EDITORIAL

MIKHAIL BAKHTIN AND THE EUCHARIST

"RELIGIO LAICI: MIKHAIL BAKHTIN'S ORTHODOXIES"

In literary studies, a few critics and scholars have come to see the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) as closer to the production of an accomplished collage artist, than to that of a scholar or an original thinker. The Russian expatriate critic Boris Groys uses elements of Bakhtin's own theories to explain the sweet science of creativity through *bricolage*. As Groys vividly describes it, the postmodern moment can be understood as the meditation on the desire for the Other, brought about through a strategy of delegitimation, through a play with "quotations, 'polystylistics', nostalgia, irony [and] the 'carnivalesque'."[1]The lifting of the stigma about the recombination of found artifacts—for already a hundred years a crucial assumption in the European and South American *avant-garde*—has, it would seem, caught up with literary criticism, or at least withi the narrow venue of our understanding of Bakhtin's contested legacy. With this thought in mind, we begin to realize that Bakhtin's own method anticipated the post-modern endeavor of system building as a self-conscious process of aggregation. Within the context of post-Emancipation Russian culture, can it be that Bakhtin bears the same sort of relation to the heterogeneous disciplines that come under the rubric of the study of culture (historiography, philology, philosophy and theology) that the composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov has to the more audacious and original Modest Mussorgsky? Does he become for us a figure who is more significant as an orchestrator and skillful amplifier of themes that he inherits, rather than creates? The phrase that I used at the beginning of this essay to describe Bakhtin, as an "accomplished collage artist"drifts by punning association into another phrase in English: "con artist." Indeed, the collapsing of any distinction between the idea of Bakhtin as a discerning borrower and modifier of innovations and a shameless plagiarist is at the centerpiece of the 2011 book-length attack on Bakhtin's legacy, Jean Bockart's and Cristian Bota's inflammatory *Bakhtin edémasqué. Histoire d'un*

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1 Boris Groys, "A Style and a Half: Socialist Realism Between Modernism and Postmodernism," in Socialist Realism Without Shores, ed. Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko (Duke Univ. Press, 1997), 82.

menteur, d'une escroquerie et d'un delire collectif.[2] Like Ostap Bender, the "grand strategist" (*velikii kombinator*) and anti-hero of Il'f and Petrov's novels *The Twelve Chairs* and *The Golden Calf,* Bakhtin has been seen as a confidence man whose considerable artistry finds expression in his deft aggregations—or re-combinations—of found objects. Can it be that Bakhtin shares affinities with Bender, his swindling contemporary in Russian fiction from the 1920s?

Certainly our analogy to the history and ethics of musical composition seems apt, as a means for coming to terms with the work of a critic and thinker who understood the expression of social being as congeries of signifiers that devolve into settings of sound that are either "polyphonic" or "monologic."Bakhtin was remarkable for bringing together, and setting into a single harmonic structure, theories about carnival, polyphony and dialogue that had already been coaxed into at least partial existence by German philologists such as Albrecht Dieterich, Eastern European linguists such as Badouin de Courtenay, and phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl. For innumerable philologists, semioticians, and scholars in cultural studies, the experience of reading Bakhtin's work for the first time is both familiar and reminiscent of the shock of discovery. You come to see how disparate ideas quickly assume an integrality and intimacy to one another, where formerly there was only a passing acquaintance; you find yourself wondering how these actors could have relations with each other that were anything but those of an accomplished ensemble of performers, a dramatic troupe that makes a point of razing the fourth wall that separates you from them.

As time passes, some of us have absorbed Bakhtin's distinctive arrangement of ideas to the point that its provenance has possibly become obscure to us. Can it be that his scaffolding of ideas has become so integral to our own thinking, that to acknowledge their existence as distinct cultural productions would be superfluous—the equivalent of bearing witness to something as achingly palpable to ourselves as our own cheekbones? Surely we see evidence of this reticence in the work of the recently deceased René Girard, whose in seminal study *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* gives only passing reference to the Russian critic in an analysis that is saturated with the force of his ideas. In the age of the Internet, you and I see this unspoken influence in a media sociologist as acute and path-breaking as Pierre Lévy, whose work from

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2Bronckart Jean_Paul, Bota Cristian. Bakhtin edémasqué. Histoire d'un menteur, d'une escroquerie d'un delire collectif. Genève: Droz, 2011. 629 p.

the mid-nineties, about the democratic possibilities of cyberspace, hinges on an understanding of dialogue which is as much the *expectation* of the Other—what Bakhtin terms the "word with the sidelong glance"[3]—as it is the unfolding of the usual back-and-forth of challenging assertions, fawning assents, and queries:

> The willingness to listen implies a return phase, a bouncing back. It assumes a dialog or multilog. Far from being fulfilled through some transcendent entity or limiting itself to the passive recognition of difference, listening is itself an immanent process within the community, a creative circularity. Thus, indicating to the collective that it has been heard by everyone amounts to providing it with the means to understand itself or, rather, to get along with itself. This brings us fairly close to the nature of the social bond: mutual understanding.[4]

Later in his discussion, Lévy identifies listening as the act that crucially "reverses the direction of the media," enabling it to serve as the conduit for "the multi-voiced murmur of the community," rather than as the mouthpiece of a morally compromised political system.[5] We sense powerfully here, and in many other places—in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's innovative writing about sexual liminality, the puppet theatre of an artist such as Julie Taymor, and in our own thinking about interactions with the world at large—the presence of Bakhtin's interdisciplinary method, and the pull of his integrative cosmology.

Yet in what did Mikhail Bakhtin himself actually believe? Bakhtin's assertion in the 1973 Duvakin interviews that he was always "completely apolitical" is arguably the most disingenuous and suspect statement of his career.[6] Did Bakhtin hold to any political belief system or orthodoxy, in the sense of "correct belief"? Was his reticence on these issues evidence of his animosity towards the very idea of orthodoxy or ideology? Lastly, how was Bakhtin actually disposed towards the tenets of the religion of Eastern Orthodoxy? At the very least, the idea of any comprehensive belief system or cosmology—be it political or theological—would seem to be no less alien to the critic's own work than the "image of a unified spirit" is (as Bakhtin puts it) to Dostoevsky.[7]

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[3] M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* tr. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984), 196.

[4] Pierre Lévy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace,* tr. Robert Bononno (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 1997), 48.

[5] Pierre Lévy, Collective Intelligence… 71

[6] *Besedy V. D. Duvakina s M. M. Bakhtinym,* ed. V. V. Kozhinov (Moscow: "Progress," 1996), 69.

[7] Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, 26.

As I argue in my book *Corporeal Words: Mikhail Bakhtin's Theology of Discourse,* the influence of Eastern Orthodox religious thought on the critic's work is abundantly evident if viewed from the twin perspectives of textology and Russian intellectual history rather than official Soviet perceptions of religiosity. Theological categories and terms recalling christology and the Eucharist are evident throughout Bakhtin's long and varied career, and are galvanized by an awareness of theology's potential as an expression of political idealism and tool of social criticism. Bakhtin constructs his ethical criticism of Stalinism on the basis of this syncretic critical heritage of the early Soviet era, the most rigorous example of which is the work of his friend Aleksandr Meier (1875-1939). Three theological notions form the cornerstones of Bakhtin's theology of discourse: the Johannine logos, trinitarian interpenetration or *perichoresis*, and the Chalcedonian image of the divided union of the human and the divine in the figure of Christ. The fact that the theological motifs in his work emerge as a triadic configuration only serves to reinforce and call attention to their theological provenance and Bakhtin's acute awareness of it; moreover, Bakhtin shrewdly plays these three ideas off of each other, emphasizing the extent to which they themselves are interrelated and therefore consistent with the ontological principle of "connectedness" that motivates all of them. In this context, Bakhtin's still unpublished notes from the 1930s, about the problems of language and aspects of the Renaissance novel, are especially suggestive. There, he characterizes the role of the novelistic image in terms that unmistakably recall both the Chalcedonian paradox and the notion of hypostatic co-inherence: "The image as the emblem of the double-faced contradiction of life as a whole. [...] The presence of the whole in every image and detail."[8]

The articles in this remarkable collection prompt us to bear firmly within our field of vision the reciprocity of the social and the Eucharistic. Interpreted cumulatively, Bakhtin's protracted and meticulously orchestrated use of incarnational *topoi* signal a renewed engagement with their ethical dimensions. As Bakhtin put it in his "Notes Towards a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book",

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[8] M. M. Bakhtin, "Materialy dokladov po problemam iazyka i osobennostei romana epokhi Vozrozhdenia i o zhanre romana voobshche (1930-e gody): Pervyi doklad [Material for presentations about the problems of language and the peculiarities of the Renaissance novel, and about the genre of the novel in general (1930s)]," M. V. Yudina Archive [Russian State Library, Moscow], Fund 527, Box 24, Item 26; p. 3. For a discussion of the Chalcedonian subtext of Bakhtin's notion of double-sidedness, see my study *Corporeal Words: Mikhail Bakhtin's Theology of Discourse* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1997), 114, 202 and 204.

Dostoevsky was hostile to world-views that "see the final goal in a merging, in a dissolution of consciousnesses in one consciousness. No Nirvana is possible for single consciousness. A single consciousness is *contradictio in adjecto*. Consciousness is in essence multiple. *Pluraliatantum*."[9]Dostoevsky ultimately emerges as Bakhtin's double, an autobiographical image in the critic's work. It is interesting to note that Bakhtin sees himself not as an Ostap Bender-like card sharp who finesses repackages and adapts preexisting material, but rather as an original creative figure in his own right; he understands his criticism more as dialogue with Dostoevsky and Rabelais, than as a commentary on them. This blending in Bakhtin's later work of the socially progressive paradigm of the novel with the critic's own understanding of the and the critic's of himself as an hermeneutic agent for transgression and change is reinforced in an especially candid and personal remark from the 1970-71 notebook: "The unity of the emerging (developing) idea. Hence a certain internal open-endedness of many of my ideas [...] Sometimes it is difficult to separate one open-endedness from another [...] My love for variations and for a diversity of terms for a single phenomenon. The multiplicity of focuses."[10]In other words, Bakthin sees that a plurality of consciousness is exemplified both by Dostoevsky and himself. The theological subtext of Bakhtin's work eventually eroded the barrier between Bakhtin the author and his subject matter, in which his criticism itself took on the some of the dynamics of a novel.

These articles also remind us that Bakhtin's adaptation of the Johanninelogology with its incarnational (and therefore inevitably Eucharistic model), taken together with the Chalcedonian and Trinitarian paradigms of unity within diversity, are pivotal in the operation of his conception of novelistic discourse and polyphony. In a certain very real sense, the antipathy towards political orthodoxy that Bakhin expresses so pointedly in the Duvakin interviews is paralleled by his idiosyncratic and non-traditional attitude towards a confessional adherence to "correct" belief—or at least, to the idea of a preponderance of a single orthodoxy. Bakhtin's professed apoliticism therefore complements a kind of practical agnosticism that recognizes the gap between our terms for or explanations of the Divine and the ontology of the godhead itself: all too often, what claims to be real belief is really more self-referential and esoteric and less a direct expression of a spiritually lived reality. His belief

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[9]Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, 288.

[10] M. M. Bakhtin, Speech Genres and Other Late Essays, tr. Vern W. McGee (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1986), 155.

would seem to be very much that of a layperson: *religio laici,* the religion of an individual for whom the act of communion represents (as Lévy puts it) a reverence for the "unstable and multiple."[11]

Yet is it reasonable to expect that multiple religious and political orthodoxies can actually flourish—and not merely grudgingly coexist, in a spirit of tepid ecumenicalism—within a single text, mind or social environment? In answer to this question, we should bear in mind the British Marxist critic Raymond Williams' insightful paraphrase of Bakhtin, that the "specific" process of culture is a "distinct historical practice, by real agents, in complex relation with other, both diverse and varying, agents and practices."[12]The wide range of scholarly approaches in this collection also makes us aware of a woefully under-examined dimension of the Eucharist: that can take on the character of a specific historical event in which different selves identities collide, and perhaps intersect. And who is to say that the Eucharist is not a "happening" among social agents and authors, a flash mob moment of shared experience?

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[11]Lévy, 250.

[12]Raymond Williams, "The Uses of Cultural Theory," *New Left Review* 150 (July/August 1986), 23.