

## Chapter 1

# Introduction

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In late 1965 a young Bulgarian critic came to Paris on a scholarship, in order to study literature there. She was introduced by another Bulgarian – Tzvetan Todorov, who had arrived a few years earlier – to Roland Barthes, then a leading literary critic and theorist, who in turn invited her to join his weekly seminar. Her first presentation was about the work of a Russian critic that few in Paris had ever heard of: Mikhail Bakhtin. She described his brilliant work on Dostoevsky, summed up in a book he'd published a few years earlier. A few years later that Dostoevsky book appeared in French translation, and Julia Kristeva, who had given the seminar talk, provided a preface, titled 'Une poétique ruinée' ('A ruined poetics').<sup>1</sup>

Why the odd title? Kristeva claimed that Bakhtin had attempted to think about language in a new way: not as a formal system that speakers learned and used to transmit bits of information (as the reigning structuralist model suggested), but as something that the speaker could twist and slant, expressing an attitude to the words used and to the person one was addressing. Language was something always 'depending on the concrete relationship which the user maintains here and now with his utterances'; it could be held at a distance, be spoken ironically or parodically, even stylised (if the speaker wanted to sound 'like' a certain sort of speaker).<sup>2</sup> Bakhtin had tried to describe this as a 'poetics', using the concepts he inherited from the Russian Formalists and structural linguistics, but the result was a patchwork of new ideas, fragmented by their reliance on an older terminology.

It's a provocative, thoughtful image: Bakhtin's new conception taking shape as the ruins of an old one, but Kristeva didn't know the half of it. For there's a sense in which Bakhtin's entire *oeuvre*, his whole intellectual project, ended up as so many ruins. He had, over the course of his eighty years, tried over and over again to articulate his ideas in public and get them a fair hearing, but was constantly frustrated. He started with an ambitious project in moral philosophy, which he then put aside in the 1920s. He managed to publish a book on Dostoevsky in 1929, but was arrested before it saw the light of day and it lay, like buried treasure, undiscussed for thirty years. He wrote books

## 2 Introduction

that didn't get published, an entry for an encyclopaedia that was cancelled, an article for a journal that was closed down, and a doctoral dissertation that took six years to be examined and another five (with constant rewriting) to be accepted for a degree. He wrote in many, many notebooks, filling them with short and long paragraphs that hazarded exciting ideas, which then lay undeveloped and unseen for decades. In short, what Bakhtin left to the world, after a lifetime of thinking and writing, was not a shelf full of polished books and essays, but a grab bag of fragments, uncompleted projects, and works that had, in one or another way, been distorted. Scholars, however isolated, eccentric, and unsociable they may be, depend on a public sphere of criticism and argument: the latter tests their ideas, helps them find definitive form, opens them up to wider concerns. Bakhtin had big ideas and no audience: as a result, we have the ruins of a project. Our job is to go through the ruins and extract what we can, to repair what we can repair, to extend and reconstruct where that is possible, and, finally, to admit that we can't make the ruins into a finished building, can't undo the history that produced them.

Why are we even aware of the ruins? Because in the early 1960s a trio of determined and passionate young scholars discovered Bakhtin's 1929 book in a library, found out – to their surprise – that the author was still alive, paid him a visit, and decided to devote a remarkable amount of their academic life and resources to a campaign for his rehabilitation. In a way, one could say that Bakhtin's reception – which I'll discuss at the end of this *Cambridge Introduction*, in keeping with the standard format for this series – preceded his biography and context. Bakhtin had not been a public figure. There was no biography to speak of and the context of his work was, to a great extent, a history of repression: he'd been arrested in 1929, served five years in internal exile, had spent the late 1930s and the war years hiding, and had finally managed a degree of normalcy by getting a post at a fairly remote provincial university (remote enough so that people who had known him earlier assumed he was dead). It was only after two of the young scholars, S. G. (Sergei Georgievich) Bocharov and V. V. (Vadim Valerianovich) Kozhinov, succeeded in getting some of the unpublished material into print in the 1960s and 1970s, that the moment of reception finally arrived and the scholarly community tried to figure out who this man was and what he had, precisely, accomplished.

Even when that moment arrived, interpretation wasn't a straightforward process. Bakhtin was himself reticent to talk about his past, and records at the time were still difficult to access. As a result, there was a struggle of sorts over Bakhtin's legacy, a struggle among different groups in the Soviet Union, each seeking to identify this emerging luminary with their cause. Structuralists and semioticians, Marxist critics of structuralism and semiotics, and Russian

‘Slavophile’ nationalists all claimed him as their spokesperson. When the archive is in ruins and the life barely documented, it’s easy to fill in the gaps according to your preferences: there were, accordingly, multiple biographies and multiple descriptions of context, each designed to support a different interpretation of the man and his work. There were arguments about why he became a literary critic: was it a matter of intellectual evolution, or was he forced onto this path because the Soviet government wouldn’t publish his early writing in philosophy? There were arguments about the early philosophy: was it inspired by Russian religious philosophy or German Neo-Kantianism? There were disputes about his friends: were his closest ones the Marxists Voloshinov and Medvedev, the Jewish philosopher Kagan, or two Jews who converted to Russian Orthodoxy, Pumpianskii and Iudina? (We will be introduced properly to all these people in the following chapter.)

You may have picked up this volume thinking that Bakhtin had smoked one of his manuscripts during the Second World War. You may believe that he wrote works published under the names of his friends Voloshinov and Medvedev. You may have been thrilled by his essay ‘Discourse in the Novel’, but wondered why it included so few references to the work of other scholars working on stylistics. ‘Towards a Methodology of the Human Sciences’ may be, despite (or perhaps because of) its fragmentary nature, one of your favourite Bakhtin texts. Now that the dust has settled, we can say with some confidence (but not absolutely, because there just isn’t conclusive evidence) that there was no manuscript to be smoked, that Bakhtin may have helped with but didn’t write the books by Voloshinov and Medvedev, that there were plenty of footnotes in ‘Discourse in the Novel’ (they were not included in the versions that were translated), and that Bakhtin never put together ‘Towards a Methodology of the Human Sciences’ (it was pieced together from various notebooks by an editor, without any authorisation from Bakhtin).

The ruin of a poetics and then what we might call a struggle over what to do with this archaeological site, which, as we shall see, ended up having far more visitors, in the Soviet Union and beyond, than anyone could have expected. There were competing ideas about how to interpret and curate the ruins and a sense of urgency about sorting them out. As I write this in 2019, the ruins have become a kind of theoretical Stonehenge: adored, surrounded by various myths and conjectures, a must-see for any tourist of literary theory, and – at this point – only to be viewed at a distance. The reader of this *Cambridge Introduction* probably knows Bakhtin from the various translations that arrived like so many wonderful gifts from the 1980s onwards, from the monographs that tried to make sense of his life, and from critical texts that were probably based on those same translations. We should think of all those

4      *Introduction*

now as the first go at reconstruction, produced with some haste though with the best of intentions, at a time when doing the job the way it should be done seemed impossible. But today things are much different. The reform of the Soviet Union in the 1980s and its eventual collapse in 1991 removed many of the constraints on Bakhtin scholarship: archives were opened, scholars from Russia were able to communicate freely with scholars from abroad, and scholarly work could be published without censorship. Between 1996 and 2012 a team of specialists at the Russian Academy of Sciences produced a six-volume *Collected Works*, a scholarly edition that far surpassed, in detail and editorial care, any Bakhtin publication that preceded it. Are there still differences of opinion about the man and his work? Without doubt. But now we have the old texts in proper form and plenty of new texts as well.

We've come, you could say, to a turning point in the reception of Bakhtin, the moment at which we can finally put together something like a reasonable biography, a thorough account of his context, and a reliable description and analysis of the works themselves. That is exciting, but it makes the writing of this *Cambridge Introduction* a little more complicated than it should be. On the one hand, this book should be like a toolbox with an instruction manual: within its pages, the reader should find concepts and arguments – theoretical tools – which will be useful for their work in literary and cultural analysis, together with sensible advice on how these can be used. While many who read this book will have picked up a few of those tools already (dialogism, or the chronotope, say) and tried to use them, this introduction ought to show them how to apply them in ways they might not have thought of or to tasks they didn't realise were appropriate.

On the other hand, this book has to set the record straight. There are myths that need to be dispelled – about Bakhtin, about his friends and his colleagues, and about some of his works. There is a complicated context to be accounted for. And there are works that need to be reinterpreted in the light of new editions or even introduced to the English-language reader. In the pages that follow I do my best to balance and coordinate the two tasks: to present a usable and interesting Bakhtin for students and researchers; and to present what is in some respects a new Bakhtin. Where a re-edited text differs substantially or importantly from the one we're familiar with, I'll make sure to note the differences. Where there are texts that remain untranslated but that offer something new and interesting, I'll make sure to alert the reader to their existence. It will require a bit of juggling, but I will try to ensure the patient reader is rewarded.

## Chapter 2

# Life

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Mikhail Bakhtin led an extraordinary life, extraordinary in its difficulty and extraordinary in its achievements. ‘To live a life is not as simple as to cross a field’, goes an old Russian proverb, and the crossing was particularly brutal and complicated for a Russian born in 1895, who would have to experience, in turn, the First World War (1914–18), the Russian Revolutions and the ensuing Civil War (1917–21), the onset of Stalin’s repression in the late 1920s, the nightmare of collectivisation in the 1930s, the purges and murders that climaxed in 1937, and the Second World War (1939–45). Many of these events touched Bakhtin’s life directly – he was in Leningrad during the revolution, and during the Civil War he moved to the town of Nevel’ simply to obtain food. He was arrested in 1929 and sent in exile to a town in Kazakhstan for five years, where he witnessed people starving to death in the streets during the famine and collectivisation. When he attempted to start a normal life after his sentence of exile, his first academic appointment came to a sudden end, as the purges of 1937 threatened his position, forcing him to run away. While he survived the war years working as a high school teacher, his mother and sisters died. His doctoral dissertation, submitted in 1940, became a subject of ideological struggle – it was even referred to in the Soviet press. He finally obtained a steady academic appointment when he was fifty. A difficult life and a hard to pin down life, as a quick glance at the 1984 English-language biography, written by Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, reveals: there is sketchy (and, we now know, partly incorrect) information about his family, a good deal of detail on Bakhtin’s activity and friendships from 1917 till 1929, very little about his life from 1930 till 1960 (except for a brief account of his thesis defence), and more detail about his life from 1960 until his death in 1975.<sup>1</sup> It is hardly surprising, for while Bakhtin survived – itself an achievement, for most of his close friends were dead by 1940 – he lived on the fringes of the Soviet system, recognised as an extraordinary and inventive mind, but, despite his best efforts, unable to gain official status.

After Stalin’s death in 1953 there was a struggle for the leadership of the Communist Party, won eventually by Khrushchev, under whose watch there

6      *Life*

was considerable liberalisation of Soviet cultural life. It was this liberalisation that made possible the publication of a revised version of Bakhtin's book on Dostoevsky in 1963 and the publication of a revised version of his doctoral thesis on Rabelais in 1965. Bakhtin's life, however, remained complicated, because his rehabilitation depended on a shifting set of alliances and compromises. There were critics who liked his work because it looked like a sophisticated rebuttal of Russian Formalism, which they opposed from a fairly orthodox Communist position. There were Formalists – Viktor Shklovsky, for example – who supported Bakhtin because they thought of him as a subtle thinker who was distant from the Communist Party line.<sup>2</sup> There were critics who thought Bakhtin represented opposition to the entire culture of the Soviet Union, in the name of either a repressed Russian Orthodox or repressed Russian nationalist tradition.

These unstable alliances complicated Bakhtin's life in the 1960s and 1970s, but they also complicated his *previous* life. Bakhtin was not forthcoming about the details of his earlier years and he had himself obscured matters by occasionally – for understandable reasons – playing fast and loose with the truth on official documents. Now that people eager to claim him for their cause were trying to discover who he was and had been, there was a rush to fill the biographical void. As is so often the case when documents are not available or accessible, rumour and surmise filled the void instead. The rumours were not aimless – they had a point. If you said Bakhtin had aristocratic origins, that gave him a certain air of nobility (and hostility to Soviet Communism).<sup>3</sup> If you claimed he had smoked one of his manuscripts, it illustrated his indifference to worldly success.<sup>4</sup> If you said he wrote some books and articles published under the names of his friends, this could imply that he couldn't write under his own name and that he was able and willing to disguise his thoughts with an alien terminology.

Bakhtin did not intervene to scupper the rumours or settle the disputes (although it turned out he had engaged in thirteen hours of interviews in 1973 with the literary scholar V. D. Duvakin, which came to light two decades later). When he died in 1975, the world was aware of his study of Dostoevsky – republished in 1963 as *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (the 1929 version had been titled *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*) – his book on Rabelais, a few fragments on the novel, and, notoriously, books and articles authored by his friends V. N. (Valentin Nikolaevich) Voloshinov and P. N. (Pavel Nikolaevich) Medvedev, which, it was claimed, had actually been written by Bakhtin. *That* claim had first been made publicly by the semiotician V. V. Ivanov, at a meeting to celebrate Bakhtin's seventy-fifth birthday in 1970, although afterwards various Russian scholars said it had been a

common belief amongst the local intelligentsia.<sup>5</sup> In 1975 a collection of essays with four works on the novel and one long philosophical critique of Russian Formalism came out in Russia. In 1979 a Russian collection was published that included a long, early philosophical fragment, excerpts from a book on the *Bildungsroman* (the novel of ‘formation’ or ‘education’), some essays on linguistics, and two collections of aphorisms and comments – some philosophical, some linguistic, some religious, some literary – called, enigmatically, ‘Towards a Methodology of the Human Sciences’ and ‘From Notes Made in 1970–71’. Now there was some explaining to do, for the Bakhtin *oeuvre* looked like a heterogeneous grab bag of work: some fairly technical philosophy that was like phenomenology, a philosophical critique of Formalism, works on the novel written in a militant tone and aiming at a sociological stylistics, a scholarly but enthusiastic recovery of popular carnival culture, and philosophical musings from later life.

Explanations were forthcoming. Some commentators suggested that Bakhtin had always intended to write philosophy and to be a philosopher, but the restrictions imposed on philosophy by the Soviet government forced him to change course, to shift to literary criticism and the philosophy of language, all the while disguising his intentions with the kind of sociological language that would appeal to Marxists. Others thought the early philosophical works were just, well, early works, which Bakhtin abandoned when his intellectual path took him in a different direction. Some thought the occasional use of religious language revealed the true Bakhtin, while discussions couched in the language of linguistics and social theory were mere window dressing for the Soviet censors. Others saw the religious language as occasional and relatively uninteresting compared to the richly elaborated studies of novelistic style and imagery. All were struck, however, by the sheer productivity and originality of a man who seemed to have worked in more or less complete intellectual isolation.

The evidence for each explanation was fairly thin, often relying on unsourced oral testimony. But to be fair, unsourced oral testimony was often all that was available, given the power of Soviet censorship. The result is one of the great ironies of Bakhtin scholarship: the fullest and most detailed elaboration of the explanation favoured by a substantial number of Bakhtin’s Russian supporters – Bakhtin was a religious philosopher forced by circumstances to work on literature and linguistics – appeared not in Russia itself, but in Clark and Holquist’s 1984 biography. There the case was made for the importance of Bakhtin’s early philosophical writings and for Bakhtin’s authorship of texts by his friends Voloshinov and Medvedev, supported in many instances by the testimony of unnamed Russian sources.



## 8      *Life*

The biography would become the standard reference for Bakhtin readers both abroad and in the Soviet Union.

But history had another card to play and Bakhtin's life was to be upended, rewritten, yet again. In the 1980s, the emergence of a reform leadership in the Soviet Communist Party, headed by Mikhail Gorbachev, led to the policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (reconstruction), which in turn led to further publication of work on and by Bakhtin. Gorbachev's liberalisation unleashed forces he could not control and in 1991 the Soviet Union itself disintegrated and with it many of the limitations that had hobbled Bakhtin scholarship. In 1992 a Russian journal devoted purely to Bakhtin was launched and it began to publish memoirs, studies of archival work, interviews, and critical studies. In 1993 the transcripts of the interviews from 1973 began to be published. In 1996 the Russian Academy of Sciences began to publish the Bakhtin *Collected Works*, a proper scholarly edition of everything by Bakhtin that had been already published – the two books, the essays, the notes – and much that was new, including the contents of many of Bakhtin's notebooks. The end result was a sea change in Bakhtin scholarship. Arguments began to be made on the basis of archival evidence and documentary sources. Texts that had been censored appeared in uncensored form. The grey areas in Bakhtin's life, like that period between 1930 and 1960, began to acquire some colour and detail. But some of the biographical facts people had accepted up till that point were contradicted by new evidence, so the biography itself also changed.

What follows is a summary of Bakhtin's life according to the current state of scholarship. (And who knows? History may have another card up its sleeve.)<sup>6</sup> There are still uncertainties and aspects of Bakhtin's life we know little about. In some respects what follows is different from the common understanding of Bakhtin's life in the English-speaking world, and sometimes the story is different from the one told by Bakhtin himself in his lengthy interviews with Duvakin – because it is contradicted by documentary evidence. Where there are facts in dispute, I've indicated it in the notes. It's still a complicated life. But the complications are now mostly complications in the life itself, rather than in the tortured process of telling it.

### **Youth: 1895–1917**

The story begins in Orel, a Russian town roughly 350 kilometres south-west of Moscow, where Bakhtin's father, Mikhail Nikolaevich, worked for the Orel Commercial Bank. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin was born on 4/16



November in 1895, second child to Varvara Zakharovna Bakhtina, in what would become a family with six children (the first date is according to the Julian calendar then in effect in Russia; the second is the date according to the modern, Gregorian calendar). The family was middle class, not – as was claimed by Bakhtin’s elder brother Nikolai and by Mikhail himself – descended from Russian aristocrats, but they were clearly well off, with a very large, comfortable house and servants. Nikolai was one year older than Mikhail; their sisters Mariia, Ekaterina, and Natalia were born between 1899 and 1909 and there was also an adopted sister, Nina. There would be, over the next several decades, a good deal of moving about, as a family and individually, and a great deal of tragedy: the Bakhtins were not destined to be as close as they might have hoped. They would not see Nikolai after 1918, when he went to fight in the Russian Civil War (he emigrated afterwards), and although Mikhail Bakhtin would remain in contact with his mother and sisters, it would be sporadic from 1929 onwards. And, to be frank, we will lose contact with them as well, for there is very little information available about their lives, their interests, and their fates.

According to Mikhail’s and Nikolai’s (not invariably accurate) recollections, the Bakhtin household was, in traditional terms, extremely ‘cultured’. Both Nikolai and Mikhail were reportedly educated by a governess in their youth, who taught them German, and Bakhtin also learned French at an early age. We do know that the bank required his father and the family to move to Vilnius, in Lithuania, in 1905. There, Nikolai and Mikhail, a year later, would enter a gymnasium – that is, an academically orientated secondary school – where they received a fairly standard classical education, which would include Latin and ancient Greek. There, also, they met Mikhail Lopatto and Leib Meerovich Pumpian, both of whom have further roles to play in this history.<sup>7</sup>

In 1911 another change in post compelled the Bakhtins to move to Odessa, a Black Sea port notable for its large Jewish population and ethnic diversity, although Nikolai stayed on in Vilnius to complete gymnasium. In 1912 Nikolai moved to Odessa and entered the local university, Novorossiskii University, and Bakhtin scholarship enters something of a black hole. For Mikhail claimed, in one of the 1973 interviews, that he, too, entered Novorossiskii University in Odessa and enjoyed being taught by a number of its notable professors, before transferring to Petrograd University. But this is only one possible account of Bakhtin’s postsecondary education: at various points he claimed to have spent two years at university in Odessa and two in Petrograd (as Saint Petersburg was known from 1914 to 1924), four years at Petrograd, just two years at Petrograd, and two years at Marburg University in Germany. There is, however, no official record of Bakhtin being enrolled in

10      *Life*

any university at the time, although there are records for his brother Nikolai. Did Bakhtin simply borrow Nikolai's academic history later in life, for purposes of employment? Both Bakhtin's erudition and his fairly detailed recollections of his university days in Odessa and Petrograd (in the interviews with Duvakin) imply he tagged along with his older brother and attended classes either as an auditor or unofficially.<sup>8</sup> But the absence of records means we don't know what happened for sure.

In any case, Mikhail moved to Petrograd at some point in 1916, attending classes until 1918. He, Nikolai, Lopatto, and the man now named Lev Vasil'evich Pumpianskii (Pumpian, born Jewish, had converted to Russian Orthodoxy in 1911 and changed his name) took up where they left off: they now met regularly as a group, which seems to have been dedicated to creating parodies of the serious works they studied by day, mimicking notable intellectual figures, and playing charades.<sup>9</sup> But by the end of 1916 both Pumpianskii and Nikolai Bakhtin were in the Russian Army. Bakhtin was not – he had osteomyelitis in one of his legs.

This left Bakhtin in what was fast becoming revolutionary Petrograd. Speaking in retrospect, he claimed that although the Petrograd University student body was full of warring political factions, who sometimes fought in the corridors, he stayed well away, devoting himself to his presumably unofficial studies. Was Bakhtin uninterested in politics? He has described himself as 'completely apolitical' (Conv 65/78), but he clearly had views. When the February 1917 revolution overthrew the monarchy, Bakhtin had no faith in the leadership of Alexander Kerensky, who had been installed as leader of the Provisional Government. The lack of faith was based on ordinary political calculation – he thought 'these intellectuals were completely unable to rule the government, unable to defend the February revolution' (Conv 106/132) – as well as some personal experience.<sup>10</sup> Kerensky, had been, in fact, the lover of the wife of his friend Boris Zalesskii, and he impressed neither Zalesskii nor Bakhtin. 'And therefore it was inevitable', Bakhtin later told Duvakin, 'that the most extreme elements would prevail' (Conv 107/133–4), meaning that either the monarchy would be restored or the Bolsheviks would triumph.<sup>11</sup>

He did not view the latter prospect with joy. The proletariat, in his view, was 'not a historical class, it has no values – actually it has nothing. Their whole lives they struggle only for narrow material things' (Conv 108/134). Having no belief in the prospect of socialist revolution and no faith in the political will or ability of the liberal movement (represented by Kerensky), Bakhtin stayed out of the way. In his own words, 'I sat at home, I read; when there was heating, I sat in the library' (Conv 108/134).