

EINSTEIN’S UNIVERSE AND BAKHTIN’S THEORY OF POLYPHONY IN THE CREATION OF AN INTERDISCIPLINARY “INTERFACE”

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In this paper, I shall attempt to show that Bakhtin’s methodology for the study Dostoevsky’s style necessitates an interdisciplinary approach which is *not fortuitous, but one aimed at carrying out a long-term project*. The main conclusion is that, by seeking to synchronize the sciences with the humanities, Bakhtin attributes the unity of culture to the subject’s living experience and draws a line of demarcation between the older schemes of monologism and the new forms of cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic activity within the purview of his transgression-based dialogism.

Key words: Einstein, Bakhtin, Dostoevsky, interdisciplinary “interface”, polyphony

In his writings, Bakhtin repeatedly made mention of Einstein’s name, as he compared the opposition between Newtonian and modern physics with that between the major types of novels (monologic and polyphonic) and drew an apt analogy to highlight that stage of the novel’s development which is marked by the rise to power of internally persuasive discourse. He developed an interdisciplinary approach in line with modern attainments by “synchronizing,” within the bounds of reason, the methodological protocols of two major fields of knowledge: the natural sciences and the humanities. Bakhtin’s reflections show us that neither modern genre theory nor the normative poetics of previous times¹ allow for the possibility of researching into contemporary prose fiction and that their downright inadequacy calls for change. The reason is that those poetics, being laden

¹ For example, the fact that “traditional stylistics . . . has no method for approaching the distinctive social dialogue among languages that is present in the novel” (“Discourse in the Novel”: Bakhtin 1986a: 263). Besides, “The utter inadequacy of literary theory is exposed when it is forced to deal with the novel” and, therefore, “genre theory must submit to a radical re-structuring” (“Epic and Novel” in: Bakhtin 1986a: 8; also see “Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse” in: Bakhtin 1986a: 41 – 43).

with theoreticisms (e.g. see Bakhtin 1993: 11, 12, 13, 27) and gnoseologisms (Bakhtin 2003: 160),² predetermine the abstract fixity of their objects of study and provide definitions and taxonomies that are stagnant. They have never been able to grasp the genuine historicity of social life and literary experience, nor have they ever succeeded in penetrating the uniqueness and unfinalizability of the self. As is well known, reducing cognition to a *single generalized Being* and breaking off individual consciousness from Being-as-event (Bakhtin 1993: 11; cf. Bakhtin 2003: 387) are among the major faults of monologic theories. On the flip side, however, his critique of them does not imply a blunt refusal to study the distinctive features and development of novelistic discourse in light of the notions of “unity,” “system(aticness),” and “simultaneity”. As his work brings into view a semantic bifurcation that we cannot ignore, it is necessary for us to elaborate on the possible types of meaning lest we lose the right perspective. The thesis statement introduced below will not come into conflict with the epistemological bipolarity of philology whose distinct research stances outline two distinctly diverse fields of vision: a limited one structured around the text itself, and another one that allows room for observation from a distance, i.e. the methods of close reading and universal analysis. As for modernity’s verdict, the latter, since it involves detailed knowledge of multiple areas, is now considered hopeless and “naive” (Averintsev 1972: 979). Ironically, the multiperspectival slant of humanities in Bakhtin’s day jogs one’s memory back to the impossible burden on classically trained philologists who flourished until about a hundred and fifty years ago. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contemporary physics and the humanities achieved some uniformity of perspective. Accordingly, in this paper I shall endeavor to prove that Bakhtin’s methodology for the study of Dostoevsky’s polyphonic style necessitates an *interdisciplinary approach* which is not provisional since it is adopted in a *long-term project* developed with the understanding that the relativity of the individual’s point of view and the subject’s uniqueness underlie the multi-faceted unity of truth and that this condition is a major determinant of the ontological status of man as reflected in the Dostoevskian novel. Thus, the issues addressed in this text are the problem of Bakhtin’s interdisciplinary “interface,” the interaction between science and philosophy as demonstrated by the proto-neo-Kantians, the neo-Kantians and Bakhtin, the Bakhtin circle’s interest in

² Gnoseologism (*Erkenntnistheorie*) is associated with German philosophical tradition (see Bakhtin 2003: 668). In referring to this passage by Bakhtin, Holquist uses the English term “epistemologism” (cf. Holquist 1990: 16 – 17).

interdisciplinary work, and the answer literary theory gives to monologism through Bakhtin's paradigm.

The problem under investigation can be further clarified by briefly elaborating on two points. First and foremost, the Bakhtin circle's deliberately-sought interdisciplinarity was conducive to remedying the heuristic deficiency of early twentieth-century humanities scholarship: Bakhtin's project (which included all of his extant writings) aimed to bridge the gap between science and literary theory by translating the former's achievements into historical poetics in view of his belief in the unity of culture. Second, of central importance is the long timespan of the project: it started in the 1920s ("Toward a Philosophy of the Act," "Author and Hero,"³ PDCA⁴/PDP⁵), continued until the early 1970s – the second, revised edition of the Dostoevsky book (1963), his doctoral thesis and book on Rabelais,⁶ as well as his extra-novelistic quests in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Bakhtin 1986b)⁷ – and pursued the same agenda that ensured a good deal of framework coherence between the ethos of science and art. And third, this coherence (which some scholars either contest⁸ or expound in different ways⁹) finds expression in the early commencement date of his theoretical model – in the 1920s which saw his philosophical texts ("Toward a Philosophy of the Act" – 1919 – 21; "Author and Hero" – 1924 – 27) and critical responses (1925 – 29) to "current intellectual movements" (Clark and Holquist 1984: 3) – and in the fact that he chose to attend and re-attend

³ In: Bakhtin 1990: 4 – 256.

⁴ That is the first edition of the book entitled "Problems of Dostoevsky's Creative Art" (1929).

⁵ The second, expanded edition of the book is *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963).

⁶ The 1939 Rabelais manuscript entitled *Rabelais in the History of Realism* and the revised version of 1965 whose English title is *Rabelais and His World* (*Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul'tura srednevekov'ia i Renessansa – The work of François Rabelais and the Popular Culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*).

⁷ The Russian edition containing these essays, among other works, is *Estetika slovesnogo tvorchestva* (1979), i.e. *Aesthetics of Verbal Creativity*.

⁸ Bakhtin's concept of the novel as a genre has faced accusations that it is "not very coherent" or, even worse, that it is "ultimately irrational" (Todorov 1984: 90; cf. Morson and Emerson 1990: 5).

⁹ Some prefer to place emphasis on Bakhtin's *evolution* "from ethics and aesthetics to philosophy of culture" in regard to the importance of the topics of genre and the novel, but they do not deny that he browsed across multiple specialized areas to selectively pick out and reinterpret ideas (Clark and Tihanov 2011: 124, 128) with a view to developing a comprehensive and coherent theoretical model.

to its innovative ideas over the years rather than replace them with a rival project. Undoubtedly, the modern era has posed an unprecedented challenge since “mathematics and the natural sciences stand in the center of its (scientific) worldview” (“Notebooks on ‘Rabelais’”¹⁰ – Bakhtin 2008: 608; trans. mine – A. M.) – a number of discoveries were made and the space-time view came to the fore, as individual elements of the new paradigm, i.e. of the theoretical investigation language and its conceptual apparatus, edged their way into the humanities, particularly into literary theory. The use of analogical reasoning sought to overcome the latter’s disciplinary isolationism by “synchronizing” its methodological program with that of the natural sciences. This led to a kind of “syncretism,” which was a sign of a major change in literary theory and practice: since the polyphonic novel had been recognized as a new object of study, there was a need to draw up and implement a forward-thinking research agenda, as the author’s prefatory note to *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (Bakhtin 1984: 3 – 4) readily indicates. This intention presupposes the creation of “an interface” between the theory of the novel and “the revolutionary models of the world that began to emerge in the natural sciences in the nineteenth century” (Holquist 1990: 16). Under these circumstances, the following question arises: What is Bakhtin’s role in laying the new conceptual and methodological foundations of rational inquiry in the humanities? In parenthesis, it should be noted here that the concept of *rationality* requires special clarification. Overall, Bakhtin associated it with the capacity for abstract reasoning that systematizes repeating supra-individual traits, i.e. the exact opposite of *unfinalizability* and *historicism*. On the face of it, it seems that he somewhat disapproved of the notion since it was its backside that left space for the teleological trajectory of novelistic discourse. In fact, however, the situation is a bit different because even in his early philosophical period Bakhtin clearly defined the relations of subordination among the act, rationality, and answerability by arguing that “The actually performed act in its undivided wholeness is more than rational – it is *answerable*. Rationality is but a moment of answerability” (Bakhtin 1993: 29). In other words, rationality has always been a discrete and indispensable constituent of individuality in the unified context of culture. Regardless of his observations on polyphony, Bakhtin noted explicitly that he was aware of the epistemological turn of scientific thought in all its profundity and that he quite deliberately translated this state of affairs into the language of historical poetics and aesthetics: “If in the pre-Newtonian picture of the world they proceeded

¹⁰ In the Russian edition: «Тетради к „Рабле”», 605 – 675 («Тетради к „Рабле”»).

from the individual organism to the Solar system,” he wrote, “they now proceed from the former toward subatomic solar systems” („Notebooks on ‘Rabelais’” – Bakhtin 2008: 647). By epitomizing new concepts of space and time, this humanities-oriented formulation was supposed to broaden the mental horizons of knowledge. Similarly, in the book on Dostoevsky he developed his ideas in line with modern scientific views and attainments by placing emphasis on the author’s interest in the inner world of man, i.e. not in the “social or psychological type,” but in the idea which in its dialogic being is “inter-individual and inter-subjective” (Bakhtin 1984: 88), and, therefore, constitutive of the unfinalizability and unity of truth that is continually generated in the zone of intersection between communicating consciousnesses (see Bakhtin 1984: 81). Like his counterpart Nikolai Hartmann who demanded that philosophy, at least partially, eliminate the inconsistency between the mind and objective reality through a tripartite act of transcendent cognition consisting of “a *going outside*, a *being outside the self* and a *return* of the subject to itself” (author’s emphasis) (Poole 1989: 122), Bakhtin endorsed the individual’s recognition of transcendental categories, which reflects some degree of consensus in the realm of neo-Kantian revisionism. In confirmation of these shared horizons, he held the view that the overcoming of monologism required a new ontological framework in which there would be a point of intersection between fixed rules and the dynamic of the ever-changing self under the circumstances of “living historicity” (Bakhtin 1993: 8). The tripartite model of cognition receives enough attention in “Toward a Philosophy of the Act” where aesthetic contemplation as an intentional projection into the object of seeing requires a “moment of objectification” (Bakhtin 1993: 14) and in “Author and Hero” where both the ethical and aesthetic are entirely dependent on the immediate empathetic identification with “another’s suffering” (Bakhtin 1990: 26) which, being based on the ineluctable transgression of the communicating consciousnesses, is necessarily followed by “a *return* into myself” (author’s emphasis) (Bakhtin 1990: 26).¹¹

In the nineteenth century, the slogan “Back to Kant” (see Liebmann 1912: 13) appeared in response to the inability of both materialists and idealists to further develop his ideas: the first ones (Karl Vogt, Heinrich Czolbe, Ludwig Büchner, etc.) encountered a number of difficulties in studying consciousness and experience because of the methodological and heuristic insufficiency of their naturalistic prism, while the second ones (Fichte, Hegel, Schelling) met obstacles arising from their predilection in

¹¹ Cf. “a *return* into oneself” (translator’s emphasis) (Bakhtin 1993: 14) – “vozvrat v sebya” (Bakhtin 2003: 18).

favor of reflection at the expense of experience and from their disbelief in “noumena” (“things-in-themselves”) as unknowable entities lying outside the scope of sensibility. In their own day, the proto-neo-Kantians attempted to establish an anti-speculative framework in order to reinforce Kant’s epistemological foundation. Hermann von Helmholtz, whose interests were in the conceptual fields of both Kant and Fichte, built a bridge between philosophy and sensory physiology so as to integrate the Kantian phenomenon–noumenon distinction into the logic of empirical analysis. Hegel’s unsubstantiated idealism highlighted the significance of materialism which, however, provided no effective method. In this regard, Lange observed that it was impossible to produce an explanatory outline of scientific cosmology at either of the opposite poles, but only in the “intermediate” zone since pure idealism was just as much bound up with the natural sciences as it was with materialism (Lange 1881: 25). The neo-Kantians of the Marburg School – in the persons of Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp – reacted in much the same way in the very first issue of *Philosophische Arbeiten* magazine (1906) published by them, where they declared that “Whoever is bound to us stands with us on the foundation of the transcendental method” (Verene, 2011: xi), but all that matters is that they bound philosophy and, in particular, this method with “the fact of science, as this elaborates itself” by specifying that “Philosophy . . . to us is the theory of the principles of science, and therewith of all culture” (Cohen and Natorp – qtd. in Verene 2011: xi). Besides, they accepted the principles of “the synthetic unity of the intellect (Natorp 1910, pp. 26 – 27),” the “unity of science [*die Einheit der Wissenschaft*]” (Natorp 1909, p. 235),” and “the final unity of culture” (Carus 2007: 85). The Baden School responded likewise. Moreover, it did so with respect to the very conception of the nature of philosophy which found expression in „the scientific treatment of the general questions relating to the universe and human life“ (Windelband 1958: 1). Subsequently, Bakhtin also accepted the principles in question, and this conceptual continuity cannot be denied. Accordingly, “the unity of consciousness” which is, purely and simply, an auxiliary image (Bakhtin 2003: 331), the “unity of science” with the “unity of thought” (Bakhtin 2003: 331) peeking from behind, and “the unity of culture” (Bakhtin 1993: 21) fall within his interpretive perimeter. Of course, the last one requires two crucial clarifications, namely that the unity of “the once-occurrent event of Being” (Bakhtin 1993: 2) rejects the unjustified division between culture and life,¹² and that the union among

¹² See also Averintsev’s endnote (Bakhtin 2003: 444).

“science, art, and life” as key areas of culture is not an abstract construct, but a living confluence that can take place “only in the individual person” (Bakhtin 1990: 1). Permeating nearly all of his work, the irreducible unity of the aforementioned areas of culture is closely linked to the position of the subject (aesthetic and ontological) relative to their boundaries. Bakhtin made it clear as early as the 1920s, first, that the aesthetic stability of the author-creator demanded that he stand on the boundary between life and art (1990: 191) and, second, that “[e]very cultural act lives essentially on the boundaries” (1990: 274) which underlay “[t]he notion of concrete systematicness” (Bakhtin 2003: 328) in Pumpiansky’s notes on „Bakhtin’s Lectures and Comments of 1924 – 1925.”¹³ This position remained unchanged until the 1960s: for instance, in the revised version of the book on Dostoevsky (1963) where on the level of action characters adopt the stance of both subjects and objects of verbal representation that “lives a tense life on the borders of someone else’s thought, someone else’s consciousness” (Bakhtin 1984: 32). Similarly, just as life finds its ontological affirmation only “on the border of *two consciousnesses*” (author’s emphasis) (Bakhtin 2002: 406), so the subject-object orientation of speech acts is conceived of in terms of movable boundaries whereon, as we are told in Bakhtin’s second working notebook dating from the 1960s and the early 1970s, “an intense dialogical struggle takes place” (Bakhtin 2002: 406) which is meaning-constitutive. That is what determines his “neutral” position as a researcher who associates himself with no particular field of knowledge, but prefers to remain in border areas. This conscious choice is directly linked to the widely discussed issue of Bakhtin’s professional career path as to whether he is a philosopher, a literary scholar, a cultural anthropologist, a linguist, etc.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw an interdisciplinary exchange in two directions: both from the sciences to philosophy, as demonstrated by Matvei Kagan who had become a student of Hermann Cohen, and from philosophy to the sciences, as exemplified by Hermann von Helmholtz who set about developing Kant’s ideas (see Holquist 1990: 5). Thus, there appeared scholarly intermediaries that facilitated the synchronization of key knowledge areas and their placement in a large common project initiated in the humanities. As is obvious from Kagan’s reorientation, an important prerequisite for this process in the Bakhtin circle was the new worldview that aroused undisguised interest in subjects going far beyond the scope of the humanities. This tendency

¹³ In the Russian edition: „Лекции и выступления М. М. Бахтина 1924 – 1925 гг. В записях Л. В. Пумпянского“ (Bakhtin 2003: 326 – 342).

toward an interdisciplinary exchange of ideas was evident far beyond the borders of Germany, too. Michael Holquist has illuminated the connection between Bakhtin's concepts and the advances of modern physics by taking note of the fact that the neo-Kantians, after Kagan's return to Nevel in 1918, became an inspiration to Bakhtin with regard to the heuristic impact of science on modern philosophy (Holquist 1990: 5). In fact, he was unwilling to separate them: he said quite explicitly, as early as 1919 – 1921, that the latter, especially neo-Kantianism, was able to develop truly effective methods of analysis that would leave ample space for “the ideal of a scientific philosophy” (Bakhtin 1993: 22). In this sense, his interest in theoretical physics (Max Planck, Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr, etc) and physiology was quite understandable (Holquist 1990: 5). This was a natural consequence of the general orientation of the Marburg school which sought to develop its heuristic potential by bridging the gap between the discoveries of modern science and philosophy, and this, in turn, intensified Bakhtin's own concern for such a convergence (Holquist 1990: 5). Undoubtedly, his protean approach reflects the transfer of ideas from natural science to the humanities, particularly philosophy and literary theory. Holquist has had good reason to think that, as far as post-Newtonian physics is concerned, relativity theory is closest to Bakhtin's worldview and even that “dialogism is a version of relativity” (Holquist 1990: 19), an inference taking into account the relationship between Einstein's experiments and each consciousness's separateness and simultaneity that predetermine the individual's uniqueness in the “I-other” social dyad. The analogy between the two theories becomes apparent mostly in regard to the chronotope (Holquist 1990: 154).

Literary theory, in the person of Bakhtin, responded to the challenge presented by the new paradigm of the scientific community or, in Lakatos's terminology, by the new scientific research program (see Lakatos 1970: 91 ff.), by attempting to reconcile *culture* with *life* (see Bakhtin 2003: 384 – 386), in contrast to Husserl's views, and by developing the theory of polyphony, thereby complementing a broad historical framework epitomizing the development of novelistic discourse over the centuries. By promoting dialogue and exchange among different areas of knowledge, Bakhtin created an interdisciplinary “interface” as he aimed to overcome the conceptual and methodological backwardness of his field of research in comparison with the natural and mathematical sciences, to ensure effective interaction among disciplines in the humanities, and to find a fundamental solution to the problem of the irrelevance of monologic poetics to Dostoevsky's prose. Bakhtin called for a methodological renovation of literary theory with a view

to studying the polyphonic novel whose stylistic characteristics “do not fit any of the[...] historico-literary schemes[...] of the European novel” (Bakhtin 1984: 7). In the above-quoted second working notebook he highlighted the inseparability of public and private activities by observing that “Both life and all areas of culture (including science and art) are permeated with communication” (Bakhtin 2002: 408), which in turn posed a challenge for literary scholars to create the proper language of theoretical inquiry into the new way of aesthetic seeing on account of its departure from the rigid definitions of all previous poetics. Bakhtin’s paradigm includes the plurally constituted idea born in dialogue and the genuine historicity of the inner self. This implies that the researcher’s mind ought to be unconditionally released from all restriction-laden models of monologic thought, e.g. Aristotelian dynamics, Ptolemaic astronomy, and Newtonian mechanics in science and ideological monism in philosophy, since all of them assume that “The unity of consciousness” that enables perception and classificatory generalizations means nothing else but “the unity of a *single* consciousness” (author’s emphasis) (Bakhtin 1984: 80 – 81).

In conclusion, the deliberately established interdisciplinary connections were in response to disciplinary isolationism and the failure of literary theory to bring to light the new forms of aesthetic experience. The most notable achievements of science were associated with the polyphonic novel. In the new era, mathematical knowledge achieved universal dominance which imposed its conceptual centripetalism on a number of disciplines, thereby bending their methodological formulations to itself. Under these circumstances, it is necessary to determine what type of relationship tradition and change establish. At first glance, Bakhtin retained some of the central tenets of the older scientific models and monologic poetics (e.g. unity, systematicness, rationality) but they were refracted through the lens of his methodology and included in his coherent theoretical model. One of the long-term objectives of his project was to bring the language and methods of literary scholarship into line with modern science, i.e. with its achievements, beliefs, and objects of study. By using some of the precepts of neo-Kantianism, Bakhtin attempted to reconcile the transcendental with the experience of a living consciousness through his understanding of the essence and targets of cognition. As for the exchange of ideas, it is obvious that the gaining of heuristic impetus is a twofold process: on the one hand, philosophy, through the efforts of materialists and idealists, fastened its gaze on itself, on its Kantian legacy, in order to get back to a reliable starting point for further acquisition of knowledge and, on the other hand, through the efforts of the neo-Kantians,

it directed its attention to empirical science (sensory physiology), thereby testifying that the interdisciplinary crossovers initiated by Bakhtin had stretched the horizons of philosophical scholarship long before the beginning of the twentieth century. The Marburg neo-Kantians were even more insistent since interdisciplinary connections were to serve as a blueprint for unity. Bakhtin adopted this approach, but he further refined it by specifying that the unity of culture was achievable only in one's consciousness and living experience. One of the main features of his project is the borderline position of the receiving subject in terms of both its aesthetic creativity and its ontological status. This fundamental principle elucidates Bakhtin's worldview and scholarly self-awareness. The concerns of his circle demonstrated the interdisciplinary mobility of cognition in the bilateral exchange between science and philosophy. Thus, early twentieth-century literary theory responded by bringing the taxonomic hierarchy of novelistic discourse into line with the progress of science. Bakhtin, inspired by the advancement in physics (Einstein's theory of relativity) and other fields of inquiry, drew a line of demarcation between the older, unhistorical schemes of monologism and the new forms of cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic activity within the purview of his transgression-based dialogism.

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