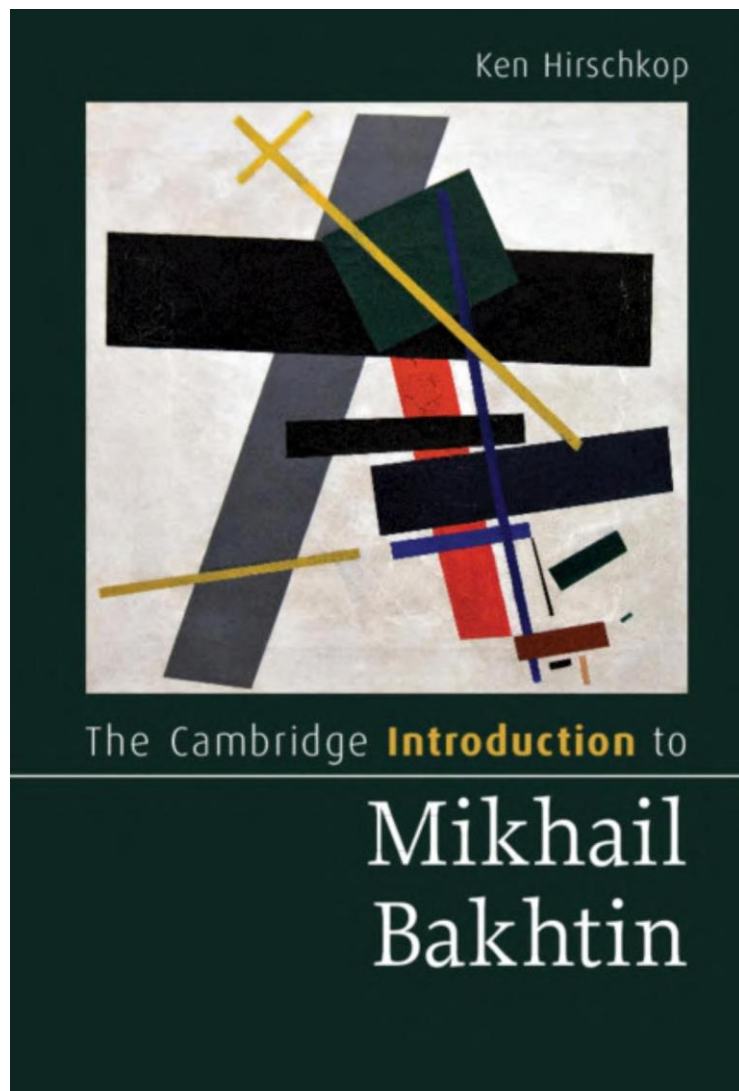


HIRSCHKOP, Ken. *The Cambridge Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin.* Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 194p. *E-book.* (Series: Cambridge introductions to literature)

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*Mikhail Bakhtin led an extraordinary
life, extraordinary in its difficulty and
extraordinary in its achievements.*
Ken Hirschkop

On the international scene — especially the English-speaking one — the New York professor and researcher Ken Hirschkop (University of Waterloo) stands out as one of the most renowned scholars of the works of Bakhtin and his confreres. In addition to organizing the work *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory* (original from 1989, with a revised and expanded edition in 2001) alongside David Shepherd, Hirschkop is responsible for the reflection present in *Mikhail Bakhtin: an Aesthetic for Democracy*. Therefore, it is not surprising that the aforementioned professor was chosen for the challenge of preparing *The Cambridge Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin*, published at the end of 2021, as part of the *Cambridge Introductions to Literature* series, by Cambridge University Press.

In this text, from the first chapter — namely, *Introduction* —, the North American researcher reveals his interest in making whatever is at his reach “to balance and coordinate the two tasks: to present a usable and interesting Bakhtin for students and researchers; and to present what is in some respects a new Bakhtin” (HIRSCHKOP, 2021, p.4). And these tasks, certainly, gain greater conditions of effectiveness with the well-thought division of the book, specifically the division between *Life, Context, Works, and Reception* — respectively, titles of the second, third, fourth, and fifth chapters. Themes are followed by a sixth chapter, entitled *A brief conclusion*.

As *The Cambridge Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin* is somewhat of a presentation of Bakhtin’s life and thought for readers of different types, a text that proposes to only expose the Bakhtin presented by Hirschkop would end up being a summary of the summary. Therefore, here, in addition to a very brief incursion into each chapter, I will make more specific considerations, which effectively highlight the most distinct points of Hirschkop’s text.

The first singular point in Hirschkop’s work is his understanding that it is necessary to accept the limits imposed by Bakhtin’s history. It is in this sense that, giving a new direction to the metaphor of ruins — proposed by Kristeva in *Une poétique ruinée*,

preface to the French translation of *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* —, the New York researcher states:

Bakhtin had big ideas and no audience: as a result, we have the ruins of a project. Our job is to go through the ruins and extract what we can, to repair what we can repair, to extend and reconstruct where that is possible, and, finally, to admit that we can't make the ruins into a finished building, can't undo the history that produced them (Hirschkop, 2021, p.2).

Hirschkop's position seems to me to be commendable. Not so much because it refuses to finish what is natively unfinished, but because, at the right time, it reminds us that the effective knowledge of a theoretical work involves attention to the sociocultural conditions of its production.

And remarkably close to this is another commendable attitude of the author. Using the metaphor of ruins, Hirschkop shows all respect for those who, even at a time without sufficient information about Bakhtin's context, sought to help in the reconstruction of this project.

Having observed these first points — which mark a respectable ethical stance, both with Bakhtin and with his interpreters —, it is worth considering issues related to the content found in *The Cambridge Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin*.

The second chapter of Hirschkop's work discusses five periods in Mikhail Bakhtin's life. In the *Youth* section, the period from Bakhtin's birth, in 1895, to the fateful year of 1917 — the year in which the Russian Revolution presents itself. The *Friendships* section explores the troubled period spanning from 1918 to the unforgettable year of 1929 — the year of Bakhtin's arrest and the publication of his work *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*. The interval between 1930 and 1946 is reported in the *Exile, Escape, and the War* section. The phase that begins in 1947 and ends in 1961 is narrated, very briefly, in the *Saransk* section. And finally, in the *Rediscovery, Rehabilitation* section, the interval of years from 1961 to the year of death, or 1975, is included.

In fact, despite the important comments about the political and social instability that lasted for decades in the USSR — and ended up interfering, for better or for worse, in Bakhtin's intellectual path — a good part of what is reported in this second chapter

already appears in other pages that record the biography of the Russian philosopher — whether in English, French, Portuguese, etc. However, it can be said that Hirschkop's text is endowed with a more balanced biographical vision and that this vision prevents him from carrying out attacks based on assumptions and prevents him from promoting hagiography.

Regarding the third chapter, five different sections can be observed once again. In *Philosophy: Influences and Options for the Young Bakhtin*, with just the right balance, Hirschkop points to Hermann Cohen's influence on the early philosophical writings of the Vološinov confrere. In the section titled *Language: Soviet Struggles over Literary Criticism in the 1920s, and Bakhtin's Linguistic Turn*, the New York researcher comments on Bakhtin's apparent uniqueness among the different groups that competed for the reins of Russian literary criticism in the first three decades of the 20th century. In the *Excursus: Vološinov's Linguistic Turn* section, with some haste, which borders on superficiality, the author takes up observations from Poole (2001)¹ and Brandist (2004)² about the philosophical-linguistic work undertaken by Valentin N. Vološinov. Finally, the last two sections of the third chapter — namely, *Literature: Socialist Realism and Arguments about the Novel in the 1930s and The 1950s and 1960s: Consolidation and a Quiet Life* —, bring to light a set of information that highlights, once again, the political injunctions that affected Bakhtin's life.

Regarding the fourth chapter, it is worth mentioning the fact that Hirschkop presents a list — sometimes more commented, sometimes less — of all the published writings of Mikhail Bakhtin. And this list, as the author himself indicates, is not organized according to the chronology of the works, but by the theme that runs through them. More importantly, this fourth chapter brings with it an exposition and a critical analysis of some Bakhtinian concepts. As an example, I observe that, after exposing the concepts of author, hero, art, and responsibility, Hirschkop advances a brief argument to question the validity

¹ POOLE, B. From Phenomenology to Dialogue: Max Scheler's Phenomenological Tradition and Mikhail Bakhtin's Development from 'Toward a Philosophy of the Act' to His Study of Dostoevsky. In: HIRSCHKOP, K.; SHEPHERD, D. (eds.). *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*. Revised and expanded second edition. Manchester, UK; New York, USA: Manchester University Press, 2001. pp.109-135.

² BRANDIST, C. Vološinov's Dilemma: On the Philosophical Roots the Dialogic Theory of the Utterance. In: BRANDIST, C.; SHEPHERD, D.; TIHANOV, G. (eds.). *The Bakhtin Circle: In the Master's Absence*. Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 2004. pp.97-124.

of the I/Other relationship, as defended by Bakhtin. Still, as an example, it is worth noting that, after exposing the concepts of author, hero, art, and responsibility, the researcher brings to light the argument that suggests seeing, at least in Bakhtin's initial texts, a conception of aesthetics that is a bit ahistorical.

The reader is free to disagree with the critical analysis that Hirschkop proposes about the chosen concepts. Even so, the very fact that the coherence of the concepts is questioned by a serious scholar, who has a friendly approach to Bakhtinian studies, is already something to be admired.

Finally, while the fifth chapter, *Reception*, presents an exposition of the different interests that have driven Bakhtin scholars over the years — from the interest in presenting Bakhtin as a religious philosopher to the interest in using him in feminist and post-colonial studies —, the sixth chapter, *A Brief Conclusion*, consists in suggesting that, although Bakhtin is not original in what he observes, he is quite original in the way he applies or allows us to apply it.

For now, then, in order not to dwell too much on these more descriptive considerations, I will say that, despite the many difficulties imposed by the subject, *The Cambridge Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin* testifies in favor of the admirable capacity of synthesis and systematization of Ken Hirschkop. Therefore, from the novice reader to the researcher most familiar with the subject, we can all benefit from the author's work.

Having said that, it is worth considering something else. It is worth saying that, even recognizing Hirschkop's valiant feat, it is necessary to see some of his interpretations with reservations. For obvious reasons, it is not appropriate to go into a detailed discussion of each of these interpretations here. Even so, as an example, it is worth mentioning at least one, so that the readers of Hirschkop do not go through such interpretations without exercising their right — and, as a good reader, their duty — to distrust.

In this direction, the interpretation that seems most objectionable is the one that concerns an apparent equivalence between the concepts expressed by the terms “polyphony” and “dialogism.” In Hirschkop's text, this interpretation is exposed, initially, in the second chapter, when, reporting Bakhtin's words present in the preface to *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art*, from 1929, the researcher states that “it's focused on Dostoevsky's

‘revolutionary innovation in the field of the novel as an art form’, which Bakhtin called ‘dialogism’ [...]” (Hirschkop, 2021, p.17).

In fact, since Dostoevsky’s “revolutionary innovation” is polyphony, the confusing quotation marks in Hirschkop’s text seem to endorse an equivalence between polyphony and dialogism. These confusing quotation marks may imply, on the one hand, that the term “dialogism” was also taken from the preface of the 1929 work, and, on the other hand, that the term referred to is used by Bakhtin to specify what would be the “revolutionary innovation” that Dostoevsky promotes within the novel.

However, when viewed closely, these jumbled quotes do nothing more than the obvious: cause confusion. And this happens, in the first place, because the term “dialogism” does not appear in the preface to *PDA* (Bakhtin, 2022, p.52) and, secondly, because the attitude of specifying “revolutionary innovation” through the aforementioned term is not Bakhtin’s, but Hirschkop’s own.

This strange interpretation by Hirschkop gains strength when the author, at some point in the fourth chapter, presents us with a section entitled *Dialogism as Polyphony*. There, right from the start, the researcher points out that “the idea of ‘dialogism’ makes its debut in Bakhtin’s 1929 study of Dostoevsky, where it appears as a peculiar and interesting form of the author/hero relationship” (Hirschkop, 2021, p.75).

Now, anyone who knows Bakhtin’s work as a whole cannot help but be surprised by a statement like this. Nowhere in his texts is the term “dialogism” used to refer to the “peculiar and interesting form of the author/hero relationship.” The term that designates such a relationship is “polyphony.”

As ironic as it may seem, this strange interpretation by Hirschkop is absolutely the same strange interpretation that can be verified in the biography that the author himself calls into question, namely the pioneer *Mikhail Bakhtin*, by Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, original from 1984. The mistake of equating polyphony and dialogism was already evident in the latter, when, regarding Bakhtin’s work on Dostoevsky, the authors comment:

the book opens with a demonstration of on-the-job dialogism. Bakhtin does to other Dostoevsky critics what Dostoevsky does to his characters. Bakhtin lets all of the critics speak in their voices, through

long quotations from each, but in so doing, they make the very points that here, Bakhtin, wishes to make (Clark; Holquist, 1984, p.240).³

As can be seen, to exemplify what they call a “demonstration of on-the-job dialogism,” Clark and Holquist (1984) mention Bakhtin’s attitude towards the other critics of Dostoevsky, that is, the fact that “Bakhtin lets all of the critics speak in their voices.” Thus, what the authors take as dialogism would be the equivalence of different voices, which is polyphony. And it is on this misconception, then, that the astonishing sentence is presented: “the phenomenon that Bakhtin calls ‘polyphony’ is simply another name for dialogism” (Clark; Holquist, 1984, p.242).⁴ And it is precisely the same misunderstanding, I repeat, that appears in the pages of Hirschkop.

This brief review of *The Cambridge Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin* is not the most favorable place to hold an in-depth discussion on the distinction between polyphony and dialogism. However, even if superficially, it should be noted that, concerning this point, on the opposite side of Hirschkop, there are those who, in general, see dialogism in terms of immediate and historical responsiveness (Morson; Emerson, 1990;⁵ Faraco, 2009).

Apart from all that, even though I am aware of the introductory nature of the work, there are two questions of which absences caused me some surprise. First, the absence of a minimal consideration of the Bakhtinian discussion about axiology. Second, the absence of a minimal consideration of the phenomenon of polyphony in Vološinov’s eyes.

It is true that, when commenting briefly on Vološinov’s essay “Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art,” published in 1926, Hirschkop recognizes the special place that Vološinov gives to social evaluation. Despite this, it is surprising that, when dealing with Bakhtin himself, the American researcher has not advanced on this topic. Therefore, in my eyes, the best presentation of the fundamental relationship between Bakhtin and axiology remains recorded in the writings of the Brazilian linguist Carlos Alberto Faraco,

³ CLARK, K.; HOLQUIST, M. *Mikhail Bakhtin*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.

⁴ For reference, see footnote 4.

⁵ MORSON, G. S.; EMERSON, C. *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

with emphasis on the enlightening *Mikhail Bakhtin: linguagem e axiologia* [*Mikhail Bakhtin: Language and Axiology*] (Faraco, 2021).

As for the issue of polyphony in Vološinov's eyes, it is true that, as Hirschkop's work is intended to deal with Bakhtin, this claim seems incoherent. However, this is just an apparent inconsistency, since, as the author emphasizes the possible influence of Vološinov on Bakhtin, it would be coherent to point out that, in terms of polyphony, the conferees keep a certain distance from each other (Gomes, 2022).

In the end, I am convinced that, as I outlined earlier, Ken Hirschkop's new work has points that demand a more detailed, more prudent reflection from each reader. In any case, this is not a demerit of the work. On the contrary, in a field where the attempt to avoid misunderstandings seems to prevent clear definitions and objective summaries — almost always causing deadly boredom — Hirschkop's courage impresses and, thus, calls for the reading of *The Cambridge Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin*.

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Research Data and Other Materials Availability

The contents underlying the research text are included in the manuscript.

Reviews

Due to the commitment assumed by *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso [Bakhtiniana. Journal of Discourse Studies] to Open Science, this journal only publishes reviews that have been authorized by all involved.

Review I

The review has an extremely appropriate critical nature, and it should be said in its favor that despite this aspect it did not fail to recognize the value of the work reviewed, carefully avoiding providing a summary of it, which by definition would imply the work was poor. This is an opportune review that raises two relevant problems of interpretation and terminology of this work and another work by English-speaking authors, encouraging the specialized reader to both read the reviewed book, which has a contribution to make, and to focus on the problems mentioned. ACCEPTED

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Reviewed on September 24, 2022.

Review III

The Author organizes the presentation of the text following the chapters presented by Hirschkop in his summary and does so in a clear, articulate, and highly intelligent way. It highlights central aspects of the work and raises some questions about central concepts

of Bakhtin's work, such as the Canadian professor's understanding of "Dialogism as Polyphony."

In the introduction to the review, he signals his position, stating: "in addition to a very brief incursion into each chapter, I will make more specific considerations, which effectively highlight the most distinct points of Hirschkop's text."

Some incursions were, in fact, "very brief," and as a suggestion, it would be the case to include at least two mentions referring to the composition of the reviewed work:

1) highlight the "introduction" genre, marked in the title of the book *The Cambridge Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin*. After all, the academic proposal is to be an introduction to Bakhtin's thought, both for those who start reading Bakhtinian texts and for researchers who find a new reading and, like the Author of the review, dialog, discuss, refute some of the concepts exposed in *The Cambridge Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin*.

2) Before the chapters, Hirschkop presents a careful chronology of Bakhtin, which allows the reader to understand the author and his work in a timeline and not in a fragmented way. I value this chronology since Bakhtin's work, published posthumously, did not follow the chronological order of writing.

During the review, the Author insists on putting in parentheses the year of publication of the work (2021) and it seems unnecessary to repeat the same information since it is a review.

I consider the points around the reservations made to the reviewed work relevant: opportune and leading the reader not to adopt an understanding without reflection.

As a contribution, I suggest that the indication of the work on page 6 be updated, using the Portuguese title *Problemas da Obra de Dostoiévski (versão de 1929)* [Problems of Dostoevsky's Creative Arts — 1929 version], in the translation by Grillo and Américo from Editora 34, published in 2022.

It is a significant review because it includes Brazilian bibliographic references in addition to critical reflections, which did not appear in Hirschkop's work. Based on the above, I am in favor of the publication. ACCEPTED

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