



*The First  
Hundred Years of*  
**MIKHAIL  
BAKHTIN**

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Caryl Emerson



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In his time, Chesterton divided humankind into three large categories: *simply people*, *intellectuals*, and *poets*. *Simply people* are able to feel but they are not able to express their feelings; *intellectuals* are able to despise to perfection the feelings of the *simply people*, to ridicule them and to root out those same feelings in themselves; but the poets, in contrast, are granted the ability to express adequately what everyone feels but what no one can say. According to this classification, Bakhtin belongs in the ranks of the poets.

(Sergei Averintsev, "*Lichnost' i talant uchenogo*")



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## Acknowledgments

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A PARADOXICAL tension exists between Bakhtin's celebration of dialogic and carnival relations and his own modest, reluctant, self-effacing practice of them. He wrote very few personal letters and disliked the genre (whereas the "monolithically monologic" Leo Tolstoy exchanged literally thousands of letters and exposed himself at every turn); he avoided the telephone and was made acutely uncomfortable by formal interviews; he left no diary or written memoirs whereby others could piece together his life. He rarely spoke on his own initiative about his personal experiences. In a group, apparently, he favored restraint and "single-voiced" behavior: the role of featured speaker or of bemused and tolerant listener. Even with close friends he remained on formal terms of address. His style in the classroom—if we are to credit reminiscences by his former students—was that of an impassioned, authoritative lecturer before whom others sat silent and in awe; in seminars he remained very much the leader, never functioning as therapist in the guise of pedagogue. Talking about feelings was not his strong suit. For Bakhtin, who prided himself on his philosophical rigor, interrelations within the world of the text came first; to revoice its ideas in one's own intonation and to assume a responsible position toward those ideas was, in his opinion, a sufficiently challenging and delicate task. The emotions and anxieties that fill our own immediate lives (lived in what Bakhtin called the realm of "Small Time") should be visited upon that text only with the greatest humility and self-discipline.

Nor did Bakhtin make a fetish out of that category of academic dialogue we call "scholarly apparatus." The first major essay he prepared for print contained only the scantiest documentation. As he put the matter dismissively in his opening paragraph—in what was, for a junior scholar, an astonishingly cavalier tone—excessive footnoting was unnecessary for the competent reader, and for the incompetent reader, useless. He never entered debates over his own work in print, which, as this study shall demonstrate, routinely received harsh reviews. Physically crippled for the second half of his life, the mature Bakhtin was increasingly immobile, ill, and (voluntarily or no) reclusive. One woman from Kustanai (the region in Kazakhstan where the Bakhtins were exiled in the early 1930s) does recall, however, a younger Mikhail Mikhailovich, pacing back and forth in the small office where he was employed as a bookkeeper, talking to himself.

Clearly Bakhtin's most important dialogues were with ideas. He read *in* them before he felt compelled to share *of* them. Most often these ideas

were attached to specific personalities (living or deceased); on occasion, we must suppose, Bakhtin altered his own adamant opinions by submitting them to others' judgment. But given the pace of change around him—he lived through every major Soviet cataclysm—Bakhtin changed his mind and his topics with exceptional slowness. At the end of his life he returned, his lexicon scarcely altered, to the questions of his youth. He remained stubbornly a man of the book. And he valued, above all, two things that twentieth-century life (and certainly the postmodernist climate) has lost affection for: *depth* and *duration*. Both are required, he felt, if we are to develop the ability or the desire to linger over something long enough to know it; this lingering was the first prerequisite for “aesthetic love.” Most of the time, as far as we can tell, Bakhtin lived in the category he called “Great Time.”

These virtues of Bakhtin's method could not be reflected in the present book. As with all cults built up around reticent, private persons who have become valuable commodities, the Bakhtin industry has known its share of gossip, turf wars, unsubstantiated rumor, dialogue in bad faith, nostalgic fantasy, and willful misreadings. These “cultic” judgments, coexisting alongside superior scholarly commentary produced under often appalling conditions, are part of the fabric of this project. The image of the man and his thought that results is of course of my own assembling, everywhere subjected to the pressure of my paraphrase and selection of materials. But the basic inspiration for this image was the Russian community of scholars, and what I have taken to be its most fruitful lines of thinking on Bakhtin up to the centenary Jubilee in 1995. As such, this study owes a huge debt to a large number of Russian colleagues, credited in a cumbersome apparatus. Of them, I owe special gratitude to Vitaly Makhlin, Konstantin Isupov, Sergei Averintsev, Oleg Osovsky, Natalia Bonetskaia, Mikhail Ryklin, Igor Solomadin, Mikhail Girshman, Nikolai Pan'kov, Vladimir Turbin, Alexei Lalo, Leonid Batkin, Liudmila Gogotishvili, Elena Volkova, Mikhail Gasparov—and, of course, the three founding Bakhtinians to whom we are indebted for the initial preservation of Bakhtin's word: Sergei Bocharov, Vadim Kozhinov, and Georgii Gachev.

In this country my debts are also profound. The work of Michael Holquist and Katerina Clark, authors of the pathbreaking 1984 biography *Mikhail Bakhtin* and pioneers in the editing, translating, and explicating of Bakhtin's texts in English, remains foundational to the field. Clinton Gardner organized “Bakhtin sessions” in connection with meetings of his Transnational Vladimir Solovyov Society from 1993 to the present, which facilitated Western interaction with Russian Bakhtin scholarship at a crucial moment in the interaction of our two academic worlds. Several dozen Princeton students, graduate and undergraduate, startled me with

their insightful “outsiderly” perceptions about Bakhtin in our seminars on his work, and I thank them for this experience. The intellectual support of the following colleagues has been especially helpful: David Be-thea, Natalia Reed, Thomas Pavel, Alexandar Mihailovic, Donald Fanger, Deborah Haynes, Gary Saul Morson, Robert Louis Jackson, Richard Taruskin, William Mills Todd, Amy Mandelker, Mikhail Epstein, Brian Poole, Anna Tavis, Clare Cavanagh, Randall Poole, Robin Feuer Miller, and Charles Townsend (to whose wisdom I owe the initial insight, in the afterword, on Bakhtin and competitive sports). Thomas Cunningham provided the index and indispensable technical expertise. Princeton University Press, and especially the intelligent midwifery of Mary Murrell, Molan Chun Goldstein, and Rita Bernhard, made the final stages of fixing the text in print a consummate pleasure. My parents, husband, and larger family have graciously put up with this unendable project, absolving and sustaining its author for longer than any of us wish to remember. A special dialogue of the threshold was born within a highly irritable chronotope, which began with the line: “Bakhtin doubtless had something to say about that too, but I do not want to know it.”

This book is dedicated to the lifesaving notion that no matter how our efforts or words may weigh in on the scales of Bakhtin’s Great (or even Small) Time, all is not yet said, done, lost.



## Abbreviations

- A&A* 90      *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*. Edited by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov. Translation and notes by Vadim Liapunov. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990. Contains "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" ("A&H").
- Bakhtinologiia* 95      *Bakhtinologiia: Issledovaniia, perevody, publikatsii* [Bakhtinology: Research, translations, publications]. Edited by K. G. Isupov et al. Sankt-Peterburg: Aleteia, 1995.
- B sb I* 90      *Bakhtinskii sbornik I* [Bakhtin anthology]. Edited by D. Kujundzić and V. L. Makhlin. Moscow: Lit. Inst. im. Gor'kogo (Moskovskii gosudarstvennyi pedagogicheskii universitet [Moscow State Pedagogical University], or MGPU), 1990.
- B sb II* 91      *Bakhtinskii sbornik II: Bakhtin mezhdurussiei i zapadom*. [Bakhtin anthology II: Bakhtin between Russia and the West]. Moscow: "Kollektiv avtorov" [Authors' collective], 1991.
- B sb III* 97      *Bakhtinskii sbornik III*. Edited by K. G. Isupov, V. L. Makhlin and O. E. Osovskii. Moscow: Labirint, 1997.
- DKKh*, no. 1 (92);  
*DKKh*, no. 1(2) (93);  
*DKKh*, nos. 2–3 (93); etc.      *Dialog Karnaval Khronotop*. General editor, N. A. Pan'kov. Vitebskii pedinstitut, Vitebsk, Belarus'. Maiden issue, 1992; last issue incorporated into this study: no. 2 (1996).
- DI*      *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. Contains the major essays in M. M. Bakhtin, *Voprosy litera-*

- Est MMB i sov* 89      *tury i estetiki: Issledovaniia raznykh let*  
[Questions of literature and aesthetics:  
Research from various years]. Moscow:  
Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1975.
- Fil MMB i etika* 92      *Estetika M. M. Bakhtina i sovremennost'*  
[The aesthetics of M. M. Bakhtin and  
the present day]. Edited by A. F.  
Eremeev et al. Sixty theses prepared for  
the first Bakhtin lecture series, 16–19  
October 1989, Saransk, by the Depart-  
ment of Aesthetics, Mordovia State Uni-  
versity, 1989.
- MB: FP* 90      *Filosofia M. M. Bakhtina i etika sovremen-*  
*nogo mira* [The philosophy of M. M.  
Bakhtin and the ethics of the contempo-  
rary world]. Edited by R. I. Alek-  
sandrova and O. V. Breikin. Saransk:  
Izdatel'stvo Mordovskogo universiteta  
[Publishing House of Mordovia State  
University], 1992.
- MMB: ENS* 92      *Mikhail Bakhtin: Filosofia postupka* [Mikh-  
ail Bakhtin: The philosophy of the act].  
Edited by V. L. Makhlin. In the Znanie  
series "Filosofia i zhizn'," no. 6 (1990).
- MMB i fil kul XX, 1 (91);*      *M. M. Bakhtin: Esteticheskoe nasledie i*  
*MMB i fil kul XX, 2 (91)*      *sovremennost'* [M. M. Bakhtin: His aes-  
thetic legacy and the present day]. Edi-  
ted by A. F. Eremeev et al. 2 vols.  
Saransk: Izdatel'stvo Mordovskogo uni-  
versiteta, 1992.
- MMB i fil kul XX, 1 (91);*      *M. M. Bakhtin i filosofskaia kul'tura XX*  
*MMB i fil kul XX, 2 (91)*      *veka: Problemy Bakhtinologii* [M. M.  
Bakhtin and philosophical culture of the  
twentieth century: Problems of Bakh-  
tinology]. Edited by K. G. Isupov. 2  
vols. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi ped-  
agogicheskii universitet imeni A. I. Ger-  
tsena; Izdatel'stvo "Obrazovanie,"  
Kul'turnyi fond SSSR, S.-Peterburgskoe  
otdelenie Bakhtinskogo obshchestva;  
S.-Peterburgskii fond shkoly; Maloe go-  
sudarstvennoe nauchno-proizvodstvennoe  
predpriatie "Vnedrenie."

- MMB i gum mysh I (95);* *M. M. Bakhtin i gumanitarnoe myshlenie na poroge XXI veka* [M. M. Bakhtin and thinking in the humanities on the threshold of the twenty-first century]. Edited by N. I. Voronina et al. 2 vols. Precis from the Third Saransk International Bakhtin Readings, October 1995.
- MMB i gum mysh II (95)*
- MMB i met 91* *M. M. Bakhtin i metodologiiia sovremennogo gumanitarnogo znaniia* [M. M. Bakhtin and methodology in the humanities today]. Theses of talks by participants of the second Saransk lecture series, 28–30 January 1991. Izdatel'stvo Mordovskogo universiteta. Saransk, 1991.
- MMB i PGN 94* *M. M. Bakhtin i perspektivy gumanitarnykh nauk* [M. M. Bakhtin and future perspectives for the humanities]. Materials from the Bakhtin conference held at the Russian State University of the Humanities, 1–3 February 1993. Edited by V. L. Makhlin. 1994. Prilozhenie k zhurnal' *Dialog Karnaval Khronotop*. Serii *Sobytiie v nauke*. Izdatel' N. A. Pan'kov. Vitebsk, Belarus', 1994. Publication realized with the financial help of the fund "Kul'turnaia initsiativa" in cooperation with the Saint Dmitry Orthodox Brotherhood, Vitebsk.
- MMB kak filosof 92* *M. M. Bakhtin kak filosof* [M. M. Bakhtin as philosopher]. Edited by L. A. Gogotishvili and P. S. Gurevich. Institut filosofii, Rossiiskaia Akademiia nauk. Moscow: Nauka, 1992.
- MMB: PNN 92* *M. M. Bakhtin: Problemy nauchnogo naslediiia* [M. M. Bakhtin: Problems of the scholarly legacy]. Edited by S. S. Konkin et al. Saransk: Izdatel'stvo Mordovskogo universiteta, 1992.
- MMB: ss 5 (96)* *M. M. Bakhtin: Sobranie sochinenii v 7-i tomakh* [Collected works in seven volumes], 1996–. Vol. 5 (Works of the 1940s to the beginning of the 1960s).



- Moscow: Russkie slovari, 1966. General editor, Sergei Bocharov.
- MMB v S 89* *Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin v Saranske: Ocherk zhizni i deiatel'nosti* [Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin in Saransk: A sketch of his life and activity]. Edited by G. B. Karpunov et al. Izdatel'stvo Saratovskogo universiteta, 1989.
- MMB v zerk 95* *M. M. Bakhtin v zerkale kritiki* [M. M. Bakhtin in the mirror of criticism]. Edited by T. G. Yurchenko. Moscow: Labirint, 1995.
- NLO* *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* [New literary review]. Edited by Irina Prokhorova. Moscow.
- PDP* Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* [1963]. Edited and translated by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Prob p&rist lit 73* *Problemy poetiki i istorii literatury (sbornik statei)* [Problems of poetics and the history of literature (a collection of essays)]. Edited by S. S. Konkin et al. Festschrift for Bakhtin's seventy-fifth birthday. Saransk: Mordovskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 1973.
- Prob n nasl MMB 85* *Problemy nauchnogo naslediiia M. M. Bakhtina* [Problems of M. M. Bakhtin's scholarly legacy]. Edited by S. S. Konkin et al. Festschrift for Bakhtin's ninetieth birthday. Saransk: Mordovskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 1985.
- SpG* M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.
- TPA* M. M. Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Translation and notes by Vadim Liapunov. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993.

# THE FIRST HUNDRED YEARS OF MIKHAIL BAKHTIN

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## INTRODUCTION

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### East Meets West in the Ex-USSR

WHO WAS Mikhail Bakhtin? As the centennial year drew near, generated its promised mass of material and then receded, this question appeared ever more complicated. Although the restoration of lost or suppressed biographies has long been routine in postcommunist Russia, the obstacles to understanding Bakhtin's life are not the usual Soviet ones. This matter was addressed on the brink of the Jubilee year, in the December 1994 issue of the journal *Voprosy filosofii* [Questions of philosophy], by I. N. Fridman.<sup>1</sup> Bakhtinian terminology has been fashionable now for twenty-five years, Fridman notes; in fact, Bakhtin's name is already somewhere between a classic and a cliché. But no clear sense of his intellectual place in the history of Russian thought has yet emerged. Similarly confused cults had accompanied other post-Stalinist rehabilitations—of the great film theorist Eisenstein, for example, or the persecuted philosopher Aleksei Losev—but in those cases, the reasons for the obscurity were more straightforward: savage times, tyranny, disobedient genius targeted by the state and duly punished. Once the tyrant dies, sooner or later the records are unsealed and the lives are filled in. However shamefully delayed, eventually a slot is found for the thinker in Russian cultural history.

But with Bakhtin, nothing of that sort has happened. Although his life was indeed darkened by politics, we cannot blame political suppression for the lacunae in his biography—nor would Bakhtin, who was completely alien to a victim mentality, ever wish us to do so. We are now free to fill his life in, and yet, Fridman writes, “Bakhtin remains homeless and unattached. It is unclear where he came from (the philosophical tradition that nourished him is yet to be clarified), where or how he lived (there is still no biography in Russian),<sup>2</sup> or even who, in fact, he is (it turns out that Kanaev, Medvedev, and Voloshinov are also Bakhtin). Such a state of affairs is most auspicious for the growth of scholarly rumors.” Fridman is

<sup>1</sup> I. N. Fridman, “Karnaval v odinokhu.” *Voprosy filosofii*, no. 12 (1994): 79–89. Quotations are on page 79.

<sup>2</sup> By 1994, this was not strictly true. The authoritative 1984 Clark-Holquist biography, which had long circulated among Russian scholars in unofficial translation, was supplemented in 1993 by a documentary biography authored by two of Bakhtin's colleagues, a father-and-daughter team at the University of Saransk; see S. S. Konkin and L. S. Konkina, *Mikhail Bakhtin (Stranitsy zhizni i tvorchestva)* (Saransk: Mordovskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1993). The Konkin biography itself played into the legacy wars over Bakhtin; see chapter 1 of the present study, pages 58–59.

#### 4 INTRODUCTION

certainly correct. The appeal of a “homeless and unattached Bakhtin,” unfinalized in the spirit of the novels he so loved, a thinker who appears not to have needed the secure points of reference that the rest of us require, has given rise on Russian soil to some paradoxical portraits. Two will suffice. Their composite features will become leitmotifs in the chapters that follow.

The first is by Vitaly Makhlin, professor at Moscow State Pedagogical University, host of the 1995 International Centennial Conference, and a central figure in the Bakhtin industry of the capital.<sup>3</sup> The essay, which appeared in 1992 in an anthology entitled *M. M. Bakhtin as Philosopher* published by the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences, deals with Bakhtin’s legacy in the context of Western postmodernism. Makhlin asks how we might explain the “grotesquely anachronistic ‘influence’ of Bakhtin’s thought, which ripened at the beginning of the century, in the West of the postmodernist epoch.” The contours of his philosophy coincide with no major twentieth-century movement. Bakhtin was—and Makhlin enumerates—a non-Marxist, non-Formalist, non-Freudian, non-Structuralist, nonexistentialist, noncollectivist, nonutopian, nontheologian; “in a word, a non-modernist.” Makhlin then surmises that Bakhtin’s popularity today owes something to the fact that modernism, with its hierarchical and universalizing impulses, was at base monologic, whereas the postmodern temperament finds something congenial in Bakhtin’s insistence on noncoincidence, incompatibility, and otherness [*drugost’*]. But Makhlin admits that the *bakhtinskii boom* of the 1980s and 1990s must have been motivated by more than the appeal of fragmentation and centrifugal energy, by then a commonplace. For Bakhtin is no postmodernist either. In fact, rather the contrary is true. As Makhlin concludes in his later and lengthier review essay “Bakhtin and the West” in *Voprosy filosofii* (1993), critics either get Bakhtin wrong from the start by equating the carnival impulse with political resistance, *ressentiment*, or ethical relativism (all of them, in Makhlin’s view, “alternative monologisms”); or else they find, to their dismay, that the inner contradictions and unsatisfying aspects of “postmodernist theory” are most perfectly highlighted when we attempt to integrate Bakhtinian ideas into them or to explicate Bakhtin through them.<sup>4</sup>

The second portrait—by far the more eccentric—is also constructed out of what Bakhtin is not. Its author, the culturologist and literary historian Georgii Gachev, is one of the most colorful senior Bakhtin hands in

<sup>3</sup> V. L. Makhlin, “Nasledie M. M. Bakhtina v kontekste zapadnogo postmodernizma,” in *MMB kak filosof* 92, 206–20, esp. 206, 209–10, 219.

<sup>4</sup> V. L. Makhlin, “Bakhtin i Zapad (opyt obzornoj orientatsii),” *Voprosy filosofii*, no. 3 (1993): 134–50, esp. 135–37.

the capital. At the Bakhtin panel of an international conference on Russian philosophy held in Moscow in March 1993, he delighted and appalled the audience with a spirited refutation of almost all the papers (Russian as well as foreign) that had been delivered on the subject of the friend of his youth, Mikhail Mikhailovich.<sup>5</sup> There is altogether too much sober scholarly talk about who Bakhtin is or what he could do, Gachev insisted. Better that we concentrate on what he could *not* do, on those aspects of reality that his particular angle of vision walled out. Bakhtin had no feeling for, nor knowledge of, the natural world; no living Eros (Gachev is among those disciples convinced that Bakhtin never consummated his marriage); no children; no dogs (only cats, Gachev obscurely remarked, "mystical and untrustworthy"); no daylight. "They sat around the table all night and smoked and talked, smoked and talked." In the process, Bakhtin destroyed the vertical dimension; everything was sublimated and spread out flat along a loving, horizontal "I-thou" axis where the ever present possibility of benevolent communication among equals supplanted—or at least kept at bay—the anxieties that would later define the bleaker landscapes of Western existentialism. In place of God, Bakhtin deified the everyday interlocutor. A creature made neither for prayer nor for parenting, he reigned in a world of philosophical conversations carried out over endless tea and cigarettes in small rooms in the dead of night. Bakhtin was a *mezhdusoboinik* (a "just-between-you-and-me-nik"). For him, the intimate voice and the chamber space was all. Gachev implied that such thinkers, or talkers, can be the source of brilliant isolated insights about literature and much spiritual uplift for their audiences—but they cannot be taught in school, cannot themselves form "schools," and are rarely forthcoming with a reliable methodology or an easily applicable theory. Such academic and institutional matters, sooner or later, require discipline, organization, verification procedures, and some constraining hierarchies.

To be sure, negative theology of this sort (defining a revered object by what it is *not* so as to respect its power or impenetrability) has a place in all mystifications and cults. As regards his own person, Bakhtin contributed to this state of affairs. He rarely spoke of himself and kept most contemporary schools of thought at a bemused distance; his tendency was to look at the world, discern two unacceptable poles functioning in it, and then posit an idea or method that would mediate or dissolve the opposition. He was always careful, however, to distinguish between the

<sup>5</sup> Transnational Institute East-West Conference on "Russian Philosophy and the Russia of Today," Moscow, 15–19 March 1993, cosponsored by the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Humanities Research Center (PUT) in Moscow; panel on Bakhtin, 16 March 1993.

strength and importance of an idea, its internal coherence and ability to influence other ideas productively, and what he considered the much smaller importance of his own attitude toward it (an exemplary instance being his attitude toward Freud).<sup>6</sup> According to Sergei Bocharov, a close friend and disciple, Bakhtin considered himself neither a religious thinker nor a philosopher in the professional sense ("I was carried away by the Marburg school," Bakhtin remarked; "that says it all."). In Bakhtin's view, philosophy was a strict science—and much of what passed for Russian philosophy was, in his opinion, mere "thought mongering" [*svobodnoe myslitel'stvo*].<sup>7</sup> As this study will show, however, philosophizing, in the loose interdisciplinary sense, is precisely what many of Bakhtin's most ardent followers consider his most valuable contribution to scholarship. The local task of water-tight literary theory or a satisfyingly whole explanation of artistic texts and authors had never been Bakhtin's primary concern. He tended, rather, to invoke literature as illustration of his principles or strategies for living and thinking.

During an interview held in the spring of 1973, the Mayakovsky scholar Viktor Duvakin asked the aged Bakhtin: "So [in the 1920s] you were more of a philosopher than a philologist?" "More of a philosopher," Bakhtin answered promptly. "And such have I remained until the present day. I am a philosopher. A thinker."<sup>8</sup> By Bakhtin's own testimony, then, his certified profession (philology, the academic field of linguistics and

<sup>6</sup> According to oral testimony at the end of his life (see n. 8), Bakhtin admired Freud as a great innovator, an "otkryvatel'" or one who opened up new worlds, whose work unfortunately had "no serious continuation on Russian soil"; but when pushed toward a personal assessment, Bakhtin admitted that with his Kantian orientation he found the Freudian approach "alien to him." "[Freud] did not exercise a direct, unmediated influence on me," Bakhtin remarked. "But all the same, there was a great deal that was not direct, that was rather more general; like every discovery of something new, even though one is not directly studying that new thing, all the same it has in some way broadened the world, enriched me with something." "Razgovory s Bakhtinym [Vaginov i drugie]," *Chelovek*, no. 4 (1994): 188–89.

<sup>7</sup> See the portrait in S. G. Bocharov, "Ob odnom razgove i vokrug nego" [About and around a certain conversation], *NLO*, no 2 (1993): 70–89. Quoted material is on page 81. The essay has appeared in English, abridged and with some imprecisions, as Sergey Bocharov, "Conversations with Bakhtin," trans. Stephen Blackwell and Vadim Liapunov, *PMLA* 105, no. 5 (October 1994): 1009–24. There the term *svobodnoe myslitel'stvo* is rendered "unconstrained philosophizing" (1019).

<sup>8</sup> Overall, Duvakin taped eighteen hours of conversations and reminiscences with Bakhtin in February and March 1973. Selections from the transcript of these tapes have been serialized in the journal *Chelovek*, 1993–95, and were published in book form in 1996 (see ch. 1, nn. 1, 2). For the discussion referred to above, see "Razgovory s Bakhtinym: Sem'ia i gody ucheniia" [Conversations with Bakhtin: Family and student years], *Chelovek*, no. 4 (1993): 136–52, esp. 152.

literary scholarship) served him somewhat as a refuge and cover. He never disowned his work on Dostoevsky or Rabelais. But in the early 1960s he remarked to Sergei Bocharov ("with a grimace," Bocharov tells us) that much of what he had written on Dostoevsky remained "mere literary criticism . . . and there must be a way out to other worlds."<sup>9</sup> What might those worlds have been toward which Bakhtin was striving? The present study will suggest some possible answers to that question, as it examines the shifting boundaries and paradoxes in Bakhtin's reconstituted Russian image now that he has passed his hundredth year.

This project was prompted by several factors. On a world scale, of course, there was the collapse of the Soviet Union and the concomitant explosion of enthusiasm among Russian intellectuals for reclaiming, re-complicating, and "de-ideologizing" their recent cultural heritage. There was also the temptation to sum up the work of a world-class thinker during his centenary Jubilee; the Russian Bakhtin boom generated dozens of lecture series, monographs, pathbreaking essays, conference volumes, and specialized periodicals, all still virtually untranslated. And then there was my private conviction, after twenty years' work with these texts, that the person and philosophy of Mikhail Bakhtin could serve as an excellent test case and foil for Russia's "postcommunist postmodernism"—a postmodernism that is now being realized and evaluated along lines quite different from those followed by late-twentieth-century theories of culture in the West.

Before we embark on Bakhtin, however, it might be helpful to the nonspecialist if this reclamation project were placed in some context and its major difficulties mapped out, for the political and literary culture that had shaped Bakhtin throughout his creative life is no longer intact. By the mid-1990s the unspoken codes that had conditioned Bakhtin's genres of self-expression had changed beyond recognition. The end of Soviet Communism was only the most recent parameter. For six centuries the ideal of centralized control had officially held sway in Russia (an ideal indifferently implemented in some eras and in others with vicious efficiency); Russia's cultural life was then freed of state supervision almost overnight. The nation became legally pluralist. Writers, philosophers, and religious thinkers, banned or crippled under Soviet rule, were revived enthusiastically and then risked becoming illegible in the space of several years. Such creative diversity and attenuated memory was exhilarating—but it was accompanied by an understandable anxiety. The new freedom, although it did serve to open Russia up, also created generation and literary gaps more profound than at any time in modern Russian history—

<sup>9</sup> Bocharov, "Ob odnom razgovore i vokrug nego," 72 n. 7.



except, perhaps, during the reforming decades of Peter the Great. America has been a poor reader of this shift. Raised on Cold War slogans, many assumed that Communism had been merely an obstacle, not a worldview with its own languages, rationales, rewards, and economies. Once the obstacle of Communism had fallen away (or so many thought), Russian culture would begin to see clearly, get back on our track, and endorse values that made sense to us.

That this convergence is not likely to occur rapidly and easily—if at all—had become clear by the mid-1990s. The present study is designed as a contribution to that sobering discovery. For it is my conviction that Russian twentieth-century thinkers, and especially those of Bakhtin's stature who have been widely and successfully translated, stand to lose a great deal if detached wholly from their original contexts. The focus of this book, then, is Bakhtin's reception by his own culture—undertaken by an outsider to that culture. My outsideness brings both losses and benefits. Inevitably a non-Russian will assess evidence and assign value differently than natives and eyewitnesses. Russians researching their own past, for example, have been powerfully tempted to see residents of that prior oppressive regime as either martyrs or collaborators. Bakhtin was neither. He was a *survivor*. And in order to survive, both morally and physically (that is, in order to avoid causing harm to others and avoid sacrificing himself to no purpose), he had mastered certain protective skills and evasive tactics. It is unlikely that students of Bakhtin's life and work will ever know definitively to what extent these survivor skills deformed, or informed, his major ideas and texts. But interested parties, both East and West, should make an effort not to forget the pressures—and at times the exaltations—of working for one's whole life within such a language environment.

Here, then, are the major "classical" features of that rapidly changing environment. For most of Russian culture (from the tenth through the twentieth century), the printed word was viewed as sacred, and it was, in varying degrees, unfree. To outwit the unfree authoritarian word, numerous strategies were developed in the nineteenth century—among them "Aesopian language," a hermeneutic device perfected by Russia's radical intelligentsia. Designed to work under combat conditions, Aesopianism assumes that the world is allegory, that no one speaks or writes straight, and that every officially public or published text (by definition, censored) has a "more honest," multilayered, hidden subtext that only insiders can decode. Ever since the birth of modern Russian literature in the eighteenth century, Russia's greatest writers have been alert to the dangers of Aesopian thinking and at the same time fatally drawn to indulge in it. In the words of two prominent American students of Russian contemporary culture, Russian literary language was "the antithesis of

'plain-speak'; instead, it was a kind of culturally institutionalized and revered 'oblique-speak.'"<sup>10</sup>

Aesopian language and the prerequisites for reading it correctly would be mere academic chatter, a glass-bead game, were it not that literature and criticism has always filled a wider slot in Russian culture than has its equivalent discipline in the United States. In successive Russian empires, omnipresent censorship of real-world events tended to make literature the best refuge of honest ideas—and for at least the last 150 years, progressive Russian readers were trained to see nonfictional referents beneath every fictional surface. This was a very mixed blessing. Not only were writers taken as prophets (and often proved to be very poor ones), but those who interpreted literary art—the critics—assigned themselves an altogether inflated task.<sup>11</sup> The “nurturing critic” became a mainstay and lodestar of Russian nineteenth-century intellectual life. As one such critic put the case confidently in 1870: “All our artists would wander off along various paths, were it not for the critic-journalists who show them the way. Who guided our novelists—Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Goncharov . . . ? They were guided by Belinsky, Dobrolyubov, Pisarev [contemporary radical or nihilist critics]. Novelists merely collect the firewood and stoke the engine of life, but the critic-journalist is the driver.”<sup>12</sup>

This situation might appear to mimic the politically correct American campuses of the 1990s, except for one thing. Russian literary critics, as a rule, have not been seen as residents of a self-contained academic caste on the margins of society, whose operating procedures are parodied by outsiders from the “real world” to the amusement (and disdain) of the general public. On the contrary, Russian literature *was* the real world, and

<sup>10</sup> Nancy Condee and Vladimir Padunov, “Pair-a-dice Lost: The Socialist Gamble, Market Determinism, and Compulsory Postmodernism,” paper delivered at the third meeting of the Working Group on Contemporary Russian Culture, Moscow, 15–19 June 1992.

<sup>11</sup> The best discussion of this phenomenon remains Donald Fanger, “Conflicting Imperatives in the Model of the Russian Writer: The Case of Tertz/Sinyavsky,” in Gary Saul Morson, ed., *Literature and History: Theoretical Problems and Russian Case Studies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 111–24. Fanger opens with several lapidary utterances by Russian writers and bureaucrats on the status of the word, including the nineteenth-century Minister of Public Education Uvarov (“Among the rights of the Russian subject, the right to address the public in writing is not included”); Trotsky (“Reality began to live a second life in Russia, in both the realistic novel and comedy”); and Pasternak (“A book is a squarish chunk of hot, smoking conscience—and nothing else!”) (111–12). “Russian writers have always worked with relation to a large imperative—cognitive, social, and ethical,” Fanger remarks. “Whether they have proclaimed, accepted, resisted or rejected it, a considerable part of the meaning and importance of their writing has derived directly from that relation” (113).

<sup>12</sup> Nikolai Shelgunov, “Dvoedushie esteticheskogo konservatizma” [The two-facedness of aesthetic conservatism], in *Delo*, no. 10 (October 1870), cited in Charles Moser, *Esthetics as Nightmare* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 29.

## 10 INTRODUCTION

Russian readers were raised to expect that literary criticism would provide the key to it. Critics assumed that their work would have important societal repercussions. When Maxim Gorky laid down the Socialist-Realist “rules” for creative literature in the Stalinist 1930s, and when Mikhail Bakhtin, then in political exile in Kazakhstan, wrote hundreds of pages that refuted those rules by invoking as exemplary different genres and different authors, both men were acting wholly within the tradition of Russian literary culture. For unlike America in much of its modern phase, literary accomplishment and criticism in Russia has mattered. You could get arrested and killed for it; thus educated society revered its poets and considered literary progress to be a bellwether of its own.

Such a fate for literary artists and critics has long proved both discomfiting and dazzling to free-world watchers of Russian culture. As David Remnick described this dilemma: “None [of the Western writers who visited Russia during the Communist period] were foolish enough, of course, to want to trade places with their mythic counterparts, but there invariably came a moment when a Western writer found himself wondering, painfully, why democracy necessarily meant a marginal place for serious writing and totalitarianism an impossibly exalted one.”<sup>13</sup> It was this special status granted to writing and to writers that lost its official support—and its officially sanctioned torment—in the Russian Press Law of August 1990.<sup>14</sup> That law abolished Glavlit, the censorship agency whose approval stamp had to be present on everything with printed words on it; of equal importance, the statute legalized the whole idea of “autonomous publishing.” Before 1990 a publishing venture or periodical in Russia had to be an “organ” of some other official body: the Writer’s Union, a government ministry, an academic institution, the Communist Party. After that date, it became legally possible to register officially as independent, a move that would have been an absolute oxymoron under the old, that is, the Communist, regime. In place of the old polarity—in which the nauseating bland mush of official documents was answered by the often hysterical righteousness of underground dissident prose—one could hear the beginnings of a shared, neutral civic language. Thus Aesopian language began to have a rival in the public sphere, and lawful public discourse began to emerge that, for the first time in recorded Russian history, did not require the prior assumption of a lie. These developments were enormously healthy for the growth of civic consciousness. But so novel an attitude toward the printed word had its inevitably dislocating effects.

<sup>13</sup> David Remnick, “Exit the Saints” [Letter from Moscow], *New Yorker*, 18 July 1994, 50–60, esp. 50.

<sup>14</sup> For this story see Jamey Gambrell, “Moscow: The Front Page,” in *The New York Review of Books*, 8 October 1992, 56–62.

Held captive, the word was believed to contain the truth. Once freed, it was supposed to work miracles. Instead of this miracle, language began to devolve into the same loose and indifferent thing that we in the West have long known the commercially public word to be.

The end of state censorship brought other paradigm shifts. There was the unhappy loss to literature of all those disciplines that, in more oppressive times, had invaded fiction because they had not been free to constitute themselves as professionally autonomous fields of study. "In Russia, criticism always played the role of an absent philosophy, sociology, cultur-ology," one contemporary critic remarked, in a forum entitled "Critics on Criticism" that appeared in *Voprosy literatury* at the end of 1996.<sup>15</sup> "It was higher than ideology, higher than the censorship, because it dealt with great literature. In Russia, criticism is a reflex toward life, not toward the text. But life is too ambivalent, huge, diverse, and thus criticism deals with literature as a mediated form of life's mode of existence. The way a physicist needs an ideal gas for theoretical constructs." Freedom put an end to literature as the ideal laboratory science. When philosophy, theology, economics, politics returned to their rightful homes—that is, when Russians gained the right to talk openly of God, idealism, real-life murderers and state swindlers—there was less need to invoke the names of such literary heroes (or antiheroes) as Raskolnikov, Chichikov, a Russian Lady Macbeth. What, many wondered, would be left to literature, except the naked, free, and now devalued word?

Then there was the oft-heard, more practical complaint from professionals that "the literary process had disappeared." By this people meant that all sense of proper sequence or organic evolution in the production of literature had died out. And indeed, with the collapse of government controls and the return of Russian émigré literature to its homeland, everything appeared at once: the Gospels, the Talmud, Nabokov, Solzhenitsyn, Franz Kafka, Henry Miller, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, the Marquis de Sade. Literary texts, stripped of their original contexts and genesis, were crammed into a sort of supersaturated space. In a culture accustomed to a great deal of regimentation from above and a quasi-religious mission attached to literature from below, this overload temporarily paralyzed writers and disoriented their readers. It resembled Bakhtinian carnival—but with this difference: there was no promise of any reimposition of the hierarchy, nothing stable in the background that might reassert traditional order and thus guarantee participants the recurring pleasure of violating it. As one young hopeful put it to me: How can the ordinary writer hope to compete "with Christ crawling out the win-

<sup>15</sup> "Kritiki o kritike," in *Voprosy literatury* (November–December 1996): 3–57, esp. 40. The critic is Dmitrii Bykov.

dow and Lolita walking in the door?" Clearly the time and need for Aesopian language had passed. But passed on to what?

This study will sample Bakhtin's role in this dizzying shift from centripetal Marxism-Leninism to the centrifugal currents of neo-humanism, neo-nationalism, and postmodernism. The émigré literary critic Mikhail Epstein provided early guidelines for understanding the transition in his 1991 essay entitled "After the Future: On the New Consciousness in Literature."<sup>16</sup> In previous eras, Epstein notes, literature—both official and unofficial—tended to be distributed in categories of pro- and anti-, "our own" versus "outsiders" [*svoi* versus *chuzhoi*]. After the collapse of Communism, however, things were suddenly no longer *anti-* but simply *post-*. Without the certainty of a single totalizing standard that one could either endorse or resist, it became much more difficult to get one's bearings. Epstein sketches a terrain where, once the old politicized binaries began to soften, Bakhtin's dispersive, centrifugal values, his carnival grotesque, his delight in authors who design their heroes to resist and outgrow their worlds, would have manifest relevance and appeal.

Epstein suggests that during those protracted years of collapse the great Hegelian plot (*plot* in all senses of the word) was thoroughly discredited in his homeland. The linear trajectory that Communism fixed for a culture or for a life—cradle-to-grave welfare, cradle-to-grave slogans, all of which sealed up the present and handed it over to a radiant future—went down in defeat, and with it, the very idea of epic plots and heroic leaps into tomorrow. Progressive sequence itself had become suspect, wherever it might be found. The immediate result was a flurry of new literary movements and sensitivities that favored modesty, fragmentation, interruption, residue, parts of things rather than purported wholes: phenomenism, conceptualism, the rear- as opposed to the avant-garde, necro-realism, the metaphysics of garbage. This overtly postmodernist agenda glorified transitoriness and deadpan parody; it advocated a special style of writing whose aim, Epstein writes, was "not to proclaim but to stutter." Although a certain minimal metonymy might keep objects in a holding pattern, "there is no center in the city of the text, . . . it consists entirely of outskirts." As he develops this idea further: "Even belonging to a definite genre, like having a set number of pages, could be perceived as the guard towers of an aesthetic Gulag, where the prisoners are to be distributed by zones and strut about with numbers on their backs. Smashed into hundreds of dully glimmering prisms, the spec-

<sup>16</sup> Mikhail Epstein, "After the Future: On the New Consciousness in Literature," in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 90, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 409–44. Quoted material is on pages 434 and 436. In this article Epstein also notes the "supersaturation of literary space" and the disappearance of the literary process mentioned above.

ter of postcommunism wanders over the most recent prose: the backbone of history—the plot—has been broken up into a multitude of vertebrae . . . The century is ending. In place of a hard-pawed and relentless predator, there are tender bugs that flash in different directions. . .”

The search in Russia for alternative literary models took place, then, against an almost Kafkaesque background of radical experimentation and decay. In its initial stage, verbal messages collapsed into visual ones; the literary market was flooded with how-to manuals, pornographic literature, videos, comic books. Powerful “postmodernist” forces seemed to be de-verbalizing culture, making it blunt, immediate, non-contemplative, non-Aesopian. But equally powerful forces in Russian culture continued to work against a full embrace of the postmodernist spirit. (As another émigré scholar, Dmitry Khanin, has noted with some irritation, the postmodernist mood of “jovial pessimism” and “ahistorical, inconsistent, and generally confounding claims about history lying in ruins” at times appeared brazenly to take credit for the fact “that the Berlin Wall *actually is in ruins*.”)<sup>17</sup> “Of course, the interval of play did its deed,” the critic Irina Rodnianskaia acknowledged in the journal *Novyi mir* in 1993. “It did a good job of emancipating authors who had become overly serious. . . . [But] how they broke their spears over the so-called instructive principle of Russian literature! How many head-spinning turns were accomplished . . . to make the Russian classics, which taught ‘truth’ rather than ‘play,’ into the guilty parties in all our historical misfortunes!”<sup>18</sup> While welcoming the new pluralism, Rodnianskaia warned that the turn away from the “instructional” classics could give rise to graver dangers: cults, totalitarian sects, facile national myths, the loss of the concrete human being as a measure for art, flight into an irresponsible, un-authored, “abstract-utopian space.”

By 1996 “the postmodern condition” had lost its shock value and become itself a platitude. For many commentators, focus had shifted to the reasons that Russian critics found it difficult to take this noisy international phenomenon with the sustained seriousness of Western theorists. Surveys and critical samplings of the major thinkers (French, German, American) had become routine in the Russian press but were performed

<sup>17</sup> Dmitry Khanin (a Moscow-trained aesthetician, later at Colgate University), “The Postmodern Posture,” in *Philosophy and Literature* 14 (1990): 239–47, esp. 241, 240. For a bewildered discourse on the continued appeal of Marxist worldviews in the West, see also Khanin’s later piece, “Will Aesthetics Be the Last Stronghold of Marxism?” *Philosophy and Literature* 16 (1992): 266–78.

<sup>18</sup> Irina Rodnianskaia, “Plaster Wind: On Philosophical Intoxication in Current Letters,” in “What Ails Russian Letters Today?” *Russian Studies in Literature* (Summer 1995): 5–44, esp. 8–9, 23–24 (originally appeared as “Gipsovyi veter” in *Novyi mir* 12 (1993): 215–31 [translation adjusted]).

somewhat dryly, without excitement.<sup>19</sup> One senior scholar, Nikolai Anastasiev, summed up the Russian mainstream position in an issue of *Voprosy literature* (Summer 1996) in the following way:

Postmodernism, briefly put, is a revolt against any hierarchy, a war of the outskirts against a center which should not exist, a war of freedom against authority, of the act against metaphysics, of practical experience against any form of knowledge that strives to generalize that experience in any way. . . . in sum, if postmodernism affirms anything, it affirms absolute freedom and an equivalent boundless toleration, for the sake of which it is willing to sacrifice even itself. This is splendid, and for us—people raised under a totalitarian regime, for us, captives for so many years to every sort of ideological cliché, . . . for us, such a position should be especially close and compatible. But here an extremely unpleasant circumstance presents itself. The irreproachable pluralists and liberals unexpectedly reveal a hidden, yet still manifest tendency toward aggression and even toward that same intellectual terror against which they direct all their inspired battle. This is noticeable even in the democratic West [references follow to Paul de Man and Lyotard] . . . The quest of postmodernism is a quest for failure.<sup>20</sup>

Mikhail Epstein has taken the case further. It was no coincidence, he argues, that in Russia a postmodernist fad followed so hard upon the demise of communism.<sup>21</sup> The two ideologies have much in common. Both celebrate “hyperreality”—simulacra behind which there is no autonomous reality—and perpetuate themselves through citation, eclectic borrowing, cultural recycling, oxymorons, and (when a cutting edge is required) violent and absolute negation of all other possible positions. In both, the line between elite and popular culture is erased. Both are suspicious of any claims to free will or self-determination on the part of the individual subject. In Epstein’s view, the only major difference between the postmodernist spirit and bombastic, overripe Soviet ideology is that the latter did not play or laugh (it is here, of course, that Bakhtin’s carnival corrective proves so subversive). “Communism,” Epstein writes, “is postmodernism with a modernist face that still wears the expression of ominous seriousness. . . . In the 1970s and 1980s, when intellectuals in

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, V. Kuritsyn, “K situatsii postmodernizma,” in *NLO*, no. 11 (1995): 197–23. Kuritsyn isolates four characteristics of postmodernism: replacement of vertical hierarchies by the horizontal and a rejection of linearity and binary oppositions; the “virtuality” of the world and “doubled presence”; “otherwiseness,” the interface and intertextuality; and attention to context, marginal practices and genres, and crises of authorship.

<sup>20</sup> N. Anastasiev, “U slova dolgoe ekho,” *Voprosy literature* (July–August 1996): 3–30. Quoted material is on pages 6–7; the final two sentences are on page 30.

<sup>21</sup> Mikhail Epstein, “Postmodernism, Communism, and Sots-Art,” in Marina Balina, Nancy Condee, and Evgeny Dobrenko, eds., *Endquote: Sots-Art and the Dilemma of Post-Soviet Literature* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, forthcoming).