



NATIONAL RESEARCH UNIVERSITY  
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**BAKHTIN IN FRANCE: A  
CRITICAL LOOK AT THE FIRST  
FRENCH REVIEWS APPEARED IN  
THE 1970S**

**BASIC RESEARCH PROGRAM  
WORKING PAPERS**

**SERIES: LITERARY STUDIES**

**WP BRP 17/LS/2016**

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## **BAKHTIN IN FRANCE: A CRITICAL LOOK AT THE FIRST FRENCH REVIEWS APPEARED IN THE 1970S<sup>2</sup>**

The paper analyses the first French critiques of the two Mikhail Bakhtin's monographs and the careful exploration of these reviews enables to explain why they presented him as a formalist. It also traces the reasons of irrelevance of the thinker's ideas in the early French reception.

Keywords: M.M. Bakhtin, French reviews, Y. Kristeva, Russian formalists

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<sup>2</sup> The results of the project "European literature from a comparative perspective: method and interpretation", carried out within the framework of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) in 2016, are presented in this work.

The first French translation of two works by M.M. Bakhtin appeared in the 1970s ("Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics" and "Rabelais and His World"), and then first reviews of these books were published in the French press (*Le Monde*, *Le Figaro Littéraire*, *La Quinzaine littéraire*), many reviewers ranked Bakhtin among Russian formalists.

Yulia Kristeva is known to introduce the Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin to Western readers (primarily, to the French readership) in 1967 [Kristeva 1967]. Two years later, an English translation of Bakhtin's book on Rabelais «Rabelais and His World» [Bakhtin 1968] came out, and shortly afterwards, two reviews of the book, written by S. Miller and F. Yeates, appeared in New York magazines. The publication of Bakhtin's book in English did not come unnoticed in France, and the first review – «Rabelais through the eyes of a Soviet author: Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World» - was published in the March issue of the journal *La Quinzaine Littéraire* [Ortali 1969]. The first French review of «Rabelais and His World» to appear, R. Ortali's text seems to be symptomatic in many respects. Therefore, we will examine the author's main ideas in detail and look at the image of Bakhtin the French critic creates.

Ortali sees Bakhtin's book as «a total, if not a totalitarian, view of Rabelais's world». The reviewer seems to believe that the «Soviet» author Bakhtin who lived under the totalitarian regime could not avoid approaching the writers he studied «in a totalitarian way» (however, the critic does not say explicitly what he means by «a totalitarian view of Rabelais's World»). Further on, Ortali makes a consideration that impacted the following reception of Bakhtin in France. Ortali regards Bakhtin as «one of the least known out of those who come under the broad umbrella term of «Russian Formalists» whose influence on our structuralist criticism proved to be so significant» [Ortali 1969: 13]. Ortali supplies this statement with a note where he expresses his bemusement over the fact that in Tzvetan Todorov's otherwise «magnificent work» entitled

«Literary Theory. Texts of Russian Formalists» not a single word was said about Bakhtin. Ortali points out that at present there is only one text available in French where one can read about Bakhtin – it is Kristeva's article in the magazine *Critique*, adding though that he could recommend that article «only to the insiders» [Ortali 1969: 13].

Why does «the Soviet author's» text nonetheless deserve attention? In Ortali's opinion, «one of the most appealing features of Bakhtin's text is its semiological aspect» [Ortali 1969: 14]. Thus, «the Soviet author's» work is presented as one of the earliest endeavors to apply the semiological approach to a literary work of the past. However, Bakhtin's work has its flaws, the main one, in Ortali's view, being that Rabelais's language is presented as a scheme, which «as some people have noticed, bears a strong resemblance to the classical Marxist scheme... Rabelaisian revolution, therefore, is nothing more but one of the incarnations of the October Revolution!» [Ortali 1969: 14]

As we may see, Ray Ortali's work endows the «French» Bakhtin with two characteristic features: firstly, he is a “Soviet writer” who lives and creates his works in the “totalitarian” epoch, which cannot but have an impact both on his general approach to literary interpretation and on his particular readings of literary works; secondly, Bakhtin, as the reviewer claims, is a formalist, therefore, his approach is formalistic with a certain “semiological aspect” to it, as his work on Rabelais demonstrates.

In 1970, after two Bakhtin's monographs had appeared in French translations, there was a dramatic rise in the number of French reviews. In the same year, six reviews of Bakhtin's books came out in the French press: only one of them was devoted to Bakhtin's book on Rabelais, while five others dealt with his work on Dostoevsky's poetics (one of the reviews discussed both of the books).

Andre Dalmas's review of Bakhtin's «Rabelais» is a very concise but nevertheless a rather accurate summary of the author's key ideas, which gives

Bakhtin credit for his original approach to the literary work of the remote past that in the course of time has lost its transparency for the reader [Dalmas 1970: 15].

The five reviews of «Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics» in French translation deserve a closer consideration. The earliest of them was written by Dominique Desanti [Desanti 1970: I, III], French writer, journalist, and historian, whose father was half-Russian and who grew up in Russian émigré milieu in Paris where she availed herself of an opportunity to learn Russian.

This is how Desanti introduces Bakhtin to the reader: «Mikhail Bakhtin, Russian formalist critic, was born in 1895, published «Dostoevsky's Poetics» in 1929 and then wrote «Rabelais» ... - too late» [Desanti 1970: I]. What does Desanti mean by this statement - «too late»? The reviewer holds that Formalists who laid claim to being «positivist and objective» were toppled by Marxists led by Trotsky. This is what Desanti deems bad luck for Bakhtin's scholarly career. And yet today, continues the reviewer, the publishing house «Seuil» presents a new French translation of the book written by «a precursor unaware of his being a precursor» («précurseur ignoré qui s'ignore»), as Kristeva had dubbed Bakhtin in her introduction to the book [Desanti 1970: 1].

Then Desanti considers the critical review written by «a young and brilliant citoyenne from *Tel Quel*, who reproached Bakhtin for «psychologism» of his approach and for the «humanistic» and Christian language he utilizes [Desanti 1970: 1]. But is it possible to analyse Dostoevsky without addressing the «mind» and «soul» of his characters? From the structuralist perspective, it is only «discourse» that should appeal to scholars. In Desanti's view, it is exactly what «formalist Bakhtin» is engaged with: «It is discourse, «poetics» that Bakhtin delves into» [Desanti 1970: 1]

In 1970, in the March issue of the magazine *L'Express* a very short synoptic review written by J.-F. Revel [Revel 1970] comes out, who regards «polyphony» turning into the very fabric of the novel as Bakhtin's key concept.

Claude Jannoud in his review of the «Dostoevsky's Poetics», which appeared in *Le Figaro littéraire* in August of the same year and was entitled «Beyond Good and Evil» [Jannoud 1970], unequivocally states that Bakhtin belongs to «the famous Russian Formalist School whose creative spirit exists no more, as the school itself was ruthlessly eradicated by Stalin in the 1930s» [Jannoud 1970: 22]. He suggests that of everything written about the Russian writer this «essay» is probably the most fundamental, and describes «Dostoevsky's Poetics» as one of the landmark works created by the Formalist School.

J.-N. Vuarnet writes his first review (which is to appear in press in 1973) “Spaces of Text” [Vuarnet 1970], where he, following Kristeva and quoting her, describes Bakhtin as a semiotician and points out that his book on Dostoevsky was the product of Russian Formalism that «immortalized itself in today's Structuralism» [Vuarnet 1970: 12]. Here, for the first time, it is made explicit why Bakhtin is considered to be a formalist: «What Bakhtin analyses is not the psychology or metaphysics of Dostoevsky's characters, it is the text as a form, a system of signification considered irrespectively of any local meaning effects or ideology» [Vuarnet 1970, Hayman 1973].

Vuarnet concludes his review with a piece of advice for Bakhtin: instead of propounding a new science that Bakhtin calls «translinguistics» in his book, it would be more appropriate to talk about topical and productive semiotic studies of which Bakhtin himself is a herald, even if unwittingly. It is noteworthy that in the fifth chapter of his book, Bakhtin calls the «new» science» not «translinguistics» but «metalinguistics». This is how the thinker understands it: «We have entitled our chapter «*Discourse* in Dostoevsky», for we have in mind *discourse*, that is, language in its concrete living totality and not language as the specific subject of linguistics, something arrived at through completely legitimate and abstraction from various aspects of the concrete life of the word. But precisely those aspects in the life of the word that linguistics makes abstract

are, for our purpose, of primary importance. Therefore, the analyses we that follow are not linguistic in the strict sense of the term. They belong rather to metalinguistics, if we understand by that term the study of those aspects in the life of the word, not yet shaped into separate and specific disciplines, that exceed – and completely legitimately - the boundaries of linguistics. [Bakhtin, 184: 181]. It was Kristeva who reproached Bakhtin for using the term «metalinguistics» and who suggested it should be replaced by «translinguistics». The fact that Vuarnet ascribes the term «metalinguistics» to Bakhtin means that the reviewer seems to have neglected the original text (even if in translation) and contented himself with Kristeva's paraphrase (not always accurate).

The French-speaking researcher of the Canadian origin Andre Belleau in his review [Belleau 1970] discusses both «Dostoevsky's Poetics» and «Rabelais and his World». The reviewer is convinced that these two Bakhtin principle books should be considered together if only because the “fourth chapter of “Dostoevsky’s Poetics” makes an essential introduction to “Rabelais” [Belleau 1970: 483].

Belleau is about the only one of all the reviewers who does not try to pigeonhole Bakhtin. Instead, he sees him as a «discoverer» of a new literary phenomenon – the phenomenon of the crowd, the multitude (le multiple) and compares Bakhtin's method to the method employed by Erich Auerbach. Belleau makes an observation that the works of the two thinkers have some congeniality that manifests itself in their shared interest in the phenomenon of the crowd, masses (public, in Auerbach's case). It is well known that Auerbach discusses «the representation of reality» and contends that «the low» popular, comic and realistic literature» and «the high» aristocratic, serious, topical and tragic literature» are inextricably linked [Belleau 1970: 482]. In Bakhtin's view, it is the carnivalization of literature that generates the polyphonic nature of a literary work, such as Rabelais's. Carnival represents a complete and perfect

expression of the masses' worldview [Belleau 1970: 482]. Belleau arrives at two conclusions: firstly, «for both Auerbach and Bakhtin, the multitude (le multiple) amounts to the masses as a literary character» [Belleau 1970: 482]; and secondly, «the XIX chapter of «Mimesis» had been the most competent text on Rabelais before the translation of Bakhtin's book appeared»<sup>3</sup> [Belleau 1970: 483]

In 1971, the number of French reviews of «Dostoevsky's Poetics» and «Rabelais» went down: only three reviews came out that year (one was devoted to «Dostoevsky's Poetics» and the other two discussed «Rabelais»). Besides, Jean-Paul Sartre gave an interview where, among other subjects, he touched upon Bakhtin and his book «Dostoevsky's Poetics».

In his interview to the magazine *Le Monde*, Sartre, when asked to name contemporary authors whose works were inspired Formalism, mentions Bakhtin's book on Dostoevsky in the first place and then remarks: «I cannot see what semiotics – this new Formalism – adds to what we already have» [Contat, Rybalka 1971: 21]. We see that Sartre shares the conventional view of the Russian thinker as a formalist and structuralist.

We are not going to discuss at length the two reviews devoted to Bakhtin's «Rabelais and His World», one of which, written by Simone Gabay [Gabay 1971], criticizes the book for idealism, and the other one, penned by Jean-Marie-Gustav Le Clezio [Le Clézio 1971], welcomes Bakhtin's research as opening readers' eyes on the revolutionary nature of Rabelais book. However, we will briefly review the key points of Claude Vrioux's review of «Dostoevsky's Poetics» [Frioux 1971].

Claude Frioux, literary scholar, Slavist, Marxist and specialist in Russian poetry of 19-20 centuries, is one of the few authors who express disagreement with Kristeva's interpretation of Bakhtin's ideas. In fact, Frioux's text we are

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<sup>3</sup> In 1990 A. Belleau will publish his won book about Rebalais: Belleau A. Notre Rabelais. Montréal, Boréal : Colléction « Papiers Collés », 1990.



going to consider presents the earliest case against Kristeva; it was translated into Russian and came out in the fifth volume of «The Bakhtin Collection» (Bakhtinskii Sbornik) in 2004 [Friux 2010].

With his review, Claude Frioux wants to «pay tribute to Mikhail Bakhtin for the years to come» because «long before us, this aged man proved to be a real warrior in the firing line» [Friux 2010: 92]. Frioux makes an important observation: «Since the recent belated discovery of Russian Formalists an opinion has been established reducing the history of Russian literary thought to the history of Formalism with a long night to follow» [Friux 2010: 80-81]. Frioux believes that the phenomenal interest Russian Formalism of the 20-30s kindled in the West in the 60-70s inadvertently contributed to «misapprehension of Bakhtin's ideas in the West» [Friux 2010: 81]. In his review, the French Slavist also notices that the French discoverers of Bakhtin, discussing his ideas, at times do that «in a tone of condescendence», and when they find in his works some thoughts and conjectures anticipating their own ideas, they reproach him for «backwardness and inaccuracy» [Friux 2010: 83]. It appears that «Bakhtin's significance is mostly historical and retrospective; moreover, it is limited by certain faults in his way of expressing his thoughts» [Friux 2010: 83]; and it was Kristeva who first drew attentions to those faults.

«Defending» Bakhtin, Frioux insists that the Russian thinker «is far [...] from utilizing the jargon of a provincial Lyceum student, who, in his efforts to disguise the poverty of his thinking, spouts pseudoscientific, scientist abstractions and neologisms which are neither necessary nor productive» [Friux 2010: 92] and which, let us add, are the soft spot of French structuralists in general and of Kristeva in her texts on Bakhtin, in particular.

In 1972, another review of Bakhtin's book on Rabelais came out under the title «Bakhtin's «Rabelais», or the Praise of Laughter». The author Yves Benot [Benot 1972] argues that Bakhtin's book may be of interest not only for Rabelais scholars or experts in XVI century and urges a broader readership to

acquaint themselves with the book, which clearly stands out from the mass of conventional studies in literary history [Benot 1972: 120]. In 1973, two French reviews appeared in press – Hayman's review of «Rabelais» [Hayman 1973] and Vuarnet's second review of «Dostoevsky's Poetics» [Vuarnet 1973] (the first one came out in 1970).

Hayman's review is basically a critique of Bakhtin's approach and his research methods. In his view, Bakhtin turns «official culture» into a pejorative term» [Hayman 1973: 78], makes hasty generalizations, and «apparently neglects the negative character of scary or ugly masks, as he strives by all means to identify the mask with the perception of reality» [Hayman 1973: 84].

Vuarnet's review entitled «Dialogism and truth» is almost a verbatim reproduction of his earlier review written in 1970. Vuarnet, echoing Kristeva's words about the logic of carnival breaking the binary «formal logic» (0-1), gives Bakhtin credit for his challenging monologism and deconstructing “the theological monophony 1 dominating the Western metaphysics and regulating much of its literature” [Vuarnet 1973: 150-151]. In the same text, Vuarnet, quite in line with Kristeva, calls Bakhtin Saussure's adherent («whom he did not know [Vuarnet 1973: 151] (sic!), as well as he did not know Freud [Vuarnet 1973: 153]) and a precursor of «Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes and Foucault» [Vuarnet 1973: 151].

We may excuse Vuarnet his unfamiliarity with Bakhtin's early works on Saussure («Marxism and the Philosophy of Language» published under the name of V.N. Voloshinov), Freud («Freudianism: A Marxist critiques» published under the name of P.N. Medvedev) and with his article «The Problem of Content, Material and Form in Verbal Art», where the Russian thinker criticised the Formal method. The book on Marxism was to be translated into French and published in France only in 1977; the book on Freud has not been translated yet; and the closure of the journal *Russkii sovremennik* [*The Russian*

*Contemporary*] that was going to publish the article in 1924 postponed the publication for fifty years<sup>4</sup>.

There is one more review that is relevant to subject of our discussion and worth mentioning here. In 1979, L. Seguin's review entitled «Spaces of Mikhail Bakhtin» [Seguin 1979] came out. The author provides basic but comprehensive information on Bakhtin's biographical background and his bibliography, including the books signed by Bakhtin's friends and early articles, which were translated in 1979 and published in Bakhtin's collected works «Aesthetics and Theory of the Novel» «Esthétique et théorie du roman» [Bakhtine 1978]. Apart from that, Seguin attempts to explicate some of Bakhtin's concepts, such as «chronotope» or «carnival».

The French critic is convinced that «out of all concepts introduced by Bakhtin, «carnival» is if not the most productive than, at least, the most widely used one: the whole world talk about it and everyone puts their own mask on it» [Seguin 1979: 18]. Seguin's statement is simple and frank: it is not that much important what Bakhtin meant by carnival – postmodernist masks have covered the original Bakhtin's concept and, most importantly, they do not need it anymore.

We may conclude that an analysis of the first French reviews of the two Bakhtin's monographs shows that, with few exceptions (Belleau and Friux), in the 1970s, the Russian thinker was seen as a representative of Russian Formalism, the school and movement he had been disputing with for all his life, and his books were reckoned among the highest achievements of the Formal method in literary studies.

There are two main reasons why the early French reception of Bakhtin failed to comprehend the thinker's ideas and on the whole proved to be irrelevant. First of all, this failure has to do with the fact that Formalism,

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<sup>4</sup> The article will be published in Bakhtin's collected works "Questions of Literature and Aesthetics", ed. by S. Leibovich (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1975). P.6-71

largely due to the efforts of Tzvetan Todorov who published French translations of the key texts of Russian Formalists, was one of the few, if not the sole achievement of Russian humanistic thought acknowledged worldwide. On the one hand for this reason, portraying Bakhtin as a formalist seemed natural and made his ideas easier to understand and explicate, whereas, in fact, Bakhtin's thinking went far beyond the Formalist paradigm, questioning and challenging it. Secondly, and most importantly, all his life Bakhtin (and not only he), due to objective reasons, lived in isolation from the «normal» history and hence was deprived of the philosophical context pertinent to his thought. Therefore, interpreters are tempted to place Bakhtin in different contexts (Formalism, Structuralism, Marxism, Freudism) and put a variety of masks on him<sup>5</sup>.

On the other hand, one of the masks pulled on Bakhtin to make him fit into the French intellectual atmosphere of the 1960-70s was the mask of a formalist and structuralist who raises, to use Kristeva's words, «issues that are crucial for the contemporary structural narratology» [Kristeva 1967: 430]. According to Kristeva, it is due to this mask that Bakhtin gained recognition in France: «To begin with, I would like to inform you about Bakhtin's existence and then to place him into the French context. To do this, I need to interpret him in the French context, making sure that the French readers would be able to read his texts. Such an approach could be considered vincible because it provides us with Bakhtin refashioned and groomed in the French manner. Nevertheless, I believe that this grooming was necessary for me and beneficial for everyone because without it, Bakhtin might have seemed only a collector of Russian folklore and would not have aroused all that interest he arouses now. My way of reading Bakhtin has given him the future and made it possible eventually to see what he really wanted to say» [Kristeva 1998].

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that the recent trend is not to pull masks on Bakhtin but to remove them. E.g. see the book of two Swiss “unmaskers” of Bakhtin: J.-P. Bronckart, Cr. Bota, *Bakhtine démasqué : Histoire d'un menteur, d'une escroquerie et d'un délire collectif*. Genève : Droz, 2011, 629 p. and our review of it: Dolgorukova N., Makhlin V. *Le ressentiment des dupes // ENTHYMEMA*. 2013. No. IX. P. 407-411.

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