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## **Traditions of thought in Bakhtin's works of the 1920s**

Based on a paper presented at the XIII International Bakhtin Conference, which was held in London, Ontario, Canada, in July 2008. I am indebted to my interlocutors at the Bakhtin Conference, and to my former supervisors David Shepherd and Craig Brandist for suggestions. I also wish to thank Professor David W. Miller of Warwick University for critical comments on this paper.

I intend to pose and discuss some questions concerning role which the traditions of thought, which were available to Bakhtin in the early twentieth century, played in his ethical and aesthetic works of the 1920s. My aim is precisely to pose questions, rather than to provide answers, to identify problems rather than to offer solutions. These questions are philosophical questions, which need to be addressed philosophically, as authentic questions of the philosophy of science. They have to do with the treatment in the Bakhtin secondary literature of certain notions that seem to me to take too much for granted, such as the notion of a “tradition of thought”, the idea of a “turn” and its implications, and a certain tendency to analyse the work of Bakhtin in terms that epistemologists label as ‘rupturist’. A quick visit to the work of Bakhtin and to some works about Bakhtin will show the need to put these philosophical assumptions to question in order to avoid misunderstandings.

There is consensus among scholars about the need to enquire into the sources of the ideas of a given thinker or group of thinkers. Such an approach does help in understanding their thought better, and furthermore it allows the researcher to position the thinker or group of thinkers in his/their proper place in the history of thought, as belonging to a certain tradition. This “contextualist” approach is warmly favoured in the Bakhtin academic world because of the bet-

ter understanding that it has provided of the thought and the works of Bakhtin and of his colleagues in the Circle, and of the problems they worked on. Thinkers inevitably belong to traditions of thought from which they profit, that account (in part) for both the orientation and content of their output, and for some of the problems that they endeavour to address. I intend to discuss the problems created by claims that the ideas that are known to have influenced Bakhtin and his colleagues can be regarded as belonging to a multiplicity of “traditions of thought” and elucidate whether all scholars who claim that there is this or that tradition of thought between the lines in Bakhtin’s or his colleagues’ works do have an essential agreement on what they regard as a tradition of thought.

Some of the philosophical assumptions underlying this contextualist approach to Bakhtin studies will serve to organize the discussion around two main groups of questions. In the first place, I shall enquire whether we can arrive at a consensus about what is to be understood as a tradition of thought. Within this first group of questions, I want to analyse the nature of a tradition of thought in the human sciences and the influences that the contemporary state of affairs in the natural sciences exert on the human sciences. This is a fundamental question for an analysis of the situation in the early twentieth century. The question centres on the mutual influences of the two big realms of thought, the natural sciences and the humanities, and the effects of the contributions in the natural sciences on philosophical reflection. Assuming that traditions of thought are “sets of general assumptions about reality”, I shall then direct my enquiry to the suitability of approaching the philosophical musings of the young Bakhtin — the Bakhtin of the 1920s — as going to and fro, and never finally taking sides, between two great traditions, a dying idealism and a nascent realism. I shall discuss also whether this approach constitutes a reduction, a simplification of the complexity of the period, or whether, by contrast, it is appropriate to see Bakhtin as trying to come to grips with a dichotomy of realism and idealism. These will be represented by specific aspects of neo-Kantian idealism and phenomenological realism.

## TRADITIONS OF THOUGHT

To start with the enquiry into the notion of a tradition of thought, let it be said that in Bakhtin studies in the last ten years, the thinkers of the Bakhtin Circle have been presented as owing a great deal to parti-coloured currents of thought, such as a certain “Herbartian tradition”, a “functional pragmatic tradition” whereby “human beings do things purposefully and are guided by intentions”, a “tradition of Völkerpsychologie”, “the Brentano tradition”. Different terms are also often used: tradition, current, movement, school and so on. Vladimir Alpatov<sup>1</sup>, for instance, treats the phenomenological movement as a tradition, a tradition with names: the Brentano-Husserl tradition. Other authors identify the idea of a tradition not with names but with a geographical location, in addition to the representative figures: “the Austrian Gestalt tradition”, a certain “Russian populist tradition”. Other traditions in Bakhtin literature are: the tradition of legal thinking, the Hegelian tradition, the German idealist tradition, the Marburg school tradition, the Hebrew tradition, cultural traditions, the Romantic tradition, a representational tradition, a tradition inspired by Frege’s philosophy of logic and language, a common ancestry of the analytic and Continental traditions, the Anglo-American tradition, the Western metaphysical tradition, the tradition of laughter and carnivalesque forms, the Enlightenment tradition, the traditions of German liberalism, the tradition of Russian eschatologism, the Kantian tradition, the tradition of sentimentalism or unofficial seriousness, the West European tradition, the German historical tradition. Some authors present various traditions as working in isolation at certain stages in the thought of Bakhtin and his colleagues, others see various traditions at work simultaneously. Some authors see the Circle thinkers as relatively independent from their sources, others assume that they verged on plagiarism and created nothing, others (thankfully fewer, as research progresses) contend that Bakhtin and his colleagues were absolutely independent and capable of creating a whole system out of some sort of inspiration and without any influence<sup>2</sup>. In the general philosophical literature, the variety of versions of the idea of a tradition presents an equally puzzling panorama. There is not a basic consensus on the character and extent of the notion of a

tradition of thought, and this creates a risk of assuming that we all mean the same thing while we do not.

Research traditions have been named variously in the course of history; some of these labels are *Weltanschauung*, world-view, “paradigm”, “research program”. The notion of a tradition appeared in historiography as a reaction to positivistic historical methodology; it was a counter-approach to a history that consisted of collections of anecdotes. My attempt to specify the nature of a tradition is grounded on the need to avoid such collections of anecdotes in Bakhtin scholarship. The main idea is that traditions are philosophical systems, metaphysical assumptions, even moral principles, that are at the basis of all human experience and thinking, and they are the product of the vital experiences of preceding generations. They give thinkers the tools to account for enigmas, they often direct thinkers’ attention towards certain specific areas of research and even prescribe research methodologies. They are neither the products of thought nor do they originate in the human will to know; their roots are rather in experience. Because definitions are conventional and provide a working tool for discussion, I shall myself provide my own conventional working approach to a tradition and build my claims on such an approach. My “traditions of thought”, and more specifically those traditions of thought to which Bakhtin and his colleagues may be said to have belonged, are sets of general assumptions about the nature of reality and about our possibilities of knowledge of such reality.

I would further like to argue that the sets of general assumptions that were available to the thinkers of the Circle at the dawn of the twentieth century were derived from a dying idealism, represented by the two major schools of neo-Kantianism, and a nascent realism, represented by phenomenology<sup>3</sup>. I refer here to that variety of “realist” phenomenology represented by Husserl’s disciples — Adolf Reinach, Johannes Daubert, Max Scheler, Alexander Pfänder, Anton Marty. I shall oppose the idea that Bakhtin “synthesised” from the different sources that were available to him. In my view, Bakhtin was unsuccessful at such an attempt to synthesise, if he at all attempted to. He stayed on the boundary, he was aware of being on the boundary, and he experienced the co-existence of the

traditions on each side of the boundary as an unresolvable tension, thence the permanent occurrence of dualities in his understanding of the ethical and aesthetic in his youth, and in his interpretation of discursive interaction in later works. The early twentieth century is also characterized by the influences that humanist thought received from the realm of the natural sciences. Fundamental advances in the sciences marked the early century; the period witnessed radical changes in the image of the world and in our capacity to understand and change the world. The natural sciences encouraged thinkers to view reality in terms of complexity, diversity, instability, multiplicity, evolution, irreversibility, chance, discontinuity and indeterminism. Prigogine and Stengers<sup>4</sup> have discussed the issue of the importance of advances in the scientific realm in re-directing the philosophizing in different periods of history. In their account, the disenchantment produced by a nature that stopped being somehow “predictable” or “foreseeable” created the need for a sort of new alliance of man and the world. Such problems as relations (rather than substances), communication and evolution, the interaction between man and nature, and between man and man had become central not only among scientists, but also in the realm of the humanities. Concepts that had seemed mutually exclusive started to be related with each other in their interrelations: being and becoming, static and dynamic images of nature. Such a state of affairs poses interesting questions. What part did the problems in the natural sciences play in the intellectual environment in which philosophers discussed the relation of consciousness with the world of physical objects? Did the problems in the natural sciences, in physics and mathematics for instance, encourage philosophers to put their current assumptions about the nature of reality to question? These issues are themselves intended to contribute to specific enquiries on Bakhtin problems, because they are likely to throw light on the question how this state of affairs had an impact on his thought. Bakhtin himself is known to have had great interest in mathematics and physics, and also in biology, so that the aforementioned problems ought to have led him to reflect on the emergent picture of reality that the sciences were beginning to provide<sup>5</sup>.

BAKHTIN BETWEEN  
IDEALISM AND REALISM

On the basis of my very rough characterization of a notion of traditions as sets of general assumptions, I shall proceed to argue in favour of the view that the various influences operating on the thought of Bakhtin and his linguist colleagues can be understood in terms of the contemporaneous decline of idealism and the emergence of realism in Central Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This does not constitute a reduction, or a simplification of the complexity of the period. Rather, I shall contend that this is the right framework for the understanding of the Bakhtin Circle thinkers, and that a declining idealism and a nascent realism were the two sets of general assumptions that were available to the thinkers of the Circle in those days. Particularly in his early ethical and aesthetic works, Bakhtin gives evidence of being caught between realism and idealism, as if between two fires, and unable or unwilling to move to either side.

The period of Bakhtin's career that preceded his "turn" of the 1930s is the most representative of the aforementioned dichotomy, and his works of this early period provide the most obvious evidence of his presumed sources. Boundaries, tensions and dualities never abandoned his works, but I shall concentrate on his earliest works here. The issue that stands out by virtue of its centrality in all the works of the 1920s is that of inter-subjective relations. This is the dominant topic in this decade, and in Bakhtin's works there is a permanent presence of boundaries; boundaries that both separate and unite two sides of dichotomies. The evident tension that these dualities reveal is a central characteristic of all the works of the decade. Bakhtin's works have boundaries separating and uniting self and other, life and culture, the "is" and the "ought", horizon and environment, cognition and perception, process and product, finalizedness and flux, subjectum of cognition and "subject" of perception. In all these texts, there are tensions between the historical human being — who is the sum of her/his past experiences — and the a priori values of outsideness and responsibility; tensions also between the sociological/dialogical and the individual, tensions between content and moment; tensions between expressive

and impressive aesthetic theories (Bakhtin's terminology, "Author and Hero", p. 61); tensions between the strict demand that the self remain outside the boundaries of the other and the need to overcome the separation and obtain access to a world of unitary validity; tensions between our knowledge of reality and our experience of objects. There are tensions in trying to reconcile the idea of life as permanent flux with that of a subject who is ever-present, all here and now, but always about to become something different, projecting to the future of consummation.

The central dichotomy, the one that works as a framework, is the dichotomy between self and other. Bakhtin scholars have claimed that this is a phenomenological characteristic of this period of Bakhtin's career, and that there is also in this period a simultaneous influence of neo-Kantianism and *Lebensphilosophie*<sup>6</sup>. My contention is that Bakhtin did not attempt to amalgamate these influences, which reached him simultaneously, but that he alternately and partially adopted elements of each, without finally taking sides. This ambivalent attitude eventually led him to unsolvable problems, and the impossibility of solving these problems may account for his "linguistic turn" in the 1930s. It is evident, for instance, that the "self", who must position him/herself outside the "other", has somehow objectivized this other, so to speak, and by making her/him an "object" the self is allowed to enter into phenomenological relations with the other. The other has become a sort of "intentional object" à la Brentano. This might suggest that we have here a phenomenological Bakhtin. But on further reading we come across claims such as the following:

I grasp an object not with my hand as an externally complete image or configuration, but with my internally experienced muscular feeling corresponding to my hand. And what I grasp is not the object as an externally complete image, but rather my tactile experience corresponding to the object, and my muscular feeling of the object's resistance, its heaviness, compactness and so forth. What is seen merely complements what is internally experienced. In general, all that which is given, present-on-hand, already realized and available — recedes, as such, into the background of the action-performing consciousness. ("Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity", p. 43)

There is nothing phenomenological or realist in this account of perception. The object in this passage definitely resides in the mind, so there may be no reality outside consciousness. The objectivized other has also “receded into the background” of consciousness. Moreover, the action that this “action-performing consciousness” performs may very well be the action of “producing” the object, including the other, in neo-Kantian fashion. This idealism, however, appears to contradict Bakhtin’s own anti-idealist protest, when he states that.

Ideological monologism found its clearest and theoretically most precise expression in idealistic philosophy. The monistic principle, that is, the affirmation of the unity of existence, is, in idealism, transformed into the unity of the consciousness. [...] The unity of consciousness, replacing the unity of existence, is inevitably transformed into the unity of a single consciousness; when this occurs it makes absolutely no difference what metaphysical form the unity takes: “consciousness in general” (“Bewusstsein überhaupt”), “the absolute I”, “the absolute spirit”, “the normative consciousness”, and so forth. (Bakhtin M. M. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* / transl. by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis and Manchester: University of Minnesota Press and Manchester University Press, 1997. P. 80—81, *italics in original*)

Bakhtin is an idealist protesting against idealism, just as he is often a phenomenologist protesting against realist phenomenology. He thus appears as an argonaut sailing between Scylla and Charybdis. At the dawn of the century, neo-Kantian rationalist idealism was falling into discredit, while a nascent phenomenology was urging to return “to the things themselves”. This urge was further strengthened by the advances in the natural sciences. The ambivalences that I have mentioned in Bakhtin’s work of the 1920s — there are more — are a reflection of the way in which two opposed and rival intellectual traditions were pressing upon his thought, and of the manner in which Bakhtin alternately adopted elements of each rival tradition without fully committing himself as an adherent to either. Bakhtin is alternately an idealist and a phenomenological realist, and he seems to be fully aware of the irreconcilability between these two positions. The style of presentation of the central aspects of his



works in this decade, as dichotomies, give evidence that Bakhtin was aware of being situated, as it were, in the boundaries between two worldviews that were irreconcilable, and between which there could be only tension and “a vigorous struggle”. A vigorous struggle is taking place over the ‘word’ and its systematic place, a struggle that can only be compared with medieval disputes between realism, nominalism and conceptualism. And indeed, the traditions of these philosophical trends of the Middle Ages are to a certain extent beginning to be revived in the realism of the phenomenologists and the conceptualism of the neo-Kantians.

There is a renaissance of medieval realism taking place among phenomenologists as part of a general renaissance of medieval philosophy, especially of Thomas Aquinas. The philosophy of the word and of the name is acquiring exceptional importance in this regard<sup>7</sup>.

Why did Bakhtin concentrate on the problems of language in his subsequent career? In my view, he took the alternative of the anti-realist way. This position consists of the rejection of the discussion whether there is a reality independent of the mind, or whether reality resides exclusively in the mind, and the adoption of a different perspective, which commits itself to neither position, as a way out of a contradiction by way of negating it. In anti-realist perspective, what really matters is the independence of reality with respect of our beliefs and discursive practices, not our capacity to cognize or the possibility that perception results in knowledge of reality. This was a characteristic of the epoch as well, which was marked by philosophers turning to language in search of answers to their philosophical questions about the nature of reality and the relations between consciousness and reality. A group of phenomenologists in Munich had started to expand the range of possible “intentional objects” in order to include the interlocutor within that to which the Husserlian “meaning-giving” acts were directed<sup>8</sup>. While there is no evidence for presuming that Bakhtin adhered to a realist phenomenology, or that he was familiar with the work of some of these phenomenologists (Adolf Reinach, Johannes Daubert), he engaged in a “linguistic turn” in the next period of his career. The interlocutor of the Bakhtin of the 1930s<sup>9</sup> was a constitutive ingredient of the

act of verbal communication, and her/his uptake was determinant of the utterance itself. In the utterance, the response by the interlocutor was somehow already “contained”. The chronotope of the late 1930s was, in Bakhtin’s words, the Kantian notion of time and space but it was “detranscendentalized”: it was time and space “as the forms of the most immediate reality” (“Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”, P. 85). But, whether this can be interpreted as a realist turn in his thought is another question that it is not within the scope of this article to discuss. For the time being, the second decade of the century has shown an ambivalent, contradictory Bakhtin, who seems never to “have got it right”. But, in a final analysis, we could also ask ourselves whether he had to get it right. Philosophers do not as a rule endeavour to obtain definitive answers to their questions; their *métier* involves, rather, the formulation of ever more, better, more precise, questions/problems, and the correction of errors. This is what keeps their work going. What is beyond doubt is that Bakhtin found no answers, but more problems, and that is what makes him a philosopher, and his career was a constant search for more questions rather than final answers or solutions, final truths. The problems that Bakhtin was unable to solve in his youth will be seen to reappear at later stages in his career, marking a continuity that reflects his permanent search for answers along different paths, the ethical and aesthetic in the 1920s, language in the works following the earliest stage. This continuity, which characterizes most of Bakhtin’s works, allows us to interpret his turn to questions of language of the 1930s in terms of evolution rather than crisis, revision and re-statement of old problems rather than rupture or “paradigm shift”.

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<sup>1</sup> *Alpatov V.* The Bakhtin Circle and problems in linguistics // *The Bakhtin Circle. In the Master’s Absence.* — Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004. — P. 70—96.

<sup>2</sup> All these examples come from relevant secondary litera-

ture on Bakhtin and the Circle, and the sources range from major works by renowned Bakhtin scholars, such as Ken Hirschkop, Craig Brandist, Galin Tihanov, Brian Poole, Caryl Emerson, among others, to papers presented in various International Bakhtin Conferences, doctoral theses and articles.

<sup>3</sup> See *Köhnke K. C.* The Rise of Neo-Kantianism. German Academic Philosophy between Idealism and Positivism. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991; *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy.* — New York: Harper, 1965; *Ringer F. K.* The Decline of the German Mandarins. The German Academic Community, 1890—1933. — Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969; *Schnädelbach H.* Philosophy in Germany 1831—1933 / transl. by E. Matthews. — Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984; *Spiegelberg H.* The Phenomenological Movement. A Historical Introduction. — The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1984; *Willey T. E.* Back to Kant. The Revival of Kantianism in German Social and Historical Thought, 1860 — 1914. — Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978.

<sup>4</sup> *Prigogine I., Stengers I.* Order out of Chaos; Man's New Dialogue with Nature. — [б.м.]: Bantam Books, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> In the Foreword to the volume *Art and Answerability* (Bakhtin M. M. *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin / ed. by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, transl. by Vadim Liapunov. — Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), Michael Holquist provides information about Bakhtin's interest and acquaintance with the natural sciences, which he acquired and enriched through his friendship with Matvei Kagan. Holquist discusses Bakhtin's acquaintance with relativity theory also in his chapter 5, pp. 107-148.

<sup>6</sup> See, among many others, Bernard-Donals M. F. Mikhail Bakhtin; between Phenomenology and Marxism. — Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994; *Brandist C.* The Bakhtin Circle. Philosophy, Culture and Politics. — London: Pluto Press, 2002 and *Brandist C. S.* The Rise of Soviet Sociolinguistics from the Ashes of Völkerpsychologie // *Journal of the History of the Behavioural Sciences.* — Vol. 42, No. 3. Summer 2006. — P. 261—277, *Hirschkop K.* Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy. — Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 1999, *Poole B.* From Phenomenology to Dialogue: Max Scheler's Phenomenological Tradition and Mikhail Bakhtin's Development from Towards a Philosophy of the Act to his Study of Dostoevsky // *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory* (2nd enlarged and expanded edition). — Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001. — P. 109—135.

<sup>7</sup> *Voloshinov V.* Report on work as a postgraduate student 1927/28 // *The Bakhtin Circle. In the Master's Absence.* — Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004. — P. 232.

<sup>8</sup> See *Crosby J. F.* Adolf Reinach's Discovery of the Social Acts // *Aletheia. An International Journal of Philosophy.* — 1983. — 3. — P. 142—194; *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy.* — New York: Harper, 1965; *Speech Act and Sachverhalt.* — The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1990; *Reinach, A.* The A priori Foundations of the Civil Law transl. by J. F. Crosby // *Aletheia, An International Journal of Philosophy.* — 1983. — Vol. 3. — P. 1—142; *Roche M.* Phenomenology, Language and the Social Sciences. — London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973; *Schuhmann K.* The Development of Speech Act Theory in Munich Phenomenology // *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy.* — 2002. — II. — P. 73—92, *Schuhmann K., Smith B.* Questions: An Essay in Daubertian Phenomenology // *Philosophical and Phenomenological Research.* — 1987. — 47, 3. — P. 353—384; *Smith B.* Towards a History of Speech Act Theory // *Speech Acts, Meanings and Intentions: Critical Approaches to the Philosophy of John R. Searle.* — Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1990. — P. 29—61.

<sup>9</sup> In this group are included Bakhtin's essays on the novel, "Discourse in the Novel" (1934 — 35), "*The Bildungsroman*" (1936 — 38), "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" (1937 — 38), "The Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" (1940), "Epic and the Novel" (1941).