Bakhtin, Cassirer and symbolic forms

Craig Brandist

Many have seen in Bakhtin's theory of the novel something relevant for a wide variety of disciplines, from literary studies, narrowly defined, to political theory and anthropology. Accordingly, it has been noted that the theory incorporates an ideal history of literary forms, a philosophy of culture, a typology of discursive relations, and a theory of conflicting social forces. The sources of such a wide-ranging theory seem to be diverse: from Marburg Neo-Kantianism to Russian Formalism, Marxist political theory and classical aesthetics. However, there seems a wealth of evidence to suggest that behind the eclecticism of Bakhtin's theory lies a unifying feature: Hegelian philosophy as modified by the work of Ernst Cassirer. I believe there are many areas in which the influence of Cassirer on Bakhtin's group can be traced, including the concept of the sign and the way such periods as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment are conceived, but here I shall limit my attention to the influence of Cassirer's work on Bakhtin's theory of the novel. As we shall see, while Bakhtin's own terminology differs significantly from that of Hegel and Cassirer, the structural features common to their works are too pervasive to be passed off as one influence among many.

Revised Hegelianism

If the structural parallels between these thinkers' works are as pervasive as I suggest, it would be reasonable to ask why, when such a huge amount of critical material about Bakhtin has been produced in recent years, no systematic analysis of Cassirer's influence on Bakhtin has appeared. One reason is the lack of a definitive, chronologically organized edition of Bakhtin's work, which is itself a product of the vicissitudes of intellectual life in the Soviet Union. Another reason derives from the way Cassirer's work has been understood until quite recently. As John Krois notes, Anglo-American writers have tended to present Cassirer as 'a scholarly investigator and historian of ideas, a representative of historicism without a position of his own', while in Germany he has been seen to represent Marburg Neo-Kantian epistemology. Thus, while many have noted the importance of Neo-Kantianism in Bakhtin's work, though with little or no archival evidence, Cassirer has remained simply one among many thinkers. Recently published interviews with Bakhtin shortly before his death make it very clear, however, that Cassirer's 1923–29 three-volume *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* was one of the most important influences on Bakhtin's mature work, while Brian Poole's forthcoming archival research has uncovered notebooks in which Bakhtin made copious notes from Cassirer's work. At a deeper level, researchers have tended to take Bakhtin's negatively tinged overt references to Hegel's philosophy at face value, assuming that they implied a rejection of Hegelianism in its totality. This is based on Bakhtin's objection to interpretations of Dostoevsky's novels which confuse the way Hegel treats different perspectives on reality as stages in a single, linear development with Dostoevsky's presentation of 'a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses' which unfold in the course of the novel without each 'becom[ing] a simple object of the author's consciousness'. There is no doubt that Bakhtin is with Dostoyevsky and against Hegel here. However, Bakhtin's comment is almost identical to a remark by Cassirer, whose central work is profoundly Hegelian, that the main problem with Hegel is that philosophy deprives 'various cultural forms ... of their autonomous and independent value and subordinates them to its own systematic purpose. Here is the point of contrast with Kant.' Despite this reservation, there seems little doubt that Bakhtin's account of the emergence and development of the novel is profoundly Hegelian, and that the novel itself takes over many of the functions of Hegel's philosophy, but now cleansed of its monologic inclinations.

For Hegel, phenomenology studies the way Geist 'appears' – that is, objectifies itself in things in order to appear 'for itself' as something opposite to itself. Bakhtin follows Hegel closely here, arguing that the novel studies and recalls the way life is objectified in
language. This recollection is not only historical but also, like Hegel's phenomenology, the study of the essential. The philosophy of Geist is characterized by Hegel as the representation of the route natural consciousness takes to true knowledge as a matter of necessity. ‘Essence’ must ultimately ‘appear’ at the end of a course of development. Bakhtin’s 1934–35 essay ‘Discourse in the Novel’ is an account of how the ‘essence’ of the novel as a genre ‘appears’, that is, comes to fully present ‘all the social and ideological voices of its era [heteroglossia], that is, all the era’s languages that have any claim to being significant’.

The parallel is explicitly outlined at one stage of this work:

Heteroglossia ‘in-itself’ becomes, in the novel and thanks to the novel, heteroglossia ‘for-itself’: languages are dialogically implicated in each other and begin to exist for each other. It is precisely thanks to the novel that languages are able to illuminate each other mutually; literary language becomes a dialogue of languages that both know about and understand each other.9

This extraordinary recasting of the Hegelian dialectic was based upon a crucial amendment made to Hegel’s system by Cassirer in 1923: the insistence that ‘philosophical awareness arises only in and through language’.10 Indeed, it may well have been the appearance of the first volume of Cassirer’s The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms in that year that led Bakhtin and his group into a prolonged and extremely productive study of the relations between language in everyday life and in literature.

Like Bakhtin, Cassirer followed Hegel in shifting the concept of ‘culture’11 from the aesthetic sense it still maintained in Kant’s writing to an anthropological sense where it helped to effect a shift in political theory from problems of ideology to questions of hegemony.12 However, Cassirer added a semiotic dimension by replacing Hegel’s ‘logic’ with the ‘law’ of symbolism that underlies the development of symbolic forms: art, language, myth, science, history, and so on. There are three stages in the development of these forms, which Cassirer calls ‘mimetic’, ‘analogical’ and ‘purely symbolic’. In the case of language, the first stage is reached when the sound uttered tries to ‘approach the sensory impression and reproduce its diversity as faithfully as possible’. Here, there is no attempt to make ‘general designations’; rather, a phonetic nuance tries to reproduce every nuance of the sensory impression.13

In an argument that strongly echoes Bakhtin’s narrative, Cassirer argues that this breaks down as different cultures and languages come into contact with each other and as a result of the internal criticism of language.14 At this stage ‘context is … communicated by a formal analogy between the phonetic sequence and the sequence of contents designated’,15 the sign has a referential relationship to reality and communicates the speaker’s relationship with reality. Ultimately language makes a ‘virtue … of the ambiguity inevitable in the linguistic sign’ and relinquishes ‘the last semblance of any mediate or immediate identity between reality and symbol’.16 Understanding is thereby liberated from close adherence to the concrete world of sense impressions, through orientation towards the activity of the subject and towards the full realization and application of the symbolic character of interpretation. In a key passage from the volume on language, Cassirer argues that the value and specific character of both linguistic and artistic formation lie in the ‘progressive removal’ from ‘the immediately given’, for ‘the distance from immediate reality and immediate experience is the condition of their being perceived, of our spiritual awareness of them’.17

The general lines of the parallels with Bakhtin’s account of the emergence of novelistic discourse should be apparent even after this short sketch. For Bakhtin, it is precisely the breakdown of the period of sealed-off national languages (monoglossia) at the end of the Hellenic period that allowed the decentring of cultural consciousness represented in and by the novel to develop. No longer was there an absolute faith in the correspondence of language and reality; only a formal analogy was now sustainable. Yet even this was subject to pressure from the relativizing influence of reflexive and self-aware (purely symbolic) forms of discourse promoted by speech diversity. Critical consciousness thus begins to emerge from the fetters of myth as the dissociation between ‘language and intentions, language and thought, language and expression’ is made clear. By ‘dissociation’ Bakhtin makes it clear that he is talking about ‘a destruction of any absolute bonding of ideological meaning to language, which is the defining factor of mythological and magical thought’. The absolute domination of language by mythological thought is, argues Bakhtin, ‘located in the prehistorical … past of language consciousness’ from which language and literature emerged and began to limit the influence of myth over thought by exposing the distance between language and reality.

**Myth as a symbolic form**

For Cassirer, all symbolic forms must ‘be emancipated from the common matrix of myth… Theoretical,
practical and aesthetic consciousness, the world of language and morality, the basic forms of community and the state – they are all originally tied up with mythico-religious conceptions'. Myth, like art, science and language, is a configuration towards being, but the specificity of myth lies not in its content but in ‘the intensity with which it is experienced, with which it is believed – as only something endowed with objective reality can be believed’. Mythic thought allows no detachment; it stands in awe of what confronts it, having ‘no will to understand the object by encompassing it logically and articulating it with a complex of cause and effects; it is simply overpowered by the object’.

The mythical world is one of conflicting powers, every natural phenomenon is imbued with those powers and it is therefore permeated by emotional qualities. Everything in the mythical world is friendly or inimical, alluring or repellent, fascinating or threatening because the primitive mentality views nature as sympathetic – that is, as a fundamental ‘solidarity of life’ in which the viewer has no unique and privileged place. Scientific thought has systematically to liberate the observer from observed phenomena and obliterate all trace of mythical perception, but such activity only restricts it to certain spheres; it does not, and indeed cannot, destroy myth itself. Myth remains in the ‘expressive function’ of symbolism, where there is no difference admitted between ‘image and thing, the sign and what it designates’, where ‘every phenomenon discloses a definite character … which belongs to it immediately’. Art, like myth, is dependent on the perception of expression, but, as we shall see, there are significant differences between the two. Myth is overwhelmed by this perception, whereas art couples depth of feeling with ‘the distance accompanying the universality of objectification’. Human life is ‘bound and fettered’ in mythical experience, whereas in art it becomes ‘aesthetically liberated’.

As well as being an ideal history of the unfolding of autonomous symbolic forms from the common matrix of myth, Cassirer’s work also presents a theory of conflicting social forces. As for Bakhtin, the main conflict here is that between mythical and non- (or anti-) mythical conceptions of the world: a dialectic of mythical and critical symbolic forms. Although a distinct and irreducible symbolic form, myth can and does enter into combinations with other forms and has a particularly close kinship with both language and art. It is especially apparent in openly emotional language and in lyric poetry. It is also there in mythic rites, where time is arrested and man can enter the ‘original time’ of the gods. In rituals surrounding birth and death, puberty and marriage, a sort of abstract ‘biological time’ is felt rather than thought in an abstract sense. Mythic experience and expression are ‘a mere passivity, a being-acted-upon rather than acting’, and this receptivity stands in evident contrast to that kind of spontaneity in which all self-consciousness as such is grounded. In the repetition of rites critical discernment and consciousness of personality are lulled asleep and the mythical conception of the world can extend its influence. This became particularly pertinent for Cassirer at the end of his life when he reflected on the rise of Nazism in Germany. Myth there became a ‘technique of rulership’ based on the shifting of language from descriptive to emotional speech; the ritualization of social life; the replacement of ideal values with concrete images of good and bad; and the development of a sort of prophesy based on scientific and philosophical claims. The spontaneity of thought and action is limited and authoritative substitutes are provided.

While it is highly unlikely that Bakhtin read Cassirer’s last work, the ritualization of everyday life and the unprecedented ideological centralization of Soviet society in the 1930s were undoubtedly enough to compel Bakhtin to treat myth as a contemporary as well as a historical and formal question. Thus while Bakhtin was to treat the absolute domination of language and literature by myth as an issue that receded into the distant past, the relative power of myth in these spheres is treated as an eternal question. Having accepted the irreducibility and incompatibility of ‘symbolic forms’, Bakhtin follows Cassirer in posing the struggle between different orientations as irreconcilable in principle. Within the sphere of language, Bakhtin sees all forces towards linguistic centralization as evidence of a mythical influence on language, while within the realm of literature he follows Cassirer in positing ‘poetry’, the ‘discourse of
pathos’ and the epic as manifestations of the influence of the mythic. The unitary language imposes ‘specific limits’ on heteroglossia, brings about the ‘enslavement of’ other languages by ‘the process of illuminating them with the True Word’. Unitary language limits the spontaneity of thought and action by limiting its verbal embodiment, and it ‘posit[s]’ itself as universally valid, directly expressive of reality itself. Coinciding with this, the disciplines which study this language have tended to assume the passive reception of this ideologically ‘neutral’ discourse as synonymous with verbal understanding as such, essentially obscuring and thus strengthening the influence of myth on language.

Similarly in poetry and poetics the mythical conception of the world has been dominant. As Bakhtin puts it: ‘any sense of the boundedness, the historicity, the social determination and specificity of one’s own language … and therefore a critically qualified relationship to one’s own language … is foreign to poetic style’. The poet is thereby dangerously close to a mythical conception of language, having no critical distance from his own language, in which he is ‘utterly immersed’. The language of the poet presents itself as at one with his immediate experience, it only exists for him from the inside. For lyric poetry, notes Cassirer, ‘there is nothing external; it is always within’; it maintains an apparently infinite ‘innerness’ to the extent that ‘it is never completely expressible or exhaustible; but this is an infinity of content not extension’. The object of poetic discourse, whether externally perceived or internally felt, has an ‘inexhaustible wealth and contradictory multiplicity’ to which the poetic word is never equal, but it need never assume other acts of ‘verbal recognition’.

Like that of the lyric poet, the ‘discourse of pathos’ also ‘has the appearance of directly intentional discourse’. Although it appears in the novel, it does so ‘to restore some other genre, genres that, in their own unmediated and pure form, have lost their base in reality’, and it is thus usually conditional. A discourse of pathos appears in the novel to resist the critical forces at work within it: ‘The discourse of pathos and the kind of representation it represents were born and shaped in the distanced image; they are organically linked with the hierarchically evaluated concept of the past.’ This discourse thus shares with poetry the expressive function as a dominant aspect, but it is also linked with a type of view of the past which dominates the world of epic and is an aspect of mythical time. For epic is concerned with the ‘absolute past’ and ‘sacrosanct tradition’, which, like the mythical ‘original time’ of the gods, is ‘impossible to change, to rethink, to re-evaluate’. Passive reverence is the only possible relationship with this time; it is a mythical time that excludes any active engagement; it is a ‘valorised, hierarchical category’, all points of which are equidistant from the present, active, open moment. The ‘absolute past’ is a mythic realm it is no longer possible to enter, but it has authority in the present, being a time of ‘beginnings’ and ‘peak times’, of ‘firsts’ and ‘bests’. The epic poet gives prophesies in a language that originates in the valorized past, which cannot be doubted; a language from an authoritative time before which the listener and singer stand in awe.

**Myth and hegemony**

This complex of myth and language is thus oriented against the decentralizing, critical forces of culture, seeking to limit those forces and present a single viewpoint as directly expressive of natural existence. The term Bakhtin gives to language that is oriented in a mythical fashion is ‘authoritative discourse’. In a famous passage he notes that

> The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it. The authoritative word is located in the distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher.

Bakhtin then goes on to pronounce the kinship of this ‘word’ with taboo, a central plank of Cassirer’s volume on myth. The ‘authoritative word’ is a ‘name that must not be taken in vain’; it can be unconditionally accepted or rejected, and its authority along with it. As in myth, ‘obligation has a purely social character and is experienced as an external force. Deliberation is unnecessary in the rigidly prescribed social sphere of mythic thought.’

As I have argued elsewhere, what Bakhtin is describing in his discussion of monologism, poetry and ‘authoritative discourse’ is less a type of discourse than an orientation towards other discourses. He speaks of relationships between languages as a type of language itself rather than as a mode of interaction or ‘hegemonic principle’. ‘Authoritative discourse’ is really an authoritative relationship between privileged and subordinate perspectives. The confusion seems to emanate from Bakhtin’s adoption of irreducible and ideal symbolic forms: myth, science, history, language etc., which remains consistent only as long as language is treated, as Cassirer treats it, in a general, abstract fashion. Once each specific language is considered as an autonomous symbolic form in itself, then it is no
longer possible to talk about myth, art and so forth as symbolic forms in the same sense. There is a crucial difference between stylistic and generic categories, which Bakhtin does not admit. Myth, in this sense, refers to the absolute hegemony of one language, the ideal limit of the authoritative hegemonic principle. This redefinition becomes necessary as soon as any attempt is made to stratify language internally in any systematic sense. This was perhaps the single most important advance made by Bakhtin over Cassirer: the attempt to stratify language according to sociological principles and orientations. However, Bakhtin was not prepared to take the next logical step: to correlate linguistic evaluation and orientation with the institutional co-ordinates of social life in anything but the most general terms. In the absence of this, Cassirer’s dialectic of mythical and critical forms of culture are grafted onto a populist dialectic of the official and the popular. Cassirer’s conceptual structure, forged from within the traditions of German liberalism, is now attached to a structure adopted from Russian populism.42

**Popular laughter and radical scepticism**

The main features of this grafting are apparent in the importance Bakhtin accords to the role of folk laughter and parody in the development of critical forms of culture. Laughter, argues Bakhtin, ‘demolishes fear and piety before an object’, making ‘investigative experiment – both scientific and artistic’ possible by bringing the object up close to examine it with bold familiarity. The destruction of ‘epic distance’, stripping the object of its ‘hierarchial ornamentation’, is ‘an extremely important and indispensable step in making possible free, scientifically knowable and artistically realistic creativity in European civilisation’. Through laughter, ‘analysis, dismemberment, turning things into dead objects’ reigns supreme.43 Turning things into ‘dead objects’ is the antithesis of mythical perception as found in Cassirer’s work, but here it is correlated with popular culture. In the carnival squares of early modern Europe Bakhtin saw the antithesis of the monolithically serious official world-view of the ruling culture.44 Playing with sacred images and official language served to destroy its fear-inspiring ornamentation and claims to ultimate, mythical validity. However, argues Bakhtin, it was only with the entry of the spirit of the carnival square into literature that the critical impulse implicit in popular travesty could achieve ideological structuredness. The epitome of this transposition of popular humour into literature Bakhtin famously found in the work of Rabelais.

Similar accounts of the role of laughter in literature, though without the populist gloss or centrality bestowed upon it by Bakhtin, appear in Cassirer’s work. In one of his last books, Cassirer noted that ‘comic art possesses in the highest degree that faculty shared by all art, sympathetic vision’. Human life appears to us with all its defects and foibles. Whereas the lyric poet can revitalize mythic feelings, the comic artist is particularly realistic:

> We become observant of the minutest details; we see this world in all its narrowness, its pettiness, and silliness. We live in this restricted world, but we are no longer imprisoned by it. Such is the nature of the comic catharsis. Things and events begin to lose their material weight; scorn is dissolved into laughter and laughter is liberation.45

In the 1932 book *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, Cassirer singled out the works of Cervantes, Boccaccio, Rabelais, Hans Sachs and Shakespeare as representatives of the use of comedy as a ‘liberating, life-giving, and life-forming power of the soul’. In these works excessive seriousness and pedantry are revealed:

> To the pedant, as to the zealot, freedom of thought is an abomination; for the former takes shelter behind the dignity of knowledge, the latter behind the sanctified authority of religion. When both retrench themselves behind a false gravity, nothing remains but to subject them to the test of ridicule and expose them.46

These Renaissance authors effectively inaugurate a comic and parodic testing of the characters’ discourse and their claims to universality. Again, this is a very short step from Bakhtin’s analysis as it appears in 1934–35, where all the examples given by Cassirer that appear in novelistic texts appear in ‘Discourse in the Novel’. Following through the logic of his fusing the dialectics of symbolic forms with populism, Bakhtin finds in the novel the literary equivalent of popular parody: it is quite the antithesis of ‘official’ genres, parodying their roles as genres, and has no canon of its own.47

As a ‘popular’ genre and a critical symbolic form, the novel evolved in and through its struggle with myth in the form of ‘poetry’, those ennobled forms of literature which assumed an immediate or mediate correspondence between sign and referent. In such ‘pre-novelistic’ genres as the minor parodic genres (*fabliaux*, *schwänk*, street songs etc.), Bakhtin saw the emergence of an inherent ‘philosophy of discourse’, in essence a ‘profound distrust of discourse as such’.
What concerns such genres is not the direct meaning or emotional content of the word, but the actual and always self-interested use to which the meaning is put and the way it is expressed by the speaker, a use determined by the speaker’s position (profession, social class etc.) and by the concrete situation. Who speaks and under what conditions he speaks: this is what determines the word’s actual meaning. All direct meanings and direct expressions are false, and this is especially true of emotional meanings and expressions. 

In response to the falsity of pathos-ridden truth claims by knights, priests, scholars and so on, one sees the ‘gay deception’, the intelligent lies of rogues or the fool’s lack of comprehension. Deception meets (dubious) truth claims, and incomprehension meets (pseudo) intelligence in a polemical fashion. Sometimes the rogue dons the mask of the fool and becomes the clown ‘to motivate distortions and shufflings of languages and labels, thus unmasking them by not understanding them’. Thus evolves a ‘radical scepticism … bordering on rejection of the very possibility of having a straightforward discourse at all that would not be false’. The further this freeing of discourse from heavy pathos proceeds, the more open it is to a further development: a dialectical synthesis of the hero’s discourse about himself and his world with the author’s own thought about him in the image of the hero’s language. Now one can take a variety of attitudes towards ‘the argument sounding within the image, … take various positions in this argument and, consequently … vary the interpretation of the image itself. The image becomes polysemic, like a symbol’. In the novelistic image the negation is itself negated and a new, qualitatively different type of knowledge is born.

In a key section of The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, to which we alluded above, Cassirer develops exactly the same argument with regard to the role of scepticism in the philosophy of language (sophism). In seeking to expose the nullity of knowledge and language, scepticism ultimately demonstrates something rather different: ‘the nullity of the standard by which it measures them’.

In scepticism the ‘copy theory’ is methodically and consistently demolished by the self-destruction of its basic premises. The farther the negation is carried in this point, the more clearly a positive insight follows from it. The last semblance of any mediate or immediate identity between reality and symbol must be effaced, the tension between the two must be enhanced to the extreme, for it is precisely in this tension that the specific achievement of symbolic expression and the content of the particular symbolic forms is made evident. For this content cannot be revealed as long as we hold fast to the belief that we possess ‘reality’ as a given, self-sufficient being, prior to all spiritual formation. 

The novelistic image for Bakhtin is just such a ‘tension’, an unresolved argument in a form ‘like a symbol’, what Cassirer called a ‘coincidentia oppositorium’. What is now revealed in the novel is that ‘the meaning of each form cannot be sought in what it expresses, but only in the manner and modality, the inner law of expression itself.’ Dialogism, the relationality of languages, is that ‘inner-law’ for Bakhtin, for it is here that the myriad voices of heteroglossia are united into a single problem and solution. Their diversity and richness are forms of human ‘spiritual’ life, but, as Cassirer puts it, ‘of spiritual life which bears the stamp of inner necessity and hence objectivity’.

**The novel**

As an artistic form, the novel presents us with a particular and indispensable type of knowledge. One is immediately struck by the wealth of visual metaphors Bakhtin utilizes in his description of the novel, from the ‘refraction’ of the intentions of the speaker, through the ‘prism’ of heteroglossia, to the novelist’s presentation of the ‘image’ of a language. For Bakhtin, as for Cassirer, ‘image worlds’ are the sole means of seeing and possessing ‘reality’. Art, argues Cassirer, teaches us how to ‘visualise things’, giving us a ‘richer, more vivid, and more profound insight into its formal structure’. By objectifying his ‘sympathetic vision’, giving expressive meaning an objective form, the artist reveals the ‘inner-form’ of the object. In the novel, argues Bakhtin, the ‘inner-form’, the ideological structure, of a language is revealed in the ‘image of the language’. Moreover, the novel presents ‘a system of images of languages’, a variety of viewpoints on the world mutually illuminated through their interaction:
Languages of heteroglossia, like mirrors that face each other, each reflecting in its own way a tiny corner of the world, force us to guess at and grasp for a world behind their mutually reflecting aspects that is broader, more multi-levelled, containing more and varied horizons than would be available to a single language or a single mirror.\textsuperscript{59}

Bakhtin here follows closely an argument presented by Cassirer in his 1927 study of Renaissance philosophy. All the perspectives of an era must be collected into ‘the unity of a vision, a visio intellectualis’ which illustrates the absurdity of the proposition that the absolute can be perceived through an individual point of view, and also the lack of priority to be given to any single perspective ‘because only the concrete totality of them can mediate a true picture of the Whole for us’. The ‘accidentality and necessity’ of every single viewpoint is ‘included and recognized’, each view including ‘the thing seen as well as the manner and direction of the seeing’.\textsuperscript{60}

Bakhtin’s novelist creates an artistic world as the ‘living vehicle’ of perception; as in the work of Leonardo, ‘fantasy guides perception and gives it significance, its sharpness and its definitiveness’.\textsuperscript{61} Selected perspectives become ‘pregnant factors’ which guide the ‘synthetic spatial imagination in certain directions’.\textsuperscript{62} Thus, the novelist ‘forces all … sociologically alien and distant worlds to speak about themselves in their own language and their own style – but the author builds a superstructure over these languages made up of his own intentions and accents, which becomes dialogically linked with them’.\textsuperscript{63} The very shape of the artistic work develops in accordance with the essential truth of things, as the sort of imaginative model Cassirer found first theorized in the aesthetics of Shaftesbury.\textsuperscript{64} The author’s own perspective becomes decentred among the various perspectives on offer, his own biases and preferences subdued to a ‘community of sensibility with others’. The novel becomes the image of democratically organized social relations, of a different hegemonic principle. In this new world it is not the authoritative, mythic use of language as a law to be obeyed that is operative, but a critically active selection, rejection and assimilation from a plurality of social perspectives. Like Hegel’s philosophy, the novel becomes a model for social relations. What Bakhtin calls \textit{internally persuasive discourse} refashions the human subject ‘from the inside, informing its subtlest affections and bodily responses with this law that is not a law’.\textsuperscript{65} It is a sort of implicit ethical ideology which is ‘half-ours and half someone-else’s’; it ‘organises the mass of our words from within’ and struggles with other ideologies, only to be selected or rejected in new contexts of usage. In its most fully developed form, the novel is a model of the transcendence of the opposition between the individual and society, of compulsion and internal impulse through the democratic hegemonic principle.

The novel takes on the role of a philosophy of culture in that it aims to reveal the basic formative principle behind verbal images of the world. Common and typical principles of formation are revealed behind diverse and dissimilar discourses: in a ‘novel’ sense the unity of ‘spirit’ behind the multiplicity of its manifestations. The diversity of the ‘products of the human spirit sustains and confirms the unity of the productive process’.\textsuperscript{66} Following Shaftesbury, both theorists argue that the aesthetic turns man away from created things and towards the creative process: ‘the operative forces which have shaped this universe and constitute its inner coherence’. It is here that the synthesis of subject and object, man and God is made possible, for man is no longer simply a creation but also a creator.\textsuperscript{67} A religious man, but nevertheless one who maintained a rigorous kenoticism of the intellect, Bakhtin followed through the Hegelian logic of his argument to its natural, but unspoken, conclusion – the absolute is the manifestation of God:

The ideal towards which our knowledge must strive, then, does not lie in denying and rejecting particularity, but in allowing it to unfold in all its richness. For only the totality of faces gives us the One view of the Divine. The world becomes the symbol of God … in that we pass through it in all of its forms, freely submitting ourselves to its multiplicity, to its antitheses.\textsuperscript{68}

In so far as Bakhtin’s theory of the novel provides a dynamic model of ‘individuals woven into an intimate unity with no detriment to their specificity’,\textsuperscript{69} it continues the hegemonic project of Enlightenment aesthetics. \textit{Dialogism}, like Hegel’s \textit{Geist}, runs throughout all epochs and social orders, and as such it describes the social whole; but as an epoch or order might fail to recognize the norms of social and political behaviour that it puts forward as a type of imperative, dialogism stands, like \textit{Geist}, ‘in critical judgement over against the historical given’.\textsuperscript{70} Dialogism becomes, in Bakhtin’s last work, the ‘\textit{superaddressee} … whose absolutely just responsive understanding is presumed, either in some metaphysical distance or in distant historical time’.\textsuperscript{71}

\textbf{Notes}

1. I acknowledge Brian Poole’s illuminating paper on the sources of Bakhtin’s cultural messianism delivered to the Bakhtin centenary conference at Sheffield Univer-
sity in 1995 as an important exception here, and one which prompted me to examine the relationship between Bakhtin and Cassirer at greater length. I believe, however, that the focus of my article is quite different to that of Poole.


7. Note Cassirer's use of this term, which in the translated texts quoted below appears as 'spirit': 'We should use it in a functional sense as a comprehensive name for all those functions which constitute and build up the world of human culture' (Krois, Cassirer, pp. 77–8).


9. Ibid., p. 400.


11. Cassirer defines 'culture' as 'the totality of activities that produce ... human history' (Krois, Cassirer, p. 73).


16. Ibid., pp. 197, 188.

17. Ibid., p. 188.


21. Ibid., p. 74.


23. Ibid., p. 72.

24. Krois, Cassirer, p. 139.


33. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, p. 278.

34. Ibid., p. 394.

35. Ibid., p. 395.


37. Ibid., p. 13.

38. Ibid., p. 342.


42. On Cassirer and liberalism, see Lipton, Ernst Cassirer.


47. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, p. 269.

48. Ibid., p. 401.

49. Ibid., p. 405.

50. Ibid., p. 401.

51. Ibid., pp. 409–10.

52. Cassirer, PSF, Vol. 1, p. 188.


54. Cassirer, PSF, Vol. 1, p. 188.

55. Ibid., p. 111.

56. Ibid.


60. Cassirer, The Individual and the Cosmos, p. 32.

61. Ibid., p. 158.


70. Ibid., p. 149.