Beyond the Cutting Edge: Bakhtin at 107

CARYL EMERSON


The first edition of the volume under review appeared in 1989, when the Bakhtin industry was a crabbier and more polarized place. Communist censors were still, barely, at their posts. “Cultural theory” in the capitalist West was largely oppositionist; only a radicalized, politicized Bakhtin was relevant to it, and a certain shrillness obtained in the debates. Although the question of Bakhtin’s Marxism had ended in a draw, carnival still meant rebellion or transgression, and the double-voiced word was deployed as often to subvert a given perspective as to supplement it. Against the spirit of liberal-humanist appropriations of Bakhtin, left-wing cultural theorists (fairly, it must be said) faulted dialogue for its fascination with process at the expense of justice and for its indifference to power. Influential French Bakhtinians, whose body-oriented and psychoanalytic theories rested on eccentric readings of a limited portion of Bakhtin’s corpus, had not yet confronted the luminous renderings of Bakhtin as religious thinker and theologically inflected aesthetician, which gathered force only in the 1990s. Bakhtin’s biography was still awash in rumor and legend. The sources of his thought in the German philological tradition had just begun to be explored.

The 1989 edition professed a distinct politics. The blurb on the back cover lamented the fact that most prior serious work on Bakhtin had been “narrowly literary in focus and blandly conservative in its analytical concerns”; Bakhtin’s diverse, often contradictory writings had been “appropriated largely as a means of fortifying the bastions of close(d) textual analysis.” This situation was to be remedied by restoring to Bakhtin “that radical cutting edge which has been consistently blunted.” The front cover displayed a Bolshevist poster from 1920 with the following slogan in Cyrillic: “A book is nothing but a person speaking publicly.” I remember thinking at the time that this poster was an astonishingly inappropriate illustration for an anthology of essays on the twentieth-century’s best-known theorist of the novel, that most privately written and privately consumed of all literary genres. The library had been subsumed by the carnival square.

Upon closer inspection, however, the public square in that poster was clearly a political rally, not a feast. It was filled with well-dressed, disciplined reader-activists, not lewd or
Beyond the Cutting Edge: Bakhtin at 107

grotesque revelers. And indeed, the “radical cutting edge” of the original anthology was more contemplative, more cautiously academic, and less abrasive than its promotional lines suggest. Of its eight entries, six are reprinted in 2001 almost without change, and (with one or two possible exceptions) none sound frantic or dated. There is a smart, gorgeously written essay by Terry Eagleton (“Bakhtin, Schopenhauer, Kundera”) on morose versus buffo philosophers and their tolerance for seeing humor in the comedy of repetition—and especially in carnival routine, which “releases us from the terrorism of excessive significance,” but at the risk, of course, of blotting out the unique (p. 236). Also of high quality is Ann Jefferson’s “Bodymatters: self and Other in Bakhtin, Sartre and Barthes,” one of the first essays to juxtapose Bakhtin’s early ethical writings (in English only since 1990) to luminaries of postwar French thought. In a compelling sequence, she compares the young Bakhtin’s appreciation of the body as a gift (bestowed by a loving author onto a passive and grateful hero) with Sartre’s far more suspicious hero/subject incarnations (the Other as theft, alienation, enslavement: in a word, bad representation), which permits a better appreciation of the mature Bakhtin’s escape from representation into participatory carnival. Jefferson concludes with Roland Barthes’s theory of reading, in her words a “strategy for using carnival as a means for resisting representation” (p. 218)—but, she admits, this “lonely carnival of reading,” for all its immediate pleasures, restores a conscious singularity to the body and thus reduces “the scope of the arena” (p. 224). This dilemma of “textual carnival,” always at some level fraudulent, is addressed in several of the essays. Again we recall that ambiguous poster on the first edition’s front cover, posing the awkward question: Do real public-square rebels, with their generous bodies that are all breasts and buttocks and don’t fear death, read books?

David Shepherd’s nuanced discussion of “Bakhtin and the reader” also survives from 1989, but does not take on such questions. Shepherd has problems enough. Internally, Bakhtin makes little distinction between readers, listeners, and understanders. And as regards the actual process of reading, Bakhtin is far more attuned to the radical particularity of any given reader’s response (irreducible to “horizons” or “interpretive communities”) than is the German school of reception theory, or the far sassier Stanley Fish. Fish plays something of a Viktor Shklovsky to Shepherd’s Bakhtin. Like the early Russian Formalists, Fish prefers to work with an on-off world, either determinacy or indeterminacy, and history for him is simply a stack of these situations piled one on top of the other. But finding flaws in others’ models does not make a theory. Here as elsewhere, Bakhtin is hampered by his reluctance to deal in a sophisticated, multifaceted way with institutionalized power. So unwilling is Bakhtin, at least in his middle period, to fix communities statically in place (that is, to keep them from further subdividing) and to grant them some benevolent, normative authority that he avoids mentioning specific readers altogether, diffusing them instead in a “dialogizing background.” It’s hard to know, Shepherd concludes, “exactly how and where to use a Bakhtinian theory of reading” (p. 151).

The remaining three “old” entries are more conventionally radical, with the feel of a cutting edge (now long past) still clinging to them. Such edges date with appalling swiftness, but the issues raised are enduring ones. Two essays are feminist in inspiration and address the relevance of carnival to women’s texts, targeting opposite extremes of that popular Bakhtinian application. Nancy Glazener’s “Dialogic subversion: Bakhtin, the novel and Gertrude Stein” is on the whole skeptical of the myth of the “larger-than-life folk body” (p. 160), questioning how such diffusely anarchic, mystified and nostalgic metaphors can really help women, especially of the lower classes. It turns out that “carnival disruption” is of less
use than we had thought. Novels are not monolithically subversive—they are merely
relativizing—and what the author can most effectively relativize is access to the heroine.
Glazener reads Stein’s haunting tale “The Gentle Lena” as a “subversion of realism” at the
level of character psychology; the doomed heroine is scarcely heard from. Such reticence is
not the way of Clair Wills in her “Upsetting the public: carnival, hysteria and women’s
texts.” Like Glazener, it takes Wills some time to wedge gender awareness into Bakhtin’s
writings (it’s just not there), but once she does, she insists on the consciousness-raising
value of unruly, open displays of female eccentricity. Taking her cue from French feminists,
she sees the dynamics of textual carnival precisely in repressed and deeply private resources
made shockingly public: the voice of the female hysteric. Although this approach yields its
truths, Wills is hobbled by her acceptance of Bakhtin’s own exaggerated binary opposition,
in his book on Rabelais, between the impenetrable, monolithically gloomy official realm
and the perpetually festive lower strata. Throughout the 1990s, Bakhtinian carnival was
increasingly called to account on this score. Such complaints were not new. When Bakhtin
defended his Rabelais project as a dissertation in 1946, his examiners raised the same objec-
tions. Among the welcome additions to the 2001 revised edition is Nikolai Pan’kov’s “dra-
matization” of that tense, seven-hour defense—and it is sobering to find there (see espe-
cially pp. 45–48) so many sensible correctives to all our early Western swallowings of carni-
val, as voiced half a century earlier by conscientious Stalinist-era academics.

The last of the reprinted essays is Tony Crowley’s “Bakhtin and the history of the
language”—the language being Standard English, as linguistic historians imposed it on the
British in the nineteenth century. Vital to Crowley’s project is that Bakhtin’s militarized
metaphors of struggle be taken literally, that is, differentiation must mean above all conflict,
not friendly rivalry or supplementation. Sameness is imposed and policed; it creates si-
lence, distortion, resentment, not soul-mates or common denominators. Dictionaries and
grammars simply enforce a (high) class dialect. But Crowley’s disapproving account of the
creation of Imperial English is also meant as a corrective to Bakhtin’s benignly Hegelian
views on language evolution. We must not assume that the historical progression from
monoglossia to polyglossia to heteroglossia is inevitably liberating and democratizing, he
writes. For all that it makes native speakers feel at home, to subdivide languages is to
subdivide and dissipate power. Oppressed classes should have the right to centralize too.
Language unity can serve the cause of self-determination as well as imperial hegemony—
and “in certain contexts a preference for heteroglossia and dialogism would be politically
regressive” (p. 192). Again we recall that Bolshevik poster, with its no-nonsense Marxist-
Leninist corrective to the carnival square.

Taken together, then, these six essays query Bakhtin’s more ecstatic and utopian sides
from the perspective of critics who wish to do more than merely contemplate the world.
They would like to change it. The biographical, poetic, and spiritual equipment of their
subject is not of much relevance to this project; nor is Bakhtin’s personal intent. But in the
post-Communist period, precisely the personalist Bakhtin (and Bakhtin as a person) has
been the site of revelations and insight. Cultural studies would have to stretch to accommo-
date it. The five new entries in 2001 do so with vigor. They are of two types, additions and
replacements, and both testify to the maturation of Bakhtin scholarship as well as to a deep-
ening of cultural studies beyond the materialist and the topically political.

Two new authors are added, reflecting two major developments in research over the
past decade: Nikolai Pan’kov, Bakhtin’s most patient Russian biographer, and Brian Poole,
the superbly equipped Canadian scholar who has spent years in Germany and Russia docu-
menting Bakhtin’s intellectual debts. Each is a scrupulous archivist and sleuth, but of different sorts. Pan'kov resurrects Bakhtin’s dissertation defense, Moscow, mid-November 1946, as (his title tells us) “real event, high drama, and academic comedy.” In fact he recasts the transcript of that tension-filled session as a tragi-farce—without, however, violating the reverently custodial tradition of Russian scholars honoring their great cultural figures. Laughter is one-way. Party-minded toadies raise inane objections, cautious but courageous academic colleagues rally to Bakhtin’s side, colorful legends—such as Bakhtin banging his crutch on the floor and shouting “Obscurantists!” to his examiners—are cited and disconfirmed. In the end Bakhtin was awarded the lesser kandidat degree, not the doktor, and although that story is patiently explained, we are set up to despise the decision. Pan'kov is the sort of chronicler we would all love to have for our own lives. He collates every scrap, and when information doesn’t add up or has been mystified, he always gives it the kindest possible spin. That Bakhtin faked parts of his CV, didn’t have an undergraduate degree, and seeded incompatible myths about himself that he knew were untrue, is stated modestly, almost as background facts of the era. But if, by pursuing this higher academic degree late in life, Bakhtin appeared to retreat from his “maximalist ascetic stoicism” (his refusal to seek honors or promotions), it was because he “at no time imagined himself a heroic figure” (p. 27). Pan'kov counters one virtue with another virtue so that his hero, however he acts, can’t lose. And Bakhtin is thus engulfed by that loving attention to exonerating detail which, in Bakhtin’s own philosophy, constitutes the only ethical way to author another subject.

Other newcomers to the anthology adopt a more skeptical, even suspicious stance. Brian Poole is one. His essay, while respectful toward its subject, is yet another chapter in the slow unraveling of Bakhtin’s immense (and in print, usually uncredited) debt to contemporary German thought. Poole made news several years ago by identifying five pages in Bakhtin’s Rabelais book that were taken verbatim from Ernst Cassirer; here his focus is on the terms and concepts (especially the notion of sympathy) that Bakhtin borrowed from Max Scheler and other early German phenomenologists. Poole’s fastidious archival work does not fit the “reverential” mode, to be sure. But Poole is not out to decrown Bakhtin. He hopes to show that powerful thinkers have predecessors and that Bakhtin, for all his cavalier indifference to idea ownership, is not “the author of his own intellectual context” (p. 109). Knowing Bakhtin’s sources can also help us to date his work. Since Bakhtin compiled his “Scheler notebook” only in 1926 and so much of his essay “Author and Hero” is resonant with Scheler’s ideas, Poole places the writing of that essay in 1927, not in 1919–22 as formerly surmised. Do five years matter? In fact they do, both for the self-other constructs in the Dostoevsky study (now only a year away) and for Bakhtin’s purported authorship of the Marxist-oriented Voloshinov/Medvedev texts, which seems less likely. Now that self-mystification is a confirmed part of Bakhtin’s biography, the conflation of Bakhtin with his colleagues is getting a welcome new look—not, however, for what it can win us in today’s turf wars, but on behalf of a more accurate reconstitution of the person of Bakhtin in his own time.

This brings us to the final category of entries: updates and “replacements.” There are three: a new introduction by Ken Hirschkop, a succinct bibliographical essay by Carol Adlam (made necessary by the worldwide explosion of writing on Bakhtin), and a piece by Graham Pechey, the eloquent British scholar who in the 1980s employed a semioticized Bakhtin in the interests of oppressed peoples (South Africans especially) and whose work in this area has since grown increasingly meditative. Pechey’s 1989 contribution, “On the borders of
Bakhtin: dialogisation, decolonisation”—an ambitious attempt to locate carnival, heteroglossia, and the poyphonic novel in the politicized Soviet context—is replaced in the revised edition by a piece originally published in 1993, “Not the novel: Bakhtin, poetry, truth, God.” “Not the novel” focuses on Bakhtin’s ambiguity toward the poetic. On the one hand, poetry ideally strives toward unity, centralization, the suppression of diversity, so when the Other breaks in (even allowing for some modest hybridization), the intruder is subject to “instant codification” (p. 63). So uncongenial does Bakhtin find this dynamic (open for an instant—snap shut—reshuffle the resources) that he dissolves altogether the classical triadic division of epic, lyric, and drama, the better to pit all three “poetic” genres against their antipode, the novel. In doing so, he shifts genre studies from ahistorical forms to actual forces, from “types” to “lines.” But this is only one side of the model. Pechey detects another essential moment in Bakhtin, highly poetic and utopian, where dialogue is suspended and the language of the gods invoked. Novels rely on these moments to protect them from endlessness and meaninglessness. Likewise, certain poetry performs itself in narrative allegory, combining the sublime and the grotesque (Pechey’s example is William Blake) in “friendly forms of authority,” palpable and intimate. For Bakhtin, Pechey concludes, “the grotesque body was only half the story of our humanity, the novel no absolute model, and the absolute a human reality” (p. 83).

A trans-materialistic Bakhtin with the simple binaries shorn away and a politics impossible to call: if this is what Cultural Theory now demands, it is welcome indeed. The new cover has done away with that Bolshevik poster, featuring instead a de Chirico canvas in shades of blue, “The Uncertainty of the Poet”: bunches of plantain fruit next to a female torso in marble. Ken Hirschkop’s new introduction, “Bakhtin in the sober light of day,” is the work of another sleuth, for whom telling a story straight is more exciting than playing midwife to one more inflated rumor. Hirschkop walks us deadpan through all the things we thought we knew about Bakhtin that (thanks to recent research) we no longer do. In particular he objects to cleansing Bakhtin of those concrete historical pressures within which he acted and thought as he did, a pious sanitizing gesture that has its equivalent in Bakhtin’s own ecstatic belief in a millennial popular culture, in symbolic forms that transcend experience, in all those moments where “Bakhtin welcomes History at the front door, [but] quietly shuffles it out the back” (p. 20). Hirschkop has tremendous respect for Bakhtin, but believes that his titanic project to yoke language to culture, approached from so many angles over so many years with such ingenious tools, was ultimately a failure. So where do we go from here? “Scholarship always dreams of a straight and steady passage,” Hirschkop writes, “forgetting that history is not only the storm that blows it off course but also the wind that fills its sails” (p. 2). Study a person or event long enough, and it ceases to provide any answers at all; instead of theory there is a singular, stubborn, quixotic journey. Bakhtin continues to be a spectacular starting point for all sorts of cultural study. But as the essays in this revised anthology reveal, he no longer provides his best readers with any ready-made ends.