

## **Bakhtin and Welby in (Imaginary ) Dialogue**

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) and Victoria Welby (1837-1912) belong to different countries, Russia and England respectively, to different historical periods and to different socio-cultural and political backgrounds. However, despite such chronotopic diversity, and despite the fact that such diversity was never bridged by any form of direct or indirect contact, Bakhtin and Welby may be related on a theoretical level in what we may envisage as an imaginary dialogue.

The sign model traceable in the theories of Bakhtin and Welby is an open model based on the value of dialogic otherness and signifying excess. This implies that categories are required capable of accounting for the specific signifying quality of signs, particularly enhanced in verbal signs, including: "dialogism", "answering comprehension", "otherness" (both internal and external), and "excess."

Like Bakhtin, Welby's interest in problems of meaning initially began with her studies on religious, theological and exegetical issues and more specifically with problems arising from the textual interpretation of the Bible. These studies found early expression in a book of 1881, *Links and Clues*. At the time, Welby had already identified problems that were to become central in her later studies on meaning: these included her concept of the linguistic conscience, her criticism of plain, common-sense and obvious meaning, of so-called "linguistic traps", her attention for the essential ambiguity of signs in general and of verbal signs in particular, her concept of textual interpretation based on awareness against the temptation of reassuring monologism, of the semantic pliancy and polylogism of signs, and of the potential multiplicity of interpretive itineraries with respect to a single text.

Aware of the dialogic plurilingualism and changeability of the semantic value of verbal signs, Welby advocated the necessity of developing a more acute discriminating linguistic conscience in the formulation of truths and dogmas. In a section entitled "Words" in her 1881 book, Welby wrote that we "survey the same expanse of truth from as many 'points' as possible", attributing many of the problems arising in relation to exegetic interpretation, dogma and orthodoxy to the failure of doing just this, to the lack of awareness of the ambiguity of words and their equivocation. Therefore, those aspects of signification which in her more mature work were to be covered by her theory of the "plasticity" of language, were already present in her writings of 1881.

For Bakhtin also, who was brought up in the Russian Orthodox tradition and remained a believer all his life (cf. Clark-Holquist 1984: 120-145), religious concerns were of central importance (especially in the early stages of his work). Bakhtin advocated the need to view religious issues in relation to the other spheres of human investigation, in relation to science and philosophy. Religion thus considered emerged as a system of ideas interacting dialogically with other systems of ideas in a continually changing world. Such an attitude contradicted methodological monism, the unquestioning acceptance of dogma and received truths. Both Bakhtin and Welby reviewed religious issues in relation to language, in the perspective of the ethics of terminology, of critical awareness and interpretive discernment. Being conscious of the polylogic and polyphonic nature of reality, of the coexistence of different viewpoints, Bakhtin, similarly to Welby, conceived the flux of life as a polyphonic interrelation of differences in continual transformation.

Without being subservient to linguistics both Welby and Bakhtin maintain that linguistic material is common to all human cultural expressions. The specificity of human culture lies in its linguistic-ideological value (Bakhtin) or linguistic-psychological value (Welby). Consequently, language analysis is not only necessary in dealing with problems of a strictly linguistic order, but with human experience at large given that in the last analysis it is rooted in language.

For both Bakhtin and Welby, the reality of signs and their meaning is the product of dynamic, dialectic, and dialogic interaction among speakers. Signs are not abstract and private entities relevant to the meaning intention of the individual, subjective consciousness, but, on the contrary, they are concrete expressions, at any given moment, of the experience of plural, social consciousness, of the social context with which the single individual continuously interacts. And analogously to a living organism, the sign is subject to change, renewal and enrichment through the acquisition of new voices, knowledge and experience. The word as it is received and elaborated by the speaking community is the sign of meanings which from a diachronic viewpoint have accumulated during the process of historical development, are co-present at the moment of use by the individual speaker, and as Welby avers, are subject to transformation at the very moment of utterance when, indeed, they acquire a fresh imprint, a new accentuation as Bakhtin would say. Thus when managing words, we are not dealing with entities that are anonymous, fixed once and for all and devoid of their own configuration, but rather with historical products endowed with the signifying intentions of others, with their own ideological consistency and capacity for further elaboration.

Welby and Bakhtin take their distances from the objective empiricism of positivistic thought. Bakhtin is critical of the mechanistic and predialectic type of materialism and, therefore, of the positivistic description of empirical data in terms of the non-dialectic, fixed, stable, precisely delimited and undisputable. This stance finds resonance in Welby's criticism of "hard dry facts". Indeed, for both Welby and Bakhtin facts and data are part of sign mediated reality: as the object of interpretation they emerge as signs endowed with meaning pregnant with the interpretive experience of others.

By contrast with nonverbal signs, verbal signs do not exist outside their sign function. The word is completely absorbed by its sign function and as such is the fullest expression of social relations: the word is uniquely ideological signifying reality. As expressions of social communication, cultural systems and the ideology that fashions them are best studied through analysis of the word, the ideological phenomenon par excellence. Verbal signs have the greatest potential for semantic and ideological plurality. According to Welby, "thought is not merely 'clothed' in language", but rather thought and language belong to the common process of interpretation. Mental life is rooted in language, and therefore, as Bakhtin says, the science of psychology must be rooted in verbal-ideological theory, or to say it with Welby, in language theory. The reality of the human psyche is linguistic-cultural-ideological reality, therefore sign reality. Consequently for both Bakhtin and Welby, problems connected with human psychic life are best dealt with through a sign interpretation approach. In this perspective, the problem of the relation between the individual psyche and cultural ideological expressions at large is also that of specifying and distinguishing between the notions of "individual" and "social", "inner" and "outer" within the common context of sign life.

The individual as a person and not merely as a biological entity is a social product. The content of the human individual psyche is social as is the language of which it is made. Bakhtin identified the specificity of the individual psyche in the union between the biological organism and the system of socio-economic and cultural conditions which enable that organism to subsist and develop as a human person. The individual organism and outer experience meet in the sign. The individual consciousness is fundamentally social consciousness. The relation between thought and external reality is a sign mediated relation for both the individual and the collectivity: "the inner psyche is not analyzable as a thing but can only be understood and interpreted as a sign" (cf. Voloshinov 1929, Eng. trans. 1973: 25-26).

Welby's position runs parallel to Bakhtin's notwithstanding inevitable differences in terminology. In a pamphlet entitled *The Use of the "Inner" and the "Outer" in Psychology: Does the Metaphor Help or Hinder?* (1892), Welby gave abundant evidence of the detrimental effect on ideas of the misuse of figurative language. She critically analyzes, for example, the pairs of opposites used in relation to mental life: "Inner and outer," "inside and outside," "interior and exterior," "within and without," "Self and Not-self," and observes that such dichotomies have fostered the erroneous conviction of a clear-cut distinction between mental life and material life:

"Mind" and "matter", "thought" and "thing," embrace all that is, all reality, all that has meaning and therefore importance or consequence (*ibid.*: 4).

After all what do we rightly want to do in describing the mental or physical world as Inner and the material or physical world as Outer? Do we not want to emphasize distinction while preserving continuity or even identity; to give intension in the one case and extension in the other? Cannot these be equally secured by more abstract terms, like subjective and objective? (*ibid.*: 6)

Similarly to Bakhtin for Welby too the aim should be to construct an objective psychology, where "objective" may be read as "socio-semiotic" and, therefore, to define inner experience, the subjective consciousness, in terms of objective, outer experience. This does not mean to accept behaviorism in its mechanistic version, openly criticized by Bakhtin (Voloshinov 1929), but as understood by Morris (1964) who was influenced by George H. Mead.

Popular culture is a major issue for both Welby and Bakhtin. As emerges in his books on Dostoevsky and Rabelais, Bakhtin's theory of literature rests on philosophy of language that takes into account the expressive reserve of folklore tradition. Bakhtin theorizes carnival, the reversal of hierarchical relations, the elimination of social distances, profanation and joyful relativity, all of which are useful in highlighting the potential polyphony of linguistic life. Welby too focused on the creative expressiveness of popular culture and its effect on cultural regeneration and renewal at large. She often pointed to the unconsciously philosophical, popular instinct of the "man in the street", symbolized by the question "What does it mean?", or "what does it signify?", as a model for the treatment of language problems at the theoretical level. She stressed the particular "significant" pregnancy of his idiom, particularly as it found expression in folklore tradition and narrative:

[...] both slang and popular talk, if intelligently regarded and appraised, are reservoirs from which valuable new currents might be drawn into the main stream of language—rather armouries from which its existing powers could be continuously re-equipped and re-enforced. (Welby 1985: 38-39)

The question "What does it mean?" or "What does it signify?", brings Welby to the question of the moral or ethic aspect of speech life and signifying processes in general, to the practical bearing and ethical value of signs. According to Welby, it is important that speakers develop a critical awareness of the value and "true significance of ambiguity", that they realize the value of experience through reflexion on the value of signs. Similarly to Bakhtin and coherently with interpretation semiotics and the sign model it proposes, sign value, according to Welby, must be looked for beyond the limits of intentional communication: it is neither founded on the logic of exchange value nor of use value, but on the logic of otherness and signifying excess, it is identified by Welby and Bakhtin respectively in "significance" and "theme". In the words of Bakhtin (-Voloshinov):

Theme is a complex, dynamic system of signs that attempts to be adequate to a given instant of the generative process. Theme is reaction by the consciousness in its generative process to the generative process of existence. Meaning is the technical apparatus for the implementation of theme (Voloshinov 1929, Eng. trans. 1973:10).

The boundary between "theme" and "meaning" is not clear-cut and definitive for the two terms interact and cannot subsist independently of each other: the "meaning" of the utterance is conveyed by transforming it into an element of the "theme," and vice versa, the "theme" is necessarily based on some kind of fixity of meaning if communicative interaction is to be realized at all. In Welby, "sense" beyond its sensorial signifying implications, concerns the way the word is understood according to the rules of conventional use, it concerns the word in relation to the circumstances of communicative interaction, to the universe of discourse and never in isolation (this is the dialectic described by Bakhtin between "meaning" and "theme"). Welby's "meaning" refers to the precise communicative intention of the user, her "significance" designates the import, implication, the overall and ideal value of the utterance.

There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as the Sense of a word, but only the sense in which it is used—the circumstances, state of mind, reference, "universe of discourse" belonging to it. The Meaning of a word is the intent which it is desired to convey—the intention of the user. The Significance is always manifold, and intensifies its sense as well as its meaning, by expressing its importance, its appeal to us, its moment for us, its emotional force, its ideal value, its moral aspect, its universal or at least social range. (Welby 1983:5-6)

We may relate Bakhtin's "meaning" to Welby's "sense"; his "theme" to her "meaning" and "significance". Such correspondences can of course only be approximate, given that, among other things, the concepts in question represent different attempts at breaking down a unitary totality which in reality is indivisible. Indeed, theoretical distinctions are always made by way of abstraction and serve to focus on particular aspects of signs. Let us remember, however, that not only do signs exist as whole entities, but that they act in relation to each other, finding in each other their specificity and significance in dialectic and dialogic signifying processes.

This parallel between Welby and Bakhtin is an attempt at appreciating their respective thought systems more fully, by translating Welby's discourse into Bakhtin's and viceversa, enabling them to shed light on each other. But more than this it is hoped that their relevance to semiotic discourse has sufficiently emerged for the reader to be aware of the eventual contribution that may come from these authors for a more comprehensive treatment of current problems in language and communication theory. In such a perspective, the cultural and chronotopic distance that impeded dialogue in real life ends up being an advantage for the realization of dialogue at the level of theoretical confrontation.