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THE FAD FOR BRINGING BAKHTIN DOWN (AND WHERE IT GOES WRONG)

Abstract. Any boom calls forth a backlash and a trashing – and Bakhtin has been trashed often, for many reasons. In this article I consider the recent biography of Bakhtin written by Aleksei Korovashko in the history of anti-Bakhtinistics, and attempt to evaluate the “Korovashko tactic”: where, in my view, it goes wrong, and what lessons we might learn from it in light of Bakhtin’s teaching (especially his theory of love). I then discuss two more productive approaches to criticizing Bakhtin: one devoted to Bakhtin and the body (Dick McCaw), the other to Bakhtin and the spirit (Mikhail Epstein).

Keywords: Mikhail Bakhtin; biography; postmodernism; outsideness; Golden Rule; Diamond Rule; Alexey Korovashko; Mikhail Epstein; Dick McCaw.

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СТРАННАЯ МОДА НА НИСПРОВЕРЖЕНИЕ БАХТИНА (И В ЧЕМ ОШИБКА)

Аннотация. Взрывной успех вызывает обратную реакцию и забрасывание «комьями грязи», а они летели в Бахтина много раз и по многим разным причинам. В этой статье я рассматриваю биографию Бахтина, написанную Алексеем Коровашко в истории антибахтинистики, и пытаюсь оценить «тактику Коровашко»: в чем, на мой взгляд, она ошибочна, и какие уроки мы можем извлечь из нее в свете учения Бахтина (особенно в контексте его теории любви). Затем я приведу два более продуктивных подхода, с помощью которых мы можем критиковать Бахтина: одно посвящено Бахтину и телу (Дик Мак-Ко); другое – Бахтину и духу (Михаил Эпштейн).

Ключевые слова: Михаил Бахтин; биография; постмодернизм; вне-находимость; карнавальное тело; пластика; алмазное правило; Алексей Коровашко; Михаил Эпштейн; Дик Мак-Ко.

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A boom brings forth a backlash and a “trashing” – and Bakhtin has been trashed many times, for many different reasons. Sometimes we do not understand what Bakhtin is trying to do. At other times Bakhtin exaggerates, or too ecstatically declaims his position. Often, though, precisely where his ideas seem the most extreme we find the key into his world, which is surprisingly sensible and pragmatic. After all, Bakhtin’s goal was to establish, in Vitaly Makhlin’s words, “a new paradigm for thinking”, non-utopian, non-idealistic, a paradigm that locates freedom in real time [24, p. 650]. In the twentieth century, which respected analysis and aspired to autonomy for the disciplines, Bakhtin (so Galin Tihanov has written) “had the originality of a great synthesizer”, taking what he wanted from linguistics, art history, theo-

logy, and then re-arranging their concepts from within [35, p. 104]. This synthesis was not to everyone's taste.

The most principled of Bakhtin's opponents was the great Russian verse scholar Mikhail Gasparov, who, from 1979 to his death in 2005, set a high standard of intellectual resistance to dialogue and carnival as interpretive strategies [see: 8, 9]. More or less gently, this criticism was echoed by literary critics, religious philosophers, and fellow classicists (Viktor Shklovsky, Lidia Ginzburg, Aleksei Losev, Sergei Averintsev). These eminent philologists under the old – that is, Soviet – regime were baffled by what Bakhtin was trying to do, disagreed with his methodology, and were astonished by his rise to world fame. But they were familiar with his contexts and subtexts, and respectful of Bakhtin the person.

If Gasparov set the high standard, then in 2017, a new (and I believe, low) standard for anti-Bakhtin polemics was set by Aleksei Korovashko, a postmodernist literary scholar and ethnologist, who authored the first full-length Russian-language biography of Bakhtin for the series *Lives of Remarkable People* [ЖЗЛ]) [20]. From the start, this 400-page biography assumes an ironic, distanced, aggressive attitude toward its subject, which (in the words of one reviewer) resembles the “dismantling” tactics of Comrade M.P. Teryaeva, the hostile unofficial Party-line examiner at Bakhtin's dissertation defense¹. But we are not in Moscow 1946. Korovashko is motivated less by Bakhtin and his thought than by an irritation, bordering on contempt, for Bakhtin's global success and cult.

About one thing, however, Korovashko is correct. Sensations and cults inevitably inflate, dilute, and simplify the legacy of a thinker. Of course Bakhtin is not responsible for his posthumous reception. He would be amazed, and perhaps also delighted, at its depth, variety and roguishness. But the insolence of Korovashko's biography was a landmark and a provocation. In this presentation I consider the “Korovashko Tactic”: where, in my view, it goes wrong, and why it has ar-

¹ См.: Аполлон Григорьев: «Подход Коровашко можно назвать последовательной “разборкой” <...> в дистанции по отношению к ММБ (и не только к нему) у Коровашко сквозит агрессия <...> В этом плане усилия Коровашко разоблачить Бахтина невольно смыкается с разгромной рецензией М.П. Теряевой на защите кандидатской-докторской диссертации по неопубликованной книге о Рабле» [18].

rived too late (for Bakhtin can no longer be stopped: too many serious, thoughtful people are working with his ideas). I then sample more productive ways for us to criticize Bakhtin.

Korovashko's basic thesis is this. He argues that Bakhtin, like Marx-and-Engels during the Soviet period, was canonized artificially, force-fed to the humanities – and thus “a biography of Mikhail Bakhtin will not fit into the canon of classic life-writing. By its structure, such a life recalls more a mythological novel about a dying and resurrecting ‘god’ of the humanities than it does a strictly documented story of the earthly fate of a person who really existed”².

The reaction of the critics was swift and polarizing. The publication impressed some readers. In 2018, the biography was long-listed for the prestigious “Big Book” prize. Some said that perhaps the biographer was paying subtle tribute to his subject, adopting, for the purpose of an exposé, a de-crowning narrative mask in the spirit of Bakhtin's favorite heroes – rogues, jesters, and fools. But laughter in this bio-graphy is clearly not the healthy, tolerant, two-way laughter of carnival. It is nasty, shallow, judgmental, with intent to insult. Korovashko's goal (in the words of one appalled reviewer, Nina Perlina) was two-fold: first, to demolish the myth by “desacralizing Bakhtin”, proving that there is nothing original in his thought; and second, to “discredit the academic humanists”, in Russia and the West, who have worked to preserve his legacy. “Korovashko” – Perlina writes – “does not believe a single word that Bakhtin said about himself”³. The image

² «...биография Михаила Бахтина не до конца укладывается в каноны классического жизнеописания. По своей структуре она больше напоминает мифологический роман об умирающем и воскресающем “божестве” гуманитарной науки, чем строго документальный рассказ о земной судьбе реально существовавшего человека» [20, с. 6]. In Korovashko's view, the “Bakhtin industry” [индустрия Бахтина] aggressively marketed their subject to the humanities, and now that the industry has suffered a “crisis of overproduction” [кризис перепроизводства], what happened to Marx and Engels will happen here: an “allergy against a ritual citing of his texts” [аллергия на ритуальное цитирование его текстов] will be replaced by a mass interest in his legacy, partly nostalgic and partly parasitic. We will have something called neoBakhtinism, just as we have had neoMarxism and neoFreudianism.

³ Нина Перлина (1939–2019, СПб-США): «“Биография” служит двум целям. Во-первых, “десакрализировать” образ Бахтина, “разрушить миф”... и доказать, что в бахтинских учениях нет ничего заслуживающего внимания. Во-вторых, дискредитировать гуманитариев» who have researched the Collected Works <...>

that emerges is Bakhtin as a careerist and an impostor. Korovashko compares him to Gogol's Khlestakov (although Bakhtin was far too clever to brag in public about his fibs)⁴.

But problems arise even with the authorial device of a "rogue describing a rogue" (a trickster describing a trickster). Korovashko does not trust contemporaries, memoirs, interviews, editors, or helper-disciples – since all of them, in his opinion, are canonizing Bakhtin to their own profit. Thus he relies on two types of documents that he considers "objective", that is, which have nothing to gain or to lose in the "struggle for Bakhtin", and which therefore don't lie. The first are official government documents from the Bolshevik, and then the Stalinist, era. The second are distanced, second-hand online sources from our own time. Unfortunately, each of these types of document lies a great deal (although for different reasons). The abundance of factual errors in the biography is largely due to Korovashko manipulating unverified materials that he has downloaded from the internet⁵. But even more important than this misguided quest for "objectivity" by ignoring eye-witnesses and immediate contexts are two other issues. Both are related to a Bakhtinian mesh of values.

The first concerns Bakhtin's theory of love. Korovashko could not reconstruct his biographical subject because he does not love him. This "love" has nothing sentimental or erotic about it. It is not about

«Коровашко не верит ни единому слову, сказанному Бахтиным о себе» [32, p. 115]. It should be noted that Perlina was not a reverent disciple. Her book *Varieties of Poetic Utterance: Quotations in The Brothers Karamazov*, written in 1985 at the peak of the Bakhtin boom, was among the first to raise sober reservations about Bakhtin's book on Dostoevsky [33].

⁴ Noting that Korovashko delights in calling Bakhtin an impostor, a vampire, Natalia Dolgorukova remarks that there used to be two groups of Bakhtin scholars in the West, those who read him in the original and those who read him in translation. "Now," she writes, "a third group has appeared: researchers who no longer read Bakhtin at all – they only 'expose' him" («...то теперь появилась третья группа: Бахтина эти исследователи уже не читают – они его разоблачают» [6, p. 183]).

⁵ After noting the large number of errors imported from secondary on-line sources and the "muddle of citations selected exclusively on the principle of free association" («сумбур цитат, возникающих исключительно по принципу свободных ассоциаций» [31, p. 79]) Oleg Osovskii, an experienced Bakhtin hand from Mordovia State University, expresses outrage and embarrassment that the venerable *ZhZL* series could have sponsored this biography [31].

“liking” or “approving” a person or a thing. It is about attention. For Bakhtin, love is cognitive. If you do not love another person’s life experience, find it interesting and extend some trust to it, you will not be able to address it, see it or hear it. Reviewing this biography for the Omsk University Herald, Vladimir Martynov notes that Korovashko “is so uninterested in Bakhtin that he never once asks a question of him”⁶. This is a serious charge. Indifference, negation, and suspicion are powerless to activate a consciousness from the inside or the outside. And here it does not matter whether Bakhtin, either for himself or theoretically, loved public-square laughter, tricks, and pranks. Carnival laughter, if one believes in its truth-bearing energy, is always larger than a single separate organism. For that reason, the task of illuminating a singular life is, by definition, outside a carnival economy.

The second issue, after love, is professional preparation. The question is complicated by Bakhtin’s well-known passion for “outsideness” [внеаходимость]. Korovashko is indeed maximally outside his subject. But for a biographer to be that far outside creates no fewer problems than does lovelessness. Korovashko is not an intellectual historian. Lacking philosophical training or literacy in its concepts – that is, being ignorant of the debates to which Bakhtin was responding, or else not “loving” them enough to find them interesting – Korovashko interprets Bakhtin’s philosophical texts as if they were literary ones⁷. Even as a literary scholar, Korovashko’s preference is not for traditional philology but for scandal, exposé, forensic fraud, and a hermeneutics of suspicion. His doctoral dissertation was published in 2009 as a book, *Conspiracies and Incantations in Russian Literature of the 19th–20th Centuries* [21]. This is a legitimate research area. But it is dif-

⁶ «В своей книге о Бахтине он его ни о чем не спрашивает. Бахтин ему неинтересен насколько, что он его ни разу ни о чем не спросил» [25, p. 117].

⁷ См. Анатолий Рясков: «Бахтин не литературовед, потративший изрядную часть своей жизни на чтение книг по неокантианству, а философ, в мышлении которого литература стала привилегированным объектом» [34]. This shortcoming was rectified in Anglophone scholarship twenty years ago by Craig Brandist (see his “The Bakhtin Circle. Philosophy, Culture and Politics” [5]), with its indispensable survey of European philosophical trends, 1910 s-20 s. See also: Brandist С. «Необходимость интеллектуальной истории» [The indispensability of intellectual history], в блоке «Контексты Бахтина» [4]. Об этом и о том, что биография «свидетельствует о глубочайшем гуманитарном кризисе», см. также Н.И. Николаев «Опороченная жизнь философа» [30, p. 386].

difficult to imagine a biographer less well suited to write the life of Bakhtin, a man who was uncommonly open, patient, unpolemical, and personally dignified – that is, a person unable to be insulted, frightened, or provoked into humiliating others.

Like most postmodernist exercises, then, Korovashko's biography more closely resembles its creator than its created subject. It is a bio-bibliographical curiosity that, on its own and out of itself, will most likely not give rise to anything else⁸. Hopefully it will be "contained" (as we now say of viruses and pandemics), not translated out of Russian, and on Russian soil supplanted by a more serious and accurate account of Bakhtin's life and works. And Korovashko is not needed. For many years, a vigorous revisionary scholarship has existed, which "brings parts of Bakhtin down" in order to adjust and extend his thought. Over the past half-decade, there have been provocative forums on "How not to finalize Bakhtin" and "What we need Bakhtin for today" [22, c. 7–38]⁹ (if we need him). These forums are not in the least reverent and often do not praise him. But they are concerned that Bakhtin continue to live (and be subject to criticism) as a classic, not as a cult. This requires a new and more inventive scholarship.

Now to move to the second part of my comments: what this inventive scholarship might look like. I mention only two innovative directions in Bakhtin studies in English over the past twenty years. One

⁸ One must ask why Korovashko was commissioned for this biography, and why he agreed to take it on. Martynov notes that the few Russian contemporaries who could have written a worthy biography – he mentions Sergei Bocharov and Sergei Averintsev – never did, and others with full qualifications (he names Konstantin Isupov, Vitalii Makhlin, Nikolai Nikolaev, and Igor Peshkov) for some reason have not done so; it appears that "each of them considers the task of a full, summary judgment on Bakhtin to be immodest". «...каждый из них считает для себя задачу полного итогового суждения о Бахтине нескромной» [25, p. 113].

⁹ More recently, see also Artem Komarov on the Gorky site (Participants: Сергей Зенкин, Александр Дмитриев, Сергей Ушакин, Илья Кукулин): "The consensus of the four is that Bakhtin was continuing a tradition destroyed in Russia in the early 1920 s; that his thought has been catastrophically vulgarized; that one of the remarkable aspects of Bakhtin was his «теплота и открытость» / "warmth and openness"; and that Bakhtin partakes of the energy-laden negations used both by Viktor Shklovsky and Vasily Rozanov (one of the duties of the Bakhtin's Other, Oushakine notes, is to remind me constantly where my 'I' stops – which is usually sooner than I would like). All agree that Bakhtin (unlike the Formalists or Lotman's Tartu semioticians) did not create a "school" [19].

deals with Bakhtin and the body; the other with Bakhtin and the spirit. Neither relies on the over-used, inflated “boom” concepts from the fertile middle period of Bakhtin’s thought: dialogue, polyphony, heteroglossia, carnival ambivalence, the laughing grotesque. Rather they draw on the early, or late, writings, many of which were left raw or unfinished. In my view, the success of such critical expansions of Bakhtin in the 21st century can be explained in part because they differ in principle from the earlier Gasparovite criticism, which had been grounded in traditional philology and traditional ethics. The Bakhtin that we are now re-discovering – or developing for ourselves – is anchored elsewhere.

First let us consider the “corporeal” Bakhtin, through the work of the English theatre historian, actor trainer, and body-movement specialist Dick McCaw. Bakhtin’s ideas about performative masks and double-voiced discourse have long been a resource for theatre. These ideas are equally important to the rise of the novel and to pre-Renaissance drama, from ancient Greek theatre with its masks up through folk theatre¹⁰. But the larger part of this work has been connected with the face of the actor, with actors’ utterances and how they speak on stage. McCaw was the first to consider the entire body as Bakhtin perceives it—both the body on stage, and the body described by Bakhtin in his early scenarios illustrating his concepts of the “I” and the “other”. [See: 26, 27, 28].

Recall that in his discussion of “the spatial whole of the hero”, Bakhtin states that “there are two ways of combining the outside world with a human being”: from within and from the outside. When my “I” looks at an “other”, a “visual horizon” [or *крягзоп*] arises from within my “I”. When an “other” looks at me, there arises for this “other” and from its perspective an “environment” or “surroundings” [*окружение*], which includes me¹¹. The first thing that McCaw notices

¹⁰For a summary, see Caryl Emerson “Bakhtin and the actor (with constant reference to Shakespeare)” [7]. In the Russian context, Anatoly Vasiliev and the *игровой театр* of Moscow’s School of Dramatic Art, as well as the more recent New Drama movement, have drawn productively on Bakhtin, primarily his insights into the discordant but positive multivoicedness [*разногласия*] of uttered speech. Cf. the work of Susanna Weygandt [36].

¹¹See section 7, “The Spatial Whole of the Hero and his World in Verbal Art. The Theory of horizon and environment”, in “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity”:

about Bakhtin's embodied scenario is that it is static – like “two characters in a Beckett play”, McCaw writes [28, p. 238]. Neither party moves. Fluidity and transition might be traits of a “cognized speaking whole” – but in Bakhtin, a concrete embodied whole is fixed in place.

McCaw is a trainer of actors, and also a devoted student of Bakhtin. He knows from his practice that if we move, even in the simplest ways, it is fully possible to grasp ourselves as fluid wholes, with “horizons” that we continually patch together into “environments”. We constantly teach ourselves to distinguish between egocentric and “allo-centric” (that is, other-centered) spatial perspectives [28, p. 238]. What interests McCaw (and I quote him here) is “Bakhtin's failure to grasp how the experience of one's own body is an important generator of meaning for oneself as a self-directed moving agent” [28, p. 238–239]. To the question: why this might be so, there are easy answers – perhaps too easy, beginning with Bakhtin's own hurting immobilized body. Much of the time, the only thing that moved for him was words. But as McCaw notes, the cognitive need that Bakhtin has for the Other is absolute in all areas, verbal as well as bodily. For Bakhtin, “the only way to understand your body as a whole is through the intercession of a loving other” [28, p. 244].

But to this, McCaw says no. The reason that humans evolved brains was because they had to move. The healthy, agile body, even if solitary, is a mobile “embrained” organism capable of wholeness and self-reflection. It is not merely a static placeholder with eyes and ears. Bakhtin (McCaw says) is reluctant to grant self-knowledge to the moving, changing, but integral body – one of the most crucial skills for the actor.

To be sure, Bakhtin has in mind *verbal* creativity – but he has a habit of generalizing loosely to other larger areas of cognition. We are not speaking of the instinctive, resilient, pain-free bodies that inhabit carnival. Those are utopian metaphorical constructs. We're speaking of everyday experience. And, McCaw argues, here Bakhtin shortchanges the body, because he shortchanges bodily movement – perhaps because free movement did not occur naturally or comfortably in his own life-experience. (It is remarkable how often Bakhtin, in his discussion of the

«Возможно двоякое сочетание мира с человеком: изнутри его – как его *кругозор*, и извне – как его *окружение*» [2, v. 1, p. 172–173].

“spatial form of the hero”, draws his examples from sedentary, even bedridden, bodies suffering pain.)¹² We get the impression that for Bakhtin, the cognitive experience that we want to have is not the result of muscular or dynamically physical input, but visual or aural. And this preference limits the insights and knowledge that consciousness can gain thanks to “movement through space”. McCaw’s work on moving bodies is a splendid example of a Bakhtin scholar confronting a dead-end in Bakhtin’s thought, illuminating it professionally, and thereby casting light on an entire matrix of Bakhtinian values: what they can do, and what not.

My second example of a “reworked Bakhtin” is not of the body but of the spirit. It does not emerge from some lacuna in Bakhtin’s own theoretical generalizations, but revises an aspect of the Western philosophical and ethical tradition in which Bakhtin’s thought is embedded. The scholar here is the prolific Russian-American cultural theorist Mikhail Epstein. In 1970, Epstein was twenty years old, a third-year student in Vladimir Turbin’s “experimental poetics” seminar at Moscow State University. The class made a pilgrimage to the old folks home in Podolsk, where Bakhtin and his wife had a room. Out of twenty visitors, only Epstein was bold enough to ask any questions¹³.

Thirty-five years later, in 2004, Epstein, now a professor at Emory University, published an essay under the title “The Unasked Question: What Would Bakhtin Say?” [16]. The question was: why are the humanities so obsessed with post: postmodern, postcolonial, post-

¹² McCaw has in mind the wisdom of “muscle memory”, which Bakhtin, of course, acknowledges. But perhaps Bakhtin underestimates its autonomy and creativity. For a discussion of Bakhtin in this context juxtaposed to early Soviet aesthetic theory, see Caryl Emerson “Shklovsky’s *ostranenie*, Bakhtin’s *vnenakhodimost’* (How distance serves an aesthetics of arousal differently from an aesthetics based on pain)” [10].

¹³ “I left neither enchanted, nor disenchanting”, Epstein later wrote, “but powerfully influenced by the fact of meeting a great man, who felt in no way obliged to display his greatness to anyone he happened to meet, much less a third-year student”. («Я ушел не очарованный и не разочарованный, но под сильным впечатлением самого факта встречи с великим человеком, который вовсе не обязан демонстрировать свое величие всякому встречному-поперечному, тем более третьекурснику», Михаил Эпштейн, Энциклопедия юности (a “dialogic encyclopedia” of 120 entries assembled together with the novelist Sergei Iourienen / Сергей Юрьенен [17, p. 57]). This entry is followed by «Бахтинские сироты (С. Бочаров, Г. Гачев, В. Кожин, В. Турбин)» [17, p. 58–60].

communist, poststructuralist, post-gender, post-human? Such a habit, Epstein says, makes us completely dependent on what came before. Bakhtin, in contrast, encourages us to study not finalizations but beginnings, embryos. Here Epstein quotes a dissatisfied entry in Bakhtin's notebooks from the early 1970s: "we foreground the ready-made and finalized <...> We do not study literature's preliterary embryos (in language and ritual)" [1, p. 139]¹⁴. Epstein is convinced that Bakhtin would have counseled us to replace post- with proto. Because only a sense of gain, not a sense of loss or absence, enables creativity.

The spirit of Bakhtin, says Epstein, is always to move from finality to initiation, and to do so joyously: from the closed text to the open malleable textoid, from the end of reality to the beginning of virtuality (all those amazing, literally "face-to-face" meetings we can hold on Zoom that could never have been managed in person and in real space), from the death of the author to the birth of hyper-authorship. The more authors – which is to say, interrupting and interfering authors – the better. In light of this future-oriented, forever proliferating proto-, even Bakhtin's concept of the "utterance" seems too rigid and too solid [16, p. 52].

The goal is an ever-increasing multiplication of thinking, speaking, and listening subjects. In Epstein's view, this is a Bakhtinian position, which finds support further down in the paragraph on the pre-literary "embryo": "In the humanities, one can hardly speak of necessity", Bakhtin writes. "Here, it is scientifically possible only to uncover potentials, and realize one of them" [1, p. 139]¹⁵. The key word is "scientifically". In the humanities, Epstein concludes, there is no methodology suitable for research other than "possibilistics" – a philosophy of the possible. Many fields require data to be dead before it is taken seriously, but not with us¹⁶.

¹⁴ «На первом плане у нас готовое и завершённое <...> Мы не изучаем до-литературные зародыши литературы (в языке и в обряде)» [3, v. 6, p. 398].

¹⁵ Translation adjusted. «Вряд ли можно говорить о необходимости в гуманитарных науках. Здесь научно можно только раскрыть возможности и реализацию одной из них» [3, v. 6, p. 398].

¹⁶ On this emerging field, see Mikhail Epstein *A Philosophy of the Possible. Modalities in Thought and Culture* [15], a translation Михаил Эпштейн *Философия возможного* [12]. See also his "Dialogism and the Methodology of the Humanities. Mikhail Bakhtin" [11].

So now to return to the problem and the expansion. Any Bakhtinian worldview must combine multiplicity – multiplicity approaching infinity – with specificity, that is, with the concrete realization of one or more of the available possibilities. But what does this precept mean for a normative ethics? Epstein considered this question too, around the same time, in an essay titled “The Ethics of Imagination” [13]¹⁷. He has now been developing this idea for two decades. Among its variants is the following.

One of the ways in which the Kantian legacy was rethought by Bakhtin was to question the categorical imperative. Underlying that universalizing imperative is a much more broadly shared rule, that we “do unto others as we would have them do unto us”. This was laid down in Leviticus 19:18, repeated by Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:12), and known as the Golden Rule.

Epstein has doubts about this Rule. It “presupposes a kind of commonness between ourselves and others that cannot be found in actual existence and empirical experience – we are all different”, he writes. Rather than the Golden Rule, based on identity ethics, Epstein recommends the “diamond rule”, based on differential ethics. The more different facets, the more beautiful and valuable the gem. Here is a rule devised to respect the uniqueness of the ethical subject: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, but in such a way that nobody but you could do unto them just that thing”. Or even more precisely formulated: “Do what no other person in the same situation could do in your place. Act in such a way that your most individualized abilities meet the most individual needs of the other” [13, p. 165]. Epstein then lays out an “ethics in the non-commanding mode, a system of requests and proposals appealing to the freedom of the other person”. It is based not on normative rules, but on politeness and imagination. And it would work beautifully in any system that does not insist upon justice enforced by power.

Now to conclude. Bakhtin did not accord very high priority to matters of justice and power. This is certainly one reason why, for all

¹⁷ A Russian variant exists as «Этика воображения» (2004, unpublished). The two versions differ; minor changes have been made in both English and Russian texts, with the permission of the author. The argument for differential (or “interferential”) ethics is continued in Mikhail Epstein “The Transformative Humanities. A Manifesto” [14].

his enormous fame, Bakhtin is so very easy to bring down. The de-crowning can be done by modernists and postmodernists, structuralists and poststructuralists – because Bakhtin is neither modern nor post-modern. Bakhtin is pre-modern, archaic even, a Romantic in the mode of his beloved Friedrich Schelling, whose philosophy of nature encompassed far more than what science could empirically prove, and whose “identity philosophy” was pointedly non-Cartesian (my ‘I’ is not primarily what ‘I’ think, not a carrier of convictions or rights, but the result of my personally forged relationship with the world)¹⁸.

To be archaic in this way does not mean to be old-fashioned, primitive, or naïve. Just as, in our current usage, the terms “modern” and “modernist” can mean many incompatible things, so can a sophisticated archaic be discovered at many levels. (Consider Bakhtin’s unconventional readings of Shakespeare and Flaubert.) Bakhtin greatly admired the Symbolist poets, especially Vyacheslav Ivanov, whose poetic vision was not linear but circular, cumulative, vast, and integrated. Matter and movement have another meaning for Bakhtin than they do for many of the moderns. And most importantly, Bakhtin’s synthesis is not political, that is, it is not about power.

Of course, there is a type of politics in Bakhtin. Carnival and polyphony are energies directed against monologization and institutional concentration of power. In this sense they are political. But neither carnivalistic nor polyphonic freedom is connected to political rights – the “political person” complete with legal complaints, the right to vote, to sue, to demand – and this is largely because energies of the carnivalesque and polyphonic sort cannot easily be organized or shaped into an authoritative, stable hierarchy. In the spirit of Epstein’s “politeness and imagination”, they are too mobile, fluid, modest, open-hearted, unsuspecting, and do not acknowledge an economy of scarcity. In my view, that is where Korovashko’s biography goes most seriously wrong, leading him to repeat the error that Julia Kristeva made in her 1970 preface to the French translation of *Problems of Dostoevsky’s*

¹⁸ In his sixth discussion with Viktor Duvakin (23 March 1973), Bakhtin remarked of Schelling – whose name he had temporarily forgotten, to his mortification – that “I loved this philosopher very much and used to know his work backwards and forwards” [29, p. 221]. См.: «Придет, как же, не может не прийти! Это ж почти мое собственное имя. Как я мог его забыть! Я его очень любил, этого философа, и знал его хорошо, вдоль и поперек» [23, p. 271].

Poetics. What seems to interest Korovashko, a modern and postmodern mind, are the genres of power: satire, exposé, ridicule, and then their targets: glory, fame, competition, fighting one's way to the top. What is known today as "adversary culture", where alienated intellectuals consider it their mission to liberate others from the tyranny of received forms, is not compatible with what we know of Bakhtin. He was open to everyone, but he was not adversarial – nor was he especially egalitarian. He de-coupled human rights from human potential. Others are indeed obliged to look at us, listen to us, give us form. But it is our responsibility to turn what has been given [дано] to us into something "posited" [задано], future-oriented.

Overall this is beneficial and useful work. In Bakhtin, the religious archaic – and even more the folk grotesque – is not competitive, ugly or awkward. It is exuberant, affirmative because ambivalent, and crowded with joyous, unself-conscious bodies who never doubt the presence of others because they never gaze into the mirror, that fatal philosophical trap. There is no fear of loneliness, no anxiety about looking pretty or being punished, no rivalry in which only the fittest survive, and very little interest in death. All this is very far from charismatic modernists like Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, who are attracted to grandiosely simplified social scenarios and generalizations, but in interpersonal affairs are driven by a hermeneutics of suspicion.

And here, finally, is one positive side effect of Korovashko's desacralizing tactic, surely unintended by the biographer. The image of Bakhtin produced by the boom and the cult was often sentimentally that of a victim – of Stalinism, of bone disease, of bad and difficult times. But the pieties of victimhood were alien to Bakhtin, who, according to those who knew him, was by nature a sanguine and grateful personality. Korovashko presents Bakhtin as resourceful, sly, a problem-solver, stubbornly self-assured, an agent in life, not a dupe or a casualty. Bakhtin would have appreciated that – although, as he told Viktor Duvakin, he had no interest in writing his memoirs. His own self as a recurrent organizing principle did not interest Bakhtin. In any event, it is now too late to fit Bakhtin into the framework of tragedy, satire, or even of myth. We can say of Bakhtin what he said of Shakespeare in the Elizabethan era: "there is no possibility of squeezing 'our Bakhtin' back into

the Soviet epoch... The author is a captive of his epoch, of his own present time, and subsequent times liberate him from this captivity”¹⁹.

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¹⁹ A paraphrase of Bakhtin’s comment that “there is no possibility of squeezing our Shakespeare into the Elizabethan epoch...” [1, pp. 4, 5]; см.: «Втиснуть в Елизаветинскую [советскую] эпоху нашего Шекспира [Бахтина] никак нельзя <...> Автор – пленник своей эпохи, своей современности. Последующие времена освобождают его от этого плена» [3, v. 6, pp. 454, 455].

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