
Bakhtin studies and the humanities more widely have long privileged the figure of Mikhail Bakhtin over those of his friends and contemporaries, the most prominent of whom are Pavel Medvedev and Valentin Voloshinov. In the last few years, however, a new translation of Voloshinov’s Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (1986) and a first translation of Medvedev’s The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics (1991) have appeared in French. Jean-Paul Bronckart and Cristian Bota’s recent study is therefore part of a larger movement that (very belatedly) gives Medvedev and Voloshinov the prominence they deserve.

The title alone gives a flavor of the tone of the work: “Bakhtin Unmasked: The Story of a Liar, of a Scam, and of a Collective Delirium.” The authors chose to focus on the issue of the so-called disputed texts, a body of work published under the names of Medvedev, Voloshinov, and Ivan Kanaev (although the latter is barely mentioned) but that were later claimed to have been written by Bakhtin. If this is a question every serious scholar interested in these works has to study and resolve for themselves, there are abundant publications addressing various aspects of the problem, dating back mainly to the 1980s. It is thus an odd choice as the main thesis of a book-length study some thirty years later, as there never really was any evidence to support Bakhtin’s authorship of these texts in the first place. Bronckart and Bota have left no stone unturned, spending several hundred pages on the matter, which leads them to conclude that “it seems . . . right and indispensable to affirm that the case of the disputed texts is definitively closed” (585; emphasis in the original). The other aim of the work seems to be to discredit Bakhtin, not just as a witness in the case of the disputed texts, Bakhtin having been totally unreliable, but as a thinker, as the authors seem to have little time for the totality of his texts or ideas as their close reading of “Towards a Philosophy of the Act,” “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” and “The Problem of Content, Material and Form” reveals. One can only deplore the fact, however, that reputation seem not just out of place in an academic publication but also do the book a disservice.

But Bronkart and Bota do not leave things at that. The spectacular, if unfounded, corollary of their thesis is that Bakhtin did not even write his own work, namely Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art, the original version of the Dostoevskii book published in 1929. They claim that Voloshinov in the wake of Bakhtin’s arrest in 1929 (and to save him from certain death) “decided to publish under [Bakhtin’s] name a part of the work he was producing at the IIAZV . . . attempting to insert into it . . . some notes from Bakhtin’s manuscripts, without however hiding completely the contradictions between these notes and his own writings. And in agreement with him, Medvedev has for his part taken responsibility for publishing this hybrid book in the series of which he was an editor” (555). Although they describe it as a “hypothesis,” they consider it “the most probable (if not the only plausible one)” (555). They overlook the fact that I. R. Titunik’s very levelheaded arguments in favor of Medvedev’s and Voloshinov’s authorship, which they quote at length, namely that the “theoretical concepts presented in the analysis of reported speech, in [Voloshinov’s] Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, are not exploited at all in Bakhtin’s Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art,” that “the style of the works by Voloshinov is totally different from that of the works signed by Bakhtin,” and finally that “all of Voloshinov’s (and Medvedev’s) works display a profoundly Marxist orientation, which is obviously absent from the works signed by Bakhtin” (60), they would seem to invalidate their own claim. Perhaps more alarmingly, they base their painstaking analyses of various Bakhtinian texts, not on the original Russian texts, but on the French and Italian translations, of which some at least are anything but accurate and reliable. Unfortunately, although a heavy volume, Bronckart and Bota’s book is not as weighty as one might at first expect.

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