THE BAXTIN PROBLEM: CONCERNING KATERINA CLARK AND MICHAEL HOLQUIST'S *MIKHAIL BAKHTIN**

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About the importance of Clark and Holquist's long heralded and already much praised *Mikhail Bakhtin* there can hardly be any doubt. It is a book that will be eagerly read not only by specialists in the Slavic field but by a phenomenally growing audience of laymen and scholars, theorists and spokesmen of the most various and sundry fields and persuasions. The Baxtin boom is very possibly the most extraordinary event of international intellectual culture over the past decade or so. At the same time, Baxtin is one of the most problematical and enigmatic figures, with respect both to his life and to his work, ever to have achieved such attention. The Clark and Holquist volume is the first major, thoroughgoing and consistent overview of Baxtin. It has been produced by authors superbly qualified for the job, who were privileged with unique access to the realm of Baxtiniana and its denizens. I believe this book to be a contribution of major importance, and I admire and respect its authors' expertise, devotion to their topic, industry, and ingenuity. And I wish this to be absolutely clear in advance because I have many objections and criticisms to make of the book. It is a work eminently worthy of the closest and most serious scrutiny.

It is my opinion that the authors of this book have failed in their main task—to *study* Baxtin. They have opted instead to utilize their formidable knowledge of their subject to synthesize a Baxtin in the image dictated by their particular and unstinting enthusiasm for their subject. The result of their efforts is not, in my opinion, a study but something like an *apologia*, or even more than that: Clark and Holquist have produced what can be described, figuratively *and* literally speaking, as *hagiography*, that is, an account both of a 'saint' of ideas (like Einstein, to whom the authors compare Baxtin) and of a Christian, even—in the authors' view—a specifically Russian Orthodox Christian saint (compared by them to Boris and Gleb, Feodosij, Serafim, and others). The question as to whether Baxtin warrants figurative or literal sanctification is admittedly an open one; a positive answer is presumably really possible, but if so, it still remains to be substantiated. I do not mean to say that Clark and Holquist have not attempted to prove Baxtin's intellectual and Christian sanctity, but—and this is my major objection—hagiography is not at all what is needed now, seeing that many and crucial problems and conundra associated with Baxtin have first to be confronted, studied, and in some reasonably objective way resolved. The Clark and Holquist hagiographical method refracts—and *must* refract—all of those problems and conundra so as to redound exclusively to the master's greater glory. That method and its expository and argumentative procedures stand at the center of my objection to this book.

I shall begin with a curious feature of the book having to do with the account of Baxtin's life. The authors have put together by far the fullest, most detailed biography of Baxtin now available. Nevertheless, as they themselves inform us, concrete data about—the factual backing for—a number of important events and activities in Baxtin's life could not be found or secured. One example of enormous importance concerns the whole issue of Baxtin's alleged authorship of a number of works published under other people's names (about this issue, see below). Another involves the substantiation of Baxtin's religious 'credentials': the authors are virtually never able to specify what in actual fact Baxtin's relations and/or affiliations were with various religious groups and even with the Russian Orthodox Church. Even Baxtin's religiosity could not be concretely substantiated (we are told categorically that "Bakhtin was a religious man," but the authors peel away all reasonable expectations as to what that might

mean—not a "churchgoer," not a "conventional Russian Orthodox," not an adherent of "the theology of the run-of-the-mill seminary" [?]—ending with "He was not interested so much in religion as in the philosophy of religion" [126]). Yet, the lacunae in the information about even the most important aspects of Baxtin's life do not prevent the authors from presenting a picture of Baxtin *tout entier.* Indeed, they often 'know,' without having or without citing sources and without identifying the kind of knowing involved, what Baxtin did, thought, even *said,* how he behaved and would have behaved. The reader is rarely alerted to the fact that the authors' picture of Baxtin is partly based on supposition, speculation, and surmise.

The governing thesis of the Clark and Holquist version of Baxtin is that early in his career, during the period 1918–24, Baxtin registered all of his leading ideas and all of his central intellectual (theological-philosophical-philological) ambitions in a sort of masterplan. After their exposition of that masterplan, the authors go to considerable pains to trace back to it everything Baxtin—as the authors understand him—was to think and say throughout the entire remainder of his career. In principle, this is an admirable thesis; it provides the biography with an overall conceptual unity and also, ipso facto, serves as 'proof' in the case for attribution of the so-called "disputed texts." However, this thesis is a somewhat different matter *in practice.*

The chapter devoted to this crucial "agenda of topics," to which Clark and Holquist give the name "The Architectonics of Answerability," is peculiarly troubling: it is the most speculative, digressive, and excursive of all the chapters in the book and the one least in contact with the text(s) it purports to study. The authors claim that "The Architectonics of Answerability" consists of a set of several texts, but in fact they deal in that chapter with only one text—an unfinished, untitled work called "Avtor i geroj v èstetičeskoj dejatel'nosti" in the most recent volume of Baxtin's posthumous works, *Èstetika slovesnogo tvorčestva* (M.: Iskusstvo, 1979). Moreover, the authors deal with only a fraction of its 175 printed pages and provide few direct quotations from it (although every other work later considered is abundantly quoted from). The "Christological" passage of the fraction dealt with—the key passage for the authors—is approximately a page and a half. Other portions of the text are paraphrased by the authors, but those paraphrases so intermingle and merge with the authors' own excursuses and digressions (a procedure frequently resorted to throughout the book) that it takes special acquaintance with the original text to discern what is and what is not paraphrase. Of course, these quantitative factors are not important in and of themselves; they are a 'sign' of the authors' method. Far more important is that Clark and Holquist promote what they understand as the key passages in this text to the status of matrix of all of Baxtin's ideas (whether they are justified in doing so is not now being denied, although their heavy reliance on George Fedotov's *The Russian Religious Mind* for their ideas about Russian Orthodox Christianity and their *assumption* that Baxtin subscribed to those very ideas make one wary); meanwhile the authors seem to have ignored what in fact that long work is—at least ostensibly—all about: it is about esthetics; it is an attempt to define and elaborate on the esthetic point of view within the set of all axiological points of view; it is indeed itself an "esthetics of verbal creativity." Yet, a reader of the Clark and Holquist book not already acquainted with the original text in question will have very little idea that such is the case.

Even if Clark and Holquist are granted the benefit of the doubt and we suppose that Baxtin did in fact intend to 'encode' his philosophical-Christological organon in this treatise on esthetics, the use the authors make of it in discussing his actual or putative later works is still open to serious question. The authors, as I mentioned, trace back to "The Architectonics of Answerability" all those later works. But the connection is along a line so general as to accommodate virtually anything whatsoever the authors choose. For instance, since the masterplan operates with the leitmotif of the I/Other opposition, not only are all of Baxtin's dialogic-polyphonic ideas traced back to it but also anything having to do with "communication"—indeed anything having to do with language, sociology, politics. Moreover, since Baxtin's (supposed) Russian Orthodox kenotic view of Christianity stresses the "enfleshment" of

Christ/The Word, anything to do with the human body and even anything *material* discussed in the later works is claimed as a development from the masterplan. Therefore, the connections made between the later works and that masterplan often seem strained and far-fetched. Some of the most striking examples occur in the tracing of the disputed texts back to the masterplan, e.g., the "Christological" connections (208, 225, 232).

Another form of the authors' possible misuse of the supposed connections between Baxtin's early and later periods is expressed in their tendency anachronistically to use the terms of the latter when discussing the former. A case in point involves the complex associated with 'carnival.' Baxtin's interest in carnival (and associated topics such as Menippean satire) seems to have originated with his work on Rabelais. Yet, the authors identify Baxtin as 'carnival man' from the start, asserting that the very ambience of his life from the earliest period of his career was 'carnivalesque.' No valid evidence for this is presented. Nevertheless, this supposed carnivalesque ambience of Baxtin's life in the twenties is freely employed by the authors as an integral and capital factor in Baxtin's entire intellectual career.

It is to the question of the disputed texts that I wish now to devote special attention, but I would like first to comment on Clark and Holquist's interpretation of the carnivalesque in relation to those texts. The "disputed texts" are those publshed under the names of Valentin Vološinov and Pavel Medvedev and attributed to Baxtin. (One article by I. I. Kanaev is also attributed to Baxtin, but it is not a disputed text for the simple reason that only Clark and Holquist seem to know about it.) Now, one version of the reason why Baxtin supposedly published under the names of his friends goes as follows: "[I]n 1924 Bakhtin realized that he was not going to be able to publish his work. He thus had no other adequate source of income unless he published under others' names. Medvedev and Voloshinov were sufficiently cynical to see no harm in such a thing. . . . [There follows a brief account of a deal Medvedev allegedly made with Baxtin for which absolutely no documentation is supplied.] The cynicism was not all on Voloshinov's and Medvedev's side. Bakhtin was himself a great lover of rascals and would have taken delight in pulling off so large-scale a hoax" (151). *Cynicism* and *rascality* are to be understood here, as the last sentences make clear, in a carnivalesque way. Indeed, we are told on the same page that "the Bakhtin circle resembled the medieval world of the carnival where, according to Bakhtin, 'civil and social ceremonies and rituals took on a comic aspect.'" (The quote from Baxtin is of course from his later work on Rabelais.) But the question is: *What hoax?* A hoax is "humorous mischievous deception," but absolutely nothing of the sort is involved here. The works in question were perfectly serious matters in every respect. Perhaps it is just a matter of one's sense of humor? The authors do supply an illustration of what they understand as carnivalesque humor: "[I]n *Freudianism* there is a curious, almost unique instance of one Bakhtin mask alluding to another. Bakhtin-'Voloshinov' cites Bakhtin-'Kanaev' and then incorrectly ascribes the Vitalism article to N. I. instead of I. I. Kanaev. This may be nothing more than a typographical error, but the irony of Bakhtin's citing under one pseudonym an article he had written under another pseudonym and getting the author's name wrong makes one believe it was intentional" (176). I know a far more glaring instance of this sort of thing, which was overlooked by Clark and Holquist. It involves two explicit *criticisms* of P. N. Medvedev's *Formal'nyj metod v literaturovedenii* in V. N. Vološinov's "O granicax poètiki i lingvistiki" (both works are attributed to Baxtin). The criticisms are perfectly apt and serious, but by the standards of the Clark and Holquist version of the Baxtinian carnivalesque this "self-criticism" must come out as something totally hilarious. I frankly fail to see any humor in any of this, least of all carnival humor. There is another candidate for similar interpretation mentioned in passing by Clark and Holquist. We are told that Vološinov wrote a dissertation the topic of which "was probably 'the problem of how to present reported speech' (*problema peredači čužoj reči*)" (110). As the authors perfectly well know, a whole section (part 3) of Vološinov's *Marksizm i filosofija jazyka* is devoted precisely to the problem of reported speech. Are the two items one and the same? Clark and Holquist inexplicably did not investigate. But if they are the same and if the Clark and Holquist view is correct, then

Baxtin and Vološinov perpetrated no mere "hoax" but out-and-out fraud—again, no laughing matter.

The whole issue of the authorship and/or responsibility of/for the disputed texts is perplexing; it is a riddle which has *not* been solved. My own view on the matter is spelled out in my article "Bakhtin &/or Vološinov &/or Medvedev: Dialogue &/or Doubletalk?" (*Language and Literary Theory*, ed. Benjamin A. Stolz, et al. [Papers in Slavic Philology, 5; Ann Arbor: Dept. of Slavic Langs. and Lits., 1984], 535-64). The article was written and typeset before the appearance of the Clark and Holquist book, but nothing I have read in that book has persuaded me to alter the attitude of skepticism expressed there. The *circumstantial* evidence for attribution of the disputed texts to Baxtin is formidable. But merely to assign everything to Baxtin and to consign Vološinov and Medvedev to oblivion—the tack taken by the majority of interested parties including Clark and Holquist—is not only manifestly unfair but also does not eliminate the problem.

The key aspect of the problem is the conceptual-ideological nature of the disputed texts. All of them advance and implement, and speak in the name of, what is identified in the texts themselves as a *Marxist* point of view. *Marksizm i filosofija jazyka* sets out to construct what it calls a Marxist philosophy and study of language; *Frejdizm* argues against Freudianism precisely as candidate for the basis of a Marxist psychology and adumbrates what it maintains a Marxist psychology should be; *Formal'nyj metod v literaturovedenii* argues against the formalists precisely in the effort to lay down the foundations for a Marxist sociological poetics, etc. Clark and Holquist bring to bear arguments *both* to deny the Marxist nature of the works in question (Marxism is "mere terminology," "window dressing") *and* to accommodate the use of Marxism to Baxtin ("it legitimizes Bakhtin's own theories by capitalizing on the common ground between them and Marxism" [157]). Those arguments strike me as, by and large, blatant sophistry (which employs, for example, facile equations of disparate things, quotations out of context or truncated quotations or quotations pieced together from different statements, specious appropriation of Baxtin's own ideas about authorship, and so on). This must stand as my own personal assessment and opinion—the assessment and opinion of an experienced and participating interested party in these matters with no Marxist axe to grind. I shall not attempt here a point-by-point critique. But it should at least be noted that I am not the only one to take the Marxist pretensions of the disputed texts seriously. H. Glück, R. Matijašević, M. Yaguello, F. Jameson, and T. Todorov, among others, have in their various ways raised the same issue (see my article). Here I shall only comment on certain items in the Clark and Holquist presentation of the issue of the disputed texts where the argument is compromised by misrepresentations or by blunders of a kind suggesting the authors' failure to acquaint themselves adequately with the texts under consideration.

1. "Marxism's opposition to Monism is used to validate Bakhtin's own anti-Monist position" (157). Clark and Holquist here have failed to take into account that Marxism proclaims itself to be *materialistic monism* and that it is precisely that kind of monism which is called upon in the disputed texts. It is Marxist materialistic monism which underlies and unifies the "study of ideologies" exposited in *Marksizm i filosofija jazyka* and *Formal'nyj metod v literaturovedenii*; it is the same monism which guarantees the validity of the eclecticism of the program for sociological poetics in the latter book; it is materialistic monism which serves as the standard for judging psychological theories in *Frejdizm*, and so forth.

2. "Bakhtin cautions . . . Art as a social factor is located 'within the overall system of sociological governance—but from that governance we shall never be able to derive art's aesthetic essence'" (200). The quotation here put into Baxtin's mouth in fact represents the position being argued *against* by the author of "Slovo v žizni, slovo v poèzii." This is perfectly evident in context and confirmed shortly afterwards by the statement: "This conception of the essence of art is, as we have said, fundamentally in contradiction with the bases of Marxism" (*Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, 95).

3. "Medvedev published another book on the Formalists, *Formalism and the Formalists*, when Bakhtin was already in exile. . . . In this work the function of the Marxist rhetoric is almost exclusively polemical, part and parcel of a virulent personal attack. The author is unmistakably Medvedev. Marxism is invoked as self-evident truth in a way that is foreign to *The Formal Method.* No one has ever suggested that Bakhtin had anything to do with this later text" (159-60). The authors are mistaken about the relationship between the two works in question. *Formal'nyj metod v literaturovedenii* and *Formalizm i formalisty* are essentially *identical* in their main sections (the critique of Formalism) and differ most importantly by what is *omitted* from the latter (for a detailed comparison, see M. Kaiser, "P. N. Medvedev's 'The Collapse of Formalism'," *Language and Literary Theory*, 405-11). If Clark and Holquist are right in asserting that Baxtin had nothing to do with *Formalizm i formalisty*, then the case for *Medvedev*'s authorship of *both* books is immensely strengthened.

4. "[T]he 1925 article 'Beyond the Social,' which was incorporated with slight modifications into the final chapter of the Freud book, is a critique less of Freud himself . . . than of Soviet psychologists who sought to appropriate Freud" (172). This statement is both wrong and garbled. The attack on the Soviet psychologists appears *only* in the book *Frejdizm.* As for the actual relationship between the book and the article in question (V. N. Vološinov: "Po tu storonu social'nogo"), see my above-mentioned article (548-59).

5. In chapter 10 Clark and Holquist discuss the topic "reported speech" as exposited in part 3 of *Marksizm i filosofija jazyka.* They overlook the fact that the author of that book deals with this topic in terms of the patterns and modifications of direct and indirect discourse. They wrongly generalize for all reported speech what the author says *only* about indirect discourse. And as for the real *pièce de résistance* of part 3—the problem of "quasi-direct discourse" (*nesobstvenno-prjamaja reč'*)—Clark and Holquist have absolutely nothing to say.

The Clark and Holquist volume is, moreover, rife with examples of other, lesser errors: incorrect or garbled Russian words, misquotations, inaccurate footnote references, confusions about history (e.g., that the Homeric age and the age of the Athenian tragedians are one and the same), and the like.

All the matters discussed above, taken together, suggest a careless disregard for facts and details, for the materials themselves, for simple logic and probability—all in the interest of Clark and Holquist's overriding ambition to have it their own way, to celebrate a Baxtin that they want Baxtin to be, no matter what. To be sure, it is done with flair and verve, with intelligence and imagination, with love and devotion. And who knows, it is not inconceivable that everything Clark and Holquist claim about Baxtin may turn out to be true. But the elementary business of studying Baxtin, of investigating the Baxtin problem, is still on the agenda, waiting.

NOTE

* Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984.