

**Creative Ways of Not Liking Bakhtin: Lydia Ginzburg and Mikhail Gasparov / *Maneiras criativas de não gostar de Bakhtin: Lydia Ginzburg e Mikhail Gasparov***

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**ABSTRACT**

This article contributes to our understanding of how Russians received Bakhtin's concepts, primarily two influential Russian scholars critical of Bakhtin, each from a different perspective. The study of such criticisms is valuable, as it encourages us to re-examine our own sometimes complacent perceptions of Bakhtin's theories. Mikhail Gasparov (1937-2005), an important classicist and preeminent scholar of verse, published virulent criticisms of Bakhtin between 1979 and 2004. His problem with Bakhtin was essentially methodological. Lydia Ginzburg (1902-1990), known for her *Notes of a Blockade Person* and for scholarship on the genres of diary, memoir, personal letter, and writer's notebook, questioned the psychological presuppositions behind Bakhtin's theories of sympathy and love. Ginzburg also had serious doubts about Bakhtin's idea of the polyphonic novel, and his use of the opposition between the monological and the dialogical to characterize the novels of Tolstoi and Dostoevsky. A close examination of the positions of Bakhtin and Ginzburg on love reveals interesting parallels and differences. The article concludes with suggestions about how Gasparov's and Ginzburg's criticisms can help us read Bakhtin in creative ways.

**KEYWORDS:** Reception; Criticism; Methodology; Love; Polyphonic Novel

**RESUMO**

*Este artigo contribui para nossa compreensão de como os russos receberam os conceitos de Bakhtin, principalmente dois influentes estudiosos russos, críticos de Bakhtin, cada um a partir de uma perspectiva diferente. O estudo de tais críticas é valioso, uma vez que nos incentiva a reexaminar nossas próprias percepções, por vezes complacentes, das teorias de Bakhtin. Mikhail Gasparov (1937-2005), um importante classicista e preeminente erudito do verso, publicou críticas virulentas contra Bakhtin entre 1979 e 2004. Seu problema com Bakhtin era essencialmente metodológico. Lydia Ginzburg (1902-1990), conhecida por suas *Notes of a Blockade Person*, e por estudos sobre os gêneros do diário, das memórias, da carta pessoal e do caderno do escritor, questionou os pressupostos psicológicos por trás das teorias bakhtinianas de simpatia e amor. Ginzburg também tinha sérias dúvidas quanto à ideia bakhtiniana do romance polifônico e a respeito do uso que Bakhtin fazia da oposição entre o monológico e o dialógico para caracterizar os romances de Tolstoi e Dostoiévski. Um exame atento das posições de Bakhtin e Ginzburg sobre o amor revela paralelos e diferenças interessantes. O artigo termina com sugestões sobre como as críticas de Ginzburg e de Gasparov podem nos ajudar a ler Bakhtin de maneiras criativas.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Recepção; Crítica; Metodologia; Amor; Romance polifônico

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My comments here deal with Bakhtin as a negative or cautionary pole, viewed through two strong critical minds that helped shape the face of Russian literary studies in the twentieth century. The first is Mikhail Gasparov (1937-2005), one of Russia's great classicists and a preeminent scholar of verse. The second is Lydia Ginzburg (1902-90), best known in the West for her *Notes of a Blockade Person* (she survived the Siege of Leningrad) and for her work on the "in-between genres" of diary, memoir, personal letter, and writer's notebook - modes of "psychological prose" most perfectly illustrated in the writings of Alexander Herzen, Marcel Proust, and Leo Tolstoy.

Gasparov, by far the more aggressive opponent, began "not liking Bakhtin" in 1979, four years after Bakhtin's death. For a quarter-century he was Russia's most articulate Bakhtinophobe, continuing his polemic very publicly until 2004. Ginzburg, from an earlier generation, was certainly no-phobe. Judging from her scattered comments, however, she found Bakhtin's ideas not especially congenial, and her published and unpublished notebooks (together with others' memoirs of her) suggest an intriguing virtual dialogue. Like Bakhtin, Ginzburg was fascinated by the novel, but she chose her exemplary novelists (Tolstoy and Marcel Proust) from later periods. Like Bakhtin, she came of age in the 1920s, when authoritative voices were proclaiming the "end of the novel." But if Bakhtin moved backward in search of the genre's essence and origins, Ginzburg moved into the twentieth century, where she embarked on her own "notebook project," a Proustian construct, part fiction, part memoir—or, as she put it, a "diary of the novelistic type" [*dnevnik po tipu romana*]. Ginzburg's writing career spanned 66 years, but her major work was published within a spread of only six. In this too she recalls, although in more drastic compass, Mikhail Bakhtin.

Gasparov and Ginzburg, very influential scholars in their chosen disciplines, were also fabulously acute observers of their current scene. For Gasparov, this scene stretched from the 1960s through the end of the first post-Communist decade. Ginzburg's scene was the whole of the Soviet twentieth century. Droll, astute, succinct often to the point of aphorism and written against the grain of accepted pieties, their "notes" range from snippets of recalled dialogue to anecdotal memoir to philosophical essay, now gathered into best-selling volumes.<sup>1</sup> Each has acquired posthumously the

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<sup>1</sup> For representative anthologies of our two critics in their droll memoiristic mode, see Gasparov, 2000 and Ginzburg, 2002.

status of public intellectual, with a cult following on websites and blogs. These two figures were chosen as benchmarks for my discussion because, as observers of Bakhtin, they balance each other out.

Gasparov and Ginzburg find fault with Bakhtin from different perspectives. Bakhtinians can benefit, I believe, from taking both seriously, for intelligent complaints that do not coincide encourage us to re-examine and “de-automatize” our perceptions of our hero. Gasparov’s problem with Bakhtin was methodological. His deepest doubts were over Bakhtin’s dialogism - which struck him as bogus and fantastic - and over the genre of Menippean satire, which in his view existed largely in Bakhtin’s head. For Ginzburg, in contrast, the problems were psychological. She doubted the very “condition of possibility” for a polyphonic narrator. Secular to a polemical degree and a self-proclaimed atheist, she was reluctant to posit any transcendental loopholes for the self. And she would have questioned the presuppositions behind Bakhtin’s theories of sympathy and love, which to her could only have seemed counter-intuitive and quite unworkable.

The larger frame for this essay is my longstanding interest in the Russian re-reception of Bakhtin. By re-reception I mean: when a major thinker emerges, is translated on a global scale, becomes a boom, a cult, is canonized, achieves “world classic status,” and when the adjectives built from the name are no longer uttered apologetically or in intonational quotation marks, and neologisms such as “chronotope” cease to sound like jargon. And so the larger world dutifully studies Bakhtinian thought. Meanwhile, the homeland goes on processing its famous native son. But by now the ideas, terms, and techniques that were once so startling have lost their cutting edge. What becomes startling instead in the post-boom domestic environment is the fit of these increasingly familiar concepts with Russia’s evolving cultural scene, and to the larger traditions of Russian literary scholarship.

Bakhtin perceived as a classic (rather than an iconoclast) has prompted a new set of debates. The recent journalistic skirmishes over this new Bakhtin are every bit as intriguing as the earlier two high-profile turf wars: the “disputed-text wars” - what was Bakhtin’s role in the texts signed by friends? Was Bakhtin a Marxist? - and the “Russian Orthodox wars” between secular and non-secular Bakhtinians—does it matter that Bakhtin was a believing Christian? Are his writings a theology in code? But the old

battles differ in important ways from the new. The current journal wars are not just insider quarrels within the Bakhtin industry, aiming at a more accurate historical reconstruction of its subject. They have also come to play a modest role in the new nationalism long on the rise in Putin's Russia. Before turning to the two critics, let us sample Bakhtin's ambivalent profile in one of the warring journals, the highly regarded *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* (*New Literary Review*, or *NLO*), founded in 1991 as a forum for Russian archival recuperations, translations of social theory, and Western-style cultural studies. For over a decade, *NLO* has been a prime Russian site for publishing and honoring both Gasparov and Ginzburg. The journal's attitude toward Bakhtin has been, to put it kindly, skeptical.

### **1 Bakhtin as neither Here nor There**

Under what conditions did the post-boom, post-cult Bakhtin - now the common property of a dozen languages and cultures - come home? Bakhtin's re-entry created a new re-translation problem in Russia. Soon after the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, state censorship was abolished along with centrally controlled "cultural plans." This liberation from the party line was followed by a massive influx of French, German, and English cultural theory into the Russian humanities. Intellectual excitement was immense. But such unmonitored diversity had its unsettling side, especially since the collapse of familiar, official "Marxism-Leninism" coincided with the dispersion of another powerful explanatory body of thought, the Tartu School of Cultural Semiotics, upon the death of Yuri Lotman in 1993. A thirst emerged for some big truth to fill the void. The result was a glut of imported paradigms - and, as one critic called it, a "tsunami of translations."<sup>2</sup> Often poorly executed, full of frightful calques, unannotated, packaged with no (or hostile) thought given to the needs and mental habits of the target culture, these imports dangled there on the edge of the Russian language, only dimly relevant to the Russian scene.

The utopian hope for salvation through translation did not last long. Awash in these mystifying, multiplying texts, the educated Russian reader was quick to realize

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<sup>2</sup> See especially the sections on a "Tsunami of translations" and "The Betrayal of Translations" in Khapaeva, 2005.

that there was no “single unified Western truth” out there - and never had been. For all that Communist propaganda had dunned in the contrary for half a century, “the capitalist West” represented many different points of view, and its theories could be just as full of error, nonsense, and failure as was Russia’s discredited ideology. A backlash set in, reinforced by government-sponsored chauvinism. Russia’s major literary journals began to take sides: on one side, the “native Russian critical legacy” (whatever that meant) and on the other, these exciting, imported newcomers. None of these paradigms offered a real solution, of course; all were flawed; all could be parodied. But they failed in different ways. In the often ugly, neo-nationalist reaction against “imports,” *NLO*, a rigorously secular academic publication, took a brave stance. Its editors argued that new language systems are not created overnight, that culture shock is inevitable when new concepts are brought in to fertilize the old, and that Russian intellectual life has a long history of importing terms from abroad during political watersheds or windows of cultural openness. *NLO* stood up for the French postmodernists, German cultural theorists, American new historicists, and, in issue after issue, devoted hundreds of pages to discussions of their work and that of their Russian disciples.



As part of this campaign, the “image of Bakhtin,” with its lingering old-world religiosity enhanced by Bakhtin’s early handlers, took on a conservative, nationalist aura in *NLO*.<sup>3</sup> Consider the cartoon above, part of a huge forum in *NLO* #53 (2003, p.280), on the state of literary studies in Russia today.

In the section “After Canonization,” the reader is treated to eight frames picturing a series of theoretical paradigms of domestic and foreign origin. The exemplary literary classic against which each approach is measured is Leo Tolstoy—with, it would seem, a not-too-subtle admixture of Karl Marx, another humorless nineteenth-century preacher and prophet. This thickly bearded, bespectacled, blinded face is represented in the spirit of the Russian formalists, deconstructionists, gender critics, structuralists, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Mikhail Bakhtin. The caricature of Bakhtin is very unkind. Unlike the other frames, it illustrates none of Bakhtin’s ideas, neither the carnivalesque nor the dialogic—although both are easy targets for parody—but only the person and perceived communication style of the critic. Bakhtin is cast in the image of a false Russian Christ, gazing sanctimoniously upward, a naked holy fool with halo, fig-leaf, and stigmata. The pose of this caricature recalls cartoons that circulated widely in the early twentieth-century Russian press depicting an archaic, pious, cantankerous Leo Tolstoy, whose “monologic” voice Bakhtin disliked and whom, after the 1928 Tolstoy Centennial had cleansed his image, the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist establishment glorified. This is not at all the Bakhtin we know in the West: a playful, rebellious, subversive, pre-post-modernist thinker. Anything but sanctimonious.

Even from a Russian perspective, however, this notion of “our own naked, holy-foolish Orthodox-Christian Bakhtin” is very curious. True, Bakhtin’s life and fate had been a twentieth-century Leninist-Stalinist one. But Bakhtin (so it seems to me) always had his choice of times, or rather, he lived in many alternative times simultaneously. As a “thinker” - and such was the label he preferred for himself, not “literary critic” or even “philosopher” - he saw connections between genres and time-spaces over thousands of years. His intellectual training took place in pre-revolutionary Europe, separated from the Bolshevik 1920s by an impassable gulf. The fiction he found most interesting was

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<sup>3</sup> I discuss this journals war in Emerson, 2005a. A fragment of this debate appears in English in Emerson, 2007, pp.1, 12-13.

not contemporary with him, not modernist, but created in the fourth through the nineteenth centuries. When an explosive twentieth-century idea, like Einstein's theory of relativity, appealed to him, he applied it backward, to ever earlier works; such was the case with relativity theory, which stimulated Bakhtin's search for polyphony in Dostoevsky and Shakespeare but not in James Joyce or in modernism more generally, to which Bakhtin was mostly indifferent.<sup>4</sup>

One could argue that what *was*, indeed, “natively twentieth-century Russian” (and thus patriotic) about Bakhtin was his homegrown, aristocratic cosmopolitanism. By this paradoxical formulation, I mean his ability to survive the system by staying outside it, being smarter than it, exploiting it for his research, refusing to feel victimized by it, beating the censors by being so well equipped in other cultures and languages that he could read in the original all those books not officially cleared (or cleansed) for Russian translation - in a word, his ability to be a novelized consciousness even under the knife, creating clever utterances faster than any censor could delete them. And all the while, Bakhtin stayed home. This paradigm has ancient credentials among Russian writers of the first rank. Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, although free to travel, tended to despise what they saw abroad and upon their return loudly preached the virtues of home. Also, Pushkin, Lermontov, and in the twentieth century, Anna Akhmatova were markedly domestic voices in this sense. Like those great writers, Bakhtin was “one of Russia's own” in that special sense of “cosmopolitan, but homegrown.” Take away his passport, strip him of his fancy clothes, put him in prison or exile, confiscate his library or his manuscripts, and he will continue to master other nations' ideas, process them in original ways, and he will not relinquish his own Russian belief or Russian life experience while doing so.

This image, both inspirational and self-congratulatory, had immense staying power among members of the trapped and closely monitored Soviet-era intelligentsia. The outward-looking editors of *NLO*, all of them long on the international lecture circuit, had no qualms about caricaturing it. Their cartoon responded to a posthumous re-emergence of Bakhtin on Russian soil that had been lovingly shaped over two decades by his devoted disciples, academics who were also Christian believers. As a

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<sup>4</sup> For an excellent discussion of this backward-looking gesture, see Stone, 2008, pp.405-21.

secular journal, *NLO* detected this piety, found the protectiveness irritating, and wanted to give a more skeptical worldview equal time. For *NLO* argued, not unreasonably, that Russian culture had never belonged to itself or spoken solely with itself, but had always addressed the world. Or, to cast the problem in more Bakhtinian terms, it was time to replace that canonized but all-too-gloriously martyred *intra*-Russian dialogue with something more irreverent, buoyant, reversible, multi-dimensional—in a word, with something more like a cosmic carnival of ideas. This tension between dialogic sobriety and carnivalistic promiscuity is the bridge to the next segment of this essay: the Gasparov and Ginzburg critiques. For what reasons did these two major intellects keep their distance from Bakhtin?

## 2 Mikhail Gasparov on the Fantasy of Bakhtinian Dialogue

To begin with Mikhail Gasparov. His first statement critical of Bakhtin came in 1979; his last was a talk delivered in Moscow in November 2004, a year before his death, titled *Sluchai Bakhtina* [The Case of Bakhtin] (GASPAROV, 2004; FLEISHMAN et al., 2005, pp.23-31). The 2004 address was so stridently Bakhtinophobic that Sergei Bocharov, Bakhtin's literary executor and by that time the single surviving original disciple, issued a protest that appeared in print soon after Gasparov's death (BOCHAROV, 2006, esp. pp.48-50).<sup>5</sup> The journal that printed Bocharov's defense of Bakhtin was *Voprosy literatury* [*VOPLI*, Questions of Literature], itself a "classic" on the Russian literary scene, founded in 1957 and thus a veteran of the cultural harassments and thaw-freeze humiliations of the post-Stalinist era. *VOPLI* is proud of its battle scars. Its history (and the life experience of most of its editorial board) long predates the fall of the Wall and the influx of Cultural Studies. The journal tends to be wary of facile postmodernist moves, and on balance has been more Bakhtinophilic than *NLO*. Although Bocharov publishes regularly in both *NLO* and *VOPLI*, the more cautious journal was clearly the proper venue for this riposte.

The persistence of Gasparov's hostility against Bakhtin is really extraordinary, Bocharov remarks in his essay. It was as if something had stung him not only in a

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<sup>5</sup> Gasparov's opposition to Bakhtin was so consistent, principled, "stubborn and provocative," Bocharov wrote, that out of respect for the now-deceased spirit of this great philologist he would alter nothing in his own essay, even though Gasparov could no longer respond.



scholarly sense, but also personally, psychologically about the very phenomenon of Bakhtin and his right to exist. What might have fueled this sense of personal insult? Bocharov suggests - I believe correctly - that a primary irritant was the imprecise, but profound, spiritual overtone of Bakhtin's writings. Suspecting that any recourse to an intuitive, faith-based realm compromised academic honesty, Gasparov raised huge questions relevant to all our professional activities: What is scholarship [or science: *nauka*]? What does it mean to "make contact with" the trace of another culture, especially one distant in time, space, language? Are there reasonable limits to the stories that a critic can weave, in his own name, around this trace? What is "alive" about the utterance, and how does Bakhtin justify his assumption that utterances do not die? Can consciousness be captured by the word, and later retrieved *from* the word, simply by wishing it so and starting to talk into the void? Gasparov disapproves of Bakhtin's solution to each of these queries. Here is his opening salvo from "The Case of Bakhtin":

M. M. Bakhtin was a philosopher. However, he is also considered a philologist - because two of his books are written about Dostoevsky and Rabelais. This has been the cause of many misunderstandings. In culture there are creative areas and research areas. Creativity complicates the picture of the world, introducing into it new values. Research simplifies the picture of the world, systematizing old values and putting them in order. Philosophy is a creative area, as is literature. But philology is a *research* area. Bakhtin should be valued highly as a creator - but there is no reason to attribute to him the achievements of a researcher (GASPAROV, 2004, p.23).

It should be said that Bocharov, in his defense of Bakhtin in *Voprosy literatury* a year later, had stern things to say about this opening statement. Bakhtin never called himself a "philologist," Bocharov reminds the reader. He was proud to be a philosopher. Indeed, Bakhtin winced at the very word "literary scholarship," which he considered a "parasitical profession." Bakhtin did not "write books about Dostoevsky and Rabelais," Bocharov insisted, but books "based on material provided by Dostoevsky and Rabelais," that is, books "about his own special Bakhtinian thing, making use of those writers as his material." What is more, the idea that "research simplifies the world by systematizing old values" would have struck Bakhtin the philosopher (as it did Bocharov the literary critic) as quite limiting and even wrong. Can such a clear boundary be drawn between research and creativity in the humanities?

By the time Bocharov's essay appeared, Gasparov was no more. But we may presume that Gasparov would not have been deterred by these corrections to the record, for he had always formulated his case against Bakhtin more globally. What especially did Gasparov not like? To approach this question we must go back a quarter-century. It is characteristic of Gasparov's dry, droll, non-Romantic temperament that he begins with "trust."

In 1979, Gasparov classified Bakhtin among those writers permeated by a "trust in the word" (GASPAROV, 1979, pp.26-27, esp. p.27). As a cautious philologist, Gasparov had always preferred "distrust of the word" [*nedoverie k slovu*]. There is nothing particularly suspicious, hostile, or paranoid about this preference, he hastened to add; it is no more than minimal protection against the psycho-linguistic reality of human being. "Philology," Gasparov argues, must "begin not with trust but with distrust of the word," because our particular academic discipline involves so many acts of translation—and "it is natural to trust only the words of one's own language." Philology is thus obliged to devise methods that resist the temptation to reduce everything that is genuinely alien and "other" to something we can intuitively trust (that is, something we can talk to directly without intermediaries or converse with eye-to-eye). Distrust is necessary, Gasparov continues, to "train us away from the spiritual egocentrism" that is so natural to humanistic inquiry. Distrust is humbling. It supplies distance and guarantees the autonomy of the research object. To "respect distance" means to acknowledge that the written artifact I am now analyzing was not addressed to me, does not speak my language, is indifferent to my values, and should not be interpreted in light of my needs.

Gasparov practiced translation all his life. By no means was he a linguistic purist, and in this realm he was far more flexible than one might expect a scholar of formal verse to be.<sup>6</sup> But his faith in the communicative potential of translation did not allay the "principled distrust" he felt toward Bakhtin's dialogism, nor the bloated fantasies that this term had introduced into academic discourse. By the early 1990s,

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<sup>6</sup> In his *Experimental translations* (2003), Gasparov repeats a conviction he had nurtured since the early 1970s: when fidelity to all the parameters of a poem is impossible to reflect in the target language (as it almost always is) and when most meters have prior culture-bound associations (as in Russian poetry they do), then the cleanest, most accurate, and least compromised formal solution for the translator might be free verse (rhythmic verse but without meter or rhyme). See the probing discussion in Wachtel (2008, esp. p.224).

Gasparov was insisting that humanists mislead themselves about their “intimate relations” with their objects of study. The fact that we work with deceased human consciousnesses and not with abstract numbers, inanimate objects, or lower forms of biological life should make us *more* cautious and respectful as “listeners,” not less. And why? As Gasparov continually emphasizes: “The most everyday experience tells us that between myself and my most intimate friend there lies a massive block of mutual misunderstanding; after that, can one even entertain the notion that we understand Pushkin?” Honest conversation is hard enough with real interlocutors. “Even when living people converse, we often hear not a dialogue but two chopped-up monologues,” Gasparov observes.

One could talk with a stone with equal success and imagine the stone’s answers... Few people talk to stones nowadays, at least not publicly, but every energetic person is able to talk with Baudelaire or Racine, even though that’s no different than a stone (GASPAROV, 1993/1994, esp. pp.8-9).

By 2004 Gasparov had become even more stridently critical of these bad habits. He insisted that to see or hear “dialogue” and “otherness” on the printed page, or even in a word, is simply an illusion. Or something worse: a “solipsistic, egocentric self-affirmation” masquerading as two autonomous consciousnesses. By what logic can we assume that voices and words fixed in a text respond to us out of their own innate potential? In a sly (and distorted) allusion to Bakhtin’s own creative use of mirror metaphors, Gasparov (2004, p.30) writes: It only “seems to us that the interlocutor in a text is changing. The text is but a mirror reflecting our own changing face. Bakhtin gazes at his own ‘I’ in the mirror and imagines that it is Thou.” Gasparov insists that communication is far more difficult than we would like to believe. Bakhtin makes it appear easy, pleasant, and abundant. The result can only be a profound misreading of what myself can offer another self, where I end and you begin. Why is all this so dangerous? In Gasparov’s opinion, it leads to genuine monologism of the most tyrannical sort, because it is so delusionary. In my role as dialogic critic, out of the dead and thus non-resisting material of deceased words, I posit the “you” that I feel comfortable talking with. This docile, derivative second-person-singular will then

naturally reinforce my Me - thereby abusing whatever traces of a real deceased Other might have survived the ravages of time and cultural evolution.

Now we turn to Gasparov's second methodological objection. It starts with Bakhtin's passion for the ancient Menippea. But the big target is Bakhtin's larger habit of working with literary fragments, or even with rumors of fragments. Here we glimpse two types of classicist scholar locked in combat: the traditional, positivistic academic Gasparov on the one side, and on the other the impressionistic symbolist-era Bakhtin. Gasparov is troubled by Bakhtin's habit of selecting the most minuscule data-base of surviving fragments upon which to construct the most extravagant generalizations about literary history and the human condition. Such a method permits Bakhtin not only to "re-write the history of European literature" but to "re-write European literature itself," that is, to alter the very content of the field. The Menippea, Gasparov assures us, was "a new, previously unheard-of literature whose program Bakhtin *composed*." Not discovered, but "composed" [*sochiril*]—that is, more or less made up. For how does Bakhtin proceed?

Take Chapter Four in the revised Dostoevsky book, on Menippean satire, which Gasparov considers typical of Bakhtinian method. The first step is to apply a very broad genre definition to a very small body of documents (or scraps of documents). Under the rubric of Menippean satire Bakhtin lists fourteen traits, ranging from "the comic" to "the everyday" to "adventure," "the fantastic," "the quest," "test," "threshold," and finally to "moral-psychological experimentation" (BAKHTIN, 1984, pp.114-19). The presence of any one of these traits qualifies a work for inclusion in the genre. Since almost any conceivable plot in the world will fit some part of this definition, Bakhtin is free - or perhaps obliged - to select those bits of text that (in Gasparov's words) "please him personally, [the ones] that he considers good and important." In this way, a bogus genealogy suddenly enters into history books and poetic hierarchies.

Gasparov of course acknowledges the necessity of working with fragments and incomplete parts, as well as the risks of doing so. Literary history of the ancient period is a fragmentary science. But this fact (like subject matter for humanists generally) should impose greater caution and discipline on the scholar's imagination, not less. Thanks to Bakhtin, precisely the opposite has occurred. His methods have spread indiscriminately to other literary styles and later historical periods, far better

documented than the Ancient World and thus inappropriate for such unscholarly fantasies. As a genre, Gasparov insists, the “serio-comical” Menippea were hardly known to European literary history - until Bakhtin devised the category. “But this fact is forgotten,” he notes, “because it is not literary historians, but theorists of literature, who use Bakhtin’s ideas in their research.” If research it is.

There is one final sinister detail. Why does Bakhtin ignore the great canonized works of ancient literature, for example, the comedies of Aristophanes? Because, says Gasparov, the undisputed integrity of these intact, finished works of art is an impediment to Bakhtin’s imagination and an obstacle to his personal value-system. “Aristophanes is too politicized, too single-mindedly satirical, too non-chaotic—but ultimately [the reason Bakhtin can’t work with him] is because he *exists*—and exists as a text, and not merely as a [fragment] or a conjecture [*domysel*].” Gasparov thinks it is disastrous to teach Bakhtin’s creative method to graduate students or apprentice academics. It spells the end of the tedious and serious sides of scholarship. No wonder everyone loves it.

So pedagogically, Bakhtin is bad news, and professors should sit up and take note. But alas, Gasparov intimates, too many of them are themselves under Bakhtin’s spell. Philology offers truer ways to revere the verbal trace and the recuperated word. The word carries precious information: patterns, rhythms, alliterations, rhymes, phonetic and semantic structures. These forms grow stronger as they repeat, refract, are interwoven - and we can retrieve these patterns. But a word uttered or deployed by a person in the past, whether real or fictional, remains a *form*. It is not a voice. It cannot be resurrected or “spoken with,” as if it were some sort of articulate ghost or spore of consciousness.

Bakhtin, as we know, began elsewhere. It was his belief that not only patterns, sounds, and structures but actual personalities take up residence inside words. These personalities can be “quickened,” like a seed; they can sense our presence, grow through contact with the outside, and give rise to new utterances out of themselves. Such a dynamic rests on an entirely different set of psychological, metaphysical, perhaps even biological assumptions—a mix of the German Romantic idealist Friedrich Schelling

(whom Bakhtin loved)<sup>7</sup> and the later Max Scheler (whose book *The Nature of Sympathy* Bakhtin deeply admired in the 1920s).<sup>8</sup> This shift to interpersonal psychology is the bridge to our second critic.

### 3 Lydia Ginzburg on Idea-Novels

Lydia Iakovlevna Ginzburg (1902-90) was far closer to Bakhtin's generation than was Gasparov. Born only seven years after Bakhtin, she was sixteen at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution. But those seven years made a huge difference. Unlike Bakhtin, who attended university courses during the twilight years of the tsarist regime, Ginzburg was entirely the product of a Soviet-era education. Bakhtin's mentors had studied neoKantianism in Marburg; his own thought was indebted to German phenomenology with a scarcely concealed religious seam. Ginzburg's mentors were the secular revolutionary Petrograd formalists. She raised herself on classic nineteenth-century Russian writers, such as Pyotr Vyazemsky, Leo Tolstoy, Vissarion Belinsky, and Alexander Herzen, and nourished a life-long love for French literary culture from Montaigne to the present. Ginzburg had met the aged Bakhtin several times, but her discussions with him at Maleyevko were on general themes and not significant for her intellectually. In a published note from the 1980s she wrote blandly: "With Bakhtin I met rarely. But the personal meaning of his scholarly works shows through" (GINZBURG, 2002a, p.303). An earlier version of this same note, before Ginzburg had edited it for publication, was less deferential. "I don't have all the keys to the creative work of Bakhtin," she wrote, "but the personal meaning of his scholarly works is obvious. Bakhtin was to the highest degree a polyphonic and dialogic person. He

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<sup>7</sup> In the Bolshevik 1920s, it was not Freud, Nietzsche or Marx but Friedrich Schelling that Bakhtin discussed lovingly for weeks on end with his close friends Lev Pumpianskii and Maria Yudina. "I loved him [Schelling] very much and knew him through and through and from the bottom up," Bakhtin remarked. When Duvakin tried to prompt Bakhtin with Soviet-approved literary Romantics like Hoffmann, Bakhtin tactfully returned to the philosophical, idealizing writers "with a religious inclination," such as Novalis, that formed the core of his discussions (always on original German texts) with the Schellingist Maria Yudina. See Bakhtin (2002, pp.271-73) "Shestaia beseda."

<sup>8</sup> The best work on Bakhtin and Max Scheler is the article by Alina Wyman (2008a), as well as her dissertation (2008b).

exchanged masks and played various games.”<sup>9</sup> According to a later memoir by Vadim Bayevsky from the 1990s, Lydia Iakovlevna had been “somewhat surprised” to learn, in November 1986, that a society of North American scholars had been founded to study Bakhtin’s work - for she considered his book on Dostoevsky to be formalist in inspiration, his idea of carnival a passing fad, and the polyphonic method, while “interesting” when applied to Dostoevsky, simply wrong when “it spread to encompass the novel as a whole” (BAEVSKII, 1994, esp. p.268).

Bakhtin and Ginzburg nevertheless concurred on some crucial issues. Both considered nineteenth-century literature a master workshop for honest human expression - and twentieth-century attempts to improve on its techniques relatively feeble. If Gasparov focused his priorities on the creative product (or rather, on the formal common denominators among creative products), then Ginzburg concentrated less on the product and more on creativity through time, the real-life contexts of the creative process. Such priorities already begin to suggest a Bakhtinian landscape, with such interactive pairs as “author and hero,” “horizon” and “surroundings,” and parallels between “authoring” fictive heroes and “authoring” one another in everyday perception. For Ginzburg, a resolutely secular thinker, these doublings never suggested a theodicy, as Bakhtin’s so often do. Her primary mental move was analysis of a skeptical Enlightenment sort; Bakhtin’s method was closer to Romantic synthesis. But Ginzburg’s analytic cast of mind was no obstacle to her embrace of the symbolist-era belief, also dear to Bakhtin, that the writer was a sort of demi-urge and language itself transformative. “Anything that is not expressed in words (either spoken aloud or said to oneself) has no reality for me; or more accurately, I lack the organs of perception for it,” she confessed. “All the joys and sorrows of life reach us through clots of words.”<sup>10</sup> At some level Ginzburg must have sympathized (as Gasparov emphatically did not) with Bakhtin’s insistence that verbal material is alive and can surprise us with its “response.”

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<sup>9</sup> Typescript of this unedited unpublished note, dated 9 November 1980, courtesy of Emily Van Buskirk, who located it in the Ginzburg archive of the Manuscript Division of the Russian National Library in 2007. Comment on Bakhtin occurs on page 2 of the 3-page essay #49. The “masks” and “games” probably refer to Bakhtin’s fabled unwillingness to confirm or disconfirm authorship (or co-authorship) of the disputed texts. On page 3 of this typescript, Ginzburg calls Pavel Medvedev an “unclear person” (*chelovek neyasnyi*). Both typescript (p.3) and published note (p.303) conclude: “Bocharov, Bakhtin’s literary executor, considers this a complicated case, and simply to replace Voloshinov’s or Medvedev’s name with Bakhtin’s during a reprinting is not permissible. Because these books are written otherwise [*napisany inache*].”

<sup>10</sup> “Iz starykh zapisei” in Ginzburg, 1982, p.385; see also the surrounding commentary by Sarah Pratt (1985, p.123).

In her view, however, this living material behaved differently than Bakhtin said it did. It was more lonely, needy, distancing, far less secure. Ginzburg understood the interpersonal word as something radically vulnerable, psychologically dependent and frail. To understand the nature of this frailty, we must turn to Ginzburg's literary relationship with Leo Tolstoy, who is for her as foundational as Dostoevsky is for Bakhtin.

What Ginzburg valued in Tolstoyan literary ethics shifted from decade to decade. Two of its core components remained constant for her, however: the decisive status of "conversation" [*razgovor*] (by which she meant pragmatically grounded verbal exchange), and "conditioned-ness" [*obuslovlennost'*] (the state of the human organism uninterruptedly exposed to social or environmental pressures). Both are discussed by Ginzburg at length in her 1977 study *On Psychological Prose*, which contains her most sustained work on Tolstoy.<sup>11</sup> These two analytic units line up well with Bakhtin's dialogue and "novel of ideas" (or "idea-persons"), concepts closely associated with his work on Dostoevsky.

For Ginzburg, it would seem, conversation is not the same as "dialogue." One even suspects that after Bakhtin co-opted the latter term for Dostoevsky's novels, Ginzburg came to distrust it. Dialogue has a coherent intellectual agenda, usually pre-shaped by the author in advance of his characters' practical need for it. It is artifice and theoretical, more appropriate for an idea-driven verbal exchange (where behaviour is arbitrary, even ornamental) than for ordinary acts of communication. Ginzburg insists that Tolstoy was the first major writer to listen to how people really talked with one another, extracting out of that agitated, inarticulate, stressful mess the necessary material for a realistic literary scene. She quotes the protagonist of Tolstoy's early experimental fragment *The History of Yesterday* on conversation ("the silliest of inventions," egotistical and indifferent to others, he says), showing how Tolstoy makes of this wretched social ritual a showcase of *obuslovlennost'*, exposing the "hidden impulses concealed in any utterance" (GINZBURG, 1991, p.286). Talking is intensely unsatisfying in a Tolstoyan narrative. Indeed, one index of Tolstoyan "realism" has always been its keen sensitivity to *comme il faut*, to a given protagonist's failure to fit in

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<sup>11</sup> English has no single word adequate to the Russian *obuslovlennost'*, "the condition resulting from the uninterrupted exposure of a given individual to outside pressures and influences." Its translation by Judson Rosengrant (see GINZBURG, 1991) as "conditionality" or "causal conditionality" is to my mind confusing. Throughout this essay, I use my neologism, which is a literal rendering of the Russian participial noun.



and subsequent social awkwardness. Tolstoy takes social and economic reality seriously—its hierarchies, conventions, conversations, pressures. This is true even though most of his heroes find that reality ghastly, and even though Tolstoy himself eventually said no to every major institution and convention of his time.

Bakhtin appears curiously free of this vulnerability. He prided himself (and his favored heroes) on an independence from what he called *ofitziios* - official-talk, formality, government-sanctioned operating procedures, “insidership” to a given reigning structure. He did not take that part of reality seriously. Or rather, he believed that taking *ofitziios* seriously was “one-sided” and likely to prevent laughter from having its proper curative and lifesaving effect. In his own life and in the literary worlds he preferred, Bakhtin was partial to situations and fictions that parodied the insiders while glorifying the loners and rogues. It is worth noting that Dostoevsky’s mature “idea-persons” all share Bakhtin’s personal preferences. They, too, aren’t bothered much by social position or convention, because none of them fits in anyway, or cares about fitting in. For a major Dostoevskian hero, eccentricity and scandal is the norm. “Dostoevsky’s hero is extraordinarily free in his actions,” Ginzburg writes in *On Psychological Prose*. If Tolstoy’s hero is conditioned in his daily behaviour by the nature of his activities, duties, position in society, then Dostoevsky’s characters, at least the vital younger ones who carry the plot, all

lack occupations: they do not work, or go to school, or manage households... Raskolnikov is a student who does not study; Rogozhin is a merchant who does not trade; Kirillov is an unemployed engineer; Dmitry Karamazov a former officer; Alyosha a former novice; Ivan a man of indefinite activities. And all of them have unlimited time at their disposal for their ideological escapades [pokhozheniia] (GINZBURG, 1991, p.260).

The reader is referred to Bakhtin for more about this special, idle type of novel of ideas. “Of course,” Ginzburg (1991, p.243) remarks pointedly about the appeal of novelistic plots like this, “it is more interesting to conceive of yourself in Dostoevskian terms, since then you can focus all your attention on yourself.”

Let us unpack that fascinating charge. Ginzburg suggests that Tolstoy is more alert to the pain and embarrassment of real human interaction, to collapses in communication and failures to become part of a desired group, than Dostoevsky could

ever be. It is true that Tolstoy resented this dependence on societal convention and eventually came to consider it cowardly and evil. For a moral absolutist like Tolstoy, how much more free each of us would be if we could focus all our attention on ourselves, our own ideas, ideals, and drives! Precisely because Tolstoy acknowledges the conditioning power of the social environment, does he resent it so deeply and work so hard to manage its painful fallout. In her 1979 book *On the Literary Hero*, Ginzburg shows how Tolstoy pursued this realistic depiction of human conditionedness to its limit, into “a micro-analysis of the most minuscule impressions and arousals” (GINZBURG, 1979, p.81) of his characters. But, she adds, “it was different with Dostoevsky” (GINZBURG, 1979, p.81). With his “metaphysical understanding of freedom of the will,” he must energetically reject determinism in all its forms. Nevertheless, a sinister sort of determinism can still be detected in Dostoevsky’s novels, one quite fraudulent from a Tolstoyan perspective. Between authentic “historical preconditions [*predposylki*] and the behavior of a Dostoevskian hero,” Ginzburg notes, “space is made for the idea - an idea that he, the hero, bears and embodies” (GINZBURG, 1979, p.83). She credits Mikhail Bakhtin and Boris Engel’gardt with researching the “system behind this novel of ideas” (GINZBURG, 1979, p.83). In the process she distinguishes between a simple thought (*mysl’*, the mental residue of experience), and a formed idea [*ideia*], which makes more impersonal and ambitious claims on reality (GINZBURG, 1979, p.83). An idea inserted into a character does not merely expand and flower in the person of its host. It produces monstrous acts on the outside. “In Dostoevsky’s novels, events - including the strangest events - are conditioned and shaped by the idea” (GINZBURG, 1979, p.84). This ideational conditionedness differs profoundly from its more public, social, shared, and merely embarrassing variant familiar to us from Tolstoy.

We may now hazard some conclusions from Ginzburg’s critique of “Bakhtinian dialogue in a novel of ideas” (Dostoevsky’s terrain) and what she considers a prime Tolstoyan scenario: failed conversations between socially-conditioned people. Hovering behind this critique, I suspect, is Ginzburg’s conviction (also Tolstoy’s) that, Bakhtin notwithstanding, the “idea as such” does not, and cannot, use a human being to live out its independent life. An idea has neither life nor independence. It does not pass from mind to mind or from mouth to mouth as an integral (or even as a recognizable) thing,

which can then move on, enriched, to enter further dialogues in other people's mouths. At every step along the way, the idea will be dragged down, disfigured, and eventually dissolved in the "situational" needs of its particular carrier. And having inflamed that carrier, it will not quiet down or pass away (as must our organic, somatic inflammations of love, laughter, jealousy or grief). If the idea survives intact, it will infect others artificially, who will distort it according to their own needs or moods.

In a word, Ginzburg does not see the "idea in dialogue" as an affirmative loophole in an open-ended chain of meaning. Her grim reading of the "novel of ideas" obliges us to reconsider Bakhtin's implication, in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, that such polyphonic structure is in principle liberating. For Bakhtin, we recall, Tolstoy was the exemplary "monolithic monologist," the ideal *anti*-polyphonist to display against Dostoevsky, freedom-loving dialogist.<sup>12</sup> But Ginzburg was never persuaded that polyphony was possible.<sup>13</sup> Nor was she convinced that polyphony (if it could exist) was honest. In her view, the texture of a Tolstoyan novel was not necessarily more monologic than a Dostoevskian one. Dostoevsky specialized in crisis-ridden, idea-laden narratives; such "novels of ideas" can only be selfish, insulated, and thus monologic. Dostoevsky's major heroes are symbolic creations, cerebral and self-contained. They do not talk with one another as much as they test their ideas out on one another. Tolstoy's worlds, in welcome contrast, are always embedded in the socially and economically real.

Here Ginzburg puts forward an argument that Tolstoyan sympathizers always emphasize when presented with Bakhtin's negative verdict on their writer. The Tolstoyan narrative voice might have its monologic, authoritarian moments, but the fictive characters Tolstoy creates are motley, multifaceted, hard to predict and difficult to define. Since they live such "socially-sensitized" lives, they present one side of themselves to one interlocutor, another to a second, a third side to a third—and each of these second parties brings out, or contributes to, a different aspect of the hero's authentic, non-reducible person. The fact that Tolstoyan heroes cohere, while not being

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<sup>12</sup> "Monolithic monologist" is Bakhtin's verdict on Tolstoy in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984, p.56).

<sup>13</sup> For all that Bakhtin was a "huge phenomenon," she remarked in an interview in 1978, "far from everyone will agree that an authorial word is absent in Dostoevsky." Ginzburg commits the common error of assuming that polyphonic structure requires abdication of the author. *Razgovor o literaturovedenii* [Conversation about literary studies] [1978], in Ginzburg, 1982, esp. p.49.

predictable in their actions or “articulatable” in any stable ideology, is the great miracle of Tolstoyan psychology. We recognize Tolstoyan heroes *not* through an “idea” (their ideas are usually a mess) but through a variegated pattern of responses from other people to their confused personalities, bodies, behaviours, and utterances. This dynamic could easily be seen as a strength quite in keeping with Bakhtin’s dearest impulses; indeed, excellent extensions of Bakhtin into “Tolstoyan” realms have been made by Western scholars, especially Gary Saul Morson.<sup>14</sup> But for idea-driven reasons of his own, partly belonging to his own value system and partly to that of his Stalinist age, Bakhtin denies this potential.<sup>15</sup>

Let me conclude this discursus - or duel - over our two critics and their respective Dostoevskys-Tolstoys with two final points: for Sergei Bocharov, Russia’s premiere voice against Gasparov’s Bakhtinophobia, contributed to the Ginzburg-Bakhtin relationship as well. In his 2001 memoir in *NLO*, Remembering Lidiia Iakovlevna (BOCHAROV, 2001, p.313), Bocharov recalled an exchange of letters he enjoyed with Ginzburg in 1978 over his review (in *Voprosy literatury*) of her monograph *On Psychological Prose* (1977) (BOCHAROV, 1978, p.268). The review was very positive. But Bocharov could not help noticing the marginality of Dostoevsky to Ginzburg’s study. When Dostoevsky’s name did appear, it was always the negative case, a writer off the “main road” of the classic psychological novel; everywhere, he noted, Ginzburg credited Tolstoy and Proust for discovering the “spiritual experience of the contemporary human being.” Such a selection, Bocharov granted, was the “personal choice of the researcher” and could be disputed. In her response to Bocharov (April 12, 1978), Ginzburg wrote that she considered his review of her book “akin to an arrow released by a very friendly hand.” And then she assured him that she fully understood what Dostoevsky meant for humanity but “the fact is, the heights and depths of Dostoevsky are not my experience... he is really not my writer.”

That this was not always the case is the burden of our final exhibit, from Ginzburg’s early diaries (1921-23) (GINZBURG, 2007).<sup>16</sup> Written when she was barely

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<sup>14</sup> See especially Morson, 1987 and his subsequent *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (1994), both informed by Bakhtinian ideas in Tolstoyan garb.

<sup>15</sup> For an excellent analysis of Bakhtin’s priorities vis-à-vis Tolstoy, see Sloane, 2001, pp.59-77.

<sup>16</sup> Unpublished early diary entries (1921-23) courtesy of Emily Van Buskirk, who transcribed them from the Ginzburg Archive in the Manuscript Division of the Russian National Library; cited and discussed

out of her teens, they yield up some marvelously unexpected juxtapositions of Tolstoy versus Dostoevsky. At first, Ginzburg admitted to not liking Tolstoy's characters and plots at all. They too closely resembled real people in her own real life, most of whom she found dishonest and "hostilely alienating." However, in a lengthy entry from 1922, suffering a hopelessly unreciprocated love attachment, Ginzburg confessed to her diary that Dostoevsky had "monstrous rights to exist." If he were anywhere at fault, it was his "inability to be higher than his heroes, as Tolstoy always stands higher than his heroes" (28 September 1922). Tolstoy, she notes gratefully, provides guidance; he "constantly establishes guilt, judges, censures or justifies. But Dostoevsky never judges . . . and that's the whole problem." Precisely that quality which Bakhtin will praise so reverently in Dostoevsky in 1929 - the polyphonic author who walks into his own novels at eye-level with his heroes, claiming no "surplus" - Ginzburg in her youth considered Dostoevsky's worst flaw.

#### **4 Love and How It Doesn't Work Out**

Up to now, the disagreements between Ginzburg and Bakhtin have been documented, albeit more thinly than Gasparov's full-scale war. In my final focus of comparison, the dynamics of love, the virtual dialogue between Ginzburg and Bakhtin begins in earnest. Part of what attracted Ginzburg (and her formalist mentors) to Tolstoy was his experimentation with the "in-between genres": diaries, memoirs, working notebooks, personal correspondence, which he would weave in and out of his creative fiction. Collectively, Ginzburg considered these literary forms "human documents," and she studied them all her life. In any given era, she believed, the in-between genres, being less codified, are more truthful to the psyche than novels could ever be, since writing fiction for the public is inevitably influenced by the market and its conventional narrative recipes. Quasi-private in-between genres permit unprecedented access to the self in its dealings with others and stimulate us to unprecedented genres of self-

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here by permission. Ginzburg notes the "fury" [*beshenstvo*] with which she first read Stavrogin's Confession in Demons. That censored chapter displayed all of Dostoevsky's "schematicity," the "whole unfreedom of his mind" that allowed pious elders to bow mysteriously in front of moral filth. If Leo Tolstoy had been in that room instead of the foolish bishop Tikhon, Stavrogin would have received not an ambiguous bow but "a gob of spit in his face"; "Stavrogin's obtuseness and vulgarity [*tupost' i poshlost'*] would have been exposed."

expression. What compels us to “experiment on the borders”? What are the benefits of that zone?

Bakhtin’s answer to these questions is familiar to everyone who has worked with his models: because that is where we exist, on the border. Our personalities have no middles, no true interior territory, just as our utterances do not; an “I-for-myself” has little to say, even to itself. But Bakhtin - and here is where Ginzburg will begin to protest - posits very high standards and exacting criteria for this border-activity. First, the boundary separates two mutually accessible, but still *unfused*, consciousnesses. Second, these two consciousnesses acknowledge their differences, but are open and curious about each other. No threats. No border guards - or as Bakhtin put the matter late in life, “benevolent demarcation and only then cooperation” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.136). For either side to begin to speak, there must be a presumption of trust. Finally, from my perspective on this side of the line, “the other side of the boundary” always presents me with a human voice or face, not a mass, not a collective, not a set of social conventions, or accepted procedures. All that is *ofitsioz*, the officially sanctioned world, which cannot obligate us. Obligation here is key. For Bakhtin, responsibility accrues when two faces confront one another, unimpeded and unmediated, and each acknowledges the radical primacy of the other: “Thou Art” [*Ty esi*]. Not only subjective responsibility but even objective causality is subject to this eye-to-eye law. It is of course essential to understand another’s “unique and unrepeatable individuality,” Bakhtin wrote in 1970-71; but “there can also be” - and here one suspects that Bakhtin feels there *must* be - “individual causality” (BAKHTIN, 1986, p.145).

Ginzburg’s understanding of the inter-generic and inter-human border was different. She was alien to the religious or Christological overtones of “Thou Art”: she rejected the possibility that values were grounded in any potentially divine Absolute. In her view, what compels us to experiment with “in-between” and “border” genres is not “Thou Art” (a confession of faith in the presence of an Other) but rather the *lack* of a loving interlocutor—and the shame and embarrassment of having to hide that need. Or, in an alternative scenario, the presence of an unspeakably difficult reality “beyond the border” will require me to bifurcate my creative and judging self. This bifurcation is undertaken not in denial of the difficulty (such escapism can never be productive), but

in imitation of Tolstoy, who aesthetically shaped his personal anxiety and pain into an “in-between genre” that allowed him to stand outside and create.

Ginzburg’s idea of an inner bifurcation or “self-distancing” [*samootstranenie*] is only now being uncovered by such scholars as Emily Van Buskirk, whose recent (2008) Harvard dissertation devotes a luminous chapter to the subject.<sup>17</sup> To “self-distance” is not to fantasize or to escape into fiction; the events of the world are real and they must be answered for (VAN BUSKIRK, 2006).<sup>18</sup> But I must equip myself for those events if I am to endure them. For what confronts me on the far side of the boundary - in Ginzburg’s Tolstoyan view of things - is most likely *not* another singular loving face curious to listen to me and eager to love me. What faces me is a fabric of social expectations, hierarchies, work tasks, public roles, at which I wish to succeed and where I desperately want to fit in. Much in Ginzburg’s personal and professional life fed in to this need: as a marginally employed intellectual in the 1930s, as a survivor of the Siege of Leningrad 1941-1944, as a woman, a Jew, and a lesbian who was prone to passionate unrequited attachments. To survive an abortive communication act or a ghastly winter of starvation under the Blockade, Ginzburg devised this self-distancing mechanism—to some extent a formalist device, but far more fragile.

When is it in my interests to deploy this method? I “self-distance” when my internal spiritual resources are so starved or stupefied that the only faculties left to cultivate are the external ones of observation and analysis. True to her Formalist beginnings and secular inclinations, Ginzburg grounds this procedure not in some sympathetic one-on-one intuition but in laws, regularities, and mechanisms. She specifically avoids Bakhtin’s territory, the “unrepeatably personal” [*nepovtorimo lichnoe*]. “Uniquely personal” life could not be communicated, in Ginzburg’s opinion, because of the social nature of language. But the opposite polar extreme, the “typical” [*tipicheskoe*] so favored by nineteenth-century Russian realist critics, was also inadequate; classification according to type made available far too little individual

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<sup>17</sup> Van Buskirk, 2008, especially ch. 1, Writing the Immanent Self: Self-distancing and Moral Evaluation (pp.56-170). I am indebted to Emily Van Buskirk for her generous sharing of her materials, early drafts, archival materials, and expertise on the Ginzburg Project, over which she and Andrei Zorin have been labouring for half a decade.

<sup>18</sup> Ginzburg’s notebooks *A Person at a Writing Desk* [*Chelovek za pis'mennom stolom*] were first published in 1989, from which her *Blockade Diary* was translated in 1995. See also the Ginzburg forums in *NLO* n.76, 2005 and *NLO* n. 82, 2006.

“face” to fuel and bond a communication act. A lonely person experiments first on herself. Paradoxically, this bifurcated “self-distancing” - perhaps similar to self-observation in dreams - cools down and objectifies events by providing us with an outside anchor, while at the same time heightening the local cruelty and loneliness.

Parallels can be drawn between Ginzburg’s formalist type of self-distancing and Bakhtin’s outsideness or *vnenakhodimost’* (cf. EMERSON, 2005b). More intriguing, however, are the differences. By “stepping outside,” agents in both paradigms seek access to a unified whole not available to the isolated author. But Bakhtin’s author “steps outside” to generate a surplus of vision that facilitates the hero’s free development. This is, in Bakhtin’s words, a “loving distancing of oneself from the life-field of the hero” [*liubovnoe ustranenie sebya iz polya zhizni geroia*] (BAKHTIN, 1990, p.14).<sup>19</sup> Such outsideness is permeated by composure, close attention to detail, sympathy and trust, for only under such conditions can an artistic stance create life. Ginzburg’s self-distancing is in every way a more agitated survival device, necessary to preserve one’s identity when the environment has lost its ethical sense - and yet no moral absolute exists. Her greatest achievement in this genre was her semi-autobiographical “Notes of a Blockade Person” [*Zapiski blokadnogo cheloveka*], written from the perspective of a lonely, starving male resident of besieged Leningrad during the darkest months of the Second World War.<sup>20</sup> It is significant that Ginzburg’s male alter-ego, “En” (also called “Otter”/ *l’autre*), finds temporary salvation in meaningless bureaucratic ritual during the worst bombardments: at last “he was not only starving and eating, now he was working too.”<sup>21</sup> As always in Ginzburg, success or failure within a community matters vitally to the hero. To relax into conventionality during times of

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<sup>19</sup> Translation adjusted.

<sup>20</sup> First published in Russian in the Leningrad journal *Neva* in 1984; translated into English by Alan Myers (1995).

<sup>21</sup> In Russian the title, *Zapiski blokadnogo cheloveka*, recalls “*Zapiski podpol’nogo cheloveka*,” [Notes of an Underground Man.] But unlike Dostoevsky’s a-social hero, Ginzburg’s alter-ego “En” or “Otter” is pleased to go out to his bureaucratic job. The very triviality of the work was its consolation. Every day, after the lonely terror of hauling water and chopping firewood, “a series of professional gestures began: joking with comrades, arranging something with a secretary, sending a manuscript off to a typist, dropping in on the boss’s office, communicating on the office phone to another department that had messed something up.” All of it was make-work, dimly perceived as meaningless during a time of “starvings and bombardments,” but life-sustaining, precisely because a self that could afford to be engaged in superfluous activities was a self that had energy to spare, that fit in and *belonged*. “After the oppressive cave-dwelling quality of his domestic activities, these official bureaucratic gestures eased the tension - through an experiencing of form, of conventionality.”



crisis is to confirm the self, not to jeopardize it. In this respect, *Notes of a Blockade Person* is a deeply non-carnival text.

Let me now summarize the “boundary maneuvers” that Bakhtin and Ginzburg each recommend. You will recall that in his dialogic writings, and especially in the Dostoevsky book, Bakhtin insists on the eternity and simultaneity of all voices, which respond to one another across a permeable boundary. These voice-values, while lodged in individuals, are indestructible and infinitely abundant. To sustain these voices does not require any arduous, risk-laden labour; on the contrary, Bakhtin’s carnival time is specifically the time of the *prazdnik*, an “idle, work-free day.” What is required in Bakhtin’s zone is receptivity, patience, and an orientation of love. Ginzburg’s interpersonal boundaries, in contrast, are Tolstoy’s, stuck deep in lonely, everyday, task-filled time. When one of the participating consciousnesses is spurned or humiliated, there is nowhere to turn but back toward its own anguished self.

Ginzburg did see an “outlet from oneself,” however. It was not in the loving other - of whose existence she could never be sure—but in one’s own activity of service. The Russian word here is not *sluzhba* or “state service,” but rather the orientation or process of serving (*sluzhenie*). The most bittersweet discussion of this service activity comes in a jotting Ginzburg made in 1934, *The Stages of Love* [*Stadii liubvi*] (GINZBURG (2002b, pp.34-38).<sup>22</sup> It will serve as our final comparison between Bakhtin and his two Russian critics.

Concluding at this point is convenient for another reason: because Bakhtin’s theory of love has always amazed me. It is so full of the warmth of sympathy, the tolerance of heteroglossia, the profligate, easy-come-easy-go, interchangeable, physical embraces of carnival, where no one is repulsive or repelled, all are permeated with the patience of a mother’s devotion to her child. It is also so devoid of the angry, envious, possessive heat of Eros. Bakhtin attends only once in *Author and Hero* to sexual attraction and intercourse as a self-other/inner-outer problem, and the passage is chillingly clinical.<sup>23</sup> Overall, “love” is more a category of cognition and close attention than of desire: when we love, we return again and again to the site of the beloved and

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<sup>22</sup> See the discussion in English in Van Buskirk, 2008, pp.313-87, chapter 4: Making Love Literary: Sexuality and the Third Person in the Prose of Lydia Ginzburg.

<sup>23</sup> Bakhtin’s paragraph on the “sexual approach” to interpersonal relations occurs in section 5: “The Inner and the Outer Body” of “*Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity*” (BAKHTIN,1990, pp.51-52).

attend to every contour of the beloved's intonation, shape, need, finding something more interesting each time we revisit it. Nothing is wrong with this - in fact, everything is right with it - but it only applies (as does so much in Bakhtin) to reciprocal scenarios. The beloved must want to be loved.

Ginzburg's concept of service figures in to a very different economy. She was fascinated with Eros, in part because it is so obsessively and mercilessly dissected in the literature she knew best (the French seventeenth through nineteenth centuries), but also, of course, because the in-between "love genres" she created for her own self-expression were almost always non-reciprocal. Non-reciprocal, and as an additional handicap to one who appreciated the force of social convention, strictly taboo. The taboo against same-sex love would not have affected a Bakhtinian theory of love, which is wholly indifferent to the gender of bodies (in carnival and everywhere else). But for Ginzburg, love was a passionate aberration. Her archive contains painful commentary on growing up homosexual in Soviet Russia - a closeted, introverted, desperately lonely affair - which must have nourished Ginzburg's belief that people, in love and out of it, care intensely about social acceptance. They wish to live normal lives and be pleased (or if need be, be pained) invisibly, not scandalously or freakishly. Against Freud, but in the spirit of Alfred Adler, Ginzburg insisted that social self-affirmation, not libido per se, is the driving force behind the behaviour that others see.<sup>24</sup>

Living normally, then, is one deep desire; another is the striving to render publicly recognized service. To serve God was not an option; Ginzburg did not believe in a God. In a love relation gone wrong, however, service could figure in, and with luck could even prove therapeutic. The essay *Stages of Love* is Ginzburg's wry and self-distancing post-mortem on her disastrous passion for the actress Rita Zelyonaia. In it Ginzburg isolates three stages, attending especially to the travail of intellectuals falling in love - a category of person she considered quite handicapped in the quest for happiness. In the first stage, *desire finds an object* [*Zhelanie nakhodit ob'ekt*]. This is a worthless stage to analyze because it is "accidental, instantaneous, devoid of ideas." Then comes the second, *the decisive moment* [*Reshaiushchii moment*]. The desire becomes a *concept*. It tries to explain itself as a force really lodged in some more

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<sup>24</sup>Zorin (2005) notes the non-Freudian moments and draws parallels with the social psychology of Alfred Adler (pp.49-51), Valentin Voloshinov (pp.54-56), and George Herbert Mead (pp.62-66).

cerebral quality, so as to protect itself and tame the feeling. Self-analysis and bifurcation begin. The unsatisfied lover, to salvage some self-respect, displaces Eros into something cooler, like “concern” [*zabota*]. To be “concerned” for the beloved is also the bedrock for Bakhtin, we recall, the beginning and end of love’s authenticity - but for Ginzburg, *zabota* is openly a substitute construct. And a good substitute it is, very satisfying: it keeps our shame at bay. Thus routinely, imperceptibly, concern turns into service, which is, Ginzburg insists, a huge and precious symbolic structure.

Stage 3, *Catastrophe* [*Katastrofa*] begins when our service ceases to be necessary. The concept no longer covers the need. Terror and clarity set in. Catastrophe is inevitable, either caused by obstacles or (more commonly) by the non-coincidence of two desires. There are various outcomes of catastrophe, however; it, too, can be productively survived. Ginzburg does not believe it can be erased, or that we can return to a pre-catastrophic stage. The catastrophe can be such that it simply annihilates the feeling, burning it out so that we cannot bear to look at it. Or it can give rise to a rebirth of the feeling in stable, narratable form: “my great unhappy love.” It becomes a cooled-down biographical episode, part of our self-identity. Or it can propel the unrequited lover out onto the path of more general service. Although this path is one long dreary quest for erotic substitutes, it is the healthiest possible outcome, for the options in Ginzburg’s world are few. There is “service upward” toward God, but that is an option only for believers. “Service downward” is toward children; but that, too, is not everyone’s fate - Ginzburg wrote frankly about her envy of the biological motherhood experienced by her female colleagues.<sup>25</sup> The most successful service ultimately is devotion to one’s work. Anything, it would seem, is better than Bakhtin’s *prazdnik*, the holiday “day off,” a time for the mind to rest or freely wander and the body to go on display. It is in this context, I suggest, that we might understand this statement by Ginzburg, made in 1978:

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<sup>25</sup> Van Buskirk notes Ginzburg’s ruminations (in a letter to her sister-in-law Nadezhda Bliumenfel’d in June 1928) on the tragic instance of Natalia Rykova, wife of the eminent literary scholar Grigory Gukovsky and fellow resident in Ginzburg’s communal apartment. In her third trimester, Rykova was informed that a Caesarian section would have to be performed to save her life at the cost of the life of her unborn child. Rykova insisted that the doctors try to save the child (her daughter survived at four-and-a-half pounds); as medically foreseen, Rykova died four days after the operation. “Children are the creation of value in the precise sense of the word,” Ginzburg wrote, weighing the worth of maternal sacrifice as a corrective to our natural selfishness. See Van Buskirk, 2008, p.14, footnotes pp.43-44.

I don't share several of Bakhtin's ideas... [but] Bakhtin is remarkable not because he said incontrovertibly true things, but because of something entirely different. His huge spiritual energy, the force of his thought, which worked relentlessly and tirelessly, giving rise along the way to such fertile concepts (GINZBURG, 1982, p.49).<sup>26</sup>

Elsewhere Ginzburg defended what she called "fertile one-sidedness" [*plodotvornaia odnostoronnost'*] (BOCHAROV, 2006, p.62).<sup>27</sup> Bakhtin certainly justified himself in that category of thinker.

Now to close by returning to the title. In what ways can these two Bakhtin skeptics help us to use Bakhtin more "creatively," that is, to more responsible and honest effect? Gasparov provides the methodological brake, and it is useful to be reminded of it. Whatever Bakhtin turns out to be - philologist or philosopher - the technical terms "dialogue," "menippea," and "carnival" must be applied with some discipline. If Bakhtin generalizes with flamboyance, we, his students, should do so more cautiously. He would certainly have required such precision from his own students at the University of Saransk, where he was revered as an authoritative and demanding pedagogue.

Ginzburg is more useful in suggesting what sort of texts a Bakhtinian filter cannot productively read. I offer three types: first are texts of unrequited communication, in which there is simply no "Other" to be found, not even a super-addressee; then come texts of absolute lovelessness, where I am forced back on the mirror—that massive fraud - in order to glimpse another face, even if it can be only a distorted variant on my own; lastly, texts of terminal deprivation. Consider again that caricature of Bakhtin in *NLO*, n. 53 (2003), Bakhtin as Tolstoy the naked pious martyr. Ginzburg would probably have seen some truth in it. Those uplifting transfiguring texts were in fact wonderfully productive for Bakhtin's special "one-sidedness," where even the violent comic clutter of Rabelais becomes a clarion call against terror and death. The canonized approaches to literature cartooned in the other seven frames were more skeptical, analytical, secular, and have proved themselves more persuasive as interpretive frameworks for our savage twentieth and twenty-first centuries. And this, at

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<sup>26</sup> In chapter Razgovor o literaturovedenii [Conversation about Literary Studies].

<sup>27</sup> Bocharov suggests that Ginzburg made the comment in reference to the "one-sided" formalists, such as Eikhenbaum on Gogol's "Shinel'" - but Bakhtin's thought is certainly another candidate.

the end of the day and of the millennium, makes Bakhtin an indispensable alternative resource.

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