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978-0-521-46647-9 - Mikhail Bakhtin: Between Phenomenology and Marxism

Michael F. Bernard-Donals

Excerpt

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at any stage in his theoretical development, one can see at once two identifiable strands in his work: one that could be roughly identified as an outgrowth of the neo-Kantian philosophy that was current in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and which was developed in different forms by Husserlian phenomenology and the work of Husserl's followers (see Holquist and Clark, "The influence of Kant"); and one that could be called Marxist (though perhaps it might be more accurately called "sociological," since – as we will see – it is far from any identifiably orthodox kind of Marxist theory), that stresses the liberatory nature of language and was developed in Bakhtin's close collaboration with Pavel Medvedev and Valentin Voloshinov. (In this work, I will leave the question of the origin of the disputed texts unaddressed: I will, however, cite the pertinent works as though they were coauthored – that is, as Bakhtin/Medvedev – since, despite Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson's recent arguments, I am more persuaded by those who see them as the work of several different hands, among them Bakhtin's. See Perlina, "Bakhtin-Medvedev-Voloshinov"; Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*; Morson and Emerson's *Mikhail Bakhtin and Rethinking Bakhtin*.)

The reason I undertake this study is that so many scholars from so many different "camps" have such difficulty in reconciling the various Bakhtins to one writer, or one set of ideas. The reason for this difficulty, I would suggest, is precisely Bakhtin's ambivalent position between phenomenology and Marxism.<sup>1</sup> One can begin to see the problems in such an ambivalence if one quickly looks at the object of study of each of these undertakings. Phenomenology generally studies the ways in which individual humans come to cognition of objects. More specifically with regard to the work of Roman Ingarden and to some extent the earlier work of Edmund Husserl, phenom-

<sup>1</sup> Phenomenology and Marxism are certainly not, in the context of contemporary critical theory, mutually exclusive. In fact, theorists since Bakhtin have built literary and cultural theories on a foundation that inbricates these two methodologies. The example that comes most quickly to mind is Jauss's *Rezeptionsaesthetik* as it appears in *Towards an aesthetics of reception* as well as in his famous essay on "the idealist embarrassment" in Marxist aesthetics.

I do want to suggest, however, that Bakhtin – who never read Jauss, or Merleau-Ponty for that matter – understood phenomenology as having for its object of knowledge a radically different set of data from those of historical materialism. I could make an arguable case that what I will go on to describe might be seen not as an impasse between phenomenology and Marxism but rather an unexplored potential connection that would make Bakhtin's work all the richer. The fact remains, however, that Bakhtin, from what I gather, never made the connection, and the contradictions that appear in his work are the result of this lacuna, one that must be accounted for prior to any project that would seek to present a single Bakhtin.

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ological studies suggest how humans can make aesthetic judgments, and come to some aesthetic understanding, of works of art. In following this notion, Bakhtin proposes a human subject that is defined by its relation to other subjects and the ways in which that relation is manifested in the creation of language. The emphasis in this “strand” of Bakhtin’s work falls on the shared, common purview of the interlocutors in any situation, and it seeks to discover how signs have been interiorized by these individual subjects and subsequently reuttered based on the relation of the subjects’ position to one another.

In contrast to this, the Marxisms which I will discuss here have as their object of study the ways in which human social formations are constructed, and the ways in which ideology plays a part in those constructions. Phenomenology deals with the construction and nature of individual human consciousness, the latter with the construction of human social relations. The way in which the Marxist strand becomes apparent in Bakhtin’s work is in his examination of the “characteristics” and “forms of the social intercourse by which ... meaning is realized.” The emphasis here is on an analysis of the broader processes of subject-formation, focusing on the ways in which language-production and sign-production yield knowledge of social formations. The ambivalence between phenomenology and Marxism can be seen in Bakhtin’s earliest encounter with Formalism – which itself was influenced both by phenomenology and Marxism, though in often abstruse ways – and it is with this encounter that I will begin my study of the pull in Bakhtin’s work between phenomenology and Marxism.

From its inception before the Russian Revolution, the primary concerns of Russian Formalism were two: first, to establish the study of literature as a scientific study, one which had at its disposal its own autonomous methods and procedures; second, these methods were to be used to find what constituted “literariness.” Specifically, Formalism wished to determine aesthetic and linguistic properties that distinguished literature and poetry from other forms of discourse, particularly from prosaic or “ordinary” language. These concerns were in reaction to what were seen by the Formalists as illegitimate trends in literary scholarship. The first of these trends was a “confusion” over just what constituted true literary study: at the time, much attention was given to the “external circumstances in which literature is produced” (Erlich, *Russian Formalism* 172), such as

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authorial-biographical studies, psychologistic studies, and cultural history. Boris Eichenbaum suggested that “the literary scholar qua literary scholar ought to be concerned solely with the inquiry into the distinguishing features of the literary materials” (*Literatura* 121). In order to make these features clear, the Formalists suggested that, rather than study the reader’s or the author’s psyche, scholars should determine the nature of what was in the work itself (Erich 173).

The Formalists’ attempt to solve the problem of how a work is “literary” suggests ways in which both a phenomenological approach and a sociological or Marxist one might be seen as alternatives to that problem. As Victor Erlich suggests, Gustav Spet and Victor Zhirmunski took great pains to distinguish between “literariness” that is the result of the material and construction of a work, and the “content” of the poetic work, what might be called its “imagery.” It isn’t what one is able to see in a literary work that makes it literary, they argue, but rather the *way* in which the author has made it be seen. For Zhirmunski, the visual images evoked by poetry are vague and subjective, as they hinge to a large degree on the single reader’s individual – and perhaps idiosyncratic – associations. Nevertheless, since the “material of poetry is neither images nor emotions but words ...” (Erich, *Russian Formalism* 174), it has at its disposal “the whole nexus of formal-logical relations inherent in the language and incapable of expression in any other branch of art.”

In this way, Formalism moves the emphasis of literary study from its content to its form, or, more specifically, its language. The notion of the “device” thereby became the central tool for literary analysis, since it is by means of the device that readers become aware of objects in works, the technique that makes the thing perceivable and artistic. “The device of art is the device of ‘defamiliarization’ of objects and the device of the form made difficult, a device that increases the difficulty and length of perception; for the process of perception is in art an end in itself and must be prolonged” (Shklovsky, “Art as technique” 12). This estrangement effect does two things. First, it focuses on how the poet uses language in ways other than the “everyday” to force the reader to negotiate unfamiliar phrases and to make the necessary mental connections in order to do so. The artist tears the object out of its normal context by bringing together, for example, disparate notions in a single phrase or stanza of poetry, thereby avoiding cliché and the regularized responses of the reader or

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interlocutor. This, in turn, acutely focuses the reader's or interlocutor's awareness on things and their sensory texture (Erich, *Russian Formalism* 177). Or, as Erlich suggests, "The distinctive feature of poetry lies in the fact that a word is perceived as a word and not merely a proxy for the denoted object of an outburst of an emotion, that words and their arrangement, their meaning, their outward and inward form acquire weight and value of their own" (177). Second, estrangement – in drawing attention to the form of the language in a work – compels the reader to ignore the ideological implications of the device, or in fact of the work as a whole. In "Art as Technique," Shklovsky cites several examples from Tolstoy, among them instances of inconsistency and hypocrisy in human behavior. Though Formalism generally did not completely disavow the connection between their own science of linguistics in a given text and that text's connection to the larger social world, the effect of Formalist study was to de-emphasize such concerns. And, in fact, the theory of literary evolution advanced by the Formalists based on the replacement of worn-out devices with different, new ones – explaining why Sterne's radical departure from traditional narrative technique became outmoded in the eighteenth century and why it had to be replaced by a new device – relies on purely literary categories without reference to historical and social changes generally.

This dichotomy between "everyday" and "poetic" language – and the attendant distance between ideological concerns and more purely poetic ones – can be seen in the early Formalist negotiation, as a result of this distance, of "form" versus "content." For, if Formalism's main concern was the study of those devices immanent in a work – more precisely, those devices that would force the reader's attention to their "difference" from ordinary language – then how could such a study begin to take account of something (that is, ordinary language) that was extraneous to literature? Attendant to this problem is one that asks from what experience a reader judges whether something is "different" or not. In other words, if literary works are defined by their literary nature, then just what is the material out of which such works are made? That there was no unanimity on this score, as Erlich suggests, suggests not just confusion but a real crisis in the theory. Erlich goes on to quote Shklovsky on the nature of material, and in the contradiction that follows is a telling critique of Formalism generally. Shklovsky suggested that "The outside world is for the painter not the content, but merely material for his painting" ("Art as technique"

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189). The same applies to psychoideological components of literature usually classified under the heading “content.” Ideas and emotions – and, one could add, history, depictions of the socioideological world – “expressed in a work of literature, as well as events depicted in it,” are treated as “building materials” for the job of artistic construction, phenomena of the same order as word-combinations (“Art as technique” 189). Just before this Shklovsky notes that “it seems obvious to me that for a writer words are not a necessary evil, or merely a means of saying something, but the very material of the work. Literature is made up of words and is governed by the laws which govern language” (“Art as technique” 188–9).

Here is the contradiction: which is it that makes up the material for the literary work of art, words or things? Needless to say, “things” don’t appear in literary works of art, but the fact remains that Shklovsky seems to want to treat words – that is, the way in which language functions, following rules of semantics and so on – in the same way that he treats linguistic depictions of objects, people, situations. In a sense this is a fundamental misunderstanding of a concept introduced by Husserl – someone to whose work the Formalists had access, mainly through Gustav Spet – namely the difference between the “object” (*Gegenstand*), the non-verbal phenomenon denoted by the word, and the “meaning” (*Bedeutung*), the way in which the object is presented. This confusion illustrates several problems for the Formalist position.

First, without some underlying theory of how aesthetics in general function, it was difficult to say how human cognition was able to distinguish between “everyday” constructs and “aesthetic” constructs. Without some idea of how the human mind processed information about objects or other people, Formalism was not able to discern the difference between human reaction to “normal” or everyday stimuli, and those that were supposed to be estranged. Moreover, what is everyday to me might not be everyday to some other reader or interlocutor. Terry Eagleton’s example of the sign “Way Out” in a London underground station may seem quite everyday to a Londoner on his way home from a pub, but to someone from California, also in the underground on his way home from a London pub, this sign might be seen as a kind of commentary from on high on his present condition (*Literary theory* 7). The point is that without knowing the difference between how the Londoner and the Californian process the information, we can’t say

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categorically whether this language is in some way “aesthetic” or not.

A second problem with the Formalist position is how to deal with language. In the Husserlian scheme – much as in the Saussurean one – language is not the same as the non-verbal object of language. This does away with the distinction between “form” and “content,” a distinction with which the Formalists were eager to dispense, but it blurs the commonsense line between the sign that says “Way Out” and the language we use to make reference to it. To treat material objects, as the Formalists did in their early stage, as phenomena of the same order as words or word-combinations is to reduce everything around us to language, which is surely not the case. (It may be – as it will be tempting for Bakhtin to suggest – that objects are not discernible outside of our ability to conceive of them linguistically. See Bakhtin/Voloshinov, *Marxism and the philosophy of language* 11.) I can know that the word-processor on which I am writing this can exist independent of my being able to talk about it; moreover, the material circumstances of its existence are not dependent upon, nor are they defined by, the language I may use to describe them.

Finally, though the Formalists did begin to theorize the ways in which literature is a three-way relationship between not just writer and text, but between writer, text and reader (by discussing the ways in which the device bridges the gap between reader and writer [Holub, *Reception theory* 18]), there is no broader discussion of the ways in which the everyday language of one reader might be “estranged” differently from another’s. Quite apart from the Londoner and the Californian happening upon “Way Out” and discovering that they read differently, one can easily imagine two native English speakers reading the same book and coming to quite different interpretations of it. The different readings may be the result of one reader having a different “language background” from the other, but explaining things in these terms raises larger questions, such as are there extra-aesthetic reasons for such a difference? If the answer to this question is in the affirmative, then the Formalist solution of severing linguistic concerns from various other social concerns seems a hasty one.

In fact, these kinds of problems were very similar to some Bakhtin had with the formal method. In two seminal works – Bakhtin’s “The problem of content, material and form in verbal artistic creation” (1924) and Bakhtin/Medvedev’s *The formal method in literary scholarship* (1928) – Formalism is addressed by Bakhtin and his circle on

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these very terms. And it is in these two works that one can begin to see the dual strands of phenomenology and Marxism at work in Bakhtin's attempted solution to the problems not only of Formalism but of literary study in general. Moreover, it is these two strands of Bakhtin's thinking that will come into contact throughout his career and that will cause such difficulty for those who would like to see in his philosophy of language a unified theory.

It is the second of these two strands that he and Pavel Medvedev address in the fourth chapter of *The formal method of literary scholarship*. Though I will pay a great deal more attention to this text in later chapters, it is important at this early stage to lay out the specific challenge Bakhtin/Medvedev makes to Formalism in Russia, and to see the beginnings of the Marxist language he uses in that challenge. Early on in that chapter, Boris Eichenbaum is quoted with approval for what he sees as the problems with contemporary scholarship: "'Academic' scholarship, having completely ignored theoretical problems and sluggishly made use of outmoded esthetic, psychological, and historical 'axioms,' had by the time of the formalists' debut so completely lost contact with the actual object of research that its very existence had become phantasmal" (55-6). Bakhtin/Medvedev praises Formalism for having brought literary scholarship back into contact with literary texts, which it had often ignored, and for having raised the level of discourse in literary studies to a degree it had not previously reached in Russia. But there is more emphasis on the problems with Formalism than on praise for it, and one of the greatest of these problems is that Formalism, in its "struggle against idealist detachment of meaning from [the] material ... negated ideological meaning itself. As a result the problem of the concrete materialized meaning, the meaning-object, was not raised, and in its place we find the mere object, which is not quite a natural body, and not quite a product for individual consumption" (64). The concentration on the device which would make a work "literary" led away from concerns of what kind of ideological material was used to construct that work. Bakhtin/Medvedev concludes that if the Formalists were led to "show the significance of constructive devices by putting 'everything else to the side as motivation,' then it is now absolutely necessary to return all this 'everything else,' i.e., all the richness and depth of ideological meaning, to the foreground of research" (65). Certainly, suggests Bakhtin/Medvedev, "[i]t is necessary to be able to isolate the object of study and correctly establish its



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boundaries," but these boundaries must be established in such a way that they "do not sever the object from vital connections with other objects, connections without which it becomes unintelligible" (77). Bakhtin/Medvedev established early on that literary works are works of ideological creation: they are material things, part of the practical reality that surrounds humans because they are constructed linguistically, and language is part and parcel of the ideological material that surrounds – and creates – humans (7).

The point here is that poetic language is only one aspect of language in general. Moreover, the linguistic study of poetry – or of any literary object – is only one way to study such an object. Though it is certainly the case that the way in which a work is constructed may serve to define it as literary or non-literary, it is also the case that any utterance may also be constructed in just such a way, and may also be seen, in certain cases, as aesthetic or not aesthetic. Formalism's mistake, then, was to have separated aesthetic objects from all other utterances, and to have studied only the former. All definitions – aesthetic, non-aesthetic, beautiful, everyday – "only pertain to the organization of the utterance and work in their connection with the functions they fulfill in the unity of social life and, in particular, in the concrete unity of the ideological horizon" (Bakhtin/Medvedev, *The formal method* 84).

What is missing from the Formalists' conception of language is history. Language isn't spoken in a void, but is borne by concrete historical and social conditions at the time and place of its utterance. More importantly, the "meaning of the word-utterance is also joined to history through the unique act of its realization, becoming a historical phenomenon" (Bakhtin/Medvedev, *The formal method* 120). History must be discerned through an analysis of the particular time and place of an utterance's generation, but also of the individuals engaged in a given discourse. This social evaluation "actualizes the utterance both from the standpoint of its factual presence and the standpoint of its semantic meaning," not just "the word, grammatical form, sentence, and all linguistic definiteness taken in general abstraction from the concrete historical utterance" (121). It defines the "choice of subject, word, form, and their individual combination within the bounds of the given utterance. It also defines the choice of content, the selection of form, and the connection between form and content" (121). Certainly, suggests Bakhtin/Medvedev, this kind of analysis is not solely the province of aesthetics; nevertheless, complete

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aesthetic analysis cannot go without such a social evaluation. The deeper and more fruitful social evaluations are “determined by the economic existence of a class in the given epoch of its existence. One may say that the major historical aims of a whole epoch in the life of the given social group are formed in these evaluations” (121).

Formalism misunderstands what the poet does. She or he does not choose linguistic forms – or poetic devices – but rather “selects, combines, and arranges the evaluations lodged in [those forms] as well. And the resistance of the material we feel in every poetic work” – what Formalism in some cases might call estrangement – “is in fact the resistance of the social evaluations it contains” (Bakhtin/Medvedev, *The formal method* 123). Bakhtin/Medvedev asks that we imagine two different social groups who have at their disposal the same language-material with the same lexicon, morphology, syntax and so on.

Under these conditions, if the differences between our two social groups arise from important socioeconomic premises of their existences, the intonation of one and the same word will differ profoundly between groups; within the very same grammatical constructions the semantic and stylistic combinations will be profoundly different. One and the same word will occupy a completely different hierarchical place in the utterance as a concrete social act. (123)

Each group lives under a different set of material conditions, brought about by their niche in the economic hierarchy. One might picture members of two groups reading a report in a Sunday newspaper about a debate on state funding for abortion counseling. One reader is of the working class, perhaps has parents who never went to college, and feels very strongly about “family values” and “the life of the unborn.” Another is a member of the upper class, whose parents went to college and who herself found a position after college working for a bank, and who has begun to subscribe to the philosophy that governments should not interfere in personal and business decisions. In reading such a report on the controversy in the very same edition of the very same paper (assuming that they both subscribe to the same paper, which might not be the case), each might have very different reactions to such an utterance, and might in turn have quite different things to say. What is important here is not what each member of the different “groups” will say, but that such a social evaluation is necessary to be able to say something about the language of the text each is reading.