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Mythmaking: why Bakhtin went back to the future in the 1930s

Abstract

I. A somewhat playful introduction

For many years, Bakhtin scholarship was occupied with debunking myths that had grown around Bakhtin (his aristocratic origins, the smoked *Bildungsroman* manuscript, his indifference to publication and polemics)

Replacing myths with evidence-based scholarship is important and sobering, but sobriety is often less enjoyable than intoxication.

So I am going to allow myself to construct a little myth in this talk.

II. The myth

My myth, like many myths, will use a brief story to explain a genuinely significant and interesting phenomenon. It will link a speculative biographical hypothesis to a sober and scholarly argument about the development of Bakhtin's work.

The scholarly argument concerns a major transformation in Bakhtin's writing on the novel in the 1930s, which, I claim, separates the project on the *Bildungsroman*, abandoned in 1937 or 1938, from the discussion of the novel in terms of the chronotope and 'contemporaneity', exemplified in 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel' and in the lecture-turned-essay, 'The Novel as a Literary Genre' (Epic and Novel).

The speculation concerns a few conversations Bakhtin had in the mid to late 1930s. I claim the conversations were the trigger for this transformation.

III. The sober, scholarly argument: some preliminaries

We are used to dividing Bakhtin's work on the novel into three streams: the writing on style embodied in 'Discourse in the Novel'; the writing on narrative, embodied in the works on Goethe and on the chronotope; and the writing on Rabelais

I am going to redraw the boundaries: I believe there is a major change in Bakhtin's writing, it takes place *within* the so-called laboratory text, 'On the *Bildungsroman*'.

This major transformation in Bakhtin's argument separates the discussion of Goethe and the history of the *Bildungsroman* from the discussion of the chronotope and later, of Rabelais.

The crux of this transformation is the introduction of 'the future' into Bakhtin's conception of history and his conception of realism

IV. Scholarly, sober argument: the *Bildungsroman*

'On the *Bildungsroman*', dated to 1937-39, consists of more than 700 pages of manuscript. In its first half, Bakhtin plays with ideas that might have organized his book on Goethe and the *Bildungsroman*. In fact, the material that was published as 'The *Bildungsroman* and its Significance in the History of Realism' in 1979 was largely drawn from the first half of the laboratory text.

In this part of the text Bakhtin traces the slow evolution of the novel, in terms of the degree to which it represents the 'historical becoming' of the world.

Crudely speaking: in the earliest novels, nothing becomes; in somewhat later novels, the hero 'becomes', but not the world surrounding it; and finally, in the mature *Bildungsroman* - represented by Goethe, Rabelais and Grimmelshausen - 'the hero becomes *together with the world*' (Bakhtin 2012, 331).

But in the course of thinking about the *Bildungsroman*, Bakhtin comes up with a few other ideas. On p. 278 of the printed text, while discussing 'the artistic representation of time', Bakhtin mentions 'Historical inversion. The connection with the future'. A few lines later we find the first mention in this text of the 'chronotope'.

For a few pages after these passages Bakhtin discusses how various events - 'meetings', 'partings', 'the road' - are imaged, concluding with a famous definition:

In all the analysed cases there is a place where spatial and temporal markers are merged in a meaningful and concrete whole. Time here thickens, it is embodied, it becomes artistically perceptible; space likewise is intensified, it is drawn into the movement of time, of plot, of history. The marks of time are laid out in space; and space is made meaningful and is measured by time. The term, which we apply to this kind of phenomenon is *chronotope*, that means in literal translation "timespace" (or "spacetime"). (Bakhtin 2012, 287-88)

Although Bakhtin will continue to ruminate on the *Bildungsroman* for another 40 pages, he has in fact reached a decisive turning point. He will never write the *Bildungsroman* book. Instead, he will use the ideas of the chronotope and 'the future' to do something very different.

V. Sober, scholarly argument: the chronotope

We know, from the editorial commentary to 'On the *Bildungsroman*', that the second half of this laboratory text consisted of the material that was later refashioned into 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel'

It represents a new approach to the problem of historical becoming in the novel. What's new?

1. Bakhtin has changed horses. The hero of the essay is Rabelais, not Goethe (who is only briefly discussed in the chronotope essay)
2. What turns the parade of historical events into 'historical becoming' is its orientation to a Messianic 'future'.
3. The novel approaches this 'historical becoming' not by the incremental perfection of its form (as in the writing on the *Bildungsroman*), but by drawing on the resources of ancient forms of popular-festive culture, which have always been bubbling below the surface.
4. 'Realism' is still used as an evaluative standard, but realism now depends on taking the standpoint of 'contemporaneity' (современность), representing the present as something orientated to the future.

It's a change for the better: as Galin Tihanov has pointed out in the 1930s, 'Bakhtin had to respond to the pressure and give realism primary importance' (Tihanov 2000, 229). In the *Bildungsroman* materials he does so in a fairly conservative manner: the realist novel represents becoming as social development or change.

In 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel' and in 'The Novel as a Literary Genre', realism is not, strictly speaking, a matter of description or representation, because it invokes and depends on a future that is unrepresentable in principle. Bakhtin makes this clear in the discussion of historical inversion in the chronotope essay. In cases of historical inversion, he says, 'something is depicted as having already existed in the past that actually can be or must be realised only in the future, that, in essence, has the form of a goal, an obligation rather than an actual past' (Bakhtin 2012, 400–1). What is transposed from its place in the future to a place in the past are 'such categories as goal, ideal, justice, perfectedness, the harmonious coexistence of person and society' (Bakhtin 2012, 400). The future has the form of an 'obligation' that transforms the shape of the present.

In addition, the new doctrine implies a different version of 'becoming' in which a drastic transformation – 'the possibility of a life different in principle' as Bakhtin put it in his Flaubert essay (Bakhtin 1996, 132) – rather than incremental change is the model.

From this point onwards, the novel is defined by this relationship with contemporaneity.

VI. The speculative biographical hypothesis

Why this change? There's an interesting series of letters from M. I. Kagan to his wife, dating from August 1937, when Kagan was in Moscow, and Bakhtin was as well, having just escaped Saransk by the skin of his teeth.

From these letters we learn that in the first two weeks of August Bakhtin spent many, many hours talking with the man who was his most important philosophical companion and the conduit through which Bakhtin absorbed the ideas of Neo-Kantianism. What did they talk about? We don't know (and we probably never will).

But we do know:

1. that in the late 1930s, maybe 1938, Bakhtin made a lengthy conspectus of two of Cassirer's works in the late 1930s, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* and the second volume, devoted to myth, of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.
2. that Bakhtin asked if could borrow two volumes of Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* from Matvei Kagan's library, after Kagan had died.
3. that in Bakhtin's conspectus of Cassirer's second volume of the *Philosophy*, he noticed Cassirer's claim, which echoed Hermann Cohen, that monotheism had introduced a distinctive '*feeling for the future*' into human consciousness, which made possible 'the time of human *history*'.

Brian Poole, one of our great myth-busters, once noted that Ernst Cassirer seems to be more influential in Bakhtin's work in the mid to late 1930s than earlier, even though conventional wisdom assumed Bakhtin had moved 'beyond' Neo-Kantianism in the 1920s (Poole 1998)

There is a prosaic explanation for this, lying in Bakhtin's archive in Saransk: Bakhtin had been reading Olga Freidenberg's, *The Poetics of Plot and Genre*, which gave folklore a distinctive role in literary history, and Freidenberg had been heavily influenced by Cassirer (Osovskii 2002; Perlina 2002)

There is a poetic explanation: Bakhtin met several times with his long-lost friend Kagan, and their deep conversations led him to draw on Cassirer once again, to make the feeling for the future central to his conception of historical becoming, embodied in the novel.

I have no proof! But it's a half-decent myth.

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