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Baxtin: The "Disputed" Texts

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First of all, this title, though accurate, may be misleading. The subject of discussion is what is contained in the so-called "disputed" texts, not the reasons they are disputed. The two are, however, inextricably related. A limited amount of information to set the stage seems necessary to lead us to the major topic, which is the social theory of language and discourse provided by the writers of the so-called "Baxtin school."

Mikhail Mikhailovich Baxtin was a literary scholar who seems to have become more important after his death than he was while an active writer. His first published work on Dostoevskij appeared in 1929, its worth recognized by only a very few contemporaries. It was only when the work was reissued in 1963 that it became the cause of the general excitement we can still see today. It was, ironically, Baxtin's second major work, on Rabelais, published in 1965 in the Soviet Union, that first came to be generally known in the West. The appearances of the English translation (Rabelais and His World) in 1968 and of the French translation in 1970 were, however, secondary to the 1967 article by Julia Kristeva which examined aspects of both the Dostoevskij and the Rabelais books. Kristeva's article is considered by many to be the introduction of Baxtin to the Western audience; had Kristeva not commanded the respect and attention that she did, it might well have been several more years before Baxtin's theories came to Western notice.

The problem of disputed texts arose in 1973 when Vjacheslav Ivanov declared that two books and three articles published by V. N. Voloshinov, and one book published by P. N. Medvedev were actually written by Baxtin. The three books which are the greatest area of concern are Voloshinov's Freudianism (Freidizm in Russian) and Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, and Medvedev's The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship.

I.R. Titunik, in his translator's introduction to Voloshinov's Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, notes several important factors which make it difficult to attribute Freudianism to Baxtin. Titunik notes an inconsistency on the part of Vjacheslav Ivanov in his claims that the six works were written by Baxtin rather than by Voloshinov or Medvedev: Ivanov declared that Freudianism was the work of Baxtin, but did not make the same claim for Voloshinov's article "Po tu storonu social'nogo" (Beyond the social) which was inserted almost entirely into the text of Freudianism. Titunik also comments in this introduction on certain peculiarities of style of Voloshinov: "his peculiar paragraphing, his repetitions of terms with different 'tonality,' his frequent recourse to conative and phatic signals (of course, you see, to be sure, and the like)." (4) These features tend to point to an authorship that is not Baxtin's. Given these features of style, it
is difficult to attribute the actual physical writing of the final draft of this book to Baxtin. Though the book appears to have been written by Voloshinov, there is undoubtedly a great deal of Baxtin's influence on Voloshinov's ideas and expression, even though not on his style. It remains to be determined what is the extent of Baxtin's influence on the ideas of his "disciple" and what part he may have played in the composition of the work, if any. There also remains to be examined the problem of the reader and the intended audience. The supposed nature of this work as a "popular" essay is belied by the sometimes sophisticated discussions. On the one hand, as noted by Titunik in his introduction, a familiarity on the part of the reader is expected with the philosophies of Kant, Nietzsche, Spengler and J.-C. Tetens, but all sexual terms such as "amnesia, uterus, penis, bisexual" are provided with glosses. (4) This schismatic presentation produces a mixed perception of the intended reader. The "duality" of the authorship and readership gives the book a particular configuration, one that does not seem to match that of the "undisputed" texts.

Al Wehrle, in his introduction to his translation of Medvedev's The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship, seems to support the claim made by Kozhinov that the "disputed" books and articles were written by the authors named in publication but "on the basis of conversations with" Baxtin. Wehrle then goes on to observe that since the major theme of the book is reported speech, the composition of the text mirrors the phenomena it analyzes. The works of the Baxtin school must be seen as the result of dialogic interaction.

From their first chapters, all three of the books demonstrate a concern with the same area: the social. It also seems worth noting that this concern is a bit different from that exhibited in the books "signed" by Baxtin. There, the social concern is strictly that of dialogism and human communication. In the works signed by Voloshinov and Medvedev, the concern is rather how to relate the quality of dialogism to society, and, as a task specific to Marxism, how society and the attempt at dialectic improvement of society can be aided by a study of the dialogistic quality of language and human communication. In Freudianism there is a strong element of socialism and socialistic thought. This will be an even stronger factor in the book Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, and the two works together create a strong authorial personality for Voloshinov.

Of all the "disputed texts," that is, those that were originally published under other names but are attributed by some scholars to Baxtin, the one that seems least to resemble the work of Baxtin is Freudianism, translated and introduced by I.R. Titunik. Titunik is one of the now rare few who has withstood the movement (fad?) towards attributing these "other" works to Baxtin.

Socioeconomic concern is clearly seen throughout the work on Freud. The qualities which are perceived as fundamental to the background of Freudism are shown to cause problems in terms of socialism. One basic motif of "present day philosophy," according to the book, is that an "attempt is made to replace all objective socioeconomic categories with subjective psychological or biological ones" (12), whereas the
The author contends that not a single action of any person can be explained without reference to socioeconomic factors. The first chapter ends with a quote from Marx's *Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach*: "the essence of man is not an abstraction inherent in each separate individual. In its reality it is the aggregate of social relationships." (Freudianism 15) Of course, this social concern can be seen as overlapping somewhat with Baxtinian issues as well. Any social situation is described as the product of human discourse, and here, the subject matter as well as the style of expression are such as could have been written by Baxtin himself:

Not a single instance of verbal utterance can be reckoned exclusively to its utterer's account. Every utterance is the product of the interaction between speakers and the product of the broader context of the whole complex social situation in which the utterance emerges. . . . [Any product of the activity of human discourse . . . derives shape and meaning . . . from the social situation in which the utterance appears. . . .

Nothing changes at all if, instead of outward speech, we are dealing with inner speech. Inner speech, too, assumes a listener and is oriented in its construction toward that listener. . . .

. . . What is reflected in these utterances is not the dynamics of the individual psyche but the social dynamics of the interrelations between doctor and patient. (Freudianism 79, referring to therapy)

It becomes clear that any discussion of verbal discourse is to be seen in the context of both the social milieu and socioeconomic surroundings. The basic error of Freudism, therefore, is to have seen the evidence of verbal discourse against the background of the individual psyche only. As it is expressed in the eighth chapter: "Verbal discourse, not in its narrow linguistic sense, but in its broad and concrete sociological sense—that is the objective milieu in which the content of the psyche is presented." (83)

This same preoccupation is reiterated and developed in the following chapter: "Therefore, nothing verbal in human behavior (inner and outward speech equally) can under any circumstances be reckoned to the account of the individual subject in isolation; the verbal is not his property but the property of his social group (his social milieu)." (86) All consciousness and activity of the psyche are always determined by the social context and socioeconomic factors and "self-consciousness, in the final analysis, always leads us to class consciousness . . . ." (87) One of the causes of the importance of the social factor is that "the human consciousness operates through words—that medium which is the most sensitive and at the same time the most complicated refraction of the socioeconomic governance." (87) The conclusion is then drawn that any conflicts existing between the inner and outer speech are ideological rather than psychical and cannot be understood "within the narrow confines of the individual organism and the individual psyche." (88) I should note that much of this remains
fairly unconvincing. What is at issue here, however, is not the persuasiveness of the arguments but the insistently ideological nature of them.

Much of this same concern is found again in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. In his introduction, Voloshinov explains that this work is one of a popular nature (as was the work on Freudism), though he notes the necessity for the reader of an acquaintance with the basics of linguistics. It has a slightly more complex presentation than the work on Freudism; it is a step removed from the completely general reader implied in the previous work.

Here, it is again the social context that is most emphasized. Voloshinov, according to the translators' introduction by Matejka and Titunik, held that utterance is "constructed between two socially organized persons and, in the absence of a real addressee, an addressee is presupposed in the representative of the social group to which the speaker belongs." Voloshinov, in his introduction (which was not included in the English edition) noted that nothing had yet been done on this area in Marxist literature. In his description of the task at hand, he claimed that the "basic idea of our entire work is the productive role and the social nature of the utterance ..." (*Marksizm* II, my translation) Though this is of course what would be expected as the subject of a work on the Marxist philosophy of language, it is indeed almost relentlessly so. For those who seek Baxtin hidden between the lines of authorship, this constant focus on the social aspects of language must be seen as essentially the work of another voice. Though there is, indeed, again, much that relates to Baxtin's thought, the bulk of this work seems to move in a direction that is not in keeping with Baxtin's body of work.

The basis of Voloshinov's introductory material, however, is a reasoned development of certain assumed givens: that if ideology requires signs, and consciousness requires signs for embodiment, and if signs can exist only inter-individually, then "the individual consciousness is a social-ideological fact." His bias can be observed in one of his conclusions: "the study of ideologies does not depend on psychology to any extent and need not be grounded in it ... it is rather the reverse: objective psychology must be grounded in the study of ideologies." (13) Some of the points presented in Freudianism are repeated here, including that the role of the word is as the "semiotic material of inner life—of consciousness (inner speech)." (14) Voloshinov's arguments for the importance of the study of the philosophy of language are that everything revolves around signs, every "ideological refraction of existence ... is accompanied by ideological refraction in word ..." (15) and must therefore be defined and structured according to Marxist principles.

In the second chapter we are told that a typology of the forms of semiotic communication is one of the "urgent tasks" of Marxism. Signs are conditioned by the social relationships of a language group and must be connected with the socioeconomic concerns of that group in order to have entered into its sphere of interest. He asserts (Voloshinov seems to have been inordinately fond of italic emphasis):
"only that which has acquired social value can enter the world of ideology, take shape, and establish itself there." (22) Even accents must be interindividually, so the only type of communication without accent or social conditioning is the animal response, a cry of pure pain. Different social classes use a single system of signs, with the result that the sign then becomes the "arena" of class struggle.

In Medvedev's The Formal Method (first published in 1928) a similar notion serves as basis and starting point: "Each individual act in the creation of ideology is an inseparable part of social intercourse, one of its dependent components, and therefore cannot be studied apart from the whole social process that gives it its meaning." (Formal Method 7) Thus, like communication, ideological creation "is not within us, but between us." (8) But in this book by Medvedev the social arena of general philosophy and psychology is changed, as suggested by the title, to the specific area of literary criticism. If with Voloshinov the socialist-Marxist approach seemed truly genuine and integral, with Medvedev it is slightly less so. At times it seems the author is trying very carefully to be sure to include phrases which keep the philosophy expressed on the proper side of the ideological line. The general tenor of the writing of the work is different from that in Voloshinov as well. This work is heavily pedantic and dogmatic, monolithic: "Particularly pernicious reasons for [the lack of study of the forms of ideological intercourse] are incorrect habits of thinking fostered by idealism, with its stubborn tendency to conceive of ideological life as a single consciousness juxtaposed to meaning." (The Formal Method 13) The careful alignment with Marxist authorities and philosophy in the matters of the sociology of discourse (by use of statements such as: "The ideological environment is the realized, materialized, externally expressed social consciousness of a given collective" 14) is important because of the budding sympathy the author seems to express towards formalism, especially of the Western variety. Though the work is ostensibly an examination of the shortcomings of Formalism (for instance: "Formalist poetics is consistently nonsociological" 37) it actually ends up defining a formalist poetics, something that had not previously existed in such a complete and thorough form. And, though the book was favorably received in 1929, by 1934 the tides had changed and Medvedev was criticized for his "unstable position." (1934 Literary Encyclopedia, cited in Wehrle's introduction xvi) Medvedev then published a revised edition in 1934 entitled Formalism and Formalists which attempted to correct some of the previous "errors." It apparently did not help, for Medvedev was "illegally repressed" and died in 1938.

What I personally find amazing and interesting is the degree to which these are all Marxist documents, pertinent only to the era in which they were published, the late 1920's. This is true particularly in the Voloshinov books, and still present, though to a lesser degree in the Medvedev book. The quasi-scientific socialistic and sociological phrasing, most of which seems naive and puerile today, shows a strong relationship to the function, at least, of Socialist-realist literature: they are both very much tied to a specific function and hold little interest outside that context. For instance, Red Love and Cement are read only in a class on, or as an example of, socialist
realism. The professor only talks about *How the Steel was Tempered*, telling students how lucky they are not to have to read it. One reads these works of Voloshinov and Medvedev only because they are somehow related to Baxtin, who is "important." This socialist-Marxist function, in my eyes, is thoroughly integral to the texts; it is not tacked on to please censors or other "powers-that-be." I do not believe it is possible to extract such a clear network of Marxism in the main works signed by Baxtin. If, therefore, one chooses to talk of a "Baxtin school" it must be with the understanding that it is a very broad category, if it is indeed one at all.

WORKS CITED


