

**Linguist, Literary Theorist, Poet and Chess Player. Professor Nikolai Vasiliev's Memory / *Linguista, teórico da literatura, poeta e enxadrista. Em memória do professor Nikolai Vassíliev***

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**ABSTRACT**

The article presents an overview of the life and works of the Russian scholar, philologist Professor Nikolay Vasiliev (1955-2021) and the assessment of his contribution to international Bakhtin studies. For many years the authors have communicated and cooperated with N. Vasiliev during the long years that give them the opportunity not only to create a portrait of this serious researcher, but also to show the world his hobbies, how his biography influenced on the choice of the issue of Bakhtin studies as a central topic for his research. Special attention is paid to his proposed solutions to the problem of *disputed texts*.

**KEYWORDS:** N. Vasiliev; M. Bakhtin; V. Vološinov; Bakhtin studies; The Bakhtin Circle

**RESUMO**

*No artigo, apresenta-se um panorama da vida e da obra do professor, filólogo e cientista russo N. Vassíliev (1955-2021), com ênfase em sua contribuição para os estudos bakhtinianos internacionais. A longa convivência e parceria dos autores com N. Vassíliev permite-lhes não só desenhar o perfil de um pesquisador sério das humanidades, mas também mostrar seu mundo de paixões pessoais e o papel de sua biografia na escolha do núcleo de suas pesquisas científicas: a problemática dos estudos bakhtinianos. Dedicase atenção especial às soluções propostas por ele ao problema dos textos disputados.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** N. Vassíliev; M. Bakhtin; V. Volóchinov; Teoria bakhtiniana; Círculo de Bakhtin

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He was a linguist, a literary critic and a poet like Valentin Vološinov. He was a literary critic, a poet and a chess player like Vladimir Nabokov. Nikolay Vasiliev would probably like both of these comparisons. He, who had the sense of self-irony, was sympathetic to the deserved praise and was open to any criticism. When people not familiar with the biography of Mikhail Bakhtin and its chronology asked the Mordovia University professor N. Vasiliev whether he was one of Bakhtin's students, Nikolay answered with dignity and discreet smile: "It can be said that I am a student of his students." And this was the absolute truth. Our article is a tribute not only to a famous scholar, but also to a good friend, with whom we have communicated and cooperated for many years.

It was fate of Nikolay Vasiliev to become a philologist and study Bakhtin's heritage. He was born on July 25, 1955, in Saransk. His father, Leonid Vasiliev, was a lecturer in the Russian and World Literature Department of the Mordovia Pedagogical Institute (later the University). From the early 1950s, the head of the Department was Mikhail Bakhtin. The house where Nikolay lived was a block away from the building of the old Saransk prison, which was converted to a house for the teachers at the Institute. In one of the apartments of the house there lived Mikhail Bakhtin and his wife Elena. Therefore, we can say that Bakhtin's aura was present in the life of our hero from his childhood.

However, Nikolay never told that he had met with Mikhail Mikhailovich, when was a boy. In his rare memories of childhood and school years there was not the slightest mention of the presence the author of books about Dostoevsky and Rabelais in his life, although, it would seem, the poet Vasiliev could give free rein to his creative imagination. However, Nikolay took the real story of his life and the life of his family very seriously, as evidenced by the great respect and exact detailed memories of his father.

It is noteworthy that in his last public speech at the Center of M. Bakhtin of Mordovia State University on March 5, 2021, Nikolay spoke about Leonid Vasiliev as a colleague and co-author of M. Bakhtin.

The scholarly interests of the father to a large extent determined the future of his son. In 1972, Nikolay Vasiliev entered the Russian Department of the Faculty of Philology at the Mordovia State University. The fact that the young student had a brilliant academic career ahead became clear in his first year. His presentations at the University

and Pedagogical Institute student conferences in Saransk, at All-Union conferences of young scholars aroused the attention of listeners with the extraordinary maturity of thought, originality of the material, and the independence of conclusions. It was at these forums that he met Nikolay Pankov, Igor Peshkov and many other scholars, who later became the elite of Russian Bakhtin studies.

Science did not prevent Nikolay from feeling the joy of daily life. He was not an armchair scholar and managed to find time for poetry and sports. He demonstrated his poetic talent primarily to the students of the same year (his poems were published in the 2000s), and his favorite sports were cycling and chess. He was really good at playing chess and won several championships of Saransk and Mordovia, some of his games even got into collections of articles on playing chess.

It can be assumed that the love of chess and the special rigor of chess thinking led to linguistics as his first choice of academic interest. In successfully graduating from the Mordovia State University in 1977, Nikolay Vasiliev stayed at the Russian Language Department, where he wanted to continue studying scientific terminology in the poetry of Alexander Pushkin. In 1978 he entered the graduate school at the Gorky State University, and in 1981 returned to Saransk to the Department, where he worked for almost 40 years, having risen from assistant to professor.

It should be noted that in the following decades the range of Nikolay Vasiliev's research interests was unusually wide. In his works he embodied the integrity of the philological approach, which is rare today, and studied simultaneously the problems of the Russian language, language theory, the history of Russian literature of the 18th and 19th centuries, and literary local studies. His scholarly heritage is enormous: it is dozens of books and hundreds of articles, while the number of his unrealized ideas and projects is impressive.

One of these ideas was creating *The Dictionary of the Language of the Russian Writers of the 19th Century*. The basis for the dictionary was his works on Pushkin's vocabulary and the language of many Russian writers: from Pushkin's contemporaries and friends Alexander Polezhayev, Konstantin Batyushkov, Anton Delvig, Peter Vyazemsky and Nikolay Yazykov to the poet and publicist Nikolay Ogarev, who was a close associate of Alexander Herzen.

In the 1980s, Nikolay Vasiliev began to study the literary works of Alexander Polezhayev, a student of Moscow University, the author of free-loving and impish poems, who was punished and called for military service as a soldier at the order of Tsar Nicholas I and lived a short life in barracks. Polezhayev, who sang Freedom, was in Nikolay Vasiliev's telling not only a tragic figure of Russian literary history of the 1820s-1830s, but one of the creators of a new poetic reality describing the bright and changing world of Russia and the Caucasus, hospitable Moscow and cold St. Petersburg. Nikolay Vasiliev wrote two books about Polezhayev and in 1994 defended his doctoral thesis at Moscow University, thereby reaffirmed his status of a lead researcher of Russian literature of the 19th century.

The choice of the poet Polezhayev, who was born in 1802 in a village near Saransk, was determined not only by questions of aesthetics, but also due to Nikolay's literary preferences, whose research traits include the literary chronotope of Mordovia. He wrote two books about the literary achievements of the ancient Russian noble family of Struyskiye (Vasiliev, 2003, 2010) and the dictionary of the Russian writers of Mordovia region (Vasiliev, 2013).

However, the main scientific achievements of Professor Nikolay Vasiliev, which gave him international fame, were in the field of Bakhtin studies. It should be noted that Nikolay Vasiliev began studying the works of Bakhtin at a time when the Soviet Bakhtinian boom of the 1960-1970s was almost over, and its next post-Soviet stage did not come yet. His first article "The Problem of Utterance (Speech Genres) in the Linguistic Concept of M. M. Bakhtin and its Importance for Developing Philological Sciences," N. Vasiliev wrote for the collection *The Problems of M. M. Bakhtin's Scientific Heritage* prepared by Professor S. Konkin. It can be said that from that moment the young scholar became a leading expert in the field of M. M. Bakhtin's linguistic views. At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, N. Vasiliev presented his understanding of Bakhtin as a linguist in two more articles: "Dialogue or Diktat (to the Methodology of Communication)?" in *the Collection Dialogue on Dialogue* (1991) and "The Theory of Metalinguistics in the Philological Concept of M. M. Bakhtin" in the collection *M. M. Bakhtin: Problems of Scientific Heritage* (1992).

From the early 1990s, the range of Nikolay Vasiliev's interests in the field of Bakhtin studies expanded markedly. Among the problems of interest to him there were

the details of Bakhtin's biography and in particular the Saransk period of the scholar's life, the relationship of Bakhtin and Soviet culture and Soviet institutes, the Bakhtin Circle as a special phenomenon of early Soviet intellectual history, achievements and shortcomings of Russian and foreign Bakhtin studies.

From the early 2000s, Nikolay Vasiliev was an indispensable participant of International Bakhtin forums. Detailed conference reports were published after each trip, from Brazil to Italy and Sweden. He was always concerned with the possibility of constructive dialogues between Russian and foreign colleagues and was extremely upset by the language barriers. In this context, he was particularly pleased with a trip to a seminar in Sao Paulo in 2019,<sup>1</sup> where he presented his reflections upon Bakhtin's Dostoevsky book. It is a pity that he did not have time to share his impressions about this seminar with his readers.

An important event in the life of Nikolay Vasiliev was his collaboration with the well-known journal *Dialogue. Carnival. Chronotope*. In this journal there were published a significant number of his articles about Mikhail Bakhtin and Valentin Vološinov, notes, replicas and reviews, which attracted considerable attention of Russian and foreign researchers of Bakhtin's heritage. Nikolay remembered that in the early 2000s, the editor-in-chief of the journal *Dialogue. Carnival. Chronotope*, Nikolay Pankov, who decided to publish Mikhail Bakhtin's biography, offered him to lead the journal. Nikolay Vasiliev refused, but his cooperation with the journal continued until the very last issue, which was published in 2018.

Another favorite journal of Nikolay Vasiliev was the *Nevel Collection*. The scholar collaborated with this journal until 2020. He always enjoyed going to the small provincial town, where in 1918 the teaching career of the young Mikhail Bakhtin began and gave talks for the annual Nevel conferences. In the *Nevel Collection* he publishes a number of unique materials about the last years of Valentin Vološinov's life, the life of Mikhail Bakhtin's mother and sisters in the besieged Leningrad during the Second World War and the miraculous rescue of the son of Bakhtin's younger sister Natalia, who was taken out of the besieged city.

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to the "International Colloquium 90 years of 'Problems of Dostoevsky's work/creation' (1929-2019)," which took place between November 26 and 28, 2019, at the University of São Paulo, Brazil. [T's N]

Nikolay collected the best of the written materials about Bakhtin and his circle and published them in book form in 2013 under the intriguing, as he liked, title: *Mikhail Bakhtin and the Phenomenon of the Bakhtin Circle. In Search of Lost Time. Reconstruction and Deconstruction. To Square the Circle.*

The most important contribution of Nikolay Vasiliev to Bakhtin studies was his work on the Bakhtin Circle and the related problem of disputed texts. It was Nikolay Vasiliev who, for the first time in Russia, made a clear and definite statement about the need to solve this issue by publishing the well-known article *M. M. Bakhtin or V. N. Vološinov? (On the Question of the Authorship of Books and Articles Attributed to M. M. Bakhtin)*. Of course, this question was written about before, but Vasiliev's article broke the tradition to gloss over these details of the biography of Bakhtin and his friends.

After the publication of this article, the discussion around disputed texts became one of the sharpest differences among Bakhtin scholars. It is necessary to pay tribute to N. Vasiliev: he did not try to achieve popularity, but really wanted to find a possible solution to a rather complicated problem. He was quite clearly aware that it is not always possible to obtain total clarity and assumed the ambivalence of the real situation of this unique phenomenon of *collective works* and the possible participation of Bakhtin in creating the books *Formal Method*<sup>2</sup> and *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*.<sup>3</sup> It is not an accident that Vasiliev's article has a noteworthy remark confirming his desire for objectivity:

Even assuming that the publication of books and articles by V. N. Vološinov was an escapade of M. M. Bakhtin and his friends, a kind of carnival, parodying action, protest against the dominance of sociologizing in Soviet science of the 1920s, and in this case the book "Marxism and Philosophy of Language" is not written by M.M. Bakhtin, at least not "authentic" M.M. Bakhtin (VASILIEV, 1991b, p.43).

Many years later, Nikolay explained the goal he set for himself bringing up this sensitive topic:

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<sup>2</sup> BAKHTIN, M. M.; MEDVEDEV, P. N. *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship. A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*. Translated by Albert J. Wehrle. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> VOLOŠINOV, V. N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Translated by Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.

It must be admitted that this very ambitious and categorical denial of Bakhtin's authorship had a grand purpose - to cause a reaction of counter-argumentation on the part of persons involved in the publication of Bakhtin's works in Russia and managed his literary heritage. The article appearing led to an "irreversible nuclear reaction" and created discussions and a series of publications that directly or indirectly supported different points of view (VASILIEV, 2013, pp.179-180).

The work with *disputed texts* naturally led Nikolay Vasiliev to study the personality and works of Valentin Vološinov, who thanks to N. Vasiliev's efforts was presented as one of the brightest figures in Leningrad intellectual life of the second half of the 1920s - early 1930s. This was facilitated by Nikolay Vasiliev's essay for the first volume of Vološinov's works (Vasiliev, 1995). Most of all, Nikolay regretted that for various reasons he could not publish the second volume, where Vološinov's literary and musicologist works were to be included.

In 1994, Professor S. Konkin, the author of the first Russian Bakhtin biography, decided to leave the position of the Head of the Department of Russian and Foreign Literature at the Mordovia State University because of his age. He wanted Nikolay Vasiliev to be his successor at this position and recommended him. Unfortunately, the management of the Faculty and University was not concerned about the fate of Bakhtin's Department, and another person took up the Department. It can be assumed that, if Professor Vasiliev was the head of this department, Bakhtin studies at the Mordovia State University would have developed much more intensively.

Nikolay was not upset about lack of career development. He quite liked his position of Professor at the Department of the Russian Language and his academic freedom, because he had enough time and energy to participate in numerous conferences and various studies. When he felt that his professor's workload was becoming an obstacle to science, he decided to retire. It happened in the summer of 2018, and the last two and a half years were the most productive periods of his scientific life. His articles were published in leading Russian and foreign journals, including *Bakhtiniana – Journal of Discourse Studies* (Vasiliev, 2018), besides traveling around Russia and the world, giving presentations. The fact that in the conditions of the pandemic, usual forms of scientific

communication disappeared, and on-line conferences replaced live ones discouraged him a lot.

The last book, which he managed to prepare together with his younger friend, student and regular co-author Dmitry Zhatkin, was an impressive volume of the literary heritage of Dmitry Morskoy's literary works (Vasiliev; Zhatkin, 2020) The researchers extracted from the archives literary texts and unique documents restoring one of the unknown pages of the literary history of Russia of the 1920s and 1930s.

Nikolay had many scientific ideas. On his desktop, there were sketches of new articles, and in his computer - new research projects. Unfortunately, critical illness took him in the prime of his power. On May 23, 2021, Nikolay Vasiliev passed away. However, his name and his works will forever remain in the history of Bakhtin studies.

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### **Statement of Authorship and Responsibility for Published Content**

We declare that the authors had full access to research *corpus*, and that they also fully participated in the discussion of the results, besides revising and approving the process of the final version of the article.

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