

## ARTICLE

# Ferrying a Thinker Across Time and Language: Bakhtin, Translation, World Literature

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This article is an attempt to understand how the work of a thinker travels across time, and what journeying through languages and cultures has to do with these peregrinations. There is more at stake in this process than the certainty of canonization would suggest. Building on my previous work, I want to examine the principal trajectories of appropriating Bakhtin in the West since the 1960s; this will allow me to revisit the question of Bakhtin's longevity, and the potential of his work to gain traction in current debates on world literature. The agenda of reviving and opening up modern languages is inseparable from thinking through its encounters within the practice of translation, and Bakhtin's work can serve as a litmus test of appropriation that involves constant meta-reflexion on what constitutes translation in different cultural zones.

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My approach to Bakhtin's legacy is sustained by a wider theory of translation which comprehends translation both more globally and more historically; at the end of this article, I also discuss the problem of translation vis-à-vis recent debates specifically on world literature, again in the context of Bakhtin's work. Let me begin with a historical excursus. Translation, in the modern sense in which we understand the term, is a fairly recent phenomenon. Its emergence is concomitant with the rising sense of intellectual property – and of the significance originality and imagination hold in literature and in scholarship – that appears in the late eighteenth century. Before that, translation lives other lives: those of imitation, transposition, rendition, emulation and re-creation of the text. This is true of the West, as much as it is true of the wider cultural region formed by the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. In the European context, we are aware of poetic contests that sought to emulate rhetorically examples of Greek and Roman poetry. These competitions were forms of translation; the resulting texts do not insist on originality, nor – importantly – do they require complete faithfulness. They present a mode of creativity that is beyond the – at the time still constraining – binary expectations of either originality or loyalty. For centuries on end, helping oneself to someone else's plot or figure of speech, or range of similes or metaphors, often suitably updated, was a way of ferrying an earlier discourse into a new zone of contemporaneity. This wider meaning of 'translation', which highlights both the passive following and the co-creative departure from the example, continues – at least to some extent – to be constitutive of our seemingly more advanced, but perhaps also more one-sided understanding of the term today. As late as the twentieth century, we can still observe this mode of consciously

unfaithful translation in what, in the German tradition, is known as *Nachdichtung* – the making of poetry following another text, a process grounded in a deliberate refusal of copying or rendering that text with precision. Of course, there lurks behind all this the question of the canon, for it is the assumption of the rhetorical force and beauty of the canonical text that often enables these acts of permissible transgression. In Central Asia and Persia, as well as in the Arabic-speaking world, for a very long time the practice of translation remains alien to our *modern* notion of it. From when Nizami, in the second half of the twelfth century, creates his five epic poems in Persian, right through to the eighteenth century, we have nothing but forms of rendition that are based on emulation, adaptation and conversation with the canonical pieces – but not on the literal reproduction our norms of translation would require. This emulation through conversation with the source text is a genre in itself at the time, known as *nazire*: a work in its own right that responds to an earlier work by plunging today's reader into uncertainty as to where the line between translation, re-creation and original writing is to be drawn – if such a line exists at all before the late eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> I would thus venture a hypothesis: for as long as the canon – based on the certainty flowing from adherence to a combination of rhythm, plot, composition and rhetorical figures – remains in place, there is no imperative for literal repetition or exactitude. It is with the shift towards originality, the premium value placed on novelty and the sense of property that emerges as a by-product of this shift late in the eighteenth and in the first half of the nineteenth century that tradition is put under strain and ceases to be self-evident (in Europe, the practice of translation as identifying 'ownership' has already begun gradually in the sixteenth century). We know that it is at that time – late in the eighteenth and early in the nineteenth century – that the European canon of 'great literature' is constructed, in which Shakespeare takes pride of place, yet no longer as the borrower of circulating plots, and rather as the irregular and chaotic but potent genius that the German Romantics saw in him. Similarly, Calderón is unearthed from oblivion. But not the Calderón who was stealing plots, lifting in one of his plays an entire act from Tirso de Molina. Rather, it his Baroque vacillation between dream and reality, the quality of unfolding, to invoke Deleuze,<sup>2</sup> that underwrites his place in this new canon which reshuffles the previous order and signals the virtues of instability, not least the unmooring of literature from a longstanding pool of recurring plots, metres, compositional patterns and rhetorical devices.

This is when translation as we know it becomes important, fitting into a new situation in which novelty and originality must be captured with reliable precision and nuance. What is more, this is a process that – historically speaking – seems to me to be nothing but the logical culmination of the protracted transition from powerful cosmopolitan koines – Greek, Latin, Persian, Sanskrit – to a multitude of vernaculars, each of which insists on its own inimitable vocabulary, sensitivity and plasticity, in the way advocated by the many supporters of a presumably organic bond between language and thinking, from Humboldt to Georgii Gachev. Although this is true of translation of profane rather than sacred texts (the history of the translation of the Bible would reveal other patterns and trends), what I am contending here is true of the way not just *literary* texts had been treated until the early nineteenth century. The translation of philosophical and political texts would be marked by the same relaxed interpretation of fidelity, by co-creation and adaptation, sometimes amounting to co-writing. One of my favourite examples is the first German translation of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* by that inveterate conservative, Friedrich Gentz. Gentz published his translation of Burke's important book in 1793, only three years after its appearance. The

<sup>1</sup> On *nazire* in the context of translation-responses to Nizami's five poems, see, above all, G. Aliev, *Temy i siuzhety Nizami v literaturakh narodov Vostoka* (Moscow: Nauka, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

translation is marred not just by inaccuracies, but by numerous insertions of Gentz's own thoughts and interpretations of Burke's work.<sup>3</sup> By our standards today this is not a reliable translation, and yet it is this translation that penetrated German and Austrian conservative debates and participated in them for more than a century and a half, until a new German edition was published (not long before the eventful year 1968) that finally signalled the less than conventional ways in which Gentz had approached his task as translator.<sup>4</sup> The moral of the story here is one we may wish to keep in mind: the texture of ideas is discursive, and translations – even before the time our stricter notions of loyalty to the source text were introduced – have always been very much part of this mode. Once a translation starts its circulation, it begins its work through this discursive universe, from which it becomes inseparable. The effects of a translation, once planted in the discursive body of culture, cannot be undone; the clock can never be turned back completely.

This of course has a bearing on how we see the task of the translator, to echo the title of Benjamin's famous essay, with regard to Mikhail Bakhtin's corpus of texts. I should begin, perhaps, by saying that Bakhtin's position in this battle within modernity over the limits of dynamic originality, on the one hand, and stability based on recurrence, on the other – a battle that we see enacted in the transition from a looser to a stricter notion of translation – reflects his own wider understanding of literature and culture. In a sense, Bakhtin performs the opposite transition. He begins by sharing a belief in the uniqueness and originality of the writer, only to end up endorsing the overbearing power of tradition imprinted in what he calls 'the memory of genre'. The entire intellectual evolution of Bakhtin can be described as a struggle against psychologism and an ever more powerful negation of subjectivity (in its classical identitarian version). He admits to Vadim Kozhinov that Edmund Husserl and Max Scheler played a vital role in his re-education into a thinker who mistrusts psychologism.<sup>5</sup> Beginning with a celebration of Dostoevsky as a unique and inimitable writer of singular achievement, Bakhtin ends up in the 1930s (in his essays on the novel) and in 1963 (in the reworked version of his Dostoevsky book) focusing on the impersonal memory of genre, leaving little room for creativity as such and examining instead the inherent laws of poetics (note the change in the title of the 1963 book, *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo (Problems of Dostoevsky's Art)*). Bakhtin's entire work and intellectual agenda, indeed the most important questions he sought to answer, are shaped by his resistance to traditionally conceived, stable subjectivity: from the question of the body (which we gradually cease to possess and be in control of, as the book on Rabelais maintains) to that of language (which, as the essays on the novel would have it, reaches us through established generic patterns and is never quite our own – as it has always already been in someone else's mouth). The fortunes of the novel embody this rejection of classical subjectivity in full measure: the individual writer is virtually irrelevant, he or she is no more than an instrument through which the genre materializes itself, no more than a mouthpiece that enunciates the calls of generic memory. Bakhtin, in other words, despite his apparent attraction to canonical figures such as Goethe, Dostoevsky and Rabelais, would ideally have liked to be able to write a history of literature without names. (The formula, 'history without names', was of course derived from the work of art historian Heinrich Wölfflin and had drawn approval from the Russian formalist Boris Eikhenbaum and also from Pavel Medvedev, who, together with Matvei Kagan, was the most

<sup>3</sup> For a recent study of this translation, see Jonathan Green, 'Friedrich Gentz's translation of Burke's *Reflections*', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (2014), pp. 639–59.

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Burke, *Betrachtungen über die französische Revolution* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967).

<sup>5</sup> See V. Kozhinov, 'Bakhtin i ego chitateli: Razmyshleniia i otchasti vospominaniia', *Dialog. Karnaval. Khoronotop* (1993), Nos. 2–3, pp. 120–34, here pp. 124–5.

important transmitter of art historical and art theoretical knowledge in the Bakhtin Circle.)<sup>6</sup> Bakhtin's trajectory is thus that of a thinker who returns from a more modern notion of individual originality and creativity to the idea of a nameless tradition, in which stable discursive formations recur and suck in, in a manner that is as fascinating as it is unstoppable, the work of individual writers who are deprived of their individualities to become servants of tradition. Of course, Bakhtin remains modern as he performs this move, for tradition to him is not a soothing force; it is disruptive in the way the archaic is both disruptive and also enduringly constitutive of the modern.

Bakhtin, then, is a thinker who de-emphasizes originality and property, those underlying features attached to our modern understanding of literature and its translation. If a pun be allowed, he retranslates literature away from the endeavour of individuals, and towards the work of anonymous verbal masses that support the typomachia of dialogue and monologue, of the centripetal and the centrifugal. His most important book, in my no doubt biased judgement the monograph on Rabelais, is a case in point. Admittedly, one of the seven chapters is dedicated to Rabelais's language. But even there Bakhtin does not approach Rabelais from a philological perspective. Most of what he has to say on Rabelais's use of language is borrowed – and readily acknowledged – from Leo Spitzer and the work of other contemporaries. Nor are the principles of interpretation exclusively pertinent to, or derived solely from, literature. The reason for all this is that Bakhtin is trying to think in this book as a philosopher of culture in its totality; language as such takes a back seat, it is only one among many different manifestations of culture. In fact, language here is submerged by sweeping manifestations of culture produced by the body in simultaneous acts of laughter, eating, copulation and so on. One might even argue that Bakhtin's Rabelais book has *non-verbal* communication and creativity at its heart.

Whether all this licenses an approach towards Bakhtin's work that applies a charitable and more flexible understanding of translation away from the – often unproductive – obsession with terminological fixity is a difficult question. To begin to formulate an answer, we have to be able to survey Bakhtin's intellectual career as a whole and discern what its different stages have in common. Bakhtin's work falls, roughly speaking, into three distinct periods. The first one, I think, is the time up until the first version of the Dostoevsky book, when Bakhtin is primarily preoccupied with ethics and aesthetics. The second phase encompasses the 1930s, the time when he is thinking as a philosopher of culture, most pre-eminently in the essays on the novel and in the Rabelais book. Again, we should not be misled into considering these texts as examples of philology or literary theory. Both Bakhtin and the formalists came of age by pushing away from preoccupations with aesthetics. Aesthetics was their shared starting point; but from there, the formalists developed into literary theorists, Bakhtin into a philosopher of culture who employs literary examples, but often (as in the book on Rabelais) those drawn from other domains – always in order to ponder larger issues pertaining to the deeper mechanisms of culture, its inner make-up, typology and evolution. The last stage in Bakhtin's intellectual career begins by the early 1940s; this is when his attention is gradually claimed by the methodology of the humanities. The late appearance of the Rabelais book and the re-publication of the reworked Dostoevsky book have skewed our perspective on what is the longest period in Bakhtin's work, from the 1940s through to the early 1970s. What genuinely interests him here is a range of *new* questions that have a meta-dimension: what is an utterance; what is meaning and how is it produced and communicated; what is the role of dialogue in how we understand the world we are immersed in? Yet different as these

<sup>6</sup> See Medvedev's *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, trans. Albert J. Wehrle (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 50–2 (with a quote from Eikhenbaum's earlier endorsement of Wölfflin on p. 52). On the idea of 'history without names' in the Bakhtin Circle, see also F. Pereda, 'Mijail Bajtín y la historia del arte sin nombres', in *Mijail Bajtín en la encrucijada de la hermenéutica y las ciencias humanas*, ed. B. Vauthier and P. M. Cátedra (Salamanca: SEMYR, 2003), pp. 93–118.

three periods might arguably be, they have something very important in common: the way in which Bakhtin handles language in his own writing. Whether preoccupied with philosophy of culture, or with the nexus of moral philosophy and aesthetics (which he seeks to resolve in the first version of the Dostoevsky book by putting forward and valorizing a non-finalizing and non-objectifying polyphonic writing), Bakhtin's proper realm as thinker is the in-between territory that is confined to no particular discipline and that he inhabits with such non-negotiable sovereignty. It is in this space between the disciplines that he crafts his own metaphors which enable him to move freely between different levels of argumentation and address issues located above and beyond particular fields of knowledge. Often elusively, but always extremely stimulatingly, Bakhtin lifts the categories he employs above the conceptual constraints of their home disciplines and instils in them new life by obliterating their previous conceptual identity. One brief example, of the way in which he formulates the idea of dialogue, should suffice. We hear in Bakhtin's use of dialogue a linguistic substratum, which can probably be attributed to Lev Yakubinsky and a host of other early Soviet linguists; and yet Bakhtin's specific interpretation of this category is so much wider, applicable to entire narratives and whole domains of culture, that focusing exclusively on its linguistic origins, even when these are attestable, would not explain the power and fascination of his dialogism. By way of illustration we could reference here Jan Mukařovský's important 1940 essay 'Dialogue and Monologue'.<sup>7</sup> Terminologically, Mukařovský's text is much more disciplined and rigorous, and yet in scope and inventiveness it lags behind Bakhtin's version of dialogue. Mukařovský (who knew and was highly appreciative of some of Voloshinov's writings) works within a narrowly linguistic juxtaposition of dialogue and monologue. Bakhtin transcends this limitation; he refreshes our understanding of dialogue by inviting us to hear the dialogue within a single uttered word, or the dialogue embodied in voices that convey conflicting outlooks and perspectives on the world, or indeed dialogue as the foundation stone for a wide-ranging typology of cultural forms. This transformation, which subjects the term to inner growth (sometimes at the expense of exactitude), a transformation whereby the term expands its relevance to the point of turning into a broader metaphor, is the most important feature informing Bakhtin's prose, the hallmark of his writings, especially those of the 1930s. It is this transformative energy that sets him apart from his likely, or even demonstrable, antecedents hailing from various specializations, be they linguistic, sociological, theological or art historical for that matter. It is not difficult, for instance, to demonstrate how several of Bakhtin's concepts – architectonics, space, gothic realism – were derived, at least to a significant degree, from the German art historical tradition.<sup>8</sup> This, however, would tell us very little about the significant transformation of these concepts when thrown into the melting pot of Bakhtin's argumentation. His originality as thinker is actually the originality of the great synthesizer who takes at liberty from various rarefied discourses – linguistics, art history, theology – and then reshapes, extends and augments the scope of the respective concepts.

Bakhtin is thus a thinker who handles language in a way that protects him from falling prey to terminological fetishism. His often metaphoric employment of terminology from different domains of knowledge gives volume and breadth to his writing and propels it into a quality that cannot be matched by a translation that shies away from preserving this potential metaphoricity. The failure to accept this hallmark of Bakhtin's writing has been responsible, at least to a degree, for the vicissitudes of his reception in the West since the 1960s. His

<sup>7</sup> J. Mukařovský, 'Dialogue and Monologue', in *The Word and Verbal Art: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Burbank and P. Steiner (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1977), pp. 81–112.

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent study of the origins of the term 'gothic realism' in Bakhtin, see N. Pan'kov, 'Smysl i proiskhozhenie termina "goticheskii realism"', *Voprosy literatury*, No. 1 (2008), pp. 227–248 (pp. 237–39 on Max Dvořák's impact, and pp. 241–248 on (neo)classical aesthetics in *Literaturnyi kritik* and Bakhtin's implicit polemic with it in the Rabelais book).

discoveries have been articulated differently at different historical junctures and in different cultural settings; the Bakhtin we see today is a fluctuating image, resulting from superimposed perspectives involving growth, modification, loss and a complex adjustment of meaning, as his body of writing travels across time, languages and discursive traditions and meets inherited patterns of reasoning. Bakhtin's work is thus not a reliable supply of knowledge or wisdom; it rather derives from the elusive, sometimes blurred, and never quite finished work of mediation and translation. And so his legacy is the function of multiple historical articulations, a patrimony in transit and subject to translation and dialogue.

We have to recall that Bakhtin's appropriation in the West commences under the sign of structuralism and its belief in scientific rigour. While in Russia Bakhtin was thought to be a foe of formalism and structuralism – and by extension, in the eyes of his future opponents (such as Mikhail Gasparov), a denier of 'exact' literary science – his career in the West, particularly in the Anglophone world, began and evolved for about two decades under the auspices of formalism and structuralism. Ladislav Matejka, an émigré scholar from Prague who had arrived in the United States via Sweden, published in 1962 a slender anthology titled *Readings in Russian Poetics*, incorporating texts in Russian by, among others, both Voloshinov and Bakhtin. The second edition (1971), which was considerably expanded and published in English, carried the telling subtitle 'Formalist and Structuralist Views'; it became the first major collection in the West to include translated work by Bakhtin and Voloshinov. Bakhtin was here introduced with a portion of his 1929 Dostoevsky book, which Matejka had first read in a class offered at Harvard by the truly ubiquitous Dmitri Chizhevsky.<sup>9</sup> Matejka was very clear about Bakhtin's status as a critic, rather than a proponent, of formalism, and yet he described both Bakhtin and Voloshinov in his postscript as 'followers of the Russian Formal method'.<sup>10</sup> The trend of packaging Bakhtin together with the formalists continued all through the 1970s, often on the grounds that his Dostoevsky book put the study of the *ideas* of Dostoevsky's novels second to the exploration of categories that originated in aesthetics, such as voice, author or hero.

This trend persisted for two decades until Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist began translating and editing Bakhtin's essays on the novel, whose appearance marked a new stage in his discovery in the West during the 1980s and beyond. But let me also briefly point to the more difficult fortunes of Bakhtin's writings in two continental environments with strong domestic philosophical traditions, where his lax ways with terminology would not earn him much sympathy. In 2008 and 2011, Bakhtin's early texts 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity' and 'Toward a Philosophy of the Act' were finally translated into German, thus rounding off the canon of his works available in that language. To be fair, an important text of Bakhtin's, 'Epos i roman' ('Epic and Novel'), had first appeared in German translation – at the end of 1968, with a publication date of 1969 – in a collective volume in the GDR, before appearing anywhere else in any other language, including Russian.<sup>11</sup> As Edward Kowalski reveals in his essayistic epilogue to the 2008 German translation of 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', the typescript of Bakhtin's article 'Epic and Novel' was smuggled out of the Soviet Union following encouragement from Kozhinov. The Russian text was published only in 1970, in the

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Peter Steiner, 'Interview s Ladislavem Matějkou', *Česká literatura*, Vol. 55, No. 5 (2007), pp. 733–8, here p. 735.

<sup>10</sup> See Ladislav Matejka, 'The Formal Method and Linguistics', in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. L. Matejka and K. Pomorska (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 281–95, here p. 290; cf. also Pomorska's statement that the anthology wanted to 'present theoreticians who "rounded up" and transformed the work of the *Opojaz*' (K. Pomorska, 'Russian Formalism in Retrospect', *ibid.*, pp. 273–80, here p. 273). Both Matejka's and Pomorska's texts were reprinted in the 1978 edition as well.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Kowalski, 'Bachtins langer Weg zum deutschen Leser', in Michail M. Bachtin, *Autor und Held in der ästhetischen Tätigkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), pp. 353–6, here pp. 353–4.

journal *Voprosy literatury*. Bakhtin's Dostoevsky and Rabelais books, as well as his other essays on the novel, were also translated into German without much delay. Yet in Germany, his discovery seemed to have been hampered by the resistance of a rich and elaborate domestic philosophical tradition which found it difficult to relate to Bakhtin's evocative but – by the standards of that tradition – largely loose and floating style of reasoning. Bakhtin's impact in Germany hardly went beyond Slavic studies, with the exception of some Bakhtinian presence in art and film theory.<sup>12</sup>

In France, Bakhtin's discovery faced similar barriers. In a 1998 interview with Clive Thomson, Julia Kristeva complained that Bakhtin's style was alien to the Cartesian spirit of the French humanities.<sup>13</sup> His writing seemed to generate too many ambiguities and there was not enough terminology. As if to placate these concerns, in her own work Kristeva had taken Bakhtin's unstable, fluid, yet extremely productive notion of dialogue and had rather controversially 'upgraded' it to intertextuality – a shift that she believed not only made Bakhtin her contemporary but also added that indispensable degree of lucidity (arguably also 'objectivity'), which the French public appears to have missed in his works.<sup>14</sup> Kristeva is acutely aware of Bakhtin's precarious status as a thinker: measured by the requirements of the various fields of specialized knowledge, he does not quite fit anywhere. The central categories of his mature writings, body and discourse, were perceived as either too vague or obsolete by the French psychologists, anthropologists and linguists.

We thus see that Bakhtin's divagations across linguistic and disciplinary borders have had everything to do with his own mode of handling language and terminology. The lifting of the structuralist curtain that had been obscuring the ultimate impossibility of thinking literature and culture by deploying a disinterested meta-language has revealed a Bakhtin who gains in acts of translation that do not seek to reify his prose in a string of one-dimensional concepts.

Of course, the case for translating – and interpreting – Bakhtin with due sensitivity to his capacious and often unfixed terminology should not be pushed too far. The early Bakhtin, for example, was serious about phenomenology, as 'Toward a Philosophy of the Act', 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity' but also 'The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art' abundantly demonstrate. As late as the early 1940s, in a fragment titled 'Towards the Philosophical Foundations of the Humanities' ('K filosofskim osnovam gumanitarnykh nauk'), in which he takes his leave from phenomenology, Bakhtin confronts his readers with a piece of philosophical prose that poses multiple challenges:

Проблема понимания. Понимание как видение смысла, но не феноменальное, а видение живого смысла переживания и выражения, видение внутренне осмысленного, так сказать, самоосмысленного явления.

Выражение как осмысленная материя или материализованный смысл, элемент свободы, пронизавший необходимость. Внешняя и внутренняя плоть для милования. Различные пласты души в разной мере поддаются

<sup>12</sup> For Bakhtin's appropriation in Germany, see Anthony Wall's articles 'On the Look-Out for Bakhtin in German', *Le Bulletin Bakhtine/The Bakhtin Newsletter*, No. 5 (1996) (Special issue 'Bakhtin Around the World', ed. Scott Lee and Clive Thomson), pp. 117–41; and 'How to Do Things with Bakhtin (in German)?', *Recherches sémiotiques/Semiotic inquiry*, Vol. 18, Nos. 1–2 (1998) (special issue 'Bakhtine et l'avenir des signes/Bakhtin and the future of signs'), pp. 267–94.

<sup>13</sup> The interview appeared in *Recherches sémiotiques/Semiotic inquiry*, Vol. 18, Nos. 1–2 (1998) (special issue 'Bakhtine et l'avenir des signes/Bakhtin and the future of signs'), pp. 15–29. See also Kristeva's earlier interview about Bakhtin (with Samir El-Muallia): 'Beseda s Juliei Kristevoi', *Dialog. Karnaval. Khronotop*, No. 2 (1995), pp. 5–17.

<sup>14</sup> Todorov later followed this move from 'dialogue' to 'intertextuality', thus continuing the process of domesticating (or rather enfeebling) Bakhtin's key concept (cf. Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Le principe dialogique* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), p. 95, where he adopts Kristeva's terminological change).

овнешнению. Неовнешняемое художественное ядро души (я для себя).  
Встречная активность познаваемого предмета.<sup>15</sup>

Clearly Bakhtin here activates a vocabulary that is as recognizably Hegelian ('an element of freedom that had shot through necessity'; 'externalization' = 'Entäußerung'), as it is Platonic and phenomenological ('видение смысла'), even as he rejects the phenomenological perspective. A translator will have no choice but to heed these fixed layers of terminology. Yet even here the fragment carries an almost untranslatable potentiality inscribed in the noun 'миловáние', to be rendered most certainly as 'caressing', but to a reader of Russian, if read out with a different accentuation ('milovanie' instead of 'milovánie'), also triggering associations with 'forgiveness' and 'absolution'. This example is only one illustration of the rewarding, perhaps also daunting, task of translating Bakhtin's philosophical prose at the confluence of equivalences shaped by, and indicative of, different philosophical and cultural traditions – a confluence very much at the heart of modern languages, both intellectually and pedagogically.

Before I proceed to my conclusion, I feel compelled to dwell on a particular aspect of Bakhtin's work in which the significance of translation and his renewed relevance for current discussions in literary studies intersect in a very pertinent manner. We seem to have been facing in recent years the rise (or, historically speaking, I should say 'return') of 'world literature' as a prism through which to spectate and study literature. A lot of this hinges, as is well known, on the question of the legitimacy of working in translation. The main positions are not difficult to adumbrate by now: there are those such as David Damrosch who believe this legitimacy to be beyond doubt, and those like Emily Apter who fear that the failure to accept that certain things are untranslatable fuels the practice of harnessing translation for the production of misleading (and ideologically consequential) equivalences. Let me begin by stating that today the legacy of modern literary theory is not available in a pure and concentrated fashion; instead, it is dispersed, dissipated, often fittingly elusive. The reason for this is that this inheritance is now performing its work in a climate already dominated by a different regime of relevance, which it faces directly and which it must negotiate. The patrimony of literary theory is currently active within a regime of relevance that thinks literature through its market and entertainment value, with only residual recall of its previously highly treasured autonomy. It is this regime of relevance that has engendered the interpretative framework of 'world literature' that has recently grown and also gained enormous popularity in the classroom. I place the words 'world literature' in quotation marks, for they refer to a particular liberal Anglo-Saxon discourse grounded in assumptions of mobility, transparency and recontextualizing (but also decontextualizing) circulation that supports free consumption and unrestricted comparison of literary artefacts.<sup>16</sup>

If we look at Russian literary theory during the interwar decades, we will be struck by the fact that many of its major trends were, obliquely or more directly, relevant to this new framework of understanding and valorizing literature in the regime of its global production and consumption. Bakhtin begins his book on Rabelais with a reference precisely to world literature: 'Of all great writers of world literature, Rabelais is the least popular, the least understood and appreciated'.<sup>17</sup> Bakhtin, however, pays lip service to the then powerful notion of world literature as a body of canonical writing: he ostensibly compares Rabelais to Cervantes,

<sup>15</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, 'K filosofskim osnovam gumanitarnykh nauk', *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Russkie slovari, 1996), vol. 5, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> For more on this, see Galin Tihanov, 'The Location of World Literature', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (2017), pp. 468–81.

<sup>17</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1984), p. 1.

Shakespeare and Voltaire. But this understanding of world literature does not really interest him. Instead, he takes a different route, reconceptualizing the study of world literature as an examination of the process that shapes the novel to become a world genre, a global discursive power that, in Bakhtin's words, 'colonizes all other genres'. Of course, Bakhtin is here indebted to the Russian formalists: for him, too, the novel is the underdog of world literature, whose discursive energies are at first feeble and scattered, unnamed for a long time, until they begin to coalesce and rise to prominence.

Bakhtin's engagement with world literature holds a distinctly non-Eurocentric and, let me repeat this, non-philological charge. He works with the novels he lists mostly in translation, as does Shklovsky before him. Bakhtin appears to be relying on a Western canon to validate his theses. But, in truth, he is more interested in the literature and culture of pre-modernity, the time when Europe is not yet a dominant force, long before the continent begins to see itself as the centre of the world. Bakhtin is thus actually a thinker much more fascinated by the subterranean cultural deposits of folklore, of minor discourses, of ancient genres, of anonymous verbal masses – all of which long predate European culture of the age of modernity (beginning roughly with the Renaissance, but especially since the eighteenth century when the doctrine of cultural Eurocentrism is worked out by the French *philosophes*, only to witness its first major crisis in the years around the First World War), which is the only *dominant* (Eurocentric) European culture we know. Even Rabelais's novel interests him above all for its traditional, pre-modern, folklore-based layers. Bakhtin performs a flight away from Eurocentrism not by writing on non-European cultures, but by discussing pre-European cultures, cultures that thrive on the shared property of folklore, rites, rituals and epic narratives, before Europe even begins to emerge as an entity on the cultural and political map of the world: his is an anti-Eurocentric journey not in space, but in time. His contemporaries, the semantic palaeontologists Nikolai Marr and Olga Freidenberg, whose writings Bakhtin knew, did something similar in their work on myth and pre-literary discourses.<sup>18</sup> All of this casts Bakhtin's work in a new light and allows us to enlist him as an early predecessor of the non-Eurocentric and translation-friendly drive of today's Anglo-Saxon academic programmes in literature.

In 2000, Caryl Emerson published her article 'The Next Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin',<sup>19</sup> itself a reference to her well-known book *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* (1997). There are now 82 years to go until the end of the century. The excitement – and the anxiety – here stem from the fact that we cannot possibly know which *long durée* this century, in retrospect, will have turned out to be part of, or, to speak in Bakhtinian terms, how this century will have positioned itself vis-à-vis 'great time'. We know by now that 'great literature' is a historically attestable category that has both a birth and an expiry date. Will there be 'great thinkers' by the end of the century, or will this, too, have proved to be a construct that disintegrates once the foil of a universal humanity is withdrawn? Bakhtin's work cannot answer these questions, but it can infuse trust in the eventual returns of meaning, celebrated for its ability to cross borders, to exude invigorating and challenging multiplicity, and to resist monopolizing appropriation. Ferrying a thinker across time and language, translation is the platform that can transform these returns into departures.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> For details, see Galin Tihanov, 'Framing Semantic Paleontology: The 1930s and Beyond', *Russian Literature*, Vol. 72, Nos. 3–4 (2012), pp. 361–84.

<sup>19</sup> Caryl Emerson, 'The Next Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin (The View from the Classroom)', *Rhetoric Review*, Vol. 19, Nos. 1–2 (2000), pp. 12–27.

<sup>20</sup> This article originated in a keynote address presented at an international workshop on Bakhtin and translation at Columbia University in February 2018. I am grateful to Irina Denischenko, Alexander Spektor, Valentina Izmirlieva and their colleagues for the invitation and for the stimulating discussion.

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