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*DIALOGIC IMAGININGS: STALIN'S
RE-READING IN THE 1930s OF
THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV*

If you want to know the people around you,
find out what they read.
– Stalin on reading

[I]t is nothing but an illusion, but its laws are dictated by life.
– Stalin on performance

In the 1930s, while a political exile in Kazakhstan – during what Anna Akhmatova might have called a vegetarian, rather than carnivorous experience of suppression – Mikhail Bakhtin offered “the internally persuasive word [*slovo*, discourse]” as a counter to “the authoritative discourse” (read, Stalinist and Stalinism) that should have made Bakhtin’s continuing (and more rigorous) suppression an inevitability.¹ That it did not is one of the mysteries in Bakhtin’s biography, but

1. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1986), p. 344f. Concerning Stalin’s “authoritative voice,” there are innumerable accounts. The 17th Party Congress in 1934, for example, adopted the resolution “that all the Party organizations be guided in their work by the proposals and tasks presented by Comrade Stalin in his speech” to the Congress (quoted in Adam Ulam, *Stalin: The Man and His Era* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), p. 372). At the same congress, Stalin’s defeated opponent Lev Kamenev proclaimed that “this era in which we live . . . will be known in History as the era of Stalin” (quoted *ibid.*, p. 373). With respect to the arts, as Robert Tucker writes: “Not only did he take a keen interest in Soviet culture; he radically reshaped it. Literature, the theater, the cinema, music, painting, architecture, education, learning, and science – all showed the deep influence of his tastes and ways of thought. During the 1930s, he effected a cultural revolution from above” (Robert Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928-1941* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), p. 551). “[H]is judgments on plays, books, films, music and ar-

there is no doubt that Bakhtin's dialogic imaginings were also a political critique of contemporary realities. "The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it" and requires "our unconditional allegiance,"² "the internally persuasive word" remains "supple and dynamic" through its "semantic openness to us, its capacity for further creative life in the context of our ideological consciousness, its unfinishedness and the inexhaustibility of our further dialogic interaction with it. We have not yet learned from it all it might tell us."³

For Bakhtin, the dialogic imagination works against the grain of any ideological insistence, including the dialectics, crude or otherwise, that demanded allegiance throughout much of his lifetime. Toward the end of his life, he wrote: "take a dialogue and remove the voices (the partitioning of voices), remove the intonations (emotional and individualizing ones), carve out abstract concepts and judgments from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness – and that's how you get dialectic."⁴ Taken to an extreme, one might say, that this is also one way that you get Stalinism, its suppression of what Bakhtin calls "the problem of the second consciousness."⁵ In this regard, Bakhtin refers to the Zosima episodes in *The Brothers Karamazov*, in particular to "Zosima's 'mysterious visitor'": "The inexhaustibility of the second consciousness, that is, consciousness of the person who understands and responds: herein lies a potential infinity of responses, languages, codes. Infinity against infinity."⁶ In the case of Zosima's narrative of the mysterious visitor, this second consciousness, which "changes the entire situation,"⁷ would first of all be Zosima as he listens to the visitor's confession, but it would also be

chitecture were categorical in the extreme. Making utterances on practically everything, as the first person in the state, he indeed became a universal dilettante, and this in turn worked to enhance his image as the omniscient leader" (Dmitri Volkogonov, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy*, trans. Harold Shukman [New York: Forum, 1991], p. 228).

2. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 342-43

3. *Ibid.*, p. 346.

4. M. M. Bakhtin, "Notes Made in 1970-71," in *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1986), p. 147.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*