Unmasking bakhtin. The story of the lie that took over the humanities

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Jean-Paul BRONCKART & Cristian BOTA

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The story of the lie that took over the humanities

Translated from the French by Ian MacKenzie

DROZ
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Jean-Paul Bronckart & Cristian Bota

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PREFACE

In the summer of 1961, three brilliant young scholars at the Institute of World Literature of the Academy of Sciences in Moscow set out by train to see Bakhtin for the first time, in the far-off provincial town of Saransk, where he taught Russian and foreign literatures at the University of Mordovia [...] The three devoted admirers were Sergey Georgievich Bocharov [...], Georgy Dmitrievich Gachev, and Vadim Valeryanovich Kozhinov (the enterprising and resourceful leader of the group).

They had recently discovered Bakhtin’s 1929 book on Dostoevsky, assuming initially that the author had perished long before. They had also discovered that their institute held (behind leaden doors) a copy of Bakhtin’s dissertation on Rabelais (submitted in 1940 and defended in 1946 and 1949).

The meeting of the three enthusiasts with Bakhtin may be regarded as the beginning of a campaign, a long and strenuous campaign that drew Bakhtin out of obscurity and eventually established him as an internationally celebrated theorist in philosophical anthropology and the philosophy of culture.

The campaign soon involved a community of friends and admirers [...] and the group’s first achievement was the publication, in 1963, of a revised and enlarged edition of the Dostoevsky book, prepared by Bocharov. The second victory, in 1965, was the publication of a revised version of Bakhtin’s dissertation on Rabelais. [...]  

A further significant factor in the spreading popularity of Bakhtin’s thought in the West was the publication of English translations of such controversial texts as Voloshinov’s Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, in 1972, and Medvedev’s The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship, in 1978. (Liapunov 1994: 1009-10)

Although it was only published in 1994 (a year earlier in Russian), this introduction to the English translation of Bocharov’s article “Conversations with Bakhtin” (which we discuss at length in Chapter 5) perfectly sets the scene for the affair that is the subject of this book.

As Liapunov says, in 1961 three young Russian academics discovered that Mikhail Bakhtin, the author of Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art in 1929 and a doctoral thesis on Rabelais, was still alive. Soon supported by a group of admirers, they undertook to publish or republish the two books, while at the same time establishing their author as a brilliant and profoundly innovative theorist who the literary world was quick to celebrate.