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DOCUMENT

BAKHTIN IN HIS OWN VOICE: INTERVIEW BY VICTOR DUVAKIN

MIKHAIL BAKHTIN
TRANSLATION AND NOTES BY SLAV N. GRATCHEV

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

On March 15, 2013, *Radio Svoboda* (Radio Liberty) broadcast a recording of selections from a series of interviews with Mikhail Bakhtin conducted in 1973 by philologist and dissident Victor Duvakin (Komardenkov 1972, 18).[1] At this key moment in the Soviet era, Professor Duvakin, who had been dismissed from his position at Moscow State University, decided to create a *phono-history* of the epoch (Timofeev-Resovsky 1995, 384). Among the three hundred people whom Duvakin interviewed was Mikhail Bakhtin (Bocharova and Radzishevsky1996, 123), the seventy-eight-year-old retired professor of literature who was known familiarly by many as "chudak."[2] Bakhtin had continued to write about Dostoevsky, the theory of the novel, and "the great time" (большого времени) of the historicity of meaning. After a number of weeks spent with Bakhtin (see Bakhtin 2002, 12), Duvakin left us an enormous archive of "Bakhtin in his own voice"—eighteen hours' worth of conversations with the philosopher, of which the broadcast portions are translated here.

In these interviews Bakhtin discusses literature and poets, and talks very personally as if he is lecturing at the university to his students. He mentions some of the most important figures of

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the literary movement in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century—figures like Fyodor Sologub, Valery Bryusov, Maxim Gorky, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Velimir Khebnikov, and Alexander Blok.

The interview has never been translated into English and, consequently, has been inaccessible to English-speaking audiences interested in the life and works of Mikhail Bakhtin. This annotated translation attempts to fill the gap and to bring Bakhtin to the Western audience in "his own voice" (Gratchev and Gyulamiryan 2014, 2). Brief notes are included to identify important Russian literary figures and historical events in order to help Western readers contextualize Bakhtin's observations.[3]

BAKHTIN ON FYODOR SOLOGUB[4]

"I would say that of all poets who were decadents and symbolists, including those like [Valery] Bryusov[5] and Viatcheslav Ivanov,[6] Sologub was the least decadent, and from him it was not possible to expect anything extravagant. He was a very respectable man; as a person, he was not a decadent at all. He was a teacher and the supervisor of a very big school; in the ballroom of that school he often held literary evenings and invited all his friends.

His poetry was real poetry, it was pure poetry! I, as a theorist and historian, I do not accept this term—*decadence*—altogether. This term was not important for major poets but more so for other little "*poetikov*,"[7] for whom the very word "decadence" was understood as a fashionable pose, enigmatic and interesting to others. Some of them, like [Alexander] Dovrolubov,[8] would wear black gloves all the time. He wore these gloves even while sitting in the living room. But the great poet would never become a decadent of this sort, and this term cannot be attached to them. For me this term smells of this fashionable pose, these black gloves. . . ."

Then Bakhtin recited emotionally the verse of Innokenty Annensky,[9] *a verse that he seemed to be enjoying thoroughly:*

> "I am an apostate of the Roman era.
> As long as my house is quiet and free from massacre,
> In a slow style I write a golden verse
> In which dies the purple color of the last sunset."
> (Я—бледный римлянин эпохи Апостата.
> Покуда портик мой от гула бойни тих,
> Я стилем золотым слагаю акростих,
> Где умирает блеск пурпурного заката.)[10]

Bakhtin continues:
"This is a real representative of *decadence*, if you will, but it has nothing to do with Dobrolubov or with Sologub. One of our composers once said: 'Do you know any happy music? I do not know any happy music.' And there is no such thing as happy poetry, and there should not be. If there is no element of death in it, if there is no element of the end, or some presentiment of death, then it is not poetry, it is a stupid rapture, an ecstasy. . . .

For instance, Blok. . . . He knew very well what life is about:

> 'And I look, and hostility measure,
> Hating, cursing, and loving:
> For the torment, for the death—I know—
> All the same: accept you!'"
> (И смотрю, и вражду измеряю,
> Ненавидя, кляня и любя:
> За мученья, за гибель—я знаю—
> Все равно:принимаю тебя!)[11]

Bakhtin continues:
"The major poets have never been *decadents*. This term cannot be attached to them. Yes, it is [Alexander] Blok. . . . I barely knew him personally.[12] I saw him, yes; I listened to him few times. I loved him as a poet very much. He always produced a strong impression. He was very handsome, slender; he recited his own poetry beautifully. He did not declare it; he read it, and he read it in his own manner. One could feel immediately that he was an unusual man, was made out of different dough (сделан из другого теста) than all of us, the sinners. He was very much above all, and even above himself. And it was the best Blok, the Blok of poetry. And then there was Blok, a person who was spending his time with . . . devil knows with whom. On the other hand, he had to have at least some kind of a body, some social status, had to do something, had to get dressed, and so on. When I saw him, he was dressed in some kind of blouse; this blouse came from France. A long time ago, during the revolution, the French revolutionaries wore this kind of blouse.

Blok's poetic imagery is always very strong; I remember Saint Petersburg covered with snow. . . . You go along the streets at night; you go to Nevsky Avenue;[13] everything is dark, only there are some strange figures that appear from the dark. Blok somehow managed to reflect all of this in his poetry; managed to reflect all these conversations, very ordinary conversations, and others not necessarily

ordinary, and all of them are amazing, amazing. But, at the same time, it is all so ironic, and this flow of irony, of course, has a different sense. Of course, it is not possible to think that these Bolsheviks are shown as positive figures.[14] These 'twelve apostles,' so to speak, who follow Christ—yes, they do, but the whole situation is described ironically. I would say that even Christ, in spite of the wonderful image 'in the white crown of roses,' Christ is still shown somewhat ironically. And the whole poetic mode is ironic as well."

Bakhtin continues:
"I did not get a chance to get to know Blok personally. I remember, I was in Vitebsk, and there we got the news that Blok's economic situation was terrible. It is true; they starved him to death.[15] And there was a terrible apathy in this, even from the side of his friends, as well as, first of all, from the side of the authorities. We decided to have a literary evening to collect money for Blok, and we collected a lot of money and decided to buy all kinds of different foods for him. In Vitebsk one could find absolutely everything: it was a city of Jews, and the Jews always managed, because of their good connections and their commercial sense and their persistence, they always could get everything. We were just about to send all these packages to Blok, but we got the news: Blok had died. We were too late. . . .

I was reciting Blok's poetry that evening:
'When you're tired out and hammered
People care and anguish;
When a grave
All that you captivated, sleeps;
When the Urban Desert,
The desperate and sick,
You go back home,
Eyelashes and heavy frost—
Then—stop for a moment
Listen to the silence of the night:
Comprehend hearing a different life,
That you could not hear during the day;
And you give a new look to the
Snowy streets, smoke fire
Night, quietly waiting for the morning
Over white, fuzzy gardens
And the sky—book between books;
You'll find the soul devastated
Once again, the image of the mother bent over,

And in that incomparable moment—
Patterns on a glass lantern,
Frost, froze the blood,
Your cold love—
All breaks out in a grateful heart,
You bless all the time,
Realizing that life—immensely more
Than *quantum satis* [in full measure] Brand's will,
And the world—perfect as always.'"
(Когда ты загнан и забит
Людьми, заботой иль тоскою;
Когда под гробовой доскою
Все, что тебя пленяло, спит;
Когда по городской пустыне,
Отчаявшийся и больной,
Ты возвращаешься домой,
И тяжелит ресницы иней,—
Тогда—остановись на миг
Послушать тишину ночную:
Постигнешь слухом жизнь иную,
Которой днем ты не постиг;
По-новому окинешь взглядом
Даль снежных улиц, дым костра,
Ночь, тихо ждущую утра
Над белым запушенным садом,
И небо—книгу между книг;
Найдешь в душе опустошенной
Вновь образ матери склоненный,
И в этот несравненный миг—
Узоры на стекле фонарном,
Мороз, оледенивший кровь,
Твоя холодная любовь—
Все вспыхнет в сердце благодарном,
Ты все благословишь тогда,
Поняв, что жизнь—безмерно боле,
Чем quantum satis Бранда воли,
А мир—прекрасен, как всегда.)[16]

Bakhtin on Maxim Gorky:[17]
"He was an amazing man. You know, in terms of worldview he lacked altogether his own will. He always got interested in what interested the person close to him at that time. One day he was for revolution, another day against revolution. Someone who was

not really a supporter of revolution could come to him and, after talking to him, Gorky could immediately agree with that person completely. Another day someone else would come, one who supports revolution, and Gorky would agree with him, too. He did not have any will in this regard. He could not choose anything once and for all; instead, he chose one thing, then another thing, and then again he chose something else. Finally life itself, the circumstances of life, compelled him to make a choice, but even then it was not totally his own choice, and he kept changing his views."

Bakhtin continues:
"This is what [Vladislav] Khodasevich[18] recalls about Gorky: 'Gorky loved deceit, and he loved those who deceive. Even when someone deceived him, Gorky accepted it patiently and was always ready to forgive the deceit. And he himself loved to deceive as well. In short, he was a liar; moreover, the figure of the liar always attracted him.' But Gorky was a very nice man, without a doubt. He had a carnivalesque element in him, and he was able to understand life only when life was outside ordinary boundaries. But the usual life, the normal life that was going on between one carnival and the other, the serious life full of ordinary chores—this type of life was foreign to his soul. The carnivalesque life was dear to him, and he felt himself a part of it. For instance, when he describes the strike at the railway station he describes it as a carnival![19] And this is exactly because he was looking for—this carnival, this break in the normal way of life. And *Klim Samgin*[20] is definitely a carnival, a series of masks. The serious people, who do not appreciate the laughs, jokes, deceit, and mystifications, simply did not exist for him. And in his drama *The Lower Depths*,[21] the only real hero for Gorky was Luka, the liar. But even then they managed to convince him that Luka is bad, that he was a liar and, consequently, it was not unacceptable, and Gorky believed them;[22] then he started to reinterpret his own work."

Bakhtin on Vladimir Mayakovsky:[23]
"For us, Mayakovsky was one of those 'krikunov'[24] for whom we held some kind of disdain. My first meeting with him was on Stoleshnikov Pereulok,[25] where the office of Narkompros was located.[26] One day I stopped at the office, but the director was away. His deputy, Kusko, a very nice man, handsome and red-haired, was there. He was one of the Old Bolsheviks.[27] We started to talk, and he told me a lot

about his encounters with Vyacheslav Ivanov. He told me a lot about Bryusov. He had great respect for Bryusov as a poet and as a scientist, but, in his opinion, as a person Bryusov was very petty: he was always scared of something. For instance, he was coming to me to play chess, but while we played he was asking me what was new, and how everyone felt about him, if his chances to stay and work here were still good, or if he might be fired, and so on, and so on.

Many different people were coming to the office, and one day a man came, a very tall man. I immediately recognized Mayakovsky; I had seen his portrait before. It is possible that I might have seen him somewhere. He was dressed very fashionably, and it was at a time when people were dressed very badly. He had a bell-bottomed coat, which was very stylish then, and everything on him was very new. One could feel that Mayakovsky was constantly aware that he was dressed like a dandy. But a dandy never thinks about how he is dressed, and this is the first sign of a real dandy. Mayakovsky was always concerned about himself, very nervous, and remembered that he had this bell-bottomed coat, and that he was dressed fashionably, and so on. I did not like it. Kusko gave him the journal where his work was published, and Mayakovsky grabbed the journal impatiently and literally started to eat with his eyes his published verses. One could immediately feel that he was savoring his own verses and the great pleasure he was getting out of the fact that his work was published. He made a very bad impression on me. These sentiments are not foreign to all people, of course, but from Mayakovsky I did not expect this. Then I saw him at a poetry reading: Mayakovsky was reading his poetry there, and I liked him a lot. On stage he behaved modestly, and he was reading his poems absolutely beautifully. He had a very reserved demeanor. Yes, that time I liked him. . . ."

Bakhtin on Velimir Khlebnikov:[28]
"He could not tolerate everyday limits, and he could not accept any of the existing moral principles. But he perfectly understood reality, and no one would be able to accuse him of being shortsighted, or of playing—nothing of this. His abstract ideas always had a symbolic meaning in them, and in some sense many of his ideas were prophetic. He even had special, mystical ideas."

Bakhtin continues:
"Khebnikov had a cosmic view. He used cosmic categories, but these categories were not abstract. In his very core he was very

carnivalesque, and he knew how to distract himself from everything ordinary and customary. He could find some infinite whole in everything and was able to enclose in himself the entire universe and then put it into words. But his words were special; they were not ordinary. I think that if we had been able to enter somehow into the flow of his cosmic thoughts, then we would have been able to understand these thoughts, and it would have been only increasingly interesting. None of the other Futurists could measure up to him."

NOTES

[1] The full eighteen-hour recording of the series of interviews with Mikhail Bakhtin was conducted during February and March of 1973 in Moscow by Victor Duvakin, a disgraced professor of Soviet Literature who was dismissed from his position for "anti-Soviet" views. The interviews were conducted at Bakhtin's house. Duvakin's entire collection now belongs to the Library of the Moscow State University, and the extracts translated here appear with the Library's permission. The broadcast interview is available at: http://www.svoboda.org/audio/audio/391290.html.

[2] "Chudak" in Russian means a strange, funny man, almost an idiot, who is fully immersed in his own quasi-fantastic world of dreams, ideas, and theories.

[3] For a fuller commentary on this interview, see Gratchev and Tatevik Gyulamiryan (2014).

[4] Fyodor Sologub (1863–1927) was a Russian Symbolist poet, writer, and essayist. He is credited with being the first writer to introduce into Russian prose the morbid—the pessimistic element that was characteristic of European literature of the late nineteenth century.

[5] Valery Bryusov (1873–1924) was one of the principal members of the Russian Symbolist movement. A prominent poet, writer, dramatist, translator, critic, and historian, he supported the Bolshevik government after the revolution and obtained a position in the culture ministry of the new state.

[6] Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949) was a prominent Russian poet and playwright associated with the Russian Symbolist movement. Coming into conflict with the Bolshevik government, he left Russia and emigrated to Italy in 1924.

[7] Here Bakhtin intentionally uses the diminishing suffix, making the word "poets" into "*poetikov*," which means "lesser poets."

[8] Alexander Dobrolyubov (1876–1944) was a less known poet associated with the Russian Symbolist movement. Dobrolyubov could be called a "mystical" Russian symbolist. After some initial success in publishing his poetry, he turned his back on literature and spent the rest of his life traveling throughout Russia.

[9] Innokentiy Annensky (1855–1909) was a poet, critic, and translator, a representative of the first wave of Russian Symbolism. His influence on the first post–Symbolist generation of Russian poets was significant. A brilliant translator, Annensky was the first to render into Russian the essential intonations of Charles Baudelaire and Paul Verlaine, two poets who subsequently enjoyed enormous popularity in Russia.

[10] This poem can be found in the 2014 edition of Annensky's Драматургия. Очерки. Стихотворения.

[11] "О, весна! без конца и без краю. . . ." This poem was written by Blok on October 24, 1907, and first appeared in the collection "Заклятие огнем и мраком."

[12] Alexander Blok (1880–1921) is one of the most celebrated Russian poets of the twentieth century. Born to an aristocratic family, Blok accepted the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, a move that surprised many of his admirers and friends. In 1921 he became ill and needed treatment abroad, but permission to leave Russian was only issued to him three days after his death.

[13] Nevsky Prospect (Nevsky Avenue) is the main street in Saint Petersburg, Russia. It was planned by Peter the Great as the opening section of the highway to Moscow. Nevsky served as an inspiration for Fyodor Dostoevsky, notably in *The Double* (1846) and *Crime and Punishment* (1866), and was described by Nikolai Gogol in his short story *Nevsky Prospect* (1835). Now the majority of the city's shopping and nightlife is located on Nevsky.

[14] Bakhtin is referring to Blok's poem *The Twelve* (1918), one of the first poetic responses to the Bolshevik' Revolution of 1917.

[15] By saying "they starved him to death," Bakhtin appears to be referring to the Soviet government, which was indifferent to Blok's difficult economic situation, his illness, and the need to go abroad for specialized treatment. Arguably, this indifference contributed to Blok's premature death at the age of forty-one.

[16] The poem is "Когда ты загнан и забит Людьми, заботой иль тоскою," which first appeared in the collection called "Возмездие" in January 1911.

[17] Maxim Gorky (1868–1936) was a Russian and Soviet writer, often described as the founder of the socialist realism. He was also a political activist and did much to save the lives of many fellow writers. In 1921, in light of an increasingly repressive climate for intellectuals, Gorky left the USSR for Italy. After a personal invitation from Stalin in 1931, Gorky returned to the USSR, but his relationship with Stalin soured after 1934.

[18] Vladislav Khodasevich (1886–1939) was a highly influential Russian poet and literary critic. After the revolution, he emigrated to Berlin where for years he presided over the Berlin circle. He published a penetrating analysis of contemporary Soviet literature and encouraged the career of Vladimir Nabokov. Khodasevich's book *Necropolis* (1939) is notable for its

ingenious characterizations of many prominent Soviet poets and writers, including Gorky and Blok among others.

[19] Here Bakhtin refers to Gorky's novel *The Mother*, which appeared in 1905.

[20] The unfinished, multivolume novel *The Life of Klim Samgin* (1927–37) is perhaps the most dramatic fiction by Gorky. It depicts the all-embracing tragedy of Klim Samgin, the offspring of a family of Russian intellectuals who is unable to find a place for himself in Russia's political climate at the turn of the twentieth century.

[21] *The Lower Depths* (1902) is perhaps Gorky's best-known play, and centers on a group of impoverished characters living in a homeless shelter.

[22] By "they," Bakhtin seems to be referring to the many Soviet literary critics who for a long time regarded *The Lower Depths* as a play that misrepresented lower class citizens. Later, in the 1970s, the play was canonized as a classic work and became mandatory for high school study.

[23] Vladimir Mayakovsky (1890–1930) was the foremost representative of early twentieth-century Russian Futurism and widely considered one of the most talented poets of the Soviet era. He was one of the few Soviet writers who were allowed to travel freely. After his suicide in 1930, Mayakovsky was canonized by the Soviet authorities.

[24] The term "*Krikun*" can be translated as "bawler."

[25] *Stoleshnikov Pereulok* or Stoleshnikov Lane is a short street in central Moscow with boutiques and shops selling many luxury goods. Today it is known as one of the most expensive shopping areas in Moscow.

[26] Narkompros (People's Commission of Education) was a Soviet agency charged with the administration of public education and culture.

[27] Old Bolshevik was an unofficial designation for those who were members of the Bolshevik Party before the revolution of 1917. Old Bolsheviks were systematically victimized by the purges and removed from office, and many were executed or sent to labor camps.

[28] Velimir Khebnikov (1885–1922) was a central figure of the Russian Futurist movement, and his poetry often explored the etymological roots of Russian words. He invented many neologisms and his poetry often sought to find significance in the sound of Cyrillic letters.

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