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Philosophy of the Other Word and Literary Writing in Bakhtin and his Circle

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An author's importance is obvious when his writings engender many and different readings. Mikhail M. Bakhtin is an example. Clive Thomson (1983), already in the First International Colloquium (October 7-9, 1983) which he organized in Kingston (Ontario), observed that Bakhtin's ideas have shown themselves to have considerable interdisciplinary potential. "The essential feature in the criticism that has been most fruitful to date is the way commentators have managed to meet Bakhtin on his own ground, and even more importantly, to expand the theoretical potential that is inherent in his work" (Thomson 1983: 252).

I believe that one of the scholars who recognized the importance of the overall corpus of Bakhtin's works as well as of his single texts, including those connected with the so-called Bakhtin Circle, was Vjaceslav V. Ivanov, author of the important essay "Znachenie idej M. M. Bachtina o znake, vyskazyvanii i dialoge dlja sovremennoj semiotiki". This essay by Vjaceslav V. Ivanov (1973) together with *Marxism and Philosophy of Language* (which appeared in English (in 1973) as the translation of the Russian book of 1929 signed by Valentin N. Voloshinov) are the starting point of my interest in Bakhtin (see Ponzio 1980, 1981, 1983 [my paper presented at the First International Colloquium], 1990, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1997a, b, 2004d, 2006a, Ponzio with Petrilli 2000, 2005, and Petrilli 1996, 2004, 2007) also in connection with Emmanuel Levinas (see Ponzio 1994, 1996, 2006b). The essay by Ivanov appeared in Italian translation in 1977, in a volume edited by myself, as the opening essay of a collection dedicated to Mikhail Bakhtin with essays by Julia Kristeva, L. Matejka, I.R. Titunik, and text by Bakhtin "Problema Teksta (1952-53).

Bakhtin's research came to light after years of silence and since then numerous readings have been dedicated to him from various perspectives. Moreover, different aspects of his work were discovered and published posthumously, gradually, and not even in the order of writing.

Texts from the early 1920s have only recently been made available. Their importance is such that they throw new light over the whole corpus of his research. Bakhtin's reflections

range over different fields and have now been introduced to areas he had not dealt with himself, as his ideas are used by researchers to deal with new problems. I have myself dedicated numerous essays and several monographs to Bakhtin, but I always find it helpful to revisit my own interpretations and review them, rethink and develop them and sometimes even reorient them in different directions in the light of new documents as they gradually emerge.

When Bakhtin must qualify himself he calls himself a ‘philosopher’ and when he must name his research he calls it ‘philosophy of language’. Bakhtin practices what we may call ‘philosophy of otherness’ which produces a real and proper revolution – the *Bakhtinian revolution* as recites the title of one of my monographs on Bakhtin – which consists in placing the other instead of the I at the centre of his thought system.

Bakhtin says that in aesthetic terms the I is entirely unproductive, just as it is unproductive when a question of constructing a philosophy of responsible action, a philosophy of language free from the "langue"- "parole" dichotomy and from subjectivistic interpretations of speech in terms of “expression”: philosophy of language according to Bakhtin turns its attention to the word of the other, and is delineated in terms of the “art of listening”.

That there exists a Bakhtin Circle, that it should renew itself, beyond the Twenties, that it should continue flourishing with Bakhtin’s ‘resurrection’ at the beginning of the Sixties through to the mid Seventies (see, for example the relation between Bakhtin and Averincev and Bakhtin’s last text of 1974) is not extrinsic or incidental with respect to the perspective of his research: there is no such thing as one’s own word that is not a word that listens to the word of the other, a semi-other word, a dialogic word, a word that arises from listening and that searches for listening, where in one’s own voice resounds the voice of the other.

According to Bakhtin, the living dynamic reality of language cannot be conveyed by the direct word, nor by linguistics when it abstracts from the internal dialogicality of the concretely oriented and specifically intonated word.

In his essay “The Problem of Speech Genres”, 1952-53, Bakhtin divides discourse genres into *primary* or *simple genres*, the genres of everyday dialogue, and *secondary* or *complex genres*, literary genres which objectify communication, that is, everyday, ordinary, objective dialogical exchange.

Dialogue in primary genres is objectified, pictured by secondary genres, losing its immediate connection with the real context and with the goals of everyday life, and therefore its instrumentality and functionality. The word *leaves the monological context* in which it is determined in relation to its object and the other words forming its context, and enters the context of the word that pictures it. This is the complex context of verbal interaction with the author who objectifies and pictures the direct word in the form of indirect, direct and free indirect discourse and their variants (discussed in part three of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Voloshinov, 1929).

Bakhtin maintains that the complexity of dialogue can be studied through the pictured word and its internal dialogization in the secondary discourse genres of literature (specially the novel). Secondary genres evidence aspects of dialogue that do not emerge in primary, simple, direct, objective discourse genres. Such a study is particularly interesting, as Bakhtin 1952-53 maintains, when the object of analysis is the *utterance* considered as the *cell of dialogic exchange*, and not the *sentence* or *proposition*, that is, the cell of *the system of language*. (The latter is an abstract concept reviewed by Bakhtin in the light of his critique of “abstract objectivism” in language studies, on these aspects see Voloshinov’s 1929 volume as well as his 1928 paper on tendencies in linguistic studies, It. trans. in Voloshinov 1926-30, pp. 165-200).

A one-sided orientation toward primary genres inevitably leads to a vulgarization of the entire problem (behaviorist linguistics is an extreme example). The very interrelations between primary and secondary genres and the process of the historical formation of the latter shed light on the nature of the utterance (and above all on the complex problem of the interrelations among language, ideology, and world view) (Bakhtin 1952-53, Eng. trans.: 62).

From the outset Bakhtin was interested in moral problems with a special focus on the problem of responsibility. In fact, in his earliest paper of 1919 dedicated to artistic discourse (in line with the journal it was published in), he connected the problem of art to the problem of responsibility.

Bakhtin was not concerned with limited responsibility as delineated in the context of identity. He was not interested in identity. When he analysed artistic discourse, he was not concerned with the artist’s identity; nor when analysing literary texts was he interested in the identity of a literary genre or a literary trend. By the same token, in his studies on problems relating to language he was not concerned with the identity of language. The “Bakhtinian

revolution” consists in shifting attention from identity to alterity with reference to all these problems and disciplinary areas.

Bakhtin was concerned with responsibility understood as answering to and answering for the other without alibis. The properly philosophical orientation of Bakhtin’s research was determined by his shift in focus beyond the boundaries of identity.

The early text from the 1920s entitled “K filosofii postupka” (Toward a philosophy of the act) – only published in Russia in 1986 in the volume *Filosofia i sotsiologija nauki i tehniki: Ezhegodnik 1984-85*, edited by S. G. Bocharov (pp. 82-138).¹ – Bakhtin states the premises that were to guide the whole course of his research. This text is of great interest not only because of its intrinsic theoretical value, but also because it yields an understanding of the overall sense of Bakhtin’s research which stretches into the first half of the 1970s.

Also, it is closely related to the first chapter of another text written during the early 1920s, “Autor i geroj vi esteticeskoi dejatel’nosti” (Author and hero in aesthetic activity), it too only published later (in 1979) in the volume *Estetika slovesnogo tvorcestva*² (cf. Bakhtin 1979). However, this chapter was not published in a complete version; the first section was considered too fragmentary and was excluded, only to be published as late as 1986 with “K filosofii postupka”, in the same volume.

The connection between these two texts, “K filosofii postupka” and “Autor i geroj vi esteticeskoi dejatel’nosti” (in particular the first section of the latter) is obvious: both are part of the same research project where “Autor i geroj vi esteticeskoi dejatel’nosti” is the continuation and development of “K filosofii postupka”, and both privilege the same literary text as their object of analysis, the poem *Razluka* (*Parting*), by Pushkin.

¹ Translated into English as *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, 1993; and into Italian as “Per una filosofia dell’azione responsabile” (Toward a Philosophy of Responsible Action), first presented with other writings by Bakhtin and his Circle (in Bakhtin 1995), and subsequently completely revised and published as an independent volume (cf. Bakhtin 1998).

² This volume was translated into Italian in 1988 and also excluded the first chapter in question. This, however, has now been translated into Italian from Russian and published in a volume edited by A. Ponzio and P. Jachia, *Bakhtin e ...*, 1993, under the title “L’autore e l’eroe nell’attività estetica. Frammento del primo capitolo”. The English edition is included in the volume *Art and Answerability*, 1990, edited by M. Holquist and V. Liapunov, as “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity”, while the first chapter of this text is placed at the end under the title “Supplementary Section” (cf. Bakhtin 1990: 208-231).

Bakhtin's text on the philosophy of the answerable act sheds light on the itinerary that led him to his 1929 monograph on Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky's "philosophy" must not be identified with the conceptions and standpoints of the heroes in his novels or with specific contents. On the contrary, Bakhtin finds traces of the architectonics theorized in his paper on moral philosophy in the overall structure of Dostoevsky's works, which in fact he describes as organized according to the principle of dialogicality. This emerges, for example, when he says, "to affirm someone else's 'I' not as an object but as another subject — this is the principle governing Dostoevsky's worldview" (Bakhtin 1963, Eng. trans.: 11): this statement becomes clearer in the light of a paper on Dostoevsky by Vjaceslav Ivanov (1973). In Dostoevsky's "polyphonic novel" the character is no longer described by an "I" and assumed as an object. On the contrary, the character itself is a center of otherness and organizes its world from this perspective:

Dostoevsky carried out, as it were, a small-scale Copernican revolution when he took what had been a firm and finalizing authorial definition and turned it into an aspect of the hero's self-definition.

... Not without reason does Dostoevsky force Makar Devushkin to read Gogol's "Overcoat" and to take it as a story about himself ...

Devushkin had glimpsed himself in the image of the hero of "The Overcoat," which is to say, as something totally quantified, measured, and defined to the last detail: all of you is here, there is nothing more in you, and nothing more to be said about you. He felt himself to be hopelessly predetermined and finished off, as if he were already quite dead, yet at the same time he sensed the falseness of such an approach. ...

The serious and deeper meaning of this revolt might be expressed this way: a living human being cannot be turned into the voiceless object of some secondhand, finalizing cognitive process. *In a human being there is always something that only he himself can reveal; in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse; something that does not submit to an externalizing secondhand definition.* ...

The genuine life of the personality is made available only through a dialogic penetration of that personality, during which it freely and reciprocally reveals itself (Bakhtin 1963, Eng. trans.: 49-59).

Toward a Philosophy of the Act was only the beginning of a bigger project designed to produce a volume on ethics, understood as the architectonics of responsibility in communication with the other. This text consists of two large fragments: what is probably an introduction to the project (with a few initial pages missing); and a section entitled "First" by Bakhtin himself.

In the introductory fragment, Bakhtin deals with the problem of capturing the moment of “transitiveness” and “event-ness” (*sobytijnost’*) (cf. p. 1)³ of the act, its value and unity of actual becoming and self-determination. As soon as the sense of the act is determined in theoretical (scientific, philosophical, historiographical) or in aesthetic terms, it loses its character as a unique and self-determined event, a truly experienced act, and assumes a general value, an abstract meaning. A division is created between two mutually impervious worlds: the world of life and the world of culture; we exist in the first even when we cognize, contemplate and create, that is, when we build a world in which life is the object of a given domain of culture.

These two worlds are united by the unique event of the act of our activity, of living experience. This is the unity of two-sided answerability: answerability with respect to objective meaning, that is, with respect to content relative to the objective unity of a domain of culture, what Bakhtin calls “special answerability”, and answerability with respect to the unique event-ness of the act, which he calls “moral answerability” (cf. p. 2-3). To unite these two types of answerability, special answerability must be related to unitary and unique moral answerability as a constituent component. That is the only way the pernicious non-fusion and non-interpenetration of culture and life can be surmounted (cf. p. 3).

This is the same problem dealt with in what is generally considered as Bakhtin’s first publication, “Art and Answerability”, 1919 – the problem of the relation between art and life. The terms of the solution are similar:

The three domains of human culture — science, art, and life — gain unity only in the individual person who integrates them into his own unity. This union, however, may become mechanical, external. And, unfortunately, that is exactly what most often happens. ... But what guarantees the inner connection of the constituent elements of a person? Only the unity of answerability. I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life. But answerability entails guilt, or liability to blame. It is not only mutual answerability that art and life must assume, but also mutual liability to blame. ... The poet must remember that it is his poetry which bears the guilt for the vulgar prose of life, whereas the man of everyday life ought to know that the fruitlessness of art is due to his willingness to be unexact and to the unseriousness of the concerns in his life. The individual must become answerable through and through: all of his constituent moments must not only fit next to each other in the temporal sequence of his life, but must also interpenetrate each other in the unity of

³ This page and the following refer to the English translation of Bakhtin’s *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, ed. by M. Holquist and V. Liapunov, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1993.

guilt and answerability. ... Art and life are not one, but they must become united in myself — in the unity of my answerability (Bakhtin 1919, Eng. trans.: 1-2).

Therefore, on one hand “special answerability” relative to a given domain of culture, a given content, a given role and function; delimited, defined, circumscribed answerability referred to the repeatable identity of the objective and interchangeable individual; on the other hand, “moral answerability”, “absolute answerability”, without limits, alibis, which alone renders individual action unique; answerability of the single individual that cannot be abdicated. The connection between these two kinds of answerability is that between objective, repetitive, identical meaning conferred by the domain of culture in which action is objectified, and the unrepeatable self-determination of being as a unique and unitary event, activity in its entirety and complexity though not decomposable or classifiable.

Here Bakhtin anticipates the criteria used for the distinction between “meaning” and “theme”, particularly important in his conception of the sign to which he dedicates an entire chapter in the 1929 signed by Voloshinov.

The act of our activity, of actual experiencing, says Bakhtin, is “a two-faced Janus” (p. 2), oriented in two different directions: never-repeatable uniqueness and objective, abstract unity.

With respect to the ought, to the concrete act of its assumption, theoretical veridicality, says Bakhtin, only has technical value. This is true of all that is aesthetically, scientifically, morally significant: all such meanings have technical value, none include ought in their content. Instead, ought can be traced in the unity of my unique answerable life as manifested in the uniqueness of answerable choice. The connection between objective, abstract, indifferent validity and the never-repeatable uniqueness of a standpoint, of a choice cannot be explained in terms of theoretical knowledge, of an abstract theoretical subject, gnoseological consciousness. Formal, technical validity is indifferent to the answerable act of the single individual. Bakhtin makes important considerations on the autonomy of what is technologically valid, governed by its own immanent laws, with a value of its own, with power and control over the life of the single individual once it has lost its connection to the live uniqueness of answerable activity. “All that which is technological”, says Bakhtin, “when divorced from the once occurrent unity of life and surrendered to the will of the law immanent to its development, is frightening; it may from time to time irrupt into this once-occurrent unity as an irresponsibly destructive and terrifying force” (p. 7).

Bakhtin evidences the alien character of the singularity of life as “answerable, risk-fraught, and open becoming” (p. 9) in a world of theoretical constructions, where abstract *being* is relieved of historical existence, determined as unique and never-repeatable: absolute estrangement from the world as the object of knowledge in which everything finds justification, except the singularity of a place in the world and relative answering action. Insofar as theoretical being is on principle accomplished, finished, given, it is *indifferent* to “that which is absolutely arbitrary (*answerably arbitrary*)” (p. 9), absolutely new and creative, the uniqueness life understood as continuous answerable activity; theoretical being “is indifferent to the central fact — central for me — of my unique and actual communion with Being” (p. 9) and of my “moral answerability”, mine absolutely. And although the “unity-uniqueness” of my life-act is alien to indifferent theoretical consciousness, unity-uniqueness is the foundation of theoretical consciousness “insofar as the act of cognition as my deed is included, along with all its content, in the unity of its answerability, in which and by virtue of which I actually live — perform deeds” (p. 12). Therefore, says Bakhtin:

Once-occurrent uniqueness or singularity cannot be thought of, it can only be participatively experienced or lived through. All of theoretical reason in its entirety is only a moment of practical reason, i.e., the reason of the unique *subiectum*'s moral orientation within the event of once-occurrent Being (p. 13).

That theoretical reason is part of practical reason should not lead us to believe that Bakhtin was a follower of Kantianism, as Bakhtin himself declares. Moral philosophy or “first philosophy”, as he also called it, describes Being-as-event as answerable action. Therefore the question of answerable action can neither resort to Kant nor to the Neo-Kantian revival as much as they consider the moral problem to be important. Bakhtin accuses the formal ethics of Kant and the Kantians of theoreticism, that is, of “abstracting from my unique self”: there is no approach to a living act performed in the real world (p. 27).

Bakhtin maintains that the philosophy of the answerable act can only be the phenomenology, participative description, of this world of action considered from the inside from the perspective of its answerability, and not contemplated or theoretically analyzed from the outside. Though connected with Husserl's phenomenology, Bakhtin's approach is substantially different given that communication with the other is centered on “moral answerability” as against the *noesis-noema*, subject-object relationship. From this point of

view, Bakhtin's attitude toward Husserl's phenomenology is similar to Emmanuel Lévinas's (cf. Ponzio 1992, 1994, 1996). The indifference of theoreticism is superseded by the *unindifference* of unique, never-repeatable and unreplaceable participation in the world, by "*my non-alibi in being*". The condition of unindifference does not ensue from a theoretical admission, but is the condition of interest, desire, cognition, action. In the condition of unindifference uniqueness is already given and is at once active, the I is passive and at once active, determined and answerable. Dogmatism and generic hypotheticism, absolute determinism and abstract freedom, void possibility, objectivism and all forms of subjectivism and psychologism, void rationalism (where logical clarity and abstract consequentiality are separated from answerable consciousness and act understood as obscure and uncontrolled forces) and irrationalism complementary to it, are all superseded by the condition of unindifference. Language itself lives in relation to participative thought and action. The word which is not an abstract word from the dictionary, nor a subjective word, is a live and "answerably-significant" word. This is the character of any form of significant and signifying communication. Bakhtin's considerations on language and communication in this early paper are developed in his subsequent books, and in the two volumes and articles signed by Voloshinov (cf. Voloshinov 1927, 1929 and 1926-30). The word manifests itself fully in relation to the uniqueness of action, says Bakhtin, not only as *content-sense*, but also as *expression-image*, and from an emotional-volitional perspective as *intonation*.

Unindifference deriving from the connection with answerable action, orients words and makes understanding possible – of objects, of lived experience. To speak about an object means to relate to it unindifferently, therefore the uttered word is necessarily intonated. However, all experience is intonated, even the most abstract thought insofar as it is concretely thought is intonated, that is, has volitional-emotional intonation. In communication and understanding an essential tie is established between content and its emotional tone, which constitutes actual value. If this were not the case, it would not be possible to utter a given word, to think a given thought, to experience a given object.

In Bakhtin's view, thanks to the unindifference of answerable action it is possible to establish a connection between culture and life, cultural consciousness and living consciousness. When such connection is not established, cultural, cognitive, scientific, aesthetic, political values rise to the status of values-in-themselves and lose all possibility of verification, functionality, transformation. Bakhtin observes that this is part of a Hobbesian

conception with clear political implications: to absolute cultural values there corresponds the conception according to which the people choose one time only, renouncing their freedom, surrendering themselves to the State after which they become slaves to their own free choice (cf. p. 35).

In his subsequent research Bakhtin amply demonstrated how all this contradicts constitutive popular resistance to “State truth”, the irreducibility of “non official ideology” to “official ideology”. Popular culture with its capacity for innovation and regeneration in relation to dominant culture is the object of study by Bakhtin in his monograph on Rabelais. Insofar as it belongs to “class ideology”, State truth, says Bakhtin in one of his subsequent annotations “From Notes Made in 1970-71”, encounters the unsurmountable barrier of irony and degrading allegory, the carnivalesque spark of allegorical-ironical imprecation which destroys all gravity and seriousness and never dies in the heart of the people.

In a passage from *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin returns to the problem of the abdication of answerability, as political answerability. He refers to political representation which in the attempt at relieving itself of political answerability often loses — both in whoever attributes it and in whoever assumes it — the sense of unique, non-alibi participation, and consequently becomes void, specialized and formal answerability, with all the danger that this loss of sense involves (cf. p. 52).

The critique of ontology (which can be extended to Heidegger) is an important aspect in the Bakhtinian refounding of “first philosophy” as “moral philosophy”. From this perspective the following passage from *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* is most significant:

Participation in the being-event of the world in its entirety does not coincide, from our point of view, with irresponsible self-surrender to Being, with being-possessed by Being. What happens in the latter case is that the passive moment in my participation is moved to the fore, while my to-be-accomplished self-activity is reduced. The aspiration of Nietzsche’s philosophy is reduced to a considerable extent to this possessedness by Being (one-sided participation); its ultimate result is the absurdity of contemporary Dionysianism (p. 49).

“Non-alibi in being” implies uniqueness and irreplaceability, it transforms empty possibility into answerable real action, it confers actual validity and sense to all meanings and values which would otherwise be abstract. “Non-alibi in being” “gives a face” to the event which is otherwise anonymous. Thanks to “non-alibi in being” there is no such thing as objective or subjective reason. Rather, each one of us has a right to a place, not only in

subjective terms, but answerably, keeping account of the other, and without the possibility of interpretation as a “contradiction”, if not for a third, disembodied, non-participating consciousness and from the perspective of abstract, non-dialogic dialectics, which Bakhtin explicitly critiqued in “From Notes Made in 1970-71”. “Non-alibi in being” relates to the other, not indifferently to the generic other, but as concrete involvement, in a relation of unindifference with the life of one’s neighbour, one’s contemporary, with the past and future of real persons. An abstract truth referred to mankind in general, such as “man is mortal”, can acquire sense and value, says Bakhtin, from my unique place, as the death of my neighbour, my own death, as the death of an entire community, or as the possibility of elimination of the whole of real historical humanity.

And, of course, the emotional-volitional, valuative sense of my death, of the death of an other who is dear to me, and the fact of any actual person’s death are all profoundly different in each case, for all these are different moments in once-occurrent Being-as-event. For a disembodied, detached (non-participating) *subiectum*, all deaths may be equal. No one, however, lives in a world in which all human beings are — with respect to value — equally mortal (p. 48).

Bakhtin insists that involvement with the other is inevitable (the concrete other and not an abstract other, conceived as abstract gnoseological consciousness), the consequence of being answerably participative in the world from the uniqueness of one’s place. To be answerably participative is also apprehension for the other, who compels me in terms of answerability. Answerability of the deed is above all answerability for the other. My uniqueness, not being replaceable, is the impossibility to abdicate such answerability, to the point of abnegation, of self-sacrifice. Therefore, “answerable centrality” becomes “sacrificed centrality”.

One can attempt to escape from this kind of non-alibi answerability, but they very attempt at unburdening oneself testifies to its weight and inevitable presence. All roles and their special answerability do not abolish but simply specialize personal answerability, says Bakhtin, that is moral answerability without limits or guarantees, without alibis. Detached from absolute answerability, special answerability loses sense, becomes technical answerability, is mere representation of a role, action, technical performance, “technical activity”. As such it is de-realized and becomes illusion.

Moral philosophy must describe the “concrete architectonics” of the actual world of the performed act in terms of a unitary and once-occurrent act or deed, the basic emotional-

volitional aspects of the this construction and mutual arrangement. All values, meanings and spatial-temporal relationships are constituted and arranged in the light of this architectonics, all aspects of which are characterized by Bakhtin in terms of otherness. These include: “I-for-myself, the other-for-me, and I-for-the-other” (p. 54).

All the values of actual life and culture are arranged around the basic architectonic points of the actual world of the performed act or deed: scientific values; aesthetic values; political values (including both ethical and social values); and, finally, religious values (p. 54).

In the section entitled “First Part” following the introduction to *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, and starting from the unique place each one of us occupies irreplaceably, Bakhtin develops an architectonics of the uniqueness and volitional-emotional unity of the world. This is described as a non systematic but concrete architectonic unity in axiological and spatial-temporal terms: unity is achieved around a unique participative and unindifferent center, the center of value represented by each one of us in our non-alibi answerability.

This kind of architectonics is incomprehensible if actualized by the same subject around whom it revolves, if it belongs to the same self, therefore to discourse of the “confession” genre, for example, or any other genre of direct discourse. Direct discourse is incapable of developing a global vision. Live communication and understanding are not possible if cognitive discourse is neither emotionally nor evaluatively participative.

Cognitive discourse understood as objective and indifferent discourse is incapable of *understanding* what it describes and consequently impoverishes it as it loses sight of that which renders it living and unfinalizable. Empathy is also an impoverishment given that it reduces communication between two mutually external and non interchangeable positions to a single vision.

According to Bakhtin the architectonics of interpretation-understanding presupposes the other, in a relation with self of difference, unindifference, a relation that is reciprocally participative. Consequently, self and other emerge as two value-centers, two value-centers of life around which revolves the architectonics of answerable action.

These two centers of value must remain reciprocally other, communication is between two others from a spatial-temporal and axiological viewpoint, the I must not dominate. As an example of this vision Bakhtin in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* analyses the architectonics of art, specifically verbal art, literature.

The language of literature is organized around a center of value that is represented by the single human being in its uniqueness, irreplaceability, precariousness and mortality. In such a situation expressions like earlier, later, yet, when, never, late, already, necessarily, ought, beyond, farther, nearer, etc., lose their abstract meaning and are charged with concrete sense in emotional, volitional, axiological terms each time they are used as part of this participative center. Bakhtin develops and specifies such statements in “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity”:

My own axiological relationship to myself is completely unproductive aesthetically: for myself, I am aesthetically unreal. The organizing power in all aesthetic forms is the axiological category of the *other*, the relationship to the other, enriched by an axiological “excess” of seeing for the purpose of achieving a transgradient consummation (Bakhtin 1920-23, in Bakhtin 1979, Eng.: 188-189).

Bakhtin traced the architectonics he intended to analyse with his moral philosophy or first philosophy in literature: the relationship to the other forming the center of value in literary discourse is transgradient, extralocalized, unique. This is to say that in the sphere of literary discourse communication between author and hero is oriented by otherness logic and is transgradient, extralocalized, unique.

In the artwork a unitary reaction to the totality of the hero’s world is essential. This reaction is distinct from cognitive and practical reactions, but it is not indifferent to the latter; it gathers all the single cognitive and emotional-volitional reactions and unites them in an architectonic whole. For the author’s unitary action to assume artistic value, it must evidence the resistance of reality, of life, which is expressed by the hero: resistance of the objective with respect to its rendering, to its objectification; the author’s unitary action must evidence the hero’s otherness and his extra-artistic values; therefore, it must set out from a position of extralocality — in space, time and sense — as regards the hero, specially if autobiographical. If this is not achieved, as in the case of autobiography, the author’s unitary action assumes confessional tones devoid of artistic value. In all this we clearly find traces of Bakhtin’s critique of Russian Formalism systematically developed in *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, 1928, signed by Medvedev.

In the part entitled “First Part” of *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin analyses a poem by Pushkin, *Razluka (Parting)* in his effort to clarify the architectonics of the aesthetic

vision. Subsequently, he focused on communication between “author and hero in aesthetic activity” producing a long paper with the same title.

Bakhtin made his first approach to the aesthetic vision through the lyrical genre. In this genre he identified dialogic communication among different points of view — in the case of Pushkin’s poetry, dialogic communication between the author’s context and that of the two protagonists, between the author-hero and the heroine. This undermines the belief that Bakhtin did not sufficiently consider the lyric genre, which was obviously not true. Another misunderstanding concerns his conception of dialogicality: for Bakhtin dialogicality is a question of *degree*. Contrary to those critics who maintain that Bakhtin made a net distinction between absolutely monological genres, e.g. lyric poetry, on one hand, and dialogical genres, on the other, specially the “polyphonic” novel (as identified in Dostoevsky), he believed that dialogicality is always present in the artistic word characterizing different genres to different degrees.

Bakhtin believed that “first philosophy” or “moral philosophy” (whose foundations he critiqued) is centered on the uniqueness and unreducible otherness of being. As such first philosophy or moral philosophy calls for the indirect and objectified view of the “I,” the subject, and not a direct, objective view. All this affords us an insight into Bakhtin’s understanding of “metalinguistics” (as used in *Dostoevsky*).

We have described the general orientation of Bakhtin’s research from his very first writings to his 1929 monograph on Dostoevsky, and new edition of 1963: he delineates the principles of his prolegomena to a philosophy of responsible action for the refounding of philosophy and discovers the possibility of their full expression in literary writing. This is determined by the fact that literary writing transcends the dimension of identity and the limits of communication founded on the difference-indifference relationship. The degree to which the identity dimension is transcended depends on the literary genre or subgenre in question. Bakhtin develops an architectonics of otherness from a perspective that is participative and unindifferent. This orientation also characterizes the research of members of the Bakhtin Circle (as evidenced by the collection of writings published in *Bakhtin e le sue maschere*, cf. Bakhtin *et alii* 1995). On the basis of his early interest in the philosophy of responsible action, Bakhtin focuses on the philosophy of literature, where *of literature* is a subjective genitive: the philosophical worldview that is offered by literature, verbal art, and not the worldview to which literature must be subjected.

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