

Monologism, Dialogism, Monoglossia, Polyglossia and Heteroglossia

Ken Hirschop and David Shepherd, eds.

Bakhtin and Cultural Theory (second edition)

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001.

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reviewed by Trevor Curnow

If ever there was a good reason for bringing out a second edition of a book, *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory* has it. Since it first appeared in 1989, the Soviet Union has ceased to exist and a flood of new materials by and about Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) has seen the light of day. However this has proven to be something of a mixed blessing. Where previously a relative poverty of materials had given Bakhtin scholars a sense of common cause, new freedoms and new resources have led to serious divisions within the community. Furthermore, it turns out that even the little that was thought to be known about him before has now to be seriously reconsidered. Amongst other things, it turns out that Bakhtin routinely lied about his academic background, and was not beyond shameless plagiarism in his writings.

But what exactly were his writings? For someone who had so much to say about the connections between historical circumstances, language and literature, it is perhaps ironic that some scholars appear to believe that Bakhtin's works should to some extent be rewritten. The argument is that he was obliged to conform to the strictures placed on academics and published authors by USSR orthodoxy, and was consequently often obliged to express his ideas in terms not of his own choosing, or camouflage them with overt nods in the official direction. However, while this is certainly true, textual emendation is too drastic a remedy. Interpret and annotate, yes; tamper, no.

The background to the whole problem is dealt with by Ken Hirschop in his introduction, where the major themes of Bakhtin's life and work are set out in a clear and helpful fashion. Nikolai Pan'kov's contribution reconstructs the circumstances surrounding Bakhtin's defence of his dissertation in 1946, a key event in his intellectual life. Brian Poole digs into the origins of some of Bakhtin's ideas, revealing previously unknown (or at least unacknowledged) debts to Max Scheler and Nikolai Hartmann in particular. In a short concluding bibliographical essay, Carol Adlam summarises the past decade or so of Bakhtin scholarship. Anyone new to Bakhtin (or to the 'new' Bakhtin!) will find that these four new pieces between them provide an excellent survey of the subject.

Of the remaining seven essays, six have been retained from the first edition of the book. They explore, in various ways and directions, Bakhtin's ideas on language, literature and society. While ideas clearly need to be tested, and while comparisons can sometimes be illuminating, some of the items, most notably those by Terry Eagleton and Clair Wills, stray too far from the central subject matter of the book to make much of a helpful contribution to it. By contrast, Nancy Glazener's essay constantly keeps in contact with Bakhtin's thought, using it as a basis from which to approach the work of Gertrude Stein.

However, for me the best of the rest by far is Tony Crowley's 'Bakhtin and the history of the language.' In a model piece of writing he first introduces the reader to some key terms in Bakhtin's thought (monologism, dialogism, monoglossia, polyglossia and heteroglossia), and then proceeds to critically apply them to the evolution of the English language. Genuine insights emerge as the usefulness of these terms in understanding the process is demonstrated, while Crowley's style has a clarity too many academics seem to find unnecessary (or impossible).

I cannot comment on Bakhtin's own style, but the book preserves an interesting expression of his attitude towards academic honours, and it is fitting to conclude this review with his own words. In his view, a philosopher 'should be nobody, because if he becomes somebody, he begins to make his philosophy fit in with his professional position' (p. 26).

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