
Bakhtin's Dialogic Imagination, Totalitarianism and the Subversive Act of Writing

LISA FRIEDLI

"What is most mysterious to me is how Bakhtin, adrift on the ocean of soviet exile, should have so closely paralleled some of the most important dialogues of our century and spoken to some of the pressing critical questions of our time." (Wasiolek, 1981, p. 176)

Literary criticism in the 20th century, from "formalism" to "stream of consciousness" to narratology", has never been able to fully account for the multiplicity of voice and human experience in the novel. "First and foremost a social theory of human interaction", Bakhtin's *Dialogic Imagination* seeks to bridge the gap between describing literary functions, and mirroring the two-way communication that occurs in literary interpretation (Bernard-Donals, 1990, p. 63). A precursor to the Postmodern, Bakhtin anchors literature in the concrete human experience in which it was conceived, lending equal weight to its future reception and interpretation in any possible world. As Bakhtin explains, his interactive model is based on speech and dialogue:

"The work and the world represented 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." (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 254)

And while Bakhtin's literary hermeneutics are speech and dialogue based, his explanation of them remains purposefully esoteric and fluid, thereby resisting categorization as a "system" of interpretation. This essay will subsequently not define systems, but rather accept the ever-standing Bakhtinian invitation to literary dialogue.

The four essays that comprise his seminal work, *The Dialogic Imagination*, are fueled by the content-laden nature of the novel as a communication "freighted with the intentions of others and the social ideologies of the past and present" (Wasiolek, 1981, p. 175). Written underground in the 1930's and warmly embraced only since Perestroika, Bakhtin's epistemology of literary functions is ever pertinent in the 21st century where writing as a subversive act continues to spark change. And while Bernard-Donals has argued that *The Dialogic Imagination* defies narrative typologies, I counter that it is equally as critical towards authoritative language, and state oppression (1990). And in the interest of more clearly articulating "the social ideologies of the past and present" that occur in *The Dialogic Imagination*, this essay seeks to measure the significance of the work to its historical context. Along similar lines, Hammond has compared Bakhtin and Auerbach's "championing" of debate and dialogue in literary interpretation as historically motivated:

"Faced with parallel experiences of exile from authoritarian states, it seems reasonable that these trained literary analysts should have sought to understand their predicament in its linguistic basis, and should have sought in response to theorize a linguistic style capable of defeating or upsetting the

styles of those in power (Hammond, 2011, p. 639).

It was during the 1920's that Bakhtin honed his ideas on dialogics, and led a productive intellectual life between Nevel and Vitebsk in Western Russian and Belarus. Although the "chronotope" of human experience in this area, and in Vitebsk in particular, has been characterized as a cosmopolitan flowering of the avant-garde, the freedom of expression that Bakhtin, and contemporaries like Chagall, knew there was relative at best (Bonetskaia, 2004, p. 10). While Bakhtin continued his philosophical and literary research during the post revolutionary period, he published his findings anonymously. This act speaks as much to the necessity of a safety measure against the hammer of the censor, as to the impossibility of free expression after the Revolution. As history has shown, Bakhtin's safeguards of anonymity and political apathy proved useless during the volatile transition between Lenin's demise and Stalin's rise to power. In yet another confirmation of Stalin's iron-fist totalitarianism, the unassuming professor was sentenced to ten years in Solovki prison camps. Among his 'crimes' were; "corrupting the youth," and simply having been acquainted with bohemian idealists in years past (Hammond, 2011, p. 638). Fortunately Gorky and Tolstoy pleaded on Bakhtin's behalf, and were able to have his punishment reduced to six years exile, albeit in a pig farming region of Northwest Kazakhstan (Bonetskaia, 2004, p. 22).

Bakhtin began *The Dialogic Imagination* in 1929 while teaching in Kustanai, Kazakhstan at the school of animal husbandry. Whereas the survival of Bakhtin's written work may be chalked up to fate, the agency involved in his act of self-preservation is demonstrative of both a masterful performance, and an empirical application of his hermeneutic theories conjoining chronotope and utterance, the concrete world and its counterpart in narrative. In a word, Bakhtin played the fool. A stranger in a strange land: the exiled, destitute amputee turned his marginalized state to an advantage. As with 18th century travel narratives or contemporary science fiction novels, Bakhtin refashioned the literary trope of the foreign visitor or "naive" in order to critique society from within. As Bakhtin explains:

"The novelist stands in need of some essential, formal, and generic mask that could serve to define the position from which he views life, as well as the position from which he makes that life public. And it is precisely here, of course, that the masks of the clown and the fool (transformed in various ways) come to the aid of the novelist" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 161).

Writing in exile, Bakhtin donned the mask of the fool in part to survive a political deluge; but also to more clearly see and expose "the underside and falseness of every situation" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 159).

The role of Bakhtin's fool is, after all, to give the appearance of being weak minded and incapable of understanding societal conventions in order to speak more freely and critically about them. In both literal and metaphoric terms, dialogue is perhaps the most essential component of free expression; and it is the work of Bakhtin's fool to maintain open channels of dialogue and social critique. A particularly liberating aspect of free speech performance associated with the fool character is distance from, if not freedom from, the dictates and norms of society.

A case in point: the fool feigns folly and uses humor to expose the underpinnings of societal convention through farce or 'harmless' observation. Playing the fool and spreading news and ideas is one thing; but bringing censored or taboo subject matter to public light, as Bakhtin's personal trajectory attests, is a rather dangerous job. Not by chance there are numerous mechanisms in *The Dialogic Imagination* intended to distance the fool's utterance from the unyielding dictates of the party line. The first recourse in Bakhtin's literary epistemology is of course dialogue, the negotiation of meaning. The fool, as author, mediates for the public who in turn mediates his "utterance." From this perspective, the: "I was only joking, what do I know?" defense is bolstered by literary mechanisms such as tropes and symbols, for the fool's speech "... cannot be understood in a direct and unmediated way but must be grasped metaphorically" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 159). Beyond the smoke and mirrors of humor as social critique, the fool's marginality in society bestows him with the "right not to understand, the right to confuse" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 163).

Extending Bakhtin's playful elision of the fool character in literature, to that of a censored, exiled author it follows suit that the chronotope of the public square functions as metaphor for the novel itself. Given the context of Bakhtin's exile, his observation of the public square as a place ". . . where common people congregate" holds great significance (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 159). As I read Bakhtin's *Dialogic Imagination*, it is precisely the absence of centralized dominion, which renders the public square a vibrant locus for dialogue. By definition a place for common man to exchange banalities, the public square stands in direct contrast to political or intellectual power centers. Bakhtin's theories therefore suggest that the public square falls under the radar of centralized forces due to its function as an anodyne center for passing pigs and potatoes.

Along the same lines, Bakhtin's quiet acceptance of exile in Kazakhstan was the realization, in a quasi-literal sense, of the chronotope of the public square. Writing in exile, Bakhtin played the role of the fool, simultaneously translating his experience into a literary strategy and a philosophy of hermeneutics. In this sense, the censored writer was his own foil as "a man who is in life but not of it, life's perpetual spy and reflector" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 161). Despite the despotic imposition of thought in a given social arena, the public square as a site of negotiation and exchange between 'commoners' fosters unfettered speech. On both a physical and a symbolic plane, the public square brings the fool into contact with society, creating a forum for his unorthodox voice. Thereby enjoying a certain diplomatic immunity, the fool as the outsider, as the eccentric, can more freely espouse in the public square what others would never dare.

From the public square, to its metaphorical counterpart, the novel, the discourse inherent to both relies upon the immanence of an audience. Ostensibly the cornerstone of *The Dialogic Imagination*, "the heteroglot unity" is the inter-human act of linguistic negotiation also known as dialogue. "Utterance" is a term that Bakhtin chose quite explicitly to describe writing as "[t]he relationship of the author to a language conceived as the common view is not static- it is always found in a state of movement and oscillation that is more or less alive" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 302). The issue therefore at stake is the vitality of the novel, and its inextricable origin in culture. Not surprisingly, Bakhtin dedicates a sizeable portion of his essay "Discourse in the novel" to both the centrality of speech, and to the speaking person in the narrative. Here it is important to note that whereas "utterance" is dependent on the interaction and interpretation of the other to exist, in Bakhtin's paradigm the author's voice does not posit authority. Most strikingly, the movement of negotiation between writer and public in the heteroglot unity occurs on a horizontal plane. Although based on difference, the effort of both reader and writer to navigate through layers of history, social order, gender, culture and class codification to reach the locus of dialogue is unified. That is to say, the author expresses a given chronotopic experience and the reader interprets from his or her own context towards the unified goal of dialogue, which by its very nature remains negotiable and fluid. A subversive writing act indeed, the heteroglot unity is diametrically opposed to classical modes of literary interpretation from the Greeks to Augustine to the Romantics: all of which conceived of literary discourse as moving vertically, from the writer's hand towards an otherworldly perfection and ultimately to God.

The absence of a vertical trajectory towards a centralized higher power in Bakhtinian hermeneutics allows for the circumvention of authoritarian language. Expanding the parameters of free expression, the negotiation that occurs in the heteroglot unity is further designed to allow for both parties to resist or support received discourse. The struggle towards meaning is integral to free expression, as is the discernment, analysis and negotiation involved. Void of an authoritative agenda, the heteroglot unity is therefore dependent on the ". . . contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language." (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 272) The point of confrontation that takes place as the reader/writer negotiates how to express and how to discern the contradictions of human experience is referred to in Bakhtinian terms as "heteroglossia."

Given the mortal dangers of writing under Stalin's rule, Bakhtin took great pains to create and construct, while at the same time dissimulating, the act of subversive writing. However, the covert political nature of

Bakhtin's writing as subversion becomes more apparent in his notion of heteroglossia. As the driving force behind the heteroglot unity, the act of interpreting another's speech, of participating in dialogue, requires negotiation or debate on some level. Moving directly to the semantic realm of politics, Bakhtin considers the negotiation of meaning that takes place during moments of heteroglossia as "contested, contestable and contesting" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 332). On the surface, heteroglossia is contestation, but here it also refers to the untenable nature of language and mutual understanding. After all is said and done, do we every really know exactly what was intended by another's speech? In a Russian nesting doll-like effect Bakhtin protects his subversive idea of contestation, by pointing out that intention is always contestable. A clever ploy indeed, the idea of contestation also underlines the necessity of debate both in dialogue and its counterpart: free expression.

The use of cryptic terms and esoteric definitions abound in *The Dialogic Imagination*, and while they serve to map dialogics in an original, erudite manner, I propose that they also serve to divert the censor. Bakhtin achieves diversion first by ascribing his critical explanation of "unitary" language to the realm of mythical poetics, a world far, far away from contemporary politics, or so it would seem. For the reader, Bakhtin's use of an imagined chronotope (the mythical age) and morbid, violent vocabulary to describe unitary language further establishes this mode of discourse as the sworn enemy of living language and the dialogical. In Bakhtinian terms, unitary language severs speech, as living utterance, from its context and renders it inanimate, if not dead. All that remains of discourse is an "objectified carcass" that Bakhtin is quick to designate as "authoritative discourse" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 343). Diametrically opposed to the heteroglot unity and its mechanism of debate, unitary language is, as its name suggests, unilateral. For all intents and purposes a dictate, unitary discourse is not interpreted, but rather ingested by the receiver based on a preconditioned state of "unconditional allegiance" to the work (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 343). Authoritative discourse hits its target by means of manipulation, one form of which is political propaganda.

It is thanks to Bakhtin, Lukács, and later Fredrick Jameson that the postmodern scholar takes for granted that all discourse carries ideology (1981, 1950 & 1981). Early on Bakhtin conceived of the dialogical as being composed of "ideologemes" or value-laden units of meaning (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 333). Ideologemes are transparent in dialogical discourse and give rise to the heteroglossia that both receiver and sender can openly debate. The ideologeme's relationship to the world of culture, history, and politics is therefore slated, in Bakhtinian terms, as integral to dialogical discourse, and contestable as heteroglossia. Conversely, unitary language, especially of the totalitarian sort, nullifies negotiation, and hides its bias. As Bakhtin states: "one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 343). Bakhtin traces the origin of authoritative discourse to the realm of the gods, to the mythical, in order to sublimate or bring greater attention to unitary language's roots in religion and foundational myths; which by analogy read as the foundational narratives of political regimes. Once again pushing the notion of free expression to the fore Bakhtin outlines the inevitable failure of unitary language in its attempt to forgo dialogue and debate. Whereas an individual might accept, affirm and ingest unitary discourse the internal mechanism of dialogue is too powerful to be forever suppressed. As Bakhtin is quick to point out, internal persuasion is the first step towards eroding the projected finitude of authoritative and unitary language.

Bakhtin focuses on the world of myth to exemplify the limited dialogue in unitary discourse. Myths, as they figure in *The Dialogic Imagination*, are "prior discourses" used to sanctify religious or nationalistic discourses. To seal these discourses off from dialogue or interpretation is an effective and rather obvious means of maintaining power in a given society; but the Achilles' heel of unitary language is precisely its claim to origins separate from society's. More specifically, as soon as a myth is discovered to be one of many, or the variation of a prior myth, its authoritative language is eroded. In essence, the more information is freely exchanged, the more people debate these 'givens' and the more easily myths are dismantled. Outsider information or what Bakhtin refers to as 'alien material' is an especially effective means of spark-

ing debate and dialogue; and it is the author as fool who is “free to be ‘other’ in this world” and present ‘alien’ perspectives” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 159). To fuel the dialogic with ‘other’ material Bakhtin holds: “the author encases his own thought in the image of another’s language without doing violence to the freedom of that language or to its own distinctive uniqueness.” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 409).

The freedom of expression intended by heteroglossic debate and negotiation that I have examined throughout *The Dialogic Imagination* is aimed at deflecting the crippling effects of authoritative discourse. Notwithstanding, Bakhtin’s theories on human culture and context in discourse are engaged, not to further a singular political cause, but to champion free expression. Revolutionary in the sense that dialogics bring the culture, history and politics of human context back into literature, Bakhtin paints a humanist, if not liberal social, paradigm for “the finer epistemological function of literary works.”¹ Based in principle on egalitarian models, the heteroglot unity is free of a tyrannical hierarchy. As I have maintained throughout this essay, Bakhtinian hermeneutics seek to establish a plane of literary interpretation and dialogical exchange that is horizontal; and from this vantage, the novel is dethroned as a sublime artifact of human artistry and utilized as an open communication of human experience, ideas and culture. While the notion of fair and free expression leans towards the ideal, given the context of totalitarianism one is drawn to conclude that Bakhtin valued free expression precisely because it was forbidden to him. Looking back on his experience, Bakhtin himself avowed:

“Everything that had been created during this half-century on this infertile soil under this unfree sky is blemished to some degree . . . I could not talk directly about the most important questions . . . I had to equivocate and go back and forth all the time. I had to restrain myself . . . (Bonetskaia, 2004, p. 21).

Under the totalitarian yoke, Bakhtin created a literary hermeneutics explicitly cloaked in metaphor and cryptic semantics to denounce authoritative, “unitary” language in the name of posterity. Whereas writers such as Stanley Fish make lofty, abstract claims that free speech does not exist in any dimension, it is to be noted that the privileged vantage of state sanctioned free speech has guaranteed, to a great extent, that he may do so (Fish, 1994). In diametrical opposition to this liberty, Bakhtin’s covert struggle to maintain the channels of dialogue and negotiation open, nonetheless serve to countervail the dehumanizing processes of censorship and state oppression.

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1 See preface to: *Bakhtin’s Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives*.

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