
Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the authors discussed an opportunity to reply to the letters published. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and regrets that it cannot consider any letter of more than 1,000 words. Letters should be addressed to PMLA Forum, Modern Language Association, 10 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003-6981.

Bakhtin and the Politics of Criticism

To the Editor:

Of late Gary Saul Morson has set himself an ambitious task: to replay the Russian revolution, but with himself in the role of Russian liberal, standing Kerensky-like against the modern-day equivalent of the Bolshevik party, the literary-critical establishment. His introduction to the Russian cluster (107 [1992]: 226–31) presents the “politicization of current criticism” as a repeat of Marxist errors against which he and other Slavists have been immunized by “the Soviet and Eastern European experience.” In a letter to a Russian colleague recently published in Moscow he allows the parallel with the “gruesome facts of Soviet history” a little more scope (227): “Of course, here in America, these people control only the universities. They can’t arrest me; their power *is* limited” (“Perepiska iz dvukh mirov” [Correspondence between Two Worlds], *Bakhtinskii sbornik, II* [The Bakhtin Collection 2], ed. D. Kujundzic and V. Makhlin, Moscow, 1991, 31–43; 38; our trans.). It is as well that the stake in this farcelike repetition of history is not the fate of a nation but the interpretation of the works of Mikhail Bakhtin, whom Morson wishes to claim for the ersatz Russian liberalism (what he has called elsewhere the “counter-tradition”) he imagines himself representing. This beguiling vision should not go unchallenged, lest non-Slavists be tempted to accept Morson’s account of the relevant intellectual history.

Readers of his introduction will have noted that, for all the grand claims he makes for a liberal, individualistic Slavic theoretical tradition, Morson offers little in the way of historical evidence to connect Bakhtin to such a tradition. This is no accident, for the Russian context of which Morson makes so much is largely a projection of his own brand of cold-war liberalism back onto an earlier time. In seeking to present Bakhtin as part of a Russian tradition that values “the initiative of individuals” against all claims made on the basis of abstractions (class, party, etc.), Morson takes Bakhtin’s criticism of “theoreticism” as an endorsement of what is effectively a rather vulgar brand of Anglo-Saxon empiricism (Introduction 228). However, Bakhtin’s conceptions of the individual and of the role and meaning of consciousness are derived from neo-Kantian, phenomenological, and religious sources, none of which have much to do with Morson’s preoccupations and all of which are theoretical (i.e., abstract, just as Bakhtin’s critique of theoreticism is) with a vengeance.

To have to refer to Bakhtin's actual intellectual sources, however, would complicate Morson's polemical and, it needs to be said, politically driven case. For "theoreticism" Morson would have us read "Marxism," so that Bakhtin's critique of the former can come out sounding like an advertisement for "American progressive ideals" (227). Unfortunately, the critique of theoreticism staged in Bakhtin's early essay "Towards a Philosophy of the Deed" is for the most part a critique of certain strands of neo-Kantianism by recourse to theoretical motifs drawn from phenomenology, philosophy of life, and neo-Kantianism itself; "historical materialism" is criticized on a couple of occasions, but then so are a number of other traditions (indeed, at one point Bakhtin claims that "economic materialism" offers an accurate *analysis* of the depraved condition of European society). To examine this work as social philosophy with any seriousness would lead to conclusions quite different from Morson's. To take the most obvious example, Bakhtin's prizing of individual self-determination in neo-Kantian terms leads him to explicit condemnation of liberal political economy and its real-world correlate—social systems that reify, materialize, or "biologize" the human by depending on self-interest as a motor of social action. He sustains this position throughout his career; it is difficult to make sense of his absolutization of the claims of consciousness without reference to it. For sure this is not Marxism; it is closer to the neo-Kantian socialism espoused by the likes of Hermann Cohen or the communitarian vision associated with Martin Buber. One has to distort the entire philosophical structure of Bakhtin's work, however, to turn it into an endorsement of the "normal" or 'civilized' character of "Western European or American social systems" (Morson, Introduction 227).

If anyone is bending the humanities to the ends of political calculation, it is Morson. His "prosaic" Bakhtin is a political creature in disguise, having little to do with the complexities of social and philosophical debate in Russia. But then his vision, outlined in the letter referred to above, of an America under the sway of "'hegemonic' literature departments" is scarcely more convincing (Introduction 227). For Morson, as a result of these departments' dominance,

the world is divided into two opposing camps. In one live the good people: women, homosexuals, and, of course, the non-Western world—nonwhites and all those who speak out against the West in general and the United States in particular. The West, men, whites, and heterosexuals—these are now the true source of evil in the world. Therefore, the worst thing in the world is, of course, a sexually normal white American male who believes in bourgeois

democracy. You can guess that I am endowed with all these bad qualities, and, most scandalously, I do not even consider it necessary to repent or justify myself before "correct" public opinion. ("Perepiska" 38; our trans.)

Nobody need look to the United States for evidence of this sharp and uncompromising divide between dissident intellectuals and domineering conformists, for it is drawn from quite another source: a vision of the Soviet Union, which Morson thinks has somehow found a second life in, of all places, America itself. But wasn't the American social system proof against just such repression? What went wrong?

Nothing, really. Morson simply has an ax to grind, and he has chosen Bakhtin as his whetstone. If the role he seeks is that of noble dissident, he is welcome to it. If his aim is intellectual debate, something else is called for.

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Reply:

Criticizing my *PMLA* introduction, Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd write:

One has to distort the entire philosophical structure of Bakhtin's work, however, to turn it into an endorsement of the "'normal' or 'civilized'" character of "Western European or American social systems." . . .

The sentence in my introduction from which the quoted phrases are drawn appears before I even discuss Bakhtin. The sentence has nothing to do with what Bakhtin thought or would have endorsed. Rather, it marks the difference between many Russian intellectuals of today and their American counterparts by noting that

[w]ithout irony, reform-minded Russians call each step toward Western European or American social systems a move toward a "normal" or "civilized" society.

The difference between my statement and their misleading rendition of it is rather typical of their letter as a whole.

It is not true that "[f]or 'theoreticism' Morson would have us read 'Marxism,' so that Bakhtin's critique of the former can come out sounding like an advertisement for 'American progressive ideals.' . . ."