
In their latest contribution to Bakhtin studies, Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson write about Mikhail Bakhtin in a way which makes of him not merely an extraordinary literary scholar and theoretician, but also perhaps the most complex modern thinker about the everyday—or as they christen it—prozaics. Their book is an excellent one with some flaws, useful for literary studies and culture criticism. While Morson and Emerson are concerned with the philosophic implications of Bakhtin's work, they concentrate their efforts on the exposition of Bakhtin's entire effort. Others—Paul de Man, Wayne C. Booth, and Michael Holquist—have explored the philosophic side of Bakhtin. It is not that Morson and Emerson are neglecting philosophy. Their rendering of Bakhtin's theory emphasizes his practical criticism, thus making the European closer to an American pragmatist.

The central notion which they introduce to Bakhtin studies is that the most important element in the history of literature is the development of prozaics and not poetics as thinkers from Aristotle to the Russian Formalists insisted. Although Bakhtin, a coiner of literary terms like dialogic and chronotype, often uses the word "prozaic," it is Morson and Emerson who isolate it as the fundamental element in Bakhtin's work. Bakhtin's emphasis is on complex process and continuous change, and he sees poetics as a discipline which freezes the conception of literature into a permanent idea.

Morson and Emerson divide Bakhtin's development into four stages. The first one, neo-Kantian, introduces the systematic study of content. The second focuses on Dostoevskii as the inventor of polyphony in literature. The third is concerned with the novel, the novelization of literature, and the carnival in Rabelais. The fourth stage is the period of mature realization for Bakhtin in which he reworks the Dostoevskii book and understands his life achievement without the "anarchim" of the Rabelais book, and without the narrowness of the Kantian writings in his early career.

Morson and Emerson differ from most critics about the development of Bakhtin's thought. Most others believe that one can read the early works of Bakhtin as embryonic versions of his whole intellectual development. Morson and Emerson argue that Bakhtin's ideas are not an organic progress, but that the important ideas—prozaics, unfinalizability, dialogic, polyphony and carnivalization—have an episodic and chaotic development. The relation between orderly progress and the chaos of living thought in Bakhtin's life presents his expositors with some difficulties. The central one for Morson and Emerson is that carnvation and the Rabelais book are wild departures from what they see as Bakhtin's balanced view of change and order.
Before they get very far into their account of Bakhtin’s work, they have to deal with an extrinsic issue which haunts all of Bakhtin’s work. Are the works on Formalism, Freud, and linguistics originally published with authorial attribution given to Medvedev and Voloshinov really authored by Bakhtin? Morson and Emerson say they are not. They contend that the external evidence for Bakhtin’s authorship is weak and that the stylistic evidence is weaker. When I read Holquist and Clark’s book on Bakhtin (1985), the issue, then, seemed merely an unimportant textual one growing out of the rancorous Stalinist intellectual milieu. Now having read the book under review and having had several discussions about the disputed texts, I find the issue more important.

Bakhtin, as Morson and Emerson show, was more open to the past and its actualities than most Soviet Marxists. Stalinist repression was often a suppression of the past when the past was inconvenient ideologically. This raises some puzzling issues: how did a man rusticated to a small Russian town come to grapple with the same historical problems of cultural analysis which agitated intellectual circles in metropolitan centers outside the Soviet Union? How was he able, living the rural life, to develop a body of theory as complex as Northrup Frye’s and to augment that theory with a detailed knowledge of history. The answer, I believe, is mixed up in the status of the Medved and Voloshinov books which are clearly the product of the Bakhtin circle’s discussions. Not only was the intellectual world of this circle hard for Holquist and Clark to understand, but Morson and Emerson denigrate Bakhtin’s philosophical opponents in the circle (“semiotic totalitarians”) rather than credit them as actors in a lifelong dialogical process.

The dialogical, a term designed for understanding the live action of language, asserts that language addressed to oneself and others is fraught with conflict, complex perceptions, and inner divisions. Each utterance is understood to be as mobile as Heraclean fire. This concept can easily be separated from official dialectical materialism, but it is less separable from Hegelian dialectics. Bakhtin does reject the Absolute Spirit, but he does so, as Hegel says jokingly about himself, a lot of walking on his head. Bakhtin’s constant reference to the life of texts and the life of ideas in men and in their experience seems to verify this. In many ways, Bakhtin is as much a praxis philosopher as Kukacs. Dialogism, for Bakhtin, becomes a way to understand those, the repressed and the oppressed, who speak surreptitiously in acts and obscenities rather than in conceptual language. In addition to being a critic of the life of ideas, Bakhtin is also a metaphysical Heraclitian. What Marxists call the material world, things composed of atoms and continuously changing, is, for Bakhtin, the source of life in form and in content.

Bakhtin’s work is highly eclectic and extraordinarily cosmopolitan. Thus, to break out of the confines of Soviet intellectual life, the Bakhtin circle must have been a strong group that, despite significant differences, was not a collection of individuals but a cohesive body sharing ideas and scholarly resources. The result of this activity has been to provide us in the West with new ways of thinking about the human sciences. Morson and Emerson understand much of this, but it is peripheral to their subject; and when they bring it up, it is, to use a Bakhtin term,