at first seem to be spatial—Russia versus the West—it is temporal at root. It has largely to do with a translation gap. Bakhtin's early work expresses most clearly the task which occupied him throughout his life, that of turning his dialogism into a full-fledged world view, and yet the pertinent texts are only now being translated. These early works reveal the broad philosophical base on which rests his more regional thinking in linguistics, literary criticism, and social theory.

The difficulties due to the translation gap are compounded by the problem of authorship, the question of whether Bakhtin actually wrote the three books and assorted articles frequently attributed to him but published under friends' names. This textological dilemma is a manifestation of the still greater dilemma of where to place Bakhtin, given the major gaps and conflicts in the available material.

One difficulty is the paucity of reliable data. Everyone in Bakhtin's family or among his early friends has died, except I. I. Kanaev, who refuses to speak to foreigners. In consequence, the main witnesses are people who knew Bakhtin in his declining years or who knew others who knew him. No personal documents as revealing as a diary survive. Only a few letters are extant, mostly from the 1920s. Bakhtin was notorious for not writing letters. Archival material exists also on some of those closest to him, including his brother Nikolai, Kagan, Pumpiansky, and Yudina.

Although many official Soviet documents on Bakhtin are available, including his employment record and medical history, others cannot be located, such as a document indicating when he graduated from the university. Bakhtin himself was cavalier about things like documents and legal requirements. Moreover, not all the official documents can be taken as reliable. Some of them, particularly his work records, were drawn up long after the period covered, by which time Bakhtin himself was vague about the

facts. Even those work records made in the year in question do not always reflect the reality of Bakhtin's employment, because friends, in order to improve his lot, sometimes arranged to have him falsely registered as performing a certain job so that he would receive the money or privileges that went with the position. There are also inconsistencies and contradictions among the extant documents, right down to two conflicting versions of his birth date.

Now that most of Bakhtin's surviving texts have been published, many of them in translation, the time has come for an assessment of his total achievement. To this end, we made three research trips to the Soviet Union, where we had access to the Bakhtin archive, library sources, and most of the surviving figures who knew Bakhtin. We also visited England and Scotland, to do research on Mikhail Bakhtin's brother Nikolai, and Budapest, to investigate possible links between Lukacs and Bakhtin. We were thus able to resolve at least some of the inconsistencies and unanswered questions that surround Bakhtin.

This book would not have been possible without the help of many people and organizations. Most of our oral sources are left unnoted. For financial support, we wish to thank the American Philosophical Society, University of Texas Research Institute, Indiana University Office of Research and Graduate Development, and Humanities Research Centre of the Australian National University. We had frequent recourse to the University of Illinois Library Slavic Reference Service, especially to Mary Stuart, who met even our most arcane requests with courtesy and dispatch. Peter Steiner, Stephen Rudy, Clara Strada Janovic, Vittorio Strada, A. Yakimov, and Militsa Colan helped us with the bibliography. For background on Nikolai Bakhtin, we are grateful to R. F. Christian of Saint Andrews University, who showed us letters that Nikolai had received from his family; Francesca Wilson and Stanley Mitchell in London; R. F. Willetts, Roy Pascal, Fanya Pascal, and George Thomson in Birmingham; the keepers of the Nikolai Bakhtin archive at the University Library in Birmingham; and Professor Serge Konovalov of Oxford University. We owe a special debt to Caryl Emerson, who read all our drafts. Our friend and colleague Vadim Liapunov stood by with useful ideas and help with sources. We thank Gary Saul Morson, James Wertsch, and Sidney Monas for advice that proved crucial, and Susan Layton, Robert Edwards, Carol Avins, and Mark von Hagen for help with sources

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Russian names in the text appear in standard anglicized versions. Russian quotations in the text and Russian citations in the notes are transliterated in accordance with the international scholarly system.

Нет ничего абсолютно мертвого: у каждого смысла будет свой праздник возрождения.

> Михаил Михайлович Бахтин, 1974

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INTRODUCTION

They do not apprehend how being at variance it agrees with itself: there is a connection working in both directions, as in the bow and the lyre.

HERACLITUS

The one who understands . . . becomes himself a participant in the dialogue.

BAKHTIN, "Toward a Methodology of the Human Sciences"

Few thinkers have been as fascinated by the plenitude of differences in the world as was Mikhail Bakhtin. Paradoxically, Bakhtin's preoccupation with variety, nonrecurrence, and discorrespondence serves to join into a coherent whole the bewildering contradictions of his career. Just as the blind pundits who touched different parts of the elephant's body gave differing definitions of the animal, so those critics who have come upon one or another of Bakhtin's activities in isolation have formulated different impressions of his life and thought, some of which appear mutually contradictory.

One reason for these contradictions is that all of Bakhtin's work stands under the sign of plurality, the mystery of the one and the many. This is true in the superficial sense that he published on a daunting range of subjects from metaphysics to kolkhoz bookkeeping, sometimes under assumed names. Moreover, different works by him speak different ideological languages: some are in the Neo-Kantian tradition, others use Marxist vocabulary, and still others employ impeccable Stalinese. At a more fundamental level, different Bakhtins emerge in the texts themselves. For instance, some of the principles announced in his theoretical works are flouted in his more particularized studies. Many Bakhtins are found even among Soviet specialists who have linked his name with disparate intellectual movements, ranging from the underground Orthodox Church to the pro-Revolutionary avant-garde.

It is difficult to pin down Bakhtin's viewpoint on a number of crucial issues, including his relationship to religion and the Orthodox Church, his attitude to Russia, the Soviet Union, and the West, and his commitment to the various movements, groups, and friends that formed his intellectual milieu. One reason for this dif-

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ficulty is the lack of knowledge about Bakhtin, rendering him a kind of intellectual cartoon figure who may be filled with any number of different hues from the palette of already existing ideological colors. The main reason, however, has to do with his own personality and credo.

An account of a man who gave chief importance to being "unfinalized" and "becoming" cannot be conclusive. Bakhtin stressed that the self never coincides with itself, and he never "coincided" with any group or ideological position. He engaged in dialogue with the major movements and thinkers of his time, preferably on paper rather than in person, but he refused to join, dominate, or even follow any movement. The thinkers and intellectual movements made up the force field in which he moved rather than exerting a definitive influence on him or establishing a position with which he identified.

Bakhtin presented himself to the world as elusive, contradictory, and enigmatic. He discriminated between his public activities and his private life of the mind, treasuring the last most. In his public utterances he accommodated to the regime and its rhetoric. He did not think ill of those who compromised, and he assumed for himself whatever guises political expediency dictated. When asked to make corrections to his texts for reasons of censorship, rather than taking offense or showing distress he passed the matter off with a shrug.

However, Bakhtin's texts are far from mere exercises in accommodation. They may be read at many levels, and he was skillful at expressing his own ideas in them. In his writings he was simultaneously an impassioned ideologue for his own outlook and an impassive ventriloquist for politically acceptable locutions. Ostensibly, most of his writings are acts of scholarly erudition and exercises in literary or linguistic theory, but underneath they are personal manifestoes, often with a political or philosophical message. Yet Bakhtin does not really stand in that hallowed tradition of fighters for truth among the Russian intelligentsia, partly because of his singularly phlegmatic and flexible relations with the official world, but mainly because of his fundamental opposition to the notion that there can be a "single truth."

Even in unofficial exchanges Bakhtin was aloof and superficially accommodating. He was diplomatic with interlocutors of all persuasions and gave them the impression that he agreed with

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their ideas. When asked direct questions about his own beliefs, he was evasive or silent.

Pinpointing a definitive Bakhtin is further complicated by the fact that there were several periods in his development. There was a philosophical period between 1918 and approximately 1924, when Bakhtin was heavily influenced by Neo-Kantianism and Phenomenology and was trying to think through a comprehensive philosophy of his own. Between 1925 and 1929, Bakhtin moved away from metaphysics and entered into a dialogue with current intellectual movements, such as Freudianism, Soviet Marxism, Formalism, linguistics, and even physiology. In the third period, during the 1930s, Bakhtin searched for a historical poetics in the evolution of the novel. Finally, in the 1960s and 1970s he returned to metaphysics from the new perspective of social theory and the philosophy of language.

Thus Bakhtin reveled in a profusion of subjects, ideas, vocabularies, periods, and authorial disguises. It is small wonder that different factions in the West, such as the Neo-Marxists, Structuralists, and semioticians, have coopted so diffuse a Bakhtin as their own. The power of Bakhtin to speak to each of these factions has been purchased at the price of reducing the apparent scope of his work. Many people have appropriated Bakhtin, but few have seen him whole.

Western scholars tend to focus on only a few of the many possible lines of research opened up by Bakhtin's work. Some literary critics regard Bakhtin primarily as the author of the Dostoevsky book who put forward a new theory of authorial point of view known as polyphony. Other literary critics, folklorists, and anthropologists define Bakhtin through his Rabelais book as the theorist of carnival and the breakdown of social hierarchies. Still other literary critics, social theorists, and intellectual historians appropriate Bakhtin for Marxist theory. For them the crucial text is *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. And for Anglophone critics Bakhtin emerges in *The Dialogic Imagination* as a theorist of the novel. All these uses of Bakhtin are legitimate, but none is sufficiently heteroglot to include the categories that Bakhtin himself felt were most important to his thought.

Bakhtin did not view himself as primarily a literary theorist. The term that he found closest to what he sought to do was *philosophical anthropology*. The many and varied subjects that he

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tackled appeared to him as being valuable chiefly for their own sakes. But at the same time he viewed them as media for working out philosophical problems. When his overriding goal throughout his various topics, disguises, and voices is seen as a philosophical quest, the many Bakhtins merge into a more comprehensive figure.

Yet this more comprehensive figure can never devolve into a single, definitive Bakhtin. In fact, to try to establish a hard-edged, finalized *Gestalt*, the "real Bakhtin," a magisterial figure to whom authority may be ascribed, would be to fly in the face of all that he endorsed. Whatever else he may have been, Bakhtin was an opponent of canons, and to claim that any version of him is somehow the correct one would be to straitjacket the philosopher of variety, to "monologize" the singer of "polyphony."

Unfortunately, all too many people have done this. Bakhtin became a cult figure among the Moscow intelligentsia of the 1960s and 1970s, who drew over him a hagiographic curtain. There is irony, as well as ground for caution, in the fact that most people who met Bakhtin during those two decades now describe him in terms reminiscent of those used to describe Lenin and Stalin at the height of their cults. Many testify that meeting Bakhtin changed their lives, that he gave them the impression of perfect understanding, and that he functioned like a magnet to draw out their innermost thoughts. Extravagant claims are also made about Bakhtin's character. Many see his forbearance in the face of Stalinist persecution as a form of saintliness.

The cult of personality surrounding Bakhtin would have been anathema to him. Rather than reacting to it with outrage or consternation, however, he would more likely have smilingly brushed it off. Bakhtin loved practical jokes, rogues, and eccentrics. He delighted in the radical inversions of social and conceptual hierarchies that are characteristic of carnival, and he would doubtless have been amused even by the misreadings of his own works that have resulted in his canonization. In fact, he had a lifelong affection for "How Ser Ciapelletto Became Saint Ciapelletto" in *The Decameron*, a story about the canonization of subversive intentions. In this tale an evil merchant, who throughout his life has lied, cheated, and fornicated, falls ill on a visit to a strange town and recognizes that he is about to die. He calls in a holy friar to make his confession. By subtle indirections and masterful ma-

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nipulations of Catholic dogma, the wicked man convinces the priest that his life was one of unexampled virtue. After the deceiving merchant dies and is buried in hallowed ground, the priest tells everyone about his discovery of a previously unsuspected holy man. Soon pilgrimages are made to the tomb of the merchant-turned-saint, and miracles begin to occur at the site.

This story, which Bakhtin had read to him in his last days when he could no longer read himself, illuminates attributes of Bakhtin the man, such as his unorthodox religiosity and his belief in the power of dialogue, the carnivalization of authority, and the mysteries of authorship. But the story also has a bearing on Bakhtin's posthumous reputation. It serves as a cautionary tale to us as authors, warning us not to assume the role of duped priests to Bakhtin's Ser Ciapelletto. The tale further serves to remind our readers not to take any particular version of Bakhtin, including ours, as canonical. While we hope to avoid the credulity of Boccaccio's priest, we also hope to celebrate the minor miracle that, after all the vicissitudes of repression, lost or ghosted manuscripts, and translation, Bakhtin's work nevertheless survives, and his dialogue with the world continues.

Tibetan Buddhism speaks of a third eye which gives to those who possess it a vision of the secret unity that holds creation together. Bakhtin seems to have had a third ear, one that permitted him to hear differences where others perceived only sameness. This sensation caused him to rethink the ways in which heterogeneity had traditionally been assigned the appearance of unity. In his several attempts to find a single name for variety, such as heteroglossia or polyphony, he was at pains never completely to stifle the energizing role of the paradox and conflict at the heart of his enterprise. He always sought the minimum degree of homogenization necessary to any conceptual scheme. He strove to preserve the heterogeneity that less scrupulous or patient thinkers often found intolerable, to which they therefore were quick to assign a unifying label. Such patience as Bakhtin's, in the face of a multiplicity that threatens to elude even the most elastic categories, is its own kind of courage. Bakhtin did not fear being overwhelmed by the flux of existence. He was never so afraid of being charged with theoretical inelegance that he felt compelled to a premature systematization. This sensitivity to variety places an extra burden on those of us who seek to find an overarching de-