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On Early Russian Reception of Mikhail Bakhtin’s Work

The Case of V. N. Turbin, or Staying at the “Boundary Of Silence”

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Abstract

“The whole history of Russian thought during the Soviet period was a history with missing chapters”.¹ One of such missing chapters is a history of the Soviet reception of the corpus of work created by Mikhail M. Bakhtin, Soviet thinker and literary critic (1895—1975).

The history of the Soviet reception of Bakhtin’s ideas has not been written yet and there are no works on the subject. There is Zbinden’s book,² which deals with research about some particular cases of Bakhtin studies in Canada and in French translations. Despite the fact that in the 1960—1980s the «theory of carnival» became, in the words of S.S. Averintsev, a «regular classic» and the subject of citation for any specialists in the humanities, the reception of Bakhtin’s ideas in the Soviet Union was not successful: all of his contemporaries and conversation partners could not come into proper contact with the Soviet thinker. The present working paper is an attempt to reconstruct one case from the history of the Soviet reception of Bakhtin’s heritage, using the works of Vladimir N. Turbin (1927—1993) as an example. The study examines Turbin’s books A Short While Before Aquarius: A Farewell to Epos and his articles from different


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years (including those published posthumously), relating to Bakhtin, his life, theories, ideas and books. All these works will answer the question why the Soviet reception of Bakhtin’s heritage in the 1960–1970 did not take place, and why the book, which Turbin wanted to write about his teacher, has not been written.

**Keywords**

M.M.Bakhtin – V.N. Turbin – history of Soviet reception

1. **The Paradox of the Soviet Reception of Bakhtin’s Heritage and “Living Non-Existence in Saransk”**

The research problem in this study concerns the paradoxes of the Soviet reception of Bakhtin’s heritage. The main paradox of this reception is that those closest to Bakhtin remained silent. In the 1960s–1980s, the popularity of Bakhtin’s ideas reached its climax, but there are no works which study this period of reception. The study of works by Vladimir Turbin, who was one of the people closest to Bakhtin, can shed light on this paradox and explain the silence.

In 1961, Vadim Kozhinov, Sergey Botcharov and Georgi Gatchev, all three research workers at the IMLI (Institute of World Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences), found out that Mikhail M. Bakhtin (hereinafter: ММБ), the author of *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art*, was, in fact, still alive. It took them some time to locate him in Saransk (Mordovia), where he was head of the Department of Russian and World Literature in the University of Saransk. Somewhat later, Vladimir Turbin, a postgraduate student and, after 1953, a professor at the Moscow State University, joined them. He was the one destined to rescue the Russian philosopher from his “live non-existence in Saransk” as well as to become “Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin’s personal attendant.”

It was, on the one hand, a “material” rescue: transferring ММБ from Mordovia to Moscow (disregarding the fact that he was not rehabilitated, not cleared of his charges, or that he did not have a Doctor of Sciences status) and installing him at the privileged and hard-to-access Kremlin Hospital. All of this Mr. Turbin managed to solicit from Yuri V. Andropov, because he was a professor and a research advisor of Andropov’s daughter Irina, who at the time

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studied at the MSU. Later on, when MMВ was already transferred to Moscow, both Mr. Turbin and the MSU students (those who were attending his seminar) had been visiting the ailing philosopher in his new apartment in Moscow—providing necessary care, giving him their support, asking questions relating to their term paper topics. On the other hand, it was a “spiritual” rescue: the participants of the above mentioned seminar with Professor Turbin recall how, as early as the 1950s, he was getting for them, practically on the sly, *The Formal Method of Literary Scholarship* by Medvedev and Bakhtin or MMВ’s Dostoevsky book and insisting that they read both texts. The later essays written by Vladimir Turbin were constantly interspersed with words and expressions from his teacher’s vocabulary: “dialogues of party leaders and church hierarchs” [диалоги партийных лидеров и церковных иерархов], “a person removed from the epos” [человек, изъятый из эпоса], “e-pi-cism of public conscience” [э-пи-за-ци-я общественного сознания]. It would not be an exaggeration to state that Turbin’s theory of the epos and the novel was created with an eye to MMВ’s theory. Apart from these essays by Turbin, correspondence between MMВ and Turbin from 1962–1966 has been preserved and it will also stay in the focal point of our attention.

Both Turbin and his three acquaintances from the IMLI wrote very little about MMВ. In fact, it would be fair to say that Turbin’s only paper which was directly dedicated to the Russian thinker and which was printed during Turbin’s lifetime was only three pages long: it appeared in June 1989 in *Kino* magazine,

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4 V. L. Makhlin related this episode in the following way (as per V. N. Turbin’s recollections): “Andropov was inclined to help Bakhtin to be admitted to the Kremlin Hospital (in fact, his daughter who had been studying under Turbin talked him into doing that), but he got quite upset because this person whom his daughter and her university professor were petitioning for did not have any chance of being admitted to such a privileged medical institution. So the head of the KGB looking for an objective reason to be used on Bakhtin’s behalf asked them: “Is he, at the very least, a Doctor of Sciences?” – “No, he is not,” Turbin sighed. – “Was he rehabilitated?” – “No, Yuri Vladimirovich, he was not even rehabilitated,” sighed Turbin, with even more regret. – “How so?” stuttered Andropov, totally confused: “Not even rehabilitated? Well, is there a solution, then?” (“На рубеже молчания. Памяти Владимира Николаевича Турбина,” in: Бахтинский сборник. Выпуск 3. Ред. В. Махлин, (Москва: Лабиринт, 1997).


6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

and at first glance this may even prompt questions and create a certain bewilderment—why Bakhtin and ... film?\(^{10}\)

The article was dedicated, however, to one line that MMB uttered in the mid-1960s after watching René Clair’s film *Porte des Lilas* at the Writers Union country home in Maleyevka near Moscow. MMB did not like the movie, but that was, of course, not the point of the matter. Turbin’s thoughts about the film lead up to his thoughts on MMB. However, before we turn to these considerations, we should complete our short review of Turbin’s works on MMB. What is left to say relates only to three of his articles dedicated to Bakhtin, his life and his innovative legacy—and all of these were all published posthumously.

2 Bakhtin-Turbin, or All Truth about “Women”

One was a 30-page-long article entitled *On Bakhtin* in Turbin’s book *A Short While Before Aquarius*,\(^ {11}\) published a year after Turbin’s death. This article is a view on Bakhtin’s life and on his concept of carnival from the perspective of someone who for twenty years had been MMB’s “personal attendant” as well as “his private driver and the supplier of groceries and medications”;\(^ {12}\) also “in a certain manner, an organizer of his life who had been taking care of his everyday needs.”\(^ {13}\)

Turbin himself, as if wishing to make excuses for his silence and his Percevalesque unwillingness to ask questions, wrote as follows: “Despite the dictum that a valet cannot appreciate a great man, I knew perfectly well just how outstanding was the man whom destiny sent me to care for. I was always fascinated by the intellectual valor of those visitors who would, while meeting with him, start querying him about the philosophical origins of his concept. As far as I was concerned, I knew my place and I was not certain that I had the right to pose such questions—thus, my conversation partner would open up to me rather via everyday concerns, through the hustle of prosaic worries of life.”\(^ {14}\)

Sometimes, however, his curiosity got the better of him, so Turbin would ask MMB about something that was most important: for example, about his views on Rabelais, about the carnival and the non-carnival age, about God.

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11 В. Н. Турбин, Незадолго до Водолея. (Москва: Радикс, 1994).
12 В.Турбин, Незадолго до Водолея, p. 446.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
Two more articles were published in 1995, two years after Turbin’s death: they appeared in the first issue of Filosofskie nauki [Philosophic Sciences] which was dedicated to MMB (the centenary of whose birth was celebrated quite widely that year).

The first article, entitled Fragment One from Unpublished Materials on M. M. Bakhtin, appeared in the section of the journal headed Serious Laughter: it was an attempt to connect the discourse on God with the discourse on carnival. The second article, entitled Fragment Two from Unpublished Materials on M. M. Bakhtin, was published in the section of the journal headed Concept Contribution: this one was a comment on an idea expressed by S. S. Averintsev in his review of MMB’s book Questions of Literature and Aesthetics. The comment was about who was the only, permanent and authentic opponent of the Russian thinker.

Turbin said that a book about Bakhtin would be his last publication. However, he did not write it, thus effectively staying “at the boundary of silence.”

We will try, nevertheless, to answer the question, what kind of book it could have been and why Turbin may have been delaying the writing of it. This question is a complex one, but we have, however, two “justifications” for posing it.

First justification: a general impression regarding what this hypothetical book could have been like might appear if we reconstruct what is available, that is if we can extract and analyze Turbin’s notes, remarks and comments about MMB that are scattered all over his writings. Taking this angle, we can divide the whole body of Turbin’s work into three groups of sources related to our topic: first is the correspondence between Turbin and MMB; secondly, there are four smaller articles which Turbin wrote about MMB (one of them was published during his lifetime and three others only after his death); thirdly, there are all the remaining articles by Turbin that were not directly dedicated to the Russian thinker, but contained comments with regard to him, his writings, his theories, concepts and terminology.

Second justification: Vitali L. Makhlin, MMB researcher, raised the question about the book during a conversation with Turbin. Its fragment is worth quoting here in full:

“The book about Bakhtin,” he told me at the time, not without a tempered importance in his tone, “will be my last book.”

16 Ibid., pp. 264–268.
17 “На рубеже молчания. Памяти Владимира Николаевича Турбина,” p. 389.
Seeing my surprise he explained:
– Just imagine this: OK, let us say, that I wrote this book on Bakhtin, it was published and then I would go, for example, to a beer stand in order to drink some beer. So, I would come up there and someone would ask about me: “Who is this guy coming over to drink beer? Is it, perhaps, the one who wrote about Bakhtin?..” Oh, no, no, I will speak the whole truth about Mikhail Mikhailovich only at the very end, as Leo Tolstoy did about “women” do you remember? I’ll tell everything and then, right then, jump down, straight into the grave, so that no one can get at me there...

I could not be silent anymore: “Aren’t you afraid that you might be late?”
– Oh, I understa-a-and that, Vitali Lvovich, I do. But...».

Turbin did not finish his answer and he did not write the book, and his explanation, as we can see, has not helped us to get closer to understanding why he kept silent.

3 “Ovid among the Gypsies”

We will analyze all three groups of sources in order to see how mmb and his writings were mentioned in them and in the hope that we may get closer to understanding the logic for Turbin’s “silence.”

Let us start with the letters. The correspondence between mmb and Turbin (1962–1966), published in Znamya (July 2005), contained a very insightful commentary by N. A. Pan’kov, mmb’s biographer. Twenty two letters were published in this issue—fifteen of them were written by Turbin and seven by mmb. This became a record of Bakhtins’ life in Saransk, with all those requests to bring butter and sugar to Saransk, with a special “thank you” for an orange and with discussions of the ills of the day: in 1961 Iskusstvo published Turbin’s book entitled Comrade Time and Comrade Art, for which he paid too heavy price at a later point. In his letter to mmb of December 31, 1962 he mentioned this not without a grain of irony and self-irony: “I was not intending to upset you with this, but you will find out about it anyway. No, it did not turn out well, not at all! They dubbed me a “trouvère of abstract art” and my book was characterized as being, from the first to the last page, enraptured with modernist perversions in the arts. Well, I am fine, I am keeping my chin up. I even wrote a ditty:

My sweetheart blowing in his horn
Threw his sounds as perfect darts.

18 Ibid.
Now I know that he was born
A trouvère of abstract arts!».

And more: these letters contain attempts to negotiate what might be a good time for Turbin to come to Saransk, sometimes on his own, in his old and beat-up Moskvitch car, at other times in the company of his students, who already knew about MMБ from Turbin and who had read the first edition of his 1929 book Problems of Dostoevsky's Art (at the time it was not yet called Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics – N. D.) and participated in Vladimir Turbin’s seminar, at the msu: there, according to Turbin's own words “Bakhtinianism” was blooming, “for the young joyfully accepted it.” There were discussions in these letters regarding a future book to be co-written by Bakhtin and Turbin (in his letters Turbin called it “a book about animals”…).

As Nikolai Pan’kov writes, “It appears that it was Vladimir Turbin who suggested to co-author the book, but he may have mistaken MMБ’s polite and non-committal manner of communicating for a readiness to cooperate”. There was, quite likely, some discussion about writing a book dedicated to how animals were presented in the arts and in literature. MMБ often mentioned, in Turbin’s presence, his own essay that dealt with how Flaubert described the animals. One might assume that Turbin would also wish to write on the subject and that he started collecting material, but eventually MMБ and Turbin did not manage to author a book together.

In his own commentary on one of his letters, Turbin remembers how he first got to know of the typewritten copy of MMБ’s Candidate of Sciences dissertation, which later became the basis for his main work—the book on Rabelais: “Late at night I would come back to my hotel (this being a hotel in Saransk where Turbin was coming late at night from the Bakhtins’ apartment—N. D.), then I would shield off my table lamp with some rag and start reading Bakhtin’s kandidat dissertation (there were three beds in my hotel room, and right next to me railway workers, somewhat drunk and tired, were sleeping; they were on a business trip having come to Mordovia’s capital in order to lobby for the necessary amount of kerosene and diesel oil to be distributed to their faraway and backwoods switching track—this being the fate of a Russian drudge of a wandering worker. The carnival world opening up in front of me was whimsical and joyful; but I could not comprehend its deep-rooted religious basis yet, and thus, as many others, I was seeing in it only a

possibility for ideological freedom which would stand up against the deadening boredom of any official dogma”.\(^{21}\)

This same ideological freedom was something that very many other readers, contemporaries of Turbin, would see in Bakhtin’s text. However, in this fragment, Turbin made an observation regarding something that escaped many of his contemporaries: “I could not yet comprehend its (i.e. the carnival world’s—N. D.) deep-rooted religious basis”.\(^{22}\) We will find thoughts about this in Turbin's articles which will be discussed later. For now, we can only highlight this and also quote one more of Turbin’s observations made in his letter to Bakhtin of March 8, 1963, illustrating the reception of the carnival theory by the generation of the 1960s: «You know, I left Saransk thinking that the idea of representing art as carnival was only one of its possible forms and a pretty specific one at that. Then, slowly, I started getting it. Because one of the traits of truly brilliant ideas is that they do not get accepted immediately, not in one gulp. Suddenly I realized that if we should, to some extent, carefully and reasonably interpret the carnival formula, everything, decidedly everything, from Homer to Voznesenski, would fit it”.\(^{23}\)

So, Turbin started looking for carnival everywhere: in Lermontov’s texts (e. g., in *Masquerade*), in Gogol’s as well as, of course, in Pushkin’s oeuvre. In a letter of May 10, 1963 Bakhtin, however, made an attempt, with his natural caution and tact, to admonish both Turbin and his students who kept seeing the carnival everywhere and were even trying to write about that in their term and diploma papers: “I liked very much your ideas regarding Hamlet and advertisement, on modernism, on the carnival nature of art, and they coincide with my own thoughts in many ways. There is a whole section in my Rabelais text dedicated to the street vendors’ shouts advertising their wares during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (the so called “les cris de Paris” [‘Parisian shouts’]). This was an ambivalent shouting of advertising which, along with some other street elements, co-existed in great harmony with Renaissance art, blending perfectly with it. Over the course of thousands of years the folk and carnival model of the world defined all creative forms of culture and thought. Only the 19th century almost entirely denied it and thus bestia seria won (that is, “Shakespeare à la Sofronov”\(^{24}\)). I said “almost” because immaculate seriousness is devoid of any creative potential. Even a simple comparison or a metaphor implies a certain minimum of freedom.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 123.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., p. 129.

\(^{24}\) Anatoli Sofronov (1911–1990) was a Soviet playwright, poet and writer, winner of Stalin Awards in 1948 and 1949.
with laughter. In the atmosphere of absolute seriousness (at its limit), no movement of thought is possible (any thought, not only the artistic one). Complete seriousness commands for standing there and not moving ('Stand still')."\(^{25}\)

The second group of sources are the articles from various years that were not dedicated to Bakhtin directly but contained notes and ideas about him or about his books and theories, or those suffused by the spirit of "Bakhtinianism."

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\(^{26}\) В.Турбин, Прощай, эпос? Опыт осмысления прожитых нами лет (Москва.: Правда, 1990), p. 18.
\(^{28}\) Ibid., p. 11.
\(^{29}\) Ibid., p. 12.
\(^{30}\) Ibid., p. 21.
\(^{31}\) Ibid., p. 28.
“Mikhail Mikhailovich, would it be fair to say that your methodology, all of it, in its entirety, conforms to the term ‘sociological poetics’?”

— “Yes”, Bakhtin answered immediately. “No doubt about that.”32

Or this:

“One must not kill this cockroach,” said Bakhtin, dignified and with his usual composure, speaking to a matron-like housemaid in the Writers Union country home. “What if I turn at some point into something like him? What if that is my karma?”33

Or here is Turbin’s prediction that partially came true: “All of Bakhtin extends into the future. Into the time that, in accordance with his terminology, is “big” [большое время]. In that big time he will remain whereas none of us will”.34

Here are his thoughts about this thinker’s fate: “Bakhtin skirted the prison.”

“I was never under torture,” he told me once, and a ghost of some awkwardness appeared for a moment in his face: this is how, perhaps, a soldier may feel awkward if he did not get to fight in a war, even though there was none of his fault in that. Bakhtin, however, who in his fifties had to take an exam in … History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) and then had to defend his kandidat nauk thesis35 and still, despite all of his grandeur, was living the last years of his life having the title of acting assistant professor—all of this meant that he was the type of prisoner who was enchained to the desk of some bureaucrat”.36

Lastly, let us look at the articles that were directly related to ММВ already mentioned above.

The first article about Bakhtin is a short history of the travails that befell this Russian thinker, all of which happened right after the 1960s, right in front of Turbin-the-personal-attendant’s eyes, the man who was always trying to make the life of his “great conversation partner” easier.

Turbin’s wife found two more articles and they were published in 1995 in the already mentioned Filosoficheskie nauki [Philosophic Sciences] magazine.


33 Ibid., p. 31.

34 Ibid., p. 41.

35 Kandidat nauk [candidate of sciences]— first postgraduate degree in the Russian/Soviet tertiary education system, following the б.а but below the Doctor of Philosophy. Editor’s Note.

36 В.Турбин, Незадолго до Водолея, p. 152.
Both articles were remarkable in their own way. The first started like this: “The New Testament is also a carnival!” Bakhtin told me in a half-whisper, shrinking in a funny manner, as if some spring got compressed inside him. That was in Saransk in the 1960s. Bakhtin spoke this, about the New Testament, in a very conspiratorial tone of voice. As if talking to an accomplice.” Further on, Turbin tries to do something that no one before him would have attempted: he tries to justify MMB’s idea of the carnivalesque nature of the New Testament and to combine something that seemed an impossible combination—God and carnival: “I already said: carnival is not thinkable without the Holy Spirit connecting the realms, both our world and the empirical world, and sending us “downwards”, towards our “material and bodily lower stratum” and thus, if you wish, sending us to f... ourselves [...].

“Carnival is the sensation of the earth from the point of view of the Cosmos, of being from the point of view of reincarnation. [...]”. As is well known, the Orthodox Church rejected Bakhtin’s theory. Even the pianist Maria Yudina, who as MMB’s close friend did much for the proliferation of his books in the West, said as follows: “There is no place for this book in a Christian home”.

In his second article, Turbin draws the reader’s attention to an idea stated in S. S. Averintsev’s critical review, which became, perhaps, the best judgment regarding MMB: “The main idea of the review was striking: Bakhtin’s writings were filled with polemic which is quite perceptible. Well, but with whom? Or with what? Averintsev recounted MMB’s possible opponents, and I will only name a few, highly approximately: the cultural-historical school, formalism, impressionism. Averintsev, however, removed, one by one, all of Bakhtin’s opponents of this kind: starting to polemicize with them would have been too shallow a task for Bakhtin. And then Averintsev named Bakhtin’s real and permanent opponent: it was, in his opinion, none other than Aristotle. Both Aristotle and whatever else derived from him.”

This thought, being most profound by itself, deserves separate examination. We should only recall how quickly Bakhtin agreed with Turbin’s definition of his poetics: that it was sociological poetics. Aristotle’s poetics is prescriptive and this is the reason why it is dead. It must be superseded by a new poetics—a project that was envisaged and partly realized by A. N. Veselovsky.

As we noted above, the last and only article that Turbin wrote about MMB was published during his lifetime in the Kino magazine. Its title—Ovid Among

37 Ibid., p. 217.
38 It is not a coincidence that Wilhelm Dilthey (who represented a branch of German philosophy which was quite close to that of MMB’s) put forward the same idea when starting his own poetics.
Nomads: on One Utterance by M. M. Bakhtin—leaves one even more puzzled than the name of the magazine. Turbin presented Makhlin with his own copy of this article and made one correction in its text, in his own handwriting: he changed the word “nomads” to “Gypsies.” It was, perhaps, Soviet censorship that insisted on abstract “nomads” instead of naming a specific ethnic group. And even a reference to Pushkin did not help. Here is the key to both the book that could not have been written and, in a wider sense, to the fact that for Turbin (and for all those around him, from the circles of this kind) it was not possible to have dialogue with MMB: “We (that is, Gatchev, Botcharov and others—N. D.) got together a short while ago, and we were all those who had been around Bakhtin from the early 1960s to his last day, March 7, 1976. And once again, like so many times before, we were trying to define Bakhtin, to find an image that would have been most adequate to what he was. I think that Georgy Gatchev’s pronouncement was the best: “What can we say? Ovid stayed among the Gypsies. What could Gypsies say about Ovid?”.

The soviet reception of MMB’s works consists of different cases; one of these cases we analyzed in this paper. Mostly this reception was unsuccessful because of the fact that the cultural gap between the 1910-20s and the 1960s led to the situation in which there were no conditions for the appearance of MMB’s readers and interlocutors in Soviet Russia.

Bakhtin was well educated in classical philology, German philosophy and hermeneutics, but his young friends, for objective reasons, did not have an opportunity to get such a good education. The potential interlocutors and interpreters of Bakhtin were either ‘purged’ (such as Shpet, who was shot in 1937) or emigrated (such as Mikhail’s brother – Nikolai, who worked in Cambridge and probably had an influence on Wittgenstein). This situation was understood by those closest to MMB, the «gypsies», one of whom was Turbin.

As MMB noted prophetically in Lectures on the History of Russian Literature:

«Рецепция совершенно независимо идет своим путем и лишь тогда, когда самостоятельно доходит до старых моментов и совпадает с ними, возвращается назад. И, конечно, здесь старое подвергается глубокой переработке, получает другой дух, другой смысл. Между рецепцией и традицией – бездна.»

40 Compare Terry Eagleton, Saints and Scholars. (London: Verso, 1987).
These old issues undergo deep processing, taking on another spirit, another sense. There is, according to Bakhtin, a huge gap between reception and tradition.42

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42 Ibid.