

## Lesson 9

### Philosophy of Language as the Art of Listening II.

#### Sidelights

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1. Mikhail Bakhtin and the Bakhtin Circle; 2. Their writings, a recent collection; 3. Philosophy of language with and beyond Bakhtin

#### 1. Mikhail Bakhtin and 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 Nikolay Zelinsky (1861–1953). In 1919 Bakhtin entered into close contact with Valentin Nicolaevič Vološinov (1885–1934), first a musicologist, subsequently also ethnologist and linguist (on Vološinov see the important 2012 monograph by Inna Tylkowski), with the philosopher Matvej I. Kagan (1889–1937), the literary critic Lev V. Pumpiansky (1891–1940) and the pianist Marja V. Judina (1899–1970). Bakhtin met them all in Nevel', as he recounts in his 1973 conversations with Viktor Duvakin, originally published in a volume of 1996 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2002), translated into Italian in 2008, edited by Augusto 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).

The so-called “Bakhtin Circle” was not a “School” in any academic sense of the term and Bakhtin was not 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 understood in terms of derivation, belonging, genealogy is also a deviation. 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 listening collaboration sharing 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.

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 the reign of Stalinism had come to an end, and his entry onto the international scene after decades of oblivion. In fact, under Stalinist repression Bakhtin was exiled first to Kazakistan 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. Consequently, 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, at an internationally level 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 was entitled, *Problemy tvorčestva Dostoevskogo*.

In sum, 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.

All the same, 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, the voices of his friends continued to resound in Bakhtin’s work as in a dialogue that was never interrupted, even when he had survived the Stalinist era all alone, pursuing his studies through to the time of his death in 1975.

In any case, 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” – not to mention the fact that such an investigation 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., may even be considered as an expedient – indeed now a rather widespread habit – to avoid concentrating on the important, innovative, indeed *revolutionary* ideas elaborated and proposed in these texts. In fact Augusto Ponzio rightly speaks of the “Bakhtinian revolution” (see Ponzio 1997c, 2008a).

Obsession with the concept of property or ownership in some cases leads to abandoning the text as the critic acts like a “detective” or a journalist in search of a scoop. Nevertheless, for anybody interested in the “paternity” of works by the Bakhtinian circle, in one case alone there exists 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. In reality, however, this article was written by Bakhtin as declared by Kanaev in writing on an extract (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 of each other is to force the issue concerning authorship. This operation 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 exchanges, of rejoinders 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 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 monological 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 (which

includes 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, precisely.

Contrary to such a vision, Bakhtin's inquiry into the conditions for subverting 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 difference, unindifferent difference – a far cry from what has been traditionally advanced by the cornerstones of Western culture.

The three passages below are from writings by Bakhtin, cited as epigraphs to each of the three parts forming a new collection of writings by Bakhtin and his Circle, *Opere 1919–1930*, published in 2014, and from writings subsequent to those included in this collection. They are reported below insofar as they draw the reader's attention to some of the main themes addressed by the Bakhtin Circle, moreover giving a sense to the texts as they are distributed in this volume – in particular, the questions of “responsiveness / responsibility,” “sense,” “dialogism,” and “singularity.” While Ponzio (of course) reports from the Italian translations of Bakhtin's works, here instead I cite directly from the 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)

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 and was not granted the possibility of publishing again until 1963, when the second enlarged edition of his 1929 monograph was proposed 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 the serious disease that afflicted him, 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 may no doubt speak of a *productive solitude*. We have mentioned his first large collection of writings published in 1975, *Voprosy literatury i estetiki*. This was followed by a second just as substantial collection, *Estetika slovesnogo tvorčestva*, published in 1979.

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, both dedicated to the artwork of two great literary writers.

Bakhtin was only granted permission to live in Moscow in 1971. And only as late as 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, his 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.

## 2. Their writings, a recent collection

How strong an impact writings by Mikhail Bakhtin and the Bakhtin Circle can have on cultural values today, their topicality for the quality of life and human relationships, is emphasized by the bilingual volume *Opere 1919–1930*, a first-time collection in Russian original and Italian translation of fundamental texts by members of the Bakhtin Circle, published in 2014, in the prestigious book series "Il pensiero occidentale," directed by Giovanni Reale (see Bachtin e il suo Circolo 2014).<sup>1</sup> *Opere 1919–1930* is the arrival point of Augusto Ponzio's studies on

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<sup>1</sup> The monumental 2,132 page collection, *Opere 1919-1930*, presents texts by Bakhtin and members of the Bakhtin Circle from the years 1919 to 1930, newly translated into Italian from the Russian original, edited and commented by the renowned Bakhtin scholar, Augusto Ponzio, Professor Emeritus at the University of Bari "Aldo Moro," Italy, where he has taught Philosophy of language since 1970 and General linguistics since 1999.

It includes four books published between 1927 and 1929: by Vološinov, *Frejdzizm. Kriticeskij očerk* (1927), *Freudismo. Studio critico* [Freudism: A critical sketch], and *Marksizm i filosofija jazyka* (1929, 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 geroj 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.

Bakhtin, initiated during the second half of the 1970s, and resulting in the early publication of his monograph, *Michail Bachtin*, in 1980, the first ever at a world level, with others that followed<sup>2</sup>.

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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 introduced 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 additional essays. Of the latter the first is “Stilistica chudožestvennoj reči” (1930), “Stilistica del discorso artistico” [Stylistics of artistic discourse], pp. 1841-1993 and the second is “O granicach poetiki i lingvistik” (1930), “Sui confini tra poetica e linguistica” [On the borders between poetics and linguistics], pp. 1995-2069.

“Iskusstvo i otvetstvennost” [Art and answerability] (1919), the first text ever published by Bakhtin that we know of, 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 – “K filosofii postupka” [For the philosophy of the responsible act] (thus titled by the editor) and “Autor i geroy v esteteskoj tvorčestva” [Author and hero in aesthetic activity]. Both of these were only published posthumously in the Russian original in a volume edited by Sergej G. Bočarov in 1986.

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).

Among Ponzio’s monographs on Bakhtin, the first, *Michail Bachtin. Alle origini della semiotica sovietica*, appeared in 1980, the first at a world level. 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 Paolo, Contexto, 2008, 2<sup>nd</sup> 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” is understood as 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 Petrilli) (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 e 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.

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*.)



Bakhtin occupies a privileged place among the authors that have most contributed to the development of Ponzio's own philosophical work. Similarly to his dialogue with Emmanuel Lévinas (1905–1995)<sup>3</sup> to whom he has dedicated various monographs since 1967 (including publications in France with L'Harmattan, Paris), Ponzio's engagement with Bakhtin has never ceased.

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 collected in *Opere 1919–1930* (with the exception of the article on vitalism signed by I. Kanaev; see Bakhtin 1926), Ponzio refers to *Sobranie socinenij*, 1996–2010, and the works collected therein. Moreover, Ponzio has consulted the most recent editions of the works of 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* (pp. VII–XXXII), this bilingual edition is the result of comparing most translations available so far. And with A. Ponzio, the work of translation is inevitably accompanied by a critical discussion of these same translations, their imprecisions and misunderstandings, including in the English. For example, Ponzio points out that the Russian term *bytje*, 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 author of the 1927 monograph *Sein und Zeit* (Being and time).

*Opere* contains works published between 1919 and 1930. Apart from all else, it is thanks to such works that Bakhtin is Bakhtin and the Bakhtin Circle is the Bakhtin Circle. Obviously, as emerges in Ponzio's general introduction to the volume as well as in his introductions to each section, that the focus of the volume is limited to Bakhtinian writings from 1919 to 1930 does not stop him from considering subsequent works by Bakhtin and his Circle, such as the

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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.

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 fact, Ponzio constantly underlines the coherence and continuity of the Bakhtinian project 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 the result of his work 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 conceptual instruments offered by the Bakhtinian vision of life and language.

### **3. Philosophy of language, with and beyond Bakhtin**

The writings collected in *Opere 1919–1930* all share a common theme (see Bakhtin e il suo circolo 2014: 3-5): the need to overcome the division between two worlds that seem impenetrable, the life world and the cultural world, united in the unique event of the act in which is decided each single individual's standpoints and decisions. This unique act is charged with a double sense of responsibility: "special responsibility" or "technical responsibility," and "moral responsibility," "absolute responsibility". Bakhtin studies the question of how to describe the uniqueness and unity of a world that in valuational and spatio-temporal terms is concretely "architectonic," beginning from the place that each single individual occupies in the world, as a unique and unreplaceable individual endowed with a unique responsibility, without alibis. He evidences two centers of value, the I and the other, "the two centers of value of life itself" around which is constituted the architectonics of responsibility. These two centers of value must necessarily remain mutually other, if the architectonic relationship between two others is to continue in spatio-temporal and axiological terms.

As described in his 1920-1924 essay, "K filosofii postupka," such a vision is reached in the sphere of art, in artistic discourse, specifically verbal art, in literature. The architectonic's of the literary vision is organized around that center of value that is the single human being in his or her uniqueness, unreplaceability, precariousness, mortality. In relation to the singularity of the unique single individual, expressions such as "before," "after," "still," "when," "never," "late," "in the end," "already," "necessary," "due," "beyond," "near," "distant" all 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 Bakhtin 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 Bakhtin e il suo circolo 2014: 177-181).

The subsequent course of Bakhtin’s research proceeds from this point onward. Having traced 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 finds 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, 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 which are organized in special terms in “verbal art.” 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).

Vološinov’s 1926 essay 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*. And thus described

the utterance is an inevitable point of reference in texts by Bakhtin, Medvedev and Vološinov (see Bachtin e il suo circolo 2014: 285-293).

“Sovremennyj vitalizm” [Contemporary vitalism], commonly attributed to Kanaev, but as we know in reality authored by Bakhtin, was published in 1926, in two consecutive issues of the journal *Čelovek i Priroda* (1, pp. 33–42; 2, pp. 9–23). The biologist Kanaev, a member of the Bakhtin 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 Aleksei Ukhtomsky, in the summer of 1925, in St. Petersburg. This conference influenced Bakhtin’s conception of the chronotope, which he studied in different life situations and literary genres, evidencing differences and specificities. As Bakhtin was to declare himself, this concept plays a central role throughout all his work.

In his article on vitalism Bakhtin rejects the mechanistic solution (which he criticizes in other writings as well 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 – he was mainly alluding to Hans Driesch, his 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 examined above all through its literary depiction in Dostoevsky’s “polypophic novel”; and the “grotesque realism” of “carnival” popular culture, which he studied through its depiction in Rabelais.

Part II in *Opere 1919–1930* contains three of the four books that form the tetralogy published during the 1920s by different 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. Vološinov focusses 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 the conscious and the unconscious involves complex relationships between verbal and nonverbal reactions and the struggle between internal discourse and external discourse in human verbal behaviour and among 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 purely 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 artistic expression and the generality of linguistic-ideological material (see Jachia & Ponzio 1993). Coherently with the Bakhtinian circle and its main orientation, Medvedev identifies this element in *social valuation* (see Bachtin e il suo circolo 2014: 911–933). Concretely expressed social valuation which is not an attribute exclusive to literary writing, but is traceable in all live utterances, confers uniqueness upon an utterance and at the same time expresses meanings that are general, common, stable, and repeatable, 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” (Bachtin e il suo circolo 2014: 923), and not as a system of linguistic, phonetic, grammatical, lexical possibilities, potential. On this basis, Medvedev repeats that study of the specificity of the literary text cannot be based on linguistics as, instead, the formalists maintained.

As emerges from his 1930 essay on poetics and linguistics (see Bachtin 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 potential, 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 *in order to be depicted* and not to other ends, whether cognitive, moral, etc. The overall organization of the literary text consists in such depiction which is merged into its construction. Unlike the everyday utterance whose finality is not the depiction itself of valuation, the linguistic-verbal material forming the artistic utterance is pervaded with social valuations and is used to express the valuation itself, to no other end but its depiction. 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 Bachtin 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 remarkably high and complex levels of reflection and methodological elaboration and of critical consciousness with respect to formalism. Interesting to underline is that Medvedev himself develops the programmatic premises of formalism more coherently – albeit not in terms of peaceful evolution, but of critique – than the formalists themselves. Moreover, Medvedev’s “sociological method” as elaborated in his book of 1928 is put into practice by Bakhtin in his

own 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 in Dostoevsky’s artwork, which he believed had generally escaped the attention of the latter’s critics. Like Medvedev, Bakhtin too aimed to evidence “the structural moments” of Dostoevsky’s vision (see Bachtin e il suo circolo 2014: 663–665, 1097, 1197).

According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky’s contribution – which extends well beyond the sphere of literature and art in general – could only ever be adequately grasped through a methodics of literary writing oriented as described above. As he specifically claims in the 1963 edition of his *Problemy tvorčestva Dostoevskogo*, polyphonic artistic thought at last renders accessible certain aspects of the human – above all human consciousness and the dialogical sphere of existence – that are completely beyond the reach of monological thought, such things as 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 self manifests its own otherness. This is the word understood as total expression, as ideology, as worldview, as the expression of one’s own otherness in addition to the otherness of others, which is never defined and determined once and for all, which remains unfinalized, unclassifiable, outside and beyond all reified determinacy (see also Vygotskij 1934). From his early writings, Bakhtin’s studies on literary writing are never an end in themselves, but rather are always functional to an understanding of human action, thought, and language.

As depicted in Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel, dialogism 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 perceived on the background of the consciousness that an-other has of this self; “I-for-me” on the background of “I-for-the-other” and “the-other-for-me” (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 the utterance, in the most

subtle structural elements of discourse, therefore of consciousness (see *Ibid.*: 1269–1275). In Dostoevsky's artwork the narrator too participates in dialogism. The narrator never remains external to the personae, as a third non-participant in dialogue. If, on the other hand, the narrator's voice in the polyphony of voices were to remain outside, it would result as a voice capable of withdrawing from dialogue. But on experimenting with polyphony, Dostoevsky's novel shows that this is not a possibility, not for any voice whatsoever, including that of the author or the narrator. Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel recovers otherness in the perception and understanding of man and his world, wherein it produces a sort of "Copernican revolution" with respect to monological approaches (*Ibid.*: 1135).

Dostoevsky's work identifies a *space-time*, a *chronotope* that withdraws from and resists a totalizing vision, that withdraws from and resists ontology, the jurisdiction of history. This chronotope acknowledges the single individual with a sense outside the commonplaces of discourse, outside the accommodation of History. It recognizes that the single individual has a sense in oneself, as an end in itself. It recognizes the single individual's unique responsibility which cannot be revoked, or deferred, which concerns one's existence in relation to the other, beginning from self as a centre of value, and not from an external objectivating viewpoint. Such is literary space-time, the "literary chronotope," precisely.

But Bakhtin was aware of the innovative power of this particular chronotope not only for the novel or for artistic production generally, but also for a more adequate conception of humanity, of man (understood as *anthropos* and not as a term in a relation of binary opposition to another term, *aner* as opposed to *gyné*) in a theoretical-practical framework. Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel recovers otherness in the perception and understanding of man and the world, thanks to which it operates a sort of "Copernican revolution" with respect to monological approaches (Bakhtin e il suo circolo 2014: 1135).

A fundamental assumption in Vološinov's *Marxizm i filosofija jazyka* (*Ibid.*: Part III) is that reality is not simply reflected in the sign, but refracted in it. Different viewpoints, orientations and programs all interweave with each other in the same sign community (see *ibid.*: 1225-1227, 1837-1839). Bakhtin also speaks of *refraction* on numerous occasions in his 1929 book. This contradicts 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: in this note the claim is that only the term "reflex" is used, and not the concept of refraction and corresponding verb (*Ibid.*: 1432).



In *Marksizm i filozofija 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*, pp. 1951-1993 – which contributes to the characterization of “sign-ideological” material. The sign is characterized by indeterminacy and semantic flexibility, which makes it adaptable to ever new and different situational contexts. Instead, the signal is univocal and performs functions that are prefixed and unidirectional. In short, his position as formulated in *Frejdizm* concerning the fact that social signs cannot be reduced to the status of signality and his considerations on reflexology are here repeated and confirmed.

The verbal sign is always ideological. And given that similarly to knowledge even the most basic perceptions like hunger are expressed through the verbal sign, perception as well is oriented socially and accentuated ideologically (*Ibid.*: 1657). Moreover, insofar as it is a *two-faced act*, determined both by the speaker and the addressee, the product of the mutual relationship between the latter in determined historical-social conditions, the utterance is always *semi-other* (*Ibid.*: 1428, 1446, 1771, 1776-1781). The speaker is the word’s owner only in physiological terms. Insofar as it is a sign the word is a social product even in its stylistic characteristics, just as the individual speaker is such in sociality.

Similarly to Bakhtin, Vološinov too focusses on 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 of Part III in *Marksizm i filozofija jazyka* (*Ibid.*: 1779-1789, 1833-1839). The most significant 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 that differ in the orientation of their intonation. He considers the study of utterance syntax of such importance as to dedicate a whole chapter to it, the third and last, where he discusses different interpretations thereof, in particular that by Charles Bally and Vossler’s school.

As emerges from *Marksizm i filozofija jazyka* (and not only the third part dedicated specifically to the interaction between one’s own word and the word of the other) as much as from his essays in Part III of *Opere 1919–1930* (the first originally 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 characteristic of the word.

