

## Review Article<sup>1</sup>

# *Exploring Bakhtin*

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IN HIS "INTRODUCTION" to this slim but pregnant volume of essays, Alastair Renfrew raises some pressing questions about the translation, publication, extension, and application of Bakhtin's ideas. These questions frame the general direction of the volume. However, in the spirit of "dialogical" engagement, Renfrew's "Introduction: Bakhtin, Victim of Whose Circumstance?" neither offers nor advocates the perilous, if impossible, pursuit of a "totalizing" Bakhtinian narrative that would function either as a ground for any grand "Western Bakhtinian project" or as a centralizing thematic thread in the volume under consideration. This is not to suggest, however, that the collection is a patchwork quilt of disparate images of Bakhtin's prodigious legacy; it is not. Although the essays in the collection span a number of topics, their approaches are informed by a shared view of the non-pejorative sense of the verb "to exploit," wherein "the very act of 'exploiting' impl[ies] the value of the resource to be exploited, its aptness or *necessity* to the purpose to which it is intended" (x). What, then, is the purpose of exploiting Bakhtin? Each contribution is, in a non-trivial sense, an individual attempt to answer this perplexing question while resisting any "finalizing" order or direction that could be construed as giving the volume a monological bearing. If there is a common thread to the volume, it is that each contribution, in its own way, critically engages the use and usefulness of "applications" of Bakhtin's ideas—of exploiting Bakhtin.

Generally affirmative of the current critical use of Bakhtinian concepts to characterize and analyze trends in recent Scottish writing and culture, Roderick Watson's "Speaking in Tongues:

Reflections after Bakhtin on the Scots Literary Tradition and Contemporary Writing” offers an insightful perspective on the familiar, if not tired, thesis that “[t]he struggle between discourses has always been political” (2). By invoking such Bakhtinian concepts as polyglossia, heteroglossia, dialogism, and Rabelaisian excess, Watson examines the conflict between discourses “as a dynamic and constantly changing interplay between centrifugal and centripetal forces . . . to show how that conflict will simultaneously demonstrate and create various discursive forms, social affects and different tendencies in representation” (2).

For those acquainted with Bakhtin, there is nothing novel in these interpretative assumptions, but this does not prevent Watson from asking some tough but appropriate questions about the often uneasy relation between poetics and politics in contemporary Scottish writing. And it is precisely in his questioning of some of the cherished notions about Scottish writing that this essay is most compelling. While acknowledging the creative value and subversive power of the highly heteroglot, carnivalesque strain in Scottish writing, Watson also recognizes the troubling possibility that the discourse of carnivalia might be the only form of authentic expression available to those who have been denied access to any other discourse—that the carnivalesque in Scottish literature might just smack of crumbs from the table of Scotland’s omnipresent English neighbour—and so “the celebration of ‘irreverent’ freedom may be no more than a rattling of chains” (5).

Similarly, the pluralism connected to the rich polyphony, Rabelaisian excess, and hybridity in Scottish writing must not be merely “a recipe for liberal relativism and an unproblematic celebration of difference for difference’s sake” (6); heterogeneity is a complicated matter, and the ideological collisions entailed by heteroglot, dialogical discourse certainly reveal real ambiguities and differences—differences that challenge literary and extra-literary authority. Indeed, as Watson observes,

in the public eye, and in the forum of literary production and publication, Scottish writers are increasingly being seen as self-

consciously politicized harbingers and proponents of challenge . . . to cultural authority, literary convention, and common decorum.

(8)

Given these considerations, Watson rightly questions the implications of the Scottish penchant for carnivalia for secular, civil society. He asks, for example, if it is coincidental that images of violence, anarchy, social failure, male rage, and profound sexism "should arise in contemporary Scottish writing, as if they were the nightmare re-visiting of an older and prouder tradition of demotic difference and self-validating, anti-hierarchical energy" (13) that informed Raebalaisian carnival. Is the polyphony of some Scottish writing the ear-mark of the sense of "powerlessness, self-contempt, and evasiveness" of those who feel slighted or abused? Or, is the Scottish carnivalesque a true challenge to bourgeois culture and authority by the voices of the socially and politically marginalized? Watson leaves these sticky questions open, but he does affirm the need to "re-examine a generally uncritical acceptance and perhaps a too comfortable validation of the Rabelaisian strain in Scottish literature . . . and reconsider, too, what carnival excess might actually look like in a modern, secular civil society" (13-14).

In questioning the moral implications of carnivalia, Watson's essay offers the most promise, but it also reveals its primary shortcoming, and this shortcoming harkens back to the question of (properly) exploiting Bakhtin. In considering Bakhtin's notion of carnival, it is common to stress the aspects of excess and to overlook the moral strain that permeates *Rabelais and His World*. There, Bakhtin sees carnival laughter as a higher kind of morality; he writes that "[l]aughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naiveté and illusion" (123). There is little in Bakhtin's analysis of that "infantile glee" that Watson suspects may underlie some of the carnivalesque scenes in works such as *Trainspotting*. We might simply ask if Scottish carnivalesque writing does what Bakhtin outlines above, or if it sometimes generates the very forms that carnival is meant to subvert. Bakhtin's moral tone is clear in his repeated references to carnival's defeating "false seriousness"

and “preparing a new sober seriousness” (376, 380, 426, 439, 448, 453, 454). This leads me to conclude that many of Watson’s most trenchant questions about the implications of the carnival aspects of Scottish literature might well be answered in light of a fuller appreciation of Bakhtin’s own notions about the deeper moral function of carnival. As Watson himself puts it, “The true force of carnival must be more than a passing breach of middle-class ‘good taste’” (9).

Alastair Renfrew’s “Them and Us? Representation of Speech in Contemporary Scottish Fiction” also cautions against the uncritical application of Bakhtin’s ideas to Scottish literature. In particular, he warns against the facile identification of dialects with heteroglossia. In examining some examples of the depiction of speech in some recent Scottish literature, Renfrew undermines the assumption that the existence or proliferation of dialects guarantees the referential illusion of authentic orality. Even non-standard orthography, which is meant to “efface the boundaries between speech and writing,” merely highlights these boundaries since “the relationship of the oral to the written must *always be arbitrary*” (17). Furthermore, as Renfrew points out, Bakhtin’s consideration of speech genres implies a unity between literary and non-literary uses of language—individual literary works evolve in a process of re-accentuation wherein second order (complex) speech genres arise out of primary (simple) speech genres. Hence, in light of Bakhtin’s analysis, the kind of criticism concerned with “*redress* or a perceived tendency to devalue orality” in such writers as James Kelman and Tom Leonard is unnecessary since “Bakhtin grants that ‘redress’ almost as a first principle” (21).

Returning briefly to a consideration of dialogism and heteroglossia, Renfrew concludes by pointing to some of the pitfalls of situating Scottish writing within the broad “postcolonial” umbrella. Indeed, to associate “non-standard” speech with “heteroglot, dialogized literature . . . masks only another form of *homogenization* of language, a homogenization which defines the works which bear its mark as particularly limited ‘utterances’ in a broader cultural dialogue” (25-26). As Renfrew sees it, the problem, is not with dialect *as such* but with the notion that in

Scottish writing its presence constitutes a distinct national *literature* (as opposed to Scottish prose which has tended to reject dialect). In general, this notion and the homogeneity that it implies have helped engender a misrepresentation of “Scottish culture’s relation to the ‘dominant’ culture to which it has been peripheral . . .” (27). The fiction of James Kelman, for example, “amounts to a misappropriation of the strategies” of resistance proper to the discourse of cultures who are “unequivocally *outside power* . . .” (27). Whether in fiction or criticism, the misguided approbation of this misrepresentation of Scottish culture results in an unsatisfactory skewing of Scotland’s relation to other postcolonial cultures. This, Renfrew rightly concludes, entails the untenable connection of the Scots with the more profoundly unfortunate ‘peripheral’ cultures of the world.

Graham Pechey’s “Bakhtin and the Postcolonial Condition,” circuitously navigates the shifting waters of the postcolonial “centre” and “margins.” Enlisting the explanatory potential of early and late Bakhtinian concepts—without pressing them into full service—the essay casts its eye away from Scottish writing toward the broader vista of “postcoloniality.” After some tenuously relevant biographical remarks about Bakhtin (intended to help connect some of Bakhtin’s writings to “postcoloniality”), Pechey adumbrates the evolution of his own thinking with respect to Bakhtin and the postcolonial condition. This evolution is set within the context of the recent cultural and political changes in South Africa.

In particular, Pechey describes aspects of the “post-apartheid condition” and asserts that it is “a species of the genus post-colonial” (34). In considering the meaning of “post-apartheid,” Pechey is led to redefine postcoloniality “away from any simple chronological or geographical or formal-political sense” and speak of it in terms of “the phase one enters when one has seen not only that it takes anti-colonial struggles to produce neo-colonial conditions, but that the neocolonial pathology draws its strength from the very pathos of anti-colonial assertion” (34). Postcoloniality is then, “a moving ‘forcefield’ of possibilities and opportunities and difficulties” (34), in which power and resistance constantly commingle in positive and negative ways. Most

importantly, however, the postcolonial is marked “by its promiscuous crossing and meeting of times: that is to say, by agendas and projects from any phase of history which had been marginalized by colonial forces about the business of domination, or by anti-colonial forces no less busy with resistance” (35). Hence, postcoloniality may entail an interpenetration of and contention between heteroglot elements including gender, identity, politics and spirituality. This interpenetration of forces, combined with hybrid speech, leads to what Pechey terms a “creolization of consciousness,” and it is postcolonial writing itself, he claims, that makes audible this “unheard creolization” and “in so doing dialogizes the global heteroglossia of empire” (36). But his description of the task of what he takes to be the most important phase of postcolonial writing is problematic.

Pechey notes that in this “proto-nationalist” phase, “the first native elites in the British Empire began answering back to the centre” not by offering competing meta-narratives, but “by ‘thinking with’ the imperial narrative, ‘innocently’ reinflecting it towards emancipatory ends, opening up its aporias by its own discursive means, holding the dominant discourse to its promises” (36). Although Pechey does grant that “[w]e are each of us a margin and each of us a centre” (37), he does not seem to recognize the implications this has for his description of the task of postcolonial writing cited above. Certainly, a case can be made that writers who would never be considered postcolonial—say Jane Austen or George Eliot—do fit the criteria of “reinflecting” imperial narrative “towards emancipatory ends, opening up its aporias” and so forth. There are a number of writers of the “centre” who in fact are, in a sense, “a margin” insofar as they offer a critique of the dominant discourse. Such critiques—whether of class, racism, gender politics, or imperialism itself—are to be found in writers of the so-called “centre.” It seems a little misleading then to state, as does Pechey, that “the post-colonial writers of our time are ‘versatile spiritual nomads’” (37) without providing the important caveat that they are not the *only* “versatile spiritual nomads” because they are not.

On a completely different note, Donald Wesling’s “Rhythmic Cognition in the Reader: Correcting Bakhtin’s Wrong Turn”

takes up the thorny issue of Bakhtin's evident aversion to the poetic genres. Wesling begins by asserting that "Mikhail Bakhtin must carry some responsibility for the effacement of poetry in the 1990s," but he adds "that Bakhtin's famous promotion of the dialogic novel at the expense of monologic poetry can be explained and . . . forgiven" (39). He claims that this is not because the effacement of poetry by Bakhtin and his proponents is a "fundamental error," but rather, because the "fundamental error" concerns "the meaning and role of *poetic rhythm*" (40). Bakhtin's "severe error" is said to lie in his failure "to read poetry as an art of human expectation" (42).

Wesling argues that focusing on rhythm rather than metre will provide a corrective to Bakhtin's "wrong turn." He illustrates his hypothesis with an able reading of Marina Tsvetaeva's "Wires" in light of an "alternative twentieth-century tradition" derived from Yuri Tynyanov, Henri Meschonnic, Emile Benveniste, and Richard Cureton. Unfortunately, Wesling's reading, suggestive as it is, does not differ significantly in practice from the kind of reading we might expect from a sensitive reader trained in traditional scansion of the sort adumbrated in Paul Fussell's *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*. The point is that he does not fully deliver on his intimated promise to explain and correct Bakhtin's alleged "wrong turn." Wesling's focus on the reader as the prime constituent of rhythm does not, it seems, bear sufficient theoretical weight (or at least is not sufficiently catholic in its representation) to undermine Bakhtin's tendency to deprecate poetic genres in favor of prosaics. As Alastair Renfrew points out, Wesling's reading of "Wires" is "intriguingly, perfectly self-sufficient" (x), but this, in fact, is the problem. It seems his actual reading of "Wires," like the poetry itself, need not be theorized at the reading level, either to explicate the meaning of the poetry, or to reveal the critical acumen of the reader. What Wesling does do is offer one admirable way of responding to poetry which, however, is not Bakhtin's way. But his reading does offer prosaics an illustration of "how to describe the movement of feeling in the novel" (55). This in itself is a laudable exercise.

The declared aim of Pam Morris's "Woman's Writing: an Ambivalent Politics" is to address the "question of how far women

can speak, act, and write from a political and ethical situatedness and yet avoid the fantasy of coherent identity" (57). Like Wesling's essay, Morris's contribution shows theoretical suggestiveness and intelligent reading, but it too lacks a clearly articulated engagement with or exploitation of Bakhtin. Drawing mainly on the thought of Judith Butler, Julia Kristiva, and Gayatri Spivak, Morris seeks to "re-theorize" Bakhtin's concept of carnival by analyzing the uses of "grotesque [female] bodily imagery" in the works of Angela Carter and Mahasweta Devi. She begins with an extension of some of Bakhtin's early writings about ethics and double-voicedness, focusing on the particular notions of bodily situatedness in ethics and ambivalence in double-voiced discourse. However, her extension of Bakhtin is, at times, questionable, and her actual reading of Angela Carter and Mahasweta Devi, although compelling in itself, is but tenuously "Bakhtinian."

One example of problematic hermeneutics is to be found in Morris's use of Bakhtin's remarks about doubt. Morris begins with sound explication of Bakhtin, but she later writes that "[t]he specific value of doubt, Bakhtin goes on to claim, is that it acts against the idea of truth as monolithic, as 'something determinate, finished and petrified'" (61). In fact, Bakhtin claims no such thing. What he does write is that "[b]eing, as something determinate, finished, and petrified in respect to its content, would destroy countless uniquely valuable personal worlds. . . ." (*Towards a Philosophy of the Act* 45-46; emphasis added). Bakhtin does, as Morris points out, claim that doubt is "a distinctive value," but he says that this is so because "[i]t is precisely doubt that forms the basis of our life as effective deed-performing . . ." (45). Here Bakhtin is interested in doubt because it is that which requires one to "realize" one's participation in "Being," not because it counters monologism.

Morris's connection of "doubt" and "excess of seeing" with the notion of "sceptical relativism" or "radical scepticism" (a key premise in her essay) is also problematic. This, however, may be more of a semantic than a hermeneutic difficulty. On the face of it, "Sceptical relativism" and "radical scepticism" seem to be unfortunate phrases, not only because the meaning of "scepti-



cal" here is philosophically vague (Small s scepticism? Large S scepticism? Pyrrhonian? Humean? Postmodern?), but also because Bakhtin is consistently careful to distance himself from relativism. Earlier in *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*, for example, Bakhtin warns that "[w]hat follows from this least of all, of course, is any kind of relativism, which denies the autonomy of truth and attempts to turn truth into something relative and conditioned" (9). Later, in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin writes that "both relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all argumentation, all authentic dialogue, by making it either unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism)" (69). That "sceptical relativism" and "radical scepticism" may be simply unfortunate phrases is suggested by Morris's own shift in emphasis to how "idealizing discourses" are ambivalent and by her qualification that "[i]t is this quality of sceptical *commitment* that I want to associate with some writing by women" (63; emphasis added). In light of this semantic shift, her subsequent readings of Angela Carter and Mahasweta Devi prove less problematic and more compelling.

Carol Adlam's "In the Name of Bakhtin: Appropriation and Expropriation in Recent Russian and Western Bakhtin Studies" marks an appropriate and measured conclusion to the volume. Adlam's essay offers not only important bibliographical information pertaining to Bakhtin, but more importantly, it also addresses with precision and insight some of the most vital issues in contemporary "Bakhtinian studies." Beginning with some suggestive remarks on Paul de Man's provocative "Dialogue and Dialogism," Adlam concisely charts the divergent courses of Western and Russian Bakhtinians, revealing their ideological and cultural disjuncture through an examination of some representative applications of Bakhtin's work. In considering their respective appropriations of Bakhtin, Adlam focuses on issues of "centrality" and "authority," aptly concluding "that only when the quest for authority ceases to be concealed in the question of authenticity, will the issue of possession and dispossession be resolved" (90).

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Alastair Renfrew, ed. *Exploiting Bakhtin*. Glasgow: U of Strathclyde P, 1997. £9.95 pb. Pp. xi, 90.