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## Review of Ken Hirschkop, Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy.

Dmitri Nikulin  
*New School for Social Research*

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**Ken Hirschkop, *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. xx + 332 pp. ISBN 0198159606 (paperback).**

**Reviewed by Dmitri Nikulin, New School for Social Research**

The figure and works of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin have drawn much attention from philosophers and literary critics in recent decades, giving rise to a number of interesting appropriations of Bakhtinian texts and notions. One cannot help but feel, however, that each time Bakhtin is approached for a coherent and more or less systematic interpretation, he turns out to be a Proteus, constantly reemerging in new disguises, changing the themes and the terms of discussion. Like Socrates' dream swan, he appears to be an author whom one can hardly catch in a final and definitive way, who hides himself behind the 'deuterocanonical' texts published, not even under a pseudonym, but under the real names of other people (V. Voloshinov, P. Medvedev, I. Kanaev); the substantial contribution he makes cannot be satisfactorily determined. Perhaps, in accord with his very 'project' of dialogism, Bakhtin escapes being pinpointed in a definitive and final way (rendering the very idea of a systematic project of dialogism rather doubtful); more than a coherent system of philosophical or literary theory, he presents a number of unsystematic and unelaborated insights, scattered throughout his texts.

Ken Hirschkop is fully aware of this difficulty, stating that "Bakhtin was to be a creator of notebooks rather than books" (xvi, cp. 53). Bakhtin is, however, the creator of two major books: the 'dialogical' one on Dostoevsky's art (poetics) and the 'carnavalesque' one on Rabelais; also of several major texts, such as "Author and Hero" and "Discourse in the Novel"; and, in addition, of a number of notebooks, some of them published only recently. A remarkable feature of the 'written' Bakhtin is that he appears to be so different from one text to another, always other, keeping an unrevealed identity—which makes a consistent presentation of his thought a very difficult task (perhaps comparable to the challenge of reconstructing Wittgenstein's thought).

Nevertheless, every attempt at a serious, thoughtful and careful reconstruction—of which the present book is an example—can bring new light to the discussion and must always be welcomed. Due to a certain non-systematicity and to the above-mentioned richness and difference in Bakhtin's topics, one can always run the risk of presenting yet another title in an obviously endless series, "Bakhtin and \_\_\_", where the blank can be filled in by any notion important to a writer. In presenting an ambitious account of Bakhtin, referring to a great variety of his texts, Hirschkop is obviously aware of the danger of simplification involved in simply making another substitution

for the blank. His main intention in the present book is to read out of (and at times into) Bakhtin the possibility of a language of and for democracy.

The first part of the book (chapters 1 and 2) reconstructs dialogism in its relation to a language of democracy, mostly in reference to “Discourse in the Novel” and “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity.” The second part (chapter 3) considers Bakhtin’s thought in its historical development, and the third part (chapters 4-7) discusses a number of Bakhtin’s ideas (his understanding of language; theory of the novel; the discussion of heteroglossia and of carnival) as they apply to the language Hirschkop is searching for. Democracy, whose normative model is not spelled out in much detail anywhere in the book [“One has to agree to the distribution of roles; one has the opportunity to comment on them, judge them, suggest others: this means democracy” (295)], has to be understood, after Habermas, not only procedurally, but also as establishing itself as a democratic *ethos* based on certain intersubjectively verifiable principles (28 sqq.). Democracy is undoubtedly a concept to be supported and developed; in doing so, however, the author for the most part substitutes a number of quotations and, at times, rhetorical ornamentation, for the elaboration of a systematic account.

One of the central presuppositions of the author is that “there can and should be an intimate relation between language and democracy” (x). Focusing his discussion mostly on the linguistic range of possibilities, he argues that an agent in a democratic society acts not only within a set or system of formal procedures, but also within a particular culture (which is present through language *par excellence*), this being a prerequisite for democracy.

Bakhtin himself was not much interested in political philosophy: “Bakhtin was virtually worthless as a political thinker in the strict sense, but his disdain for the ordinary business of politics, the distribution and mechanisms of political power, has a certain virtue, for it led him to think of democracy not as a political category, but as a cultural-aesthetic one, as the promise not so much of a society in which the people are sovereign as of a society with a historical experience worth having” (274, cp. 290). As Hirschkop argues, Bakhtin’s situation was unique: he was living simultaneously in an environment without democratic procedures and in an established democratic culture (that of the intelligentsia) (ix, 33). Thus, linguistic (cultural) democracy and procedural (formal and legal) democracy are two separate aspects and can exist apart from each other. As the author suggests, however, in order to be authentic (i.e., as a democratic being), one has to participate in both aspects of democracy at the same time. Thus, one needs to establish a proper language of and for democracy. In Hirschkop’s account, it is through Bakhtin’s writings that it may become possible to render such a language explicit (cp. 26 sqq. et passim). Since the democratic *ethos* has

to presuppose democratic public discourse, the author's intention becomes to read the language of the democratic discourse out of Bakhtin (45-49 et al.). According to such a reading, democracy, apart and even beyond its purely procedural aspect, should be sought as a form of language in the first place. The peculiarity of Hirschkop's approach is that he finds it appropriate to refer mostly to Bakhtin's aesthetics, while dismissing his ethics, in trying to establish the desired *ethos*.

However laudable the intention to spell out a (if not *the*) language for democracy in its aesthetic form might be, taken as a normative principle of reconstruction it leads one to ignore the multi-faceted and at times seemingly incommensurable character of Bakhtin's texts, by reading and presenting them in a rather one-sided way, from a preconceived angle, in an attempt to find a unified, intersubjectively valid aesthetic. The author further stresses the importance of language in establishing a specific kind of narrative, that of history: "History is the framing context which brings a language out of itself and dialogizes it, introducing that element of self-distance necessary for critical judgement; history, because the point of responsible action is not only the satisfaction of needs and the enactment of justice, but the creation of a meaningful narrative" (295). Hirschkop attempts to read out of Bakhtin "a conception of history which is entirely aesthetic" (287), reproaching Bakhtin for never having left "the dream of purely ethical dialogue" (221).

If history is to be portrayed as a narrative, then, of course, the role of language cannot be underappreciated: "Only by translating these descriptions of language [Bakhtin's description of dialogicality] into a critique of a conception of language can we make plausible the otherwise bizarre claim that the style and technique of a language could be substantively relevant to a discussion of democracy" (16). The author pays attention to the "linguistic turn" in Bakhtin, which goes hand in hand with Bakhtin's interest in the linguistics of Saussure, with the critique (together with Medvedov) of the formal method in literary criticism, with a number of attempts to spell out the fundamentals of the social (in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*) and (primarily) of literature and human dialogical interaction, both mediated to a great extent by the structures of language. It is thus from the point of view of the 'linguistic turn' that Hirschkop tries to put the pieces of the Bakhtinian puzzle together into a coherent picture. Consequently, dialogism in Bakhtin necessarily turns out to be nothing more than an intersubjective relation, "a form of language," in which the relationship of the I to the other has to be thought primarily and exceptionally as linguistic (155, 168 et passim; cp. language as dialogue, 207).

One wonders, however, if such a linguistically intersubjective unification of the variety of remarkably multiple and truly pluralistic voices and appearances in Bakhtin really does justice to his thought. No doubt, reflections on the role of language play an

important part in different periods of Bakhtin's life. It is not only Saussure (cp. chapter 4, esp. p. 213 sqq.), however, but also—and primarily—Kant (and Hegel), as well as the Neo-Kantians with their entire range of themes (the preeminence of the functional, relational approach; the distinction between the sciences and humanities; the attention paid to historical background in a systematic argument, etc.), who are of major importance for understanding Bakhtin. Unfortunately, no concise account of neo-Kantianism is found in the book, except for sporadic references (for instance, the whole of Kant's moral philosophy is given through a very brief reference to Scheler's criticism, 198-199). In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics (Art)* the human person (*'lichnost'*) is not portrayed as solely a form of language, is not reducible to a mere referential source of a form (possibly, a number of heteroglotic forms) of speaking. Dialogue itself is, of course, impossible without recurring to a language, particularly to a language in its intersubjective function (its "double-voiced word"), which both unites and separates the I and the other (and, to an extent, the I-for-myself and the I-for-the-other). Dialogue is not, however, just a particular, historically developed form of language. Although Bakhtin unequivocally recognizes the dialogicality of language (at least, its inevitably dialogical overtones; cp. *Sobranie sochineniy [Collected Works]*, T. 5, Moscow, 1996, p. 238 et al.), he nevertheless stresses that the dialogical interaction is primarily defined not by language (i.e., that dialogue is not solely a linguistic phenomenon), but by a particular structure of the person (her unfinalizability, represented through the voice), independently of both purely ideological and linguistic discourse (cp. "Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book" and *Sobranie sochineniy*, 63 sqq.).

Close and careful reading of Bakhtin makes it clear that the person, for him, is not (at least, not only and not primarily) "an ideal framed by the traumas and transformations of modern Europe," as the author puts it (203); that it is *not* the case that "the subject of dialogism finds itself in dialogue not with other persons but with other languages" (222), but exactly the opposite. The person (or personality) for Bakhtin is a fully independent and "unmerged consciousness" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 17 et al.), interacting with other, equally independent persons, represented through independent, individual voices. Although Hirschkop's reconstruction may be a consistent one, it does violence to the interpreted texts, and consequently has to overlook, if not ignore, a number of Bakhtin's key notions, which are mentioned in a rather cursory way (e.g., that of the "event", p. 210-211, 221-222; the "voice," which is identified with a "socio-ideological language," p. 262, cp. p. 228), since they obviously do not fit the author's rigid interpretative scheme.

Furthermore, Hirschkop primarily tends to stress the "printed word" (e.g., p. 261), whereas Bakhtin in his dialogism emphasizes the spoken word; being rather suspicious of the very form of '*Schriftlichkeit*,' he leaves the most intimate thoughts to

the oral dialogical discussion (in the tea sessions till morning), to dialogue outside of theoretically construed dialogism. Hirschkop also stresses the necessity of achieving agreement and consensus through the dialogue (9, 227 et al.), whereas Bakhtin points out that the dialogue is much more of an (inescapable) disagreement and dissensus, the tragic rupture of calm unification, which is the *conditio humana* in the dialogical exchange.

As might be expected, when Hirschkop abandons his attempt to fit Bakhtin into the “\_\_\_”, he is capable of providing an excellent scholarly work. Thus, the account in the second part of the book (chapter 3, “Bakhtin Myths and Bakhtin History,” 111 sqq.) of Bakhtin’s writings at all stages of his career is thoughtful and quite useful (except, perhaps, for the last period, 1961-1975, which is presented rather sketchily; 190-193). Among other interesting points aptly presented in the book, one might also mention the discussion of the ambiguity of Bakhtin’s philosophical account of language [which “has not only to represent contexts, but to respond to them” (213)], as well as that of the mutual exclusivity and complementarity of dialogue and narrative (chapter. 5, 225 sqq.). Thus, despite a number of shortcomings in its philosophical reconstruction—which forces Bakhtin into being solely a linguistic-intersubjective thinker—the critical and historical parts of the book contain several valuable insights and contributions to the understanding of Bakhtin’s development throughout different periods of his life, a life that itself presents an important testimony to the epoch.