

Michael Holquist (1935–2016)

In a luminous early meditation on the “problem of death (death from within and death from without),” Mikhail Bakhtin notes that “birth and death as *mine* are incapable of becoming events of my own life.”¹ My death, he insists, can be an event only for others; it is, moreover, an aesthetic event, descending on others as a gift, at last enabling them to shape my personality. These remarks by the young Bakhtin—a man in his late twenties who had suffered from chronic bone disease since childhood and who, like the honoree of this essay, survived into his eightieth year—pave the way for this tribute to Michael Holquist. For it was Bakhtin’s conviction that we cannot write our own life story. If we do, we must adopt a mask. In 2013, already seven years retired from Yale, Holquist published a brief autobiographical sketch, the checkered account of a slow learner and resilient rejectee, done up in the voice of a picaro.² Technically everything in it is correct, but the tone had a task of its own, which was to give the speaker a face that we would smile at, that we would interrupt with a counterstory. Drawing on that serio-comic document—the CV narrated from within—the major phases of Michael Holquist’s life are these.

Born 1935 in Rockford, Illinois, into a poor working-class family. Failed first grade because he could not learn to read. Expelled from the University of Illinois in the mid-1950s for anti-McCarthy activity. After two grueling years as a factory worker, saved himself by enlisting in the US army (1958–61). Could not handle an M-1 rifle and had to repeat basic training. But loved learning Russian at Monterey and being deployed by Army Intelligence with the West German border police. Then readmission to U of I (on probation), a Woodrow Wilson fellowship, graduate study at Yale, and a dissertation under Victor Erlich. As a precarious Assistant Professor, helped restructure Yale’s literature program and wrote a book on Dostoevskii. Denied tenure in 1975. Moved to the University of Texas as Chair of Slavic, which coincided with his discovery of Bakhtin, who had died that year in Moscow.³ Then the move to Indiana University (1980–86). More translations and editions followed, the first biography of Bakhtin in any language (with Katerina Clark, 1984), and the good fortune to attract IU’s Vadim Liapunov, consummate philologist, to the task of moving Bakhtin’s early manuscripts into English (1990, 1993). At last, the global Bakhtin boom would be grounded in European philosophical discourse.

Holquist, meanwhile, had returned to Yale, to its Comparative Literature department, in 1986. After writing a book on dialogism, he began to wonder—as all of us

1. “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” in *Art and Answerability. Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, trans. and notes by Vadim Liapunov (Austin, 1990), 104.

2. Michael Holquist, “Catch-ups and Workarounds: A Jury Rigged Life,” *Intellectual Trajectories*, vol. 2, eds. Kai Erikson and Patricia Dallai (New Haven, 2013): 93–100.

3. It was during the Austin period (1975–80) that Michael recruited me, a restless over-age graduate student, to co-translate with him some curious, just-published essays by Bakhtin from the 1930s that went decidedly against the grain of the French theory then regnant in the literary academy. Among those thanked in the Acknowledgments of *The Dialogic Imagination* is Snugli Cottage Industries. For such were our sessions in the Chair’s office at UT: debating every word of Bakhtin’s rambling, wide-ranging prose with newborn Nicholas, Michael’s fourth son strapped to his chest in a Snugli front-pack, and first with Katerina Clark.

groundlings in the industry have done—if there was life beyond Bakhtin. (He would find it in world literature and the global humanities.) Retirement from Yale in 2005 was not a threshold event. As Emeritus, he taught at NYU, CUNY, Columbia, served as President of MLA (2007), ran a modest import business in French wines with his wife Elise Snyder, and began a study of literacy in the digital age. Holquist ended his 2013 biographical sketch on an endearing note: “My life has been a long series of attempts to come back from failure, a story of catch-ups and workarounds. . . . I always had to repeat things. But I learned.” Being obliged to learn so often from the bottom up, on the other’s terms, doubtless facilitated Holquist’s uncanny, street-smart sense of organic (not only logical) contexts. He had an intuition about what questions had to be asked, to whom, and why others might find it useful to listen. In all his work—and nowhere more potently than in his explication of the tangled relation between Bakhtin and Kant—he was a historian of ideas first and a theorist only later.⁴ He always pushed an idea up one notch beyond what we thought it meant. At the heart of dialogism is not just back-and-forth talk, but the necessity of relation, “the inability of anything to be [merely] itself.”⁵ Philology means not just loving words, but the “systematic dream of making connections.”⁶ (To philology we will return, for the definitions accrete.) This virtue of seeing outside the box was noted by the first of Michael’s students to write up his posthumous story, Ilya Kliger, in his “Some Themes from Michael Holquist (1935–2016),” posted on a NYU blog on July 5, 2016.⁷ Kliger too remarks on the texture of the lived life as “a kind of adventure novel,” “generously mischievous,” even “picaresque.” Two of Kliger’s “Holquist themes”—simultaneity and academic partisanship—will serve as anchors for the remainder of this tribute.

First, simultaneity. Kliger celebrates it as a Dostoevskian “idea-feeling” precious to Holquist, a heightened sense of reciprocity (Kliger calls it the “togetherness of existence”) and of potentials inhering in the present. Simultaneity is indeed a Bakhtinian virtue, given its due in the Dostoevskii book (“The fundamental category in Dostoevsky’s mode of artistic visualizing was not evolution, but *coexistence* and *interaction*”).⁸ Holquist’s theme does more work than this, however. For a long time, Bakhtinian dialogue was understood as a lateral, linear, largely secular thing, a matter of voices conversing (speaking, listening, and answering). Dialogue thus conceived spreads out in linear fashion and piles up in time—freely, chaotically, unsystematically. Without denying this forward dynamic, Holquist returned our attention to the same-time-ness of Bakhtin’s cosmic worldview, its insistence on the continuous integration of dissimilar things and the uninterrupted feedback loops that are essen-

4. For a masterful survey of the Kantian substrate in Bakhtin, and the most lucid explanation possible of Kant’s “transcendental” versus Bakhtin’s “transgredient,” see Michael Holquist, “The Role of Chronotope in Dialog,” in “From Petersburg to Bloomington. Essays in Honor of Nina Perlina,” ed. John Bartle, Michael C. Finke, Vadim Liapunov, *Indiana Slavic Studies* 18, (2012): 65–79.

5. Michael Holquist, “Preface,” *The Novelness of Bakhtin. Perspectives and Possibilities*, ed. Jørgen Bruhn and Jan Lundquist (Copenhagen, 2001): 7–9, here 7.

6. Michael Holquist, “Bakhtin and the Task of Philology. An Essay for Vadim,” in “In Other Words: Studies to Honor Vadim Liapunov,” ed. Stephen Blackwell, Michael Finke, Nina Perlina, and Yekaterina Vernikova, *Indiana Slavic Studies* 11, (2000): 55–67, here 56.

7. Ilya Kliger, “Some Themes from Michael Holquist (1935–2016),” NYU Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia, at www.jordanrussiacenter.org/news/themes-michael-holquist-1935-2016/#.WA5vhoMrLct (last accessed October 24, 2016).

8. Mikhail Bakhtin, Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. and ed. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 28.

tial for all living systems—what he recognized as Bakhtin’s organicism.⁹ The vertical or timeless structure of simultaneity lends it a spiritual aura, a sense that living matter is constantly in motion and never (until its death) in a position to hoard its goods. The same vision of “all of life, all at once, available to all” is detectible in Bakhtin’s more rapturous discussions of carnival. It is no accident that among Holquist’s richest projects at the time of his death was an investigation of the novel in terms of profane tools (statistics, the science of numbers) and the ground they share with the sacred.

It is on one fragment of such a project that I end this commemoration. The second theme Klinger put forward in his NYU post was Holquist’s temperamental inability to be “an impartial historian of ideas.” He took sides passionately, relished controversial stands, adored battling them out in public. By his final decade, Michael had become a spokesperson for the global humanities. In his contribution to *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* (2011), he approached the current global explosion of texts through a whirlwind “history of the profession,” the profession of text preservation and interpretation, which he called philology.¹⁰ This ancient discipline, Holquist insisted, is *not* dead. Its golden age was the German late 18th-19th century, from Friedrich Wolf to Nietzsche, when the world to be examined was still ridiculously small. Recent technologies that scan millions of texts a year on to interactive data bases have been a challenge to it, but in no sense has philology been superannuated. Philology is now *the* world discipline, and the discipline most needed by the world. For in addition to a practice, philology is also a goal, an exemplary intellectual attitude, a “secular, critical stance toward texts grounded in scholarship and rigorous method, as opposed to a mode of reading governed by faith and ecclesiastical authority” (149). As the world knows, faith and authority can come in both benign and aggressive forms. But surely Holquist intends here the minimum definition that Bakhtin held out for dialogism: to be a philologist I must be willing to *stand outside*, to admit that my word is not the only word, nor the final one—and furthermore, be grateful that this is so. Give up the fantasy of an original text: “Philology is a version of academic agnosticism: beginning with the conviction that there is no text privileged *in itself*, the scholar then goes on to do the work of establishing . . . what might be called a *good enough text*” (154).

Here too, Michael thinks outside the box. For thirty years, the great Russian verse scholar Mikhail Gasparov campaigned vigorously against Bakhtin’s concepts of dialogism, heteroglossia, and menippean satire as loose philosophical conjectures that undermined responsible philology. The Holquist position in this debate seems to be: love the word, but take a hard look at where language now is, for Bakhtin is our ally. Support for this conjecture comes from Michael’s final year: an incomplete eight-page sketch titled “Ideology, the Sacred, and the Novel. Moscow, June 2015,” found unexpectedly on his computer by Ilya Klinger during an inventory of the Nachlass.¹¹ The Russian conference at which Holquist spoke was devoted to problems of World Literature. Michael was already one year into his miraculous reprieve. A year earlier,

9. Michael Holquist, “Dialogism and Aesthetics,” in *Late Soviet Culture From Perestroika to Novostroika*, ed. Thomas Lahusen and Gene Kuperman (Durham, 1993): 155–76.

10. Michael Holquist, “World Literature and Philology,” in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, eds. Theo D’haen, David Damrosch, Djelal Kadir (London, 2011): 147–57.

11. “Ideology, the Sacred, and the Novel. Moscow, June, 2015. 20 minutes = 2,600 words.” Located by Ilya Klinger and forwarded to the author several days after Holquist’s death (June 26, 2016).

in July 2014, his doctors, while looking for something else, had discovered his rare cancer and given him three to six months to live. Between treatments, Michael continued to travel, teach, lecture, and create.

The English draft of this conference paper breaks off mid-idea, and a much longer, stiffer version published in Russian under the same title in 2016 shares some of the topics but none of the tone.¹² Thus, the penultimate word on the humanities by Michael Holquist presents us with all the problems that philology is supposed to solve. He begins by declaring the academic study of literature in 2015 to be in a “Kuhnian phase of unnatural science,” and admits that his will be a “gloomy evaluation.” The major problem is the sheer volume of available texts. Digital humanities, “distant reading,” and translation programs where no single “brain” needs to know any language at all (only statistics and algorithms) are recent attempts to exit abnormal science into a new consensual identity. As regards authoritative meaning, Michael reminds us, numbers and words are *both* systems based on approximation. Numbers, however, have always seemed more precise, more truth-bearing and pregnant with a solution. Modern science—although it speaks of “utility rather than divinity”—inherits this halo. In contrast to mathematics, the authority of natural languages, in all their glorious diversity, has steadily lost ground. It seems that the vast new scope of the profession can only be served by numbers. Here the draft talk ends, and involuntarily I thought again of Michael’s autobiography from 2013, which he saw as “a series of attempts to come back from failure.” Where would this gloomy idea have gone, once it picked itself up and set off?

In Bakhtin’s early writings there are moments that reach for sacral authority, and often they highlight the virtues of simultaneity. One occurs during Bakhtin’s discussion of “rhythm” in life and art: “The demand is: live in such a way that every given moment of your life would be both the consummating, final moment and, and at the same time, the initial moment of a new life.”¹³ The catch, for Bakhtin, is that my success in this task is not up to me; someone else must make that judgment. Has my new life begun? “For me myself, only a history of my fall is possible, whereas a history of my gradual ascent is in principle impossible.”¹⁴ Michael Holquist’s self-image in that Yale biographical sketch, of a man running fast to keep ahead of his own failures, was that history. It can now be supplemented by our stories of his ascent.

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12. M. Khol’kvist, “Ideologiia, sakral’noe i roman,” in *Literatura i ideologiia. Vek dvadtsatyi*, O. Yu. Panova, V. M. Tolmachev, ed. trans. T. A. Pirusskaia (Moscow, 2016): 9–18.

13. Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” 122.

14. *Ibid.*, 123.