

ERATION AND TRANSLATION

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icated, translations from Russian and other rs and/or editors.

RE-INTRODUCING THE BAKHTIN CIRCLE *David Shepherd*

The nature of God is a circle of which the centre is everywhere and the circumference is nowhere. (Attributed to Empedocles)

Centre and circumference

'There was a circle around me that is now known as the "Bakhtin Circle". A lot is being written about it of late. Those mentioned as members are first and foremost Pumpianskii, Pavel Nikolaevich Medvedev, and Voloshinov':¹ thus did Bakhtin, recalling towards the end of his life his time in Vitebsk more than half a century earlier, confirm his status as centre, and that of Medvedev, Pumpianskii and Voloshinov as circumference, of the Bakhtin Circle. However, like other autobiographical utterances by Bakhtin, this one tells us both more and less than might appear at first sight. The repetition of 'circle', in the context unavoidable and so ostensibly unremarkable, is twice as insistent in the original Russian, thanks to the etymology of the preposition 'around': 'vokrug menia byl krug ... "krug Bakhtina"'. Might we perhaps detect in Bakhtin's locution a teasing anticipation of his gloss, 'A lot is being written about it of late'? Moreover, in this gloss the English passive voice has been used to render, with textbook orthodoxy, the active construction of the original, 'they are writing' ('pishut'): the indeterminate 'they' whose contribution is indicated entirely morphologically, by a third-person-plural verbal ending, are also responsible for the very phenomenon 'which they now call "the Bakhtin Circle"' ('kotoryi nazyvaiut seichas "krug Bakhtina"'), as well as for its membership, in which 'they include first and foremost Pumpianskii, Pavel Nikolaevich Medvedev and Voloshinov' ('siuda vkluchaiut prezhde vsego Pumpianskogo, Medvedeva Pavla Nikolaevicha, Voloshinova'). The perils attendant upon over-interpretation of a remark made in conversation are evident: all too often we are asked to believe that Bakhtin was incapable of saying or writing anything that was not pregnant with historico-cultural significance, as though philosophers were not entitled to slip into the careless locutions or prosaic inconsequentiality characteristic of those who merely think to live rather than live to think. Nevertheless, whatever Bakhtin may or may not have wished to

1 M. M. Bakhtin, *Besedy s V. D. Duvakinym* (Moscow: Soglasie, 2002), p. 161.

convey to Duvakin and his tape recorder (a particularly meaning-charged, historico-culturally speaking, example of the technology with which he was apparently ill at ease),² the effect of his remark, tantalisingly suspended as it is between direct and quasi-direct speech, is to place a certain discursive distance between him and the Circle by telling us that his place at its centre is in large measure a product of the way in which he and that Circle have been spoken and written about.

This volume arises from a conference held at the University of Sheffield's Bakhtin Centre in October 1999 and entitled 'In the Master's Absence: The Unknown Bakhtin Circle'. The title of the conference signalled an intention to subject to defamiliarising scrutiny both elements of the collocation 'Bakhtin Circle'. Does the fact that the Circle bore Bakhtin's name reflect accurately his personal and intellectual primacy among his associates, or does it obscure the independent credentials to which those associates might lay claim? And to what extent does use of the term 'Circle' promote or impede understanding of the intellectual project(s) pursued by its members? 'In the Master's Absence' provided a forum for papers and discussions in which disagreement, for the most part healthy and cordial, about the possible answers to these and related questions played at least as constructive a role as agreement. The variations in emphasis and perspective in evidence at the conference are no less visible in the articles about the Bakhtin Circle collected in this volume. An interesting and encouraging feature of this diversity is that it does not correspond to the kind of opposition between 'Western' and 'Russian' approaches frequently commented on in Bakhtin studies of the first half of the 1990s, the years of the earliest sustained, and wary, contact between two seemingly established traditions: on the evidence of this collection, differences of assumption and methodology are such as to confirm that those traditions are no longer so distinct, if indeed they ever were. There is further evidence for this in the marked contrast between the three articles translated from Russian, a contrast symptomatic of historically specific processes of scholarly (and ideological) diversification. The purpose of this introduction is

2 See B. F. Egorov, 'Slovo o M. M. Bakhtine', in K. G. Isupov *et al.* (eds), *Bakhtinskii sbornik 1* (Moscow: Prometei, 1990), pp. 4–6 (first published 1979), in which we are told that 'In the world of newspaper correspondents and revolving tape recorders Bakhtin looked ancient, old-fashioned, lonely, lost' (p. 6).

and his tape recorder (a particularly meaning-culturally speaking, example of the technology apparently ill at ease),² the effect of his remark, added as it is between direct and quasi-direct certain discursive distance between him and the that his place at its centre is in large measure a which he and that Circle have been spoken and

to provide a background against which all differences of assumption and methodology might stand out in helpful relief.

Going round in circles

I'm up and down and round about,
Yet all the world can't find me out;
Though hundreds have employed their leisure,
They never yet could find my measure. (Swift, *On a Circle*)

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The circle has an impressive lineage in Russian social, political and cultural history, in many instances embodying precisely the peculiar role that cultural activity and discourses were called upon to fulfil in the absence of a more conventionally constituted 'public sphere'. Thus, to take just a few exemplary instances, between 1831 and 1839 the literary-philosophical circle around Nikolai Stankevich, which included, among others, the pioneering literary critic Vissarion Belinskii and the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, contributed to the dissemination of German philosophy, in particular the ideas of Schelling and Hegel, to the development of Russian journalism and to liberal opposition to autocracy and serfdom.³ A decade later Mikhail Petrashevskii brought together a circle dedicated to a more radical, utopian-socialist agenda which, in the wake of the European revolutions of 1848, accounted for the arrest of many of its members, including the young Dostoevskii, for whom the experience of Siberian imprisonment was to prove instrumental in his turn to the right and transformation into a public intellectual on the side of the tsarist regime.⁴ Other circles had a more purely academic focus, such as the Moscow Linguistic Circle, founded in 1915 and meeting at, although not institutionally part of, Moscow University. (This Circle's leading members included Roman Jakobson, M. N. Peterson and Grigorii Vinokur, all key figures, as Vladimir Alpatov's article demonstrates, for an understanding of the Bakhtin Circle's relationship with and contribution to the development of Russian linguistics in the Soviet period.) The years immediately following the October 1917 Revolution witnessed an explosion in circles, societies and associations, some

M. M. Bakhtine', in K. G. Isupov *et al.* (eds), ow: Prometei, 1990), pp. 4-6 (first published that 'In the world of newspaper correspondents : Bakhtin looked ancient, old-fashioned, lonely,

³ See E. J. Brown, *Stankevich and His Moscow Circle, 1830-1840* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966).

⁴ See J. H. Seddon, *The Petrashevtsy: A Study of the Russian Revolutionaries of 1848* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).

officially sanctioned, others determinedly unofficial and informal, dedicated to the discussion and dissemination of ideas literary, philosophical, religious and political in varying combinations.⁵

There is thus a tradition and an immediate context in relation to which the Bakhtin Circle might be located, although the very diversity, both quantitative and qualitative, of circles of differing degrees of formality and ephemerality makes this a less than straightforward task.⁶ Certainly there is to date no consensus on the matter, something reflected in variations in the terminology used to describe the Circle. In his conversation with Duvakin, Bakhtin, as we have seen, used the term *krug*. Others, however, use the diminutive form of this noun, *kruzhok*. For the most part this simply reflects an established fluidity in usage, in which the two terms, even if patterns of collocation mean that they are not interchangeable, do not convey strict and regular semantic differentiation: although the diminutive form may (as when it is applied to a schoolboy circle such as that to which, as Nikolai Nikolaev reminds us, the Bakhtin brothers and Pumpianskii belonged in Vilnius) imply lesser seriousness or greater immaturity, it is applied to fully-fledged and indisputably serious organisations at least as frequently as is *krug* (*kruzhok* is routinely used, for example, for the Stankevich, Petrashevskii and Moscow Linguistic Circles). Occasionally, however, the connotations of the diminutive form are activated. Thus, in a subtle move unavoidably obscured in the translation of their article for this volume, Iurii and Dar'ia Medvedev use *kruzhok* to reinforce the suggestion that in its first, Nevel phase the Bakhtin Circle was an embryonic or at best fledgling organisation; that this phase did not last long enough for Bakhtin's intellectual primacy to be established; and that the Circle's maturity, and graduation to the status of *krug*, came only with its move first to Vitebsk, then to Leningrad, and with the participation in its activities of Pavel Medvedev and other non-'Nevelites'.

5 For examples of such groupings in the cultural sphere, see S. S. Konkin and L. S. Konkina, *Mikhail Bakhtin (Stranitsy zhizni i tvorchestva)* (Saransk: Mordovskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1993), pp. 105, 369 n. 11.

6 Identification of the precise relationship between the Bakhtin Circle and analogous formations is one of the objectives of a doctoral project currently being pursued in the Bakhtin Centre by Robin Vaughan-Williams, some of whose preliminary conclusions may be found in 'The masonic and the messianic in the Bakhtin Circle and its cultural context', in Bogusław Żyłko (ed.), *Bakhtin and His Intellectual Ambience* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2002), pp. 92–105.

others determinedly unofficial and informal, mission and dissemination of ideas literary, philosophical and political in varying combinations.⁵ In addition and an immediate context in relation to the circle might be located, although the very diverse and qualitative, of circles of differing degrees of formality makes this a less than straightforward issue. As to date no consensus on the matter, some variations in the terminology used to describe the circle with Duvakin, Bakhtin, as we have seen, others, however, use the diminutive form of this circle. In most part this simply reflects an established habit which the two terms, even if patterns of colloquial use are not interchangeable, do not convey strict differentiation: although the diminutive form is applied to a schoolboy circle such as that to which we all belong, reminds us, the Bakhtin brothers and Pumpianskii imply lesser seriousness or greater immaturity. The circle was a fledgling and indisputably serious organisation as is *krug* (*kruzhok* is routinely used, for example, by Petrashevskii and Moscow Linguistic Society). However, the connotations of the diminutive circle, in a subtle move unavoidably obscured in this article for this volume, Iurii and Dar'ia tried to reinforce the suggestion that in its first years the Circle was an embryonic or at best fledgling phase which did not last long enough for Bakhtin's circle to be established; and that the Circle's maturity, status of *krug*, came only with its move first to Leningrad, and with the participation in its activities of other non-'Nevelites'.

Groupings in the cultural sphere, see S. S. Konkin and I. I. Bakhtin (*Stranitsy zhizni i tvorchestva*) (Saransk: Izdatel'stvo, 1993), pp. 105, 369 n. 11. The precise relationship between the Bakhtin Circle and one of the objectives of a doctoral project currently at the Bakhtin Centre by Robin Vaughan-Williams, some of the questions may be found in 'The masonic and the messianic and its cultural context', in Bogusław Żyłko (ed.), *Local Ambience* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2002), pp. 102–105.

This view of the Nevel period contrasts sharply with that espoused by Nikolai Nikolaev. Although, like Vladimir Alpatov, he applies the term *kruzhok* neutrally to the Circle throughout its lifetime, as the title of his article testifies he believes that its intellectual coherence and originality in the Nevel phase were such as to warrant the coining and application of the term 'Nevel School of philosophy' (*Nevel'skaia shkola filosofii*). This term has acquired sufficient currency to generate an encyclopaedia article by Vitalii Makhlin, and an article entitled 'Was there a Nevel School?' in which Makhlin argues that, despite both the absence of a public declaration of philosophical principles, and the presence of considerable personal and philosophical differences between its members, the 'Nevel School' existed to the extent that the term conveys coherent historico-cultural and scholarly-methodological positions, denoting a real, if unrealised, philosophical programme.⁷ But if the major achievement of the Nevel School was to facilitate formulation of the principal conceptions that were subsequently to guide the work of Bakhtin, Kagan and Pumpianskii, then the term 'school' might be applied no more or less meaningfully to the formative years of any group of thinkers, however tight or loose their association. Moreover, if the members of this 'School' did indeed use the term themselves,⁸ we should ask whether they did so in all seriousness, or in full knowledge of its portentousness, not to say pretentiousness. These were, after all, people who with due solemnity named a local Nevel beauty spot 'The Lake of Moral Reality' to mark its contributions to their discussions of moral philosophy.⁹ While it is no doubt possible to see in this act of nomination an 'idiosyncratic monument to the spiritual life of the

7 See V. L. Makhlin, 'Nevel'skaia shkola', in A. I. Abramov et al. (eds.), *Russkaia filosofii: Mali entsiklopedicheski slovar* (Moscow: Nauka, 1995), pp. 359–65, and 'Byla li "Nevel'skaia shkola"?' in V. A. Gushchina (ed.), *Chtenii: Nevel'skii krug M. M. Bakhtina (26-29 sentiabria 1994 g. Nevel)*. Tezisy dokladov (Moscow: Nasledie, 1995), pp. 15–18.

8 For evidence of this, see Nikolai Nikolaev, 'The Nevel School of philosophy (Bakhtin, Kagan and Pumpianskii) between 1918 and 1925: materials from Pumpianskii's archive', in David Shepherd (ed.), *The Contexts of Bakhtin: Philosophy, Authorship, Aesthetics* (Amsterdam and New York: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), p. 29.

9 See Nikolai Nikolaev, 'M. M. Bakhtin v Nevele letom 1919 g.', in L. M. Maksimovskaia (ed.), *Nevel'skii sbornik 1* (St Petersburg: Akropol', 1996), pp. 96–101, quoted in Ken Hirschkop, *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 147 n. 83.

late 1910s and early 1920s',¹⁰ it is important to remain sensitive to the contribution made to that spiritual life by irony and humour. The transcript of Bakhtin's account of this moment in the life of the Circle shows that he recalled it with laughter (*ukhmyliaetsia*).¹¹ This laughter may have been an expression of nostalgic affection; but it may equally have been a product of self-conscious irony, an acknowledgement that the gesture was carried out not so much in the spirit of a serious philosophical 'school' as in that of the university circle (*kruzhok*) Omphalos to which the Bakhtin brothers and Pumpianskii belonged and which was characterised by 'a light-heartedly critical attitude to all aspects of life and contemporary culture'.¹²

To suggest this is to court the danger of appearing to imply that the Bakhtin Circle had its true origins in an association whose very name, referring as it does both to the navel and to the point in the temple of Apollo at Delphi marking the centre of the earth, is replete with circular associations, and anticipates the fruitful, carnivalesque co-existence of the serious and the comic that was to be such an important theme in the work of Bakhtin (and indeed Pumpianskii and Zubakin).¹³ Such a move would be no less problematic than uncritical acceptance of the 'Nevel School' as an actually existing entity. For perhaps the most important constant feature of the Bakhtin Circle was precisely its inconstancy, fluidity, and informality. Beginning in 1918 in Nevel as a 'Kantian seminar' whose participants (Bakhtin, Iudina, Kagan, Pumpianskii, Voloshinov, Zubakin) pursued

10 L. Maksimovskaia, 'Nevel' bakhtinskii', *Pskovskaia pravda* (2 December 1994), p. 2.

11 Bakhtin, *Besedy*, p. 269.

12 Bakhtin, *Besedy*, p. 61.

13 See L. V. Pumpianskii, 'Gogol', in *Klassicheskaia traditsiia: Sobranie trudov po istorii russkoi literatury*, ed. A. P. Chudakov, comp. E. M. Isserlin and N. I. Nikolaev, notes by Nikolaev (Moscow: Iazyki russkoi kul'tury, 2000), pp. 257-342. A recent study of Zubakin as Rosicrucian refers to a synopsis, two typescript pages in length, of a paper on 'Laughter and seriousness' ('Smekh i serioznost') that Zubakin gave in 1921 in Moscow, and before that in the autumn of 1920 in Minsk, where his military service had brought him from Nevel earlier that year; the suggestion that 'it was the discussions in Nevel of Henri Bergson's *On Laughter* that gave rise to the theme that was later to make Bakhtin famous', and that 'it is natural to assume that the theme of laughter had arisen in the Nevel circle in which Bakhtin, who addressed the theme ten years later, was a participant' is refreshingly non-Bakhtinocentric. See A. I. Nemirovskii, 'Sud'ba Borisa Zubakina', in Nemirovskii and V. I. Ukolova, *Svet zvezd, ili poslednii russkii rozenkreitsler* (Moscow: Progress-Kul'tura, 1994), p. 71; the summary of Zubakin's paper is on pp. 96-8.

1920s,¹⁰ it is important to remain sensitive to that spiritual life by irony and humour. The account of this moment in the life of the Circle led it with laughter (*ukhmyliaetsia*).¹¹ This is an expression of nostalgic affection; but it is a product of self-conscious irony, an acknowledgement was carried out not so much in the spiritual 'school' as in that of the university circle which the Bakhtin brothers and Pumpianskii as characterised by 'a light-heartedly critical life and contemporary culture'.¹²

to court the danger of appearing to imply that its true origins in an association whose very centre is both to the navel and to the point in the hemisphere marking the centre of the earth, is replete with irony, and anticipates the fruitful, carnivalesque work of Bakhtin (and indeed Pumpianskii) in the move would be no less problematic than the 'Nevel School' as an actually existing and most important constant feature of the Bakhtin Circle: constancy, fluidity, and informality. Beginning with a 'Kantian seminar' whose participants included Pumpianskii, Voloshinov, Zubakin) pursued

Pumpianskii', *Pskovskaia pravda* (2 December 1994),

Voloshinov', in *Klassicheskaia traditsiia: Sobranie trudov po istorii i teorii kul'tury*, ed. A. P. Chudakov, comp. E. M. Isserlin and N. I. Voloshinov (Moscow: Iazyki russkoi kul'tury, 2000), pp. 100-101. Zubakin as Rosicrucian refers to a synopsis, two pages long, of a paper on 'Laughter and seriousness' ('Smekh i smysl') given in 1921 in Moscow, and before that in the Caucasus where his military service had brought him from the Caucasus. The suggestion that 'it was the discussions in Nevel of the Circle that gave rise to the theme that was later to become the theme of the Nevel circle in which Bakhtin, who addressed the participants, is refreshingly non-Bakhtinocentric. See also a paper by Boris Zubakina', in Nemirovskii and V. I. Nemirovskii *ruskii rozenkreitsler* (Moscow: Progress, 1991), p. 96-8.

their discussions, in the time-honoured Russian manner, fuelled by endless tea and late into the night,¹⁴ it moved the following year to Vitebsk, becoming part of that town's remarkable cultural renaissance referred to by several contributors to this volume, and welcoming Medvedev and Sollertinskii as important participants even as Kagan departed to Orel. The final, Leningrad phase, from 1924 onwards, when there were continuing gatherings of 'the philosophical circle bound by a common project and programme' alongside 'the larger meetings [which] were more occasional events', drew into the Circle's orbit occasional contributors such as Ivan Kanaev, Mikhail Tubianskii, Konstantin Vaginov and others.¹⁵ Given such fluctuations in the membership of the Circle, it seems not unreasonable to accept that the source of its stability was indeed the man whose name it bears.

Neither a borrower nor a lender be

Let us live in as small a circle as we will, we are either debtors or creditors before we have had time to look round. (Goethe, *Elective Affinities*)

It is hardly surprising that the 'they' of Bakhtin studies in its 1970s infancy, at the time of his conversations with Viktor Duvakin, should have placed Bakhtin at the centre of his Circle: this was more or less guaranteed by the appearance, as the Khrushchev cultural and intellectual 'thaw' petered out and yielded to the conservatism and 'stagnation' of the Brezhnev years, first of his revised study of Dostoevskii (1963), then of his Rabelais book (1965), allied to the (rapidly mythologised) story of how the venerable survivor was plucked from his provincial obscurity to be lionised in the Soviet capital.¹⁶ Bakhtin's associates became part of the background against which Bakhtin came to prominence. But in this respect Bakhtin's new acolytes were seemingly doing no more than reviving the practices accepted within the Circle itself. Thus the mason, mystic, poet and later sculptor, Boris Zubakin, one of the 'Nevelites', seems to have delighted in attending to mere practicalities in order to have the privilege of listening to conversations between Bakhtin and Kagan: "I'll tend the stove and

14 See Konkin and Konkina, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p. 55.

15 See Hirschkop, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p. 160 n. 105; see also Konkin and Konkina, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p. 103.

16 For a suitably respectful but wry account of Bakhtin's rediscovery, see Hirschkop, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, pp. 111-26.

fetch water: you talk! Just talk!"¹⁷ Now there is nothing here to indicate that Zubakin paid greater heed to one or other of his friends.¹⁸ Indeed, one might expect that these conversations would have been perceived by the two participants and by observers alike as dialogues between equals, if not, indeed, as dialogues between master and pupil in which Bakhtin rather than Kagan took the latter role: it was the older Kagan, after all, who had studied under the Marburg neo-Kantians Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp, a feature of his curriculum vitae that so impressed Bakhtin that he was, notoriously if in the circumstances quite understandably, to borrow it for his own in 1920.¹⁹ Kagan's obituary of Cohen, translated into English here for the first time, bespeaks a closeness to and sympathetic understanding of his late teacher from which the Circle's discussions of neo-Kantianism must have gained much of their early momentum: Kagan was, after all, the leading figure in the 'Kantian seminar' in Nevel.²⁰ (Kagan's rather slapdash referencing in this obituary may also have set an example for the later practice of at least one other member of the Circle.) However, there is evidence that Kagan later joined other members of the Circle in acknowledging Bakhtin's superior powers. In a letter to his wife in 1936 (long after the Circle had ceased to meet) he refers to the manuscript of 'Discourse in the novel', which Bakhtin has given him to read: 'To judge by the beginning, it contains an idea similar to the one that I once expressed in an article on Turgenev. ... That article has been

17 Cited in Iudif' M. Kagan, 'People not of our time', in Shepherd (ed.), *The Contexts of Bakhtin*, p. 8.

18 The editorial commentary in a study of Zubakin on a letter from Voloshinov to Kagan of autumn 1921 notes that 'Strangely, Bakhtin is not mentioned in a single document by Zubakin to which we have had access', and suggests that this may be a result of Zubakin's resentment that Bakhtin had come between him and his closest childhood friend, Voloshinov: see Nemirovskii and Ukolova, *Svet zvezd*, p. 101.

19 See Hirschkop, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p. 142.

20 The case for the founding intellectual role played by Kagan is made by Brian Poole in an article pointedly entitled 'Back to Kagan': B. Pul', "'Nazad k Kaganu": Marburgskaia shkola v Nevele i filosofii M. M. Bakhtina', *Dialog. Karnaval. Khronotop*, 1 (1995), 38-48; see also his 'Rol' M. I. Kagana v stanovlenii filosofii M. M. Bakhtina (ot Germana Kogena k Maksu Sheleru)', in V. L. Makhlin (ed.), *Bakhtinskii sbornik 3* (Moscow: Labirint, 1997), pp. 162-81. For an exploration of the intellectual relationship between Kagan and Bakhtin, see Ruth Coates, 'Two of a small fraternity? Points of contact and departure in the work of Bakhtin and Kagan up to 1924', in Shepherd (ed.), *The Contexts of Bakhtin*, pp. 17-28.

‘Just talk!’¹⁷ Now there is nothing here to be paid greater heed to one or other of his: might expect that these conversations would by the two participants and by observers alike as equals, if not, indeed, as dialogues between which Bakhtin rather than Kagan took the latter Kagan, after all, who had studied under the Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp, a feature that so impressed Bakhtin that he was, circumstances quite understandably, to borrow it Kagan’s obituary of Cohen, translated into ‘st time, bespeaks a closeness to and sympathy of his late teacher from which the Circle’s ‘ianism must have gained much of their early’, after all, the leading figure in the ‘Kantian Kagan’s rather slapdash referencing in this let an example for the later practice of at least he Circle.) However, there is evidence that r members of the Circle in acknowledging rs. In a letter to his wife in 1936 (long after to meet) he refers to the manuscript of which Bakhtin has given him to read: ‘To it contains an idea similar to the one that I icle on Turgenev. ... That article has been

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intellectual relationship between Kagan and Two of a small fraternity? Points of contact and khtin and Kagan up to 1924’, in Shepherd (ed.), 7–28.

published. My idea is a passing remark, though it is important, the basis for a short article. In M. M.’s work everything is significant, fully elaborated.²¹ But perhaps the most graphic (literally) evidence of Bakhtin’s status as, in Nikolai Nikolaev’s terms, *primus inter pares* is provided by materials preserved in Pumpianskii’s archive: as well as meticulously documenting his own reading and his own thoughts, Pumpianskii appears to have attached especial importance to recording Bakhtin’s contributions to the Circle’s discussions in its Leningrad period, from 1924 onwards.²²

That Pumpianskii saw himself as the junior partner in his relationship with Bakhtin appears to be confirmed by Nikolaev’s argument that Pumpianskii’s presentations to the Circle during its Nevel period, which were to form the basis of his later work on Dostoevskii, Gogol’ and Pushkin, were all ‘inspired’ by Bakhtin, and thus that the claims advanced by Aleksandr Mikhailov for Pumpianskii’s primacy in the ‘Nevel School’ are unfounded. Nikolaev’s arguments, based as they are on his unparalleled knowledge of and sensitivity to Pumpianskii’s work, both published and unpublished, are undoubtedly more compelling, as well as more up to date, than Mikhailov’s. Nikolaev does, of course, argue that the theory of the comic and the history of laughter outlined in Pumpianskii’s study of Gogol’ (1922–25) were later to help shape Bakhtin’s approach to these issues in his study of Rabelais. However, this gives rise to one of several problems of interpretation, insofar as, if Pumpianskii’s Gogol’ book was indeed inspired by Bakhtin’s early work, then we find ourselves confronting the proposition that Bakhtin’s may have been, in a curious act of

21 M. I. Kagan, letter to Sof’ia Isaakovna Kagan of 7 August 1936, cited in Iu. M. Kagan, ‘O starykh bumagakh iz semeinogo arkhiva (M. M. Bakhtin i M. I. Kagan)’, *Dialog. Karnaval. Khronotop*, 1 (1992), 75. Kagan’s comparison of his own work and Bakhtin’s cannot, frustratingly, be verified: an editorial note reveals that Kagan’s article on Turgenev was not in fact published, and has not survived in his archive (88).

22 See, most notably, ‘Appendix: M. M. Bakhtin’s lectures and comments of 1924–1925. From the notebooks of L. V. Pumpiansky. Introduced, edited, and annotated by N. I. Nikolaev’, in Susan M. Felch and Paul J. Contino (eds), *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), pp. 193–237; see also Nikolaev, ‘The Nevel School’, and his contribution to the present volume, where, as well as using the term *primus inter pares*, he comments on Pumpianskii’s apparent appending of a pithy gloss by Bakhtin to his own piece on Marxism (pp. 125, 144–5). Sollertinskii’s archives also contain extensive notes on lectures (fourteen in total) given by Bakhtin in Vitebsk in 1920–21: see Konkin and Konkina, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p. 64.

parthenogenesis, his own source.²³ Such is the (circular) logic to which an understanding of the workings of the Circle in strictly hierarchical terms, with Bakhtin always above his fellows, can lead. If Iurii and Dar'ia Medvedev are less equivocal about Pavel Medvedev's scholarly autonomy, which has been subjected to somewhat more sustained challenge than Pumpianskii's, in their approach Bakhtin nevertheless remains in some respects a standard against which Medvedev is to be measured (and found not wanting): hence their comment that 'Bakhtin's philosophical anthropology fecundated the life and work of this Circle, giving it the qualities of a unitary cultural phenomenon'. Iurii Medvedev's attempts, both in the article in this volume and elsewhere,²⁴ to demonstrate that his father's early interests, and the terms in which they were articulated, bespeak a spiritual or intellectual closeness to Bakhtin, are thoroughly uncontroversial (or beyond dispute, to use terms more familiar in Bakhtinian debates). But identification of echoes and anticipations of the ideas of one member of the Circle (usually Bakhtin) in the work of another member (be that Pumpianskii, Medvedev, Voloshinov or Kagan) cannot serve as an end in itself; it must be no more than a starting point for an attempt, in Nicoletta Marcialis' words, 'to rescue from anonymity these scholars who, their names always appearing in a row like the beads of a rosary, risk being reduced to bodiless shadows'.²⁵

The extent to which Bakhtin did or did not endorse the privileging of his work over that of his associates is still a matter for debate, as we will see later when we turn briefly to the vexed matter of the 'disputed texts'. But the reflex of referring in the first instance to what Bakhtin may or may not have thought is the source of problems as much as of solutions. Ken Hirschkop has given a perceptive account of the distortions and obscurities introduced by 'Bakhtin myths' – myths of exceptional erudition, wisdom, and intellectual authority – in a world where 'productive relationships were ... often sustained on the moral basis of friendship or the intellectual "circle"', and where 'closeness to the person and closeness to the intellectual commitment are considered of a piece'.²⁶ In this

23 See also Nikolai Nikolaev, editorial notes to 'Gogol', in Pumpianskii, *Klassicheskaia traditsiia*, p. 710.

24 See especially 'An encounter that was "intended to be"', *Dialogism*, 5–6 (2001), 10–20.

25 N. Marcialis, 'Bakhtin and his circle', *Russian Literature*, 41:3 (1997), 270.

26 Hirschkop, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, pp. 125–6.

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respect Bakhtin's insistence on the 'shared conception of language and discursive production', by which Iurii and Dar'ia Medvedev set such great store, should not necessarily carry more weight than his subsequent emphasis on the 'independence and originality' of *The Formal Method* and *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, or on the fact that Medvedev and Voloshinov also produced works that 'lie in a different plane and do not reflect this shared conception'.²⁷

Thus, even if there is a case for acknowledging that the naming of the Circle after Bakhtin has a certain practical validity, it does not follow from this that other members of the Circle may not have possessed intellectual credentials as great as, or even greater than, Bakhtin's, or that their intellectual endeavours and achievements are best accounted for with reference to their association with Bakhtin. Crude quantitative measures such as the number and titles of works indisputably written and published by other members of the Circle should not be entirely discounted, although they should be treated with due caution. More telling is the fact that their affinities, many of them dealt with in the various contributions to this volume, are not all necessarily elective: Bakhtin and his colleagues were not, *pace* Goethe, either creditors or debtors, but both borrowers and lenders who, notwithstanding their in principle unique, unrepeatable position in being, shared much with each other and, no less importantly, perhaps, with figures outside their immediate Circle. Failure to recognise this exposes us to the danger of anachronism, of endorsing a model whereby the Bakhtin Circle's major ideas are seen to have been always already present, in embryo, from the outset of its activity, rather than to have developed in the course of a series of socially and historically specific engagements with currents of thought variously subjected to respectful or disparaging treatment in a changing ideological climate. The Circle's own members clearly did not believe that their meetings, held as they were in domestic spaces, and however scrupulously minuted by Pumpianskii, could secure the appropriate impact for their maturing intellectual project. In order to be more than something in and for itself, this project needed to be articulated in a more publicly institutionalised space.

27 Bakhtin, letter to Vadim Kozhinov of 10 January 1961, in 'Pis'ma M. M. Bakhtina', *Literaturnaia ucheba*, 5-6 (1992), 145.

Squaring the Circle

Most people live, whether physically, intellectually, or morally, in a very restricted circle of their potential being. (William James, letter to W. Lutoslawski)

In 1927 the Soviet writer Valentin Kataev wrote his play *Squaring the Circle* (*Kvadratura kruga*), which offers a burlesque dramatisation of the stock 1920s conflict between ideologically sound revolutionary asceticism and ideologically suspect aspiration towards domestic well-being. The play achieves a resolution of the seemingly impossible task alluded to in its title through a bedroom-farce process of husband- and wife-swapping that transforms two incompatible and warring couples into compatible pairs capable of peaceful co-existence within their shared apartment. In this respect it reflects the way in which the conditions of the New Economic Policy contributed to a bourgeoisification of Soviet life that was to be consolidated and entrenched during the period of high Stalinism.²⁸ Konstantin Vaginov, an occasional participant in the Bakhtin Circle's Leningrad meetings, focused on similar processes in his 1928 novel *The Goat Song* (*Kozlinaia pesn'*), which charts the decline of a circle of intellectuals dedicated to the preservation of traditional culture into (Soviet-style, officially approved) bourgeois solidity and obsession with kitsch and cultural ephemera. As Nikolai Nikolaev's article in this volume shows, the characters in Vaginov's *roman à clef* are representations of members of the Bakhtin Circle so thinly disguised that the portrayal of the central character Teptelkin's willing capitulation to pressures to conform led his prototype, Pumpianskii, to sever his ties with the novel's author.²⁹

These two works were written from rather different standpoints, but both draw on a model that has shaped many accounts of Soviet cultural, political and social history: a model of compromise and

28 For an account of these processes, see Catriona Kelly and Vadim Volkov, 'Directed desires: kul'turnost' and consumption', in Kelly and David Shepherd (eds), *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution: 1881-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 291-313.

29 For a detailed account of the relationship between the novel's characters and their prototypes, see Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 115-19, 370. Benjamin Sher's translation of the novel under the title *The Tower* is available on his website at www.websher.net/srl/twr.html (consulted 15 November 2002).

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conformity imposed from above and resisted (more or less openly) from below. The leading historian of Soviet culture, Sheila Fitzpatrick, has recently offered a trenchant account of the forms of necessary impersonation and perceived imposture at all levels of society that resulted from the state's hypertrophied preoccupation with class affiliations and identities.³⁰ There are obvious and poignant resonances between this account and Bakhtin's concern, in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, with 'pretendship' as an index of inauthentic being.³¹ Bakhtin himself was of course unable to avoid such pretendship altogether, resorting by necessity not only to tactical adoption of features of Kagan's biography, but also to related recreation of a non-existent university education and obfuscation of his family origins.³²

As Fitzpatrick shows, the consequences for individuals of impersonation could be pervasive and devastating. As a result, there is a strong and honourable tradition of celebrating those, particularly artists and intellectuals, who were bold and resilient enough to resist and refuse conformity and compromise, and of documenting, with due respectfulness and admiration, the consequences faced by those who remained true to themselves and to their beliefs. Such celebration, and concomitant condemnation of willing compromise, has been a particular feature of cultural history in the post-Soviet period. This lies behind Nikolai Nikolaev's insistence that in the Nevel period the members of the Bakhtin Circle did not 'make any concession to the victorious proletarian ideology', and his citing of attacks in the aptly named local newspaper *Molot* (*The Hammer*) as evidence of their probity. Certainly that newspaper's report of a public dispute on 'God

30 See Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Making a self for the times: impersonation and imposture in 20th-century Russia', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 2:3 (2001), 469-87.

31 See M. M. Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, ed. M. Holquist, trans. V. Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), esp. pp. 42, 49-52; Russian 'K filosofii postupka', in *Raboty 1920-kh godov* (Kiev: Next, 1994), pp. 43, 48-50.

32 On the confusion surrounding Bakhtin's education and family origins, see Hirschkop, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, pp. 140-6, 111-12. Bakhtin's appropriation of details of his brother's education is particularly noteworthy, having the curious effect of establishing oblique, second-hand connections between the Bakhtin Circle and Nikolai, even though he had left Russia in 1918, and so did not extend his earlier contacts with Pumpianskii at school and university into participation in any of the Circle's activities. The apparent anticipation of some of Mikhail's ideas in the works of Nikolai adds a further dimension to these oblique connections: on this, see Galin Tihanov, 'Misha and Kolia: thinking the (br)other', in Zytko (ed.), *Bakhtin and His Intellectual Ambience*, pp. 79-81.

and socialism' in which Pumpianskii and Bakhtin participated appears to bear out their unyieldingness:

The first to speak was Pumpianskii [*sic*], who referred to himself as not a socialist, but an Orthodox Christian. His speech was of a most scholarly character, so that half the audience did not understand his rather well delivered address. Pumpianskii, who referred to himself as an Orthodox Christian, defended this religion, but that he believed in and accepted what he was defending was not obvious from his words. Being by nature a good man, he acknowledged that there was an element of the good and the useful in the deeds of the Communists ... but he himself remained 'to one side'. ... In his speech, in which he defended that muzzle of ignorance, religion, [Bakhtin] was up in the heavens and higher. His speech contained no living examples from life and the history of humankind. At some points in his address he acknowledged and valued socialism, but merely wept and fretted that this socialism showed no concern for the dead (did he mean that it didn't say requiem masses for them?) and that in time the people would not forgive it for this. When, exactly, will the people 'not forgive' – in a hundred years' time or more? When the people is a hundred times more enlightened than at present! 'That won't happen', someone responded to Bakhtin. In general, listening to him speak, you felt that the hosts lying rotting in their coffins would rise up and be resurrected and sweep from the face of the earth all Communists and the socialism that they are establishing.³³

What better confirmation could there be of the deliberate self-separation from the world that B. F. Egorov has identified as a feature of Russian circles in general, and of the self-distantiation from the dominant ideology that was, he argues, a defining aim of the Nevel Circle in particular?³⁴ Some caution is in order, however. Understandable post-Soviet disdain for the Soviet *ofitsioz*, that condescence of official restriction, regulation and repression, can lead to a projection of the homogeneity of Stalinism back on to the comparative ideological heterogeneity of the early Soviet period; simply holding up a mirror to reductive ideologisation may not be the best way of understanding or combating it. On the one hand it is clear from the *Molot* report that

33 *Molot* (3 December 1918), cited in Iu. M. Kagan, 'O starykh bumagakh', 80–1, and in Konkin and Konkina, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, pp. 57–8.

34 See B. F. Egorov, 'Nevel'skii "kruzhok" Bakhtina i tipologiya kruzhkov', in Gushchina (ed.), *Chtenia*, pp. 12–14.

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Pumpianskii and Bakhtin were articulating, with no little courage, positions, elaborated within their Circle, that were at some remove from those associated with official public discourse. On the other hand, it is just as clear that they were not exactly shying away from participation in that discourse. As Konkin and Konkina point out, 'The young Nevel scholars did not restrict themselves to the framework of their seminar. They willingly, enthusiastically became involved in cultural and educational work, reading lectures and papers to the people of the town, directing creative and educational circles for young people, taking part in the [public] disputes that were widely practised at that time'.³⁵ And Nikolai Pan'kov has found in the local archives compelling evidence that 'the young Bakhtin ... seems to have been caught up in the daring Sturm und Drang of the time. This extremely strong-willed, active teacher and practical "man of action" seems so unlike the Bakhtin of the later years, famed not just for his academic works but also for his silence, his reserve, his aloofness from the everyday realities of that time!'³⁶

Any account of the Bakhtin Circle's activity framed in terms of simple opposition to, or withdrawal from, the public sphere is thus bound to be inadequate: to attempt to reach an accommodation with and within that sphere did not necessarily entail conformism or compromise. Taken together, the articles in this volume show just how sustained, from the outset, was the engagement of the Circle's members with a wide variety of institutions outside the domestic confines of their meetings and, crucially, how this engagement did at least as much as those meetings to shape their work. Thus the cultural renaissance of Vitebsk both nourished and was nourished by the work of members of the Circle; most notable, perhaps, are the phenomenal energy and leadership displayed by Medvedev in his capacity as mayor of the town and visionary organiser of its educational institutions. No less significant is Medvedev's later involvement in cultural practice as well as theory through his work in Gaideburov and Skarskaia's Travelling Theatre and editorship of the Theatre's journal, and through his role in the Petrograd writers' group Sodruzhestvo (Community). His pithy definition of that group and its aims reveals how he, like Bakhtin in Nevel, subscribed to the

35 Konkin and Konkina, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p. 56.

36 Nikolai Pan'kov, 'Archive material on Bakhtin's Nevel period', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 97:3/4 (1998), 738; cf. Galin Tihanov's reference to Bakhtin's search for a 'contributory' modus vivendi ('Misha and Kolia', p. 76).

spirit, not to mention the rhetoric, of the times: 'The members of Sodruzhestvo are writers and social activists. Without advocating or defending the vague and over-general term "fellow travellers", they feel that they are contemporaries of our great era, participants in its universal calling and cause'.³⁷ Galin Tihanov's article demonstrates, through an imaginative widening, to include the émigré community, of the perspective from which Medvedev's work should be examined, how this work resonated unexpectedly far beyond the confines of the Bakhtin Circle itself.

If much of their activity outside the Circle was associated with informal or semi-formal institutions, at least as much again was conducted within or with reference to the frameworks provided, both during and after the period when the Circle was active, by official institutions of research and higher education. Pauline Fairclough and Ben Taylor show in their articles how the intellectual trajectories of Sollertinskii and Kanaev respectively can be properly understood only with reference to their positions as teachers and (especially important in Kanaev's case) researchers. Kanaev's profile as both experimental scientist and historian of science exemplifies well the combination of disciplinary specialisation and intellectual breadth to which the members of the Circle (in common, it should be said, with many other Russian and Soviet academics and intellectuals) strove. Medvedev and Pumpianskii likewise achieved positions as respected teachers and researchers. But the case of Voloshinov provides perhaps the most interesting illustration of the contribution made to the work of the Circle by educational institutions: Craig Brandist's detailed exploration of the strengths and shortcomings alike of Voloshinov's engagement with the field of linguistics reveals how these were shaped by his position as a postgraduate student at the Institute for the Comparative History of the Languages and Literatures of the West and the East (Institut sravnitel'noi istorii literatur i iazykov Zapada i Vostoka, ILIaZV) as much as if not more than by his membership of the Bakhtin Circle. Moreover, these strengths and weaknesses cannot be evaluated without reference to the fact that Voloshinov's specialisation at ILIaZV was, as Vladimir

37 P. N. Medvedev, 'O "Sodruzhestve" (k 4-letiiu gruppy)', in *Sodruzhestvo: Literaturnyi al'manakh* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1927), p. 295, quoted in V. A. Shoshin, 'Literaturnoe ob"edinenie "Sodruzhestvo"', in V. P. Muromskii (ed.), *Iz istorii literaturnykh ob"edinenii Petrograda-Leningrada 1910-1930-kh godov: Issledovaniia i materialy*, vol. 1 (St Petersburg: Nauka, 2002), p. 295.

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Circle was associated with various institutions, at least as much again was a reference to the frameworks provided, in a period when the Circle was active, by the high and higher education. Pauline Fairclough in their articles how the intellectual and Kanaev respectively can be properly referred to their positions as teachers and researchers. Kanaev's profile as a linguist and historian of science exemplifies disciplinary specialisation and intellectual rigour of the Circle (in common, it should be said, of Russian and Soviet academics and intellectuals). Pumpianskii likewise achieved positions as a linguist and researcher. But the case of Voloshinov is an interesting illustration of the contribution of the Circle by educational institutions: Craig Vinton's discussion of the strengths and shortcomings of the Circle in its position as a postgraduate student at the Institute of the History of the Languages and Literatures of the East (Institut sravnitel'noi istorii iazykov i literatury Vostochnoi Azii, ILIaZV) as much as if not more than the Bakhtin Circle. Moreover, these positions cannot be evaluated without reference to the specialisation at ILIaZV was, as Vladimir

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Alpatov reminds us, not in linguistics but in literary studies – another instance of the urge to transgress established or emerging disciplinary boundaries that we find in Bakhtin and other members of the Circle.

Among the features shared by the members of the Circle was, then, what we might call a will to participate, a will that was realised in ways that cannot be simply characterised in terms of either culpable trimming or laudable oppositionism. Which is not to say that the Circle's members were not exposed to the vicissitudes of changes in political direction and priorities. This could scarcely be further from the truth. As is well known, even before his arrest and exile for involvement in Aleksandr Meier's Voskresenie (Resurrection) movement Bakhtin was unable to find a secure position, and the subsequent provincial obscurity of Saransk did not rank high on the scale of academic rewards.³⁸ Pumpianskii, briefly arrested in connection with the Meier affair, later felt obliged to retreat into relatively uncontroversial areas of scholarly activity. High-profile developments in cultural and national politics had deleterious, if comparatively short-lived, consequences for the careers of Sollertinskii and Kanaev. Kagan, unable to establish a firm foothold either in the newly established Orel University, or in the Russian (later State) Academy for the Arts (Rossiiskaia (Gosudarstvennaia) akademiia khudozhestvennykh nauk, RAKhN (GAKhN)) in Moscow, abandoned philosophy for economics, only to find himself unable to cope with the requirement to falsify production statistics; he stopped going to work, anticipating an imminent arrest from which he was probably saved by his premature death from angina.³⁹ Voloshinov, although the ILIaZV archives show him to have been in many ways a model student, fully committed to the social activities (*obshchestvennaia nagruzka*) expected of him,⁴⁰ was shortly afterwards to feel the chill winds of the officially sanctioned hostility of Marxist linguists increasingly confident of their hegemony; had he not died of tuberculosis,

38 On Voskresenie, see Hirschkop, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p. 168, and Iu. P. Medvedev, "Voskresenie": K istorii religiozno-filosofskogo kruzhka A. A. Meiera', *Dialog. Karnaval. Khronotop*, 4 (1999), 82–157 (also available on-line at www.shef.ac.uk/uni/academic/A-C/bakh/medvosk.doc).

39 On Kagan's difficulties in Orel and Moscow, see Konkin and Konkina, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, pp. 64–74; on the circumstances leading to his death, see Brian Poole's obituary of Kagan's daughter, Iudif' Matveevna, *Dialogism*, 5–6 (2001), 225.

40 See 'Lichnoe delo V. N. Voloshinova', *Dialog. Karnaval. Khronotop*, 2 (1995), 70–8.

he might well have faced the same fate as Medvedev, whose difficulties in pursuing and publishing his work culminated in his arrest and execution in 1938 in the wave of repressions unleashed the previous year.

The intricacies of the often fraught relationship between the Circle's members and the institutions in which they saw the possibility of both enriching their intellectual enquiries and disseminating their results are further complicated by the vexed question of their relationship to Marxism. One of the first things that Bakhtin said to the triumvirate of his rediscoverers, Bocharov, Gachev and Kozhinov, was 'But I am not a Marxist ... But I was never a Marxist to any degree whatsoever',⁴¹ a statement that says at least as much about the tarnished prestige of the Soviet state's official ideology by the 1960s as it tells us about Bakhtin's personal convictions. Vladimir Alpatov shrewdly warns against taking Bakhtin's attitude towards Marxism late in life as an indicator of his views in the 1920s. And certainly his statement is not one that would have been made by Medvedev, Pumpianskii or Voloshinov, for whom professed Marxism was no barrier to critical engagement, until such time as this became impossible, with the institutions and policies of the Soviet state.⁴² In this sense, Pumpianskii's 1924 notes on Marxism, translated here for the first time, raise at least as many questions as they answer. Closer to pastiche than to serious analysis, they might be considered to cast more doubt against the intellectual credentials of their author than against those of Marxism. Their interest lies precisely in their status as evidence that the Bakhtin Circle not only did not always possess finely honed answers to the burning questions of the day, but could apparently be far from assured in its posing of the questions themselves. To see in them, as Nikolai Nikolaev asks us to, an expression of Pumpianskii's (and the Circle's) true attitude towards Marxism, even

41 S. G. Bocharov, 'Ob odnom razgovore i vokrug nego', *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 2 (1993), 76-7; abridged English translation Sergey Bocharov, 'Conversations with Bakhtin', *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, 109:5 (1994), 1016. On the question of Bakhtin and Marxism, see Hirschkop, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, pp. 129-36.

42 Nikolai Nikolaev's article in the present volume gives details of Pumpianskii's unexpected conversion to Marxism in the late 1920s, while that by Iurii and Dar'ia Medvedev addresses the specific nature of the Marxism of *The Formal Method*. On Voloshinov's Marxist convictions (more precisely, his being 'captivated by Marxism'), see Anastasiia Tsvetaeva, 'Poverkh (nauchnykh) bar'erov: Tri poemy', *Dialog. Karnaval. Khronotop*, 1 (1995), 142.

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of the often fraught relationship between the institutions in which they saw the possibility of their intellectual enquiries and disseminating or complicated by the vexed question of their membership. One of the first things that Bakhtin said to his rediscoverers, Bocharov, Gachev and Kozhinov, was 'Marxist ... But I was never a Marxist to any extent'. A statement that says at least as much about Bakhtin's personal convictions. Vladimir Voloshinov is against taking Bakhtin's attitude towards Marxism as an indicator of his views in the 1920s. And it is not one that would have been made by Voloshinov, for whom professed Marxism was an engagement, until such time as this became a question of the institutions and policies of the Soviet state.⁴² In 1924 notes on Marxism, translated here for the first time, as many questions as they answer. Closer to analysis, they might be considered to cast light on the intellectual credentials of their author than on their interest lies precisely in their status as members of the Circle not only did not always possess the answers to the burning questions of the day, but could not ensure in its posing of the questions themselves. Nikolai Nikolaev asks us to, an expression of the Circle's true attitude towards Marxism, even

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the present volume gives details of Pumpianskii's attitude towards Marxism in the late 1920s, while that by Iurii and the specific nature of the Marxism of *The Formal Marxist* convictions (more precisely, his being a Marxist) see Anastasiia Tsvetaeva, 'Poverkh (nauchnykh) Karnaval. Khronotop, 1 (1995), 142.

Though they were written three years before his declared conversion, they require an anachronistic conviction that the only sustainable attitude towards Marxism is hostile rejection. It also requires a sleight of hand by which the perfectly reasonable assumption that the notes were probably the basis for a presentation by Pumpianskii to the Circle becomes verified fact: 'The fact that a paper containing an extremely negative characterisation of Marxism was delivered to the Circle is undoubtedly evidence of its members' negative attitude towards Marxist ideology.' Pumpianskii's postscript, apparently reflecting Bakhtin's contribution to the discussion of his analysis of Marxism, stands as a welcome indication of the need to resist the temptation, to which Pumpianskii clearly succumbed, to target straw men, or to create a problem where there is none. Not every circle, after all, needs to be squared.

Vicious circles

Round and round the circle
Completing the charm
So the knot be unknotted
The cross be uncrossed
The crooked be made straight
And the curse be ended (T. S. Eliot, *The Family Reunion*)

Such would increasingly appear to be the case with that other vexed, or accursed, issue in Bakhtin studies, the question of the disputed texts. The articles in this volume reflect the range of established positions, from Nikolai Nikolaev's conviction that Bakhtin was the principal if not sole author of works by Voloshinov and Medvedev, through Vladimir Alpatov's equivocal references to the 'authors' of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, to the unqualified assertion by Iurii and Dar'ia Medvedev of Pavel Medvedev's status as author of all that was published in his name. At the same time the predominant view among our contributors, as it was among the participants in the 1999 conference, is clearly that there is less and less reason to ascribe Voloshinov's and Medvedev's texts to Bakhtin, leaving only the article on vitalism published under Kanaev's name to continue to be attributed to him. By far the most persuasive account of this issue to date is that provided by Ken Hirschkop.⁴³ The evidence for the

43 See Hirschkop, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, pp. 126-40.

authorship of those whose names the works bear seems overwhelming and incontrovertible; notwithstanding its undoubted collaborative ethos, the Circle seems to have gone along with the very conservative, traditional patterns of authorship in the humanities and social sciences in the Soviet Union. It would be difficult to gainsay archival evidence such as the preparatory drafts of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, translated here for the first time, which reinforce the argument that Voloshinov's position in ILIaZV was more important for the genesis of the book than his relationship with Bakhtin.⁴⁴ Bakhtin apparently insisted, in a letter to Vadim Kozhinov in 1964, that Voloshinov could justifiably be called his pupil; but as N. L. Vasil'ev points out, here and in his conversations with Duvakin Bakhtin seems to base his recollections on the Nevel period, when Voloshinov was principally a poet and musician, ignoring his subsequent development as a scholar.⁴⁵ The many (and often contradictory) accounts, written and oral, of what Bakhtin in his anecdotalage did or did not claim, in writing and orally, that he did or did not write should not necessarily be granted privileged status in the debate, even if in the peculiar context of Soviet history such accounts may legitimately claim a significance greater than that due to analogous phenomena in other cultures. Ultimately, there seems to be no better reason to ascribe, say, Medvedev's 'Scholarly Salieri-ism' ('Uchenyi sal'erizm', 1924) to Bakhtin on account of its similarities to 'The problem of content, material and form in verbal creative art' ('Problema soderzhaniia, materiala i formy v slovesnom khudozhestvennom tvorchestve', 1924) than there is to do precisely the reverse.⁴⁶ Such whimsical, if not vicious, circularity is the best that can be hoped for if we remain obsessed with what has all but become a non-question.

44 It should be noted, however, that the section of the drafts dealing with the transmission of alien discourse is, intriguingly, written in an unknown hand: see N. L. Vasil'ev, 'K istorii knigi Marksizm i filosofiia iazyka', in M. M. Bakhtin, *Tetralogiia* (Moscow: Labirint, 1998), p. 533.

45 See Vasil'ev, 'K istorii', pp. 531–2.

46 See David Shepherd, 'Editorial', *Dialogism*, 5–6 (2001), 7.

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Moving outside the Circle

It is true that around every man a fatal circle is traced, beyond which he cannot pass; but within the wide verge of that circle he is powerful and free. (de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*)

Where does all this leave Bakhtin and his Circle? They are of course still there, historical figures and facts of indubitable significance and tremendous importance. However, this book is intended as a contribution to the general and welcome movement in recent Bakhtin studies away from uncritical celebration and application of the Circle's ideas, and towards their sober analysis and contextualisation – a feature particularly characteristic of the articles by Alpatov, Brandist and Tihanov.⁴⁷ This is a movement that may in due course reveal the term 'Bakhtin Circle' to be useful to the extent that its historical limitations are acknowledged, celebrated even. Indeed, it is not impossible to imagine that in years to come the term may no longer be needed as a shorthand designation of those who surrounded Bakhtin, sometimes climbing on to his shoulders, at others letting him perch on theirs, and at yet others seeking a vantage point on the shoulders of thinkers not directly associated with Nevel, Vitebsk, or Leningrad, but without reference to whom their own contribution to scholarship and the history of ideas cannot be evaluated.⁴⁸ To the long overdue acknowledgement of Bakhtin's many dependencies it is time to add a recognition (and a celebration) of the fact that his 1920s associates are beginning to defy de Tocqueville's dictum by stepping outside of the master's Circle and out of his shadow.

47 In this sense the book is part of the Bakhtin Centre's ongoing project 'The Russian and European Contexts of the Works of Mikhail Bakhtin and the Bakhtin Circle', begun in 1997 (for more details see www.shef.ac.uk/uni/academic/A-C/bakh/contexts.html).

48 For existing major contributions to the intellectual contextualisation of Bakhtin and the Bakhtin Circle, see Craig Brandist, *The Bakhtin Circle: Philosophy, Culture and Politics* (London and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2002), and Galin Tihanov, *The Master and the Slave: Lukács, Bakhtin, and the Ideas of Their Time* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

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The Bakhtin Circle

IN THE MASTER'S ABSENCE

*edited by Craig Brandist,
David Shepherd & Galin Tihanov*

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