Science, Art, Politics, and Praxis in Mikhail Bakhtin

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"The place of philosophy. It begins where exact scientificity ends
and heteroscientificity begins".
"Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its resurrection".
(M. Bakhtin, "Toward a methodology of
human sciences", 1974)

"In his conversation with Saint Bernard in Paradise, Dante suggests that
our body shall to 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.
(M. Bakhtin, "Author and hero in aesthetic activity, 1924,
Eng. trans. in M. Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, ed. by M. Holquist
and V.V. Liapunov, Austin 1990, 57)

"In a draft for a preface to a collection of his works from various years
Bakhtin notes: 'My love for variations and for a diversity
of terms for a single phenomenon'. We can also observe this love
for variations on certain themes and ideas in the two early texts [of 1920-1924]"
(Sergej G. Bocharov, "Introduction to the Russion Edition",
in M. Bakhtin, *Toward a philosophy of act*, ed. by
V. V. Liapunov and M. Holquist, Austin, 1995).

In his conversation in 1973 with Viktor Duvakin, Bakhtin says:

Marija Veniaminovna Judina was an absolutely unofficial person. Anything official was a burden for her. The same for myself. Neither can I suffer that which is official.

Bakhtin, an unofficial person: with respect to official, public circles, from another circle, tending towards unofficialness even before his arrest and conviction; and precisely because of this, capable of proceeding in his voyage of reflection and writing, during the many long years of total extromission from the culture of his time.

In the last note of "Notes Made in 1970-71" (Bakhtin 1979, Eng. trans. 1987, p. 155), Bakhtin outlines an introduction that anticipates a collection of his texts from various phases in his research and writing. He was working at this volume (*Voprosy literature i estetiki*, 1975) just before his death. In the last note he declares the following:

The collection of my essays *is unified by one theme* in various stages of its development.

The *unity of the emerging* (developing) *idea* […] In these works there is much external incompleteness, open-endedness, that is, *an open-endedness not of the idea itself but of its expression and exposition*. Sometimes it is difficult to separate one open-endedness from another. *My love for variations and for diversity of terms for a single phenomenon. The multiplicity of focuses*. Bringing distant things closer without indicating the intermediate links.

In Bakhtin's works "the theme in various stages of its development", or "the emerging idea" is the notion of *chronotope*. This idea is already present in the text by Bakhtin from the early 1920s, "K filosofii postupka" (1920-24, bilingual Russian and Italian text in Bachtin e il suo circolo 2014)), where he introduces the notion of exotopy (*vnenakodimost'*). In this text he also introduces the notion of "architectonics" according to which all values, meanings and spatial-temporal relationships are characterized in terms of otherness: "I-for-myself, the other-for-me, and I-for-the-other" (*Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, 1995, p. 54. Here *postupok* is also translated as *deed*).

All values of actual life and culture are arranged around the basic architectonic point of the actual world of the performed act or deed: *scientific values, aesthetic values, political values* (including both ethical and social values), and, finally, *religious values*. (*ibid.*)

The text which specifically analyses the notion of chronotope, "Forms of time and of the chronotope in the novel," is dated 1937-38. It contains a note which refers to the conference by the neurophysiologist Aleksej A. A. Uchtomskij, which as reported by Bakthin was delivered in 1925, and a section entitled "Concluding Remarks," written in 1973. So this text crosses over the whole range of Bakhtin's research in its various phases, from his early writings to the latest. Moreover, this crossing is not only of the temporal order but also the conceptual.

In "Notes made in 1970-71," to explain the difference between architectonics in life and architectonics in art, Bakhtin considers the difference between Dostoevsky the journalist and Dostoevsky the writer. As a writer Dostoevsky was able to sense in the opinions and ideologies of the time a dialogue on ultimate questions (in great time). As a journalist he dealt with issues that were resolved in his own day.

The journalist is above all a contemporary. He is obliged to be one. He lives in the sphere of questions that can be resolved in the present day (or in any case in the near future). He participates in a dialogue that can be ended and even finalized, can be translated into action, and can become an empirical force. […] When entering the area of Dostoevsky's journalism, we observe a sharp narrowing of the horizon; the universality of his novels disappears, even though the problems of the hero's personal

life are replaced by social and political problems. The heroes lived and acted (and thought) before the entire world (before heaven and earth). Ultimate questions that originated in their small personal and daily lives broke away from their lives and attached themselves to "the divine universal life". (Bakhtin 1979, Eng. trans in Bakhtin, *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, 1987, p. 152)

We find in these "Concluding Remarks" of 1973 (in "Forms of time and of the chronotope in the novel") what Bakhtin sets out in his programmatic article of 1919, "Art and answerability".

> The work and the world depicted in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers. Of course this metabolic process is itself chronotopic: it occurs first and foremost in the historically developing social world. We might even speak of a special *creative* chronotope inside which this exchange between work and life occurs, and which constitutes the distinctive life of the work. ("Forms of time and of chronotope in the novel", in Bakhtin 1975, Eng. trans. in *The Dialogic Imagination*, 1982, p. 254)

Precisely because of the surplus of literary sense with respect to contemporaneity, Bakhtin believes that the exotopy of viewpoint, its outsideness with respect to the cultural context of the literary text, favours its comprehension in a dialogue which overcomes the limits of contemporaneity. In *Philosophical basis of human sciences* (ed. by V. Kozinov in *Kontext*,1974, pp. 375-377), Bakhtin remarks that if it is not possible to study literary texts separately from the culture of their epoch, even more disastrous is to confine the literary phenomenon to the epoch of its creation, to its "contemporaneity". In the process of their life *post mortem*, great works are enriched with new senses. Neither Shakespeare nor the interpreters of his time knew the great Shakespeare we know. The author is imprisoned in his contemporaneity. Subsequent epochs liberate him and the function of the science of literature consists in contributing to this liberation.

In the literary work, the chronotope is what determines its unitary character and constitutes the possibility of dialogue beyond the time of its contemporaneity. Likewise in Bakhtin's work, the chronotope is the idea, the theme which determines its unitariness and maintains the dialogue between Bakhtin's work and our own time.

In what emerges as a kind of programmatic manifesto (his first published text), a short article, *Art and answerability* (1919, Eng. trans., p. 1-2), Bakhtin remarks that the three domains of human culture – science, art, and life – gain unity only in the praxis of the individual in his singularity, who integrates them into the unity of his own acts, his

responsible acts. But, unfortunately, in most cases this union becomes "mechanical". What does this word, "mechanical," mean? A whole is called "mechanical", says Bakhtin, when its constituent elements are only united in space and time by some external connection and are not imbued with the internal unity of meaning: the parts of such a whole are contiguous and touch each other, but in themselves they remain alien to each other.

We encounter Bakhtin's accusation once again *à propos* the lack of unity in the three domains of human culture in his conclusion to the second edition of his book on Dostoevsky of 1963, *Problems of Dotoevsky's Poetics*, speaking of the contemporary separation between science and art. But this separation is not between science and art understood as abstract concepts, but rather between *scientific consciousness* and *artistic consciousness*, and consequently between concrete scientific praxis and concrete artistic praxis:

> The *scientific consciousness* of contemporary man has learned to orient itself among the complex circumstance of "the probability of the universe": it is not confused by any "indefinite quantities" but knows how calculate them and take them into account. This scientific consciousness has long since grown accustomed to the Einsteinian world with its multiplicity of systems of measurement, etc. But in the realm of *artistic* cognition people sometimes continue to demand a very crude primitive definitiveness, one that quite obviously could not be true. (Eng. trans. p. 272)

Therefore the new variety of the novel created by Dostoevsky – whose innovative features Bakhtin highlighted in the first edition (1929) of his book –

> may be considered a huge step forward not only in the development of novelistic prose [....] but also in the development of the artistic *thinking* of humankind. It seems to us that one could speak directly of a special *polyphonic artistic thinking* extending beyond the bounds of the novel as genre. This mode of thinking makes available those sides of a human being, and above all the *thinking human consciousness and the dialogic sphere of its existence*, which are not subject to *artistic* assimilation from *monologic positions*. (*ibid*., p. 270)

Consequently, the connection between *scientific consciousness* and *artistic praxis*, introduced by Dostoevsky thanks to his new form of artistic visualization, enables us to develop its innovative potential in *life*, that is, in the praxis of the relationship of each one of us with oneself and with the other (see *ibidem*).

Bakhtin traces an analogous relation between *artistic praxis* and *scientific consciousness* in Kazimir Malevich's "suprematism". He declares as much in his conversations of 1973 with Viktor Duvakin (1996, second edition 2002, It. trans. M. Bachtin, *In dialogo*, 2008, p. 220) during which he recounts his first encounter with Malevich in Vitebsk. Bakhtin was interested in scientific research of his time. We know that the article on

"contemporary vitalism" ("Sovremennyj vitalizm"), published in 1926 in a journal specialized in biology and signed by his friend, the biologist Ivan Kanaev, was written by Bakhtin, as Kanaev himself declared explicitly to Bocharov. We know directly from Bakhtin about the influence wielded upon him by Aleksej Uktomskij (which also involves his interpretation of Dostoevsky, apart from the concept of chronotope) and by Wladimir Vernadskij (well-known for the concept of "biosphere"). In "Notes Made in 1970-71," Bakhtin refers to Vernadskij to draw attention on the difficulties involved in understanding dynamical processes in the cultural sphere as much as in biological life and in the evolution of species – they are too slow to be understandable, and we end up denying them.

We have observed that in *Art and answerability* (1919) Bakhtin maintains that the unity of science, art, and life in human culture is only possible in the singular individual who integrates them into his own unity. This unity is not ontologically fixed or guaranteed. The connection is only guaranteed by the unity of individual answerability. The individual must become answerable through and through in his praxis, in his life day by day. The division created between two mutually impervious worlds can only be overcome in life, where we exist even when we cognize, choose, act, create, when we build a world in which life is made the object of a given domain of culture. In responsible praxis, in the answerability of our own acts, all of the constituent moments of culture "must not only fit next to each other in the temporal sequence of his life, but must also interpenetrate each other in the unity" of an individual person.

> I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life. The artist must remember that it is his art the guilt for the vulgar prose of life, whereas the man of everyday life ought to know that the fruitlessness of art is due to his willingness to be unexacting and the fatuousness, silliness of the concern in his life. (*ibid.*, p. 2)

These guiding ideas are developed by Bakhtin in texts from the early 1920s, but published in Russia only in 1986 thanks to Sergej G. Bocharov under the title "K filosofii postupka". The subject of this text is closely related to the first chapter of a longer work – it too from the early 1920s – published as "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" in the 1979 collection of Bakhtin's writings, *Estetika slovesnogo tvorchestva*. Considered as fragmentary, this chapter in the Russian original was excluded from the 1979 volume, and published by Sergej Bocharov in 1986 together with "K filosofii postupka" and then in the book he edited in 2000, Bakhtin, *Autor i geroy*.

These two texts are of great interest not only because of their intrinsic theoretical value, but also as a key to a global understanding of Bakhtin's research and writings as they extend into the first half of the 1970s.

Bakhtin is still considered as a literary critic. This is the case, for example, in Italy, although all his works are translated. All the same, as Bakhtin claims in his conversations of 1973 with Viktor Duvakin (1996, second edition 2002, It trans. M. Bachtin, *In dialogo*, 2008: 120), "I am a philosopher, a thinker".

Postupok, the word used by Bakhtin and consequently by Bocharov in the title of the text in question, means a lived act. The world of *postupok* is, according to Bakhtin, the *world of responsive praxis by the singular individual*. In this world, that which is endowed with abstract meaning and mechanical unity in the world of science, art, in academies, politics, technology, in the world of impersonal roles, jobs, tasks, duties, in the world of responsive praxis all this recovers its sense and is integrated into the unity of responsible acts.

Postupok, act, or *deed*, contains "stup", which means "step" in the sense of "decision", "an important step", "a big step", "to take a step", "bring himself to take a certain step": initiative, stance, to pass from the level of the theoretic, planning, normative, to the level of personal answerable praxis. Bakhtin also uses the verb *postupat'*, to act, to perform an answerable act, or deed.

In its connection with "to take a step", "*postupok*" recalls the expression "transgredient", connected in Bakhtin with "outsideness", "extopy", "*vnenakodimost'*", "transgredient": from Latin *transgredo*; English, *step across*, *step over*.

In "K filosofii postupka" Bakhtin characterizes the contemporary crisis as the crisis of the contemporary act, which has become technical, formal, mechanical action. He identifies this crisis in the separation of the act, with its concrete participative, responsible motivation, from its cultural product which is reified and, consequently, loses sense. This interpretation is similar to Husserls's phenomenology, especially as developed in *Die Krisis der europaischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phanomenologie* (published posthumously in 1954). But in Bakhtin, unlike Husserl where a certain theoreticism persists, sense is not conferred by the intentional consciousness, by the transcendental subject, but by the answerable praxis of the singular individual in the situation of non-alibi in its existing in the world.

Furthermore, Bakhtin emphasizes how separation of the product from the answerable act, for example, of the technological-scientific apparatus from concrete motivation, of culture from life, does not only involve a degradation of the product, a loss of sense in the cultural world become autonomous dominion, knowledge emptied of sense. If individual

praxis is isolated from cultural meanings, the act itself, separated from social values, is impoverished of its ideal moments and descends to a low degree of biological and economic motivation: outside objective culture, the act appears as bare biological subjectivity, an act. The value placed by Bakhtin on the act is that of unitary and unique answerable praxis distinct from technical action with its special answerability (cf. *Toward a Philosophy of the act*, 1995, pp. 54-56):

> The contemporary crisis is, fundamentally, a crisis of contemporary act (*postupok*). An abyss has formed between the motive of the actually performed act or deed and its product. But in consequence of this, the product of the deed, severed from its essential roots, has withered as well.
> Money can become the motive of the deed […]. In relation to the present moment, economic materialism is in the right […]. All the energy of answerable performing is drawn of into the autonomous domain of culture, and, as a result, the performed act, detached from that energy, sinks to the level of elementary biological and economic motivation, that is, loses all its ideal moments: that is precisely what constitutes the state of civilisation. The whole wealth of culture is placed at the service of biological activity (*akt*). Theory consigns the performed act or deed to the realm of brute existence […].
> Given this state of affairs, it may seem that what remains, after we abstract the sense-moments of objective culture, is bare biological subjectivity, the activity *qua* biological need.
> That is why it seems that I am objective and spiritual only as an artist or a scientist/scholar, i.e. only from within the product I have brought forth. And it is from within these produced objects that my biography must be constructed; after substracting that, all that remains is a subjective activity. (54-55)

What Bakhtin shows is that, in the current state of affairs, there are two forms of answerability.

1) On one hand, "special, or technical, or formal answerability", relative to a given domain of culture, a given content, a given role and function, delimited, defined, circumscribed answerability, referred to the repeatable identity of the objective and interchangeable individual.

2) On the other hand, "moral answerability", "absolute answerability", without limits, alibis, which alone renders individual action unique, answerability of the singular individual that cannot be abdicated.

The act of our praxis, of actual experiencing, says Bakhtin, is therefore "a two-faced Janus" oriented in two different directions: never-repeatable uniqueness, and objective, abstract unity.

The connection between these two kinds of answerability is also that between objective, repetitive, fixed meaning conferred by the domain of culture in which action is objectified,

and the unrepeatable self-determination of existing as a unique and unitary event, as praxis in its entirety and complexity, non subdivisible and unclassifiable.

In Bakhtin's view, the uniqueness of the answerable act establishes in individual living consciousness a connection in culture between institutional values and life, between "official consciousness" and "unofficial consciousness". When this is not the case, cultural, cognitive, scientific, aesthetic, political values rise to the status of values-in-themselves and lose all possibility of verification, functionality, transformation.

Concerning politics, Bakhtin observes that this situation is part of a Hobbesian conception with clear political implications: to absolute cultural values there corresponds the conception according to which the people choose one time only, renouncing their freedom, surrendering themselves to the State, after which they become slaves of their own free decision (cf. p. 35).

In his subsequent research Bakhtin was to amply demonstrate how all this contradicts constitutive popular resistance to "State truth", the irreducibility of "non official ideology" to "official ideology", the character of popular culture. The capacity of popular culture for innovation and regeneration in relation to dominant culture is the object of study in Bakhtin's monograph on Rabelais (1963). Furthermore, it is significant that when Bakhtin returns to his book on Dostoevsky for his 1963 edition, he was to integrate it with a chapter dedicated to the genesis of Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel whose roots are traced in serio-comical genres of popular culture. The polyphonic novel is considered as the greatest expression of "carnivalized literature".

Insofar as it belongs to "class ideology", State truth, says Bakhtin in one of his annotations (*in Literaturno-kriticheskie stat'I*, Moskou, 1986), "encounters at a certain point the insurmountable barrier of irony and degrading allegory", "the carnival spark of allegorical-ironical imprecation, which destroys all gravity and seriousness" and "never dies in the heart of the people" (in Ponzio and Jachia ed. 1993, p. 191-192).

From this point of view Bakhtin's book on *Rabelais* occupies a place of central importance in Bakhtin's overall conception. By contrast with oversimplifying and suffocating interpretations and realizations of Marxism, Bakhtin instead develops Marx's idea that the human is fully realized where the reign of necessity ends. Consequently, a social system that is effectively alternative to capitalism is one which considers time available for self and for others, and not work time, as the real social wealth: the "time of festivity", in the sense illustrated by Bakhtin, which is closely connected to the "great time" of literature.

In a passage of *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin pauses to reflect on forms of proxy, in particular political proxy by which one delegates one's own answerability. Bakhtin refers to political representation in which, in the attempt at relieving oneself of political answerability, one often loses – both in whoever attributes it and in whoever assumes it – the sense of one's roots in unique, personal non-alibi participation, and consequently answerability becomes void, specialized and formal answerability, with all the danger that such loss of roots and of sense involves (cf. p. 52):

Bakhtin says:

> In attempting to understand our whole life as representation and every act we perform as ritual action, we turn into impostors.
> Every representation does not abolish but merely specializes my personal answerability. […] The loss of once-occurrent participation in the course of specialization is especially frequent in the case of political answerability. The same loss of the singular unity takes place as a result of the attempt to see in every act, in every object of a given act, *not* a singular individual concretely involved, but a representative of a certain large and whole.
> What is answerable does not dissolve in what is specialized (politics), otherwise what we have is not an answerable deed, but a technical or instrumental action. (*ibid.*, pp. 52-57)

In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (p. 87), Bakhtin refuses the concept of truth, inherited from rationalism, as formed of general, universal moments, as repetitive and constant and as separate and set against the individual and the subjective. Vice versa, as says Bakhtin, the unity of real consciousness acting answerably must not be thought in terms of continuity, at the level of content, of principles, rights, the law, and even less so of being: a clear standpoint against all forms of dogmatic absolutism, including the ontological. No being or value is identical or autonomous, a constant principle, separate from the live act of its identification as such and such being or value.

> It is not the content of an obligation that obligates me, but my signature below it […] And what compelled me to sign at the moment of undersigning was not the content of the given performed act or deed. This content could not by itself, in isolation, have prompted me to perform the act or deed, but only in correlation with my decision to undertake an obligation. (ibid., p. 88)

As regards the critique of ontology (extensible to Heidegger's ontology) as an important moment in the Bakhtinian refounding of "first philosophy" as "moral philosophy", particularly significant is the following passage from *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*:

Participation in the being-event of the world in its entirety does not coincide, from our point of view, with irresponsilbe self-surrender to Being, with being-possessed by Being. What happens in the latter case is that the passive moment in my participation is moved to the fore, while my to-be-accomplished self-activity is reduced. The aspiration of Nietzsche's philosophy reduces to a considerable extent to this possessedness by Being (one-sided participation); its ultimate result is the absurdity of contemporary Dionysianism (p. 49).

In "K filosofii postupka" Bakhtin makes frequent use of the expression *bytie, sobytie, bytie-sobytie Bytie*, to exist, or existence, according to context: "to exist as event", "event within existence" (from German *Seins-geschehen*). The English translation by Liapunov (ed. by Holquist, Austin 1995) goes so far as to translate *bytie* as *Being*, written with a capital. The shadow of Heidegger! And this in spite of the fact that in the passage quoted above, we find a a critique *ante litteram* to an Heidegger-type ontology.

My "non-alibi in existing" involves my uniqueness and irreplaceable involvement. It transforms void possibility into an answerable real performative act (or deed); it confers actual validity and sense to all meanings and values which would otherwise be abstract. "It gives a face" to the event which is otherwise anonymous. Because of "non-alibi" in existing, neither objective nor subjective reason exists. Each one of us is right in his/her own place and is right not subjectively but answerably, without the possibility of his/her praxis interpreted as "contradiction" if not for a third, non incarnated, non participative consciousness and in the perspective of abstract, non-dialogic dialectics, that is, of a pseudo-dialectics which Bakhtin explicitly calls into question in "From Notes Made in 1970-71".

A key-word in Bakhtin's philosophy of the act is *Edinstivennyj*, singular, unique, incomparable, *sui generis*, equivalent to German *einzig*. We find *einzig* in the title of Max Stirner's work, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (1844). But Bakhtin, unlike Stirner's selfish, egoist individual, refers to a personal oneness, a personal singularness, open to the relation of otherness with itself and with others, a singleness connected to the life of the whole universe and contains in its finiteness the sense of infinite. *Edinstivennyj*, singular, unique, in some respects evokes Soeren Kierkegaard's "singular individual", an author familiar to Bakhtin, even before the translation of his works in Russian (as Bakhtin himself says in his conversation of 1973 with Duvakin, noting "an incredible similarity" of ideas between Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky (It. trans. 2008, p. 115).

"Non-alibi in being" relates to the other, and not in terms of indifference with a generic other, both as examples of mankind in general, but as concrete involvement, a relationship of

unindifference with the life of one's neighbour, one's contemporary, with the past and future of real persons.

An abstract truth referred to mankind in general, such as "man is mortal", acquires sense and value, says Bakhtin, only from my unique place, as the death of my neighbour, my own death, as the death of an entire community, or as the possibility of elimination of the whole of historically real humanity.

> And, of course, the emotional-volitional, valuative sense of my death, of the death of an other who is dear to me, and the fact of any actual person's death are all profoundly different in each case, for all these are different moments in once-occurent Being-as-event. For a disembodied, detached (non-participating) *subiectum*, all deaths may be equal. No one, however, lives in a world in which all human beings are - with respect to value - equally mortal. (p. 48)

Bakhtin insists particularly on the inevitability of involvement with the other – with the concrete other, and not with an abstract other self,– implied by being answerably participative in the world from the uniqueness of one's own place. To be answerably participative is also apprehension for the other, who obliges me answerably; answerability of the act, of the deed is above all answerability for the other, and my uniqueness is the impossibility to abdicate such answerability, not being replaceable in it.

One may also attempt to escape from this kind of non-alibi answerability. But even attempts at unburdening oneself testify to its weight and inevitable presence. All given roles, with their given, special answerability, do not abolish my personal answerability, says Bakhtin, that is, my answerability without limits and guarantees, without an alibi. Detached from absolute answerability, special answerability loses sense, it becomes technical answerability, and having become mere representation of a role, action, technical performance, as "technical activity" it is de-realized and becomes illusion. With respect to the decision, to respect to the step, to the concrete act of its assumption, all given meaning, all ought, all that which is aesthetically, scientifically, morally significant, says Bakhtin citing Husserl, has only a technical value because it is indifferent to the answerable act of the single individual. Particularly important are Bakhtin's considerations on the autonomy of what is technologically valid, governed by its own immanent laws, acquiring a value of its own, as well as power and dominion over the life and praxis of the single individual, once it has lost its connection to the live uniqueness of the answerable act:

> All that which is technological – says Bakhtin – when divorced from the once live unity of life and surrendered to the will of the law immanent to its development, is

frightening; it may from time to time irrupt into this once-occurent unity as an irresponsibly destructive and terrifying force. (p. 7)

Bakhtin insists particularly on the alien character of the singularity of life as "answerable, risk-fraught, and open becoming" (p. 9) with regard to the world of the constructions by theoretical consciousness with its abstract *being*, "lightened" of historical existence, determined as something unique and never-repeatable. The latter presents an absolute estrangement with respect to the world as the object of knowledge in which everything finds a justification except for the singularity of the existential position and of the respective answering act. Theoretical reason "is indifferent to the central fact – central for me –" (p. 9) of my unique and actual answerability.

And although the "unity-uniqueness" of my life-act remains alien to the indifferent theoretical consciousness, such unity-uniqueness is the foundation of the latter "insofar as the act of cognition as my deed is included, along with all its content, in the unity of its answerability, in which and by virtue of which I actually live - perform deeds" (p. 12). Therefore, says Bakhtin,

> Once-occurent uniqueness or singularity cannot be thought of, it can only be participatively experienced or lived through. All of theoretical reason in its entirety is only a moment of practical reason, i.e., the reason of the unique *subiectum*'s moral orientation within the event of once-occurent existing. (p. 13)

Bakhtin's assertion that theoretical reason is part of practical reason should not lead us to believe that he was a follower of Kantianism. Moral philosophy or "first philosophy" as he sometimes calls it, which should concentrate on describing the Being-as-event as known by answerable action; the question of answerable action cannot avail itself of the Kantian conception or of the Neo-Kantian revival even if they do consider the moral problem to be particularly important. Bakhtin accuses the formal ethics of Kant and the Kantians of theoreticism, that is, of "abstracting from my unique self": there is no approach to a living act performed in the real world (p. 27).

The philosophy of the answerable act, says Bakhtin, can only be the phenomenology, the participative description, of this world of action, assuming it not as contemplated or theoretically thought out from the outside, but rather from the inside in its answerability. Though connected with Husserl's phenomenology, the approach just described is substantially different, given that it proposes the otherness relationship centered on "moral answerability" as against the *noesis-noema*, subject-object relationship. From this point of

view Bakhtin's attitude toward Husserl's phenomenology is similar to that adopted by Emmanuel Lévinas (cf. Ponzio 1992, 1994, 1995).

The indifference of theoreticism is superseded by all that referred to by the *unindifference* of being participative in the world uniquely, never-repeatably and unreplaceably, by "*my non-alibi in existing*". As regards this situation of unindifference – which does not ensue from a theoretical admission but which is the condition of my interest, desire, cognition, action, in which my uniqueness is simultaneously already given and actively set by myself, in which I am passive and active, determined and answerable – both dogmatism and generic hypotheticism; absolute determinism and the abstract conception of freedom as void possibility; objectivism and all forms of subjectivism and psychologism; void rationalism and the irrationalism complementary to it, are all superseded.

Language itself lives in relation to participative thought and to action, and the word which is not an abstract word from the dictionary, nor subjectively casual, becomes a live and "answerably-significant" word in relation to them. We already have clearly expressed considerations on language in this early paper which were also developed in Bakhtin's subsequent books, in the two volumes by Voloshinov and in articles by the latter (cf. Voloshinov 1980). It is in relation to the uniqueness of action that the word, as Bakhtin says, manifests itself in its fullness, not only in terms of *content-sense*, but also as *expression-image*, and from an emotional-volitional viewpoint as *intonation*. Unindifference deriving from the connection with answerable action orients words and makes possible the comprehension of objects, their living experience: to speak of an object means to enter an interested, unindifferent relationship with it, so that the uttered word cannot avoid being intonated. But all that is experienced is intonated and even the most abstract thought, insofar as it is concretely thought, has a volitional-emotional tone, and if an essential tie were not established between content and its emotional tone, which constitutes its actual value, a given word would not be uttered, a given thought would not be thought, a given object would not enter living experience.

In the part entitled "I" following the introduction to *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin starts from the question whether or not it is possible to understand and describe the axiological, spatial-temporal concrete architectonic whole arranged around a unique participative and unindifferent center, the center of value represented by each one of us in our non-alibi answerability.

Such architectonics could not be understood if actualized by the same subject around which it is organized, if belonging to the same self and therefore to the discourse of the "confession" genre or of any other genre of direct discourse which as such is incapable of developing a global vision. Nor is comprehension possible from a cognitive point of view, which is neither emotionally nor valuatively participative; which from an objective, indifferent point of view is incapable of *comprehending* what it describes and which, therefore, would end by impoverishing the latter and losing sight of the details which render it living and unfinalizable. Nor can it be based on empathy which would also be, if this were possible, an impoverishment insofar as it would reduce the relationship between two mutually external and non interchangeable positions to a single vision.

According to Bakhtin interpretation-comprehension architectonics presupposes the other, both different and unindifferent, but reciprocally participative. Consequently there are two value-centers, myself and the other, the two value-centers of life itself around which the architectonics of answerable action is organized and arranged. And these two centers of value must remain reciprocally other, the architectonic relationship among two others must remain from a spatial-temporal and axiological viewpoint, and the viewpoint of the I must not dominate.

In *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, Bakhtin detects this possibility of understanding and describing this architectonics in art, specifically, in verbal art, in literature, which is organized around the center of value represented by the single human being in its uniqueness.

Bakhtin finds that the comprehension of architectonics he intends to analyse is realized in literature, in verbal art: here we find the otherness of a value center of an individual architectonics considered from a transgredient, extralocalized, exotopic point of view, which in turn is unique and other. This is the author/hero relationship in the sphere of the literary text.

For to assume artistic value, the author's unitary gaze must evidence the hero's otherness and his extra-artistic values. Therefore tt must begin from a position of extralocality – in space, time and sense – as regards the hero, specially if autobiographical. Differently, as in the case of autobiography, the author's unitary action takes on confessional tones devoid of artistic value. In all this we already find clear signs of Bakhtin's critique of Russian formalism which is systematically developed by Medvedev in *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928).

In the part entitled "I" of *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, "Fragment from the first chapter of 'Author and Hero'" Bakhtin analyses a poem by Pushkin, *Razluka* (*Dipartita, Departure*, 1830) in his effort to clarify the architectonic layout of the aesthetic vision.

Subsequently, Bakhtin focussed on the relationship between "author and hero in aesthetic activity" producing a long paper by the same title in which the first chapter, as mentioned above, begins with an analysis of the same poem, developing considerations which had already been made in the final part of the fragment at our disposal. This is particularly interesting to the end of understanding Bakhtin's research itinerary. Having identified an example of the type of architectonics he wished to analyse in the viewpoint of literature, Bakhtin ended up focussing on this viewpoint to the extent that what was only intended to be an example held his attention for the rest of his life.

Another important point is that Bakhtin initially approached the aesthetic vision through the lyrical genre where he originally identified the relationship of dialogic otherness among different points of view – in the case of Pushkin's poetry the dialogic dialectic between the author's context and that of the two protagonists, the author-hero and the heroin. This undermines both the mistaken interpretation which accuses Bakhtin of having been unattentive toward the lyric genre; and of his conception of the *degree* of dialogicality relative to the diverse genres – and always present in the artistic word – interpreted as perspecting a rigid opposition among absolutely monological genres, such as lyric poetry, and dialogical genres, specially the novel in its "polyphonic" version (as identified by Bakhtin in the works of Dostoevsky).

Bakhtin notes the difference between the beginning of the Pushkin's poem in the final version and the beginning in the first version.

Final version: *Bound for the shores of your distant homeland / You were leaving this foreign land…*There are two voices, two viewpoints; "I" (the author-hero) and "you" (the heroine).

First version: *Bound for the shores of a distant foreign land / you were leaving your homeland…* There is only one voice, one viewpoint, that is the voice and the viewpoint of the "I", the author-hero.

In the final version in the beginning as well as throughout the whole poem all of the concrete moments are concentrated around two centers of value, the author-hero, that is, the "I" of the remembrance, of the narration, and the heroine with her emotional-volitional tone. In the beginning of the first version both the foreign land (Italy) and the homeland (Russia)

are presented only in the valuative context and in the emotional-volitional tone of the author-hero, of the "I". Consequently, Pushkin feels in the verses of the first version the lack of poetic value and rectifies them. In fact, as he says, the world correlated to myself, to "I", on principle can't enter aesthetical architectonics. To contemplate aesthetically is to refer to the valuative viewpoint of the other.

Bakhtin develops and specifies such statements in "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity":

> My own axiological relationship to myself is completely unproductive aesthetically: for myself, I am aesthetically unreal. [...]. The organizing power in all aesthetic forms is the axiological category of the *other*, the relationship to the other, enriched by an axiological "excess" of seeing for the purpose of achieving a transgredient consummation. (Bakhtin 1920-23, in Bakhtin 1979, Eng.: 188-189)

The comprehension and description of uniqueness and irreducible otherness of the existing individual do not call for a direct, objective vision of the "I", of the subject, but an indirect and objectified viewpoint of "other", as developed in literary writing.

In Bakhtin's text on the philosophy of the answerable act we find the premises that were to guide him through the whole course of his research. This text sheds light on the itinerary which led him to his 1929 monograph on Dostoevsky. We understand the sense of Bakhtin's declaration, in the second edition of *Dostoevsky*, that his analysis of the concrete life of the word, through Dostoevsky's work, is not linguistic: it belongs rather to "metalinguistics". The living dynamic reality of language cannot be understood through an approach to linguistics that abstracts from the internal dialogicality of the concretely oriented and specifically intonated word.

As Bakhtin demonstrates in a paper of 1952-53, "The Problem of Speech Genres", discourse genres may be divided into *primary* or *simple genres,* that is, the genres of everyday dialogue, and *secondary* or *complex* genres, that is, literary genres which represent and objectify everyday, ordinary, objective dialogical exchange. As a component of secondary genres, the dialogue of primary genres becomes represented dialogue thereby losing its direct link with the real context of everyday life and its aims, therefore its instrumentality and functionality. The word *leaves its monological context* in which it is determined with respect to its object and the other words forming its context, and enters the context of the word that represents it, the complex verbal interaction with the author who objectifies and pictures it in the form of indirect, direct and free indirect discourse and their variants (discussed in part three of the Voloshinov book of 1929, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*).

Bakhtin maintains that the complexity of dialogue may be studied through the represented word and its internal dialogization, present in the secondary discourse genres of literature – specially the novel –, which evidence aspects of dialogue not revealed by primary, simple, direct, objective discourse genres. Such a study is particularly interesting, as Bakhtin 1952-53 maintains, when the object of analysis is the *utterance* considered as the *cell of dialogic exchange*, and not the *sentence* or *proposition*, the cell of *the system of language.*

Says Baktin:

> A one-sided orientation toward primary genres inevitably leads to a vulgarization of the entire problem (behaviorist linguistics is an extreme example). The very interrelations between primary and secondary genres and the process of the historical formation of the latter shed light on the nature of the utterance (and above all on the complex problem of the interrelations among language, ideology, and world view). (Bakhtin 1952-53, Eng. trans. 62)

According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky's "philosophy" is not to be identified in the specific conceptions and standpoints of the heroes in his novels or of specific contents. He calls this mistaken interpretation "Dostoevskyvism". Rather, Bakhtin finds traces of his architectonics in the overall structure of Dostoevsky's works which he describes as organized according to the principle of dialogicality, which is what Bakhtin was alluding to when he says, "To affirm someone else's 'I' not as an object but as another subject – this is the principle governing Dostoevsky's worldview" (Bakhtin 1963, Eng. trans.: 10). Dostoevsky's "polyphonic novel" describes the character no longer as an "I", as an object, but as a center that is "other" forming the perspective according to which his world is organized.

> Dostoevsky carried out, as it were, a small-scale Copernican revolution when he took what had been a firm and finalizing authorial definition and turned it into an aspect of the hero's self-definition. [...] Not without reason does Dostoevsky force Makar Devushkin to read Gogol's "Overcoat" and to take it as a story about himself [...]
> Devushin had glimpsed himself in the image of the hero of "The Overcoat," which is to say, as something totally quantified, measured, and defined to the last detail: all of you is here, there is nothing more in you, and nothing more to be said about you. He felt himself to be hopelessly predetermined and finished off, as if he were already quite dead, yet at the same time he sensed the falseness of such an approach. [...]
> The serious and deeper meaning of this revolt might be expressed this way: a living human being cannot be turned into the voiceless object of some secondhand, finalizing cognitive process. *In a human being there is always something that only he himself can reveal; in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse; something that does not submit to an externalizing secondhand definition.* [...]

The genuine life of the personality is made available only through a dialogic penetration of that personality, during which it freely and reciprocally reveals itself. (Bakhtin 1963, Eng. trans.: 49-59)

This is the itinerary followed by Bakhtin from his early works. Furthermore, thanks to Bakhtin's initial interest in the philosophy of answerable act, this research itinerary coherently develops into an interest in the philosophy of literature, where *of literature* is a subject genitive: not a philosophical vision to which literature must be subjected, but a philosophical vision which literature, verbal art, make possible.

If we now examine Bakhtin's last paper, "Toward a Methodology of the Human Sciences" (in Bakhtin 1979), written in 1974, we soon discover a surprising insistence on the same issue proposed at the beginning of his research. The material forming this paper was mainly written toward the end of the 1930s or beginning of the 1940s, and returns to the problem of the impossibility of applying categories proper to the subject-object relationship to the human world. When dealing with human expression, the criterion of knowledge is neither the "exactness", nor philosophical "rigorousness", in the Husserlian sense, but the "profoundness of answering comprehension".

The center of values in the world of aesthetic seeing is not the man in general, the man in its abstraction and in relation to abstract values as good and evil, but a concrete human being, a concrete individual, a mortal human being. All spatial and temporal moments as well as all values such as good and evil, beauty and ugliness, truth and falsehood, become concrete moments only when they are correlated with concrete values in the architectonics of the concrete individual as a mortal human. In the aesthetic chronotope all spatial and temporal relations are correlated with man and only in relation to him do they acquire valuational meaning: "high", "far", "above", "below", "abyss", "infinity", boundlessness". All these expressions reflect life and the tenseness of a mortal human individual: in the horizon and in the environment of mortal man space gains body, time possesses depth and weight (cf. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, p. 64-65).

Moreover, according to Bakhtin, the centre of value in the architectonic of the aesthetic vision is not man as something self-identical, but "as a lovingly affirmed concrete actuality" (T.Ph.A,, p. 63). All constituent moments of the architectonic of aesthetic are encompassed by an all-accepting loving affirmation of the human being. In this sense the relation of the author, and consequently of the reader, to his hero is "an uninterested interest", an uninterested participation. Says Bakhtin:

In this sense one could speak of objective aesthetic love (but not in a passive psychological sense) as the principle of aesthetic seeing. A variety of human values can present itself only to a loving contemplation. […] Only un-self-interested love on the principle of "I love him not because he is good, but he is good because I love him", only lovingly interested attention, is capable of generating a sufficiently intent power and encompass and retain the concrete manifoldness of existing, without impoverishing and schematizing it. (*ibid.*, p. 64)

On the contrary, an indifferent, loveless, or hostile reaction is always a reaction that impoverishes, breaks, ignores, neglects. The biological function itself of indifference consists in diverting from what is inessential for one's own needs: a kind of economy or preservation. And this too is the function of oblivion. In conclusion, says Bakhtin,

Only love is capable of being aesthetically productive, only in correlation with the loved is fullness of the manifold possible. (*ibidem*)

Thus what does responsive comprehension consist of in life, in the architectonics of life, in its chronotope, that is, responsive comprehension with respect to what we have experienced and understood in art, in its architectonics, in its chronotope, so that everything we have experienced and understood does not remain ineffectual in life? Bakhtin's answer throughout all his work is: responsive comprehension consists in recognizing, in appreciating disinterestedly the value of the other, and in listening to him, to his distinctive, peculiar word, in everyday life, in all kinds of daily praxis.

Translation from Italian by Susan Petrilli

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