

Michael
Holquist

Dialogism

Bakhtin and his World

2nd edition

 Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

IN THE SAME SERIES

Alternative Shakespeares ed. John Drakakis
Alternative Shakespeares: Volume 2 ed. Terence Hawkes
Critical Practice Catherine Belsey
Deconstruction: Theory and Practice Christopher Norris
Dialogue and Difference: English for the Nineties ed. Peter Brooker and Peter Humm
The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin
Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion Rosemary Jackson
Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World Michael Holquist
Formalism and Marxism Tony Bennett
Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism ed. Gayle Green and Coppélia Kahn
Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction Patricia Waugh
Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan
Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word Walter J. Ong
The Politics of Postmodernism Linda Hutcheon
Post-Colonial Shakespeares ed. Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin
Reading Television John Fiske and John Hartley
The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama Keir Elam
Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory Toril Moi
Structuralism and Semiotics Terence Hawkes
Studying British Cultures: An Introduction ed. Susan Bassnett
Subculture: The Meaning of Style Dick Hebdige
Telling Stories: A Theoretical Analysis of Narrative Fiction Steven Cohan and Linda M. Shires
Translation Studies Susan Bassnett

Michael
Holquist

Dialogism

Bakhtin and his World

2nd edition


 Routledge
 Taylor & Francis Group
 LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1990
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

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

Second edition first published 2002

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

© 1990, 2002 Michael Holquist

Typeset in Joanna by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-415-28007-9 (Hbk)

ISBN 0-415-28008-7 (Pbk)

This book is dedicated to my sons,
Nicko and Bas

CONTENTS

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE	ix
INTRODUCTION	xi
INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION	xiii
1 Bakhtin's life	1
2 Existence as dialogue	14
3 Language as dialogue	40
4 Novelness as dialogue: The novel of education and the education of the novel	67
5 The dialogue of history and poetics	107
6 Authoring as dialogue: The architectonics of answerability	149
7 This Heteroglossia called Bakhtin	183
NOTES	196
BIBLIOGRAPHY	206
INDEX	219

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

No doubt a third General Editor's Preface to *New Accents* seems hard to justify. What is there left to say? Twenty-five years ago, the series began with a very clear purpose. Its major concern was the newly perplexed world of academic literary studies, where hectic monsters called "Theory", "Linguistics" and "Politics" ranged. In particular, it aimed itself at those undergraduates or beginning postgraduate students who were either learning to come to terms with the new developments or were being sternly warned against them.

New Accents deliberately took sides. Thus the first Preface spoke darkly, in 1977, of "a time of rapid and radical social change", of the "erosion of the assumptions and presuppositions" central to the study of literature. "Modes and categories inherited from the past" it announced, "no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by a new generation". The aim of each volume would be to "encourage rather than resist the process of change" by combining nuts-and-bolts exposition of new ideas with clear and detailed explanation of related conceptual developments. If mystification (or downright demonisation) was the enemy, lucidity (with a nod to the compromises inevitably at stake there) became a friend. If a "distinctive discourse of the future" beckoned, we wanted at least to be able to understand it.

With the apocalypse duly noted, the second Preface proceeded

piously to fret over the nature of whatever rough beast might stagger portentously from the rubble. "How can we recognize or deal with the new?", it complained, reporting nevertheless the dismaying advance of "a host of barely respectable activities for which we have no reassuring names" and promising a programme of wary surveillance at "the boundaries of the precedented and at the limit of the thinkable". Its conclusion, "the unthinkable, after all, is that which covertly shapes our thoughts" may rank as a truism. But in so far as it offered some sort of useable purchase on a world of crumbling certainties, it is not to be blushed for.

In the circumstances, any subsequent, and surely final, effort can only modestly look back, marvelling that the series is still here, and not unreasonably congratulating itself on having provided an initial outlet for what turned, over the years, into some of the distinctive voices and topics in literary studies. But the volumes now re-presented have more than a mere historical interest. As their authors indicate, the issues they raised are still potent, the arguments with which they engaged are still disturbing. In short, we weren't wrong. Academic study did change rapidly and radically to match, even to help to generate, wide reaching social changes. A new set of discourses was developed to negotiate those upheavals. Nor has the process ceased. In our deliquescent world, what was unthinkable inside and outside the academy all those years ago now seems regularly to come to pass.

Whether the *New Accents* volumes provided adequate warning of, maps for, guides to, or nudges in the direction of this new terrain is scarcely for me to say. Perhaps our best achievement lay in cultivating the sense that it was there. The only justification for a reluctant third attempt at a Preface is the belief that it still is.

TERENCE HAWKES

INTRODUCTION

In an earlier book, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (by Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, and published by Harvard University Press in 1984), an attempt was made to present Bakhtin's life and thought in as neutral a manner as possible. Of course, the impossibility of being neutral is one of the founding assumptions of dialogism; I invoke the word merely to suggest that every attempt was made to give the facts as we knew them, without knowingly interpreting them to conform to our own views, even when what we were reporting was at odds with our own values. For instance, I am a non-believer (*neveruyushchii*, *неверующий*, with all the cultural baggage that term carries in Russian), and yet no attempt was made to downplay the fact that throughout his life Bakhtin was a deeply religious (if also highly eccentric) man, for whom certain Russian Orthodox traditions were of paramount importance.

This book differs from the earlier study in a number of respects, largely because – although drawing on all Bakhtin's texts known to exist – it does not seek to give equal treatment to all of them. Certain works are highlighted, while others are mentioned only in passing. The attempt here is to be as economical as possible, without ceasing to be responsible, in the dialogic sense of that word. Dialogism is a phenomenon that is still very much an open event. Any attempt to be "comprehensive" or "authoritative" would be misguided. This book provides

nothing more – or less – than a personal view of what one reasonably intelligent reader has deduced to be significant about dialogism after having spent some years reading, translating, editing, and teaching Bakhtin's work.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

In preparing this second edition I have had cause to reflect on the enormous changes that have taken place in the relatively short time since I started editing, translating, and explicating the works of Mikhail Bakhtin. In the decades that have elapsed since publication of *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981, translated with Caryl Emerson), Bakhtin has emerged from being the concern of a small group of eccentric Slavists to being a necessary point of reference for serious students of literature around the world. He has become a phenomenon, his notoriety such that he is cited authoritatively even by those who have never read him.

In the light of such fame, can a little volume such as the present one, a work that never sought to be more than a brief introduction to Bakhtin, still be useful? Clearly, both the editors at Routledge and I feel there might still be a need for such a primer. If anything, it could be argued that there are more pressing reasons for a synoptic guide than was the case ten years ago. In the last decade so much has been written about Bakhtin that inevitable contradictions have risen as claims are advanced for this or that view of his achievement. Is he a literary historian and theorist, a religious thinker, an ethical philosopher, a sociolinguist, a figure to be claimed for politics of the Right or Left? These and many other Bakhtins are now in the marketplace of ideas. As each vendor cries his wares, they all have a mountain of new data to

draw on for confirmation of their claims. It is increasingly difficult to see Bakhtin whole.

The modest claim of this volume is to do just that. In a short new conclusion I offer a survey of recent trends in Bakhtin studies; the bibliography has been brought up to date as well. This edition ends with a suggestion for how we might incorporate what we know into a vision of Bakhtin that is drawn together from several conflicting versions of his life and work. The aim is not to construct a premature identity, but a tensile unity of simultaneities. The reader can accept such a construction, or argue with it, but the hope is that the figure who emerges from these pages is at least whole enough to be engaged in a meaningful dialogue.

Michael Holquist
New Haven,
January, 2002.

1

BAKHTIN'S LIFE

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin was born on November 16, 1895 (November 4, old style) in Orel, a medium-sized town south of Moscow.¹ His father was a bank executive who came of an old but not particularly distinguished family of the minor nobility. As a child, Bakhtin was educated at home; his governess was a German woman of unusual gifts, and from an early age Bakhtin was bilingual in German and Russian. His life up to 1918, when he left Petersburg (or, as it then was, Petrograd) University, could not have been more in character for a man who was to become a student of heteroglossia (many-languagedness). Since his father's job required frequent transfers, the adolescent Bakhtin spent his gymnasium years in Vilnius and Odessa, two cities that stood out even in the patchwork Russian empire as unusually heterogeneous in their mix of cultures and languages. Vilnius was part of the ancient Lithuanian kingdom that had been ceded to the Romanovs after the third partition of Poland in 1795; thus the "official language" was Russian, but the majority of citizens spoke Lithuanian or Polish. Vilnius was also the intellectual center of East European Jewry, the "Jerusalem of the North" famous for its Talmudic exegetes, so Yiddish and Hebrew were also in the air. Odessa, a busy port on the Black Sea, was another of East Europe's large Jewish enclaves, and a city in whose streets mingled several different cultures, each with its own language.

In 1913, Bakhtin entered the local university in Odessa, but transferred the following year to St Petersburg University; in his gymnasium years he had passionately studied Latin and (especially) Greek, so he registered in the classics department of the historico-philological faculty, following in the steps of his older brother Nikolai, who was two years ahead of him at the university. Nikolai, an extraordinary figure in his own right, inspired Mikhail's lifelong love affair with the Hellenistic age. Indeed, he was in general the greatest influence on the youthful Bakhtin until the two were separated in 1918, never to see each other again. Nikolai joined the White Guards and, after many adventures, ended up as professor of linguistics in Birmingham University, England, where he died in 1950.

In the spring of 1918, Bakhtin, like many others, sought relief from the chaos that followed in the immediate wake of the revolution by going into the country districts where food and fuel were more abundant. He ended up first in Nevel, and then in nearby Vitebsk. In both places, he quickly became a member of a small group of intellectuals who feverishly threw themselves into the debates, lectures, demonstrations, and manifesto writing that characterized life at that extraordinary time. It was in this atmosphere of immense intellectual and political intensity that Bakhtin sought to think through for himself some of the problems then of most concern to philosophers, such as (to name only a few) the status of the knowing subject, the relation of art to lived experience, the existence of other persons, and the complexities of responsibility in the area of discourse as well as in the area of ethics.

Bakhtin had already immersed himself in philosophy from a very early age, particularly in ancient Greek, Hellenistic, and modern European philosophy. He read the German systematic philosophers, as well as Buber and Kierkegaard, while still a gymnasium student in Vilnius and Odessa. At university, he trained as a scholar in the Greek and Latin classics as they were taught in the old German philological tradition, in which the study of literature and language were inextricably bound up with each other. In addition, Tadeusz Zielinski, his eminent professor of classics, emphasized the need to know the complete spectrum of classical civilization, including philosophy.

Thus Bakhtin's interests were broad, but no more so than those of the group of young people he joined in 1918, although it was the latest

work in philosophy that attracted their most passionate attention. It was here, in the study and disputation of texts by contemporary German philosophers, that the nucleus of an ongoing "Bakhtin circle" was formed. It included the then musicologist Valentin Voloshinov, and the then journalist and organizer of literary events Pavel Medvedev, both of whose names would later become intertwined with Bakhtin's in disputes over the authorship of several texts written in the 1920s.

Until 1924 at least, then, Bakhtin was surrounded by intense philosophical debates. These took place not only in his friends' study circle (of which he very soon became the intellectually dominant member), but in public forums organized by the local Communist Party committee.

The particular school which dominated the academic study of philosophy in Europe during these years, and which was of great importance to the young Bakhtin, was Neo-Kantianism. Since this school has now fallen into some obscurity, a few words will perhaps be helpful on at least those aspects of it that are germane to Bakhtin. By 1918, Neo-Kantianism had been the dominant school of philosophy in Germany for almost fifty years. From roughly the 1870s until the 1920s, most professors of philosophy in Germany defined themselves by taking a position *vis-à-vis* Kant. This period corresponds to a time when Germany was considered by most Russians to be the home of true philosophical thought. Chairs at the leading universities not only in Germany but in Russia as well were held by Neo-Kantians of one kind or another. They were particularly well entrenched at Petersburg University during the years when Bakhtin was a student there.²

Although Neo-Kantianism was widespread phenomenon embracing several philosophies that were highly varied in their concerns, the one feature of Kant's thought they all had to confront was his formulation of the mind's relation to the world, the insistence on a constructive epistemology at the heart of his "Copernican revolution."

In Kant's view, his predecessors had either, like Leibniz, over-emphasized the role of ideas, thus diminishing the role of the world outside the mind; or, like Locke, they had gone too far in the opposite direction and by sensualizing concepts had made the mind merely a receptor of information provided by sensations from the world. Kant's

breakthrough was to insist on the necessary interaction – the *dialogue* as Bakhtin would come to interpret it – between mind and world.

Kant argued that what we call thought is really a synthesis of two forms of knowledge: sensibility and understanding. “Sensibility” may be taken roughly to mean what empiricists such as Locke or Hume assumed to be the sole basis of knowledge, the realm of physical sensation. And Kant’s use of “understanding” is roughly what rationalists, such as Leibniz, assumed to be the sole basis of knowledge, the realm of concepts in the mind.

The ability to think, which Kant assumed to mean the ability to make judgments, requires *both* forms of knowledge, which he triumphantly brought together in his “transcendental synthesis”: *a priori* concepts exist in the mind, but they can be used to actively organize sensations from the world outside the mind. The world, the realm of things-in-themselves, really exists, but so does the mind, the realm of concepts. Thought is the give and take between the two.

Those who came after Kant interpreted this synthesis in various ways. The Marburg School, the particular Neo-Kantianism in which the young Bakhtin steeped himself, was founded at the University of Marburg by Hermann Cohen.³ Cohen radically revised the mind/world relation as Kant had defined it. He emphasized the transcendental aspects of Kant’s synthesis, pursuing the quest for a oneness so immaculate that it made him a hero to other seekers after metaphysical purity, such as the young Pasternak who in 1912 travelled to Marburg to sit at the feet of the great man. And it was the same lust for unity in Cohen that inspired another Russian, Lenin, to attack him as a particularly virulent idealist.⁴ What attracted Pasternak and repelled Lenin was the same quality in Cohen: his opposition to the potential dualism in Kant’s account of how internal thought relates to the external world. Cohen had a remarkably precise mind, and his philosophy is a model of the kind of systematic thought that sought to unify all operations of consciousness. Roughly stated, his method for doing so was to abandon Kant’s notion of the thing-in-itself in order to declare a “logic of pure knowing”⁵ in which there is only a realm of concepts: the world exists as the subject of thought, and the subject of thought, no matter how material it might appear, is still always a subject that is *thought*.

Bakhtin’s connection with the Marburg School was relatively direct,

in that his closest friend during the years he was in Nevel’ and Vitebsk was Matvei Isaevich Kagan, who returned to Nevel’ from Germany almost simultaneously with Bakhtin’s arrival there from Petrograd. Kagan was a man of remarkable intellect who commanded the respect of all who came into contact with him. Originally fleeing from Russia’s Jewish Pale to Germany to escape persecution, and intending to pursue study in mathematics and physics, he had instead taken up the study of philosophy with Cohen in Marburg. Kagan’s move from the exact sciences to philosophy was not unusual in the years before the First World War, when scientists such as von Helmholtz sought to reinterpret Kant through the logic of mathematics and the workings of the human nervous system, or when physicists such as Ernst Mach applied what they had learned about the nature of matter and energy in the laboratory to the great questions of metaphysics. The Marburg School was the version of academic Neo-Kantianism most concerned to unite new discoveries in the sciences with the study of philosophy; so Kagan, the erstwhile mathematician, felt quite at home in the old German university on the heights above the river Lahn. But Kagan’s budding career as a philosopher in Germany was interrupted by the outbreak of the war in 1914. For the next four years he was held as an enemy alien (although Cohen himself had intervened on his behalf), being released for repatriation to Russia only after the signing of the treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918. The enthusiasm of Bakhtin and his other friends for German philosophy was given new depth and impetus by Kagan’s return.

Two general aspects of Marburg Neo-Kantianism that played an important role in the composition of Bakhtin’s early work should be emphasized. The first of these is the Neo-Kantian desire to relate traditional problems in philosophy to the great new discoveries about the world and nature being made in the exact and biological sciences on the cusp of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Bakhtin himself was greatly interested in science, particularly the new physics of Planck, Einstein, and Bohr, as well as in current developments in physiology, or more precisely the study of the central nervous system, an area in which Petersburg was one of the world centers. His closest friends were either lapsed mathematicians such as Kagan or, in later years, the biologist (and historian of science) Ivan Kanaev. This aspect of his

activity will perhaps explain the attention paid to questions of perception and materiality in Bakhtin. Dialogism shares in the general effort of thinkers after Einstein and Bohr to come to grips with new problems raised by relativity and quantum theory for anyone concerned with the traditional issues of how mind relates to body, and how physical matter connects with such apparently immaterial entities as relations between things. There is a certain ambiguity about these issues in Bakhtin's philosophy, deriving in some measure from ambiguities inherent in the treatment of the same topics in contemporary science. Einstein was arguing that physical objects were not static matter, but forms of volatile energy. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that matter while still being a basic category for philosophers and physicists alike – should have lost the kind of certainty that had previously made it seem so convincing when materialists confounded their more idealistic colleagues by merely kicking a stone. In Bakhtin's youth, the clear-cut distinctions that had so unproblematically been assumed in traditional (binary) distinctions between matter and mind, or body and soul were fast being eroded.

A second aspect of the Marburg School's activity that proved to be important in Bakhtin's development was the emphasis of its founder on unity and oneness. Bakhtin was not merely a passive receptor of Neo-Kantian ideas. One of the most important ways he demonstrates his independence from Cohen, even at this early stage, is in his resistance to the idea of an all-encompassing oneness, or *Allheit*. In this, Bakhtin is perhaps best understood as a figure who is trying to get back to the other side of Kant's synthesis, the world, rather than the mind (and in particular the rational mind), the extreme to which Cohen tended. The original Kantian concept of the heterogeneity of ends is much closer to Bakhtin's work than the later Neo-Kantian lust for unity.

During his years in Nevel' and Vitebsk, from 1918 to 1924, Bakhtin pursued a number of different writing projects, all of which, in one form or another, may be seen as an attempt to rethink the possibility of constructing a wholeness in terms more complex than those provided by the Marburg School. Kant's version of how mind and world related to each other defined the knowing subject as one who made sense out of the otherwise inchoate matter of the world. In such early essays as

"Author and hero in aesthetic activity" or "Toward a philosophy of the deed," Bakhtin's understanding of perception as an act of authoring brings him closer to Kant himself than to Cohen, in so far as he rethinks the problem of wholeness in terms of what is an essentially aesthetic operation. In those essays, the individual subject is conceived as similar to the artist who seeks to render brute matter, a thing that is not an art work in itself (independent of the artist's activity), into something that is the kind of conceptual whole we can recognize as a painting or a text. Cohen's lust for unity, with its attendant rationalism, was not what drew Bakhtin to the sage of Marburg. It was rather his emphasis on process, the radical "un-givenness" of experience, with its openness and energy – the loopholes in existence – that attracted him.

With the exception of one small piece that was published in a short-lived provincial newspaper, none of what Bakhtin was writing during these years was published. But the philosophical underpinnings of the work he would do for the rest of his life were established during these crucial years.

In 1924, Bakhtin returned to Petrograd, on the eve of its transformation into Leningrad. Although a time of great hardship, during which he lived on the earnings his wife eked out by making stuffed animals from old rags, the next six years were the most active of his life. Bakhtin was unable to take a normal job, because he was both politically suspect (for participating in several discussion circles which had connections with banned groups of Orthodox believers in the "catacomb church") and an invalid (in Nevel' he had contracted the severe osteomyelitis which would necessitate amputation of his right leg in 1938). Although there was hardly money for the endless tea and cigarettes Bakhtin required to work, life was not bad: not working meant there was more time to read and talk to friends, some of whom went back to the Nevel'/Vitebsk discussion circle, and others of whom were newly made, such as the eminent biologist Ivan Kanaev, who permitted the Bakhtins to live in his relatively spacious quarters just off Nevsky Prospekt, the city's main thoroughfare.

But most of all, there was time to write, and during the years from 1924 to 1929 Bakhtin wrote several of the books that would later bring him fame. He abandoned his earlier, rather technical philosophical style for one that was more popular – or at least easier for most people

to read. He (and others) would later claim that he published some work from this period under the names of his friends Medvedev ("The formal method in literary study," 1928), Voloshinov ("Freudianism: a critical sketch," 1927; "Marxism and the philosophy of language," 1929), and Kanaev (a two-part article, "Contemporary vitalism," 1926).⁶ The claim has struck many subsequent scholars as questionable, and a whole literature has developed on the topic of these texts' disputed authorship.⁷ This is not the place to go into the arcana of the dispute, but the reader of this book should be aware that I hold to the opinion that Bakhtin is, in his own charged sense of the word, primarily responsible for the texts in question and that I have treated them accordingly in this book.

One consequence of doing so is to see a shift in the conversation Bakhtin conducted throughout his life. During the late 1920s and early 1930s Bakhtin switched from participation in debates about aesthetics, the status of the subject, and the philosophy of religion (which is not the same as religion itself) – topics heavily influenced by contemporary events in German intellectual life – to the great issues of the day in the Soviet Union. These included controversy in several different disciplines about the relation their traditional methodologies bore to Communist doctrine: how would psychology, linguistics, and literary theory look when inter-illuminated by Marxist theory and Bolshevik practice?

Bakhtin participated (under his own name or that of one of his friends) in all these methodological and political struggles. In the 1928 Medvedev book he took exception to work done by the Russian Formalists, while also pointing out limitations in the still very poorly developed area of Marxist literary theory. In the Voloshinov books, he attacked Freud for his inability to imagine a collective subject for psychoanalysis, and Saussure for failing to recognize the importance of history and everyday speech in his theory of language. And under his own name, he published a book (*Problems in the work of Dostoevsky*, 1929) that argued against the hegemony of absolute authorial control. Thus all of the work that can be associated with his name during this period – while continuing to extend his attacks on the transcendental ego, continuing further to underline the need always to take others and otherness into account, and continuing to emphasize plurality and

variety – also lent itself to the *new* conditions as arguments against the increasing homogenization of cultural and political life in the Soviet Union that would culminate in the long night of Stalinism.

A sign of how things were going was Bakhtin's arrest in 1929; although he was never told exactly why he had been picked up, it can reasonably be surmised that it was in connection with a sweep of intellectuals associated with the underground church. After a brief period when it looked as if he was going to be sent to certain death in the dreaded hard labor camp in the Solovetsky islands of the far north, Bakhtin was sentenced to an easier exile in Kazakhstan. He was saved from this camp by his patently bad health, but only after intervention by (among others) the wife of Maxim Gorky, who had been approached by Bakhtin's wife, Elena Alexandrovna, and his old friend Kagan, who had become a rising star as a mathematician in the prestigious governmental commission on Soviet energy reserves. Bakhtin was sent to Kustenai, where he worked during the day teaching the almost illiterate former partisans who now ran Kazakhstan how to do bookkeeping, while at night continuing his studies on the history of the novel. Supplied with crates of books by Kagan and Kanaev, Bakhtin finished a number of monographs in the general area of the theory of the novel, including the very important "Discourse in the novel" (1934–5) and the long essay on the chronotope (1937–8).

Bakhtin's term of exile came to an end in 1934, but he stayed on in Kazakhstan for another two years, for although the area was particularly hard hit by the horrors of collectivization (it has been estimated that over 1.5 million Kazakhs lost their lives at this time, either through execution or starvation), he was able to make a better life in Kustenai than if he returned to Leningrad or Moscow, where many released political prisoners were being rearrested. In the years leading up to the Second World War, Bakhtin moved about a great deal; he worked for a year in Saransk, at the Mordovian Pedagogical Institute, where he was virtually a one-man literature department, but escaped possible rearrest in the great purge of 1937 by fleeing to Savelovo, a small town on the Volga, where he was able to work fairly undisturbed. During this period he finished two more long manuscripts. The first, called "The novel of education and its significance in the history of realism," was completed in 1938, but was mostly lost because the publishing house

that was to bring it out was destroyed by the Germans in the early months of the war; the second was to be submitted to the Gorky Institute of World Literature for a postgraduate degree. It was completed in 1941, but was not published until twenty-five years later as a book on Rabelais. Both books were directed in subtle (and some not so subtle) ways against the official doctrine of Socialist Realism, further indications of Bakhtin's peculiarly decentered way of acting out his responsibility in the historical events of his time.

After the German invasion, restrictions were loosened all over the Soviet Union, and Bakhtin, who had previously been banned from teaching in the high schools for fear he would corrupt the young, was permitted to teach German (using captured Nazi propaganda leaflets that were dropped on the town in both languages) and Russian in the Savelovo gymnasium. When the war ended, Bakhtin was recalled to Saransk, where the former teachers' college had been declared a university, and he was made chair of the faculty of "Russian and world literature." In 1947, his dissertation on Rabelais was accepted, but, after great controversy, he was given not the degree of Doctor but the lower one of Candidate. For several years Bakhtin was an enormously successful teacher in Saransk, and became something of a local legend. Through a combination of luck and circumspection (he gave lectures on such delicate topics as "Stalin and the English bourgeoisie"), he escaped rearrest during the insane xenophobia of the anti-cosmopolitan campaigns of the 1950s.

In the early 1960s, a group of young scholars at the Gorky Institute who admired Bakhtin's writings (they knew the Dostoevsky book and had read the Rabelais dissertation in the Institute library) discovered, contrary to their expectations, that Bakhtin had not perished with most of his generation of literary intellectuals. The group, composed of Vadim Kozhinov, Sergei Bocharov, and Georgy Gachev, all of whom would go on to become eminent literary scholars in their own right, dedicated themselves to rescuing Bakhtin from the obscurity into which he had fallen.

There was a dramatic change in Bakhtin's fortunes after 1963, when a second edition of the Dostoevsky book appeared, followed in 1965 by publication of the Rabelais book. Both created a sensation in the Soviet Union. Bakhtin was brought to the Moscow area, but in spite of

his new fame, had difficulty getting the necessary permission to live in the city (where residence is very tightly restricted to this day). Through the good offices of one of his young admirers, the daughter of Andropov, the then head of the KGB, he and his wife were put for a time into the state hospital reserved for only the very highest party officials. In 1971, Elena Alexandrovna died, and Bakhtin was distraught for months. He was finally permitted to move into a Moscow apartment in 1972, where he led a quiet life, seeing people, reading proofs for new editions of his earlier works, and writing new essays (largely based on earlier versions of texts he had worked on in the Saransk period). After the death of his wife, Bakhtin revealed to Kozhinov (who, with Bocharov, had by this time become his executor) that there were some unpublished manuscripts in Saransk from his very earliest period of activity. Bakhtin in his last phase turned again to the philosophical questions that had preoccupied him in the early 1920s, and his last activity was to help prepare his earliest texts for republication, which occurred only after his death. Early in the morning of March 7, 1975, Bakhtin finally succumbed to the emphysema that had plagued him (but had not kept him from smoking) in his last years.

In the intervening period almost all his works have been completely translated into several languages, including English. Some stock-taking is now in order. This book is "synoptic" because it treats all the texts of Bakhtin's different styles, periods, and even names (the disputed texts of Kanaev, Medvedev, and Voloshinov) as a single body of work, a position now possible because something like a complete canon has emerged. At the beginning and again at the end of his career, Bakhtin meditated on the different meanings that "consummation" or finishing off might have; he concluded that if done with care and with the constant awareness that the other, too, was an active consciousness, "consummation" could be a kind of gift that one participant in the ongoing dialogue of history could bestow on the other. This book is an attempt to achieve the transgression necessary at this time to initiate another step in Bakhtin's own consummation.

Bakhtin lived a long life: he was born in 1895 and he died in 1975. His longevity is in itself not so unusual, but in his thought nothing is ever "in itself." If, then, we put his life into the context of the wars, revolutions, famines, exiles, and purges which he managed to live

through, the fact that he reached the age of 80 years becomes more remarkable. Given such massive displacements, it is less surprising that for almost sixty of those years he never ceased to think about the mysteries of locating a self. He argued early and late that what a person said was meaningful to the degree his or her utterance answered a question, and the particular set of questions he himself addressed may be understood as growing out of problems that confront anyone seeking to heed Socrates' injunction to "Know thyself!" How could one "know"? And, assuming for the moment that one might somehow be able to know, how could one then know something called a "self" – especially in an age when every sector of knowing raised new challenges to existence of the "self" as anything but the delusion of a discredited metaphysics?

Bakhtin went out of his way to search for the most powerful attacks on the notion of selfhood. Dostoevsky once complained that the atheists of his day were not really very good at inventing arguments against the existence of God, so that in the service of testing his own faith, he had been forced to invent a few of his own. And the more one knows about the life of Bakhtin, the more it seems he found himself in the same dilemma: his meditation on the possibility of selfhood makes its way through the most powerful doubts about its existence that have been raised across the spectrum of the human, social, and even the so-called precise sciences. He was a particularly keen student of questions about individual subjectivity that arose in biology and in physics (which is why some time will be spent in the following pages on parallels between certain turns in the work of Bakhtin and Einstein).

Bakhtin's pondering of such questions is hardly unique in the modern period, of course. More distinctive is his project's radical emphasis on particularity and situatedness, the degree to which it insists that apparently abstract questions about selfhood are pursuable only when treated as specific questions about location. Given this way of looking at things, it is not surprising that Bakhtin devotes so much attention to questions of time and space, and relations between them. This preoccupation resulted over the years in a reformulation of the question "How can I know myself?" into another question with quite different implications: "How can I know if it is I or another who is talking?" Bakhtin's search for an answer to this last question led him to explore

parallels between the conditions at work when any of us speaks in the most common everyday situation on the one hand, and on the other, conditions that obtain when an author writes what we call a literary work. In both cases, utterance is understood as an act of authorship, or, as we shall see in greater detail later on, of co-authorship. These two parameters of authorship – utterance as it activates apparently simple address in everyday speech and as it animates complex works of art – constitute the poles between which the following synoptic account of Bakhtin's total oeuvre will take its course.

2

EXISTENCE AS DIALOGUE

Mikhail Bakhtin made important contributions to several different areas of thought, each with its own history, its own language, and its own shared assumptions. As a result, literary scholars have perceived him as doing one sort of thing, linguists another, and anthropologists yet another. We lack a comprehensive term that is able to encompass Bakhtin's activity in all its variety, a shortcoming he himself remarked when as an old man he sought to bring together the various strands of his life's work. At that time he wrote:

our analysis must be called philosophical mainly because of what it is not: it is not a linguistic, philological, literary or any other particular kind of analysis. . . . On the other hand, a positive feature of our study is this: [it moves] in spheres that are liminal, i.e., on the borders of all the aforementioned disciplines, at their junctures and points of intersection.

(*Estetika*, p. 281)

But if we accept even so privative a sense of "philosophy" as a way to describe the sort of thing Bakhtin does, the question remains: what kind of philosophy is it?

DIALOGISM AS AN EPISTEMOLOGY

Stated at the highest level of (quite hair-raising) abstraction, what can only uneasily be called "Bakhtin's philosophy" is a pragmatically oriented theory of knowledge; more particularly, it is one of several modern epistemologies that seek to grasp human behavior through the use humans make of language. Bakhtin's distinctive place among these is specified by the dialogic concept of language he proposes as fundamental. For this reason, the term used in this book to refer to the interconnected set of concerns that dominate Bakhtin's thinking is "dialogism," a term, I hasten to add, never used by Bakhtin himself. There can be no theoretical excuse for spawning yet another "ism," but the history of Bakhtin's reception seems to suggest that if we are to continue to think about his work in a way that is useful, some synthetic means must be found for categorizing the different ways he meditated on dialogue. That is, some way must be found to conceive his varied activity as a unity, without losing sight of the dynamic heterogeneity of his achievement. Before looking at any of Bakhtin's particular works, it will be useful to have some sense of the ideas that permeate them all. This chapter will seek, then, to lay out in a general way some of the ideas considered by Bakhtin at the beginning of his career, and which – with different shifts of emphasis and new accretions of significance – he never ceased to hold.

Dialogue is an obvious master key to the assumptions that guided Bakhtin's work throughout his whole career: dialogue is present in one way or another throughout the notebooks he kept from his youth to his death at the age of 80. Most of these are lost, some remain in the form of communications so self-directed they are now almost impossible to decipher or understand, while others eventually took on the more public and comprehensible form of published books. But early or late, no matter what the topic of the moment, regardless of the name under which he wrote or the degree of shared communication he presumed, all Bakhtin's writings are animated and controlled by the principle of dialogue. It is becoming increasingly evident that Bakhtin's lifelong meditation on dialogue does not have a place solely in the history of literary theory, capacious as the borders of that subject have recently become. It is now

clear that dialogism is also implicated in the history of modern thinking about thinking.

In this it is far from unique: the work of many other recent thinkers, especially in France, combines literary criticism, even literary production, with concerns that are essentially philosophical. But the kind of literature and the kind of philosophy that are woven together in the writings of a Sartre or a Derrida constitute genres significantly different from those that characterize dialogism. Rousseau, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, the philosophers recently "discovered" by students of literature, represent, not surprisingly, the *literary* aspect of philosophy. They are lyrical thinkers, some of whom set out consciously to poeticize metaphysics.

Bakhtin is working out of a very different philosophical tradition, one that is little known, even among many Anglo-American professors of philosophy. The men who constitute a dialogizing background for Bakhtin differ from most thinkers now in fashion in so far as they were, in their own day, very much in the mainstream of academic philosophy. They held chairs in the important German universities and sought to make metaphysics even more systematic than had Hegel (most were, in fact, militantly anti-Hegelian, as was Bakhtin himself). Systematic metaphysics is now out of fashion and the names by which philosophy was defined in the latter half of the nineteenth century are for the most part forgotten. It is difficult for most of us now to conceive the passion excited in their time by such men as Hermann Cohen or Richard Avenarius. And if we take the trouble to look into their books, it becomes even harder, for they are written in the forbidding language of German technical philosophy in one of its more complex phases. And there are very few translations. I mention this tradition (emphatically) not to scare anyone away from a deeper involvement in Bakhtin's philosophical roots, but only to make it clear that such an involvement requires the extra effort always required to go beyond the categories and concepts (and translations) currently in fashion.

Dialogism, let it be clear from the outset, is itself not a systematic philosophy. But the specific way in which it refuses to be systematic can only be gauged against the failure of all nineteenth-century metaphysical system to cope with new challenges raised by the natural and mathematical sciences. The most spectacular of these failures was the

increasingly obvious irrelevance of Hegelianism (right or left) to the new scientific discoveries. As a result, from the 1860s on, more and more attention was paid to Kant: by the 1890s Neo-Kantianism in one form or another had become the dominant school of philosophy in Germany – and Russia.

DIALOGISM IN THE CONTEXT OF NEO-KANTIANISM

There are many reasons why the rallying cry "Back to Kant!" proved so successful, but chief among them was a compatibility between Kant's work and developments in the realm of science outside philosophy. Kant himself had taught scientific subjects for many years before he published his first critique and became known as a philosopher. And the first critique was aimed precisely at the kind of pure reason divorced from experience that would bring Hegel's Absolute Spirit into disrepute in the later nineteenth century, an age when empiricism and experiment were yielding such obvious scientific benefits. In the fields of physics, mathematics, and physiology, such men as Ernst Mach and Wilhelm von Helmholtz were explicitly committed to working out the larger implications of Kant's speculative epistemology not in the philosopher's study, but in the scientist's laboratory, as they charted new paths in physics and physiology.

Dialogism's immediate philosophical antecedents are to be found in attempts made by various Neo-Kantians to overcome the gap between "matter" and "spirit." After the death of Hegel, this gap became increasingly apparent in the growing hostility between science and philosophy. Dialogism, then, is part of a major tendency in European thought to reconceptualize epistemology the better to accord with the new versions of mind and the revolutionary models of the world that began to emerge in the natural sciences in the nineteenth century. It is an attempt to frame a theory of knowledge for an age when relativity dominates physics and cosmology and thus when *non-coincidence* of one kind or another – of sign to its referent, of the subject to itself – raises troubling new questions about the very existence of mind.

Bakhtin begins by accepting Kant's argument that there is an unbridgeable gap between mind and world (but as we shall see, he differs from Kant in assuming that therefore there are things in

themselves; there may be things outside mind, but they are nevertheless not in themselves). The non-identity of mind and world is the conceptual rock on which dialogism is founded and the source of all the other levels of non-concurring identity which Bakhtin sees shaping the world and our place in it. Bakhtin's thought is a meditation on how we know, a meditation based on *dialogue* precisely because, unlike many other theories of knowing, the site of knowledge it posits is never unitary. I use the admittedly cumbersome term "meditation on knowledge" here, because from his very earliest work Bakhtin is highly critical of what he calls "epistemologism," a tendency pervading all nineteenth- and early twentieth-century philosophy. A theory of knowledge devolves into mere epistemologism when there is posited "a unitary and unique consciousness . . . any determinateness must be derived from itself [thus it] cannot have another consciousness outside itself . . . any unity is its own unity" (*Estetika*, p. 79).

In dialogism, the very capacity to have consciousness is based on *otherness*. This otherness is not merely a dialectical alienation on its way to a sublation that will endow it with a unifying identity in higher consciousness. On the contrary: in dialogism consciousness is *otherness*. More accurately, it is the differential relation between a center and all that is not that center. Now, a caution is in order here. Serious questions have recently been raised about the validity of any discourse that invokes the concept of center, as in various versions of what has come to be called "logocentrism." "Center" has often been used as a name for the unreflective assumption of ontological privilege, the sort of mystification sometimes attacked as the "illusion of presence." It is important from the outset, then, that "center" in Bakhtin's thought be understood for what it is: a *relative* rather than an absolute term, and, as such, one with no claim to absolute privilege, least of all one with transcendent ambitions.

This last point is particularly important, for certain of the terms crucial to Bakhtin's thought, such as "self" and "other," have so often been used as masked claims to privilege. Before we further specify the roles played by these protagonists in Bakhtinian scenarios, the simple yet all-important fact should be stressed again that they always enact a drama containing more than one actor.

THE FUNDAMENTAL ROLE OF SIMULTANEITY

Self and other are terms that sound vaguely atavistic in an age remarkable for its celebration of all that is extra- and impersonal. We are frequently told that not only God has died, but so has the subject. And perhaps no subject is quite so moribund as the particular kind that once was honored as author. It has even been argued with self-immolating eloquence that man (or at least Man) himself has died in history. All these deaths are melodramatic ways of formulating an end to the same thing: the old conviction that the individual subject is the seat of certainty, whether the subject so conceived was named God, the soul, the author, or – my self. Bakhtin, too, is suspicious of untrammelled subjectivity's claims; he perhaps least of all is mystified by them. And he attacks such claims at their root, in the self itself, which is why for him "self" can never be a self-sufficient construct.

It cannot be stressed enough that for him "self" is dialogic, a *relation*. And because it is so fundamental a relation, dialogue can help us understand how other relationships work, even (or especially) those that preoccupy the sometimes stern, sometimes playful new Stoics who most dwell on the death of the subject: relationships such as signifier/signified, text/context, system/history, rhetoric/language, and speaking/writing. We shall explore some of these further in later chapters, not as binary oppositions, but as asymmetric dualisms. But we must begin by recognizing that for Bakhtin the key to understanding all such artificially isolated dualisms is the dialogue between self and other.

Whatever else it is, self/other is a relation of simultaneity. No matter how conceived, simultaneity deals with ratios of same and different in space and time, which is why Bakhtin was always so concerned with space/time. Bakhtin's thought was greatly influenced by the new concepts of time and space that were being proposed by revolutionary physicists after the collapse of the old Newtonian cosmos. In Newton's mechanics it was possible for physical processes to propagate at infinite velocity through space. This meant that if one and the same action emanates from one body and reaches another body at the same instant, the process is purely spatial for it has occupied zero time. In Newton's