

## CHAPTER 36

## MIKHAIL BAKHTIN

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IN the summer of 1924, the twenty-nine-year-old Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), already invalidated by a chronic bone disease and without regular employment in the new Soviet state, delivered a lecture to his study circle in Leningrad on that category of religious experience he called ‘grounded peace’. Prayer was key to it. The task of a philosophy of religion, Bakhtin argued, was to understand ‘the form of a world in which prayer, ritual, and hope’ could have validity for consciousness. Peace of mind is the product either of complacency, or of trust. Aesthetic tranquillity—our mind coming to rest in a well-formed work of art—tends to be complacent. What liberates us from complacency is uneasiness or anxiety [*bespokoistvo*], which develops into repentance, a principled ‘non-coincidence’ of self with self. Whenever this internal bifurcation occurs, I need a Third, someone who can witness and evaluate, ‘Someone who needs me to be good’ and whom I can address. Thus ‘the true being of the spirit begins only when repentance begins’ (Pumpiansky 1923–1925, 207–9).

Throughout that year and the next, the study circle was occupied with Kant and questions of theology. Bakhtin consistently maintained that a religious event was always radically personal. It could not be generalized into a religious norm. What grounds a religious act is not a categorical ought, as in the Kantian framework, but a ‘unique or once-occurring ought’—because ‘no one in the entire world, besides myself, can accomplish what I myself must accomplish’. Bakhtin elaborated on this idea a year later, during a lecture on the *Critique of Judgment*. ‘The logic of religion is completely different from that of philosophy’, he noted. Religion is ‘a personal relationship to a personal God’. But that relation is also what constitutes the ‘special difficulty of religion’, what generates its ‘distinctive fear’: a fear of religion itself, of Revelation, of the entire ‘personal orientation’ (Pumpiansky 1923–1925, 220).

Bakhtin’s comments reflect his passionate early interest in Søren Kierkegaard (Duvakin 2002, 41–3; Sandler 2012). They also register his engagement with the works of the Marburg Neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842–1918), especially Cohen’s attempt to disentangle experience from cognition and ground religious reality in the individual subject (Kagan 1920 [2004], 208–10). Those two thinkers, together with the

German Romantics and later Russian idealist philosophers, stimulated Bakhtin's idiosyncratic phenomenology of I–other relations in his writings of the early 1920s. By the end of the decade, its dynamic would inspire that strange mix of personalism, inter-active coexistence, and ethical flexibility that fuels the polyphony and dialogism of his Dostoevsky study (Bakhtin 1929, rev. 1963). Bakhtin is not usually considered part of the Russian religious tradition. His theory of dialogue, with a passing nod to Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, has been comfortably assimilated as a secular concept, and his carnival has flourished as a downright pagan one. His chronotopic theory of the novel relies on socio-temporal constructs that owe more to the workings of language and biology than to God-seeking or God-building. And yet for reasons both immanent and tactical, a rich Christian subtext has been divined in Bakhtin's work. It can be shown to animate both the Word of dialogism and the Body of carnival—those two strands of Bakhtin so often viewed as incompatible—and even to synthesize them. The task of this chapter is to document that metaphysical-religious subtext, in three stages.

National reception history plays a large role in the story, as does the timing of translations. The first stage is the recuperation, during the twilight years of Marxist-Leninism in the USSR, of Bakhtin's spiritual ('idealist') side and its attachment to a Christian worldview. Crucial here is Bakhtin's early discussion of 'spirit' [*dukh*] and 'soul' [*dusha*], in his peculiar re-accentuation of those theological terms. Interpreters of this material in the West (our second stage), working with partial or bowdlerized Russian texts, 'trimmed him (albeit often unwittingly)' to their own presuppositions (Lock 1991, 68). As work went forward in Russia on a six-volume *Collected Works* (1996–2012), Bakhtin's intellectual history was pieced together and the dichotomy 'socialism versus faith' reappraised. Bakhtin, a believer, saw no necessary tension between the profane aspects of his thought and its more transcendental dimensions. During his police interrogation in 1929, he admitted to welcoming theological experts into gatherings held at his own apartment, and he self-identified as 'Marxist-revolutionist, loyal to Soviet power, religious' (Savkin 1991, 110–14). In our final stage we revisit from across the corpus other theologically inflected categories in Bakhtin's worldview in addition to spirit and soul, with an emphasis on the graced virtues Faith, Hope, and Love.

The quest for the Christian Bakhtin was partly an accident of history, a turf war over his legacy that erupted after Bakhtin's death in 1975. But that struggle, carried on furtively during the final Soviet decades and openly in the more innocent West, is itself of some fascination. Bakhtin considered his own physical survival a carnivalized event, an unwarranted and morally suspended act. What had it cost his spirit? To the great Byzantinist and Biblical scholar Sergei Averintsev (1937–2005) Bakhtin, near the end of his life, confessed that he had been 'no better than his time' (Averintsev, cited in Bonetskaia 2017, 6). In 1970, to his disciple Sergei Bocharov (1929–2017), Bakhtin remarked that his generation had betrayed everything, homeland as well as culture. When Bocharov asked him how betrayal might have been avoided, Bakhtin answered 'rather cheerfully, with an unclouded face: "By perishing"' (Bocharov 1994, 1020). Bakhtin had not perished. But he was a markedly sanguine and detached witness, a person not wholly of his own time—or rather, not trapped in his own time. He considered

great fictive environments every bit as real, responsive, and worthy of our trust as the world we wake up to, perhaps more worthy. Averintsev, whose poetic sensibility matched Bakhtin's, would have agreed. But Averintsev was suspicious of those who rushed to make 'consecrated Orthodox philosophy' out of Bakhtin's thought, when the most that could be said was that 'generally speaking, it was never atheistic' (Averintsev 1995). Bakhtin the man was another matter, however. He was astonishingly unburdened, Averintsev recalls. He never remembered an insult. In shrill polarized times, he had no talent for polemics, preferring instead to invite everyone in. Averintsev came close to comparing this 'lightness of spirit' with 'Christian meekness'. The more secular sceptics among eminent Bakhtin scholars in Russia, such as Natalia Bonetskaia, have been awed by this apotheosis of his image: an unknown Soviet-era thinker, she marvels, received in the West 'as a kind of revelation, as the gospel truth!' (Bonetskaia 2004, 5).

Bakhtin, a banker's son from the provincial Russian gentry, received a pre-Soviet education and was intimate with the poetic and metaphysical culture of the Symbolist period. Fluent in German since childhood, formed intellectually by Kant and Schelling and a close student of the German philosophical tradition up through Ernst Cassirer, he felt at home in those debates throughout his life (Brandist 2002, 1–52). Marxism appealed to several of his closest friends, but never to Bakhtin himself. His field was the classics, his starting point was Kant, and he revered the erudite Symbolist poet and German-trained fellow classicist, Vyacheslav Ivanov. Before the revolution, Bakhtin knew (and admired) Nikolai Lossky, professor of philosophy at Petrograd University in 1916–1917 (Duvakin 2002, 63–4). Literature was important to Bakhtin largely as an illustration of his philosophy, as the freest possible carrier for it. Among his long-term philosophical goals was to develop a four-part typology of deeds—or, as he preferred, 'events': ethical, aesthetic, political, and religious (Bakhtin 1993, 54). The political and religious parts were never written, and even the ethics remained in rough draft. The times did not encourage it. Two years before Bakhtin delivered his lectures on Kant, in 1922, Russia's most eminent idealist philosophers had been deported out of Petrograd to Western Europe with no rights of return. Bakhtin was infinitely below that visibility bar. He stayed home, was arrested in 1929 on the obscure charge of lecturing on idealism and participating in an Orthodox study circle, and escaped being sentenced to a far-north death camp thanks to poor health and the intervention of high-ranking officials. As he recalled the incident near the end of his life, he had been well treated, not like the brutal terror later. It was, he said, a routine roundup of religious-idealist intellectuals; 'they had to find some reason to arrest us, so they latched onto this' (Duvakin 2002, 101). Bakhtin and his wife were exiled to a village in Kazakhstan for five years, and thereafter banned from official residence in large cities. Bakhtin supported himself as a lecturer, the book-keeper for a pig farm, a high school teacher. When the amputation of his right leg in 1938 improved his health sufficiently to allow him to hold a full-time job, he defended a dissertation and became professor of world literature at a teachers' college in the provincial town of Saransk. Friends sent him books, and he devised more acceptable vehicles for the metaphysical aspect of his thought.

Bakhtin never intended his thought as a theology. He identified his work (presumably following Kant and Scheler) as ‘philosophical anthropology’—and Bocharov agreed with this classification. At some point in the 1920s, Bocharov claimed, Bakhtin had ‘turned from the high road of Russian religious philosophy.’ He had saturated his early writings with theological concepts and resolved his aesthetics through them, but it remained ‘aesthetics on the border of religious philosophy, without crossing that border’ (Bocharov 1995, 42). To date, the most thorough treatment of Bakhtin’s ‘borderline discipline’ is a UCLA dissertation by Marilyn Louise Gray. She uses the term ‘Russian theological anthropology’ to situate Bakhtin somewhere between a ‘philokalic’ (patristic) orientation and the ‘philosophic’ tradition inspired by Soloviev (Gray 2011, 2–18; the binary is Paul Valliere’s<sup>1</sup>). But Gray points out that the conservative neopatristic synthesis dominant in the émigré theology of Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky, with its anti-philosophical, anti-Western purifying zeal, never touched Bakhtin. He was a child of the Symbolist era and heir to the ‘intense, flexible, and creative theological investigations’ of the Russian 1890s (Gray 2011, 10).

In Gray’s spirit, this essay approaches Bakhtin as a non-canonical Christian personalist. His thought presumes a human being who is outward-reaching but not acquisitive, answerable for deeds but not autonomous, and although at any given moment a conscious working unity, never, until death, a unified or graspable whole. In *Bakhtin and Religion*, the first English-language anthology on the metaphysical side of our subject, Randall Poole identifies this worldview as ‘apophatic’ (Poole 2001). Such a focus on cognitive humility, recalling Bocharov on Bakhtin’s elusiveness and Averintsev on his ‘lightness’ and ‘meekness,’ is highly productive. Bakhtin is phenomenological in that he argues not transcendently but immanently, beginning with observable subjective experience in the world. Although he cares deeply about individual responsibility, he is less haunted than is, say, his beloved Dostoevsky by questions of radical freedom, especially as registered in transgressive acts. Rather, Bakhtin defines human freedom temporally: not as a range of potential acts or rights to act, but as the undefinability and unfinalizability of the subject in time. What cannot be finalized cannot be wholly known. The unknowability of persons is the most God-like thing about us. For (as Poole glosses Bakhtin’s argument) I am not a natural given. I am a task to be accomplished, and thus I do not coincide with myself. I need *you* to complete me, to make me aware of my agency and its effects. But however you complete me at this moment, I always remain free in my upcoming response to you. Bakhtin insists upon this open economy for every ‘I’ and every ‘other.’ It is this dynamic that confirms us in the image of God.

Now in place of that ‘other,’ that ‘you,’ put God. Bakhtin did this every now and then in his private notebooks. Just as God is unknowable and unfinalizable, so is every person. By itself, Poole notes, the I–Other model need not have religious implication. It works

<sup>1</sup> The binary (philokalic/philosophic Orthodoxy) is something Valliere first suggests in chapter 18, ‘Introduction to the Modern Orthodox Tradition,’ of *The Teachings of Modern Christianity on Law, Politics, and Human Nature*, edited by John Witte Jr. and Frank S. Alexander (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 503–32.

equally well with naturalism or theism. But this ambiguity is worth sustaining beyond the obvious caution one must observe when contemplating God in an atheistic state. If I choose to make God my Other, more than a mere lateral extension of trust is required; I require faith. Faith is always a leap. But the unknowable does not necessarily mean the mystical. An apophatic stance, celebrating the inaccessibility of what cannot be known, can be palpable and concrete, an ally of uniqueness, open-endedness, non-self-sufficiency, our best reason to tolerate the existence of others and refrain from judging them. Poole notes similarities here between Bakhtin's model and the work of important religious thinkers such as Sergei Bulgakov (1873–1944) and Pavel Florensky (1882–1937). It is telling that an essay published in the émigré press after the appearance of Bakhtin's early Kantian writings (but before any serious Russian work on his biography or sources) simply assumed that he was an integral part of the Russian religious renaissance (Ilinskii 1986).

There is much to recommend this approach. For Bakhtin as for Soloviev, human dignity depends upon the personal embrace of an embodied divine or absolute idea. The Dostoevsky book, often read as a falling-away from religious paradigms and the exile of the Author, is understood by Gray as a broadening of both. Bakhtin's nomination of the Idea as the 'dominant' of Dostoevsky's hero 'functions as a philosophical equivalent to the person's theological status as a unique hypostasis' (Gray 2011, 106). And Bakhtin is less absolute and 'legal' about sin than are many orthodox theologies. Following Soloviev, he sees sinfulness as more a tendency than a condition, the result of flawed self-other or part-whole relations. Gray argues that Bakhtin's model of aesthetic representation (and thus of Creation and creativity generally), both early and late, is based on a radical kenotic Christology (Gray 2011, 238), but one that remains on the human rather than sophianic or cosmological level. Ascetic self-discipline and mortification play no role in it—which can come as no surprise to enthusiasts of Bakhtin's carnival grotesque. Nor does Bakhtin share the common Russian fascination with the Holy Fool, a national type he downplays as deficient in responsible human relation (Gray 2011, 207). Bakhtin's ambition, which he pursues through visual horizons, words, and bodies, is to restore the marred Image by 'the existential laying-aside of the privileged position of the self' (Gray 2011, 225). Can this be done?

## THE BECOMING OF BAKHTIN AS A RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHER

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In 1972, three years before his death, Bakhtin informed his three devoted 'discoverers' Sergei Bocharov, Vadim Kozhinov, and Georgii Gachev, young Moscow humanists who were also Orthodox Christian believers, that he had stored some abandoned philosophical work from the 1920s in Saransk. Two water-damaged notebooks were retrieved from a rat-infested lumber room, lovingly transcribed, and eventually published in 1979

and 1985 (in English, 1990 and 1993). These early writings, dense with Christian motifs, caused some confusion when inserted into the known Bakhtin corpus. Outside Russia, Bakhtin was being read as a Marxist and a progressive sociologist. Several books arguing against formalism, against Freud, and on behalf of sociolinguistics, which had been published in the 1920s under the name of Bakhtin's Marxist friends, were being ascribed to Bakhtin. To the Western academy, disenchanted with structuralist system-making and unfulfilled by the relativizing post-structuralism that was its backlash, Bakhtin seemed a breath of fresh air. He came on the scene with a voice, a face, a principled commitment. *Rabelais and His World* had appeared in English in the restless year 1968 and became a bestseller. Its division of European culture into official-clerical (dead, serious, unfree) and unofficial-anarchic-folk (alive, laughing, and free) sounded a liberationist note. The French translation of Bakhtin's Dostoevsky book appeared in 1970 with a preface by Julia Kristeva, celebrated Bulgarian-French cultural critic and psychoanalyst, under the title 'Une poétique ruinée' [translated into English as 'The Ruin of a Poetics'], in which heteroglossia was equated with rebellious political action and Bakhtin's thought with the best freedom-bearing impulses of the modern era: secular, anti-totalitarian, and anti-theological.

Precisely those aspects of Bakhtin's profile that so appealed to Western intellectuals were distressing to more religiously inclined Russians at home, for whom Marxist thought had far less glitter. Aleksei Losev (1893–1988), known in the 1920s for his work on myth, logic, music theory, and a linguistics deeply informed by Logos, was, like Bakhtin, 'rounded up' in 1930, served time, survived a crippling disability, and returned to write massive works in the post-Stalinist period (see Obolevitch in this volume). At the end of his *Aesthetics of the Renaissance*, published in 1978, Losev devotes a half-dozen scathing pages to Bakhtin's book on Rabelais (Losev 1978, 586–93). The book is unscholarly, Losev insists, fantastically exaggerated, and wholly misrepresents François Rabelais, a man of the Church, whose *parody* of Renaissance humanism Bakhtin takes as true coin. What Bakhtin calls progressive realism was in fact nothing but 'the aesthetic apotheosis of everything vile and obscene.'

Losev's more temperate student Sergei Averintsev also questioned the compatibility of laughter with Christian culture. He, too, balked at Bakhtin's incomprehensible remark that 'no violence lurks behind laughter' (Averintsev 1988, 85). The very physiology of laughter—a mechanical outburst, an explosion—is unstable and, if prolonged over time, maniacally grotesque. Christ did not need to laugh. But Averintsev avers that for Bakhtin, authorial intent is not the issue. As Bonetskaia also noted, it was not the literary achievement of Rabelais that thrilled Bakhtin but the vital Being of carnival, its immediacy and indifference to death. It leapt up from the page 'as if independent of the author's creative awareness', as if Rabelais were 'a passive medium of the carnival force' (Bonetskaia 2004, 26). In Bakhtin's value matrix, carnival ambivalence need not serve nihilism. The laughing world is neither perverse nor demonic. On the contrary, it frees up the spirit and liberates the powerless from fear. More relevant than the flinging of excrement is the image of the Christian martyr laughing at his executioners (Averintsev 1988, 82). But this is very much Bakhtin's own spiritual take on the matter.

In a follow-up essay, Averintsev observes that laughter is variously marked in different languages and cultures—and that Russian folk culture had long associated, and rhymed, *smekh* [laughter] with *grekh* [sin] (Averintsev 1993, 278). This polarization discouraged the moral discrimination that both moderates and civilizes the best works of affirmative comedy in the West. Bakhtin, in applying typically extremist Russian binaries to a Western European text, created a utopia of faceless communal laughter and cheerful maximalism, anaesthetized, indifferent to violence, treasuring the vigour of the whole and ignoring the vulnerability of the part. As long as this utopia stays out of power—and Bakhtin is hopelessly uninterested in the pragmatics of power—its ideals can inspire individuals to a more spiritually satisfying life. But came the revolution, and the utopia did not stay out of power.

The debate over the godlessness of carnival, and whether Bakhtin contributed to the Stalinist erasure of human rights or to the revival of a post-communist humanism, continued for another decade among Russian Bakhtin scholars (Isupov 1991). The Russian field of *kul'turologiia* (culturology, not to be confused with our more politicized cultural studies) adopted Bakhtin as its intellectual mentor. The philosopher and pedagogue Vladimir Bibler (1918–2000), author of *Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, or the Poetics of Culture* (1999), founded a school in Moscow devoted to 'dia-logic', the science of thinking within a multiplicity of logics, modelled on set theory in mathematics. In Bakhtin's spirit, Bibler dismissed both deduction and induction as reductive and monologic, recommending instead a mental process he called 'transduction', the paradoxical enablement of one thought by another taken from an irreducibly other realm (Epstein 2018, 7–9). Culturology is a secular field, but like Bakhtin's apophatic 'I–other' paradigm, it appealed to the spiritually adventurous. As Averintsev had divined back in 1972, while invoking Bakhtinian categories in a routine encyclopaedia entry on the 'artistic symbol': there are units of knowledge that are neither *nauchnyi* [scientific/scholarly] nor anti-scientific, but *inonauchnyi*, 'scientific in another way'.

Averintsev is a good bellwether for domestic discussions of Bakhtin and religion. Unlike his fellow classical philologist, the great verse scholar Mikhail Gasparov (1935–2005), he did not consider it his public scholarly duty to oppose (and expose) every aspect of Bakhtin's dialogism, polyphony, carnival, and menippean satire (Emerson 2007), as these concepts became buzzwords and rose uncontrolled to world fame. But Averintsev seemed repeatedly embarrassed by the vague nature of Bakhtin's religious vocabulary, its fragmentariness and unexplained ecstasies. A scholar of legendary erudition and authority for the non-Marxist Soviet intelligentsia, Averintsev had been baptized as an adult and openly declared his faith (Pyman 2004, 198). Like Pavel Florensky and Vyacheslav Ivanov earlier, he had come to Christianity through an intellectual immersion in Hellenistic paganism. In this trajectory he resembled Bakhtin. But Averintsev was cautious about the global Bakhtin boom and made nervous by any official endorsement of it by Church–State power in post-Soviet Russia. To him, this familiar Byzantine model was more dangerous than the follies of an indifferent secular democracy. The 'sectarianisms' and 'minor totalitarianisms' that take root after a major tyranny collapses can only be resisted, Averintsev believed, by 'consciousness of the

unity of all culture and the inseparable nature of religion and humanism' (Epstein 2017, 9–10). Here Bakhtin had done his part. He did not proselytize any doctrine, but he was somehow always more than a mere academic philosopher of religion. Although people had begun, uneasily, to recall that Bakhtin claimed the Gospels were carnival (and the Crucifixion and Resurrection as well), about matters of faith Bakhtin always spoke elliptically. Just as he saw no necessary tension between reason and religion, so, too, did he consider the 'carnival way of seeing and feeling life' sacralized, that is, an integral part of one's faith and patterns of gratitude (Emerson 2002). And he had emphatically declined to clarify the issue by writing his memoirs.

After 1990 and the end of the atheist state, Bakhtin's original disciples felt freer to come forth with their testimony. It mixed a deep commitment to Bakhtin's person with unverifiable conversations and potent charismatic impressions. Gachev recalled that Bakhtin was 'like an elder from the Optyn Monastery for us' (Gachev 1991, 45). Kozhinov claimed in an interview in 1992 that although Bakhtin 'knew perfectly the entire patristic tradition', he was proud to remain an unofficial 'thinker'—so proud, in fact, that he turned down titles and promotions, since (in the spirit of Socrates) a philosopher, to remain free, 'must be no one' (Rzhevsky 1994, 437–8). In 1993, Bocharov recalled a conversation he had with Bakhtin back in 1970, in which the latter claimed his book on Dostoevsky was 'morally flawed' because it 'misrepresented the church' and could not talk of 'the main thing, what Dostoevsky agonized about all his life—the existence of God' (Bocharov 1994, 1012). But oral testimony recalled decades after the fact could only persuade so far. Some text was needed from the master's hand. A breakthrough came with the posthumous publication of Bakhtin's early philosophical writings ('Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', 'Toward a Philosophy of the Act'), in which scholars readily detected a theist vocabulary. Special attention was paid to Bakhtin's use of the terms *dukh* [spirit] and *dusha* [soul], those two aspects of our non-bodily being, developed during his discussion of the value of the human body in history. In that survey, Bakhtin moves quickly through the Dionysian cults, Epicureanism, Stoicism, Neoplatonism, and ends with the body's 'confused rehabilitation' during the Renaissance. Fundamental for Bakhtin's visually based aesthetics in each historical phase is the distinction between 'inner body' (what I feel internally, what belongs to me) and 'outer body' (what belongs to you and I see only from the outside). Central to this survey of bodies is a digression on Christianity (Bakhtin 1990, 55–8).

'Inner' and 'outer' are key Bakhtinian concepts, out of which he creates a tri-partite model of the self. He then proceeds to map his concepts of 'spirit' and 'soul' onto this model (Bakhtin 1990, 54–5, 99–111; 1993, 46). Three types of relation are possible between an individual consciousness and what is outside it. First is the 'I-for-myself', my experience of myself from within. It is open-ended, provisional, the realm of potentials—and thus neither articulate nor authoritative. Being fluid and unformed, 'I-for-myself' is deaf, blind, mute. It is pre-aesthetic in the sense that it precedes an image, and, possessing no stable point of view, it is not capable of telling any coherent stories. This condition Bakhtin calls 'spirit'. Spirit is 'hopeful' because it is open; it has no firm points of consummation. It is always non-coincident with itself. We can see why that 1924



lecture on ‘grounded piece’, from this same period, spoke of our need for a Third precisely when we feel uneasy, insecure, not in control of our own boundaries, unable to tell our story. That muteness and restlessness, a precondition for repentance, is the essential truth of all that is inwardly alive. Only something outside of me can tell stories, perceive boundaries, forgive my acts, and create wholes. But any given whole must also be temporary—or else it, too, in Bakhtin’s special sense, is ‘hopeless’.

In addition to the ‘I-for-myself’ there is the ‘I-for-others’: the part of me that others see. Its obverse (and the third component of the model) is the ‘other-for-me’, how others appear to my consciousness. To others, astonishingly, my fluid open-ended self looks whole, wholesome, resolved in body and deed. This bounded entity Bakhtin calls the ‘soul’. It can be seen, heard, known, narrated. Since the story it tells is its own, and since it is always only one randomly finished-off part of what it potentially could be, its natural state (and here again Bakhtin recalls the argument made by Soloviev in the first chapter of his *Justification of the Good*) is shame, that prompt and pulsating core of human conscience. Others engender a soul out of me, and I a soul out of them. In both cases, what is created is palpable, partial, full of purpose and inevitably opportunistic. ‘My soul’ is even something of a misnomer, since it comes into being in response to another’s act of attention. In this technical sense, a soul is a moment of my inner spirit that another consciousness, simply by perceiving me, temporarily stabilizes, encloses in boundaries, and then returns to me, Bakhtin says, ‘as a gift’. This gift is the only peace my consciousness can know. It is a peculiarity of Bakhtin’s radical dialogism that he makes no provision for an absolutely private realm, a realm in which the ‘I’ is conceptualized and voiced but concealed, inaccessible, known by no outside consciousness. The absence of an ‘individual ineffable’ is one important difference between Bakhtin and the German phenomenologist Max Scheler (1874–1928), whose ideas on empathy and value personalism were otherwise formative for Bakhtin (Wyman 2016, 28–30). Bakhtin believed that spirit is operative within every sentient singular consciousness, but souls require a minimum of two: the kernel of dialogue.

In these early discussions, ‘spirit’ and ‘soul’ are deployed laterally in a human-to-human event, interpersonally rather than transcendently. Bakhtin specifically declined to take on ‘the religious-metaphysical problem of the soul (metaphysics can only be religious)’—although he then added, as if to explain his suggestive parentheses, ‘there is no doubt that the problem of immortality concerns the soul, not spirit’ (Bakhtin 1990, 100). Careful work in Russian has been done on these cautious early meditations of Bakhtin, restoring to them their possible wider application. ‘I-for-the-other’ is givenness, the body, perhaps even a thing; the ‘other-for-me’, which is also ‘God-for-me’, is positedness, that which is projected and still unfulfilled. And the ‘I-for-myself’, that elusive immaterial spirit, can be justified aesthetically only by a Divine other (Babkina 1992, 317–18; Gray 2011, 49–50).

Bakhtin’s psychic economy might seem piecemeal, lonely, morally haphazard, my spirit trapped within me until some other consciousness emerges out of nowhere to realize it. But within an Orthodox worldview, it must be remembered, there is no ‘nowhere’, no void. No individual can be existentially alone. Values are already out there,

and my task—or the task of my soul-to-be—is to attach to them. Thus an emerging self is not repressed by socialization (as in a Lacanian or Freudian model) but made whole through it. An encounter with the other, and with the other's language, is not a mirror reminding me of my own lack of self-sufficiency, but rather a roster of options, something like a spreadsheet for the realization of my authentic presence in the world. It is precisely the sudden *delimitation* of the world by another that makes me responsible and creative within my portion of it. Such a belief, personalistic but deeply social, recalls Sergei Trubetskoi's concept of *sobornal* or communal consciousness, and also the self–other dynamics of Gustav Shpet. And it animates some of the most paradoxical formulations in Bakhtin: 'In spirit I can and must do nothing but lose my own soul; the soul may be saved and preserved, but *not through my own powers*' (Bakhtin 1990, 101). I am only a condition for potential in my own life.

Such is the larger context for Bakhtin's commentary on Christianity in these early notes on the history of the body, specifically his luminous paragraph on the 'Christ of the Gospels'. Only in Christ do the otherwise conflicting values of wholeness (which others bestow on me as a 'soul') and openness (which I experience as 'spirit') miraculously come together. 'In Christ we find a synthesis of unique depth, the synthesis of *ethical solipsism* (my infinite severity toward myself) . . . with *ethical-aesthetic kindness* toward the other. For the first time, there appeared an infinitely-deepened *I-for-myself*, not a cold *I-for-myself*. . . an *I-for-myself* that renders full justice to the other as such. This 'full justice' is possible only by confirming the uniqueness (and thus the unknowability) of every distinct other: 'for myself—absolute sacrifice, for the other—loving mercy. But *I-for-myself* is the *other* for God.' This is no longer the internally accessed wisdom of the pagan Ancient philosophers: know thyself, tame thyself. According to the new logic of Christ, from within I cannot justify myself or be merciful to myself. 'What I must be for the other, God is for me' (Bakhtin 1990, 55–6). If the spirit–soul dynamic is the motor or prime mover of dialogue, then this intimate individuating reciprocity promised by the embodied image of Christ is its metaphysical ground.

The best gloss we have on the momentous implications of this passage is by the South African-British literary scholar Graham Pechey. In his words, '[A]esthetics has for Bakhtin the task of tempting ethics away from "morality" and towards an ontology of the uniquely situated body' (Pechey 2007, 160). Note here that 'ethics', as the academic study of moral norms, is not an entirely affirmative term. It is a category in some tension with individuation and mercy, two values absorbed from our earliest childhood when we confront, with terror and delight, the reality of our own incarnated bodies. Incarnation for Bakhtin is more closely tied to aesthetics: the creation of concrete, real, open relations. As Pechey interprets Bakhtin's logic, 'if the Law disincarnates the subject, then conversely an incarnating ethics will destabilize the Law . . . Christianity breaks with both the neoclassical emphasis on the body (when "everything corporeal was consecrated by the other") and its neo-Platonic denial (when "the aesthetic value of the body becomes almost extinct")' (Pechey 2007, 161). Pechey does not claim that Bakhtin's thought is a theology in code, just as Bakhtin himself insists that his inquiry into self–other relations is 'strictly secular' (Bakhtin 1990, 149). But for Bakhtin's antecedents

Pechey looks beyond such disavowals, deep into European tradition: German idealism with its intonations of mysticism, ‘St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Francis of Assisi’, an *imitatio Christi* that stands ‘not for the body’s denial but rather for its justification here and now and its transfiguration in eternity’ (Pechey 2007, 162).

Not every Russian critic was sympathetic to these religious passages in Bakhtin’s early writings. Bonetskaia, for one, has long seen more Nietzsche than the Christian mystics in his early development: ‘Nietzsche, along with Kierkegaard, was the chief interest of young Bakhtin’, she writes (Bonetskaia 2004, 7). She links Bakhtin to existentialism (mentioning as benchmarks Berdyaev and Lev Shestov, in her view already the ‘post-Christian period of Russian culture’) but then she asks: ‘Is this spiritual cosmos the Church? Of course not, for not only is it not theocentric, but God has no existential place in it’ (ibid., 9, 12). Bakhtin’s passion, Bonetskaia insists, was to develop a new doctrine of Being, a new ‘first philosophy’ out of the individual answerable act. It was a quest of characteristically Russian hubris, very much in the ambitious spirit of its time. But even if we bypass the God debate, all the religious analogies in the world could not condone Bakhtin’s offensive celebration of carnival, which Losev had called obscene and even Averintsev, a far gentler critic, seemed to regret. Bonetskaia reminds us that Bakhtin’s close friend and confidante, the great pianist and ardent Christian believer Maria Yudina (1899–1970), declared categorically that no Christian should have the Rabelais book in their home (ibid., 6). Others pointed out that the bloated bodies of carnival rarely feature eyes, mouths, ears—individuating organs—and, in their maniacal search for the regenerative orifice, leave almost no trace of words. Was this not Stalin’s Body of the People, easily tortured and silenced because presumed to be immortal? Non-Russian researchers such as Graham Pechey and Alexandar Milhailovic, sympathetic to the religious subtext, could divine the Incarnation in Bakhtin’s body-centred carnival utopia, a confirmation of matter and its resurrectionary qualities that was powerful enough to sanctify violating the Law. But at home, over the ruins of the Soviet experiment, lawlessness had a very bad name. As Bakhtin’s surviving manuscripts and drafts slowly moved into annotated Russian editions and then into other languages, the topic of his religious views was developed more dispassionately, and with less risk, by commentators outside Russia.

## BAKHTIN IN THE WEST AND THE CHRISTIAN-METAPHYSICAL TURN

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In their pioneering biography of Bakhtin, Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist declare unequivocally that ‘Bakhtin was a religious man’ (Clark and Holquist 1984, 120). In the 1980s this was a bold statement. Since that time, a large body of work has accumulated in English on Bakhtin as a philosophical theist or, less ambitiously, a philosopher of religion. Commentators of various Judeo-Christian traditions—Hebraic, Eastern

Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Pietistic—have found in Bakhtin inspiration, scriptural enrichment, and insight into many of the more profane concepts upon which his global fame rests. These religious readings form a strange cobbled-together structure, with windows facing in different directions and the fundamentals of Christian practice variously activated. Before we sample them, however, one cautionary note is in order, hinted at by Pechey above and made explicit by Charles Lock, a Bakhtin scholar in Copenhagen. In his essay ‘Bakhtin and the Tropes of Orthodoxy’, Lock reminds those who would investigate Bakhtin’s spiritual side not to forget their own presumptions and starting points. “‘Religion’ or ‘theology’ are terms that within a Protestant paradigm . . . invoke the categories of ethics (behavior) and belief (intellectual conviction)”, Lock writes. But this is a Western habit of thought. ‘Within an Orthodox paradigm, the immediate associations would be neither creedal nor ethical but liturgical (bodily presence) and sacramental (the holiness of matter) . . . A sacramental theology finds nothing reductive in the cosmos, and celebrates reason as part of creation’ (Lock 2001, 100–1). Conflicts that seem innate and unavoidable to some Western Christianities—between science and religion, say, or between reason and faith—were felt in Russia as imports from the West, peripheral and unpersuasive. If we free Bakhtin from these imported conflicts, Lock suggests, even as we credit his deep indebtedness to Kant, we can see him as yet another Russian mind at work against such dualistic models of thinking and being. This less polarized, less judgemental and more matter-friendly ‘theological anthropology’ has parallels in some branches of Western Catholicism (the Franciscan and the Thomist, for example) and had been studied by Russian medievalists such as Averintsev, who were eager to loosen the deadlock between Marxist materialism and the Church (Averintsev 1981, 1996; in English, Epstein 2006, 103–4). Bakhtin’s body–spirit synthesis is hardly unprecedented. In the West, it was examined first by Bakhtin scholars seeking the place of religion in the life of their subject. As Bakhtin became a world figure, the topic was taken up by scholars of religion who sought to place Bakhtin within their discipline, as both a goad and corrective to it. Several of the latter have claimed that Bakhtin offers an exciting way to study religion beyond the limits of phenomenology (Bagshaw 2013, 99–110).

Two book-length studies by Bakhtin scholars at the end of the 1990s launched the theme. Alexandar Mihailovic’s *Corporeal Words* was patristically oriented and organized around core concepts in the Russian Orthodox worldview: embodiment, participation, communion, Logos, the Chalcedonian ideal, *perichoresis*—which in Bakhtin (as we saw in his 1924 lecture on ‘grounded peace’) often becomes the challenge and the blessing of the Third (Mihailovic 1997). Mihailovic devotes two chapters to carnival, noting its problematic amorality but also its fantastically tolerant, loving embrace (as he puts it) of ‘the fruit and flesh of the grotesque body’ (Mihailovic 1997, 151). Bakhtin needed this materiality, for ‘the problem of Kantianism is that its profound rationalism renders ethics far too mechanical, if not static’ (Mihailovic 1997, 65). Presence for Bakhtin is overwhelmingly organic, corporeal, and liturgical. Within a year, Ruth Coates published her *Christianity in Bakhtin*, with a pan-Christian rather than an Eastern Orthodox lens (Coates 1998). Her concern was to trace the chronological fate of

four Christian motifs in Bakhtin's work: God (or the Author), the Fall, Incarnation, and Love. In her reading, Authorship (or Godship) begins in the 1920s as a creative and redemptive force, is transformed into a participatory or polyphonic energy in the Dostoevsky book, and then, in the 1930s, goes underground, becoming diffuse and hidden. Coates, like many other subtle and discerning Western readers of Bakhtin, assesses his work chronologically, against the background of decreasing freedom and mobility. 'His literal exile is accompanied by a long period of authorial exile in which he effectively maintains silence on matters of theology' (Coates 1998, 155). But she notes Bakhtin's optimism and 'unconditional affirmation of human creativity' (Coates 1998, 159) even surrounded by deceit and violence. Coates was the first in English to discuss the darkest writings by Bakhtin that have survived, essay fragments dating from the grim years 1943 to 1944, where Bakhtin declares both word and image utterly disgraced. From the depths of that dark place, Bakhtin repairs to Saint Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians (to these wartime fragments we will return). Fifteen years later, the theme of exile and authorial silencing becomes the governing metaphor of another fine synthesis, which groups Bakhtin with an 'Exilic Constellation' of European thinkers: Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas (Erdinast-Vulcan 2013). In this view too, Bakhtin's mode of faith was shaped less by a pre-existing 'theology or vertical metaphysics' than by a pressing need to recover the lost transcendent. Bakhtin did so by shifting from a 'vertical-external orientation' to a 'lateral-immanent' one, 'wherein human intersubjectivity (the opening up to alterity) is extrapolated into the realm of the divine' (Erdinast-Vulcan 2013, 203).

These are probing interpretations. They are not naïve about the horrific Soviet century, Bakhtin's descent into it, and the need for a new existential grounding. But their dominantly sombre and joyless tone must be read against Bakhtin's own words, uttered by him during his 1973 conversations with Viktor Duvakin and remembered by his friends: that his survival was a carnival miracle, that blessedly he had been 'well treated' during his six-year brush with Stalinist repression, and that heteroglossia (a Babylonian multiplicity and confusion of tongues) was most likely an 'event pleasing to God' (Gachev 1991, 46). Even the osteomyelitis and eventual one-leggedness was only a minor inconvenience: 'I could walk very well, with crutches, as well as if on my own two legs—I could run, jump, climb up and down, everything I wanted...' (Duvakin 2002, 54). The dominant intonation of Bakhtin's own testimony is one of bemusement, irrepressible delight at Russian culture (especially its poetry) and, above all, gratitude. His understanding of the Fall is characteristic of his particular type of Stoic kenosis. It focuses not on the sin of disobedience and even less on the sin of sexuality—moralistic readings both. Adam's Fall is the sin of pride, understood here as the false claim of autonomy, a doing without the divine but unknowable Other, for 'to claim autonomy is both self-destructive and destructive of the world' (Coates 1998, 32).

A unified image of Bakhtin East and West is not forthcoming, and there have been poignant attempts to forestall it. Whenever the Bakhtin boom undergoes one of its routine decrownings, Russian émigré scholars familiar with both academies weigh in. In 2006, Russia's premiere humanities journal *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* ran a forum on 'The Contexts of Bakhtin', with a focus on how not to finalize him. Evgeny Dobrenko, an

expert on the Stalinist period now at University of Sheffield, was wary of leaping from 'a Slavic village to the broad expanses of theory' with this formidable thinker, and asks that we simply respect his personal fearlessness. Psychologically, Bakhtin did not become an internal exile, nor did he withdraw into a private sphere. 'Remember that he was there,' Dobrenko writes. 'Do not turn him into a Christological theoretician or a postmodernist one, entwined in the meshes of some Cartesian-Husserlian empiricism, but simply see a heavy person on crutches . . . an experienced exile, mercilessly and consistently social in his thought' (Dobrenko 2006, 71).

We now consider, in conclusion, how this 'mercilessly social' thought, in times of great trial, drew on the theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Love. All three play a central, if enigmatic, role in those wartime fragments, when it seemed as if both word and image were strapped to finalization, violence, and the lie. Those fragments were probably intended as part of a larger (and unrealized) post-Rabelais project on the gradual 'seriousification' of the European world, a selective history of the collapse of our carnival wholeness and the emergence of transgressive individuality, beginning with Greek tragedy and ending with Dostoevsky (see Bakhtin 2014, 524). In 1943–1944, Bakhtin was isolated in a small provincial town, teaching German in high school, surrounded by total war. The word had become 'vain, self-assured, full of hope,' he writes. 'The word does not know whom it serves, it comes from darkness and does not know its own roots' (Bakhtin 2017, 207–9). Although these notes mention Revelation and 'son-ness,' the contrast with his 1924 lectures on Kant and 'grounded peace' is striking. There is no talk of escaping complacency. 'There has not yet been a truth that warms, only a lie that warms . . . A person encounters a truth about himself as a deadening force. Grace has always descended from without' (Bakhtin 2017, 209).

## BAKHTIN AND THE GRACED VIRTUES

It is a matter of some significance that the theological or 'graced' virtues were the only ones Bakhtin really cared about. The cardinal virtues—Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance—did not worry him overmuch. Bakhtin insisted upon individual answerability as the price of identity, to be sure, but he was too much a Kierkegaardian to be a universalizing moralist, a fact that goes a long way towards explaining his preference for Dostoevsky over Tolstoy. The cardinal virtues were a function of good habits and could be worked on by disciplined minds and sound bodies in all moods and environments. Faith, hope, and love are another matter. They are so often unreasonable and, for dysfunctional bodies in catastrophic situations, so often unrealistic, that to be applied to life with any confidence, they require Grace.

In this connection Dobrenko's reminder of Bakhtin as 'heavy flesh,' as a thinker on crutches who was obliged to take the material principle seriously, is a useful summary image. Bakhtin began as a student of the receptive body, humble, broken, opened up. In the first instance this was his own body, 'drilled into' (as he put it) in repeated operations

since childhood. In the early writings we can detect a background hum of chronic pain. Bakhtin's self–other scenarios, so immobilized and static, often have a whiff of the sick-room about them. One of his loyal enablers in the 1960s to 1970s, Vladimir Turbin, remembered the ritual of fruitless searches for painkillers in provincial pharmacies, which Bakhtin would take 'by the handful' whenever they could be found (Turbin 1994, 449). A broken body can be linked with the three graced virtues—but perhaps not as is conventionally done in a theology, through the triumph of the Cross. Even though Bakhtin called the Gospel story 'carnival', he did not see anything sacred, heroic, joyous, or salvation-bearing in prolonged physical suffering. About suffering he was utterly matter-of-fact, as he was about the amputation of his right leg at the hip in 1938. There was no martyrdom in it, no special wisdom to it; it was simply the way flesh worked. And if the physical body did not qualify to be a vessel at peace with itself, it could always become that far more valuable thing, a conduit for others. It could serve as a passageway for another life. This required faith and hope.

In his 1961 notes for revising the Dostoevsky book, Bakhtin wrote: 'Not faith (in the sense of a specific faith in orthodoxy, progress, man, revolution, etc.) but a *feeling for faith*, that is, an integral attitude (by means of the whole person) toward a higher and ultimate value' (Bakhtin 1984, 294, trans. adjusted). A 'feeling for faith' is the striving of a part for a whole: not so as to dissolve into it or be finalized through it, but so as to become a distinct, purposeful, and active subject against its benevolent and soothing background. In his wartime fragment known by its opening line, 'Rhetoric, to the Extent That It Lies' (1943), Bakhtin speaks of faith, *vera*, as the need for our inner infinity—our spirit—to be loved, even as it cannot be defined within clear-cut boundaries. 'Faith in a love that is adequate to this inner infinity', Bakhtin writes. 'Faith in the adequate reflection of oneself in the supreme other; God is simultaneously in me and outside of me; my inner finality and unfinalizedness is completely reflected in my image, and his [God's] outsideness is likewise realized in the image' (Bakhtin 2017, 211).

That same wartime fragment opens with a curious gloss on hope. 'Rhetoric, to the extent that it lies, strives to evoke precisely fear or hope', Bakhtin writes (Bakhtin 2017, 203). 'Art (authentic) and cognition, on the contrary, strive to liberate us from these feelings. *Tragedy* and *laughter* liberate us from these feelings, each in its own way'. Here Bakhtin's carnival cosmology, with its overcoming of Kant, begins to make sense. If faith is positive energy directed towards the generous resources of a Supreme Being, then hope can function as deception, enslavement, the narrowed focus on a yet-unattained but desperately desired thing. Like its obverse, fear, hope can be a weakness. Bakhtin frequently links these two emotions as 'short-term' reactions to the world. Fear and hope both rely on the world remaining the same, and on my inner moral law not being disturbed. But that inner law, too, is afloat in an 'infinity', unfixated and vulnerable, awaiting outside justification. As Bakhtin wrote in his early essay on authors and heroes, 'I believe insanely and inexpressibly in my own non-coincidence with my inner givenness'; I cannot at any point believe that 'I already exist *in full*' (Bakhtin 1990, 127). Only the unexpected, it would appear, can enrich us. In 1925, during his Kantian lectures, Bakhtin suggested that Revelation is as continuous and multifaceted as are natural laws, and for

that reason we fear it. A frightened mind is 'afraid of accepting a favor, afraid of becoming obligated'; this is precisely 'the fear of receiving a gift, and thereby obligating oneself too much' (Pumpiansky 1923–1925, 220). The role played by love in this nervous, asymmetrical economy is exhilarating and severe.

For Bakhtin, aesthetic creativity is only possible in the presence of love. But there is nothing sentimental or erotic about this category for him—as there was, say, for Soloviev. Love is above all a cognitive category, a recurrent curiosity and concentration of attention. 'Lovelessness, indifference, will never be able to generate sufficient power to slow down and linger intently over an object, to hold and sculpt every detail and particular in it, however minute' (Bakhtin 1993, 64). A feeling for love is an alternative to standardization and rules. I cannot afford to love indiscriminately; the demands of love on my attention are too great. And because I cannot form an image or a story about myself from within, I can never hope to love myself. From within, the scene is one of shame and repentance, tolerable only because we cannot see it or narrate it. But thankfully, there is 'Someone who needs us to be good'. As Bakhtin returns to this theme two decades later in his wartime notes, 'Love for oneself, pity for oneself, admiration of oneself' are complex emotions. Excepting the instinct of self-preservation, 'all spiritual elements of love for oneself... are a usurpation of the other's place, of the other's point of view' (Bakhtin 2017, 211).

At the end of this 1943 fragment, looking out on global catastrophe, Bakhtin wrote: 'The atheism of the 19th century—primitive and flat—did not obligate religion to anything... A new *philosophical wonder* before everything is necessary' (Bakhtin 2017, 213–14). Thus was faith, hope, and love tied afresh to an open, unfinalized world, complex, rounded, multi-voiced, still in need of Revelation.

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