

## Introduction: the ‘Bakhtin Circle’ in its own time and ours

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Published online: 30 June 2015  
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The papers collected in this issue of SEET were originally presentations delivered to the 15th International Bakhtin Conference held in Stockholm, Sweden in July, 2014. This was the first conference in the series to be held since completion of the publication of the *Collected Works* (*Sobranie sočinenija*) of Bakhtin (1996, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2008, 2010, 2012). Though originally scheduled as a seven-volume set, to have included a final volume containing works published in the name of Ivan Kanaev, Valentin Vološinov and Pavel Medvedev, this was abbreviated to six volumes [albeit with volume four in two parts (2008, 2010)] of works about which there is no reasonable doubt about Bakhtin’s sole authorship. This was a significant revision of the original editorial plan, and probably reflects the impact of the significant amount of archival work conducted by a number of scholars that has significantly strengthened the case for the authorship of Vološinov and Medvedev to be taken seriously. It should be noted that one of the figures responsible for such work was Pavel Medvedev’s son Jurij, who died in October 2013, and about whose life and work a special session was held (for an obituary see Brandist 2013). Although differences of opinion persist on the authorship of these works, and the extensive editorial apparatus of the *Collected Works* bears one such perspective, it has become increasingly untenable to maintain a perspective on the work of Bakhtin that does not take into serious consideration the discussions that took place within what is now (not unproblematically) called the ‘Bakhtin Circle’. Most participants working in the area certainly welcomed the change in editorial policy, and the session in honour of Jurij Pavlovič often focused on the implications for understanding the works of each individual participant in the ‘Circle’.

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Given the research that has been carried out in recent years based on the archives of the various institutions in which members of the 'Circle' worked, and on the published materials that give a general perspective on their careers, the widely accepted model of a leader and his disciples now appears quite inappropriate. It appears that institutional projects on sociological poetics and the palaeontology of plots exerted powerful influences on the development of Bakhtin's work of the late 1920s and 1930s, as well as shaping the works of Vološinov and Medvedev in the 1920s to a very considerable extent. The publication of works by the philosopher Kagan (2004), who established the 'Circle' in the early 1920, and of the literary scholar Pumpjanskij (2000), have served to broaden the focus of the works under consideration and have provided a richer sense of the variety of perspectives that intersected in the informal meetings of the group. Now it is also becoming ever more apparent that the focus needs to be extended further, to consider the work of other participants working in quite different areas and institutions. This particularly refers to the prominent early Soviet orientologists Nikolaj Konrad and Mikhail Tubjanskij, who not only enriched discussions with perspectives taken from studies of Asian cultures (primarily Japan in the case of Konrad and India in the case of Tubjanskij), but also encouraged the development of *global* theories of cultural development. One needs to remember that Bakhtin's dissertation on Rabelais was defended at the Institute of World History in Moscow, and that he was subsequently appointed Professor of World History in Saransk. Thus, while Bakhtin's focus in his literary work is primarily (though not exclusively) on European literature, it is far from clear that Bakhtin regarded all his categories to have only a European applicability or resonance (though some clearly were specific to European culture). In this, Konrad's controversial extension of the idea of the Renaissance to Asia, which was particularly developed in his works of the 1960s (Konrad 1966, 1967), but was present in his earlier work, may have some significance. Given the repeated attempts to employ Bakhtinian ideas in the study of postcolonial literature, this background takes on some considerable importance, and one then needs to consider the ideas the orientologists may have brought to the Circle's discussions. Given the way in which Bakhtinian ideas have become the focus of significant numbers of researchers in India, China and Japan, following on from an already considerable amount of interest in Latin America, these considerations can only become more pertinent. It will be interesting to see how these areas have grown at the next conference in the series that will take place in Shanghai in 2017. The image of the 'Circle' that begins to appear from these considerations resembles a Venn diagram in which a number of circles overlap, with it never being entirely clear which 'circle' was the most important for each participant, with the possible exception of Bakhtin himself, since he was the only participant who was not engaged in any formal institution in the 1920s.

Along with the appearance of new primary texts by Bakhtin, the *Collected Works* include textologically superior versions of a number of works that Bakhtin himself did not prepare for publication, and in one case, the new version of the central 1936 essay 'Discourse in the Novel' ('Slovo v romane', Bakhtin 2012, pp. 9–179) is substantially different from that published earlier and translated into English (Bakhtin 1981 [1934–1935]). Moreover, a number of important contextual materials

such as notes taken by people attending Bakhtin's lectures and summaries of books by certain German thinkers of the time are included in the new edition, and the commentaries also relate some of the primary texts to correspondence and other documentation held in Bakhtin's archive. Unfortunately, however, the edition does not include an inventory of Bakhtin's personal archive, and so in many cases the materials that lie behind the selections made in the *Collected Works* remain obscured. Moreover, there were materials published in a number of Russian periodicals, particularly the important journal *Dialog Karnaval Khronotop*, edited by the late Nikolaj Pan'kov, which did not find their way into the *Collected Works*. All together, the newly published materials are substantial enough to make the corpus of texts that exist in translation quite deficient in many respects, and this is in addition to the many problems that have been identified in the translated materials over the years, particularly relating to Bakhtin's most popular works. For this reason there were discussions at the conference about how a new English-language edition of the *Collected Works* might be developed.

Given that the conference was of a considerable size, and was attended by people from all over the world, many of whom were employing 'Bakhtinian' ideas to discuss literary texts, debates in social studies, pedagogy and various other areas, the current small selection showcases those which both focus on the work of the 'Circle' in historical context and do so within the editorial remit of SEET. That said, there is a considerable variety of material and focus here.

Ken Hirschkop presents a detailed and sober assessment of the *Collected Works* as a scholarly edition, discussing both the impressive textological work carried out and the often voluminous commentaries that accompany each volume. While expressing considerable admiration for the collection as a whole, Hirschkop draws out a number of areas in which questions may legitimately be asked about editorial decisions and bias within the commentaries. He also comments on the way in which the protracted period during which the edition appeared (1996–2012) seems to have left a mark on the edition itself since the scale of the editorial apparatus became gradually more modest with each volume published, so that two of the earliest volumes to appear, one and five, bear a much larger apparatus than, for instance, volume three, the last to appear, and which happens to be the one containing the essays on the novel of the 1930s that are widely regarded to be among the most significant in Bakhtin's oeuvre. The article will be very helpful for those who are unable to read the original texts, but also for those who have not had the opportunity to engage in a detailed assessment of the new edition as a whole. It is also significant in drawing attention to the decisions taken by the editors and the specific perspective that dominates the commentaries, and in doing so it should help scholars to engage with the edition with a productive level of detachment.

Two of the contributions, by Chris Beyers and Sergeiy Sandler, offer varying forms of close readings of Bakhtin's central philosophical ideas. Beyers works through a consideration of Bakhtin's early work with reference to the ideas of Nietzsche, with particular focus on questions of will, ethics and aesthetics. While engaging only with the English-language translations, Beyers focuses on the early texts that are generally held to have more reliable translations, and so is able to draw out some important conceptual continuities between Bakhtinian and Nietzschean

conceptions that, to some extent, may be explained by their shared engagement with neo-Kantian ideas. Moving beyond these considerations, however, Beyers provocatively relates Bakhtin and Nietzsche to the notions of ethics and community, employing the idea of ‘communality’, which was mediated by Vjačeslav Ivanov’s notion of *sobornost*, and his interpretation of Dostoevskij’s ‘novel tragedy’. He also considers the relationship between the ethical deed in Bakhtin, and Nietzsche’s ‘will to power’, which becomes quite provocative when attention shifts to the ‘will’ of the author in Bakhtin’s essay of the mid 1920s, now known as ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’. While not extending his analysis into Bakhtin’s central essays on the novel, he does consider the implications for the analysis of Dostoevskij that Bakhtin develops at the end of the 1920s, in which the novel may plausibly be interpreted as a point of intersection of various wills.

Sandler presents a careful consideration of Bakhtin’s engagement with Kantian ideas, particularly as developed in the ideas of the Marburg neo-Kantians. With close attention to the Russian originals, Sandler draws out the points at which Bakhtin converges with and diverges from the ideas of Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp, showing that Bakhtin’s support for the ideas was highly selective and conditional, displaying an independence of mind that goes beyond claims to Bakhtin’s pan-originality or derivative thinking. Sandler argues that Bakhtin, while sharing the same starting points, and borrowing frequently from neo-Kantian ideas, has a very different philosophical orientation and motivation, and that he subordinates the borrowed elements to his own philosophical conception. Sandler’s analysis is particularly notable for his close reading of the primary texts and the way in which intersections between Bakhtin and his interlocutors led to the emergence of a distinctive position.

Caryl Emerson turns her attention to Bakhtin’s engagement with the theatre which, she argues, was more appreciative and sustained than the general impression one gains from some of Bakhtin’s well-known comments comparing drama and the novel. From his collaboration in staging student productions in Nevel in 1918, through his polemical preface to Tolstoj’s drama and use of theatrical masks in the Rabelais book, to his teaching and reviewing activities in Saransk in the 1950s, drama was more than a passing metaphor. Working through Bakhtin’s early phenomenology of authorship in ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’ of the mid to late 1920s, Emerson shows theatrical concerns are never far from the surface, and that the phenomenology of author-hero relations that are found in that text merit comparison with Stanislavskij’s discussion of how the actor inhabits his or her role. Emerson also considers Bakhtin’s discussion of Shakespeare, including the relations between seriousness and laughter, tragedy and carnival, as well as the curious lack of explicit engagement with the theatrical experimentation and theorisation that was extremely prominent in the 1920s, particularly involving figures such as Nikolaj Evrejnov, Vsevolod Mejerxol’d and Sergej Ejzenštein.

Finally, Craig Brandist focuses on the contribution of the orientologists to the ideas of the Bakhtin Circle, by presenting a consideration of the work of the Indologist and Buddhistologist Mikhail Tubjanskij. Drawing on both published and archival sources, he traces Tubjanskij’s career through his early engagement with the work of Hermann Cohen and Plato to the study of Buddhism in India, Tibet and

Mongolia, and his focus on modern Bengali literature and intellectual life, centred on the work of the polymath Rabindranath Tagore. It is shown that Tubjanskij was philosophically erudite before meeting Bakhtin in the mid-1920s, having prepared commentaries on Hermann Cohen and on Plato, and that his study under the major Russian Indologist Fedor Ščerbatskoj (generally known in English as Theodor Stcherbatsky) encouraged him to find parallels between Indian philosophical concepts and the neo-Kantian philosophical nomenclature. Tubjanskij was a resolute opponent of Euro- and Ethno-centrism and propagated the idea that the contours of European culture could only be understood when brought into comparison with non-European cultural forms that were no less subtle or worthy of study. This article is supplemented by the first publication of a brief autobiographical sketch written by Tubjanskij in December 1926, and which is presented in English translation.

Together, the articles presented here move on our understanding of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, and the group of thinkers now known as the 'Bakhtin Circle', with reference to the publication of new primary materials and changed perspectives arising from new foci and considerations. The result is a much more historically grounded way of approaching the works as embedded in the philosophical dialogues of their time, but also in the wider sphere of institutional life and intellectual production. They also serve to bring the concerns of our own time and institutional environments to bear on the works in question, highlighting issues of publication and interpretation as well as the contemporary resonances and ramifications of the ideas. It is hoped that the materials published here will therefore help in the development of further historical studies of the time, but also in better grounding the application of the ideas, helping to bring out their hidden potentialities as well as their limitations.

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