

DIALOGISM AND POLYPHONY

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Mikhail Bakhtin is one of the most important and most original philosophers of the twentieth century. Due to the Soviet repression that persecuted him from the end of the twenties onwards, his work remains poorly known. Bakhtin is commonly classed as a literary critic and linguist, but, as he himself affirmed: 'I am a philosopher'. His work has yet to be investigated from this angle.

Bakhtin only worked under acceptable conditions between 1919 and 1929. Even during this short period, however, he was not able to publish all that he wished to because of the communist censorship. His collaborators, Medvedev and Volonisov, were murdered in the midst of the Stalinist purges – the first in prison and the second in a camp – whilst Bakhtin himself was spared on the grounds of his chronic illness and sent into exile in Kazakhstan, from 1929 to 1936. We have thus lost, due to the numerous changes in his places of exile, two 'philosophical' books of which only a few dozen pages remain.

The work of what will later come to be called the Bakhtin 'circle' was banned. It was only at the end of the sixties that he was rehabilitated (together with Medvedev and Volonisov) and his writings were once again made available. We can thus say that the Russian revolution crushed this new image of thought which, in my view, was far more faithful to the event of the revolution than the intellectual misery of Leninism and Trotskyism – the only things we inherited from this great upheaval.

Bakhtin's philosophy can still speak to us because it poses the problem of the relationship between life and culture, between life and

art, a problem that traversed the entire beginning of the century, and the twenties in particular. The solution given by Bakhtin to this problem is markedly distinct from the solution of the 'avant-gardes'.

According to Bakhtin, in order to 'overcome' the separation and opposition between art and life, between art and culture, the elaboration of a 'first philosophy' is required: The philosophy of event-being. Art and life cannot and must not tend towards identification, as was the case with the Situationists, for example. But, in order that the enriching, excessive and productive difference between art and life be able to express itself, it is necessary to possess a theory which, whilst maintaining the irreducible differences between these two dimensions, articulates them in the achievement of the event.

Bakhtin is interested in art and in language, first and foremost for philosophical reasons. In the linguistic act and in artistic creation we approach the achievement of the event. Through language and art, we come to possess an image of the components (of expression) and the participants of the event.

The speaker in the linguistic act and the author in the aesthetic act find themselves in a relation of analogy.

Daily practical communication has the character of an event; the most insignificant of verbal exchanges participates in this continuous formation of the event. In this formative process the life of the word is intense, even if different than the one it enjoys within the work of art.

The functions of the author, the material, the hero and the spectator are all re-defined by the comprehension of action *as event*. One can speak of a philosophy and an aesthetic of relation, but the latter must be understood as an *evental* relation.

Event/Language/Sign

Bakhtin introduces a new conception of being and world as event (and not as something that exists ready-made). But this first philosophy implies a theory of language and of meaning, because the event *expresses* itself through these two dimensions.

'When studying man, we search for and find signs everywhere and we try to grasp their meaning.'ⁱ

The physical action of man must be understood as an act, but the act itself cannot be comprehended outside of the virtual sign that it *expresses*.

'A thing, as long as it remains a thing, can affect only other things; in order to affect a personality it must reveal its *semantic potential*, become a word [or a sign], that is, assimilate to a virtual verbal-semantic [or semiotic] context.'ⁱⁱ

The eventual relation is therefore a relation of meaning. But, unlike in linguistics or semiotics, action cannot be constrained by and understood within language and the sign – as many thinkers tried to do throughout the sixties and seventies (from his first writings onwards, Bakhtin remained wholly outside of the logic of structuralism).

Bakhtin thereby introduces the problem of language and signs as fundamental, anticipating what will come to be called the 'linguistic turn' in philosophy (from Wittgenstein to Habermas). But, unlike the philosophy of language, he denies that the true, the beautiful and the just can be elements of language. Bakhtin substitutes the categories of the philosophy of language with those of meaning and value: The meaning of what is said and the evaluation of the speaker.

Meaning entertains a very close relationship both with the sign and with language, since it is through them that it expresses itself. But language and the sign do not contain meaning. Meaning does not exist

outside of the proposition that expresses it, but between the one and the other there is a difference in kind.

The existence of meaning is not that of words, but it is not that of things either. Is the world in which 'we live, act and create composed of matter and psychism' – of words and things (according to the famous title of one of Foucault's books)?ⁱⁱⁱ As Bakhtin asks: 'What is the work of art composed of?' And he responds: 'Of words, propositions, chapters, unless it is of pages, of paper.'

With meaning, we are confronted with another – altogether specific – stratum of being, which Bakhtin calls 'over-existence' (and Deleuze calls 'extra-being'). In this way Bakhtin returns to an old philosophical tradition, that of the Stoics, for whom meaning is an 'incorporeal' action at the border between words and things, matter and mind.

'Meaning cannot (and does not wish to) change physical, material, and other phenomena; it cannot act as a material force. And it does not need to do this: it itself is stronger than any force, it changes the total contextual meaning of an event and reality without changing its actual (existential) composition one iota; everything remains as it was but it acquires a completely different contextual meaning (the semantic transfiguration of existence).'^{iv}

This event-world is not just the world of being, of what is already given, of the ready-made. No object, no relation, is ever simply already there, totally present. In the world of event-being, the task – or the goal that must be attained – is always given as well. In Bakhtin's words: 'One must, it is desirable'.

The specificity of the word within the event stems from the fact that it participates fully in the event's achievement by breaking up what is given as ready-made.

'Similarly, the living word, the full word, does not know an object as something totally given: the mere fact that I have begun speaking about it means that I have already assumed a certain attitude toward it – not an indifferent attitude, but an interested-effective attitude. And that is why the word does not merely designate an object as a present-on-hand entity, but also expresses by its intonation my valuative attitude toward the object, toward what is desirable in it, and, in doing so, sets it in motion toward that which is yet-to-be-determined about it, turns it into a constituent moment of the living, ongoing event.^v

In the event, meaning is therefore expressed either by language or by the sign. But we can find the meaning of a phenomenon only if we know the force that appropriates the phenomenon by expressing itself within it. This force is that of will and sensation, and expresses itself through the voice and its tonalities.

Meaning is therefore very closely related to evaluation, to the 'emotional-volitional tone', to the responsible affirmation of a world of value.^{vi} The history of a word or of a sign is the history of emotional-volitional forces, of evaluations that seize these forces in order to express themselves through them.

Affirmation and Evaluation

For living consciousness, existence presents itself as event; it is in the event that consciousness orientates its activity.

But the orientation of thought and action in event-being takes place through the 'emotional-volitional tone' – through evaluation. Evaluation expresses a singular manner of evaluating, of distributing the true and the false, the beautiful and the just.

These values in turn are not determined in relation to language (*qua* system) but rather in relation to reality, to the speaking subject, to

other utterances, and, in particular, to those utterances that posit them as values, as affirmations of the true, the beautiful, the just.

It is only through these evaluations that the potentialities of language become realities.

For what reason are any two given words put together? Linguistics only explains why they can be put one beside the other. It is not possible to explain why they are effectively put together if we remain within the limits of linguistic virtualities. Social evaluation must intervene in order to transform a grammatical virtuality into a concrete fact of the reality of language.

In linguistics, as in every social science, there is no necessity but only an empty possibility, an abstract convention.

This affirmation-evaluation expresses itself in the tonality of the voice coming from the body and in the tone coming from consciousness (the tonality of consciousness). Between words and things and between the subject and the object Bakhtin does not simply introduce the incorporeal of meaning, but also a pre-individual life of the body and the brain.

The Ego and the Other

In order to grasp the significance of this theory of the event, we must take into consideration what Bakhtin calls the 'architectonic principle of the real world of action': The relationship between 'myself and the other'. Right away, we must note that this relation is not that of the subject/object within theories of knowledge (Kant), of Hegelian dialectics (a relation that has haunted the human sciences as well as Marxism), or even that of a simple intersubjectivity that limits itself to making constituted subjects interact with one another. For Marx, Capital is indeed a relation and not a thing, but it is a relation that is not expressive. The limit of all those theories which think relation under the

subject/object form is the fact that they do not contain a theory of expression.

In the ego/other relationship, the second term expresses the existence of 'possibles' for the first; it thereby structures the world of perception, affection, thought and objectivity. The ego is the development or explication of the possibles that the 'other' envelops within its existence, the process of their realization in the actual.

'Only the other makes possible the joy that I will experience in encountering him, the sadness in leaving him, the pain that I would suffer in losing him. All emotional-volitional values are only possible in relation to an other. They give the life of the other an evental weight that my own life does not have. This signifying eventality is not accorded to my own life: my life is what the other's existence envelops in time.'

The relation between myself and the other is a relation between possible worlds, between two 'others' who have affirmed – from their emotional-volitional point of view – a different world.

There is a difference in principle between myself and the other, but this difference is neither of a logical order, as in Hegelian dialectics, nor of a psychological one. Rather, it is a difference of an *evental* order. The relation between myself and the other is established on the plane of values and it is affirmed from an emotional-volitional perspective. It is this relation which is productive, enriching, excessive.

With the definition of the event in terms of relations between possible worlds we enter into a Leibnizian universe in which the ego and the other are configured as monads ('singular centres', as Bakhtin calls them) that express 'all possible being and all possible meaning' in accordance with singular points of view. But, unlike for Leibniz, here the monads – the different possible worlds – are not closed. Therefore, they are not co-ordinated amongst each other by 'pre-established'

harmonies. In the philosophy of the event, possible worlds and monads communicate with each other: We pass from divine harmony to 'polyphonic' composition, according to another musical metaphor dear to Bakhtin.

In this evental relation we find the singularity of the affirmation and the expression of the ego, at the same time as we encounter the impossibility of defining oneself independently of the other(s).

This evental relation to the other is constitutive of the ego. The latter is not identity, unity, but rather difference, alterity. It is only in this universe of monads and their virtuality that the Rimbaud's words can resonate: 'I is an other'.

In order for my lived experience – my internal flesh – to become my own object, I must surpass the limits of the value-context wherein my lived experience effectuates itself: 'I must become the other of myself'.

The limits between what is proper to me and what belongs to another are difficult to define. It is at the *border* between the ego and the other that individuation takes place. This is of particular importance for the definition of the author (of the utterance and the work).

Dialogism and the Author

On the basis of this theory of the event, Bakhtin establishes a difference in kind between language (or grammar) and enunciation, between the proposition and the utterance. He extracts a new sphere of being, unknown to linguistics and to the philosophy of language, which he calls 'dialogical' – the sphere of questions and responses. Within this sphere, relations are relations of meaning that express themselves through language and signs but they are not, as we know, reducible to these two dimensions.

The dialogical relation is a specific relation that does not fall under a logical, linguistic, or psychological system. Dialogical relations presuppose a language (or a semiotic) but in the system of language (or in the system of signs) they do not exist.

‘They constitute a special type of *semantic* relations, whose members can be only *complete utterances* (either regarded as complete or potentially complete), behind which stand (and in which are *expressed*) real or potentially real speech subjects, authors of the given utterances.’^{vii}

Only in the dialogical sphere can there be affirmation – the emotional-volitional tonality that transforms the empty possibility of language or the sign into an affirmation of meaning. Only in the dialogical sphere do the forms and possibilities of language become concretely real. Ordinary language functions and actualizes itself only in this sphere, the sphere of utterance.

‘Thus, emotion, evaluation, and expression are foreign to the word of language and are born only in the process of its live usage in a concrete utterance.’^{viii}

Dialogical relationships are also possible under other signifying relations (not only verbal ones). It suffices that these phenomena be expressed in a semiotic material. In order to become dialogical, logical and semantic relations must embody themselves, must enter into another sphere of being; they must become words (i.e. utterances) and have an author, the creator of the utterance in which his or her own valuations are expressed.

An author of the utterance is therefore necessary, a singularity embodying the empty possibility of language, of knowledge and of psychological processes so as to affirm their necessity. But what sort of author are we dealing with? Certainly not the author that functions as the ontological support of the rights of intellectual property.

On the one hand, the author's rights over the word are limited, since, as we know, he or she is confronted with the other (with the word of the other). On the other hand, the author is not already there, he or she is constituted in and by the event, in relation to his or her own specific difference vis-à-vis the other.

The other is simultaneously different from and immanent to me.

The Word of the Self and the Word of the Other

Bakhtin translates the eventual relation between myself and the other into a theory of enunciation, conceived as the eventual relation between the words of the self and the words of the other.

The author (the speaker) is constituted and operates at the border, at the limit between the singular (ego) and the multiplicity of others. This relationship does not simply hold between individual and collective, since the individual only exists as a relation immanent to the other, and the collective – being composed of singularities – is not an abstract entity (such as human being, man, community, society, and so on). It is on this border that creation is possible, because creation takes place 'outside the subject', outside of me, in the eventual relation with the other, with the words of the other.

The author (the speaker) of the utterance is not a mythical Adam who speaks for the first time. The author lives in a world in which the word exists in three guises: as the neutral word of language which belongs to no one, as the word of the other belonging to others, and as a word of the self that the self has appropriated – forced to become its own word – by means of the capture of a foreign word.

But the word in the dialogical relation is never a neutral word of language, empty of intentions and uninhabited by the voice of the other. The author receives the word of the other (beginning at infancy, when it is received from the mother) filled with the intonations – the emotional-

volitional affirmations – of others. My own expressivity finds each and every word already inhabited. To speak is to enter into a dialogical relationship with the other's words, a relationship that is also one of appropriation. This relationship has to do, first and foremost, not with the meaning of words, but with the other's expressions, intonations and voices. To whom does the word belong? To me, to others, to no one? Can one be the owner of the word in the same way that one is the owner of a thing?

'The word (or in general any sign) is interindividual. Everything that is said, expressed, is located outside the 'soul' of the speaker and does not belong only to him. The word cannot be assigned to a single speaker. The author (speaker) has his own inalienable right to the word, but the listener also has his rights, and those whose voices are heard in the word before the author comes upon it also have their rights (after all, there are no words that belong to no one).^{ix}

The border between myself and the other can genuinely be regarded as passing through my own words. In my words, all of the utterances which appropriated them during the course of their respective histories can be heard resonating. Not only do the voices of the past resonate, but all the future voices as well, all the voices that will come to speak these words. The other is not present merely in words which have already been uttered, but is also an immanent and constitutive element of every utterance to come.

The listener is an internal participant of the act of linguistic creation. The others, those for whom my thought becomes – for the first time – a real thought, are not passive listeners; they are active participants in verbal exchange. Others are co-creators.

It is for this reason that verbal exchange cannot be understood as a transmission of information or as a communication ruled by a code. Modern theories of information and communication fail precisely

because they do not manage to grasp verbal and communicational exchange as event.

According to Bakhtin there is no ready-made information. Information is created in the very process of communication. Information also cannot be understood as being transmitted from one human being to another; instead, it is constructed in the process of evental interaction as an 'ideological bridge'. At base, semiotics proceeds in the same fashion. As Bakhtin says: 'In the living word the message is created for the first time in the process of communication and there is, in fact, no code.'

The New Image of Thought

We are confronted here with a new image of thought, since 'thought is not what you think it is' (Nietzsche). Thought is an activity that expresses itself in an assemblage of evental relations between the body, the incorporeal, the brain and the other (*qua* envelope of possibles). We have seen how the utterance and constitution of the ego takes place at the border between the self's words and the words of the other. Thought is constituted in the same fashion, since the relationship between the word and thought is an extremely close one.

In this new image of thought the idea is not a subjective and psychological-individual formation with a permanent residence in the human skull: 'It is inter-individual and intersubjective, and its sphere of being is not individual consciousness, but the relation of meaning. The idea is a living fact that creates its own border in the dialogical encounter between two or more consciousnesses.'

Thought clears its own path through a labyrinth of words and gestures originating in others. The entire material of real thought is set out before us as a series of orientations or evaluations. The path of an embodied thought does not go from one thought to another, but from

one orientation to another. Thinking means installing oneself within a dialogical relation, experimenting new orientations-evaluations by combining them with each other.

To put it in a paradoxical way: One does not think about thoughts, but about points of view, expressions, voices.

And, just like with words, the problem of the 'rights' of all those who participate in the event of thought poses itself. Who does the idea belong to?

Polyphony

According to Bakhtin, art grasped this paradigm shift – the 'first philosophy of event-being' and the new image of thought, action and subjectivity that it implies – long before other disciplines. For Bakhtin, Dostoyevsky's work is the one that translates dialogism, the relation with the other, and the plurality and multiplicity of words into a specific aesthetic: Polyphony.

Dostoyevsky is the first artist to 'dialogise' everything that he encounters, forcing both object and subject to undergo radical transformations, and entering into a dialogue of the senses with them. Dostoyevsky would thus be at the origin of a 'Copernican revolution' in art, since in his work the author no longer holds any primacy in relation either to the characters or to the contemplators-spectators. Dostoyevsky considers both characters and contemplators-spectators in the second person singular; all of them participate, with the same rights, in the unpredictable creation of the event.

The work of art can enter into the event that constitutes our world and our existence if it defines itself as event, if it assumes a dialogical form: Polyphony.

The author is the one who makes the work live as event, in the midst of a world that is itself understood as event.

We can thus say that the work of art is a living and signifying aesthetic event, situated in turn within that singular event which is existence; the work of art is not a thing, it is not a purely theoretical object of cognition bereft of the meaning of eventality and the weight of values.

The work of art is neither a thing nor a psychological product, but rather an action exerted upon the relations of the senses. The work of art is a relational event.

The artist must confront the dialogical sphere because it is the sphere of the relations, questions and responses that concern meaning, because it is here that the confrontation takes place between evaluations, between different affirmations of the true, the beautiful and the just. It is here that the artist finds the resistances that push him or her to create.

The artist must surmount the 'purely literary' resistance offered by the old artistic forms, because at the basis of the creative act 'there is the determining function of artistic struggle with the ethical and cognitive aim of life and its signifying tenacity; this is the point of highest tension for the creative act (the rest are only means)...'

In the work we must be sensitive both to the resistance of the world's evental reality and to the creative act which is itself also an event, since the passage from the possible to the embodiment of meaning is not a simple realization. It is the production of something new.

The Paternity of Bakhtin's Works

The concepts of polyphony and dialogism can help us to resolve a curious problem in this man's troubled life: the paternity of a number of works originating in Bakhtin's circle. In the thirties, three books and several articles were published under the signature of Bakhtin's three

collaborators: Medvedev (a critic), Volonisov (a philosopher) and Kanaev (a biologist). For practically forty years, nothing more will be heard either of Bakhtin's works or of those of his collaborators, swallowed up by the Stalinist purges. For all those years, socialist realism alone had right of place in the Soviet arts.

From the middle of the sixties onwards, with the new edition of his book on Dostoyevsky, interest was rekindled in Bakhtin (the only surviving member of his circle) and his works. Increasingly insistent rumours circulated according to which even the works signed by Medvedev, Volonisov and Kanaev should really be attributed to Bakhtin himself. The latter, when directly interrogated, always allowed doubt to hover over this question: sometimes claiming paternity, other times attributing the works to his collaborators. We do, however, have some written accounts by Kanaev recognizing that, even though the article on vitalism bears his signature, it is really Bakhtin's. Moreover, we have the testimony of Bakhtin's wife, claiming that she made fair copies of most of the books in question. In any case, even though requests were officially made by the VAAP (the Soviet agency for the protection of the rights of the author) he never tried to claim legal paternity of these works. Different reasons have been put forward to explain this imbroglio: the fact that the communist censorship of the time forced Bakhtin to proceed hidden behind masks; the sometimes openly Marxist character of the theses advanced in these books; the claim that Bakhtin, in so doing, would have done a favour for his collaborators, who had aided the publication of the book on Dostoyevsky, which he held particularly dear. Although all of these contradictory justifications contain a kernel of truth, I think we can begin to explain this strange matter of signatures through Bakhtin's own theory of enunciation and of dialogism (polyphony). From the point of view of his theory of enunciation, an entire book and a single word have the same status:

they are both utterances. For Bakhtin, a single word is already a 'public place' in which different evaluations, points of view, and voices confront one another: 'Each word presents itself as a miniature arena in which social accents with contradictory orientations both intersect and struggle' (*Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*).

From the polyphonic composition of these different accents a new meaning is born. The books in question can therefore be understood as an arena, a public place, in which different orientations of thought confront one another: the voice of Bakhtin and his theory of the event, those of Medvedev and Volonisov, more Marxist in their concern with the public, social and collective nature of language, as well as the voices of those past and contemporary authors to which Bakhtin and his circle address themselves and with which they enter into dialogue. All of them have rights over 'ideas' and all participate in their constitution.

For Bakhtin, thought is forged in a dialogue/confrontation that takes place between this multiplicity of voices, of points of view, of conceptions of the world. Instead of subjecting – like the Marxists – artistic and theoretical production to authority (Marx, Lenin, etc.), Bakhtin thinks that, with capitalism, we find ourselves in a new situation: 'Not only men and their actions, but ideas themselves were wrenched away from their closed hierarchical grids and established a familiar contact within an absolute dialogue (which nothing limits).'

This absolute dialogue without limits is also the condition presupposed by the production of Bakhtin's own works. The author has lost the authority of which he or she was the bearer in previous epochs and which is still conserved in the etymology of the word.

An author is indeed necessary, but this author has cut a path through the throng composed of the voices of others, and it individualizes itself at the border between the ego and the other. This enunciative singularity is always precarious, unstable, and open to an

interminable process, since the author is but one link in the production of meaning.

A signature of the work is indeed needed, but this signature is not the mark of the subject, of the sovereign individual who legitimates the property of these works, but an operation of singularisation that affects a multiplicity of voices. Singularity and multiplicity, instead of the opposition of individual and collective.

Translated by Alberto Toscano

NOTES

ⁱ M.M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, trans. by Vern W. McGee, ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 114.

ⁱⁱ *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, p. 164 [translation modified, words in brackets are the author's].

ⁱⁱⁱ *Les mots et les choses* – Words and Things – is the original French title of Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*.

^{iv} *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, p. 165.

^v M.M. Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, trans. by Vadim Liupanov, ed. by Vadim Liupanov and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993), pp. 32-33.

^{vi} *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, p. 33.

^{vii} *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, p. 124.

^{viii} *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, p. 87.

^{ix} *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, pp. 121-122.