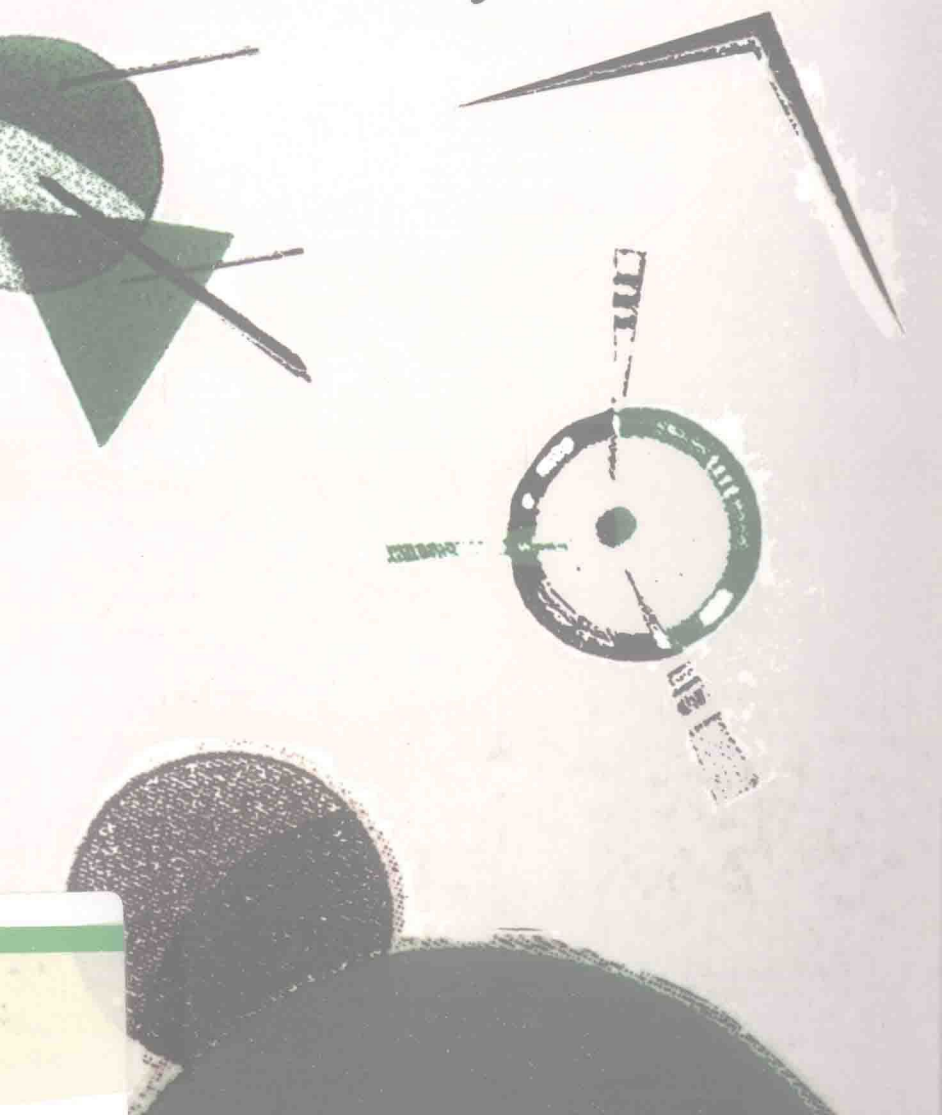


MIKHAIL BAKHTIN

THE WORD IN THE WORLD

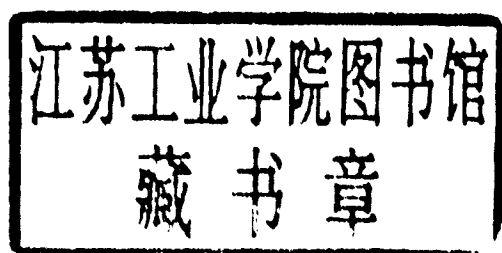
Graham Pechey



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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY
OF MY LATE WIFE, THE ARTIST NOLA
CLENDINNING (1943–93)

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

The twentieth century produced a remarkable number of gifted and innovative literary critics. Indeed it could be argued that some of the finest literary minds of the age turned to criticism as the medium best adapted to their complex and speculative range of interests. This has sometimes given rise to regret among those who insist on a clear demarcation between 'creative' (primary) writing on the one hand and 'critical' (secondary) texts on the other. Yet this distinction is far from self-evident. It is coming under strain at the moment as novelists and poets grow increasingly aware of the conventions that govern their writing and the challenge of consciously exploiting and subverting those conventions. And the critics for their part – some of them at least – are beginning to question their traditional role as humble servants of the literary text with no further claim upon the reader's interest or attention. Quite simply, there are texts of literary criticism and theory that, for various reasons – stylistic complexity, historical influence, range of intellectual command – cannot be counted a mere appendage to those other 'primary' texts.

Of course, there is a logical puzzle here, since (it will be argued) 'literary criticism' would never have come into being, and could hardly exist as such, were it not for the body of creative writing that provides its *raison d'être*. But this is not quite the kind of knock-down argument that it might appear at first glance. For one thing, it conflates some very different orders of priority, assuming that literature always comes first (in the sense that Greek tragedy had to exist before Aristotle could formulate its rules), so that literary texts are for that very reason possessed of superior value. And this argument would seem to find commonsense support in the difficulty of thinking what 'literary criticism' could *be* if it seriously renounced all sense of the distinction between literary and critical texts. Would

it not then find itself in the unfortunate position of a discipline that had willed its own demise by declaring its subject non-existent?

But these objections would only hit their mark if there were indeed a special kind of writing called 'literature' whose difference from other kinds of writing was enough to put criticism firmly in its place. Otherwise there is nothing in the least self-defeating or paradoxical about a discourse, nominally that of literary criticism, that accrues such interest on its own account as to force some fairly drastic rethinking of its proper powers and limits. The act of crossing over from commentary to literature – or of simply denying the difference between them – becomes quite explicit in the writing of a critic like Geoffrey Hartman. But the signs are already there in such classics as William Empson's *Seven Types Ambiguity* (1928), a text whose transformative influence on our habits of reading must surely be ranked with the great creative moments of literary modernism. Only on the most dogmatic view of the difference between 'literature' and 'criticism' could a work like *Seven Types* be counted generically an inferior, sub-literary species of production. And the same can be said for many of the critics whose writings and influence this series sets out to explore.

Some, like Empson, are conspicuous individuals who belong to no particular school or larger movement. Others, like the Russian Formalists, were part of a communal enterprise and are therefore best understood as representative figures in a complex and evolving dialogue. Then again there are cases of collective identity (like the so-called 'Yale deconstructors') where a mythical group image is invented for largely polemical purposes. (The volumes in this series on Hartman and Bloom should help to dispel the idea that 'Yale deconstruction' is anything more than a handy device for collapsing differences and avoiding serious debate.) So there is no question of a series format or house style that would seek to reduce these differences to a blandly homogeneous treatment. One consequence of recent critical theory is the realization that literary texts have no self-sufficient or autonomous meaning, no existence apart from their afterlife of changing interpretations and values. And the same applies to those critical texts whose meaning and significance are subject to constant shifts and realignments of interest. This is not to say that trends in criticism are just a matter of intellectual fashion or the merry-go-round of rising and falling reputations. But it is important to grasp how complex are the forces – the conjunctions of historical and cultural motive – that affect the first reception and the subsequent fortunes of a critical

text. This point has been raised into a systematic programme by critics like Hans-Robert Jauss, practitioners of so-called 'reception theory' as a form of historical hermeneutics. The volumes in this series will therefore be concerned not only to expound what is of lasting significance but also to set these critics in the context of present-day argument and debate. In some cases (as with Walter Benjamin) this debate takes the form of a struggle for interpretative power among disciplines with sharply opposed ideological viewpoints. Such controversies cannot simply be ignored in the interests of achieving a clear and balanced account. They point to unresolved tensions and problems which are there in the critic's work as well as in the rival appropriative readings. In the end there is no way of drawing a neat methodological line between 'intrinsic' questions (what the critic really thought) and those other, supposedly 'extrinsic', concerns that have to do with influence and reception history.

The volumes will vary accordingly in their focus and range of coverage. They will also reflect the ways in which a speculative approach to questions of literary theory has proved to have striking consequences for the human sciences at large. This breaking down of disciplinary bounds is among the most significant developments in recent critical thinking. As philosophers and historians, among others, come to recognize the rhetorical complexity of the texts they deal with, so literary theory takes on a new dimension of interest and relevance. It is scarcely appropriate to think of a writer like Derrida as practising 'literary criticism' in any conventional sense of the term. For one thing, he is as much concerned with 'philosophical' as with 'literary' texts, and has indeed actively sought to subvert (or deconstruct) such tidy distinctions. A principal object in planning this series was to take full stock of these shifts in the wider intellectual terrain (including the frequent boundary disputes) brought about by critical theory. And, of course, such changes are by no means confined to literary studies, philosophy and the so-called 'sciences of man'. It is equally the case in (say) nuclear physics and molecular biology that advances in the one field have decisive implications for the other, so that specialized research often tends (paradoxically) to break down existing divisions of intellectual labour. Such work is typically many years ahead of the academic disciplines and teaching institutions that have obvious reasons of their own for adopting a business-as-usual attitude. One important aspect of modern critical theory is the challenge it presents to these traditional ideas. And lest it be thought

that this is merely a one-sided takeover bid by literary critics, the series will include a number of volumes by authors in those other disciplines, including, for instance, a study of Roland Barthes by an American analytical philosopher.

We shall not, however, cleave to theory as a matter of polemical or principled stance. The series will extend to figures like F.R. Leavis, whose widespread influence went along with an express aversion to literary theory; scholars like Erich Auerbach in the mainstream European tradition; and others who resist assimilation to any clear-cut line of descent. There will also be authoritative volumes on critics such as Northrop Frye and Lionel Trilling, figures who, for various reasons, occupy an ambivalent or essentially contested place in modern critical tradition. Above all the series will strive to resist that current polarization of attitudes that sees no common ground on interest between 'literary criticism' and 'critical theory'.

CHRISTOPHER NORRIS

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Versions of the chapters of this book have appeared – in some cases more than once – in various journals and collective volumes between 1990 and 2003. Formal permissions have been granted by the following copyright holders: *Radical Philosophy* for Chapter 1, which appeared in that journal as ‘Boundaries versus Binaries: Bakhtin in/against the History of Ideas’, 54, 1990; Routledge for Chapter 4, which appeared in greatly abridged form as ‘Modernity and Chronotopicity in Bakhtin’ in David Shepherd (ed.), *The Contexts of Bakhtin: Philosophy, Authorship, Aesthetics* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998); Taylor and Francis (Journals) (<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>), publisher of *Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies*, for Chapter 5, which appeared there as ‘Not the Novel: Bakhtin, Poetry, Truth, God’, 4:2, 1993; Raphael de Kadt, editor of *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, for Chapter 6, which appeared there as ‘Eternity and Modernity: Bakhtin and the Epistemological Sublime’, 81/82, 1994; and David Shepherd, editor of *Dialogism: An International Journal of Bakhtin Studies*, for Chapter 7, which appeared there in greatly abridged form as ‘Philosophy and Theology in “Aesthetic Activity”’, 1, 1998. I take this opportunity of formally thanking all of the above; and of thanking also those others – Paul Contino, Caryl Emerson, Susan Felch, Michael Gardiner and Ken Hirschkop – who encouraged me to believe that the project of this book was worthwhile by later reprinting four of these essays in volumes edited or co-edited by themselves.

All of the individuals cited above have had a larger role in the development of my understanding of Bakhtin than is circumscribed by the function of editor in relation to particular pieces of my work, and they are joined in this by so many others that it would be an insult to the inadvertently excluded to start naming too many

names. Moreover, I have chosen to confine my specific acknowledgements to those friends who have discussed Bakhtin with me substantially; others, who share my other interests (in South African literature, and more generally in linguistic, literary-critical, literary-historical and theological matters) and who might feel rebuffed by their absence from these paragraphs, will find themselves duly acknowledged in two further volumes on those topics which I hope to bring out in the not too distant future.

The first of my less formal acknowledgements begins with a reflection of Bakhtin's on kinsfolk. We must not, he writes, say of our relatives, 'They are mine', but, rather, 'I am theirs'. It is from them – and of course in the first instance from one's parents – that one acquires the gift of an earthly name, for (as he writes elsewhere) I cannot name myself; only the other can name me. My own first others, who knew nothing of Bakhtin, and who had no literary pretensions, none the less by their radically different verbal habits drew the young Graham Pechey's attention to words – his mother by a strict literalism of their definition, his father by a relentless punning play on them – that he cannot do otherwise than remember Dorothy and Noel Pechey now with love and thankfulness. The last paragraph of Chapter 6 was written in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, on the eve of my mother's funeral in 1992, and it takes some of its tone from my mood at that time.

Bakhtin loomed large in discussions with some of my former colleagues at the University of Hertfordshire (UH) between 1973 and 2000: these were the glory days of 'theory'; Bakhtin was understood to be a 'theorist', however limiting and inimical to his own self-image that description might have been; and 'theory' was part of the innovative diet we served up to our students. I am indebted to Gill Davies, Alan Hooper, Jean Radford, George Wotton and the late Dennis Brown both for such discussions and for their touching faith in the reality of this book, which was so long in its gestation. With the shift to university status, with the consequent pressure to build up a 'research culture' – above all with the peculiar self-consciousness of our status bred by the regular quadrennial 'Research Assessment Exercise' – 'Pechey's book on Bakhtin' seemed ever to be receding into the distance, impossible of completion. Now that it has at last appeared, I am long retired from UH, and it redounds of course to no institution's greater glory. Whilst the satisfaction is wholly my own, some at least of the credit for this book must go to those who taught and talked with me through all those years in harness together.

Outside that institutional context, but no less important for all that as significant interlocutors, are Paul Connerton, friend of forty years' standing, distinguished writer on social memory and co-conspirator with my daughter in the plot to get this book out; Charles Lock, critic and philologist *extraordinaire*, whom I met through the Bakhtin connection but who, in the uncanny conjunction of our diverse scholarly interests, has also helped me to see that there is life after Bakhtin; Anton Simons, writer of an excellent book on Bakhtin in Dutch; and Donald Wesling, from whose important interventions in the field of 'Bakhtin and poetry' I have drawn strength in making my own. My thanks also go to Christopher Norris, general editor of the 'Critics of the Twentieth Century' series, for so carefully reading and annotating the manuscript, and to Polly Dodson, my editor at Routledge, for her unstinting help with the practicalities of producing this book.

Finally, I remember in this place my late wife Nola Clendinning, miniaturist and painter of icons, whose knowledge of Orthodox Christianity altered my reading of Bakhtin, and who is both the posthumous inspiration of Chapter 7 and the hidden antecedent of its feminine third-person pronouns; my daughter Laura, who at eight drew a carnivalesque cover for this book (sadly now lost) and who then at twenty-five shamed me by her doctoral industry into finishing it at last; and my wife Rosie Sykes, craftswoman, literary scholar and wildlife enthusiast, from whom I have learned to balance my tendency too precipitately to look past the visible with an attentive gaze upon this world's particulars. To all of these, my love and thanks for bringing me to where I am today.

G.K.P.
Cambridge,
8 September 2006

ABBREVIATIONS

Full bibliographical details of volumes cited will be found in the bibliography at the end of this book.

AA	'Art and Answerability', in <i>Art and Answerability</i>
AH	'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', in <i>Art and Answerability</i>
BSHR	'The <i>Bildungsroman</i> and its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)', in <i>Speech Genres and Other Late Essays</i>
DN	'Discourse in the Novel', in <i>The Dialogic Imagination</i>
EN	'Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel', in <i>The Dialogic Imagination</i>
FMLS	P.N. Medvedev, <i>The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship</i>
FTC	'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', in <i>The Dialogic Imagination</i>
IENM	'Interview with the Editor of <i>Novy Mir</i> ', in <i>Speech Genres and Other Late Essays</i>
MHS	'Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences', in <i>Speech Genres and Other Late Essays</i>
MPL	V.N. Voloshinov, <i>Marxism and the Philosophy of Language</i>
NM70-71	'From Notes Made in 1970-71', in <i>Speech Genres and Other Late Essays</i>
PCMF	'The Problem of Content, Material, and Form in Verbal Art', in <i>Art and Answerability</i>
PDP	<i>Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics</i>
PT	'The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis', in <i>Speech Genres and Other Late Essays</i>
RW	<i>Rabelais and His World</i>
TPA	<i>Toward a Philosophy of the Act</i>

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INTRODUCTION

Not the last word

This book of essays records a twelve-year exchange in a much longer conversation with Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895–1975) – a conversation which began, indeed, when he was still alive, and which has now lasted half of *my* life. Given his own overriding contention that dialogue is a much broader phenomenon than the face-to-face, turn-taking interlocution which conventionally goes by that name, it scarcely matters that Bakhtin and I trod the same earth for thirty-five years without ever meeting; or that if, by some extraordinary quirk of fate, we had met, the Babelic confusion of tongues which put Russian in his mouth and English in mine would have forestalled understanding. If a certain deference to my more sceptical readers makes me reluctant to speak of a plane beyond the punctualities of time and space which will find both of us together again – and of the luminous transparency of understanding which, one trusts, that meeting will yield – then I have to say that those among such readers who have never (if only momentarily) suspended their disbelief in the afterlife will not have reaped the considerable philosophical rewards of placing oneself uncompromisingly on the other side of the known, and will have missed something quite crucial in their reading of Bakhtin. For the philosopher himself, such spiritual acrobatics yield the deepest understanding, and he expects of us a skill like his own in their execution.

Modern literature begins in the *Divine Comedy* with just such an intricately imagined excursion: Dante Alighieri's innovative use of the dialogue of the dead – by no means new in itself – places the solid, shadow-casting body of a living, ongoing consciousness among the variously judged shades of the next world; the upshot is a defamiliarization on both sides. In Bakhtin's terminology, a 'spirit' finds himself among dead 'souls', the otherworldly products of

finished worldly lives – directly fashioned works, as we might call them, of the ‘aesthetic activity’ of the Almighty. The author outside the work imagines himself as its hero, and his sphere of action is God’s workshop of souls, where the great cosmic labour goes on. Dante’s audacious fiction aimed at jolting a whole social order chaotically out of joint into seeing itself for what it is might have failed as a spur to praxis in the historical world of his time and ever after; as an adventure of knowledge, though, it is not only as new and effectual as ever, but also the paradigm for all modern acts of literature. Its essential gesture is repeated as much in *The Canterbury Tales* and the work of William Blake as it is in the last poem written by Geoffrey Hill. And it is at the root, too, of the European novel: Bakhtin’s own most favoured heir to Dante’s omni-temporal imagination is his fellow Russian Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, and Dostoevsky had before him, of course, the example of Nikolai Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, intended (in Bakhtin’s view, misguidedly) (*EN*, 28) as the first part of a Russian *Divine Comedy* in prose.

In his earliest work, Bakhtin twice offers us an analysis of a short poem by Alexander Pushkin which has the lyric hero undergoing a twofold parting from his lover – she returns home to Italy, only then to die – and ending by holding her to her promise of a kiss in what will now be not the earthly future but the hereafter. The Dantean connotations scarcely need elaborating. Unsurprisingly, in the second of his two analyses, Dante’s name crops up several times, along with the observation that the ‘emotional-volitional reaction’ of the author finds expression not just in that aestheticization of natural intonations which he calls ‘rhythm’ – Bakhtin extends the sense of this word as he was later equally to elasticize that of ‘dialogue’ – but in the very ‘choice of a hero’ for the work (*AH*, 225). If we read this *in tandem* with a point made in the same context about how in ‘aesthetic seeing’ there is always a ‘potential hero’ (*AH*, 229), even if that hero is not thematically manifested or is removed from the centre of attention – even, indeed, in a still life, or a piece of purely instrumental and non-programmatic music – we are moved to reflect in a Bakhtinian manner on Bakhtin’s own choice of heroes in *his* work. For Bakhtin certainly chooses heroes: the litany of them is well known; Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist identify them with those of any educated Russian of his generation.¹ Bakhtin is an author whose heroes are authors; and Dante, I would argue, is the principal ‘heroic’ potentiality in all of his writing. Fitfully present in a citational sense, the subject only of occasional comments in the great monographs, Dante could be said

to haunt them none the less as the human axiological centre around which they revolve and by which they are rhythmically energized. Bakhtin, I contend, learns more from Dante than from anyone else. Dante's relative absence and Dostoevsky's strong presence in the work of Bakhtin that has come down to us – these are absolutely Dantean situations: after all, according to Bakhtin himself Dante's earthly world is a world without centres (*AH*, 208); and, besides, what could be more in the spirit of Dante than the choice of a vernacular hero in Dostoevsky?

Bakhtin's later emphasis upon the novel should not encourage us in the view that he did not like poetry. Of his four major heroes, two are principally poets, two write prose; laid out chronologically, they form a revealing pattern, at once chiasitic and alternating. Thus, first we have a late-mediaeval Italian poet; then an early-modern French prose writer; then a high-modern German poet; finally a Russian writer of prose. Or: framed by two writers to whom a synchronic, omni-temporal imagination is ascribed are two others who variously represent the linear track of history. Or, again: from a 'formally polyphonic' (*PDP*, 31) poetry of the 'vertical' of eternity (Dante) we pass on to the prose (Rabelais) and the poetry (Goethe) of the 'horizontal' of history, finally coming to rest in the novelist of cosmic synchrony in whom the polyphony of fully weighted voices has broken out of mere juxtaposition into interaction. The correlation of Dante and Dostoevsky is made quite explicit in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. This temporal ordering of Bakhtin's pantheon dramatizes for us the fact that the modern literary hero closest to him in time and culture is in some sense a throwback to modern literature's first great figure: that the two figures most widely sundered in time link up over the heads of intervening figures who between them mark the stages of a growing self-consciousness of history in the West. The unmerged though still only externally juxtaposed voices of Dante's poem give way to the dynamically interlocutory voices of Dostoevsky's prose. That late-mediaeval polyphony has been freed from its stasis is for Bakhtin the signal cultural achievement of a modernity which has otherwise proved itself only too tragically productive of social and spiritual pathologies. As I hint in Chapter 7 of this book, Dostoevsky seems to signify for him the intersection and reconciliation of modern (sociopolitical) freedom and its premodern (theological) counterpart. Elevating the novel over other forms must then be seen as a strategic move designed to draw attention to the power of modern literary discourse to absorb social languages

and dialogize them, in a challenge to all earthly centres – all absolute points of reference in *this* world. To challenge the latter is to reinforce the legitimate claim of the only such centre: that which is not of this world, and which believers call God. As a social phenomenon, ‘poetry’ in Bakhtin’s sense is a code for the abuse of literary discourse in the celebration of worldly centres of power. If his early descriptions of aesthetic activity seem to imply poetry as a model, that is because Bakhtin is not invoking there the sociopolitical effects of literature in oppressive contexts but speaking, rather, of the general ‘architectonics’ of ‘verbal art’. Singing, celebrating, ‘rhythmicizing’ real-life intonations: whilst perversions of these aesthetic acts are possible, such perversions are plainly not the concern of the early work. In any case, the *Divine Comedy* is so capacious a work that it might be said to anticipate all literature, including modern prose fiction; *Purgatory* is in some ways a proto-novel in verse. *Hell* shows us a place where the abusers receive their justified lot: namely, abuse of what remains of their whole personalities. *Paradise* shows us a place of unalloyed praise. *Purgatory* is the otherworldly place most like our earthly world, inasmuch as it is a hybrid state of ambivalent praise–abuse; reading *Purgatory*, we understand better the transcendental meaning Bakhtin attaches to the novel genre. What we find in purgatory is nothing less than the illuminating estrangement of this earthly condition in which we enjoy the God-given freedom to repent and to amend our lives. Those in hell have lost that freedom; those in paradise no longer need it.

It cannot escape an attentive reader that many of the perennial Bakhtinian motifs have their germ in Dante. Before all else, there is the idea of knowledge as experiential, incarnational, chronotopic – of truth as a matter of pilgrimage and of personal encounter with a great diversity of thoroughly, indeed intensely, individualized *persons*. Virgil’s role in the poem puts before us very vividly the early-Bakhtinian notion of rationality as a moment of ‘answerability’: Dante’s ‘master’ does not in any simple allegorical sense stand for (pagan) Reason; in his readiness to lend both physical and intellectual help to the poet-hero through Hell and Purgatory – that is, to put the matter more concretely, in his energetic *answering* with body and soul – he is important above all for what he *does*. Virgil is, in short, a paradigm for (indeed a paragon of) answerable action. Dante himself, as often as not, answers with his body to what he witnesses, particularly on those occasions when feeling overwhelms him in contemplation of the consequences of God’s