

Bakhtin – a Personal Memoir / Bakhtin - uma memória pessoal

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ABSTRACT

This text recalls and comments, from a personal perspective, on Mikhail Bakhtin's impact on the Brazilian academic scene during the modernization of language studies in the 1970s and 1980s, when "Russian formalism" was revived as a research line, in the wake of Linguistics rising to a cutting-edge science, in waves of predominantly French theoretical immigration. Within this panorama, the essay looks back on the two main focuses of Bakhtin's work – the thematic-literary and the strictly linguistic – highlighting the permanence and vitality of his thought in forming a theory of the novel. Finally, the text covers a brief reflection on the contemporary sense of literary sensibility, from the multiplicity of the voices that constitute the fabric of literature in the Bakhtinian perspective.

KEYWORDS: Dialogism; Polyphony; Prose and poetry; Literary sensibility

RESUMO

O texto relembra e comenta, numa perspectiva pessoal, o impacto da descoberta de Mikhail Bakhtin no ambiente acadêmico brasileiro de modernização dos estudos da linguagem nas décadas de 1970 e 1980, quando retomavam-se as linhas de pesquisa do chamado "formalismo russo", na esteira de uma ascensão da Linguística como ciência de ponta, em ondas de imigração teórica preponderantemente francesas. Neste panorama, o ensaio relembra os dois focos principais da obra de Bakhtin, o temático-literário e o estritamente linguístico, e destaca a permanência e vitalidade de seu pensamento na formulação de uma teoria do romance. Ao final, o texto faz uma breve reflexão sobre o sentido contemporâneo da sensibilidade literária, a partir da multiplicidade das vozes que constituem o tecido da literatura na perspectiva bakhtiniana.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Dialogismo; Polifonia; Prosa e poesia; Sensibilidade literária

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I have been away from the University for over ten years, having decided to leave academic life behind and dedicate myself to the writing of literary fiction.¹ Therefore, the reader will not, by a long shot, be presented with a scholar up-to-date on the theme. And informational updating is crucial, especially in the case of Mikhail Bakhtin, and even more so in this distant Brazilian space, during a time – when I came into contact with his work – in which almost every reference to him was indirect. This regards an author who, shrouded in dense biographical shadows, had spent an entire life under Soviet censorship, becoming a well-known and important international reference, only in the last decades of the 20th century, after his death.

There are so many meanderings comprising the consolidation of his bibliography, that each new information about him is precious, while his theoretical and philosophical presuppositions continue alive and relevant to our times. In light of this, certainly the most prudent thing to do would be to decline the invitation, for declared incompetence. But as the reading of Bakhtin, even in the distant 80s, was fundamental in my academic development, and ended up illuminating obscure or, then, purely intuitive aspects, in my works of fiction, and as I continue maintaining an affinity with his theory that is both intellectual and affectionate, I accepted, risking disaster, purely for the pleasure of talking about Bakhtin. Everything that refers to Bakhtin interests me. That flame of interest, which, four decades ago, triggered a type of “Eureka” in my collegiate mind, continues aflame. This little personal epiphany is what I would like to write about.

What was this click, in the mind of that beginning writer and academic? Contextualizing the moment is necessary. As good readers of Bakhtin know, theories don't fall out of anywhere and into our heads, and our minds are never a blank slate ready to receive, in a state of purity, the words of the world. The living word is always a contaminated and undomesticated animal. Thus, as the 70s and 80s unfolded, the Brazilian academic horizon, in the field of Letters, riding the sway of modernization in linguistic studies, was positively immersing itself in formal theories of language, those

¹ In this sense, I would like to especially thank the honorable and generous invitation to participate in this International Colloquium, commemorating 90 years of Mikhail Bakhtin's classical work that, centered on the search for a definition of Dostoevsky's literature, ended up transforming and in a good measure revolutionizing the perception of the novel as a genre and compositional form. I say generous because, to my great pleasure, the invitation was made to the writer, and not the academic, which, technically, I am no longer.

largely based on the structuralist presuppositions of great prestige, within a broad confluence of many different branches.

Remembering two of them, ultimately determinant, is enough. The first came from the strong and consistent rebirth of the theories of language and literature that, as disparate and contradictory as they may have been, were routinely defined under the all-encompassing title of “Russian Formalism.” This extraordinary set of theoretical works, which were primarily concentrated in Russia in less than two decades, turned the parameters of literary studies upside-down, while simultaneously advancing – here the second branch – the also spectacular ascension of Linguistics, narrowly recognized as a cutting-edge science, with profound consequences in the entire network of disciplines in the human sciences that had words, and their derivatives, as objects of analysis. Synthesizing simply, we can say that the 20th century discovered, reiterating Wittgenstein’s aphorism, that the limits of the world are the limits of language. If we want to know what reality is, we begin by trying to understand the language trying to define it.

The funny thing is, this formal-rationalizing wave among us, by reflex, went on to dominate the substantial part of Language and Literature studies of the period, which summed up constitutes the beginning of the 1970s, but encountering a cultural global context that seemed to push precisely in the opposite direction, or to the contrary epistemically. Let me better explain this intuition: it is as if the new theoretical-scientific rationality that moved the pioneers from the beginning of the 20th century, found, 50 years later, a scene that was moving in the opposite direction.

This is because the 1960s and 70s were an era of liberating irrationalism, if we can represent them metaphorically. The distrust in big systems exploded at that moment, practically on every ground: political, religious, existential, and, also on the very ground of science. “Deconstruct” – that which was considered apparently solid up front – became the rule. The concept of magic, or the cult of imprecision, seemed to lose its amateur (or even charlatan) character, to which modern science had relegated theoretical impressionism, and went on to gain a certain transcendental status, at times vaguely poetic. The theory gained the strength of the existential performance, at times merging with it, and oftentimes surrounded in a stimulating aura of cannabis, mescaline, or any other natural substances that opened our “doors of perception,” to use Aldous Huxley’s

classic expression. Classic and popular: remembering “The Doors,” the celebrated rock band, whose name was inspired by Huxley, an undeniable intellectual. This image – the doors of perception – is a powerful sign of the era.

We can say then, in this culture shock, whose consequences we feel to this day, the libertarian and indeterminate impulses of existence struggled against the dry determination of the theoretical essences, if I may indulge in the infamous pun on the existentialist principle. In political philosophy, the desire for deconstruction reencountered the explosive demons of Dostoevsky. In literature, there was an emergence, via post-modernity, of a certain “narrative cynicism” that sought to implode the very idea that a narrative, with a stable axis of value of reference from which the chaos of the world would gain some meaning, could be possible or at least even desirable. For a good time, writers wrote to warn readers that writing was a lie, thereby giving them a good lesson.

Well then, I make this gross simplification on looking back because in my personal story, here comes an anecdotal confession, I lived out this conflicting landscape intensely. My adolescent project to become a writer was immersed in libertarian anarchy, perfectly in accordance with the existential protocol typical of those years. After all, I became an adult during the 60s. But, when the dream died – as John Lennon prophesied --, and my utopian and communitarian projects ran aground, there I went, defeated, to study Letters, already late in life, in search of a job, employment, a practical way of surviving.

And, unruly as I was in class, in the Literature classes, at first sight, I encountered everything I hated: structural analysis of the narrative, categorical equations, Gremasian trigonometry, the bible of the first Todorov, skeletal summaries of narrative agents agonizingly reductive, machines of meaning, Lacanian semantic parallels, a complicated set of formal imperatives, and theoretical corridors that could be reduced to one primordial concept: *extract, as irrelevant, anything from the text that is not literature, and then you will arrive at the essence of the aesthetic object.*

And what isn't literature? What about Psychology, Philosophy, Religion, etc. These are thematic questions that speak to their respective sciences, not to literature. After all, had they not already said that a poem is made of words, not ideas? That was the idea, so to speak. The rest is rhetoric, and, therefore, useless. Thus, seen from here, in a rough

simplification, all of that was nothing more, nothing less, than hardcore, radical “Russian Formalism,” if it were possible to reduce that extraordinary movement to a crude synthesis. As if the 1970s, completely enthralled, had rediscovered the 1920s, and decided to hang out there.

Remember what I said initially: this is a mere anecdotal retrospective of a personal experience. I hated all that, in fact, but I truly did not have any cultural repertoire to counter what I read and studied. The only authority I had was from “personal feelings” and, as a good child of the 60s, I just *felt* that that type of theorizing about literature had nothing to do with what I imagined literature was or should be – and I *felt*, along with the active part of my generation, that that seemed to be a sufficient category, and even necessary to explain, and to move the world. It was difficult to separate the gaze of the writer from the gaze of the analyst – which, in fact, is never easy, on any terrain.

What sounded especially strange to me was the abyss I sensed existed between Linguistics and Literature, without, meanwhile, being able to formulate the nature of this chasm. With my formal admission into the Letters undergraduate course, the introduction to Linguistics was a true theoretical revolution for me, through the hands of my mentor Carlos Alberto Faraco. Actually, an epistemological revolution, before I even knew the implications of the meanings of this word. Through the basic study of linguistic concepts, that little wild one, immersed in the existential, transcendental utopias of his time, arrived at some perception of the structure of language, though elementary, a place I would never have arrived on my own if I had tried to move ahead with the self-taught agenda of the times.

That is, contrary to the intuition of common sense, I understood the basics – language is not an obvious object of study, something about which we all know for the simple fact that we all know how to speak and understand our language. If language is a “natural” phenomenon, what we say about it never is. That was the first click that went off in my mind. In the hands of Linguistics, what came to me was a perception of the complications in the concept of science, or about what, in the end, comprises the scientific method.

If the method meanwhile seemed useful and crystalline enough to account for the phenomena of language, or at least put it on a track on which you could arrive at some consistent analytical place, its transposition, more or less mechanical, to the world of

literature created some very complicated problems of methodology, or presuppositions, which the stubborn mind of that novice writer saw itself incapable of solving. I sensed something was wrong, but had no theoretical scaffolding on which to pinpoint it.

The difficulty seemed to me especially true in the case of prose. If poetry, or the poetic structures, let's say, seem to obey the iron fist of formal reiterations more docilely, in its abstract descriptive method, prose seemed always too wily, too erratic, too diversified, to fit in the – employing the expression that, in the long run, seemed to be the shadow of the theoretical project, the secret butler of the crime – natural sciences. Russian formalism itself (always recognizing the generic expression encompasses a great number of disparate branches, often contradictory) found in prose, a complicated enemy to decipher. Within the structure reiterated by Vladimir Propp, in search of a universal narrative DNA, and, let's say, the celebrated concept of *estrangement* by Viktor Chklovski, there was an attempt to fit prosaic series in some formal domesticated model – then there were those who simply discarded prose altogether as an aesthetic genre, relegating it merely to the field of its thematic activity, as an expression of its journalism, history, psychology, etc., a technically hybrid and deformed monster without a place in authentic artistic classification.

The end game of this theoretical persecution, which seemed to recognize the aesthetic stature of prose solely insofar as it was capable of being read and deciphered as poetry, obeying its disciplinary parameters, was methodologically coherent – and, finally, came the nail on the head of the coffin, the decree that “the novel is dead.” This was a mantra frequently heard in the 1970s, and the following years. The novel was dead, period. It became a predominant idea, academically, that in the new universal poetics, prose, or the traditional forms of prose, would not have a place unless identified formally with poetry.²

Continuing my literary anamnesis: for a prose writer like myself, someone who put his creative projects in the form of novels, this death sentence rang with a particular sting. Of course, I'm talking about a cartoonish theoretical hypertrophy, a wee voice suffocated in the limits of the Brazilian province, but the feeling was real. There was

² I recognize that, within the brief scope of this essay, I am addressing the formal Linguistics that was at play. The “death of the novel” had other culprits and other heralds, so to speak, revolving around what can generically be called a crisis of realist representation, and consequently of what (also generically) would be defined as conceptual art. That is, critical categories, generated in the field of fine arts migrating, with a certain speculative ease, into the literary field.

something wrong there, which, however, I couldn't grasp. What seemed to be understood as the "novel" – I only formulated this later – was just the compositional form of the celebrated great novel of the 19th century, a type of technological model (the "technological" here is not exactly ironic, because in fact, there was an arrogant scientific obsession in the air) becoming obsolete; thus, just as shoemakers do not produce shoes with four clasps, writers must not produce more "novels." After all, aesthetic objects are (or were understood as) unilateral "objects," and not points of confluence of living and contradictory voices (but this occurred to me only later on).

That was when, with the 1980s underway, a xeroxed chapter of the French edition of Discourse in the Novel,³ by a certain Mikhail Bakhtin, fell into my hands. It was the second chapter of Discourse in the Novel, which today lauds a translation into Portuguese, directly from Russian, by Paulo Bezerra.⁴ As it were, I had just begun my Master's, and was looking for a theoretical foundation for dealing with the distinction between prose and poetry, since I had chosen a work of poetic prose by a Brazilian author as my object of study (APA, 1977; 1978).

That chapter, which I read and reread a thousand times, translating line by line, in my faulty French, and trying to familiarize myself with his style, vocabulary and theoretical presuppositions (which sounded far from the scholarly jargon to I was accustomed to), had a special impact on my mind, and ended up determining the entire direction of my academic career. There, in the first paragraphs, Bakhtin seemed to respond directly to my ignorant anxiety about the nature of the novel – the fact that literary language studies, up until then, had not had the capability of accounting for the specificity of the novel as a genre, or, more broadly, and in a certain revolutionary way, of *the novelistic discourse*, of the nature of artistic prose, in its many historical forms. That text, written in the 1930s, in some lost corner of the Soviet Union, seemed to respond directly to the theoretical questions still prevailing fifty years later.

What called my special attention was the fact that Bakhtin shifted the compositional question of genres from the *a priori* in which it was found, that is, the historical gaze of the genres as a set of compositional drawers, objective and stable, to a

³ BAKHTIN, M. Discourse in the Novel. In: BAKHTIN, M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin. Edited by Michael Holquist; translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981. pp.259-422.

⁴ For reference, see footnote 3.

moment *a posteriori* of the artistic process. In other words, – attempting to reproduce here what went through my mind during the reading – in the living and concrete language there is a preview and mandatory interaction of conflicting voices at play in the production of text and its literary meanings, whose relative nature, or, more precisely, whose network of hierarchical relationships, would define the compositional structure. In short, I perceived, through Bakhtin, that poetry and prose are not properly defined through their *compositional forms* (except didactically and classificatory), but through the nature of complex relations of intentionalities between the author, his or her object, and what is said about the object, the voices that already resound about the object when I lay down with it for it to add to my word.

The DNA of this initial perception was simply – keeping in mind that the then reader of Bakhtin was a young aspiring writer, and hardworking academic at the beginning of his career – in the fact that, in the poetic text in the strict sense (that is important; it is a very broad continuum, that goes, shall we say, from extreme prose to extreme poetry), the voice of the poet *adheres* to its words in an absolute and complete form; the poet signs below each word written. Signs him or herself, the poet him or herself; the poet always says declaring him or herself author of that spoken in the immediate sense of his or her voice. It's also worthy to note in this definition the idea of *isolation of the poetic word*, a visible isolating intentionality, or at least the impulse for isolation, which ends up being carried out concretely through composition: meter, music, verse, rhyme, vocabulary, everything in the poem appears as the determined expression in an effort to avoid being confused with common voices, or at least always using them for their own purposes.

Meanwhile, didactically reducing the question to a schema, we can say that the prose writer takes up the word with the other at their “place of speaking” (to use a contemporary expression), a place from where they speak that is purposefully displaced; the prose writer, heretically opposing one of the political dogmas of our times, abdicates his or her own place of speaking, creating a narrator, a type of narrative alibi – in fact, another author, who goes to the field to say what is said, leaving the voice of the actual author in the shadows. I feel that this *displacement principle* is one of the central axes of the vision of the Bakhtinian world. I will return to this point further on.

Thus, the compositional form would be before a formal result of a previous process, intrinsic to the production of meaning, and that could be defined phenomenologically by a question: *when writing, what do I do with the voice of the other?* It is a question every writer, prose or poet, asks before writing their first word, even if they don't consciously think about it. The voices of the others are already present in the word before it is written on the page: writing is establishing, from the first breath, some relationship with an intruding voice. It can be a complicit pact. Or war without truce. Or, once again, as everything in real life, a continuum of infinite gradations and nuances.

This brief epiphany of a little student – shall we say, to color that moment – reiterated the question of the novel on another level. Because, after all, that is what I was discovering in that random chapter by Bakhtin: the novel is not a closed literary genre as, say, a sonnet, or it isn't defined exclusively as a compositional form more or less delimited in time or space. In other words, no, the novel was not born one lovely morning on January 16th in 1605 by the name *Don Quijote*, and did not drop dead to its death on the 2nd of February in 1922 with the monumental *Ulysses*, by James Joyce, as if in this interval all of the technical resources available to construct that scientific-literary object called the “novel” were exhausted, an irritating encumbrance that classical theory is unable to fit neatly anywhere, as Bakhtin pointed out.

The novel is a language, or more precisely, an arena of languages, languages that – the detail is important – maintain some degree of their semantic and intonational autonomy, even after being handled by the intentional and stylistic hands of the narrator, they maintain their specificity, their “historical grammar” side by side with their original intentionality, so to speak. The compositional form that resulted from that would be, shall we say, its superficial appearance, its specific concretization in time and space, but not its genetic definition. The compositional form is the phenotype of the novel, or – it's necessary to change the very terminology here – novelistic language.

From this perspective, the history of literary prose gained another dimension. For example, the simple idea disseminated and popularized that the novel would be a natural evolution of the epic, a typical idea arising from a certain historical positivism, and of an optimistic and irreversible optimism, was turned on its head by Bakhtin. For him, the novel genre is precisely the ideological-formal destruction of the epic, and not its smooth “evolution” – in fact, the very idea of literary “evolution,” the idea that we always advance

in the direction of some future perfection, applied to literature, is strange, a Hegelianism delivered by forceps in the history of literary forms. As Bakhtin emphasizes, it is easier, verisimilar, and consistent, to find the origin of the novel in platonic prosaic dialogues rather than in Homer's epic verses.

Because, if you think about it, a work such as *Satyricon* from the beginning of the Christian era, is, largely, structurally as “modern novel” as *Don Quijote* itself (and in some moments, for its psycho-realistic traces, even more so, by anticipating forms of representation of intimacy that only became current from the 18th century on); and if the historical and cultural circumstances of the Roman Empire, plus the talent of Petronius, were able to produce it, the long medieval winter would forget it completely to advance in another direction, with reborn epic-religious hues. Because the arena of language is more or less autonomous, which is the discourse of the novel in Bakhtin's view, demands certain historical-social presuppositions to sustain it, among them the conflicting coexistence of distinct languages, the direct fruit of the processes of urban concentration, of the living multiplicity of contrasting values, of the social prestige of the written word, and of at least relative liberty.

The “Eureka” moment was, then, perceiving that the idea that the novel was dead was a theoretical error of mistaken origin, or even just an arrogant *outburst*. Because there were two other Bakhtins, besides the literary theorist, intertwined and inseparable from this first, forming that door through which I dove into his texts. One of these others, a fundamental one, was the linguist. To substantially define the novel as an arena of battling languages and not as someone's singular voice who defines the world solely on their own terms (as classical poetry tends to view prose), Bakhtin relies on a concept of language that, necessarily, transcends the structural limits of linguistic science. He could not keep from going ahead of the linguistic schema, because, after all, literature is not a fact of nature, an immobile reality, recurring and closed, determined by gods, but a shifting and fabricated fact of human culture.

To try to encounter the Holy Grail of “literariness” solely in the neutral compositional forms, leaving the so-called contents to their respective fields of study, is to drain literature of what it in fact has that is literary, leaving us gripping a linguistic

skeleton, more or less. Just as in *Freudianism*⁵ Vološinov would complain about Freud; the fact that he elaborated a psychoanalytic theory entirely based on language without, however, making a theory of language explicit, which Bakhtin would remind us is what formalism had just done to literature.

The other Bakhtinian dimension is the philosophical one, but this I only perceived much later on, and in a subsidiary way, because Philosophy is not my central field of study, although without its shadow it would be difficult to think with any clarity about any area of knowledge related to natural language. The Bakhtinian immersion continued systematically from that eye-opening chapter. My next reading was, precisely, *The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*,⁶ the 1981 edition, with the green cover, lauding a translation directly from Russian by Paulo Bezerra.⁷ The set of references was growing. Almost at the same time, other references arrived in Brazil – *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*,⁸ by Vološinov (whose authorship, however, was attributed to Bakhtin), translated from Russian into a French version, and later on, *Aesthetics of Verbal creation*,⁹ also an indirect translation, which currently lauds a translation into Portuguese directly from Russian by Paulo Bezerra (BAKHTIN, 2003). From this volume, the text “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” was another watershed moment in my reading life. In fact, I consider it a truly monumental work about the nature of the novel; among other reasons, and it is worthy to note, because it is much more than simply a theory of the language of the novel.

My entire academic life revolved around those works, and some of their fundamental concepts. Many of them certainly refracted and transformed *Bakhtinianishly*, so to speak, in my mind, as always happens in the process of theoretical, cultural, and intellectual assimilation. In my efforts to understand Bakhtin, there were

⁵ VOLOŠINOV, V. *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*. Translated by I.R. Titunik. New York: Academic Press, 1976.

⁶ BAKHTIN, M. *The Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*. Translated by Caryl Emerson. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

⁷ BAKHTIN, M. *Problemas da poética de Dostoiévski*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Forense-Universitária, 1981.

⁸ VOLOŠINOV, V. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Translated by Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1986.

⁹ TN: Some of the essays in *Estetika slovesnogo tvorchestviya* (Aesthetics of verbal creativity) published in Moscow in 1979, were translated into English and collected in the following editions – the text mentioned here is from the third collection: 1) for reference see footnote 4; 2) BAKHTIN, M. *Speech Genres and other late essays*. Translated by Vern M. McGee. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986. 3) BAKHTIN, M. *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity*. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin. Edited by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov; translated by Vadim Liapunov. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990. pp.4-256.

many historical variables at play during those years, especially in Brazil, each one of which with some degree of orthodoxy, but three especially stand out.

On the political scene, Marxism shimmered – at what point or to what degree was Bakhtin’s gaze “Marxist”? For a Brazilian academic in the 1980s (or even today, and who knows perhaps always), it was a crucial question at times that could glorify it or demonize it with the same intensity. And inside the immense, and diverse, Marxist cathedral, at what point was it, let’s say, “Soviet,” orthodox, dissident etc.? The restless shadows of Vološinov and Medvedev were there, always present, in search of a response. (We must remember that the manuscript of *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (1993), his first work, which addresses again this question philosophically in other terms, would only be discovered last in his turbulent bibliographic history).¹⁰

On the strictly literary or linguistic side, in what measure would Bakhtin be considered just another “Russian formalist”? What’s funny is that, in various moments, this accusation served as much to minimize his supposed originality (well, he just reproduces typical concepts of formalism!), as to reinforce his importance, giving him the dimension and the prestige of a consecrated theoretical movement (at the very moment his supposed heresies are being erased). The fact that Bakhtin himself, or Medvedev, effecting the same points of view, at times with the same phrases, vocabulary and even argumentative structure, to be the author of the text that demolish the formalist philosophical presuppositions was not saying much, when Trotsky himself had condemned formalism to the underworld, and thus it would be necessary to read between the historical lines, always highly relevant in the Soviet context. There is a delicate ethical question at play when you know that the formalist movement entered into political disgrace, which was often literally deadly under those circumstances.

And, after all, Bakhtin’s philosophical-theoretical rigor did not have anything schematic or “phamphleteeringish” (with the exception at times in the first chapter of the book, destined for the gaze of the censor in the Stalin period) and there were those who see in him, yes, a very rigorous formalist, who gives to the movement itself a

¹⁰ My first contact with this work was the American edition of 1993 – *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Translation and Notes by Vadim Liapunov. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993. In partnership with Carlos Alberto Faraco, I did a translation of the book for my personal use when I began my doctorate (under the supervision of my mentor João Roberto Faria), in 1998. The doctoral dissertation was published under the title *Entre a prosa e a poesia – Bakhtin e o formalismo russo*. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 2003. TN: title in English: *Between prose and poetry – Bakhtin and Russian formalism*.

methodological and philosophical consistency of what his most famous defenders lacked. In any case, this would always be a point of tension: keeping the given historical proportions, in the same way being a formalist in the 1930s soviet union, was to be an anti-formalist in the 70s and 80s in the west, was not an academically comfortable position (even though, it's worth remembering, fortunately nobody in the 70s and 80s was gunned down for that, which is a substantial difference).

Finally, there is a mystic Bakhtin, an orthodox Christian in the best and deepest Russian tradition, which perhaps was the interpretation that most surprised me from everything I'd read about him. But this theme, which most probably is related to Dostoevsky's central role in the creation of his critical categories, and with the ethical sense, and eventually religious, of what dialogism and polyphony mean in his world view, is very much beyond my critical repertoire, and my knowledge of the Russian roots of his thought, and so I merely make the reference as a point to ponder and study.

In closing this brief Bakhtinian memoir, I am reminded that just today I read, always with pleasure, relying on the new translations directly from Russian that Paulo Bezerra and other great translators have been presenting us, less as an academic – which, as I said, I am no longer – but entirely as a common reader, this ever rarer bird. And on the occasion of the 90 years of his masterpiece on the literature of Dostoevsky, which continues very much alive to challenge us, I wanted to briefly reflect on the contemporary sense of what I call intuitively, literary sensibility, and which I consider one of the conditions of humanity.

In short, what does literary fiction, understood as a very particular mode of perception, recognition and representation of the things of life and the world, what does this strange language that, as Bakhtin teaches us, appropriates all living languages of social life, but is not narrowly confused with any one of them, have to teach us? Perhaps that central point is in the extraordinary category created by Bakhtin in his work about the author and the hero: which he calls “exceeding aesthetic vision,” the fact that the narrator knows more than his characters, is always ahead of them. This literary category, however, is not specifically literary, in the mere instrumental sense of the term, as, let's say, in the concepts of plot, suspense, protagonism or antagonism – he derives directly from the real limits of our apprehension of reality. Citing Paulo Bezerra's translation from the chapter on the spatial form of the character, “When I contemplate a whole human

being who is situated outside and over against me, our concrete, actually experienced horizons do not coincide.”¹¹

But it is no intensely active coincidence: my words, before being offered up, internalize the image and the intentionality of the other, and need them, even if they are just shadows, to remain standing, and to be carried out. Thus, the intrinsically dialogical nature of language – a definition that is in the originally narrow field of language theory – in the hands of Bakhtin becomes a type of Archimedes’ lever, in understanding the nature of literature, a measuring tape from which the different historical manifestations of literature, and their specific compositional forms gain an original and productive hermeneutics.

In my view, this was the principle that moved his revolutionary approach to the work of Dostoevsky, and from it, Bakhtin created the concept of novelistic polyphony; it was, equally, the principle that generated his concept of carnivalization in his understanding of Rabelais’ work. Polyphony and carnivalization are not, however, instrumental critical creations that function as reiterative frames that can be applied to strict compositional forms, which is what they ended up becoming through their inevitable didactic popularization; they are, yes, architectonics of precise historical moments, consubstantiated in works by specific authors.

I like to think especially of the two categories that arose in distinct fields – the first in language studies, the second in literature studies – dialogism, and polyphony. They are the two categories that are at the argumentative center of that extraordinary and foundational work, *The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*.¹² They are definitions that, for their immense thematic and argumentative potential, form the inexhaustible implicit philosophical and existential suggestion in his principles, the notion of dialogue and the notion of the multiplicity of voices, representing a powerful metaphor for what’s lacking in the politics of our times. They are, equally, an illumination of the potential and the specificity of literature, at a moment in which, perhaps on the treadmill of contemporary technological arrogance, the literary arena seems to be stamped out, losing its cultural force of reference, its instinctive apprehension of the values of the times, in name of the

¹¹ BAKHTIN, M. Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin. Edited by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov; translated by Vadim Liapunov. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990, p.22.

¹² For reference, see footnote 6.

fragmentary gods, quicker, more brutal, unilateral and efficient in the war of meanings. There is no polyphony on Whatsapp whatsoever; and what was enthusiastically born as a new telegraph seems to have transformed into the only arena of cultural meanings in a short period of time.

Many troubling signs indicate our, so to speak, growing dialogic paralysis. One of them perhaps is almost clinically locatable in a typically contemporary phenomenon, but that cannot be reduced to our times, and that is more or less recurrent in the great temporality, to use a literary image, which is the decadency of irony. The voices seem, today, only to manage to breathe in a single direction; there is, in the air, a difficulty as if a deafness to perceive the multiplicity of meanings in the real life of language. It is as if the fact, simultaneously symbolic and concrete, that the other will always have an exceeding view of us had been erased from our horizon. It is not only that the idea of polyphony is fading away; it is as if we no longer wanted it to exist.

I remember that, in my academic learning, on entering in contact with Bakhtin's concept of polyphony as a central definition of the literary architectonic of Dostoevsky, I came up against various complicated theoretical problems (some of them raised by Todorov himself in his preface to the French edition of *Aesthetics of Verbal Creativity*).¹³ Broadly summing up, the question boils down to the difficulty of imagining that a character of a novel can be on the same argumentative level as its very author, and that the ideological contrast between them is not closed in an authoritarian narrative voice. This type of "ideological unfinished state" would define the polyphonic novel, carried out by Dostoevsky, as a culminating point of a truly millennial dialogical literary current, and decentralizing in nature. It would also be conducive to the perception of the "unfinished man," which, for Bakhtin, is at the heart of novelistic genres.

What's curious is that the series of requirements that Bakhtin established to, in fact, define a novel as "polyphonic," practically reduced its applicability to the work of Dostoevsky. Bakhtin himself had difficulty in pointing out any other polyphonic writer. Bakhtin did not truly define a literary genre reproducible from some compositional form – he created a specific category to account for Dostoevsky's originality, weaving the historical threads of its origin. But, far from questioning this supposed methodological

¹³ For reference see, footnote 09.

“fault,” one must pay attention to the critical key that Bakhtin offered to the interpretation of literature.

Years later, on reading *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*,¹⁴ his first manuscript, it occurred to me that the Bakhtin we knew was a born philosopher; and the project of his youth was the search for a philosophy that described the events of life without transforming it into a theoretical abstraction, without turning it into an object in which the subject had no place, a philosophy necessarily moral and responsive. Curiously, we find in the work on Dostoevsky an extremely expressive image: “We must renounce our monologic habits,”¹⁵ Bakhtin said, in order to feel at home in Dostoyevsky’s polyphonic sphere.

It is as if, in his search for a philosophy that, in his eyes, was lost in the historical circumstances of the origin of the Soviet Union, Bakhtin found in Dostoevsky, and in the immense potential of literary creation, an inexhaustible field of dialogical representation. “To renounce the monologic habits” is an expression that goes far beyond the compositional definition of a literary genre. It is, in fact, the expression of an ethics of concrete life, which, from its first word, was always at the center of Bakhtin’s intellectual and existential universe.

On calling our attention to the dialogic, and eventually polyphonic potential of the novel, he was equally remembering the intellectual generosity implicit in the literary expression, which compulsively transforms us into “others” as soon as we write and read our first word. At a time when it seems we are watching the progressive erasure of the literary sensibility, and seemingly incapable of reaching the subtleties of irony because it can only manage to hear its own voice, Mikhail Bakhtin remains an extraordinary and necessary counterpoint.

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¹⁴ For reference, see footnote 10.

¹⁵ For reference, see footnote 6, p.272.

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