

BRONCKART, Jean-Paul & BOTA, Cristian, 2011, *Bakhtine démasqué, Histoire d'un menteur, d'une escroquerie et d'un délire collectif*, Genève: Droz, 629 p.

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The publication of *Bakhtine démasqué*, written by Jean-Paul Bronckart and Cristian Bota¹, brings to mind the various recent exegeses by French-speaking academics of the works of the “Bakhtin Circle,” especially the new translation of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* by Patrick Sériot published in 2010. These two independent works, nevertheless, have different objectives: Whereas Sériot's preface dealt with the historical and epistemological recontextualisation of Valentin Vološinov's work, the main thrust of Bota and Bronckart's book is to restore the truth regarding the authorship of Mikhail Bakhtin's “disputed texts.” Three texts published in the USSR at the end of the 1920s – namely *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* and *Freudianism, A Marxist Critique* published under Vološinov's name, and *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, published under Pavel Medvedev's name – were, from the 1970s onwards, attributed to Bakhtin in many of their editions and translations. This was the consequence of Russian linguist Vjačeslav Ivanov's statement that these texts had obviously been written by Bakhtin (IVANOV [1973] 1975; KULL & VELMEZOVA, 2011). This unsubstantiated claim was rapidly accepted and relayed, notably in their translations into French, leading to readings and interpretations of these works as a single unified corpus produced by one and the same author. As a result, their scientific appropriation established theoretical connexions, which went largely unquestioned, between autonomous texts. Bronckart and Bota claim that these texts were in fact written by their respective signatories, Vološinov and Medvedev, claim which is now shared by a number of researchers. Their book,

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however, offers to push the “unmasking” of Bakhtin even further with what is this time an original thesis: The famous *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*², first published in 1929 under Bakhtin's name, and whose authorship had never been called into question up till now, would in fact be a patchwork of different texts written not only by Bakhtin but also by Vološinov.

Bronckart and Bota's book is divided into two parts: The first is concerned with the successive receptions of Bakhtin, Vološinov and Medvedev in the Western world (mainly English and French-speaking), by comparing the different reactions which preceded and followed the announcement of Bakhtin's all-encompassing authorship, and by pointing out their contradictions and inconsistencies. This panorama is supplemented by a study of Bakhtin's own declarations late in his life. In the second part, Bronckart and Bota return to Bakhtin, Vološinov and Medvedev's major texts and, through a comparative textual analysis, attempt to bring out the deep formal, methodological and theoretical differences that distinguish these authors from one another. They then use this as evidence in support of the idea that *Dostoevsky* was written by two different authors. If it is impossible to account in full for the wealth of information contained in this weighty book (600 pages), I will now draw up a necessarily incomplete review of the major ideas it contains.

The first part of this book, thus, focuses on the case of the “disputed texts,” that is, how the three texts considered here were attributed to Bakhtin and how this claim was then, in most cases, accepted, repeated, and backed up by Western researchers. Bronckart and Bota operate using complex chronological loops, comparing the ways in which these texts were received both after and before the case broke out in the 1970s, and comparing the biographies of Bakhtin which were written in the 1980s with factual data available in later sources. These multiple perspectives reveal the many contradictory arguments that were put forward to prove the coherence and the importance of a body of work supposedly written by a single author.

French-speaking readers will thus find in this book an account of how the texts of the “Circle” were received in France after Marina Yaguello's translation of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* was published under Bakhtin's name in 1977, with a preface by

² Henceforth *Dostoevsky*.

Roman Jakobson. Bronckart and Bota focus in particular on Tzvetan Todorov's *Dialogical Principle* published in 1981, which greatly helped popularise the works of Vološinov and Bakhtin in France, while at the same time turning into fact Bakhtin's authorship of all three texts: These are presented as a single corpus, thanks in part to the organisation of Todorov's book into thematic chapters in which excerpts from texts signed by different authors are grouped together.

Careful attention is also paid to the work of American slavists Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, whose *Mikhail Bakhtin*, published in 1984, represents the “hagiographic apex”³ of Bakhtinian studies. The glorification of Bakhtin's work is paralleled by the denigration of Vološinov and Medvedev, dismissed as a mediocre thinker for the former and a cynical careerist for the latter. If this hagiography had a long-lasting influence over the field of literary studies, it was nevertheless followed by several more sceptical texts that denounced the development of the *Bakhtin Industry*, such as the important counter-biography of Gary S. Morson and Caryl Emerson (1990). Bronckart and Bota underline the importance of this latter work that points out the inconsistencies behind the idea of Bakhtin's all-encompassing authorship. However, at the same time, they expose the ideological stance of its American authors, which certainly played a role in their desire to distinguish between the works of Vološinov (which were more Marxist at first glance) and those of Bakhtin.

Finally, Bronckart and Bota examine some of Bakhtin's last declarations before his death in 1975, which were published by his publishers and advocates at the beginning of the 1990s. Far from providing us with new data that could help determine the authorship of the disputed texts, these interviews and second-hand remarks instead add to the numerous contradictions that pepper Bakhtin's successive accounts of the conditions in which these texts were written at the end of the 1920s. Furthermore, they do not reveal any new information regarding the existence of the alleged intellectual circle subsequently christened the “Bakhtin Circle” and only confirm Bakhtin's fluctuating vision of his own personal history, of which he gave varying accounts throughout his life.

³ “l'acmé hagiographique” (p. 133). All quotes have been translated from French by the translator of this review.

In this first part of their book, Bronckart and Bota, thus, draw up a panorama of the factual inconsistencies and contradictory justifications that were, since 1975, supposed to back the idea of Bakhtin's all-encompassing authorship. The fact that Bakhtin refused all along to sign a document officially recognising his authorship of these works, the lack of direct accounts regarding the writing of the disputed texts other than Bakhtin's and his wife's, and the biographical inconsistencies (such as Bakhtin's alleged productivity – he would have written four books and nine articles between 1926 and 1929, thus displaying a rhythm of writing which he never matched either before or after this period) are thus all factual arguments which tend to disprove the idea of his all-encompassing authorship. Bronckart and Bota also underline the lack of data in support of the existence of the said “Bakhtin Circle” or of the influence which the supposed master Bakhtin would have had over his disciples: If several Soviet thinkers, including Bakhtin, Vološinov, and Medvedev but also Matvej Kagan or Lev Pumpjanskij did regularly meet and work together during the 1920s, it appears first of all that they each were active in several different groups and not in a single circle, and secondly that none of these circles was under the patronage, whether material or intellectual, of Bakhtin.

The idea of Bakhtin's sole authorship is further discredited by the accumulation of contradictory explanations which were called upon to justify it: The publishing of these texts under the names of Vološinov and Medvedev was in turn analysed either as a “gift” from Bakhtin to his friends, or on the contrary, as a strategy set up by a destitute Bakhtin to be able to publish his works and thus receive his royalties, argument which is itself contradicted by the publication in 1929, that very same year, of *Dostoevsky* under his own name. Bronckart and Bota also reveal the strange system of argumentation, which they call “specular hermeneutics”⁴, that Bakhtin's Western exegetes used to support the idea of his all-encompassing authorship: This hermeneutic approach entails justifying the substitution of authors using concepts taken from Bakhtin's own texts as if the story of his publications served as an embodiment of the content of “his” work. Thus, Bakhtin would have published texts under the names of Vološinov or Medvedev because of his taste for masks, because of the carnivalesque atmosphere that suffused his circle or because his work was *addressed to*

⁴ “herméneutique spéculaire”.

its authors in a case of dialogic interaction... When assembled and confronted to each other, as Bronckart and Bota have done, these multiple and contradictory justifications only illustrate the fragility of the statement according to which Bakhtin is the author of these disputed texts.

The second part of Bronckart and Bota's book is a detailed analysis of respectively Bakhtin, Vološinov and Medvedev's texts. Each text is examined in a linear fashion "as a *whole* and in its *general coherence*"⁵. Far from the patchwork of excerpts that Todorov assembled, here is a study of the "Bakhtinian corpus" in its entirety so as to trace its theoretical and stylistic outline.

Bronckart and Bota start their analysis by looking at Bakhtin's early writings which comprise three unpublished articles written in the 1920s: *Toward a Philosophy of the Act, Author and Hero*, and *The Problem of Content, Material and Form in Verbal Art*. Based on these, Bronckart and Bota bring out the main characteristics of Bakhtin's "religious ontology"⁶ which displays an extolling of the religious status of human life along with the responsibility of the subject for his or her acts: This responsibility applies to the work of the writer, who, when writing, must convey through his or her hero the moral essence of human acts. The authors also highlight the "dense style," the "obscure nature," and the "absence of explicit textual planning"⁷ which characterise Bakhtin's texts. This muddled and identifiable style of writing plays an important role in their argumentation concerning the authorship of the disputed texts.

Vološinov's work, in particular *Freudianism and Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, is then the object of a laudatory study that highlights both its theoretical and formal differences with Bakhtin's work. The "firm grounding in Marxism"⁸ of Vološinov's work is thus put to the forefront along with the themes which helped secure Vološinov's posterity amongst contemporary linguists, such as dialogism, the forms of reported speech or speech genres. Bronckart and Bota note that these themes, which are also present in Medvedev's work, are absent in Bakhtin's early texts. Finally, Bronckart and Bota focus on

⁵ "dans leur *globalité* et dans leur *cohérence générale*" (p. 336).

⁶ "ontologie religieuse" (p. 363).

⁷ "style touffu", "caractère obscur", "l'absence de planification textuelle explicite" (p. 335).

⁸ "l'ancrage résolu dans le marxisme" (p. 415).

The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship and stress once again the contrast between Medvedev's "sociological and Marxist poetics"⁹ and Bakhtin's religious program.

The comparative study of these different texts, the complexity and thoroughness of which we cannot do justice to in such a short summary, allows Bronckart and Bota to state that the "radically separate and largely antagonistic approaches" of Bakhtin, Vološinov and Medvedev, "on a theoretical, conceptual, methodological" and "stylistic level"¹⁰ leave the authorship of the disputed texts without a doubt. Furthermore, this textual analysis helps them support the main thesis of their book which states that *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* was not written by Bakhtin alone but is a patchwork of texts by both Bakhtin and Vološinov. According to Bronckart and Bota, the first edition of this work, published in 1929, contains chapters that contrast rather surprisingly with one another, to the point that some may even be "incompatible"¹¹. Some chapters, thus, deal with the topics which Vološinov was working on at the time but which were absent from Bakhtin's writings (dialogism and reported speech studied through a sociological and Marxist lens), while others recall the "traditional and religious"¹² tone of Bakhtin's early texts. The second edition, published in 1963 under the initiative of Bakhtin's advocates, who also helped coordinate it, displays, on the contrary, a less sociological style of writing and fewer passages devoted to the theme of dialogism, while at the same time offering a new chapter on the Bakhtinian theme of carnivalization.

To support their demonstration, Bronckart and Bota draw not only on their textual analysis but also on biographical data: In his later accounts, Bakhtin seems to have always disowned this work and regretted its Marxist undertones. Furthermore, when the book was published for the first time in 1929, Bakhtin had been arrested for his religious activities and was being threatened with exile to the Solovetsky Islands: At the time, following the arrest, friends of Bakhtin's launched a campaign to support him and the good critical reception of *Dostoevsky* certainly helped alleviate the sentence that had originally been

⁹ "poétique sociologique [et] marxiste" (p. 480).

¹⁰ "approches radicalement disjointes et largement antagonistes [...] aux plans théorique, conceptuel, méthodologique [et] stylistique" (p. 507).

¹¹ "incompatibles" (p. 544).

¹² "traditionnaliste et religieuse" (p. 590).

planned. If we follow Bronckart and Bota's argument, it is possible that during this support campaign, Medvedev and Vološinov decided to speed up the publication of a book with Bakhtin's name on it and assembled a number of Bakhtin's notes with texts written by Vološinov, thus resulting in the publication of *Dostoevsky* under Bakhtin's name. Bronckart and Bota recognize however that they “do not have any material evidence”¹³ to support their thesis.

The final chapter of Bronckart and Bota's book focuses on Bakhtin's later texts, such as the famous *Speech Genres*, texts which they believe also share this “apocryphal”¹⁴ nature. Bronckart and Bota's book is thus an invitation to fully reread and critically examine the texts published under Mikhail Bakhtin's name.

Before discussing the argument of this weighty tome, we would like to underline the fact that despite the impressive amount of information it contains, and despite its complex chronological construction, reading *Bakhtin démasqué* is surprisingly easy and agreeable, thanks to its masterfully crafted structure and the careful attention paid to the reader by its two authors who sum up their lengthy study at regular intervals. Also, as suggested by the book's subtitle (*The history of a liar, a scam and a collective fit of madness*¹⁵), Bronckart and Bota adopt a highly polemical tone, which contrasts strongly with the traditional academic style of writing, and they make their position clearly known when it comes to this “grim case”¹⁶. For instance, they ruthlessly describe Bakhtin's writing as “a-theoretical right-thinking literature” or “ultra-phenomenological churchy rants,” and they refer to Clark & Holquist's biography as “nauseating prose”¹⁷.

What will surely give rise to many commentaries and debates, more than its unusual form, are the numerous new suggestions and leads this book lays out. For now, within the limits of our skills, we will briefly comment on its methodology and suggest a few carefully selected comparisons with other French-language studies that are currently available.

¹³ “pas disposer de preuve matérielle” (p. 591).

¹⁴ “apocryphe” (p. 558).

¹⁵ *Histoire d'un menteur, d'une escroquerie et d'un délire collectif*

¹⁶ “ténébreuse affaire” (p. 14).

¹⁷ “littérature a-théorique bien-pensante”, “tissu de considérations ultra-phénoménologiques et bondieusardes” (p. 515), “prose [susitant] le dégoût” (p. 154).

Bronckart and Bota's work is entirely based on translations of the Russian texts they are studying. The translations they use (only one per Russian text) are directly compared to one another despite the fact that they have different authors and were written at different times and in different target-languages (French, Italian, English). The terminological and conceptual blurriness which comes as a result of these heterogeneous secondary sources is all the more problematic that the declared goal of the authors is to highlight the “stylistic” differences between Bakhtin, Vološinov and Medvedev's texts, differences “pertaining just as much to the general structure of their argumentation as to their syntactic and macro-syntactic organisation”¹⁸. Although Bronckart and Bota do list the translations they use at the beginning of their book, some reflexive comments, in which the authors could have taken stock of the pitfalls resulting from their methodology, would have been welcome. The corpus of translations upon which this study is exclusively based necessarily limits the number of sources used, and hinders the interpretation of Bakhtin's later accounts along with the interpretation of Bakhtin, Vološinov and Medvedev's own texts. For instance, the textual comparison of the first and the second edition of *Dostoevsky* (a comparison aimed at supporting *Bakhtin démasqué's* key thesis according to which *Dostoevsky* was written in part by Vološinov) is based on the Italian translation for the first edition and the French translation for the second one. The change in target-language may very well have had an impact on the comparison of these two texts.

Bronckart and Bota, in their interpretation of Bakhtin and Vološinov's work, discuss at length the Marxist dimension of Vološinov's texts, rejecting the “demarxising” readings of Vološinov that were put forward during the 1980s, when people were trying to prove that his texts and those of Bakhtin's were in fact the work of one and the same author. Bronckart and Bota, thus, try to show that far from being a superficial and rhetorical artifice, the Marxist orientation is part and parcel of Vološinov and Medvedev's research programmes, which cannot, therefore, be confused with Bakhtin's. As a result, their reading is at odds with that of other contemporary exegetes of Russian texts, such as Sériot or even Alpatov. The latter, thus, claims that even if for Vološinov, Marxism is “a frame of reference” and

¹⁸ “ayant trait à leur organisation argumentative globale aussi bien qu'à leur organisation syntaxique et macro-syntaxique” (p.507).

constitutes “a general sociological undertone” in his work, he nevertheless moves away from it as soon as it can no longer supply him with the conceptual tools he requires (2003, p. 19)¹⁹. As for Sériot (2008a, 2010, 2011) or Ageeva (2008), they draw our attention to the pitfalls that are the concepts of “ideology” and “social” environment in that they induce a “recognition effect” among contemporary francophone readers who fail to grasp the meaning of these terms in their socio-historical and epistemological context of production. Distancing themselves explicitly from Sériot's interpretations, in which Vološinov's texts are compared with certain “reactionary” European philosophical movements of the 18th century (2008b, p.89), Bronckart and Bota draw up an axiological opposition between Bakhtin described as a plagiariser, a liar, and a mediocre mystical religious writer, and Vološinov and Medvedev seen as brilliant and brave thinkers who died too young (the former died of tuberculosis, the latter was shot by a firing squad) and whose political “founding work”²⁰ still disturbs American Liberal critics. These portraits contrast once again with the more nuanced ones drawn up by Sériot, especially with that of a young Vološinov described this time as interested in mystical circles and the occult (2010, p.52).

“There seems to be as many Bakhtins as there are countries where his works were received”²¹ (SÉRIOT, 2007: online): There even seems to be as many Bakhtins and Vološinovs as there are readers. Furthermore, the multiple interpretations that we briefly described here could be supplemented with the multiple historical and scientific reconstructions of these works that are now available. These recent and diverging exegeses, to which Bronckart and Bota's work now has to be added, are stimulating for the French-speaking linguist in that they constitute an invitation to a renewed and more historicized and rigorous reading of these texts, which are so often quoted in contemporary discourse research.

However, despite the efforts to recontextualise these texts, and despite the questions currently raised regarding the context of their writing, the deep influence of Bakhtin, Vološinov and Medvedev's texts over francophone studies seems to be following its original

¹⁹ “un cadre de référence”, “une tonalité sociologique générale”.

²⁰ “œuvre fondatrice” (p. 453).

²¹ “Il semble y avoir autant de Bakhtine qu'il y a de pays de réception”.

path, which started with the first translations into French: The notions of *dialogism* and *polyphony*, which are extremely heuristic when it comes to understanding the already-said, the already-here and the alien discourses which can be found in a text, have been happily combined with Pêcheux's *interdiscourse*, Foucault's *enunciative field* or Lacan's *divided subject*, and have thus given rise to many theoretical contributions and founding works in discourse analysis. From Jacqueline Authier-Revuz's *enunciative heterogeneity* and Oswald Ducrot's *enunciative polyphony* to more recent notions such as those of *formula* (Alice Krieg-Planque) or *interdiscursive memory* (Sophie Moirand), from the works of the praxematiicians (Paul Siblot, Jacques Bres) to those of the Scandinavian movement of ScaPoLine, the readings and interpretations of Vološinov and Bakhtin's texts that emerged in France a few decades ago still inspire many linguists. Furthermore, the productivity of this field does not seem to be hindered by the misunderstandings surrounding the authorship of these texts, which came as a consequence of their first translations...

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