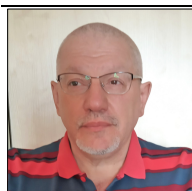




Ken Hirschkop's "new Bakhtin" for the English-speaking students



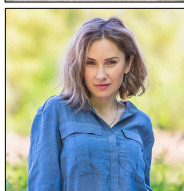
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Abstract

A review of Hirschkop K. *The Cambridge Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. xvi, 250 p. (Cambridge Introductions to Literature).

Speaking today about the importance of Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas for the humanities is restating the obvious. The book by the renowned Canadian literary and cultural studies scholar Professor K. Hirschkop, *The Cambridge Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin* (2021), aims at a systematic description of M.M. Bakhtin's scholarly legacy for the English-speaking reader, primarily for students. In our view, in this edition, the author solves both the traditional tasks of a textbook-reference book, written in the genre of "Introduction," and the research tasks. The Russian thinker's theory and practice analysis is presented based on the texts of his *Collected Works*, which, according to Hirschkop, form an image of a "new" Bakhtin. The tried and tested scheme of the *Cambridge Introduction* enables the author to draw a concise sketch of the scholar's life, outline the main sources and contexts of his scholarly quest, analyze key ideas and works, and describe the process of Bakhtin's reception in the English-speaking world.

Keywords: K. Hirschkop, M.M. Bakhtin, J. Kristeva, Bakhtin Studies, biographical reconstruction, reception of scholarly legacy.

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Review

Speaking today about the importance of Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas for world humanities is restating the obvious. The recently published monographs and collections of articles by American, European, and Russian authors and the responses they received clearly reflect the global presence of the thinker and his legacy in the field of social, philosophical, and educational theories and practices (Mahlin, 2015; Tihanov, 2019; Brandist, Gardiner, White, Mika, 2020; Matusov, Marjanovic-Shane, Gradovski, 2019; Freise, 2018; Emerson, 2020; Osovsky, Dubrovskaya, Chernetsova, 2021; Kirzhaeva, Maslova, 2021).

However, Bakhtin is important not only for researchers but also for those who are just embarking on an academic or pedagogical path. This raises a number of important questions: how do today's students come to Bakhtin, what can they gain directly from Bakhtin, and is there a place for an intermediary in this dialogue? It seems that the answers to these questions can be found in the book by Professor Ken Hirschkop (University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada).

In evaluating this book, let us first draw the reader's attention to its genre. "Introduction" is a common type of educational and scientific reference publication, serving didactic rather than research purposes. This is its main value for students. In our case, the author consciously goes beyond the traditional format. His main goal of presenting a systematic description of Bakhtin's major works and ideas does not interfere with delving into the depths of Bakhtinian thought, searching for new interpretations of his theoretical legacy, and revealing specific details of the history of the origin and publication of Bakhtin's texts. Thus, it is immediately evident that K. Hirschkop's book is an event not only for the educational but also for the scholarly field of Bakhtin Studies.

Since the Russian thinker's legacy has reached the reader not only in the form of censored books and articles but also in the form of unpublished fragments of manuscripts, sketches, notes, etc., the key image for Hirschkop is that of ruins. Borrowing it from J. Kristeva (Kristeva, 1970), Hirschkop provides the reader with an experience similar to that of intellectual archaeology. From these metaphorical "ruins" of Bakhtin's heritage, he restores the unity of his theory. Hirschkop's consciously polemical dialogue with Kristeva becomes the book's backbone, signifying a fundamental rejection by contemporary Bakhtin studies of the myths and clichés of the 1960s and 1970s. Creating the complete picture of Bakhtin's legacy restored from the "ruins" is the book's primary aim. Before us is not the "order of things" in the Foucauldian way but the "archaeology of knowledge." The way the researcher solves the problem of the meta-description of Bakhtin's theory becomes an example of a particular "reconstructive" method, which can be used to systematically describe the legacy of other participants of the Bakhtin circle, primarily V.N. Voloshinov and P.N. Medvedev. This is how K. Hirschkop explains his position: "We've come, you could say, to a turning point in the reception of Bakhtin, the moment at which we can finally put together something like a reasonable biography, a thorough account of his context, and a reliable description and analysis of the works themselves. That is exciting, but it makes the writing of this Cambridge Introduction a little more complicated than it should be. On the one hand, this book should be like a toolbox with an instruction manual: within its pages, the reader should find concepts and arguments – theoretical tools – which will be useful for their work in literary and cultural analysis, together with sensible advice on how these can be used. While many who read this book will have picked up a few of those tools already (dialogism, or the

chronotope, say) and tried to use them, this introduction ought to show them how to apply them in ways they might not have thought of or to tasks they didn't realise were appropriate. (Hirschkop, 2021, p. 3)."

To be fair, we should note that Hirschkop was not the first to write about the need for a problem-chronological presentation of Bakhtin's texts and ideas. Thirty years ago, Professor G. S. Morson, in correspondence with the Russian bakhtinist and historian of philosophy Vitaly Makhlin, noted the paradoxical nature of the American (more broadly, Western) reader's acquaintance with Bakhtin's texts: "The book on Rabelais was the first to be translated into English in the United States and became widely known outside of Slavic studies, which, we believe, led to a misunderstanding of Bakhtin's work in general. Everything that was read afterward was already perceived through the carnivalesque lens, in the light of extreme ideas rather than the prose of life. But let us imagine what would have happened if Bakhtin had first been discovered as the author of the article "Art and Responsibility" and the manuscript "Toward a Philosophy of the Act"; then as the author of "Discourse in the Novel"; and if only after that the book on Rabelais had been read. Wouldn't Bakhtin's image be different?" (V. L. Mahlin - G. S. Morson, 1992. P. 41). As if guided by this thought, Hirschkop lists Bakhtin's works in a chronologically justified order, which eventually allows him to provide the reader with a plausible account of the thinker's evolution.

One of the most challenging tasks that Hirschkop undertakes in his analysis is to create a compact biographical essay. He set a rather ambitious goal for himself: to dispel several biographical myths and present a reconstructed account of Bakhtin's life on a more or less documented basis. Having engaged in a dialogue with J. Kristeva in chapter 1 ("Introduction"), Hirschkop enters into a polemic with other scholars in chapter 2 ("Life"), his main opponents being C. Clark and M. Holquist, the first and still the only English-speaking authors of Bakhtin's biography (Clark & Holquist, 1984), as well as with most of the Russian Bakhtin's biographers ranging from S. G. Bocharov, V. V. Kozhinov, V. V. Ivanov to contemporary scholars. For example, he reassesses some well-established myths about Bakhtin's complete lack of integration into contemporary literary criticism, his authorship of "disputed texts," and even the anecdote that Bakhtin used pages of his manuscript of "The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism" for cigarette paper.

In general, he presented a compelling and consistent picture of the thinker's life in the context of the era's political, ideological, social, and cultural realities. Birth in the family of a bank manager in provincial Orel, relocations to Vilnius, Odessa, and then to Petrograd, the years of the revolution and the Civil War spent in Nevel and Vitebsk, return to Leningrad, exile to Kustanai, Saransk, Savelovo, Saransk again and finally Moscow – these are the milestones of the thinker's life journey, rigorously described in this chapter. The author does not separate Bakhtin as a man from Bakhtin as a scholar, mentioning straight away his most important discoveries made in a particular period. By doing so, he prepares his audience for the transition to a new level – a gradual immersion in Bakhtin's thought and its contexts in the following chapters. This essay can be called one of the best biographies of Bakhtin in the format of a "concise biography."

It should be noted that the biographical material is not only present in this chapter; it determines to a large extent the reader's exposure to the "contexts of Bakhtin's thought," which at the same time turn out to be the contexts of Bakhtin's life in Chapter 3 ("Contexts"). As Hirschkop states, "context is the most ambiguous of ideas. It can vary dramatically in scale and structure, ranging from the quirks and random happenings of biography to the large-scale structural forces at work in a particular historical period. A contextual reading can ground itself in the everyday circumstances of the author, in a contemporaneous clash of opinions or worldviews, or in the gender or class relations of a historical time and place. When the contextualised object is intellectual and cultural, context can mean other intellectual and cultural objects – 'influences,' as they used to be called – as well as social and historical circumstances" (p. 30). However,

here as well, the context of life appears to be of secondary importance. Rather, the author shows how Bakhtin's ideas of a certain period relate to contemporary philosophical and aesthetic thought in Germany and Russia, to the philosophical interests of his friends and companions, to the pressing problems of Soviet humanities, etc. Predictably, much of the focus is on German neo-Kantianism and first of all H. Cohen, later E. Cassirer, E. Husserl's phenomenology, K. Vossler and L. Spitzer's philosophy of language, M. Kagan's "Cohenianism" with notable notes of messianism and Marxist ideology, the original views of L. Pumpianskii, discussions with formalists, debates about the sociology of language and literature in the 1920s and 1930s, the search for new ways of constructing the theory of the novel in the pre-war decade, and the problematization of speech genres against the background of Stalin's "Concerning Marxism and Linguistics."

Bakhtin's consistent work with the most important discoveries of contemporaneous intellectual thought and his constructive dialogue with leading representatives of Soviet and foreign humanities emphasize the originality of his figure and ideas in Hirschkop's interpretation. To use the author's architectural metaphors, we note that it is the reconstruction of contexts carried out in this chapter that allows us to see the silhouette of the grandiose intellectual edifice created by Bakhtin from the late 1910s to the early 1970s.

Chapter 4 ("Works") is the most important chapter for the novice reader. We should admire the tremendous research work undertaken by the author to carefully compare the available English translations of Bakhtin with the corpus of his texts presented in *The Collected Works*. In fact, it is the *Collected Works* that Hirschkop relies on in his endeavor to reconstruct Bakhtin's legacy. "Bakhtin left behind one book published 'on time' (just after it had been written), one book published in a revised form about twenty years after it had been written, and then a seemingly endless trail of not-quite-finished essays, half-finished essays, outlines for books and essays, and notebooks filled with material that might have become books or essays, had circumstances been different" (p. 59), – Hirschkop writes, and it is difficult to argue with him.

As a result, the history of the publication of Bakhtin's works in the USSR becomes a series of publishers' attempts to thread their way through the obstacles of ideological censorship, accompanied by inevitable compromises with the authorities and by the removal of certain fragments and even lines of the published text. K. Hirschkop succinctly and eloquently describes this process at the beginning of the chapter: "Another consequence of the complicated times was that when the notes, drafts, and outlines were finally published, they were, with one or two exceptions, chosen, shaped, edited, corrected, and given titles by someone else, besides Bakhtin, often with an eye on the still-existing regime of Soviet censorship. As a result, in the thirty years between Bakhtin's rediscovery (in 1961) and the disintegration of the Soviet Union (1991), Bakhtin's archive of unfinished, unpublished texts was gradually turned into a body of published work, but almost all the published work was in some way deformed or distorted, often very substantially. Many texts appeared in censored form, with lines, paragraphs, and pages excised from them, either because Soviet censorship required these excisions or because Bakhtin's editors decided that certain lines or paragraphs didn't represent the true Bakhtin, that they were mere 'camouflage' added by Bakhtin" (p.59-60).

To present Bakhtin's scholarly legacy as a coherent and consistent system, Hirschkop identifies several problem areas: philosophy and aesthetics, subjects of Dostoevsky and Rabelais, the theory of the novel, and the problem of speech genres. The choice of a problematics rather than a chronological approach has its advantages. The points of intersection and juxtaposition of Bakhtin's interests in different periods give us a sense of how the early philosophical aesthetics "shines through" in the works on the novel

of the 1930s and how the idea of dialogue, first formulated in the book on Dostoevsky, becomes a leading one throughout his post-war work.

For Hirschkop, it is important to reveal to the reader the meaning of Bakhtin's quest and to outline his key concepts, so he provides an analysis of the texts within the following didactic framework: an exposition, which presents a brief listing of the most important characteristics of specific works, their critique followed by a summarizing conclusion on the concept.

Such a presentation of Bakhtin's texts is fundamentally important for what might be viewed as a new turn in Bakhtin Studies that has been taking place in Russia and beyond since the publication of the *Collected Works* (see Osovsky & Dubrovskaya, 2021). It is perhaps in Hirschkop's book that the argument for the significance of the *Collected Works* for new interpretations of Bakhtin's legacy appears to be the most plausible, and it is here that the Canadian scholar sees the "new Bakhtin," extensively discussed in this book. In the course of his writing, the "archaeologist" turns into a textual critic. It is hard to expect that students will be very interested to read about the importance of missing fragments and inaccuracies in translation. But for a specialist immersed in the nuances of Bakhtinian theory, this is certainly a reason for taking Hirschkop's book as seriously as possible. At times, the author seems to be carried away by his fascination with the idea of restoring the original Bakhtin. This is where we strongly disagree with his assertion that only the *Collected Works* represent the truly authentic and undistorted Bakhtin. The evil role of editors and publishers that Hirschkop writes extensively and with pleasure about is certainly exaggerated. It is safe to say that neither S.G. Bocharov nor V.V. Kozhinov have ever used Bakhtin's material to suit their own academic interests or ideological predilections. This is yet another myth that grows on the ruins of those that Hirschkop consistently debunks.

It is to be regretted that the texts of Bakhtin's university lectures were not the subject of consideration in the chapter. While Hirschkop mentions notes of lectures on the history of Russian literature taken by R. Mirkina in the 1920s, Bakhtin's lectures to students at the Pedagogical Institute, as partly published (see: Klyueva, 2019; Voronina, 2020; Bakhtin, 1999), these notes remain almost beyond the writer's attention. It should be emphasized that this material, in fact, provides much insight into the way Bakhtin taught and lectured, both in 1936-1937 and in the 1950s, combining the standard material from the history of literature and literary theory courses with the problems of his own research, which is not difficult to discern even in student notes (see Osovsky, Kirzhaeva, Chernetsova & Maslova, 2020; Dubrovskaya, 2020).

Chapter 5 ("Reception"), devoted to the reception of the scholar's writings and ideas, seems less informative. Hirschkop is very selective in his account of the difficult way Bakhtin's books and ideas reached the Western humanities. On the whole, the picture is quite accurate and adequate: from almost incidental references to "Problems of Dostoevsky's Creative Art" in English-language Slavic studies in the second half of the 1950s and early 1960s to the keen interest in the author of books on Dostoevsky and Rabelais in the 1960s and 1970s, followed by the "Bakhtin boom" and then by the long and quite multivocal process of exploration and interpretation of Bakhtin's ideas in various fields of the Western humanities, from deconstructivism and feminism to postcolonial studies.

It is not usual for the review genre to include any extensive additions. However, it is still necessary to say a few words about the process of Bakhtin's reception in his homeland. The Russian reception of Bakhtin is more than a hundred years old. It dates back to the early 1920s, when Bakhtin's name first appeared in the pages of Petrograd intellectual journals¹, and his lectures and seminar presentations were

¹ The young scholar M.M. Bakhtin has written a book on Dostoevsky and a treatise *The Aesthetics of Verbal Creation*. Zhizn' Iskusstva. Petrograd, 1922.

discussed not only in Nevel or Vitebsk, but also in Leningrad. This interest, which continued at the turn of the 1920s and 30s with the discussion of his book on Dostoevsky, was interrupted by a period of long silence due to his arrest and exile, illness, and a long stay in a remote province, and was only resumed with his return to academic life in the 1960s and first half of the 1970s, when books on Dostoevsky and Rabelais started to play a crucial role in the post-Stalinist renewal of Soviet humanities. A critical stage in this process is the late Soviet and new Russia Bakhtin boom of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which coincided with Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost, the collapse of the USSR, and became one of the intellectual features of Boris Yeltsin's democratic Russia.

It was in the late 1980s and 1990s that the foundations were laid for professional Russian Bakhtin Studies and that Vitaly Makhlin, Nikolai Nikolaev, Natalia Bonetskaya and Lyudmila Gogotishvili embarked on their study of Bakhtin's legacy. Over the next three decades, these researchers, with their numerous books and articles, contributed a lot to the understanding of Bakhtin's philosophical and philological discoveries (Makhlin, 2009; Makhlin, 2015; Nikolaev, 1998; Nikolaev, 2010; Bonetskaya, 2016; Gogotishvili, 2006). This list should be complemented with the names of other scholars: Vladimir Bibler, Igor Solomadin, and Sergei Kurganov, who first showed how Bakhtin's thought forms the contours of dialogic pedagogy (Bibler, 2009; Solomadin & Kurganov, 2009); Natalia Avtonomova, Vladimir Alpatov and Nikolai Vasilyev, who devoted a considerable amount of time and energy to the study of the Bakhtin circle and its contribution to modern linguistics (Alpatov, 2005; Avtonomova, 2009; Vasiliev, 2013); Semen Konkin and Nikolai Pankov, who reconstructed Bakhtin's biography (Konkin & Konkina 1993; Pankov, 2009); Natan Tamarchenko and Valery Tyupa, who identified the key features of Bakhtin's poetics (Tamarchenko, 2011; Tyupa, 2021). A significant role in the study of Bakhtin's legacy has been played by a series of Bakhtinskii Sbornik (Kuyundzhich, Makhlin, 1990; Kuyundzhich, Makhlin, 1992; Makhlin, 1997; Makhlin, 2000; Makhlin, 2004) and collections of articles and monographs published in Saransk (Osovsky, 2002; Osovsky, 2006; Dubrovskaya, 2019; Dubrovskaya, 2020a). It is impossible, of course, to name all the names and achievements. A recent review of Russian Bakhtin Studies in the second half of the 1990s and 2010s cites over 150 entries in the bibliography. Thus, Russian Bakhtin Studies has become an integral part of international studies (Dubrovskaya, 2019; Dubrovskaya, 2020a; Osovsky & Dubrovskaya, 2021).

It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the tremendous work done by the authors who contributed to the Collected Works has noticeably influenced the nature of Russian Bakhtin Studies. They highlighted a number of problems that had not previously been addressed. Thanks to the researchers who took part in this work, not only Sergei Averintsev, Sergei Bocharov, Vadim Kozhinov, and Leontina Melikhova, who were part of Mikhail Bakhtin inner circle, but also to the new generation of Bakhtinists (V. Makhlin, N. Nikolaev, and L. Gogotishvili), the readers were able to discover the depth of the early philosophical texts and the philological and philosophical nature of Bakhtin's book on Dostoevsky. One of the most important discoveries of the Collected Works is the publication of Bakhtin's 1940 manuscript on Rabelais and its extensive materials, prepared by Irina Popova. Bakhtin, the theorist of the novel, and Bakhtin, the philosopher of language and culture, were presented in a completely new way in his notes, fragments, and unpublished texts from the 1940s and early 1970s. In fact, this is the same new Bakhtin that Ken Hirschkop writes about in his book.

Perhaps, Hirschkop considered it sufficient to refer to C. Emerson's monograph dedicated to Bakhtin's reception in Russia (Emerson, 1997). However, it remains unclear why *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a prosaic* (Morson & Emerson, 1990) and Holquist's *Dialogism* (Holquist, 2002) are not on the recommended reading list, nor is Hirschkop's own fascinating monograph (Hirschkop, 2002).

We will not argue that it is impossible to comprehend Bakhtin without reading this book. Still, it is clear that reading it should be a necessary step for anyone who wants to seriously understand Bakhtin and

appreciate the full scope of his ideas and their significance for the contemporary humanities. This applies equally to a student who is just beginning to engage with Bakhtin and to an experienced researcher who has decided to take a fresh look at the thinker's legacy.

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