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Contributions to Bakhtinian Readings in Italy

(1970-1998)

During the 1970s the following books by Mikhail M. Bakhtin appeared in Italian translation: his 1975 Russian collection translated with the title, *Estetica e romanzo*; his *Rabelais* of 1965 translated as *Rabelais e la cultura popolare nel Medioevo e nel Rinascimento*; and thanks to Augusto Ponzio, the trilogy—recently reprinted in Russia under the general title *Bakhtin's Masks—Freudianism* (1927), *Il metodo formale nella scienza della letteratura* (1928), and *Marxismo e filosofia del linguaggio* (1929) (the main text is translated from the English while the introduction is translated directly from the 1930 Russian edition which had been excluded from the English). All three are signed by two of Bakhtin's collaborators as the result of work done collectively by the Bakhtin Circle during the 1920s: Valentin N. Voloshinov for *Freudismo* and *Marxismo e filosofia del linguaggio*, Pavel N. Medvedev for *Il metodo formale nella scienza della letteratura*. Two important anthologies collecting writings by different authors also appeared during the same period: *Problemi di teoria del romanzo* (see Strada 1976 ed.), which included Bakhtin's "Epos and romanzo" (1938-41) (published again both in *Teoria e realtà del romanzo* and in *Estetica e romanzo*), and *Michail Bachtin. Semiotica, teoria della letteratura e marxismo*, (see Ponzio 1977 ed.: collecting essays by V.V. Ivanov, J. Kristeva, L. Matejka, I.R. Titunik, and A. Ponzio with the addition of Bakhtin's "Problema teksta", 1959-1961), appearing for the first time in Italian.

During the 1980s Bakhtin's work was at the centre of attention in Italy. In 1984 his biography found its Diogenes Laertius in Michael Holquist (with the collaboration of Katerina Clark) with the monograph, *Mikhail Bakhtin*. In any case, Augusto Ponzio authored the first monograph ever on Bakhtin at a world-wide level under the title, *Michail Bachtin. Alle origini della semiotica sovietica*, published in 1980.

Ponzio examines Bakhtin's research in all its complexity and in the historico-cultural context of its development evidencing the specific orientation of Bakhtin's research as against other philosophical, literary, psychological, and culturological currents of the time. Ponzio's

monograph is theoretical by comparison with the biographical orientation of the Holquist-Clark monograph, and far broader than Tzvetan Todorov's, *Mikhail Bakhtin. Le principe dialogique*, 1981. The latter together with the Holquist-Clark 1984 monograph and Holquist's subsequent monograph of 1990, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World*, do not do justice to Bakhtin's work because of their misunderstanding of the Bakhtinian concept of dialogue.

Ponzio in his monograph reconstructs the historico-cultural context in which Voloshinov, Medvedev and Bakhtin published their writings on literature, with a particular focus on "La parola nella vita e nella poesia", signed by Voloshinov. Differently from the Russian formalists, Voloshinov insists on the homological relation between ordinary discourse and literary writing rather than on the contrast, and in this light concentrates on the specificity of the literary text. To contextualize Bakhtin's contribution to the critique of "Freudian philosophy" as formulated in *Freudismo*, Ponzio describes the debate on psychology in the USSR during the 1920s. He analyzes the relationship between Bakhtin and Vygotsky, as well as the latter's interest in the psychology of art. In his description of the relationship between the Bakhtin Circle and Russian Formalism Ponzio reconstructs the itinerary leading from Medvedev and Voloshinov and their analysis of the ideological character of verbal material, from the concept of "extralocality" presented in Bakhtin's early writings, from "representation" in Medvedev's book of 1928, to the difference between the objective word and the objectified word developed by Bakhtin in his book on Dostoevsky, where he works on the concepts of the "dialogically internal word" and "polyphony" characterizing the Dostoevskian novel.

Ponzio also analyzes Bakhtin's monograph on Rabelais in which the distinction (introduced in *Freudianism*) between "official ideology" and "non official ideology" is developed in relation to popular culture, carnival and the relationship between "high genres" and "low genres". He also works on the analogies and differences between Bakhtin and Vladimir Propp with reference to their interests and methodologies employed in their study of culture.

Furthermore, in his 1980 monograph Ponzio also reconstructs the dispute of 1950 between Stalin and Marr concerning language theory and the false problem as to whether language is or is not a

superstructure. According to Ponzio, Bakhtin's approach to signs and ideologies reveals that linguistic and sign phenomena are not generally characterized by the concept of "superstructure", but that, on the contrary, the concept of "superstructure" is explained non-mechanistically through the study of verbal and nonverbal signs which inexorably mediate between so-called "base" and so-called "superstructure". From this viewpoint, of great interest are both the original introduction to *Marxismo e filosofia del linguaggio* (eliminated from the English edition), and the first chapter of *Il metodo formale e la scienza della letteratura*.

In 1980 Umberto Eco also contributed to discussion on Bakhtin's *Rabelais* with an article entitled "Il *Rabelais* di Bachtin". Nonetheless, in his work on literature theory, the author-reader relation, the problem of the "limits of interpretation" Eco does not take Bakhtin into consideration. In 1980 other articles on *Rabelais* are published by the French studies specialist Giovanni Macchia, the anthropologist Clara Gallini, and by Ponzio in collaboration with the anthropologist Maria Solimini (1981). In 1980 Ponzio publishes in Italian translation a collection of writings by Voloshinov originally published in Russian journals between 1926 and 1930, *Il linguaggio come pratica sociale* (Bakhtin and Voloshinov 1980)

In 1981 an essay by V. Strada, "Dialogo con Bachtin," and the Italian translation by C. Strada Janovic of Bakhtin's 1970-71 "Appunti" were published in the first issue of the journal *Intersezioni*. The same text was subsequently included in the 1988 Italian translation of the 1979 Russian collection of Bakhtin's writings, published as *L'autore e l'eroe*. In Ponzio's opinion the first Italian translation of this text is better than the second, having the merit of rendering Bakhtin's interesting distinction between *tisina* and *molcanie* with the terms "silenzio" and "tacere" (silence and taciturnity) (cf. below, 1V.3) and unfortunately replaced by "silenzio" and "mutismo" in the 1988 version.

In "Dialogo con Bachtin", V. Strada refers to the Italian translations (promoted by Ponzio) of the books by Medvedev and Voloshinov, and is more rigid concerning the distinction between what belongs to the author Bakhtin and what does not. On the contrary, in his 1976 introduction Strada (1976 ed.) accepts the interpretation according to which texts by Medvedev and Voloshinov contain ideas that "are substantially Bakhtin's". However, he does not yet take an extreme

position in "Dialogo con Bachtin" on the question of private property relatively to the works of the Bakhtin Circle. Strada claims that books by Voloshinov and Medvedev, "having appeared in the USSR when Bakhtin was forbidden all possibility of publishing, doubtlessly develop Bakhtin's ideas, but in a 'Marxist' context which is not Bakhtin's" (*ibid.*: 116). Indeed, as a reading of their works reveal, the Marxist context of the books by Medvedev and Voloshinov was by no means "Marxism intended as the only 'scientific' and above all 'state' philosophy", but rather critical Marxism which, as declared in the texts in question, was still to be constructed in relation to studies on individual consciousness and cognitive processes, verbal and nonverbal signs, and the problem of the specificity of the literary text. Strada identifies two "key concepts" for literary works in Bakhtin's "dialogic model": "great time" and "extralocality" (*ibid.*: 123), though he does not succeed in grasping the specificity of this "dialogic model" being concerned as he is with tracing analogies between Bakhtin and neokantianism, Heideggerian philosophy, Hans Gadamer's philosophy and—considering his aim to describe Bakhtin as a "personalist philosopher"—the work of Martin Buber and "perhaps" Max Scheler (*ibid.*: 118). As observed by P. Jachia (*Introduzione a Bachtin* 1995: 132), Strada overlooks the fact that Bakhtin criticizes the philosophy of both Max Scheler and Martin Buber for their total lack of scientific rigor.

In the same year, 1981, another book appears by Ponzio, *Segni e contraddizioni. Tra Marx e Bachtin*, in which he analyzes Bakhtin's theories of language and literature with the aim of constructing a theoretical perspective in which the problems of language and translation are dealt with in terms of the relation of alterity and contradiction. Another important element in this book is the confrontation of Bakhtinian ideas with Marx as freed from prejudice and stereotyped interpretations.

In 1982, *Tempo e segno* by Patrizia Calefato inaugurates the book series "Segni di Segni," directed by Ponzio and Maria Solimini. In the paragraph entitled "Festa e tempo gioioso in Bachtin," Calefato confronts the Bakhtin's perspective on time with the dominant Western view grounded in a cumulative concept of history, according to which the subject's experiences take place linearly as established by a fixed idea of progress, speed, and anticipation.

In the same year the second edition of *Ideologia* by Ferruccio Rossi-Landi is published with a section on "Linguaggio e ideologia in Bakhtin e Voloshinov" (1982: 192-203). Rossi-Landi observes that Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov have the merit of signalling the "need for a new and creative Marxist approach to problems of language, ideology and their relations" (ibid.: 203), and of denouncing the fact that mechanistic categories were established in all fields only just touched on or completely left aside by Marx and Engels.

Ponzio's "trilogy" of three books (*Spostamenti., Tra linguaggio.e letteratura, Lo spreco dei. significanti*) published as a sequence in the above-mentioned book series, "Segni di segni", are rich in references to Bakhtinian theory not simply as the direct object of study but as the theoretical perspective according to which problems of philosophy of language, text theory, and theory of literature are reconsidered. Ponzio relates Bakhtin's contribution to R. Barthes, J. Kristeva, J. Derrida, M. Blanchot, and E. Lévinas. Another interesting publication is the collective volume *Polifonie* edited by Ponzio, in relation to which I shall simply signal the latter's essay, "La polionimia di Kierkegaard," in which Bakhtin's approach is ascertained in the "author's extralocality," achieved by Kierkegaard through the expedient of pluri-pseudonymy.

The Second International Conference on Bakhtin, "Bakhtin teorico del dialogo" was organized in Cagliari in 1985. The conference proceedings were published in 1986. Ponzio's paper which unites his studies on Bakhtin and Emmanuel Lévinas (cf. Ponzio 1995a), was subsequently included in his book *Filosofia del linguaggio 1*, together with "Abduzione e alterità", in which Bakhtin's dia-logic is confronted with what we might call Peirce's semio-logic.

This double reference is also present throughout another volume by Ponzio (written with the collaboration of Massimo A. Bonfantini), *Dialogo sui dialoghi..* Ponzio's 1986 volume *Interpretazione e scrittura*, is also dedicated to the relation between Peirce's semiotics and Bakhtin's philosophy of language with a focus on language and dialogue from the viewpoint of "literary space". References also return to the expert of otherness, Lévinas.

Another International Conference on Bakhtin was organized in 1989, in Urbino (Italy), by the Centro internazionale di semiotica e linguistica, on "Bakhtin e l'epistemologia del discorso". Foreign participants included M. Holquist, C. Thomson, and I. Zavala; among

the Italians Ponzio held a paper with Angela Biancofiore entitled, "Dialogue, Sense and Ideology" (in Ponzio 1993d), Susan Petrilli (1990d) confronted Bakhtinian theory with Welby's "significs" in "Dialogue and Chronotopic Otherness in Bakhtin and Welby", and Paolo Jachia presented "Bachtin e il marxismo".

In 1990 another volume by Ponzio appears entitled *Man as a Sign*, which though repositing earlier papers originally published in Italian, does not have an Italian equivalent organized in the form of a unitary volume. Bakhtinian categories are present in Ponzio's sign theory: otherness, dialogism, answering comprehension (or responsive understanding), and therefore the difference between sign and signal. Bakhtin is also present as the direct object of analysis, with Ponzio's return to confrontation with Lévinas and Peirce in addition to Rossi-Landi, Schaff, and Welby. Using Bakhtin in conjunction with Peirce and Rossi-Landi, Ponzio signals the direction in which code semiotics may be overcome. This volume also includes an appendix by S. Petrilli ("The Problem of Signifying").

In 1991 Ponzio published another two books in which Bakhtinian thought plays a primary role both as the general perspective and as the object of analysis. The first, *Dialogo e narrazione*, comprises the chapters: "L'acrobata e la sua ombra", "Dialogo e narrazione", "Alterità e origine dell'opera", "Il dialogo fra Rousseau e Jean Jacques". The second, *Filosofia del linguaggio 2*, includes a third section specifically on Bakhtin, "Senso e valore fra identità e alterità", though the latter is present throughout the whole volume, beginning with the section "Segno e ideologia" and ending with "Architetture e metodo".

Two monographs appear on Bakhtin in 1992: *Introduzione a Bachtin* by Paolo Jachia and *Tra semiotica e letteratura. Introduzione e M. Bachtin*, by Ponzio. A noteworthy aspect of Jachia's book is the comparison—important not only for Bakhtin criticism but also for today's ideological consciousness— between Bakhtin and Marxism in which the former's originality, autonomy and innovative capacity is underlined. It is not a question of "Marxisizing Bakhtin", as says V. Strada (cf. "Introduzione" to the Italian edition of Bakhtin's *Tolstoj*, Bakhtin 1986: 45), but if anything of "Bakhtinizing" Marxism in the perspective of a new form of humanism (such as that proposed by Adam Schaff in *Umanesimo ecumenico* or of Lévinas' "humanism of otherness"). In *Tra semiotica e letteratura* Ponzio returns to his

monograph of 1980 which he amplifies with the addition of works written in the meantime. His 1992 monograph is divided into two sections: 1) "La specificità della parola letteraria"; 2) "Soggetto, segno, ideologia". The value and specific character of Bakhtinian research is underlined in all its complexity, unlike numerous other studies which fail to do justice to Bakhtin. These in fact tend to be inadequate—despite treating important problems—simply because Bakhtin's work is often rather restrictively related to the interests of a particular discipline, therefore, to sectorial issues. On the other hand, Ponzio's viewpoint is fundamentally theoretical, turned as it is to problems around which Bakhtin's research is organically articulated. Bakhtin's work is evaluated by Ponzio both in the light of current debate on literary theory and semiotics, an area Bakhtin related to directly, as well as the other human sciences which are always present in the background. For this reason, in addition to situating Bakhtinian thought in the ideologico-theoretical context of its real (direct or indirect) referents, Ponzio also confronts it with trends which had not been taken into consideration, at least directly, by Bakhtin such as those connected with such authors as Propp, Peirce, Lévinas, Blanchot and Chomsky. Such confrontations are fundamental in fathoming the implications of Bakhtinian thought in its various aspects and in fully evaluating its topicality, capacity for innovation and relevance to semiotic theory and literary today. Ponzio also dedicates to Bakhtin part VI of his book, *Production linguistique et ideologie sociale*, 1992b.

In 1993 a fragment from the first chapter, "L'autore e l'eroe nell'attività estetica" from Bakhtin's book *L'autore e l'eroe*, is published for the first time in the volume, *Bakhtin e...* edited by Ponzio and Jachia. This fragment had neither been included in the 1979 Russian edition of Bakhtin's writings, nor consequently in the corresponding Italian edition of 1988. *Bakhtin e...* is divided into two parts: "Bakhtin e..." and "Simbolo, valore, alterità". In addition to the "Frammento" by Bakhtin (159-185), this second part also includes "Dalle Annotazioni", notes by Bakhtin (187-196), translated for the first time from the 1986 Russian edition of these texts published in "Literaturna-kriticheskie stat'i". The second part of *Bakhtin e...* also includes a strongly Bakhtinian article by S.S. Averincev (who with S. Bocharov has edited many of Bakhtin's writings for publication) and "Il simbolo" quoted by Bakhtin in his most recent work of 1974, "Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences"

(in Bakhtin 1979) Each one of these translations is preceded by a brief presentation by Ponzio.

In the first part of *Bakhtin e...*, the Russian scholar is confronted with other significant figures populating the cultural scene of our times (as signalled in the title), with essays by A. Biancofiore, P. Calefato, P. Jachia, R. Luperini, S. Petrilli, A. Ponzio and M. Valenti. One of the contributions by Ponzio, "Scrittura, opera, alterità", focuses on the relation between Bakhtin and Lévinas, also examined by him in another paper ("Bakhtin e l'umanesimo dell'alterità"), written in English for the International Conference on Bakhtin in Manchester, 1991, and read in Spanish by Iris Zavala in the author's absence. This relationship is also the topic of another book by Ponzio (*Scrittura, dialogo, alterità*, 1994). Theory of knowledge, philosophy of language, moral philosophy and literary criticism can all be transversally correlated to the notion of otherness, a central theme in the thought of both Bakhtin and Lévinas. Ponzio's volume discusses this hypothesis through his theoretical analyses and critical readings.

Fondamenti di filosofia del linguaggio by A. Ponzio, P. Calefato and S. Petrilli (1994) is rich in implicit and explicit references to Bakhtin, including the conception itself of "philosophy of language": see in particular the sections "Competenza linguistica, comunicazione e coscienza linguistica"; "Linguaggio e identità"; "Dialogo"; "Linguaggio e produzione letteraria"; "Linguaggio e corpo"; "Filosofia del linguaggio e linguaggio della filosofia".

Another recent editorial initiative is the publication by Eutopias, in an issue entitled *Tres miradas sobre Bakhtin*, of three Bakhtinian papers by Mercedes Arriaga, Petrilli and Ponzio, originally presented at a Seminar dedicated to Bakhtin held in July 1994 at the University of Madrid.

A large volume edited by Ponzio and Jachia, *Bakhtin e le sue maschere*, is also published in 1994. This collects various texts in Italian translation by Bakhtin and his Circle from 1919-29, some of which are translated directly from Russian for the first time, such as the 1925 text, "Il vitalismo contemporaneo", signed by the biologist, I. I. Kanaev but in reality written by Bakhtin as explicitly declared by the latter.

For the most recent editorial initiatives concerning Bakhtin readings in Italy, we shall simply remember the following:

—by A. Ponzio, *La rivoluzione bachtiniana. Il pensiero di Bakhtin e l'ideologia contemporanea* (1996), which proposes through Bakhtinian categories and in a Bakhtinian perspective, a critique of today's globalized communication connected with the plan for the development of neocapitalism;

– a new enlarged edition of the book of 1992, *Tra semiotica e letteratura. Introduzione a Michail Bakhtin* by Augusto Ponzio, 2003;

—the first Italian translation of the 1929 edition of Bakhtin's *Dostoevsky*, confronted with the 1963 version, by M. De Michiel and with an introduction by A. Ponzio (referred to in the paper on Bakhtin by Ponzio in the present issue, see above, I.2).

—the Italian translation of an essay by Bakhtin of 1920-24, *K filosofii postupka*, published for the first time in Russian in 1986, and proposed in Italian translation under the title *Per una filosofia dell'azione responsabile* (that is *For a Philosophy of Responsible Action*), as an independent volume, in 1998, with the addition of two essays by Ponzio and Zavala (the same volume with the addition of other texts by Bakhtin was published in Spanish in the same year). This volume in Italian inaugurates the new book series "Di-segno-in-segno", directed by A. Ponzio, S. Petrilli and C. Caputo.

—a critical edition of *Marxismo e filosofia del linguaggio*, edited by De Michiel with an introduction by Ponzio scheduled to appear in the same book series, "Di-segno-in-segno", in January 1999.

Connecting Bakhtin to Lévinas favors our understanding of Bakhtin's theoretical horizon while avoiding the misunderstandings that Augusto Ponzio has contributed to evidencing. In fact, Lévinas' critique—or at least the distance he takes—as regards such authors as Buber, Heidegger, Sartre as well as the representatives of neo-Kantism, helps toward understanding Bakhtin's critique which is very similar even if he is not necessarily direct or explicit.

The fact is that after a specifically philosophical beginning expressed specially in his early writing, *K filosofii postupka*, Bakhtin was subsequently to dedicate himself completely to the study of literature where he discovered that the relationship of otherness was developed in the terms he was mainly interested in studying. In the literary text the triadicity of the otherness relation clearly emerges, being a relation between author, hero and receiver. On the other hand, Lévinas—who is also particularly attentive toward the problem of

refounding the question of otherness and saving it from reduction to the ideology of identity as well as from the categories of the subject—persevered in his philosophical study of this question to the point that—or if as though— Bakhtin's implicit philosophy finds in Lévinas its full explicitation.

This is why we believe confrontation between Bakhtin and Lévinas—both of whom may be counted among the major and most original thinkers of our times—is fundamental, especially if we wish to avoid misunderstanding the Bakhtinian conception of dialogue and otherness. It is not an exaggeration to state, as does Ponzio in *La rivoluzione bachtiniana*, 1997, for Bakhtin, on one hand, and in *Sujet et alterité*, 1996, for Lévinas, on the other, that the work of these two authors constitutes an important space for the critical interrogation of the whole of Western ideology grounded in the category of identity. Dialectic from Hegel to Sartre did not succeed in conducting an adequate critique of identity or of Western reason to any satisfactory answers. Together Lévinas and Bakhtin represent an alternative which should be taken into serious consideration for a critique of reason inspired by alterity: a critique, that is, founded in otherness, answerability, dia-logic reason.

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