



PROJECT MUSE®

---

A More Difficult, Less Inspiring Bakhtin

Michael Eskin

Poetics Today, Volume 23, Number 2, Summer 2002, pp. 351-355 (Review)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/27904>

## A More Difficult, Less Inspiring Bakhtin

Michael Eskin

*Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures, Columbia University*

**Ken Hirschkop, *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. xx + 332 pp.**

Ken Hirschkop's study intervenes in Bakhtin scholarship at a moment of intense reassessment and reevaluation—of the significance, originality, and sociopolitical relevance of Bakhtin's oeuvre, as well as of its critical reception over the last two decades.<sup>1</sup> Hirschkop attempts to displace what he perceives to be overtly tendentious trends in Bakhtin studies, which have “left us not with a knowledge of his work, but with a series of Bakhtin-figures or totems, each equally ambitious, equally insightful, equally dogmatic, and absolutely different from every other figure” (vii). Dividing these trends summarily and polemically into the “Russian-religious” and the “American-liberal” (5), the author, who lives and teaches in the United Kingdom, takes exception to critics' presumably facile understanding of Bakhtin's inquiries into dialogue. For the “religiously guided interpretations of Bakhtin now current (but by no means exclusive) in Russia dialogue is endowed with redemptive force . . . insofar as the model for all such interchange is conversation (in the form of prayer and confession) with the divine Himself” (6),<sup>2</sup>

1. See for instance Hitchcock 1998; Poole 1998; Eskin 2000: 66–129; Tihanov 2000. Beginning with Julia Kristeva's groundbreaking (if misguided) essay, “Bakhtine, le mot, le dialogue et le roman” (originally published in 1967 and reprinted in Kristeva 1969: 82–112), Bakhtin and his works have steadily been gaining visibility within the international critical community.

2. Hirschkop here thinks of such scholars as “N. K. Bonnetskaia, L. A. Gogotishvili, [and] I. L. Popova . . . (to name the most interesting and rigorous of Bakhtin's religious inter-

while for the sociopolitically oriented American take on Bakhtin “the lineaments of the ideal conversation” imply “norms for the conduct of social life [and] serve as models for a desirable political and ethical community” (8).<sup>3</sup>

Alleging to steer clear of the Scylla of religiosity and the Charybdis of moralism and normativism (of any color), Hirschkop endeavors to present us with a “more technical, more difficult, less inspiring [and] more ‘historical’ Bakhtin” (vii). This is a Bakhtin who does not offer answers to ultimate questions or blueprints for political renewal but, rather, a Bakhtin whose thoughts on language, interaction, and the social import of literature enjoin us continuously to scrutinize sociopolitics with a view to advancing a “democratic culture” (ix) on the individual level, notwithstanding (or, ironically, by virtue of?) Bakhtin’s own silence on the relationship between his analyses of novelistic discourse, carnival, and public square culture and the political proper. Thus, although Bakhtin does not address the paradox that, historically, neither the popularity of the polyphonic novel nor sanctioned periods of public license—the Brazilian carnival or the German *Fasching* would be cases in point—have brought about political empowerment and liberation, he manages *ex negativo*, as it were, to spark a politically inclined reader’s desire to search for solutions to social problems through the very inadequacy of his own aesthetic treatment of human interaction to deal with historical-political reality. As Hirschkop points out, Bakhtin may not “think that political democracy has much to do [with the literary and cultural] struggles between forms of language [and individual views of and approaches to the world]” (ix), which he uncovers in and by way of the works of authors like Dostoevsky and Rabelais; however, Hirschkop emphasizes, “much of what [Bakhtin] wants a dialogical culture to achieve depends on the very kind of politics he regards as irrelevant” (ibid.). In other words, even a moderately adequate reception of Bakhtin’s writings—a reception predicated on discursive freedom and agon, on the sanctioned possibility of continuous disagreement and mutual respect—presupposes democratic structures.

Hirschkop’s preoccupation with the question of democracy as a political system, which he opens onto the more specific question of democratic culture on the individual, ethical level, is motivated by his belief that “while there are plenty of political democracies today, there is far less in the way of democratic politics, and the reasons for this are cultural as much as political” (ix). Democracy, he argues, “must mean more than procedure; it needs

---

preters),” for whom “the inwardness of dialogue . . . guarantees access to that metaphysical sphere which alone holds the key to salvation” (6). See also Borodich 1996; Melikh 1999.

3. Hirschkop refers in particular to Morson and Emerson 1990: 54–56. See also Emerson 1997: 26–27; Clark and Holquist 1984: 63–94, 230; Holquist 1990: 14–39.

the depth culture has to offer. An emancipated society has to mean not only control over economic life, but satisfying relationships, everyday dignity and solidarity, and narratives which make one's life not only prosperous but also meaningful" (ibid.). To reflect productively on these issues, we "can turn to Bakhtin . . . because in the Russia where he lived and worked democracy existed *only* as culture, never having established itself as a set of observed political procedures":

In the wake of 1917 "democracy" meant not polling booths and campaigns, but education, confidence among new sectors of the population, urbanization, electronic culture, literacy, mass mobilization: a partial democratization, one might say, of feeling and imagination though not of fact and institution . . . Bakhtin tangled with these changes, and their equivalents across Europe, in a way which was both intensive and blinkered. The intensity we see; the blinkers we often fail to notice. If we grasp them together, we have a striking account of the problems of a democratic culture. Bakhtin still speaks to us, but we have to ask him the right questions. (Ibid.)

Asking these "right" questions stakes out Hirschkop's critical trajectory, whose ultimate aim emerges as the elaboration of Bakhtin's implicit "aesthetic for democracy."

Hirschkop engages Bakhtin's oeuvre—from "Toward a Philosophy of the Act" and "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" (written in the 1920s) through "Discourse in the Novel" (1934–1935), "The Problem of Speech Genres" (1953), *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929; 1963), and *Rabelais and His World* (1965) to his ruminations on the "Methodology of the Human Sciences" (1974)—through the prism of three basic (rhetorical-heuristic) questions: "Can one attribute, in general, political meaning to the . . . stylistic structures of language? Is a concept of democracy usefully enlarged or refined by discussions of language? Does the definition of democracy itself have an inner connection to a style of language?" (16). The study as a whole can be read as an elaborate response to these questions from an aesthetic-philosophical point of view. Insofar as there is indeed a connection between language, style, and politics—a connection established in Bakhtin's discussions of the novel as an exemplary artistic intervention on behalf of the individual—there ought to be ways of using language democratically such that "grammatical, syntactic, and lexical structures themselves instance or embody [democratic] kinds of social relationships" (21). Furthermore, insofar as the very concept of democracy is suggested to be inherently enmeshed with a "style of language," we should look to that style which most saliently stages democratic relationships if we want to advance democratic culture; that is, we should look to—and here Hirschkop follows Bakhtin's penchant toward the novel—novelistic style: "In . . . novelistic style one

finds an intersubjectivity which depends on a historical sense, irony, a literate print culture, an eye and ear for social differentiation. . . . A definition of democracy which hasn't room for these facts isn't worth much . . ." (48). Bakhtin, Hirschkop concludes, may have been a "virtually worthless political thinker in the strict sense, but his disdain for the ordinary business of politics, the distribution and mechanisms of political power, has a certain virtue, for it led him to think of democracy not as a political category, but as a cultural-aesthetic one, as the promise not so much of a society in which the people are sovereign as of a society with a historical experience worth having" (274).

Hirschkop's study excels on numerous levels: meticulous and elegant in execution and style, exhaustively researched, acribically documented, and rigorously argued, it betrays its author's masterful grasp of his subject—both biographical-historical and conceptual-philosophical. Hirschkop's simplistic polemical division of Bakhtin scholarship into a Russian-religious and an American-liberal camp aside,<sup>4</sup> his attempt to construct a more historical, more difficult, less inspiring Bakhtin than the one we have come to know as a proto-poststructuralist, proto-postcolonialist, or neo-liberalist<sup>5</sup> has certainly set new critical standards for Bakhtin scholarship to come. The question remains, however, whether Hirschkop succeeds in convincing the reader of the validity of his particular version of Bakhtin. For when all is said and done, Hirschkop's argument seems to wind up in a neoconservative spot as far removed from the democratic culture he advocates as those versions of Bakhtin he critiques. If it is, in part, through reading novels that we become democratically acculturated, that we gain an awareness of what it means to participate in a democratic culture (and this seems to be Hirschkop's ultimate claim), then we still have to confront the host of critical queries pertaining to the sociopolitical conditions and pre-suppositions of a society in which reading (read: education) enjoys a high status, implying privilege and, hence, restricted accessibility—that is, precisely those queries which have been raised by poststructuralist, feminist, postcolonial, and cultural critics. In other words, the aesthetic-democratic culture that Hirschkop advocates via Bakhtin reveals itself as a kind of neo-bourgeois reading culture, implicitly excluding those who do not or cannot read, cannot afford to buy books, and so forth. It is exactly at this point that Hirschkop's heuristic distinction between democracy as a political structure

4. Needless to say, there are scholars in Russia who do not approach Bakhtin as a primarily religious thinker (e.g., Riklin 1992; Karimova 1999); concomitantly, there are American scholars who do not co-opt Bakhtin for liberal-conservative purposes (e.g., Hitchcock 1998; Wall 1998; Eskin 2000).

5. See for instance Kristeva 1969: 82–112; Pechey 1989; Bhabha 1994; Emerson 1997: 26–27.

and democracy as a cultural category collapses. For only in a democratic polity can a democratic culture be sustained. In the end, both Hirschkop and Bakhtin fail to answer the ethical question: How do we get from art to “life,” from reading to behaving democratically, from novels to political democracy? But, then, maybe it is sufficiently meritorious to raise the question in as sophisticated and complex a manner as Hirschkop’s.

## References

- Bhabha, Homi K.  
1994 *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge).
- Borodich, V. M.  
1996 “M. M. Bakhtin i russkaia religioznaia filosofia” [M. M. Bakhtin and Russian religious philosophy], *Bakhtinskie chteniia* 1: 33–38.
- Clark, Katerina, and Michael Holquist  
1984 *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press).
- Emerson, Caryl  
1997 *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- Eskin, Michael  
2000 *Ethics and Dialogue in the Works of Levinas, Bakhtin, Mandel’shtam, and Celan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Hitchcock, Peter  
1998 “Introduction: Bakhtin/‘Bakhtin’,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 97 (3/4): 511–36.
- Holquist, Michael  
1990 *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge).
- Karimova, Z. Z.  
1999 “K voprosu sociologicheskoi interpretatsii M. M. Bakhtina” [On the question of a sociological interpretation of M. M. Bakhtin], *Dialog, Karnaval, Khronotop* 4(29): 11–48.
- Kristeva, Julia  
1969 *Σημειωτική: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Editions du Seuil).
- Melikh, V. L.  
1999 “M. M. Bakhtin: Paralleli k religioznoi filosofii L. P. Karsavina” [M. M. Bakhtin: Parallels to the religious philosophy of L. P. Karsavin], *Dialog, Karnaval, Khronotop* 4(29): 72–81.
- Morson, Gary Saul, and Caryl Emerson  
1990 *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).
- Pechey, Graham  
1989 “On the Borders of Bakhtin: Dialogisation, Decolonisation,” in *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, edited by Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd, 39–68 (Manchester: Manchester University Press).
- Poole, Brian  
1998 “Bakhtin and Cassirer: The Philosophical Origins of Bakhtin’s Carnival Messianism,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 97(3/4): 537–78.
- Riklin, M. K.  
1992 “Soznanie i rech v koncepcii M. M. Bakhtina” [Consciousness and speech in Bakhtin’s conception], in *M. M. Bakhtin kak filosof* [M. M. Bakhtin as a philosopher], edited by L. A. Gogotishvili and P. S. Gourevich, 175–89 (Moscow: Nauka).
- Tihanov, Galin  
2000 *The Master and the Slave: Lukács, Bakhtin, and the Ideas of Their Time* (Oxford: Clarendon).
- Wall, Anthony  
1998 “A Broken Thinker,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 97(3/4): 669–98.