

REVIEW ARTICLE

Four Bakhtinian Perspectives¹

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Only error individualizes.

(Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 81)

After more than twenty-five years of heavy manufacturing in various sectors of the international "Bakhtin Industry," production lines continue working full-tilt. Just eight years ago, the one-hundredth anniversary of Bakhtin's birth, a pause in production seemed appropriate in order to look at what had been accomplished. Conferences were organized for the job all over the world: in Europe, in North America and in South America — the list of countries was long. Even though there was agreement at the time on the need to stop and take stock, the problem was that nobody ever really stopped for very long.

Monographs continued to be published, more edited collections appeared, new archival material was scoured (or strategically leaked), two volumes of the critical edition were finished, special journal issues were edited, even more international conferences were organized, new translations were being prepared (still unpublished), the Bakhtin Centre in Sheffield continued its essential work, Bakhtin's ideas spread further from literary studies to other disciplines, the West and the East continued to meet in their idiosyncratic ways, and more and more university courses on Bakhtin were being taught all around the world.

1 Review article on Caryl Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997 (hereafter referred to as E); Ken Hirschkop, *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1999 (hereafter referred to as H); Galin Tihanov, *The Master and the Slave: Lukács, Bakhtin and the Ideas of their Time*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2000 (hereafter referred to as T); Greg M. Nielsen, *The Norms of Answerability: Social Theory Between Bakhtin and Habermas*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2002 (hereafter referred to as N).

Bakhtin, “the *thinker*,”² helps us to “think again” about what we always thought about human culture. Nearly thirty years after his death, scholars working in the Social Sciences and Humanities continue to discover new perspectives with which to do this rethinking. Due to a lack of space and (especially) of expertise, this review cannot discuss all the relevant issues, especially those dealing with Bakhtin as a religious thinker (see Mihailovic, Coates, Green, Lock, Felch and Continuo, and Peachey), or Bakhtin as a dialogic thinker in the philosophy of dialogue (Makhlin, Poole, Brandist, Jacques, Popelard *et al.*). For reasons of linguistic “manageability,”³ it privileges English-language publications, thereby neglecting works published in three other major world languages where publication on Bakhtin continues to be very strong (Russian,⁴ Spanish, and Portuguese⁵).

In the following article, four substantially different perspectives on the thinking of Mikhail Bakhtin are discussed, all of which appeared since the centenary of his birth: they variably deal with the history of Russian-language criticism (Emerson and Hirschkop), developments in social theory (Hirschkop and Nielsen), and the history of ideas (Tihanov 2000). Indeed, they illustrate the fundamental differences, earlier pointed out by Peter

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- 2 Bakhtin had a marked liking for the Russian term *myslitel'* (loosely translatable as “thinker”) for describing how he saw himself in his intellectual work (E72).
- 3 Any attempt to read Bakhtin seriously entails formidable problems of linguistic “manageability.” This is true for everyone, however many languages one may speak and read. You need Russian to understand the nuances of his work, you also need some German to check the (still today) untranslated German sources; and, if you want to understand the burning issues of the international scene, you need, in addition to English, a good base in Portuguese, Spanish, French, Italian, German, and Japanese (more or less in that order).
- 4 One should never forget how vibrant research in the Russian language continues to be in the field of Bakhtin Studies. This being said, the material conditions of publication in the Russian-speaking world are often such that many documents are unobtainable since, for various cultural and economic reasons, they are frequently ephemeral in nature. In the early 1990s, English-language volumes began to appear which contained Russian-language research in translation, for example in work edited by Shepherd, Hitchcock, Adlam *et al.*, Wall, Zytko, and periodically in the American journal *New Literary History*. Emerson’s and Hirschkop’s critical overviews of Russian-language criticism (both under discussion here) are therefore highly welcome. The Russian-language journal *Dialog, Karnaval, Khronotop*, at first published in Vitebsk (Belarus), and since 1998 in Moscow, is a high-quality forum for the publication of Bakhtinian research in the Russian language, but it is *very far indeed* from representing anything even close to the *whole* of research that continues to flourish all over the vast and varied Russian-speaking world.
- 5 The Eleventh International Conference on Mikhail Bakhtin, organized in Curitiba, Brazil in 2003, represents a crucial moment in the history of international Bakhtin Studies. The prolific research done in the Portuguese language finally meets face to face with other linguistic communities in the “global” Bakhtinian arena. Intellectually as well as culturally, Brazil is a living crossroads where Latin-American traditions meet both with European intellectualism (especially from France) and with Anglo-American pragmatism (especially in the Social Sciences), a place where the South meets the North. For recent works published in Spanish and Portuguese, see bibliography. For details on recent work published in Brazil, see my “On Bringing Mikhail Bakhtin into the Social Sciences” (Wall 2001).

Hitchcock, underlying any juxtaposition between Bakhtin and “Bakhtin,” in this case between Bakhtin and four “Bakhtins.”

With my title “Four Bakhtinian Perspectives,” I wish to suggest both a retrospect and a prospect, a result *and* an opening. The prefix “per” (Latin = through), combined with the verbal stem “spectare” (Latin = to look at), further suggests the English verbal phrase “to look through.” We will be looking at Bakhtin through others’ eyes, that is, we will be “looking through” Bakhtin’s readers, in a certain sense. To “see through someone” is paramount to understanding this person better, by grasping how he/she sees a third (in this case Bakhtin), whom we all purport to know. Thus the word “perspective” entails a comparison as one looks through the present towards the future: the second hundred years of Mikhail Bakhtin? A perspective thus involves seeing “*ce qui arrive*” (Paul Virilio), seeing or anticipating what is happening — either by participating with others in its unfolding (the dialogical approach) or by looking upon it from the outside in the spectator approach (thoroughly criticized by Virilio). At the beginning of a new century, we see ourselves on the brink of something new: something bigger, better, more colossal. We have the choice of participating or watching.

The publication of the four books under review here can be seen as important events for the history of international Bakhtin scholarship. Before going any further, I propose a short summary of each one of them:

(i) Caryl Emerson, *The First Hundred Year of Mikhail Bakhtin* (1997): The opening up of a new age for Bakhtin Studies was eloquently ushered in by Caryl Emerson in 1997, soon after the centenary of his birth. Starting with her own observations on the Seventh International Bakhtin Conference, held in Moscow in 1995, Emerson provides a personal account of how she sees the evolution of Bakhtin Studies in the Russian-speaking world. It was the very first comprehensive account, for non-Russian speakers, of the main issues, and included detailed descriptions of the multiple “centres” of Bakhtin Studies. At the same time it offered a number of comparisons with ideas developed in the English-speaking world on Bakhtin. The book is most interesting for what it has to say about neutral perspectives, for what it does and does not say about its own perspective, and on the differences between outsider and insider information.

(ii) Ken Hirschkop, *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy* (1999): This book is at the same time similar to Emerson’s and very different. Both contain an extensive review of what has been happening in Russian-language criticism, interspersed with detailed personal analysis. Hirschkop polemicalizes at several crucial moments with Emerson, in particular with regard to the relationship between the individual and society as it appears in Bakhtin’s thinking. Hirschkop revisits the thorny authorship issue, giving no doubt the most lucid account yet about who wrote what, and — the original part — *why* so many people have been adamantly defending one position or the other. This he does by providing a substantially revised, and thoroughly fascinating, version of Bakhtin’s life story. Hirschkop offers a truly critical study of Bakhtin, taking him to task for certain failures and unforgivable contradictions. Nowhere do we find in his book a “unified” Bakhtin.

(iii) Galin Tihanov, *The Master and the Slave: Lukács, Bakhtin and the Ideas of their Time* (2000): This elegantly written study situates Bakhtin's ideas, particularly those expounded in the Dostoevsky and Rabelais books, within the evolving intellectual context of his time and country. Displaying an impressive mastery of German and Russian sources, Tihanov studies Bakhtin's intellectual journey, in Russia, under the shadow of Lukács, whose work and presence preceded Bakhtin's on so many fronts. At the centre of both thinkers' writing, the novel provides a grand point of comparison between the two, as well as the grounds for explaining the important differences and major shifts in their respective intellectual careers. Among the myriad of sources and influences that inform Bakhtin's thinking, Tihanov wishes to pinpoint the truly original dimensions of his evolving thought.

(iv) Greg M. Nielsen, *The Norms of Answerability: Social Theory Between Bakhtin and Habermas* (2002): The political subject is a double-faced figure in a number of ways: one side turned towards norms, the other towards creativity; one side turned toward one's own culture, the other towards other cultures. What in much social theory is portrayed as irreducible opposites (*ethnos* versus *demos*) becomes for Nielsen the starting point for a dialogic relationship. The vital aspects of particularity and universality combine dialogically in the formation of the political subject. Nielsen provides a series of comparisons involving several major social thinkers, each of whom helps understand the shortfalls and strengths of Nielsen's two major figures: Habermas and Bakhtin. In the last third of the book, arguments about *ethnos* and *demos* are brought into focus in an informed discussion of contemporary Quebec.

On the basis of these four books, and the ideas they expound, the present article reviews the following topics: (1) Political Affiliations, (2) Conceptual Hierarchies, (3) Religious Affiliations, (4) Comparative Methodologies, and (5) Chronotopic Otherness in the Everyday.

1. Political Affiliations

At one time, not so long ago, it was very tempting to describe Bakhtin as "politically incorrect." But being incorrect, it turns out, is neither an innocent nor a neutral attitude. Describing him as such cannot represent any such attitude either. "Bakhtin was not a political thinker. His concepts of dialogue and polyphony, like his concept of carnival, are free of all constraining (and defining) codes, hierarchies, one-way conversions, prohibitions, subversions that really subvert or compulsions that really compel" (E38). The differences between Ken Hirschkop's and Caryl Emerson's careful accounts of Bakhtin Studies in Russia are illuminating because they highlight the principle that being anti-political⁶ is not any less constraining than being political. These two books illustrate the hypothesis that any

6 In Emerson's book, the prefix "anti-" takes on the meaning of being irrelevant to a particular way of viewing the world. For example, being "anti-revolutionary" means that one views the world in ways that do not involve the revolution. "As a provisional answer to this complex question of Bakhtin's politics, I suggest that he be called 'antirevolutionary'. Not 'counter-', just 'anti-': a person who viewed the dynamics of the world within quite other parameters" (E70). This use of "anti-" can be compared to what she writes when she speaks,

theory — be it social theory, cultural theory, or political theory — is no more, and no less, detached from “reality” than, say, literary theory should be detached from literature.

If it is now established that Bakhtin’s “dialogism” is not a description of “real” speech *per se* but of something theoretical having to do with speech, then in a similar fashion we can say that Bakhtin’s “democracy” is not about “real” politics but about something theoretical having to do with politics. There has therefore been a basic misunderstanding underlying various readings of Bakhtin’s politics. Whereas for Hirschkop, and to a lesser degree Greg Nielsen, “politics” are *in* the very way that Bakhtin does his thinking, in Emerson’s analysis the political is often conceptualized in terms of superfluous codes, as if politics could be understood as something “avoidable” in speech and communication, as if it would someday be possible to speak without codes or without a particular code. “Bakhtin [...] had a relationship to power that was more visceral, superstitiously evasive, and metaphorical than analytical. Rather than study it, he turned away” (E48). For Emerson, Bakhtin is above all a *survivor*, and the ability to survive depends to a very large extent on the fact that “he was a dissident, a non-cooperator, an outsider who had been largely ignored by the Soviet literary establishment” (E117). Although a survivor, Bakhtin was never a victim and he did not ever see himself as such. It is important to understand the conscious choices he made during his life since, as Emerson points out, he was “an outsider by choice” (E123).

Hirschkop’s (un-hidden) polemics with Emerson revolve around the interpretation of what it means to be an outsider. For Hirschkop, we cannot continue to conceive of dialogism as something from “out of this world,” as Baudelaire would say, for this would be to argue for a concept that depends on the “reflected image of the self-understanding of American liberalism” (H9). A nuanced understanding of dialogism involves a careful consideration of “the historical forms which discourse assumes” (H10); it necessitates concrete utterances and concrete works of art. Art and politics therefore belong together as they reinforce one another as vital parts of democracy (H77). Bakhtin’s critics need to uncover the political dimension of his writing not so much in what he explicitly says but in the ways his thinking is structured from the inside.

Nielsen and Hirschkop talk different theoretical languages when they talk about these politics. Hirschkop analyzes the hidden logic of Bakhtin’s positions in relation to those issues of political theory that are part of the Russian thinker’s core — in his analysis, Hirschkop constantly points out the holes, the omissions, and weaknesses of what Bakhtin says, while at the same time bringing out the political thrust of the ideas expressed about culture. Hirschkop underlines certain inherent paradoxes in Bakhtin’s approach — the fact that the latter remains resolutely detached from public politics and yet his writing presupposes a very definite notion of politics. Nielsen, on the other hand, wants to stress the notion of the “creative act,” replete “with fragmentary cognitive and ethical dimensions” of

for example, of the “profoundly anti-Marxist conclusion” of the Dostoevsky book (E104).

the individual subject. The act comes into contact, via the “loophole,” with larger wholes (N17). He takes a comparative approach to Bakhtin’s political thinking by attempting to understand Bakhtin’s notion of the political subject *through* other writers, for the most part unknown to Bakhtin, who have studied certain key aspects of human intersubjectivity. Thus Nielsen’s approach is “external” in its analysis of Bakhtin’s ideas when compared with the “internal” analysis of Bakhtin’s logic proposed by Hirschkop.

Both Nielsen and Hirschkop point out core contradictions. In Nielsen, however, the uncovering of internal contradictions does not lead to suggestions for improvements and repairs but rather becomes a springboard to a new understanding of Bakhtin’s central concepts. Crucial to everything Bakhtin says and does in the realm of ethical thinking, the basis for his discussions of social theory is provided by the epistemological problem of how to pass from the general to the particular. The problem is already thorny enough when posited in terms of interpersonal relationships: it becomes even more complicated when there is an intercultural dimension involved (N42). Nielsen is interested in finding the “transcultural source of Bakhtin’s philosophy of answerability” (N43): people from other cultures both remind us of what we already know and provide us with an opportunity for learning something new. The situation of contact with other cultures forces us to look, something Bakhtin failed to do, at issues of finding a common language between interlocutors with divergent cultural horizons. What are the ethical issues involved? What are the creative possibilities involved? What are the languages of power implied here?

For Nielsen, Bakhtin has a distinctive way of understanding (applying) Socrates’ dictum about the importance of knowing oneself. He understands that “humans (wherever they are) must overcome all kinds of diversity and relativity in order to become themselves” (N44). In Bakhtin, there is a crucial “recognition of the many — of diversity, and by way of extension the struggles for this recognition”; there is also the realization that this very recognition “also precedes the recognition of the singular unity of the world” (N44). Nielsen often uses the notion of “two-sidedness,” what Bakhtin often calls the Janus-like face of human existence: “Two-sided answerability is required to join the individual and the collective or life and culture” (N44). In this context, “the dialogism within and between cultural communities needs to be theorized both on a micro lifeworld level of *ethnos* as well as on the macro level of the political community or *demos*” (N68).

For Habermas, certain contradictions of social theory are resolved by positing the existence of more or less separate spheres of action and knowledge, the most important ones being the “practical,” the “aesthetic,” and the “scientific.” The German philosopher wants us to respect more or less strict boundaries between the utterance produced in an aesthetic context and that produced in a everyday-life context. “Unlike Bakhtin, Habermas argues that everyday utterances of speech lose their force when they enter a literary universe” (N86). However, for Bakhtin, part of the difficulty of active understanding derives from the fact that the various dimensions of social life are not separated from one another, but rather are brought into constant and more or less direct dialogical contact. The “utterance” therefore takes on very different hues, depending on whether we consider it from a Bakhtinian or a

Habermasian perspective. Nielsen aptly develops Bakhtin's combined approach in relation to the "act": here he sees a clear "need to reunite the aesthetic (the shaping of meaning in action) and the ethical (a cognitive element of the act itself) in explanations of the act as a unified event" (N36). In short, to be effective, the act must have an aesthetic dimension. However, there is a fundamental contradiction in Bakhtin between the drive toward finalization contained in the aesthetic dimension and the absence of final consensus advocated at many moments of his thought: "This is where the most fruitful difference lies with Habermas" (N47). "Put most succinctly, Habermas defines identity and intersubjectivity in terms of the simultaneous processes of socialization and individuation. Only conventional ethical subjects that have first learned to reason on behalf of the other can hope to attain such postconventional universals" (N55).

Given the complexities of these issues, how is it possible, with any real precision, to get at the political dimension of Bakhtin's thinking, especially considering that he does not write very much, if anything, explicitly about politics? Emerson points to the hard fact that he once contemplated writing an essay about politics and — significantly — never completed the task. Indeed, a number of Bakhtinians deny any political nature whatsoever in Bakhtin's thinking, exhorting us, as does Emerson, not to "conflate the ethical with the political" (E22). Faced with such a situation, it would seem that Hirschkop and Nielsen have an uphill battle to wage. They are not the last to recognize the daunting challenge: "Although Bakhtin remained apolitical throughout his career it could be argued that his approach is compatible with a particular version of politics" (N140). The problem is even more acute for Hirschkop who wishes to uncover a particular "democratic" dimension in this hidden political thinking. Thus it no longer suffices to do archeological digging through all the printed and unprinted texts, feverishly looking for yet another use of the words "politics" and "democracy." This is because democracy is "not merely the free expression of beliefs or commitments, but the question of the very form that these beliefs and commits assume" (H203). Construed in this manner, the "political" is found both explicitly and implicitly in most of what Bakhtin says about discourse, art, and everyday life. It is a matter of seeing how ideas, foundational for "democracy" *per se*, make his theory tick. It involves seeing the shape they take *in* his thinking: "Democracy is therefore not merely the free expression of beliefs or commitments, but the question of the very form these beliefs and commitments assume" (H203); "Democracy may have to be more than politics in the strict sense to succeed as politics in the strict sense" (H275); it leads to an understanding of a fundamental possibility in life: the possibility of failure within the intersubjective community, something which "means not only making decisions, but having the authority to take part in the particular decisions that shape a historical form of life" (H241).

Whatever this is, it is certainly *not* Weber's notion of responsibility, as Hirschkop points out, because for Weber the reward of being recognized as an authorized actor in society plays a prominent role in a subject's life-decisions. Hirschkop usefully develops a notion of narrative that places a person in a larger picture than immediate existence: narrative gives meaning to the subject, for his or her decisions in the future rather than for the

past. Indeed this is the very “essence” of Bakhtin’s novel according to Hirschkop. Bakhtin realizes that “historical movement is ‘chronotopic’ rather than a matter of pure personalities, maintaining the spontaneity of an unconsummated present becomes a rather more complicated affair” (H248); it is no longer a question of pure voice because a specific ingredient was necessary which was “bodily enough to carry the burden of historical becoming” (H252). Especially the notion of genre must be historicized, taking into account the material conditions of production in which genres typically arise. “For the difference between a newspaper and a shout in the street is not a difference in point of view, and it takes some doing to make it appear that way” (H259). This point of view is markedly different than Emerson’s for whom “*power*— whether understood as prerogatives embedded in an institution, in official rank, or as rights won and then concentrated in a besieged self— has little to do with knowledge, freedom, literary insight, and spiritual growth” (E24). Further, “genuine knowledge and enablement can begin only when my ‘I’ consults another ‘I’ and then returns to its own place, humbled and enhanced. In its curiosity and charity, this model is immensely attractive as a counterweight to some of the shrill excesses of cultural politics familiar in the West” (E26).

2. Conceptual Hierarchies

To stress the importance of “whole and parts,” Hirschkop quotes a passage from the personal notes Bakhtin wrote as he prepared the printed version of *Rabelais and His Word*: “the ultimate protest of individuality (bodily and spiritual) yearning for immortality, against change and absolute renewal, the protest of the part against dissolution in the whole” (H277). This dialectic⁷ exchange surfaces not only for Bakhtin in his work on the carnival, but also in the early texts as well, where he saw the “aesthetic as the form in which the ethical relation between subjects is consummated, and examines how a part is meaningfully shaped into a whole” (N28). This view can be summarized in saying that, by “positing the animated existence of another I, Bakhtin addresses the larger question of the ‘consummation’ between parts and the whole in the experience of the action itself” (N102).

The dialectic relationships between the general and the particular, and between the whole and the part, are highly prominent in Bakhtin’s overall thinking. At all times, we ask whether his general notions are really “general” or just peculiar outgrowths of particular situations. How do the general and the particular fit together? How does the particular part fit into larger wholes? When Galin Tihanov proposes to retrace the twists and turns of Bakhtin’s intellectual development, this series of question is cast within a similar mould: the unity of Bakhtin’s overall project is visible not in the sense of a system “where each particular bit should match the rest, but rather in the sense of a flowing continuum underlain by stable (but not fixed) philosophical assumptions” (T102). If this is unity, it is a

7 On the use of the word “dialectic,” I refer to Michael Gardiner, “‘A Very Understandable and Marxist Phenomenology’” (2000b).

peculiar kind of unity. Nielsen proposes to formulate the concept of “unity,” as applicable to Bakhtin, according to Habermas’ “postmetaphysical” thinking, which “understands unity as being constructed from diversity rather than the reverse” (N50). “Unity exists in the answerable act” and as such is “unique and unrepeatable” (N50).

For ethics, the classical problem of wholes and parts is construable in terms of how a general principle can be applied to a particular (individual) situation. In this arena, Nielsen sees the young Bakhtin under the spell of Simmel’s thinking. The problem of knowing how wholes and parts fit together thereby takes on a peculiar twist. Simmel reflects: “if the general law means the agent can give a universal value to action and yet the action can only be carried out by the agent’s own definition, then law is no longer general but only particular to that agent’s case. Thus, each specific case would have to include the formulation of a new law that would only ever be valid for a singular case” (N98). Nielsen asserts that it “is especially Simmel’s moral philosophy that is at the heart of Bakhtin’s philosophy of the answerable deed” (N99). Unlike Kant’s moral imperative, which calls for abstract equality between social agents, Simmel and Bakhtin stress “the differentiation of individuals” (N101).

A consensus is emerging about the shape of Bakhtin’s overall intellectual career: it seems best not to speak of parts subservient to a unified whole, nor about a clearly defined teleology. What is at stake is a constant rewriting of unsolvable problems. Bakhtin’s oeuvre is thus made of recurring and mutating parts. “But in truth what has been left to us is not a complete work but a trail of fragments, each marking a slight change of tack in Bakhtin’s voyage through the 1920s” (H149). In Nielsen’s book, we see the early Bakhtin not as someone who is putting things into a place for an entire philosophical programme, one that, slowly but surely, will be executed by the progressively aging Bakhtin. Already in the early Bakhtin, he sees a series of significant conceptual shifts. The critic’s role consists in providing the unseen motives for these shifts (N107). “As he shifts from ethics to aesthetics to a philosophy of dialogue, Bakhtin regularly substitutes new concepts for previous ones in an effort to pose the same questions in different disciplines” (N204). We will return to this idea of several disciplines.

Recent criticism has had much to say about Bakhtin’s neo-Kantianism, while it has very little to say about his no-less-obvious phenomenology (H65). This may be part of a larger tendency to cast Bakhtin in such a way as to downplay sociology as “a vulgar excrescence on the Bakhtinian corpus” (H91). Those convinced of a unified intellectual career often dwell on Bakhtin’s neo-Kantian roots. Indeed, it would seem that the attempt to extoll the virtues of his neo-Kantianism goes hand in hand with the idea that “all sociology is a shell and cannot be otherwise” (H133). In this view, the goal of Bakhtin criticism must be to understand “the true nature of things”, and this is, in Bakhtin’s case, “hidden, of course, from the social sciences” (H133), of which phenomenology is just one nasty little part. In this ongoing debate, there is merit to the idea of re-examining the scope and context of Bakhtin’s rather late linguistic turn, which is often considered as the moment when Bakhtin “breaks with” Kant, the moment when the identification between the ethical and linguistic takes shape (H198). An idea present in Max Scheler — i.e. our desire is guided by our preferences for certain values — is cast by Bakhtin in linguistic terms.

The jury is still out, however, as to whether Bakhtin ever really “breaks” with Kantian philosophy. After all, his “neo-Kantianism” was never really pure Kant in the first place but rather Kant *as read by* Georg Simmel and Max Scheler, amongst others. To this extent, his Kant would have been phenomenological from the very beginning. Brian Poole has argued that the phenomenologist Max Scheler was a major source for the young Bakhtin’s understanding of ethical questions, more so, one might surmise, than Kant himself. Nielsen makes a similar case, saying that Bakhtin’s Kantianism is really inspired by Simmel’s social theory. The linguistic turn, which many critics once placed in the 1930s could indeed be seen to have occurred much earlier, in the very way the young Bakhtin used neo-Kantian ideas during the 1920s.

The ways in which Bakhtin’s readers see (or do not see) a break with Kant is indeed related to the relative emphasis they place on certain parts of his work. Their emphasis is directly related to the question of whether or not they believe Bakhtin’s linguistic turn should be seen as something profound. “Those who would present Bakhtin as a moral philosopher regard language as a mere medium for relationships, the essential qualities of which are defined elsewhere. For them the linguistic turn of the 1920s does not affect the core of this ethical position” (H204). Since linguistic theory addresses only superficial issues, it does not affect the “true” core. “By contrast, semioticians (Ivanov serves as a good example) see it as an essential scientific manoeuvre, without which Bakhtin might have languished in the empty wilderness of ontology” (H204). This deep difference in interpretation begs the question of whether “ethics without language” or “language without ethics” is even conceivable.

Part of the problem concerns a simplifying desire to view Bakhtin’s developing thought as *either* absolutely continuous or absolutely discontinuous. Let us start from the position that the “linguistic turn” provides the moment when Bakhtin’s thinking about the eventful and ethical dimension of human existence shifts from a view based on the aesthetic dimension to one which stresses the dialogic dimension (H208). Does this necessarily mean that he has broken absolutely with his philosophical past? Rather than a clean break, the more likely scenario would indicate that Bakhtin’s dialogism inherits a certain aestheticism from his previous work. “The position I want to defend is that the linguistic turn in his existential-phenomenology, along with the reorientation of the original sociological concepts this entailed, is an attempt to advance his earlier attempt to deepen his ethics and aesthetics of ‘a philosophy of the answerable act’” (N72). It is increasingly clear that very different philosophical options co-habit Bakhtin’s thinking at the same time. For example, we have two accounts of language that accompany two accounts of dialogism: one stresses the participant, the other the author-hero. Thus it is no surprise that strange relationships develop between Bakhtin’s major concepts over time. Bakhtin is obviously prone to thinking along more than one line at a time — even concerning the same notions. A case in point is his thinking on the body and the chronotope, concepts he developed in very different ways — and at the very same time — according to whether he was working on Rabelais or Goethe. “Thus we can see Bakhtin’s readings of Goethe and Rabelais as transmitting, with equal ardour, the opposing values of modern individualism and pre-modern collectivism” (T289). “Bakhtin’s *Rabelais* emerges from our analysis

as the battleground of two divergent approaches that are hard to reconcile" (T290). How one interprets the difficult relationships between these competing philosophical lines of thinking is of course another matter.

3. Religious affiliations

Hirschkop and Emerson repeatedly come to this fundamental dimension of Bakhtin's thought and they do so with remarkably similar observations and conclusions. Both see religious sources for many of Bakhtin's key concepts and both see these concepts functioning in a secular way. "Even unofficially, if measured against intuitivist or Orthodox notions of 'communality,' Bakhtin's ideal of ever abiding uncertainty and outsideness seemed strange and daringly short on faith" (E62). "Bakhtin may have secularized his project without realizing it" (H67). Emerson sums up the situation that Hirschkop analyses in detail: "From this we might conclude that Bakhtin appreciated truth and religious faith in his own somewhat secular, thoroughly dialogized way" (E158).

Religious discourse gives an experience of uniqueness, but here "uniqueness is not a property of the individual discovered by discourse, but an attribute of the individual created by the right kind of intersubjectivity." This is why "one experiences the address of religious discourse as unique, because it is in the nature of such discourse to address respondents as unique, irreplaceable, and therefore responsible persons" (H211). Bakhtin's basic model sees "the religious form of intersubjectivity as, in effect, the origin of all others" (H241). The shape of this particular model has important theoretical consequences we should not neglect. For dialogic communication, "the privileging of a Christian form of religious intersubjectivity condemns to second rank every kind of response which entails an act of judgement rather than mercy" (H241); it blinds Bakhtin to the historical variability of intersubjectivity itself. There can be no doubt that, while the base is religious, the playing out of the details is not. According to Emerson, the "I-Thou relation that Bakhtin endorses [. . .] does not prepare us for eternal salvation" (E232). Even in the notions of the superaddressee, and the Third, which several commentators have attempted to attach directly to a Christian-Orthodox God, it must be understood that "God is a *possibility* in this relation, but not a necessity" (E232). Emerson concludes that we should consider "more circumspectly the whole question of Bakhtin's allegiance to an anthropocentric or theistic view of humanity. Is Bakhtin a 'secular thinker' as opposed to a religious one, as Gurevich asks? More probably, Bakhtin is trying to break down this binary opposition as well" (E232).

Although both critics return to this position several times in their respective studies, Hirschkop's book provides considerable more detail than Emerson's. He develops an original analysis of the ideas of redemption and revelation. He begins with the premise that Bakhtin's early thinking is informed by a primarily Christian phenomenology (H82) and here the notion of revelation is intricately linked to his notion of responsibility. However, over time, Bakhtin's overall philosophical projects evolve significantly: the religious elements at their core gradually become extraneous, if not contradictory, in relation to the general thrust that his thinking takes on. It is almost as

though his thinking unwittingly outgrew the basis from which it began, almost as though for Bakhtin philosophizing and religious beliefs could never be exactly the same thing. In general, the philosophical principles that Bakhtin deduces from his religious beliefs begin to reveal severe contradictions, as in the case of his thinking on the notion of dialogic discourse as something different from the situation of the believer in the face of the revealed word: “there was always a danger that discourse would reveal a moral universe different from the one demanded by Christ’s presence. There is every reason to believe that Bakhtin shifted his perspective, convinced that the intersubjectivity he would uncover would retain its religious bearings, and that matters simply got out of hand” (H198). The notion of discourse that Bakhtin develops over time thus brings him to propositions that go well beyond the religious discursive situation between God and creature. “[T]he novel of becoming had to acknowledge not only those values handed down to it by Kantian philosophy and Christian ethics, but also those maintained or established by no more than the force of actual intersubjective agreement and practice” (H247). An example here can be adduced with the way the religious concept of revelation functions implicitly in his thinking. Obviously, Christian revelation entails the obligation, on the part of the believer, to “respond.” There is an obvious link with Bakhtin’s thinking on the non-alibi of existence. We simply *have* to respond. The place revelation takes up in Bakhtin’s full-blown ethical scheme, however, implies positions that are not part of the original Christian concept itself.

We have to be careful, while reading Bakhtin, not to confuse his thinking on ethics with religious thinking. Nielsen sees theological issues as a major philosophical source for much of Bakhtin’s thinking in the realm of ethics. “This is a founding question of monotheism: what to do with foreigners who do not believe in the one God? In fact the problem of the foreigner is a key political problem for all societies” (N103). Hermann Cohen, one of Bakhtin’s major intellectual sources, argues that “monotheism, specifically Judaism, gave rise both to the humanist concepts of man-as-all-mankind and man-as-individual. But monotheism had to solve the problem of how to deal with the other who would not share the beliefs and customs of the one religion” (N104). Nielsen shows here that what could be seen to have religious roots functions theoretically in significantly different ways. Take, as another example, what has been described as the Messianic element of Bakhtin’s carnival. Carnival, it can be said, is what saves us from the numbing effects of mundane existence. In this thinking, religious faith is replaced by a belief in the power of laughter: “Bakhtin uses laughter as an equivalent of faith: the moment when one laughs is the moment when one gives up the immediate in favour of the work of history, and it is not at all an accident that even in Bakhtin’s work this moment inhabits a separate place, with separate rules, and separate times” (H292). It is clear, at the same time, that we should not go too far in pursuing such a religious base in Bakhtin’s carnival work, for the obvious reason that the Rabelais book is anything but religious: the carnival requires us to be careful with the ideas of faith and redemption. This being said, redemption can also be seen as part of the normal experience of being thrust forward into the future. It is part of the ideal movement toward the absolutely just understanding of an ideal superaddressee, something “which, of course, never actually arrives” (H237-38).

We see how elements that could arguably be seen as inspired by religious principles eventually evolve into something quite different from what they once were. From the last quotation we notice an obvious connection with Christian eschatology. At the same time, we must remember that, contrary to Bakhtin's early thinking, the notion of dialogism takes on an element of openness, what Hirschkop refers to as an "apparently unchristian belief in the virtues of permanent conflict" (H262). Hirschkop further points out Bakhtin's growing desire to avoid a devaluation of "the ethical substance of the present" (H237). He imagines a dialogic world in which there is still faith, but one of "a different kind": "that the forward movement of history has to be grounded in an unredeemable anticipation of redemption" (H237). This is no doubt one of the reasons Emerson encourages caution in relation to the notion of redemption: she guards us against the temptation to see it in the context of a permanent (religious) community that would await the individual, invite him/her inside, thus robbing him/her of all individuality. "Just as there is not originary sin in Bakhtin's scenarios (again we should note his overall indifference to origins), so is there no unconditional redemption; no community of believers stands ready to invite an individual inside once and for all or to promise absolution to the repentant" (E230). For her, redemption presupposes "absorption into the whole," something which is anathema to Bakhtin's survivor-image. If Bakhtin survives, it is first and foremost because he is a strong individual. Emerson comments on Brian Poole's work, especially what he says about the influence exerted on Bakhtin by the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism. Marburg is seen as part of a "secular, de-theorized understanding of interhuman communion that requires neither absorption into a whole nor the 'survival'/ resurrection of the individual" (E231).

Although Emerson, Nielsen and Hirschkop all agree on a number of crucial points concerning Bakhtin's secular use of religious motifs and concepts, where Emerson and Hirschkop differ is how this secularization relates to political concepts. For Emerson, his lack of personal commitment to a particular (social) cause — be it religious or political⁸ — is really one and the same package, all part of Bakhtin's keeping a survivor's distance from overly compromising life-decisions. This all guarantees that his philosophical thinking remains of an entirely different nature than projects that seek to "apply" ideas. She shows scepticism towards the theme "Bakhtin and the Divine" (E18) when she points to a certain fashion, in Russian-language criticism, which seeks to mine "once dissident, now redeemed Russian thinkers for Christian subtexts" (E18). In the end, the problem is that this type of analysis tries to pin-down the bountiful potential of Bakhtin's thinking, "applying" it in ways that are not entirely appropriate. Thus, Emerson would subscribe to the idea that "Bakhtin's thought is misused when read as a theological or political commentary" (E171). The particular content of the application is not what counts, it is simply the attempt to "apply."

8 One should be careful, however, in making such broad equivalencies in the things one rejects or in the reasons one gives for rejection, as for example the broad-stroke lumping together, pointed out by Emerson, in Mikhail Epstein's work, between communism and postmodernism (E194).

Emerson's significant theoretical move, between 1990 and 1997, from a rather anti-carnival perspective to a much more balanced evaluation of carnival, fits in with this new line of thinking. She culls, for example, from Grigory Pomerants' comments on the carnival: "The essence of the holiday is liberation from the practical [*delovoi*] orientation of the mind, liberation from the dismemberment of the world into north and south, big and small, past and future; it is an experience of the world as unity, as an 'eternal present'" (E177).

Hirschkop proposes an entirely different relationship between the religious subtexts of Bakhtin's writing and the possible political lessons that can be drawn. For Hirschkop, Bakhtin's religious ideas are rethought and rejigged to the extent that they become *part* of the political thinking underlying his overall concept of culture. In the final analysis, Bakhtin's later thinking takes on elements that are altogether different from any possible religious sub-text. For Emerson, on the other hand, the role of carnival is determined by its relationship with form and Bakhtin's "paradoxical attitude toward revolution (positive and 'permanent' during carnival, negative and oppressive in prosaic reality)," something that helps in turn to understand "Bakhtin's paradoxical relationship to form [...] at the center of all that confounds us in his theory of art" (E242). This is all part of Emerson's way of bringing out the importance of the notion of "loophole." We need finalization "as a loophole out of everyday and shapeless life — almost as for Bakhtin carnival and the polyphonic word, by wholly different routes, can be a loophole" (E243).

What at first glance appeared to form a solid consensus, now appears, through the power of comparisons, to contain significant differences. It is perhaps time to move to a discussion of comparison as a method of reading Bakhtin.

4. Comparative Methodologies

Questions of "methodology" have always been important for Bakhtinians (see Clive Thomson 1984). Increasingly, the central concern for Bakhtinians today is not so much the methodologies Bakhtin himself uses in his work but rather the methodologies we use for reading him. We must think carefully about the methods we use to read Bakhtin and we must be willing to compare these to others' methods. In this essay, I am reading Bakhtin "through" others, never quoting directly from the Russian thinker himself, and letting four authors come together in what they say about a "common" subject of reference.

The methods of all four books are based on explicit and implicit comparisons. Nielsen proposes a sociologists' introduction to Bakhtin Studies and this he does by comparisons. The latter are explored not just in relation to some of Bakhtin's possible sources (such as Simmel) or to some of Bakhtin's contemporaries or imputed mentors (Cohen, Vvedensky), but especially to a number late twentieth-century social theorists whom Bakhtin could never have known: "As the book progresses I introduce Bakhtin further into a dialogue with social theory in order to allow a response to the challenge of joining the self-other level of action and general political levels into a unified approach"

(N20). There is a conscious application of Bakhtin's well-known phrase, from *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, about the principle that two discourses, which have the same referent, must necessarily enter into a dialogic relationship of some sort with one another. This coming-together has heuristic effects: "The point of converging two theories should be to mutually reinforce them. The key to such an exercise is to point out the weaknesses of the one and to reinforce it with the strengths of the other" (N65). Nielsen thus proposes to study the "creative act" using the Bakhtin's concept of dialogism and Habermas' discourse ethics: "The concept of dialogism helps refocus questions onto the lived relations of transculturalism while discourse ethics points to a series of normative questions that must be considered. The question of how we should act toward others needs to be theorized from both angles" (N65).

Both Nielsen's and Hirschkop's book contain multiple comparisons with ideas expounded by Habermas. Yet their comparative methodologies are significantly different. A case in point is their respective treatment of Caryl Emerson's work: in Hirschkop's book, Emerson's notion of the individual comes under heavy fire as being utterly inadequate for understanding the essential democratic principles of Bakhtin's thinking (although the tone of these criticisms is much less strident than in Brandist 1999); in Nielsen's work, Emerson is quoted approvingly on several occasions, and she writes an incisive afterword for his book.

One might be tempted to conclude that Hirschkop and Nielsen are not dealing with the same "Bakhtin" at all. While Nielsen is mainly interested in the young Bakhtin for his analysis, Hirschkop deftly moves through the entire Bakhtinian corpus, pointing out shifts, contradictions, and needed improvements as he goes. Their methodologies of comparisons show that no comparative method in the Human Sciences is ever neutral. It always depends on the purposes for which the comparisons are being done. Hirschkop's book *on Bakhtin* pleads for a better understanding of his evolving thinking. Nielsen "uses" Bakhtin, especially the young Bakhtin, for the specific task of highlighting the creative side of social behaviour and interaction in a transcultural setting.

Galina Tihanov's methodology of comparison has different aims in mind. In relation to Lukács, Bakhtin is placed under the sway of a Bloomian "anxiety of influence": Tihanov "reconstructs Bakhtin's efforts to emancipate himself from Lukács's often officially championed thought and to respond to it in a fashion that brings to the fore the originality of his own ideas despite the inclemency of the social climate and his personal life. But Lukács' voice, however successfully opposed by the force of argument, was not processed out of Bakhtin's mind" (T15). A number of comparisons involve a certain pathos, especially when the question of sources arises.⁹

9 The notion of "sources" has become extremely complicated ever since Brian Poole and others have shown the Bakhtin Circle's penchant for "pilfering" important concepts without giving them due recognition. It is thus tempting to "psychologize" Bakhtin by looking for deeply personal reasons for this behaviour. This is, I believe, Tihanov's stance. Greg Nielsen's stance is more "pragmatic" in relation to questions of plagiarism: he mentions the problem while explaining his decision to cast Simmel as a major source of Bakhtin's personal reading of Kant. On the idea of "pragmatic plagiarism," see Marilyn Randall.

The question of Bakhtin's sources is sometimes placed at the centre of his truth. The problem is that it is hardly possible to determine what is original in Bakhtin's arguments and what is surreptitiously borrowed. Further, many of Bakhtin's sources come to him second- or third-hand. Such is the case of the German-Jewish base of the I-Thou relationship: "It reached Bakhtin in provincial Nevel and later in Petrograd through his close friend Matvei Kagan, who repatriated to revolutionary Russia in 1918" (E225). Despite much borrowing, many readers wish to affirm Bakhtin's originality and independence of thought as two of his supreme virtues. Yet one can ask whether it ultimately matters, for the internal dynamics of Bakhtin's thought, whether such and such an idea was borrowed or new. When we have established that a given passage is taken from a given writer, do we thereby understand Bakhtin's writings better than we did before? We harbour doubts about the oftentimes ingenious sleuthing about that is needed to do this type of work: is there any correspondence between this particular methodology and Bakhtin's own methods? After all, as Tihanov points out, Bakhtin often gives us the impression "that he favours complex intuitions over verifiable statements" (T151). The question thereby becomes: are Bakhtin's own methods not suitable for reading his own work? In this "ère du soupçon" (Nathalie Sarraute), we sometimes distrust the rhetoric of "source production." We are dismayed by the egregious example of misuse given by Emerson: the nationalist Vadim Kozhinov's attempt to prove that the ultimate source of Bakhtin's "dialogism" was not, as everyone had always thought, the German-Jewish neo-Kantian thinker Hermann Cohen, "but rather the fifteenth-Century Transvolga hermit and mystic, Saint Nil Sorsky" (E54).

Of the four studies under review, Galin Tihanov's is the one that is most involved in tracing sources, in his case the intellectual roots of Bakhtin's theory of the novel. He sees Bakhtin's originality in terms of how he puts the conceptual bits and pieces at his disposal into new and innovative configurations. As his methodology involves a careful comparison between Bakhtin and Lukács, we must be aware that the "contact between Bakhtin and Lukács went in one direction only" (T14). Tihanov stresses a number of issues the two thinkers had inherited in common as he sketches a number of similar transformations both underwent during their respective careers. "Indeed, both Lukács's and Bakhtin's early careers end with the abandonment of their attempts at a systematic philosophy of art (which remained unfinished in both Lukács's and Bakhtin's cases) in favour of an interest in the social aspects of literature" (T19). Both Lukács and Bakhtin were "disciples" of Simmel, both felt the sway of his philosophy-of-life along with Bergson, both were influenced by Nietzsche and Dilthey, both were avid readers of Goethe, Schiller and Schlegel, etc.

Interesting questions arise as to the status of "common sources." Assuming that Simmel constitutes a common source for both Bakhtin and Lukács, which "Simmel" is it that each of them reads? I mention Simmel because the parts of "Simmel" that are discussed by all four books do not appear to be the same "Simmels" at all. For Tihanov and Nielsen, Simmel is a central but hitherto neglected source of much of Bakhtin's early thinking: Tihanov's "Simmel" is a philosophy-of-life theoretician who uses the neo-Kantian problematics of civilization and

culture in innovative ways; Nielsen's "Simmel" is a reader of Kant with a particular twist on issues of how wholes and parts fit together in a theory of society. On the other hand, Hirschkop and Emerson mention Simmel rather casually, three times each. A cursory comparison of the texts and passages, taken from Simmel, and which Tihanov and Nielsen see as pivotal, reveals different sources of inspiration. For Tihanov, once again, Simmel's thinking shapes Bakhtin's oft-cited notion of cultural boundaries, he teaches Bakhtin to respect the inherent contradictions between life and art, he helps us reread Hegel's notions of self-development, he is important for both Bakhtin and Voloshinov alike. For Nielsen, Simmel is one of those unacknowledged sources of Bakhtin's writing we must now take into account; he is instrumental in a rethinking of Kant's categorical imperative and in recasting the need to surpass abstract notions of the subject in ethical theories of human action; he is instrumental to an adequate understanding of Bakhtin's notions of individuality and subjectivity.

The issue of sources inevitably leads to Bakhtin's footnotes, many of which were expurgated from his published works. And then there is the matter of oblique references, of unacknowledged quotations, indirect references. In the new *Collected Works*, there arises the question of whether or not to let references to Marx and Engels stand. Hirschkop's book makes for exciting reading when he discusses this particular issue. But is there in the end a fundamental difference between acknowledged and unacknowledged sources? Hirschkop appropriately asks whether certain texts should have a superior status in the Bakhtin archive because of the fact that they were published during his lifetime; he asks whether all Bakhtin's texts — whether notebooks, notes, jottings, published books or articles — should be considered as equal parts of the "Bakhtin" we wish to decipher. In the end, he opts to consider all texts as virtually equal. But then he must deal with the difficulties such a position entails: what do we do with oral sources, is there no difference between a formally printed word and a hand-written word? While "from the standpoint of formal linguistics, the structure of language present in oral speech, in print, and in the electronic media is identical," "from an intersubjective perspective, differences in the medium of expression cannot be neutral" (H19).

And then there is the status of the archive itself as the ultimate and indeed ultimately unknowable source of "truth." Whenever there is an ambiguity in one of the published manuscripts, whenever we are in doubt as to the precise meaning of such and such a passage, it suffices to find some relevant, previously undiscovered note in the archive to relieve our anxieties. If only things were as easy as that. The archive is actually more a source of mystery than a source of ultimate answers. As already indicated, many of us have become leery of the practice, used to prove a point, "of selectively deploying the writings of Bakhtin and his circle, culled from archives available only to [...] select disciples" (E44).¹⁰ A new term or idea is found and it suddenly becomes the heart and soul of everything Bakhtin ever said and did.

10 This being said, English-speaking Bakhtinians should be careful in the way that they quote Bakhtin in English, often "modifying," "loosening," "adjusting" the published translations in order to bolster the particular points they wish to make.

The post-Soviet “Bakhtin” has become one for whom it is now admissible to see some hitherto “unacceptable” sources. We can now re-evaluate references to Marx and Lenin; unacknowledged sources are now in the open, Lukács being a case in point. Bakhtin’s relationship to Hegelian philosophy presents an interesting example in this arena. While certain readers still regret Bakhtin’s moments of “Hegelian weakness” (H252), Tihanov’s study is brilliant in showing important unacknowledged Hegelian subtexts. He also shows the way in which Hegel arrives in Bakhtin’s head along a number of meandering routes. First, Simmel helps Bakhtin rewrite Hegel’s concepts in “the neo-Kantian direction of collision between culture and civilization” (T67). We witness the individual’s creative potential within historical developments, such as the evolution of a genre. At the same time, Bakhtin’s Hegel (as does Bakhtin’s Simmel) sometimes creates inner contradictions: in the contrasts between the forces of organic growth and creation (Simmel), in the implicit logic of a genre theory that needs creative individuals but where discursive forces blindly obey impersonal or even secret laws.

Tihanov usefully debunks a number of philosophical binaries: Bakhtin is *either* Hegelian *or* neo-Kantian, *either* Marxist *or* neo-Kantian, etc. This is because Tihanov’s Bakhtin cogently incarnates more than one philosophical tendency *at the same time*. “The sociological trend in the work of the Bakhtin Circle in the late 1920s, which developed in an intensive affiliation and critical dialogue with Marxism, did not cancel out the neo-Kantian ground of Bakhtin’s philosophizing” (T103). While Tihanov sees Bakhtin’s notion of becoming as something ultimately Hegelian, he also notices that it has something “new in that it frustrates the Hegelian assurance of final peace after reaching the goal” (T145). And while he shows that Bakhtin’s “way” of thinking is often Hegelian in nature, it is surely not “only” Hegelian. For example, the chronotope of everyday modernity is one of transformation and crisis: “Thus Bakhtin appears to reconcile organically the neo-Kantian value marked concept of the chronotope with a Hegelian phenomenology of progressive awareness of time” (T158). The essential thing is to preserve the multiplicity of sources at the heart of Bakhtin’s thought.

When Nielsen introduces the “young Bakhtin’s ideas on an ethics and aesthetics of action into a dialogue with classical and contemporary social theory” (N1), he does so by linking “Bakhtin’s aesthetically informed transcultural ethics to a theory of the interpersonal and intersubjective basis of a community.” Nielsen too wants to preserve multiplicity in Bakhtin since he refuses to engage in a “formal separation of the cultural sources of ethics from the emerging constellation of contemporary postnational politics” (N1). Rather than multiplicity *per se*, however, Nielsen stresses, more often than not, “the importance of interdisciplinary studies for balancing a concept of creativity with the normative approach” (N3). In Nielsen we have a useful discussion of the tensions between sociological theory based on the purview of the individual political subject versus sociological theory based primarily on notions of the social group. He clearly shows that “general sociological theory needs the political and ideological tension generated by interdisciplinary studies. Only a general sociological theory claims a comprehensive analysis of both micro and macro levels” (N13). The distinction between macro and micro levels of analysis turns into an examination of the

energy released when individual action and overarching structure are combined in a single analytical gesture. The distinction brings in the tension between knowledge derived from a general point of view and that derived from an aesthetic point of view geared towards the individual. In the discipline of sociology, the differences between general sociological theory and empirical research are brought together: “The assumption of this book is that Bakhtin’s nonpositivist and nonempiricist philosophy can be fruitfully read alongside sociology as a source that can provide a rich opening to a dialogical research program that privileges the creative and normative dimension of action”

(N16). Here the “creative” dimension of action must be seen not as something corollary but as “the most important basis of social action” (N15).

Nielsen’s comparisons often involve, as we have just seen, the differences of method between competing disciplinary points of view. Comparison is also at the core of Tihanov’s endeavour, but what he compares involves two other basic types: (1) comparing Bakhtin and Lukács, and (2) comparing Bakhtin to Bakhtin. Of the latter type, the most prominent is a comparison of the two Dostoevsky books, something done on the basis of an analysis of their respective styles and contents. In his careful reading, he notes the disappearance of the “social,” which he deduces from the erasure of sociological vocabulary, most notably the word “sociological.” This disappearance is read as the indication of a profound change of position for Bahtin between 1929 and 1963. “Through a close reading of Bakhtin’s Dostoevsky texts I shall demonstrate that the sociological approach gradually fades and gives room to the phenomenological and metagenic approaches” (T187). The conclusion he draws is surprising. These are thus “two essentially different books rather than versions of the same text” (T189).

There are a number of reasons for this radically new way of comparing the two texts: first the conception of dialogue changes from one based on a strong (if not monological) notion of the individual in the first Dostoevsky book compared to the dialogical conception that we see later. In this instance, Buber should be considered less of a source of the first edition than people have otherwise believed. Indeed, the first book stresses a conception of dialogue that is based on self-enrichment rather than on I-other relations (“A follower of Plato rather than a predecessor of Habermas, Bakhtin’s concern in his early text is with the self, not with society” [T197]) while the second book expands the scope of dialogue far beyond what it was in the first. The result is that it loses all clarity in its concept of dialogue and, quite literally, undermines the position of dialogue as an absolute value (T211), emerging as it does from a new chapter on carnival roots which has weakened its foundations. Much weight is attached by Tihanov to sentences from the first book that are missing in the second; he notices particular words and phrases in the first that have been replaced in the second by new ones and interprets these substitutions as proofs of “the deliberate suppression of the sociological dimension for the benefit of either abstract historicism [...] or a metapoetic ahistoricism” (T213).

We need however to account for the fundamental difference between, on the one hand, the erasure of the

actual words “sociological” and “social” and, on the other, excising the sociological dimension altogether. Just as democracy for Hirschkop is not a matter of the times the word “democracy” appears in Bakhtin’s writing, so too we should not reduce the sociological to appearances of explicitly sociological vocabulary. The shift in focus Tihanov sees produces a number of undesirable results. “The 1963 book proves to be an ill-disciplined work, in which various incompatible voices resonate and affect each other without ever blending into harmony” (T214). The problem underlined is one of changing methodologies, something that will reoccur a number of times, for example, in his thinking on the chronotope. And while, in the case of the two Dostoevsky books, inconsistency in methodological focus is repeatedly criticized, it is markedly praised for the form it takes in the Rabelais book. Here, rather than an “undisciplined” work, the Rabelais book is seen as a highly original “synthesis between Hegelianism and other lines of thought, notably those of *Lebensphilosophie* and phenomenology” (T268).

Something of an inconsistency of method might me pointed out. Clearly in this use of differences brought out by comparisons we see clear discrepancies between Bakhtin’s own methods and those used to analyse his writing. The problem consists in knowing when to attach a positive value to these discrepancies, when to attach a negative one. For Bakhtin, however, no such problem appears to exist.

5. Chronotopic Otherness in the Everyday

The contrasts in approach his work embodies are often seen as something most positive. The creative dimension of communicative interaction, we can say, is to a large extent based on one’s ability to change perspectives, to change genres, to change methods: in other words to see oneself as an *other*. Caryl Emerson understands this important dimension in her study of the Russian Bakhtin: as an American she is necessarily an outsider in relation to the Russian-speaking world of which she writes. Her exotopy helps her to see that Russian-speaking reality in ways that Russians cannot always see it.

Reality, of course, dictates that we can never “really” *become the other*. The question remains however as to whether one becomes *other than what one was* through encounters with various forms of otherness. Bakhtin’s idea of outsidership (or exotopy) captures this particular possibility of becoming. As one constantly *becomes* oneself, one necessarily becomes *other*. This principle is crucial when intercultural exchange is concerned. While there are ultimate limits in how far this kind of thinking can ever go (we always experience the pain of the other as the *other’s* pain and never our own), there are many instances where it is plausible to believe in the importance of incorporating within one’s own view of reality something from others.

First, we can begin to see the other as an integral part of the everyday, a way to avoid seeing the everyday as a bastion of “security and stability,” as Bakhtin writes on Flaubert (H183). Must the everyday always continue, with or without us, with or without others, in endless repetition? Can the everyday even exist in the absence of relations

with others? In the absence of repetitions that bring about change? Hirschkop's book is very much concerned with refuting those interpretations that believe that the answer to these questions is yes. The reduction of everyday reality to something without others is further reduced to an everyday without time or history. He reminds us that "meaningless, endless, probably repetitive everyday life is [...] not so much a product of modernity as one of its leading fictions" (H265). We should be careful not to conflate the apparent repetition of the everyday with the concept of ceaseless dialogue that Bakhtin's concept of dialogism entails, what certain sceptical Russians have referred to as the "neurosis of incessant talk" (E147).

Laughter is one of such instruments that lift us out of such conceptions of the everyday by bringing us into an appropriate space for reflection, for re-evaluating our place in the world and creating links with others. For Emerson, too, laughter is an epistemological tool, a "route to knowledge" (E204). It is also an antidote to anger, and thus cultivated by Bakhtin "who was too proud to wish to appear ridiculous" as one too often appears in relation to those who do not feel our anger of the moment. But in the end, if laughter elevates, if it liberates, it would appear to do so, in her view, for the primary benefit of the individual: it is even seen as being more private and intimate than verbal language: "Under stress, words explicate and thus obligate; laughter (a much more private and impenetrable reflex) can confound and liberate" (E204). It becomes just another mechanism, as art in general, for "knowledge of the self through communicative exchange" (E206).

Outsideness for both Emerson and Hirschkop can always be seen in relation to the everyday. Where they depart is in the way they choose to "use" Bakhtin's stress on "outsideness." The difference begins with their respective readings of the young Bakhtin. Whereas Hirschkop would say that the young Bakhtin advocates the necessity to think in terms of the other, Emerson sees the young Bakhtin's vision of dialogue as being above all profitable to the individual and not to the ideal of relationality. That is to say, because of dialogue, the individual becomes a better individual, one is better able to know oneself, or in Emerson's words: I as an individual am spared "the worst cumulative effects of my own echo chamber of words" to the extent that "only concrete others, in responding to me, can check the monstrous growth of my own view of things" (E153). The notion of "outsideness" is predicated on the notion of the individual and thus provides the "common denominator between Bakhtin's ethics and his aesthetics" (E207).

For Hirschkop, the everyday cannot be seen as bereft of either others or time. What we sense as the eternal unchanging everyday is a product of the forward driven interest of *homo oeconomicus* (H92). Commenting on Flaubert's realism of the average, he sees an everyday world which obfuscates the world of responsible reflection as one which contains human bodies that are "mere physical substrate of *homo oeconomicus*" (H181). This is the point where prosaic narrative can be given philosophical legitimacy. "Narrative is not a scaffolding for languages, but their truth" (H228). It allows for an expression of the time-consciousness of modernity, of "history as experienced by an individual subject and history as the form of intersubjectivity itself" (H99). It is a form in which to see "historical

becoming” (H103). “If culture is all there is, then humanity has nothing to fall back on — it is ‘responsible’ for the world, in the sense that it has no other choice than to continue to create it, moving, as Bakhtin once put it, ‘ceaselessly into the future’” (H165).

Tihanov’s study places the novel front and centre in his comparison of Bakhtin and Lukács. He points out that “by the time Bakhtin wrote the first of his essays on the novel (1934-35), there was already a well established tradition of theorizing about the novel in Russia” (T139). In his detailed comparisons of the two Dostoevsky books, as well as in his discussions of carnival, the prominence of the “novel” is never in doubt. To a certain extent, it could be argued that Bakhtin understood his own tendencies to place competing philosophical viewpoints side by side in his own thinking; his predilection for the novel genre provides the ideal place to pursue thinking along these lines. However, this privileging of the novel comes under close scrutiny in Hirschkop’s book. He reminds us that his “philosophy of language is in turn the reflection of historical facts it does not acknowledge — cultural innovations like the modern press, the nineteenth-century university, the mass-printed book, popular education, and, of course, the novel itself, which decisively altered the discourse of Europe” (H254). No genre is born with an eternal, immutable essence. Significantly, the idea of “novel” dominated Bakhtin’s thinking for a much shorter period of time than critics implicitly suggest: “Bakhtin’s single-minded attention to novelistic culture was relatively brief and intense, although it permanently altered the shape of his project” (H186).

Hirschkop’s analysis of “forward moving time” is thus markedly different from Tihanov’s analysis of “novelistic” time, an “eternal present” that denotes not so much the durability of the present than it does its “expandability in either direction” (T154). This difference of opinion is probably not purely superficial. For Tihanov, Hegel is a major intellectual source (hence his comparison between epic and the novel) but for Hirschkop the Hegelian elements in Bakhtin’s thinking are like philosophical “relapses.” Their difference in interpretation is also linked with Hirschkop’s political reading of “redemption.” In the early Bakhtin, and in the Dostoevsky book, the moment of redemption occurs “in a flash” (Benjamin’s word) and it is a matter of “temporal points” (H177). This all changes in the *Bildungsroman* project where the present affects the future by the way time is conceptualized, as that conception where the hero “becomes *together with the world*” (H178). Time is made visible (the importance of visibility in Bakhtin’s philosophy of culture has yet to be properly appreciated). In Tihanov’s reading, by contrast, the novel is able at times to embody “timeless features” (T161).

Bakhtin’s concept of the carnival has sometimes been analyzed as founded on a curious historical inversion whereby the loss and decline mediaeval carnival is described as something utterly regrettable. Modernity, it would seem, would do well to turn time backwards to rediscover that particular way of living our bodily nature in harmony with the world conceived as a whole. But it can also be said that the mediaeval carnival represents for Bakhtin a conceptual model where it is possible to rethink the way human beings live the everyday, a way which “predates the moment at which everyday life becomes a ‘private affair’ and the human body becomes the mere physical substrate of

homo oeconomicus" (H181). It gets us away from the logic of individually "calculable success" (H292) and has us understand that "the distinction between the *res publica* and *res privatae*" is also "a legal-juridical one, and legal distinctions, unlike phenomeno-logical ones, can be altered" (H233).

This is also where Bakhtinian thought on language differs so radically from Saussure: "The ethics of speech in Saussurean theory comes down to the need to *match* the speech of the other, either in the system of language one carries around in the mind or when one speaks in return" (H217). For Bakhtin, this sort of communication in a social vacuum is inconceivable since "it is not possible for a social actor to learn to dialogue without having been socialized" (N149). Conceptualizations of the I-other relationship must include the place a given human being assumes within his/her social group, a place that can change with time. They require thinking in terms of relations and not just in terms of mathematical individuals. Communication is not binary even when it gives birth to a relationship of one with another. Bakhtin's thinking thus provides a dialogic way of conceptualizing the public square.

For political thinking, this public situation can be conceptualized in terms of citizenry. Nielsen is especially interested in this problem when issues of transculturalism are involved. He analyses the problem not only in terms of individuals, but also in terms of groups and nations. He argues that "if we link the concept of transculturalism to both Bakhtin's ethics and his concept of dialogism and to Habermas's concept of communicative action and discourse ethics, we would be in a position to pose a much broader set of questions regarding national politics and social justice than would be possible should we approach either theorist's position separately" (N145). The questions posed by Nielsen are related to the issue of whether or not legal "belonging" sometimes involves mechanisms for actually diminishing social diversity. He wonders whether there are forms of citizenship that do "not coincide with the existing cultural fragmentation of the world," whether "nationhood" might not be "responsible for some diminishing cultural diversity" (N144). The theoretical questions are usefully brought into the context of contemporary Quebec and the ways are analyzed in which political theories, including Habermas' own, have been used to understand the political and social situation presently unfolding in French-speaking Canada. "Various aspects of the contemporary discussion on postnational democracy, citizenship, and new national pleas for recognition can be understood using a social theory situated between Bakhtin and Habermas" (N145). Dialogical thinking is needed for an adequate understanding of the shifts that occur when analysis moves from a study of interpersonal relationships within a given culture to that of citizenship and national identity at the societal level. "A dialogical theory of the political cannot universalize *demos* by eliminating the particular pathologies of *ethnos*. The specific uniqueness and autonomy of a people needs to be understood as it were in dialogue with the multiplicity, diversity, and variety of individuals and groups that cohabit the political community" (N148).

Bakhtin belongs to the type of thinkers who "refuse to sacrifice either self to society, or society to the self" (Nxii). The I-other relationship needs to be thought of "transculturally." It plays off transcendental parameters against concrete norms or constraints. "Lived dialogic self-other relations" support "the moral basis of community

and the specificity of culture (*ethnos*) and the general level of political community (*demos*) and of the universal entitlements for citizens of the nation-state" (N18). A "two-sided approach to answerability" is advocated in counterdistinction with normative theories of democracy derived from a complete separation of *ethnos* and *demos*, as developed by thinkers such as Habermas. "Habermas contends that the parliamentary and legal forms of communication that constitute the nation must be 'subjectless'. In other words, the nation itself is subjectless in the sense that its reference must be derived from sources beyond all particular traditions so it can represent all members who live under its constitution" (N185). "Shifting from the level of interpersonal to societal dialogue risks obscuring the national question when it ceases, for example, to be explained as a dialogue in social solidarity and transcultural creation and is instead categorized under the purely legal domain in the *demos* or conversely when it is dismissed as an archaic tribal-like pathology of *ethnos*" (N206).

The everyday takes on fundamentally political dimensions when discussed in this fashion. We take the everyday out of the nebula of a theory-less no man's land and reinsert it into the dialogical dimensions of the individual vis-à-vis other individuals, of the individual vis-à-vis his/her social group(s), of the individual vis-à-vis his/her political belonging. We begin to understand the need to understand inter-group relations as something dynamic and dialogical. Rather than a formless, shapeless desert of meaninglessness, the everyday becomes the ground for much-needed refinements of Bakhtin's notions of dialogism, the chronotope, and the other.

Conclusions

This has been a meandering excursion through four recently formulated Bakhtinian perspectives. While an attempt was made to capture the spirit of Bakhtin by reading Bakhtin through others, we should never forget that these four studies all come to us from the English-speaking world. We should always bear in mind that there many "others" who are presently writing on and with Bakhtin, those through whom we can also get to know "Bakhtin."

Significantly, these others speak in many languages. The international Bakhtinian scene is not a politically organized, multi-national force strategically poised to defend ill-defined aspects of civilization against non-civilization, for example, just as it is not in any shape or form a government sanctioned "multiculturalism"¹¹

11 There is an "international" Bakhtin even though there is no international Bakhtin society. In a spirit of remarkable cooperation, there have been many international Bakhtin conferences, organized throughout the world, and held in such varied countries as France, Canada, the United States, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Denmark, Mexico, Germany, Croatia, Slovenia, Belarus, Ukraine, Russia, Italy, Israel, Brazil, etc.; some of these conferences have been part of a series of eleven Bakhtin conferences organized in (1) Kingston, Canada in 1983 by Clive Thomson, (2) Cagliari, Italy in 1985 by Simonetta Salvestroni, (3) Jerusalem in 1987 by Dmitri Segal, (4) Urbino, Italy in 1989 by Pino Paioni, (5) Manchester, Great Britain in 1991 by David Shepherd, (6) Cocoyoc, Mexico in 1993 by Ramón Alvarado, (7) Moscow in 1995 by Vitali Makhlin, (8) Calgary, Canada in 1997 by Anthony Wall, (9) Berlin in 1999 by Brian Poole, (10) Gdansk, Poland in 2001 by Boguslaw Zylko (11) Curitiba, Brazil in 2003 by Carlos Alberto Faraco and Gilberto de Castro.

replete with a well-defined cultural politics. The dynamic reality of international Bakhtin Studies today can only be seen by comparing the many and varied perspectives. Every perspective is informed by others.

We attempt to show how this international field of study does not force us to adopt binary choices between, say, “Bakhtin as a culturologist” and Bakhtin as a “politically acute multiculturalist” (E69). The internationalism of Bakhtin Studies is not reducible to the English-speaking and the Russian-speaking academies, as the current vibrancy of Bakhtin Studies in the Portuguese and Spanish speaking worlds clearly shows. There is something excitingly multilateral on the making in the Bakhtinian world unfolding before our eyes and ears: his ideas have now generated serious, multi-disciplinary reflection on what it means to live in a transcultural world.

These four books offer refreshing arguments for a number of old issues: the question of authorship, Bakhtin’s biography, his intellectual roots, ethical philosophy, his intellectual career. They show us that it is no longer acceptable to accept an inherent incompatibility between neo-Kantianism and Marxism, between Hegelian dialectics and dialogism, religious roots and secular applications, political disinterestedness and political potential, the humanities and the social sciences. We especially understand the need to rethink any view, which — whether implicitly or explicitly — suggests that language is transparent and that the everyday world in which we all live is somehow bereft of time and relations with others.

The windows for new thinking open onto four very different perspectives on Bakhtin. We are perhaps tempted to ask whether they could all be right at the same time, whether they might in the end all be wrong at the same time. After all, it would seem, no one can ever be totally “right” about Bakhtin, only in error. And this is why, in our most profound humanity, the dialogic world we live in individualizes us in ways we could never have dreamed of alone.

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