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Dialogue, responsibility and literary writing: Mikhail Bakhtin and his Circle

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Abstract: Mikhail Bakhtin cannot be discussed without discussing his friends and collaborators forming the Bakhtin Circle. The name Bakhtin itself announces a polyphony of different voices and viewpoints, internally to Bakhtin's own voice and externally, all evidencing the word's capacity for dialogism and otherness, the possibility of cohabitation and interference among different voices in the same word, the propensity for participative listening, ultimately the inevitability of responsiveness/responsibility toward the other, that is, the other's singularity. The name "Bakhtin" or, better, the expression "Bakhtin Circle," offers a concrete perspective for a world constructed in terms of multiplicity, diversity, and hospitality toward the other. This essay presents some characteristic aspects of Bakhtinian philosophy, keeping account of the writings collected in the 2014 bilingual volume *Opere 1919–1930*, presented by the renowned Italian Bakhtin scholar Augusto Ponzio.

Keywords: dialogism, listening, otherness, polyphony, responsibility, singularity

Пытаясь понимать всю свою жизнь как скрытое представительство, а каждый свои акт, как ритуальный – мы становимся самозванцами.

Всякое представительство не отменяет, а лишь специализует мою персональную *ответственность*.

... ответственное не растворяется в специальном (политика), в противном случае мы имеем не поступок, а техническое действие.

Se cerchiamo di interpretare la nostra vita intera come celata rappresentanza, e ogni nostro atto come rituale, diveniamo degli impostori.

Ogni rappresentanza non abolisce, ma semplicemente specializza, la mia personale *responsabilità*.

... il responsabile non si riduce allo specialistico (la politica), in caso contrario non avremmo un atto, ma azione tecnica.

[If we try to interpret our whole life as hidden delegation, and every one of our acts as a ritual, we become impostors.

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Every representation does not abolish, but simply specializes, my personal responsibility.

... the responsible person is not reduced to the specialized (politics), on the contrary we would not have an act, but technical action]. (Bakhtin in *Opere 1919–1930*: 124–125, 130–131; “Per una filosofia dell’atto responsabile” [For a Philosophy of the Responsible Act], 1920–1924)

1 Topicality of a lifetime’s work

In some cases the more time passes the more an author becomes topical. This is the case of Mikhail Bakhtin and his Circle. This rather extraordinary fact can be stated with an expression adapted from Bakhtin’s own language. He speaks of the “great time” which he juxtaposes to the “small time” of contemporaneity. There exist enormously important works, but which emerge as such only in the ephemeral time of their contemporaneity. And there exist works that endure far beyond the lifespan of the person who produced them and of their immediate addressees. This is generally the case of literary works. However, here we are engaged in tracing the possibility of life beyond one’s own time in writing that is not literary writing, but rather what Bakhtin himself defined as “philosophical” writing.

However, there may be an explanation for this. Bakhtin’s philosophy, a philosophy pervaded by studies on the sign, insofar as it is based on listening, philosophy elaborated in terms of the “art of listening”, is a philosophy, or if we prefer, a semiotics of literature. Here “of literature” does not mean that literature is the object, but on the contrary that literature is the subject, the point of view, the angle from which we dialogue. Perhaps this is the “secret” that explains the “duration” of the ideas proposed by the Bakhtin Circle, ideas without property, without ownership, without belonging. “Circle” in the sense that the word circulates, it circulates freely in the Bakhtin Circle, it circulates freely as a “free word” by contrast with what is commonly referred to as “freedom of the word,” “freedom of speech” – a situation that Bakhtin and his “friends” indicated as the essential semi-other character of the word.

How strong an impact writings by Bakhtin and the Bakhtin Circle have on cultural values today, their topicality for the quality of life and human relationships, is emphasized by the volume *Opere 1919–1930*, a first-time collection of fundamental texts by members of the Bakhtin Circle from the years indicated, in Russian original and Italian translation (see Bakhtin e il suo circolo 2014).

In fact, as a starting point for our reflections on Mikhail M. Bakhtin and the Bakhtin Circle, we shall begin from this bilingual volume (Russian / Italian), *Opere 1919–1930*: published in 2014 in the prestigious book series “Il pensiero occidentale,”

directed by Giovanni Reale. This volume presents a collection of writings by Bakhtin and members of the Bakhtin Circle (Michail Bachtin e il suo Circolo), in new Italian translations from the Russian original, edited and commented by the renowned Bakhtin scholar, Augusto Ponzio¹ (Introduction, pp. VII–XXXII). *Opere 1919–1930* is the arrival point of the latter's studies on Bakhtin, which began during the second half of the 1970s and as an initial result led to publication of his monograph, *Michail Bachtin*, in 1980, the first ever at a world level.²

Bakhtin occupies a privileged place among the authors that have most contributed to the development of Ponzio's own philosophical work. Similarly

1 Augusto Ponzio is Professor Emeritus at the University of Bari "Aldo Moro," Italy, where he has taught Philosophy of language since 1970 and General linguistics since 1999.

2 *Opere 1919–1930* is the expression of a project conceived and developed by Ponzio and the most recent result of groundwork carried out since the 1970s. He has worked uninterruptedly on writings by Bakhtin and this circle for over forty years, since the early 1970s when he first took an interest in Bakhtin's philosophy occasioned by the Italian translation, which he supervised, of V. N. Vološinov's *Marksizm i filosofija jazyka* from the 1973 English translation. During all these years Ponzio has produced a substantial number of publications specifically dedicated to Bakhtin and his circle, whether as the author of books and essays published in journals, Italian and international, or as editor of Italian translations of their works (see Ponzio 1977, 1980, 1981, 1992, 1994a, 2015c).

Among Ponzio's monographs on Bakhtin, the first, *Michail Bachtin. Alle origini della semiotica sovietica*, appeared in 1980, the first at a world level as well. This was followed by *Tra semiotica e letteratura. Introduzione a Michail Bachtin*, published in the book series "Campo Semiotico," directed by Umberto Eco, 1992 (new revised and enlarged edition 2003). In 1997 Ponzio published *La rivoluzione bachtiniana. Il pensiero di Bachtin e l'ideologia contemporanea*, a volume collecting studies on Bakhtin and his circle, written between 1975 and 1997, particularly well received in Latin American countries as well as in Spain and Portugal (Madrid, Cathedra, 1998; Sao Paulo, Contexto, 2008, 2nd enlarged ed. 2012). The expression "Bakhtinian revolution" indicates the shift in perspective, operated by Bakhtin, from the logic of identity to the logic of alterity, where "alterity" implies excess and escape from the sphere of being, the same, the identical. Therefore two centers of value come into play and cannot be reduced to each other, two centers of value that stage irreducible otherness, the other of the Other and the other of the I.

Fundamentos de Filosofia da Linguagem is the title of the first book by Ponzio published in Brazil (Portorico), with Vozes, in 2007 (original Italian edition 1994; co-authored with Patrizia Calefato and Susan Pettrilli) (see Ponzio 1994b). In the enlarged Brazilian edition, philosophy of language is described in terms of "the art of listening," clearly inspired by the writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Vološinov. Most recently, another original monograph by Ponzio on Bakhtin was published in Brazil in 2013, *No Circulo com Mikhail Bakhtin*, with no exact Italian correlate (see Ponzio 2013).

Finally, I wish to signal another important collection of writings, published by Ponzio titled, *Bachtin e le sue maschere* (Bachtin et al. 1995), inspired by the title of a book series "Bakhtin and His Masks," edited in Russia by V. L. Machlin during the early 1990s, which, in addition to M. M. Bakhtin's *Dostoevsky*, collected the works of Medvedev and Vološinov. The 1995 volume co-edited by Ponzio contains other texts by Bakhtin, Vološinov, and Medvedev with respect to the 2014 collection. (For a complete overview of books and essays by A. Ponzio on the works of Bakhtin and his circle, see the bibliography appended to *Opere 1919–1930*.)

to his dialogue with Emmanuel Lévinas (1905–1995)³ to whom he has dedicated various monographs since 1967 (including publications in France with L'Harmattan, Paris), Ponzio's engagement with Bakhtin has never been interrupted.

Beyond addressing the question of dialogue, Ponzio's reading and interpretation of Bakhtin is itself the expression of a dialogue with all those whom, in turn, have dedicated their attention to Bakhtin, including, among others, Tzevetan Todorov, Michael Holquist, Vladimir Krysinski, and René Wellek (Ponzio 2006, 2007, 2008b, 2012).

For that which concerns the texts by Bakhtin translated and presented in *Opere 1919–1930* (with the exception of the article on vitalism signed by I. Kanaev; see Bakhtin 1926), Ponzio refers to the works collected in the edition titled, *Sobranie sočinenij*, 1996–2010. Moreover, Ponzio has consulted the most recent editions of works by both Medvedev and Vološinov, and for what concerns Vološinov's *Marksizm i filosofija jazyka*, he has also kept account of the recent French translation by Inna Tylkowski-Aageeva published in a bilingual Russian / French edition of 2010, edited by Patrik Sériot.

As explained in his introduction to *Opere 1919–1930*, this bilingual edition is the result of comparing most translations as they have appeared so far. And with A. Ponzio, the work of translation is inevitably accompanied by a critical discussion of these various translations, of their imprecisions and misunderstandings, including in the English. For example, he points out that the Russian term *bytie*, which he translates into Italian as *esistere*, 'to exist,' is rendered in the official English translation as 'Being' with a capital B and Bakhtin is made to seem like Heidegger from his 1927 monograph *Sein und Zeit* (Being and time) (see Heidegger 2006).

As anticipated by the title, *Opere* contains works published between 1919 and 1930 and it is thanks to such works that Bakhtin is Bakhtin and the Bakhtin Circle is the Bakhtin Circle. Obviously, as emerges in both Ponzio's general introduction to the volume as much as in his introductions to each section, that the focus of the volume is limited to Bakhtinian writings from 1919 to 1930 does not at all stop Ponzio from considering subsequent works by Bakhtin and his Circle, such as the second 1963 edition of his monograph on Dostoevsky, his 1965 monograph on Rabelais, and the two important essay collections of 1975 and 1979 (see Bakhtin 1963, 1965, 1975, 1979). Throughout his own writings, in

³ Ponzio took an early interest in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and on suggestion from his mentor, Giuseppe Semerari, professor of theoretical philosophy and moral philosophy, published a monograph on Levinas in 1967, *La relazione interpersonale* (from the text of his dissertation) which like his 1980 monograph on Bakhtin was the first ever worldwide.

fact, Ponzio constantly underlines the coherence and continuity of the Bakhtinian project as it unfolded from the 1920s to the beginning of the 1970s.

Ponzio's encounter with texts by the Bakhtin circle, their language and specific terminology is not only as a philologist / translator focused on restoring their meaning and sense, but also as a "responsive interpretant" engaged in reading these texts together, in relation to each other and to texts by other authors. Moreover, Ponzio reinterprets these texts in the context of social practice today, which he analyzes with the instruments of Bakhtinian theory and categories (see Ponzio 2015a).

2 The Bakhtin Circle

Mikhail Mikhajlovič Bakhtin (Orël, Russia, 17 November [but 4 November according to the Julian calendar, 1895] – Moscow 7 March 1975) is a major representative of twentieth century European culture. Bakhtin pursued his university studies first in Odessa and subsequently in Petrograd (St. Petersburg, subsequently Leningrad) where courses were taught by such figures as Alexander N. Veselovsky (1838–1906), Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929) and Nikolaj Zelinskij (1861–1953). In 1919 Bakhtin entered into close contact with Valentin Nicolaevič Vološinov (1885–1934), first a musicologist, then also ethnologist and linguist (on Vološinov see the important 2012 monograph by Tylkowski), with the philosopher Matvej I. Kagan (1889–1937), the literary critic Lev V. Pumpianskij (1891–1940) and the pianist Marja V. Judina (1899–1970). He met them all in Nevel', as he recounts in his 1973 conversations with Viktor Duvakin, originally published in a volume of 1996 (2nd edition 2002), translated into Italian in 2008, edited by Ponzio (see Bakhtin 2008).

Pavel N. Medvedev (1891–1938) joined the group soon after this initial encounter of 1919. Bakhtin met Medvedev in Vitebsk, where he went to live in 1920. In 1921 Bakhtin married Elena Aleksandrovna Okolovič who remained by his side until 1971, the year of her death. Sick with chronic osteomyelitis which rendered him seriously invalid all his life, Bakhtin shifted to Petrograd / Leningrad where the Bakhtin circle took shape. In addition to Vološinov and Medvedev, other members included the biologist Ivanov I. Kanaev (1893–1984), musicologist Ivan I. Sollertinsky (1902–1944), writer Kostantin Vaginov (1899–1949) and poet Boris M. Zubakin (1894–1938).

Ponzio makes a point of underlining that the so-called "Bakhtin Circle" was not a "School" in the academic sense of this term, nor was Bakhtin a "leader of a movement," or a "master." Consequently, not only is the expression "circle" deviating if we understand it as a school, but the expression itself "of Bakhtin,"

“Bakhtin’s,” that is, “Bakhtin” in the possessive is also a deviation if understood in terms of derivation, belonging, geneology. In his 1973 conversations with Duvakin, Bakhtin himself mentions the “Bakhtin Circle,” a group of people whose work somehow revolved around his own, which had originally formed in Nevel’ and subsequently grew and was consolidated first in Vitebsk with the addition of Medvedev and then in Leningrad – “a circle they now call the ‘Bakhtin Circle’.” The Bakhtin circle was more of a sodality, an association, a brotherhood, an understanding, a “place” where friends came together in the spirit of participative collaboration. These people all shared a multiplicity of different interests, viewpoints and competencies that converged on common themes, viewed in the context of the architectonics of an overarching vision of signs, language, and life and of the values that inspire them (see Ponzio 2009).

Like the expression “Bakhtin circle” the adjective “Bakhtinian” coupled with “school” in relation to this group became common currency during Bakhtin’s own lifetime (he died in 1975) with his official return to public life once Stalinism came to an end, and his entry onto the international scene after decades of oblivion. In fact, under Stalinist repression Bakhtin was exiled first to Kazakhstan and then Mordovia simply for having participated with a religious-philosophical association called “Voskresenie,” founded by Aleksandr A. Mejer (1874–1939). In those same years, Vološinov died from tuberculosis (1937) and Medvedev was arrested in Leningrad and executed (1938), without a trial, for reasons unclear still today. Relatedly to such a context, the works of these two authors (generally considered the two most important exponents of the Bakhtin circle) became known as “Bakhtinian” having come to the public attention, internationally as well thanks to their translations, as a consequence of Bakhtin’s return to official culture in 1963 with publication of the second edition of his monograph on Dostoevsky, *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo* – the original 1929 edition being entitled, *Problemy tvorčestva Dostoevskogo*.

In conclusion, the statement that works by members of the Bakhtin circle are Bakhtinian is relatively true to the extent that the word circulated among its members without them claiming “private property” over it. But this statement is false if “Bakhtinian” intimates that the inspirer of all writings produced by the Bakhtin circle is Bakhtin himself.

In any case, as the Bakhtin circle took shape first in Nevel, then in Vitebsk and finally in Leningrad, Bakhtin’s research effectively intersected with that of his collaborators, particularly Vološinov and Medvedev. Moreover, their voices continued to resound in Bakhtin’s work, as in a dialogue that was never interrupted, even after Bakhtin survived the Stalinist era alone and pursued his studies through to the time of his death in 1975.

In Ponzio’s view, just as it is not relevant to search for Dostoevsky’s voice among the many voices in his novels, what Bakhtin describes as the “polyphonic”

novel, in the same way to search obstinately for the voices of the individual members forming the Bakhtin circle in Bakhtin's writings is at the very least a waste of time – similarly to the renowned “Homeric question” – apart from the fact that such a search contradicts the Bakhtinian thesis (supported by Bakhtin, Medvedev, and Vološinov) that the word is always “semi-other.” To concentrate on establishing what is properly Bakhtin's and what instead “belongs” to Medvedev, Vološinov, Kagan, or Pumpiansky, etc., could even be considered as an expedient – indeed now a rather widespread habit – to avoid concentrating on the important, innovative, we might even claim *revolutionary* ideas elaborated and proposed in these texts. In such cases, having abandoned the text, the critic acts as a “detective” or as a journalist in search of a scoop. Nevertheless, for anybody interested in the “paternity” of works by the Bakhtinian circle, unfortunately in one case alone does there exist sure evidence – and what's more involving the life sciences. Our allusion here is to “Sovremennyj vitalizm,” the 1926 article on contemporary vitalism published in the biology journal, *Človek i Priroda*, signed by Bakhtin's good friend, the biologist Ivan Kanaev for a question of credibility, but written by Bakhtin, as declared by Kanaev himself in writing on the extract of this article, dated 3 November 1975, sent to Sergej G. Bočarov eight months after Bakhtin's death. Bočarov was very close to Bakhtin during the last years of his life, and contributed generously to the reedition of his works. In Kanaev's own words: “This article was written entirely by M. M. Bakhtin. I limited myself to providing the necessary bibliographical materials and I facilitated publication in the journal, given my relations with the editorial committee.”

To read texts by the Bakhtin Circle and insist on separating their voices and describing them as independent from each other is to force the issue concerning authorship. This operation, as Ponzio claims, tends toward what Bakhtin *à propos* Dostoevsky tagged “Dostoevskyism.” Bakhtin evidenced the absurdity of insisting on the search for the “author's voice” among the many voices in Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel. The following passage is from the 1984 translation of the second 1963 edition of Bakhtin's Dostoevsky monograph:

“Dostoevskyism” is a reactionary, purely monologic extract from Dostoevsky's polyphony. It is locked forever within the limits of a single consciousness, rummages around in it, and creates a cult of the duality of the isolated personality. The important thing in Dostoevsky's polyphony is precisely what happens between various consciousnesses, that is, their interaction and interdependence.

One should learn not from Raskolnikov or Sonja, not from Ivan Karamazov or Zosima, ripping their voices out of the polyphonic whole of the novels (and by that act alone distorting them) – one should learn from Dostoevsky himself as the creator of the polyphonic novel. (Bakhtin 1963, Eng. trans.: 36)

Critiquing “Dostoevskyism” and continuing on from this passage, Bakhtin adds that we should all go to school not with this or that other personage, one that seems more congenial to us, that we like more, but with Dostoevsky himself, and learn from him, inventor and master of the polyphonic novel. “Dostoevskyism” refers to the phenomenon of identifying the word with the person who utters it, which Bakhtin considers as an oversimplification, a reduction. On the contrary, for Bakhtin to go to school with Dostoevsky means to recognize the word’s *otherness*, the other in the word, the multi-voiced capacity of the single word. This approach contrasts totally with the primacy of monologism and monological identity. Bakhtin denounces monologism in whatever form it emerges, even when masked (however poorly) as “dialogue,” that is, “formal dialogue,” considered as dialogue simply because it presents itself in the form of a succession of rejoinders exchanged among interlocutors. Instead, on Bakhtin’s account, even discourse belonging to a single voice can be dialogical, for a single voice can effectively contain a plurality of different voices. So, on one hand, we can have “single-voiced discourse” even when on a formal level there are many voices, and on the other “multi-voiced discourse” even when formally there is only one voice.

A monologic understanding of dialogue is recurrent in dominant ideology today, at the service of the reproduction of identity. This means to say that in the present day and age what appears as dialogue on a formal level in reality serves the reason of monologic identity (including the reason of war), to be reproduced at all costs. But dialogue thus understood is only formally dialogue, substantially it is single-voiced and monologic. Monologic identity still goes largely unquestioned by dominant ideology, and as such is easily imposed upon the world, even at the cost of applying the *extrema ratio* of war.

Contrary to such a vision, Bakhtin’s inquiry into the conditions for the subversion of identity and its ideologies represents a major, indeed indispensable contribution toward recognizing that a new type of logic is possible. In fact, the logic proposed by Bakhtin is centered upon otherness, *dialogized otherness*, which as such presents a vision of the world and of the interpersonal relationship that is open to multiplicity and altogether different from what has been traditionally put forward by the cornerstones of Western culture.

Opere 1919–1930 is divided into three parts preceded by three epigraphs cited from writings by Bakhtin, subsequent to those included in the collection, that is, to 1930. They are reported below insofar as they draw the reader’s attention to some of the main themes addressed by the Bakhtin circle upon which Ponzio too has centered his own studies, moreover giving a sense to the texts as they are distributed in this volume – the questions of “responsiveness / responsibility,” “sense,” “dialogism,” and “singularity.” While Ponzio, of

course, cites from the Italian translations of Bakhtin's works, here instead I report from existing English translations.

The first epigraph is from Bakhtin's "Notes Made in 1970–1971," included in the 1986 collection, *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*:

With meaning I give answers to questions. Anything that does not answer a question is devoid of sense for us ... The responsive nature of contextual meaning. Meaning always responds to particular questions. Anything that does not respond to something seems meaningless to us; it is removed from dialogue. Contextual meaning and formal definition. Formal definition is removed from dialogue, but it is deliberately and conventionally abstracted from it. It contains potential meaning. (Bakhtin 1986: 145)

The second epigraph is from Bakhtin's 1920–1924 essay, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," cited here from Bakhtin's *Art and Answerability*:

In his conversation with Saint Bernard in Paradise, Dante suggests that our body shall be resurrected not for its own sake, but for the sake of those who love us – those who knew and loved our one-and-only countenance. (Bakhtin 1990: 57)

The third is from an essay of 1961 by Bakhtin, "Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book," included as Appendix II in the 1963 edition of Bakhtin's monograph on Dostoevsky:

Our point of view in no way assumes a passivity on the part of the author, who would then merely assemble other's points of view, other's truths, completely denying his own point of view, his own truth ... The author is profoundly active, but his activity is of a special dialogic sort. (Bakhtin 1963, Eng. trans.: 285)

As anticipated, the first edition of Bakhtin's *Problemy tvorčestva Dostoevskogo* appeared in 1929. And we know that under Stalinism Bakhtin was exiled and banished from official culture, nor was he granted the possibility of publishing again until 1963, when the second enlarged edition of his 1929 monograph at last appeared under the title *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo*. Bakhtin's only publication between 1929 and 1963 was his study on the requirements of collective enterprises in the journal *Sovetskaja orgovlja* [Sovietic commerce], in 1934 – an indication of his work as an economist in the district cooperative for consumption in Kustanaj where he had been exiled.

In fact, Bakhtin was arrested during the early Stalinist purges and subsequently, in 1929, exiled first to Kustanaj between Siberia and Kazakistan, and then, in 1936, to Saransk in Mordovia. Moreover, in 1938 as a consequence of a serious disease, osteomyelitis, his leg was amputated. In Saransk he taught at school from 1945 to 1969.

However, in spite of living in exile for most of his active life, from 1929 onward, and in extremely difficult life conditions, Bakhtin continued his

research and writing, such that we might speak of a *productive solitude*. We have already mentioned his first large collection of writings published in 1975, *Voprosy literatury i estetiki*, followed by a second just as substantial collection in 1979, *Estetika slovesnogo tvorčestva*.

In 1941 Bakhtin presented his Phd dissertation on *Rable v istorii realizma* [Rabelais in the history of realism] at the Gor'kij Institute in Moscow. The discussion took place in 1949 at the Institute of world literature in Moscow, but Bakhtin did not receive the recognition he deserved. Nonetheless, this masterpiece was published in 1965, being the second monograph by Bakhtin after the first on Dostoevsky.

Bakhtin was only granted permission to live in Moscow in 1971. And only in 1974 was he rehabilitated civically, that is, just a year before his death, in 1975.

In short, during his lifetime Bakhtin's publications were limited to the following: his brief 1919 article "Iskusstvo i otvetstvennost'" (see Bakhtin 1919); in 1926 his essay on contemporary vitalism, "Sovremennyj vitalizm" (signed by Kanaev, see Bakhtin 1929); in 1929 *Problemy tvorčestva Dostoevskogo*; in 1929 and 1930 respectively, Bakhtin's introductions to volumes XI and XIII of Lev N. Tolstoy's works; in 1963, under the title *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo*, the revised and enlarged edition of his original 1929 monograph; and in 1965 his monograph *Tvorčestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaja kul'tura srednevekov'ja i Renessansa*. A chapter dedicated to Rabelais and Gogol' was omitted from the 1965 edition, but an enlarged version of the same was published in the journal *Kontekst*, in 1972. Moreover, partial versions of texts written by Bakhtin between the 1920s and the 1940s, including his response to the journal *Novy Mir* 1970, were also published between the second half of the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s.

3 Foundational works by members of the Bakhtin Circle

The monumental 2,132 page collection, *Opere 1919–1930*, includes four books published between 1927 and 1929: by Vološinov, *Frejdizm. Kriticeskij očerk* (1927), *Freudismo. Studio critico* [Freudism: A critical sketch], and *Marksizm i filosofija jazyka* (1929, 2nd ed. 1930), *Marxismo e filosofia del linguaggio* [Marxism and philosophy of language]; by Medvedev, *Formal'nyi metod v literaturovedeni* (1928), *Il metodo formale nella scienza della letteratura* [The formal method in the science of literature]; and by Bakhtin, *Problemy tvorčestva Dostoevskogo* (1929), *Problemi dell'opera di Dostoevskij* [Problems in the work of Dostoevsky]; together

with a series of articles and essays which appeared between 1919 and 1930, as indicated in the title.

These texts are distributed across the volume in three parts:

Part I: “Arte, vita, responsabilità [Art, life, responsibility] (1919–1926),” begins with three essays by Bakhtin: “Iskusstvo i otvetstvennost” (1919), “Arte e responsabilità” [Art and answerability], pp. 27–31; the programmatic essay “K filosofii postupka” (1920–1924), “Per una filosofia dell’atto responsabile” [For a philosophy of the responsible act], pp. 33–167; “Autor i geroy v esteteskoj tvorčestva” (1920–24), “L’autore e l’eroe nell’attività estetica” (frammento del I capitolo) [Author and hero in aesthetic activity (fragment from Chapter I)], pp. 169–213. Because of its fragmentary nature, the latter was excluded from the original Russian edition of this essay published in *Estetika slovesnogo tvorčestva* [Aesthetics of verbal art] (1979), and consequently from the corresponding Italian translation (*L’autore e l’eroe* [Author and hero], 1988).

Other texts in Part I include the article signed by Kanaev, “Sovremennyj vitalizm” (1926), “Il vitalismo contemporaneo” [Contemporary vitalism], pp. 215–269; and a renowned essay by Vološinov, “Slovo v žizni i slovo v poezii” (1926), “La parola nella vita e nella poesia” [Word in life and in poetry], pp. 271–333.

Part II: “Coscienza, ideologia, parola letteraria, dialogo [Consciousness, ideology, literary word, dialogue] (1927–1929)” contains three of the four books announced above: Vološinov’s *Frejdzizm* (1927; pp. 355–597); Medvedev’s *Formal’nyi metod v literaturovedeni* (1928; pp. 599–1051); and Bakhtin’s, *Problemy tvorčestva Dostoevskogo* (1929; pp. 1053–1423).

Part III: “Linguaggio, sintassi dell’enunciazione, linguistica generale [Language, utterance syntax, general linguistics] (1929–1930)” is entirely dedicated to writings by Vološinov: his monograph, *Marksizm i filosofija jazyka*, pp. 1461–1839; and two essays. Of the latter the first is “Stilistica chudožestvennoj reči” (Vološinov 1930a), “Stilistica del discorso artistico” [Stylistics of artistic discourse], pp. 1841–1993, which is divided into: 1. “Che cos’è il linguaggio?” [What is language?]; 2. “La costruzione dell’enunciazione [Construction of the utterance]; 3. “La parola e la sua funzione sociale” [The word and its social function]; and the second is “O granicah poetiki i linguistiki” (Vološinov 1930b), “Sui confini tra poetica e linguistica” [On the borders between poetics and linguistics], pp. 1995–2069.

The texts by Bakhtin and Vološinov from 1919–1926 in Part I are particularly important given that they contain the reasons (and implied explanations) of the subsequent orientation of their research, in Vološinov’s case stopped abruptly with his death in 1937, in Bakhtin’s pursued through to the beginning of the 1970s.

“Iskusstvo i otvetstvennost” [Art and answerability] (1919), the first text ever that we know of published by Bakhtin, proposes the main theme pervading all

his work from his 1929 monograph on Dostoevsky to his most recent writings from the 1970s. This 1919 text is closely connected with Bakhtin's two manuscripts from the early 1920s, only published in the Russian original as late as 1986, posthumously, in a volume edited by Sergej G. Bočarov: the first, "K filosofii postupka" [For the philosophy of the responsible act] (thus entitled by the editor); and the second, "Autor i geroj v esteteskoi tvorčestva" [Author and hero in aesthetic activity].

These writings share a common theme, the need to overcome division between two worlds that seem impenetrable, the life world and the world of culture. But as Ponzio underlines in his introduction to *Opere 1919–1930* (pp. 3–5), we are always in the first even when we cognize, contemplate, and create, when we construct worlds that take the life we lead as their object, considering it from the perspective of a given cultural sphere. These two worlds, the life world and the cultural world, are united by the unique event of the act in which is decided each single individual's standpoints and decisions. These are charged with a double sense of responsibility: that relative to the objective unity of a given cultural sphere, what Bakhtin denominates "special responsibility" or "technical responsibility," and that concerning the unique, singular event-ness of the act (*sobytičnost*), which Bakhtin calls "moral responsibility." So, on one hand, we have "special responsibility" which is relative to a given role, a given function, and which as such is delimited, defined, and referred to the repeatable identity of the objective and interchangeable individual; on the other, "moral responsibility," an "absolute responsibility," without delimitations, without the guarantees offered by a given order, without alibis and which alone, as responsibility which cannot be deferred to others, without the possibility of exemption, derogation, is responsibility that invests the single individual and renders his act unique, unrepeatable (see Bakhtin e il suo circolo 2014: 37–39). In Bakhtin's view, the connection between culture and life, between cultural consciousness and consciousness of the unique single individual is given by the unindifference of the responsible act. In the absence of a connection with life, cultural, cognitive, scientific, aesthetic, and political values become values in themselves, with which they lose all possibility of verification, sense, transformation. This problematic is addressed in "K filosofii postupka," but was already outlined in 1919 with "Iskusstvo i otvetstvennost'," specifically in relation to artistic activity (see Bakhtin 1919, 1920–24a, 1920–1924b).

Bakhtin studies the question of how to describe the uniqueness and unity of a world that is not abstractly "systematic," but concretely "architectonic" in valuational and spatio-temporal terms, beginning from the unique place that each single individual occupies, without being replaceable, in one's responsibility without alibis, as a participative and unindifferent center (see Bakhtin e il suo

circolo 2014: 47–49, 113–117). He uses the word *edinstvennji*: singular, unique, unrepeatable, exceptional, uncomparable, *sui generis*, corresponding to the German *einzig*. It is not possible to describe this architectonics made of particular values and a space-time as experienced by each single individual from an objective, detached, abstract, that is, cognitive viewpoint, one that is not emotionally and valuationally participative, a standpoint that is indifferent, incapable of *listening* and *responsive understanding*. In fact, this non participative point of view ends up in oversimplification, impoverishment and mystification. Nor can understanding be based on empathy, which too would be an impoverishment insofar as it reduces the relation between two mutually external and non interchangeable positions to a single vision. On Bakhtin's account, interpretation-understanding of the unique single individual presupposes a viewpoint that is external, extralocalized, exotopic, other, different and at once unindifferent to the other, therefore participative, responsive to the otherness of the other.

According to this description there emerge two centers of value, that of the I and that of the other, “the two centers of value of life itself” around which the architectonics of responsibility is constituted. These two centers of value must necessarily remain mutually other, if the architectonic relation of two others is to continue on the spatio-temporal and axiological level.

In “K filosofii postupka,” Bakhtin sees the possibility of reaching such a vision in art, specifically verbal art, in literature. The architectonics of the literary vision is organized around that center of value that is the single human being in one's uniqueness, unreplaceability, precariousness, mortality, in relation to which expressions like “before,” “after,” “still,” “when,” “never,” “late,” “in the end,” “already,” “necessary,” “due,” “beyond,” “near,” “distant” lose their abstract meaning and are charged – in terms of the emotional-volitional tone of this participative center – with a concrete sense at each occurrence (see Bachtin e il suo circolo 2014: 131–135).

Only in the relationship between author and hero in literary writing does Bakhtin find what he is searching for *à propos* the relationship between the singularity of the unique single individual and a viewpoint capable of understanding and responding participatively: literary writing establishes a relationship that maintains otherness as the center of value, in turn considered as “transgredient,” extralocalized, exotopic, unique and other. To explain all this, Bakhtin examines a specific artwork, namely, a poem by Puškin titled (but not by the author) “Razluka” (‘Parting’; see Bachtin e il suo circolo 2014: 177–181; see also Ponzio 2016).

The subsequent course of Bakhtin's research begins from this point onward. Having found the possibility of describing the singularity of each single individual in the viewpoint of literature, Bakhtin dedicated his studies to this

viewpoint so that what was simply intended as an example, ended up holding his attention for the rest of his life (see Bakhtin e il suo circolo 2014: 9–11).

The formal method establishes a dichotomy between “ordinary language” and “poetic language” and on this relationship founds the categories of “automation,” “perceptibility,” and “estrangement.” This approach is rejected by Vološinov in his 1926 essay, “Slovo v žizni i slovo v poezii,” where he maintains that all the potential of artistic form is already present in the utterance of everyday life, obviously expressed in special terms in the artistic utterance. Analysis of the ordinary word is the necessary starting point for an adequate understanding of artistic form. Through his analysis of concrete linguistics acts, of the word in situational context, Vološinov identifies elements and aspects in the utterance of common language that are traced and organized in special terms in “verbal art.” Among other things, Vološinov dedicates special attention to the relationship between author, addressee, and protagonist (or hero) of the utterance, which varies and is specified according to literary genre, as in the dynamics of everyday speech and its different discourse genres (see Bakhtin e il suo circolo 2014: 297–299).

This essay of 1926 by Vološinov is of particular interest because it elects the *utterance* as the fundamental linguistic unit of analysis, and not the *sentence* (the object of analysis privileged by official linguistics, still today). The utterance is endowed with characteristics that are altogether lacking in the sentence: *intonation, unrepeatability, implied meaning, the understood, singularity, precise identification of speaker and addressee*. Thus understood the utterance is an inevitable point of reference in texts by Bakhtin, Medvedev and Vološinov (see Bakhtin e il suo circolo 2014: 285–293).

“Sovremennyj vitalizm” [Contemporary vitalism], commonly attributed to Kanaev, but in reality, as anticipated, authored by Bakhtin, was published in 1926, in two consecutive issues of the journal *Človek i Priroda* (1, pp. 33–42; 2, pp. 9–23). The biologist Kanaev whom we know was a member of the Bakhtinian circle contributed to Bakhtin’s interest in biology. Thanks to Kanaev, Bakhtin, as he declares in a note to his text “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” (1937–1938, in Bakhtin 1975), listened to a conference on the chronotope in biology, delivered by the physiologist Aleksej Ukhtomskij in the summer of 1925 in St. Petersburg. This conference influenced Bakhtin’s own conception of the chronotope, which he studied in different life situations and literary genres, evidencing differences and specificities.

In his article on vitalism Bakhtin rejects the mechanistic solution (which he also criticizes in other writings from the 1920s) as much as the vitalistic. He considered vitalism as the expression of speculative philosophy in spite of its

claims to an experimental basis in biology – allusion here is to Hans Driesch in particular, Bakhtin's main target of criticism.

Bakhtin's interest in the “philosophical questions of biology of the time,” as Kanaev says, explaining to Bočarov why Bakhtin wrote an article on vitalism, are strictly connected to the two main problematics that characterize his research: “dialogue,” which he examines above all through its literary depiction in Dostoevsky's “polyphonic novel”; and the “grotesque realism” of “carnival” popular culture, which he studies through its depiction in Rabelais.

Part II in *Opere 1919–1930* contains, as anticipated, three of the four books that go to form the tetralogy published during the 1920s by members of the Bakhtin Circle: Vološinov's *Frejdizm* (1927), Medvedev's *Formal'nyi metod v literaturovedeni* (1928), and Bakhtin's, *Problemy tvorčestva Dostoevskogo* (1929).

Frejdizm reveals a profound interest in Freudian theory. As pointed out by Ponzio, Vološinov's main focus is on the fact that a critical analysis of Freud's psychological theory leads directly to the most important and difficult problem of human psychology, namely, *the problem of verbal reactions and their meaning in human behaviour* (see Bachtin e il suo circolo 2014: 389–394).

Developing some of the more essential and original aspects of Freudian theory, *Frejdizm* proposes a linguistic analysis of the psyche. *Frejdizm* conducts a constructive critique, valid still today, of the philosophical assumptions of psychoanalysis. Under many aspects, and considering the relationship established between the unconscious, language and ideology, this book by Vološinov is extraordinarily original. It anticipates Jacques Lacan's reinterpretation of psychoanalysis as well as the critique of Freud proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.

Reading Freud, Vološinov evidences the linguistic structure of the unconscious. Conflictuality between consciousness and the unconscious involves complex relationships between verbal and nonverbal reactions and the struggle between internal discourse and external discourse in the sphere of human verbal behaviour and between the different stratifications of internal discourse.

Recalling his essay “Slovo v žizni i slovo v poezii,” Vološinov claims that not a single verbal utterance, whether expressed or buried in the unconscious, can be wholly credited to the utterer: on the contrary, a verbal utterance is the *product of interaction among speakers*, or, more generally, of the whole complex *social situation* in which the utterance arises. No product of verbal activity in any of its most important expressions, the unconscious included, from the simplest everyday utterance through to the most complex utterance of literary art, owes its form and meaning to subjective experience, or to abstractly biological factors (see Bachtin e il suo circolo 2014: 521–527).

In *Formal'nyi metod v literaturovedeni*, Medvedev formulates a rigorous theoretical and methodological analysis of literary genres. At the same time, while working on literary genres insofar as they are “complex,” “secondary genres,” genres of the objectivated, indirect word, the depicted word (as demonstrated by Bakhtin in his 1952–1953 essay, “Problema rečevykh žanrov” [“The Problem of Speech Genres”]), this study by Medvedev also throws new light on “simple,” “primary genres,” non-literary genres, the genres of the objective, direct word, the word of everyday representation, the genres of the ordinary word.

Rather than establish an inversely proportional relationship between artistic meaning and ideological meaning as do the Russian formalists, Medvedev, like Vološinov in “Slovo v žizni i slovo v poezii,” searches for the mediating element between the uniqueness of the artistic fact and the generality of the linguistic and ideological material employed (see Jachia and Ponzio 1993). Coherently with the Bakhtinian circle and its main orientation, Medvedev identifies this element in *social valuation* (see Bakhtin e il suo circolo 2014: 911–933). Concretely expressed social valuation that is not an attribute exclusive to literary writing, but is traceable in all live utterances confers uniqueness upon an utterance and at once expresses meanings that are general, common, stable, and repeatable, meanings that can be traced in all other utterances. Valuation identifies and materializes the general, abstract meaning of a verbal sign.

The material of literary writing, as claimed by Medvedev, is verbal language understood as a “system of live social valuations” (Bakhtin e il suo circolo 2014: 923), and not as a system of linguistic, phonetic, grammatical, lexical potentialities. On this basis, Medvedev repeats that the study of the specificity of the literary text cannot be founded on linguistics as, instead, the formalists maintained.

As emerges from his 1930 essay on poetics and linguistics (see Bakhtin e il suo circolo 2014: Part III, 1995–2069), where he discusses Vinogradov’s work, Vološinov is on similar positions. Linguistics can only explain the reason why two given words *can* be combined with each other. But remaining within the limits of linguistic potentialities, it does not explain the reason why they *effectively are* combined with each other.

Specifically the literary text *depicts social valuation*: different ideological, cognitive, political, moral, philosophical meanings, etc., enter the construction of literary writing, but they enter *to be depicted* and not for other ends, whether cognitive, moral, etc. The overall organization of the literary text consists in such depiction, which is indissolubly merged into its construction. Unlike the utterance whose finality is not depiction of valuation itself, the linguistic-verbal material forming the artistic utterance is pervaded with social valuations and

is used to express the valuation itself, with no other end. As underlined by Ponzio, the way social valuations are expressed in a poetic construction, the way an artwork unfolds and develops, the fact that, for example, narration is conducted by an impersonal narrator or by the protagonist, are not aspects to be considered incidental or ideologically indifferent (see Bakhtin e il suo circolo 2014: 344–348).

The construction of literary writing cannot be fully understood if we abstract from the social interrelations in which it unfolds, beginning from the mutual relations that exist between author and addressee, and the relations of consensus or opposition that the artwork installs with the latter.

The theses proposed by Medvedev in *Formal'nyj metod* are formulated at a remarkably high and complex level of reflection and methodological elaboration, and of critical consciousness with respect to formalism. Interesting to underline is that Medvedev, even if not in terms of peaceful evolution but rather of critique, develops the programmatic premises of formalism more coherently than the formalists themselves. Moreover, according to Ponzio, Medvedev's "sociological method" as elaborated in his book of 1928 is put into practice by Bakhtin himself in his book on Dostoevsky (the third book included in Part II of *Opere 1919–1930*), published the year after, and subsequently reviewed and enlarged for the 1963 edition.

In *Problemy tvorčestva Dostoevskogo*, Bakhtin proposes to capture the "organic unity" of the characteristics presented by Dostoevsky's work, which he believes has generally escaped the attention of his critics. Like Medvedev, Bakhtin too aims to evidence "the structural moments" of Dostoevsky's vision (see Bakhtin e il suo circolo 2014: 663–665, 1097, 1197).

In Bakhtin's view, Dostoevsky's contribution can only be grasped adequately through a methodics of literary writing oriented in the sense described above. This contribution goes well beyond the sphere of literature and art in general. It consists in the fact that polyphonic artistic thought renders certain aspects of the human accessible – above all human consciousness and the dialogical sphere of existence – that are completely beyond the reach of monological thought. Our allusion is to consciousness as voice, as external and internal sign, as interior dialogue, as response, as a double-voiced word. Consciousness thus described, this double-voiced word reveals itself in the relationship with the consciousness of others, with respect to which it manifests its own otherness. This is the word understood as total expression, as ideology, as worldview, as the expression of one's own otherness, which is never defined and determined once and for all, which remains unfinalized, unclassifiable, outside and beyond all reified determinacy (see also Vygostskij 1934).

Dialogism, depicted by Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel, consists in the fact that one's own word alludes always and *in spite of itself*, whether it knows it or not, to the word of the other. There is no such thing as a word-judgement, a word on the object, an objectual word, that is not a word-allocation, that is to say, a word that enters into dialogical contact with the other word, *a word on the word and turned to the word*. Consciousness of self is reached and always perceives this self on the background of the consciousness that an-other has of it, "I-for-myself" on the background of "I-for-the-other" (Bachtin e il suo circolo 2014: 128–129).

Dialogism operates in the single voice, in the single utterance, emerging in the form of interference among contradictory voices, present in every "atom" of this utterance, in the most subtle structural elements of discourse, therefore of consciousness (see Bachtin e il suo circolo 2014: 1269–1275). In Dostoevsky's artwork the narrator does not remain external to the personage, as a third non participant in dialogue. If, on the other hand, the narrator were to remain outside, in the polyphony of voices, it would result as a voice capable of withdrawing from dialogue. But by experimenting polyphony, Dostoevsky's novel shows that this is not possible for any voice whatsoever, including that of the author or the narrator.

Dostoevsky's work identifies a *space-time*, a *chronotope* that withdraws from a totalizing vision, from ontology, from the jurisdiction of history. This chronotope acknowledges the single individual with a sense outside the commonplaces of discourse, outside the accommodation of History, with a sense in itself, given the single individual's unique responsibility which cannot be revoked, or deferred, which concerns its existence "in relation" beginning from self, and not from an external objectivating viewpoint. Such is literary space-time, the "literary chronotope," precisely. But Bakhtin is aware of the innovative power involved in the identification of this particular chronotope, not only for the novel or artistic production generally, but also for the theoretical-practical conception of man. Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel recovers otherness in the perception and understanding of man and the world, wherewith it operates a sort of "Copernican revolution" with respect to monological approaches (*Opere 1919–1930*: 1135).

A fundamental assumption in Vološinov's *Marksizm i filozofija jazyka* (Bachtin e il suo circolo 2014: Part III) is that reality is not simply reflected in the sign, but refracted, as different points of view, orientations and programs present in the same sign community all interweave with each other (see Bachtin e il suo circolo 2014: 1225–1227, 1837–1839). As Ponzio observes, Bakhtin also speaks of *refraction* on numerous occasions in his book of 1929, contrary to the claim made in the translator's note in the bilingual Russian/French edition of *Marxism and Philosophy of Language* (Vološinov 1929, French trans.: 144), edited

by Patrik Sériot, where the presence of this concept and the corresponding verb in Bakhtin is denied, maintaining that use is made only of the term “reflex” (Bachtin e il suo circolo 2014: 1432).

In *Marksizm i filosofija jazyka*, Vološinov distinguishes between “sign” and “signal” – a distinction he also makes in the essay “Slovo i ego social'naja funkcija” (“La parola e la sua funzione sociale” [The word and its social function]), it too included in *Opere 1919–1930* – which contributes to the characterization of “sign-ideological” material. While the sign is characterized by indeterminacy and semantic flexibility which makes it adaptable to ever new and different situational contexts, the signal carries out a prefixed, unidirectional function which renders it univocal. So the irreducibility of social signs to signals already evidenced in *Frejdizm* and studied by reflexology is repeated and confirmed.

The verbal sign is always ideological. And given that not only knowledge but perception itself, even the most basic like hunger, is expressed through the verbal sign, this too is socially oriented, ideologically intoned (see Bachtin e il suo circolo 2014: 1657). Moreover, insofar as it is a *two-faced act*, determined both by the speaker and the addressee, in other words, insofar as it is the product of the mutual relation between speaker and addressee in determined historical-social conditions, the utterance is always *semi-other* (see Bachtin e il suo circolo 2014: 1428, 1446, 1771, 1776–1781). The speaker is the word's owner only in physiological terms. As Bakhtin shows in all his writings, the word as a sign, even in its stylistic characteristics, is a social product, like the individual speaker.

Similarly to Bakhtin, Vološinov is also interested in that linguistic phenomenon still poorly studied today that is *interference between one's own word and the word of the other* in the same word, the same utterance, the same context. This is the main theme in Part III of *Marksizm i filosofija jazyka* (Bachtin e il suo circolo 2014: 1779–1789, 1833–1839). The most important type of interference occurs in that form of reported discourse known as *free indirect discourse*. *À propos* the latter Vološinov speaks of “inter-referential merging” of two discourses whose intonation is oriented differently. He considers the study of utterance syntax so important as to dedicate a whole chapter to it, the third and last. In it he discusses different interpretations of the phenomenon, in particular that by Charles Bally and Vossler's school.

As emerges from *Marksizm i filosofija jazyka* (and not only the third part dedicated to the interaction between one's own word and the word of the other) as much as from his essays collected in Part III of *Opere 1919–1930* (the first divided into three parts and published in three subsequent moments, the second of which discusses Vinogradov's conception of the relation between poetics and

linguistics), Vološinov like Bakhtin in his work overall, recognizes the otherness relationship as a fundamental character of the word.

4 Bakhtin, a philosopher

“I am a philosopher” declares Bakhtin in his conversations with Duvakin in 1973, a statement that finds immediate confirmation in his programmatic essay of the early 1920s, “K filosofii postupka.” But most interesting is the fact that Bakhtin elected the language of literature as the perspective of his philosophical reflections. Literary language operates a shift in the point of view of discourse, namely, from the self to the other, from identity to alterity, this being the condition of its aesthetic capacity and worldview.

In fact, in his early essay of 1920–1924 on the “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” Bakhtin claims that: “Ethical and aesthetical objectification requires a powerful *point d’appui* outside itself; it requires some genuine source or real strength out of which I would be capable of seeing myself as another” (Bakhtin 1990: 31). For Bakhtin, this shift in perspective from the I to the other, from identity to alterity means to get free of the theoretistic orientation that dominated at the time over philosophy and the human sciences (see Bakhtin 1974). This shift in the center of value from the self to the other characterizes the architectonics of Bakhtin’s thought system. And as anticipated (note 2), Ponzio draws attention to the overwhelming significance of this shift with the expression “Bakhtinian revolution” in the title of his 1997 book, *La rivoluzione bachtiniana*. As I too have demonstrated in my own monograph on Bakhtin (Petrilli 2012a), this expression is central to a full understanding of the work of Bakhtin and his Circle.

The revolution achieved by Bakhtin and his collaborators is effectively no less than a “Copernican revolution,” one that has overturned our phenomenological references altogether. In fact, with respect to the phenomenology of life and human relationships we know that Bakhtin shifted the general perspective from the axis of identity to that of alterity, from the I to the other. The implications of such a shift are enormous and concern no less than the overall orientation of Western philosophy, indeed of Western culture generally. Similarly to that other great philosopher from the twentieth century studied by Ponzio, Emmanuel Levinas (a Lithuanian living in France), for Bakhtin too, as we have evidenced, the problem of otherness is pivotal in the architectonics of his thought system, in his vision of life and human relationships. Both Bakhtin and Levinas interrogate dominant philosophical trends, values and worldviews in

the light of otherness logic. Both have contributed substantially to the *critique of identity*, such that given the affinity these authors can be read together (see Ponzio 1967, 1980, 1994a, 2003, 2008a).

The “philosophy of literature” where “of literature” is understood as a subject genitive, that is, philosophy structural to literature, the philosophical vision characteristic of literature – is what renders the Bakhtinian revolution conceivable. The language of literature converges with an exotopic vision of life. Bakhtin’s studies on the human capacity for exotopy (synonyms include extra-locality, extralocalization) and its conditions of possibility by comparison with a worldview orientated by the logic of identity, or better the “ideo-logic” of identity are in effect no less than revolutionary. The capacity for exotopy calls for a different type of logic, the logic of otherness, precisely, by comparison to mainstream logic, the logic of identity.

This new vision of the world as thematized by Bakhtin and staged by the language of literature inaugurates the possibility of a “critique of dialogic reason,” where the expression “of dialogic reason,” as Ponzio avers, is another subject genitive alluding to the capacity for critique inherent in dialogic reason, possible thanks to dialogism. Only on the basis of critique oriented by dialogical reason is it possible to recover the multiplicity of voices in dialogue, including the multiplicity of voices resounding in a single voice, and thereby obtain polyphonic dialectics. As such dialectics can no longer be reduced to the condition of monologism, univocality and closed identity. Truly dialectical reason is dialogical reason. The word itself is polyphonic and to the extent that it is polyphonic it is an internally dialogized word.

Bakhtin’s critique of dialogic reason is developed on the basis of his thematization of the logic of otherness, where dialogue is not the result of initiative taken by an I. Dialogue as understood by Bakhtin does not ensue from a subject’s decision to open to the other. On the contrary, dialogue alludes to the fact that to close to the other, to shut out the other is impossible, that the other cannot be ignored, that involvement with the other in one form or another cannot be avoided, even if only to reject the other. In spite of any attempts made by the I at withdrawal, involvement with the other is inevitable. *The I is dialogical in spite of itself*, not as the result of a kind concession made towards the other, but as passive involvement with the other, in the word of the other.

Interpreted in such terms dialogue is not a prerogative of the human universe, but rather a limit, an obstacle to its definition and finalization, to the possibility of recomposing the identical. Thus described dialogue cannot be reduced to a formal exchange of rejoinders among interlocutors, even less so can it be considered as a quality of the personality. Not only: all attempts at closing and separation – that inevitably occur in the word whether in the form of

internal or external discourse – are vain; for the word is constitutionally other with respect to the I, to the subject. The word is already inhabited by the other, by the word of other, by the intention of others, by the sense of others. *The word is always semi-other*, as Bakhtin says. The word is always the home of the other words that it contains; the word always speaks about other words. Moreover, the word arises in the relation among bodies; as such it flourishes in the condition of intercorporeality. As Bakhtin says in “From Notes Made in 1970–1971”: “Everything that concerns me enters my consciousness, beginning with my name, from the external world through the lips of others (my mother, and so forth), with their intonation, in their emotive tonality based on values. I become aware of myself, at first, through others” (Bakhtin 1986: 138).

As evidenced above, the word is dialogical in this sense above all, in the sense of interference among voices; manifold voices interfere with each other whether in the single word, in the single voice or in the many: dialogism, substantial dialogism is interference of sense, intentions and intonations whether in a single voice or in the many, in spite of the subject’s claims to rendering the word one’s “own word,” of being master of one’s own word, of guaranteeing the intentions of one’s own word – “on my word,” “my word of honour,” “I give you my word,” “to put out the word,” etc. In reality, there is no such thing as a word that is not oriented towards the other, that does not enter into dialogical contact with the other, the word is a word on the word, a word turned to the other. It ensues that consciousness of self is achieved in the relation with the consciousness that another has of one self’s own consciousness, just like the child who enters the world for the first time. In Bakhtin’s words from “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity”: “The child begins to see himself for the first time as if through his mother’s eyes, and begins to speak about himself in his mother’s emotional-volitional tones – he caresses himself, as it were, with his first uttered self-expression” (Bakhtin 1990: 50).

Correlated to thematization of the logic of otherness is Bakhtin’s critique throughout the whole course of his writings of monologism and his appreciation of dialogism. And, as anticipated above, we know that here by “dialogism” is understood something completely different from the mere formal exchange of rejoinders among two or more interlocutors. In fact, a synonym for “dialogism” as understood by Bakhtin, that is to say, “substantial dialogism,” is “intercorporeity.” Dialogism understood as intercorporeity alludes to the condition of inevitable interconnection and interdependency with the other, a condition that characterizes human life, indeed life generally. But the point we wish to underline here is that dialogism understood as intercorporeity alludes to the fact that identity can only ever be reached in the relation with the other (see Petrilli 2013, 2015).

In the architectonics of Bakhtin's thought system dialogism, otherness and the body are inexorably interconnected. Bakhtinian dialogism converges with the semiotic materiality of otherness, it consists in the irreducible materiality of otherness in which human subjectivity takes shape and develops. Dialogical involvement with the other is intercorporeal involvement: the I must respond to the other, must answer to the other, for the place that it occupies in the world physically, materially, being a place that nobody else can occupy. This place is the perspective that the I speaks from, and from which alone can it have a voice. Subjectivity develops in the relation among signs not as disincarnated consciousness, but as bodily material, in the situation of intercorporeality, as a body that remembers its constitutive polyphonic intercorporeality far beyond the limits of memory, classifications and definitions, not only on the biological level, but also the historico-social, outside the division of parts, outside roles, outside codes and communicative intentionality, independently from moral imperatives, standpoints or initiatives taken by the subject.

According to Bakhtin, words in live communication are utterances, vital and flourishing expressions, altogether different from dead sentences in the system of language thematized by linguists (see Ivanov 1977). Words are voices and are incarnate. Dialogue is encounter among voices and not among abstract ideas, among different voices in the same utterance, a multi-voiced utterance, in the same thought, the same intention, the same consciousness, the same self.

In dialogue the voice, the word is strongly oriented, intonated, accentuated; the voice in dialogue expresses a point of view, or different points of view, an evaluation, or different evaluations. Logic in Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel is dia-logic, because ideas are incarnated in the voice, in different voices, voices that are not indifferent to each other in spite of all attempts at ignoring the multiplicity of voices in which difference is constituted. As clearly emerges from Bakhtin's analyses in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Dostoevsky never gives up the voice, so that to maintain that his dialogues are dialectical is a mistake (Bakhtin 1963, Eng. trans.: 251–261). Impossible to get free of the physical presence of the other, just as it is impossible not to feel the absence of the other. According to Bakhtin, the voice, its incarnation, the body is what distinguishes dialogue in Dostoevsky from dialogue in Plato. On this account, included in the 1984 translation of the 1963 edition of his original 1929 monograph on Dostoevsky, we find the following statement formulated to effect by Bakhtin in his 1929 "Fragments," precisely from the section entitled "From the Chapter 'Dialogue in Dostoevsky'," collected in Appendix I to the English translation of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*:

Everywhere there is an intersection, consonance, or interruption of rejoinders in the open dialogue by rejoinders in the heroes' internal dialogues. Everywhere a specific sum total of ideas, thoughts, and words is passed through several unmerged voices, sounding differently in each. The object of authorial intentions is certainly not this sum total of ideas in itself, as something neutral and identical to itself. No, the object of intentions is precisely the passing of a theme through many and various voices, its rigorous and, so to speak, irrevocable multi-voicedness and varivoicedness. The very distribution of voices and their interaction is what matters to Dostoevsky.

The idea in Dostoevsky is never cut off from the voice. For this reason it is radically wrong to claim that Dostoevsky's dialogues are dialectical.... It is not the idea as a monologic deduction, even if dialectical, but the event of an interaction of voices that is the ultimate given for Dostoevsky.-279, "Fragment 1929")

In "From Notes Made in 1970–1971," Bakhtin delineates the process that leads from concrete dialogue without synthesis to abstract dialectics, attributing a fundamental role to the voice in his distinction between dialogue and dialectics:

Dialogue and dialectics. Take a dialogue and remove the voices (the partitioning of voices), remove the (personalistic-emotional) intonations, draw abstract concepts and judgments from live words and responses, cram everything into a single abstract consciousness – and that's how you get dialectics. (Bakhtin 1986: 147)

Indifference as it characterizes abstract differentiation is replaced by indifference of the responsible act, of answering to somebody for something, of exposure without alibis to the other (see also Ponzio 2002).

To repeat, then, dialogue as thematized by Bakhtin is inevitably associated with the body, it implies encounter among bodies, among singularities, between the other as other and one's own I, described as the "naked I," intercorporeality. The allusion here is to encounter among alterities before and after the restrictions of definition or social identity, which invests both the I and the other – whether family, social class, profession – with "concrete flesh." In Bakhtin's own words from the 1929 "Fragments" cited above:

The "man with man" dialogue analyzed by us is a highly interesting sociological document. An exceptionally keen sense of the other person as another and of one's I as a naked I presupposes that all those definitions which clothe the I and the other in socially concrete flesh – family, social and economic class definitions – and all variants on these definitions, have lost their authoritativeness and the form-shaping force. A person, as it were, senses himself in the world as a whole, without any intervening stages, apart from any social collective to which he might belong. (Bakhtin 1963, Eng. trans.: 280, "Fragment 1929")

Dialogue and intercorporeity. Bakhtin analyzes intercorporeity keeping account of Rabelais. Dostoevsky and Rabelais united in a single voice, Bakhtin's. In *The*

Life of Garantua and Pantagruel, by François Rabelais, the body is portrayed as a grotesque body – a body that is not mystified by an individualistic vision, that is not isolated or reduced to a silhouette, that is not defined and delimited by spatial and temporal boundaries. The body as depicted by Rabelais and theorized by Bakhtin (*Rable v istorii realizma* [Rabelais in the history of realism] was the original title of his monograph, presented as his doctoral dissertation) is the body as experienced by popular culture across the world. This is the grotesque body, the dialogic body which subtends the tip of an iceberg represented by a limited and egotistic vision of the body, imposed upon us by contemporaneity.

The most effective image of the dialogic body is, in fact, the grotesque body. Dialogue and the body in Bakhtin are closely interrelated. As Ponzio claims in a book of 2011, *Rencontres de paroles*, the grotesque body is the image that best portrays the dialogical body, which is why it appears in the novel and notably in Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel: "Pour Bachtine, le dialogue et le corps sont étroitement interconnectés, et l'image correcte du corps dialogique est celle du corps grotesque. Voilà pourquoi le grotesque apparaît également dans le roman et notamment dans le "roman polyphonique" de Dostoievski" (Ponzio 2011: 53). The relationship between dialogue and the body, the dialogic body is at the basis of Bakhtin's philosophy of language, his dialogism is all one with his biosemiotic conception of the grotesque body.

With Bakhtin and his collaborators the objectivity of signifying / interpretive processes, of semiosis in becoming is reasserted in the interrelation between subjective and objective, inner and outer, inside and outside, public and private, official and unofficial. The critique of identity reaffirms the "objective," that is, the "social," and the "material," the objectivity of "semiotic materiality," of the "signifiant," of the "interpreted sign," the semiotic materiality of "otherness" (Petrilli 2010: 137–158). To recover the logic of otherness and dialogism is to recover the sign's potential for plurivocality, heteroglossia, dialogic plurilinguism, polylogism as opposed to the monologism of identity (understood as closed identity), to the dogmatism of univocality.

Bakhtin and his circle celebrate the objective, social dimension of sense relevant not only when a question of "explicit meaning," of discourse formulated directly, overtly, publicly, but also when a question of "implied meaning," indirect discourse in its various forms from parody and irony to silence. Recourse to implied meaning, assumed meaning is not possible if not on the basis of the objectivity of sense, of silent understanding, the understood, or the misunderstood (see Petrilli 2014: 139–157; 2016: 279–305). As Vološinov claims in his 1926 essay, "Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art":

What I alone know, see, want, or love, cannot be assumed. Only what all of us speakers know, see, love and recognize – only those points on which we are all united can become the assumed part of an utterance... Assumed value judgements are, therefore, not individual emotions but regular and essential social acts. Individual emotions can come into play only as overtones accompanying the basic tone of social evaluation: “I” can realize itself verbally only on the basis of “we.” (Vološinov 1927, Eng. trans.: 100–101)

5 Critique of identity and social praxis today

The problem of the relation between identity and otherness is a constant focus throughout all Bakhtin’s writings from the 1920s through to the 1970s. His research provides a useful indication as to how to orientate the search for identity in Europe today, indeed in the crisis-ridden Western world globally (Ponzio 1993: 126–137). Whether a question of small communities such as political groups, cultural associations, minority ethnic groups and their languages, or of larger communities such as nations, the European Union, the Western World and their languages, the interrelation between identity and otherness is essential, such that to ignore it means to decontextualize and render abstract all research concerning signs and ideology, the self and other.

With other members of the Bakhtin Circle as illustrated above, Bakhtin dedicated a large part of his studies to the inseparable interrelation between signs and ideology, recognizing the centrality of this relation in the human world where life is constituted in signs and oriented by ideology. As studies in semiotics have demonstrated so clearly, signs are the material of human behaviour and expression in all its spheres (from everyday activities, through to the professions, the arts, science, politics, etc.). Ideology itself is constructed and vehicled through signs (not all signs are necessarily ideological, but ideology cannot subsist without signs; see Petrilli 2010: 56–57, 147–165). In addition to Ponzio, another major scholar in Italy for his studies on the relation between signs and ideology is Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1972, 1978, 1992), his mentor after Giuseppe Semerari. Apart from Rossi-Landi’s publications dedicated specifically to this problematic, he founded the journal *Ideologie* and with Ponzio directed the journal *Scienze Umane*. Bakhtin and his circle have made important contributions to the critique of ideology, ultimately providing us with instruments of analysis for a critique of the world-as-it-is today (see De Paula and Stafuzza 2010; Grupo de Estudos dos gêneros do discurso 2007).

In his search for language to talk about signs, language and ideology in an era, our own, which has proclaimed the “end of ideology,” Ponzio examines semiotic discourse on both a historical and theoretical level from Charles S.

Peirce to Mikhail Bakhtin, passing through Ferdinand de Saussure, Emmanuel Levinas, Adam Schaff, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi and Umberto Eco (see Ponzio 1990, 2015b; Petrilli and Ponzio 2005, 2016). In his analysis, a primary role is carried out by “dialogism” and “interpretation,” where interpretation is understood in terms of “responsive understanding,” or responsiveness to the other, by contrast with interpretation oriented by the logic of identity. Major concepts connected with other-oriented semiosis and interpretation include in addition to the concepts themselves of “alterity,” “dialogism,” and “interpretation,” in alphabetical order, “alienation,” “critique,” “deferral,” “enthymeme,” “humanism,” “ideology,” “identity,” “great time,” “linguistic work,” “listening,” “responsibility / answerability,” “responsiveness,” “semiotic materiality,” “sense,” “sign fetishism,” “significance,” “understanding,” “utterance,” “value,” and “writing.” To draw on such concepts in the framework of the logic of otherness allows for a critique of identity which inevitably implicates sign and subject, language and ideology.

Dialogue as foreseen by the official order of discourse is formal dialogue. As such this is “fake” dialogue, monologic dialogue and certainly not “dialogic dialogue,” as described by Bakhtin. In formal dialogue, where the multiple voices of so-called “substantial dialogism” are lacking, all aspirations and expectations belong to the same universe of discourse, to the same semiotic universe, where they are homologated without opening to the other, where otherness is not foreseen. In other words, these voices converge and identify with each other. Ultimately, these voices are homologated by their common interest in the rights of difference, but difference is understood here as “identity-difference.” And difference conceived in terms of identity, difference wholly conditioned and oriented by the logic of identity is difference indifferent to the rights of the other, to the very point of segregating, excluding, suppressing and even physically eliminating the other (Ponzio 2009).

On the contrary, as thematized by Ponzio (2002), Bakhtin’s conceptualization of dialogism and otherness, his “dialogic otherness,” demonstrates that another form of difference is possible. This is difference that cannot be indifferent to the other, difference that is structured in such a way as to make indifference impossible, *unindifferent difference*.

As signalled above, Bakhtin studies Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel because he is fascinated by its capacity to depict dialogism in a single voice, in a single utterance, interference among contradictory voices present in every “atom” of the utterance, in every element of discourse, of consciousness. A single rejoinder is already dialogical in itself, just like internal discourse, but even a monologue can be multi-voiced – think of James Joyce and the final chapter in his novel, the classical masterpiece *Ulysses*, often called “Molly Bloom’s soliloquy,” or to stay

with Dostoevsky, his masterpiece “The Underground Man” in *Notes from Underground*. Dialogue as portrayed in Dostoevsky evidences how indifference towards the other is impossible.

Even when indifference is flaunted, or hostility and hatred prevail the self must always keep account of the other, for the self is always involved with the other, affected by the other, whether he wants it or not, whether he knows it or not. Dialogue is not the result of the subject deciding to open to the other, but rather is the impossibility to close. We could even claim that the inevitability of dialogue emerges most strongly in our attempts at closing to the other, at feigning indifference, attempts that to say the least appear tragico-comical. Dialogism emerges most strongly in the very illusion of indifference to the other. In fact, dialogism is present in one’s own point of view, in one’s own system of values, in one’s own thoughts, voice, etc. It ensues that dialogue understood in a Bakhtinian sense not only is *not* the expression of initiative taken by the self, but even more radically it is the very place where the self is constituted and manifested.

Dialogue in Bakhtin consists in discovering that we are always involved with others, in the sense of others. This is not subjective sense, sense of an abstractly psychological order, but socially organized, socially oriented sense: ideology. As already mentioned, in addition to their work on the role carried out by signs in social practice and life generally, their characterization of artistic discourse, of literary writing, we have seen that Bakhtin and his collaborators contribute significantly to our understanding of the problem of ideologies, superstructures, and consciousness (see Bachtin 2000, 2003, 2004; Volosinov 1980).

Given its sign-linguistic nature, the material of the conscious as much as the material of the unconscious is imbued with social ideology. And just as we need to question the concept of dialogue understood as a concession made to the other, as agreeing to open to the other, we also need to revisit the notion of “speaking subject” as thematized by linguists and philosophers of language. The point is that we don’t have a subject, on one hand, and a word, language, on the other, as though they were separate entities. It is the word that renders the subject an I, a self, that makes the subject a “speaking subject.”

The speech act, where “act” is distinct from “action,” is a “responsible act,” a “step” that nobody else can decide, that nobody else can take, *postupok* in Bakhtin’s terminology. A speech act is inextricably enmeshed in the speech act of the other, in the word of the other. Encounter among unique, single individuals, without alibis, without the possibility of substitution, without derogation or delegation cannot be avoided. Every one of us, each one of us in our singularity is a unique center in the architectonics of life, and cannot be

substituted. This special center is characterized in temporal, spatial and axiological terms. The self is structured dialogically to the extent that it develops in the relation with the other, just as the word flourishes in the relation with the word of another, and cannot be separated from the self, the speaking subject. The self, like the word, is part of a tangled net with no way out, which it cannot exit. Indifference to the other is impossible. Responsivity / responsibility toward the other cannot be evaded. Critique of identity in Bakhtinian terms recognizes this other in the very heart of the I, of the self. The upshot is that social systems based on indifference will inevitably collapse and attempts at excluding the other will inevitably backfire – think of the “natural” disasters provoked over the world today by the interests of a few, which thanks to progress in technology assume global dimensions as our planet is systematically anthropized and plundered, and life is compromised. Consequences on the multitude, on their well-being are inevitable and cannot be avoided. Again, think of the new face of migration today and its global dimensions, a problem whose sense is neither fully understood nor as a consequence appropriately addressed by governments and their citizens, whether in Europe or elsewhere – the Mediterranean sea is fast becoming a new mass cemetery and citizens on the mainland are affected by different types of “allergies,” so to say, as they become ever more intolerant (see Petrilli 2012b, 2012c).

The global social reproduction system, the reality of today’s world, is constructed on concrete abstractions that are forged by the category of identity: individual, society, state, nation, community, politics, law, ethics, knowledge, science, truth, equality, equal exchange, justice, freedom, responsibility, sex, race, religion, class, role, profession, etc. Moreover, as the production-exchange-consumption cycle spreads worldwide, the social reproduction system with its concrete abstractions tends toward the concretely universal. The dominant social reproduction system is centered on identity logic, just as dominant ideology is centered on identity. For an adequate critique of today’s social reproduction system and the logic of identity upon which it is constructed, the category of otherness is essential. Moreover, critique calls for a viewpoint that is other, one that is able to interrogate, detotalize, and subvert false (ideological), but concrete totalities like those just listed.

Bakhtin describes the conditions of possibility for the reorganization of life and human relationships. He thematizes the possibility of another way of organizing the world, one that is not entrapped in some predetermined ontology with respect to the existing world, to the living world, in some form of essentialism, or in some other form of abstract humanism. The dominant orientation in Western culture still today, indeed ever more so in the era of globalization, is characterized by a tendency toward abstraction, lack of differentiation, and the

ideology of egalitarianism. All this inevitably leads to the reproposal of identity interests, always the same despite good intentions.

The so-called “detotalizing method” refers to the other, the other as a center of value and in this light it evidences the multifaceted and dialogic nature of any totalizing structure whatsoever, the specificities and differences that form a totality, and the unity among such differences beyond any artificial barriers and separations (see Petrilli 2013: 22–25; 2014: 151–152). But identity logic is not only present in a system intended to maintain and reproduce dominant social planning and the social relations it presupposes. Identity logic operates even where it is not suspected, that is, in plans and projects that aim to modify these very same relations, if not replace them altogether. The dominion of identity is such that all demands, claims or assertions of any sort are all aligned according to the same logic: the dominant aspiration is to achieve the same rights as those in command, as those who control the power game – identical opportunities, identical lifestyle, identical reasons for happiness.

Dominant ideology creates a communication universe where one can aspire to possible “alternatives” at the most, to “being otherwise,” to say it with Levinas (1978), and this is always “being” based on identity. Instead, on his part, Levinas shows the way to “being otherwise than being,” that is, otherwise than being-as-it-is, than identity, otherwise than the world-as-it-is, than the already made world.

In fact, where the logic of identity and of alternatives based on identity dominate, where the dynamics of identification, of homologation orients a community, at any level (whether a question of the community that shapes the single individual self or the nation), all forms of otherness are excluded. In a system dominated by the category of identity the other is expunged. The construction of identity as we are describing it – monological identity, closed and finalized identity, the identity of concrete abstractions structural to our social reproduction system – requires elimination of the other, sacrifice of the other. Individual identity gives up its singularity, its uniqueness, that is, its otherness, its signifying materiality (see Petrilli 2012c: 36–42, 157–190).

The rights and the duties of concrete abstractions – including the concrete abstraction that is individual identity itself, the single individual, the subject – are limited to the rights and the duties of identity, of the identity with which the subject identifies, separate from other identities, from which the other is excluded. Here allusion is not only to the other from self, but also to the other of self, the self’s very own other. To construct identity in such terms means to sacrifice the other thus described and deny singularity, the condition of irreplaceability, therefore of unlimited responsibility/responsivity, the capacity for

participative involvement with the other, for dialogic listening to the other, for hospitality toward the other. In Ponzio's words reading Bakhtin:

To recognize the other is to recognize the inevitability of the obligation to recognize the other. To recognize the other not as a concession, as a decision made freely by the Individual, the Subject, the Self, but as a necessary imposition caused by alienation, by the loss of sense, by the status of *homo homini lupus* (consequent and not mythically antecedent – Hobbes fallacy! – to concrete abstractions such as the State, Politics, Law). To recognize the other as a necessary imposition caused by the fear of violation of the space of one's own identity whatever it may be, a fear which increases the more the other is excluded. To recognize the other as a necessary imposition caused by the threat of "normal" or "unpredicted" pollution – e.g. an "ecological disaster" – of the environment, one's own or someone else's. To recognize the other as a necessary imposition caused by the impossibility of annihilating the other through war without (even lethal) consequences for everyone. (Ponzio 1993: ix–x)

6 The “Bakhtinian revolution”

Bakhtin searches for the conditions of possibility for his Copernican revolution in history and in the social. In fact, the social contains potential for the type of development that memory at the service of the official order and dominant discourse, of the identity logic they are based upon, wants to forget and eliminate, a potential that leads beyond the social, that is, beyond the world-as-it-is, beyond the realism of the existent. But in spite of identity, in defiance of identity logic, the language we speak, the nonverbal sign systems we use, discourse genres, from everyday speech to the literary, our very own bodies remember what dominant ideology wants to forget. In its absolute singularity, in spite of the illusion of belonging to the I, of individuality, in spite of assignment to a genre/gender, to a group of some sort, in spite of delimitation in terms of Being, the body is connected to other bodies and to the world overall, both synchronically and diachronically, indeed can only flourish in relations of dialogic intercorporeality and of intercorporeal dialogism, relations that cannot be dissolved, that are no less than vital, inevitable.

As anticipated in our discussion above on the philosophy of the language of literature, Bakhtin identifies the most appropriate space for his revolution in the artistic dimension of semiosis, particularly in literary writing. The specificity of the literary text offers the concrete possibility of correctly highlighting values connected with alterity rather than with identity, with the otherness of the I, the I open to the other, rather than with closed identity. In literary discourse the word presents itself as internally dialogic (see Petrilli 2012a).

Bakhtin analyzes forms of popular culture that have been suppressed, but that are alive in the “great time” of literature. The logic driving popular culture can still be traced in the ambiguity, polyvalency, duplicity that, in truth, is structural to all signs and cannot be eliminated. He evidences the possibility, a founded possibility, of imagining communities that are other, open communities, that is to say, communities where differences are not levelled onto identity logic, are not homologated. This type of community escapes the project for univocality at the service of the dominant communication order, univocality functional to the reproduction of the identical, today the global communication order, as foreseen by George Orwell in his novel, *1984* (see Petrilli 2016; Ponzio 2008).

In open communities, non-identity communities, not work-time but time made available for alterity, for the other, for the festival of otherness is considered as the real social wealth. With unemployment in the dominant and global reproduction system on the rise, work-time is reduced ever more. But once again the reality of unemployment and the time it liberates is not yet correctedly recognized for what it is, that is, a phenomenon structural to the system. This means, in turn, that the benefits of unemployment – understood as liberation from the work force – for social practice, have not yet been adequately elaborated.

Bakhtin’s interest in literature is an interest in a view of the world that the artistic vision, particularly the literary word, projects. This vision is unique to art. Bakhtin is interested in the ideo-logic of the literary word. This word is other with respect to the official order of discourse and as such is endowed with an non suspect capacity for subversion.

The concept of “dialogue” thematized in association with the concept of “otherness” understood in its capacity to transcend the sphere of being, the same, the identical; and with “otherness” the concepts of “singularity” and “responsibility” all evidence the general importance of Bakhtin’s critique of ontology and reformulation of humanism. By contrast to the “humanism of identity,” Bakhtin proposes a reformulation of humanism in terms of otherness, dialogue and unindifferent difference. With Bakhtin, in fact, but also with Levinas, a new form of humanism can be envisaged, one that is oriented by the logic of otherness and dialogism, that is, dialogic otherness, non-relative and absolute otherness with a vocation for evasion from the logic of identity, from its short-sightedness and egocentrism. Insofar as it is open and responsive to the other, oriented by the search for the other, this new form of humanism is the “humanism of the other” (Levinas 1972).

The human capacity for responsiveness / answerability implies the capacity for “moral” responsibility which, as we have seen, Bakhtin thematizes from his very first writings in terms of *unlimited, absolute responsibility* by contrast with

special responsibility. Special responsibility refers to the type of responsibility that is connected to social roles, where its scope is limited to technical action. To live one's life in obedience to the canons of technical action, excluding the creativity and responsivity of participative involvement is to reduce the sense of life to a fact of representation, and its actors to the status of impostors. Indeed, we have seen that according to Bakhtin, if we interpret our whole life as representation, we become impostors. Representation does not abolish, but simply specializes personal responsibility. The loss of personal unique participation as a result of specializing and thereby limiting responsibility occurs in the roles of everyday life, in art and above all in politics. Responsibility cannot be reduced to special responsibility; otherwise, what we obtain is not a responsible act, but technical action. Life can only be understood in concrete responsibility, so that, as Bakhtin teaches us, "the philosophy of life is ultimately a moral philosophy."

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