

**M. M. BAKHTIN**

*Toward a Philosophy  
of the Act*

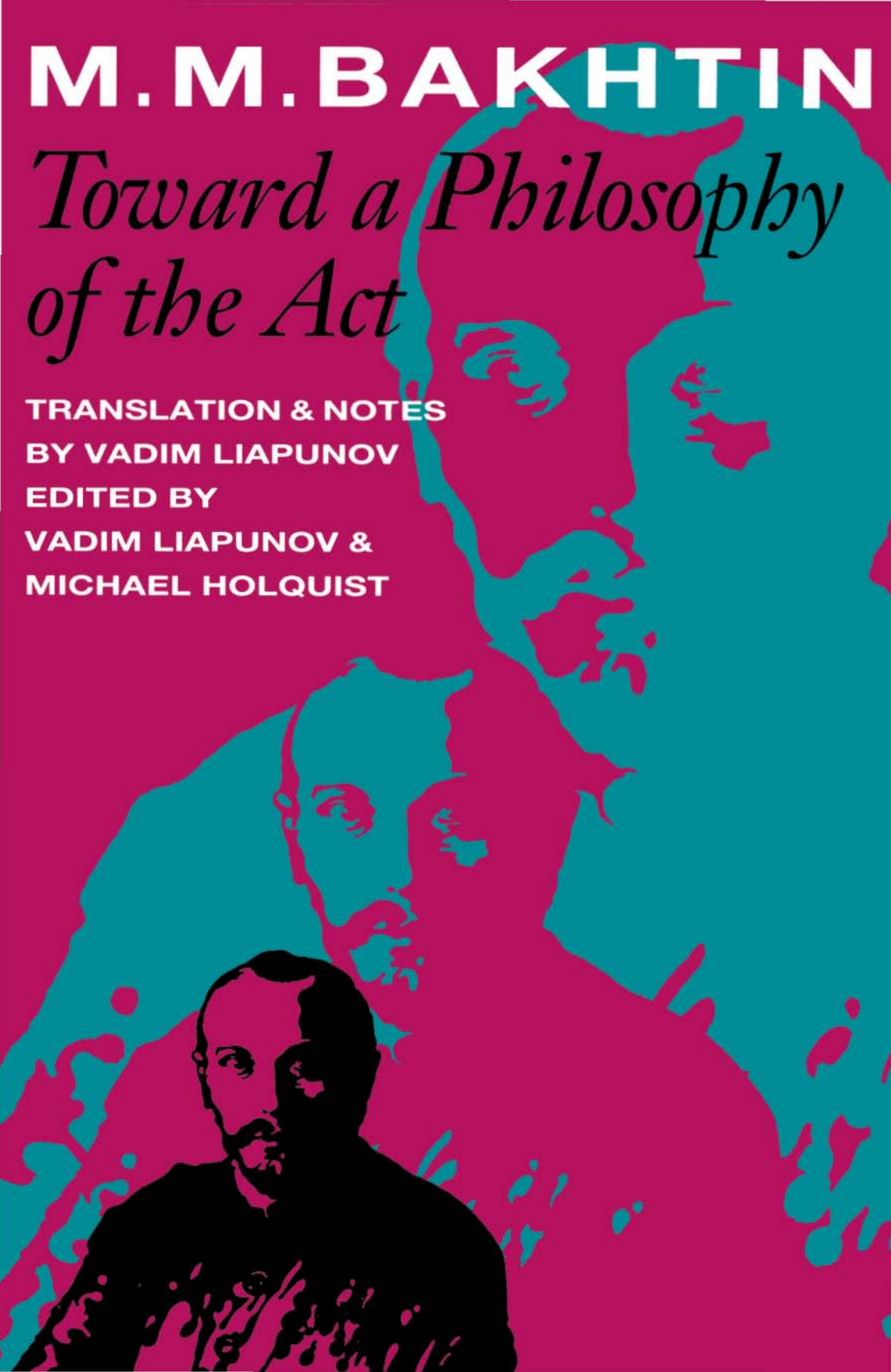
**TRANSLATION & NOTES**

**BY VADIM LIAPUNOV**

**EDITED BY**

**VADIM LIAPUNOV &**

**MICHAEL HOLQUIST**



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TOWARD A PHILOSOPHY OF THE ACT . . . . .

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*General Editor*

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MICHAEL HOLQUIST

## FOREWORD

In his long life under Soviet rule, Bakhtin experienced the whole range of effects an author can produce, from censorship, imprisonment, and banishment to fame and adulation. The shock of his arrest during Stalin's terror made him extremely cautious in later years. It was with the greatest difficulty that a group of young admirers in the early 1960s convinced him to publish again. And it was only after he achieved international acclaim as a result of these publications, and at a time when he knew his death was imminent, that he confessed to his supporters the existence of a cache of his earliest writings. They were hidden away in Saransk, where he lived after returning from his official exile in Kazakhstan. His young friends were ecstatic in 1972 to learn that Bakhtin had, throughout his many moves, managed to keep with him some of his earliest writings. But when they went to the Mordovian capitol to retrieve the manuscripts, they were horrified to discover them packed away in a lumber room, where rats

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and seeping water had severely damaged the crude student notepads in which Bakhtin always wrote his books.

After a long period of decipherment and retranscription by yet another devoted band of young disciples, the notebooks were found to contain the fragments of two important projects Bakhtin had undertaken at the outset of his career, when he still thought of himself as working in the tradition of German philosophy. The larger of the two manuscripts was published as *Art and Answerability* by the University of Texas Press in 1990.

The smaller fragment is here published as *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, translated and annotated by Vadim Liapunov, whose work on the 1990 volume received universal acclaim. The appearance of the present book is an important event for at least two audiences: the increasingly growing number of those who are interested in Bakhtin as the foundational figure in dialogism, a thinker in his own right, and the even larger number of those who are concerned with questions bearing on the relation of philosophy to literary theory, particularly those occupied by the problematic relation of aesthetics and ethics.

For the first group, this text is required reading because it is the earliest of Bakhtin's sustained works, dating from 1919–1921. He was in the midst of all the hardships and exhilaration created by the Revolution's after-effects in Nevel and Vitebsk. There were shortages of food and extraordinary chaos all around, but intellectuals and artists were given a field day. There were several orchestras, staffed by refugees from the former imperial conservatory in St. Petersburg; the art school was enlivened by disputes between Chagall and Malevich. And there were endless public lectures, staged debates, and organized discussions that drew large crowds who wrangled about the eternal questions of God, freedom, justice, and politics. Although Bakhtin even at this time suffered from severe osteomyelitis (and complications arising from a bout of typhus), he was young, vital, and fully engaged in several projects, both private and public.

*Toward a Philosophy of the Act* is the result of one of those projects. The original manuscript of the present volume was difficult to read not only because of the ravages of time, but because, for the most

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part, it was written in haste, with some clearer sections in his wife's script, when she took dictation during periods when his bone disease kept Bakhtin from writing in his own hand. In the faded scrawl we can see the race between the occurrence of ideas and their feverish transcription. This volume provides a chance to see Bakhtin in all the heat and urgency of thought as it wrestles with itself. In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* we catch Bakhtin in the act—the act of creation.

This text further sharpens the profile of Bakhtin's whole career insofar as it demonstrates the depth of his early involvement in the professional discourse of philosophy. More precisely, it reveals new filiations between the themes that first appear here and will guide Bakhtin's thinking throughout the course of his long life. The topics of "authoring," "responsibility," self and other, the moral significance of "outsideness," "participatory thinking," the implications for the individual subject of having "no-alibi in existence," the relation between the world as experienced in actions and the world as represented in discourse—these are all broached here in the white heat of discovery. These themes will be present in more lucid form and specificity in later works, but their suggestiveness and scope will never be greater than they are in the present volume. We are here at the heart of the heart, at the center of the dialogue between being and language, the world and mind, "the given" and "the created" that will be at the core of Bakhtin's distinctive dialogism as it later evolves.

One way to establish the distinctiveness of this work is to contrast it with the project it is seeking to criticize and correct. Much has been made of the youthful Bakhtin's interest in the Marburg school of Neo-Kantianism. What these pages make clear is Bakhtin's obsession not so much with Hermann Cohen and his followers as with Kant himself. We know that during the time he was working on *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin incessantly read, debated, and lectured on Kant, as he would continue to do after his return in 1924 to Petersburg. Put very crudely, this text is an attempt to detranscendentalize Kant, and more particularly to think beyond Kant's formulation of the ethical imperative.

Kant argued that ethics could be grounded on the principle that

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all moral agents should make judgments “as if” their consequences did not apply to a particular case involving the agent’s own interests, but rather “as if” each judgment might affect any person at any time. Bakhtin calls this principle “the universality of the ought” (p. 100 in original, p. 25 in this translation). Such a principle protects morals from the potential viciousness of unbridled relativity. It therefore has much to recommend it in a post-Enlightenment world no longer able to invoke the authority of an unproblematic God. The principle—a philosophically refined, rationally motivated version of the golden rule, really—continues to be built into most of our current theories of law, as formalized, for instance, in John Rawls’ influential ideas in his 1971 *Theory of Justice*.

But Kant’s ethic leaves something important out, according to Bakhtin. The system is highly abstract: it gains in authority by marking a distance from the specific, the local—anything, in other words, that has an odor of the subjective about it. Bakhtin in this volume is seeking to get back to the naked immediacy of experience as it is felt from within the utmost particularity of a specific life, the molten lava of events as they happen. He seeks the sheer quality of happening in life before the magma of such experience cools, hardening into igneous theories, or accounts of what has happened. And just as lava differs from the rock it will become, so the two states of lived experience, on the one hand, and systems for *registering* such experience on the other, are fundamentally different from each other. Bakhtin is not talking about the now familiar gap between the order of signs and the order of things so much as meditating the more originary difference between acts (physical and mental) we feel to be uniquely ours in their performance—events occurring in what Bakhtin calls here the “once-occurrent event of Being”—and the consequences of such events. He wants to understand how the constantly aeteiolating difference between what is *now* and what is *after-now* might be bridged in the relation I forge between them in all the singularity of my unique place in existence.

Most of us will intuitively recognize that something is always left out of account when we describe our actions. Bakhtin argues this is not merely a weakness in our own powers of description, but a dis-

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unity built into the nature of things. How, then, are the two orders—experience and representation of experience—to be put together? This is a problem other members of Bakhtin’s circle in Nevel and Vitebsk were also seeking to solve, and their meetings were devoted to endless discussion of the subject. Bakhtin’s philosophical friend Matvei Kagan was using historiography as an example of how an event and its description might be imagined to have coherence; Pumpsiansky wrestled with the problem in his readings of Dostoevsky. But it was Bakhtin who attempted to confront the problem head on.

Much of the difficulty of Bakhtin’s prose here derives, then, from the complexity of the task he sets himself. He is in a very real sense going back to the point where Kant began his questioning: how can concepts that by definition must be transcendental (in the sense of being independent of any particular experience if they are to organize experience in general) relate to my subjective experience in all its uniqueness? “Possible experience” is a major factor in Kant’s system, and one which troubles Bakhtin here greatly. For “possible experience” is an order of experience that is not uniquely mine; it presumes that I can absolutely empathize with another: “Pure empathizing, that is, the act of coinciding with another and losing one’s own unique place in once-occurrent Being, presupposes the acknowledgement that my own uniqueness and the uniqueness of my place constitute an inessential moment that has no influence on the character of the essence of the world’s being. But this acknowledgement of one’s own uniqueness as inessential for the conception of Being has the inevitable consequence that one also loses the uniqueness of Being, and as a result, we end up with a conception of Being only as possible Being, and not essential, actual, once-occurrent, inescapably real Being. This possible Being, however, is incapable of becoming, incapable of living. The meaning of that Being for which my unique place in Being has been acknowledged as inessential will never be able to bestow meaning on me, nor is this the meaning of Being-as-event” (p. 93 of original, pp. 15–16 of translation).

Bakhtin is condemned from the outset by the nature of his subject to perform an impossible task: “All attempts to force one’s way from inside the theoretical world and into actual Being-as-event are quite

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hopeless” (p. 91 of original, p. 12 of translation). Recognizing that all accounts of acts fundamentally differ from those acts as they are actually performed, he nevertheless seeks to describe—the act itself. It is a particularly complex way to demonstrate the truth of the old dictum that states you cannot escape theory, because any opposition to theory is itself ineluctably theoretical. Also, and not coincidentally, Bakhtin here reveals some of the existential pathos that sleeps in such ineluctability.

In his attempt to bridge the chasm between lived act and the “same” act’s representation (which is, of course, not at all the same), Bakhtin opposes Kant’s principle of “as if,” positing instead another principle: that of “no alibi” in existence. The biggest difference between the two (at least at a formal level; there are of course many differences at other levels that are no less defining) can be localized in the ground each presupposes as the basis for ethical action. For Kant, it is the synthesis between sensibility and reason on which his whole system is based. That synthesis requires Kant to postulate the two basic forms of intuition, time and space, and his twelve categories (substance, force, etc.) as necessary transcendently, insofar as they are prior to any specific act of judgment.

Bakhtin, too, is here seeking a synthesis between sensibility (the lived act, the world of *postupok*) and reason (our discursive systems accounting for, or giving meaning to the act, a world always open to the danger of falling into mere “theoriticism”). But the whole he posits that is capable of containing both is not grounded in a pre-existing structure (the necessary codependence of reason and understanding, personal sensibility and extrapersonal categories that are always prior to specific instances, i.e., Kant’s transcendental synthesis).

For Bakhtin, the unity of an act and its account, a deed and its meaning, if you will, is something that is never a priori, but which must always and everywhere be *achieved*. The act is a deed, and not a mere happening (as in “one damned thing after another”), only if the subject of such a *postupok*, from within his own radical uniqueness, weaves a relation *to* it in his accounting *for* it. Responsibility, then, is the ground of moral action, the way in which we overcome the guilt of the gap between our words and deeds, even though we

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do not have an alibi in existence—in fact, *because* we lack such an alibi: “It is only my non-alibi in being that transforms an empty possibility into an actual answerable act or deed . . .” (p. 113 of original, p. 42 of translation).

One way to think of the importance the non-alibi has for Bakhtin is to think of it not only as a lack that I must fill, but as a lack in Being, a hole in the fabric of the world. The gap Non-alibi seems to name for Bakhtin is something of which we are all aware. It is the space between subjective and objective knowledge which, especially in face of the undoubted power of the exact sciences since the seventeenth century, has manifested itself with increasing frequency. The difference between the order of the mathematical world and the world of human experience has always been recognized. The impersonality of the objective world of geometry was what precisely recommended it to Plato as a model of perfection that could usefully be opposed to the clumsy world of reflections in which actual human beings lived out their brief existences, bewildered by degraded imitations and flickering shadows. The difference between the objective cosmos and our human world was brought home to Roman legionaries every time one of their units was punished with decimation: in the order of numbers, the difference between “nine” and “ten” is purely systemic; for the soldier standing ninth in line it meant life, whereas the “objective” fact of being tenth consigned the next man in line to death. The difference between that event as seen from the perspective of number theory alone and what it meant to an actual legionary on a particular day is the lack Bakhtin’s non-alibi seeks to accommodate.

The distinction has become even more profound in post-quantum physics. As Richard Feynman states the case with his usual clarity, “in all the laws of physics that we have found so far there does not seem to be any distinction between the past and future.”<sup>1</sup> That is, the laws of gravitation, electricity and magnetism, nuclear interaction, the laws of beta-decay—they are all indifferent to time, insofar as they are in themselves processes that remain the same, even if the order in which they occur is reversed. And yet, if a glass of water falls off a table, none of us expects the drops to reconstitute them-

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selves, the shattered shards to fly together into their previous shape, or the whole complex then to jump off the floor back onto the table.

The most poignant way we manifest our expectation that time is not reversible is in the sure knowledge each of us has that we shall one day die. And yet the glass—and our bodies—are made at the most basic level out of atoms, molecules, and quarks, all of which behave, literally, as if there were no tomorrow—or yesterday. The cold reaches of space, the cosmos as it is understood in theoretical physics, is a space in which human beings are not necessary. It is indeed the case that, as Bakhtin says, “An abyss has formed between the motive of an actually performed act or deed and its product. . . . We have conjured up the ghost of objective culture, and now we do not know how to lay it to rest” (p. 123 in original, pp. 54, 55, 56 in translation).

And yet we cannot, as did some of the so-called Life Philosophers (Dilthey, Bergson), or the Existentialists of the 1950s, ignore the objective world: our world as answerable deed “must not oppose itself to theory and thought, but must incorporate them into itself as necessary moments that are wholly answerable” (p. 123 of original, p. 56 of translation).

This means that “The world in which an act or deed actually proceeds, in which it is actually accomplished, is a unitary and unique world . . . The unitary uniqueness of this world . . . is guaranteed for actuality by the acknowledgment of my unique participation in that world, by my *non-alibi* in it. . . . This world is given to me, from my unique place in Being, as a world that is concrete and unique. For my participative, act-performing consciousness, this world, as an architectonic whole, is arranged around me as around that sole center from which my deed issues or comes forth: I *come upon* this world, inasmuch as I *come forth* or issue from within myself in my performed act or deed of seeing, of thinking, of practical doing” (p. 124 of original, pp. 56–57 of translation).

Bakhtin’s *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* is itself an example of what he is here seeking to understand. His deed had a meaning for him as a once-occurrent being in the second decade of this dark century; but the possible slough of subjectivity that act constituted is justified

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through the resonance it has in a different time and a different place. It is arguably the case that the differences between Italy and Russia, Amalia Riznich and Alexander Pushkin that are analyzed in Bakhtin's reading of Pushkin's 1830 poem are as nothing compared to the differences between the unique site of Vitebsk in 1920 and the United States in 1993, or between the once-occurrent being who was Bakhtin at the moment of this text's composition and the uniqueness of any of us who read the text here and now. But the non-alibi Bakhtin sought to underwrite in this text finds (one of) its justification(s) in the new configuration of the unitary and unique world constituted by the unique appropriation each of us as readers will make of the work. In a time and place dominated by the rediscovery of the potential radicalness of the Kantian tradition, a new turn to "ethical criticism," and the vexed questions raised in cultural criticism by the problem of "situated knowledge," *Philosophy of the Act* will find its own "answerability."

1. Richard Feynman, "The Distinction of Past and Future," in *The World Treasury of Physics, Astronomy, and Mathematics* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991), p. 148.

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VADIM LIAPUNOV

TRANSLATOR'S  
PREFACE

*Toward a Philosophy of the Act* is a translation of an unfinished philosophical essay by M. M. Bakhtin (1895–1975) that was published in Russian in 1986 by S. G. Bocharov under the title *K filosofii postupka*.

According to Bocharov, the manuscript has come down to us in very poor condition: the opening pages are missing (hence we do not know the title Bakhtin himself gave to the essay) and a number of words and phrases are barely legible or quite illegible.

We do know what Bakhtin planned to accomplish, for on page 54 in the present volume he provides an outline of the whole essay. It was to comprise four parts, of which he seems to have written only part I (we do not know how complete it is). Part I begins on p. 56 in the present volume; the whole preceding text is, therefore, an introduction (with several pages missing at the beginning).

The opening paragraph of the introduction (in its present truncated form) is a conclusion: “Aesthetic activity as well is power-

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less . . .” Judging by the immediately following paragraph, we may assume that in the preceding pages Bakhtin dealt not only with aesthetic activity (aesthetic intuition, aesthetic seeing), but also with the activity of discursive theoretical thinking (actualized in the natural sciences and in philosophy) and with the activity of historical description-exposition.

All of these activities have no access to the “event-ness” of Being, no access to Being as ongoing event. (In another context Bakhtin explains that “the ongoing event of Being” is a phenomenological concept, “for being presents itself to a living consciousness as an ongoing event, and a living consciousness actively orients itself and lives in it as in an ongoing event.”) All of these activities proceed to establish a radical split between the content/sense of a given act (i.e., its *noema*) and the historical actuality of its being, that is, the actual and once-occurrent performing/experiencing of that act. The given act, however, is an actual *reality* (that is, it participates in the once-occurrent event of Being) only *as an undivided whole*: only this *whole* act is an actual, living participant in the ongoing event of Being.

The ultimate result of splitting off the content of an act from the actual, once-occurrent performing/experiencing of that act is that we find ourselves divided between two non-communicating and mutually impervious worlds: the world of culture (in which the acts of our activity are objectified) and the world of life (in which we actually create, cognize, contemplate, live our lives and die—i.e., the world in which the acts of our activity are actually accomplished once and only once). (The reader should note here Bakhtin’s anticipation of Husserl’s concept of the *Lebenswelt*.)

Concentrating above all on theoretical cognition and on aesthetic intuition, Bakhtin argues that neither of them has any way of gaining access (from within itself) to Being as ongoing event (i.e., to the world of life), for there is no unity and interpenetration in them between the content or product of an act and the actual historical performance of that act, in consequence of a fundamental and essential abstraction from oneself as participant in establishing any sense and seeing. In aesthetic intuition, just as in theoretical cognition, there exists the same radical non-communication between the object

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of the act of aesthetic seeing (the object being a *subiectum* and his life) and the *subiectum* who is the bearer/performer of that act of seeing: in the content of aesthetic seeing we will not find the actually performed act of the one who sees.

And yet the integral, whole act of our activity, of our actual experiencing, is two-sided: it is directed to both the content and the being (the actual accomplishment) of the act. The unitary and unique plane where both sides of the act mutually determine each other (i.e., where they form an undivided whole) is constituted by the ongoing, once-occurrent event of Being. To reflect itself in both directions (in its sense and in its being) the act must, therefore, have the unity of two-sided responsibility or answerability: it must answer both for its content/sense and for its being. The answerability for its being constitutes its *moral* answerability, into which the answerability for its content must be integrated *qua* constituent moment. The pernicious disunity and non-interpenetration of culture and life can be overcome only by regaining this integrity of the act of our activity.

For in reality every thought of mine (every lived-experience, every act), along with its content, constitutes an individually answerable deed—*my* individually answerable deed or performance; it is one of my individually answerable deeds out of which my once-occurrent (unique, singular, sole) life is composed as an uninterrupted deed-performance. This individually answerable deed of mine Bakhtin calls *postupok* (etymologically, the noun means “a step taken” or “the taking of a step”) in distinction to the more general *akt* (the Russian equivalent of the Latin *actus* and *actum*). Bakhtin’s whole (projected) essay is centrally concerned with the phenomenon of my *postupok*, my individually answerable deed or performance, and with the world in which my *postupok* orients itself on the basis of its unique participation in Being as ongoing event (the world of a unique, individual life as a *postupok*).

In translating Bakhtin I needed a great deal of support, encouragement, and advice from friends and colleagues. I am especially grateful to Michael Holquist, Savely Senderovich, James Hart, Nina Perlina, and Caryl Emerson.

**TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE . . . . .**

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S. G. BOCHAROV

INTRODUCTION  
TO THE  
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Among Bakhtin's works published posthumously in the collection of his essays *Estetika slovesnogo tvorchestva* [The Aesthetics of Verbal Creation] (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1979) the text of central importance is the treatise "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity."<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin worked on this treatise at the beginning of the 1920s but did not finish it; it has been published from a manuscript which was preserved (unfortunately, in an incomplete form) among his papers. Bakhtin's papers also included the manuscript of another philosophical treatise which is quite similar in its problematics, basic ideas, and language to "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity." This manuscript was also preserved in an incomplete form, which we are publishing here under the title *K filosofii postupka* [Toward a Philosophy of the Act].<sup>2</sup>

The text published here represents only the initial part of a more extensive philosophical project. The text consists of two large frag-

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ments. The first fragment is apparently the introduction to a treatise on moral philosophy that was to consist of several parts, according to the plan outlined at the end of the introduction. The first pages of this introduction are missing in the surviving manuscript: the first eight out of fifty-two, according to the author's pagination. The introduction is followed immediately by "part I" (that is how the author entitled it in the manuscript); only the beginning of this part has been preserved (sixteen pages, according to the author's pagination).

Both the content of the text published here and the outlined plan of the whole treatise show that the distinctive philosophical aesthetics presented in "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" was only a part of a larger philosophical project which went well beyond the bounds of aesthetics. This project is concerned with more general questions which lie on the boundary of aesthetics and moral philosophy; it is concerned with what Bakhtin calls the world of human action—"the world of event" [*mir sobytii*], "the world of the performed act" [*mir postupka*]. The leading category in this projected treatise is "answerability" [*otvetstvennost'*], and the distinctive concretization of it is an image-concept that Bakhtin introduces here—a "non-alibi in Being" [*ne-alibi v bytii*]: a human being has no right to an alibi—to an evasion of that unique answerability which is constituted by his actualization of his own unique, never-repeatable "place" in Being; he has no right to an evasion of that once-occurrent "answerable act or deed" which his whole life must constitute (cf. the ancient parable of the buried talent as a parable of moral transgression).<sup>3</sup>

It is with a discourse on "answerability" that Bakhtin entered the intellectual life of his time in the immediate postrevolutionary years: his earliest known publication (1919) was an article entitled "Art and Answerability."<sup>4</sup> It spoke in a impassioned tone about surmounting the ancient divorce between art and life through their mutual answerability for each other; and this answerability was to be actualized in the individual person, "who must become answerable through and through": "I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art . . ."<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin probably began working on the treatise "Toward a Philosophy of the Act" soon after

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that programmatic article and it is inspired by the same passion of surmounting “the pernicious non-fusion and non-interpenetration of culture and life” (p. 3 in the present volume). One can feel that passion behind the somewhat difficult technical language of the treatise that reflects, of course, the philosophical trends of the time of its writing. The critical dimension is very pronounced in the text published here: Bakhtin develops a critique of “fatal theoreticism” in the philosophy of that time (in epistemology, in ethics, and in aesthetics) and opposes to it, as a task to be accomplished, the “answerable unity” of thinking and performed action; he also introduces such categories as “action-performing thinking” [*postupaiushchee myshlenie*] and “participative (unindifferent) thinking” [*uchastnoe myshlenie*]. A human being who “thinks participatively” does not “detach [his] performed act from its product” (footnote on p. 19)—that is the main thesis of this distinctive “philosophy of the answerable act or deed” [*filosofia postupka*], as the author himself defines the content of his treatise in the text published here (p. 28). Based on this definition, we have entitled this text “Toward a Philosophy of the Act” [*K filosofii postupka*], since we do not know the author’s own title.

Bakhtin apparently worked on this treatise during his stay in Vitebsk (1920–1924). It is very likely that the Vitebsk periodical *Iskusstvo* [Art] (1 [March 1921]: 23) was referring to this treatise when it reported that “M. M. Bakhtin continues to work on a book devoted to the problems of moral philosophy.” In the text published in the present volume we are dealing with the early Bakhtin, at the beginning of his life’s career; and we find here the philosophical sources of a number of leading ideas which he continued to develop in the course of more than half a century of his activity as a thinker.

It was in the context of working on his treatise on moral philosophy that Bakhtin began to write the treatise on aesthetics that the reader knows—“Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity.” This treatise was apparently an offshoot from the treatise on moral philosophy and was written somewhat later. The text of “Author and Hero” that has been published in *Estetika slovesnogo tvorchestva* [The Aesthetics of Verbal Creation] did not include an extant fragment of the first chapter, which deals with certain preliminary propositions

INTRODUCTION TO THE RUSSIAN EDITION . . . . .



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